



Presents ...

Fantasies

volume IV

four tales of erotic romance by ...

Vivien Dean

Eva Gale

Philippa Grey-Gerou

Cat Johnson

Fantasies IV

Four Tales of Erotic Romance

by

Vivien Dean, Eva Gale,
Philippa Grey-Gerou, and Cat Johnson

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And Then There Were...

by Vivien Dean

Also by Vivien Dean

The Canvas of Her Skin

The Ice Butterfly

Ryan Nixon had survived hunting vampires for the past decade for one very good reason. Looking at him, nobody would ever assume that the bookish façade, the clear eyes, and the unabashed grin that always made him seem like he was barely out of college—instead of in his mid-thirties—hid the heart of a killer. It was why vampires made the mistake of thinking he was easy prey before finding themselves crumbling to dust by the stake they never saw coming. It was why he was able to stroll through the nearly deserted Grand Central Station without even a casual glance from a passerby. It worked for him. Ryan wasn't one to argue with advantages when it meant life or his death.

At nearly midnight on a Wednesday evening, only a few people dotted the main concourse. A security guard who looked older than the terminal stood near the ticketing booths, and for a moment Ryan frowned. The old ones were almost worse than the new. While young guards were usually quick on the trigger, older guards had a tendency to have antiquated notions about honor and doing the right thing. It was nice, really, but Ryan had seen too many good people lose their lives "doing the right thing." Sometimes, survival meant you made decisions that made you unpopular or brought the demons out in your sleep. Ryan didn't worry about either anymore. He'd lived with demons nearly every day since Jeannie had been killed. Nothing his dreams conjured could scare him any longer.

And being unpopular simply meant he didn't have people he cared about living in constant danger. That was equally acceptable.

He glanced at the clock in the center of the terminal. Five minutes. Ryan had little doubt that the vampires would arrive precisely at midnight. There was supposed to be a meeting between the clans to discuss territorial boundaries, and the clan heads were notorious for their meticulous attention to detail. Whatever new war between them that might have sparked such a discussion didn't matter to Ryan. All he cared about was that five of the most deadly vampires in the United States were convening in a single place for one night. Such an opportunity could not be overlooked by any respectable demon hunter.

With long, languorous strides, Ryan wandered around the terminal,

his eyes constantly on the lookout for the vampires' arrival. He meant to look as if he was just killing time as he waited for a train to pull in, but the way the old guard kept glancing at him made Ryan's neck itch. He shot him a friendly smile, hoping to put the guard at ease, but all it did was make the man's bushy brows draw together into a tight line and his hand go to his belt.

Damn it. The last thing Ryan needed was to be distracted so close to the designated hour. Angling his body away from the guard, he pretended to look at a watch he wasn't wearing before walking toward the bathroom, whistling under his breath to enforce the picture of nonchalance. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the guard track his movement, but within a few feet of the bathroom door, the man dropped his hand from where it had been poised over his weapon.

He went inside anyway. He'd wash his hands and be back out before the clock struck midnight. It might be worth it to do a quick weapons check as well.

The sterile room was deserted, the walls echoing his footsteps back to his ears as he crossed to a sink. Turning on the water as hot as he could stand, Ryan ran his hands beneath it, warming his chilled skin as he tried not to notice his reflection in the mirror. There were slight shadows beneath his eyes, and his light brown hair could be labeled grunge chic by any reputable fashion magazine. For a brief moment, he considered running his damp fingers through it to try and make it a little more presentable, but quickly dismissed the vain notion. He wasn't here to look good. He was here to stake vampires who should have been killed long before now. His hair was only going to end up looking worse by the time the night was through.

A swift pat-down of his clothing confirmed that everything was in place. Stakes were strapped to each calf and more tucked into his jacket. A bevy of sharpened pencils were hidden in an inside pocket, and the breath spray he always carried held holy water instead of minty freshness.

He was armed. More importantly, he was ready.

Resuming his low whistling, Ryan walked back out into the terminal, grateful that the old security guard had his back to him, giving directions to a slim, dark-haired woman. He had taken three more steps before his head snapped back to the pair.

Ryan faltered.

The angular lines of the woman's face were aching familiar, and though her head was turned away from him, affording him only a profile shot, he knew her eyes would be such a dark brown that they would look almost black. The hair was the same, stick-straight and hanging down her back in a sleek ponytail. He couldn't attest to anything else. It had been ten years since he had last seen Tala Mamola, and then it had been under the worst possible circumstances.

But it was her. He had seen her too often in his dreams, woken with the taste of her lingering on his lips and the touch of her ingrained in his fingertips, to have any doubts.

His eyes shot to the clock. Less than two minutes to midnight. Another scan of the terminal didn't reveal the vampires he expected to arrive, but with Tala's presence Ryan was more certain than ever that they would. Somehow, she must have caught wind of the meeting as well. There was no other reason one of the world's most renowned vampire hunters—the one responsible for Ryan even being alive to become one himself—would be on the opposite side of the world, away from her home in Manila. Tala only left the Philippines for serious hunts.

It didn't get any more serious than this.

He took a seat that had all the major entrances in his line of sight, his hand slipping into his pocket to curl around the stake he had tucked there. His callused fingertips stroked the smooth wood, taking comfort in its familiarity.

One minute.

The guard finally turned away from Tala, resuming his post at the ticket booth. She was already walking, chin up as she crossed the terminal, when her dark eyes caught Ryan's in a random moment. It was Tala's turn to hesitate, the smallest of lines appearing between her finely arched brows. She recognized him. He wasn't presumptuous enough to assume that it had anything to do with why he knew her so well, but his body reacted as if she'd touched him anyway, sharpening and hardening at the same time. Her attention jumped to the clock, dragging Ryan's with it.

Midnight.

A train's screech came from the platforms. It was high and piercing, much louder than anything Ryan had heard since his arrival, and he winced as it grew in volume, bringing a hand up to his ear to muffle the

sound. Others were doing the same, but it was the blinding illumination from above that truly alarmed him. Just as he jerked his head up to look at the skylights, the ground shook, the screech a death rattle that made the air vibrate. He had to grip the bench at his side in order not to fall off.

Then the terminal went black.

The noises stopped.

Everything stilled.

Ryan sat there, with his blood roaring in his ears and his stomach in his throat, as he waited for something to shift back to normal. The air felt heavy without the tremors that had shaken it moments earlier, like a thick blanket being tucked around him in the height of summer. There was no sound either, not the whisper of breaths, not the scuffle of feet, not even the hum of electricity to indicate life of any sort. For one brief moment, the thought that he'd died in whatever event had occurred in the station made him want to giggle hysterically, but it was swiftly replaced by his more rational side.

He didn't hurt. He was aware of sensation. When he tried to move his fingers, he could. If he was dead, surely all of that would be impossible.

Maybe it was just a power failure. And everybody else was too frightened to do anything.

Carefully, Ryan braced his hand on the bench, using it to steady himself as he rose to his feet. The urge to call out and find the others was strong. His mouth was open, the greeting already on his tongue, when the realization hit him that that would only draw the vampires straight to his throat if they had already arrived.

His jaw clamped shut, and his fist tightened around his stake.

They wouldn't get him that easily.

Using the bench as a guide, he stepped noiselessly to its end, trying to remember how the scattered people in the room were positioned when the lights had gone out. Nobody had been near him. Tala was probably the closest, but she had been in the middle of the room with nothing solid between them. The guard and the ticket cashier were off to his right, but that would mean—again—walking through open spaces without any way of knowing for sure that he was going in a straight line.

He needed lights, damn it. It wasn't like he could see in the dark like a...

His blood ran cold.

Vampires would be able to see perfectly well in this. They didn't need the illumination. They would be able to track the inhabitants of the terminal by scent or body heat.

It was going to be a bloodbath. And Ryan had walked right into the middle of it.

He took a tentative step forward. The sound of his sole scuffing along the floor seemed impossibly loud, and he froze before advancing any further. His ears strained to pick up any signs of an encroaching attack, but with his motions stilled, all he detected was the echoing silence.

Until a gurgled cry cleaved the air.

Ryan jerked toward the sound on instinct, the stake raised as his eyes scanned uselessly through the darkness. It was too low to be female and faded almost immediately. But it was the sucking that became audible with its dissipation that made the hairs stand up on the back of Ryan's neck. The vampires were attacking. They were going to pick victims off, one by one. Unless somebody did something soon, they were all sitting ducks.

"Do you really think we're that easy?"

The woman's voice rang out, the soft accent only heightening the disdain in the clear words. It was Tala, but before Ryan could wonder who it was she thought she was talking to, she shouted something in a language he didn't recognize. The sound of glass shattering immediately followed.

Blinding light flooded the terminal, so bright that Ryan averted his head and squinted his eyes to mere slits to ward it away. From random spots around him, pained screams buffeted his senses, and the scent of charring flesh began to burn his nose. He turned in the direction of the loudest and strongest, and blinked against the brilliant illumination to see a scarred vampire burning only a few yards away. His arm jerked, the stake ready, but the vampire was already half-ash, its body dissolving long before the threat was in biting distance.

Ryan blinked again. The world was a little bit clearer.

When he turned around, the screams had mostly faded, only a single vampire who had been trying to duck into the bathroom for safety still burning. Tala stood where he had last seen her, a stake in her hand as well, with broken glass scattered across the floor at her feet. Her face

was grim, but she was doing the same as he, scanning the room for signs of what had been going on.

It didn't make sense.

Most of the room seemed frozen, locked in some sort of catatonia, as if someone had put the world on pause. The old guard was in mid-scratch of his nose, and his lifeless eyes were fixed most determinedly on the clock. A woman with a baby asleep in a stroller was frozen in mid-reach as she bent over to pick up a stuffed animal that had fallen to the floor.

But Ryan was moving freely. As were other figures around the room.

There were five in total. Ryan. Tala. A young black girl with dreads down to her waist. A Japanese man in his forties, slim and small, with a bald head that gleamed in the artificial light. And another man, this one white, with a closely trimmed beard and black hair that hung down to his shoulders, built like a brick house.

They all had something else in common, too. Each of them was clutching a stake.

"What the fuck is going on here?" the black girl demanded. A strong New York accent masked some of the fear Ryan heard in her voice. "Who the fuck are all of you? And why does it look like high noon in the middle of fucking July in here?"

Tala briefly met Ryan's eyes before turning to the girl. "It's a sunlight spell," she said. "I use it in emergencies. It won't last."

That explained why the vampires had gone up in flames. He should have known that Tala would have a trick like that up her sleeve.

The Japanese man approached her, stopping a few feet short before giving Tala a curt bow. She returned the greeting, and the exchange that followed raised even more questions for Ryan, like how she knew the man and what they were saying. After a few words, however, both heads turned to him, and he distinctly heard Tala utter his name.

The Japanese man bowed to Ryan.

"This is Katsu," she said, switching back to English. It was an introduction that was directed at everybody, and the others drew closer, gathering around Tala. "And it would appear that we are all here for a single purpose."

The black girl snorted. "Yeah, to kill some fucking vamps."

The outburst didn't ruffle Tala's calm composure. "You're the only

one here I don't recognize," she said. "But you're young, so you can't have been hunting for long."

The girl straightened, her strong chin jutting out. "Long enough to have more than a few notches in my stake," she proclaimed. "The name's Noni, and this is my fucking town."

"To which we've been invited apparently. I'm Tala Mamola. Katsu, I've introduced already." She nodded in Ryan's direction. "That is Ryan Nixon. And—"

"Scott Ammadon." He appeared suddenly at Tala's side, towering over all of them. Ryan had the irresistible urge to stand straighter. "And maybe you should have stayed home for this one, little girl. This isn't a party game."

Ryan caught the tightening of Tala's jaw and frowned. The comment had been meant for Noni, but Tala had taken it more than a little personally. She'd also been prepared to introduce Scott, which meant she knew the man. There was history there, beyond the fact that she recognized him as a hunter.

Soft words from Katsu diverted Tala's attention and she spoke with him for a moment while the others waited. He pointed toward one of the platform exits. All eyes turned to follow the path of his finger, and Ryan's stomach dropped when he saw the male body lying crumpled on the ground.

It was another face he recognized, though now it was slack in death. Oliver Waits. The hunter who'd trained him. Ryan wanted to throw up, but shock had his system refusing to cooperate.

Oliver's was the gurgled cry he had heard. The vampires had picked off the prey closest to the exits first.

"This is a joke," Scott muttered.

Tala whirled to face him. Though he towered over her by at least a foot, the power in her muscular body made her bristle enough to make Scott take a half-step back. "You can always leave if you want," she spat. "You are *so* good at that, after all."

His lip curled into a sneer. "Only when I've got good reason."

"Which would be just about anything, if I remember correctly."

"Whoa, let's back it up here." Though the last thing he wanted was to get into the middle of what was incontestably very personal business, Ryan stepped forward, placing himself between the pair. "Obviously, something's going on. Or am I the only one who thought there was a clan

meeting going on here tonight?"

Reluctantly, Tala tore her attention away, her glare softening only slightly as she met Ryan's eyes. "You're not the only one," she conceded.

"And there's magic at work, magic more powerful than your sunshine spell." When it looked like she was going to argue again, he held his hands up in surrender. "Which was great, by the way. Very ingenious. Saved our asses, at least for now. But not the point."

"Someone's put the whole joint in lockdown," Noni commented, her dreads swinging around her shoulders as she looked around. "But how come the vamps only went for the one white dude?"

"That one white dude was a hunter, too," Ryan said tightly. "For some reason, the vampires aren't interested in just any prey tonight. They want us."

"They want us dead," Tala corrected. "This is about eliminating their greatest threats."

Scott snorted. "No offense, sweetheart, but you're not exactly—"

The rest of it was cut off when Tala flew past Ryan, a blur of motion, and slammed the heel of her hand into Scott's solar plexus. The larger man choked and stumbled backward, not quite falling but losing enough of his balance to allow Tala to do a leg sweep that landed Scott on his ass. The heel of her boot came down on his throat, and the fury in her dark eyes was so reminiscent of the last time Ryan had seen her that a shiver ran down his spine.

"I'm not exactly *what*?" she asked Scott.

Katsu barked out a single word, and though Ryan didn't know the language, there was no mistaking the chastising tone. Tala immediately stiffened, her foot lifting from Scott's throat, and in the next second Scott grabbed her ankle and pushed her off, forcing her to do a back flip in midair in order not to land on her head.

Katsu spoke again, this time coming to Ryan's side to prevent any more fighting. Everybody looked to Tala to translate, but all she did was shake her head.

"Well, I don't know about you people," Noni said, tucking her stake into her waistband, "but I'm out of here. I didn't show up to be a sitting duck for a bunch of crazy vamps."

Nobody stopped her as she turned and bolted for the front exit, but just as she stretched out a hand to open the door, the wall shimmered and sparked, the entire room pulsing as if taking deep breaths. Noni

screamed the split second before she was thrown away from the exit, landing over twenty feet away on her upper back with such force that her head snapped back and hit the floor.

Tala was the first to run to her, with Ryan right on her heels. By the time they were crouching at her side, Noni was already struggling to push herself upright, wincing with every new flex of muscles.

"They put up a fucking forcefield?" It was said with such youthful incredulity that it was hard not to smile. "Are they crazy?"

"Lie down," Tala said. Her nimble hands pushed Noni back to the floor, slipping around the back of her head to feel for injury. Her mouth was grim as she explored, but when she pulled away her fingers were clear of blood. "You probably have a concussion, but the skin's not broken and I can't feel any fractures in your skull. You need to take it easy, though."

"Yeah, well, tell that to the vamps who've locked us in here." Pushing away their hands, Noni unfolded away from the floor, swaying as she rose to her feet. She didn't refuse the arm Ryan snuck around her back to help her return to the group, though as soon as they were there, she collapsed on the nearest bench. "So what's the what? These vamps want their very own dollhouse of vampire hunters? Because that's just fucking weird."

"They corralled us," Ryan said. "They want us all dead."

Scott rolled his eyes. "No shit, Sherlock."

"They've used a stasis bubble." Tala's voice was still even, in spite of her earlier fight. Ryan hadn't seen her in action since she'd saved his life at Purdue, but the memory of her cool efficiency, her deadly accuracy, lived on in his dreams every single night. His memory hadn't failed him. "They've created a temporary holding cell for us. It stops time for others not affected by the spell, which is why everyone else appears to be frozen."

"How long do these bubbles last?" Ryan asked.

"Several hours, usually. It depends on the strength of the spellcaster."

The lights flickered and dimmed.

"Damn it." Tala looked down and scanned the floor. When her gaze came to settle on a larger piece of glass, she stepped to crush it under her heel. The artificial illumination she'd provided immediately brightened again, but her face was anything but pleased when she turned back to the

group.

"We're running out of time," she said. "The vampires have done something to the power so that we can't fight as well, and my sunlight spell won't last much longer. We need to find a way to restore it."

Ryan nodded. "Sounds like my cue." At her curious glance, he shrugged. "Vampire hunting doesn't exactly pay the bills. In my downtime, I'm an electrical engineer. I wasn't at Purdue to party, you know."

Though he'd hoped that his reference to their first meeting might break the ice between them a little, Tala ignored it, choosing instead to regard him with that piercing, black gaze. "I'll come with you. We need to stay in teams." She spoke a few words in Japanese to Katsu, who nodded and immediately moved to sit with Noni. In front of Scott, though, she paused.

"Can you play nice and help Katsu keep an eye on the kid?" she asked.

"Hey!" Noni protested. "Nineteen is not a kid! It's fucking legal!"

Everybody ignored her outburst. "Why do I have to stay?" Scott argued.

"Because if the spell dies before we get lights on, the vamps will come back. And better to have one of you guarding the kid while the other takes any of them on." Tala glared. "Unless you're still only in it for the chicks and attention, in which case, I hope you fall on your stake in the dark."

His mouth tightened, as did his grip around the piece of wood in his hands. "Be fast. I'm not in the mood to lose my life on a babysitting job."

Tala didn't stop to watch him retreat to stand next to the other pair. She grabbed Ryan's arm and began dragging him away from the middle of the room, toward a narrow door marked *Private*. He kept his mouth shut until she shoved the door open and hauled him through, but when it slammed behind them, leaving them in pitch black again without the sunshine spell to guide the way, he dug his heels in.

"Do you know where you're going?" he said. He felt a little ridiculous talking to the dark, but the curling of her fingers around his arm helped dispel some of his hesitancy.

"You mean you showed up to what you thought was a clan meeting without learning the layout of the place they were using?"

Her voice dripped with disdain; she might as well have screamed,

"Amateur!", and been done with it. It was enough to put Ryan on the defensive. Tala might still be the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, but he wasn't some Hoosier straight off the farm.

"Considering I just found out about it yesterday, flew all night from Phoenix to land this morning at LaGuardia, and spent half my day arming up, I don't think I did too badly just being here in the first place," he snapped.

"Except now you're a hostage."

"So are you. And what good would knowing the blueprints of this place have done you if you didn't have me to help you get the power back up?"

She fell silent at that, and Ryan regretted not being able to see her features. The fact that she didn't automatically have a comeback surely meant he'd scored a point in whatever contest of wills she was waging, but without visual confirmation, he had no way of being sure.

"Let's go," she said after a few seconds. Her grip tightened as she began to lead him slowly down the hall. "We don't have time to waste here."

Ryan put his other hand to the wall to feel his way along. She was right. There was a job to be done, even if it wasn't the one he'd set out that night to do. And, he got the distinct impression that Tala Mamola had just decided he wasn't as green as she'd originally estimated.

That was an impression Ryan wanted to foster. After all, she was the entire reason he was even a vampire hunter in the first place.

* * * *

It didn't matter that it was night, or that winter was making its presence known early that year, or that he'd forgotten to grab a heavier coat before leaving the dorm. What mattered was that Ryan was late, and that Jeannie was going to be pissed, and that if he didn't get his balls across campus in the next five minutes, she was going to leave without him and he could say goodbye to the night of debauchery that he'd had planned for them, the night he'd spent the past two weeks organizing. She was going to be leaving for her home in Maine in three days for Thanksgiving, and if he wanted any quality time with his girlfriend before she got sucked into the drama of high school sweethearts who still lived in their hometown, he needed to get it now.

So he ran. He cut across lawns, he ducked between buildings, he used the fire exit that was always propped open for smokers at the back

of the theater, in order to get to her dorm in time. He never heard the footsteps behind him. He never heard the whispers. All he heard was the tympani of his heart in his blood and the nagging voice of his high school gym teacher in the back of his head, yelling at him for being so out of shape and running like a girl.

Ryan caught Jeannie walking down the front path in front of her dorm. He was out of breath, and his sweat-soaked skin made his thin shirt stick to his back, in spite of the icy chill in the air. She, on the other hand, looked as perfect as always, not a hair out of place in her short, blonde cap, her make-up dramatic but expertly applied. Her blue eyes flashed at him in anger, and she jerked out of his grasp when he tried to stop her from walking away.

"You do this all the time, Ryan! You make me wait for you, and then you think you can just waltz in whenever the hell you feel like it."

"You think this was waltzing? I can't even breathe here."

But trying to turn his tardiness into a joke didn't make her laugh as he'd hoped, and Jeannie flounced past him, the hard soles of her boots clicking on the walk as she marched toward the student parking lot.

"Let me explain—"

"Don't bother. We're done. I'm done."

They were on the edge of the lot, and he was just reaching to try and grab her arm one more time, try and make her see reason, that he loved her and he could be better, he really could, when the shadows erupted in a flurry of snarls and leather. The horizon tilted in front of him when strong hands jerked him back by the shoulders and tossed him to the ground.

Ryan barely had time to see something dark jump at Jeannie before a body was on top of his, pinning him to the half-frozen grass. He heard her scream, though, because it tore through the night, tore through his skin, shredded his heart as he heard it get cut off in a wet gurgle.

"Jeannie!"

A hand clamped over his mouth, and he turned terrified eyes to the figure holding him down. The sandwich he'd scarfed down before bolting for Jeannie's threatened to come back up when he saw the corpse-gray skin and the snarling fangs and the red-pupiled eyes, but there wasn't any time to contemplate the churning of his stomach before his sense of survival kicked in.

He wriggled beneath the legs that were clamped around his hips,

and though his sudden movement jarred the body of—let's face it, it was a vampire, whether he wanted to believe in Dracula or not—it didn't dislodge it. If anything, his fight seemed to amuse the monster, and a sickening smile made its lips spread over its fangs.

"Do that some more," it said. "You'll taste even better with the fear running through your veins."

Reason would have told Ryan to stop, but reason had fled the building as soon as he'd heard Jeannie's death cry. The vampire rode his writhing body for several seconds before the hand around his mouth tightened, pushing upward to block off the passage of air through his nose.

"Okay, I'm bored now," it announced. "Let's eat."

"Let's not."

Ryan didn't have time to register the female voice as anything but not-Jeannie before the vampire was twisting around on top of him, seeking out its owner. The hold over Ryan's mouth loosened enough for him to gasp for air, and then it was gone entirely, leaving behind a shower of ash that had him choking even more than when he'd been suffocated.

Rolling onto his hands and knees, he coughed and gagged, clearing his lungs before lifting his head to see what was happening. The vampire who'd attacked him was gone, but the one who'd killed Jeannie was in full battle mode with a dark-haired dervish, her slim body twisting and dancing so gracefully that it didn't even look like a fight. His eyes darted to Jeannie, lying discarded on the concrete like a broken doll, and the ash that coated his throat mixed with the bile that rose from his gut, making him heave into the grass.

By the time he looked up again, the second vampire was gone, and the dervish was crouching by Jeannie's body, feeling for a pulse.

"Is she dead?" he called out.

The woman straightened. "Yes. But she did not drink so she will rest."

"Rest?" Hysteria drove Ryan to his feet, and he lurched toward the curb. "She's dead! That's not resting. That's murder."

"To a vampire, it's called survival." She lifted her head. The eyes that met his were like black marbles, catching glints of moonlight to gleam in the darkness. She had to be the same age he was, Ryan realized with shock. And yet, she moved and spoke like someone centuries older.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he replied automatically, even though he was far from it. But her query laid the permission for his flurry of questions to explode. "Who are you? What are you? What the hell just happened here?"

At his almost belligerent outburst, she lifted her chin. The fresh angle cast the streetlight across her delicate features, a long nose, high cheekbones. The dark skin and slight slant to her eyes suggested a non-Caucasian background, but all Ryan knew was that she was likely the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"I saved you," she replied, her tone suddenly crisp. For the first time, he noticed the accent in her words, like English was a second language or even a third. Exchange student, maybe? "I am sorry I could not save your girlfriend. I did not intend for either of you to die."

His mind whirled. She hadn't answered either of his first questions, and those were the ones he needed the most right now. "So you knew they were going to attack us," he fished.

"I knew they would attack someone tonight, yes."

"And you just let them."

"I needed to be sure they were the ones I was after."

"By letting them snack on us? Who the hell does that kind of thing?"

Her mouth thinned. "Someone who does not wish to kill innocents, for one," she snapped. She tucked the wooden stake she still cradled in her hand into a narrow pocket in her cargo pants; if he hadn't seen her do it, he wouldn't have even suspected it was there. "Savor the chance you've been given. Not everyone gets a second one."

He watched her march off through the parked cars. Her head was high, her spine straight, but her hands were clenched into fists at her side. She had gone almost twenty feet, before he broke into a run after her, grabbing her arm and forcing her to a stop.

"I don't know who you are," he said. "Or why you did what you did."

There was a shine in her eyes that hadn't been there before, enough of a glistening to make him loosen his hold on her. "My name is Tala Mamola," she replied, carefully extracting herself from his hand. "And I did it because I had to."

Ryan remained rooted in his spot as she backed away. It wasn't until the night had swallowed her up that he murmured, "Thank you."

** * * **

So often, it felt like he'd lived two whole lifetimes since that night at Purdue, but here, in the darkened back hall at Grand Central Station with Tala's small hand warm and firm around his wrist, it could have been yesterday. He'd changed his whole existence after meeting her, seeking out answers and finding Oliver instead. It had been Oliver who had told Ryan about Tala's family heritage, about how vampire hunting was her whole life, her entire legacy. She left her home in the Philippines whenever a threat arose elsewhere, even when it took her to West Lafayette, Indiana. It had been Oliver who'd agreed to train him, to teach Ryan everything he knew about vampires and how to kill them.

Now Oliver was dead. And Tala was back. And Ryan didn't know what was going on anymore.

They had wound through too many corridors for him to keep track of, meandering into the bowels of the station, when Tala finally spoke again.

"I am sorry about Oliver. I know he was...your friend."

Her subdued voice was warmer than it had been, a melodious balm in the chaotic darkness. A knot unraveled in Ryan's gut, and he let out a long, low sigh.

"Some friend I am," he said. "I didn't even know he was going to be here."

They turned a corner, and in the distance he saw the red glow of an emergency exit light. It revealed the curve of Tala's head in front of him, but her gaze was firmly fixed ahead, as if she didn't need the scant light to see.

"None of us knew," she said. "If we had, we would have been far more organized, I think."

"At the very least, I would've saved money, hitching a ride with Oliver." His tone was light, and though he heard her small chuckle, he knew his joke had done little to dispel the somber mood. "I don't know any of the others, though," he continued. "Just you."

"Katsu is an excellent hunter. He'll be valuable if there's a fight."

She didn't elaborate on Scott, and she obviously knew him. If she thought she was going to get off that easy, she had another think coming. Ryan had long ago given up the notion that the unknown was acceptable.

"So what's the deal with you and Scott?" he asked. Maybe it was a little bit of jealousy that prompted him to ask as well. The other man had had a taste of the woman who had obsessed Ryan's thoughts for a

decade. "I'm guessing you're not on each other's Christmas card list anymore."

He heard her breath, felt it take life like an entirely separate creature between them. "We used to hunt together. And then we lived together. And then we didn't do either anymore."

"Because he left you or you left him?"

"Does it matter?"

In the darkness, Ryan shrugged. "It helps in figuring out who's playing on whose side. Like that Noni. She's a fireball. I wouldn't pick her last for my team."

Tala snorted. "She's a child."

"She's nineteen."

"A child."

"You couldn't have been much older that that when you saved me at Purdue."

She stopped so suddenly that Ryan ran into the back of her. Tala stumbled, letting him go so that her hand could fly out to the wall to steady herself, and then whirled to face him, the ends of her hair whipping across his face.

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

Ryan frowned. "I told you. Because I heard about—"

"No."

She pressed a palm to his chest and shoved hard, pushing into the wall. It knocked the air a little from his lungs, but the last thing Ryan wanted was to get into a fight with Tala. In the dark. In a place locked down by vampires.

But most importantly, not with Tala.

"When I heard you were hunting vampires," she said, "I didn't believe it. I thought, he's trying to get revenge for the ones who killed his girlfriend. And then I thought, lucky girl, for having a man love her so much that he needed to do such a thing. But you didn't stop. And you didn't get killed. And I don't understand why you would choose to do such a thing if you didn't have to. So tell me, Ryan Nixon. Why are you here?"

He wished it wasn't so dark. He wanted to see her face, see if she looked as confused as she sounded. That line was probably back between her brows, and the fine bow of her mouth drawn into a moue that begged to be kissed.

But she had asked a question of him, and he shook himself from his wayward thoughts to focus on the reality of her words, not the ephemeral beauty of his dreams. What was it again? *Why are you here?* Once upon a time, Oliver had asked the same question, so giving her what she wanted was easy. It just wasn't simple.

"Because I got a second chance," he said. "Because people shouldn't have to rely on getting second chances."

First Tala's hand disappeared, then the heat of her body as she stepped away. The red light from the far end of the hall just barely outlined the side of her face, not nearly enough to discern anything more than the fact that she was looking at him. He'd been wrong. *Now*, he wanted to see her. He'd wanted to tell her what she'd taught him for over ten years, and it wasn't fair that he was denied her reaction now that he had.

"What we need is up here," she said. Apparently they were done with the conversation. Back to business. Disappointed didn't even begin to describe how he felt. "I have another sunlight spell to give you light to work, but it's very small compared to the one I used in the terminal. You'll only have five minutes to restore power. Is that going to be enough?"

Ryan pulled himself off the wall. "Shouldn't you have asked me that before we left?"

"Is it going to be enough?"

"Yes, but—"

"We mustn't waste any more time then." Unerringly, Tala found his wrist again and headed back down the corridor. "The sooner we get back to the others, the safer we're all going to be."

When she stopped this time, he was prepared for it and hung back out of her way as she fiddled with the door knob. If it was locked, she gave no indication that it gave her any trouble. The slight creak in the hinges as she pushed it open came soon enough. Tala led Ryan inside, only releasing him when the door clicked shut behind him, and said a single word, the same he'd heard her cry out in the terminal. Glass shattered, and a dull yellow light filled the small control room.

The first thing he saw was that Tala's hand was bleeding.

When he moved forward to help her, she immediately backed off, tucking into a corner as far away from him as possible. "Get the power back on," she ordered. She dug around in her pockets and pulled out a

dark piece of cloth. "Don't worry about me. We don't have time for that."

Ryan bit the inside of his cheek to keep from arguing with her. It didn't take a genius to see that she hadn't dropped or thrown her crystal or whatever it was that released the sunlight. She'd broken it with her hand to keep from accidentally hitting Ryan. As thoughtful as the gesture was, it was a little annoying to think that she wanted to protect him from something as minor as some little cuts when there were god knew how many vamps crawling through the place. He turned to the control panel on the wall before his annoyance became even more evident.

It didn't take five minutes to get power back up. It took thirty seconds. Whatever vampires were running this operation didn't know jack about electricity or power grids. Ryan was almost annoyed.

Tala was still wrapping her hand by the time he turned around. "Why was that so easy?" she asked.

He wondered if there was anything she didn't find suspicion in. "Maybe because I'm good at what I do?"

"Let's get back to the others," she said, ignoring his tone. Catching the end of her makeshift bandage in her teeth, she swiftly finished tying it off before turning back and yanking the door open again. "We'll need to—"

Ryan saw it before she did, but his dive to pull her out of the way was slower than the vampire's lunge on the other side of the door. With a snarl, the vampire snatched her out of the entrance, twisting her in his arms so that her back was to his chest and his forearm tight around her neck. Ryan only caught a glimpse of his fangs before the pair disappeared from sight. He didn't need to see more. His body reacted on instinct.

The stake was in his hand before he made it through the door. Tala struggled against the vampire's superior strength, but the position he'd placed her in made it difficult for her to get free, especially with her injured hand. Her heel lashed backward, connecting with his shin, and while the vamp grunted, he didn't let go or stumble as he continued to drag her down the hall.

Ryan ran. The narrow corridor didn't give enough room to go around the pair, but Tala saw his approach and curled in on herself, creating as small an obstacle as possible. He angled to the side, but when the vampire countered in the same direction, Tala suddenly lifted her legs from the floor. Ryan dove at the same time the vampire stumbled.

His shoulder slammed into the demon's knees, sending all three of them to the floor, but he barely noticed the way Tala twisted off the vampire's chest. He was too busy burying his stake in the creature's heart.

They crumpled to the floor when the vampire disintegrated into ash. His legs sprawled over Tala's, and when Ryan tried to find the floor to push himself up, his hand encountered the soft flesh of Tala's hip instead. He froze. It was as inviting as he'd ever dreamed, and his cock hardened against his thigh. Brief flashes of how she would feel writhing beneath him, of how she would taste, made staying like that very tempting, but then his better self kicked his lecherous self across his skull, and Ryan rolled off instead of indulging fantasies that were never likely to be realized.

Tala pushed into a sitting position, her back braced against the wall. She seemed oblivious to how he'd been touching her, her gaze fixed on him in careful contemplation. "I suppose this makes us even."

His mouth was open with a smart retort when he saw fresh blood staining her bandage. "We need to get you washed up," he said. He lurched to his feet and held out his hand to her. "Your blood is going to attract every vampire in the place."

The look on her face said the last thing she wanted was his help, but Tala accepted his offer anyway, her grip surprisingly strong. She took one step and promptly crumpled to the side, crying out in startled pain. Ryan's arm shot out, scooping around her waist to pull her back upright.

"What's wrong?"

Tala scowled. "I think I twisted something," she said. Gingerly, she tried putting her foot back down, only to jerk it back again as soon as she started applying pressure. "Damn it!"

"Even more reason to find someplace safe to clean you up." Firming his hold, he shouldered more of her weight, though her muscles were tense enough to make it difficult. He sighed in exasperation. "Stop being such a baby and let me do this!"

"I'm not—" Her jaw clamped shut, her nostrils flaring. After taking a deep breath, Tala said, "The others are in danger. We need to go back to them."

"So we have two invalids to guard? I don't think so." Exerting his strength, Ryan began dragging her down the hall. "Now are you going to tell me where there's a bathroom in that blueprint memory of yours? Or am I just going to wander aimlessly and hope we don't run into another

vamp because you're leaving a trail of blood crumbs wherever we go?"

The answer wasn't long in coming.

"Behind us. Left. Halfway down the hall."

Ryan did the reverse without speaking. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless. He would take whatever he could get.

* * * *

The light in the bathroom was unflattering, casting a sallow shadow across Tala's skin, highlighting circles beneath her eyes he hadn't seen in the terminal. She hadn't said a word since telling Ryan where the bathroom was, and for the first time since spotting her, he wondered if she was all right. She seemed tired, more tired than she should have been considering her injuries. And the way she sat silently on the edge of the counter, letting him clean and rewrap her hand, was nerve-wracking.

"I'm kind of glad I saw you tonight," he said, desperate to shatter the calm. He realized how it sounded as soon as the words escaped, and immediately backpedaled. "Not in the way that I'm glad we're trapped or that you got hurt, but that you were here at all. I've been hoping to see you again for years now."

Her black eyes fixed on him, her mouth unsmiling. "You don't have to say thank you. We're even, remember?"

Ryan shook his head. "It isn't about gratitude. When Oliver told me about some of the things you've done, about your family..." He shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. Maybe silence was better. "I guess you could call me a fan, though that makes me sound fifteen and way less cool than it feels like in my head."

Her lips twitched. "You're a very weird man, you know that?"

Grinning, he let go of her hand and crouched at her feet, ready to examine her ankle. "I've been called worse."

Tala lapsed into silence again as he slipped off her boot and sock. She'd been right. She had twisted it. Her ankle was already swelling to twice its normal size, and there was a nasty bruise forming on her instep.

He grasped her heel and toes carefully and looked up. "I'm just going to rotate this and see if there's anything broken. It's probably going to hurt."

Tala nodded. "Just do it."

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip the second he started to turn her ankle, and her knuckles went white where she gripped the edge of the counter, but Tala didn't make a sound as he did the rotation. When he let

it go again, her breathing was a little quicker, but she simply gazed at him in expectation.

"Not broken," he announced. "But definitely hurt. We need to get it wrapped to keep the swelling down."

Tala exhaled and seemed to deflate. "I'm going to be useless when it comes to a fight."

Ryan straightened, but couldn't bring himself to move away from where he stood between her legs. Her heat, even in the sterile bathroom, was magnetic. "I find it very hard to believe that you could ever be useless."

"You don't know me very well, then."

"And maybe you're selling yourself short."

"Why do you keep saying things like that?" Her eyes searched his, but what she hoped to find, he had no clue. "You don't know my life. You don't know my family. You know facts. Statistics." Her mouth curled into a sneer. "Scorecards."

"You're right," Ryan agreed. "I do know the facts. I know how far you've traveled to get to a vampire, and I know roughly how many you kill a year. I know that you saved your family six months ago from a very vicious, focused attack, and I know that the day after your father got out of the hospital, you were on a plane to Paris because the Clan Fournier was threatening to uprise." He leaned forward, his face just inches from hers. Through the scent of blood and antiseptic, the clean smell of her skin made his mouth water, drawing forth dreams he'd harbored for a decade. "You know what else I know, Tala Mamola? You are the single bravest woman I have ever had the fortune to meet, even as fleeting as our introduction was. And I know that I would do anything it took to earn your respect. Anything."

It felt good to get it out there. They were feelings he'd had for years, all wrapped up in the desire to share them. Getting it off his chest felt like someone had thrown open the curtains to blind him with sunshine.

Slowly, Tala shook her head. "It doesn't take bravery to do the only thing you know, Ryan." It was the soft way she said his name that made his chest tighten—without derision, without contempt, without anger. It was an acknowledgment of equality that he hadn't even realized he'd been hungry for until she gave it without his asking. "Maybe that's why you've managed to survive this long. Because you still have the power of faith backing you."

"I don't believe in God."

"I never said you did."

"Do you?"

"Believe in God?" Tala snorted. "All I believe in is the power of my hand."

The finality of her tone wrested the ounce of satisfaction Ryan had garnered and dashed it to the ground. She looked almost desolate, and in that desolation, so young and vulnerable that Ryan reacted without thinking.

He closed the distance between their mouths, ducking his lashes to catch one glimpse of her lips before touching them with his own. Her quick intake of breath was audible, and her muscles tense, but Tala didn't retreat, didn't push him away, didn't do anything but sit there on the edge of the counter and let his mouth work gently over hers. Ryan kept it simple, soft. It was enough to savor the delicate taste of her lips and to know that she wasn't fighting him. It was more than enough.

Then she touched him. Fingertips faint against his chest, as if she was bracing herself from falling over. And her mouth moved in tentative reciprocation, lips parting the smallest of fractions to allow the tip of her tongue to taste his.

"Tala..."

The utterance of her name shattered the spell, and she pulled back, regarding him with resignation. "This isn't the time or place for this," she breathed.

"I know," Ryan said. He pushed a strand of hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail back behind her ear. "I couldn't resist."

In spite of her declaration, she didn't move from her spot on the counter. "You should. I'm the last woman you want to be having those kind of impulses around. Just ask Scott."

The last thing he wanted was to be thinking of Tala's ex-relationships. "Scott's not here."

"No. He's out with Katsu and the child. We're wasting time not getting out there and trying to stop whatever it is the vampires have planned."

Ryan glanced down at their motionless bodies. "And yet, you're not moving."

"You're in my way."

"You're not the kind of woman who usually lets that stop her."

Tala pressed her uninjured hand more firmly to his chest and pushed him away. "I'm also not the kind who sits back while others fight for her," she said. "I want to get back to the terminal."

Though Ryan nodded, he didn't make any move to leave. "We still have to wrap your ankle," he said. "The swelling is just going to get worse."

She hopped down off the counter, deliberately keeping her weight off her sore foot. "I'll manage. Let's go."

The hardest thing he'd done all night was touch her after having tasted her kiss. But he did. Ryan slipped his arm around Tala's waist and shouldered her slight weight as she leaned against him. The impulse he'd had earlier returned with a vengeance, her flesh hot and pliant beneath his palm, but the closest he could come to indulging was to splay his fingers over the curve, molding her firmly into his side. It made walking difficult. It made thinking difficult. He didn't let it slow them down.

Backtracking through the halls was a vastly different experience than when they'd set out to restore power. Now, Ryan was faced with glimpses of people trapped by the stasis spell, people they'd passed without his even being aware. A woman frozen in mid-step. A janitor bowed over his mop as he wrung it out in a bright yellow bucket. How had they avoided running into them? he wondered. He glanced at Tala, but she seemed oblivious to their surroundings, her eyes distant. If there was a secret to how she'd done it, it was one she was going to keep.

Tala only spoke to give him directions, telling him when to turn, telling him which exits to take. The silence echoed around them, so that by the time they reached the door to the main terminal, Ryan was glad to be joining the others. It felt like he was stuck in a museum; even the sound of Scott and Tala fighting would be a welcome return to a semi-normal world.

There was only one problem.

The terminal was completely empty.

Tala stiffened at his side, breaking free to hobble toward the middle of the room. "Katsu?" she called out. The name bounced back at them, a ghost of its first incarnation that multiplied before finally dying out. She tried again, louder, but the result was exactly the same.

"Noni?"

Ryan circled in the opposite direction to Tala, eyes searching past the frozen figures in quest of the teenager. Calling Scott's name provided

the same fruitless response, and he quickly returned to the center of terminal where Tala was leaning against the bench they'd left them at.

"I don't see any extra dust," she jumped in. "I don't see any signs of a fight, or any reason at all why they shouldn't be here." There was a panicked gleam in her eye when she whipped her head toward Ryan. "Where are they? Did they get out? Why aren't they here?"

She was trembling when he took her by the shoulders. "Deep breath," Ryan said. "I'm sure they're fine. They probably just moved someplace a little less open—"

A screeching train cut him off. Almost immediately, the ground shook to match the vibration in the air. Both Tala and Ryan jerked, but before he let her go, the disturbances vanished with a split second of darkness.

In the next blink, the terminal was alive again. The old guard finished scratching his nose and then promptly sneezed, reaching into his pocket for a wrinkled handkerchief. The baby made a whimpering sound in its sleep as its mother replaced the stuffed animal in the stroller.

Ryan's gaze shot to the clock. Twelve o'clock. As he stared at it, it ticked over to 12:01.

"What happened?" Tala whispered. She was frozen in her spot, probably feeling much like Ryan and unsure about moving.

"I think it's safe to say the stasis spell is gone," he replied, matching her tone.

"But what does that mean? What did it accomplish?"

A heavy weight settled in Ryan's stomach. He wasn't sure what the vampires' specific plan was, but he was well aware that plenty had been accomplished. Oliver was dead. Tala was hurt. Noni, Katsu, and Scott were missing. If the vampires had hoped to thin the hunter ranks a little, they had more than succeeded.

The old guard flashed them a curious glance, his brows drawing together when he saw the way Tala was favoring her good ankle. He watched them for a solid minute, and when Ryan attempted to block his view, he stepped to the side in order to counter it.

"We need to get out of here," Ryan murmured, deliberately tearing his attention from the guard.

Tala gaped at him like he'd just suggested she strip in the midst of the entire terminal. "I don't leave people behind," she said. "If that's how you work—"

"I work it smart," he interrupted. "One. You're hurt. Two, we don't even know where the others are, and searching for them now is going to be a little bit harder with people around to actually try and stop us. And speaking of..." He twisted his body, placing himself between Tala and the security guard. "In about five seconds, Buster back there is going to realize you weren't bleeding before he blinked, and since I'm the only person in striking distance of you, he's going to pull his gun and try to be Dudley Do-Right. Be smart about this, Tala. Let me get you out of here."

Her eyes flickered over his shoulder, but Ryan didn't dare risk a glance back that might cast further suspicion on him. "I don't like it."

"Your objection is duly noted." Carefully, he took her elbow. When she didn't fight him, he took a little more of her weight and headed for the main exit. "We aren't going to forget what happened here, you know. We just have to be smarter than the vampires."

Tala sighed and rested her head for a moment against his arm. It might have been silly, but a thrill of excitement rippled through him at her warmth, even as fleeting as it was. There would be more to come, once he had her away from the terminal. Too much had transpired between them in the past...what? Two minutes? Half hour? The decade since she'd saved him and changed his life? It didn't matter. Too much had happened. Ryan wasn't going to let another opportunity pass him by.

* * * *

She didn't voice a word of protest when he instructed the cabbie to go to his hotel and not hers. Outside of Grand Central Station, Tala retreated into her thoughts, the faint lines in her brow more prominent with the gravity of what was consuming her. Ryan knew she was dwelling on his insistence to leave the others behind for now, but it was pointless to say anything to her. She would not be one of the world's best hunters if she didn't care about the people she was protecting. But she wasn't going to do anybody any good in her current state.

It gave him more time to appreciate just how beautiful she was, even if she did look tired. Tala reminded him of one of those flowers he'd see on those gardening shows he always flipped past. Proud and exotic and unattainable to the common man. And yet, she had allowed him to kiss her at the station. She had kissed him back. She had given him a taste, and while she might not have fully blossomed with the caress, she hadn't withered, either. There was still a chance that under other circumstances, in a gentler care without a threat hanging over their

heads, she would bloom.

Ryan was suddenly filled the overwhelming desire to make that happen.

When they arrived at his hotel, he guided her out of the cab without giving her room to argue with him, taking most of her weight as he helped her inside. He had picked the hotel for being the cheapest thing he could find in a reasonable proximity to Grand Central Station, but as they waited for the elevator and listened to the grinds and creaks of its motor, Ryan wished he was taking her somewhere nicer. They both deserved it after tonight.

Tala didn't speak until she was sitting on the end of his bed and Ryan was kneeling at her feet with the first aid kit he always traveled with.

"I owe you an apology." Her voice was low and tempered, and when he glanced up at her, he saw that her gaze was fixed on the wall over his head, like it hurt too much to look at him as she spoke. "I assumed the worst of you tonight, even knowing what I do, and you proved me far from right in doing so. I'm sorry I made the ordeal so unnecessarily unpleasant."

Ryan wrapped the Ace bandage around her swollen ankle. "The fact that the night turned out so bad was never your fault," he replied. "Let's face it. You don't know me, and as far as you're concerned, I'm a wannabe with a death wish for even attempting this kind of lifestyle. I think that justifies you going off the deep end once or twice."

"My family would be ashamed of my behavior."

"Yeah, well, your family isn't here." He secured the end of the bandage and set her foot down, sitting back on his heels. "Which is pretty good for me, actually. My room's a little small for all those people."

Tala tilted her head to gaze at him, her dark eyes as unreadable as ever. "I think I could live to be a hundred and never understand you."

"Funny, but I don't remember asking you to."

"You seemed rather adamant about knowing me back at Grand Central Station. I'm denied the same right?"

"You seemed to make it clear that you don't want to."

"That's why I apologized." She took a deep breath. "I was wrong."

Without looking away, Ryan rose to his knees, settling his hands on her knees. When she didn't flinch, he slowly skimmed up the top of her

thighs, feeling the smooth muscles beneath the fabric until he reached her hips and curled his fingers around them. "Why didn't you tell me to take you back to your hotel?" he asked softly.

"You didn't give me the option."

Ryan shook his head. "That doesn't make a difference, and you know it."

He pulled her closer, toward the edge of the mattress, and watched carefully for the first sign of reluctance. It never came, not even when the insides of her thighs pressed against the outside of his hips.

Slowly, he reached out and grasped the hem of her shirt. Tala didn't stop him as he pushed it up to expose her taut stomach, nor did she say anything when he lifted it over her head. His fingertips burned where they trailed over her bare shoulder, and when he found the thin line of her bra strap, Ryan turned the path of his hand back downward.

"Are we done tending my injuries?" Her voice was husky, sending a jolt straight to his cock.

"I think it's time to tend to less hurtful needs." He traced the upper satin edge of her bra. "I know you didn't believe me in the bathroom, Tala, but I really do think you're one of the most remarkable women I have ever had the privilege of knowing." He looked up at her through his lashes, though his hand continued to feather along her skin. "Don't believe it if you don't want to. But you changed my life."

The mask that had guarded her emotions up to that point melted away, stripping her down to the woman beneath the hard shell. Tala blinked once, and then twice. The fragile skin in the hollow of her throat was vibrating from the force of her pulse, but otherwise, she didn't move. Not until she grasped his shoulders and tugged him upward, forcing him up to her level.

The kiss was delicate, the faintest of brushes across his waiting mouth. He tasted her breath, hot and spicy, but when he parted his lips to deepen the caress, Tala retreated, skimming sideways so that the tip of her tongue tickled the corner of his mouth.

"I didn't tell you to take me somewhere else because I didn't want to be alone," she murmured. "I thought you might wish for the same."

"I do," he said, matching her tone.

Ryan smoothed his palms around her back, the power of her muscles rippling through him. His fingers jumped across her skin, the flawless canvas broken by irregular bumps and valleys. Immediately,

Tala stiffened and started to pull away, but Ryan locked her in his embrace.

"You don't think I know you have scars?" He tilted his head and bared the bite marks at the curve of his neck, waiting until she looked at them before continuing. "I'm good with mine, Tala, if you're good with yours."

Her attention flew back to his face, and her fingers trembled where they gripped his shoulders. Her mouth opened to speak, but rather than listen to her try and explain it all away again, Ryan crushed her to him, seeking out her lips for a kiss that would extinguish—if only temporarily—her doubts. It took a moment, then two, for Tala to respond, but when she did it came with a torrent, her nails digging into his skin even through his shirt, her teeth savaging his lower lip.

Ryan kissed her without letting go, strong hands molding over her back to find spots of tension to knead. He kept her mouth on his, even going so far as to knot his fingers in her hair to curl fingers into her skull when she attempted to explore elsewhere. He had wanted this for so long. He wanted it to last as long as possible.

Tala wrapped her legs around his hips, simultaneously pulling him closer while sliding forward to meet him. It ground his erection into the junction of her thighs, and though he worried about exacerbating her injuries, it didn't stop the deluge of sensation from rushing through him. Not the tight curl in the pit of his stomach when Tala scratched deep furrows down his back. Not the prickle of heat along his arms when she moaned his name, a whisper that wrapped around the pair of them to draw them closer. Not the ache in his chest when she finally broke away and looked at him, dark eyes burning into his.

"What?" he prompted when she didn't speak

Tala shook her head. "It's just...nothing tonight feels real. Or maybe it's felt too real. I don't know. It just..."

When the words failed her, Ryan brushed his lips over hers, wondering when they had gotten so swollen. "Don't worry about it," he said. "We deal with the unbelievable every day. A few hours where we forget isn't going to be the end of the world."

Steadying his arms around her, Ryan rose to his feet, carrying Tala with him as he went around to the side of the bed. He laid her down, letting her finally go so that she could stretch and get acquainted with it, then stood back to start divesting himself of his clothes and weapons.

After a moment of watching, Tala did the same, shoving her pants down her legs almost clumsily. His hands faltered at his belt when he saw her toned thighs, dark hair visible through the pale fabric of her underwear, and she sat up, knocking his hands from their work in order to strip him herself.

He didn't have time to tease her about her change of attitude before she was pushing his pants out of her way, taking his briefs with them and freeing his hard cock. Her eyes glittered, and she grasped him at the base, holding him steady as her tongue darted out and dragged across the wet tip.

Ryan hissed, but his pants at his ankles trapped him. "Tala, you don't..."

The rest was lost when she opened her mouth wider and swallowed him down, leaving Ryan to groan. He settled his hand on the back of her head and followed the motion as she began sucking back up his hard length. "Tala," he tried again, but a long, shuddering sigh wracked through him as she let her teeth scrape at the crown. His fingers tightened, pulling at her hair, but it did nothing to stop her.

Resting her hands on the taut muscles of his hips, Tala balanced swallowing his cock down with allowing him to guide her along, a fragile equilibrium that had him trembling far too soon. At first, she closed her eyes, but it didn't take long for her to open them again, looking up at him through her lashes. All traces of her irises were gone, her pupils blown to swallow any trace of color. If he'd had any doubts about her returning his desire, they were now gone. He simply didn't understand why.

Her expert tongue had his balls tightening far too soon. He didn't want to come this way, didn't want this to be about her getting him off so that he would roll over and leave her alone. He needed her to enjoy this as much as he was, which was the only way he found the fortitude to pull more strongly on her hair when she slid back up his length.

Tala looked up at him when he forced her to abandon his cock. "Why did you stop?"

How to explain? It wasn't worth wasting the time. Instead, Ryan pushed her back to the bed, his mouth fusing to hers in a desperate kiss she had no choice but to reciprocate. As he stripped her of the rest of her clothing, his fingertips burned where they dragged along her skin, and he abandoned it to get rid of his own shirt when he realized it was the last

thing separating them. Her hard nipples scraped across his chest, and he tore himself away from the promise of her hot mouth to seek them out.

Tala whimpered when he licked around the left one. "You...you don't have to do this."

He caught the tip between his teeth for a moment before glancing up at her. "Who said this was anything about have to?"

If she wanted to argue, she held her tongue, simply falling back onto the pillow as Ryan worked his way downward.

His hands sculpted the curve of her waist, long fingers slipping beneath her ass and the bed to hold her still as he licked along the twitching muscles of her stomach. It didn't take long for the trapped heat to scorch through his skin, but Ryan was too intent on tasting every inch of her to care about freeing his hold. He licked a path around her navel, dipping into the tiny indentation with the tip of his tongue. When she squirmed and tried to get away from it, he smiled, making a mental note about the ticklish spot for future reference.

Down and down he went, bypassing her mound to drag his tongue along her inner thigh. The scent of her pussy was rich and musky, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw the dark hair glistening from her juices. It was tempting to forego teasing her, learning what made her whimper, torturing her with sensations that brought the strongest responses, but Ryan held firm. He finished with one thigh to shift to the other, then used his hold on her bottom to lift her hips from the bed.

Tala's hands flew to the blankets, fingers clawing into the fabric to keep steady as she looked down the length of her body at him. Her throat worked, and her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. When she finally managed to speak, only a single word came out.

"More."

Ducking his head to hide his pleased smile, Ryan ran the flat of his tongue over her pussy. He meant it to tease both of them, but with the first taste, he tossed his sense of play aside in favor of something more satisfying. Setting her back on the bed, he let go of her ass to move his hands to the front, splaying them on either side of her opening to force her lips to spread. His heart pounded, his fingers grew slick, and before the opportunity overwhelmed him, he lowered his mouth to her wet passage.

She shuddered at the initial contact. The hands she'd used to root herself to the mattress flew to the back of Ryan's head, threading through

his hair as he traced around and along her pussy lips. Murmurs filled the room, but Tala spoke in her native tongue, the individual words unknown to him. Her tone was unmistakable, though. It encouraged him to press on, go deeper, explore the musky folds, until his mouth and chin were glistening from how wet she was.

Only then did he extend his exploration. To that point, he'd studiously ignored her clit, intent on fucking her with his tongue and sensitizing her to the point of madness. His scalp prickled from how tightly she clutched at his head, so in order to get her to relinquish a fraction of her hold, Ryan circled around her opening one more time while his hand slid up to take his mouth's place. It was a simple matter of a few inches for him to flick his tongue across her clit at the same time he buried three fingers into her passage.

Tala screamed. Her body arched away from the bed, and her legs scissored around his neck, drawing him in closer as her orgasm wracked through her. Ryan twisted his wrist, changing the sensations inside her, as he sucked her clit in between his teeth. He loved this part. Hearing the sounds a woman made as she came, tasting her on his tongue, was enough to make his cock throb and his body tighten. As soon as she began to come down off the high, he would grab a condom, slide up Tala's body, and bury himself in her pussy.

Tala beat him to the punch.

Even before her cries had died out, she was sitting up, clawing at his shoulders and neck in order to drag his mouth to hers. She whimpered at the first touch of their tongues, but the hard kiss was too fleeting for his satisfaction.

"You have something, right?" she rasped. Her eyes glittered with desire. "Now would not be a good time to tell me you don't."

"I do."

He pulled away to bend and reach for his pants, pawing through the pocket to extract his wallet. His fingers felt thick and clumsy as he searched through the contents, finally feeling the sharp edges of the foil wrapper buried amidst his receipts. Relief was a sharp pang as he pulled it out, replaced with amusement when Tala plucked it from his hand and tore open the packet.

Ryan groaned when she grasped his cock and rolled the condom down his length. Her hand was hot, her grip tight, and the promise of what it was going to feel like sinking into her wet depths made his balls

ache. He followed her when she laid back, still holding his shaft, and moved his hips accordingly as she guided him to her slick opening.

"I don't do rough," he said as he hovered over her. His eyes searched hers, hoping for understanding. "I can't hurt you."

Tala looped her arm around his neck and drew him closer to her mouth. "Just don't stop," she murmured. "That's all I ask."

A band tightened around Ryan's chest, and he could only nod before she was kissing him again. He sank into her slowly, deliberately, as gentle as he could handle without losing the edge of his hunger. When he was completely sheathed, he paused for only a moment before rocking in and out of her with long strokes. Tala never stopped kissing him, stealing his breath, stealing his heat, moving with him to match his thrusts. It was exactly what he had wanted. It left no room to contemplate the consequences of what had happened at Grand Central Station. It gave life to every dream he had ever had about her.

Ryan kept their pace steady and even, giving his hands the luxury of exploration. Fingers found hard nipples, nails scratched across sensitive skin, all of it worked together to leave her quivering beneath him. With his heart tripping, the world faded to nothing but Tala and her mouth and her heat and the growing certainty that nothing had felt so right in quite some time. When she squeezed around his cock, harder than she had yet, a ragged groan came from his throat, forcing Ryan to tear away from her lips and rest his brow to hers.

"Do that again," he murmured. It wasn't quite begging, but his need was undeniable, and Tala granted the request without hesitation.

This time, Ryan's groan was almost a growl. "The things you do..."

"There's more." Tala scratched her nails across his nape, seeking out his mouth again. "But I think I shall surprise you."

The husky promise made his strokes intensify, harder, longer. He felt his orgasm begin to curl deep in his gut, his balls tightening, and he wrapped her closer to him in desperate need of the contact. Ryan didn't quicken even as he screamed her name, and though his strokes became increasingly erratic, she arched under him with her second orgasm, a wordless cry spilling from her lips as her lashes fluttered shut.

The world erupted then. Inside, out, everywhere, with his cock jerking as he slammed into her one final time. His mouth went crashing back against hers, and Tala returned his shaken kiss with a matching fervor, smoothing her palms down his back.

They stayed like that for minutes on end, neither seemingly willing to break the connection that bound them. It was temporary—Ryan knew that—but in the time he was swallowing her down, in the space of the circle of their arms, it felt like more. It felt like hope, a fragile bird springing free of the nest to soar higher than anyone anticipated. He didn't want to let that go. In a world with so much death, and especially in the aftermath of their ordeal at the terminal, he needed that as much as he needed to breathe.

When he finally rose from the bed to dispose of the condom, Tala sank back into the pillows and watched him with heavy-lidded eyes. "Are you taking me back to my hotel now?" she asked quietly.

Ryan stopped halfway to the bathroom. The possibility hadn't occurred to him. "Do you want me to?"

Her walls were slowly coming back. They were almost visible as she erected them again. "I don't want to impose."

"It's not imposing. And that doesn't tell me whether you want me to or not."

It took a moment for her to reply. "I'd like to stay."

Ryan smiled and resumed his path. "Then you're staying."

He stripped the sticky condom off his cock and tossed it into the trash, washing his hands afterward. His reflection was a little startling. It wasn't that his hair was in disarray or that his face was still slightly shiny from her drying juices. It was the sated gleam in his hazel eyes that made him pause. There had been a few women over the years since Jeannie, but nothing permanent or long-lasting. His world wasn't conducive to it. It was more than his erratic schedule or the secrets he was forced to keep. It was the danger of losing someone he cared about again, someone who couldn't protect herself. He couldn't go through it again.

His gaze strayed to the slightly ajar door.

Tala could protect herself. Tala knew all the secrets already. Tala was someone he could love if he allowed himself the chance.

Hell, he was half there already. He'd been in awe of Tala Mamola since he'd first laid eyes on her. And he'd never wanted a woman more.

His step was slower as he returned to the bedroom, but the smile on his face faded when he saw she was no longer lying down. Instead, Tala sat at the desk, his laptop open in front of her, eyes intent on the screen.

"What're you doing?" he asked, coming up behind her.

"I saw your computer. I was wondering if there would be anything

online about what happened tonight."

That possibility hadn't occurred to Ryan, and he felt a little foolish for getting wrapped up in his lust instead of focusing on the problem at hand. "Let me." Gently, he pushed her out of the chair, switching places with her, and backed out of the news site she'd accessed. His fingers flew over the keyboard. "I know a few back doors. The media coverage is usually compromised in some way, so I always go straight to the source."

It took a few minutes, but he finally got into Grand Central Station's internal network. Most of it was extraneous, details about schedules, information on personnel and events, the occasional engineering request. A look at the server showed little activity as well, and a scan of what few e-mails were being bandied back and forth only said that the staff had far too much free time on their hands in the midnight shift.

"They don't even realize anything happened," Tala commented from over his shoulder. "How can they be so blind?"

"They're so blind, because we make the world so they can be," Ryan replied. He left the laptop open and logged in as he turned to look at her; he'd long ago fixed the security levels on his computer to make it next to impossible for anybody to trace a hacking back to him. "We'll check it again in the morning, but we should really get some rest now." He dared to reach up and stroke her cheek, pleased when she didn't pull away. "Do you need any painkillers or something to help you sleep?"

Her smile was wan, but he was just glad she smiled at all. "I'll be fine. Are you this protective of everyone?"

Returning her smile, Ryan rose and took her hand. "Only the ones who save my life." He pulled her to the bed and then into his arms once they were lying down. She rolled over so that they were spooning, and he buried his nose in her hair. "Sleep, Tala," he murmured.

He didn't know how long it took her. Ryan was out within the minute.

* * * *

Waking for Ryan was always a swift process. He had never been one to dawdle in bed, or hit the snooze button seven or eight times, or demand several cups of coffee before he was functional. It wasn't that he was a morning person, either. Since he'd started hunting, his sleeping patterns had shifted drastically. He simply didn't linger in that space between dreams and consciousness. He never had.

Waking the morning after the Grand Central Station debacle wasn't any different.

Well, except for one thing. He'd expected to wake up with Tala still warming him. Instead, Ryan was alone in the bed. And in the room.

Pushing back the blankets, he rose from the bed and immediately went to the bathroom to check to see if Tala was there. The door stood ajar, and the air was crisp and sanitized. She hadn't even showered before she'd gone. When had she left? He remembered falling asleep with her in his arms, and he remembered a tumble of dreams about chasing her through dark corridors, but he had no recollection of when she might have stirred or slipped out of the bed. He wasn't normally such a heavy sleeper.

A quick scan of the room told him all her clothes were gone as well. The only thing that was different was that his laptop was now closed. Maybe the light from his screensaver had been bothering her while she tried to sleep, he reasoned. Tala had obviously closed it before leaving.

When he opened it up, however, there was a sheet of hotel stationery resting on the keyboard. Tala's script was long and angular, but it was easy enough to read her note.

They found Katsu and the girl at Grand Central Station. Both dead. Off to check it out.

He barely made it to the bathroom in time. Even though there was nothing in his stomach to come back up.

When the guilty heaves had subsided, Ryan returned to the desk. Tala hadn't signed the note. He was a little disappointed that there wasn't even a greeting or mention of the night before.

Sitting down, he looked at his browser history to see what Tala had been looking at. The internal memos going back and forth were still open, detailing how an older Japanese man and a young black girl had been found slaughtered in the back halls of the station, but as Ryan scanned through them, one question quickly arose.

What had happened to Scott?

The reports of the bodies told him both Katsu and Noni had been drained. The vampires had gotten to them, in spite of his and Tala's hopes otherwise. Each had been found in entirely separate portions of the station, though. One was in the restaurant of the Italian restaurant/bar, Cipriani Dolci, while the other had been discovered by the cleaning crew in the bathroom next to the Central Market Grill. The

police had been called in, and a thorough search done of the premises for more bodies, but none were to be found. Not even Oliver's body had been discovered, and Ryan knew for a fact that he was dead as well.

Why had Scott abandoned Noni and Katsu? Had there been a fight? Had he fled the scene as soon as the stasis spell had been lifted?

None of the possible answers made him feel very good about the other vampire hunter.

Ryan knew exactly why Tala had gone out to investigate. There was no way she hadn't come to the same conclusions Ryan had, and given her acrimonious history with Scott, it was far more likely that she'd gone off in search of him. There were no more clues in his history to indicate where she would have gone, but he knew where he would start.

Where it had all started in the first place.

Grand Central Station.

* * * *

The place was a zoo.

News teams were scattered in clutches throughout the terminal, and everywhere he looked, another policeman was taking a statement or observing the people rushing about or disappearing through doors marked *Private*. Ryan stood inside the entrance, wondering if he'd made a mistake about assuming Tala would come back here at some point. There were too many people. If he knew nothing else about her, he knew that Tala was a private person with a strong dislike for civilians getting in her way. Add in the fact that it was daylight and there would be no vampires lurking about, and Ryan suddenly felt very stupid considering Grand Central a reasonable place to begin. It made no sense for her to come here.

It also made no sense for Scott to emerge unscathed from the entire incident. He needed to stop thinking about Tala—as hard as that was—and focus on the problem at hand.

Ryan walked around the edge of the terminal, eyes hopping from cop to cop until he found one he liked the look of. He approached with his most unassuming manner, hanging back until the burly policeman noticed him hovering at his elbow.

"Can I help you?" the cop asked. There was a weary edge to his voice that testified to how long he'd been around. If not one of the first called on to the scene, definitely one who'd come toward the end of a shift. He'd be easier to manipulate with his senses dulled.

Ryan pulled out his wallet. "I heard about what happened here on the news this morning," he said. "And now I'm all worried."

"About what?"

He pulled out the picture he wanted. Using the hotel's business center, Ryan had printed up a photo he'd found of Scott and trimmed it down to make it look like it lived in his billfold. He'd even bent down one of the corners to age its appearance.

"My friend was supposed to arrive last night, but I never heard from him," he lied. "I've tried calling his cell, calling our friends, but all I found out was that he was on the train when it left. I think something might have happened to him."

The cop took the picture and squinted as he looked at it. "This is your friend?" he said.

His suspicious tone made Ryan frown. "Yeah. Why?"

"His wife's already shown up looking for him."

Ryan froze, though he kept his features neutral. "His wife?"

"Yeah. Pretty girl. Asian, I think." He passed the photo back. "Her picture was better than yours. But there's no reason to worry. Your friend was here being questioned. Last I saw, the two of them were heading up to one of the restaurants to grab something to eat."

It had to be Tala. And she had found Scott.

Ryan's gaze strayed to the upper level as he slipped the photo back into his wallet. "How long ago?"

"Thirty minutes or so."

That meant they could still be there.

Thanking the officer, Ryan headed toward the escalator, trying to keep his pace slow so that he didn't look too eager. He wanted answers, damn it. The fact that Scott had been here for the police to interrogate—and not be seen as a witness or an injured party—made his skin crawl in warning. Something was going on, and he had to trust that Tala had found out what they wanted in order to shed some light on the situation. People they cared about were dead. Those deaths needed to mean something.

He was halfway up the escalator when he saw the couple approach the escalator going down. In the light of day, they made a striking pair, both dark-haired, both in prime physical condition. But the grim set of Tala's mouth and the tight grip of Scott's hand on her elbow told anybody who was paying attention that these weren't lovebirds. Scott

was practically dragging Tala onto the escalator. It had to be her fear of creating a scene that was stopping her from trying to get away.

Ryan caught Tala's eye the moment before Scott saw him. Scott halted, dragging Tala flush to his body, and immediately reversed direction, tearing her away from Ryan's scrutiny. It didn't matter. He'd already seen the panic in her eyes.

Stepping around the elderly man standing in front of him, Ryan took the escalator two steps at a time, weaving between the people riding it in order to reach the top as soon as possible. Scott and Tala were out of sight, but as soon as he was off, Ryan veered in the direction they'd disappeared, quickening his step to just shy of a run. The people he passed stared, heads turning to follow him as he bolted around the corner of the balcony.

When he saw Scott yanking open a service door, Ryan called out Tala's name. It grabbed their attention, and in the split second Scott looked in his direction, Tala elbowed Scott in the ribs, twisting out of his hold. He tried to snatch her back, but the people milling about were now watching the disturbance. Curious glances turned from Tala to Ryan. With a snarl, Scott let her go and vanished through the door.

Ryan caught Tala's upper arms as she rushed toward him. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"Scott set us up. The vampires cornered them last night, and he made a deal with them, in exchange for being allowed to walk free afterward." Her eyes were blazing, and she tugged at Ryan's hold. "We can't let him get away. We have to stop him."

He didn't disagree, but something about her tone made him pause. "So we'll tell the police. He's human. We don't have any authority over him."

"He killed Katsu and the girl!"

"No, vampires did that."

"He might as well have done it himself."

"I'm not saying you're wrong—"

Tala gaped at him as if he was a stranger. "I can't believe this doesn't make you angry," she said. "He's getting away now, even as we stand here and argue about this. Is that what you want? You'd let a murderer walk?"

His teeth clicked as his jaw clamped shut. No, it most definitely wasn't what he wanted. But he could tell from the look in her eyes that

she was ready to do it herself if Ryan didn't come with her.

"Fine," he said. He let her go and headed for the door. "But we're only catching him and turning him in. I don't kill people, Tala. And neither do you."

Thankfully, she didn't argue, rushing past him to reach the door first. She pulled it open wide enough for him to follow her through without having to wait and hold it for him, and took off down the hallway, the irregular rhythm of her feet against the floor the only indication that she was favoring one leg over the other. Her ankle was still bothering her, Ryan realized as he took chase. And yet, she continued on.

She simply amazed him.

He followed her around the corner and promptly ran into Scott's broad chest. Powerful hands clamped around his shoulders, whirling Ryan around and shoving him face-first into the wall. He took the brunt of the impact with his head, making stars dance behind his eyes, but as he blinked them away, he saw Tala standing a few feet away, unmoving, watching them both.

"I'm sorry," she said.

His ears were ringing, and air was becoming precious as Scott pressed his heavy forearm against the back of his neck. "Don't just stand there," Ryan rasped. He tried to lash back, but the hard wall of the other man's body was almost as immovable as a vampire's.

Scott laughed. "God, you really are that naïve, aren't you?" The cold whisper of metal filled Ryan's ear, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Scott open a switchblade that had to be six inches long. "She sold you out, asshole. To save her own skin." He snorted. "I don't even know why I have to bother with you. You're a fucking joke."

Tala's wide eyes jumped from Ryan to Scott. "You could still let him go," she said. If nothing else, the urgent tone of her voice sounded genuine. "You don't have to do this."

"And have the vamps after my ass instead? No, thank you." He used the blade to point at her. "And *you* better shut the fuck up before I change my mind about letting you go. Unlike some people, I try to honor my promises."

Tala paled, and her nostrils flared. "You don't have any honor. Otherwise, you would never have let them slaughter Katsu and the girl."

"And the way I see it, it's better to have at least one vampire hunter

still standing at the end of this nightmare than none. Or does your grand family tradition tell you to throw yourself to the dogs when the going gets tough? I could never keep track of all the bullshit you used to spout at me."

Ryan didn't know why Tala was engaging Scott in an argument, but he was grateful for the temporary reprieve. Every second counted. He just had to bide his time and wait for Scott's guard to lower enough to make a break for it. And try not to think about the implications of Scott's testimony about letting her off the hook.

"Let him go," Tala repeated. She took a step forward, but when she put her weight on her injured ankle, she winced and visibly faltered. Both men looked down at her feet as she leaned against the wall, edging closer like a wounded animal. "Don't damn yourself entirely, Scott."

"You shouldn't have traded your safety for his, then." Scott shook his head, and the pressure on the back of Ryan's neck increased until spots began to dance in front of his eyes. "Don't worry. I'll make it quick."

With his vision darkening around the edges, he wasn't entirely sure what he saw first. There was a flash of light catching off the blade in the corner of his eye. There was the flex of Scott's muscles as he braced even harder against Ryan. But then there was the blur of Tala's injured foot, lashing out within a hair's breadth of Ryan's ribs.

Scott's cry of pain was followed instantly by the disappearance of his arm against Ryan's neck. Ryan crumpled, twisting and crawling out of the way when Tala flew past. He looked back in time to see her pick up the knife she'd kicked out of Scott's hand, but before Scott could wrest it away from her, she rolled and slashed across the back of his thigh.

Blood spurted from the fresh wound, and Scott fell to one knee. Though his back was to Ryan, the string of obscenities that came from his mouth revealed his anger and frustration. He reached inside his jacket, the fabric straining across his back.

Tala was still turned away. She didn't see Scott reaching for what Ryan was sure was another weapon.

Ryan lunged at Scott's back, knocking him forward. The blood on the floor made him skid, and he fell across Scott's calves, trapping him from moving further out of the way. The second knife Scott barely had his fingers around went flying.

"You son of a bitch," Tala muttered.

Ryan saw her too late.

She buried the switchblade in the center of Scott's back, twisting it with a hard yank before pulling it back out again. Scott twitched once, and then slumped onto the floor.

Ryan scrambled away. His throat burned from the bile rising to sear it, and his gaze flew to Tala's pale face. "You killed him. My god, Tala, you actually killed him."

She turned away from him, but not before he saw the shine of unshed tears in her eyes. "He would have killed both of us," she said. Her voice was smooth, with no evidence at all of what she'd just done. "And he let the vampires kill Katsu and the girl last night in order to save himself. I did what I had to do."

Slowly, Ryan stood up. His knees were shaking, his hands even more so. He had killed a lot of vampires in the past decade, and he had seen a lot of people get killed at the hand of the same, but he had never been so involved in a human death before, even one that he couldn't argue was probably necessary. This was going to have consequences. The cops in the terminal would suspect him and Tala as soon as Scott's body was found. None of his information was on file, but that didn't mean he wasn't still terrified about being caught.

"Go now."

At some point in his ruminations, Tala had come around Scott to stand right in front of Ryan. He looked down at her hands, and while there was still fresh blood on them, the knife she'd used was gone.

"Go back to your hotel," Tala repeated. "This isn't your problem, Ryan. I'll take care of everything."

He shook his head automatically. "I can't just leave you here like this."

"You stay, and you'll be questioned."

"Maybe." He looked over her shoulder at the corpse again. "He said you sold me out. Was he lying, Tala?"

When he looked back at her, the shine in her eyes was gone. The tears were now slipping down her cheeks, though she did nothing to acknowledge them. "I let him think that I was doing that," she said. "I knew you'd come here. And I needed him to trust me so that I could get close enough to stop him."

That was it. No apology. Ryan didn't doubt for a second she would

do it all over again, given the chance.

"I'm assuming you know a back way out of here," he said.

"Of course," she replied softly.

As he followed her down the corridor, it took everything he had not to look back over his shoulder. He had Tala in front of him. That made it easier.

* * * *

He should have been packing. He should have been sitting at LaGuardia, waiting to board a plane to take him home. He shouldn't have been obsessively monitoring the Grand Central Station network for updates about what had happened to Scott, and he most definitely shouldn't have been debating going back to find Tala.

But he was. And with each passing minute, Ryan was that much closer to saying to hell with it.

The knock on his door made him jump.

Ryan disconnected and snapped his laptop shut. Another knock, a little more insistent, sent fire ants marching down his spine, and he slowly rose from the chair to answer it. Nobody had found Scott's body, or at least, nothing had been said about it in e-mails or security logs at Grand Central Station yet. But maybe the police were being more discreet about their investigation this time. Nobody else knew Ryan was here. He should have left when he had the chance.

He gripped the door knob more tightly than usual to stifle the shaking in his fingers. His heart leapt into his throat when he opened it, but not because it was the police, ready to arrest him on the other side.

Because it was Tala.

"I am beginning to think you're predictable in your unpredictability," she said softly.

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask the same of you." She glanced past him into the room. "May I come in?"

Ryan stepped back automatically, giving her room to enter. Some time since he'd left her at Grand Central Station, she'd changed her clothes, wearing jeans and a fresh t-shirt that molded over her upper body. A backpack slung over her shoulder made her look like a student, and when she turned to face him, her eyes were clear and dark again. Any trace of her earlier tears was gone.

"I owe you a thank you," she said.

He frowned. "For what? I didn't do anything."

"No, you were just yourself. As it turns out, that was exactly what I needed." She slid her pack from her shoulder and set it on the bed, unzipping the outside pocket and pulling out an envelope. Without a word, she held it out to Ryan.

He took it and pulled open the flap. His brows shot up at the contents.

"You have a passport, right?" Tala asked.

"Of course," he replied. "But what makes you think I'd want to go to Manila? I'm assuming with you."

The directness of his tone did nothing to sway her. "Because distance from this debacle with the vampires and Scott's treason will only be good for you. Because you go where you're needed, where you can do good, and there are just as many vampires in the Philippines as there in Arizona." She took a step closer, and her voice softened. "Because I would like you to."

"You were trying very hard to get rid of me this morning."

Tala shook her head. "I was trying to clean up the mess that I was partially responsible for. You can't hold that against me."

None of this made sense. He understood Tala's need to take control, and he appreciated that she felt responsible, but this added step in purchasing him a plane ticket out of the country left him perplexed. He had said so out loud before he could think not to.

"I came to New York, ready for this to be it," she said. "I was so tired of it all. Tired of the responsibility, and tired of not being able to have anything for myself. And then I saw you. I saw how much passion you still have, how much dedication. The way you treated me last night..." She closed the distance and touched his mouth with her fingertips. The soft gesture made his heart thud. "You're an amazing man, Ryan Nixon. And you've changed my life by coming into it."

He had thought those words so often in conjunction with Tala that it sounded weird hearing her say the same thing about him. *But I'm nobody*, he wanted to say to her. *You're the amazing one*. He didn't, though. He couldn't. Because there was no doubting the sincerity in her touch or tone.

Cupping her face, his thumbs stroked the hollow of her cheeks as he leaned down and brushed a kiss over her lips. "Everything I am is because of you." Her mouth opened to protest and he silenced her with

another kiss. "Why don't we compromise and say you get the finder's fee, okay?"

"Does this mean you'll come with me to Manila?"

How was he supposed to say no to her? It was impossible, and even more, it was unwanted. He wished to be with her, and she was offering him...what, exactly?

"Does this mean last night wasn't a one-time thing?" he asked carefully.

Tala leaned into him, her breasts soft against his chest. "Only if you want it to be," she replied. "But I would like the chance to find out if we could be even more."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "So would I."

Though she didn't smile, some of the tension in her face vanished, and a fresh light appeared in her weary eyes. "I look forward to hunting with you. I think my family will be very surprised."

He smoothed her hair back off her face. "Just hunting?"

"Well..." Hooking her fingers into his waistband, Tala backed up toward the bed, pulling him slowly with her. "That is all that I will let my family witness. You don't have an exhibitionistic streak I should know about, do you?"

Ryan laughed. This was the lightest he'd felt since landing in New York, even better than he'd felt after making love to Tala the night before. "I spend too much time already out in the open," he replied. "The last thing I want is to share what little privacy I get with the world."

"Me, too."

Tala tugged, and Ryan fell onto her, propping himself up along her length as she smoothed her hands down his back. "I didn't know you meant you wanted to start now," he teased.

"And why not?" The power in her fingers eased the remainder of the knots in his back. "We were each one. Now we're two. I don't see a reason to wait."

He bent and kissed her, harder this time, longer, tasting the sweet and salt of her mouth. "What about our flight?" he murmured.

"Leaves after midnight."

"So we have a few hours?"

Tala gazed at him with dark eyes, large and luminous. "We have as long as you want. As long as you'll have me."

Ryan smiled, and as he pressed against her, devouring her lips for

what was thankfully not the last time, all he could think was, *And now there are two of us.*

The next decade suddenly looked worlds brighter.

Scorpion's Orchid

by Eva Gale

Also by Eva Gale

101 Degrees Fahrenheit
Fortune's Fool

PHAZE FANTASIES IV

To Ann, whose eyes pointed out many holes. And to Selah. You asked for birth control, you got it. And to my husband, who explained the hormone precursors over and over again.

Chapter One

Dr. Martin Detweiller stared at the lab dish in front of him, wanting to shatter it on the wall. The liquid inside maintained its dark crimson color. He'd wanted—no, *needed*—a bubbling and color change to yellow. Without enough of the reactive agent, he wasn't going to get either result. He reached across the table, first seizing then crumpling the blood-purple petals and bulb of a *Rhizanthella slateri*, as his hand formed a tight fist.

Martin raised his fist to slam the table but pulled back just short of hitting it, unwilling to waken the boy who slept in the corner cage. Instead he dropped the crushed orchid to the floor and ground it beneath his heel. He'd teased every drop of liquid from the damned flower, the last of his supply. And it still wasn't enough—not enough to test the new formula, and certainly not enough to produce enough serum for Xavier. Or the dozens more like him that transformed and died on the city streets every month.

Doc pushed his aero goggles back on his head, scrubbed his face, and pulled his timepiece out of his vest pocket. He considered his options. While he didn't have another sample of the orchid, he had plans to get more. At a time in history where the private possession of any plant was a high felony, his attempts to buy the rare species had been thwarted by secrecy, higher bidders, and what appeared to be pure obstinacy on the part of the plant's seller. But this time, if Katerina Metrenko wouldn't sell the orchid to him—well, she'd learn just how desperate a buyer he'd become.

Besides, how could she report the theft of a flower she couldn't legally own?

This time he had been sure, completely positive, that it would work. He braced himself on the plank table and hung his head. The laboratory was silent except for the bubbles of the aquarium that held the squid, and the slight breathing of Canine.

Scorpicos were starting to mutate faster, at younger ages, and his theory used to be that the squid phosphorescence injections would settle in the venom gland and, when placed behind the revealing panel, light up. If he could locate the gland before it matured there were hopes he could operate and remove it, stopping the final transmogrification.

He bent down to stroke the Neapolitan Mastiff's slate fur and sighed.

So many adolescents were turning, and it was killing the ones who couldn't finish the change. He'd come across bodies that were half spider or scorpion, with random appendages, and the human half of them looking as if it had exploded, with bits of eviscera lying in globs around the body.

Derwold, his investigator and assistant, watched the city for him, collecting bodies when he could for study. It was a gruesome task, and they always buried the corpses after their investigations, hoping that it gave the dead youths a measure of peace. Derwold collected another for tonight, and by what he'd heard, tonight's body should be more intact than previous ones, which meant there would be more to dissect.

He was so close. He knew he was. In the last body he'd found what he thought to be a segment of the venom pouch, and tucked behind that was a small pea-sized gland. At first he thought it was just a nodule of fatty tissue, but after he preformed the biopsy, he discovered it contained a high amount of hormone. Something like a pituitary gland, but this hormone was more time released according to age.

That finding brought about a whole avenue of thought he'd never considered.

Seeds of knowledge were harvested from different places. One was from the old texts. Late one night while he was up reading he thought of the idea for a hormone precursor. A simple blood draw would show him where in the chain of hormones the youth was, and by locating the Scorpicos' hormone precursor, he could then know if the adolescent had the disease, and use the orchid compound he was working on as a vaccination. He could administer the serum to all adolescents, but if the youth didn't have Scorpicos, he would die from poisoning. If he did have it, Doc could save him. The other problem was that the hormone peak was different in every person. Some would change at sixteen, some at twenty.

Most days the responsibility was overwhelming. The heavy weight

of finding a cure sat on his shoulders day and night, and in the meantime more youths died

A rasp sounded from behind the blanket that was tucked in an alcove.

"Xavier, are you awake?" Doc set the aero-goggles down on top of a pile of chipped plates and walked back to the iron cage. Realizing Xavier was awake, he threw back the blanket he used to cover the cage.

Xavier's cage was a foot taller than Doc and reinforced with double rivets. Doc reached in and checked Xavier's pulse, making sure he was calm before he unbolted the cage.

"How long was I out this time?"

His voice sounded scratched and rough. Doc would have Mathilde make him some tea.

"Three days."

Xavier closed his eyes and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry." Doc took the hammered ring off the peg on the wall, the skeleton keys clanging, making Xavier wince. "I should have been able to make a more long lasting solution by now."

"You can't get it right all the time."

"I don't have a choice."

Xavier would never be saved unless Doc found a cure. But a vaccination was a start. The boy didn't understand the magnitude of what was going on and what it meant. But he was only nineteen, and who thought about the plight of humankind when they were nineteen? Xavier was supposed to be out dating, having fun, and planning his future. Not sitting in a cell at least twice a week as Doc injected him with a stabilizer made from another orchid that one day wouldn't work. Doc dreaded that day. As it was, Xavier used to get the shot every day, at the exact time, and now Doc noted that the time between shots was getting closer and closer. The slight ticks Xavier got beforehand started happening two to three hours earlier each week.

Time was running out.

He would do what he could to keep Xavier from turning completely, but Doc didn't have that much serum left. It was a fluke that no matter how he tried, he couldn't duplicate. His only hope now lay in the orchid shipment Katerina Metrenko would be making out of Grand Central Station later tonight.

Xavier tried to stand up and wobbled, grasping onto the iron bars to steady himself.

"Do you remember what happened when you started to change?" Doc stepped into the cage to brace him.

"No, I just remember being mad."

Xavier's skin was clammy and he blanched as he stood straight.

"At least you were able to get to the lab before the change completed." Doc led him out and held him up until Xavier's feet became steadier. He sat him down and went to the wall to pull the bell string, telling Mathilde to come up.

Xavier ran his hands down his arms and legs. Doc knew why. He checked to make sure there were no spider appendages or hairs left. That the total sum of him was Xavier.

"Doc, why was I out so long this time?"

His voice was shaking and thin. Piercing blue eyes and shaggy black hair studied his face. He couldn't lie, but he wanted to.

"The serum isn't working as well. We need to find the venom gland and remove it. Until then..." He scrubbed at his short hair. "Katerina has a shipment going out of Grand Central tonight. Derwold and I will go get the *Rhizanthella slateri*. I want you to stay here."

"But—"

"No. You will stay here." Doc glared at him. "Under no circumstances will you leave. Do you understand?"

Xavier hung his head. "Yes."

A soft knock came before the massive oak door opened. "Yes, sir?"

Mathilde stood in the doorway, her white bun hanging on the side of her head. Although she was slight, her heart was enormous and Doc considered her his mother. "Mathilde, Xavier has awakened. Do you have any of your soup?"

Mathilde's eyes brightened. "Why, surely I do. I was just making some in hopes that he would wake up." She glanced at Xavier protectively and gave Doc the once over. "And you look like you could use a bath and some food yourself." She shook her head, "Tsk, look at the state of this room. I have no idea how you work in this disorganization."

Her apron pocket sagged and she reached in, taking out a handful of paper wrapped candies. She put them in the bowl that always sat on the edge of the table. The door closed with a soft click behind her.

Xavier reached over and snatched one, unwrapped it, and popped it in his mouth, tossing the balled up paper into the garbage barrel. "Do you still have the hots for Katerina?"

Spoken like a nineteen-year-old.

"I never had the hots for Katerina."

"Then why did you have her followed all over and then make sure you were the one that tried to nab her? Derwold could have done it."

"Because I only trust myself with the orchid. If anything happens to it there will be no precursor, and I can only blame myself."

For Xavier's death, is what he left unspoken. But they both knew, Xavier most of all. That was why Doc could never blame him for getting out and having a life while he could.

He didn't want Derwold to ever blame himself for Xavier's death, either. If anything ever happened to Xavier, the blame would lay solidly on Doc's shoulders.

The boy slouched and rubbed his eyes. "I still think you have the hots for her."

Doc turned and hung up an oilcloth apron so Xavier couldn't see his grin. "I'm too old to have the hots for anyone. Even you admit that thirty-nine is ancient."

"Yeah, but Katerina is old, too."

"I believe she's thirty-two."

"Yeah, like I said, she's ancient. But you both are." Xavier plucked another candy out of the bowl, the little sugar fiend. He'd put so much ascorbic acid in them Doc was surprised he wasn't puckered. "You two should hook up. Both of you being ancient and all." He smiled, the candy puffing out his cheek like a chipmunk.

Doc put the keys for the cage back on the post and folded up the blanket that covered the cage while Xavier was in spider form. Mathilde's chastisement was like being scolded, and now he needed to clean his room.

The door burst open, this time Derwold ran in with his derby hat askew and his duster flapping behind him. Derwold's handlebar mustache, as always, was in perfect place.

"Sir, it's time. She's been loading the plants."

Adrenaline shot through Doc in a rush. Maybe tonight he would finally get the orchid.

"You're sure she's got the right shipment?"

"Derwold nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Xavier, you will be here when I get back." Doc demanded obedience this time, and he let the boy know. When he got back he would start the extraction on the orchid, and the last thing he needed was having Xavier traipsing around the city.

"Yep."

Derwold grinned. "That one's got spark, I tell you."

Doc didn't respond. Derwold was right, and if Xavier wanted to stay alive, he needed all the spark he could get, but the responsibility of the Scorpicos still was all Doc's, no matter who had it. He was the one with all the antique medical texts that first gave him the idea of the precursor. Doc clapped Xavier on the shoulder as he walked past to get his coat.

"She'll be there soon, sir."

Doc grabbed his duster off the brass coat tree, put it on, and pulled his derby on his head. Maybe his excitement wasn't only about the orchid. He did want to see her again. Her perception entranced him. And he respected her work with her orphans.

They both strode out the door and it slammed behind them, the stone walls of the hallway absorbing the sound of their feet as they ran to the tunnels.

* * * *

Katerina stood on the partially destroyed main platform of Grand Central Station checking the moss packed crates one by one. She couldn't afford to lose a single plant. So far they looked as if they would survive the transport well, but she wished the weather was warmer. She originally planned the transport for the first week of June, but once the city officials raised the bribe and threatened to take all thirteen of the children if she didn't pay it, she did the only thing possible. Move the plants early.

She clutched her antique saint medallion and kissed it in hope that her misfit pack was safe. She had no idea what saint it was. The old religions had been abolished after the Sand Wars because they were said to cause extreme sectarianism, but it gave her a measure of hope that someone out there, some divine being, might help her. It also prevented her from being eaten with cynicism. Not really, but she hoped it would.

The last crate, exploding with moss out of the hastily nailed slats, was stacked and anchored.

She kissed the medal again. All in one piece, please.

The engine gave a clang and the gears shifted, warning her that the steam engine would leave in moments. The tunnels were dark but for a few gas lamps that were scattered every few feet down. Still, not all of them were on and the flickering lights that partially lit the tunnels were eerie, casting long shadows. She couldn't help but look over her shoulder.

The brake released and she jumped on the Pullman, her carpetbag in her hand and her canvas apron and duster slapping around her ankles. Her hair, fashioned in a heavy braid, thudded between her shoulder blades as she strode down the car looking for a seat that would afford her a view of all the doors. Just in case.

She'd made sure no one knew of her shipment, but so many people wanted to get their hands on her orchids that she never knew if someone in her neighborhood sold her out, even though she helped feed them, too. They wouldn't dare, but everyone had a price, and the Fraternal Order of Sycophants, as she liked to call Mayor Grimsbee's cabinet, had a lot of power. She couldn't underestimate what they would do to get more money and her plants. Last time when she was four hours late they came close to sending the children to the Salt Mines. They'd wanted sexual favors in return for releasing them, but she was able to talk them into more money. She thanked the stars. An image flashed through her mind of little four-year-old Nathaniel, dressed in scraps and with his bottomless brown eyes, no shoes, mining buckets of salt and maybe getting one bowl of rice and fish gruel a day. Her stomach turned over.

She kissed the medal again.

The officials were pressing in harder. There wasn't a week that went by without them sending some caseworker to harass her, threatening to take the kids away, and now they'd increased the payoff. The fuckers. She wanted to hit someone. How was she supposed to feed and clothe the children if the stupid officials kept demanding more? She knew that was their intent, and that they took the money because they could, not because they wanted the children—the city was full of orphans. Maybe if she could find out what they were doing with her orchids she could get herself out of the situation. But right now, she was what historically would have once been called a drug runner. Plants were illegal; any plant since the United League of Nations took control of all the independent countries. The officials blackmailed her because they could. Her only other alternative was the underground sex trade. They had her. They

knew it and so did she. She'd tried to think of ways out, but kicking out her children was not an option, and so she paid. But she never stopped searching for a way to end the bribery.

Everything was controlled by the ULN. Clothes, food...everything. Once the city teemed with small independent stores—bodegas, hardware, clothes, even coffee shops—but after the war they closed one by one, the owners driven out at the end of a gun. Now the only way to get food was to stand in line for eight to ten hours and hope that there were enough rations by the time you got to the counter.

Too bad she wasn't adept at growing coffee. She didn't have the land for the plants so it was good her orchids grew in caves, but the illegal coffee trade was raking in more money than she was. What she would do for a cup right now. If she closed her eyes she could remember the smell of it in her parents' kitchen, how the enamel blue percolator always sat at the back of the cast iron stove.

She was exhausted. Was it wrong of her to want to quit? The only way you won was by getting up the next morning though, as her father told her.

Her eyes burned. She missed her parents so much. How they loved her and took care of her. How they loved each other and drew strength from their marriage. It didn't make their life easier, but it made it bearable. And they lived through the Sand Wars.

The train jerked and she felt the wheels turn under her. She let go her breath in a whoosh. Now it would be fine. No one had stopped her.

Crouching down in the worn velvet cushion, she pulled the bag between her feet and covered it with her skirt. The one orchid that would pay the most was in a cloche-covered pot and tied with strips of material. She'd stuffed old newspapers around it and tucked it in the bag. The safest place for it was with her. She reached down and patted the bag just to make sure, and felt for the cloche knob.

As she sat back, still slouched, the sliding door scraped open and two enormous men stood in the doorway, their features obscured by the glaring light from behind them.

"Katerina Metrenko?" the man on the right said.

The voice wasn't unfamiliar, but she couldn't place where she'd heard it. Still, she tightened her feet around the bag and remembered to breathe.

"No."

"Katerina."

Again, the name that went with the voice was just on the edge of her recognition, but it rolled over her, all smooth and dark, making her even more afraid.

"I said, you have the wrong woman." She hoped they didn't hear the tremble in her voice.

The one on the left took a step forward and the light from the window caught his face, making it look sharp and harsh. But it was a face she knew, and her stomach dropped.

She'd have to find a new medal to kiss.

"I hoped we could negotiate further for the orchid."

She nodded. "Doctor Detweiller."

She plastered herself to the back of the bench as he took a step forward.

"You never responded to my previous offer."

Why did he have to take up all of the room in the car? His gaze swept over her from head to toe making her stomach flop. She tucked a stray lock behind her ear and sat up. It would seem the good Doctor wasn't told no often.

"That is because I had no counter offer. The orchid is not for sale."

"It is for sale. Just not to me." He crossed his arms. "And I doubled the amount the Mayor offered."

If it were possible he looked even bigger when he crossed his arms. Thankfully he didn't scare her one iota. He was a doctor and an intellectual, not a pugilist. Didn't doctors still take the Hippocratic Oath?

"You're a smart man. I hoped you would take my lack of response as being a no."

"I am a smart man. I know large amounts of money make people change their minds."

Kat crossed her arms. "I am not selling—nor will I sell—my orchids to you."

He yanked his derby off and scrubbed at his hair. He'd cut his usual dark brown mop short, like Caesar, the Roman bust she saw in the library. She preferred it longer, like he had it, but the new cut didn't look bad. Actually, it showed the silver at his temples. It was growing on her as she watched him. Lines creased his forehead and he looked a bit confused, not an emotion he was used to, she was sure. Maybe it was *Doc* that was growing on her.

"Why?" He finally spit out.

"Because they're mine, and I get to choose what to do with them."

She took a perverse pride at the look that crossed his face, like he held a mouthful of vinegar and sugar and he couldn't decide if he would swallow it or spew it out.

"I don't understand. I was assured you would take my offer. I know you have all those children you take care of. I was told you needed the money."

At his stress on the word told, and the way Derwold looked sheepish she guessed he was the one that gave Doc the wrong information.

"I do need the money, but my shipments are precisely counted and expected. If I don't make them the Mayor Grimsbee's henchmen will not hesitate to send the children to the salt mines."

"But why does the Mayor need the orchids?" His brows knit.

"I have no idea. So, now, if you please? I have work to do." She waved to the door. They didn't move.

Damn, if this day wasn't bad enough. Although dealing with Doc was a pain in the ass, she knew he'd never hurt her. It wasn't in his character, and she knew for a fact that he and Derwold did their share of trying to help the street youth.

Amy, her sixteen-year-old, recently told her of a rumor that Doc had one of the insect people in his cellars. Katerina had seen their bodies dead on the streets, everyone had. Some desperate homeless even ate the remains, but no one she knew had ever seen a living one. And if Doc had found a way to save one, she knew beyond a doubt that he'd never hurt her. Although they were at odds about the orchids, they were on the same side. Saving people any way they knew how.

Doc hadn't spoken for a few minutes and she started to pull at the hem of her apron. She didn't remember how heavy lidded his eyes were or him smelling so good before. Like a pine forest. And being so...present.

She wished she could give him the orchid. But in the contest of who needed it more, her kids would win every time. That's what she was there for.

"What if we got married?"

For a minute there she thought he asked about getting married.

"Katerina? What if we got married?"

She stopped thinking for a moment.

"Katerina?"

He reached out and felt her forehead.

"Did you say that we should marry?" She blinked rapidly.

"Yes, it would solve a multitude of problems. Combined we could provide a more secure living arrangement for the children, put an end to the blackmailing, and arrange a more lucrative partnership for our business—you growing the orchids for me. The marriage would take away the excuse they use to extort money."

When the roar in her ears subsided she realized it was a pretty good assessment. But she needed a better understanding of some points. "Define benefit number three: a more lucrative partnership." She crossed her arms.

"I need the orchids, you grow them. I would make sure that the children wanted for nothing and in turn you would provide me as many orchids as you could."

So. He was seeing this only as a business transaction. She would ask about the sleeping arrangements after the deed was done. That way he couldn't get out of it. Not having to worry about how she would find a meal—not paying for it, actually finding the food—would be an enormous burden off her shoulders.

"That would be perfect."

"Derwold will go now, get the children, and get them to the manor so there are no repercussions on their persons from the Mayor or his men. While he is there he can gather the immature orchids and bring them back, too. I could help you make this last shipment and stop at the licensing office on the way back to have the marriage license sealed."

"I want to get married in a church." Not that she had a lot of room to demand anything, but if this was the way she would be married, with no love or affection like her parents, then she at the least wanted it in a church.

He looked shocked. "There are no churches left. All of the priests were executed, you know that."

"I know, but I want to get married in a church anyway. We could stop by the ruins later and at least say a few words."

An awkward moment passed and for some reason her request made her feel vulnerable, as if his denial would be a personal judgment against her.

"I never thought you a believer. I'm not, but if it would make you feel better I'm not entirely opposed."

"I appreciate that. Thank you." She was sincere, and she hoped he knew that.

She reached behind her neck and unclasped her saint medallion and pressed it into Derwold's hand. "Give this to Amy so she knows I sent you."

Chapter Two

"How much further?" Doc snuck a glance at Katerina from his dirt-filmed goggles. The truck's barrel front clip shimmied, and the jerking of the panels sent up clouds of dust onto the both of them as they made their way to the drop-off point. That's what you got when you soldered scrap pieces of automobiles.

They'd taken the train back to the station and offloaded the orchids onto Doc's trailer once she'd agreed on his impromptu arrangement.

"Not much now."

The crates of orchids were stacked high on the trailer, and the chains of the hitch dragged on the road, clanging and giving him a headache. Or it could have been the tension in his neck from the whole day. And now she was sitting so close to him. The hem of her coat touched his, but he couldn't drive and get any closer to the door. Or lack of a door, as was the case.

He'd recite what he knew of the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing pharmacopoeia--anything to keep his mind off of the fact that in a few hours he would marry her. It was the only solution he could come up with at the time, and still was. Some might see the move as altruistic, he knew it was selfish. He needed those orchids. Xavier's life and countless others depended on it. Knowing it was the only way to solve both their problems didn't make it any easier. He never planned on getting married.

He shifted and pulled around the turn. "What is it, this place we're going?"

"It's an abandoned meat processing plant." She shuddered.

"Cold? I'm sorry, I should have put the roof on."

"No. I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh. Well, I suppose that won't present that much of a problem for Mathilde. May I ask why? We have a very reputable butcher that supplies our household. In return I give his family any medical attention they need. Rations can't keep a rat healthy, and you could use the

protein."

She pulled her scarf back over her head from where it had blown off, and he realized her hair was nut brown. Which surprised him. Maybe it was her personality that made him previously think it was red.

"I found out the government was scavenging the bodies of the dead Scorpicos and..." She pinched her nose and blew out the air in her cheeks.

He didn't want to make her sick all over the car. "What are the directives?"

She shot him a look of extreme gratitude.

"We—" She coughed from the dust that went into her mouth as she spoke.

He handed her a candy out of his pocket, and after opening it she popped it into her mouth.

"Thank you." Her eyes widened a bit and he knew the flavor must have hit.

She reached into the same pocket he produced that one from and pulled out another, opened it, and brought it to his lips.

He downshifted and brought the car back onto the road.

Her hand bounced, but she steadied it and he opened his mouth.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Out of the corner of his eye it looked as if she was amused.

"So. What are our directives?"

"Oh, yes." She rolled the candy into her other cheek. "We must drop them off in the main refrigeration area, well, the old one. And that's it."

He was surprised she hadn't said anything about the candy yet. Most times people didn't like the tart cherry flavor. He made them with extra ascorbic acid so that people got the added health benefit of vitamin C. Scurvy had come back once the citrus rations were cut. Now citrus was nonexistent.

"Do we uncrate them?" He wasn't too keen on the idea of them being alone in a vacant warehouse for long.

"No. It's quick. I just set them on the floor and by the time I'm done, my money appears at the base of the front stairs in an antique milk chilling box."

"It's not there before?"

"No. Only after."

"You've checked?"

"Of course."

"So, that would mean that there is someone in the building as you unload the crates."

"I suppose." Her forehead wrinkled. "But I've never seen them, and they've never hurt me."

A flash of anger rushed through him at her carelessness.

"You have all those responsibilities—the children, the neighborhood—and you come out here, with no one to protect you, and you knew that someone is here watching you?" He didn't have the right to be mad at her, but he was. It was irresponsible of her, putting everyone at risk.

She turned to him and her mouth dropped open. "Who could have helped me? Should I ask the children to come with me?"

"You know I didn't mean that."

"I don't make enough to keep food on the table, let alone hire help! If I did, I wouldn't have to marry you!" She flung the door of the truck open and stomped around to the back.

He shut his mouth so fast his teeth clinked.

"Well, it will be over today."

She huffed.

Apparently that was the wrong reaction. He would consider this a learning experience.

Ahead of them loomed an enormous cement building, its windows broken with vicious jagged edges and with holes chipped out of the walls.

His anger rose up again. She could have been killed, or beaten and left for dead and not one person would have been able to help. And back at the house there would have been thirteen children waiting for her, for food, and faced with the fear of losing yet another person in their miserable lives.

"You will never ever come here again. Not alone, not with another person. If our marriage doesn't put an end to the blackmailing—forget it. Under no circumstances, do you hear me?"

She grabbed a crate off the truck and glared at him over it. "We're not married yet, and the way you're going we won't be."

He threw his derby on the ground at his feet. "May I remind you that I am doing this for the children's benefit, or are you just that self-

absorbed and selfish?"

She studied him and then walked the crate to the loading dock without answering him

They didn't have time for him to figure out what that meant.

With his help, they made short work of the job, and although she never once noticed, there were shadows in the windows of the higher floors watching them.

He glanced up and grit his jaw. Stupid fool.

The last of the crates was stacked and she started to walk around to the front of the building.

"Where are you going?"

"To go get my payment."

"Get back in the car and I will drive you to the front. Or have you not noticed that we've been watched this whole time?"

Her face blanched and although he'd made his point he took no joy in winning this argument.

"All right."

She slid into the seat and sat a little lower than when she'd first gotten in.

A slight push locked the crankshaft into place, and he spun the engine to life, its rumble deafening where moments ago there was tense silence.

He slid the gears into first and brought them to the front of the building, where just as she said, a rusted milk cooler lay on the crumbling cement stairs.

She opened the door before he could stop her. She ran to the box, yanked off the lid, and reached in.

A whoosh of air escaped him when she didn't snatch her hand back, but instead lifted out a grimy paper sack and looked back at him, her eyes triumphant.

She stepped towards him and bullets threw up dirt at her feet as they missed her.

He gassed the engine and opened the door, yelling her name as she ran gripping the bag, bullets flying in every direction now, as if the first miss could be remedied with a mass onslaught. Pings of bullets hitting metal and the rumble of the engine didn't drown out her scream.

Just as he was about to get out and grab her, she made it into the car, falling flat onto the bench. He took off, the door open and gaping as

he tore down the pitted road.

He never knew fear had a taste.

* * * *

Pain jolted through her as her body landed on the bench and her face slapped the leather, knocking the air out of her. She scrambled up, her feet slipping, and held onto the edge of the seat, steadying herself as Doc whipped around the turn and out the driveway, making the trailer hitch snap.

"Fuck!" He punched the steering wheel as the trailer tumbled off into a gutter ditch. With one hand steering he grabbed her under the shoulder and hauled her up.

"Thank you," she gasped, shaking like she had been plunged into an icy river. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't make her teeth stop chattering.

"Pull your coat around you," he shouted over the growl of the engine, but there was raw anger in his voice, too. Her heart was still pounding and she turned and maneuvered herself to sit down. She reached for her medallion, and found bare skin.

Yep, it was shaping up to be the perfect day to get married.

She gripped the paper sack to her chest tighter, closed her eyes, and concentrated on taking deep breaths.

"This is exactly what I tried to warn you about!"

Her eyes snapped open. She hadn't even stopped shaking, and now he was yelling at her? Blaming her for this? She just hoped she didn't start to cry, which she normally did when she got angry enough. Pissy men on top of getting shot at might push her control. It was the most embarrassing thing, and she hated that people perceived it as weak, but no matter how hard she tried not to—if she got angry enough—she always did.

His face was set in a grimace, with his shadowed, dirty jaw looking as if his cheek had been chiseled.

Bugger him. "And here I was thinking this was your fault."

"My fault?"

The fact that he was so astounded at her perception of the ordeal was almost amusing. It would be laughable if she didn't want to kill him. Apparently, Doc didn't have a lot of people around him dissent. At least, not to his face. Well, there was a first for everything, and she normally headed the parade.

"Yes, your fault. You are the only variable in this delivery. It's the only logical deduction because I was fired at today and you are the only factor of divergence in the arrangement. Did the big words help clarify?"

He huffed. "Are you bleeding anywhere?"

He scrubbed at his hair, making it stick up. If she didn't know him, she would think he was a street urchin. But none of the homeless she knew filled out a duster as well. It cost too much money to look that healthy.

His concern took the wind out of her sails. "Not that I'm aware."

"Have you stopped shaking?"

"Almost."

They were far enough away from the meat packing plant that he slowed down a bit. Not enough to make her teeth stop clanking every time he hit a bump, but enough that she could keep her rear adhered to the bench.

"Pull the blanket from the back seat and wrap yourself in it. I don't need you going into shock."

"You wouldn't want to have to prop me up so we could sign the papers?"

"It's not funny."

She shook her head. "No siree, not at all."

"It's not."

"I so agree." She bit her lips and nodded at him.

He growled.

It wasn't a full growl like a dog, but an under the breath rumble. The Doctor of Pharmacology growled at her. And it rolled over her skin in such a way that she wanted him to do it again.

When she had seen him before, during the times he was trying to get her to sell him the orchid, he'd always been perfectly in control. His voice never wavered with emotion, let alone rise in anger. So what made him angry now? She backtracked in her memory to when he first started yelling at her. Which would be about the children, and when he discovered she was putting herself in danger. So, essentially, he was afraid for her. Why did that make her insides flop? The last time someone cared for her was when her parents were alive. As much as he pissed her off with his tirade, it also made her feel cared for.

Maybe getting married to him wouldn't be such a bad thing. She knew from the other times she dealt with him that he was a respectable

man, he kept his word. That meant a lot, especially now when it seemed that everyone had a price. And she'd considered the fact that he could take the orchids and get rid of the children, but that would go against everything he stood for.

He pulled off to the side of the road and let the car idle while he yanked her arm and took her pulse. His fingers were cool and firm against her wrist, but it didn't stop the tingles that ran up her arm and set her heart pounding faster.

"You're still jumpy. I want you to calm down. We can't get married like this, you'll tip them off to something being wrong."

She snatched her arm back. "Something is wrong. Seven hours ago I did not plan on getting married or being shot at. I wanted to deliver the orchids, get my money and go buy food." She adjusted her scarf. "Today is Seamus' birthday. I promised him a cake."

"Well then, let's get this thing done then, no? And maybe we can have Mathilde make him a cake later." He pulled out onto the road again. "Maybe they would want to celebrate the nuptials with a party of sorts? To make everyone feel involved?"

What made her think he was cold and non-emotional? Or maybe someone caring was just so foreign? She'd made up her mind to keep this about business, and there he went being thoughtful. Way to wreck a plan. The kids would love him, they were masters at wrecking plans.

"I think they would like that. They have so little to celebrate." Her voice caught on the dust that still coated her throat. She had to be more prepared for when he pulled sappy stuff out on her like that.

She stared at him, the man she would within the hour marry, and wondered what fate she'd consigned herself to. What possessed him to make such a life altering offer to a woman he hardly knew? Especially with how sarcastic she was in his presence. He never saw a softer side of her. Maybe he was brave. Or a masochist...a brave masochist.

She sighed.

Lying to herself wasn't a trait she liked. He was handsome, and dealing with him had always brought out the worst in her. It was as if her senses were heightened and she couldn't control them. It all came out in bitch. She had experienced lust before, but this was more. Something scary, like she was walking one of those tightropes at the circus but her feet weren't so sure of the next step.

She studied his profile while he concentrated on the road. His eyes

were brown and blue—not quite one or the other. When he stared at her it was arresting. His dark hair made them even more striking, the combination of dark and light making them the focal point of his face.

In all the times she'd seen him, though, he'd never smiled. And that bothered her. At times life was so harsh she didn't know how she woke up to face another day, let alone being married to someone who never laughed. The moments of happiness that her family shared were like faceted diamonds in her heart. Being married to a person who couldn't laugh was not going to be good.

"Do you ever smile?" One minute it was in her head, the other it was off her tongue and hanging there between them.

He scowled. "Of course I do."

That was so reassuring, really.

"But I've never seen you smile."

He growled again, and it did the same hot boiling thing to her skin as before.

"Just because you've never seen something doesn't mean that it doesn't exist."

"So—you laugh?"

"Of course I laugh," he snarled.

She wanted to laugh and the bubbles almost burst out her mouth. "Yes, I can see it so clearly now."

What was wrong with her to antagonize him like this? It was like he drove her to bait him. And what was worse than her reaction to him, was the questions running through her head about why he made her react like that.

He pulled in to the parking lot and slammed the breaks so hard her head jerked. She reached up to her neck and rubbed at it.

"Thank you, I had a kink there. You fixed it up very nicely." She reached out and patted his arm. "No wonder you're so respected."

With six strides he was at her side and guiding her by the elbow into the offices. For every one step he took, she took two. Maybe it wasn't so wise to taunt the man.

"Are you trying to make me regret helping you? And the children? You remember them, don't you? The ones we're trying to save?"

With those words her bright flame of spite died. He was the only man she'd met that had the ability to make her feel lower than a worm. Being ashamed was a feeling she didn't want to have again. Now she

knew why she poked a stick at the rattler. Arguing was safer.

He turned back to her when he realized she wasn't walking with him and huffed his exasperation.

If she were going to do this, she needed to know where she stood.

"Do you want to do this?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"A straightforward one. I need to know. Do you want to marry me?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I asked you. That would mean that I wanted to."

"But you don't like me."

"God, almighty—I didn't dislike you, but I'm considering it."

"So you admit it, you don't like me."

He grabbed her by her shoulders and held her at arm's length. "Katerina, what I know of you I like enough to offer marriage as a way to help those we care about."

It was a good answer. A truthful answer. But still not the one she wanted. For some bizarre reason she wanted to be told she was loved, then maybe kissed. She knew that expecting that from a man she didn't know was...stupid, it was. But that didn't make the desire for it go away.

She closed her eyes and resigned herself to it. "All right. Let's get this over with."

"It's not as if you're going to your own funeral."

She walked through the door he'd held open for her. It *was* a funeral. One for the death of her dream to be loved by the man she married.

Old cigarette smoke greeted her nose and a woman in a dyed burlap dress sat at the front desk and rose, giving them a clipboard. "Marriages, step to the right. Divorces, step to the left. All others, please sign in and have a seat. Someone will call your name as soon as possible."

"We're here for a marriage," Katerina said.

The woman looked her over with thinly veiled contempt. "The Family Planning Officer will see you in a moment."

Katerina looked at Doc, who shrugged. "I've never been married before, I have no idea."

"Next!" A booming voice shouted from the room they were supposed to go in, but as they went in, a young couple walked out, blocking the door. The woman, who looked about the same as Katerina's thirty-five years, was blushing so furiously she wouldn't meet Kat's eyes.

Perfect. Because she just wasn't nervous enough.

"Permanent or annual?"

They hardly made it in the door before another woman, this time in a severe boiled wool dress, flung out her question.

"Excuse me?" Exasperation laced Doc's question.

"Permanent or annual? Birth control?" She rolled her eyes. "If you want to apply for a Biological Child Permit right away you can take a semi or annual injection, the paperwork for the application should be gone over before it wears off, but you have to sign here," she pointed to a line, "so that if for some reason you become pregnant before the paperwork has been processed, you agree to immediately terminate the pregnancy."

"Excuse me?" This time Katerina asked. And she was incredulous. No, furious.

"When was this policy enacted?" Doc's cheek muscle twitched.

"Two weeks ago, at the Central Nations Summit."

"Who will be injected?" Katerina took her headscarf off so she could do something with her hands—or at least to not wring the woman's neck. Because she looked as if she loved her job a bit too much.

"Both of you. Makes no sense to do it otherwise. What if one of you went hot-footing it around?"

"Annual," Doc answered, his voice brooking no argument. He looked at Katerina, "That way we have time to decide."

"Okay then." The Frau went over to a chipped enamel cabinet on the wall, pulled out a vial, and handed it to Doc. "You can take your coat off and give me a sample in this tube."

"Sample of what?" Doc asked, taking off his coat for the injection.

"Your sperm. No point in having a shot if you're sterile." She jabbed the vial at him.

He stopped, his one arm still inside the duster.

Kat had never seen Doc blush before, but it wasn't all embarrassment. The vein in his temple throbbed.

"And where may I go to do this?" He slipped his other arm out and folded it over the back of a chair.

Every word was clipped.

"Right here." She crossed her lumpy arms over an enormous chest. "I have to watch."

Kat gasped and wanted a gaping hole to swallow her up. This was

going to be a disaster and she wanted to stop it all like the nightmare it was.

"Why. Here."

"Shewww, you don't know about the black market sperm crackdown, either? Because of the radiation fallout, men are paying a lot of money for healthy sperm. Some men were caught bringing in vials from the outside." The hag got a lecherous grin on her. "You don't look like you'll have that problem, you look right healthy, you do."

Kat's vision started to blur. She couldn't do this. No, she couldn't watch him do this and thinking of him having to watch her was making a scream gather in the base of her throat.

"Martin, you don't have to do this, we'll find another way." She hoped he took her offer, she did. She couldn't imagine having to be him. That she might have to do something similar, and she didn't think she could go through with it, even if that made her a coward.

"What about Katerina, how will she prove her fertility?"

She couldn't breathe, terrified of the answer. It was astounding how he read her mind. And she was thankful he considered her, because she was too afraid to ask herself. If it was anything like what he had to do, they would just have to find another way to fight the Mayor because she would break down before she was able to do it.

"We use Soundsonic Viewing to see if her ovaries are productive."

The silence in the room was deafening, tense with the dread of what he would have to do, and what she seemed to escape.

"What of the other people out there who don't get married?" But she already knew that answer. That's how Amy came to her, shattered and broken. She'd been arrested as soon as they could tell she was with child. They came in the night and tying her down, expelled the child. For her own good, they said.

Chapter Three

She called him Martin.

He had to masturbate and ejaculate into a glass tube held by a vile woman, and all he wanted was to hear her say his name again.

"He'll be a quick one." The Official gave Katerina a lascivious wink. Katerina blanched.

Oh, God, he hated this. He wanted to have sex with her, but not like this. He didn't think he could even get hard in a situation like this. And not being able to get an erection wasn't the best way to start a marriage. How would he ever face her again if he couldn't perform?

He wasn't naïve enough to think that she was a virgin, but this was not exactly how he planned their first sexual encounter. And he did plan one. She might think it would be a marriage of convenience, but he had no such intentions. It wouldn't matter anyway after he couldn't get it up. She'd laugh him to oblivion and he'd never be able to have sex with her after that. But now wasn't the time to ruminate on the future—he'd a trial to get through. If he could.

"Give me the vial." He held out his hand. "You can watch, but I will hold the tube."

"How will you hold it and pump at the same time.?"

He wouldn't get angry. He wouldn't give the bitch the satisfaction of any sign that might show how much he hated doing this. Katerina might never forgive him, but it was for those he meant to save. He had to keep his mind on *why* he was doing this.

"I'll think of something."

"Sure thing then, whatever makes you get the deed done." The Official handed him the tube, then sat behind her desk and leaned back, ready for a show. He was accustomed to helping the unsavory of humankind, but leeches of the weak always made him wish he could not fully adhere to the oath he took.

"May I help him?" Katerina pulled at the hem of her sleeve,

twisting a thread around her finger and turning it purple.

There she went again, trying to save people from the harshness of life. It was why he liked her so much. He was proud of her not caving in to her fears. But she might not be able to help him. If he couldn't get hard there was nothing to do.

The Official cackled.

He didn't think Katerina would like to hear it, but he respected her and her work to help others. So much so, that he'd planned on finding a way to marry her long before today.

"Ohh, you're one of those. We get a lot of them in here. So happy to be applying they give Gertie in there and me a little live show." She winked again. "Grease for the skids, helps get the paperwork through."

"That—"

"What she was going to say was that she is a bit embarrassed for me, it being her first time with her fiancé." He took two silver dollars out of his pocket and slid them across the grooved desk. "And she was hoping that you would allow us at least a façade of privacy."

Katerina wisely kept her mouth shut and nodded.

The woman pocketed the coins. "Just make sure I get some sound effects."

He caught Katerina's eye and motioned her to come over.

"Stand in front with your back to me." He whispered it under his breath, so just she could hear.

Again, Kat nodded, and did as he asked.

"Oh, no. You have to make it at least a little believable." She pulled out another vial from a pocket and waved it. "You know, make it worth my while."

He thought she might do that, but he had to at least try and save Kat her embarrassment.

"Fine." His temple started to throb.

She cackled again and slapped the desk with her pork chop hand. "Fine he says!"

Katerina looked back at him, a question in her eyes. He nodded and she turned towards him, her apology written all over her face.

"It will be fine. Ready?"

She blinked and he unbuttoned his trousers, found the slit in his drawers, and pulled his cock out.

Katerina blushed crimson, but never muttered a word. He didn't

know if that was good or bad. He needed good. He was having a hard enough time even going through with this, he needed to believe that she wasn't disgusted. Even if he believed she truly was. So he blocked it and tried to think about Kat kissing him, taunting him with her eyes and mouth.

He wrapped his fist around the base and squeezed, the familiar feel of his own warm skin lost in the static of his head. He squeezed again, gave a shake and then a slow pump. Up and down, slowly, hoping to get this done quickly, but he only hardened slightly. This was going much worse than he had hoped.

He closed his eyes, and rested the back of his head against the wall and tried to imagine Katerina, naked with her hair down all around her, her small breasts and nipples peeking out, enticing him.

A slight rush to his groin hardened him a bit, and he gave a stroke down to the base, making him even harder. However long this took—dreading it didn't get the job done.

"Come on now! At least give me some sound effects."

His erection softened. He'd love to strangle her, damned the oath. He grit his teeth and tried again, focusing on the curve of Kat's neck, the smooth slope of skin to her nipples.

Still nothing. Not even a tingle. Fuck. Sweat started to bead on his forehead. He wanted to punch something. His embarrassment gripped his chest with metal blades and his stomach was about to quadruple his shame.

He clenched his eyes shut and felt the sweat trickle down his temple.

Cool, slim fingers caressed his chin, and another hand, this one moist, enclosed his cock above his own grip. A rush of heat stiffened him at her touch, not much more than before, but it was a start.

He wanted to open his eyes, but he was afraid of what he would see. He couldn't go through with this if he saw revulsion in her face or eyes. He'd stop and walk out. It was better to just keep them closed.

He tried to imagine something—anything—to help him.

More wetness slid down the heat of his erection, and her fingers slipped over the head and down, bumping into his. It helped a little.

An urge to open his eyes overcame him, but he still couldn't, afraid to lose the effect of her help.

Another drop of moisture encircled the tip of his glans and he felt

the familiar ball of heat start at the base of his spine. He could imagine the look of her smaller hand encircling him, pumping with him as their hands slid up and down. Now he was getting somewhere. His skin prickled and hummed.

"You getting going there or what? I thought you'd be done now. Thank goodness I didn't place any bets with Gertie out there."

He softened a bit.

"Do you want to stop?" She whispered to him.

He shook his head no.

More moisture. He started to bump his head on the wall in a rhythm. This could go on forever, and it had the possibility of being devastating. He didn't know if he could stand being so ashamed—or her knowing it.

She cupped his cheek and slid her hand down the side of his face again. "Open your eyes."

He jerked his head no. No, no, no. Please, he couldn't see her disgust.

"Open them for me, I promise..."

No. But he didn't have anything to lose. Because it couldn't get worse than this. He took a deep breath and cracked them open, just enough to see her eyes through his lashes.

Her hazel eyes were dark and heavy with desire.

* * * *

Of all the things she would do, she never thought she would be putting "exhibitionist" on her list. It excited her a little. And that made her feel guilty. Just a bit, but enough to be a twinge.

How wrong was it that she was enjoying this, even the littlest amount? Not the bitch behind her, but watching him have to do this. She would have been a coward. Or maybe not. Not if he helped her and liked what he saw, like she was helping him. Watching his fist grip his cock at first was startling, but as he worked it—down and back up, over and over—she felt a welcome pool of heat she thought no longer existed.

Men that she was willing to sleep with were far and few between. Most would have robbed her and hurt her children in a heartbeat. But Doc was always different, and never more so than now. Sacrificing his pride to help others.

What a turn on.

"You almost done? You two are the most boring I've seen yet. It's so

bad I might give you this money back."

His face tensed, and he clamped his teeth so hard his jaw twitched.

She held her tongue. Revenge shouldn't be one of the deadly sins. Some people deserved what they got, sometimes more.

She palmed his stubbly face again, and gave her head a shake. If he lost focus now they would have to walk out. She would if he had to, but she knew he would be a tangle of regret, shame and guilt. Not a good way to start a marriage, even if it was just a glorified business arrangement.

She let the saliva pool on her tongue, then licked her hand and capped his erection again.

His eyes closed and the crease between his eyebrows deepened.

He needed more. She gathered her courage in a deep breath. With her free hand she opened the buttons on her blouse and slid her breasts out of their bindings. Heat flashed her face, but if he had to expose himself like this, than she would be a coward to not aid him. And "coward" wouldn't make her list. She didn't have room after "exhibitionist".

She leaned in and kissed his jaw. His skin tasted of salt and desperation. Her nipples brushed his shirt, sending shocks to her womb. "Look," she said into his ear, so the hag couldn't hear.

She pulled back just enough so he could see her breasts, their deep valley and dusky pointed nipples. His mouth relaxed and his bi-colored eyes blackened.

All she could hear was his labored breathing and the squishy slick sound as his cock slipped through her fingers.

They were almost there. Just a few minutes more and they could walk out of there, away from their audience.

Martin glanced at her breasts again from under his lashes and it was like a touch, making her nipples peak. She leaned into him and nipped his jaw then his earlobe and he moaned into her hair.

The slip-squish went faster, almost in time with her heartbeat. She licked her other palm and switched off her hands making the suction sounds louder. His cock was dark and red, straining through their wet hands. Pangs of heat whipped through her. She had thought to help him, she didn't expect to want him more while she watched. But she loved the feel of his cock sliding through her fingers, and she wanted him sliding in between her thighs,

He opened his eyes and fumbled for the vial. "Keep pumping me," he said through gritted teeth.

She clasped him and worried that the lost momentum would make him lose his concentration. It didn't, and he kept thrusting as he positioned the vial so it would catch every drop. He stared at her breasts intently and she decided he needed just a little push over the edge. She teased her nipple with her fingers and with one flex of his hips three long shots of white liquid pooled at the tip of the tube.

He sighed and rested his head on her shoulder, giving her neck a quick kiss. "I'll thank you later." She got a little rush down her neck where his lips touched. Or maybe it was what he said. Either way, she wanted more.

"About time!"

Just like that the softness was gone from his face and the former fury replaced it. She didn't blame him, she wanted to give the woman a piece of her fist, too.

He handed her the vial and she just stood there, not knowing exactly what she should be doing with a vial of sperm in her hand. She would have liked to button herself up, but she understood why he wanted to go first, so she stood there blocking him from the woman's eyes.

"I don't even get a little peek?"

"All done now." Martin answered before she could, and she was thankful. What she had to say was nowhere near as nice. It was more along the lines of she would kill the woman first before she even got near enough to look at him.

"Stop frowning, it's over." He had himself all tucked back in place and took the vial from her.

It was over, they could leave, but she was still mad that they were treated like they were. The woman could have left them with some dignity, she didn't have to degrade them and take such pleasure in it.

Martin studied her face for a moment, then tipped her nose. "Let's go, button up."

He turned and handed the vial off to the woman and as Kat turned around, the bitch sniffed the vial.

"Just making sure you didn't fill it with anything else." She winked at him. As he turned back to check on her, Kat watched the woman dip her finger in and taste the sample and then become flushed. She put a rubber stopper in the tube, wired on a tag that she'd written on, and put it

in the icebox.

"We'll have the results in six to seven weeks—"

"But it won't be viable if you test it then! And what will happen to our procreation rights if you get a false negative?" Martin's voice shook with rage, and Kat put an arm on his sleeve.

The Officer held the clipboard close to her chest and offered Martin a pen. "Sign here, stating that it is your sample that you gave."

He ripped the pen out of her hands and scrawled his signature.

"I said the results—the vial will be processed tonight, then we send the application off to the Central Nations Council to check and see if there have been any outstanding court orders or arrest warrants. We need to make sure the parents of the future generation are upstanding citizens."

She said the last as if she was the morality police, and although Kat had enough children to take care of, she wouldn't want to deprive Martin of his rights.

He sighed, deep and tired, just like she felt. At least the worst was over.

"Finally! Now, onto you." The Officer patted the table.

Kat's throat dried up.

Martin helped her up and pressed his palm to her face as he stepped to the side. It was comforting, and she was happy now that she'd made the decision to help him, because now he would return the support. And she needed it more. She was a coward. If it weren't for him, she would have stopped this long ago.

"Dress up."

Kat blushed, the heat of it making her forehead damp.

She lifted her hips and gathered her skirts up and under her rear. She wore no drawers, and as the cool air hit her nethers, the embarrassment was almost more than she could bear. She saved all of the fabric she found for the children, never imagining that she would be in such a position.

"Well, Miss Prissy Pants here seems to have forgotten hers."

Kat bit her lip and turned her head.

"Just get on with it." His voice came from behind her.

She was learning his nuances, and he was not happy. Not that there was anything nuanced about him now. Hatred burned off him.

The Official wheeled a long armed ironed box over her hips and

cranked the lever until it rumbled so loudly Kat thought she'd be squished when it fell off the spindly arm.

"You're done."

"That's it?" She lifted her hips and rushed the fabric back down, thankful to be covered again. Which was wrong, she knew. He had to go through so much more and it wasn't fair in comparison.

She had this overwhelming urge to apologize, but she'd settle for leaving.

"Where do I sign?"

The woman placed the clipboard on her lap and pointed to where she needed the signature. Kat wrote her name and hopped off the table. She didn't want to sign. She wanted to be able to have a child if she wanted without having to ask the Council's permission. One thing was for certain—she would make sure she didn't get pregnant.

"Wait, you forgot your shot. Dress up and bend over."

Kat gathered her skirts around her rear and leaned over the table, the cool air making her very aware that he could see everything. A sharp pinch hit her rear cheek.

"Done."

The skirts slid down her legs and she was never so happy to be covered. Martin silently led her out to the reception area.

"Congratulations on your marriage," the secretary said, as they walked out.

Martin grabbed her, guiding her to where their coats were and she slipped hers on, numb from the day, and tired that there was still more of it to get through. Even more to think about when she laid her head on her pillow tonight and dealt with the images that would replay in her head until she passed out from sheer exhaustion.

She pattered most nights after she tended the children and orchids as a way to calm down. Times that she was able to read after she got the little ones to bed were her favorite. Or she'd go back, walking around the caves tending the orchids. It paid the bills, but she would do it anyway for how much the pattering released stress. Right now, since all of the more mature orchids were shipped, she would be splitting the baby roots.

But she'd given up her house now, too. Tonight she would lie in a bed she didn't know, in a house she didn't know, with a man she didn't know. It was overwhelming, and so she sat there beside him, staring outside and thinking of nothing.

At some point while they were in the office, night had settled. She couldn't remember when, she was too numb, just following where Martin pulled her. It looked as if the moon were following them, playing hide and seek behind the clouds. The crunch of gravel brought her back. She blinked and looked around, unfamiliar with their location, but in awe that he remembered when she forgot.

The church ruins.

It was a skeleton, bleached white in the moonlight. All that remained were the outer walls and the graveyard beyond, but her heart eased even still.

She turned to him and wanted to throw herself into his arms, but instead sat perfectly still.

"Thank you." He looked blurred for the tears that welled in her eyes. It was too much, that he'd been so taken advantage of, yet thought of her.

"It's a pleasure." He kept his hands on the steering wheel. "Would you like to get out?"

"If you don't mind."

"Would you like me to come with you?"

She studied him for a minute, wondering if she wanted him there, then deciding that yes, she did. Not for protection, but she'd married the man. And no matter the reason, she wanted a blessing on it. Even if she didn't quite believe in the God who was once worshiped there. She wanted to believe, though.

She stepped out of the car and held out her hand to him. It felt good when he took it. She'd gained a fellow soldier in their strange uniting and it was nice not to have to fight alone. There were no regrets. She did what she had to do. Just like always.

Hand in hand they made their way over rubble and ivy until they stood in the center, the moonlight casting day-like shadows on the walls.

"What would you like to say?" he whispered, but his voice sounded loud in the silence.

"I don't know."

"Do you know any prayers?"

She tried to think of one and drew a blank. "No, none."

"Did your parents believe?"

"No. No one I know does. Even in the underground." What possessed her to come here? She couldn't even think of a prayer, and she

felt like a fool, not even able to explain herself.

"Would you like me to say something?"

"No. I made you do this. Give me a minute." She closed her eyes and hoped for eloquence, but simple words always suited her better. It was all she could manage now, anyway. "Thank you for someone to help me. And I hope that I can help him. Please keep our new family safe."

Chapter Four

When he thought he had her figured out, she surprised him again. He thought she would go straight, but she'd turn. Back in the office he thought he'd be filling that vial as a trial by fire. She didn't know him at all, and yet, she helped him through one of the most embarrassing situations in his life without making it worse. And she could have. If she'd laughed, cried, anything other than what she did, it would have been torture. He might have had to walk out. But she was strong and helped, and he was grateful. He wasn't ready to share that with her yet, but he would have to thank her eventually. After he got his nerve back up.

Rationalizing didn't take the sting of his embarrassment away, it made it worse. If their first time together could have been any other way, he would have taken it. He wouldn't be able to look at her if he found she helped him for pity, either. It was her future she secured in that office, too, not just his.

He had to think about what he wanted to say. And to know he could say it without being ashamed or embarrassed. Which, at this moment, seemed unlikely because without knowing it, she just took what dust mote of pride he had left and blew it to oblivion. She said a prayer for them, which meant that in some way she hoped that this would work despite their untraditional union.

She looked at him and smiled, a big smile but a little sad, showing the small gap between her teeth. It crinkled the corners of her green eyes and made his chest squeeze.

"That was perfect," he said.

"You think so?" She cocked her head.

"You covered everything important."

She smiled again, a real one. "Thanks." She bit her lip. "I wonder how the children are?"

He could hear the worry in her voice, but he focused instead on her

lips.

"Mathilde has probably fed them until they fell over, bathed them, then tucked them into beds so soft they'll think they're sleeping on clouds."

"Really? Is there a bed like that for me?"

He knew what she meant, her eyes were shadowed from exhaustion, but still the images of the licensing office descended onto him like a granite boulder. Her breast and her hands...

Control. He was a Doctor, and he needed to make this clinical. It was nothing but a biological response to stimuli.

"Yes. I'm sure Derwold has had Mathilde fix you a room."

Maybe Mathilde put her in his room. They were married, after all.

He shook his head. He couldn't think like that. It was an anomaly. It would torture him to have to live with her if he had expectations of sex. She didn't help him fill the tube for wanting or desire, she did it for obligation. It was unfair of him to want more from her.

But he did anyway, especially after the scene at the officials. It made him rock hard with wanting.

Maybe if he gave her some time and started slow. She licked her lips. Kissing her would be a start.

She picked his hand from his side. "I think this will be good."

"I hope so." Her hands were warm and soft. He liked being close to her like this. But it was havoc on his willpower.

She took a step, closing the space between them. "I was hoping we could make a new start."

So, she did hate what happened. He didn't blame her. He swallowed past the rocks in his throat. No pressure, none at all.

"After the farce of a wedding we had, I think coming here was the best thing we could have done," He looked down into her smoldering eyes and tried not to think about her nipples. "I'm not a believer in religion, but a marriage is a covenant, and although we don't have the most traditional of unions, I would have started off in a better way."

"People get married all the time because they have to."

He could feel her breath on his chin.

"Yes, they do, don't they?" He wished she would step back because if he leaned in, just a little...

He didn't want to upset her and make her think he was refusing her. "Maybe we should get going."

She splayed her fingers over his stomach and he sucked it in, willing himself to not move, not breathe. They had to leave before he took her hand and placed it lower.

She didn't want this. She was confused after the emotional day they shared. It was all psychologically explainable.

Her hands ran up to his chest and he shivered and held back from rocking into her.

"I think you're exhausted, and need some sleep. We should get back."

The seductive grin on her face under any other circumstances would have had him stripping, but he took a deep breath and stepped back. Breaking body contact was the only way to get out of this with his conscience intact.

Come morning, she would more than likely be horrified by what they had done today. If he compacted sex on top of that, she might bury herself in guilt. He wanted her to make decisions with all her emotions unimpaired, not out of some subconscious need for comfort.

Confusion and anger played across her eyes. She snatched her hands from him and walked to the car. Of course she would see this as rejection, and maybe it was better that way. She could shut herself off from him for a while and she wouldn't be tempting him to fuck her senseless.

But he couldn't stand her being hurt over this. She bore too much today as it was. Guilt had its positives.

"It's not what you think," he said to her back. "I just want to give you time to ease into things. You were shot at, married, and forced to watch and help me ejaculate into a vial so that we could marry. You are going home to a strange house, and you've given up all your belongings, if they are still there. The Mayor's henchmen probably burned it all to the ground by now."

He stopped her at the car door. "I don't want you rushing into a physical relationship with me that you may regret come sunrise."

"That is very considerate of you—"

"Exactly—"

"I would prefer if you fuck my brains out."

He jerked back. Apparently, she wasn't one to mince words.

He was hard as ever right now, and turning her down. There should be a medal for him somewhere for this. "No. If you feel the same later

then we can talk about it, but I don't think you know what you want."

She sat in the car and looked up at him. "I know exactly what I want, and where I want it. I'm a big girl and I can make decisions for myself. But don't you worry, I won't throw myself at you again."

"I don't think you were throwing yourself at me, I think you were making unsound decisions based on your volatile emotions. It's natural after a dramatically life altering day like you had to want comfort and to—"

"Fuck you."

* * * *

The ruins must not have been far from the manor, because it only took minutes to arrive at Doc's home. For that, she knew there was a god. She couldn't sit there next to him for one second more without letting him have the fury of her frustration. The truck didn't stop before she launched out and bounded up the large stone stairs. The front door was opening and she was walking in before she heard his footsteps on the gravel. Now if she could get through the rest of the night without having to see him again she would be thrilled.

What a nincompoop she was. She would love a reason to blame it on anything other than herself, but she won the award for pushy bitch tonight, hands down. And the simmering anger thing she had going worked, because she didn't want to think about how mortified she was at his rejection.

Her stomach flopped. She tried not to pay attention to his footsteps behind her.

"Ohh, you must be Katerina." She was engulfed in a hug by a white-haired woman that smelled like sugar cookies. Heaven. She would have stayed right there but the woman pulled away and hugged Doc next.

"I'm Mathilde," she told Kat as she looked Doc up and down, shaking her head in maternal disapproval. "You two look like you went ass over teakettle a few times today."

Kat stood transfixed, a smile of adoration plastered to her face. She and Mathilde would rub just fine.

"It was a long day, but we're here. And I'm starved, if you have anything?"

Mathilde shooed Martin into the kitchen. "I have some food in the warming drawer and fresh tea and cookies." She looked at Kat. "Those children ate like there would be no food tomorrow."

"Sometimes it's day to day as to what I can get them." She just wanted to sleep. "Would it be too much if I went to bed? I'm too tired to eat."

"I know, pet, I do. We have plenty here and have never wanted for anything, thanks to Martin." Mathilde opened the kitchen door to make sure Martin was eating and, then she let it close.

"Yes, he does procure anything he needs, doesn't he? Even by marriage." She didn't mean to sound so hateful when she spoke.

Mathilde didn't take her words at face value, but instead looked at her with a measure of sympathy. Why it pushed Kat over the edge she didn't know, but it she wanted to lash out, and as much as she wanted to bare her claws at Mathilde for the whole day, she knew the old woman didn't deserve it. She would have walked over broken glass and bore the pain happily, if that would draw the malignant anger from her.

"Why don't I show you your room so you can get settled? A good night's rest should take the shadows from your eyes, I think. And the children will be thrilled to see you in the morning."

Mathilde led Kat up the staircase and down a long hall that was carpeted with a worn Oriental runner and oak paneling. Doors went off both sides. The house was huge and it looked as if there would be plenty of room for all of them. As long as she wasn't sharing a room with Mr. Detweiler, she would be happy.

The old woman wore a mauve knitted wrap, and her hair was still in a bun, sitting like a platinum halo on her head. She shuffled down the hall and opened a door at the far end. "This one will keep the noise from the children waking you up."

The thought of all of them bounding all over her bed in the morning made her smile. Normally she wouldn't appreciate it as much, but she almost died today.

"I hope they weren't a problem?" She would have liked to have woken them up and kissed them till they screeched to get away from her, but they would never go back to sleep if she did.

"Not at all!" Mathilde squeezed Kat's shoulder. "They were on their best behavior. I have a feeling that will change in a few weeks when the newness of their situation wears off."

Suddenly the permanence of her decision fell on her with the power of a tornado, making her heart plummet.

She would never go home again.

This was her new home, and all the children's home. Not knowing when she woke up that her future would change so drastically, she never thought to bring anything with her that would be a touchstone through the adjustment. She'd gotten up and made sure the children were dressed and washed. They'd even had fresh eggs, the hens had started laying as the days got longer. And she left. Done. Gone.

The quilt that her mother and grandmother made during her parents' courtship had lain on her bed. A few pictures of her parents had been on her dresser along with her first lock of hair. They weren't expensive, but they meant everything to her. It was all she had left.

She knew it was sentimental to want those things, and what mattered was that the children and she were safe, but it choked her up anyway.

Mathilde handed her a kerchief from her wrap sleeve. "It's been a rough day on you, hasn't it, pet?" She hugged Kat's shoulder. "It's all starting to sink in, isn't it? Well, if you can get some sleep things might look a bit better come the morning."

The older woman took her hand and led her into the room which glowed from a gas lamp and turned down the covers of the biggest four poster bed she'd ever seen, with a blue toile down quilt that looked a foot thick.

It just wasn't her Mother's quilt.

"There's a clean nightdress on the end here," she said, as she patted the mattress. "I'll leave so you can get some rest."

Kat sat down on the mattress like a robot and stared around her, amazed at the luxury, even in these times. The sheets were crisp and clean, smelling of lavender and sunshine, the down coverlet like a cloud. If she worked herself to the bone she could never provide this for them. It was a good thing to have happened. Or, that was what she kept trying to tell herself.

Mathilde whispered goodnight and the door clicked shut behind her. Kat sat up and undressed. It took no time at all—she couldn't afford a corset that fit, so all her clothes simply untied, unbuttoned and slipped off.

She looked around the room for a wash basin, not wanting to dirty the nightdress or sheets, and found one in the stand with a pressed hand towel over a dowel. The small embroidered swallow and edging lace unleashed the banked tears and she couldn't tell what washed her face

more, the water or her crying.

The lawn nightdress was pin-tucked and fit her well, not like it was made for her, but enough and better than anything she had. It floated around her, and sleeping in something so fine was a bittersweet reminder again of what she had lost and gained in her decision. She untied the string from her braid and combed her fingers through her hair. There wasn't a brush that she could see, so it would have to do for now.

She slipped into the bed and pulled the coverlet over her and stared at the ceiling, unable to stop her thoughts from spinning like a top.

It must have been a few hours that she laid there wide awake, praying that she would pass out from exhaustion. But her eyes never even closed, and she couldn't stand lying there one minute more.

She threw back the covers and got up, dreading leaving the warmth of the bed but decided now would be the perfect time to figure out the house. No one would be awake but her and the mice, and they wouldn't tell if she snuck something from the pantry to quiet her growling stomach.

The hall was pitch black except for the slight illumination the lamp in her room provided, which was just enough to not trip and wake everyone up. She tiptoed past the bedroom doors, six in this wing alone, and down the back servants' stairs into the kitchen. A sliver of moonlight streamed in from the window, and she poked her head into the butler's pantry and scanned the shelves for some crackers or bread leftover from yesterday. Better than bread, there was a breadbox that held not just a toast loaf, but a few scones, and she found the butter well and a knife. The scones were almost sweet and perfect, with dried cherries and orange peel, all the flavors dancing on her tongue and silencing her stomach.

The kitchen table was for servants, not the family in the house who ate in the dining room, so it was less formal, but more comfortable than she would have been sitting in the dining room by herself.

Now, if she could get a glass of milk she would be thrilled.

Milk didn't go with her mood, but her stomach didn't care. It felt as if there were a burning hole in it, and the milk would soothe it—or it would if she could get some. Instead she got up, leaving a napkin of crumbs and fetched herself a mug from the drain rack and some water from the spigot. They had glasses, she was sure, but she didn't want to go opening and closing cabinet doors to find one. Avoiding Martin for

another forty-eight hours would be perfect and unrealistic, but she needed to avoid him now. Her pride hadn't begun to patch itself together yet.

She drank it down in a few gulps, and realized that she hadn't had anything to drink all day and got herself another mugful. When she was done with that one she placed it in the sink and shook the napkin out over the garbage. She didn't want Mathilde coming down to a mess in the morning.

After folding the napkin and placing it on the table, she wound her way through a series of doors and around a half round wall that spit her out into a small den. High up on the wall was a dragonfly stained glass window that let enough light so that she could make out shadows.

On one wall there was a green carved marble mantle flanked by a dark leather club chair. Black bookcases filled every other wall, from floor to ceiling, every inch of shelf taken with books.

Over on an oak desk there was a lamp. Although she didn't want the light to wake anyone up, her curiosity to learn more about her new husband won, and she lit the wick and trimmed it low.

It was a masculine room, but more than that, it was imposing. It was centuries of learning, knowledge, and writing all in one room. Knowing Martin he'd searched every nook and cave of the earth trying to find a cure for the Scorpicos and found every book on healing ever written.

She loved that about him. He was passionate in his purpose to find the solution. Failure couldn't be an option. The responsibility of his profession and his calling carved itself into every line on his face. In his case, it made it a wonderful face. One filled with character and depth that she wanted to know more about.

She dragged her finger along the shelves as she read the titles, some in languages she didn't recognize. It amazed her that he never gave up. That he sacrificed everything he was to help others. It made her feel unworthy, that held in comparison somehow she was lacking. She hoped that he didn't see that part of her. She was sure he did, she couldn't hide her faults very well, but she wanted to ice herself up nice and sweet so maybe it filled in her weak spots enough to pass muster.

For the past few years she and Martin had been circling in the same sphere, helping the city orphans in any way they could. With his training, his efforts were more practical, but she was able to provide a safe house for some of them. At least, she hoped she did.

She turned the knob on the lamp and watched as the flame disappeared, then sank into his club chair and stared up at the stained glass. Off to the side in a basket was an old wool blanket and she pulled it up over her and buried her face in it, wanting to hide like she did when she was a child. It surprised her when it smelled like Martin. Not strongly, like he used the blanket every day, but traces, and she brought it to her nose and inhaled, letting it comfort her.

The scariest part of the day had nothing to do with the shooting, or the marriage, but that she didn't like the overwhelming wanting she now had for him. Now when she saw him she itched to run her hands through his hair, and smell his skin. She anticipated the gleam in his eye, and how it made her knees weaken.

As long as he had been Doc Detweiller, she never had to think about him as a man. He was a professional, a business man, even a healer. But never once did she see him as just Martin. A man who withstood the most excruciating embarrassment with courage that left her in awe. Her respect for him tripled today. Unfortunately, her desire did, too.

She could admit now that he was right when he told her she needed time to adjust. It was mortifying, what she'd done. Acting like a cow-eyed adolescent wasn't the route she had planned to take on asking him to sleep with her. Apparently she wasn't that good of a seductress, because nothing she'd tried had worked, and when he'd said no it was a severe blow to her pride. What she had left after the day's adventures. Helping him fill the vial had been the most sexually exciting and embarrassing thing she'd ever done. It made her think of him in ways she couldn't ever erase from her mind.

And she didn't want to.

Chapter Five

As soon as Martin closed the door behind him, it opened once more and Xavier and Canine bounded through, oblivious to his mood and need for solitude.

He couldn't blame the boy. Or the dog. Huge changes took place in the house today. Xavier was used to privacy, as they all were, and now there was a houseful of children. They would all need to know about Xavier's condition and he was sure Xavier wasn't comfortable with that. Canine settled in with a grunt on his blanket on the floor at the foot of the bed.

"Have you met Amy yet?" Xavier splayed himself across Martin's bed with his feet hanging off the edge.

"No, I haven't. I'm sure I will tomorrow at breakfast. Katerina has told me some about her."

Xavier started bouncing his legs. "She helped Mathilde get all of the children settled in and fed."

"Well, that was good of her. I'm sure Katerina would expect no less."

"And she helped feed them all, too."

"Good." Martin took his shirt off, folded it, and placed it on a chair even though it was filthy. He resisted the urge to ball it up and throw it into a corner. "How do you feel about everyone coming here to live? I would have spoken to you about it, but I had to make a sudden decision."

"Everything is great. After I helped clear the supper table I took Amy out to the pond and told her about things here. She's not much older than I am."

Martin sat on the edge of his bed and tried to understand what he was hearing. "You brought her out to the pond?"

Xavier never went to the pond with anyone. It was his private place, and Martin had always allowed him privacy there. He was amazed Xavier shared it with Amy so quickly. But maybe not. Xavier knew he

didn't have long.

"Yeah, and she's like me, she can't sing at all. I did my impression of that Stone Heart song that makes Derwold laugh all the time? She snorted. We cracked up."

Again, for the zillionth time today, Martin was dumbfounded. He'd always heard parents joke about children coming with a manual, and he never understood the joke. Maybe it was that Xavier wasn't his child, and that altered the way they related to each other. But now, he wanted that imaginary handbook because he had no idea how to proceed.

Xavier expounded on the perfection that was Amy, and Martin turned responses over in his mind until he knew there would be no right way to deal with Xavier's feelings. If anything, Xavier himself knew the problems that were ahead of him. But Martin knew confrontation would only make the boy defensive.

Maybe it would be better if he let them both go, but under a watchful eye. Knowing what he did about Amy, if her heart became involved and Xavier died—and he eventually would if Martin couldn't find a cure—it wouldn't be fair to her to bear the death of everyone she loved in her life. The strongest of people couldn't bear such heartbreak—it would only be right that Xavier be honest with her and let her make the decision. But he would have to do it before they became more emotionally involved. It didn't leave much time, because the boy was enamored.

It was devastating to watch Xavier going on about her. He deserved to love someone, and he needed to be loved in return. And to know that Doc was responsible for keeping him alive so he could have those things...Doc wouldn't know what to do if he couldn't find a cure. Time was running out for Xavier. A few months were all he had left. And there was the very real possibility that the precursor wouldn't work at all. He thought it was a viable theory, but it was still a theory.

Would Amy be happy with a few months? Did they realize that if the hormones didn't work, Xavier's last days would be in full spider form trapped in the cage until there was no shred of the humanity that was once Xavier left?

Then Doc would have to give him a final injection that would stop his heart. His throat swelled with the thought. For as much as Doc wanted Xavier to have someone, knowing that it would end in such pain didn't seem like the responsible decision.

"And then she skipped a rock across it and when we came back to the house I helped her with folding all the laundry that they brought for the little ones."

Doc swallowed past the ache in his throat. "Xavier, she sounds wonderful—"

"She is! Did you know that she can speak French fluently?"

Martin put his hand on the boy's thigh. "Xavier, you need to think about your health, how it will affect your relationship with her. Do you want her to be hurt if everything goes wrong?"

In an instant Xavier's face went from open and animated to harsh and angry.

"It won't! You'll find a cure for me, I know you will. You're a genius."

Xavier's childlike faith was Martin's undoing. He looked at the ceiling and blinked. "Xavier, I'm just a person, I may not be able to figure out a cure in time. You need to think about that and how it can hurt her."

Xavier's brows drew down. "I won't hurt her."

"You won't mean to, but it will happen."

"No, I won't."

"Xavier," Martin pitched his voice low and calmed himself down.

"You can't have a physical relationship with her."

"It's not like that!"

"No, it's not now—but it will be one day if you get closer. It's a natural progression. How will you tell her you can't have sex? That she can't ever have children with you? Is it fair to her to not tell her these things and let her make a decision?"

"You just don't want me to be happy!" Xavier stood up, his face scarlet, and squared himself off.

Martin had to calm him down. He put his hand out and beckoned Xavier to sit. "I, more than anyone, want to see you happy, Xavier. But you're old enough to understand that it's your responsibility to tell her these things, and let her make her decision. That is what being a grownup is about."

"I will tell her, you just don't understand how it feels to love someone! You don't have anyone like Amy and you don't get it."

How did a person who spoke three languages do such a piss poor job of communicating with an adolescent? Now what did he do? He

wished Kat were awake and here to help him, because he knew that he was making it worse. He had no idea how to fix it, either.

"We can talk about this tomorrow, Xavier. I'm tired and I don't know how to make this better with you now. Maybe you're tired, too, and need to get some sleep. You change earlier when you haven't had enough sleep. You need to be careful, especially with Amy and the other children here."

"Stop telling me what to do! I'm not an idiot."

"No, you're not. But we both need some rest. We can talk about this tomorrow?"

"You're an asshole!" Xavier stormed out, slamming the door so hard it shook the hinges.

Doc rubbed his eyes, and let the pain of his frustration sit in his chest for a few minutes. He needed to feel it. It fed him. It was the force that drove him every day, and it was the fear that kept him up at night.

He could forgive himself of many things, but failure was not one of them. If anything, now he needed to work twice as hard, to find something before Scorpico's not only destroyed Xavier, but those now in his care.

He pulled a clean shirt from the armoire and called for Canine to come downstairs with him. The dog followed at his heels, the ever faithful companion in the labs even when he was there for days.

Right now he needed a drinking partner and headed towards the library where his decanters were. Not too much, but enough to calm him down and let him focus on something other than death. As he passed the door Katerina was behind, he paused and wondered if she slept well. If she had everything she needed. Maybe he could go in and check, to make sure.

What he would like was for her to take him in her arms and tell him that he would find the solution to his problems. Or maybe she would be his research partner. Anything, but most of all to find oblivion and rest in her body. The second he thought it, he felt guilty. Wasn't that exact need what he chastised her for this evening? And now he understood why she needed him. Because those few moments of lost time were balm to a person's soul.

As excruciating as the Marriage Office had been, he liked sharing those moments with her. He felt more connected to her because of them.

And he wanted her now, because of the desire he saw in her eyes,

but he lifted his hand from her doorknob and kept walking down the hall and stairs to the library.

The door opened with its usual creak and he walked over to the sidebar to pour a snifter of cognac. He couldn't take the stress anymore. Maybe it was just the fact that it was a different stress added in to his normal amount. Stress was a part of his life. Sexual tension was not.

Normally he would just take care of himself as just a bodily function and get back to work. He always thought more clearly after an orgasm anyway.

But now it was a tangled skein of desire and need and the only relief he wanted was Kat.

There were always women in his life, but they were more of an ancillary position. Something he used to amuse him or take care of his sexual needs. He didn't admire or respect any of them, that was for sure. They'd always wanted him for his position in the community, for safety and what he could provide. He didn't blame them, even getting food was a Herculean task, but he wanted more than to be someone's assurance of a meal and a place to sleep. He wanted someone to help him in his pursuit, what he felt was his calling. He'd always wished for someone like her, and now they were married.

When he'd gone to try and convince her to sell him the shipment of orchids he never expected for her to refuse him. As far as he was concerned, only a fool would refuse the amount of money he offered. It was more than a person could wish for, and at one hundred eighty thousand dollars for one hundred orchids, he thought it was a great return on her investment.

What he didn't know was that she needed the shipments to ensure the safety of her orphans. He thought she was providing a luxurious existence for them, and if she was, all the better for her. But it was nothing like he assumed.

Instead she was barely keeping them alive and having to pay the Mayor's council in contraband so she could never reach higher for help.

As he turned the problem over in his mind on the train, he couldn't think up any other solution. And the worst part, was realizing he didn't mind. Not that he was ambivalent. Instead he found himself enjoying the thought of spending his days with her.

He stood in front of the bar and finished the drink, then went over to the table to turn on the gas lamp. It flickered to life, casting a glow

over the room, and he went to his desk where his papers and research books lay out exactly as he'd left them.

Quickly he scanned where he left off, trying to pick up the train of thought. He heard Canine's muffled mumble and turned to find Katerina, sleeping in his chair with his old baby blanket tucked under her chin.

* * * *

Kat knew he stood over her, but she kept her eyes closed anyway. She came downstairs to get away from him, not to have him staring at her. Maybe if she pretended to sleep long enough, he would leave her and walk away. Not likely, with her luck. Especially today.

He grabbed a corner of the blanket and covered the side of her leg, which she must have kicked off after she fell asleep. It wasn't what she expected him to do. So she lay there, pretending to sleep because she couldn't figure out if she wanted to screech at him or thank him. Or beg him again to fuck the chaos away. It would have to be screeching, that she could take back or apologize for. Sex—you couldn't pretend it didn't happen.

A wet snuffle nosed her thigh and her eyes flew open, startled and scared, but knowing nothing would hurt her.

"Canine, you woke her," Martin chastised the dog in a husky whisper.

She faked a yawn. "You couldn't come up with a better name than that?" She sat up, but kept the blanket secure around her. It wasn't the best nightgown to wear. But then she hadn't intended on being caught in dishabille.

"I didn't have time to think of one that suited him."

Why was she talking about a dog's name? This was not the subject they needed to discuss. But she didn't want to talk about the other things, either. So, dog's names were a good subject after all.

His face held more worry than it did before, and she could tell he hadn't slept at all either. Damn it, she didn't want to pity him, it sucked away all that good, ferocious anger. Anger that could have been an effective tool in keeping him away from her for a few days. Or months.

He sat on the rolled arm of the chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "There have been some developing circumstances that I think you should be apprised of. Apparently, while we were gone, Xavier grew a bit of a crush on your Amy."

"Xavier?" She tried to stay calm. The last thing Amy needed was a

suitor.

Martin's forehead wrinkled. "Xavier is the Scorpikos youth I've been working with and using to develop the Scorpikos cure."

"So, he's a part time bug."

Martin frowned. "Being cruel won't help the situation."

"I don't mean to be cruel, but that *is* what he is, is it not?"

"Yes." He sighed.

"Amy has dealt with more horror in her life than most people, and that is considering the wars and the fallout from them. It would be unbearably cruel to have her grow any affection towards him and then have him die." The blanket slipped down her shoulder and his eyes followed it.

"I told him as much."

"And what did he say?"

"That I had no idea how he felt."

She snorted. "Typical. Was there any sulking and slamming?"

"Yes. To both."

"Well, apart from the disease, he sounds normal." It didn't make her any less apt to strangle the kid. He had no idea. "They're quite selfish at that age and can't see the world beyond their own needs and expectations. Cut him some slack, I know adults who are no better."

"But what should we do?"

She could tell by the tone of his voice that he was reaching the end of his ability to cope. His words were very precise and his voice controlled. How she understood that, she had no idea, but it made her want to put her hand on his thigh and reassure him.

"We watch them. If you demand that he not pursue her, he will, fourfold. It's happening here, in the house, so we can supervise and make sure that it doesn't go too far. Don't forget, Amy may reject him."

"That worries me more."

The mask fell from his face and she saw all of his anxiety and burden that he carried for this child. For all of the Scorpikos youths. It made him look tired and old, and her heart squeezed.

He inhaled, and went on, "Xavier is fragile. For all of his bravado, he skirts the precipice of destruction constantly now. He's moments from losing complete control of the disease. Once turning, never being able to return to human form, it eats away at his humanity. He wants nothing more than a normal life. To have friends—everything that encompasses

a life for a nineteen-year-old. And he wants love. He has no family, they deserted him when they realized that he was afflicted. Does he ask so much, that he has someone to love him? I do, but it's not the same, and he knows that."

She couldn't tell which hurt worse, Xavier himself, or hearing Martin talk about him with such unabashed adoration. Her heart went out to the boy. Maybe she was wrong, maybe the best thing that could happen would be for Amy and Xavier to find friendship and love. It might heal some of their wounds. Didn't they deserve that?

Didn't *she* deserve that, too?

In a way, she was jealous. She wanted that adoration. She wanted Martin to feel as intensely about her. And she wanted to return it. She did feel some things, but they were jumbled up with confusion and shame, a tight-knotted ball of thread that was much safer without her yanking on strings.

All the things that happened that day stripped her usual self-confidence in one fell swoop and she wanted his arms around her, and for him to tell her that everything would work out. That all of the kids would settle in, that Xavier would be accepting of Amy's feelings, and that this marriage—that became more than a business arrangement the time they were in the Licensing Office—would work.

She placed her hand on his thigh.

He looked down into her face and cupped her cheek, and she rested her face into it. Her heart started to thump like she'd run a marathon, but she didn't mind, he didn't push her away.

"Before..."

She closed her eyes. "Yes?"

"I was a bit harsh before."

He sat down on the edge of the chair and she moved over for him, gasping when he hauled her onto his lap and pulled her legs over his. He yanked the blanket over them both and snuggled her into the crook of his arm, her head resting on his shoulder. After a few moments of listening to the metronome of the clock and wondering if she should say something, he took a deep breath.

"This was my baby blanket."

Another pause.

"It's tartan wool."

"Family plaid. It's important to the family heritage. I guess my

parents wanted to start me young." His voice started off quiet, but became a little stronger as he realized she was listening. His thumb stroked the side of her thigh, the heat of his palm burning through the thin lawn.

She brought the blanket under her nose again and inhaled, this time remembering the scent and knowing it was his.

He wasn't the kind of person that you would ever imagine as a child. He was born an adult, with the sense of intense maturity that only came with age and the wisdom it brought. To think of him as a baby, with a family heirloom as a blanket, that he had a family, parents, a past. She never thought of him like that.

It was disconcerting that she wanted to know that part of him. And she had her own history to tell, which made her feel as if she had her own treasures to offer.

His thumb still stroked her thigh, slow and hot, and it made her very aware of his hard-soft planes that she rested against.

"My parents were from Scotland and my brothers and I immigrated with them. My father was a doctor also, and my mother a scientist."

He wrapped his other hand around her and pulled her close. "I'm the oldest of three, my younger brothers Ian and Brian live in New Gotham.

Her skin was scorched under his hand now, like there would be a red mark when he lifted it. But she didn't want him to move. Instead, she pushed into him and enjoyed his pause of breath.

"We were very close while growing up, but our studies took us all our separate ways. On Christmas they come back here for a fortnight and we catch up. Especially since Mother and Father died."

She slid her hand up his stomach to his chest, and his breath caught again.

"I went to Cornell University, and by the time I graduated, the Sand Wars were over and...well, you know what happened after that."

"Yes." She nuzzled her nose into the space between his neck and shoulder and relaxed into the comfort of him. Could she do this forever—this moment—right now? Where all of her problems were on the other side of the door? This could be good.

He blew her hair out of his face and she smiled into his skin. She could almost taste the salt and heat of him, and it made her want to lick him.

So she did. Just a little, right there in the dip of his collarbone.

His whole body stilled, and he stopped whatever it was he was going to say, and she could feel him spiral. That whatever control he had, the walls he put up, they all fell at her feet when her tongue touched his skin.

The thumb that lazily stroked the side of her thigh now moved with purpose—up, up, up until it bunched the fabric of her nightgown, and he slid his finger into the vee of her hip and thigh. Her body responded like a geyser, all boiling hot and wet so fast she rolled her eyes and closed them, praying he'd go those few inches more.

And he did, right there, perfect, stroking her with the same rhythm hard and slow, that he did her thigh.

He must have gotten an A in anatomy.

She wanted to shift over and straddle him, to rub herself against the ridge in his pants. That hard, lovely ridge that she saw, and squeezed and wanted to lick earlier. And maybe, if she angled herself just so, he would slip-slide right into her and bring it home.

"Were you this wet when you were jacking me off?"

"Yes," she said into his neck.

"Did you want to have sex then?"

"Yesssss."

"You wanted me inside you."

"Mmmm." Making her lips shape words was becoming too difficult. She let her knees flop open and gave his skin a nip.

Another sharp inhale, and he rocked up.

"I didn't think you wanted me, I thought you were just being kind."

She laughed, she couldn't help it. That such an educated man could have misunderstood her awkward attempt at seduction, or its implied meaning.

With one movement, he slid his fingers into her and she tried not to grind herself down onto his hand. It was torture, it only made her want all of him now, immediately, and she moaned.

"Such a tease," she said, and then trailed her tongue up to the little pocket behind his earlobe.

He gave her two fingers and another inch.

She traced the whorl of his ear, and he did something fluttery with his fingers, and she could feel the squish deep inside.

By now, he was getting his own rhythm of rocking against her thigh and pushing his fingers in, and one more measure of this and she would

bite him in frustration.

"Inside me. Please."

He slid his fingers out and the wet slurp sounded like music as he tapped her pebbled clit. "Here?"

She shook her head no.

His fingers, all four of them, went inside of her and swirled again. "Or here."

"There, damnit."

"Straddle me."

Those were the magic words she wanted to hear.

She angled herself over him, the blanket skimming over her bare ass and falling to the floor as he popped open the buttons to his trousers and shook them off in between the bridge of her thighs.

His cock gave a jerk against the inside of her thigh and left a slippery trail of her and him, and she took its head and guided it until it was poised—just waiting for one of them to make the move.

See what he got for teasing her. That would show him.

But he drew his thumbs alongside either side of her, pressing enough to almost go in, all the way to her clit and then back down, spreading her lips open so he could taunt her. He arched up and pushed in an inch, stretching her while he held her hips in place, not letting her move.

"Please," she whined.

He gave her some more.

"Gah." She closed her eyes and let him have all her weight, but he braced himself for it and chuckled. Chuckled, the bastard.

"Did you know you have a web of nerves that ring around your cunt to your ass? There's more sensation out there, than inside you."

"Like hell."

"Shall we do an experiment?"

"No. You can fuck me now."

"Fine then, your loss."

"Perfect. Now get moving."

"I can make you come right now, if you want?"

"No. I want to be stuffed so full of you that I feel like the fucking Thanksgiving turkey. Now if you please?"

With one endless long slide he filled her, and all she could think was *finally*.

Chapter Six

The leather under his ass was so hot it was like being burned from both sides. Only Kat was a wet hot, opposed to the dryness of the chair.

Honestly, he thought it was going to be all elbows and knees and stiff embarrassment. Semi-hard to hard, back to semi with her all anxious about him and herself. That was normally the way it went for first times, or at least for him. But for some reason, with Kat it was smoother. Maybe her jacking him off in the Marriage Office, with all its agony, counted as the first time. It seemed to work all the bugs out, and now there was an ease, an intimacy from being soldiers in the foxhole together.

She hadn't moved once he let her slide on him. She sat there, her head hanging back with her hair grazing his hands that still gripped her hips. Sweat beaded on his brow as he refused to let himself rock deeper into her. It was torture. Still, he'd had his turn, this time was hers, so he waited for her to even so much as twitch to give him the go ahead.

Her thighs started to tremble, and she sank down. He didn't bother to hold his groan back.

He'd had her hands, her slippery spit-wet hands jacking him off. And watching her do it was more erotic than anything he'd experienced so far, but the anticipation and reality of her taking him all in was better.

She clenched him so tightly it was euphoric, but he started to move anyway. Down into the chair and back up, not much, but enough to grind her clit a little. When she started to breathe in small tiny pants it made the nerves under his skin spark up and down his limbs, and settle low in his spine.

But this wasn't the way he wanted her. He'd like to spread her out on his bed. But it was one flight up, and he would have to disengage to get there. Maybe it would be better if he could get her on the floor. His knees weren't so great anymore, but...she leaned into him and trailed her tongue up the side of his neck again and exhaled in his ear.

There was more to marriage than sex and he knew that, but he wanted them to have a new beginning. Or maybe not, because the one they had bonded them, but there was a certain part of her untouched, and he wanted to know it. Even though she jacked him off, because of where it was, they held themselves removed from aspects. There were walls. And he needed to know that she wouldn't keep herself distanced from him because of the peculiarities of their arrangement. They would never make it if she did. He had laid himself bare for her. She deserved no less. But she had reservations, he could tell, and he needed to find a way to reach her.

Thinking back on the day there had been one thing that they didn't do.

Kiss.

He met his lips with hers, just a feather touch, then caught her lower lip in his and tugged. She smiled and ran the tip of her tongue along the corner of his top lip and the sparks danced across his skin again. This time down to his spine. He basked in the acceptance of her when she slid her tongue along his, taunting him to play.

He chuckled. Not with his mouth, they were still attached, but deep in his chest. He ran his hands up the sides of her back, her skin cool and silken beneath his palms and caught the back of her neck, cradling her head. It all made him want to kiss her more.

And he did. Slow and hot, wet and tangled, until she was putty in his arms, the weight of her head being held by his hands. Somewhere in the kiss, it had stopped being a race to orgasm and had become a slow dance.

Hands skimmed, tongues tasted peaks and crevasses, limbs tangled and the effects had her panting in his ear gasping unintelligible words of passion.

Her nails dug into his hips, pulling him closer. There would be crescent welts there, and the thought of her marking him was nothing he'd experienced before. It made him want to throw his head back and roar.

She linked her arms around his neck and drove her tongue into his mouth while she impaled herself on him again.

When he let himself come, it was as if he'd had no bones left. He'd had to kneel down with his forehead resting on the floor, because his head was spinning too much to stand, or remain vertical for any period

of time.

"You?" he said, between deep breaths.

"Mmm." Her eyes didn't open.

He stayed there, staring at her, trying not to be impressed with them, and more so himself. He could get used to this. Who knew?

"I have to get upstairs." Her voice sounded a little more composed than before.

"Upstairs?" His bed was upstairs. That's what she meant. She was tired, too.

"Yes, I have to get back to my room." She started to gather her clothes, not meeting his eyes.

"Just push Canine off. I'll be there in a minute."

She slipped the nightgown over her head. "Canine sleeps on my bed?"

"Your bed now."

"He wasn't there before."

"He always sleeps next to me. He'll just have to learn to stay on the floor."

She stopped and gathered the blanket around her. "I planned on going back to my room. It's the first night for the children to be in your house. They know where I'm supposed to sleep, if I'm not there..."

"Yes, you're right." He gave the blanket a tug. "But it's your house now, too. And I'll sleep with you."

She paused, then nodded and walked out, closing the door softly behind her.

It made him feel bad cornering her like that—not really, but her reaction was what he was after. Start as you plan to go on, and he'd be damned if she slept in her own bed. They were married. If the day hadn't gone as it had, well that would be different. He knew now that she wasn't averse to him, and if they were going to make a family out of this motley crew.

He put his clothes back on and slipped out and up the back stairs after her. The sun would be up in a few hours, but they'd get some sleep and hopefully be able to start propagating the seedlings to start the next level of experiments.

When he got to her room she was tucked into the bed already, looking like some spent princess from a fairy tale. But by the look of her, balled up in the far corner of the bed, he wondered how they would

make it with all of the problems they had stacked against them. And the knowledge that he probably made it worse.

Maybe a honeymoon would be a good idea. Something where they could spend time away and see if there could be something salvaged from this disaster of a day.

Just like an old fashioned courting, except on his honeymoon. The irony didn't escape him.

* * * *

Maybe this time when she pretended to sleep she'd be a better actress. Or Canine wouldn't give her away. She hadn't heard the shuffle of the dog padding in behind him, so she might be safe.

Was there a stronger word than horrified? Because that would be an accurate description of how she felt about attacking Doc. Only she was aroused, too, so the guilt was doubled and confusing. It was that damned medal. The old religious guilt still worked. It must rub off through osmosis.

What kind of woman let a stranger fuck her like that? Worse, what kind of woman fucked a stranger with the passion she did?

Apparently her, that's what kind of woman. An insecure, wretched, tangle of a woman, whose life changed in one day. For the better.

And she was lying. She did know Doc. Not on more than a friendship basis before today, but she did know him. He should be canonized as a saint, and knowing that she married him—just like that. Jumping on top of him and screwing him brainless was a bonus. He probably thought he married the town tramp.

If he only knew.

She almost snorted and gave herself away.

Suffice to say, suitors were not lining up at her door. She came with numbers that no man wanted. Like the lucky number thirteen. That was the black spot of her resume. To her it was a good plumb line.

The mattress depressed with a sigh next to her and she squinted her eyes shut, thankful to be facing away from him.

He laid his hand on her hip, and against her will her insides sighed with relief. And even better, she would have snuggled back into him if she could just let go of that niggling guilt. The warmth of another body was an incredible lure. Better to stay consistent and keep away from him, at least until her feelings were more sorted. Yep, safer to stick with the guilt.

"I'm sorry I didn't...I thought...I mean I hoped we could ...ah...build a bridge, so to speak. It's my fault. I should have given you more time." His voice sounded like one of her boys when they felt guilty.

They were about as safe as two people in straight jackets. Guilt was very effective. But it was also disabling, because they were two people in straight jackets alright, but being dangled over a tiger pit and with no way to save themselves. Still, she'd have to add that to her stock of motherly tools. She had a feeling she hadn't used that one to its potential.

She kept quiet now, not because she wanted to avoid him, but because she didn't know what to say.

Apart from railing at him for taking on all the responsibility for their relationship onto his shoulders, she had no idea how to respond.

He didn't look like he was Atlas, but he'd taken on the same portion and she wanted to hug him and tell him that she could help. That he didn't need to shoulder the burden alone. Plus, she was greedy. Her fuck ups were her own. There wasn't a lot that she could take pride in, but when she messed up? It was all hers, baby.

The poor guy had a misguided sense of responsibility and she needed to correct it.

She rolled over towards him, loving the way his hand slid over her hip as she did. "It's not your fault. I am not your responsibility. I'm a human, not an experiment that you can apply scientific theory to and come to a definitive conclusion."

"You're right. And I wasn't trying to. I wanted to give us a more solid base to our relationship."

"You are such a man." She rolled her eyes. "Sex does not a relationship make."

"No, not all of it, but it plays a huge portion and I would not want the last memory in your mind to be of us at the Marriage Office. I wanted you to know I desired you, Katerina, the woman, because of *you*—not because a troll of a woman made me."

She sunk down into the covers and pulled his blanket over her head.

He continued, "I have the utmost respect for you. I would like to think that I've earned yours. Respect and a healthy dose of lust have begun a good number of long lasting, satisfying marriages."

She resisted the urge to punch him, but it was hard.

"So, let me see if I get this. Respect plus lust equals a relationship?"

"No, you're being contrary. It's a beginning."

His words were sterner than his voice and he pulled her to him and snuggled her into the curve of his body.

"Is it a good start?"

There was a waver in his voice like a small boy.

"Yes," she whispered.

* * * *

Katerina's body heaved off the bed in a jolt of adrenaline.

Doc had leapt out of bed, still fully clothed, and was already running out the door.

"What? What?" All she knew was her dream was interrupted by a loud crash.

"The labs! It came from the labs!" He disappeared and she heard him bound down the hall and then the stairs.

The children started crying and others were making their way out of the rooms as she tried to calm them down and reassure them that the men had not come to take them away from her. Some of the older ones, Grant and Sioban, picked up the little ones and comforted them with hugs and whispers but as Kat counted heads one of the older children came up missing.

Amy.

Mathilde came up on her side and scooped up Nathaniel, kissing his tear streaked face and smoothing his hair. "It's all right. I'll watch them."

Her understanding eyes met Kat's over Nate's sable head and Kat nodded.

"Thank you." She tugged on Jilly's braid and pulled her close for a hug. "You all listen to Mathilde while I go help Doc? I love you all, be good, I'll be right back."

God bless her, Mathilde had it all under control.

Kat pulled the blanket around her tighter, glad for his scent that calmed her, and started to follow, but stopped. "Mathilde? Where are the labs?"

"Down the stairs at the end of the hall, through the kitchen and to the left of the pantry is another door. It will take you to the cellars where the lab is."

Kat started to run.

"Katerina!"

Kat stopped and turned.

"In the kitchen, on the left side of the door is an ironing cabinet. I have a shotgun in there. Take it with you."

Kat nodded and flew to find Amy, grabbing the gun on the way like Mathilde told her to.

When she burst through the doors she was glad she listened.

He was so shocking she froze.

His trousers were shredded, flapping off his legs in streamers. But that was all that was left of his human body. His once concave stomach was distended, not fully a spider abdomen, but bulbous, with coarse hairs sticking out of it, and all the way up his back. Spider legs, three on each side, had grown, making his shoulders hunched with joints. He still had his human arms, too, but they hung at his side like deflated balloons, flopping and boneless.

A gut wrenching scream choked in the back of her throat, but the worst of him she had to turn away from.

What must have once been a sweet face now had knots of scarred flesh covering it, spiking hairs growing like black spears. Fangs grew out of his cheeks, black and sleek. All of it was disgusting. The stuff of nightmares. But the most horrific were his eyes.

All of them bulged out the top of his skull like obsidian marbles. His beautiful blue eyes looked out from below, where his nose once was.

She could see Xavier in them. He was pleading with his eyes.

* * * *

Two decades of his research...destroyed.

Nothing could be left after a crash like that. Whether it was chemicals or not, nothing would be left.

His feet hardly touched the treads as he flew down the stairs.

He hit the custom four-inch iron reinforced door with both hands from the bottom stair, throwing it open. In the same moment, he became the center of attention.

And that attention was a half human eight foot spider and its cornered prey.

Xavier, who had Amy against a wall, fighting for her life.

Behind him lay the ruins of the labs. The cage Xavier often used had been ripped from the wall and splintered like nothing more than pick up sticks and the anchoring cement wall was now small rocks on the floor.

That cage had been anchored with six inch screws.

Amy was smart. She'd grabbed a fire iron, positioning herself behind a tipped lab table. Every time Xavier got too close, she jabbed it at him. It didn't make him go away, but it kept him from killing her. Her face was dirty and tear-streaked, but underneath you could see her anger. It was what kept her alive.

Doc's mind lightning fired through equations that could have led to this outcome. All of which equaled his argument with Xavier.

He should have known how volatile the boy was and how he would react.

"Xavier, let her go!"

Xavier drew back and hissed.

He didn't know how much of Xavier's humanity was left. What the boy understood of himself and his actions. By what he knew of Xavier's changes before, he lost more self awareness each time.

A fist of anguish gripped him.

Xavier had missed his last shot because Doc was too busy fucking Kat to remind him.

"Xavier, back away."

Amy jabbed at him with the iron.

"No, Amy, don't enrage him, there might be something of Xavier left."

"No, there's nothing. He attacked me when I told him I wouldn't marry him. And then he turned into *this* right in front of me!" She jabbed at him again.

"Xavier, why didn't you go into the cage?" But he knew the answer. Why? Why prolong the inevitable? After Amy refused him, what was left for him to hold onto? Doc loved him, and there was the hope of a cure, but when that faith couldn't sustain you...

Xavier drew back and tried to strike with a back leg, but Amy blocked him with the fire iron again.

"I didn't want to hurt him." Her voice was raw.

"I may not have a choice."

How do you kill your child? Which was exactly what Xavier was to him. Even though he'd turned, Doc saw in him all that he could be, and all that he would have been if he were healed.

But what Doc didn't know was how much of Xavier's mind was left.

Doc glanced to see if he could give the boy a shot, but his work was in shards on the slate floor, crunching under his feet.

The steel locker that held what was left of the serum had been knocked over and ripped apart...almost as if someone had chewed at it.

Amy screamed and snapped his attention back to her. Xavier was taking swings, his eyes glowing and focused on her.

Before Doc could always see the person in the Spider, there was always Xavier, the boy, in there somewhere. But now... And it worried him, because if there was no humanity to reach out to?

Katerina screamed as she stood in the doorway. She almost dropped the gun, but Doc lunged to grab it.

"Amy, stop!" Kat ran up to Xavier and tried to attack him, but Doc grabbed a fistful of her nightgown and hauled her back.

"I don't need you hurt, too."

Xavier slashed out again, cuffing Amy in the head before she could block him.

"Amy!" Kat leaned down and picked up a shard of glass, hurling it at Xavier.

"Don't make him angrier!" Doc slapped her arm down.

"You speak of him as if he's a person!"

"I hope he still is in there somewhere." But Doc hated his choices, and there were only two.

Kill Xavier before he killed Amy, or kill him after he killed Amy.

He raised the gun.

Amy scrunched her eyes shut, with tears running like rivers down her face.

He loaded the shell and focused on Xavier.

Xavier heard the snaps and turned his head to look at him.

Please. If there was a God, please let this not happen. Maybe if Xavier could escape. To do what though, kill other people?

Doc focused on him again and took a breath.

First, do no harm.

Go, Xavier, please go.

The ounce of humanity left in the spider boy was a dim light in his multi-lensed eyes, once bright blue, now the target of the gun's crosshairs.

"Xavier, I love you."

Xavier reared on his back four legs and swiped at him as the gun went off.

Kat screaming was the last thing he heard.

Chapter Seven

Kat's voice gave out the third time she screamed his name. She tried to swallow past her scraped throat, but the spit wouldn't make it down so she cleared her throat a little and tried again.

Amy ran out of the room crying and Kat closed her eyes. Nice one. Really. Total loss of control was a great leadership quality. At least there was no blood. If there was blood gushing everywhere she would have lost it. When Michael, her oldest, got bloody noses the others laughed at her as she ran for the water closet. But Martin wasn't bleeding and she still lost it. He looked like he was sleeping except for the swelling and bruises forming around his eyes.

She put her hand on his chest to make sure it rose and fell. When it did, it was a small relief, but they had more to do. Like catch Xavier. She gave his shoulder a little shake.

"Martin, please wake up."

"I would, but there's a banshee screaming and I'm afraid she's come for me."

His voice was so low and cracked she had to lean in to hear him. "If you weren't hurt I'd hit you."

"Your compassion is overwhelming."

She brushed the dirt off his forehead. "You bring out the best in me."

"Xavier?"

"He left. I have no idea where to."

He squeezed her hand. "Probably to the underworld in the tunnels."

"Underworld?" It got worse?

"There are colonies in the tunnels of Grand Central Station."

"Oh. Is that why I see blinks of lights as the train goes through?"

"Yes." He closed his eyes. "Derwold sometimes finds clusters of bodies down there."

Her chest squeezed. Those poor kids. It reminded her that they had

a cause to fight for. And the first thing they had to do was get to what was left of her orchids, then fix this lab.

"Speaking of Derwold, we should send for him. Maybe he can find traces of Xavier."

He sat up and looked around him and Kat wanted to cry at the anguish on his face. All he worked for was lost. She couldn't imagine what work he'd been doing, but it must have been a lot because the room looked as if they were in the middle of a dump and there wasn't one glass test tube left whole. They would have to start all over again. Maybe this time she could help him.

She heard running footsteps, and a second later Derwold stood in the doorway. How he knew or got there was a mystery for another day.

"Doc, I think I found him!"

Martin got up with a grimace, bracing himself on his knees and straightened slowly.

"Everything all right? No broken bones?" She ran her hands down his muscled legs while she studied his face.

"No, just sore." Martin brushed himself off and started out the door. "Let's go then."

"I should go check on Amy and the children first. You go on, I'll catch up."

"I don't want you walking the tunnels by yourself. Come now or stay."

She hesitated but gave in to the need to go make sure her brood was fine.

"Go check. I have to see if there are any syringes left anyway." He scanned the room, "which seems to be an exercise in futility."

She picked her nightgown up, carefully stepping over the shards and splintered boards.

"Kat, it would be one less thing I had to worry about, you being there. People have been known to disappear, and Derwold has evidence that some Scorpicos...ah...cocoon their prey."

And that's all she needed to hear. Since the time she woke up with a Wolf Spider on her face, she'd hated spiders with a vengeance. Xavier, she'd made an exception for, but on the whole—no.

But with as much relief at not having to go, she worried for Martin and Derwold.

"I want a time you will be back. A precise time."

"I don't know—we could search all day."

"No. No—I will not sit here all day wondering if I've become a widow."

"Five hours?"

She raised her eyebrow. It struck fear into some of the children.

"Three?"

"Three. Exactly. I will start counting now."

* * * *

Doc and Derwold scoured the deserted tunnels of Grand Central Station for two and a half hours, thankful he wore his duster because the walls were a collection of molds, fungi and slime that were unclassified, he was sure.

The light from the torches they brought evaporated into the blackness, and if you were searching for them, signs of the underworld were about. Not many, and not to the unaware eye, but they were there.

Scratches on the walls in specific repetitive patterns which looked to be random, but were not. Trails of footsteps. Or spider steps. The slight indentations to the fine dust that created a trail that almost wasn't there.

Most of the time when people looked for trails they concentrated on footprints in front of them. Spider prints were about six feet off to the side when they didn't walk the walls.

Fissure cracks in the tiled walls needed to be checked for webbing.

He should have known that this would have happened. He should have been ready with the shots before Xavier lost his temper completely. He should have found him right away after their argument and given him a higher dose knowing he wouldn't be able to control it this time. That his emotions and frailty couldn't hold it all together.

He wished he could have told him he was sorry.

For a few moments he thought a familiar look came into Xavier's soulless blue eyes. Almost a begging. But a begging for what? For a cure that might be years away? Or a quick death because he was so tired of fighting a lost cause. Doc couldn't do it.

First, do no harm. Archaic, but the creed brought humanity to what was left of the medical profession.

Maybe the more compassionate thing would be to help ease Xavier's pain. It was a moot subject now because Xavier was gone, and Doc didn't do a good job either way. He would think about it though in

case he was ever in the position again.

Derwold covered his mouth with his sleeve.

"He ain't here."

Doc pulled a bit of the inside of his shirt and wiped his face. "He's here, but too far gone."

"Here." Derwold took Kat's medallion out of his pocket and put it in Doc's hand. "This might bring you luck."

He let the exhaustion and anguish fill his words. "There's a slight chance, too small to mention even, that he could return to his human form. Most likely not, but miracles have been known to happen. Still, it would take time, and a deathlike quiet. He would need to put himself in a deep sleep. Maybe hypnotize himself until his body would make the change back."

"Do ya think if he does that he'll come back?"

Thank you for the perfect lead-in, Derwold. "He's my son. He'll always be welcome in my house, no matter who I married."

If Xavier was out there—and Doc was certain he was—at least Doc could help him this last bit.

"We have to go. We've got a half hour to make it back before Kat sends out a search party and I'm sure she'll be in the lead. I can't have her in danger like that."

Derwold grunted his assent and they began picking their way back through the black tubes when a leg fell in front of them.

Doc jumped back and pulled out his shotgun. Derwold ran behind a half wall and cocked his gun.

There was no protecting yourself in terrain like this. Behind you held more surprises than in front.

After a thick moment of silence and nothing else happening, Doc waved Derwold forward and they both started out again, this time more carefully. Doc walked three feet around the leg, which looked like a chicken joint that had been hacked, all chunky meat and bone. Normally Derwold wouldn't hesitate to find cadavers in the tunnels, but this time was different. This time they both knew they were being watched, and that was a warning sign. One they had no problem listening to.

"We'll keep looking. Once a month, we'll come back to check."

Again, for their watchers benefit.

Walking briskly towards the pinpoint of light on the horizon, Doc realized he was anxious to get home. Not because he was tired and

wanted to relax, but that he had someone to go home to.

And wasn't that a great feeling?

* * * *

It was three hours and fifteen minutes by the time they made it back, and when he opened the door to the manor Kat had all thirteen children in a row in the parlor to greet him. They were all ages, dressed as well as they could be and they'd all been bathed and their hair combed. The smallest ones faces were shining with pride and happiness, except for the one who hung on Kat's skirts. He looked as if he held a few trepidations.

"You're late."

Kat wore a dress Mathilde must have found in the house, but she looked beautiful.

"My apologies."

Kat nodded, the anxiety easing from around her eyes. "Xavier?"

He shook his head. "As for now, no. But if he can turn...I made sure he knew he could come back. Maybe by then I can find the solution."

"We'll work hard. Maybe if I can get my orchids growing and you have a constant supply?"

He scrubbed his face and sighed. "I would like to think so."

"I would like to introduce you to our thirteen children." She walked to the end of the line they formed and said, "As I say your name, please step forward."

"Grant, Amy, Jordan, Maria, Jon Jon, Miranda, Eva, Sioban."

All eight did as she'd asked and he was impressed.

"Evan, James, Jared, Sophia and Nathaniel."

Nathaniel didn't get on line, he still stood gripping Kat's skirts until Kat swung him up in her arms and settled him on her hip seating him there as she went on.

"Hello, all. Welcome to your new home." They were a force to be reckoned with. And so was their mother.

"In celebration of our nuptials, we have put together a party of sorts. Mathilde was quite generous in making a cake."

For the first time since walking into the room, he'd seen his faithful friend standing on the side against the wall. He smiled and she smiled back, and he knew that she'd loved how he increased the household.

They'd even brought some plants in, and rearranged the furniture.

Mathilde had always had freedom to do what she wished and it was a happy room in the French country look she liked so much. They all put in a lot of effort into their party.

"Sir, how would you have us address you?" Grant asked.

No one had ever called him anything but Martin or Doc before. It was a strange thing to realize that he also never thought of being a father figure before this. Xavier was so much older when he'd brought him home, he never imagined the boy would call him anything but Doc. Some of Kat's -- their—children were small though. He'd not time to think about things like names up until now so he was wholly unprepared and he took a few minutes to think about it.

"Doc, Martin, Dad, Father. Whatever you like. You can all call me what you wish, I wouldn't want any of you using a name you were uncomfortable with."

Kat's eyes widened and she smiled softly. A smile he hadn't seen before.

She hugged Nat and put him down. "You may all have some cake and milk."

The younger ones who had reached their limit if sitting still ran off to the table that was beautifully decorated with linens and the cake. Kat had even placed flowers in bouquets. She'd apparently found his carefully concealed greenhouses he'd kept, waiting for the orchids. He chuckled, knowing now that the Scorpikos Orchid grew in caves.

Mathilde stopped them from grabbing handfuls and running by threatening them with gruel in the morning with no butter and honey.

"Martin, would you like to cut the cake with Kat?"

It was a peculiar day to be reminded of these old traditions. Some things shouldn't have been forgotten; they added a sense of meaning and depth, where it could have been clinical and embarrassing. It made a poignant counterpoint.

"I will if he doesn't also take up the old tradition of smashing the cake into the bride's face." Kat looked at him, studying him to see if he was capable of such silliness. A few days ago maybe not...

He stilled his face.

Mathilde handed the knife to Kat for the first cut and she sliced the cake just so, leaving the decorations equally distributed for the children, he was sure. Then she picked up a piece between two fingers and offered it to him, holding it in front of his lips so he wouldn't get mussed. Which

was very thoughtful of her.

He bit off the edge and chewed. It was his favorite cake of Mathilde's. Lemon with a lemon curd filling. Tangy and sweet.

Kat smiled and he took the piece from her hand. A shadow of worry crossed her face but she smiled and opened her mouth, right in time for him to palm the icing into her cheek. Her eyes shot fire.

The children were shocked, and the room became eerily quiet until Kat started to laugh. Not a polite chuckle, but a deep belly laugh. When they heard her, they all started to laugh too, the little one slapping his knee as if it were the best joke he'd ever seen.

Kat scooped the cake from her face and smashed the remnants into Martin's face. Which is what he expected.

"I was trying so hard to be proper. To show the children how to live in a house like this."

"And I needed to show them that I could have some fun. I think we made a good start."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out her saint medallion, put his arm around her waist, and kissed her.

Railroad Standard Time

by Philippa Grey-Gerou

Also by Philippa Grey-Gerou

The Black River

Passion Aggressive (with Emery Sanborne)

Dani Whitehall didn't even notice the guy until she ran into him.

Literally.

It was the long way to go to get from her subway to the office, but she preferred making her way through the dirty, meandering hallways and institutional stairwells up from the platform until finally she came out in the amber gold light of the main concourse of Grand Central Station. Every time she stepped from the dinginess into that splendor, she smiled a little. It had become a ritual for her, a reminder of all that was good and wonderful in a city like New York.

So when she bumped into him just before that moment, she was a little ticked.

"Hey, watch it!"

It was a weird sensation, not like when you bounce off someone and move on. There was a give to it, like putty or pudding, that seemed to try to cling to her even as she backed away.

His hands on her shoulders didn't help.

"Sorry about that, miss," he apologized with a sincerity that surprised her. "I didn't see you coming."

That was when she noticed he was gorgeous.

Not in a cover model, hunky beefcake kind of way. More like old Hollywood, with a square jaw, pale brown hair cut short enough to be neat, but long enough to hint at the curls beneath the hair gel, a neatly trimmed beard to match, and gray eyes that looked through her like ice. The black leather pants followed his shape nicely without outlining anything inappropriate, while the blue of his collarless shirt brought out the paleness of his eyes. And when he smiled...

She hadn't seen teeth that white outside of a toothpaste commercial.

"Yeah, well..." Realizing she was staring, Dani backed away. "Watch where you're going next time."

"I will. Sorry."

She skirted around him and headed onto the concourse.

When she looked back, he was gone.

* * * *

She stopped at the front desk on her way in. "Any messages,

Calle?"

The receptionist for the Hermes Marketing Group grinned and offered her a pile of little pink slips. "You ask that like you expect I'm ever going to say no, Dani."

"The day you do, I'll probably die from the shock." She quickly sorted the messages by priority. If she waited until she got in her office, she'd never make the calls.

"What time did you get out of here last night?"

Still focused on the messages, Dani answered, "Almost eleven-thirty, I think."

"So an early night for you." Calle shook her head. "Honestly, honey, you're too young to be old. You should be going out at night, meeting men, having some fun while you can still enjoy it."

The advice stung, even though it was probably true. "You speaking from experience?"

"How do you think I found Simon?"

"Well, when you find another one like Simon, send him my way. In the meantime, I'll be in my office, returning my calls."

Calle just shook her head. "Let me know if you want me to order in lunch. Or dinner. Again."

* * * *

He was there again the next day.

Dani paused in the hallway. He was standing in almost exactly the same spot as yesterday, still in the same leather pants, although this time the shirt was green.

And he was watching her.

Pulling her purse and computer bag closer on her shoulder, she skirted around him, not meeting that devastating smile but feeling the effect of it anyway.

"Have a nice day!" There was laughter in his voice.

She hurried on.

* * * *

"I ran into a man today," she admitted to her friend, Holly, at lunch that afternoon, not looking up from where she poked a lifeless salad around a plastic take-out box. "Well, yesterday, actually."

It was warm and clear. The sunshine filtered down through the tall buildings to shine on the low wall where the two of them sat eating—the city sounds a little brighter, a little more cheerful with the coming of

summer.

"Oh, yeah?" Holly looked doubtful.

Dani got defensive. "I do meet men, you know."

"No, you meet clients." Holly slurped the last of her iced tea through the straw before setting it aside. "And you never talk about them in that tone of voice."

"What tone of voice?"

"That one that says you've done something you don't think I'm going to like. So okay, spill. Who is this guy?"

Dani set her box aside. "I don't know."

"Danielle!"

"It's not like that! He was just...there. I didn't even see him until I ran into him." She hesitated. "But he was there again today."

Holly's eyebrows lowered to match her suddenly tight mouth. "What did you do?"

"Nothing! I'm not stupid, you know!"

"I know you aren't. I didn't mean it like that. Did you talk to the cops?"

"No. I don't think he's dangerous or anything. It was probably just a coincidence. It's just..."

"What?"

She thought about her words carefully. "I don't think he's dangerous. But he's...different, somehow. I don't know."

"Good looking?"

"Only if you think Cary Grant is gorgeous."

"I do."

"Then yeah." Dani couldn't help smiling at the memory of the way leather and blue cotton shaped that man's figure.

"You're smiling. That's new."

"I smile all the time!"

"Not like this, you don't." Holly crumpled up her lunch bag, took Dani's box, and deposited both in the nearby trash bin. "You've got a secret smile. Who knew?"

"It's not like that," Dani insisted again.

"Well, maybe it should be." Holly crossed her arms and looked down at Dani. "You don't think the guy's dangerous. You *do* think he's gorgeous." She studied her for a moment. "Have you talked to him?"

"Well, I told him to watch where he's going."

"That's not what I meant. Life's too short, and you spend all your time in that damn office making up pretty lies to sell other people's dreams. If you're interested in this guy, then for God's sake, Dani, say hello to him. Go someplace safe for a drink. Take a chance."

"And if he's a stalker?"

"I didn't say take a stupid chance."

"I don't know..."

"Dani, you're twenty-eight years old. You deserve more than just a career. You *want* more than that, I know you do."

"There just hasn't been time—"

"Then *make* time." Grabbing her hands, Holly pulled Dani to her feet. "And then if he doesn't work out, introduce him to me."

* * * *

She felt ridiculous. She'd spent so much extra time getting ready that morning, she nearly missed her train. But the time had paid off. The dark purple of her silk pant suit brought out the violet in her eyes, and her haphazard curls were pinned back in a neat twist, letting black ringlets fall around her forehead and ears. She'd gone all out on her makeup, from foundation to finishing powder, until her face was flawless, with extra attention paid to her mouth. It was the look she pulled together for client parties and major social galas, the opposite of how she preferred to go, with her hair loose and a minimum of makeup. It probably looked desperate and needy.

It probably was.

For a minute she panicked as she climbed the stairs, but he was there again, standing in the archway, watching back down the corridor. Maybe he was actually waiting for her?

That smile seemed a little more purposeful today. But maybe Dani was just reading too much into it. That didn't stop her heart from speeding up. "Good morning," he said, low and chocolate smooth.

As tempting as it was to run, she stopped. "Good morning."

He studied her openly, making her flush faintly. "You look nice today. Special meeting?"

"No, not really." Instantly she cursed herself for not having come up with a lie. "I mean, I was just..."

The grin became a little too smug. "Well, I hope he's worth it. Personally, I like the natural look better."

Her hand went up to her hair as her face flushed, embarrassment

making her drop her head.

"Hey, don't worry about it. I know how it is. You have to look one way for work, even though you'd rather just be in jeans and bare feet. I'm sure whoever you're meeting will be impressed."

Apparently not, but she didn't say anything. "Are you here every day?"

"For a while." He shrugged. "All part of the job."

"Oh, so you work for MetroNorth?"

"If you like."

"I haven't seen you here before."

"I've seen you."

That startled her. "Really?"

"You're difficult to miss."

She was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable with his attention. "You're just saying that, aren't you?"

"Hardly." Then he began reeling off a litany of her life that left her blood cold. "Your name is Danielle Whitehall, you're twenty-eight years old, a graduate of Columbia University with an MBA in marketing from Wharton. You were the youngest person ever to make partner at the prestigious Flentroy Jones Agency, two years after graduation, which you turned down to join Hermes Marketing Group, a new agency specializing in Internet startups, where you are now Senior Vice President in charge of new markets. You have a lovely home in Jackson Heights, but you don't even have time for a pet, let alone a boyfriend. You're a Taurus, your favorite color is purple and your favorite food is Italian. Did I miss anything?"

Horried, she could only whisper, "I hate Italian."

"Really?" He looked genuinely surprised, then shrugged. "Okay, I confess I guessed on those last. But Italian's usually a safe bet. So what *do* you like?"

"How do you know all that?" She ignored the question, fear and a sense of violation slowly choking her.

His face fell, regret steeling his features. "I'm sorry, Dani. It's just my job, that's all."

She backed away from him, stopping him with a hand up before he could take a step. "I don't know who you are or what your job is, but you just stay away from me."

"Dani—"

"Leave me alone!" She turned and ran back down the hall and out the other entrance off the platform, not daring to risk shoving past him for fear he might grab her. Once on the street, she started yanking the pins from her hair, dropping them on the ground as she went. It didn't matter. Her tears were ruining her makeup, anyway.

* * * *

Dani didn't stop for her messages, leaving Calle looking startled in her wake as she stormed into her office and slammed the door. Fear had given way to blinding rage about two blocks before, and now her hand shook as she jerked open her desk drawer to dig through the clutter in search of a mirror. Her face was flushed, her eyes raccooned from her mascara running, her hair a tousled mess. Steadying herself, she tried to repair the damage even as she punched the autodial on her phone.

"The next time you have some good advice to make my life better, save it," she snapped as soon as Holly picked up the phone.

"Why, what happened?"

"He turned out to be a scary stalker freak, that's what." She scrubbed at her eyes. The mascara that had run so easily when she'd started tearing now stubbornly resisted her attempts to remove it.

"Oh, my God, Dani, are you okay? What did he do? Did he hurt you?"

"Worse. He violated me. He knew everything about me, Holly, everything. I think he's been spying on me."

The other end of the line was quiet for a minute. "That's kind of romantic," Holly finally offered.

"Holly!"

"What? It is!" She sounded completely unrepentant. "You said he wasn't creepy looking. If he looks that good, he can't be a stalker."

"Did you *see American Psycho*?"

"That was a movie. This is real life." Holly was obviously thinking. "Maybe he's a spy. Maybe he thought you were hot, so he got your FBI file and found out all about you so he could hook up with you."

"He is *not* a spy!" Giving up, Dani tossed her tissue in the trash. "And if he was trying to impress me, he went about it all wrong. Mr. Leather Pants can forget about it."

"Wait, he knows all about you and you still don't even know his name? Come on, Dani, you can't give up now!"

"Oh, I so can. I'm not about to become another New York City freak

show statistic, thank you very much."

"Well, you're going to at least have to tell him."

"No, I don't! Are you trying to get me killed? I tell him to leave me alone, and he'll snap, and start following me home until he can kill me on my front porch late one night."

"Dani, you're exaggerating things. If he were that unstable, he would have set someone off by now."

"Well, I'm not finding out."

"You have to, or you'll be scared of him for the rest of your life. Come on, I'll go with you."

Dani hesitated. Holly was probably right. She couldn't spend the next twenty years avoiding that particular hallway in Grand Central just because he might be there. And if she wasn't alone, he couldn't do anything. If he tried, Holly would get the transit cops on him so fast it wasn't even funny. "All right," she finally relented. "But I'm taking a cab in tomorrow, and I'll meet you here. I'm not going to risk running into him on my own."

"It's a deal. I'll meet you at eight forty-five tomorrow, okay? Don't worry, sweetie. We'll get this straightened out."

"If you say so."

She disconnected the call and stared at the phone. Holly had this ability to talk her into things she knew better than to do herself. It was probably why they were such good friends. But Dani couldn't help the sense of foreboding weighing down in the bottom of her stomach.

"Dani?" A soft tap accompanied Calle's appearance at the door. "I'm sorry, but your ten o'clock is here. You all right?"

"I'm fine, Calle, thanks." She checked herself in the little hand mirror again. The perfection of this morning was gone, but the dark rims from her mascara now looked more like eyeliner than tear stains, and a quick powder would fix the damage to her foundation. "Tell them I'll be right out."

* * * *

Holly was waiting on the curb with two large coffees, the city breeze whipping her strawberry hair around her face. "You owe me lunch for this," she insisted, handing Dani one of the cups after she finished paying the cabbie.

"Hey, this was your idea, not mine."

"Well, if he's as good looking as you say, I want to see this guy."

Her mouth quirked. "It might be worth dating a stalker if he's cute enough."

"You're hopeless, Holly, completely hopeless."

They pushed against the flow of the oncoming crowd to get into the station, pausing at the top of the marble staircase to get their bearings. "So where is he?" Holly asked, looking around.

"Over there." Dani pointed through the crowd to the hallway leading back to the subway entrance. "He always meets me in the same spot."

"Well, come on, then." Holly led the way down the steps, shouldering people aside without thought. Dani followed, making note of every police officer between here and there.

He wasn't there.

To her surprise, Dani found herself disappointed. "Well, maybe he took the hint yesterday and went off to stalk someone else."

"Or maybe he wasn't stalking you at all and we just missed him."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not going to see him again either way."

"Dani—"

"No, Holly," she forestalled her friend. "I did what you said. I tried. There just isn't time in my life for romance. Things will settle down in a year or two, and then I'll start thinking about meeting a nice, *safe* man to share my life with."

"That's the whole point, Dani. You share your life with someone when it's hard, to make it easier to do what you have to. If you wait until things are easier, then why bother? You won't need him then."

"Then maybe I just won't bother." She shoved her coffee back into Holly's hand. "I have to get to work. I'll see you for dinner on Friday."

"Dani, wait!"

She didn't stop, letting the flow of humanity carry her back out into the city.

* * * *

She tried to forget about him. There was enough work to do to keep her busy. But every morning when she had to deliberately turn her feet away from her old familiar route through the main concourse, she remembered. Remembered the hurt in his face when she'd run off. Remembered the pang of loss when he hadn't been there the next day. Every time she shook it off. It was stupid and dangerous. He could be anyone. It was better just to avoid the whole situation.

The Armingazha account was her undoing.

She was so immersed in going over the presentation slides, mastering all the company details and how Hermes could most creatively fill their needs for the pitch meeting that morning, that she didn't even think where she was going. Nose down in her notes, laptop bag slung crosswise across her chest, she trudged up the stairs from the platform.

"Good morning, Dani."

The rich, velvet voice stopped her in her tracks. He was there, right where he always was, watching her with uncertain eyes. The vulnerability only added to his good looks, and Dani had to look away again to keep from getting lost in him. "I thought I told you to leave me alone." Too late to backtrack, she tried to slip around him instead.

He reached for her arm. "Dani, please wait."

Reflexively she jerked away from him, but in doing so she spilled the file she'd been studying all over the floor at their feet. "Damn it!" She crouched down to sweep the pages up before they could get walked on. "See what you made me do?"

He knelt next to her to gather up the papers closest to him. "You don't have to flinch away from me whenever you come near, you know." He offered her the papers. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"How am I supposed to know that? I don't know anything about you. Hell, I don't even know your name!"

He grinned. "Do you want to?"

"No!" He was getting to her, damn it. She had to get away from him. "I don't want to know anything about you. I just want you to leave me alone!"

"Fine." His jaw tightened in resolution. "In that case..."

Before she could react, he caught her arm, knocking her papers to the floor again as he jerked her to him, crushing her mouth with a demanding, searing kiss that drove everything from her mind. She struggled briefly, but he was unrelenting, his arms banding around her to trap her against his solid chest, his mouth coaxing and demanding by turns until she weakened. She relaxed into him, easing her mouth open just enough to invite him in. He took the invitation, tongue teasing at the swell of her lip before slipping inside.

She must be losing her mind. That was all there was to it. She was standing in the middle of Grand Central Station making out with a man she didn't know, and all she could think was how she wanted more. His

beard was soft against her cheek as he turned his mouth to probe deeper, his hand broad and strong when he palmed the back of her head, guiding and encouraging her on. The world around her had turned thick and slow, clinging to her, adding layers of sensation to their contact, making every brush and breath feel like an eternity. She should have been ashamed that he was the one to pull away first, but she seemed to have lost all ability at rational thought.

His pale eyes turned dark as he brushed a loose strand off her cheek. "Trev."

"What?"

"That's my name. Trevalyn Sutcliffe. But everyone calls me Trev."

Sanity started to bleed into passion. "I didn't ask."

"I know. I wanted to tell you anyway." He glanced at her watch, her wrist still close to his face as her hands rested on his shoulders. "You're going to be late for your meeting."

It was the last thing she'd expected him to say, a bucket of cold water on her overheated psyche. "Shit!" She was back down in an instant, gathering up her papers yet again, still half crouched as she broke in a sprint across the concourse.

"Good luck!"

She glanced back for a last look at that brilliant smile of his, but he was already gone.

* * * *

She didn't tell Holly. That would have been awkward and embarrassing, and it really wouldn't have accomplished anything. Dani didn't want to be lectured, but she also didn't want to be encouraged. This was all so complicated, she needed to figure it out herself.

To her embarrassment, she found she couldn't face him, so she continued her avoidance as she tried to work out what in the hell she was doing with this guy. He was a complete stranger, but there was something about him that just made her respond, made her feel alive in a way she never had before. If she were honest, she was a bit worried about how she might react if she saw him again. She woke up shaking from dreams of that kiss and where it could have gone. If the reality was even half as good as her fantasies...

She didn't trust herself enough to risk finding out.

Five days passed without seeing him. The dreams started to fade, the flutter in her stomach easing with each day she turned away from the

main concourse to go out into the street instead. This obsession couldn't be healthy. Everyday she went without, she was a little bit better. Maybe in a few days, she could go by, see if he was still there.

Waiting for her.

Another late night had her racing through the station at quarter of midnight, hoping to catch one of the last trains home. She had just passed the place where they always met—where they had kissed—when she remembered she'd left her jump drive plugged into her desk top back in the office. With a frustrated sigh, she stopped and turned around, resigning herself to a cab ride home instead.

Trev was standing there. Right where he always was.

She froze. "What are you doing here?"

One eyebrow rose. "What if I said I was waiting for you?"

"I wouldn't believe you." She crossed her arms protectively over her chest. "You couldn't have known I'd be coming through here now."

He grinned. "You're right. It was just my shift. Guess I got lucky tonight."

"Your shift?" She ignored his innuendo. "So standing here really is your job?"

"Did you think I was lying to you?"

"Yes, frankly. Who the hell makes a living standing around in a train station?" She thought about it a moment. "Are you guarding the station? Homeland security or something?"

"Something like that."

"And this is a vulnerable point in the station? Are there other guys like you standing around waiting for something to happen?"

"Nope, just me and my team. Just here."

"But where did you come from? You weren't here a second ago."

"Yes, I was."

"No, you weren't." She stepped closer, challenging him. "I just walked past there and the hallway was empty."

"Nope, I was standing right here. You must have just not noticed me."

"Believe me, I would have noticed you."

He grinned, teeth white behind his beard. "Well, that's good to hear."

"I mean," she corrected, forestalling his reaction, "that the station isn't exactly busy right now. It would have been hard to miss you."

"I was kind of noticing that myself. Funny how quiet a busy place like this gets at night." He glanced around before turning his devastating eyes back on her. "It's almost romantic."

"Trev, don't—"

He stopped her, catching her arm to draw her closer. "I like the way you say my name."

She knew she should resist. "I didn't say it anyway special."

"I know." She was close enough now for their hips to rest against each other. His arms curled around her waist almost affectionately to hold her close. The sense of softness was back, of the world clinging to her, enclosing her, wrapping her in an embrace almost as comforting as his. "Makes me wonder how you'd say it in the middle of a blinding orgasm."

Now she did struggle, but that only made her more aware of the solid lines of his body pressing against her. "Don't do me any favors."

One hand shifted up to the middle of her back, staving off her resistance. "Maybe I'd be doing myself a favor."

"You aren't helping your case any, mister."

"What's the matter? Haven't you ever had a man express sexual interest in you before?" He lowered his head closer to hers, and she started having a hard time breathing. "Where I come from, when one person is interested in another, they tell them. There's no shame in it."

"And if I say no?"

"Then I'll stop."

He released her so fast she almost fell on her ass, grabbing at his arms to keep her balance. Grinning, he pulled her back into his arms. "But you don't really want me to, do you?"

It was too easy, too comforting to resist. For the first time she allowed herself to look up into those pale eyes and see the storm within them. "I don't know what I want anymore," she forced herself to admit.

"How about we start with this."

It was a gentle kiss, teasing softly around the edges of her mouth before tenderly encouraging her to open up to him. She tried to resist, but it felt too good, the sense of danger only adding to the attraction. When his tongue traced along her teeth, hers hesitantly met it. His reaction was emphatic, pulling her closer to him so she could feel the line of his erection growing against her belly. He wanted her, and it sent a heady rush to her head.

A low, crystalline chime broke through the pounding blood in her ears and the hungry sighs they made together. A moment later there was a heavy whump that reverberated off stone walls, followed by a rising hum that seemed to suck all the air away. Dani broke away from Trev to look around the empty station. "What was that?"

It took a moment for her words to register, his expression tightening, whether in anger or frustration, Dani wasn't sure. "A wake-up call," he said tersely. "Dani, I..."

Puzzled at his hesitation, she studied his face. "What is it?"

He seemed to be fighting some sort of war with himself. When he pulled her tight against him, she wasn't sure if he'd won or lost. "Nothing," he insisted, his mouth on her skin yet again, making her whimper in pleasure. "I don't care. I just want you so much, Dani."

His mouth on hers stifled any reply. He pushed her back until the cold marble wall pressed against her back. The world clinging to her stretched and pulled as though trying to keep hold of her, until finally she could have sworn she felt something tear. Suddenly everything was brighter, clearer, Trev's body harder and more insistent as he ground into her. One hand slipped under her blouse, coming up to cup her breast through the fine lace of her bra, thumb toying with her nipple as he nipped his way down the side of her neck.

"Trev, we can't," she panted, saying the words with no conviction. She wanted this as much as he did. If they stopped, she thought she'd start crying. "Someone will see."

If they stopped, she might come to her senses.

"No one can see, love, I promise." Her short business skirt rode up her thighs as he explored higher and higher, his fingertips brushing the damp panel of her underwear, making her gasp in anticipation. "And you don't want me to stop."

It wasn't a question. She shook her head anyway.

Shoving the fabric aside, his coarse fingertip traced along her labia, freeing the moisture there to dampen her thighs. "You want me, Dani," he growled against her neck. "You want me almost as much as I want you. Tell me, Dani. Show me."

Now was the moment. She had to stop this, walk away, catch a cab, and go home for a cold shower and some quality time with her vibrator. It was the safe thing to do. The smart thing.

She slipped her hand into his pants.

"Oh, thank God," he groaned in relief, pressing forward against her. Emboldened by his obvious desperation, she dared to wrap her hand around his cock, savoring the velvety rigidness of it, anticipating how good it was going to feel inside her. She whimpered softly at the thought.

He pushed her hand aside with a growl and yanked open his fly before shoving her up against the wall again, his bare cock hot and hard against her sex, shooting fire through her.

"Now, Dani."

Lifting one leg to twine around his hip, she guided him in, gasping at the first contact of his head with her sensitive pussy. He took over, pushing in relentlessly as she arched against him, his hand on the small of her back holding her close until he was fully sheathed. His forehead rested briefly against hers before he caught her mouth again, beginning a slow, intense rocking that left her mewling eagerly with each stroke.

"Knew you'd feel good," he grunted against her neck, speeding up with each pulse. "God, Dani, you feel amazing."

"Good." She couldn't bring herself to say more, the last lingering uncertainty making her unwilling to commit to more. But it felt amazing. The cool stone behind her, their hot skin meeting only along their thighs, his mouth hungry yet gentle as it searched out each sensitive spot along her throat, the risk of discovery at any moment, all combined to overwhelm her senses until she started trembling against him. "Oh, God, Trev, so good, so..."

"Dani!" he groaned as she came, bucking hard against him and the wall behind her. Lifting her, he shoved her back against the wall hard, pinning her there as he thrust through her orgasm, coming a moment later with a shuddering groan.

They held each other like that for a few moments afterwards, his arms tight around her, her legs tangled around his back. As reality slowly settled in, Dani lowered her legs back down, wobbly when she tried to put weight on them. Trev pulled back with obvious reluctance, withdrawing and tucking himself away in his pants before adjusting her skirt for her, never stepping far enough away to let her escape. "That was amazing, Dani," he murmured almost reverently against her ear.

"Thanks." It was so inane, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

He didn't seem to mind. Pulling back, he smiled down at her. "You

going to be okay getting home?"

She nodded. "I was going to get a cab," she said slowly, amazed at how hard it was to get the words out.

"Smart girl." He brushed his lips over hers. "Dream about me?"

"I..." She blushed fiercely.

His grin grew broader. "I wish I could walk you out. I've gone too far as it is. In more ways than one."

"I understand." She gathered her bags, still flush from passion.

That irrepressible grin wavered. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

This must be what insanity felt like. Knowing something was completely crazy and doing it anyway. Leaning in, she gave him a short, fierce kiss. "Yes."

* * * *

Trev greeted her that morning with a smile and a soft kiss. "No regrets?"

"I must be crazy," she confessed, her arms curling around his neck, "but no, no regrets."

"Good." This time the kiss was more intense, a reminder of the passion of last night. "Will I see you tonight?"

"I can't." She softened the disappointment with a caress. "I have an appointment back in Queens this afternoon. Maybe you could come over tonight, though?"

"I would love that." The regret on his face told her it wasn't going to happen even before he spoke. "But I can't get away."

She stroked his beard. "We can't keep meeting in the train station."

"I know." If anything, he looked more frustrated. "But it's better than not at all."

She agreed with another long, languid kiss. "Then I'll see you here tomorrow morning. Bring coffee, we can make a real date of it."

"Promise. Have a good day, Dani."

His wistful smile didn't register until she had started into the concourse. By the time she turned around, he was gone.

* * * *

There was no coffee the next morning.

There was no Trev.

Instead, a heavyset older man stood in their spot, reading an oddly-sized newspaper and ignoring the world in general. Dani hung around, going so far as to stop at the coffee bar herself while she waited, but the

older man never moved and Trev never came.

The next day was the same.

And the next.

She started to worry. What if something had happened to him? What if some terrorist or drug dealer had shot him and he was lying in a hospital somewhere? Or worse? No one knew her, so no one would think to let her know. She wasn't even sure if he had her phone number, although he had everything else, so most likely he did. But still he didn't call.

She hesitated in the corridor. That man was there again, reading that same odd newspaper. This time, though, he glanced over the top of it at her, his look almost menacing. Dani pulled her bags a little closer and hurried past.

"He's not coming."

She spun around, but all she saw were the streams of commuters coming up the hall.

Then suddenly the man with the newspaper appeared in front of her. Very literally. One moment the corridor was empty, and the next he stood there, his dark look unchanged. "Get on with your life, Miss Whitehall," he insisted. "Mr. Sutcliffe won't be back."

"Why not? Where is he? Is he all right?" In her urgency, she didn't question him knowing her.

"None of that is your business." He rolled up his newspaper and jammed it under his arm. "You've caused him enough trouble. Suffice it to say he's back where he belongs. Forget about him, Miss Whitehall. Move on. He won't be back."

With one last dark look, he turned towards the wall and disappeared again.

"Wait!" She rushed after him.

When her foot hit the spot where he had stood an instant before, the world suddenly became thick and slow, fighting her attempts to move forward. She heard again that odd whoosh she had first heard while making love with Trev and the soft echo of voices.

Something wasn't right.

The realization made Dani back up several steps, pulling free of the lethargy that had enfolded her.

It hadn't been in her mind. She had felt something. Reaching out, she tentatively pawed at the air until she met with resistance. The air

thickened into an amorphous blob that she couldn't quite find the dimensions of as she felt her way around it. It ended abruptly, like a piece of fog cut off by a knife. It was still there, just ended suddenly, so that the side facing the concourse was a flat plane as opposed to the undulations of the other side.

This had to be what Trev was guarding, she realized. But why? What was it and why was it here? And more importantly, why wasn't Trev?

But the other man didn't come back, leaving Dani no choice but to go in to work with a thousand questions swimming in her head.

* * * *

"You can't keep pining over him, Dani," Holly admonished after the bartender set their drinks in front of them.

"I'm not pining." Using the speared olive, Dani stirred her martini aimlessly without tasting it.

"It's been three weeks, Dani. You haven't gone out, you haven't done much of anything except work."

"So things are back to normal."

"It's not a joke. Don't think I can't tell when you've been avoiding me."

"I haven't—"

"Three weeks, Dani," Holly cut her off, "and this is the first time you've agreed to meet me for anything, let alone talk on the phone."

"Maybe it's because I didn't want to get the third degree." She picked up the glass and swallowed half of it without flinching.

"What happened?"

"Like that one." Picking up a pretzel rod from the basket on the bar, Dani began breaking it into tiny pieces. "I don't know what happened. We were going to meet for coffee and he never showed."

"Did you call him?"

"How? I don't have his phone number."

"What about going over to his place?"

"I don't know where he lives."

"That's new. You don't usually take guys home."

"I didn't."

Holly was obviously perplexed. "But I thought you said you two..."

"We did." Dani was in no mood to help her.

"Well, if you didn't take him home, and you didn't go to his place,

where on earth did you do it?"

"In the station."

It was worth revealing the intimacy just to see the look on Holly's face, part dumbstruck, part sheer awe. "You had sex. With a complete stranger. In the middle of Grand Central Station? Holy shit, Dani. I wanted you to loosen up a little, not go crazy!"

"Well, thank you for that, Holly, I really appreciate the support." She slammed back the rest of her drink and stood up, slinging her purse and laptop bag over her shoulder. "I'll see you later."

"Dani, don't. I didn't mean—" The rest of Holly's pleas was lost in the bar noise before the door shut behind Dani, silencing all of it in favor of the quiet din of the city at night. She cut across the street quickly and headed to the station, anxious to get away before Holly followed her.

She couldn't blame her friend. She was right. Dani had filled up her whole life with school, then with work. She didn't date much, didn't even go out socially all that often unless it was work related. Then Trev crashed into her life, and suddenly she was throwing all caution to the wind. She'd gotten burned, and she deserved it. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

It was early yet, but the main concourse was quieting down from the hectic race of rush hour. Dani stopped across the street for buy-by-the-pound salad and Chinese food to take home for dinner, then made her way through the station headed for her train.

"Dani."

She whirled at the sound of Trev's familiar voice behind her. He stood right where he always did, black silk and leather dressing his lean length, complete with a long black duster that just begged for a cowboy hat. His face was tight, defensive, but that warm light still lingered in his eyes. "God, you look good."

"Where have you been? I was so worried, and then that man—"

She wasn't even aware she had moved closer until he reached out and took her arms, drawing her into his embrace. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to come, but they wouldn't let me."

The thickened bubble enfolded her as closely as his arms, but she felt safe in his embrace and didn't resist. "They? They who?"

"I can't tell you." When she stiffened, he kissed her temple. "Shh. You wouldn't believe me if I did. But I can show you. If you trust me."

There was something ominous in his tone that told her this was

more than just sneaking into his office in the middle of the night. But the warmth seeping into her skin through his silk shirt comforted her. "Yes, I trust you."

"Then come on."

And he stepped backwards, taking her with him.

The thickness around her resisted, pulled, and finally tore away, making her stumble into Trev, who steadied her. "Easy, now. You'll be a bit lightheaded for a minute. I know I was the first time I came through."

It took her a moment to register the changes around her. There was no one rushing about. Instead the evening commuters meandered in quiet conversation. Everything seemed cleaner, quieter, the lights dimmed to an ambient glow. There was no rumble beneath her feet. Even the schedule board was gone, replaced by names and numbers suspended in midair. "What is this place?"

"What's the matter, you don't recognize Grand Central? You've been through it every day for years."

Dani looked around wildly, seeing everything familiar but so startlingly different. "This isn't Grand Central. It's too quiet."

"That's the mag lev trains. They're almost silent except when the magnets drop starting and stopping. Welcome to the future, Dani Whitehall."

Startled, she looked up, but he just smiled. "The future?"

"2237, to be precise. Come on, we can't stay here." Taking the duster off, he draped it over her shoulders before taking the bag of food from her. "I know you've got a lot of questions. But this isn't the place to answer them."

"Where are we going?" She let him guide her, his arm around her waist, maintaining their closeness.

"Back to my place. We'll be safe there for a little while."

"Safe?"

He gave her a quick squeeze as he led her past the ticket booths. "No one's going to hurt you, Dani. But I shouldn't have brought you here. People are going to come looking for you soon."

"If you weren't supposed to bring me here, then why did you?"

This time he stopped, looking down into her eyes with an intensity that left her breathless. "Because I missed you."

The brush of his lips over hers was brief but reassuring, promising more later. His eyes glinting, he took her hand and led her out. "Come

see my city."

They stepped out into an enormous glass tube, with sliding sidewalks leading to and away from the station. There were only a few dozen people out—normal, everyday looking people, some talking quietly with that same cant of the head that was familiar to her from the earpiece cellphone users she knew, only without any actual device being visible. It all looked so normal, if she overlooked the fact that she was sliding down Fifth Avenue on a covered walkway.

"Look up," Trev murmured against her ear.

She did. It took a moment to adjust to the darkness outside, but slowly the stars in the sky above resolved themselves into hundreds and hundreds of lights, small windows on enormous buildings rising up to disappear into the night. "My God," she breathed. "How big are they?"

"Most of them are over three hundred stories," he answered quietly, his eyes following hers skyward. "Each one is thirty acres at the base and houses a hundred and fifty thousand people."

"How many are there?"

"On Manhattan, there are fifty-seven. There are about three times that if you go out into the boroughs and New Jersey."

"My God."

"You okay?"

"I'm just... My God, Trev, this is amazing."

He grinned. "You're saying that a lot. I didn't know you were that religious."

"Well, what do you expect me to say?"

He pulled her closer again, the walkway still carrying them on to their destination. "I was hoping you might say you missed me, too."

"Do you really think now is the time?"

"Sweetheart, it's the only time we have."

She rested her head on his chest, ignoring the sense of melancholy from his words in the comfort of his heartbeat. The sidewalk slid on, carrying them through an enormous atrium, soft amber light illuminating dozens of other walkways crisscrossing in an elegant web. Trev stepped them onto one, and then onto another that led out into another tube and off into the night. "What happened to the rest of the city?" she asked, trying to peer out into the darkness.

"It's still there," he assured her. "Most of it, what wasn't torn down to make room for the arcologies, was just left. A lot of it has collapsed

and been grown over, but there are parts where people still live. A few people resisted moving into the towers, so now they live a more primitive life out in the city wilds."

"Homeless?"

"No one is homeless anymore. Everyone is given a place to live and work when they come of age."

"But what about those people out there?"

"They aren't homeless. They have places to live, schools, medicine, opportunities. They just live a more basic life than those of us in the towers."

Dani looked up to see him gazing wistfully out the window. "You sound like you envy them."

Startled, he shrugged. "It's a hard life. But at least you know you're living." Reaching up, he toyed with a lock of her hair. "Life in the towers is good. It's safe. But sometimes you forget there was once more."

Dani snorted. "Yeah. Gas bills and terrorist attacks and having to work for a living."

"And passion." He caught her chin and lifted it. "Don't ever forget passion."

"Don't you find passion here?" His intensity left her breathless.

"Right now I'm only finding passion in one place."

He only had time for the briefest of caresses before the walkway carried them into another atrium. This time Trev led them to the middle, away from the walkways and towards rows upon rows of enormous glass and chrome elevators disappearing up into the domed ceiling of the atrium. "These aren't glass up all three hundred floors, are they?"

He chuckled. "No, just at the landings. Any more and I think it would make even the stoutest heart a bit acrophobic." Ushering her around to one of the back banks, he guided her into a waiting elevator. "Two-eleven."

"Proceeding," a melodic, feminine voice responded, and the elevator started up.

Dani barely felt the elevator start up, and had no sense of their speed until she realized that the lights flickering past periodically were actually the open landings Trev had mentioned, whisking past in a fraction of a second. A trip she would have guessed to take twenty minutes or longer was over in less than half that.

As it started to slow, Trev spoke again. "Southwest residential."

"One moment, please."

The elevator slowed to a halt, then slanted leftwise, making Dani squeak and stumble into Trev, who gave her a comforting squeeze. "Almost there."

"Are we going sideways?"

"Unless you'd rather walk," he confirmed obliquely. "But it's a long way around."

"No, this is—" She stopped, unsure of how to describe this strange new world she found herself in.

"I understand. Even just the glimpses I saw into your world from my little corner were amazing."

"But Trev, what's going on?"

"Not here." He glanced up to the corner where, even in her time, security cameras were hidden.

Nervous now, she followed his glare up, crossing her arms over her chest.

The elevator doors finally opened onto a long corridor running perpendicular to them, lined every forty feet or so with plain wooden doors. It looked like nothing so much as an old fashioned hotel hallway, dimly lit and sterile, while trying to appear invitingly homey. It certainly wasn't what she'd expected in a twenty-third century city building.

Sliding his arm around her waist, Trev guided Dani down the hall to the right. Twelve doors down, he stopped and ran his thumb over a small blue-lit pad. A moment later the door slid back into its frame, just like on *Star Trek*, and Trev ushered her in.

Either the human body required certain shapes and forms for comfortable living or humanity just resisted radical change, because Trev's apartment looked like any modern apartment in Manhattan she'd ever been in. There was a small galley kitchen, a little eat-in dining area, and a living room that seemed to be more of a lounge, all open into one another. The lights started to come up until Trev said a soft, "Dim." They subsided, leaving the room faintly illuminated. "Go on," he encouraged. "Take a look."

She didn't need to ask what he meant. Her eyes had locked onto the enormous picture window on the far side of the lounge, her feet already carrying her towards it as she let her briefcase drop to the floor.

Breathtaking didn't begin to describe it.

New York was always a city of lights, but now it seemed as though

all those lights had been taken and reshaped upwards into climbing spires, networked together by webs of crystalline luminescence that must be the walkway tubes. "All the residences are on the outside," Trev explained, leaning close behind her, looking out himself, "so that everyone has a view. All the commerce and industry are on the inside rings."

"Aren't you worried about getting hit by an airplane or something?"

"We don't use them anymore. The mag lev trains go faster than any jet and are more appropriate and sustainable. Grand Central is the hub for trains to Chicago, London, and Dakar. You can go across country in about three hours without your feet ever leaving the ground."

"Because we're so earth bound now," she said archly over her shoulder.

He chuckled. "Point taken."

Turning back, she let her eyes follow the black ribbon of the river down until she found the familiar viridian glow of Liberty Island. Some things remained the same, at least. "Doesn't it become too much, though? I mean, God, we must be a half a mile up. Don't you ever get overwhelmed?"

"That's easy enough to fix. Window, opaque."

Instantly the glass went black, blocking out the view as though it had never been.

Freed from the mesmerizing view, she turned to him. "So, now can you tell me what's going on?"

"I can think of better things, but..." Taking her hand, he guided her to sit down in a low slung armchair, then sat opposite her, leaning close. "A few months ago, there was an accident in one of the research facilities here in Greenwich One. One of our scientists was working on teleportation technology and something happened. We aren't really sure what. All we know is that it made a small tear in the fabric of time and space, a sort of bubble of temporal flux, right in that one spot in Grand Central Station, half in the twenty-first century and half in the twenty-third." Almost unconsciously, he took up her hand and began stroking it gently between his own. "At first it was just small, almost microscopic, but as more people from your side pushed through it without noticing, it slowly tore wider and wider until it was as large as a person. The scientists were scrambling for a solution, but in the meantime they needed to stop the rift from tearing further. So they put me and a couple

of others on guard duty. We were to divert people around the bubble just by being seen without ever having to come all the way through ourselves."

"And then I ran into you."

"Oh, I'd noticed you long before that." Even in the dim light, she could tell his eyes had gone smoky. "Every morning at eight forty-three you would go rushing past, with your bags and your files and your hair a gorgeous mess. And every day I would watch you until you passed the edge of the bubble, wishing I had a way to get to know you. It took me three weeks with the facial recognition software and historical databases to finally find your name. After that, I dug up every scrap I could find on you."

"So you know all about me?" Her heart clenched. "Everything that's coming? When I die? How?"

"No." He pulled her into the comfort of his arms. "I only looked backward from 2005. I needed to know who you were, not who you will become."

His hands now stroked her back, offering comfort but exciting her a bit more. "You could have asked me."

"I couldn't. We weren't allowed to step through. If I did that, they would have taken me off that duty and I'd have lost you completely."

"But that night..." Her face flushed at the memory as much as in response to the exploration of his broad hand, now caressing her bare skin beneath the back of her shirt.

"That night I made love to you for the first time?" He slid her closer against him, his eyes locked on her lips as he spoke, tempting her to wet them in invitation. "I wasn't thinking much with my head that night. Every time you got close, you became a bit more aware of this side. I knew I couldn't bring you through, but I thought maybe I could get away with going the other way."

"But you couldn't." Her fingers toyed with the collarless edge of his shirt, almost of their own accord.

"No." His lips brushed hers faintly as he spoke, an electric, teasing caress. "I was called up the next day and put on security duty elsewhere. It's taken me this long to worm my way back to you."

"But that horrible man who took your place, he came through, too."

"Don't be too hard on Rigitt," he said, lips teasing along her jaw. "He was just following orders, wrapping up loose ends. Who do you

think got me on tonight?"

"So that's what you're worried about now." Her breath was coming quicker now, her fingers no longer resisting the urge to undo his shirt. "You've broken the rules again by bringing me through, and you're waiting for them to come and arrest you."

"No." He caught her chin, forcing her to look at him. "I'm waiting for them to come take you away from me."

His mouth crashed down on hers, and she welcomed it.

"Did you bring me all this way just to have sex?" she gasped when he finally released her mouth.

"I didn't really think about it at the time." His beard tickled lightly against her skin as he kissed inch by slow inch down between her breasts. "All I could think about was seeing you again." Pausing, he grinned up at her. "But now that you mention it, I think it sounds like a great idea, don't you?"

His boyish innocence was infectious, making her giggle. She caressed his cheeks with both hands, tugging playfully at the soft threads of his beard. "Do you have beds in the future?" she teased.

"Yes, we have beds in the future," he responded in kind.

"Well, how should I know? For all I know, you all sleep upside down like bats or something."

"Well, maybe we don't use the beds for sleep." He stood suddenly, making her squeal and clutch at him with arms and legs. His hands cupped her ass as he strode through the small apartment. Another magic door slid open and he carried her through into his bedroom.

The windows here were clear, revealing more of the splendor of this new city, but she paid little attention to it as Trev lowered her to her feet. Men hadn't changed much in two hundred and fifty years. There was clutter scattered around the room, and the bed was a tousled mess. He spooned up behind her, his arms curling around her waist. "See? A bed."

She nestled back against him. "Big enough for two."

"You're right." He began undoing her blouse even as his lips danced havoc along her neck. "Maybe it's too big. Don't want you getting away from me."

She gasped, rolling her hips against him when he palmed her breast through her simple bra. "Maybe it just gives us room to maneuver."

"I like the way you old time girls think." Turning her, he eased her blouse off her shoulders before twitching the straps of her bra free. She

hadn't even been aware he'd undone it. His gaze on her as he undressed her was so intense, it started to embarrass her, and instinctively she brought her arms up to cover herself.

"No." He caught her wrists and gently but firmly drew them down again. "We didn't get this the first time. I want to savor every inch of you. No hiding from me."

"Well, what about you?"

With that smug little curl to his lip, he held his arms wide. "Feel free."

More comfortable with an active role, she made quick work of his buttons, revealing pale skin and a thatch of fine honey-colored hair covering muscles that were firm without being overly defined. She ran her hands up his chest, enjoying his soft hiss as her fingers caught on his curls as they passed. Her arms curled around his neck, and for the first time their bare chests touched with an electricity that overwhelmed her.

He must have felt it as well because he groaned softly, burying his face in her hair. "You feel so good, Dani. So amazingly good." A small turn of his head brought his lips against her throat. "You feel good," he repeated, slowly backing her towards the bed, "and you smell good, and you taste good." Catching her just as her knees hit the back of the bed, he lowered her into the tumbled bedding. He knelt beside her, his mouth continuing a slow descent along her breast. "I'm going to enjoy tasting all of you."

Her soft whimper turned to a moan as his lips closed around one flush nipple, teasing it to full prominence before tracing every crinkled curve with his tongue, alternating tight lines with broad strokes until she was trembling beneath him. Meanwhile his hand toyed with her other breast, working that nipple erect so that when he was ready for it, it eagerly waited on his pleasure. She sobbed, her fingers tangled in his hair to guide him back up to her mouth, but he resisted, dancing eyes glancing up at her as he worked her.

"Delicious," he murmured, descending down her belly.

"Trev, please," she tried again, anxious and aroused at once with where this was headed.

His fingers were already searching out the zipper on her skirt, mouthing gently over her navel as he pushed the fabric down. "Don't stop me, Dani. I haven't had enough of you yet."

Still she was tempted to argue with him until his warm, coarse

palms stoked up her legs, pressing them apart while his mouth explored the crease of her thigh. She whimpered and squirmed, but he held her tight, shifting side to side, his whiskers tickling at sensitive skin while his mouth barely brushed over her cotton covered sex with each pass. She was already out of her mind by the time he hooked his thumbs in the waistband of her panties and started easing them down. Then he was kissing her intimately, tongue teasing folds apart in gentle worship, the warmth and softness suffusing her whole being. He traced each crease, finding the bottom-most point and swiping up in a slow, broad stroke that had her sobbing in pleasure. "Knew you'd taste amazing."

The vibration of his voice against her sensitive flesh made her groan.

He set to with a ferocity that surprised her, like a starving man at a banquet. Lifting her legs over his shoulders, he opened her up to him even more, tongue slicking up over her aching clit before dropping down to circle the fragile lips of her pussy and back up again—no hesitancy, no awkwardness, as though this was all he wanted in the whole world. And she was the lucky one who got to give it to him.

Her fingers clutched, fighting for purchase on the mattress beneath her. The sensations were all quickly becoming too much. His teeth nipped at tender flesh before soothing it with soft, catlike licks, and his fingers dug into her hips as he held her trapped between his mouth and the mattress. "So close, Trev, God," she mewled, fighting with every ounce of restraint to keep her hands in place.

He simply shook his head, adding to the friction against sizzling nerve endings.

"Please, Trev, I can't—"

"No!" His head snapped up, fierce eyes pinning her as his thumb took up the patterns of his mouth. "Not yet or I swear I'll stop."

It was no casual threat. She could see it in the hard line of his jaw. But she had to be honest with him. "I can't, Trev, please. I want to, but—"

"You can." His eyes softened, in passion, in pride. "You deserve this. Let me do this for you. Let me drive you mad with it."

His devotion was almost as powerful as his attentions, buoying her up, making her want to give him all he asked for and more. Slapping her palm against the headboard, she struggled for control, cocking her knee to rest her foot against his shoulder. He chuckled and resumed his

attentions.

Using the headboard for leverage, she joined in, rocking herself on his face as he added his thumb to his play until finally her body betrayed her, orgasm sneaking under her control, leaving her bucking against him in spasms of release. He didn't stop until she collapsed limply beneath him, his mouth returning to the soft, almost affectionate kisses he had begun with to ease her back into reality.

"I'm sorry," she panted weakly as he came up to lie beside her.

"Sorry? Why?"

"That I couldn't hold out longer."

"Don't be sorry." He pushed a lock of her hair back from her face. "I shouldn't have asked. Making love isn't work. I just...it felt so good to make you feel that good. I didn't want it to end."

His hand wandered freely over her torso as their mouths met in short, almost chaste kisses, the passion slowly building again as her energy returned. She grew more eager, trapping his mouth longer, tongue teasing his and escaping again until he softly growled, sending a primal shiver through her, all power and desire waking her sated senses.

She startled him, shoving him hard to fall on his back before quickly straddling his thighs, trapping him. "My turn," she insisted, fingers already scrabbling at his waistband.

"I'm all yours." His voice was as rough as it was playful.

There was just one problem.

"How do you get these things open?" she growled in frustration when she could find no snap, button or zipper on his pants.

He chuckled, hand catching hers to guide her fingers to a tiny catch next to the fly seam. Together they pressed it, and magically his pants opened. "Magnets," he explained roughly.

She didn't care, she was much more interested in the rewards of his instruction. He wore nothing beneath the fine leather, his cock already eagerly rising up to greet her. Shoving the pants lower, she freed him completely, rising up to give him room to kick them off. Watching his face in the half light, she slipped her hand down between his thighs to cradle his balls in her palm and was instantly rewarded with a low groan as his eyes fell shut. With carefully judged pressure, she massaged him, fingers probing at the sensitive muscle beneath as she rolled his testicles across her palm until he arched against her, struggling for more. More was easy. A small shift of her wrist and she was grasping his length,

easing along it in firm, slow strokes. "You like that?"

"Don't stop."

Chuckling, she leaned forward to trace a kiss over his lips, her hand never slowing.

To her surprise, he caught her, deepening the kiss into something more erotic and demanding, his free hand clutching her hip to draw her up. "Now, Dani." It was part plea, part command. "I've waited too long."

"Shh." Her mouth brushed softly over his, her dark curls hiding their faces from the world. "We have plenty of time."

He caught her mouth again, passionate but gentle, but his hands on her hips were more insistent, guiding her up to straddle his waist, his cock probing at her thigh. She surrendered, using her gentle hold to guide him in, and then letting go, bracing her arms on either side of his head. "You're all mine," she whispered before slowly sinking down onto him.

His head snapped back, jaw tight, fingers clutching into her hips as he fought the obvious urge to quicken her pace. "Yours, Dani. Take me."

She was gasping by the time she had him fully seated, every inch of him shooting pleasure along her nerves, leaving her blind to everything but him. When she rose again he hissed, but immediately she descended again, setting up a quick rhythm that had him growling his approval. It felt so good, so much more intimate than their quick encounter in the station—skin warm and soothing against skin, hands searching, caressing, holding, mouths hungry and eager. When he rolled them over to take control, it was the most natural thing in the world. She twined her legs around his waist, lifting to meet every quickening thrust with soft sighs and fierce kisses until he started shaking. A hoarse, "Oh, God," escaped him before his whole body went rigid, pulsing to set her writhing as her second release took her as well.

He didn't let her go when he collapsed onto the bed, holding her close against his chest. His mouth never stopped, raining gentle kisses on her hair and face as his hands offered comfort instead of arousal. "So worth it," he whispered against her hair.

Craning her neck, she looked up at him. "What was?"

"You are." Tenderly he combed the damp curls back off her cheek. "You are worth everything. Even if it's only for now."

She curled tighter against him, as though his presence would block out the reality waiting for them like a merciless enemy.

* * * *

Dani woke up suddenly. She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep. There weren't any clocks in the room. But it was still dark outside Trev's window, the same faint glow of the city she was familiar with lighting the glass.

Trev slept on beside her, his features soft and relaxed, his arm loosely draped over her waist. She was tempted to reach out and touch him, assure herself that this was all real, but she didn't want to wake him. He looked too peaceful.

Instead she carefully slipped out from under his arm and, wrapping the sheet about her Greek style, went over to the window to look out.

New York was still the city that never slept. Many of the windows on the surrounding structures were dark, but there were thin strips of light at regular intervals, encircling each building at the elevator landings. The fine web of lights from the walkway corridors continued to glow along the ground. The river remained a dark band winding along at the feet of the great towers, lined by pearls of light and crossed occasionally by glowing bands from walkways that arched above the water. In the far distance, she could see a slender filament of amber light rising almost invisibly up to the sky, and high above them a patch of sky shimmered with translucent iridescence, colors pale but visible even in the darkness.

She wasn't surprised when Trev's arms slid around her waist, holding her comfortably without saying a word. "It's all so amazing," she whispered quietly, almost reverently.

"I don't really think about it." His voice matched hers, not breaking the quiet reverence of the moment. "I've seen it all my life."

"What is that?" she asked, gesturing to the cloud of color in the sky.

"What's left of Eta Carinae. It went supernova the year I was born."

She couldn't resist turning her head to grin at him. "A sign of things to come?"

"Superstitious primitive." He dropped a quick kiss on her lips before turning her attention back to the window. "It was so bright that I didn't see a star until I was four." He stared out the window with her, seeing it through her eyes, she suspected. "See that?" His finger traced the fine amber line of light in the distance.

"It's beautiful. What is it?"

"It's the Lake Superior Space Platform supply line. It's an elevator

to carry supplies up to one of the exploration ship platforms in orbit up there."

"Exploration ships? Like space ships?"

"Yup." He held her closer, eyes still focused on the sky. "We've made it beyond the edge of the solar system already. They're getting ready to try for the next one."

"My God." She just stared, overwhelmed by everything. This was the future. And it was beautiful. "It's all so incredible."

"I just wish I could show you all of it."

There was mournfulness in his words that reminded her again that this was all borrowed time. She turned in his arms, resting her head on his chest as she held him close in return.

"It's enough."

* * * *

Dani woke up nestled in the security of Trev's arms. The sheets that tangled around them were warm and felt vaguely not-cloth, but all she was concerned about was the velvet slide of his skin against hers. She snuggled back closer against him, and his arms tightened, hands caressing her stomach as he leaned closer to suckle gently at the curve of her neck. She smiled and rolled onto her back. "Good morning."

"It's pretty good so far." Brushing a loose curl off her cheek, he bent down to tease at her lips. "I bet it could get a lot better."

"Nice to know guys in the future don't change," she teased, curling an arm up around his neck. "All you think about is sex."

"Nah." His hand coasted down her belly and along her thighs. "When you're not around, I'm thinking about really important things."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"I don't know." His hand settled on her hip, pulling her closer against his burgeoning erection. "I can't remember anything else when you're around."

"Sweet." She pulled him down to her slow, inviting kiss.

Shoving the sheets off them, Trev shifted, the heavy weight of his body coming to cover her, his ardor infectious as Dani tangled her legs around him to draw him even closer.

"Trev, they're coming."

The strange voice was a dash of cold water on both of them. Dani sat up, clutching at the sheet in belated modesty, looking around anxiously for the speaker but finding only an empty room. Trev,

however, was a flurry of motion, scrambling for clothes, throwing hers at her even as he stumbled into his own. "Get dressed. Hurry."

"Who was that? What's going on?" Trying not to panic, she struggled to find the right openings in her blouse and slip it on even as she climbed off the bed.

"Riggit. Ear comm." He tapped at his right ear before sealing his trousers shut. "We have to get you out of here."

She stumbled trying to pull on her underwear, giving up on even attempting her pantyhose. "What happens if they catch me?"

He stopped, his expression agonized. "I don't know, Dani."

His uncertainty stiffened her own spine. "Well, then, let's not find out." She finished buttoning her skirt around her waist, brushing it straight with a flourish. "Let's go."

Trev grinned in relief, tugging her to him for a quick fierce kiss before taking her hand. "Come on."

They stopped briefly in the lounge to gather her shoes and her bags. She didn't bother putting the pumps on, as the heels would only slow her down. Instead she stuffed them in the front pocket of the computer case while Trev peeked out the door. "All clear. Come on."

There were people moving about out in the corridor, but Trev just smiled and nodded, his arm around Dani the whole time as he led her back towards the elevators. "You're going to have to call it," he murmured as another resident passed.

"Why?"

"If I scan my print, they're going to know I used the lifts and where I went. Yours won't register, so the system will mark you as a guest and let you out. It will take them a little while to track it once they realize we aren't in the flat."

She shouldn't be nervous, but she couldn't help catching her lip between her teeth as she ran her fingertip over the small blue light. The blue turned yellow, then blue again a moment later, and the call light on the elevator lit up.

They both breathed in relief.

The ride down was as quick as going up had been, but Dani had no attention for it. "Are they sending police after me?"

Trev watched the numbers flash by, squeezing her hand gently. "Not police. Security, though. Guys like me."

"Friends of yours."

He shrugged. "Maybe some of them."

Her free hand clutched the strap of her laptop bag. "What are they going to do to me when they catch me?" Fear began to gouge stripes into her guts.

"Nothing." Trev gripped her shoulders, turning her to face him. "I'm not going to let them get you, Dani. It will be all right, I promise."

"Like you promised to meet me for coffee?"

"I mean it." He enfolded her in his arms, reinforcing his assurances with the solid comfort of his body. "You'll be home in time to get to work."

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine."

Neither of them said what they were thinking. He belonged here. She didn't. And there was no way he could come back with her without doing even more damage. There wasn't going to be a happy ending to this.

The atrium was busy when they stepped out of the lift, full off people of all ages off to whatever people in this kind of world did everyday. In any other situation, Dani would have been fascinated by them. Now she just eyed them all distrustfully, keeping close to Trev as he guided her across the walkways. "We'll go over to Bowery," he explained quietly. "They won't expect us to go south, and then they'll be watching the west side walkways. We can slip up to Madison and then in from the east."

"You're good at this."

His pale eyes were dark when he looked down at her. "I have good reason to be."

It was her turn to squeeze his hand.

They got a couple of questioning looks as they rode the walkways out to the Bowery arcology, Trev's arm tight around her. It was daylight now, and Dani could have gawked at the towering buildings and the overgrown rubble at their bases. Instead she kept constant watch around them for any signs of pursuit. It would be so easy to trap them in these tunnels, with only two directions to go and no other escape available. She was starting to understand why gerbils in those habitrains seemed so tense all the time.

Another atrium, another change of walkways, and Trev leaned down to her. "Next stop."

They'd almost made it.

"Sutcliffe! Stop right there!"

The voice behind them echoed in the enclosed space. All around them people turned to look, but Trev just grabbed her hand. "Run!"

Her long legs matched his stride, and the two of them flew along, propelled by the momentum of the moving sidewalk. It was a shock when they reached the end and gravity took hold again, the marble steps startlingly hard beneath her feet. Trev didn't slow, pulling her along into the station.

Voices and whistles sounded all around the concourse, demanding they stop, but Trev kept on, making a direct line to their corridor and the gateway. "Hurry up!" he shouted, glancing around in panic.

She forced herself faster, grateful she hadn't bothered with her shoes. There was no way she would have been able to run on these glassy floors in three-inch heels.

Suddenly Trev twitched and stumbled.

Startled, Dani tried to catch him just in time to see another fine thread dart through the air to land on him, making him spasm again. "Stop it!" She tried to support him, yanking at the strings hanging from him now, ignoring the dozen men closing in on them fast.

"Dani!" Trev bellowed, grabbing her shoulders. But instead of supporting himself, he shoved her hard.

She stumbled backwards, hit the pillowy cushion of the time bubble and tumbled through, falling on her ass in the corridor of Grand Central Station, circa 2007.

"Trev!" Dani was back on her feet in an instant, leaving her bags behind as she lunged for the rift.

Before the field around it could grab hold, she was blocked by a stocky form from the other side.

Riggitt.

"Stay right where you are, Miss Whitehall." His voice was flat and uninflected, his arms folded sternly over his chest.

"Get out of my way!" She shoved at him, but he grabbed her arms, holding her in place with a strength she wouldn't have suspected despite her attempts to struggle free. "Trev's in trouble!"

"The only trouble Trev is in is because of his obsession with you."

His words stopped her.

"He couldn't leave well enough alone," Riggitt went on, his words

implacable but something softer in his eyes. "He wasn't content just to see you. He had to get to know you, and from there... That's what's caused all this. Let it end. For both your sakes. For everyone's sake."

Biting at her lip, she tried to see past him, but he held her back just far enough that all she could see was her own dirty, noisy incarnation of the station. "What will happen to him?"

"Nothing."

"You're full of it."

The man actually smiled at that. "He'll be confined to his home tower, given a job there and restricted from the transport levels. He hasn't committed any crimes. He just needs...time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to forget about you. Which is what you should be doing. I told you before. Go home, Dani Whitehall. You've had an exciting, romantic adventure. Now go back to your real life. There's nothing left for you here."

"But—"

A new man stepped into view—older, whipcord slender, his dark hair heavily peppered with white. "Any problems here, Mr. Riggitt?"

"No, sir." Riggitt eyed Dani meaningfully, then ignored her. "Just resolving a loose thread."

"I see." Riggitt's superior barely glanced at her. "Sutcliffe's surrendered. We're taking him back to Greenwich. I trust you'll see to it we have no more incidents here?"

"Yes, sir. I'll mind the opening myself."

"Yes, well..." There was a trace of disdain in his voice as he glanced at Dani again. "See to it."

"Yes, sir."

The other man disappeared back into his own time.

Riggitt turned to her again. "Go home."

"Why are you doing this? You helped us, helped him! I thought you were his friend!"

"Even in your time, friends keep friends from making dangerous mistakes. Trev's being selfish, thinking only about himself. Never mind the hundreds and thousands of people on both sides endangered by the widening of the tear the two of you caused going back and forth. Be grateful for the time you had, Miss Whitehall. Many people don't even get that much."

She hadn't thought about the effect they were having on anyone else. Horror gripped her at the thought of what they might have inflicted on innocent people in their own desperate need for each other, followed instantly by a wave of shame.

Dani had no other choice. She gathered up her bags under Riggitt's watchful eye and headed down the tunnel against the flow of morning traffic back to her train. She'd call in sick. There was no way she would be able to work today.

She made it as far as Jamaica before the tears started.

* * * *

Life went on, but Dani felt even less a part of it than she had before. Thinking her life was meaningless without Trev in it was too melodramatic, but even so, everything seemed a little duller, a little less exciting than it had before him.

Rather than indulge in it, Dani fought against the pull of melancholy that threatened to choke her. She threw herself into work, landing three more big clients who promised to eat up what little remained of her free time. She even made a point of contacting Holly for lunch and drinks. Neither of them spoke about what had happened, Holly because she was probably worried about setting off another fight and Dani because there was no way Holly would believe any of the truth. It was a fragile balance, but at least it was human contact.

At night Dani dreamed of high, glittering towers and the warm caress of skin and lips.

Riggitt stood in the archway every morning as Dani passed through the terminal. She didn't look at him, but she knew he was there, watching her, keeping her from trying anything foolish like throwing herself back through the rift to find Trev. It was tempting, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her pain. Eyes forward, she walked on, never slowing, never looking back.

Summer faded into fall and brought with it cold rain and the promise of a colder winter. Dani tugged her blazer closer around her and hurried up the hall, not looking forward to having to brave the foul weather for the few blocks it would take to get to the office.

"Want some coffee?"

The voice was so achingly familiar that Dani's eyes welled up. Squeezing them tight for a moment, she turned to face the speaker. "No thanks, I don't..."

It wasn't an illusion.

Trev leaned against the wall near where she had seen him so many times before, a tall cardboard cup in each hand and a duffel by his feet, his handsome face blooming into a grin as he took in her shock. Pushing off the wall, he sauntered over to her. "I know I'm kind of late with this, but I did promise you a breakfast date."

"What..." She reached out, unsure, but his chest was real beneath her fingers. She threw herself into his arms, all the tears she had bottled up the past months suddenly bursting forth in happy sobs.

"Careful, sweetheart, I've got hot coffee here!" Nevertheless he held her as close as his full hands would let him, nosing at her cheek until he found her mouth in a long, hungry kiss.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a brief attempt to breathe. "Aren't they looking for you? Do we need to hide?"

"The only place I want to hide is in your bed, love." He backed away, leaving her aching at his loss. "But no, no more running." He stood next to where the rift was, then took a long step sideways.

She cried out, reaching for him.

Nothing happened.

Still grinning mischievously, he hopped back and forth a few times. "All gone," he assured her. "They fixed it this morning."

"So you're..." She hesitated, puzzling it through. "Wait, you're stuck here?"

"Not stuck," he insisted, his face intense. "Not if you want me."

"Oh God, Trev!" She was in his arms again in an instant, mouth seeking his, fingers raking his hair, not caring at all about the grins and murmurs of the people passing by. "But why?" she asked finally, reassured marginally about the reality of all this.

"Riggitt." Trev leaned his forehead against hers. "You were breaking his heart, everyday walking by looking like someone had kicked your pet. Can I get a pet here? We weren't allowed them in the towers, too wasteful on resources. You like pets, don't you?"

"We can talk about that later," she said with a glare. "Riggitt helped you? But he was so cold about moving on, giving up on you."

"He's a hardass on the outside, but inside the man's a big romantic. When he got word the scientists had to fix the time rip and were going to implement it today, he smuggled me out of Greenwich and into the station so I could jump through just as they fixed it. No harm to anyone

else, and I get to be right where I want to be."

"Are you sure? I mean God, Trev, you're giving up so much here."

"Recirculated air, processed food and no you? Yeah, I think I can make the sacrifice." He lifted the coffee to inhale its aroma. "I've been looking forward to this for a long time."

Snatching both cups from him, Dani turned to toss them into the nearest trash can before wrapping her arms around him again, enjoying the feel of his free hands settling naturally along the curve of her spine. "Forget about the coffee."

"But..."

She silenced him with another melting kiss. "Forget about it. There's time enough for that later."

He surrendered with a smile, returning her passion in equal measure.

Grand Central had always been a reminder for Dani of all the things that were good and wonderful in a city like New York.

Now it was just a little bit better.

Beneath the Surface

by Cat Johnson

Chapter One

Pussy was all right.

Really, what heterosexual red-blooded American male didn't appreciate a nice cunt? But right now, Rick would rather have a beer.

Over the throbbing bass of the music, he couldn't help but realize how sad that thought sounded in his head as the stripper on the stage in front of him bent from the waist and gave him a close up view of her assets. Yup, it was all out there on display for him, shaved clean as a whistle. Smooth as a baby's bottom. Not even a g-string to pretend to hide what she openly showed.

He never did understand why men liked looking at things they were not allowed to touch. If looking led to fucking then he was all for it, but that was not an option at the moment. Although another glance at the dancer made him realize he probably wouldn't partake even if she offered it up to him right there on a silver platter. Besides that, Rick did not want to be in the spotlight. Not there, not tonight. He needed her to move her little show along now.

Rick noticed the steroid-pumped bruiser of a bouncer watching him closely from a dimly lit corner as he reached up and slid a single bill into the only garment she wore, a garter at her thigh. She wiggled her ass a few more times in his face as thanks for the tip. He looked on, appropriately appreciative, until she strutted her mile-high heels and enormous high riding and definitely *not* God-given tits over to the next lucky patron who waved some cash further downstage.

"Mmm, mmm. Would love to get me some of that."

Rick had smelled his informant long before he heard the familiar voice near his ear—the guy wore way too much cologne. Sipping casually at his soda while still wishing its bubbles contained hops and barley rather than sugar and caramel coloring, Rick asked without turning around, "Why don't you ever want to meet at a titty bar that serves alcohol?"

"Cause in the joints that serve liquor the girls aren't totally nude," the man informed him as if that logic made all the sense in the world. "And this place has private back rooms where the right amount will get you all the way into heaven."

Rick raised a brow. Personally he would rather drink a brew than see some bush, and he wasn't sure he would qualify what paraded in front of him as heaven, but to each his own. At least the other patrons seemed so enthralled with the show they did not pay much attention to the two of them. If his snitch came through with the information he hoped, the trip across the George Washington Bridge to this God-forsaken strip joint in Fort Lee, New Jersey would have been well worth it.

The smell of liquor permeated Rick's nostrils over the reek of Smitty the Snitch's cologne. No wonder the guy didn't care there was no alcoholic beverages served on the premises. He probably had a flask hidden in his cheap suit. Whatever. Rick did not plan on being here any longer than he had to, ever-changing unclad female scenery or no. He watched as a new nude replaced the bushless bleached blonde. This one a natural redhead, he assumed, since the carpet matched the drapes, so to speak. She had obviously left the small triangle of curls between her thighs to let patrons know and appreciate the fact she was a true redhead. Her hair color may be natural, but nothing else was. Rick spared a brief thought about how the local plastic surgeons must have made a small fortune on the girls in this place alone.

His own personal Deep Throat took the empty seat to his right, his eyes never leaving the new girl on stage as he asked, "Do you got what I asked for?"

Rick slipped the pack of cigarettes he bought on the way there out of his leather jacket and laid it next to his drink...make that soda. The snitch snatched it up and opened the lid, no doubt grinning when he saw the five twenty-dollar bills Rick had slid into the box. "This will get me what I want in the back room plus some. Thanks."

Keeping his eyes on the stage, Rick asked, "Do you have what I want?" If this sleaze was willing to turn over information that could get him killed on the streets for the price of a few lap dances and an illegal blow job, or more likely a quick fuck in the private back room with one of these girls, who was Rick to argue?

"Yup. Sure do. You ready for this? You ain't gonna believe it."

Rick was in no mood for this guy's big build up or guessing games.
"Try me."

"Grand Central."

That revelation halted the drink in Rick's hand halfway to his mouth. He lowered the glass, set it down gently, and fought to not look at his informant. He hated not being able to look into someone's eyes. It was the best gauge he had to tell if they were lying. Rick kept the shock out of his voice when he asked, "Grand Central, as in the train station?"

"Yup."

"You sure?"

He risked one quick glance now and saw the guy grin and nod.
"Mmm hmmm. One hundred percent."

Jesus Christ. Fucking Grand Central Terminal in the middle of damn Manhattan. Rick rose from his seat and said a quick, "Thanks." He had barely cleared the exit before he pulled his cell phone out and had the numbers punched in. His contact answered on the first ring. Rick dispensed with the pleasantries and cut right to the chase. He said the three words slowly and clearly, letting each one and the ramifications resonate across the cellular airwaves. "Grand. Central. Station."

"Ah, shit."

Exactly. Right under their damn fucking noses.

* * * *

Beth slowed her pace and, smiling, gazed up at the constellations. Every time she saw them they took her breath away, even now, years later. It did not matter how long ago she had been employed to conserve the crowning glory of this illustrious historical New York City monument, its beauty would never cease to affect her. The Sky Ceiling above the Main Concourse at Grand Central Terminal was the highlight of all the tourist attractions in the city in her opinion, and she couldn't help but consider it hers. Her sweat, her patience, her time—years of it—had brought it back to life.

Someone whacked into Beth's shoulder hard, pulling her out of her reverie while knocking her bag off of her shoulder. Frowning, she turned to her left and saw one of the many blue-suited cookie cutter businessmen who frequented the train station Monday through Friday.

"Tourist," she heard him mumble as he whizzed past. Phone pressed to his ear and frown firmly in place, he shot her another less than friendly look and kept walking down the ramp to the subway, weaving in

and out to avoid another collision as he passed everyone in his path.

Beth laughed at his comment. She was far from a tourist. She'd been born and raised in the city, the daughter of one of New York's finest, but the rude man was correct about one thing—aside from Beth herself, only tourists bothered to take note of the beauty right beneath their noses, or in this case, above their heads.

She caught sight of a small girl dressed for a big day in the city in what was obviously her best party frock, gazing gape-mouthed as her mother squatted beside her and pointed up at the magnificent painted constellations. The scene reconfirmed Beth's knowledge that all of the hours of painstaking cleaning and conservation of the terminal's zodiac ceiling had been well worth it.

Planting her large leather satchel firmly back onto her shoulder, Beth turned to head for the terminal's administrative offices for another day of the work she loved, when she felt a strange sensation. Turning, she caught sight of a man near the information booth, a train schedule open in his hand, but his eyes on her. Caught staring, he smiled and dropped his gaze back to the schedule.

She smiled. The interns she worked with were always teasing her about never having a date. Actually, more accurately, they teased her about never having sex—at least, not in recent memory. They said she would forget how from lack of practice. Ha! Apparently, judging from the man's obvious interest, she still *had it* even if she had not *used it* in a while. Just because she did not go out with and sleep with a different guy every weekend did *not* make her a prude. She just was career-focused at the moment. She had plenty of time to go out and sow her wild oats. Right? After all, she would only be turning thirty next month.

As she walked through the door of the offices and caught her two college Conservation and Preservation major interns in an obviously passionate embrace, she had to reconsider that thought. Suddenly, thirty sounded really old in her own head.

Resigned, she cleared her throat. "Good morning."

They broke apart, looking more reluctant than guilty. Ahh, the exuberance of youth that can squelch shame plus so many other annoying little feelings that got in the way of enjoying life when you got older—such as Beth's new and sudden fear that she really had become old before her time. Maybe they were correct, she did need to get some, and she would as soon as she had handled the latest problem to pop up at

work, if some other issue did not need her attention after that...

"I need you two to give me an update on those ceiling tiles down by the restaurant. We need to determine if any of the cracks have worsened. If so, we will have to take measures to stabilize them. I'm hoping the damage I found initially was simply from the renovations of the Oyster Bar. If not, we have a big problem on our hands."

The task required only one person, but Beth knew better than to separate the two new lovebirds. They would only spend the whole time text messaging each other on their cell phones if they were not together. You can't fight love, she supposed. Might as well roll with it. And they were working for free as part of their college classes, not that that was an excuse for a shoddy work ethic. She sighed, she did sound old. Next she would be telling them how back in her day there had been no such thing as text messaging.

Robby, the male intern, grabbed the tools he would need to measure and record the information she requested. "Will you be doing the tour today?"

Beth frowned. "Is it Wednesday?" She could have sworn it was only Tuesday.

Lyssa, Robby's female counterpart, laughed. "Yes, it's Wednesday. Damn, Beth, you really have to get a life outside of work."

Beth could feel the creases in her forehead increase at that comment. Now that she was turning thirty, she would probably get wrinkles, too. If she had a social life, or any prospects for one, she might consider getting Botox injections for that...

"I'll do the tour for you if you want," Robby offered.

Beth shook her head. "No, it's fine. I'll do it. I just didn't realize it was today." The weekly Municipal Arts Society tour for the tourists was actually the highlight of Beth's work week. Hers could be a lonely job, as evidenced by the years she had spent stuck alone on top of the scaffolding as she scrubbed the delicate painted Sky Ceiling. The tour let her interact with actual living people.

Robby shook his head and grabbed Lyssa's hand with his free one. "Lyssa's right. You need to get out."

Lyssa nodded. "Hey. Maybe there will be some hot male tourist on your tour. Maybe he will ask you out for coffee or a drink afterwards."

Beth rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right!" Although, she wouldn't mind going out with the hottie in the leather jacket by the information booth

giving her the eye before, but what were the chances he would still be hanging around in two hours?

"Well if that happens, you better bring him down to the Oyster Bar so Robby and I can have a look." Lyssa looked way too excited about Beth's non-existent fantasy date.

"It is not going to happen, and besides, you and Robby better be finished down by the Oyster Bar by the time I'm done with the tour," Beth warned.

Damn, she did sound old.

Chapter Two

He should have been a bum.

Bums faded into the woodwork. If people did notice the homeless population they passed daily, they pretended they did not. No one wanted to think that there were those who had to do without right here in one of the most affluent cities in the world. It got in the way of the enjoyment of their own piggish material consumption. His decision was made. Tomorrow, Rick would go undercover as a bum because dressed as he was and acting like a tourist, he was getting far too much attention today. Even the pretty thing walking around with her head in the clouds that morning noticed him, and she had gotten herself nearly mowed over a few times by commuters while staring up at the ceiling.

Rick glanced up now. Something about the constellations painted on the ceiling did not look right to him but he could not quite put his finger on it. Maybe he would figure out what was wrong later. He would be here for the rest of the day, observing, looking for something out of the ordinary, waiting for his gut to pick up on some tiny thing that his mind could not. If his snitch was correct, there was a hell of a lot more going on here than met the eye. He had already cruised through the tunnels of stores and restaurants—at least he would not starve with all the places to eat around there—but he had yet to come across any clue that Smitty told him the truth.

Now, he positioned himself once again by the information booth in the center of the Main Concourse. There was supposed to be a tour here every Wednesday at twelve-thirty. It would be a good way for him to move around unnoticed and blend in with the rest of the tourists for an hour or so. Who knows, he might even enjoy it and possibly learn something.

He glanced at the clock atop the booth, anxious to get this show on the road. The clock read twelve-thirty, on the dot. A small crowd had already gathered. All they needed now was the volunteer from some

artsy fartsy society to lead the tour so they could be on their way.

And then he saw her again...and she saw him...the ceiling-gazing tourist from that morning who had caught his eye, and had caught him watching her. And the badge that hung from a lanyard around her neck read "Tour Guide". Shit. The young thing who he'd assumed was an out of town visitor was the tour guide. Well, surprises never ceased.

Now he really had to play sightseer before she blew the whistle that some suspicious looking character was hanging around Grand Central all damn day with nothing to do. He was so dressing like a bum tomorrow. But until then, he put on his most charming smile and decided he would not mind one bit playing the traveler flirting with the pretty tour guide for now.

He could tell the moment she spotted him. Walking fast, probably because she knew she was late, she literally stumbled to a stop when her huge ocean blue eyes met his. He smiled at her obvious nervousness when she smoothed the blonde hair pulled back and secured in a severe bun at the nape of her neck. She even blushed as she broke eye contact and turned to address the small group assembled for the tour.

Rick listened carefully when she introduced herself as Beth. Bashful Beth the tour guide had piqued his interest, which struck him as odd since he didn't usually go for her type. He liked them bolder...raunchier even. The kind of woman you could say the word "fuck" to without offending her and then proceed to do just that, good and hard. The kind you could get a little bit rough with and she would not only enjoy it but ask you for more.

This woman—Beth—looked like she required a gentle touch and a slow hand. And he would bet good money that the word "fuck" had ever crossed her lips. So why the hell was he picturing himself peeling the boring beige suit right off her slender body? He must be spending too much time at sleazy strip clubs with Smitty the Snitch lately. His taste had now swung the other way, toward the librarian type...sexy librarians with full pouty lips who blushed from a hard stare. He could only imagine what she would do if he presented her with something else hard... Mmmm. Intriguing thought.

He brought his attention away from those kind of thoughts before his dick woke up any further and listened more closely to the woman, suddenly very interested in what she had to say in that soft gentle voice that would sound so nice crying out in his ear as she came... Damn.

Now his dick really was awake. He moved the newspaper he was holding in front of him and directed his attention upwards as she pointed to the constellations above them, wrestling his mind away from the image of taking her on the roof of his apartment building under the real stars.

"...built in 1913 but was nearly taken down by developers in the nineteen seventies. Grand Central was preserved by the efforts of New Yorkers, led by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Conservation efforts began in 1996 with the cleaning of the Main Concourse Sky Ceiling. Now you may have noticed there is something strange about the constellations." She paused for dramatic effect and all the rapt listeners nodded, himself included, waiting for her explanation as she continued. "That is because..."

Then his cell phone rang, sounding louder as it interrupted her speech than it ever had in the entire time he'd owned it. With a mumbled curse Rick stepped quickly away from the group and answered it, thinking how he really wanted to know what was up with the stars. "Yeah."

"Anything?"

"Not yet. I've been here all day and I've been pretty much everywhere I'm allowed to go, plus a few places I wasn't. Nothing."

"Damn it! How the hell can so much stuff be moving through there and not be seen?" His contact sounded as frustrated as he felt.

"I have no clue." But it was Rick's job to find out. "Maybe it's an inside job."

"You mean an employee there?"

"Could be. They have access to restricted areas...non-public areas," Rick suggested. Areas he could get into if he tried hard enough, but it would be a risk if he got caught.

"So what the hell you gonna do? Get a job at Grand Central as a janitor or something?"

"If I have to."

He heard his contact laugh. "I'd love to see that. Keep me informed."

"You got it." Rick disconnected the call, pasted on an apologetic look, and rejoined the tour. The one upside was that after the phone call, his dick was now behaving itself again, but he'd still missed the constellation talk because now they were headed for Vanderbilt Hall and

she was talking about rededication galas and special events or some crap.

The tour ended much too soon, in his opinion. He would have liked to listen to her talk more but in just half an hour, she had led them all back to the Information Booth where they had first started and asked if anyone had any final questions. Rick had some questions he would personally like answered...such as did she like it better on top or on the bottom, what did her hair smell like, was she soft or loud...but he didn't think that was what she meant.

A little grey haired lady next to him asked a far more appropriate question. "How do you get to be a tour guide here?"

Beth smiled. "The tours are run by the Municipal Arts Society and all the guides are volunteers. I take a lot of the tours because I happen to work here at Grand Central in the Conservation Department, so it's convenient for me to just pop upstairs for half an hour on my lunch hour." She shrugged modestly.

Well, well, thank you to Granny for asking such a helpful question. A few more questions got asked and answered but none were as important or pertinent as that first. She worked here at Grand Central, an employee with inside access and knowledge. This could be the answer Rick sought. It may just save him from having to get a job scrubbing the train station toilets *and* he now had an excuse to cozy up to sweet soft-spoken Beth. Win-win as far as he could see. This assignment was proving to be far more enjoyable than he expected.

Straightening his spine, Rick waited for the crowd to thin before turning his irresistible charm on her.

* * * *

He was on her tour. The man who had been staring at her earlier. More than that, he was headed right for her now. She felt her heart race and her cheeks grow hot. Her interns were correct. It had been so long she *had* forgotten. And if she got this nervous at the idea of talking to a guy, what the hell would she be like once...rather *if*...they got physical. Oh, my. She was in trouble if she was already picturing sleeping with this tall, dark, and handsome stranger when in reality he was probably just approaching to ask a question he was too shy to ask in front of the group. People did that sometimes when they were afraid they would look stupid by asking a silly question, although this guy looked neither shy nor stupid.

Then he was directly in front of her and blinding her with the most brilliant smile and beautiful green eyes she had ever seen and she had to concentrate on remaining on her feet rather than contemplating his IQ.

"Um, uh, hi. Did you, uh, have a question?" *Real smooth there, Beth*, she thought to herself as she stuttered like a nerdy schoolgirl when faced with the star quarterback.

His smile never wavered but instead grew until his eyes crinkled in the corners. "Yeah, actually, I do have a question. Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee." That unbidden truth came blurting out before she could stop it. Darn it! What was she thinking? If he had offered to buy her turpentine to drink she should have simply smiled and said yes. Now he probably thought she wasn't interested. She was definitely going to die a spinster, alone, and possibly never have sex again before then.

He tilted his head to one side slightly, grinning. "Ah, I should have guessed. You're more the herbal tea type."

She felt herself blush deeper. Could she help it if caffeine made her jittery? She dropped her eyes, embarrassed and not sure if she should feel insulted or not, until his hand beneath her chin raised her eyes to his. "I can do tea, when the motivation is right."

Oh boy! He was touching her...and she liked it. "Um, okay, I guess..." More stuttering. One would never know she had been called upon to address assemblies of hundreds of people and discuss her conservation work on numerous occasions. She could go on for hours about preservation techniques but it seemed she was incapable of a single coherent sentence when the topic was herself and the audience one hot guy...with really nice pecs and very strong-looking thigh muscles.

Her cell phone vibrated in her pocket and she physically jumped and let out a tiny yelp that had him pulling his hand back from her and frowning.

She cringed inwardly, probably outwardly, too, and apologized. "I'm sorry. Cell phone." Pulling it out of her pocket, Beth turned slightly to the side and answered.

"I think you need to get down here." Robby's voice sounded serious.

"Where? Why? What's wrong?" She glanced up and saw the stranger watching her. Now she was babbling, but at least she was no longer stuttering.

"We are outside of the Oyster Bar and we found something that looks pretty major in one of the ceiling tiles."

"Major how?"

"A crack. And I mean a big ass crack and it is new, too, not one of the old ones that just grew."

If she were the type who cursed, this would have been the perfect time for a doozy. "I'll be right down." She took one step and then stopped and suddenly remembered she had just made a date. Wasn't this just perfect? The situation was totally representative of her entire life, but in microcosm. Her job getting in the way of her social life, the reason she had not had a date in what felt like forever and hadn't had sex in longer than that.

She glanced into this stranger's eyes and decided enough was enough. If fate was kind enough to throw this delicious man into her path for whatever reason, she would not ignore it or him without taking at least a small taste. Beth forced a smile and hoped it did not look as nervous as she felt. "Would you like to come with me and see a very rare insider's view of the conservation and preservation efforts here at Grand Central Terminal?"

He treated her to a crooked grin and made her heart do another flip. "I would love to. Lead on."

The dubious wisdom of her invitation to the stranger became apparent with every step they took toward her two interns and the "big ass crack" they had found. Robby spotted them first and elbowed Lyssa, whose eyes popped open wide and mouth formed a surprised "oh". By the time Beth and her date reached the pair, both were grinning like fools and blatantly staring.

Stifling a groan, Beth decided the only thing to do would be to take the offensive position. "Okay. Where is this crack you found?"

Chapter Three

Rick watched the formerly shy tour guide blossom into a take charge professional, fascinated by what amounted to a tiny crack in some old brick in the ceiling. As she and the young brunette took photos, measurements, and notes, he stood by and observed, while he himself was observed. The young guy who'd been with the brunette kept looking at him and grinning. Finally, Rick turned toward him and extended his hand. "Hi, I'm Rick."

The kid's smirk widened. "Rick, huh? I'm Robby, one of Beth's interns. That's Lyssa over there. She's the other one. So, uh, she's never mentioned you before. When and where'd you two meet?"

Rick raised a brow over the obvious fishing expedition and shrugged, not wanting to give the kid any information just on principal. "I'm sure she'll tell you all about it." Not that there was anything yet to tell. Rick would work on that though. There was no reason he couldn't get the inside track on GCT and enjoy the company of a pretty woman at the same time.

Unfortunately, Rick had to get this kid's attention off of him first, and his evasiveness seemed to only intrigue the intern further as Robby beamed more brightly. "I can't wait to hear it."

Ah, Jesus. This kind of attention Rick did not need, not while undercover and investigating a case that could blow this city wide open. Rick attempted a diversionary tactic, trusting that these geeky conservation students would be even more into talking about old stuff than gossiping. "So what's the big deal with this cracked brick? Can't you just replace it with a new one?"

Robby's eyes opened wide. "Replace it? Are you crazy? These are the original, turn of the century, self-supporting, interlocking terracotta tiles designed and patented by none other than the famous Spanish architect Rafael Guastavino. Dude, you can't just replace it!"

Bingo. Rick did not know who this guy was or why his tiles were so

important, but he smothered a smile at his own cleverness because Robby was now off of the subject of him and Beth and on to another topic altogether. "Oh. Well just throw some grout or clear caulk or glue or something on the crack, then."

The kid actually grabbed his own long, curly hair in frustration at that comment. "What? No. First of all, we have to figure out what is causing the crack, then we need to stabilize it to prevent further damage."

"Oh."

Rick was proud of himself and his diversionary tactics until Robby frowned, cocked his head to the side, and asked him directly. "What do you do for living?"

Perhaps he wasn't so clever after all but luck seemed to be on his side because just then Beth came towards them, looking apologetic. "I'm really sorry. This is going to take longer than I expected."

Shit. Rick turned to Robby. "Could you give us a sec?"

That elicited the expected schoolboy grin. "Sure." He scooted directly to the brunette for some gossip, Rick was sure, but he didn't care because he had Beth alone for the moment and that was all he needed.

"How about tonight? I certainly hope you're not going to sit here all night long and watch this crack." He was joking, but actually, from what he had seen of her and her team so far, that might be the plan.

She smiled. "No. I'll set up a machine to monitor vibrations overnight and then measure the crack again in the morning. There's not much else I can do tonight until I have those readings."

He returned her smile. "Good. Meet me tonight then. Dinner, drinks, herbal tea...whatever you want."

Rick watched the struggle going on inside of her clearly written on her face as she decided—the woman better never try to play poker. Finally she nodded slowly. "All right. I'll give you my cell phone number." Then she stopped, pencil poised above her pad of paper, eyes opened wide. "I don't even know your name."

He bet this was the first time she had ever agreed to a date without even knowing the guy's name. He'd done far more than that with women without ever knowing their names, but he could tell Beth was so far out of her comfort zone he feared she would go running back into it if he did not act quick.

This was not the kind of woman he usually took home from a bar,

fucked, then asked her name...if they got around to that last part. He took the pencil and paper from her hands and wrote his name and his cell phone number, figuring she would feel better if the control lay in her own hands. Smiling, he handed the pad back to her. "Rick Jones. My cell phone number is on the paper. Call me when you get off work and I'll meet you wherever you want. Hell, we can eat right here if you want. I'm finding Grand Central very interesting and you'll be near your bricks."

Visibly relieved, she glanced down at his name and number, then smiled up at him and nodded. "All right. I'll call you, but unless things change we'll plan on here at the Oyster Bar around six-ish?"

"Perfect." That would give him a few hours to do another sweep of the building, get in touch with his contact about this new tactic to get inside information, and come up with a convincing story about who this alias Rick Jones was and why he would be hanging around Grand Central Terminal in New York for days at a time. One thing he knew for sure, Rick Jones was going to be very interested in both this train station as well as the woman in charge of keeping it from literally falling to pieces.

* * * *

Was she putting too much thought into this? Beth stood in front of the store mirror and agonized over the tight black and very form-fitting sweater as the sales girl stood by not so patiently and waited for her to make her decision. "Are you sure it isn't...I don't know...too revealing?"

The clerk raised a brow. "It's long-sleeved with a high scoop neck."

Beth guessed that was a no and sighed. She did not have time to run home and change before her date—even just that word made her heart jump—but luckily her second home, that being Grand Central, was chock full of stores. She figured if she bought a black sweater to wear with the beige pants from her suit instead of the white button-down cotton shirt and suit jacket she'd worn to work, she would look dressed up enough for dinner at the Oyster Bar. And the black actually brought out her blonde hair.

So why was this decision so difficult? Maybe because the last time she had dressed for a date was so far in the distant past she could not even remember what she had worn.

Glancing at her watch she saw it was nearly quarter to six. "All right. I'll take it. And I'll wear it out if you could just cut the tags off and ring it up."

The clerk looked relieved to be close to getting rid of her after the near twenty minutes of indecision. "No problem." She headed off to get scissors while Beth took the opportunity to observe how badly her hands were shaking as she took out her credit card. They had been shaking since she'd gotten up the nerve an hour ago to call Rick. She'd held her breath as he answered and said hello and again as she waited for his response when she told him she would be getting out of work soon and could meet him at the Oyster Bar at six if he was still interested. He said he was definitely interested and her heart took off speeding...and had not slowed down since.

Completing her transaction, she made her way to the restaurant, her heart pounding harder as each step brought her closer. Worse than that, the entire way she kept thinking that Robby and Lyssa were right. She was so out of practice when it came to dating that it would be funny were it not so sad.

Well she would remedy her dating drought here and now, and when she saw Rick and noted how his gaze appreciatively took her in from head to toe and then back again, she suspected her sexual dry spell might be coming to an end soon also. She swallowed hard at that thought and realized she seemed to not have enough saliva to even do that. For the first time in her life she really felt like she needed a drink, and not herbal tea, either.

He walked up to her, took both of her hands in his, and smiled, all while she struggled to not pass out.

"Hi. You look great." He looked down at her from a height that must be at least six-foot-two compared to her five-foot-eight.

"Thanks," she said shakily. He looked great, too, but not because he had gone to any length at all to do so. He was in the same clothes she'd seen him in earlier and his five o'clock shadow—make that six o'clock—had filled in, giving him a sexy, scruffy and a bit of a dangerous look. She imagined what that stubble would feel like against her cheek when he kissed her...or between her thighs.

That image flooded her cheeks with heat and her lower abdomen with butterflies and desire. She dropped her eyes guiltily to avoid looking at him, afraid he would know exactly what she had envisioned.

"Shall we go inside?" he asked, still smiling.

"Sure."

"They don't have a table available for hours but they said we can

order some appetizers at the bar if we want. Is that okay?"

She nodded. Better actually. Less intimate, less nerve-wracking. She would have to ease her way back into this dating thing slowly.

That concept—easing into things slowly—worked until the first glass of white wine, cushioned by nothing but Oysters Rockefeller, hit her stomach and her bloodstream like a nuclear bomb. Before she ordered the wine, she should have remembered she had skipped lunch to give the tour, and then had been pulled right into the cracked tile mystery. Given that fact, the second glass she sucked down had probably been a really bad idea. But the conversation seemed to flow much smoother after each sip she took. And Rick was so cute and sexy. She felt like she could listen to him talk forever about his marketing company and how he was in New York researching the demographics and traffic patterns of visitors in Grand Central Terminal. And how he really loved classical architecture and how he wanted to learn more. She told him as much as she could without it sounding like a lecture about the history of Grand Central and he listened to every word she spoke with rapt attention. He was so smart...and so hot.

But eventually all that wine supplemented with a few glasses of ice water to combat her dry mouth caught up with her and she could not ignore the pressure in her bladder any longer. Rising to go to the restroom, she swayed dangerously.

Rick smiled and placed one strong hand on her arm to steady her. "You all right?"

She nodded and lied. "Fine."

In the bathroom she somehow managed to not fall into the toilet, get her pants zipped and buttoned, and put on lipstick without going out of the lines, but it all seemed harder than it should have been.

Beth planted each foot precisely in front of the other in an attempt to look natural and sober as she made her way very slowly and carefully back to Rick at the bar. He took one look at her and smiled again. He had a beautiful smile. "I think I should take you somewhere and get you something solid to eat." He ran one hand lightly down her arm and she felt a tingle run up her spine.

She nodded. "All right." That was probably a good idea. In fact, she had a sudden craving for pizza...as well as a few other things that only Rick could supply.

He glanced quickly at their bill, threw cash on the bar, and stood.

"Ready to go somewhere else? Unless you want to stop and look at your brick again first."

She frowned for a second, not understanding, then remembered the cracked ceiling tile. The realization that she had actually forgotten about work for even a moment stopped her dead in her tracks. That had not happened in...ever. But now that he mentioned it, she could take a peek at the readings on the motion detector...

No. She would not let work interfere with her personal life anymore. Especially not now that it looked like she might actually have the beginnings of some sort of social life. Beth smiled. "No, I'm good. The Whispering Gallery will live without me until tomorrow morning."

He frowned. "Whispering Gallery?"

Thinking that impressing a hot guy with her knowledge was not really work, she pulled his hand and led him out of the restaurant and into one corner of what was known to only serious aficionados of Grand Central trivia as the Whispering Gallery. "You stay right here and listen closely."

Feeling giddy, she turned and ran under the vaulted ceiling to the opposite corner. Glancing back to make sure he was still where she put him, she turned to face the corner and whispered, "Want to come home with me tonight?"

When drunk, things that sound so good in your head don't always seem wise once hanging out there in mid-air. Not that she was really drunk, not that she got really drunk often enough to be familiar with how it felt. But she was definitely feeling loose and freer than usual, enough so that she for once did exactly what she wanted and did not let her common sense talk her out of it. But now she had to deal with the consequences and she truly hoped her common sense would not have cause to come back and say *I told you so*.

Beth turned slowly and watched as Rick spun to face her. Then he smiled and was next to her in seconds. "That is quite the little party trick you have there. How does it work?"

How does it work? Those were not the four words she had been hoping for. *Yes, I'd love to* or *please lead the way*...those would have been far better responses to her question. She retreated to more comfortable territory, lecture mode. "Um, it's the acoustics of the low ceramic arches. The sound travels along the curvature in the vaulted ceiling. It's called telegraphing."

While she felt the distinct urge to crawl under one of those ceiling tiles, he listened to her explanation, then he asked, "Does it work in both directions?"

She nodded, vowing that this would be the last time she would drink wine on an empty stomach and ask a man to come home with her.

"Stay here," he said and planted her firmly back in the corner. Across the space he faced the corner like she had and she heard his voice, soft and so close it was as if he were standing right next to her, say, "I want nothing more than to come home with you."

Turning, she smiled when she found him back beside her again, stroking her arms through the thin sweater gently with his big strong hands. How would those hands feel on her bare skin? A bit rough but gentle probably, like his short growth of stubble, like the raspy sexy quality of his voice.

Beth managed to nervously choke out around the heart lodged firmly in her throat, "Good. Let's go."

Chapter Four

Damn. You never knew with some women. They could look all meek on the outside, but inside burned a sexual hellcat. Rick was finding that out now first hand, and he was not complaining.

The subway ride from the train station to her stop had been uneventful. She'd held his hand, but kept blushing and looking away, so shy he was convinced they would be going back to her apartment for herbal tea and maybe some PBS on television. That would have been fine with him, though. Not only was she an interesting woman to talk to—he didn't usually go for the cerebral types and it proved to be a nice change—but he might also be able to learn something useful about the behind the scenes workings within Grand Central that would help him with his assignment.

Then in the elevator, somewhere between the lobby and the fifth floor, she got an undeniably interested look in her eye. Rick leaned in for a quick peck on the lips, just to warm her up a bit and maybe pave the way for more later, when he suddenly found his head held firmly in her grasp, her womanly body pressed tightly up against the front of him and her mouth open and searching his. He let his tongue meet hers and tasted her wine mingled with his beer.

What had started out as a fairly innocent kiss pretty much denigrated into an all out groping make-out session for three more floors until the elevator binged and the door opened onto the hallway of her floor. Luckily none of Beth's neighbors were around because neither one of them was in any shape to see anyone.

He released her reluctantly at first, until he realized the sooner they got inside her apartment, the sooner they could be out of their clothes and he could be inside of her. That possibility looked more and more like a definite with each passing second. That was a good thing because he really wanted this woman. He wanted her so badly he was hard enough to feel his pulse throbbing in his cock.

Rick looked on as she struggled to get the key into the door and flipped the two sets of locks while he imagined how smoothly he would slide into her over and over again. She was probably a missionary position-type girl. That would be fine to start. Then he would have to show her the virtues of a few other more interesting positions. Damn, she was tall and slender, but had all the right curves a woman should. She would look fine straddling him, or on her knees, or up against a wall, or bent over a desk...the mind boggled at the possibilities.

And then he did not have to imagine because they were inside. She had dumped her giant bag on the floor and was on him again, her mouth on his, her hands roaming over his chest. He kicked the door shut behind them as she clawed at his jacket to get it off of him. He broke free. "Hold on, baby. I'll do it."

Rick flung the jacket onto the floor on top of her bag and looked around. "Which door is the bedroom?"

The slightly tipsy and very horny hellcat disappeared as quickly as she had come as Beth got a look of panic on her face at his question. He could have kicked himself in the ass for asking it so soon. Time for damage control. Rick brushed one hand lightly up her cheek while running the other up her arm. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I don't usually do this."

He laughed. Of that fact he was fairly certain, which made the recent turn of events on this date even more amazing. "I know, baby. You're not the type. I could see that the minute I laid eyes on you."

"Really?"

He nodded and took one small step closer, bringing his body close to, but not quite touching, hers. "Really. But the fact is I like you, and I think you like me..."

She nodded and he continued, fairly confident he could charm the pants right off of her with a bit of work. "And even good girls are allowed to be bad once in a while you know. It doesn't make you less of a person, and believe me, it can be a lot of fun. I promise."

Cradling her head in one hand, he lowered his mouth to the pulse in her neck and ran his tongue gently down her throat. He felt the tremor run through her. God, she was easy to rile. He wet the whorls of her ear slightly and let his breath touch the same spot. She actually moaned softly. All of this foreplay was getting to him, too. He leaned in and pressed against her so she could not possibly miss feeling exactly how

aroused he was. Her breath caught in her throat.

He let one hand stray down her side to the waist of her pants. He wanted them gone, but he didn't want to move too fast and scare her. Rick turned her so his groin stayed nestled happily against her hip but his hand could dip inside the front of her pants. Hearing Beth's breathing change again, he slid his hand lower, knowing once he got his hands on her clit, she would be his for the taking. He held his own breath as his fingers slid under the elastic of her panties, lower to the rough triangle of curls he could only imagine would be a slightly darker blonde than the hair he had just released from its bun and tucked behind her ear, to finally encounter the slick hot wetness of her slit. That made him smile. She was already wet. She wanted him. Her head may be fighting it, but her body was ready and waiting.

So enthralling was this discovery, he nearly missed the slight movement she made that set her feet further apart and gave him easier access to her pussy. Taking full advantage of her willingness to play, Rick let his finger slide inside her. He watched her squeeze her eyes more tightly shut as he pumped into her a few times before pulling out, coated with her juices. Damn, he wanted to taste that later and he had every intention of getting the chance. Still afraid she would turn tail and run if he moved too fast for her, Rick began to slowly circle her clit, softly at first, then harder, until she leaned more heavily against him and grabbed his shirt with two fists for support.

More than aroused, he pressed his erection more firmly against her thigh. He was perfectly happy to get her off first, but he wanted to remind her he was still there and wanting.

Her head turned toward his as he lowered it to take her breast in his mouth through the sweater. He wanted that sweater gone, too, but he could wait. When he felt her warm breath ruffle his hair as she began panting, getting closer to orgasm, he knew it wouldn't be a long wait. Increasing the pressure of his fingers, he rubbed harder and faster until her knees buckled and he had to hold her up with his free arm around her waist.

Her voice did sound sweet when she came, just like he thought it would. It was a sound he intended on hearing many more times that night. And he wasn't quite done with her yet now. Sliding two digits inside her this time, he finger fucked her while his palm stayed pressed against her clit. She continued to cry out and nearly collapse in his arms.

He wanted her so worked up that nothing but his cock buried deep inside her would satisfy. Judging by the way she weakly gripped him but made no attempt to move away, he figured he was doing a good job.

He finally pulled still glistening fingers from her. Had she been any one of the other women he usually fucked, he would have slid those fingers right into her mouth and told her to taste herself, or he would have licked them clean himself. Beth wasn't one of those women, and he was too close to getting what he wanted to risk it now by scaring her off. Instead, he wiped them on the back of his jeans. After spending the day at Grand Central, partly in some of the lesser-known and less sanitary areas, there were probably many other things on this clothing by now, he was sure. He'd worry about getting clean clothes tomorrow *after* he left Beth's bed.

All night in her bed was a really enticing vision. In a voice he barely recognized as his own, Rick said, "I want you, Beth."

Her eyes didn't quite focus when she opened them and looked up. "Middle door."

Middle door?

Then it hit him. She was telling him that the bedroom was the middle door off the hall. Rick wasted no time scooping Beth up in his arms and swooping her through that door because he was more than ready to sink himself to the hilt into her sweet pussy.

* * * *

As the reality that she was about to have sex with Rick became more and more apparent, Beth's stupid conscience kept saying *no, no, no* but luckily she had consumed enough wine to ignore it. And then once the orgasm hormones reached her brain there was no question as to which direction this internal argument would go. She wanted Rick totally and completely, wanted to be made love to all night long until she could not walk the next day. In fact, what the hell, she said just that out loud.

He smiled, then outright laughed after she did say those words that shocked the all work and no play half of her self.

"I am definitely the man for that job."

As he stripped off his shirt and revealed a chest and abs the likes she had only seen on the cover of romance novels, she decided she had made the right choice. After hanging around with museum curators, professors, and art students most of her adult life, Beth had not been

exposed much to the phenomenon of the Alpha male. But Rick was one if ever she saw one. He had carried her to the bedroom...actually physically carried her! Now he stood totally nude before her, hard and erect, and ready to please her. When her gaze finally traveled back up to his face, she realized from his expression as well as his erection just how aroused he was, too.

Crawling onto the bed beside her, she could swear he growled as he said, "Get naked."

Her heart sped, nervous and excited at the same time. This was nothing like her first sexual experience with her virgin boyfriend during freshman year at college. This was not even the ill-advised relationship with one of her professors in graduate school. Rick was a real man and she had a feeling she was about to be made love to like she had never been before. After she shyly pulled off her pants and sweater and lay before Rick in only bra and panties she became certain of that when he crawled between her legs, looked up at her hungrily, and declared slowly and deliberately, "I am going to taste you first and then proceed to fuck you all night long."

That crude statement took her breath away and turned her on like she'd never been before. Beth had had sex, she had even made love, but she was quite certain she had never been fucked before. There was no doubt in her mind she would be now and she could not wait.

Her panties disappeared quickly, floating down to the floor beside the bed where Rick flung them. Her inhibitions disappeared just as fast as Rick spread her legs wide, boldly looked her over, and even more boldly trailed his tongue over her most private area, sending a shiver up her spine. He licked her one more time. "Mmmm. I've wanted to do that for hours." Then he set to tantalizing her with a tongue that proved to be as talented as his fingers had earlier. Soon she writhed beneath him, making noises she had never known to come out of her mouth before, eventually coming so hard and long it bordered on painful until finally, panting and unable to speak, she pulled him off of her by his hair.

He complied, biting and kissing his way up her body, pushing aside the cups of her bra to suck on one nipple and then the other, before he reached her mouth. "Kiss me, baby." He plunged his tongue into her mouth and she both smelled and tasted her sex on his lips.

Beth groaned, more aroused than ever before in her life. Rick was incredible, his every touch sending her into ecstasy, and she wanted all

of him. Then realization and fear began to sink in. She could not possibly be as good as him. "Rick, it's been a long time for me."

"Mmm. Good. I like the idea I'm the only one you've been with." He went back to nibbling at her throat like a true proprietary caveman.

Relieved, she spread her legs wider and nestled closer to him in invitation, wanting him to enter her, but he didn't. Instead he said, "Tell me what you want."

"I want you," she whispered.

He shook his head and kissed down her throat temptingly. "Nah uh. Wrong answer. Tell me what you want."

He obviously was going to make her work for her pleasure. "I want you to make love to me."

Rick raised himself on an elbow and laughed. "No, you don't. Tell me what you *really* want."

Knowing what he was getting at now and wondering how the heck he was reading her mind, Beth swallowed hard and said what she had never ever uttered in her near thirty years and had not even thought until just moments before. "I want you to fuck me." The words were soft and sounded painfully shy, but it satisfied Rick. He smiled and finally, blissfully, thrust into her, sliding easily into her ready body. A sigh escaped her lips as he stroked in and out of her slowly, sending tingling impulses through her.

"I'm going easy on you for now, you know. But I won't for long. I think that when a good girl decides to be bad, she wants to be really, really bad. Is that true, baby?"

How did he know exactly how she felt? She wanted him to do things to her that had never been done before. She wanted to experience it all with him. "Yes."

His grin was both sexy and sinful. "Good." He pressed her one leg to the bed while raising the other to rest on his shoulder. Nibbling at her ankle, he watched her face as he thrust deeper, harder and faster than she'd ever been taken before. And when he wet one finger in his own mouth and slid it slowly into her anus, she came again with a full body shattering, amazing orgasm. He followed right behind her with a shout and a release of his own.

Listening to this man finally give in to his own need, sensing him shudder within her, feeling more powerful than ever before because she was the one giving him pleasure, she hoped this would be the first of

many more times to come.

Chapter Five

The dim sunlight slanting through the apartment's bedroom window shades told Rick he had fallen asleep at some point and in the meantime dawn had arrived.

He stretched and groaned as his sore muscles protested. Memories from the night before came flooding into his brain and his dick hardened. Smiling, he rolled over onto his side and ran one finger lightly down Beth's arm. Still half-asleep, she let out a small sound of satisfaction. He would let her rest some more. If he felt this sore, she would no doubt feel even worse. Besides, he had to pee, and his teeth felt like they were growing cotton since brushing them the night before had been the absolute last thing on his mind. After a brief trip to the bathroom to take care of a few necessities, he would wake her up in a big way.

Rick took a quick shower to help him wake up. If they had gotten a solid four hours of sleep the night before it would surprise him. While brushing his teeth with her toothbrush, Rick considered the lack of shuteye well worth the sacrifice as he remembered all of the various looks of shock, passion, and satisfaction on Beth's face the night before when he'd introduced her to new and exciting sexual experiences. Beth definitely would not mind his using her toothbrush after what they had shared the night before. Considering all of the places both of their mouths had been, what was one plastic toothbrush? And those memories had his dick hard and bobbing once again.

Rick rinsed the brush off with hot water and jabbed it back into the holder next to the sink, then padded barefoot and naked back to the bedroom to find Beth waking up. She stretched and cringed. "Ow. I'm sore all over."

He smiled, crawled into bed, and nestled his erection against her while nibbling on her shoulder. "Too sore for some fun?"

Beth laughed. "Honey, if you can find a part of my body that is not in pain, feel free to use it. But otherwise, I don't think I can

accommodate you. In fact, I doubt I will be able to walk or sit all day."

He smiled with satisfaction. She was correct, he had invaded every orifice...more than once...but Rick always did like a challenge. The situation simply called for a little creativity. He would love to feel his dick sliding between those breasts of hers. He pictured her tongue shooting out to tickle the tip on each upstroke. That thought had him throbbing. Of course there was always the good old sixty-nine. He could be gentle with her since she was sore, thanks to him—he loved knowing that. Hopefully, she would not be too gentle with him.

Considering the best course of action, he opened his mouth to make a few suggestions when she glanced at the bedside clock and sat straight up in bed. "Oh my gosh. Look at time! I have to shower, dress and get to work."

Groaning, Rick rolled back to the pillow on his side of the bed. Apparently the party was over, but his job was far from over. Enough playing—for now—he needed to get back to work. "What is on your agenda at work today? Your big crack?" Hmm. That did not sound too good so he added, "In the ceiling, I mean."

She giggled. "Yes, that's one thing, among others. What about you?"

"I was hoping a certain sexy conservation expert would give me a private behind the scenes tour of the station." He raised an eyebrow suggestively.

"All right." She was so damn cute. She actually blushed at being called sexy, even after all they had done.

"Good. I'll look forward to it. Now go hop in the shower."

He could run home, change, check in with his contact for any updates and then get back to Grand Central for hopefully a more successful day...although, as he watched Beth stroll naked across the room, he would be no means consider the prior day a failure.

* * * *

Beth frowned down at the perplexing readout in her hand. "There seems to be an unexplained spike in vibrations."

Rick shrugged. "It's a train station. There are giant engines rattling beneath the building day and night."

"But it's more than usual. I know what the average vibration readings measure and this is far greater."

"Is there construction nearby?"

Beth shook her head. "I'll check again but no, there's none that I know of. We are a major historical landmark. Contractors are required to inform me of any work in the area that could impact or compromise the building. And even when they were doing the major construction upstairs and installed the second marble staircase in the Main Concourse the overnight readings didn't look like this. Who works major construction at night? It would cost a fortune in overtime with union labor."

Rick leaned one shapely jean-clad buttock on the edge of her desk and totally blew her concentration to bits. And she was pretty sure she was about to say something else important, too.

"Where are your two underlings today? Maybe they know something," Rick suggested.

With the faint smell of his spicy deodorant assaulting her nose, and the memories of the prior night still so fresh in her mind as well as in her body aches, it took Beth a moment to process that he meant Robby and Lyssa. She glanced at her watch. "They should be here by now, but they're college kids. They're late more often than not."

Rick frowned. "You should fire them then."

Beth laughed. "They're interns. They don't get paid, so it's kind of hard to fire them. The worst I can do is give them a bad evaluation at the end of term. Besides, they're good kids usually, just young."

Rick walked his fingers across her desk, over her report and up her arm, to end at her chin. "Well I think we did pretty good last night for two 'old' people."

She felt her face flush and he laughed.

"You are so cute when you blush."

Scowling, she finally forced her eyes up to his. "No, I'm not. It's embarrassing."

"Yes, you are and it's not embarrassing. It's cute as hell." Rick leaned down and planted a kiss on the tip of her nose—which sent tingles all the way through her core—just as the door flung open and the two youths in question flew in.

"You have to come downstairs and see this!" Robby demanded.

It must be important since he didn't take the time to tease her for being caught with a man on her desk. Ah, the exuberance of youth. "Good morning to you, too. What do I have to see? If it's the off the charts vibration readings from the Whispering Gallery from last night,

I've already got them."

"No, but it is quite possibly the reason for those off-the-charts vibration readings," Lyssa chimed in excitedly.

Beth was more interested now. She rose from her chair. "Take me there. You can tell me what you found along the way."

Rick rose from the desk also. "I'm coming, too."

This guy really was into architecture if he was interested in crawling around in the bowels of Grand Central Terminal in search of the source of a mysterious vibration.

"Well, Robby and I were at the library last night doing research for our final paper..." Lyssa started.

"...and we read about this secret entrance that Franklin Delano Roosevelt used to use," Robby interrupted her and completed her sentence.

"From the Waldorf Astoria Hotel next door directly to a private platform here at Grand Central," Lyssa added, completing the tag team storytelling.

Beth nodded. "Mmm hmm. I know all about that. So what?"

They both stopped dead. "You knew and you never told us?" Robby accused. "Beth, what the hell?"

Rick also stopped in his tracks and looked more than interested.

Beth threw both of her hands up in the air. "What? Besides the historical interest, it's not important. That elevator between the Waldorf and FDR's private platform has been sealed for decades. It's welded shut."

"That's the point. When we went looking for it this morning..." Beth's sentence was cut off by Robby finishing it with, "it doesn't look welded shut any longer and we heard the elevator motor running."

Beth frowned. "What? It can't be. Who would be using it?" Then her anger piqued. "If some executive at the Waldorf is using it as a tourist attraction and didn't tell me..."

"Hold on a second." Rick placed a hand on her arm. "Beth. I need you to tell me more about this."

She shook her head. "Sweetie..." Beth cut that word off but not soon enough judging by the smug looks on her interns' faces. "Rick. I'll give you a tour later, anywhere you want, and a lecture, too, but right now I have to deal with this."

He shook his head. "No. This is important. You need to tell me now

about any and all passages running through here that the public would not have access to."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you why. Just please, trust me." His eyes pleaded with her and for some reason, she did trust him.

She didn't know why this was so important but she nodded and took the time to explain. "Okay. Under Grand Central there are steam-pipe tunnels and numerous storage areas. There is also a network of underground tracks that almost no one is aware of, as well as a train platform with a secret entrance and an elevator straight up to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. FDR used it as his private entry into New York, probably so he could avoid any press photographing him in his wheelchair. But like I said, the door to the elevator is supposed to be welded shut."

Rick whipped out his cell phone and held up one hand to silence her next question as he dialed. Whoever Rick called must have answered because he turned his back to her and she heard him say softly, "I've found something. I may need back up... A fucking secret train track that hasn't been used in probably fifty years. Looks like it may be active again... Okay."

Beth watched Rick in confusion. What did the track have to do with Rick's marketing research? Were they going to use it in an ad campaign? She'd have speak to the Grand Central Partnership first, she wasn't sure this was something they wanted tourists flocking there to see. It was not only in an off-limits area, it was probably pretty dangerous and not even near up to today's codes for public use.

She was about to tell Rick all this, but he never gave her a chance. Instead, he stepped forward and placed a hand on Robby's arm. "Robby. You need to take me to this secret underground elevator you found." He turned back to Beth and Lyssa. "You two need to go back to your office and stay there. Do not call anyone. Do not tell anyone about what you've found. Wait for us to get back. Got it?"

Beth shook her head. This was all too strange. "No. I don't 'got it'. Rick, what is going on?"

He sighed and turned back to her. Placing both hands on her arms, his eyes softened. He took in a deep breath. "Please, Beth. You have to just trust me."

"I will, as soon as you explain yourself and your interest in these

tunnels because I have to tell you, it isn't normal if you are who you say you are. So are you? Are you really here doing marketing research?"

His hands squeezed her arms more tightly. "Not exactly."

As the tears threatened to fill her eyes, she wiggled to free her arms from his grasp. When she couldn't, she said, "Let me go." She noticed Robby protectively take a single step forward and felt a little better that she wasn't alone with this man who she had thought she knew but obviously did not, not one little bit. Her common sense screamed in the back of her brain that this situation was exactly the reason she did not date much. And she had done a heck of a lot more than "date" Rick last night. Her face colored again as she remembered all she had done with him, without hesitation, with complete trust. This time her eyes did fill with unshed tears.

Seeing her face, Rick let out a vile curse and pulled her away from Robby and Lyssa. Robby took another step forward, saying, "Beth?"

"It's fine, Robby. Stay there." They were still in sight and could run for help should she need it. She shot a hurt-filled look up at Rick's intense face. "What do you want from me?"

Looking torn, Rick glanced up at the ceiling. "This isn't one of those places where they can hear me whispering from over there, is it?"

She shook her head and scowled, remembering what she had whispered to him the night before. She was so stupid. "No, it's not."

He let out a huff of breath. "Okay. I am going to tell you something that could at best end my career and at worst get me killed. I am telling it to you because I want you to know. The only reason I lied to you is because it was absolutely necessary."

She looked away in disgust. "There is never a good reason to lie."

He gripped her shoulders and shook her lightly until she looked up at him. "Yes, there is. That is what I am trying to tell you."

She let out a huff of her own. "Fine, tell me then."

"You can not repeat this to anyone, not the two kids over there, not your boss or whoever, no one. Understand?"

Beth rolled her eyes. She would not repeat it because whatever came out of his mouth next would probably be as big a lie as everything else he had told her. And she had let him...she could not even think of what she had let him do to her. The fact that she had enjoyed it was even more embarrassing.

"Beth!"

"Okay. I swear I will never repeat what you tell me." She forced herself to look up at him.

"I've been deep undercover for the NYPD for two years trying to track the origin of huge shipments of drugs that are somehow mysteriously appearing in circulation on the city streets."

Well, this was a doozy. This guy had quite the imagination.

He continued. "It didn't seem to be coming in by boat through the harbor, we couldn't catch anything crossing the borders by road or even by private plane. I mean I'm not talking small amounts here, Beth. I am talking truckloads full of drugs...or *trainloads*."

Her eyes opened wide, starting to believe him for the first time. "The private track?"

He nodded. "Exactly what I'm thinking."

It still sounded a bit like a late night movie to her. "Can I see some identification?"

Rick laughed out loud. "Beth. Deep undercover means just that. I am not in any way identified with the department. I have one single point of contact by secure cell phone only. That is it. Otherwise, I am on my own. I show up dead in the street one night and I will be listed as just another John Doe."

She frowned, torn. "If you can't be affiliated, how are you paid by the department then?"

He laughed again. "Look, we get through today, I crack this case and stop those drugs from coming into my city and onto the streets, and I will sit down and tell you everything you want to know. Right down to my pension benefits. But right now, there isn't time."

Dropping her eyes, she had to ask one more question. "So you and I...it was all for your cover?" *His cover*. She felt like she sounded ridiculous using his spy lingo.

He lifted her chin with one hand and lowered his head to speak close and right up in her face. "No. Don't ever think that. I had my eye on you from the first moment I saw you yesterday morning, wandering around like a tourist and staring up at the ceiling. The fact you worked here was a coincidence and yeah, I'll admit, convenient that I suddenly had access to a Grand Central expert. But you and I last night was just that...you and I. That was not work. That was me, a man wanting a woman he found...finds...very attractive and wants to know better."

She had never felt more confused in her entire life, and that must

have shown all over her face.

"Beth. There will be plenty of time to doubt me later. If I'm lying you can take the story to the police or the damn *New York Times* if you want. But right now, what would it hurt to simply trust me?"

Pulling in a deep, shaky breath, Beth nodded. Raising her voice, she called out, "Robby, take him down there. Do whatever he says but be careful. Lyssa, you come back to the office with me." Then she looked back at Rick's relieved face. "If you are lying, and if you get Robby hurt in any way, I will track you down myself. My father was a cop before he died. I know my way around a gun."

Unexpectedly, Rick smiled. "You are full of surprises, aren't you? And you can shoot. I knew there was a reason I was first attracted to you. I can't wait to find out more later, and to repeat last night." He grabbed her face and planted a big kiss directly on her lips. "Hold that thought."

Then he and Robby disappeared down the dimly lit hallway, and Beth was left to worry. Two thoughts dominated her mind. One, she hoped Rick had told her the truth. Two, if he had and was correct about the massive amounts of drugs coming through here literally beneath her nose, and he and Robby were about to stumble directly into the middle of the whole operation, she really hoped he was carrying a gun, a big one.

Soon after Lyssa and Beth had arrived back at the office, Robby hurled through the door, alone and flushed. "What the hell is going on and who is that guy, Beth?"

Beth stood so fast, she sent her wheeled desk chair flying behind her where it crashed into the metal filing cabinet with a loud bang that did nothing to soothe her already jangling nerves. "Why? What happened?"

"We got down to the elevator. He took one look at it, dragged me back down the passageway, made me swear to come right back here to you and not talk to a soul or he'd do all sorts of bodily harm to me, then he disappeared."

Beth sighed. So now Rick was down there alone, possibly with these drug runners. Should she call someone? If only he had given her the name and number of his contact at the NYPD. What if he needed help and his cell phone didn't work down there? Her heart pounded. He could be killed and no one would ever know. Or worse, he could wrap up this case and disappear into his undercover network never to be heard

from again. Or even worse than that, what if the entire thing was one big lie? Either way, truth or lie, what if she never saw him again? Suddenly, this all mattered to her...a lot.

"What do we do now?" Lyssa asked, looking relieved at Robby's reappearance as she walked over to give him a big hug. If only Beth could do the same with Rick.

The wheels squeaked across the tile floor as Beth pulled her chair closer to the desk and plunked her weary body heavily into it. With a sigh she answered, "We wait and don't tell a soul, just like he asked."

"What is going on here, Beth?" Robby asked again.

"Honestly, I don't really know, Robby. I wish I did." And that was the absolute truth.

The rest of the day passed in agonizing slow motion as the three kept busy, Beth in particular in an attempt to keep her mind off of what could possibly be going on right beneath their feet. They re-measured the cracked Guastavino ceiling tile in the Whispering Gallery and reset the motion detector. She delved into the stack of paperwork on her desk she had been avoiding. Mostly, she watched the clock and jumped each time the phone rang or someone knocked on the door but none of the calls or visitors was the one she wanted.

Finally, she went home for the day, holding tightly to the hope that she would find Rick waiting in the hall outside her door. Or maybe even inside her apartment. If he really were a cop, he could get in no problem, she supposed. It was all just so far-fetched and confusing. It would be even if she weren't sleep deprived from spending most of last night in the throes of passion with the man in question.

She arrived home seeing neither hide nor hair of Rick. She ate some leftovers in the fridge, but still nothing from him. She got ready for bed while keeping an eye and ear on the local nightly news on television hoping to pick up some clue that the police had been alerted to what he suspected. Nothing again.

Beth fell into a fitful sleep full of dreams about sex and guns, trains and drugs, and woke up possibly feeling more exhausted than she had before going to bed.

Chapter Six

"Hey Beth. Are you taking the tour today?"

She sighed. "Is it Wednesday again already?"

Robby laughed. "Yes. It is."

Beth groaned. She had dreaded Wednesdays and those lunchtime tours for weeks now. They only reminded her of Rick and the day they had met, and the night that followed, and the fact she hadn't heard from him in a month. Nor had she heard one word on the news about any drug ring busts, leading her to believe the whole story had been one big lie, which meant Rick was one big liar.

She glanced up when Robby began talking again. "Since you don't look all that enthused about it, do you think I can give the tour?"

She frowned. "You really want to?"

Robby nodded. "Yeah, sure. Classes end soon and graduation isn't far away. I guess I'm feeling a bit nostalgic, leaving you and this job and all."

Beth smiled. "I'll miss you and Lyssa, too. You better come back and visit, though."

"Oh, we will. And don't be surprised if you see my resume and job application cross your desk, as soon as we get back from our trip across Europe. We're taking the Eurorail."

She laughed. "Haven't you had enough of trains after this internship?"

He shook his head. "No way! I'm just getting started. Hey, it's getting late. I'm gonna head upstairs now for the tour."

Beth nodded. At least one of them was on the ball. "Thanks, Robby."

Alone again in the office, she leaned her elbows on the desk, rubbed her face hard with both hands, and groaned when her cell phone rang in her bag. About two weeks ago she had stopped jumping each time her phone rang, that had been about the time she had given up on Rick.

She located it in her oversized bag now and glanced at the caller ID. It said *Private* which was not that odd since a few of her colleagues had unlisted numbers. "Hello."

"Hi."

Her hand holding the phone began to shake as Beth's heart pumped harder. "Rick?"

She could hear the smile in his voice when he said, "You remember me. That's a good sign."

She struggled to control the shaking in her voice. "It's been a month."

"I know."

"Where have you been all this time?"

"Doing my job."

"Why should I believe you? I haven't seen anything about what you told me in the paper or on the news."

"Ah. I guess you haven't seen the noon edition of the paper yet today."

Beth's eyes opened wide. She grabbed her wallet from her bag and rose from her desk. She could probably make it to the newsstand and back without losing cell signal. Flinging open her office door, she stopped dead, face to face with a copy of that day's paper lying on the ground in front of her door. She had no doubt who had placed it here for her and, since it had not been there when Robby left moments before, that person had to be somewhere close.

She said into the phone unsteadily, "Where are you?"

While he answered, she picked up the paper and glanced at the front page. "Nearby. You can read the whole thing later, but it basically says the NYPD has had this station under surveillance for the past month in an attempt to find the source of the drugs passing through here. It wasn't enough to just get the people transporting it, we needed the source, too, to dry up the supply."

She looked at the article incredulously and said into the phone. "And did you get them?"

"We did. You did good, Beth. You and your two college kids not only gave me the lead that cracked this case, you also kept your mouths shut and allowed us the time we needed to finish it. I'm really proud of all of you."

"I'm glad of that, that you got them, I mean." But cracking a drug

ring still did not make her feel any better about things between the two of them.

"Hey, you know what. There is something I have been dying to ask you since the day we met."

The sound of her own pulse in her head was now so loud she could barely hear his answer when she asked him, "What is that?"

"Why do the constellations look funny in the Sky Ceiling?" Rick asked. "I missed that part of your tour the day we met."

Her heart fell and she repeated by rote the line from the tour. "The Zodiac is reversed. The artist was inspired by a medieval manuscript that showed the heavens as seen from the outside of a celestial sphere."

"Ah. That's it." She heard him laugh. "You are very sexy when you talk shop, you know."

"I am?"

"Yeah, you are. In fact, I was hoping now that this case is wrapped up we could get together and talk shop again real soon. Maybe tonight, even."

Beth swallowed hard and hesitated. She glanced down at the paper again. His name wouldn't be in there if he actually were undercover. In fact, he was probably using a fake name to begin with, but she wanted to believe him so badly. Somehow, even without definitive proof, she did believe him.

"Come on, Beth. I know you've thought about me, about us, this past month. I also would bet a million bucks you haven't been bad with anyone else since that night."

She felt her face grow hot and heard him laugh.

"I would also bet a good amount of money that you are blushing right now. Am I right?"

The fact he knew her so well, inside and out, literally and figuratively, was a big turn on. She hated to admit it, but it was. "Yes. You're right."

"So what do you say, baby?"

What the hell kind of boyfriend would an undercover cop who disappeared for a month at a time make? She answered her own question. She did not care what kind of boyfriend he would make or if they had a future past the immediate one. She'd lived for too many years, thirty to be exact, worrying and over thinking everything in her life. Now for once, all she wanted to do was live. The decision was suddenly clear

in her mind and the absolute relief of having made it, and feeling completely sure that it was the right one, made her laugh with sheer abandon.

"I say I want to be bad. Meet me on the platform for my subway line in ten minutes. I'm taking the rest of the day off. Maybe the rest of the week."

She heard his low, sexy, satisfied laugh through the phone and she knew it was going to be quite a day...the first day of many in the rest of her life.

About the Authors

Vivien was born in a house very familiar with the written word. The daughter of an author and sportswriter, she fell in love early on with the stories that played inside her head, transcribing the first of those at the age of five. She moved on to explore other formats, including acting and film production, but always came back to her storytelling roots.

Currently, Vivien resides in northern California with her British husband and two beautiful children. She's thrilled to be back to her romantic roots, and looks forward to sharing with you some of the voices that have been living inside her head.

www.viviendean.com

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Always an artist, Eva Gale started writing to keep her sanity and instead found her life's passion. She loves thinking up characters and can get happily lost in endless hours of research. Along with other erotic romance stories, she is currently working on a full-length historical romance and paranormal romance. She enjoys reading, hunting for the perfect antique, art shows and gardening. Eva lives in the northeast with her husband and home teaches her 7 children.

* * * *

Philippa Grey-Gerou, or Grey, was born the eldest daughter of a Protestant minister in New England and was raised in various small

towns throughout the Northeast and Midwest, where there was little to do but live in her imagination. She was a voracious reader, and started writing at an early age, settling on that as her life's work before higher education led her astray. After attending state and Ivy League universities to earn degrees in History, Anthropology and Folklife Studies, she settled in suburban Pennsylvania to start her own family. There she rediscovered her love of the written word, and has been writing ever since. She's been in love four times, had her heart broken twice, broke another's heart once, and is currently working on her happily ever after.

For more on Grey and her thoughts and experiences on writing and the big wide world of publishing, visit her website at www.greygerou.com. Or you can write to her directly at grey_gerou@yahoo.com. And sign up for her mailing list *Passion* *Oscura* (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/passionoscura/>) for monthly excerpts, conversation and contests.

* * * *

It all started in first grade when Cat Johnson won the essay contest at Hawthorne Elementary School and got to ride in the Chief of Police's car in the Memorial Day Parade...and the rest, as they say, is history. As an adult, Cat generally tries to stay out of police cars and is thrilled to be writing for a living. She has been published under a different name in the Young Adult genre, but released her first romance in 2006.

On a personal note, Cat has two horses, 10 cats, one dog, six parakeets, numerous fish and one husband and is not sure which of those gives her the most grief. Needless to say, she is very busy on her 18th century little farm in New York State. She plays the harp professionally and stresses that this does not mean she plays well, just that people pay her for it. A past tour guide, bartender, marketing manager and Junior League president, Cat's life is quite the dichotomy and on any given day she is just as likely to be in formal eveningwear as in mucking clothes covered in manure. Cat looks forward to hearing from you all. Please writer to her at cat@catjohnson.net.

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