



Salacity

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Dedication

For Deanna Lee
Just for believing in me and this book.

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∴. When Darkness Falls ∴.

Chapter One

Year: 1999

Nina bolted from the window and into the corridor of the apartment building, pulling the door closed until she heard the lock click. She tucked the envelopes beneath her arm, adjusted the lapels of her satin robe, and turned just as the elevator opened. Quickly, she grasped the doorknob of her apartment and began wriggling it frantically.

"Shit!" She hissed and made a show of trying to use strength to open her door. She heard him step from the elevator and halt, and threw up her hands as if exasperated with the unyielding lock.

"Do you need assistance?"

A fleeting smile flashed across Nina's face, disappearing before she turned to face the officer. She made sure she looked relieved to see him and that her robe hung loosely around the thin piece of black material that she'd bought earlier at Victoria's Secret.

"Officer Dillion," she breathed, holding her hand toward the door as if it were a culprit needing apprehending. "I only stepped out to get my mail but left my keys inside."

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He didn't even glance down at her "come rescue me" outfit as he set his grocery bag on the floor outside his apartment door and approached her. "Let's see if we can't get you back inside."

She looked down, opening the lapels of her robe a bit more when his back was to her, before stepping up next to him. "I'd offer you a credit card to use, except my purse is inside."

He pulled a small case from the belt that hung around his waist, opened it, and retrieved a few items she recognized as tools specifically for picking locks. Nina's gaze slid over his sexy black uniform, wishing desperately that for once he would notice her.

She wasn't supermodel gorgeous, but she wasn't ugly either. And this was her third damsel in distress attempt this month. First she'd staged her car to stall, flashing a bit of thigh when she climbed out of the car to pop the hood so he could check the battery cables. Then she'd asked for help carrying a heavy package that consisted of anything she could throw into the box. She made sure she left her unmentionables in plain view when he entered her apartment. Now, she was scantily clad and locked out of her place only moments before a break-in scare was to happen. What more did she need to do to get the guy to notice her?

"What is that?" She bent closer, making certain he had a full view of her cleavage, but his attention remained on what he was doing. She frowned and felt like kicking the door in front of her.

He was only the sexiest man she'd ever laid eyes on. Tall and dark haired, with deep-set dark eyes and a lean body that filled out his police uniform. He made her mouth water. He'd been the target of her fantasies ever since she'd met him. She'd found out just last month from the gossip across the hall that he had no woman, and decided she might have a chance to make him part of her fantasies. But maybe he was gay, she surmised. What a waste that would be.

A soft click sounded. He shot her a satisfied smile that made her heart skip a beat. "There you go." He tucked away his tools and reached forward to turn the knob, allowing the door to swing open.

"You're useful to have around, Officer Dillion." She laughed. "Do you do laundry, too?" *Wanna do mine?*

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"I have my moments." He glanced inside and frowned. "You should keep the window closed, Miss Nichols. Anyone could climb up the fire escape and slip inside when you're sleeping."

She stared at him. She was more interested in *him* slipping inside *her* than any kind of sleeping.

"I don't remember leaving a window open," she took a step forward to peer into her apartment. "It's a bit too cool this time of year..." She let her words trail off.

Instantly he put out a hand, which connected with her chest. "Maybe I'll take a look just in case."

She turned toward him, making sure her breast rubbed his palm. "You don't think someone's in there, do you?"

"Could be." He stepped inside, his right hand resting on his holstered weapon. She marveled at the silent way he moved as he stepped inside. His gaze swept the front room before he peeked into the bathroom and then her bedroom, where she'd left her lacy undies tossed over a chair.

When he returned, he walked to the window and looked out. Seeming satisfied that there was no intruder, he closed the window. "The wind might have blown it open." He secured the latch. "You should check the latch when it's closed."

"I won't make that mistake again." She lifted her hand to her chest and hurried forward to drop several envelopes on the coffee table. "What a scare I would have had, if there had been someone in here."

"Yes, well—no need to worry now. You're safe." He smiled reassuringly. "Good night."

Nina glanced around frantically for anything that might cause him to linger a little longer. "Wait!"

He looked back, and she laughed. "I hate to be a burden, but would you....would you mind staying a moment—just until my nerves settle?" It was a lame idea, but he inclined his head and pointed toward the door.

"Just let me get my groceries out of the hall."

She watched him disappear through her door, reached up to smooth back her hair, and listened to the sound of him entering the apartment next door. A moment later, he returned.

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"I feel a bit silly, but I do appreciate your understanding. Would you like a drink? I think I'll have one. It might help chase away my nervousness." She started towards the kitchenette but stopped when he shook his head.

"I don't drink."

She cursed herself silently. It was stupid to think that he might be more inclined to pay attention to her if he thought her drunk. Not when he hadn't tried to take advantage of her before.

"Are you hungry? I have lasagna that will only take a minute to heat up." *The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.* Her mother's words echoed in her head.

"No, thank you," he answered, confirming her suspicion that her mother didn't know any more than she did about men.

She was running out of ideas. Resignedly, she sat down on the sofa while he remained standing, his hands clasped behind his back. She glanced up at his features, admiring his high cheekbones and the straight line of his nose. She offered him a little smile, which he returned stiffly.

"Long night arresting bad guys?"

"Every night is a long night," he answered politely. "No arrests, though."

"You must hate the midnight shift."

"It suits me." He remained where he was. "I've always been a night owl."

"I would be too if I didn't have to be at work in the morning." She sighed when he said nothing. It was like pulling teeth getting him to just have a conversation with her. She sat there in her own thoughts for several minutes.

"Well, perhaps I'm only being silly," she suggested, feeling a little uncomfortable just sitting there in silence. "Thank you for your help."

He inclined his head and quickly left her alone in her apartment. The moment he closed the door behind him and the lock clicked, she released a sound of frustration. Was he dense?

Nina didn't usually go to such extremes to find a date. She usually didn't try to find a date at all. She just kept to herself and didn't bother

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staying up until two in the morning when she knew she would have to be at the library at eight. But there was something dangerously erotic about Officer Darq Dillion.

She'd officially met him six months before but had noticed him long before that. And it wasn't until Mrs. Keyes had mentioned that he was unwed and had no girlfriend that Nina had decided to see if she could snag his attention somehow.

When she'd loosened her battery cables and put on the short skirt, it was the boldest come on she'd ever tried in her life. But it didn't work, and her boldness had rapidly become desperation. Between her schemes, she'd made certain she was always in the elevator when Darq left for work at seven every night. He offered polite conversation whenever she spoke to him, but like tonight, he always remained reserved and never once looked at her as if she were anything more than his neighbor.

She made another groan of frustration.

* * * * *

Next door, Darq chuckled at the muffled groan echoing through the wall that divided his apartment from Nina Nichols' place. He had to give her credit. She had determination.

He'd been tempted to tell her that he knew what she was up to, but his amusement and curiosity had made him keep his tongue. Tonight she'd sunk to a whole new level, he decided, as he put away his groceries. Her outfit had nearly caused him to end their little game. A black lacy thing, he recalled, that barely covered her body. Clothed, she was striking. With chestnut brown hair, delicate feminine features, and outfits that flattered her curves. But tonight, she'd looked like a sex kitten waiting to be rescued from the low limb of a tree; a tree that he'd been tempted to crawl into with her.

Nothing could come of it, he thought bitterly as he swung the refrigerator door closed and tossed the empty grocery bag into the trash. A relationship wasn't an option for him, and although she might behave as if she only wanted a one-night stand, he knew better. Nina Nichols was

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the kind of woman who would expect more. Hell, she deserved more—and certainly more than he could give.

Darq knew that sooner or later she'd end up with her heart broken or worse, once she found out the truth about just who and what he was. She'd wonder why he wouldn't request a shift change to match her schedule. She'd question the occasional injuries he got on the job and wanna know why he was late coming home from work. It just wasn't worth it.

He made his way to his bedroom, where he began to undress. He did enjoy Nina's little scenario set ups, however. He smiled as he discarded his uniform and weapons, setting them on the nightstand next to his bed.

Every time he was near Nina, he felt her hot energy pressing out toward him. It set him on fire. Her aura was easier to read than most. Red, hot, and pulsating. And even without her ploys, he felt her energy get warmer whenever she looked at him.

As he walked naked into the bathroom, he wondered what scheme she'd plan next. Turning on the shower, he imagined her sitting on the sofa, her robe open around her, waiting for him to join her. He knew what she was waiting for. It had taken all his strength not to give in to desire and remain standing, afraid that if he sat down next to her, all would be lost.

As steam began to drift over the glass door, he slipped into the shower and stepped into the heat of the spray. He ran his hands over his face, attempting to wash away the arousal that filled his veins. What man wouldn't want a woman who'd go to such extremes to catch his attention?

He turned and leaned a hand against the stall as the water pounded rhythmically onto his back. The image of Nina in that damnable outfit was burned into his brain. He couldn't push it aside. God, she'd looked inviting. His hand slid down to his hardened cock. He'd wanted to rip the outfit off her the moment she turned around and faced him.

Closing his eyes, his fingers wrapped around his shaft and ran up the length to its head. Down again. When she'd leaned closer, he'd smelled her natural scent buried beneath the soft scented perfume she'd

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dabbed at her throat. That scent had pleaded with him to bury his face in her flesh, to taste her.

The rhythm of his hand on his cock quickened as he recalled the softness of her breast against his arm. It had been her pebbled nipple, pushing past the lace constraint and the material of his shirt that he'd noticed most.

And when he'd stepped into her bedroom, she'd left several of her unmentionables scattered about. He was certain it had been purposely done and had felt like a pervert when he'd dared hold one of the silken garments in his fingers. Her eyes had been pleading, hopeful, desperate even, when she'd offered him the drink.

Agonizing tension knotted in the pit of his belly, and his breathing deepened. He worked his hand over his cock, desperate to find a release for the need surging through his body. He turned, leaning his shoulders against the cool tiles of the shower wall, growling low as the warmth that rained down on him heightened his arousal.

He groaned as pain ripped through him, but his hips moved against his hand, and he was unable to slow himself. Tilting his head back, he opened his mouth, allowing his canines room to extend. He fisted his free hand against the raw hunger that tore through him in hot pinpoints of pain.

His skin sensitized so that he could feel each droplet of water bounce off the crown of his cock as it slipped in and out his fingers. The steam filled his lungs as he dragged a breath through his nose. His senses became more acute and he could hear her moving about her apartment, returning to bed over the pounding water. Would she sleep in what she'd been wearing?

Her bed groaned softly beneath her weight. The covers rustled as she pushed them away from her. A drawer opened and a moment later, a soft hum penetrated the walls. His hand stilled momentarily, his entire body rigid. The humming sound was muffled at first, then grew louder before it was muffled again. Good lord, he thought with a jolting shock. *She was using a vibrator.*

A low growl crawled up from his throat, but he knew she couldn't hear him like he could hear her.

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He had never invaded her apartment. He could do it easily by reaching out and stimulating her with his mind, devouring her sexual energy before it ever left her body. But that would go against everything he stood for as a cop. So, instead, he waited until that energy filled her apartment and eased into him, grateful for the heat that soothed his hunger.

Now, his hand resumed its path up and down his cock, this time at a slower pace. He imagined her sprawled across her bed, dipping that battery-operated device in and out of her sweet body. A soft moan found his ears and his fingers tightened.

He could hear her breath pushing her full lips apart. He felt like tearing through the walls between them and leaping atop her. His balls tightened when she moaned again and he echoed the sound with his own voice.

"Come, Nina," he gritted between clenched teeth. But she wasn't rushing to reach her peak. He could tell by the humming rhythm. Was she thinking of him? If she was, she had it wrong. He would bury himself deep and fuck the living hell out of her. There would be no lazy in and out, no soft moaning or gentle panting. He would ride her until she screamed.

His body shook with need. He wanted her energy. He wanted to feel its warmth sliding through his veins. His chest pumped in and out as his ragged breathing grew deeper. As usual, he felt the first wisps of heat from her penetrate the walls between them and he drew them to him. He already felt a bond with her that could be dangerous to both of them.

As her little moans became desperate whimpers, he pushed his doubts from his mind and allowed his hand to quicken again. He thrust his hips forward, imagining Nina thrashing beneath him. Blood pumped through his body in a wild rhythm. She would arch into him when he clamped his mouth onto her nipple and drove her into the eye of her storm of pleasure.

Her energy became hot, indicating she was close to climax. It pulsed—and Darq drew it into his own body, groaning as it fed his hunger. He shook as he continued to work his cock.

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Her voice trembled as she reached her peak behind the wall and Darq could almost feel her wet cunt gripping him, milking him of everything he had to give, while he milked her of her passion. He jerked forward, finding his own release from torment. Several moments later, he released his cock and rolled his head back against the shower wall, dragging deep breaths into his chest. At the soft click of her lamp, Darq reached up and turned off the water.

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Chapter Two

Darq stepped from the elevator onto the third floor to find Nina hovering near his door. Surely she wasn't going to tell him she'd locked her keys in her apartment again. She wasn't wearing anything sexy this time, he noted with disappointment, just attire that looked like the kind he usually saw her in when she was coming home from work. But he'd been called in earlier today, so he'd missed seeing her in the elevator.

She turned and faced him, breathing out as if relieved. "I didn't know what to do. You're usually home an hour earlier. I...I..." she stammered, and Darq had to admit she was a decent actress. She had her damsel in distress role down pat.

He fished his keys out of his pocket and approached his apartment door, listening all the while for her to continue. "At first I thought it was a joke. Some cruel joke by a neighbor who thought it would be funny to pick on the single woman who lived alone. But the more I thought about it...the more I—"

"What's the problem? Tell me, and I'll take care of it." He pushed open his door and stepped inside, dropping the paper bag he carried onto the shelf inside his door. When he faced her, she thrust a crumpled piece of paper at him. He noticed she even managed to make her hand shake. "What's this?" He took the paper and stepped into the doorway of his darkened apartment, away from the glaring light in the corridor, then peered down at the typed message.

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I enjoyed your show last night. That black nightie was hot. I jerked off for hours thinking of you in it. I wish I'd been that silver bullet you pushed into your pussy. Next time I'll join you, and give you something bigger to get off on. Forget about the stupid cop. He doesn't want you. I do. I want to hear you scream, you fucking cunt. And when you do, I'm going to cut your fucking tits off.

Darq's startled gaze rose to Nina's trembling lips.

She met his eyes and her voice shook with genuine fear. "Did you...did you write it? It's not funny if you did."

"Where did you find it?" He wasn't sure if she was still acting or not.

"When I came home from work it was crammed under the door of my apartment." Her voice cracked slightly, as if weak under the stress of finding the letter.

"This isn't one of your schemes?" He held up the paper. "If it is, it's going too far." Her eyes widened but she shook her head frantically. Her whole body shook. The woman was truly terrified.

He stepped back into the corridor and looked up and down its length. "Maybe someone saw you last night before I arrived?"

"No. There was no one else here. I came out only a moment before you stepped out of the elevator." Her face flushed at the truth she told of her ploy, but she didn't try to hide the facts.

Darq turned on the radio at his shoulder and made a call to the precinct, requesting an officer. "If this is one of your games—" he warned, after the dispatcher affirmed his request.

"No. I haven't even gone inside my apartment," she interrupted. "I've been too afraid that I'd find someone there. Sometimes I do open my windows and forget to latch them, as you accused me last night. But you latched when you were here. No one could have gotten in. I don't know how they would know what I was doing."

"You've been standing in the hall for seven hours?" He watched her bite her lip.

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"I...no. Only for about three. I went out with some ladies from work. Tomorrow is Sunday. The library is closed. We usually go out on Saturday night," she explained. "I told you, I didn't know what to do."

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"Because you live next door to me." She looked like she was going to start crying at any moment. "I...I was scared. I didn't want to report it if it was some kind of prank, or if you had written the note."

"Come inside." He waved her into his apartment and pointed to one of the leather chairs. With a frown, he retrieved a clear bag and zipped the note inside to keep from damaging any fingerprints. Then he tucked the bagged note into his shirt pocket. "Sit down. I'll go check your apartment."

"Shouldn't you wait for one of the other officers? What if someone's in there?" She stopped as she was about to slip past him into his living room. "If there is someone there, he could be dangerous."

"I doubt he would have left the note under your door if he was inside the apartment." Darq placed his hands on her slim shoulders, trying to calm her.

"Unless that's what he wanted me to think." Her voice rose slightly with the beginning echoes of panic.

"Stay here. I'll be right back." He released her and held out his hand, "Keys?"

Her fingers shook as she dropped them into his palm. He closed the door behind him when he stepped into the corridor, and instantly he drew his weapon. With his free hand he unlocked her apartment door, allowing it to swing open.

A slow walk-through of her apartment revealed no intruders. Her window remained latched. Lowering his weapon, he went into her bedroom and pushed aside the drawn curtains. Below the blue flashing lights of two patrol cars pulled into view. His gaze lifted to the building across the street, and he decided no one could have spied Nina unless they were scaling the brick wall with a pair of binoculars.

Carefully, he let the curtains fall back into place. It didn't make sense.

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He stepped back into the corridor as the elevator emptied itself of three officers. "What've you got, Dillion?"

"Just a note. The apartment is clean." He produced the note and handed it to Robert Rich, who in turn held it up to read it without opening the bag.

"A real pervert," the older man growled after his eyes swept over the contents of the letter. "Who's the tenant?"

"Nina Nichols, a librarian at the Salacity Public Library. Lives alone. She came home earlier this evening and found the note shoved under her door."

"She didn't report it?" Rich asked as the other two officers ventured into her apartment.

"She wasn't sure if it was a prank or not." Darq jerked his head towards his apartment. "I left her in my place for now."

"This is where you live?" Rich glanced around him with a scowl. "Loser."

"Yeah," Darq grunted.

"You need a life. Sleep and work is no way for a man to live." Rich often tried to offer friendly advice, but Darq always ignored it.

"She knows I'm a cop, and waited out here until I came home."

Rich sighed, seeming to realize that Darq was dismissing the topic of his personal life. "Might just be some kid writing sick shit to the single woman down the hall." Rich held the note back out to Darq.

"Except he knew what she was wearing and what she was doing in her apartment." Darq waited while Rich's brows drew together and he reread the letter.

"Silver bullets and black nighties. Is she pretty?" Rich lifted his gaze, but Darq didn't answer. Rich nodded. "Might be a peeping tom case. Some kid could have climbed up the fire escape and looked in on her."

"It's possible, but her bedroom window doesn't open to the fire escape." Darq frowned, "Though the railing out there would be easy enough to scale."

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"A lot of trouble just to get his rocks off. If I were you, I'd just file the report and keep an eye on her." Rich handed Darq the note, and he tucked it away.

"You don't think it's a kid either." Darq frowned. "Do you?"

"Nope. Kid wouldn't have mentioned the cop next door." Rich glanced down the corridor. "Any families on this floor with teenagers?"

"No. I know the people here. Garris, in 347, is a little weird, but he's not the type to do something like this."

"Are you sure?" Rich looked at him, and winced. "Of course you are. Sorry. Any new tenants?"

"A few. I'll find out who they are in the morning."

"Doesn't seem like there's anymore we can do if all he left behind was note." Rich exhaled loudly. "I hate these kinds of cases. Fuckers who don't have the balls to do any real damage, but have just enough to scare the shit out of someone."

"She's pretty shaken." Darq glanced at the other officers who emerged from the apartment. They'd obviously found no more than he did because they both shook their heads when Rich looked back at them.

"Want me to talk to her?" Rich offered.

"I'll do it." Darq held the note out to Rich with a grin. "You file the report. I'm off duty."

Rich took the letter. "Asshole." He waved to the other two and they stepped into the elevator.

Darq closed and locked Nina's door before returning to his own apartment. He found her sitting tensely in one of the chairs as he'd instructed her to do. He closed the door behind him and walked into the living room, while she looked at him expectantly.

"Well?"

"Nothing. We checked your place, and decided that whoever left the note did not gain entry to your apartment." He sat down across from her. "Tomorrow, I'll take you down to the station so you can give an official statement about what happened." She nodded.

At least she looked a little more calm than when he'd first found her in the corridor. "Would you like a drink?"

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"Yes," she said. "Thanks."

He rose and moved to the kitchenette to retrieve a beer from the fridge. He brought it back to her and pulled off the cap for her.

"I thought you didn't drink." She glanced up at him.

"Not when I'm in a woman's apartment and she's wearing nearly nothing," he amended as she accepted the bottle, her expression revealing slight surprise. What? Did she think he hadn't noticed her outfit the night before? He'd had to have been blind as a bat not to notice.

"How did you know my emergencies weren't real?"

"I didn't, until you asked me to carry that package up to your apartment." He returned to the chair across from her. "It didn't have any postage." Her cheeks flushed as she looked down at the bottle in her hands.

"It was probably just a kid who left the note." She was speaking more for herself than for him. "A cruel joke, as I first suspected."

"Most likely." Darq decided against scaring her any more than she already was. "I'll look into who the newer tenants are in the morning. It's obviously someone who's seen you around and who wouldn't seem suspicious when they were in the hallway."

She hesitated, then lifted the lip of the bottle to her mouth and took several swallows. Darq's gaze dropped to the smooth skin of her throat as it worked around the liquor. His gaze lifted to her dark hair, twisted back into a bun, then lowered to her shapely legs, crossed at the ankles. She looked much different than she had the night before, and he found the change oddly erotic.

She lowered the bottle. "Why didn't you tell me you knew what I was up to?"

He grunted a chuckle. "Never had a woman go to so much trouble before. Kept me wondering what you would do next."

"But you aren't interested." She chewed on her lip. "May I ask why?"

Darq rose to his feet, busying himself with removing his belt, radio, and holster. "No time for that kind of stuff." He turned his back on her when he moved to set his equipment on the counter. Inhaling deeply, he closed his eyes as her scent filled him. It was obvious that her fear was

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slowly ebbing out, only to be replaced with that incredible sexual tension she always exuded when she was near him.

"Time?" She laughed, causing him to glance over his shoulder at her. "You had time to entertain all my silly ploys. Surely it wouldn't take as long as the time..." Her words faltered when he slowly turned to face her.

"Would that be enough for you?" he asked softly, then shook his head. "You're the kind of woman who looks for a relationship."

She lowered her gaze. "I'm the kind who just gets lonely sometimes, too," she said quietly. "I saw no harm in seducing my neighbor. What are the odds that a man would look for more if I put out what I would normally make him wait for?"

"Nina?" Darq's chest tightened. "You mean to say that sex, and nothing more, will satisfy you?"

She tilted her head and shrugged. "It's been three months since I broke up with my boyfriend. I'm not looking to rush into another serious relationship. But..." she stood and set the beer on the coffee table, seeming suddenly embarrassed to have revealed so much to him. "I think I'll go home now. I've wasted enough of your time." She fled for the door but Darq moved lightning quick, catching her around the waist to stop her just in front of it.

She was trembling when she lifted her eyes to meet his. But it was not fear that shook her this time. Darq felt an electric current the moment his fingers touched her. He took a step forward and her back hit the wall behind her. "If all you need is sex, I can give that to you." His voice was deep; he didn't even sound like himself. It couldn't be helped. He'd fed off of the edges of her solitary passion for months. Now he had a chance to drink his fill without worrying about hurting her.

"Sex?" The word on her lips was breathless and hopeful.

"Basic animalistic sex." He placed his hands on either side of her head and leaned closer. "Just fucking." She made a soft sound in her throat that sounded like a half whimper, half growl. It sent a flurry of sensation into Darq's loins, while the heat of her this close burned his insides. "No strings."

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"I don't care who you see or do after tonight. It isn't my concern. Just don't let me leave until I have to crawl back to my apartment." She reached up and placed her hands on his chest. "F-fuck me until I can't walk."

Those bold words were apparently just what Officer Dillion needed to hear, for his eyes darkened seconds before his lips crushed hers in a rough and fevered kiss. She parted her lips, and his hot tongue filled her mouth. She slid her hands up his chest to his strong shoulders.

Surprise at his sudden passion swept over her. He'd always seemed so reserved, but that reserve disappeared as he thrust his body against her, flattening her against the wall. He groaned into her mouth, settled a leg between her thighs, and rubbed his rock hard cock against her hip.

Her heart pounded as her hands circled his neck and urged him to kiss her more deeply. His tongue danced against hers, his lips so rough she was certain he'd leave them bruised. Still it wasn't enough. She wanted more.

The longer he kissed her, the more uninhibited she felt. Something inside of her unleashed, something dark and wild that gave her a rush of adrenalin. Her fingers fell back to his chest and shook as she tried to unbutton his shirt. Finally she just grabbed each side of the garment and jerked at it roughly, feeling one of the buttons snap against her stomach as it ripped open.

Never once releasing her lips, he let his arms fall away from her so she could push his shirt over his shoulders until it dropped from his body. She fisted her hands in the cotton material of his undershirt and tugged it upward, forcing him to lean back and help her lift it off. The moment it was gone, she spread palms against his smooth, heated skin, appreciating the hard muscles beneath her fingertips.

He raised his own hands to her blouse, working each button quickly until it fell open, revealing the thin camisole beneath. She looked up at his face to find the planes of his cheeks flushed. His nose flared with every heavy breath that labored in and out of his muscled chest.

He jerked her shirt over her shoulders, until he trapped her arms at her sides. Pushing her back against the wall, he lowered his head. When

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his mouth opened wide and clamped around her right nipple, she moaned. Her moan became a cry and she shuddered when he applied suction.

She couldn't explain the thrill that shot through her when he released her blouse, allowing the garment to fall to her feet, and snaked an arm around her waist to lift her to his mouth. In doing so, he pressed his leg against her sex, sending heat veining through her entire body.

When he released her nipple, she moaned. He quickly moved to her left breast and applied the same attention, grinding his cock against her. There was something primitive about the way he was touching and kissing her, a way that made her feel more alive than she'd ever felt.

His leg moved and a moment later his hand slipped beneath her skirt to press her clit. She groaned and jerked toward his touch. His thumb hooked her panties and shoved the material aside before plucking at her moist flesh. She whimpered, until he rocked a finger into her, and her throat closed over the sound.

"Oh God," she gasped when his finger hooked and began sliding in and out, while his palm continued to stimulate her clit. His lips released her nipple and moved to her throat. She closed his eyes when he licked at her skin before catching her mouth and kissing her deeply.

The strength of his need vibrated against her lips, and she reached down to press her palm beneath his balls. Slowly she dragged her hand up along the length of his cock. His jerk sent another electric thrill through her.

He tore his lips from hers, and his eyes glittered down at her. "Suck me."

Tension knotted in the pit of her stomach. She heard the desperation in his voice as he removed his hand from her. Slowly, giving in, she slid down the wall and rolled forward to her knees. She wasted no time unzipping his pants. Her blood at a fever pitch, she pushed them down his legs and he kicked them behind him.

His briefs pulled tight against the hard ridge of his cock. She carefully widened the waistband and slid them down over his erection. They too went flying behind him.

Salacity

Nina guessed he was nine inches if he was an inch, and her pussy tightened with anticipation of having him inside her. He groaned when she grasped his thick shaft. Slowly she licked the crown, rolling her tongue around it until it glistened.

Then she looked up at him and her heart quickened. He'd planted his palms on the wall behind her, his head bent, his dark eyes glittering as he watched her. She licked her lips as her gaze momentarily met the heat in his eyes, then she leaned forward and tilted her head so he had a clear view as she took the head of his cock between her lips. A low groan of appreciation met her ears.

"Deeper," he rasped, the sound of his voice twisting like lightning in her veins. She rocked forward and pushed him to the back of her throat.

He made a strangled down sound.

She drew back slowly, tightening her lips and pressing her tongue against the ridge beneath his shaft until she reached the tip. Then she sucked him in again.

She couldn't take his entire length, but what she managed to swallow filled her with an odd sensation of control and power. She released him and grasped each of his thighs, using only her mouth to bring him pleasure. He reached down and freed her hair from the clip, allowing it to fall around her face as she continued stroking him. The muscles beneath her palms tightened, and he rocked his hips forward, matching her rhythm.

His breathing became heavier, but she didn't stop to look up at him as she worked him in and out of her mouth to the beat of her pounding heart. Until finally, his hand fell down to still her.

She looked up at him as he pulled himself from between her lips. "You don't want me to keep going?"

"Not this time." His deep voice was strained, as if he were fighting for control. He reached for her hand and urged her to stand. The moment she was upright, his arms slipped around her and he lifted her to her feet. His mouth clamped onto hers as he carried her across the room in four long strides, to his bedroom.

Sable Grey

Chapter Three

Darq set Nina on her feet next to his bed, then slipped his hands down her waist and over her hips. She stood there, clutching his shoulders, her blue eyes wide as she stared up at him. He slid his palms around to her ass and squeezed it before bringing his fingers to the clasp at the dip in her lower back. Her breath caught and held as he dragged the zipper down. Slowly, and only using his palms, he slid the skirt down over her hips, lowering it until she could step out of it.

She stood in front of him wearing only thigh-highs, garters, and a pair of white satin panties. His cock throbbed painfully but it was the smothering heat of her energy that tormented him most. He steeled himself against the urge to feed on it, not wanting to frighten her away.

He leaned forward and nipped the inside of her thigh, wanting to devour her. "Lay down, Nina." She instantly turned and crawled onto his bed, offering him a fine view of her ass. His gaze followed the sweep of moist satin that dipped between her thighs.

She rolled over and rested on her elbows to wait for him, and his attention lifted to the large damp circles he'd left on her top around her nipples. Desire flushed his whole body and he slid onto the bed between her parted knees. He bent his head and pressed his tongue to the wet spot on the white fabric on her pussy. Her breath hissed through her teeth when his lips closed over it, and he sucked hard.

Salacity

"Get *in* me," she whispered huskily, bringing Darq's gaze back to her face. "Please."

He needed no more encouragement. His pulse pounded in his temple as he rose above her, pushed her panties aside, and nudged her pussy with his cock. Her hands slid around his shoulders, her nails scratching his skin as she lifted her knees to his sides, allowing him entry.

He pushed between her folds, testing the wetness of her body. Her muscles squeezed the head of his cock and her fingernails bit into his shoulder blades. He thrust forward to the quick, causing her to arch upward and a cry to escape her lips. One hand slipped beneath her thigh, lifting it against his chest while the other pushed the material of her top above her tits. Her nipples pointed up as he rocked back, and then drove into her again.

"Yessssss," she hissed, lifting her hips to grind against him. He leaned closer and drove into her, allowing his hunger to finally take over. He jabbed in and out of her roughly, the slap of their bodies coming together filling the small room. She bucked beneath him, meeting his every thrust with the same need that drummed in his veins. Sweet pain tore through him. *No, Darq*, his mind commanded over the lust that burned his ears. *Don't let her see you like this.*

He released her thigh and pulled out just long enough to flip her over. Her startled cry, followed by a husky chuckle, drove the heat deeper into his abdomen. Reaching forward, he grasped her waist and jerked her up to her knees, then moved the material of her panties aside with his thumb and drove into her.

Her hair slid across her back when she threw her head back and cried out, inviting the intrusion. He pushed into her, his rhythm quickening with tightening tension. His eyeteeth extended painfully from his gums as she rocked back against him, her voice lifting with each deep thrust.

"Hurry, Nina," he clapped his hand on her ass and kneaded her soft ivory flesh. Her heat enveloped him, seeped into him. Perspiration glistened on her back and he felt her body tighten around him, indicating that she too was close to release. "Give in to me."

Sable Grey

Her body went rigid for all of two heartbeats. Then her voice lifted as her body shook, her head thrashing back and forth as her body bucked against his. He grasped her hips and worked her cunt with abandon. He opened himself up, sucking in the energy that blasted into him from her orgasm. It filled him in a rush and he shouted against the intensity of the feeding. For so long, he'd fought this kind of full satisfaction, and now it trembled through him freely.

His hand slipped beneath her, hooked her with his arm as he leaned over her, pumping in and out of her again and again. His other hand fisted in her hair and he fought against his urge to make her his completely when he reached his own thunderous orgasm.

She couldn't know what she'd given him, how she'd fed him. It was just sex, he'd told her. But he felt a bond tighten between them, one of which she wasn't even aware, one that was much stronger than any he'd felt in his past.

They stilled, and he remained folded over her as they both fought for composure.

Darq rested his forehead against her back and tried to steady his breathing. Her scent was all around him, on him, in him. He slid his hand beneath her to caress her breast.

"Was I too rough?" he murmured against her skin.

She laughed shakily. "No. Was I?"

He smiled and pressed his lips to her back.

"Do you want some water?" he asked, and she hummed an affirmation. He groaned as he pulled from her wet tightness, not really wanting to leave the comfort he'd found within her. She lowered herself to the bed and rolled to her side, and he turned quickly and headed from the room. One glance in the mirror outside the bedroom, and he knew it had been wise not to let her see his face. His eyes, completely blacked out and glassy, glared back at him. The two white points of his teeth peeked from beneath his upper lip, and the dark veins branching beneath his skin started to fade.

Turning from the mirror, he headed for the kitchen. He drank a glass of water and then refilled the glass. This time when he passed the

Salacity

mirror, he looked normal. But he knew the transformation was only temporary.

"I thought of something," she said, sitting up when he entered the room and handed her the water.

"What's that?" He eased onto the bed next to her.

"We didn't use protection. It was stupid of me not to think of it." She chewed at her lip, apparently nervous with her loss of control and lack of forethought. He smiled. She didn't need to worry. She wouldn't become with child, unless he allowed it.

"Don't worry. You won't get pregnant." He leaned towards her and kissed her shoulder lightly. "Drink up because I'm not finished with you yet."

"Or me with you," she added, before bringing the rim of the glass to her lips.

* * * * *

One moment Darq was asleep, and the next he bolted upright, awakened by an odd sound. Footsteps. His gaze dropped to Nina's sleeping form next to him as he strained to hear their direction. Someone was moving around inside Nina's apartment.

Silently, he slid from the bed and carefully unlatched the window. He didn't make a sound as he pushed it open and leaned out to peer at Nina's window. It was open as well.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that Nina was still asleep. Quickly, he slipped outside, placed both hands on the wall above the window, and let his feet lift from the sill. Crouching against the vertical surface, he moved quietly across the brick over the opened window. He leaned forward, peering into the apartment. A shadow moved, then went still. When the intruder looked his way, Darq quickly jerked from sight.

He waited, and a moment later a body leaned out the window and peered down at the street below. Darq shifted closer to the man and tapped him on the shoulder. The man whirled, but didn't look up. Darq could see a bag gripped in his. He pressed his lips together. This wasn't the person who'd left the note. This was just a burglar.

Sable Grey

"Why don't you go back inside and put everything back in its place?" Darq's voice brought the man's head up. His eyes widened but before he could shout, Darq reached forward and grasped his throat, choking off the sound.

Darq shook his head and brought a finger to his lips, "Shh. You have the right to remain silent."

* * * * *

Maury Mercer's white brow pulled together as Darq relayed an account of what had happened at Nina's apartment the night before. His gaze darted to Nina. "You poor dear."

Nina smiled at the super. "I'm fine. I was just a bit shaken."

"I'd like to know about the newer tenants." Darq watched the old man's eyes widen. "I know someone moved in on the fourth floor last weekend."

"You think it was someone who lives *here*?"

"I can't be sure, but it wouldn't hurt to find out who our neighbors are...just in case," Darq answered patiently. "I'd rather look into it myself instead of having the place crawling with officers, disturbing or alarming the tenants."

"No, no, of course we don't want that!" Mercer turned and using one finger, typed something into his computer. "The new tenant is Harry Henson. Apartment 421. Single. Just moved here from Chicago." Mercer looked up, lowering his voice even though there was no one else in the lobby to hear.

"I thought he seemed a little weird. When he unloaded his boxes from his vehicle," Mercer leaned closer, "there were a bunch of girly magazines on top. You know the kind I mean. Indecent." Mercer nodded as if sending a secret signal that Nina wouldn't understand. She clamped her lips together to keep from laughing.

"Couldn't you get a warrant or something because of that?" Mercer was obviously trying to be helpful, but Nina could see that his suggestion irritated Darq.

Salacity

"There is no law in Salacity against people owning pornography."

"It wasn't normal p...p...pornography." Mercer whispered the last word as if it were something not to be spoken aloud. "It was unnatural. Leather and chains." He nodded again and brought his hand up to muffle his next word. "Bondage."

"Thank you, Mr. Mercer. Has anyone else moved in recently?" Darq asked when Nina turned her back to keep from laughing in the man's face.

"Only a family on the second floor. Man and his pregnant wife. But they seem normal to me," Mercer answered.

Nina didn't look at him, and the moment they stepped from the building she burst out laughing. She glanced up at Darq when he squinted against the morning light and slipped a pair of shades onto the bridge of his nose.

"He's just old," she said. "He doesn't know any better."

"He knows how to badger you a week before your rent is due to make sure he's paid," Darq growled.

"It makes him feel important when he offers you information."

Nina glanced behind her to find Mercer peering out the curtains at them, then turned to see a man with a large mole over his brow walking toward them on the sidewalk. He suddenly looked up at Darq and bolted across the street.

"I have girlie magazines. That doesn't mean I'm gonna write a sick note and stuff it under a girl's door." Darq grunted. Nina watched the man with the mole continue down the street, his thick legs moving quickly, as if he were trying to get as far away from them as fast as he could.

"*Bondage* magazines?" Nina dismissed the man with the mole and grinned when Darq looked at her, but all evidence of the passion he'd shown the night before was gone. His cool reserve was back in place.

A kid suddenly raced past them, and Darq whirled around. He moved lightening quick, grabbing the kid's shoulder and jerking him to a halt.

"In a hurry?" Darq looked down at the youth.

Sable Grey

"I'm late for school." The kid tried to loosen his shoulder from Darq's grasp, but failed.

Darq raised his eyebrows. "School on Sunday?"

"Sunday School yeah...at my church." The kid nodded.

"You wouldn't be running to Sunday school with something that doesn't belong to you, now would you?" Darq reached down and dug in the kid's coat pocket, producing a magazine. The boy rolled his eyes.

"I've found your culprit." Darq glanced back at Nina and held up the issue of Penthouse. Nina chuckled.

"C'mon, man, it's just a magazine," the boy whined.

"I suppose that's the Virgin Mary on the cover. She's had a little work done." Darq glanced back at Nina. She laughed. "What do you think? Should I haul him in? They'll send him to juvie for a couple of months."

"Come on, cut me some slack, lady," the kid pleaded, causing Nina to smile.

"It's just a magazine, and he's only a kid." Nina smiled at the boy. "How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"He's a kid today. Tomorrow, I'll be busting him for grand theft and he'll be ass meat down at the pen. Might be better to do it now, maybe make a difference in his future." Darq turned his attention back to the boy. "You choose, kid. Return this magazine, or I make a call to your parents."

The boy ducked his head. "I'll take it back," he murmured.

"Wait here." Darq tossed over his shoulder to Nina. She smiled when his tone softened as he walked the kid back down the sidewalk. "I knew you were a smart kid."

"Can I at least look at it on the way?" the boy asked.

"Are you Nina Nichols?" Nina turned at the sound of her name, and dropped her gaze to the little girl that approached her.

"Yes, I am."

"That man over there said you dropped this." She held up an envelope.

Salacity

"I think there must be a mistake. I wasn't carrying—" Nina looked at her name typed on the face of the envelope. Her gaze lifted across the street. "What man?"

"I don't know. He was there." The little girl pointed again before turning and running off to join her friends. Curious, Nina opened the envelope and unfolded the letter inside.

Fucking whore. You called the cops. Then you fucked him. That was a bad thing to do. Now I'm really going to hurt you. I'll make you scream harder than the badge did. He's a freak, and you let him ride you like a devil on his whore. I'm gonna cut you. I'm gonna cut you good.

Darq turned at the sound of his name. His gaze zoomed in on Nina, who still stood where he'd left her, a letter in her hand. Oh hell. He thrust the magazine into the kid's hands. "Take the magazine back and get lost, kid. Keep out of trouble." He took off towards Nina, ignoring the kid when he called after him.

"What is it?" He didn't stop until he was back at Nina's side.

"He was here," she whispered. "He was right here on the street. That little girl said a man was there and told her to give this to me." Her legs nearly gave out beneath her, but Darq caught her around the waist and guided her to the steps of their apartment building. She sat down, her hands shaking.

He lifted the letter from her fingers and read it quickly. Instantly, his eyes lifted and searched the street.

"Hey, is...is she okay?" The boy with the magazine ran toward them. "Lady, are you okay?"

"Which little girl gave you this?" Darq ignored the boy and looked at Nina. She lifted her hand and pointed to the blonde jumping rope.

Darq finally looked at the boy. "Stay with her, okay?" The boy nodded and Darq turned to stride toward the group of children playing. Despite the slight sting to his eyes, he removed his sunglasses and waved at the little girl Nina had indicated. When she stepped forward, he squatted down and smiled at her.

Sable Grey

"Hi there. You just gave that lady over there an envelope. She said you told her that a man asked you to give it to her, but he's gone now. Is that right?"

She nodded. "He said she dropped it."

"Well it was nice of you to be so helpful and return it to her." He tapped her nose and she smiled broadly at him. "Do you know who the man was?"

She shook her head. "No...um...I don't know."

"Did he look familiar?" Darq pressed.

She nodded.

"Can you describe him to me? I'd like to thank him for noticing that she'd dropped her mail."

"He wasn't as tall as you, and he had a mustache." She told him. "He had big hands and a funny looking shirt."

Darq tapped her nose again, bringing a little giggle from her. "You've been so helpful." He reached in his pocket and retrieved a peppermint. "Here you go, sweetheart." She eagerly grasped the candy and Darq stood. He walked back to the steps where Nina still sat.

"How....did he know what we'd done?" Nina whispered when he halted in front of her.

"I don't know, but I intend to find out." Darq frowned. Whoever it was had called him a freak, as if he knew Darq's secret. The guy was closer than he thought. "Let's go to the precinct. Once, and we'd put it off as a prank. But twice, and the prankster becomes a stalker."

"Want me to come too?" The boy asked.

Darq looked down at him. "What for?"

"I dunno. Maybe I can help." He reached for Nina's hand. "She might need me."

Darq started to say no, then shrugged, thinking that if the boy were given a bit of positive responsibility, it might change the way he was heading.

"Can I sound the sirens?" He tucked the magazine in his pocket.

"I'm not in a patrol car." Darq grasped Nina's shoulders and urged her to stand. "Come on, Nina." She allowed him to guide her to his car,

Salacity

and slid into the backseat with a little encouragement. The boy climbed in beside her and reached for her hand. Her fingers curled around his, accepting his comfort. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to have the boy with them, he decided quickly, slipping behind the wheel.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Jack." He answered. "Jack Jordan."

Sable Grey

Chapter Four

"Don't you need to call your parents, Jack?" Darq poured the kid a glass of milk. The sound of the shower drummed from the bathroom where Nina was taking a bath. They'd spent most of the day at the precinct. He could tell she was exhausted when they returned to his apartment.

"Don't have any." Jack looked at the milk Darq slid towards him. "It's just me and my uncle, and he doesn't give a shit when I come home." Jack turned the glass back and drained the glass.

"Watch your language, kid," Darq reprimanded dutifully. He tossed his sunglasses onto the counter.

"The couch is pretty comfortable. I've got cable. And if you're hungry, there's food in the fridge. But you can only stay if you call your uncle and let him know where you are." Darq didn't look back at him. "Otherwise, I'm gonna take you home now."

For a moment, there was silence. Then he heard the receiver lift from the cradle on the bar. Darq smiled as the kid dialed a number.

He tilted his head slightly as his senses became acute, and listened to both ends of the conversation.

"Hello?"

Jack's voice differed from the way it had sounded only moments before. "It's me." He suddenly sounded small.

"What do you want?"

Salacity

"Officer Dillion said I had to call you if I wasn't going to be home."

"Are you in trouble, kid? That's all you are to me. Why can't you just—"

"I'm not in trouble," Jack interrupted quickly.

"Good," his uncle snapped after a moment. "I'm glad you won't be home. I've got company tonight, and you'd only get in the way."

"I don't get in your way."

"Don't sass me, boy or I'll dump your ass on the street for good."

"Yes, sir." Jack's voice was defeated and Darq was surprised by the charge of anger that burned his veins. Jack had no one. Darq knew all too well how that felt. His fist clenched, but he forced himself to relax when Jack hung up the phone.

"Everything okay?"

"Okay." Jack echoed. He was silent a moment, then his voice returned to its normal tone. "Have you ever used that gun on anybody?"

Darq glanced around his apartment, looking for some way that someone could have slipped in the night before. It made no sense. He would have heard an intruder.

"No," he answered.

"Never?" The boy sounded as if he didn't believe him.

"No."

"You don't like the sun, do you?"

When Darq looked back at him, the boy was wearing his Ray bans.

"Why do you say that?"

"You were squinting when you were talking to that girl outside—the one who gave Nina the note. You took off the shades so she wouldn't be afraid of you, but you put 'em back on when you stood up." Jack held up his hand and pointed, with his thumb straight up. "Pow."

"I'm sensitive to bright lights. I have a stigmatism." Darq returned his attention to the room.

"Like a vampire." Jack snickered. "Officer Darq, the vampire."

"Are you making fun of my name?" Darq walked to the window and looked out. In that note, it had seemed someone knew that he and Nina had been together, that perhaps they'd been watched. But no one

Sable Grey

could have gotten in through the window, he decided, when he examined the lock.

"It's a cool name. Just too bad your last name isn't Black. Darq Black, the vampire cop. Too bad you don't work at night. That would be great."

"I do." Darq glanced over his shoulder. "I work the night shift."

Jack grinned back at him. "Darq Black saves the day after darkness falls on Salacity." The kid was clever.

"Is Nina your girlfriend?" Jack hopped down from the stool and followed Darq when he headed for the bedroom. "That note said you'd been with her."

Darq cut his eyes at the boy and received a shrug in return. "I heard the other officer reading it aloud." He still had on the Ray bans. "What are you looking for? You think the guy who wrote the note got in here and spied on you?"

Darq opened the window and leaned out the balcony to look around. It wasn't like someone to leave no sign at all if they'd broken in. "You're quick, kid. You should be a detective." He leaned back in and closed the window, securing the latch.

"Really?" Jack seemed to think about that. "I could keep watch for you. See if the fucker comes back."

"Watch you language," Darq reminded him, then shook his head. "I don't need anyone to watch. I don't think he was in here."

"Then he was spying from somewhere else." Jack nodded as if he had it all figured out. "Maybe through a peephole. I saw that in a movie once. Some weird fu...dude...was peeking at women through holes in their walls."

"There are no holes in my walls, or I would have found them by now." Darq answered absently.

"You see that good in the dark? Because of your stigmata?" Jack asked.

"Stigmatism," Darq corrected as he faced the boy. "Yes, but it's not dark in here." He reached forward and plucked the sunglasses from Jack's nose, placing them on the counter when he returned to the front room.

Salacity

"Oh yeah." Jack laughed, following him.

Darq's gaze rested on the closet near the door. He strode forward and opened it. Just his coat hung on a wire hanger. Jack stepped to his side and peered inside.

"Yeah, good thinking. Most of these old buildings have crawl spaces in all the closets that connect between floors. The place where my uncle lives is like that. I used to hide and play in them when I was little."

"Crawl space?" Darq echoed.

"Yeah." Jack leaned past him and looked up, then pointed. "See that square? It's a panel you push aside. I'd bet all the apartments have one."

Darq turned, grasped Nina's keys, and headed for her apartment. Once inside, he opened the closet door and looked up. The kid was right. The panel suddenly moved aside, and Darq's hand dropped to his gun.

Jack's head poked into view. "I was right. It's open up here. It'd be easy for someone to move around. There're stairs at the end, too," Jack's head disappeared. "Probably between floors....hey!"

Jack stared at Darq as he effortlessly pulled himself up through the crawlspace and looked around. "How did you climb up so easy? You must work out a lot."

"Yeah, kid." Darq peered down into his closet and then glanced around at the other small panels of the third floor. "Okay, back down into my apartment." Jack obeyed, while Darq slipped back down into Nina's. He made sure to lock the place up and then returned to his own place, where the kid waited.

Darq stepped back into the closet and turned around. He had a clear view across the living room, down the hall, into the bedroom and of the bed. It was the only way anyone could have seen Nina and him together. "Son of a bitch was standing right here. I should have seen him."

"Well, if you were doing what the letter said you were doing, you might not." Jack snickered. "Were you on the top or bottom?"

"Shut up, kid," Darq murmured, reaching up to push the panel back into place as he'd done inside Nina's closet. *A freak*. The intruder had been standing there when Darq came into the kitchen for water. He'd seen his face, and known he was different.

Sable Grey

"Can I call it in on your radio?" Jack asked.

"No." Darq shook his head. "I think I'm going to handle this one myself."

"I thought you were supposed to call for back up. That's what they always do on TV." Jack argued.

"I don't need back up," Darq stepped back and closed the door. "I mean, I have you."

"You mean, like a deputy?" Jack asked eagerly.

"That's right." Darq nodded.

"What are you gonna do?"

"Set a trap and catch the bastard." Darq heard the water of the shower shut off.

"When?"

"When darkness falls."

* * * * *

Darq stood outside apartment number 421 and waited. He heard someone moving around on the other side of the door. A moment later, it swung open. Harry Henson was a short man, with a round stomach covered only by a dingy undershirt. He peered out, his mustache twitching as he scrutinized Darq from inside the cracked door.

"What do you want, Officer?" His voice was soft, almost feminine. "I'm busy."

"Wondering if you've noticed anything unusual around here." Darq crossed his arms.

"No. I just moved in." He started to close the door, but the toe of Darq's shoe prevented it from closing.

"I hate moving. It's such a hassle."

"Yeah, whatever," Henson murmured.

"Mind if I come in and look around?" Darq didn't move his foot.

"Do you have a warrant?"

Darq laughed and shook his head. "You don't want to make this difficult, Mr. Henson. It would be a lot easier to just invite me in and let

Salacity

me look around a little. Otherwise, I'm going to have to break your nose and look around anyway." It was an empty threat but had worked on occasion when dealing with those who were being uncooperative.

"You can't threaten me. And if you don't have a warrant, you can't come in." Henson sneered.

"You're going to choose the hard way, aren't you?"

"If you touch me, I can sue you and the whole fucking police department." Henson frowned. "I have rights."

"You can—and you do, but you'll be doing both with a broken nose." Darq waited while Henson's gaze narrowed on him. "All right, have it your way."

He began to roll up his sleeve.

"No. Wait." Henson held up his hands and stepped back from the door. "Of course you can come in, Officer."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Come on in." Henson stepped back out of the way.

Darq stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"Wanna beer?"

"I don't drink." Darq's gaze swept the room. "You stay here alone?" Nina's apartment and both notes had been fingerprinted. Nothing had come up. Nothing. Darq wasn't going to sit around and wait for another note or worse—for the psycho to act on his impulses. He had to fish around for the culprit.

"Look, if this is about the woman, I didn't hurt her." Henson shifted when Darq stiffened and faced him. "I just like the thrill, you know? I wouldn't hurt anyone."

"It certainly sounded like you would." Darq watched his fleshy face flush.

"I wasn't hitting her or nothing. She...she hits me." Henson cleared his throat nervously. "I mean, I pay her and I know it's against the law and everything, but we didn't hurt anybody and I never even stuck it in her."

Darq relaxed. "A dominatrix, huh?" He walked toward the bedroom and glimpsed the small stand with leather straps attached to each corner.

Sable Grey

"Will you make me pay a big fine?"

"No." Darq shook his head. "As you say, you aren't hurting anyone."

Henson's breath released heavily. "Yeah, you know. We all have our differences. You...you won't tell anyone?"

"None of my business." Darq held out his hand. "Darq Dillion. I live downstairs. I like to meet the new tenants, know who is living around me. Doesn't seem like there's anything here that can do any harm."

Henson's relief was evident on his face. He clasped Darq's hand and shook it, until Darq's fingers closed over his, offering him a firm squeeze. "But if I hear of you turning the tables, deciding you want to hit women instead, I won't be happy."

"Me? I couldn't swat a fly." Henson laughed.

"Then we'll get along fine." Darq smiled and released the man's hand. "You'll tell me if you see anything strange around here?"

"Yeah, sure. Of course." Henson's head bobbed up and down.

"I'm one floor down, apartment 367." Darq opened the door of the apartment and stepped into the corridor. "Don't be a stranger."

"Stranger danger." Henson's laugh faded when Darq cut his eyes back at him. He waited until Henson closed the door, then frowned. The mustache made him suspicious. But Henson wasn't the man he was looking for; he'd given a bit of resistance when Darq had first shown up but had quickly rolled over. The person who'd written the note was more of a predator than this guy. Damn. He turned and headed to the elevator.

Inside, he punched his floor and waited, but the elevator didn't move. He punched the number again. Nothing. Suddenly, the elevator jerked. And above him, he heard the cables strain and groan.

"Fuck."

Something snapped, and the elevator began plunging downward.

Salacity

Chapter Five

With excitement that he might finally catch a glimpse of the person he was looking for, Darq jumped, opening the hatch at the top of the elevator. He grabbed its edge and pulled himself atop the dropping metal box. He grasped one of the undamaged cables and allowed it to carry him quickly back up the shaft.

Something hit his shoulder, causing him to grunt, then wrapped around him. "Die you bastard! The bitch is mine!" A low scratched voice hissed in his ear seconds before his fingers were peeled away from the cable and something shoved him downward. A pale white, snake-like face sneered at him from above as he fell.

Turning in the air, he saw the elevator crash at the bottom of the shaft. Then he landed atop it with a heavy thump. Pain ripped through him as he struggled to pull himself upright. Gritting his back teeth together, he lifted his hand and struck his shoulder, shouting as it popped back into its socket. Now he was really pissed.

"Cool." A voice echoed from below him and he looked down to find Jack peering up at him through the open hatch. Jack scrambled up as others started to peer into the damaged cab, using his body to shield Darq from those behind him, his expression reflecting awe rather than fear at the sight of Darq's change.

"He went that way." Jack pointed straight up.

Sable Grey

"Thanks, kid." Darq leapt to the wall of the elevator shaft and scaled to the top quickly. Swinging over the railing, his feet hit the metal walkway but he didn't slow down as he ran along it, his gaze searching the shadows for any movement. Suddenly something opened above him, allowing the afternoon sun to shine down into the dark area.

"Burn, bitch, burn!" That scratchy voice echoed around him as he squinted.

"Doesn't work like that, asshole. I'm not that kind of vampire." Darq heard a movement behind him and whirled. His fingers connected with something soft and rubbery. A moment later, he was struck with surprising force that propelled him backwards. He reached out, caught the railing of the walkway and used his momentum to swing his feet up and over it. He turned his head as the thing roared in anger and began barreling toward him.

Darq arched a brow. It looked like a thick yellow python with legs and arms. "Come on, lizard boy. Let's dance." The thing lunged forward, but Darq bent his legs and leapt into the air, flipping backwards onto the monster's back. It twisted, the sound of its fury piercing Darq's ears. Its long white tail whipped around and caught him across his chest, knocking him sideways into the wall.

That tail whipped around again and sliced at his face, leaving a sting. Darq growled deep in his throat and reached out to grab a hold of the tail. He scurried up its length, despite the way it flicked sharply back and forth, and climbed back onto the creature's smooth white back. Its head turned and the elongated pupils of its yellow eyes expanded.

"No pets allowed." Darq gritted his teeth, drew back his fist, and punched the creature between its two flaring nostrils. It bucked in response, catapulting Darq over its head into the stairs, where he rolled down several metal steps. He leapt up with a shout and whirled, but the entire space was empty. The thing had vanished without a trace.

* * * * *

Salacity

"Oh my God!" Nina's hand flew to her mouth when Darq stepped into his apartment. He imagined he looked battered to hell. "What happened?"

"Don't ask." Darq tossed his broken sunglasses onto the counter and grasped his shoulder, rotating it against the tight tension that still made the tendons itch.

"Should I take you to the hospital?" Nina rushed forward and reached up to examine the cut on his brow.

"No. I'll be fine." He stared into her concerned face.

"Harry Henson said he thought you were in the elevator when it failed." Her hands dropped to the rip in the side of his shirt, and she gasped when she found the tear was not to just the material of his uniform.

"I was—but it didn't fail. Someone isn't very happy with me." Darq glanced at Jack, who sat on one of the bar stools at the counter. The boy hadn't said a word.

"You think someone tried to....that they meant to kill you?" Nina shook her head and frowned. "You're lucky they didn't get their wish. I saw the elevator. I don't know how—"

Darq held up his hand. "How about some ice for my head? I banged the hell out of it."

"We should go to the hospital. You could have a concussion," Nina insisted.

"Just get me some ice." Darq waited until she pressed her lips together and turned to retrieve ice from his freezer, then leaned towards Jack. "How you doing, kid?"

"She's not telling you." Jack slanted his eyes at Nina when she made a sound of warning, obviously meant to silence him.

"Telling me what?" Darq's eyes narrowed.

"There's another note." Jack ignored Nina and pointed at her jacket. "She hid it there and wouldn't let me read it."

Darq reached for the jacket, but Nina dropped the ice on the floor, and rushed forward to stop him. He stared at her when she grasped the garment and tried to tug it from his hands.

Sable Grey

"It's been a really bad day, Nina. I'm not feeling overly patient right now." He jerked the jacket from her fingers and reached into the pocket. Unfolding the letter, he glanced up at her. "Ice, please." His gaze dropped back down to the note.

Ditch the kid and get rid of the cop, or they'll both be sorry they ever met you, bitch. You choose. You, or them. And then I'm going to make you bleed before I take my pleasure. I'm going to make you pay for giving me so much trouble. Meet me on the roof tonight. Alone. Or else.

Darq lifted his gaze to Nina as she brought him a dishcloth wrapped around several cubes of ice. "Why would you try to hide this from me?"

Her eyes flashed as she lifted the makeshift ice pack and roughly slapped it to his temple, causing the cut to throb.

"This place is crawling with police officers right now, and still someone managed to leave that note under your door." She met his gaze. "He's more dangerous than I thought. I will *not* be responsible for something happening—"

"You aren't going to the roof tonight." Darq interrupted.

"But if I don't, he'll come here." Nina glanced back at Jack, "Darq, please."

"No. If he makes a move on any of us, it will be because he came here and went through me. You don't know what you're dealing with." He warned. "It's bigger than just some crazed tenant."

"What do you mean?" She stared up at him as he held the ice to his head, and reached out when he started to turn. "Don't turn away from me, Darq Dillion. You tell me what's going on. I deserve to know. It's me he's after, remember?"

"Keep away from me." He'd said the words many times. They always worked, but this time they forked pain into his heart.

"Keep away?" she repeated. "What about last night? And the night before?"

Salacity

"I told you, Nina. I can't give you what you want. This...thing..." He held up the letter without looking back at her. "It's a monster, and you're in danger."

"Then we'll come up with something together."

"There is no together." Darq steeled himself against the tightening in his chest. "There's only you, and me. And you'll stay here with the boy."

"The hell I will." Nina's words brought Darq around to stare at her. She lifted her chin. "You might not have a heart, but I do. I won't just sit here like a coward. I won't."

"You don't understand."

"I understand that you're an asshole and don't seem to take into consideration that in the last few days, I've been threatened in my own goddamned home and the man—the police officer—who lives next door to me isn't good for anything but tightening a few cables and unlocking a door." She shook with anger. He allowed her to continue, knowing that her outburst was a combination of emotions, including fear.

"Did our time together mean nothing to you? Nothing at all?"

"I told you I could only give you sex."

"You offered Jack friendship. You can't even offer that to me?" She demanded.

"Jack isn't going to judge me for what I am."

"And what are you?" She raised her voice.

Darq moved like lightening, stopping when his face was only an inch away from hers. He knew she could see the whites of his eyes darken. "You don't want to know."

Fear, stark and unmistakable, filled her expression. She leapt backwards against the counter.

"Just keep away from me and let me do what I do." He turned and headed for the bedroom. Inside, he sat down in the chair and pressed the ice to his temple, but he could still hear Nina and Jack.

"Did you see that?" Nina's hushed voice and filled with shock and fear.

"I saw it earlier," Jack answered in an offhanded manner.

"What do you mean?"

Sable Grey

"I think he's a vampire," Jack said absently. "Or something like one."

"That's...that's not possible."

"He cares about you," Jack said. "Otherwise, he wouldn't push you away."

"Aren't you afraid? He's not...not human," she whispered. "He's a monster."

Darq winced.

"He's not a monster." Jack's voice suddenly hardened, and Darq heard him slip from the stool on which he'd been sitting. "I know a lot of people who are monsters. Monsters hurt people. They don't care about anybody. They hit you and make you sleep outside so they can hurt someone else for awhile."

"Darq doesn't do any of that. He helps people. He cares. He let me stay with him when I didn't have anywhere else to go. He—" Jack's voice cracked and he grew silent. "What do you know? You're just a stupid girl." He stomped off towards the bedroom.

Darq pointed to the door when Jack entered. "Go apologize to her."

"She's stupid." Jack raised his voice as if he wanted her to hear him. "She's not like us. She wants to ditch you, even after everything you've done for her."

"Go apologize," Darq repeated, but his heart went out to the boy. As he suspected, Jack had been hurt. He'd not been given much of a chance in his young life.

"No."

"What if something happens to her? Do you want that to be the last thing you said to her?" Darq said. "Go apologize to her."

Jack turned and looked out the door. "Only if you do."

Darq studied the boy, then inclined his head. He waited until he heard Jack's apology before rising and going back into the front room. Nina wouldn't look at him. He exhaled loudly and tossed the ice pack to the counter. Then he reached for her shoulders.

Her body went rigid when he first touched her, but he ignored her reaction, pulled her against his chest, and slipped his arms around her. "It

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meant something." He forced the words from his mouth. "More than I ever intended."

Nina bowed her head, and he could tell she was crying. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I didn't want you to...hurt you. I wanted you, and knew that if I told you the truth, you wouldn't stay with me."

"But you're..."

"I know." He winced. "I don't expect you to accept it. It's too much. Just know that it *was* more than just sex for me."

She said nothing, and Darq kissed the top of her head.

"The one who left the note—he's not a man either," he said.

Her head snapped up and she stared at him. "You mean he's...like you?"

"Not quite." Darq ran his thumb down her cheek. "But don't worry. I'll get him. It's what I do. I won't let him get to you."

"How?" Her gaze remained locked on him for several moments.

"Show me."

"No."

"Come on, Darq. Show me."

He released her abruptly. "I don't want you to see me like that."

"Then how am I supposed to wrap my head around it? How am I supposed to understand?" She rubbed at her temples.

"It's cool," Jack piped. "I saw him. I was like *whoa!*"

Nina crossed her arms, and Darq frowned.

"Fine, but you just remember that it was your idea," he warned, but she didn't move. He groaned as he closed his eyes and forced the pain upon himself. He heard her sharp intake of breath, but continued to change into what he truly was.

When he opened his eyes, she took a step backwards. "You have fangs."

"I don't drink blood," he told her in a low voice. "Daylight doesn't kill me. I have a reflection. A stake to the heart would probably kill me, but in the same way it would kill you." He cut his eyes to Jack, and the boy laughed.

"What about silver?"

Sable Grey

"No problem." He rolled his shoulder and felt the throbbing of his injury ease. He'd planned on locking himself in the bathroom until he could heal himself. At least now he wouldn't have to sit in pain.

"Crucifixes?"

"Nothing." He answered her without looking at Jack, afraid that if he didn't keep his eyes on her, she'd run away screaming at any moment.

"So—you just look different?" she finally asked with trembling lips.

"He can walk up walls. I saw him do it in the elevator shaft. It was awesome!" Jack said.

"I see well at night, and I hear things other people can't." Darq shrugged.

Nina moved forward slowly as if afraid he might suddenly leap at her. "This is why you never let me see your face when we..." she glanced at Jack. "When we were together."

"Yes."

Darq held his breath as she lifted her hand hesitantly to his face. "If you don't bite people, why do you have fangs?" Her palm caressed his cheek. He closed his eyes and turned his cheek into her warmth.

"They have two purposes. To mark my mate, and help me defend myself."

"You've never bitten me," Nina argued.

"It was supposed to only be sex." He opened his eyes, retracted his teeth, and allowed the pain to slip away. "I can only choose one mate."

"I see." Her hand fell away from his face. "Are there more like you?"

"Yes. Not many here in Salacity, but yes." He watched her expression closely, and could see she was still trying to come to terms with what he was telling her. She was taking it much better than others had in the past.

She exhaled loudly. "My head hurts. Yours seems to be better now."

"That's one perk of being a monster. I can heal myself." He watched her nod and turn away.

Salacity

"I need to lie down." She said nothing else as she retreated to the bedroom.

"Stupid girls," Jack murmured as he flopped onto the couch and reached for the remote.

* * * * *

It was midnight when Darq heard a bump inside the closet. Moving silently, he placed himself in front of the door to wait. Finally it pushed open, and the snakehead snapped up as if surprised to find him there.

"Hello, Boots." Darq lifted his gun and fired, but the snake was quick and dodged the bullet. Its tail whipped out. Darq leapt over the long white appendage and fired again, this time hitting the monster in the stomach.

The snake hurled forward, knocking Darq to the floor and sending the gun skittering across the linoleum. "Get back!" Darq yelled when Jack rushed forward.

The boy darted into the kitchenette instead, and the snake slithered atop Darq, as if it meant to suffocate him. Darq opened his mouth and dug his fangs into the creature, ripping its tail in half as it jerked off of him.

It turned around and shoved him, hard enough to hurl him back into the wall, and its other hand reached out to grasp Jack, curling the boy against its bleeding body. "Say goodnight, boy." It hissed, and Jack lifted the container of salt and threw the tiny grains into the snake's face. It screamed and released him.

He ran to Darq's side. "Snakes don't like salt."

Darq leapt forward and punched the snake with all of his might. The creature tumbled backwards, still clawing at its burning eyes. Darq jumped atop him, his breath heavy as he drew back his hand. Then his gaze lifted to Nina, who was watching from the doorway.

"Don't look," he told her, then shouted as the arm of the snake wrapped around his neck and lifted him into the air by his throat. He struggled to loosen the creature's hold and drag air into his lungs, but to no avail.

Sable Grey

It squeezed tighter. Darq could feel his face heating. And tighter still. Blackness swirled around him, but was interrupted by the sound of two gunshots. Instantly, his throat was released and he collapsed atop the unmoving creature. He coughed and took a deep breath, his attention drawn to the two holes ripped in the creature's head.

When he looked up, he found Nina standing there with hands grasping his duty weapon. She was shaking, her eyes wide.

All at once, Darq felt the body beneath him lower and begin to change. He stood up and stared down at the body forming on the floor, surprised at the familiar blue eyes staring lifelessly up at him.

They belonged to Maury Mercer.

* * * * *

Rich and the officers came to the apartment, listened Darq's story, went through procedure, and left, finally hours later taking Mercer's body with them. Maury Mercer had apparently become infatuated with Nina and entered the apartment with the intention of killing her, Jack, and Darq. Darq had heard the intruder and shot him. Case closed.

After the excitement settled, Darq sat in the darkness of his living room, listening to Jack's steady breathing. He glanced at the bedroom door. Nina had left the light on, as if she were now afraid of the dark. He hadn't wanted her to know the truth about him. It would have been easier if he could have kept things the way they were. Still, she probably would've found out sooner or later anyway.

She'd saved his life. That fact bothered him, since he'd been trying to save her. Yet it also empowered him—because she'd saved him even knowing what he was. It had taken remarkable strength for her to do that.

As dawn stretched across Salacity, he reached down and pulled the blanket over Jack's shoulder. The kid had looked at him with no judgment when he'd seen him in natural form. He'd accepted it as if it were something normal. Darq didn't find that kind of reaction and acceptance often.

Salacity

The sound of Nina waking caused him to straighten and edge forward so he could see her kicking the covers aside and sitting up. Slowly, he walked toward her, but she didn't notice him until he was standing in the doorway.

"Can't sleep?"

"On and off," she answered with a yawn. "Is Jack sleeping?"

"Like a baby." Darq watched her rise and reach for her clothes. His gaze slipped over her T-shirt and panties. She was beautiful.

"Do you hate me now?" His gaze settled on her face.

"You hurt me." She let the pants slip from her fingers and lowered herself to the edge of the bed. "I don't know what to feel now."

"It doesn't change anything," he said, although he knew it did. He eased toward her and sat down beside her on the bed.

"You're a vampire, Darq, when I thought you were just a cop." She shook her head. "Are you one of the good guys, or the bad guys?"

"It won't matter how I answer any of your questions. You're going to make your own assumptions." He started to stand, but she placed her hand on his arm.

"You wouldn't ever...physically harm me would you?"

Darq frowned. "I'm not answering that."

"Does that mean you might?" She stared at him.

"It means that you've gotta make up your own mind. Have I hurt you yet? And before you saw me like that, did you ever think I might?" He jerked to his feet. "That's why I offered my friendship to that kid. Because when he saw me, it changed none of his perceptions of my character. And that's the first time that's happened to me in a long, long time."

"It's too difficult to just—"

"Then I guess we have nothing left to discuss." He walked to the closet and found a shirt. He was about to slide it over his head when her palm rested against his back.

"I'm sorry."

He went still, waiting for her next move. When she said nothing else, he turned. He didn't want to hope. *Yes, I do*, he told himself. He wanted to hope, to pray, to plead with God that she wouldn't walk away

Sable Grey

from him like all the others had. He wanted her to be different. Special. Was that hoping for too much?

"There's something else that bothers me." She bit her lip.

"I'm not born of the devil or anything."

"Not that." She waved a hand. "It never occurred to me."

"Then what?"

"Why...wouldn't you choose me as your mate?"

He stared down at her. "What?"

"You said you only get to choose one mate. Why can't it be me? Am I not good enough because I'm not like you?"

Darq wanted to laugh. Not too long ago, she'd called him a monster and doubted his integrity. Now she was feeling low self-esteem because he hadn't bit her?

"It's why I didn't want a relationship with you. Because you *are* good enough for me." He lifted his hand to her cheek. "The kind of woman I've always seen myself with, when I would let that thought torment me."

"Then why didn't you bite me?"

"I wanted to, Nina." Darq chuckled. "But how much more hurt would you have been if I hadn't given you a choice? If I'd just made you mine and then said, 'oh, by the way, your husband is a vampire?'"

"Is that what it would mean? That we'd be married?"

"Yes." He nodded. "Mates for life."

"And you'd choose me?"

"I chose you the first night you stayed here."

She placed her palms on his shoulders and laid her head on his chest, and he felt his heart quicken in response to being so close to her.

"It won't be easy for me," she said.

He swallowed. *She was choosing him, too.*

"I don't have to make you my mate right away. You can have some time to get used to the idea first, if you want." He reached around her, closing his eyes when she allowed him to hold her. It meant she wasn't leaving.

"Will it hurt?" she whispered.

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"No." He chuckled. "Actually, it will feel good—and it won't make you a vampire. There won't be any transformation. No change. It's just a bite that signifies that you're mine." He nuzzled her cheek. "Two tiny marks will be left on your skin."

"On my neck?" she asked.

"No." He lifted his hand and ran a thumb over the nipple of her right breast. "I prefer to do it here." She shuddered against him, and a comfortable silence dragged between them.

"I like Jack." She said after a moment.

"I do too. From what I understand, he's in a situation where he's unwanted. His uncle acted as the kid is a burden to him."

"Maybe we could adopt him. He would never feel unwanted again." She tilted her head to look up at Darq.

"I'd already planned on it." From the other room he heard Jack give a little shout. He smiled. "We're gonna make one crazy-assed family."

"Yes, we will." She nodded against him and snuggled her closer. "But we will be a family...at least, by day."

Darq breathed out a long, slow, shuddering breath. She understood. He didn't even have to explain. She already knew he'd be hers whenever the sun was up, but he belonged to Salacity when darkness fell.

Sable Grey

... Chasing Shadows ...

Prologue

An old Grandfather looked at his grandson, who had come to him burdened with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice, and said...

"Let me tell you a story, grandson. I too, at times, have felt great hate for those who have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It's like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die.

"I have struggled with these feelings many times. It is as if there are two wolves inside me; one is good, and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all those around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way.

But...the other wolf...ah! The littlest thing will send him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all of the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing.

"Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside of me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit."

The boy looked intently into his grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?"

The grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one I feed."

- A Native American tale told many times around the Sacred Fire

Salacity

Chapter One

Year: 2000

The rumble of thunder and the soft slap of Dixie Daniels' shoes against the sidewalk carried her across the Salacity Junior College Campus to the scene of the crime.

"Agent Daniels, FBI," she said to the officer on scene, flashing her badge. He looked up at her, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"FBI?" He stiffened, signaling his unhappiness about the fact that she was there. *Of course he is*, Dixie thought. *I'm invading his territory*. She'd be pissed as well, if it were the other way around.

She offered him an apologetic smile. "I just go where I'm told," her gaze dropped to the badge on his uniform shirt. "Officer Dillion. I do my job, get paid, go home, and pay my bills." It was a routine familiar to her and it usually worked, but Officer Dillion wasn't softening. She doubted he had a soft side to show her even if he could. When she'd first approached him, she'd immediately sensed his determination and drive...and his closeness to the murder. That alone told her that this was another strangling, and that this cop had already invested hours trying to find the killer himself. Either that or, he knew the victim.

He regarded her silently, so she switched gears. "They only sent me. I'm a special kind of agent, and I don't interfere."

Sable Grey

"No?" He grunted and shook his head, as if he wasn't buying anything she said. "So you aren't about to meddle in this case?"

Fine. He could have it his way. She met his distrustful gaze and didn't flinch. "This is the fourth murder on this campus in two months, Officer Dillion. I can't see how anything I do here will make whatever you've already done any worse. I'm to do my job and report back to my supervisor. You can either cooperate and be in on anything I find, or you can get the fuck out of my way. Either way, my bills will get paid."

Again his gaze narrowed, but his regard for her shifted to make way for a tiny flicker of respect. He took a deep breath and glanced around.

She waited, watching the lights of the patrol cars behind them flicker blue across his strong features. Finally he exhaled loudly and turned, waving for her to follow him.

"The victim is Marianne Moore. She's...she *was*...a student here. She was on her way to the girls' dormitory when it happened, after having been last seen by her boyfriend around midnight. She was dragged from the sidewalk, strangled, and cut, just like the other three."

Dixie stopped walking and focused on his wide back.

His stride slowed. He turned around and looked back at her.

"Don't you want to see the body?"

Dixie nodded and forced her legs to start moving again. Five years of seeing dead bodies, and she could never get used to it. Even from several feet away, she could smell death. The odor knotted her stomach and dried her mouth. It would take her hours to get away from that smell, it stayed with her, in her memory, long after she left a crime scene.

As they approached, she brought her hand to her mouth. Marianne Moore looked to be about twenty. She was slim, with a petite frame. Easy to overpower. Her blouse had been ripped open, and obscene dark cuts marred the lifeless pale skin of her breasts and upper body. Bile rose into Dixie's throat and she turned away, gulping air into her lungs.

"Are you okay?" Concern edged Officer Dillion's voice.

She forced a nod and met his eyes. "Who found her?"

Salacity

"A professor made the call to the police. He found her on his way back to his apartment around four a.m." He walked to her side. "Is this your first murder case?"

Dixie imagined she looked wet behind the ears and green in the face. She took another breath of air, but only succeeded in taking the scent deeper. Then to her horror, the image of her mother's own twisted body flickered in her mind. *No. No. No.* She struggled to push that image aside before her hands started to shake.

"Just give me a minute," she murmured. She'd only been nine years old that night, and had sensed the intruder's presence long before his silhouette moved past her doorway. She'd been paralyzed with fear. Couldn't move, couldn't breathe. She squeezed her eyes closed. And she'd heard her mother's door open.

Her father was working late again. He wouldn't be home until after midnight. And when he did finally make it home, he found her curled up against her mother's lifeless body. He'd shouted and rushed forward, reaching for both of them, as horror enveloped his expression and Dixie's senses.

The memory suddenly shifted to empty space. "*Chase them away,*" a voice whispered in her ear. Chase what away? She frowned.

"The shadows."

Dixie's eyes flew open and her gaze swung to Officer Dillion, who stood on the sidewalk, watching her. She swallowed. "Did you just say something?"

"No, I was giving you a minute." His cautious expression darkened. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes," she said, looking around. Someone had definitely reached out to her just now. Someone close who...had similar gifts. *Someone like her.*

"Who is that?" she asked, spotting a woman with a mop of unruly curls leaning against the hood of one of the patrol cars. Dixie studied the woman, whose features reminded her of Bette Midler.

"Ginger Gregory. She teaches journalism."

"Is she the one who found the girl's body?"

"No. Professor Shadow made that call. That's him beside her."

Sable Grey

Dixie's gaze shifted to the tall, lean man standing beside the woman. She blinked. Why had she not seen him first? *Shadow*, she repeated mentally, watching as he peered down at the clipboard one of the officers presented to him through a pair of wire rimmed glasses perched on the bridge of his straight nose. His hair was inky black, cut short, with gray frosting marking each temple. His cheekbones rode high on his face, creating a long, narrow illusion that contrasted with his thick black brow. Though she couldn't see his eyes, his long, dark lashes softened his otherwise sharp features.

"Ginger's just a busy body, and wouldn't leave once she got here," Dillion growled. "Some of the other officers are scared of her. I was about to remove her myself when you walked up."

"Is she's a friend of Shadow's?"

"I don't know. I've only met him once at the museum, and he didn't strike me as a man who keeps a lot of people around him." Dillion supplied. "His name is Sylver Shadow. He teaches psychology and ancient mythology."

"You made that name up," she said, a laugh tumbling from her lips.

"No, I didn't. And believe me, his name isn't all that's weird about him." He continued, "About two years ago, his wife ran out on him."

"People split up all the time." She dragged her gaze away from the professor and faced Dillion. "There's nothing weird about that."

"It was their wedding night—and she ran out on him in the middle of it and checked herself into a mental hospital." Dillion crossed his arms. "Why did the FBI send out a new agent? One with a weak stomach?"

"They didn't. They sent one who would find out what they needed to know."

He just stood there looking at her, and Dixie sighed.

"I've been with the Bureau for five years, and I've worked many murder cases. I just never get used to it."

"You could just sit back and let me do all the work."

She winced. "Don't sound so hopeful." She glanced back at Marianne's body. "Okay, I think I'm ready. Let's try this again." She lifted

Salacity

her chin, forced herself to move, and felt a tickle of respect seeping around the hard edges of Dillion's energy.

"If my wife had run out on me when we got married, I would have been the one to check into a mental hospital," Dillion said as they halted in front of the body. "I'd be crazy without her."

Dixie knew he was only trying to distract her, to head off any nausea she might feel. Maybe she was wrong about Officer Dillion. He did have a softer side. It just wasn't the kind of soft to which she was accustomed.

Dixie gazed down at Marianne's body. "I didn't picture you as having a wife."

"Were you hoping I was single?" There was a hint of humor in his tone.

"Don't flatter yourself," she said.

His answering grunt sounded almost like a laugh.

Dixie looked up. "Can you leave me alone with her for a few minutes?"

She knew what had to be done. Officer Dillion had a strong presence, and she didn't want him interfering. *Darq Dillion*. The name suddenly popped into her head. No way. She nearly laughed. Did everyone around here have strange names?

"You wanna be alone with her?" The surprise in his voice made her blink away her amusement.

"I don't need much time to do what needs to be done."

"Why can't you do it with me here?" He sounded suspicious.

"Because you're intimidating. You do it on purpose, and I need peace. Go stand over there." She waved toward a tree. "Just be quiet and keep still." She felt him bristle and almost laughed. He probably wasn't used to taking orders. She wondered if the police chief had a hard time controlling him.

After some hesitation, he moved away. She could still feel his gaze when he stopped a few feet away, but at least now there was enough distance between them that she could concentrate. She knelt down and closed her eyes. Blocking out the noise around her, she focused all her

Sable Grey

energy on the body. Its scent reached out to her, but she pushed it aside as well. And when she opened herself up, it came quickly.

The light over the sidewalk winked out as Mari walked quickly toward the dorm. She shouldn't have stayed so late at Rob's. Three murders—and here she was out walking after midnight. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Her thoughts scattered when she heard soft steps behind her. She turned and smiled, releasing a breath. "Thank God. I was about to scare myself silly."

Then her smile faded and her eyes widened, first with disbelief, and then horror.

"You?" Her throat closed up. She shook her head, and began to back away, sucking the breath she'd just released back into her lungs as she prepared to scream.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

The images scattered and Dixie cursed. Someone was moving toward her. She opened her eyes, and through their blurry vision, saw Officer Dillion approaching. Yet the connection wasn't broken. Something hit her in the stomach, and then her head snapped backward, cracking against the sidewalk. Hard fingers wrapped around her neck, choking off her breath. She reached up, knowing she wouldn't find anyone's hands there—because she was feeling what Marianne had felt in during her last terrifying moments.

Those hands held her, and she felt the chilly concrete beneath her back. Then grass, cooling the burn left by being dragged across the sidewalk. Crushing pressure closed her throat. Hot breath hit her face. Dixie couldn't move.

Gradually, Darq moved closer, until she could barely differentiate between him and the perp. He put his hands on her shoulders, and she couldn't really feel them. She was too deep into the vision.

Instead, she felt pain slice across her breasts and a low growl vibrated in her ear, the sounding more animalistic than human. A strange satisfaction leached from her attacker as another sliver of pain lanced across her chest. Another. And another.

Salacity

Dixie felt the pressure applied to Marianne's neck strangling her own, and her heart pounded. She couldn't breathe. Another slicing pain stunned her. Pain entered in her lungs as she tried to draw a breath despite the fingers cutting off her air.

Let go. A voice came from nowhere. *Let go of it.*

"I can't," she croaked.

Let go and chase it away.

"I need to—" Dixie closed her eyes. She only needed one glimpse of the attacker. Just one. But darkness was swirling around her. Not me, she corrected herself, Marianne. *Marianne is dying.*

Sylver watched the blonde as the cop he recognized as Officer Darq Dillion took her by the shoulders. She'd closed her eyes and drifted away somewhere. Her breathing had changed. She was slipping. He took a few steps toward them, and saw her whole body still. He strode forward.

"Jesus Christ." The officer gave her a hard shake. "Agent Daniels. Dixie."

Her breath caught, and then quickened. Good. At least Darq's energy was strong enough to reach her. When Sylver approached, Dillion glanced up at him.

"Let me help her," he said.

Dillion reluctantly released Dixie, rose, and stepped back. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's letting herself get sucked in." Sylver knelt and took her shoulders as Darq had done. "Dixie, it's time for you to let go. She's dead. Leave her be."

"I can't...I have to...just one look..." Her words were barely a whisper. Her entire body had grown tense and jerked as if she were taking blows.

"I said *let it go*." He forced command into his voice and sought her with his mind, finding her easily and giving her a shake. Instantly she blinked, her eyes clearing before brimming with tears.

"I didn't get to see...I didn't see. I have to try again...before it's too late..." She tried to pull free, but Sylver wouldn't release her. Not yet.

"It's enough."

Tears spilled down her cheeks. "No!" she said fiercely.

Sable Grey

He frowned and released her, remaining by her side as she turned toward Marianne. After a few moments, she bowed her head.

"It's gone." She wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Damn it, I was so close!" Sylver said nothing as she cast her gaze at Marianne. Slowly her complexion paled and after a moment, she lifted her hand to her mouth.

"She's going to be sick," he told Darq. He pulled Dixie to her feet and turned her away from Marianne. She pulled away from him and took a few more steps before doubling over.

"What the hell just happened?" Darq Dillion stared pointedly at him, as if waiting for an answer.

"She has gifts...psychic gifts...that allow her to connect to a crime." Sylver saw disbelief flicker in Dillion's eyes. "It allows her to feel, see, and smell whatever the victim suffered. She was trying to get a look at the killer."

"It looked more like she was having a seizure."

"She might have been. If I felt like I was dying, I might have a seizure, too." Sylver looked back at Dixie and offered her a handkerchief from his pocket. She took it and wiped her mouth.

"You held on too long. Don't you realize that's dangerous?" He watched her take a couple of shaky breaths before she turned, her gaze resting on Darq.

"I thought I told you I needed peace." She took another deep breath. "I told you to keep away."

"Excuse me—" Darq began, but she interrupted.

"Why would you allow this man, a possible suspect, to interfere with me? It would've only taken a few minutes if you'd just let me do what I was sent here to do."

"And just what exactly the fuck do you think you were doing?" Darq frowned, clearly not liking how she was speaking to him.

"Exactly *what the fuck* I get paid to do. I told you—if you can't cooperate, then stay out of my way."

Darq's jaw clenched and he turned stiffly to stride away. She watched him go. Then she gathered her thoughts and tried to compose herself.

Salacity

Sylver turned as well, but when she addressed him, he stopped.

"Professor Shadow." He turned to find her gaze locked on him.

"How did you know what I was doing?"

"I teach psychology. I know what people are capable of doing." He watched her regard him quietly for several minutes before she shook her head.

"I felt *you*. You were in my mind." She looked uneasy. "More than once."

Sylver knew she expected an explanation, but he wasn't going to give her one. "I don't know what you're talking about. Excuse me." He turned and headed away from her, glancing at Darq, who was ignoring Ginger's curses as he escorted her away from the scene. Sylver didn't stop. They had everything they needed from him. He was tired and in need of a strong drink.

Agent Dixie Daniels. He said her name silently as he headed for his apartment in the Jefferson building on campus. He'd noticed her the moment she walked onto the scene. Blonde hair, large blue eyes, a small upturned nose, full pink lips and a body that screamed for attention. But that was his observation after the fact and not what had first drawn his attention. He'd *felt* her, and that hadn't happened in a very long time.

He'd felt her reach out, her energy desperate and afraid, despite his walls. And then her energy had shifted to that of a child, as if she'd lost herself in memories. He'd been unable to ignore the child's needs and only glimpsed what she recalled as he helped her away from it.

It had been a mistake. He'd only met Darq Dillion briefly once before, but it had been long enough to conclude that he wasn't stupid—or only what he presented himself to be. Darq had known that about Sylver as well.

He frowned as he walked up the steps of the Jefferson building, turning to look at Dixie as the first drops of rain began to fall. She looked lost and confused.

"Apartment nine," he said. "I'm having a drink. You might need one, too."

Her cheeks colored with embarrassment at being caught following him. Surely she'd known he knew she was there. Her energy was

Sable Grey

unreserved. He could feel her emotions even now. She was like an open book.

She fought with herself—and had been curious about him, yet she'd been sent to solve a murder investigation. Anger welled inside him again. Anger, mixed with guilt, loss, and failure.

"You can do nothing more out here but get drenched. I don't think you were sent to hang around the body for very long anyway." He softened his voice slightly and she glanced back at the crime scene before nodding and stepping forward.

* * * * *

Sylver Shadow's apartment was a cozy collage of books, antiques, and worn furniture. It was clean, yet cluttered—in a way that, strangely enough, made Dixie feel comfortable and secure. She stood in the doorway as he headed into the tiny kitchenette and pulled two glasses a cabinet.

She watched him unscrew a beveled glass container of bourbon. "You were in my head."

"And now you are in my home." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Close the door, please. There are enough rumors floating around about me that I don't need to add 'alcoholic' to them."

Dixie nervously tucked her hair behind her ear. She wasn't sure she wanted to be alone with him. She couldn't read him. For all she knew, he could be the killer. Her mind found Marianne's body again, and she shivered.

"Don't think about her." Sylver faced Dixie and held out one of the filled glasses. "Have a drink, then chase it with another one. You can be suspicious of me once you are inside and the door is closed."

He touched her shoulder, nudging her farther into the room so he could reach behind her and close the door. She heard the latch engage and waited tensely.

"Relax." He frowned and stepped past her. "I'm not going to pounce on you."

Salacity

"How in hell do you know what I'm thinking?" Her voice shook, despite her attempts to force strength into her words.

"I don't." He walked to the window across the room and looked out toward the crime scene. "I know what you are feeling. It's your energy. You're beating the shit out of me with it." He turned up the glass and took three long swallows.

Dixie frowned. He knew her feelings? Like she knew other people's feelings? It was possible. She'd heard of others who could do it, too. But he'd done more.

"You were in my head," she repeated.

"You gave me little choice." He looked back at her. "You were losing yourself and becoming desperate. What's a man supposed to do when someone is begging for help?"

"I needed no help."

"Then perhaps I did it to relieve my own worries," he murmured, turning back to the window. Another few swallows, and his glass was almost empty.

She looked down at her own glass, then took a sip. It was strong and warmed her throat. She took another. "The fact that you can do it makes you dangerous."

"That's not what makes me dangerous." He sighed heavily. "She was only twenty years old."

Dixie nodded, even though he wasn't looking at her. He finally turned from the window and walked over to one of the chairs. She nearly smiled. She'd done the same thing before to put someone at ease. Sit, and let them stand, to put themselves above you in a position of power. Made people feel more comfortable.

"Young *and* pretty." Dixie lifted her drink, watching him over the rim of her glass.

"I don't have affairs with my students if that is what you are fishing for." He stared down into his glass. "I don't kill them, either."

Dixie believed him. She couldn't explain why, since she could read nothing but the expressions he allowed her to see. "Still, you were the one who found her. There are no classes on Saturday, yet you were up early.

Sable Grey

Very early." She waited, but he said nothing. So she tried another question. "Is there security on campus?"

"Tripled since Lana—" he winced, and finally showed a flicker of emotion. Lana Leach had been murdered before Marianne. Dixie suddenly felt like kicking herself. It was sadness she read in him. Deep sadness, like the emotion fueling Darq Dillion's hard determination. Darq cared about victims in a way that couldn't bring harm.

"I don't do well with other people around." He seemed suddenly uneasy with exposing too much to her, and waved his hand quickly. "And I like to take walks. So I do it early, before everyone rouses. I was coming back to my apartment when I saw her."

Dixie moved to the loveseat. "May I sit?" He inclined his head, lifting his gaze to watch her ease onto the cushions. "I can't decide if I'm pissed off at you or curious about how you're capable of reading people."

"The same way you're capable of seeing a death after it's been committed, I would imagine." He finished off his drink, rose, and poured himself another glass. "The human mind is an amazing organ."

She stared at him. He'd been *inside her mind*. It was an intrusion, but she knew he'd meant to help her. And he had. Twice he'd pulled her back when she was too weak to do it herself. She studied the angles of his face. He was a stranger, yet he felt familiar...secure. He'd touched the most intimate part of her. Had he seen what she'd seen? Felt the things she'd felt? She remembered the choking fingers around her throat, how they'd squeezed the breath from her. She'd been terrified.

"You can use my shower if you need to. This storm isn't letting up anytime soon. I'm certain I can find something of mine for you to wear." He glanced at her and his gaze dropped to her breasts, making her feel suddenly even more exposed.

"What are you looking at?" she snapped.

His eyes flicked up to hers. Something glittered behind them. "You have blood on your blouse."

Dixie looked down to find he spoke the truth. Where had it come from? She'd not touched Marianne.

"You had a nose bleed," Sylver said. "Right before I...came in."

Salacity

"It happens." She looked up at him. She'd thought he was checking her out. Her cheeks heated. He was only being kind—in a distant, reserved sort of way.

"Take a shower. It'll make you feel better." He was pushy, but Dixie knew he was right. She had to wash off the smell of death if she wanted to think straight. She set the glass aside.

"Through that door to the left. There are clean towels on the rack." He indicated the door across the room. Dixie stepped into Sylver's bedroom and closed the door behind her, feeling a bit awkward at being in his personal space. Still, she did a quick sweep of the room. A rather large bed took up most of the floor. Other furniture included an umbrella stand, a small dresser, a cedar chest at the foot of his bed, and a small desk shoved into the far corner.

It was cramped and simple. But looking at the flat top screen computer and expensive bedding, Dixie decided he had a streak of frivolity. Perhaps because he was single, he chose to live in the tiny apartment even though he had the means to live in a larger home.

Though she normally wouldn't shower in a stranger's home, she decided to trust her instincts about Sylver Shadow. She opened the bathroom to find it equally small. There was no tub, and just enough space for her to walk past the sink and toilet to the large shower. She closed the door and began removing her clothes. Like always after a connection, she felt a bit numb, as if she were moving through a cloud. She stared blankly at her reflection in the mirror over the sink.

She barely knew herself anymore. All she did was work. Once the FBI had deemed her worthy, they sent her to every case with no leads. Dixie reached into the shower to turn on the water. She shouldn't complain. They paid her well. And finally she was regarded with some respect for what she did, rather than as just some kook psychic.

She wasn't a psychic. She couldn't foresee the future—she could only connect to the past. And she was sensitive to emotions. She couldn't count the number of times she'd been placed in a room with a criminal while an agent questioned him. Within an hour, if the suspect was guilty, his emotions would give him away.

Sable Grey

That had been her life for the last five years. It was lonely, leaving her little time to do anything else. *Very lonely*, she amended as she stepped beneath the spray of water. Even Darq Dillion, who'd radiated dedication to his job which had made her feel an instant bond with him, had a life when he was off duty. A wife. And probably kids, she surmised. He wasn't bad to look at, either.

Sylver Shadow had no wife. But his face was interesting enough to hold someone's attention for hours, Dixie decided as she turned her face into the warmth. She ran her fingers over her hair and turned, to allow the water's steady rhythm to massage her back. Sylver had once had a wife. She remembered Darq offering that vague detail. Dixie wondered why the woman had left him like she had, on their wedding night.

Maybe she'd discovered Sylver's gifts. Some people didn't know how to deal with such things. He didn't strike Dixie as the kind of man who'd be violent or cruel to a woman. In fact, she was certain he would be gentle. Closing her eyes, she traced his image from memory. He'd moved with cat-like grace when she'd followed him, his every step filled with confidence and self-assurance. He knew who he was and what he was capable of doing.

She imagined he was no different with a woman. As she reached for the soap, she imagined those long fingers brushing across her shoulder. Those thick dark lashes would lower, to veil those silvery blue eyes while he murmured gentle words against her skin.

Dixie's body ripened, warmed, and she welcomed the sensations. Anything was better than numbness. Now, imagining of Sylver's touch, she began to break away from her connection with Marianne's death completely, pumping life back into her veins.

Rolling the almond scented soap between her fingers, she smiled at its sweet fragrance. She brought it against her skin, rubbing feeling into her limbs as she created lather on her body. The scent filled the shower stall and chased away the hint of death still lingering in her nose. This is how he smelled, she thought as she swept the bar over her breasts. Of almonds and something spicy, she remembered.

Salacity

Her ears suddenly found the melody of a violin's haunting strings over the rhythm of water, the sound echoing from the front room and weeping softly against an orchestra's background music. She grew still for a moment before resuming her shower. So...he played the violin. Dixie smiled. She'd always wished she'd learned to play a musical instrument.

Running her hands down the length of her legs, she moved with the rise and fall of the melody. Her fingers moved up her thigh and over her sex, and she hesitated. She shouldn't. But it would help relieve the stress of the earlier connection. She knew it would. Could she even do it? In his home? Excitement, mixed with a little shame over her desire, filled her.

The violin suddenly quieted and she waited, holding her breath for several moments before Sylver began playing again. This time, the melody was slow and bluesy. She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes, imagining his long fingers drawing the bow across the strings. Her fingers moved in the same rhythm, swaying back and forth against her clit.

Recalling his masculine scent, Dixie breathed it deep into her lungs. It'd been so long since she'd had a man hold her. She hummed softly at the tension born beneath her fingertips. Warm shivers traveled up her arms, over her shoulders, and around the back of her neck. When the melody he was playing pitched slightly and its tempo quickened, she stayed with it, following every rise and drop.

Would he make love to a woman in the same manner? Controlled and practiced? Would his fingers move over her as they moved over his instrument now? Her breathing came in shallow pants as she imagined *his* hands, *his* mouth carrying her toward release.

Her free hand moved up to her breast and she squeezed gently, a soft moan pushing past her lips. Would he be so hard to read if he were atop her? Or would those walls he'd erected around himself crumble?

Tension knotted in the pit of her belly and her legs started to shake. She was close, so close. She sucked the steam in and out of her lungs as the violin danced wildly in the other room. It was too much. Her body tensed and she closed her throat around the cry trying to push free with the explosion of pleasure erupting from within her.

Sable Grey

Her climax was lightening quick, scattering her thoughts for only a moment. Then warmth shook through her limbs and she released a heavy breath. Good lord, she'd actually done it. In a stranger's bathroom. She didn't know whether to feel satisfied or disgusted with herself. At least the numbness was gone and she was whole again. Quickly, she rinsed herself off and turned off the water.

Drying off and wrapping the towel around herself, she stepped into the bedroom and saw that no change of clothes had been pulled out for her. Sylver was still playing the violin in the other room. Carefully she pushed open the door and peeked out, her breath catching in her throat.

Salacity

Chapter Two

Sylver Shadow's entire body moved with the wild melody and his dark hair had fallen across his brow. He looked erotically sinister as his nose flared and his thick lashes lowered. The violin and bow seemed connected to him as he played. Her still sensitive sex tingled as she gazed at him. She took a step forward, and the music abruptly ended.

Sylver whirled and pointed the end of the bow at her.

"No. Don't take another step." Desperation vibrated in his choked words. His thick lashes lifted and revealed intense torture. "I couldn't bear it if you did."

"I didn't mean to interrupt you," she said. "I only need a change of clothes."

His chest rose and fell and the silvery depths of his gaze slid over her, making her feel as if she had no towel wrapped around her. "In the dresser, second drawer." He set the violin and bow aside without taking his gaze off her.

He almost looked mad, she decided, but guessed that was to be expected from any kind of artist. He'd been playing as if obsessed. "Please, don't stop. I truly didn't mean to interrupt you. It was beautiful."

The sound that shook his throat was half groan/half growl, a sound of pure emotion. She tried to push past the wall hiding his energy. What the hell was wrong with him?

Sable Grey

"Don't try it, Dixie Daniels. I've just about got myself rooted enough so that I won't leap across this room at you. But if you come probing around, I can't promise I'll have the strength to keep still."

She stared at him. Maybe he *was* insane. "I don't know what you mean." There was a look of wildness in his eyes and Dixie couldn't deny that she half curious, half aroused. He leaned forward as if about to step toward her, then turned abruptly and reached for the bottle of bourbon left on the table next to the window. He turned the bottle bottom up. Her gaze dropped to his throat he took several long swallows.

He finally shifted it upright and closed his eyes. "Christ, you are killing me,"

"I am?"

His lids flicked open to meet her gaze and she sensed the shift immediately. He'd lowered a wall. Fierce emotion rushed at her, hit her hard. Hot, thick, lust. It stole her breath and her eyes widened with the realization that he'd known exactly what she was doing in his bathroom. Her cheeks flamed. Of course he did. That's how the music had matched her flight of pleasure.

"Oh God," she croaked, taking several steps forward. "I—I'm sorry. I just needed something to—sometimes it helps after I've—"

"I know," he ground out. "But you should know that I want to pounce on you now. So please, for your own sake, Agent Daniels, go put some goddamned clothes on."

Dixie was surprised at the excitement twisting inside her. She'd evoked desire within him; dark, aching desire that he had to fight against. She felt a rush of power that quickened her pulse.

"Then you were playing for me?" She saw his jaw clench and almost smiled. She liked the idea of him wanting her so badly. It was something she was unaccustomed to and made her feel heady and drunk with lust and a bit of harmless power.

"Yes."

"You were trying to help me again?"

"Yes."

Salacity

"And now you're standing there miserable, because you did. I could have handled it myself, you know." She failed terribly at not grinning when he looked at her. His eyes glittered slightly.

"You would have been nervous, maybe too afraid to let go. The music soothed you, didn't it?"

She nodded, and he eased toward her in slow deliberate steps. Her heart thumped. *No, Dixie. You're on assignment.* Then he locked his gaze on her, and she suddenly didn't give a fuck about her job.

"I'm not sure how I feel about your being part of something so intimate," she said. He halted in front of her, and she forced herself to breathe. "I don't know anything about you...except—" Her gaze darted around the room at the books. "That you have a fascination with wolves."

"Do you need to know any more than that?"

"I'm not sure. You keep yourself hidden. I'm used to being able to read people."

"That makes me unique." His lips lifted slightly before he cocked his head. "Wolves are fascinating creatures. Do you know that when they court, the male can smell the female's scent and tell if she's ready to mate?" His deep voice sent erotic vibrations through Dixie's veins.

She stared at him as he leaned forward, his aftershave drifting around her. His fingers lifted to her elbow, and his faint touch shocked Dixie. Sylver must have felt it, too. He hesitated, intense gaze rising to her face, searching as if he were afraid she would back away. When she didn't move, his lashes lowered, veiling his eyes once again, and he nuzzled her throat.

His heat enveloped her and his energy, the little he was allowing her to feel, was so intense it made her dizzy. He inhaled deeply and then exhaled, the sweep of air against her skin making chills race up her spine. It was a basic and primitive thing for him to do, and would have been absurd if he hadn't groaned in the back of his throat.

She felt rooted, paralyzed, when he breathed her in again. He was barely touching her. But suddenly it felt as if he *owned* her. The rush of his breath brought her nipples straining against the towel she still had gripped tightly around her.

"Well?" Her voice shook when he leaned away. "How do I smell?"

Sable Grey

"Ready," he murmured. She licked her lips, and his gaze dropped to her mouth. Another blast of desire hit her, bringing an ache deep into her core.

"You were right to hide your emotions before," she whispered, bringing his gaze back up to hers. "If I'd felt your intensity before I would have ripped your clothes off on sight." His brow shot up in surprise and a sudden chuckle rolled from his chest.

"You hide nothing. How do you think I feel?" He reached up and ran the back of his finger along her cheek.

"You should know that I have—" she winced. "I can't enjoy sex."

His lips slanted, "No?"

"I mean, I enjoy this, how you are making me feel. But I've..." she searched for the words that wouldn't ruin the mood.

"Don't do that. You needn't be delicate or choose words with me." His finger slid down her the side of her face, around her jaw, to her throat. "Not when I've already given in to you."

"Given in to *me*?" She almost laughed. He said it as if she were the one in control.

"I'm only moments from attacking you, Agent Daniels. I didn't get like that on my own." He lowered his gaze and brushed hand along her collarbone. "Now you tell me you won't enjoy it. I think you're trying to strip me of what little control I've managed to hold on to."

"I only mean to explain that I don't have...that I don't *find* pleasure." She chewed her lip, closing her eyes when his fingers closed over hers and tugged gently, urging her to release the towel. She loosened her fingers and the fabric fell from between them.

"You've been raped."

She opened her eyes and his gaze dared up to her face. Her entire body stiffened.

"Yes." Dixie finally answered. "No. Not me. A case I was assigned. The girl had been raped."

"And you lived through it when you connected with her." Sylver nodded.

"How did you know? Did you read my thoughts?"

Salacity

"No. It's just a guess." He seemed unaffected by the revelation. "I can't promise I'll be gentle, but I can promise you will enjoy it."

"No." She winced again. "I won't."

"Tonight, you will. You might not know much about me, but you can take it to the bank that I'm a man of my word." His thumb grazed over her nipple and she sucked in her breath. "Do you know that you have perfect breasts?"

She laughed nervously and looked down at his long fingers as he ran the backs of them over the peaks of her breasts. "No."

"They are." Looking like a mischievous boy, he slanted a gaze at her face. "Shall I show you?"

She swallowed. This was it. He was giving her one last chance to back out. But she didn't want to. Even if she didn't climax, she would enjoy having a man's body touching hers. So slowly, she nodded.

"Sit." He nodded at the chair. For minute she just looked at it, and then she slid down onto the cushioned seat. "Good. Now, rest your hands behind your head," he said. She didn't mean to giggle, but he didn't seem offended with her amusement. When she did it, he smiled, his gaze never leaving her breasts.

"Now," he said as he knelt in front of her and parted her knees. His fingers touched her sides, slid over her ribs, and then he splayed them over her breasts. "The perfect size." Gently his palms slid to the side so his thumbs ran across her nipples. He leaned closer and opened his mouth. She watched her right nipple disappear between his lips.

When he sucked, she arched, inhaling sharply at the warm sensation that veined from beneath his lips. His tongue swirled once before his teeth raked gently over the tip. His lips glistened when he leaned back.

"The perfect response and the perfect color." His voice was thick, strained. "Like strawberries and cream." He turned and gave equal attention to her left breast. When he leaned away again, Dixie released a breath she hadn't realized was caught in her chest.

"You're a breast man."

"I'm an *everything* man," he corrected. "Breasts, legs, ass, lips, cunt, ears, hair..." His voice trailed off and he leaned down to lick her navel.

Sable Grey

She chuckled but the sound choked in her throat when his hand slid against her sex, causing that ache to flare to life again.

She wanted him inside her. She wanted that comfort. The feeling of fullness. That intimacy and contact. She thought of the violin bow drawing back and forth on the strings. She wanted to hear that kind of music inside...

"You are making it impossible for me to go slow." His teeth grazed the tender skin beneath her breast.

"Then don't," she whispered.

His head snapped up and his blue eyes searched hers. Lightening flickered outside, and she cried out with surprise when he grasped her arms and hauled her to the floor. Instantly he was atop her, pressing his hips against hers so she could feel his erection through his slacks.

"Thank you." His lips covered hers and he kissed her deeply, hot waves filling her as his tongue danced around hers. He rose above her and freed himself from his pants, then nudged her sex.

It came to her fast, the image of the rapist above her. She turned her head, preparing to distance herself, but Sylver grasped her chin and forced her to look at him.

"Stay with me."

"You don't understand."

"Let it go." His fingers tightened and his gaze bored into hers. Suddenly the rapist was gone. And in her mind the scene changed, to a path in a thick wooded area. Beside it, a brook gurgled. *You are safe here. These are my woods. You come here whenever you feel the need.* She did feel safe, she realized, and blinked to stare up at him. He'd come into her head again.

His lips found hers and his cock pressed against her. Instantly she thought of the woods, far away from anything ugly. Alone...not alone. Sylver was there with her. He was naked, and so was she. He dragged her to the ground and moved atop her. When he entered her, she felt him push into her body as well. Her mind left the woods and she stared up at him as he rose above her and eased the length of his cock gently forward to fill her.

Salacity

He was long and thick, and he felt delicious. He withdrew just as slowly and she gazed up into his face. His eyes closed and he thrust forward, burying himself deep.

She cried out. "Damn." Half growled between her clenched teeth, it didn't even sound like a word.

She tightened her body around him, squeezed, and instantly felt his walls weaken. She brought her legs up, wrapped them around him, and squeezed again.

His eyes darkened with raw hunger and he rocked back into her. Again. In. Out. Every time she closed her eyes, they were in the woods alone. No fear. No evil. Just growing tension and the friction of his body inside hers.

His thrusts grew faster, harder, and Dixie's breathing quickened. She lifted her hips, meeting each thrust with her own urgency. He groaned low in his throat, his hands grasping her hips to help her bring them to him.

"Yes, Dixie, come to me." His deep words ignited a fire in her body. Warmth licked across her skin. Her sex ached for more of him.

"Please," she whimpered as his hips jerked wildly against hers. "More." His answering growl didn't even sound human. It sounded like that of a wild animal. And she followed it with a protest when he withdrew from her. He flipped her over as if she weighed nothing, then grasped her waist and lifted her onto her knees.

The head of his cock slid against her pussy, then slipped inside. Sylver didn't wait for her approval. He suddenly thrust so deep that it teetered on pain—sweet, erotic pain that promised something tremendous. He reared back and gave her another sharp thrust, so deep she cried out.

"Give, Dixie." He slid one hand down to knead her ass. "Let go." She closed her eyes and found the woods. *Whatever you want. You are safe.* It was Sylver's voice in her head as he continued to rock in and out of her. *Share it with me,* he coaxed. *It's safe here.* She gave in and the woods darkened slightly. Sylver was sitting against a tree and she leaned over him, taking his cock into her mouth.

Sable Grey

It was control. It was a physical connection she'd always enjoyed. And it was Sylver's cock. He moaned behind her and she felt his walls crumble as he fucked in and out of her. His rhythm grew wild as he jabbed into her, scattering the fantasy with tiny pinpricks of light that threatened to make her lose consciousness.

Her body felt as if it were on fire and the sounds low in his throat drove that heat to prick every inch of her skin. She whimpered with every thrust and pushed back against him, wanting more and more. Tension coiled inside her and strained to break free. Her whole body shook as her whimpers became cries.

His nails raked down her back and she arched again. Pleasure broke free, exploding into a thousand shards of dark ecstasy. She bucked against him with no control. He shouted and drove in to the hilt before releasing into her. She felt his pleasure—it thundered through her entire body, bringing her orgasm higher. A scream slid from her lips.

And then he went still, three heavy breaths later, his walls intact again. Tears slipped from Dixie's eyes onto her cheeks. She'd never felt anything so tremendous in her entire life. It was as if he'd taken *her* inside *him*. As soon as he pulled from her body she collapsed, her limbs weak.

Sylver closed his eyes, leaned against the chair, and took several breaths. He'd lost control. He hadn't meant to, but Dixie Daniels made it impossible for him not to lose himself. Her energy had been red hot, her thoughts all over him. Thankfully, his control had left him only for a moment, not long enough for him to actually change. But the possibility *had* threatened. He'd felt the beast inside of him yearning to be free.

Dixie's voice suddenly lifted in a startled cry, and he opened his eyes. She was on her knees looking out the window as thunder and lightening sounded outside. She looked like a goddess sitting there naked in the dim light.

Fear, intrusion, and shame radiated from her.

"What is it?"

"There was someone out there." Her voice shook. "Looking in."

Sylver's body tensed. His senses became acute as he stood and adjusted his clothes. Stepping around Dixie, he opened the window and

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the sound of rain drummed into the room. Cocking his head, he listened. His nose flared as he sought the scent of whoever had been out there.

"Are you certain?"

"Of course I'm certain!" she snapped.

He glanced back at her just as she stood and reached for the towel to wrap around her body. His stomach clenched. He wanted her still.

"Stay here." He closed the window and headed for the door.

"I should be the one to go."

"I just want to look around. I'll be back," he promised, unlocking his door and slipping into the corridor. "Lock the door behind me." He pulled it closed and waited. After a moment, he heard the lock click on the other side and he jogged quickly down the corridor to the front door of the building. Outside, and into the rain. He turned up his nose, breathing in the scents of the storm and the area around him. The hairs on the back of his neck rose as he felt someone approaching.

"Smell something?" A deep voice brought him whirling to face Officer Darq Dillion. Surely it hadn't been *him* that Dixie saw?

"What do you want?"

"My FBI agent," Darq answered. "If you're done with her."

Sylver bristled. "I don't appreciate spying, Officer Dillion. I'm a private person and I doubt you'd want me looking in on whatever you do with *your* woman." His words struck hard and Darq took a step forward.

"I don't need to spy to know what you were doing. I kept my distance until you were finished. And if you ever mention my wife again, you won't have to worry about anyone ever invading your space again. Do I make myself clear, Professor?" The whites of Darq's eyes blacked out completely, and Sylver regarded him coolly.

"Dixie saw someone at the window," he said after a moment.

Darq's head snapped around, his vampire eyes sweeping the area. "Who?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't have accused you." Sylver frowned. "It could have been a student."

"In this weather?" Darq apparently didn't believe that idea and more than Sylver did. "Is she one of yours? I didn't feel anything on her that would indicate it, but I have to know." The question brought Sylver's

Sable Grey

gaze back to Darq's. Dillion's eyes had returned to normal, with no trace of vampire left.

"No. She just has gifts." Sylver had known Darq knew his secret. He imagined that just as he'd sensed the difference in Darq Dillion, Dillion had sensed it in him as well. Silenced dripped between them along with the rain.

"Does *she* know?"

"No." Sylver didn't like the question. "There's no reason for me to tell her."

"So you two were just fucking, huh?" Sarcasm dripped from Darq's lips.

"Fuck *you*."

"Shall we go inside out of this weather before you start to stink?"

Sylver wanted to hit him. No he didn't. He wanted to bite his arrogant throat out. Most vampires behaved that way—as if they were better than others who changed.

"Yes, let's go in. I'm hungry, for perhaps something thick and sticky. You?" Sylver expected anger. Instead, he received a chuckle as he stepped back into the Jefferson building. Once at his door, Sylver knocked once and waited. He caught the door before Dixie could swing it open.

"Are you dressed?" he asked.

"Yes." When she answered, he pushed the door open. She had on his clothes. And although he'd suggested it, he hadn't thought it would have such an effect on him. His sweats. His T-shirt. *His*.

"Officer Dillion." Her cheeks flushed prettily as she hurriedly made an excuse for her presence. "I got caught in the rain and Professor Shadow offered me a change of clothes. I get ill easily. Weak immune system."

"Save it." Darq stepped forward. "I don't like FBI involvement, but since you're here—" He waited for Sylver to close the door and watched them both face him. "When the last victim, Lana Letton, was brought in, I pulled a few strings and got a friend of mine to run forensics on her body. The results were just brought to me."

"Perhaps we should discuss this somewhere more private," Dixie suggested, cutting her gaze at Sylver. "Like the precinct?"

Salacity

"There were canine hairs on her person." Darq met Sylver's gaze.

"Canine?" Dixie repeated. "You don't mean to insinuate that a dog attacked her, do you? I know for a fact that no dog did that to Marianne. It was someone she knew. Someone she was comfortable with."

Sylver's stomach clenched. "There are no other canines...on campus."

"Pets aren't allowed?" Darq asked.

The jab made Sylver's temperature rise, more so when Darq's eyes glittered with humor. "You and I are going to have to do lunch one day soon, Officer Dillion. You could use a few lessons in tact."

Darq grunted and swung his gaze down to Dixie. "You're a psychic. Tell me how it works."

When Dixie licked her lips, Sylver's attention dropped to her mouth and he was immediately reminded of the fantasy she shared with him. Damn. He didn't want to think of those things. She'd gotten to him, and he didn't like it.

"I live the victim's death through their memory."

"If the victim is dead, how can she have a memory?" Darq crossed his arms.

"At the crime scene...it's like the memory is recorded. If you'd taken me to the morgue to see Marianne's body, it wouldn't have worked. I'd have gotten nothing." Dixie glanced at Sylver, and he nodded for her to continue. "I also feel things. People's emotions. Sometimes I can find out if a suspect if the perpetrator just by spending time with him. Sooner or later, the crime shows itself."

"And what do you feel about Professor Shadow?" Darq asked.

"I did *not* kill that girl," Sylver answered before Dixie could speak.

"No?" Darq's gaze lifted. "Why did your wife run out on you on your wedding night?"

"That's private and has nothing to do with this," Sylver answered coolly.

"Was it because of fear? Perhaps you —"

"Is your woman afraid of you?" Sylver smiled smugly when Darq tensed, and then he frowned. "Perhaps it was fear, but not because I brought her harm. And that is all I will divulge at this time."

Sable Grey

Darq's attention dropped to Dixie. "What do you feel about him?"

"He's harder to read than most," Dixie admitted.

"You fucked him, Agent Daniels. Unless he swings the other direction, I imagine you at least got some kind of reading from him." Darq didn't look away from her even when her cheeks turned red with embarrassment.

"Couldn't you be a little more delicate?" Sylver growled.

"Four women are dead, Shadow," Darq said. "There's nothing delicate about murder."

Dixie nodded in agreement. "When I did sense his energy, there was nothing that would indicate he'd done anything wrong. I felt some old guilt and shame perhaps, but no more than I sense from you."

Sylver could have kissed her. And Darq shifted, clearly uncomfortable with her revelation. Served the arrogant bastard right, Sylver thought.

"Then this case just got a lot uglier." Darq ran a hand through his hair.

Salacity

Chapter Three

"Hey! Hey! Wait up!" It was the Bette Midler look-a-like. Dixie watched the woman hurry toward her, her short legs working quickly as she jogged down the sidewalk. At her side, a tall, blond drink of water easily kept pace with long strides.

"Damn," Darq murmured from beside Dixie. "The two most cunt crazy people on campus." Dixie blinked, surprised at Darq's explicit description.

"Hi. Hi there," 'Bette' said, trying to shove her unruly curls from where they had fallen across her forehead.

Dixie remembered the name now. Ginger Gregory. "Hello, Ms. Gregory." She smiled at Ginger.

"So? Darq Dillion, I know you can tell us something about what's going on around here." Ginger looked pointedly at the officer.

"I know nothing more than you do, Gin," Darq answered with little cover for his impatience.

"Bullshit." Gin's gaze swung to Dixie. "What about you? I heard you're an FBI agent. This one hasn't done a damned thing but skulk around in the shadows." She jerked her head toward Darq, then pinned Dixie with an intense look. "Can you tell us anything?"

"Excuse her. She hadn't had her chocolate for the day." The man beside her smiled handsomely and extended his hand. "Leo Luther, Wolverine football coach." Dixie shook his hand, noticing that he held on

Sable Grey

a few moments longer than necessary. "And this is Gin Gregory, journalism professor and local bully."

As if to prove his point, Gin jerked her arm and dug her elbow into his ribs. "I just want to know what the hell's going on around here. My students are dropping like flies and those who are left are pulling out and going home. I'm tempted to go home myself."

"We're doing everything we possibly—" Dixie said.

Gin held up a hand and rolled her eyes. "Everything you can, yes. I believe I've heard that one."

"Can you tell us anything at all?" Leo sent her another brilliant smile.

"I'm afraid not." Dixie returned the smile.

"We *are* one step closer to finding the killer. We received a bit of evidence last night that sheds more light on the case." Darq removed his shades. "That's why we're here again today, so I can show Agent Daniels the other murder sites."

"What does that mean?" Gin tapped her foot.

"It means we have a lead. A breakthrough," Darq answered. "Now if you'll excuse us, we have bad guys to catch." He planted his hand in the middle of Dixie's back and guided her away from them.

"Why the hell did you do that?" Dixie frowned.

"Did you get anything off Leo Luther?" Darq kept his voice low even after they were out of earshot, and slid his shades back onto the bridge of his nose.

"Mostly appreciation of my breasts. We weren't with them long enough for me to really get a feel for him. Why?" Dixie fought the temptation to look back over her shoulder at the football coach as Darq led her toward his patrol car.

"I don't trust him. Never have. And—he has a thing for blondes."

"All the victims were blonde."

"Exactly." Darq nodded.

"Perhaps I should spend some time with him...and see if I can read his energy," Dixie suggested.

Darq slanted a glance at her. "Like you did with Shadow?"

Salacity

Dixie tensed. "I don't usually do that kind of thing."

"No?" He opened the door to the car. "Well, I do." He suddenly grinned, surprising her. "Every chance I get." He ducked into the car as she chuckled. She watched him drive away, then headed toward the library where the Dean had allowed her to set up in one of the small rooms in the back. He'd offered her an apartment in the Jefferson building, but Dixie wasn't sure she was comfortable being that close to Sylver when she needed a place to think.

* * * * *

Opening the door to her small space, Dixie stared up at Leo Luther in surprise. "Coach Luther," she said, wondering what the hell he was doing there at eight in the morning.

"I was hoping you haven't eaten breakfast yet." He held up a bag, and the aroma of eggs and sausage coming from it made Dixie's stomach growl.

"Actually—no. I haven't." She stepped aside so he could enter, thinking this would be a good opportunity to try to read his energy. Food relaxed people, making them easier to tap into.

"Great! Didn't know what you like. So I have a sausage and egg on biscuit, a blueberry bagel, some fruit, and—" He looked for a place to set the bag.

Dixie quickly cleared the files off her desk and dragged a chair closer. "The bagel sounds good." She motioned for him to sit as she settled into her chair and stacked the files on the corner of the desk.

"Looks like you've been working. Have you slept at all?" He unfolded a napkin in front of her and placed the bagel atop it. A small cup of coffee followed.

"I never sleep much," she admitted as he sat and set his meal in front of him.

"Probably comes with the job." He sent her a brilliant smile. "I sleep like a rock." Dixie spent the next thirty minutes listening to Leo talk about himself. Eventually he got around to talking about the students on campus and how they looked up to him.

Sable Grey

"Did you know Marianne?" Dixie asked as she finished up her bagel.

"Yes, I did." He nodded. "Great girl."

Dixie couldn't help but to notice that his elaborate details suddenly disappeared.

"Where'd you move here from?"

"Chicago." Dixie sipped her coffee. "What about you?"

"Born and raised here. I couldn't live anywhere else." He ran his fingers through his blond hair. "I love Salacity."

"Then you probably know everyone in town." Dixie forced a laugh. "Was Marianne a bright student?"

"Yes, she was." He nodded. "Very."

"What about her boyfriend?" Dixie regarded him intently. She'd felt a slight change in his energy, and his emotions were easy to read. Resentment. Jealousy.

"Great fullback, one of the best I've ever coached." His gaze rested everywhere but on hers. He was hiding something.

"How long did they date?"

"Not long." Leo frowned and leaned forward. "It was sex. That's all."

"Really?" Dixie decided to push his emotions a bit to see what happened. "You never know. Love happens."

Leo snorted and his emotions grew hot. "There was no love. Like I said, she was a smart girl. He was dumb as dog shit." His mouth clamped shut, as if he realized he was offering too much. "But I shouldn't judge. As you say, there could have been something more between them that I didn't know about."

"She was pretty."

"Yes, she was." He smiled and nodded. "So are you."

Dixie returned his smile. "Thank you."

"You look like her, you know? Same frame, blonde, cute." His gaze dropped to her breasts. Okay, now she was uncomfortable. She retreated into the woods in her mind as Leo continued to describe the similarities between her and the dead girl. Dixie was surprised to find Sylver in the

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woods with her. *If I'm not imagining you, come save me from Leo Luther's advances.* She blinked and focused on Leo when he reached out and ran a finger along her jaw. *Hurry.*

"I'm certain that I'm meaner than Marianne." Dixie hoped he would get the hint. Instead, he grinned.

"I like a mean woman."

"I have a feeling you like all sorts of women."

His grin twisted. "I only love one at a time, though."

A rap sounded on her door, and she sighed in relief. Clear disappointment radiated from Leo, even though his smile remained in place. She swung open the door to find Sylver standing there, his eyes narrowed.

"I'm taking my walk late this morning. Thought you might like to join me." He looked past her. "Oh. Hello, Leo."

"Shadow," Leo returned.

"Actually," Dixie cast an apologetic glance over her shoulder. "I don't usually eat breakfast. I'll feel much better about stuffing myself if I take a little walk first." Leo nodded and stood.

"Why don't you join Gin and me for lunch at noon? We usually set up out by the lake." He waited, and Dixie knew she'd have to accept.

"Sounds great!"

He nodded again before inclining his head at Sylver. Then Leo stepped past him and hurried toward the front of the library.

"Thank you," she breathed as he took a step inside, his gaze darting around the small space. "Any longer, and he would have tried to grope me."

"I can't say as I blame him," Sylver murmured.

Dixie grinned. "That's a pretty nifty trick with the woods. How'd you learn to do that?" She returned to her desk when he closed the door.

"I need a place to go to chase away the shadows that sometimes creep up in my mind. There were woods behind my grandparent's home in Connecticut that I loved when I was a boy. So I created a safe place in my mind similar to that, where I can go any time." He shrugged. "Over the years, I've learned how to stretch those woods."

"But how'd you make it where you I could —"

Sable Grey

"It's not much different than the way you connect with the dead. I can connect with the living — although I try to avoid it as much as possible. Living beings are filled with more ugliness." He sat down in the chair Leo had just left.

"I have ugliness?"

"You have memories, some of which aren't even yours. But nothing really ugly, no." He reached forward and touched her hand. "It's refreshing."

"I admit you're a mystery to me, Sylver Shadow." She tilted her head. "I can't figure you out."

"Maybe I don't want you to. Maybe I like being the mysterious man in your life." His eyes glittered wickedly.

Dixie laughed. "Figuring out mystery men is my job."

"I have better things in mind for you to do with me." He laughed at the flush that heated Dixie's cheeks. "One in particular is that fantasy you shared with me."

"How do you know I'm interested in fulfilling those fantasies?" Dixie tried to be nonchalant despite the quickening of her pulse. What girl wouldn't want a man to try to make her fantasies come true?

"Because you're exuding heat like a radiator." He arched a brow. "So—how do you want me, Agent Daniels?"

Dixie bit her lip. "First, tell me why your wife left you."

Instantly the humor left his eyes, and Dixie wished she hadn't asked. He lifted his chin. "I like my privacy."

"I like mine too, but that hasn't stopped you from getting into my head and my body." She touched his hand. "I won't judge you."

"People always judge." He frowned. "It's naïve to believe otherwise."

"Naïve?" Dixie withdrew her hand. "No. I'm *not* naïve. I just want to get to know you, especially since you know so much about me. It isn't fair."

"Life isn't fair. You don't want to know my past. It's better for you to just know me as I am whenever we're together."

"But that's only what you allow me to know."

Salacity

"Exactly."

Dixie suddenly felt angry. "So will you pay me now, or later? Because if I'm not being naïve, I do believe that's how it works with men and whores."

"I never said such a thing." His frown deepened.

"You didn't have to." She crossed her arms. "I'm not accustomed to having my thoughts about someone who only wants to share sex and fantasies dictated to me, but I'm fairly certain there should be money exchanged when it's done."

"I'm only trying to save you."

"I don't need saving." She met his gaze.

"It's probably better this way." He stood and opened the door, halting without looking back at her. "My wife left me when she found out what I really am." He stepped from the room and pulled the door closed firmly.

Sable Grey

Chapter Four

"Leo Luther has strange emotions about Marianne Moore. I believe he might have been having an affair with her." Dixie sat in Darq's car in the campus parking lot. "I had breakfast with him, and he seemed nervous. At lunch, I got a very sick vibe from him. He may have a split personality, since there was such an extreme change in his energy."

She hesitated while Darq waited for more. "I think the killer's going to strike again very soon. And there is a hunger for power and a rage that is unfed in Leo."

"How soon?" Darq's eyes glittered in the darkness of the car.

"The hunger was dominant—so strong I could barely concentrate on pretending to enjoy my meal or keep the conversation going between him and Gin. I'd say he won't neglect it too long. Maybe a week."

"Shit." Darq's gaze swept away from her and out at the campus grounds.

"I also found out that he has a dog. Off campus, of course, at his home, but it's not uncommon for him to bring the animal to work with him."

Darq said nothing. Instead, he opened his door and climbed from the car. Dixie hurried to get out as well. "I think we can catch him."

"If I catch him, I'll sink my teeth into him," Darq growled, waiting for her to step to his side.

Salacity

"Well, thank you for coming. I thought you'd want to know what I picked up from him."

"I appreciate it. I'm walking you to your office, by the way. I'm not having another dead woman on top of all of this mess." He started for the library, and Dixie fell into step beside him without argument. Normally she'd question it, but there had been an underlying sense of evil in the air during lunch. It made her nauseous and uneasy.

"When the case breaks, it's yours," she said. "The Bureau doesn't mind paying me to do my job as long as no one else knows I'm doing it." She retrieved her library key and unlocked the glass doors. "By knowing, you've made it easier on me than in past cases. But then, you're smarter than most people I work with, too."

"Thank you." He squinted toward the back of the library, and Dixie felt another presence. She instantly stiffened. All at once, a shadow darted across the wall and Darq moved fast, pushing her toward the door before bolting forward.

Dixie stared. Darq moved lightening quick, blending in with the darkness of the library. She turned and flipped on the lights. He instantly halted, throwing up his arm to shield his eyes, but Dixie's vision adjusted quickly. She whirled as the door behind her swung closed. The intruder had been right behind her!

"Turn some of them off. My eyes are sensitive to light." Darq squinted as he approached her, and she flipped off a few of the overheads. Her heart pounded.

He frowned. "Did you see who it was?"

"No. I'm sorry. If I'd known about your eyes, I wouldn't have done that. I thought that maybe if we had light, it would be easier to see the intruder."

"The door to your office is open." He headed for the back of the library, and Dixie hurried to keep up. The smell hit her instantly.

"Please, no," she whispered. Her stomach flipped.

"Hell," Darq growled as he stopped in the doorway.

"Is it...another...?" Dixie waited.

"No. It's a dead cat."

Sable Grey

Dixie breathed out and widened her eyes. It wasn't just dead—it was mutilated. She watched Darq kneel to examine the carcass, then forgot her nausea and leaned closer. The animal's throat had been...it looked to have been bitten out.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

"I think its time for you to take yourself off this case, Agent Daniels." Darq slowly rose.

"Off the case?" She lifted her gaze to follow his stare. Written in blood on the wall was a clear message. *Go Away, Dixie.*

* * * * *

Dixie sipped her coffee and offered Darq Dillion's wife, Nina, another apologetic smile. Her gaze drifted to the boxes cluttering the living room. They'd just moved in, most likely to make room for the baby growing in Nina's belly. Dixie guessed her to be in her seventh month of pregnancy.

"It was a cat?" A boy's head stuck back in sight from the hallway. Dixie had liked the kid, Jack, from the moment she'd met him. He was chatty and seemed to have an insatiable curiosity.

"Jack," Darq warned. "Back to bed."

"And you said the intruder moved so fast you couldn't catch him?" The boy held up a hand. "Okay, I'm going, I'm going. But you might need a partner on this one." His words grew quieter as he headed back to his room. Dixie smiled. Darq had quite a family.

"You should call the Bureau," Darq said to Dixie.

"I'm not taking myself off this case." Shocked by the sight of her office at the library, she hadn't argued with him then. Now, she knew she'd have to put her foot down if she wanted him to stop trying to bully her into doing what he wanted.

"Why not? Do you think that was a joke?" Darq stared at her.

"No, but I've never left a case unsolved and I refuse to start doing so now. My reputation is the only thing that keeps me from being locked

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up or called a fruitcake." She glanced at Nina, who busied herself with fluffing the pillows on the sofa. "I'm not taking myself off."

"You're in over your head." Darq's voice softened slightly, as if he understood her concerns. "It's best to let me take it from here."

"I've been on worse cases."

"You don't know what you are dealing with." Darq's tone hardened.

"So, enlighten me."

For a moment he just glared at her, then he took three strides forward, ignoring his wife when she said his name. Dixie's eyes widened and a cry escaped her lips as his pupils blacked out and the veins of his skin darkened until they stood out in stark contrast to his natural color.

"Things are not always what they seem." He spoke around a pair of fangs.

Dixie began to shake. She'd never seen anything like it before. What *was* he? What did it mean?

"He's a vampire, but not the kind you see in the movies," Nina offered. "Although he's just as dramatic. Stop it, Darq, you're scaring her."

Slowly, his appearance returned to normal. Dixie still didn't speak. She couldn't. Her throat had closed against any sound she might have made.

"You see, Agent Daniels, some things are bigger than your gifts. I think you're in great danger and should take yourself off this case."

Dixie swallowed and tried to collect her scrambled thoughts. Vampires weren't real. There were no such beings. But her eyes hadn't lied. She'd seen it for herself. What did it mean? Were there others? Is that why he wanted her off the case? Because the killer was a vampire? Should she run?

"I'm sorry." His gaze softened and he reached out to touch her, but she jumped away, knocking her coffee over on the table. She didn't care. She didn't even glance at Nina when she moved to clean up the spill.

"Should I be afraid of you?" she croaked.

"No."

"Then this killer...is he like you?"

Sable Grey

"Not exactly, but he's not a normal man either." Darq took a step backward, as if trying to put her at ease.

"I think I want to return to the college now."

"What? Don't you know that you're in danger? Those words on the wall were not a threat. You said yourself that you know Leo is dangerous. Can't you see that the danger is more than you can handle?" He frowned. "You can stay here, with us."

"No. I'm not staying here. I'll check into a motel. But I need to go back to the campus for my car." She held her breath. When he snatched up his jacket, she let it out slowly. She didn't say another word as she followed him back out into the night.

Salacity

Chapter Five

Dixie didn't check into a motel. It wasn't like her to run and hide. She needed answers. Too much had happened over the past couple of days and she needed to wrap her mind around everything. Instead, she let the dean give her a new office closer to his own apartment.

Now she sat surrounded by more comfortable furnishings than she'd had before, and she rubbed her temples. Closing her eyes, she sought Sylver in the woods of her mind. He was there but when she called to him, he turned and walked away.

Dixie opened her eyes. He was trying to punish her. Hell, maybe she deserved it. It surprised her to find that she was lonely without him. Just knowing he was in the woods was comforting, and the closest thing to having a real friend she'd ever known.

"Don't be stupid. Go apologize to the man," Dixie scolded herself aloud. She looked at the clock. Nine fifteen. *Nine fifteen*, her mind repeated, and she instantly moved back three years. The victim had been a child. Smothered. *Nine fifteen*. The killer leered at her from the girl's memory and Dixie felt her heartbeat quicken. *No. Let go*, she told herself. Chase them away. Desperately she sought the woods and could almost find them, but not before she slipped back into the memory.

Come to me. It was Sylver. He was there with her. *Let go*. She followed his voice in her mind, letting him pull her back from the memory until she stood in the trees. Nothing bad here, she thought. Safe. Then she

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found Shadow, and he turned and walked away, disappearing into the darkness at the edge of the woods.

She called out to him but he didn't return, leaving her feeling cold and empty when she opened her eyes. Now she felt more alone than she'd ever felt.

Dixie made the quick decision to go to Sylver's apartment and was up and out the door before she could change her mind. She walked quickly. Then she heard footsteps behind her, and slowed her steps. Was it the killer?

Her gaze darted to the Jefferson building. She might make a run for it. But then she'd never know the killer's identity. The street lamp above her suddenly went out, and darkness flooded around her.

Slowly, her heart thumping, she turned. And spotted a wolf. Gray and white. Standing no more than three feet from her. Fear froze her breath in her chest. *Sylver! I'm sorry. Please—I need you!*

Nothing. He'd abandoned her for good.

The wolf took a step forward, its teeth bared, and she matched its movement with a step backward, holding out her hands to try to calm it. It wasn't human, but not quite animal either. Darq's warning suddenly rushed at her. *Sometimes things aren't what they seem.* Oh no. Vampires and werewolves?

The wolf's low growl vibrated toward her. She took another step back toward the Jefferson building. If she could just get to the doors. *Sylver, please! It's a fucking wolf!* And then the fucking wolf leapt. Dixie screamed, throwing her arms over her head and turning her face to the side. But the animal never hit her. She took a chance and peered between her arms.

From behind her another wolf, this one solid black, dove between her and the gray one. They collided and tumbled away from her, biting and scratching. She was paralyzed with shock for a few moments as she watched the two beasts roll away from one another and then stand, facing each other.

When they charged, Dixie drew her gun as the gray wolf gave a higher jump and its teeth sank into the black wolf's paw. It went tumbling

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backward, giving out a quick yelp that was followed by a gunshot. The gray wolf staggered, and then slumped to the ground.

Dixie found the source of the bullet. Darq Dillion's steady hand held the gun. She let out the breath she was holding but it sounded more like a desperate whimper. Her legs suddenly felt like jelly and she sank to the ground.

"I should have let her have you for not doing what I said." He strode forward to kneel beside her. "Are you okay?" She nodded and looked back at the wolf. The black one had disappeared, and the gray one lay motionless. Then, before her very eyes, its body began to shift.

"It's still alive!" Dixie shouted, lifting her gun again, but Darq shook his head.

"No, she's dead."

Dixie stared as the wolf began to transform herself into a human body. Her bones shifted, and her hair shortened. Blood seeped from beneath her to create an ugly pool around her. Dixie holstered her weapon and held onto Darq's arms as he helped her up.

"Well, you did it, Dixie Daniels. You got your killer. I never even suspected." Darq spoke as he guided her forward. Dixie stared. It wasn't Leo Luther, she thought numbly.

It was Ginger Gregory.

* * * * *

A rap sounded on Sylver's door, and he let the bow slide away from the strings. "It's open." The door opened and, surprised to find Dixie standing in the corridor, he blinked.

"May I come in?" She chewed on her lip, looking like she was afraid he'd send her away.

"Certainly." He set his violin aside and loosened the bow, laying it beside the instrument. What did she want? Nervousness, wrapped around guilt, reached out from within her. He frowned. She was coming to apologize.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, speaking quickly before she had the chance to start. "I wanted to apologize to you for the other day. It isn't

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like me to become angry. It's just...my wife's leaving was painful for me on a number of levels. And I didn't want to chance your leaving as well."

Her gaze dropped to the bandage on his hand. "What happened to you?"

"Violin string," he lied. "When they break, they lash out. Sometimes it happens."

She was silent as she closed the door and stepped farther into the room. "I have feelings for you, Sylver Shadow. I can't explain it, since I've only known you such a short time. But I feel a connection with you that I've never felt with anyone before."

He winced. Those words were more beautiful than any he'd imagined, and the very ones he'd both dreamed of and dreaded to hear. "It won't work between us."

"Well, no, it won't." She surprised him when she agreed. "A relationship should be based on trust—and how can I trust you when you tried to deceive me?"

"Deceive you?"

"Just tell me. I won't judge." She crossed her arms.

He frowned. "Tell you what?"

"That you're the black wolf." Dixie stepped closer. "That you saved me last night. That you feel the same connection I do. That you care about me. And that you don't want me to leave now that this case is closed."

Sylver stared at her. She knew? How? Had she found a way around the barriers he'd worked so hard to erect around himself? And she didn't care, even though she knew the truth? "You read all that from me?"

"No. I'm not strong enough to break through your walls." She smiled. "But I work with the FBI. It wasn't hard to figure out once I knew your kind existed, thank to your fascination with wolves and the fact that the black wolf showed up after I called for you last night. And the black wolf's paw was injured." She nodded toward his hand. "Your hand is bandaged." She shrugged.

"I'm not certain what to say. I'm suddenly feeling uncomfortably exposed." He watched her close the distance between them.

"That's why she left you, isn't it? Because she saw the black wolf?"

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"Yes."

"And you think I'll leave you, too."

Sylver shifted his weight. "I don't know what to think right now."

"Think of the woods. It's safe there," she whispered. "It's my favorite place to be."

Sylver reached for her and she didn't resist when he pulled her against his chest.

"It's safe here, too," he whispered into her hair.

She hummed against him "And you can help me."

"Yes." He nodded.

"To chase away the shadows?"

"Yes." His mouth captured hers, his tongue delving between her lips. No, she wouldn't leave him. She was his. He'd finally found his mate.

Sable Grey

∴. The Dark Side ∴.

Chapter One

Year: 2018

Andrea stared up at the two story brick building and frowned with uncertainty at the dark curtains that hung in every window. She looked down at the paper where she'd scribbled the address, and then double checked the number etched into the gold plate next to the door. 326 Cobblestone Drive. She was at the right place.

Taking a deep breath, she quickly walked up the steps, pushed open the door, and stepped into an empty reception area. Slipping into the solitary chair against the wall, she clutched her purse in her lap and waited anxiously. She needed this job. If she had to sleep in her car one more time, she was sure she'd lose her mind.

Since Aaron had walked out on her, taking everything she owned with him, she'd been desperate to find a job—so desperate that she'd moved to Salacity with hopes of more employment opportunities. She'd scoured the newspaper every day with no luck, until yesterday when she called J&H Laboratories about an assistant position. Finally, a break!

The man she'd spoken with had been Hyder Haines, who had a deep, smooth voice that had assured her she sounded qualified for the job. So here she was. But where was he? She checked her watch. Fifteen after.

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Perhaps the receptionist hadn't been informed that she was to meet him. Andrea stood and headed for the door across the room, fearing that Mr. Haines might think she'd not shown up for her interview. She tried the door and found it locked, so pushed the button next to it. After a few moments, she heard the door lock click, so she pushed it open and hurried forward.

As the door swung closed and locked itself soundly behind her, she stopped and stared. Rather than an office or a hallway, she was in an open courtyard. Two story walls rose high on all four sides of the square area, revealing the morning sky above. In the center of each brick wall was set a door, with a stone path leading from each of them into the center to join in a circle around the fountain.

She stood there looking around at the grass and small shrubs, and then dragged her gaze back to the odd fountain. It was made of marble—with what looked like a huge three headed dog chained to its base. Water spewed from each of their mouths like angry blue fire. It was beautiful, yet disturbing.

Suddenly the door on the right opened, and a man stepped into the courtyard. He was tall and lean and dressed in dark gray slacks and a black knit shirt, and while it wasn't like Andrea to be affected by a man's looks, she took exception with this one. He was gorgeous. His black hair was tied back from his evenly featured face and a pair of green eyes peered out from behind thin framed glasses perching on the bridge of his perfect nose.

She swallowed. "Mr. Haines?"

He lowered the clipboard he held and glanced around, as if half expecting someone else to be standing there. His eyes locked on her face. "What's your business here?"

Andrea painted on her best smile and stepped forward. His gaze dropped and she felt a little disappointed that he didn't seem to appreciate her looks as much as she did his. "I'm Andrea Ashley. We spoke yesterday on the phone about the assistant position. I'm very excited about the possibility of working with you, given how sure you were that I'd work out at your company."

Sable Grey

"You spoke with me yesterday?" He didn't take her hand when she offered it in greeting; instead, he just stood there looking at her as if she'd grown an extra nose.

"I did if you're Mr. Hyder Haines. I have an appointment with him today. An interview." When he continued to stare at her, she reached into her purse and retrieved the newspaper ad. "This says that the position comes with a small apartment in addition to the small salary."

His gaze dropped as he took the paper from her and read the advertisement. "I'm afraid there's been a mistake," he said after a moment. "I never authorized this."

Andrea's hopes plummeted. "Are you Mr. Haines?"

"No. I am Dr. Jack Jordan. I own this company. Hyder Haines is...a colleague of mine. He had no right to place an ad like this. He certainly had no right to set up an interview." He thrust the ad back towards her.

"But...he said I was a good fit for the company." Andrea pulled out her resume and unfolded it. "As you can see, I'm well qualified. I worked for several years in medical records and payroll in the state hospital."

"I'm very sorry, Ms. Ashley, that your time was wasted today."

"Wait, Dr. Jordan, I have references from the finest doctors at the hospital." She knew she sounded desperate, and when he said nothing and just stood there looking at her, she let her hand drop to her side, her fingers still clutching the resume. "He assured me that I had nothing to worry about."

"This is a facility that contracts to local authority teams, Ms. Ashley. Most bring their own staff when they contract with J&H. The work we do on our own doesn't require a large staff. We only need the one receptionist."

Andrea frowned, wishing Mr. Haines would show himself so she could wring his neck for giving her false hope. "A receptionist that is about as useful as Mr. Haines, I imagine, unless of course she's allowed an early morning break."

"Break? She doesn't break until noon." His eyes hardened and his well defined lips pressed together in a thin line. "You've got to be kidding me." He strode past her toward the door she'd just come through, and she

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followed him. He retrieved a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door. Andrea stood there holding it open as he walked inside the reception area and then cursed under his breath, throwing his clipboard to the surface of the desk.

"She's gone," he growled opening some of the drawers before throwing up his hands. "That's three in one month! Goddamnit!" He removed his glasses with one hand, brought the other up to pinch the bridge of his nose, and closed his eyes.

Andrea stepped inside, let the door close behind her, and waited for him to compose himself. "Does that mean that there *is* a position open?"

He shook his head without looking at her. "I don't know what I'm going to do, how I can keep doing this work if—" He took a deep breath, and then another. Andrea kept quiet until he placed his glasses back on his nose.

"There's a simple solution. I need a job and a place to stay, and you need a receptionist, Dr. Jordan. Perhaps Mr. Haines' blunder can be turned into something that works for both of us."

He placed his hands on the desk and leaned his weight forward. "I would say yes, but it'll only be a matter of time before you walk out on me, too. The process of hiring you isn't worth the trouble of replacing you in only a few weeks."

Andrea hurried forward and placed her resume on the desk in front of him. "I'm a keeper, Dr. Jordan. You can call any one of these people, and they'll tell you that I don't just walk out on a job. I gave two weeks notice when I left there and even came in for an extra week to finish training the woman they hired to replace me." She reached for the phone, ready to dial the number herself. "The only reason I quit was because I had a personal matter that couldn't be ignored—a personal matter that is no longer a problem in my life. Let me call the hospital for you. Anyone who works there will tell you that I'm dedicated, prompt, and—"

His hand covered hers and guided the receiver back into the cradle. "That won't be necessary, Ms. Ashley. Your being qualified and your dedication are not my concern." Warmth spread across her knuckles from

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his touch before his fingers slid away. "Every person I've hired has been qualified and should have worked out well."

"Apparently not, or your receptionist would have at least informed you that she was leaving." Andrea pointed out. She wasn't about to let this chance at landing a job slip through her fingers because of the unprofessional ninny that he'd hired before.

He breathed out heavily. "It's not Ellen's fault. She lasted longer than the others. It's...Hyder."

"Mr. Haines?"

"He makes women uncomfortable. He's unpleasant, unpredictable, and unprofessional." He shook his head. "A person can only take so much of his behavior before they've had enough of his abuse and leave."

"Give me a chance. I may surprise you. I've thick skin, and I don't fold easily," Andrea insisted.

"You aren't the first to promise that." He surprised her by chuckling. "Although, I will admit, none of the others have ever been so aggressive about working here. Do you know anything about the company?"

"I don't have a clue, except what you've told me," Hope began to raise Andrea's spirit. "I imagine that if you contract out, you'll need me to schedule periods of use for the facilities, make lists of what equipment is needed and what will be brought in by the teams you contract. With no other staff, you may also need someone to retrieve supplies and make equipment orders with suppliers and providers." Andrea spoke quickly, hoping to prove that she was smart and capable, with enough common sense to know the basics of the tasks she could accomplish.

"Security is of obvious importance." She glanced at the locked doors. "I mean, you must have expensive lab equipment and if you are working with the authorities, you probably have important files and information that requires confidentiality on the premises." She looked at him, and saw that the corners of his lips had lifted into a little smile.

"So—are you impressed with me yet?"

He nodded. "A bit. However, it still doesn't change the fact that I might very likely be dealing with harassment charges within the next two

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weeks." He straightened and crossed his arms, apparently still unconvinced.

"I promise you no harassment charges, two weeks notice if I decide to bolt, and I'll put it in writing." She bit her lip and watched him consider her offer. "You can't lose with me. I've dealt with men who can't keep their hands to themselves, and I can handle myself. If all else fails, we'll both get a break from Haines if I have to break his nose."

Dr. Jordan's face cracked, revealing a perfect smile that made Andrea momentarily forget her determination. A soft chuckle rolled up from his chest as he nodded. "All right, Ms. Ashley, seeing how you've got me at a disadvantage and I can't but help to like your brass, we'll give it a try."

Andrea beamed. "You won't regret it, Dr. Jordan."

"I pray you're right. Call me Jack. Come on, and I'll show you the facility." He picked up his clipboard, retrieved his keys, and unlocked the door.

J&H Laboratories was huge, with space to accommodate equipment for forensic tests, crime related autopsies, and an enormous lab for chemical work and testing. Still there was room for living quarters and two small apartments, one accessible through the stairs in Jack's home that was to be hers and one that was only accessible from stairs outside one of the doors in the courtyard. That one belonged to Hyder Haines.

Jack gave her the full tour and she noticed that every door he either entered or exited, he locked. All except one across the lab office area that led to an office she was told she would probably work in as well as at the receptionist desk.

"What's behind door number 406?"

"That's my personal workspace, where I'm never to be disturbed for any reason." He held up a second ring of keys. "There are twelve doors in this building that require locks. My keyring has all twelve keys. Chief Dillion of the SPD has a ring of twelve also. No one else has all the keys. Your keyring has eleven keys. My personal workspace is off limits to everyone."

"The secret lair." She laughed as she accepted her ring of keys, thankful that each was marked to tell her which door it opened.

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"All doors must be kept locked at all times. As you enter each one, you should turn and lock the door behind you." He met her gaze. "This is very important. Failure to follow this rule will result in immediate termination."

"I understand." She nodded.

"Most of the work you'll be expected to perform, you've already guessed. I may occasionally have you help clean up after a contracted team has finished their work, but they don't usually leave the place in disarray."

"Piece of cake," Andrea assured him.

"I can offer the apartment and the additional salary we've already discussed. I keep the kitchen pretty well stocked, but you should feel free to bring in whatever food you want. Use the living area as you like. The television in the main room has cable, but there is a second hook up in your apartment if you want your own set." He crossed his arms. "You said you were sleeping in your car. Do you have any belongings you need help moving in?"

"I have a couple of bags, but I can manage them myself."

"Okay then." He smiled. "I guess we're set. I'll expect you to start tomorrow."

* * * * *

Andrea opened her eyes and stared into the darkness of the unfamiliar room. It took her a moment to remember where she was. J&H Laboratories. Smiling, she nestled into the pillow, appreciating the softness of the mattress beneath her.

She was proud of herself. An opportunity had opened itself to her and she'd jumped on it, landing both a job and a place to stay. The apartment came furnished, and not with cheap pieces, and was painted and decorated with soothing, earth tone colors. It was perfect—the perfect place, the perfect job, the perfect everything, to help her start over.

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She glanced at the window she'd left open and heard a noise in the alley below. She was about to dismiss it when a woman's voice suddenly drifted up and into her room, followed by the deeper sound of a man.

Pushing back the downy comforter, she slipped from bed and walked over to the window, pushing the dark curtains aside to look down. A single light over a door in the next building lit the small parking area, enough that she saw more than she expected.

There between her car and Jack's was a blue sedan. A woman leaned across the hood while a man stood behind her, his pants down around his ankles. Every thrust brought a soft cry of encouragement from the woman.

Andrea's mouth dried as she stared down at the two of them, and a dark ache twisted inside her stomach and accelerated her pulse. It was too long since she'd been satisfied and now raw hunger made her quiver with excitement.

The man's hands rested on her hips, his fingers kneading into the woman's ivory skin while his dark hair hung around his face. The blonde rested her weight on her arms, pushing back into him, accepting his cock greedily. He murmured something in a low voice before reaching forward to wrap his hands in her thick blonde hair. When he tilted her head back and leaned forward, his own dark strands slid forward across her face.

Andrea licked her lips, feeling heat from what the two were doing. It pulled at her, tempted her, and rooted her there in the window so that she was unable to look away. Her fingers crept beneath her T-shirt and inside her panties, where her clit throbbed with moist desire. After a few strokes, she fell into rhythm with them, matching their frenzy of passion.

As the woman's cries grew louder, Andrea's breath quickened with her own need. She hungered desperately for fulfillment, craved more than what little she had to satisfy her. It was painful sweet agony that brought a whimper from her own lips and then a gasp when the man lifted his face toward her window. Her heart thumping, she whirled away and pressed her back to the wall. Had he seen her?

The woman's cries continued to rise and Andrea breathed out, realizing that she'd most likely not been seen. She resumed her movement against her pussy, her free hand lifting to squeeze her breast. Closing her

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eyes, she waited, praying to share in the woman's rapture. It came quickly, exploding across Andrea's body and from the woman's lips in one screamed word. *Hyder!*

Biting her lip to stifle her own cry of release, Andrea stood on unsteady legs, pushing back against the wall as she arched into her hand. But the flood of pleasure subsided much too quickly, leaving her starved for more. Carefully she eased around and peered out between the curtains to find that the man had already pulled up his pants and was helping the woman adjust her own clothes.

So that was Hyder Haines, the man who'd promised her a job that hadn't existed. She watched him retrieve his wallet from his back pocket and pull out a few bills, but the woman shook her head and Andrea heard her say, "On the house." Realization threaded through her. The woman was a prostitute. So why wouldn't she take the money?

Hyder murmured something and the woman lifted her face to smile up at him. He reached around her to open the sedan's driver side door and waited until she slid behind the wheel to close it. He didn't bother tucking in his shirt as he watched her drive away, but instead shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

Slowly he turned and with a lazy step, headed for the back of the J&H building. She moved so she could watch him, but darted backwards when he glanced at her window again. She heard a low chuckle that made her ashamed of herself and what she'd just witnessed and done. Frustrated, she returned to her bed and stared at the ceiling. She heard the door to the apartment above hers open and close.

Quiet followed for several minutes, and then she heard a sharp deliberate sound. Three raps of his knuckles against the wood and plaster that separated their apartments.

Her eyes widened. Then there was silence.

Salacity

Chapter Two

"It's rather strange. This increasing amount of criminal activity."

Jack nodded absently as he watched Andrea Ashley tuck some of the files she'd been instructed to put away into the file cabinet. The plain gray skirt she wore flattered the curves of her hips and stopped just below her knee to reveal her shapely legs. When she turned and leaned forward to retrieve more folders, her white blouse opened to expose white lace framing her creamy breasts.

He'd always had a thing for brunettes. When he'd first seen her the day before in the courtyard with all that straight chocolate hair hanging around her shoulders, he'd had a strong urge to run his fingers through its silkiness. Today, she had it pulled back in a ponytail, showing off the smooth, graceful line of her neck.

"You aren't listening to a damn word I'm saying, are you?"

Jack's head snapped around and he met Darq Dillion's narrowed gaze. "Of course I am."

Darq's gaze lifted past Jack to look at Andrea. "Well, I can't say that I blame you. There are more interesting things to consider than unwanted criminals and discarded bodies. She's the new girl?"

"I hired her yesterday. Ellen fled without even leaving a note, although she did call me this morning and apparently received a lecture from the new girl about professional behavior before she was patched through to me." Jack glanced back at Andrea in time to see her catch her

Sable Grey

full bottom lip between her teeth and lower her thick lashes, veiling dark brown eyes as she read the label on the file in her hand.

"She's prettier than Ellen," Darq observed.

"I didn't hire her for her looks."

"Didn't you?"

Jack pulled his attention back to the man who'd raised him. "She practically forced me to hire her when she realized my receptionist had abandoned me."

Darq's brow rose. "Forced?"

"She was like a lion on the last piece of gristle." Jack laughed.

"Pretty *and* aggressive. A nice combination. Is she smart?"

"Quick." Jack nodded.

"Nice find. I hope she works out better than the last few receptionists you've hired." Darq shook his head as Andrea headed toward them with the file still in her hand. "Though I won't hold my breath."

"Excuse me, Dr. Jordan, but do you want this filed under the contact's name or with the police department files?" She turned the file so he could read it.

"Any files for Dillion are filed separately." Jack smiled and turned to Darq. "He'd be insulted to have it shoved in with the rest of them."

"I would." Darq agreed and uncharacteristically held out a hand in greeting. "Darq Dillion."

"He's the chief at Salacity PD," Jack provided when she shook his hand.

"Andrea Ashley, local lioness." She slanted a glance at Jack when he laughed. "I'm not nearly as dangerous as he made me out to be."

"Oh I imagine he doesn't know the half of it." Darq released her hand. "But I won't tell him if you won't."

"We'll just keep it between us." She winked with good humor. "I'm sorry for interrupting." She turned and headed back to her files.

"I believe you've taken on more than you can handle this time." Darq chuckled as Jack waved him toward the door. "She'll be running this place within a week."

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Andrea's soft laugh followed them from the room. As Jack locked the door behind him, he saw a little smile on her full lips through the glass window. "She promised to break Hyder Haines nose if he pawed at her."

"I'm inclined to believe she'd do it." Darq laughed. "You know, your attraction to her is not one sided."

Jack grinned as he led him through the corridor, "I'm thirty one, Darq, not twelve. I do know when a woman is interested in me."

"Yes, but you don't feel the sexual energy reaching out from her like I do. She's not just interested in you, Jackie boy. She's smoldering." Darq smiled smugly as they stepped into the corridor. Jack didn't answer. "So you don't know nearly as much as you think you do, do you?"

"You could feel that from her?" He locked the door and nodded at the one leading to the reception area.

"It was smothering me," Darq admitted.

As Jack unlocked the door, he considered what Darq's vampire senses had revealed. "Having a relationship would only complicate things, no matter how attracted I am to her or she is to me."

"Don't be so sure. I have a feeling she'd be more understanding than you think."

Darq withdrew his sunglasses and slid them onto his nose as he opened the door that led to the street. "I'll be back in a week to see if you still give a damn about understanding women."

"It's a bit early for you to be trying to bite into me. Don't you have a belfry to nest in for the last few hours of daylight?"

"That's one." Darq paused outside the door and held up a finger. "You might not be so miserable if you had a woman to do more than filing for you, so I'll let it go."

"I need a woman like you need a stake in the heart," Jack said, leaning against the doorframe. They'd played this game since he was kid. "The older I get, the more you meddle in my life."

"That's two." Darq held up a second finger. "I'm not the one going to bed alone every night."

"Okay, that's something I *won't* be discussing with you." Jack grinned. "Besides. I know you and mom sleep separately. There's only room for one in a coffin."

Sable Grey

"That statement is way below your IQ. I'm not even counting it." Darq chuckled.

"If I didn't love you, I swear I'd crucify you," Jack jabbed.

"That one I'll count. I'm going now." Darq turned and lifted a hand in a wave.

Jack smiled and watched him walk down the street to his car. "I'll see you next week?"

"You know it, kid."

When Jack returned to the office, Andrea had just inserted the last file into the cabinet. She smiled as he entered and locked the door behind him. "He's nice."

"Nice? Well, he was a lot more impressed with you than some — and he was on good behavior." Jack headed to his desk in the corner where she'd left his schedule. "Most are put off by him at first, but he grows on you."

"You know him well?"

"I should. He raised me since I was twelve." Jack turned off the lamp after glancing at the schedule. "He's the only real father I ever had. Before him, there was only a drunk uncle, and he was the best of any other family I could mention."

"I want to double check the orders I emailed," she said, not commenting on his family situation. "I'd feel awful if I botched something like that on my first day. Will you join me for dinner this evening?"

Jack glanced at the door to his work area, part of him wanting to take her up on the offer. "I'd like to, but I have a lot more work to do tonight."

"Then I'll say goodnight." She smiled and unlocked the door into the corridor. "I hope your work goes well."

She'd hidden her disappointment, because secretly she'd hoped to spend more time with Jack. She could tell he was into her and had caught him looking at her when he was supposed to be working during the day.

Back in the reception area, as she double checked her work, she wondered if she'd have to prove she wasn't going anywhere for him to actually let himself show interest. He didn't seem uptight and he'd freely

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offered her the information about his family. The truth was, he seemed perfect. Nothing was wrong with him, he laughed easily, and it didn't hurt that he was drop dead gorgeous, even with the glasses.

Satisfied that she hadn't made any mistakes, she cut off her computer, checked the front door to make sure it was locked and slipped out into the dark courtyard. As she locked the door, she wondered how late Jack worked every night. She could always cook dinner and keep it warm for him when he finally came in.

She tucked the keyring into her pocket, turned, and came face to face with a solid chest. She yelped. The man's black T-shirt stretched tight across his chest. She lifted her gaze to the man's face.

"At last we meet."

Andrea looked up. Dark hair hung around the man's handsome face. His intrusive green gaze swept lazily down the length of her, and then up again. He slowly drew his lips into a half grin.

"I'm Hyder Haines," he supplied. "And you're Andrea. You've worked out well for the company."

His likeness to Jack Jordan was uncanny, and yet she felt no easiness now as she had earlier when she was alone with Jack. She frowned. "No thanks to you. You set me up to be interviewed for a non-existent job."

"I had inside knowledge that the receptionist's position would open up for you." He didn't move out her path, keeping her there where she stood. Even his voice was similar to Jack's—similar, but not quite the same. Jack's voice had none of the thickness she heard now. And Jack's gaze never assaulted her like a predator on the prowl as this man's did. Despite her words of bravado the day before to Jack, she suddenly felt as intimidated as hell.

"I won't complain. I needed a job, and it worked out." She started to step around him, but he shifted, mirroring her movement.

"You aren't rushing off now, are you? What kind of gratitude is that?" He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "I'd hoped you'd at least offer me dinner." Jack had made it perfectly clear that Hyder Haines was not allowed in his living area.

Sable Grey

"I'm afraid I have other plans." She offered a smile that wavered when he inched closer, closing the distance between them. Involuntarily, she took a step backwards and bumped into the door she'd just locked.

"May I watch?" His eyes glittered.

Pull it together, Andrea. He'd caught her off her guard and she hadn't expected his degree of confidence or the intensity of his presence. Now he'd managed to corner her and she was most likely reacting in the manner he'd expected.

"Or would you rather watch me again? Voyeurism is a bit of wickedness I wouldn't expect in someone who looks so pure. I'm delighted to have discovered your dirty little secret."

"You don't know me or my secrets." She forced her voice not to shake and retracted the retreat she'd just taken, but he still didn't move aside. "I heard something and looked out the window. Once I saw what you were doing—"

"You watched," he interrupted.

"I was half asleep. It took me a moment to realize what I was seeing." It was a weak lie, at best.

"I didn't mind. I'm not a bashful man." His voice purred through the fading light, confident and strong. "Did you touch yourself while you watched us? Did you imagine I was inside you instead of the woman I was with?"

Andrea felt heat rush to her cheeks, which surprised her. She wasn't easily embarrassed. And then she pinpointed it. Hyder radiated sensuality. That lazy, lopsided grin told her that he knew the titillating effect he had on people. And there was a fearlessness and cockiness about him that both alluring and intimidating. He was sexy as hell and Andrea knew she should run away from him as fast as she could.

"You needn't answer. I know you did. Why else would you have continued to watch? You were surprised to see us there and excited by what you saw." He sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly. "As excited as you are now, since I mentioned it and brought the image back into your mind."

Salacity

She itched to slap him. She'd have to set him straight quickly and then avoid him from then on like the plague. "You must be easily confused. I'm not feeling excitement. It's more like disgust. Is this the ploy you used to run off the receptionist before me?" She tilted her head. "It's a bit lame. Is that the best you can do?"

His eyes darkened. "You're issuing me a challenge?"

"Give it your best shot." She raised a brow. "Because if all you've got is a few cheesy lines and a half assed grin, you're wasting both your energy and my time."

He lifted a finger and waved it at her. "You've got a spine the others didn't have." He leaned forward to peer around her, and she forced herself not to move. "And a nicer ass as well." He straightened.

"I imaging I've also got a better rack and more of an attitude. Are you finished?" She wasn't going to let him unnerve her again.

"My best shot?" His grin deepened when she put her hand on her hip and tapped the toe of her shoe. "Fair enough." He leaned toward her, dipping his head slightly to breathe in her perfume. The rush of his breath against her skin caused her to shiver.

"I *liked* that you watched me. When I realized you were there, I imagined it was you I was with and it was your pussy wrapped around the head of my cock instead of the sloppy cunt who entertained me. I thought of you, on all fours, of spreading your thighs so I could sink into what you only played with." His words were unabashed and shameless. "I thought of how slick you'd be and now I'm wondering that if I slip my fingers beneath the hem of this pretty skirt, would I find you the same way? You want my best shot, Andrea Ashley? Lay your ass down on the ground and I'll give it to you."

Her insides shook. Her blouse suddenly seemed too tight and she couldn't shake the heat that had climbed up inside her abdomen. He was everything a woman avoided in a man. It made her want to leap on him.

"Are you finished?" She felt like cursing when her voice cracked.

His low chuckle infuriated her. "I haven't even gotten started yet. I have an insatiable appetite and wouldn't stop until you whimpered and begged for me to quit. Then I'd start all over again, just to remind you that you asked for my best shot."

Sable Grey

"Fuck you."

"I'd rather fuck you." He leaned closer so that his lips brushed her ear, and his voice dropped to a low whisper. "Hard."

She had to get away from him. If she stayed another minute, she knew she'd give in and throw him to the ground. Her whole body ached as she ducked away and bolted toward the door of her living quarters. Hands shaking, she fumbled with the key, and then shoved it into the lock.

"If you change your mind, Andrea, just knock three times."

She didn't look back as she rushed through the door and slammed it on his low chuckle. Leaning back against the door, she took a deep breath. Heaven help her—her body felt like it was on fire. She'd expected a groping pervert, not a man who could pinpoint her desire and manipulate it at will. Hell, it was no wonder the women before her had taken off. He'd barely touched her and she felt as if he was all over her.

She whirled when his knuckles rapped three times on the door. But he didn't turn the handle. Instead, she turned the lock.

* * * * *

Andrea stared at the article she'd found on the computer about J&H. "So Hyder Haines and Jack Jordan are partners?"

"Equal owners of the company," Ellen Evary answered through the receiver. "Although Jack has the executive power of running the place."

"It says here that the company is a government funded facility." Andrea scrolled down on the screen. "Do you know anything about that?"

"Only that it has to do with the work Jack's doing. He'll tell you all of this if you ask him." Ellen paused. "You've met Hyder, haven't you?"

Andrea frowned and closed the article on the screen. "Yes. Two days ago."

"I think he's Jack's brother or something, from his birth family. I hate the bastard." Ellen's voice tightened. "He's...he's..."

"A pig," Andrea supplied.

Salacity

"Yes, and then some. The day before I left the company, I walked in on him in the reception area with a woman. On my desk. The bastard laughed and asked if I wanted to join them!"

Andrea's lips twisted. She'd already gathered in their short conversation that Ellen was very conservative. To hear her curse in her clipped angry voice was laughable.

"Well, thank you for talking to me, Ellen."

"He's disgusting. If you know what's good for you, you'd get out of there as fast as you can. Who knows what that man is capable of?" she warned.

"Thank you for the advice." Andrea said goodbye and hung up the phone. She'd already received pretty much the same response from the four previous receptionists she'd called. They all knew very little about the company and expressed extreme dislike for Hyder Haines, although all of them said he'd never actually touched them. He'd just been as inappropriate with them as he had with her.

She turned off the computer, checked the locked door, and swiped the schedule. She'd avoided speaking to Jack about her encounter with Mr. Haines in the courtyard and while she knew he'd noticed her withdrawal, he hadn't questioned her. She found him in the office at his desk, and decided it was time she breached the subject of Mr. Hyder Haines.

"Will you please look over the schedule? We've had a few new reservations for facilities." She slid the schedule in front of him. "And by the way, I've met Mr. Haines."

Jack's entire body stiffened. After a few minutes, he carefully removed his glasses and set them aside before rubbing his fingers over his eyes. He didn't look at her.

"How much is it going to cost me?"

"He was offensive, but not in the way I expected." Andrea continued to stand there as Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. His other hand fisted so tightly that his knuckles whitened.

"Goddamnit!" He stood, and his chair spun out from beneath him and hit the wall. "Did he touch you?" Anger flashed in his eyes.

"No."

Sable Grey

He breathed out, as if he'd been holding his breath. "I won't hold you to your promise of giving me two week's notice. It's not your fault."

Andrea could tell he was angry. He shook from it. She had to give him credit for his control. He looked like he was ready to tear the room apart.

"He's not the kind of man who'd put his hands on a woman if she didn't want him to," she said, feeling the sudden urge to ease some of his tension. "I've worked with perverts that grope women. That's why I was thrown off guard. I expected that kind of man, from your description of him."

"I don't understand." Jack stared at her. "I know how he is. He scares the hell out of people. Ellen told me he has violence in his eyes, which frightened her."

"I've talked to Ellen about it." Andrea leaned against the edge of his desk. "I hope you aren't angry that I called her...and some of the others. All of them said he never touched them. And I didn't feel threatened by him physically. I think they might have misread him." She laughed when Jack continued to stare at her. "Maybe it's because of my years at the institution. I'm used to reading people and determining the level of violence they're capable of releasing."

Jack moved forward, clearly interested in any profiling she might offer. But the moment he stepped closer, she didn't give a damn about Hyder Haines or what he was after. This close and she could smell his spicy aftershave, and the faint scent of maleness underneath it.

She licked her dry lips. "Don't get me wrong—I'm no psychiatrist. I've only had experience with dealing with patients at the institution." She swallowed as her gaze lowered to the few buttons of his pale green shirt, which had been left unbuttoned. "But it didn't seem like it was violence he was after. There was intimidation in his eyes, but not the kind meant to overpower someone physically."

"What do you mean?" Jack tilted his head.

"It was sexual." She met his gaze and looked away when his eyes widened. "He wouldn't force sex. What I mean is that while he doesn't

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use flowery words and try to mask his intentions, and it is power he's after, and his goal is to seduce—to manipulate desire in a woman."

When Jack didn't say anything, she continued, although she refused to look at him. "He's good at reading people. A good manipulator always is. Rather than building desire however, he attempts to shock, bringing an instant reaction that helps him measure his chances at seduction." She finally looked up at Jack to see his brow drawn as he weighed her words. "I've seen it in some of the patients at the hospital. They tell the worst part of their history and wait to see which ones run. The ones that don't usually have that history in common. Hyder Haines isn't looking for someone who's traumatized, however."

"What is he looking for?"

"Someone who's matched with him sexually." Andrea laughed. "I think I failed the test. I fled."

"Then he did frighten you." The corners of Jack's mouth dipped downward.

"No. He used the shock method, like I said. It's very effective because it instantly makes you examine your own basic desires and instincts rather than his character." Andrea felt her cheeks burn. "I ran because I scared the hell out of myself."

She ignored Jack's surprised expression. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere; I need this job. I just thought you should know what happened."

"I appreciate that."

Andrea hesitated, then reached for the schedule and headed from the room.

Sable Grey

Chapter Three

Darq leaned back against the leather sofa in Jack's living room.
"She said all that?"

"She was very honest, and I imagine it embarrassed her." Jack sipped his coffee. He'd called Darq the next night right after Andrea had retired. "I thought about it all day and wanted to talk to you about it. Her summation makes sense."

"Will that make a difference in the cure?"

"I believe it might." Jack nodded. "The work I've been doing has been based on anger and violence. If Andrea's right, I've been working in the wrong direction." He set his coffee aside and leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees.

"But you can't be certain."

"Work through it with me," Jack began counting the behaviors off on his fingers. "Picking locks to get out—and most of those times are with women. The verbal harassment against women hired at the company. Everyone Andrea called said Hyder had never forced himself physically on them. And then, of course—there's *you*."

"Me?" Darq laughed. "What do I have to do with any of this? I have my sex drive in check."

"I avoid you completely when I'm in Hyder mode, because of your acute sense of sexual energy. If I was angry, wouldn't you be the first target I'd pick to fight?" Jack watched Darq think over his words.

Salacity

"What about that man—the one in the bar? You punched him in the face."

"Yes." Jack nodded. "Over a woman."

"That's right, it was," Darq agreed. "So you're telling me that all this time we've been locking doors, it's just to keep your libido in check? Your darkest secret side is just horny?"

"Don't make jokes. This could be a breakthrough for me. After the accident, I withdrew from relationships because of my illness. The few exchanges I've had with women are short lived. It's the only part of me that's neglected. It makes sense that the side effects of my medicine would bring my resentment and anger to the surface."

"Does that mean that if you had sex regularly, you wouldn't scour Salacity for women at night?" Darq looked skeptical.

"It may be a combination of some kind of chemical reaction to the drugs and neglect. Many drugs affect the sex drive." Jack frowned thoughtfully at the surface of his coffee table. "Andrea said she didn't feel threatened physically, that the intimidation was only sexual. You know me, Darq. If I'm angry, I show it. But frustration, sexual or otherwise, I usually stifle and try to think my way out of it."

"And all this time we've feared you might be violent," Darq said after several moments of silence. "It took your lioness secretary all of two days to point out that you simply need to get laid."

"I don't know why I confide in you." Jack leaned back and reached for his coffee. "I'm trying to tell you that this gives me hope that I might be able to come up with a cure and get back to a normal life."

"Normal is boring." Darq laughed.

"Don't say that." Jack shook his head. "You can't compare your life with mine. You're being a vampire is not the same as losing control of yourself just so you can stay alive."

"No," Darq agreed. "But I'm the closest you'll get to understanding."

Jack said nothing. He knew Darq meant well, but his being a vampire couldn't possibly compare to the lonely hell in which he'd been living over the past three years.

Sable Grey

"So you didn't scare her off. She's sticking it out. Maybe she didn't mind that you've got this darker side. She might even like it," Darq drawled, interrupting the bitterness of Jack's thoughts.

Jack shifted. While his recollection seemed like a dream, he did remember her watching him when he'd fucked the woman in the parking lot. It had surprised him when he first remembered it. And then in the courtyard, it had been obvious that she was excited by his brash words.

"I've nothing to offer her until I get control of this."

Darq tilted his head back, looking up at the area of the ceiling that was Andrea's apartment. "If she's as aggressive as you described her, you might consider testing the waters to see what she likes. She may be just the cure you're looking for."

"You mean I should take advantage of her?"

"I mean, women enjoy sex too, Jackie." Darq straightened. "There's nothing wrong with having a sexual relationship with someone who is accepting of whatever kink you're into."

"Kink?"

"Well, dominating with sex and—"

"Enough. I'm not gonna sit here and let you twist this into something it's not. I've got work to do." Jack stood, gritting his teeth when Darq grinned up at him.

"Sounds like I hit a nerve. You must like her a lot."

Jack opened his mouth to argue, but decided against lying about his reaction to her. "I have to respect her for not running like the others did."

"She does have guts," Darq agreed. "And she's also a knock out. I've already told you that she's attracted to you. I hope I didn't raise a fool." He came to his feet slowly.

"She trusted me enough to tell me her theory about him. The subject of the conversation may have—"

"Turned her on?" Darq interrupted. Then he laughed. "That would be my guess. Don't bother rolling your eyes. I'm outta here. I have work to do."

"Be careful out there."

Salacity

"Always." Darq let himself out.

* * * * *

Andrea looked up as the door of the J&H building opened and the embodiment of sex strolled into the reception area. She caught her breath. Hyder's jeans hugged his hips and his white shirt hung open, exposing the dark hair across his chest. As before, his hair hung around his face, giving him a wild "I don't give a shit" look, and Andrea steeled herself against the jab of arousal that pierced her. She suddenly noticed the sealed box tucked beneath his arm.

"This is the new shipment of supplies the good doctor ordered last night." He set the package on the floor and slid a leg over the corner of her desk. "Busy?"

"About to fall asleep," she admitted, narrowing her gaze. "Maybe if someone didn't keep me up all night knocking on my ceiling, I could get some."

Damn that mouth when it pulled with a crooked grin. "I'd much rather keep you up in other ways."

"I don't really feel like listening to your juvenile fantasies today." She swiveled to face her computer and then smiled smugly when he slid off the corner of the desk. She stiffened however when she felt him move behind her. She sat frozen as he leaned down, his face level with hers, to look over her shoulder at the computer screen.

"Schedules. That's pretty boring. Maybe it's the work and not me that has you nodding off." He turned his head and breathed in deeply as if inhaling her scent. When he released his breath with a low groan, her clit throbbed.

"I like my job."

"I like you."

Andrea forced herself to laugh. "You can't possibly mean to try to sweet talk me after you've already shown me your true nature. I'm not gullible, and I don't trust false charm."

"I don't want you to *trust* me, Andrea." He grinned when she turned her head to look at him, and his eyes glittered. "Never trust me."

Sable Grey

"I wasn't planning on it."

"You know," his gaze returned to the computer screen as he spoke, "You keep me up at night, too."

"I won't give you the opportunity to tell me why. And unless you're scheduling some kind of appointment, you'll have to leave so I can get back to work."

"I lie in bed and think about that luscious mouth, those lips." His words were spoken in a low voice just next to her ear. "And of what you could do with it."

"Bit your throat out, perhaps?" Her quip brought a chuckle from his lips that vibrated inside a rush of hot breath against her skin.

"If that's what you're into, I'm game." He pointed at the screen. "You misspelled *pantothenic*." He dropped his long fingers to her keyboard, backspaced, and corrected the spelling.

"So, you are actually good for something."

"I'm good for a lot of things." He turned his head to meet her gaze, that damnable grin curled his defined lips. "Aren't you wet right now? Isn't your pussy throbbing to be touched?"

Andrea didn't let her expression give away that he'd guessed the truth about her reaction to him. Instead, she faced the computer. "My pussy and its condition are none of your business."

"They could be. I could make it my business. I have a feeling it wouldn't take but a flick or two of my tongue, and you'd want it to be my business." His hot breath tickled her ear as he continued to whisper in a low voice. "Wouldn't you like that? I think you would, Andrea. You know what I'd like? For you to part those lips for me now. Let me see your tongue slip along your soft pink mouth."

Andrea's entire body warmed. *Damn him*. The air around them seemed to thicken, making it harder to breathe. Without thinking, she licked her lips, and then felt like cursing when he groaned in her ear. It was a deep, low sound that sent chills across her skin.

"You like to play, too. I knew it." His breathing deepened and Andrea felt like her heart might pound right out of her chest. "You enjoy

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the torment. Your pussy aches right now. It craves to be touched and licked, and you love it.

"You're just exciting yourself." She shrugged. "And in vain, I might add."

"Aren't you hot right now? Can't you feel the wetness of your panties against your clit? Don't you want me to—?"

"No, I don't." She turned and looked at him. Their gazes locked, and for a moment that seemed like eternity, he just stared into her eyes. Then he slowly straightened.

"When you change your mind, Andrea, I'll be waiting."

She remained as she was until he stepped into the sunshine and the door closed behind him. Then she released a slow, shaky breath. She'd done better this time than the last. At least, she thought so. Her body, however, had enjoyed the same reaction she'd had before. Something about him, his wildness, tempted her into giving in to her basic desires, but she'd kept control of herself this time. She'd won the second round.

But several hours later, she didn't feel like she'd won. She was frustrated as hell and was having a hard time focusing on anything. Well, almost anything. Jack Jordan held her attention well enough as he worked at his desk, oblivious to her desperate condition.

She couldn't go on like this. She needed some kind of release.

"I was thinking I might go out tonight, after work." She hadn't meant to blurt out the words. "I wanted to ask you what your policy is about...bringing a friend home."

He lifted his gaze to peer at her over the rims of his glasses. "A friend?"

"A male friend." She clutched the folders in her hands and took a few steps toward his desk. "I hate to even bring it up, but since security is so important to you, I thought I'd ask in case I need to find a motel later instead."

He leaned back in his chair and slid the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows as he regarded her. "You mean you want to go out and pick up a man?" He frowned. "You know, I'm embarrassed to admit that I've never even considered that situation. Most of the women who worked here before either didn't stay long enough for the topic to arise or they were

Sable Grey

married." He rose, removed his glasses, and paced in a slow circle, his gaze on the floor.

Andrea licked her lips and chose her words carefully. She didn't want to scare him off. "Well, what's the norm for you? Do you bring women here, or take them somewhere else?"

"Me?" He looked up at her and laughed. "I just bury myself in my work. Of course, I don't expect someone like you to do the same."

"Someone like me?" she repeated.

"Well...beautiful, and I'd guess used to receiving attention when you need it." He scratched his head and fell back into thinking over the problem.

Andrea stared at him. "Work can't replace a warm body." His pace halted and his gaze flicked up at her. She hurried to add, "I mean, if I tried to do that, I'd end up as sex starved as Mr. Haines." Okay, she needed to stop talking. But when he continued to stare, she couldn't help herself.

"What good would it do for your company if I started leaping on the techs sent over by the police department? Or better yet, you? I can't make a living if you have to call your father to arrest me and throw me in jail every night for sexual harassment."

Apparently embarrassed by her outburst, he cleared his throat. "I don't think we'd have to worry about that happening."

"We don't?" Andrea ventured closer to him, so she could see his expression when he turned. "Why not?"

His gaze darted to her, and a small smile curled his lips. "I don't generally call the police on women who leap on me, despite my obsession with my work"

She grinned. "So, what should I do?"

"In regards to leaping on me?" Jack looked at her with amusement.

Andrea laughed. "No. What should I do about taking care of my little problem? Bring them home, or go to a motel?" *Home. Home. Come on, Jack.*

"Ah."

She could've sworn she saw disappointment flicker in his eyes, so she moved a bit closer. "Not that I'm not in favor of leaping on you. It's

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just that it might make it a bit awkward, considering you're my employer." She was baiting him, feeling him out a bit at a time. She didn't want to go out and pick up a man. She wanted this one.

"Of course." He crossed his arms and let his glasses hang loosely in his fingers. "If you're discreet, I don't see why you should have to pay for a motel."

"By discreet, do you mean to keep quiet while I'm...?"

"Please," he uncrossed his arms and held up his hands with a laugh that was clearly nervous. "I really don't want to hear what your habits are in bed if it's not going to be my bed. I meant discreet, in that you'd just take whomever upstairs and not have him wandering around the facility."

Andrea chewed her lip and studied his face. She could feel the tension between them, so thick she could taste it. He'd have to be a fool if he didn't feel it as well.

"What about you?"

"I can stay in my study tonight if you'd like." He turned and reached for the papers on his desk, and she heard his added murmur. "Lord knows, I'll need to do something."

"You know, I wouldn't mind it being your bed if I didn't think it would be weird between us later."

His shoulders stiffened, and he grew still. "You think I'd fire you."

"I don't know. I've never slept with a man I worked for before." She chewed at her lip and waited. Finally, he turned and walked slowly toward her, stopping once he stood right in front of her.

"It would be just a means to an end?"

Andrea nodded. "For both of us. Nothing more." She knew it was lie even as she said it. She'd already found reasons to be in the same room with him and had come to him with trumped up problems just so she could talk to him. But a relationship was something she couldn't promise, either.

"Goddamnit, I want to say yes." His expression became tortured, as if he were fighting with himself. He lifted his hand, as if to run the pad of his thumb over her mouth and instinctively, she parted her lips. "But there are complications."

Sable Grey

"It doesn't have to be complicated," she argued.

The tip of his thumb dipped between her lips, but didn't linger. Instead, he leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers. Liquid heat washed over her, caressing her along with the movement of his mouth. When his hot tongue slid forward and found hers, she moaned at the need suddenly filling her.

One moment he was kissing her in a soft lazy rhythm, and the next strong fingers lifted her to the edge of his desk and his body pressed against hers. His kiss became as hungry, frenzied, and demanding, and his cock strained against the material of his pants. It touched her thigh, succeeding only in bringing another moan from her throat.

A shiver of excitement shook Andrea when he reached behind her and cleared his desk with one sweep of his arm. He pulled free of the kiss and tilted his forehead against hers, his chest pumping with each breath.

"I can't." His words sounded forced.

Andrea dropped her hand to rub against his cock. "It doesn't feel like you can't."

He groaned deeply. "I want to...goddamnit, I really want to." He straightened. "But it's not fair to you."

"What isn't fair is your kissing me like that—and then changing your mind. It's not only unfair, it's outright cruel." She leaned back on one elbow atop his desk, watching him from beneath her lashes as she dragged her hand up her thigh, pushing her skirt up until her fingers touched her wet panties. "I want you, Jack Jordan."

His eyes dropped to her fingers and she watched him as she slid them beneath the slinky material. "I'd rather you were touching me." She pulled her panties aside and exposed herself to him. He took a step forward, and she smiled.

Jack took a deep breath. "I can't. It's not you, Andrea. I have too many complications that—" he groaned when her finger rolled over her clit. "You play a dangerous game."

"I'm not playing games, Jack."

"That's the problem." He forced himself to look away. "You're not the kind of woman who plays for one night stands. You deserve more

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than that." He fought with himself and finally succeeded in turning away from her completely. His cocked throbbed painfully and he heard her blow out her breath with frustration.

"You're right. I don't like one night stands. But I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here in misery one more night. And if you won't sleep with me, Doctor, I'll find someone who will."

He made a fist as she got up and left him standing there. The thought of another man with her drew an ugly, jealous demon from his gut. "The hell you will."

He headed to his private workspace, and his gaze locked on the vials. He swiped one of them, unstopped the end, and turned it up without hesitation. Its stark, sour taste burned down his throat. He stood there waiting, his whole body shaking with lust for the woman he'd just sent away. Never before had he come to the medicine to welcome the side effects. But as Hyde, he could have her without complications. She wouldn't expect more from *him*.

The effects, as always, came quickly. His vision blurred and he closed his eyes, his breath heaving as he shook. Then as the side effects subsided, a new feeling overtook him, casting his mind back into a haze.

"Stupid jack ass." His hand lifted to pull the band from his hair moments before he jerked the knit shirt over his head. He undressed completely, tossing the clothes aside and walking to the broom closet across the room. Three outfits hung there. He chose a pair of black jeans and a black silk shirt.

Sable Grey

Chapter Four

The pain of rejection fought with the lust still quivering inside Andrea's body, and she took one last look in the mirror. She'd let her dark hair fall around her bare shoulders. The red spaghetti strap dress didn't even reach mid thigh. It hugged her skin and screamed exactly what she wanted. *Sex*. The red heels matched her dress perfectly.

She left her apartment and headed downstairs. She let herself into the courtyard and locked the door behind her. Discreet, my ass, she thought to herself. She was gonna make sure Jack Jordan heard every sound she made with whomever she brought back.

Turning, she headed toward the back door of the courtyard. Her stride slowed and then halted as the door slowly swung open. A shoulder rolled into the doorway and rested against the brick wall.

Andrea wanted to scream. Hyder stood there with his black silk shirt hanging open and his gaze slid over her lazily, his nose flaring with each breath. Then he rolled his shoulder forward and took a step toward her, and she took a step backward.

"You look like you're on your way to hunt down a good time." His thick voice, floated into the darkness settling over the courtyard. He was too intense. Sex oozed from him, reaching out as if to choke her.

"I don't have time for this," she snapped.

He halted in front of her. "Do you have a date?"

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"No but I will before the end of the night." She tried to step around him, but he shifted, blocking her way. "Look, I'm in a desperate state. I don't feel like going through all this craziness with you right now."

"Desperate?" His lips curled sexily. "I like desperate. Desperate is right up my alley. No need to go out looking for something when you only need to knock on my door."

When she said nothing and just continued to stare at him, he leaned forward. "Why are you so desperate?"

"Because I was just laid across a desk and basically told to take a hike."

"Ouch." He clicked his tongue against his teeth and whispered in her ear. "Don't waste your time with the good doctor. Jordan is consumed with his work."

"Please, just get out of my way."

"Not until you part those lips for me again. I've been thinking about that sweet little tongue of yours all day."

The scent of him wafted around her, a mixture of hot arousal and maleness that made her knees weak. His intensity grasped at her hunger, wringing aching need from deep within her.

He leaned back, his gaze searching her face as his smile widened, exposing those perfect white teeth. Slowly he lifted a finger, and when it neared her mouth, she couldn't force herself to move away. His eyes glittered before the heat of his finger touched her bottom lip.

"Open for me." It was a command, thick and gentle, yet demanding. And she did as she was told. Against her will, her lips parted and he purred approval as his finger dipped into her mouth, sliding against her teeth until he touched her tongue. Then he withdrew it, pulling that moist warmth across her full bottom lip.

"What is it you're after?" she asked. Her whole body shook as he stepped from her path and walked around her, halting to whisper in her ear.

"I think it's obvious. I want what you want. And I won't stop. Not until you beg me."

The moment his lips brushed her jaw, she knew she'd lost the battle. A whimper gave her away, and his answering chuckle made her

Sable Grey

want to slap him. Instead, she leaned back against him, and his hand crept around to cup her breast.

"I was going to tell you before, when I wasn't as hot as I am now." She groaned when he rubbed his cock against her ass. "I'm not what you think I am."

"You have a secret fetish you think might turn me off?" His chuckle rumbled against her skin as his lips caught the lobe of her ear. "You like to watch. I already know about that one. So turn around and watch me."

She turned and dropped her gaze as he worked the zipper of his jeans. He walked backward, shoved his jeans low enough for his cock to jerk free, and leaned back against the marble concrete of the Cerberus statue.

Her throat closed and her mouth went dry when his hand clamped around the width of his cock and he ran his fingers up and then down its length. Eight inches, maybe eight and a half, and thick. Heat veined through her as she watched him pump himself.

"Do you have on panties under that dress, Andrea?" His voice found her, drawing her closer even though she never lifted her gaze.

"No." The word was barely a whisper.

"Slide it up and do what you did when you watched me before."

"I'm too turned on." She shook her head. "If I wasn't so close—"

His hand left his cock and she frowned with disappointment, but it disappeared when he headed back toward her. His pace was determined, purposeful.

Her gaze rose to his face, and she turned to run.

"No. I'm not letting you get away this time." He grasped her arms and hauled against him. Then he dipped and pressed his cock to the cheek of her ass, flesh to flesh.

"I'm not what you think," she said again, almost whimpering the words. Pain ripped through her, and caused her to arch back against him.

"What are you then, Andrea?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't stop the hunger from taking her over. For a few moments she was blinded by it, then she whirled, pushing him back with a strength that made his eyes widen.

Salacity

"*This* is what I am." She knew he could see the way her veins had darkened and now spidered across her skin. His gaze lifted to her mouth, and then to her eyes. She knew how she looked, completely blacked out. Her canines slipped over her bottom lip. It was what made them all leave when they discovered the truth.

For a moment, he just stood there, staring at her. "You're...a vampire."

"Flesh and blood."

He took a fearless step forward, and her eyes widened. Then his hand snaked out and slid around her waist, jerking her against him.

"That should make things interesting." His eyes glittered as he pressed his cock to her thigh. "No wonder you ran away from me."

"You're very intense." She groaned when his free hand began bunching the material of her dress up her hip. "More so, now that you've seen what I am."

His smiled, apparently pleased with her revelation. "Now I don't have to worry about hurting you."

Andrea would have laughed at his cockiness, except he pushed her to the ground, his heat engulfing her as he ripped the thin material of her dress away from her body. He straddled her, bent forward, and opened his mouth over her nipple. She arched into the warmth of his lips.

His energy assaulted her and she fed off it as he sucked fiercely. When his finger pushed inside her cunt, she thrust her own fingers into his hair, jerked him sideways, and rolled atop him. Lust and hunger made her whimper as she fought for control, suddenly afraid with her frenzy of energy that she might hurt *him*.

"Come on, don't slow down on me," he said with a deep chuckle, reaching for her hips. "Take what you need."

Tears stung her eyes, and grateful that he understood her nature, she pushed against the head of his cock. Before she could slide down, his fingers tightened on her hips and he thrust upward into her, bringing a growl of satisfaction from deep within her. He withdrew and then jabbed again, each jerk filling her with his hot energy.

"Goddamnit, that's good." He reached up, grabbing a handful of her hair and pulling her forward so he could lick the skin of her jaw.

Sable Grey

Andrea groaned, meeting each upward thrust with a downward one of her own.

When his teeth grazed her ear lobe, she couldn't think. "More." No sooner had the word slipped from her lips, than she found her back on the stone path.

"Take, Andrea." His deep voice was followed by a groan as he began rocking into her. But she didn't have to take anything. He was as heated as she was and his energy came at her without her having to draw it into her. She bucked beneath him, needing him to find his orgasm for her to reach her own.

When he leaned down, his teeth nipping again at her ear, she jerked up against him and dug her nails into his back. His breath hissed out through his teeth but he never missed pace, driving his cock into her core.

"Damn," he groaned and as he straightened and grasped her legs behind her knees. He pushed them forward, exposing more of her to him. "You feel good."

Andrea squeezed her muscles when he thrust into her and a growl that sounded more like creature than man rolled up from his chest. He was so close. She could feel his body readying as he tried to slow his pace, and she squeezed again.

"Hurry," she pleaded.

His eyes glittered as he finally gave in and rocked into her, shouting as he came. His burst pushed her over the edge into her own orgasm and she screamed her pleasure. It took everything she had not to lean up and bite him, marking him as hers. He didn't stop immediately, riding her until her screams softened to tiny whimpers.

His breathing was heavy as he dropped forward and rested his weight on his arms. "Give me a minute. I'm not done with you yet."

Andrea stared up at him as he grinned down at her. "You can't be serious."

"I have an insatiable appetite."

Salacity

"I gather." She stretched as he pulled from within her and stood. It had been so long since she'd been able to feed like that. "You knew what I was."

"It's not the first time I've seen someone like you. Did you think you'd scare me away?" He clicked his tongue against his teeth as he shrugged off his silk shirt and tossed it to her. "I like sex, Andrea. What should I care if it comes with fangs or not?"

Andrea sat up and watched him walk to the fountain. When he leaned down and cupped his hand to splash blue water on his face, she laughed. He straightened and looked at her again, and his grin was gone. He looked like a hungry predator.

"You're full now, but I'm not. Without those teeth in the way, I want to see what that beautiful mouth can do." He pushed down his jeans and kicked them off to the side.

"What makes you think I will?" She raised a brow.

He halted in front of her, hands on his hips. "Because you like sex, too."

"Maybe I'll just bite the hell out of it."

"Whatever you do, don't stop until I tell you."

Andrea knew she should get up and leave. She knew she should. But she didn't.

Chapter Five

Jack lingered in the lab as Andrea finished cleaning up for the night. His gaze slid down her figure as she cleaned out the sink and he fought the urge to walk over to her and touch her. It was becoming harder and harder for him to ignore his attraction to her. It wasn't just a physical attraction, either. He found himself wanting to share work details with her ever since she'd shown interest in the last test they completed for the police department.

"Will that be all tonight?" She faced him, her clipped voice reminding him that she was still hurt by his rejection. He felt the urge to share something with her, to make up for treating her so poorly.

"This other work I'm doing," he nodded towards the door of his personal work area before continuing. "I'm working on a cure."

"A cure?" Some of the anger ebbed out of her expression, and was replaced with curiosity.

"Yes. A medicine," he said. "While I have something that will work, the side effects are still too extreme."

"You are testing it on yourself?" Her brow wrinkled.

He removed his glasses, set them aside, and brought his fingers up to rub his eyes. "The truth is, I'm sick. It's why I sent you away last night." He dropped his hands to the desk in front of him and smiled warily. "I didn't want to send you away. It's me and this sickness."

"What kind of sickness?" Her voice was soft and he recognized the sudden dread in her tone. She understood what he was saying.

Salacity

He released a heavy breath. "J&H used to specialize in medical care and pharmaceuticals for special government projects. The lab became the target for a terrorist attack. The bombing was meant to be a message of power, because they waited until after hours to bomb the place. It was just a small bomb, but with all the chemicals stored in here—"

"Oh my God, you were here when it happened!" Andrea's hand lifted to her mouth.

"Yes."

When she said nothing, he continued, "Because of the exposure to the chemicals, I've developed a disease that is like a form of cancer. The government funds my research, thinking that if I can come up with a cure, they can study it and use in the event of chemical warfare." He shook his head. "I've found a solution to keep me from dying, but nothing yet that can truly be called a cure. If I stop taking what I've got, my health deteriorates."

"Jack—"

"I told you it's complicated." He laughed. "But I felt like such an ass after you left last night, and I thought you deserved to know."

He watched Andrea lower her gaze to his desk, could see her mind whirling to wrap around what he'd told her, to make sense of it. "I did want you last night. But you aren't the kind of woman who settles for a one night stand. I'm not a complete buffoon. I do know there's chemistry between us. And if I'd indulged myself, I would've wanted more. But that would be unfair to you, given my circumstances." He still wanted more. Even through the haze clouding his mind about the night before, he remembered the sound of her moans, her screams. He swore he remembered her saying 'Jack' once, rather than Hyder. It pulled at him.

"I appreciate your telling me. I wish there was something I could do to help."

"There's nothing anyone can do. It's my own battle to fight."

"You don't have to fight it alone, Jack." She reached out and touched his hand. "Are you in pain?"

"If I don't take the medicine, yes." Jack watched her fingers curl around his. "Great pain. I've almost given up a hundred times, but it's hard for me to let go of something I haven't finished."

Sable Grey

"Does your family know?"

"Yes. Darq doesn't need nearly as much help as he lets on." Jack laughed. "It's his way of coming by to see that I haven't given up."

"Can you show me your work?"

Jack winced. He wanted to. She made him want to share it. But he knew he couldn't. What would she think? And the betrayal of learning that it had been him fucking her last night after he'd sent her away would drive her to leave.

"I can't. I probably shouldn't have told you what I have, except—" He withdrew his hand, but to his surprise she walked around the desk and halted at his side.

"It's okay. You don't have to explain anything else." Her fingers drifted across his temple, and he closed his eyes.

"It feels good just to talk about it with someone. It's not easy, being here every day and—" His eyes opened as her lips brushed his, and lingered. "Andrea."

"Shhhh. I know all about loneliness, Jack. I can help you," she whispered against his mouth before dropping another feathery kiss on his lips. His hand shook as it lifted to her waist.

"Come with me." She stepped back and gave his hand a tug.

"I should stay and work," he said, but still he allowed her to lead him from the lab. He followed her through the door, across the courtyard, and into his home. Once inside, she reached for him.

"Andrea," he lifted a hand to her face. "You weaken my will." Tracing the line of her lips with his finger, he wished he could find it inside himself to either tell her the truth or push her away. He couldn't do either. Instead, he kissed her.

* * * * *

"He hasn't come out since yesterday, and he never gave me a key to that door. I didn't want to break it down in case I just hadn't seen him leave." Andrea wrung her hands as Darq found the key on his keyring to

Salacity

fit the door of Jack's workspace. "He shouldn't be alone when he's working like that. What if something goes wrong?"

"Stay here." Darq told her as he unlocked the door.

"The hell I will." She pushed past him into the room. "Jack?"

"Andrea, you can't be in here."

She searched the room and found him sitting on the floor in the corner. Relief flooded through her, but her stomach knotted as her gaze found the syringe that hung from his arm. "Oh God."

Darq moved forward and carefully removed the needle. Then he slipped a shoulder beneath Jack's arm and hefted him to his feet.

"I thought I'd found it. Wrong combination." Jack's eyes rolled back for a minute. "The pain is too much."

"There, on the shelf—is a case with a number of vials," Darq instructed her as he settled Jack into a chair. Bring me one."

"No." Jack shook his head and pushed Darq away.

"Jack, you need your medicine."

"No. Send her away."

Andrea grabbed the case of vials and held it out to Darq. "I'm not leaving you, Jack."

"You have to. Please, you won't understand." He slapped Darq away and the vial flew to the floor, the delicate glass splintering.

"Jack, please—"

"Leave and let me take care of him," Darq told her. When she didn't go, he raised his voice. "Leave!"

Reluctantly, she fled.

Darq retrieved another vial.

"I want her, Darq. I wanted to fix it all so I could have her."

Darq steeled himself against the heartache filling him. He'd been in this place before with Jack. It was the first time anything had caused him pain that he couldn't kill. As he lifted the vial to Jack's lips, his hand shook.

"Drink, Jackie."

Jack stared up at him with such a tortured expression that Darq felt like screaming. He'd considered turning his son on more than one

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occasion; as a vampire, Jack would no longer suffer. But it was a selfish desire, so he refrained.

"Drink, son, please." His voice cracked and to his relief, Jack's lips parted and he drank the medicine from the vial.

* * * * *

"What the hell do you mean, you're letting me go?" Andrea stared at Jack.

"I told you never to come into my workspace. It's a simple rule. I tried to explain the importance of it to you, and while I realize you were only concerned about me—"

"You could have died in there alone!" She shook her head. "That's your foul, not mine."

"I'll send you off with enough money to find another place to stay." Jack still hadn't looked at her.

She reached out and touched his shoulder. "I'm not leaving you, Jack."

"I don't want you here." His words sounded forced, and she knew he didn't mean them. Still, they hurt. "It's too complicated."

"No, it's not."

"Damn it, Andrea, I care for you. I'll only end up hurting you if you stay." He slammed a hand down on the table. "And Hyder will use you if you continue to sleep with him."

So that was it. She almost laughed. "Jack—"

"I understand that you're attracted to him."

"Jack—"

"Goddamnit, you want something I'm trying to kill."

"Jack," she reached for his arms. "It's you—I'm attracted to *you*. Not Hyder."

His gaze was tormented. "I can't put you through this shit. It's not fair. I remember only glimpses of you and...you called my name when you were with *him*. How can I live with that?"

Andrea could see that he was fighting himself. "It's you."

Salacity

"When you're with me, do you think of him? And what if the cure never works? There's no way I can live like this."

"I've only slept with you."

"I *know* you were with Hyder. Don't insult my intelligence by denying it," he growled. "I don't blame you. It's my fault. I did it. It was a selfish thing for me to do, but the thought of you leaving in that damnable red dress—" His fist clenched. He was furious, mostly with himself. Ranting, and for once, out of control.

"You know my secret."

"Why should I care about your being a vampire? I'm talking about *my* secret. It would drive us apart if you knew." For a moment his eyes went wild, then they cleared and he stared at her.

"You know my secret because I showed you." She touched his face. "And because I *am* a vampire, I know yours."

"What?"

"I've always known. It's the same energy, more intense after you take the medicine, but still the same. Your energy marks you. I'm surprised you don't know that, having a vampire in your family." Andrea ran her hand down his cheek. "I didn't understand it completely, this dual life and attitude, not until you told me of the accident and your illness. But I've always known that you and Hyder are the same man."

He said nothing, just continued to stare down at her, so she went on, "That night, in the courtyard—I thought you might be playing some kind of sick game. And you were so...intense, that you left me with little choice by pushing me so I needed to feed. But it was still you, and if the only way I could have you was to play that game, I was willing at that point to play it."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I did," she grinned. "As you said, I called *your* name. I suppose I did it because I was still angry that you'd sent me away."

"But I behave so differently when I'm Hyder...I've no control over the things I say or the way I act."

"You're not that much different, Jack. It's just a different side of you. When you kissed me the first time, it was with the same fire and lust

Sable Grey

that is always in your eyes after the medicine. The same kiss. The same dick. The same arms around me."

"But it was Hyder who had you first."

"No, it was you." Andrea touched her fingers to his lips. "I fell in love with you the first day your father came here. Vampires sense one another. And you had no judgments against him for being different."

"He never told me."

"Well, it's kind of a rule that we aren't supposed to out one another." She laughed. "If he'd told you and I found out, he and I would have gone rounds."

"It doesn't change the fact that you can't stay here." Jack's voice deflated. "I don't have anything but a fucked up life to offer you and I can't promise that I'll ever find a cure to my illness."

"Panthonetic acid is part of your problem." Andrea slid her hand against his temple. "When I'd misspelled it and you...Hyder...pointed it out, I looked it up."

"It's a muscle relaxer. It eases the pain when I'm weakened by the sickness."

"Some doctor you are." Andrea snorted. "A muscle relaxer that increases sexual stamina? It makes you want to fuck. I imagine mixed with all that other stuff in your medicine, its effects are increased."

"My God."

"Take it out of your medicine and get laid sometime and you won't have a cure, but you may eliminate the Hyder effect." She dropped her hand to his. "I'd come in handy for the getting laid part."

He laughed abruptly, as if he'd not meant to. "Yes, you would, but it wouldn't be good because you shouldn't see me as I was yesterday. Sometimes the medicines I create don't have the effects I hope for."

"You can't do it alone, Jack, and you can't keep hiding from me. We can work through this together. You can create a medicine that will keep people from dying. It just needs some tweaking."

"It doesn't cure me."

"No, but I can."

"You can't."

Salacity

"Ask your father. I'm sure he's thought of it before. I can change you, to be like me—and you'll have no more sickness." She shook her head. "Of course, you can't keep testing the medicine on yourself. But you could live on to continue your work."

"You mean you'd make me your mate?"

"No, that's something totally different." Andrea smiled. "I mean that I could change you, and make you a vampire. You're gonna be my mate no matter if you grow fangs or not."

His eyes narrowed, but she saw brightness come in and chase away the hopelessness reflected there. "What makes you think I'd want to do that?"

"You have a dark side, Jack Jordan, and I've seen it. Think of how it feels to have sex with no earth beneath your feet." She raised a brow, and laughed when his gaze darkened. "Now think about doing that with someone who loves you."

He stared at her for several seconds, and she held her breath, waiting. She'd bared her soul to him, told him her feelings. She wasn't going to let this opportunity for happiness slip away from her without a fight.

Finally he gave her the words she wanted to hear.

"I love you too, lioness."

Sable Grey

Author Bio

Sable Grey resides in the Deep South of the United States with her wonderful husband, one very spoiled dog, and two crazy cats. She spends her time writing, researching her genealogy, designing cover art, watching movies, and reading.

With favorite authors like Stephen King, Piers Anthony, and Iris Johansen, it's no mystery where she gets her inspiration to write tales of love, adventure, and mystery. An avid reader and storyteller at a young age, Sable began writing small stories as a child for her mother. However, it wasn't until she was well in to her twenties that she realized her calling was sharing her stories with a larger audience than just family members and friends.

Now, Sable is dedicated to her craft and to bringing her readers quality fiction with unforgettable characters. For her, writing a story means writing a story meant to touch the mind, body, heart, and soul.

Salacity

Also Available from Cobblestone Press, LLC

Enduring Promise by Tempest Knight

Chapter One

"Don't do this to me," Evan Harris muttered under his breath.

His sports car lurched one last time, shoving him against the steering wheel, knocking the wind out of him, before it came to an abrupt stop and died.

"C'mon, start." He turned the key and pressed the gas pedal several times, but the motor remained dead.

"Shit!" He slammed his fist against the steering wheel. He fished his cell phone from the backpack on the passenger seat and hesitated for a moment. Who could he call? Nobody knew where he was headed. He'd jumped into his car and driven away without even leaving a message for his assistant. He let out a long sigh. Maybe Triple A. He started to punch the numbers when he noticed the *No Service Available* in the display.

"Great. Just fucking great." He threw his cell phone back in the bag. Leaning back, he ran his hands through his hair in frustration. He looked out the windshield to see nothing but a great expanse of shortgrass prairie and scrub vegetation. The sun's weak rays barely pierced through the thick, low hanging gray clouds. At least the hard rain that had followed him since he left the highway had lightened to only a soft drizzle.

Sable Grey

What the hell had he been thinking when he took this shortcut? Rubbing his temples, he frowned. But that was exactly the problem, wasn't it? He'd not been thinking. Tension and unease had slowly built inside him for days. But this morning he'd awakened with a sense of restlessness he couldn't explain. The urge to get away from New York—and his work—had grown as the hours went by. This morning, before he'd had time to consider what he was doing, he'd phoned his partner to take over the photo shoot he'd scheduled. Then he'd packed a light bag, jumped in his car, and slammed his foot down on the accelerator like a possessed madman. The car ate up the miles. The need to drive away had been all consuming. Yet, the edginess hadn't eased once he'd hit the highway. On the contrary, it'd grown with each mile. Mixed with a sense of urgency. Until he'd meandered onto the country road.

"Yeah, well, now I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere," he muttered. Opening the glove compartment, he pulled out a road map he kept there for emergencies like this. As he studied the map carefully, his frown deepened. Once he'd gotten out of New York, he'd been compelled to head south, that much he remembered. Yet he couldn't remember exactly when or where he'd gotten off the highway.

Tossing the map aside, he threw his head against the headrest, eyes closed, and swore under his breath. Unbelievable. He was lost. Really lost.

You are not lost.

He opened his eyes and looked around. Had he been thinking out loud? He grabbed the map and focused on it. Gradually a few marks started to become clearer. If his calculations were correct, there should be a town about five miles away. He folded the map and put it away.

He grabbed his backpack and climbed out of the car. A gust of chill October air swirled around him, and he wrapped his jacket tighter. With a last contemptuous glare at the car, he shouldered his pack and headed down the dirt road.

He took a quick glance at his watch. A quarter after four. The sun would set soon. With any luck, he could make it to the town before dusk. He hurried his footsteps, not wanting to be caught after nightfall in these desolate parts.

Salacity

The heavy rain had turned the road into a mess of muddy sludge and puddles. With every step he took, his leather boots sank deeper in the muck. His breath became ragged with the exertion. Sweat covered his brow. Every now and then he glanced over his shoulder, hoping for the sight of a passing car or a farmer's truck, but he hadn't seen another vehicle since leaving the highway behind. Not even a single house.

The wind picked up, feeling like sharp knives cutting his face. He drew his jacket tightly around him, zipping it all the way up. The light grew dimmer. He shifted his backpack and rubbed the muscles knotted with tension beneath the straps. The urge to keep moving grew stronger with each step he took.

He stopped short at the sound of thunder rumbling in the distance. He turned around and stood frozen as he stared in dismay. Big gray-blue clouds darkened the sky, and rain enveloped the land like a blanket, moving fast in his direction.

He weighed the idea of returning to his car to weather the storm, and his glance wandered back in the direction from where he'd come. Did he have time to get back to it? Lightning struck closer. Without another thought, he turned and ran.

The clouds rolled closer, casting shadows with every flash of lightening. The storm would be here any minute. The soft droplets that had accompanied him before were thick now. He couldn't stay out in the open. He needed to find a place to weather the storm—and soon. He looked around desperately in search of anything that could work as a shelter. When a flash of lightning pierced the darkness, he spotted a broken-down picket fence to his left and a faint glow of light beyond.

A house.

Bending double against the bitter wind, he jogged to the other side of the road. A soft mist rose from the ground and swirled slowly around his feet as he reached the fence. His gaze traveled up and down until he found a gravel path leading to the house shrouded by tall weeds. From where he stood, the house looked old and deserted, yet dim lights shone from the lower floor.

He glanced over his shoulder again. The storm raged less than a half mile away, and the gentle drops became thick, slashing at his cheeks.

Sable Grey

The wetness crept into his shirt, beginning to soak his flesh. Needing no further encouragement, he darted up the gravel path.

The rain picked up. He peered over his shoulder. Behind him the mist turned into a thick fog that rose higher. Unnatural.

Armand...