

ON A WING AND A WISHBONE

Sienna Black

LooseId®

www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id® e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

On a Wing and a Wishbone

Sienna Black

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © November 2007 by Sienna Black

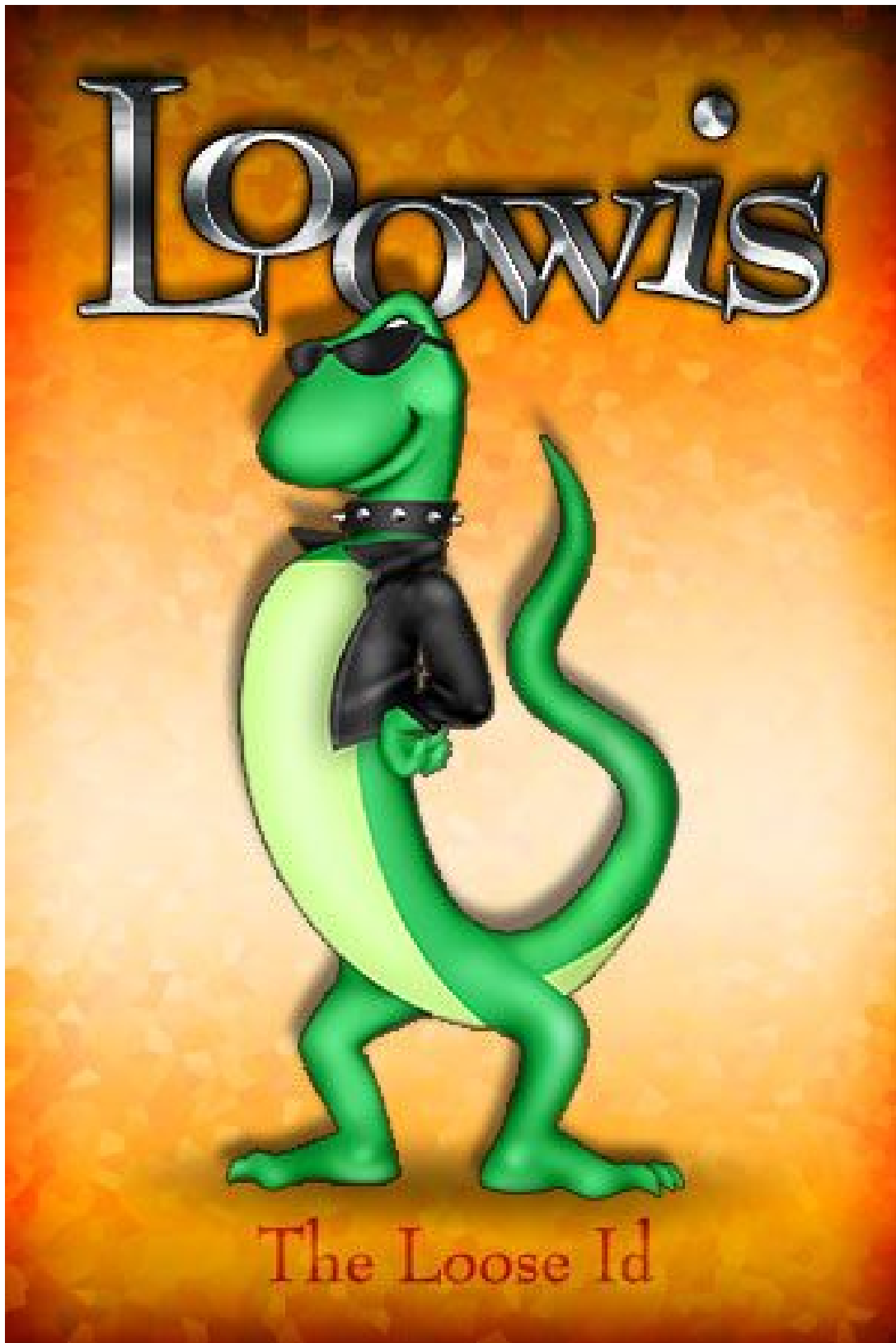
All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-592-0

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Jana J. Hanson
Cover Artist: Anne Cain



www.loose-id.com

Chapter One

The tinkle of breaking glass sounded like falling chimes in the sudden silence of the café kitchen. It might even have been beautiful if the world weren't splintering around her as well. Takara Duncan grabbed the edge of the counter just to assure herself the room hadn't really turned into a Tilt-A-Whirl.

"Take it easy, Taks. It's not that big a deal."

Takara's heart lurched, and her eyebrows leaped for her hairline. "Not a big deal for *who*, exactly?"

Very few things were a big deal for Ben Warner, her boyfriend of one year, seven months, and thirteen days. Six feet plus of bronzed skin and obvious muscle, a square jaw, permanent dimples, and true blue eyes meant most people liked him at first sight. He took life in stride and hardly ever stumbled. He wasn't Takara, who tripped more often than she glided. She'd memorized the taste of shoe leather from chronic foot-in-mouth disease and taught herself how to apologize without ever using the words *I'm sorry*. No, this wouldn't be a big deal for good old Ben.

She closed her eyes. "Just give me the number again. Slow and clearly. I want to make sure I heard you right. You volunteered me to make how many pies?"

Ben cleared his throat. Good. Maybe he'd feel just a hint of guilt, for a second. Or two. "Fifty."

Takara's lungs tightened. Panic climbed her spine and made the short hairs on the back of her neck lift. "Fifty. In how much time?"

He coughed this time. "Two weeks?"

There it was again, that stomach-churning sensation of the floor dropping out beneath her feet. Before she could open her eyes, she felt Ben's hand at the small of her back. His arms slid around her waist, and he urged her against him, folding her into the warmth of his chest.

"I'll take it back," he murmured, breath warm as it feathered through her hair and across her scalp. "I'll tell them I went crazy, and we can't get it done."

"We." Takara sniffed and turned, pressing her face against his chest as she threaded her arms past his and held on in return. "You tell them that, and they won't hear we. They'll hear *I* couldn't do it. Crazy Takara and her catering dreams."

She tried to keep her voice light and the tightness in her throat from getting in the way. The truth was, the whispers behind hands and glances people thought she didn't see had slowly begun to take their toll. No one in Wexford Bay believed a Duncan would follow through on their plans. Why should they? They'd had plenty of reasons to scoff and snicker and shout their doubts from the rooftops.

Her father'd started it. Michael Duncan had big plans when he brought his family to Wexford Bay, Washington. New York wasn't for him, he'd told his friends and family. A successful, if small-time, architect, he'd boasted that he'd build a community the likes of which the world had never seen. He designed amazing, standalone house plans with split levels and sprawling lawns. He wanted schools built and shopping centers and a clubhouse that was the equivalent of a Broadway theatre, a professional gym, and an incredible library. He had big dreams.

But dreams were hard to turn into reality.

Despite the fact that he had convinced a bank to believe in him, or the many people who responded to his promises with enthusiasm and the excited buzz in town when he broke ground on the first of many planned construction projects, it hadn't been enough to keep him on track.

Nine months later, only two houses had been built, and word was out that there'd been difficulties in getting started on any more. The school board had yet to give its approval for a new facility, and until they saw some real forward progress, no retail stores were willing to sign a contract to move in to non-existent properties.

The dream fizzled and died. Michael called it off when the fifth house was finalized. They were gorgeous homes and highly in demand. They sold for twice what he expected, but the money didn't lead him back to the grand design. He settled for remodeling older homes and the occasional corporate contract.

Her mother, Danica, had a few failed ventures as well: coffee shops, a bookstore, a scrapbooking boutique. She always started out well, full of the same sort of enthusiasm and hope for her shop. It always faded away the minute her profits came in less than expected.

Even her brother, Wes, had disappointed the people of Wexford Bay. Somehow, he never managed to keep a tutoring appointment with the kids he'd conned in school. Twenty bucks meant nothing if the sun was shining and the water in the bay was anything less than turbulent.

So she didn't blame them for expecting her business to fail. She just wanted to prove them wrong with every fiber of her being. She *had* to prove them wrong. Takara Duncan could make this work.

"I said we, and I meant it," Ben insisted, pulling her back to the present. "Whatever I can do, I'll do. Open cans, stir up whipped cream. Hell, I've seen you smash graham crackers with a rolling pin. I could do that."

Takara laughed and straightened, sniffing the threat of tears away. She poked a finger into his chest and pushed lightly. "Graham crackers are for cheesecake. Gingersnaps for pumpkin pies." She paused. "They don't all have to be the same kind of pie, do they?"

Ben grinned and shook his head. "I named a number, not the kind."

Well, that was something. "Then you can swing the rolling pin around. Carefully."

"Scout's honor," he told her, holding up a hand. "Point me, aim me, turn me loose."

"That's what I like most about you," Takara told him, going up on her toes. "Once I aim you, you stay right on course." Sure, it was wicked, but judging by the quick widening of his pupils and the low rumble that passed his lips, he didn't mind a little wickedness. She threaded her arms around his neck and kissed him, letting her eyes drift shut.

She liked kissing Ben almost as much as she liked luring him to bed. The man had a mouth just made to be kissed. His bottom lip was full and almost unfairly soft. His upper lip was thinner, but no less fun to nibble on.

Sandy blond hair just long enough to hang onto, to tug and encourage him to tilt his head so their lips could seam together while their tongues twisted, tangled, and played.

He rumbled again and stepped forward with her, pressing her butt against the edge of the counter. Broad hands and long, deft fingers wrapped over her hips, bracing her as he fit against her, the bulge of his denim-trapped erection already evident as he ground against her. She loved that part of him, too.

Takara laughed and pulled away from the kiss. "Not in the kitchen," she murmured. "Health codes."

"Health codes," he echoed, a mutter of playful protest. "Since when do you stick so closely to the rules?"

"Since I like my job," she answered. "And since it works better than praying nobody notices if I don't. Speaking of which, *you'd* better pray someone up there hears mine. I'm going to need help from more than one extra set of hands, thanks to you."

She meant it only half seriously. She could manage. She *would* manage, no matter what, but her determination didn't keep the flutter of anxiety from skipping through her veins. Teasing or not, she touched the pendant she always wore. A trinket her mother had brought back from one of their recent retirement trips. A souvenir from Europe or Asia or maybe Greece. Danica claimed it brought good luck. Takara thought it was pretty, but if it really worked, there was no harm in using it now.

Ben nudged her chin, startling out of her impromptu plea for diving intervention. His lips traced her pulse and a buzz like static electricity raced through her, making her heartbeat skip. "Did you feel that?" she wondered, even as Ben kept on, making her tip her head to one side to expose her neck. Warm breath fanned over her skin, forcing a shiver out of her.

Ben answered in a voice that was all but a growl. "Every time, baby. Break time."

He curled his fingers through the belt loops on her jeans and took her with him as he backed across the kitchen toward the stairs that led to the apartment over the café. Pulse pounding, she cleared her throat and called out, "Going upstairs for a quick nap," as she tripped after him, her fingers knotted in his shirt, less for balance than for simple contact. She felt his heart thumping hard beneath her palms.

Susie, her counter girl, squawked, "What? Now? You can't take off in the middle of lunch, Takara!" She might as well have shouted into the wind. Takara didn't slow down, and she didn't pull away from her boyfriend.

Who turned her in his arms again when they stood at the bottom, then put his hands at her hips and propelled her up the steps in front of him. He had so much of her weight braced against him, he might as well have carried her, awkward position or not. She felt as though her feet barely grazed the stairs.

Takara unlocked the door, and Ben crowded her through. She almost missed the click of the tumbler snapping back into place for the sound of her heartbeat in her ears. She loved

this part about her boyfriend, too. He was undeniable when he wanted something. When he wanted *her*. She didn't need the power to resist him. She wouldn't use it anyway.

"Tell me you forgive me," he said as he pushed off the door and crossed the room. He didn't walk so much as he prowled. Stalking her. Takara's heart leapt into her throat, and another shiver raced her spine, this one born of excitement and desire.

"Forgive you for what?" She sounded breathless to her own ears. She crossed her arms and grabbed the hem of her shirt, pulling it off then dropping it quickly. The apartment was warm, but standing in her bra, the air was cool enough to tighten already stiff nipples even more. She watched Ben's gaze dip to take them in, then lift again. His next stride was longer, devouring distance.

"Getting you in over your head." His hands were at her waist again, fingertips tracing the curve of her blue jeans. He hooked a finger just behind the button closure, then tugged until it popped.

"Long as I'm with you, over my head is a-okay."

She meant the reassurance wholeheartedly. Though she sometimes envied Ben's easy way with situations and strangers, she didn't hold it against him. He was her anchor and her security when the rest of the world went nuts.

He also knew exactly which buttons to push to make her forget her worries.

The clasps on her bra didn't last long beneath his fingers. She kissed his chin, nipped the bottom lip on his wicked little smile, then gasped and closed her eyes again as he peeled the wire and cotton away. He curled his hands around her breasts, lifting them as he ducked his head to kiss the upper swells.

She curled her hands in his hair, tugging lightly, when he ducked his head and covered one nipple, tracing swirling designs with his tongue as his thumb bumped back and forth over the other. He bit, very carefully, startling a hiss out of her. She pulled harder in response. "Be nice," she murmured.

Ben lifted his head, eyes gone all to pupil and that smile turned into a grin. "I'm being nice. I'm gonna get better," he promised, and lifted her, urging her legs around his waist.

The apartment over the café wasn't all that large, but nobody covered distance like Ben when he had sex on his mind. Long-legged strides took them both through her bedroom door and he toppled with her, making her years-old bedsprings squeal in protest. Laughter covered the sound, at least a little, as Ben nipped and nuzzled his way down to Takara's waist. He dipped his tongue into her navel and she shivered, then lifted her hips so he could peel her jeans down.

"I love these freckles," he told her after kissing the inside of her thigh. "Have I said that?"

Takara lifted her head. "Only every time you get me naked. They've been there, they'll still be there the next time," she promised, and let her head fall.

As a teenager, she'd been reluctant to wear bathing suits in public because of that trio of marks. Not quite a triangle, the moles -- or freckles, as Ben insisted -- were large enough to be noticed but more or less hidden between her legs, even in high-cut bikini bottoms.

Ben had been fascinated by them from the first time he'd seen them. She'd blushed to her toes when he laughed, thinking he'd make fun of her. Then she'd flushed to her scalp when he tasted them, tongue smoothing over skin that had rarely been touched by someone else's fingers, much less lips, tongue, and teeth.

His hands slid higher, thumbs pressing into her flesh. He groaned lowly and urged her legs further apart, then spread her more with his fingers. He rumbled again, and her skin prickled with goose bumps. "I like this freckle, too," he murmured, breath cool when it brushed the moisture between her legs.

"That's *not* a freckle," she corrected, breathless. She'd knotted her fingers in the bedsheets, anticipation winding her wire-tight all over again.

“Sure it is,” Ben argued. At the first touch of his mouth against too-sensitive skin, she arched off the bed, pressing against his mouth. “There's one here,” he mumbled before his lips closed over her clit. He made quick circles with his tongue. Takara twisted her hips and bit back a plea for more. “And here,” he added, half a second before she felt his tongue slide into her.

She rocked her hips back, pressing them into the mattress. Ben followed eagerly, threading his arms behind her knees and curling his hands on her thighs from below. Takara scratched at his knuckles, fitted her fingers in the valleys between bone and kneaded them in time with the touch of his tongue.

He drove her toward orgasm, rather than letting her take her own sweet time. When she gasped and shuddered, whispering his name on an exhaled breath, he moved his mouth back to her clit and suckled there again. When she arched sharply and felt the spasms of climax begin, he let go of one leg and slipped two fingers into her depths, pulsing them into her determinedly.

And when she came with a full body shudder and a high-pitched keen, he stayed where he was, licking and kissing her in ways that made her jump and giggle. He crawled over her, eventually lowering his head to steal a still-hungry kiss. Takara held him there, fingers knotted at the back of his skull as he ground his hips against hers. “Your turn next,” she promised languidly.

The apartment door rattled as someone on the outside knocked hard.

Ben's head thumped against her shoulder. His hips stopped moving. “Or not.”

Chapter Two

Susie looked everywhere but at Takara as she stood in the living room, a blush hot on her cheeks. Takara grabbed a robe and shut the bedroom door behind her. She didn't intend to leave Ben alone in there for long. Her hair was mussed, she knew. Given Susie's fidgeting, she was sure her assistant knew exactly what she was interrupting.

"Is something on fire?" She perched on the arm of her couch, tugging the robe over her knees. Knees hardly counted as indecent, but Takara didn't want to traumatize the girl into quitting. "Is someone unhappy with something?"

"Well." Susie shifted her weight from foot to foot. "Not exactly."

Takara lifted an eyebrow. "What, exactly, Susie? I said I was taking a break."

Susie's gaze snapped up quickly, darted to the bedroom door and back. Her blush blazed. "I know," she insisted, "and I'm *really* sorry, but I didn't know how to handle it."

Patience, Takara, she willed herself. She counted silently to three and put on a smile. "Didn't know how to handle what?"

Susie chewed her bottom lip. Takara bit the inside of her cheek. Finally the high school girl squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. Looked Takara in the eye and held herself as if she faced a firing squad. "I didn't know how to handle all the turkeys."

Takara paused. "What do you mean *all* the turkeys?"

Susie squirmed. "Well."

"I ordered a dozen, Susie. Twelve turkeys. Fifteen pounds a piece. That's a lot of frozen bird, but there's room for them in the freezer. I made sure. So what do you mean, all?"

Her assistant was crimson to her hairline. "The order got doubled. Somehow," she added quickly, eyes wide. "I didn't do it, I swear. But the delivery guy brought *two* dozen. He was cracking jokes about feeding the whole neighborhood."

Takara's stomach tightened and twisted. "Two dozen...we can't afford to pay for two dozen turkeys. And what am I supposed to do with that much meat?"

"That's the other weird thing." Susie flinched when their gazes met. "We only got charged for one. No joke. I triple checked the invoice thingy. Twenty-four turkeys, but it says twelve on the sheet. I tried to get him to take them back, but --"

"Show me." Takara stood before she remembered what she was wearing. "Okay, give me five minutes to get dressed, *then* show me. I want to see this mysterious multiplying meat." She tried not to wince at her own unintentional alliteration as she stepped toward her bedroom door. "Five minutes," she said again, watching Susie stand and make a dash for the stairway to the café below. "And don't let anyone else in."

* * * * *

Takara sat in front of the freezer door. It stood open, waves of frigid air pulsing over her as the motor worked to cool the whole kitchen. Her electric bill would reflect the damage, but she couldn't help herself. She'd never seen the freezer quite this full.

"Turkey ice cream. Turkey kebabs. I'll be serving turkey potpie until *next* Thanksgiving," she said out loud when she heard footsteps behind her. Male, that much she could tell by the weight in each footfall. "What am I going to do with five hundred pounds of turkey?"

“You could feed hungry strangers, I guess.”

She was on her feet in two seconds flat, heartbeat suddenly racing and her fingers tingling. Adrenaline made her scalp prickle. That wasn't Ben's voice.

Those weren't Ben's shoulders or his smile and certainly not his eyes. Alight with amusement, sparkling with an almost silver glint, that pair didn't belong to any man Takara'd ever seen.

“Who are you?” She folded her arms across her chest and took a step back. The edge of the freezer door stopped her, now squarely between her shoulder blades. She dared to look past the stranger only for a second, then her gaze returned to him. He hadn't moved. He stood there smiling. He wasn't talking. “Well?” she prompted. “How did you get in? Susie?” She raised her voice. “I thought I said no one was supposed to get through that door!”

Now the man shook his head faintly, glancing just as briefly over his shoulder then back again. “There's no one out there,” he informed Takara easily. “I mean, I didn't see anyone. Maybe this...Susie?...maybe she's hiding. Shall we look for her?”

Another intruder might have tried to mug her. Demanded she open the cash register or taken food from the freezer at gunpoint if he was hungry and desperate enough to rob a café kitchen. This man did neither of those things. Instead, he offered his hand, palm up, fingers curled, those curious dove gray eyes still somehow twinkling.

Despite knowing better, despite her racing heart, Takara reached for him. She stopped herself with a jerk and tucked the rebel hand beneath her arm. She lifted her chin, an act of defiance. She arched an eyebrow, daring him to press his luck.

Instead he turned his hand over and held it up, palm outward. He ducked his head, and a curious smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. “Fair enough,” he offered. “We haven't been introduced.” He inspected the backs of his own fingers then and a faint line appeared between dark eyebrows. “And my hand is filthy. I wouldn't touch me either. May I?”

He gestured toward the kitchen sink and moved when Takara gave him a slight, bewildered nod. She watched him move, his steps even and unhesitating. He wore trousers and slightly scuffed brown dress shoes. His jacket was a few shades darker, a little worn at the edges, but serviceable. Had she really seen suspenders? She tried to remember. She could ask him to turn around.

He slid the dish towel out of the wooden ring that served as a holder, drying his hands as he turned back to meet her gaze again. Yes, there were suspenders disappearing beneath the sides of his coat. Takara hadn't been imagining things. She didn't know whether to count that as a comfort or not.

"You'll have to forgive my odd and old-fashioned appearance," he told her as if she'd voiced her thoughts out loud. "It's been a while since I could do any shopping." He draped the dish towel over his shoulder and stepped forward again, once more offering his hand, this time in something closer to an ordinary shake. "Peter."

Takara slid her fingers against his palm, shaking his hand carefully. When he closed his fingers around hers, another jolt went through her, making the small hairs on the back of her neck lift. It took every ounce of will she had not to flinch or jerk away. "Sorry. I've been doing that today."

"Doing what?" The curiosity in his expression seemed genuine. He held on to her hand, heat from his palm traveling through her fingers and up her arm.

Takara felt her cheeks heat and tugged her hand free, hoping that she hadn't turned an embarrassing shade of red. "Shocking people," she explained. "Static electricity." Her hand went to the pendant again, tugging on it lightly. "I'm Takara, by the way. Takara Duncan. Peter what?"

When he smiled this time, Takara's stomach tightened. Pleasure washed over her and stole her breath. "Just Peter," he answered. "Other names don't matter. That's the only one I need."

The nonanswer should have set off warning bells, or at least annoyed her badly enough to demand a better explanation. Instead she watched him cross to the sink, take the towel from his shoulder, and fold it neatly, then fit it through the ring holder and turn to face her again.

He leaned against the sink and crossed one ankle over the other. His hands slid into his pockets. He looked curiously at home. One shoulder lifted beneath the worn jacket, echoed by that little rise at the corner of his mouth. "You needed me. How can I help?"

Takara's lashes fluttered. Had she heard him right? He didn't so much as twitch toward correcting himself while she stared at him. That enigmatic half smile stayed firmly in place. He didn't blink. He hardly breathed. For a second, she'd convinced herself she was imagining the man standing there. He *had* to be a hallucination. Strangers didn't invite themselves into a business and announce --

"Did you say I *needed* you?" She felt her own lips twitch. "Why would you think that? By the way, you never said how you got in."

His -- Peter's -- smile widened. It warmed; the shift of expression did good things to his face. Not that she noticed. Not that she would. She had a boyfriend. She was devoted to Ben. Devotion, however, wasn't keeping her mind from wandering.

"I walked in," he answered. She hadn't noticed his accent before, but the amusement making his voice rich and warm thickened his words as well. German? No. Russian maybe. "The door was open," he went on, leaning forward a little, like he needed to be sure she heard him. "Like an invitation. I simply stepped through." He paused and Takara swore he was just a breath away from laughing. "Would you like me to leave?"

"No." The answer came so fast, so forcefully, that she might have liked to stare in disbelief at herself. "I mean" -- there was the heat in her cheeks again -- "the door should have been locked. I didn't mean to be rude. Sorry. You just surprised me." She squared her shoulders. She took a deep breath. "And I'm going to disappoint you. I'm not hiring."

Peter's hinted grin blossomed broad and bright, very perfect, very even teeth bright in an already almost-perfect face. "I'm not disappointed. I'm not looking for a job."

Takara frowned. "But you said I needed you. You said you came to help."

Peter nodded and pushed off the counter, closing the distance between them in a few easy steps. "And I did," he agreed. He put his hands on her shoulders, his touch surprisingly light. "But I expect no money. You will repay me in other ways."

It could have been a threat. A sane woman, Takara's conscience all but shrieked, would take it as such, push the guy away and shout for help. Her heart certainly pounded hard enough to fuel fight-or-preferably-flight.

But Takara didn't move. She swallowed against her pulse, and she wet her lips. It wasn't fear thrumming through her, fanning out through her body from the places where his hands rested against her. It was curiosity. No -- it was desire.

And it was reflected back toward her in Peter's eyes. Silver, sparkling as he lowered his head.

He was going to kiss her, and she wanted him to do it.

She could all but feel his lips against hers already. Her eyelids lowered, lashes blurring the sight of him. She lifted her chin. She rose to her toes...

She was taken. Dating. Practically engaged. She slid away from the stranger, putting space between them as he turned to follow her with his gaze. She leveled a finger at him and backed toward the doorway that led to the staircase up. "Don't," she said. "Don't say anything. Don't move. Maybe you shouldn't breathe. I don't know how you mind-whammied me, but you can just stop."

Peter's expression twisted into an almost comic expression of confusion. "I don't understand," he told her. "Mind whammy?"

Takara made a frustrated sound. "Hypnotized me. Tricked me into almost kissing you. It's not cool," she clarified. "I think you should leave."

To his credit -- and her relief -- he didn't come toward her again. As a matter of fact, he turned and paced back to his place against the sink. When he faced her again, she saw that his smile had gone wry. He met her gaze briefly, then focused on a spot somewhere over her head.

She gave him a three-count to explain himself. When he didn't say a word, she pursed her lips. "Funny how it doesn't look like you're leaving."

His gaze dropped to hers again. For a second, something dark passed through his expression. It was gone before she could name it, but a shiver climbed her spine. "If I could walk away right now," he told her, "I'd be out the door and gone. You wouldn't see me again. It doesn't work that way, though, I'm afraid. You've called me to you."

Takara managed to restrain herself to a quiet snort and an eye roll. "I called you to me? Please," she said. "Tell me that this is some tacky joke Susie's playing. If it's not, the only thing I'm going to be calling is the police."

Peter held his hands up, palms out again. "Please. I promise. I don't know who this Susie is. And if you call the police, the only trouble will be for you. I don't mean to hurt you," he went on as his hands sank to his sides. "I couldn't if I wanted. I'm here to help you."

"I don't need help!" She hadn't meant to shout, but her patience had abruptly run out. "I got dragged down here because someone brought too many turkeys. If you didn't have something to do with that, I don't want to talk to you!"

Guilt, pure and unmistakable, flooded Peter's expression. Takara felt her eyebrows climb.

"You? You doubled my turkey order?" She stared hard as he stood his ground, not denying the accusation. It took several more moments for her to splutter. "*Why?*"

And only a second for her to hear Ben's voice behind her. "Takara? Are you all right?"

She whirled to face him, mind racing. How did she explain Peter? She needed a story.

Or not. Ben stepped through the doorway, gaze sweeping the kitchen before it settled on her. Curious, his lips quirked up into a smile. "I thought I heard you say something. Who were you talking to?"

Any second now. Takara's voice stuck in her throat. She managed a smile but that wouldn't keep the questions at bay for long. In a second or two, Ben's attention would go back to the man by the sink and he'd start asking questions. Guilt pulsed through Takara, riding her heartbeat.

What had she been thinking, being tempted to kiss anyone but Ben? How could she have been tricked by shiny silver eyes? She felt better, safer just standing toe to toe with him than she had headed for a kiss with Peter.

Which she wasn't thinking about.

She slid her hands behind Ben's neck and pulled herself up to kiss *him* instead. She felt his hands settle at her waist, fingers curling so he could tug her closer, encouraging the way she leaned against his chest.

"Is this show for him, or for me?"

Takara startled and bit the inside of her own lip.

Ben chuckled and raked her hair back with one hand. "Got a little too enthusiastic there, huh?" His brow furrowed. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she lied, feeling heat claim her cheeks again. "Just a little overwhelmed, I think."

"He can't see me." Peter sounded like he was holding laughter back.

Takara wasn't going to turn to look. She didn't need to call attention to him, just in case. She made her eyebrows climb. "Did you hear something?"

"He can't hear me, either," Peter supplied as Ben shook his head and laughed again.

"Just you, asking if I heard something." He tucked her against him and scanned the kitchen again. "Maybe there's a radio on somewhere."

“Yeah, maybe so. I'll have to talk to Susie.” But now she wasn't in the mood for more kissing. She knew her lone employee wasn't the source of her unease. Takara pulled away from Ben with a quick, apologetic smile, and went back to the freezer door. The chill that swept through her had less to do with cold air than jangled nerves.

“So this is the mysterious extra turkey, huh? Guess you don't have to worry about running short.”

She felt and heard footsteps as Ben spoke. Warm hands touched her shoulders, and she felt them relax beneath the weight. She leaned, heaved a sigh and let heat spread through her. “Not worried. We've got enough bird in there to last through Christmas. Maybe New Year's Eve.”

Strong arms circled her waist. She curled her fingers over his forearm. She let her eyes slip toward closed before she realized that what she felt wasn't bare skin, but fabric. Buttons.

Ben had been wearing short sleeves.

Takara didn't mean to yelp, but the sound escaped her as she jerked upright and spun to face the man behind her. Not Ben. Peter. Beyond him, she saw Ben's eyebrows lift and a curious, almost comical, concern sweep over his face.

“You okay?” He started toward her.

Takara backed away, not from him but from Peter, who stepped smoothly out of her boyfriend's path. “Fine,” she lied, surprised she didn't choke on the word. “Just caught a chill. I need to close this door.” She turned her back on both of them, swung the heavy door shut, and rested her forehead against the cold stainless steel.

All right, so she'd completely lost it. She'd invented a backup boyfriend who liked to be hands-on in front of the flesh-and-blood version. Some voyeuristic fantasy of hers had sprung to Technicolor, 3-D life in her head. Stress, it had to be stress. It was the only explanation that made sense.

So she took a deep breath and turned around again, pressing her back against the solid door behind her. She forced a smile that felt brighter than she did. "I swear the holidays are going to drive me crazy."

Too late. They stood nearly shoulder to shoulder now, Ben and Peter, the two men in her life. Peter was shorter, narrower, but that was no surprise. Takara didn't know many men she could compare to Ben when it came to sheer measurement. He'd taken her breath away at first sight.

And yet, in comparison, Ben's blue eyes just didn't seem as exciting anymore. Lots of people had blue eyes. Silver-gray, that was new and different. Peter could convey a lot with the quirk of an eyebrow and the tug of a smile at those oh-so-kissable lips. She couldn't help remembering that she felt as though she fit there, tucked in the curve of Peter's arms. He was more her size, less overwhelming.

Ben broke her staring spell. "You sure you're okay, Taks? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Should she confess? Would Ben understand? If Peter didn't go away, she had to think of something before she convinced her boyfriend she really had gone crazy. So she sighed and chewed her bottom lip, gaze shifting between them as she made up her mind.

"Takara?"

"I'm not sure what I'm seeing." She blurted the words, heart pounding. "If I told you something impossible, would you believe me?"

For the first time since his arrival, Peter looked uncomfortable. Wary. He turned to look over, and up, at Ben before his gaze came back to her. He shook his head slightly. "Think about what you're doing."

"I *am* thinking. I've been thinking a lot."

Ben's forehead wrinkled. "Thinking about what?" The wrinkle turned into a frown. "Aw, come on, Takara. You're not gonna say what I think you're gonna say..."

“What?” Her heart lurched. “No, God, no. I'm not breaking up with you.” She'd reached for the worst-case scenario and hoped she hadn't picked the wrong fear. Ben's posture relaxed, and she managed a deep breath. On the nose. “But what if I told you there was someone else?”

There he went, tensing up again. His voice dropped an octave, and the question came out more a rumble than words. “Excuse me?”

“If you tell him, he'll see me. You won't be able to pretend I'm not here.”

“If you're not going to go away, I can't do that anyway, can I?” Takara put her hands on her hips, glared at Peter briefly, then looked at Ben again.

Who stared back at her. “Who are you talking to? What the hell's going on, Taks?”

Here goes everything. Takara took as deep a breath as she could manage and stepped off the edge of sanity. “When I came downstairs, there was a guy here. A man named Peter. He's still here now.”

Predictably, Ben looked around the kitchen again. “There's no one here but us, Takara.” He started forward, one hand out. “Maybe you should come back upstairs and lay down.”

She backed up until the door bumped her shoulder again. “I'm not joking. His name's Peter, and he's standing right beside you.” She wet her lips and swallowed hard. “Black hair, gray eyes, wearing a suit. Look again, Ben. Try to see.”

Ben stared another moment. He narrowed his eyes at her, as if by squinting, he could force her to make sense. “This is weird, Taks. Really freaking weird.” But he took a breath and held up his hands. “Right. Okay. Looking again.” He turned his head...

Takara had never seen a grown man move that fast. One second, Ben stood rooted in place, tense but stable, on two feet. The next -- the moment he finally saw Peter, she guessed -- he'd all but teleported into the wall to his left. If he'd been able, he looked like he

might climb inside. Wide-eyed and slack-jawed, he gaped at Peter, who casually lifted a hand, summoned a smile and waved.

Now it was Ben's gaze ping-ponging between them wildly. His mouth worked, dropping open and snapping shut several times before he got hold of himself and relaxed enough to speak. He lifted a hand and pointed, slightly unsteadily. "How did you do that? Where the hell did he come from?"

Peter's shoulders shifted subtly beneath his suit jacket. "I've been here all along," he reported. "Just as Takara tried to explain. Peter," he added, pressing a hand against his chest. "My name is Peter, and you need me."

Chapter Three

Ben had to stop his mind from whirling and wheeling around inside his skull. He was giving himself a headache. That never happened. Well, now and again after a night of too much partying, but never standing in a kitchen. Never around Takara.

It wasn't her fault. Couldn't be, exactly. It had to be because of this magic trick, appearing act, whatever it was that this guy had done. Peter. He said his name was Peter. Ben felt his forehead crease again. "What in the hell do I need you for?"

He wasn't angry, no matter how he sounded. Startled, sure. Confused? Oh, yeah. Worried about the things he saw flickering through his girlfriend's expression? And then some. Anger hadn't hit yet, but he could feel it brewing.

Someone else. Takara had called him someone else. A phrase no man wanted to hear from the girl he was dating. He hadn't signed on to share her with anyone, and he wasn't going to start now, just because some halfway decent-looking guy showed up and proclaimed it so.

All right, more than halfway decent. He could admit that. This Peter guy struck him as the sort that played the best friend on a Wednesday night TV show. Not a square-jawed hero of a man, but the kind of guy people got used to. Enough time watching him, and eventually

his better features would appear. That half-formed smile of his would be familiar, expected. The viewer would want to see it. Be happy when he did.

And Ben had to give him credit for the threads. A lot of guys he knew could never pull that look off. They'd come across as playing dress up, raiding Dad's closet, or trying to look respectable when they didn't have a chance any other way. Not Peter. He looked like he'd been born to wear those clothes. Jeans and a T-shirt wouldn't suit him. If he'd been sporting a Fedora, Ben didn't think he'd find it weird. It'd fit, just like the suspenders. Just like his body language.

Why was he checking out this weird little guy?

"I came to help," Peter was explaining when he tuned back in. "When you talked by the sink, about the pies, she was hoping for help in making this job go smoothly. Not," he added quickly, "that your offer wouldn't make a difference. Not that she doesn't want you, too. But together, we can turn an opportunity for trouble into a chance at fantastic success."

Ben narrowed his eyes again. "Sounds like a sales pitch. What do you mean?"

Peter shook his head. "No sales," he promised, stepping forward. He clapped a hand against Ben's arm, and under his touch they both turned to face Takara. "This meal you want the pies for, it's just a start. Think. If you turn a meal into a feast, you can feed so many more. People will talk about your generosity. Your food will bring you customers. Those are good things, don't you think? You want success."

"Of course, I do. *We* do," Takara amended, looking between the two of them. "That's why I'm glad Ben offered to help me."

"But that's not enough," Peter pressed on. "Turkey, stuffing, feed the whole city. It will be an event never forgotten in Wexford Bay. I can help you make that happen."

Ben shifted under Peter's hand, and the other man let his touch fall away. "It's a big idea. It sounds great, in theory. But what's the catch? Where'd you really come from? And what's in it for you?"

He had him. Ben swallowed a surge of triumph as Peter's smile faltered and his gaze flickered away. Nothing was ever as simple as it sounded the first time around. This guy had some kind of scheme in mind, Ben felt certain. He stepped sideways, offered his arm to Takara, and enjoyed the wash of satisfaction that came when she stepped into his side and leaned close.

Peter's gaze moved between them both, and he sighed and rubbed his face. "I will explain," he said when his hand fell again. "But you will not believe me right away. That is the curse on top of the curse." His shoulders straightened, as did his spine. "This is not like a fairy tale," he added quietly. "No matter that it starts with once upon a time."

Ben bit back a protest that he wasn't in the mood for story time. The guy was a salesman, and God knew salesmen liked to talk. More to the point, Takara hadn't objected. She just nodded a little and nestled closer to his side. If she could handle whatever Peter -- if that was his name -- made up, then so could he. He'd be here to keep her head on straight if she bought the story.

"So talk," he prompted. "What's this non-fairy fairy tale?"

Peter smiled again, the shift of expression looking somewhat less than comfortable. He flexed his hands, knuckles cracking. Not a threat, Ben realized a second after his stomach tightened. Just a way to bleed off anxiety. He met Peter's gaze. Peter glanced at Takara. Then he took another breath and started talking.

"I was born in Russia, in a town called Sovodskaya. It was small, close to nothing you would know. My father was the doctor. He had been to Moscow to study and come back to help the people in the place where he grew up. He could have made more money somewhere else, but we were happy there. It was a good place to live.

"But my father was not the only one who did the healing."

Before he could get another word out, Ben interrupted. "Let me guess. There was a witch in the woods?"

Peter's grin was quick this time, but far more genuine. "You've heard this story," he joked. "Not quite in the woods, but on the edge," he agreed. "And she could heal anything, even things my father had no idea how to treat. She didn't turn anyone away, as long as they could pay the price."

"What price?" Takara's eyes had gone wide.

Ben squeezed her gently. "He could be stealing this story from a dozen places, Taks. Easy."

She looked up at him and lifted a hand, patting his chest. "I know," she promised. "But I'm curious. What was the price?"

Peter shrugged again, predictably. "It depended on the person and the ill she cured. Sometimes she asked for a meal. Sometimes a goat. Sometimes she would bargain for things her patients would never tell. Baba Genie was clever that way."

"Baba Genie," Ben repeated, the hard G sticking in his throat. "What kind of name is that?"

"Like Baba Yaga," Takara supplied. "She was a Russian witch, too." Her attention went back to Peter. "Is that who you mean?"

The other man shook his head. "Baba Yaga is a story. A myth. I've never met anyone who's met her, anyway. Genie was real. Yvgenia," he explained with a little nod in Ben's direction.

"Okay, okay," Ben said. "I got the point. So what happened?"

"One winter a sickness came that killed several people. My father could not help. He could ease the pain, but not stop the fever. Baba Genie called him a fake, no good. When she visited the sick, they got well. But she refused to work with my father. She did not want him to taint her healing, she said."

Peter set his jaw and lifted his chin. A kernel of indignation lodged in Ben's chest as well, a reflection of his change of posture maybe. He did his best to ignore it. It was just a story. "So?"

"So he was my father. Though I was grown, I wanted to defend him and protect my family. But no one" -- he warned, one finger lifted -- "challenged Baba Genie. So I hid, instead."

The more he talked, the more his hands moved, until Ben could almost swear he saw the scene Peter described.

"Baba Genie had a chicken coop, and she was known to have long conversations with the birds at sunrise and sunset. The rest of us often said that, if only the chickens could talk, we could learn a lot of big secrets. That was how I decided to hide in the coop. I thought, perhaps, she might confess the secret to her cure when she fed the birds some morning.

"So for three days and nights I sat in the coop, hiding beneath the nesting boxes and waiting. For three days and nights, she did nothing but cluck and coo when she came out. She told no secrets; she gave away nothing. I had decided if she did not say something that made sense the next morning, I would go home and forget my silly scheme.

"She came at midnight, when the hens were sleeping. I, too, had dozed off in my hiding spot, but she knew I was there. She had known all along. She called my name like a warm breeze," Peter said, his expression gentling as if he'd fallen under a spell again. "'Show yourself to me, Petya,' she said, and I could do nothing but obey. I stood before her, not afraid, while she looked me over, clucking at me.

"'What a good boy, you are, Petya. So loyal and so noble, to risk so much for your family. To want to help them so badly that you would give up your life.' I should have noticed her hands. I didn't try to get away as she wove her magic around me, binding me.

"'If you want to help so much, I will make it easy.' She made a fist then, jerking her hand back as her fingers closed. I felt a tearing inside, as though she'd pulled out a piece of

me.” His hand rose, and he rubbed the heel of it against his chest. Ben's heart pounded hard against his ribs.

“She whispered into her fist and, to this day, I will swear her fingers glowed. Then she opened her hand and showed me the thing she had made.” His gaze slid to Takara again and the rubbing hand turned so he could point her way. “That pendant.”

Takara flinched against Ben's side and sucked in a sharp breath. Her hand flew to the necklace, and she curled her hand around it possessively. “My mom bought this from a street vendor, I told you. Probably for cheap.”

Ben moved, stepping between her and Peter, if that was his name. He caught her face between his hands, making sure that her gaze met his. “Just relax,” he murmured. “Trust me, and take a breath. Don't let this guy freak you out.” He imagined Peter's gaze on his back, heat racing down his spine but he ignored it. Tried to keep the shivers that followed at bay. Did his best not to wonder why the speed of his heartbeat felt more like anticipation than anxiety. Takara needed him first.

“Let me see it,” Ben prompted gently as he pried her fingers away from the pendant. Once he had it free, he rolled it gingerly between his fingers. He leaned close to Takara, peering at the enameled surface and the silver end caps, looking for a maker's mark. Something identifying.

“What are you doing?” Takara's breath stirred his hair.

“Looking for the spot where it says ‘Made in China.’ There have to be a thousand of these things.”

“There is one, and one only.” Peter had moved and stood beside them now, looking at the necklace in Ben's grip. Those odd eyes of his were only molten silver now. “Wherever it goes, I am bound.”

“So why not make it fancy,” Takara asked him, a note of desperation in her voice. “Why not diamonds or gold or something people would know was special right away?”

Peter cracked another faint grin. “If someone thought it was important, they might keep it. Lock it away in a box and pass it down to their family. If it sits untouched and unused, then I have nothing to do. It would be a break for me. That would spoil the curse. So, something easy to pass on and discard, so new hands always touched it, and new wishes were made.”

“That sucks.” Ben startled himself with the sudden words. He hadn't planned to say anything. Embarrassed, he shifted his weight uneasily. If this was all real... “Never knowing where you're going to end up? It's crazy.”

Peter laid a hand on his arm. His other hand rested lightly on Takara's hair. “Sometimes it *is* crazy. Sometimes I find people like you.”

Chapter Four

Takara's scalp tingled beneath his hand. The feeling turned her skin to gooseflesh again and swept down through her body, making her nipples tighten beneath her bra. Guilt didn't take long to rear its head, and she curled her fingers in Ben's shirt. "Please tell me it's not just me," she murmured before she bumped her forehead against his shoulder.

"What's not just you?" Ben's fingers touched her chin. Peter's didn't move. "What's wrong, Takara? Talk to me?" The fingers pressed up gently, prompting her to lift her chin. It took a concerted effort to lift her lashes again. She watched his pupils flare wide when he met her gaze and knew her own must be as hungry-looking and dark. This time when she wet her lips, she did it purposefully.

"Feeling that buzz. That hum, you know?" She tried to find a better word for the sensation, but could only come up with one. "Horny." Heat flooded her cheeks at the next heartbeat.

"Oh." He looked her over, gaze lingering on her breasts. She didn't doubt he could see the proof of her arousal, any more than she could have missed the telltale swelling behind the fly of his jeans. "Yeah, I feel it. Trying to ignore it," he confessed hoarsely.

"And you?" Takara's blush flared as she turned her head, dislodging Peter's hand. She was certain she'd find his eyes dark with wanting, too. He was responsible for what she felt, after all, wasn't he? "You have to feel it. You're doing it, aren't you?"

Instead, his gaze was full of sorrow. Sorrow and apology. He let his hands fall and shook his head. "It's the curse that does this when it chooses, not me."

"Then the kiss --"

"Wait, you kissed him?" Ben's eyebrows rocketed toward his hairline.

"No." Takara shook her head enthusiastically. "We didn't kiss. Our lips never touched." She hesitated for a second, then ducked her head. "I would have. I almost did. It felt like all of a sudden I'd never wanted anything more. It was weird," she confessed. "And good at the same time."

"Not good," Ben countered. "You wanted to kiss another guy."

"Wanting isn't doing. I kissed you instead."

"But what if I'd said I wanted to kiss another girl. What if I did it? What if I kissed *him*?"

Less than a second passed before Ben moved, lashing out to catch Peter's wrist. He hauled him close, all but crushing the other man against his chest. Peter didn't protest, hardly had time, before Ben lowered his head and pressed their mouths together. It looked like a bruising kiss from where Takara stood.

And yet it went on, lingering, until the tension bled out of both men's bodies. Until Ben's grip on Peter's wrist eased and fell away. Until Peter lifted the other hand to Ben's hair and curled his fingers against it, clutching lightly. Their lips moved, their mouths parted, and Takara watched as Ben pushed his tongue forward, invading Peter's mouth.

Her boyfriend was kissing another man. In front of her.

Desire pulsed between her legs. She bit the inside of her own lip to keep from gasping aloud. Something tightened, low in her belly, and she thought for a moment that her knees might give out.

Then just as abruptly as it had started, Ben and Peter shoved one another away. Peter stood with his arms heavy at his sides, his mouth still slightly parted, lips dark and glistening.

Ben swiped the back of one hand across his mouth, then shoved it through his hair. "Son of a bitch."

Peter backed off further. He looked for all the world as if he might bolt any second. Despite his sudden appearance, the unlikelihood of his story and the fact that he had this strange influence on her -- *both* of them -- Takara couldn't help but follow. She heard Ben mutter something, heard him move as well, but her attention stayed on Peter.

"Please don't run away."

His gaze jerked toward her, bounced away, then returned. His eyebrows lifted slightly. "I'm bound here," he said, somewhat miserably. "No matter how I offend you, I cannot leave." The surprise became a faint frown. "I make you feel things you do not choose to feel, and yet you would want me to stay?"

It sounded crazy. It *was* crazy and she knew it, but she still shrugged and summoned up what she hoped was at least a passable smile. "If you're not doing it on purpose, then we can't hold it against you. Besides," she confessed with another embarrassed shift of her shoulders. "I liked it."

He looked away quickly, staring hard at the floor. A muscle in his jaw tensed, but he didn't speak. Not to scold her, not to agree. She'd really put her foot in it this time, hadn't she?

So she hugged herself instead, fingers digging into her elbows to remind her to show some restraint. "You said I needed you to help me. I'm *asking* you to stay."

"And your boyfriend? What do you suppose he would ask?"

Ben now sat with his back against the wall beside the staircase doorway. One leg stretched out before him. He had the other leg bent and his forehead pressed against his knee. If he'd heard the question, he didn't let on.

She should ask, Peter was right. She couldn't just speak for him, not when they'd never been in a situation like this before. Not when things were changing so quickly. So Takara wiped damp palms against her jeans and crossed the room toward him. She chewed on her already-abused lip as she moved and sank to her knees at his side, half a reach away. She hesitated before she touched him, brushing her fingers over his hair.

He lifted his head immediately. His gaze flickered toward where Peter still stood, waiting, then his brow furrowed and he looked at her instead. "I kissed a guy, Taks."

"And that's why you're freaking out?" She managed another smile, sincere if subtle. "It doesn't change anything. Nobody has to know."

"It changes *everything*," he argued. He took a breath like he'd say something, held it, and let it out on a hiss. He ducked his head, tugged his own hair, then let his hand fall again. "I liked it, okay?"

She wouldn't laugh. She would not give in to the urge, no matter how relief swept through her. She'd been afraid he was really upset. That Ben was angry or offended. Surprised by his own desires was easier to handle by a long shot.

She leaned close and kissed him, twice and then again for good measure, tugging on his bottom lip gently. "It's okay," she promised with a grin against his mouth. "To tell the truth, it's pretty hot."

That coaxed a grin out of Ben at last, and Takara let herself relax, a little at least. She settled beside her boyfriend, who draped his arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss into her hair.

“So we can keep him, right? I swear he followed me home.” Takara asked the question of her boyfriend, but her gaze settled on Peter, who watched them both warily. “I promise to feed him and take him for walks.”

Ben nudged her, a firm jostle but nowhere near hard enough to hurt. “Be nice. He's not a pet.” He straightened up. “You really think you can help Takara out? Really get this place off the ground and take care of this dinner thing at the same time?”

Peter straightened where he stood, too. His shoulders went back as his chin dipped and rose. “I know I can. I know *we* can make something good.”

Ben draped a hand over Takara's knee, squeezed lightly and nodded. “Then I guess we've got a new roommate. And someone to help me wield the rolling pin. Those pie crusts aren't gonna know what hit them.”

* * * * *

Takara felt like she'd been run over. Maybe by an entire fleet of semitrucks. She could still count heartbeats in the soles of her feet and her back felt like she'd been carrying cinder blocks. Just the little stretch she managed beneath the sheets made muscles she hadn't known existed protest the movement. She groaned quietly.

She'd been going nonstop for the last three days. When Peter said he knew how to make good things happen, he'd failed to explain how much work a “good thing” entailed. When the big event was over and Thanksgiving a memory for another year, Takara had convinced herself she could live with satisfactory service. She didn't need to provide bells and whistles. She just needed to keep her customers happy.

But she had to give Peter credit where it was due. He'd promised big results, and they'd already started rolling in. From the first phone call he'd arranged with the local newspaper to the radio interviews and appointments with the city council, things had been falling neatly into place. She already had the sponsorship of half a dozen other businesses, places willing to help her advertise or supply her with resources she couldn't otherwise afford. She had flyers

being printed and a banner to hang over the main drag through town. She had a promise of attendance from the Mayor himself.

She just needed ten more minutes of sleep.

The knock on her bedroom door proved it was not to be. She knew immediately that it wasn't Ben. For starters, he didn't knock when he wanted to come in.

Second, he'd begged off for the day. Though he'd pitched in and helped, working every bit as hard as Takara herself, he had a life outside the café that needed his attention. If he'd shrugged off his friends, family, and other obligations, Takara would frankly have been disappointed. So she knew it wasn't her boyfriend at the door.

That only left the taskmaster. When he knocked again, she covered her eyes with her arm, nose tucked into the crook of her elbow. "What time is it?" she called out. "Three-thirty? It's still dark outside."

The doorknob turned. She heard the hinges protest. "Not exactly true," Peter answered as he stopped in the doorway. "The sun will be up in twenty-seven minutes. There's already color in the sky. Good morning, Takara."

She groaned and dragged a pillow over her face. "Do you have to be so cheery?"

"Is there a reason not to be?" She felt the bed tilt as Peter's weight tipped the mattress. He tugged the pillow out of her grasp gently. "It's not that early. Nearly six, and we have a lot of things to accomplish today."

Takara squinted through her lashes at him. Even at six in the morning, with her vision blurred by clinging sleep, she couldn't deny that he was a handsome man. He'd obviously been up long enough to shower. His hair curled slightly behind his ears, damp enough to shine even in the low light in the bedroom. She could just make out his usual hint of a smile and amusement in his eyes. The whole package made her heart thud a little faster in her chest.

"Six o'clock is early on this side of the planet, mister. You're lucky I don't boot you off the bed."

"I don't think you will," Peter volunteered. "That would be work, and you want to sleep."

"Sometimes the work is worth it," she said, giving into a grin as she shifted beneath the covers. It took some struggling but she worked her feet to where he sat and braced them against his hip, preparing to push.

She expected him to fight back. Her pulse was racing in anticipation of the game. Already, schemes were dancing through her head of how best to take advantage of his position, and hers. She wanted the upper hand early on in the game.

She was already too late. Peter moved away from her feet, gliding easily off the bed to stand. He didn't stop there, however. With a grace she hadn't seen from him since they'd met, he doubled back and climbed onto the bed with her. One knee on either side of hers, he trapped her in the blanket, pinning her in place. Then he planted a hand on either side of her ribs and leaned in close. Smug satisfaction sparkling in his eyes, he murmured, "I think I win."

There weren't many options for retaliation, not the way Takara saw things. She could give in and let Peter win without trying to redeem herself. Or she could knock him off guard.

She wasn't the sort of girl who just gave in.

So she fisted the front of his shirt and used it to pull herself up until their mouths met. She bit at his bottom lip, and when he opened his mouth to make a sound of surprise, she licked past his teeth and stroked his tongue with her own.

Thinking right after waking up had never been Takara's strong suit. If it had been, she might have tried another tactic. Tickling, wrestling, a scratch across the ribs. Anything but that kiss and the tingling heat that buzzed between them every time they touched.

She didn't know which one of them groaned first. She wasn't sure whether she'd heard the sound anywhere but in her own imagination. Touching him changed the tone of the game. It shifted from playful to serious in the space of a few frantically pounding heartbeats. She knew better than to act on impulse and yet, now that she had, she couldn't find a reason compelling enough to make her stop.

Working with Peter day in and day out, wanting to touch him and holding herself back, had been sheer torture. She'd been behaving as a good girlfriend would, forcing herself to keep Ben in mind. She'd restricted herself to glances, peeks at Peter through her lashes when he wouldn't notice. When he wasn't looking back. She found excuses to work beside him and chose the chair next to his in planning meetings, but that was as far as she'd let it go. She told herself it was enough.

She was a terrible liar.

Want blazed along her nerves, singeing her all the way out to her fingertips as she curled them into his hair and tugged him down closer into her. The blanket that had conveniently trapped her when the game was light felt like an anchor now. It became a barrier she struggled to break through.

She freed a hand from his hair and pushed the covers down enough that she could catch one of his hands and press it against her skin. T-shirt pushed up and wrinkled from sleep, it left a space where his fingers could fit, glide over her skin, graze her ribs, and sweep along the curve of her body to the underside swell of her breast. When Peter cupped her lightly, she groaned in frustration and covered his hand with her own, forcing his fingers over the tight peak.

This time she knew he groaned first. The sound vibrated against her skin, warm over her collarbone before he nudged her chin up, out of the way, and traced her pulse with the tip of his tongue, sending a whole new wave of shivers racing across her body. She gasped for air and exhaled on a whimper, arching into his touch as his fingers pinched and rolled. He reached across her body to catch her other nipple and do the same.

"I want you," she murmured, mostly breath. He couldn't have missed it if she'd screamed at the top of her lungs. A thought struck her, and she laughed, then amended, "I *need* you. Just like you said, Peter. That first day, when I met you. I need you. You were right."

She might as well have doused him with cold water, judging by the way he reacted to her words. He flinched and froze, eyes wide as he stared into hers. His hand stilled on her breast, then eased away as he braced himself on his arms and pushed back. He straddled her knees for a moment longer, then climbed off the bed and to his feet, shoving a hand through his already-mussed hair.

"When I said that you needed me," he began, his voice and accent thicker than usual. "I didn't mean like this. To help with the café, with the event, yes. I shouldn't have come in here. It's dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Takara struggled to hang on to the thrills she'd felt while he touched her. Crushing disappointment could wait until she was alone. She forced a smile and shook a spiral of hair out of her eyes. "It's not like I'm going to explode." Not in a ball of fire, at any rate.

"Dangerous to you and Ben," he answered, looking along his shoulder at her. "I don't want to pull the two of you apart. I don't want Ben angry with me."

She pushed up on her elbows. "Pull us apart? Are you serious? You're really worried about that? You think you're going to split us up?" She sat up completely, elbows on her knees now. With distance between them, she could think again. She was thinking, and worrying about the crease between his eyebrows.

Peter studied his hands for a long moment. He twined his fingers together and separated them. When he glanced up at her, it was only for a second, then his gaze skittered away again. To the corners, to the far wall, he looked anywhere but at her.

“When Baba Genie put her curse on me, she added something more. Men can make decisions. We are not animals. We can choose whether to accept an offer of help or a gift in the first place. If someone refuses what I offer, then I don't have to work, and that would not do. So she made certain those who met me would want me.”

He took a breath and spread his hands. “Some felt the way you do. They thought they wanted me, loved me. I've started fights and ruined marriages, and none of it by my choice.” He looked up again. “I like you. I like Ben. I don't want to pull you apart.”

Takara bit the inside of her cheek and pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. He looked completely serious, earnest in his concern about hurting her relationship. She kept her lips from twitching as she finally crawled out from under the comforter on the bed and crossed it to kneel at the foot beside him. She unfolded one leg and felt a surge of triumph when his gaze shifted to her wiggling toes. She watched him track the curve of her calf, the shape of her knee. His gaze traveled halfway up her thigh before he blinked and looked somewhere else.

She leaned toward him, slid a hand beneath his chin, and tipped it up gently until their gazes met. “Just for the record and so you know? Ben has had some seriously hot fantasies about you. So stop worrying.” She grinned, kissed his cheek, and slid to her feet. “I'm gonna take a shower. I'll be downstairs in a bit.”

She glanced back, once, and caught him staring. When she ducked into the bathroom, she was grinning so widely her cheeks hurt. Mean? Maybe. But absolutely true. She and Ben had talked about some enlightening things. Just another reason to keep Peter around.

Chapter Five

It was all going according to plan. People across the city had sent their RSVPs. Three film crews had been through the café kitchen in as many days. Takara had hosted them with consummate grace, cheerfully offering samples of the meal to come. In between, she'd put up with impromptu inspections by health officials and nosy professionals alike. She handled them without a complaint, and their reports noted nothing out of place.

Throughout it all, she'd kept most of her temper and her complaints out of the public ear and eye. When she did give in and let her weariness or impatience show, it was usually at his side, leaning against Peter for moral and physical support.

He knew he shouldn't enjoy those moments as much as he did. He should be keeping her at arm's distance, reminding himself of the oath he'd sworn a hundred times. Never again would he fall in love with the one who'd summoned him. He wouldn't let himself get close, wouldn't indulge in the urges Baba Genie had made so easy. He wouldn't wish for the touch of skin or human warmth, the sweetness of kisses and shuddering breath.

The lie he told himself was splintering. She'd started it. Takara. The morning when he'd gone to her, intending simply to wake her up, and had instead wakened his own desires all over again.

She'd encouraged him to touch her. She'd planted thoughts he struggled to banish from his mind again. She'd whispered that her boyfriend, her partner, harbored fantasies, too. Those words had haunted Peter ever since.

They echoed now as his thoughts chased themselves through his mind. He replayed them over and over, remembering the feel of her breath against his skin as he watched Ben work this morning.

The big blond man had taken over the task of setting up tables. Row upon row of wood-brown rectangles were lined up on the floor in the places where they'd stand. They waited, metal legs folded, as Ben methodically worked his way down the lines. He'd settled into a rhythm of sorts. He'd pick up a table, snap the legs into place, then bend and disappear beneath the edge to latch the ends together, so they'd stay steady. It made a curious sort of music. It made Peter smile.

"If you're just going to stand there and grin at me," Ben said, interrupting Peter's thoughts, "you could come help me. That's what you're here for, right?"

Peter shook himself and started forward, a blush beginning in his ears. "Of course. I should have offered before. I thought --"

"You thought I had it under control, I know." Ben smiled. "And I do. Just figured I don't need supervision, and if you're not doing anything except standing there to watch, you could lend a hand. And a shoulder." He clapped a hand to one of Peter's. "Seem pretty solid to me, and the set up will go faster with both of us."

The fleeting contact was enough to speed Peter's heartbeat. He couldn't remember whether that sort of thing had been commonplace before, but since Takara's whispered taunt, he noticed every touch, counted each nudge, and graze of hand to hand. He let the warmth wash through him, then shook himself again and joined Ben at the next table down the line.

"I didn't think this was going to work, I gotta tell you," Ben offered, as they stood the table on its legs. "This whole feed the city thing. It sounded crazy. It still kinda does."

Peter ducked his head and steadied the table as Ben ducked under the edge predictably. "Not crazy," he argued. "Different. Unexpected."

"That and then some." Ben's eyes danced with undisguised mirth. "But you're not going to keep me away from crazy, no matter what other words you try. Little places like Takara's don't try to feed whole towns. If they did, they'd go bankrupt. People would point and laugh at the owners when they walked down the street. Which reminds me."

He sobered in a second, stood and leaned forward, half across the table toward Peter. He braced his weight on his knuckles and hunched his shoulders, lowering his head so their gazes had no choice but to meet. "If this goes wrong," he started, "and people really do laugh at Takara and me? Don't think you're getting out of it clean. I'm not gonna let her take the fall for this alone."

Peter felt his eyebrows climb at the same time a chill began in the pit of his stomach. He swallowed before he answered. "Do you think I'd let her suffer alone? If any part of this goes wrong, then I've failed in my task." He hesitated before admitting, "I've never failed before. I don't let myself. I don't know exactly what would happen if I did. Knowing Baba Genie, she planned for such an event. So we won't fail." He tried for a smile.

Ben studied him a long moment in silence, then he nodded and straightened. "Just checking. I just felt like we needed to be clear. She's my girl, you know, and I don't want anything happening to her." He shook his head. "I know she trusts you. She likes you, but her family's got this thing about getting in over their heads. Takara's been pretty good about keeping things simple. So this" -- the gesture encompassed the room -- "is one big risk."

"For all of us." Ben's gaze snapped back to his and Peter straightened where he stood. "The three of us, working together, I mean," he clarified. "That part is the true risk, if you ask me." Which he hadn't, but since they were speaking frankly, he'd decided to voice his fears

as well. "I told this to Takara, when you were away, but I'll say it again. I'm not used to having everyone get along when there's more than two. Me and whoever summoned me, that is. Ordinarily, I drive people apart. She --"

He paused again, heat spreading from his ears to his cheeks. He didn't blush often. He didn't know if it showed, but he ducked his head against the feeling all the same. "From what she said, I gather that driving you apart is not a concern."

Ben's eyebrows lifted now, echoed by the corner of his mouth as he smiled a crooked grin. "Told you about that, did she?" He folded his arms across his chest and shifted his weight to his heels, but he didn't blush or flinch or hedge. He held Peter's gaze steadily. "How'd that particular topic come up?"

Caught. Peter was caught, and given the other man's seeming comfort, if he squirmed or fidgeted, he'd give himself away. The collar of his shirt felt several sizes too small, and the temperature of the room seemed to skyrocket. "I went to wake her, the morning you were away. We talked."

Ben's eyebrows quirked higher. "Is that what you call it?"

Peter's heartbeat jumped. "Nothing happened." The lie felt heavy on his tongue. "Not much happened," he amended. "She kissed me."

"You felt her up." It wasn't an accusation, not spoken that lightly. Ben bent at the waist, leaning forward again. He lowered his voice and murmured, "Takara tells me everything."

Peter braced himself and waited for the blow that was sure to follow. When Ben uncurled his arms and reached one broad hand toward him, Peter willed himself not to flinch. He nearly succeeded; his shoulders hitched when Ben patted his cheek, not even hard enough to sting.

"Relax," the other man said. "I'm not mad. Stop acting like I'm gonna eat you or something."

He moved to the next table, and Peter stood watching for a moment before he caught up. "I didn't think you'd eat me," he pointed out. "But take a swing at me, maybe. You said it, after all. She's your girl."

"She is," Ben agreed, pausing to lock the legs into place. "But I don't own her."

"No, but she's your girlfriend," Peter insisted. There was something here that he didn't understand. "If the circumstances were right, you'd marry her, wouldn't you?"

Ben looked up, startled, and laughed out loud. "Sure, maybe, if the circumstances were right. And if I was the kind of guy that got married. I haven't decided yet."

"Not married. Ever?" Peter reached to steady the table as Ben disappeared again.

"Yeah. That happens nowadays, you know? People live together without tying the knot." He reappeared beside the table. "Don't try to tell me you're so old-fashioned you wouldn't do it if you could."

Peter blinked a few times. Old-fashioned? "Not old-fashioned," he agreed. "Just old, I think."

"Come on. How old are you? Twenty-something?"

"Twenty-five," he answered. "But that was then."

Ben paused. "Then? Then when?"

Peter took a breath. "When Baba Genie cast her spell, it was 1817, Ben." He cracked a wry, apologetic grin. "I'm much older than I look."

"But no more intelligent now than you were then."

The voice -- a woman's voice, dry and cracked and as ancient sounding as he often felt -- sent shivers chasing one another up his spine. He knew it as surely as if he'd last heard it yesterday, instead of all those years ago. He closed his eyes and breathed its name. "Baba Genie."

* * * * *

Peter went white as a sheet, and his shoulders stiffened. Ben looked between him and the woman in the doorway. He hadn't heard her pull open the doors that lead to the street from the banquet hall, but then, he'd been talking. He'd been known to miss highway off-ramps when he had something to say.

So he stood, dusting his hands together, and put himself between her and the other man. "Were you looking for someone? Another party maybe? The feast's not for two days, so I think you got a little turned around."

"Oh no," the woman answered. Croaked, more accurately. "I found exactly the one I was looking for. And I found you. How fortunate for me."

The woman straightened and started in to the hall. Her back was bent, her steps unsteady, and she kept her hands clasped behind her back as though that slight weight counterbalanced her enough to move at all. She reminded Ben of a Halloween decoration. The wrinkled face, dark, bead-like eyes, and wisps of flyaway silver hair that escaped her bandana and danced around her head reminded him of the cotton-stuffed witches that appeared during that season. She hardly looked real.

She changed as he watched. The closer the haggard woman came, the straighter she stood and the easier she moved. Wrinkles smoothed, and her hair changed color, shifting from gray to a rich red that reminded him of autumn leaves. Her skin warmed with pretty color; an old woman's curves became hourglass perfect. Her clothes changed with her, the ankle-length black shirt shrinking as it rode up her thighs to reveal stately legs. The diving neckline revealed cleavage of the sort that mirrored a Hollywood fantasy.

And her smile was as flawless as the rest of her, parting and widening to reveal perfect teeth. When she'd reached him, she laid her hand against his chest. "Like what you see?"

"I..." He wasn't sure what he was seeing. What he'd seen. Ben knew he was staring, that his eyes were wide, but he couldn't make himself blink. He felt like he was freezing

from the inside out. Every breath was harder to drag into his lungs than the last. He wasn't sure he could move.

"Leave him *alone*." The demand was tight and dark, almost more a growl than words. Peter stepped into sight, then shoved himself between them, slapping the woman's hand away. His shoulders brushed Ben's chest.

Ben caught himself on them, his spine suddenly weak. He sucked in a deep breath to make up for the air he'd been missing. He felt Peter tremble against his palms, or thought he could, at least. Maybe he was the one doing all the shaking.

"Your temper has not improved over the years, Petya." The woman sounded amused. Unconcerned. Ben lifted his head and caught a glimpse of her back as she moved away. The dress dipped as sharply as it did in the front, revealing a tempting expanse of her back and the shadowed line of her spine. He stepped forward, without thinking, and collided with Peter again.

Peter reached back and swatted Ben on the hip, jarring him out of the urge to move, but he didn't step aside or move out of the way. "Leave him alone," he said again. "If you're here for me, then deal with me. Not him. He doesn't know what you are."

She laughed, and it made the hair on Ben's arms lift. "What? A woman? I'm sure he's seen his share of those."

"You're not a woman. You're a witch," Peter countered. "And he's done nothing to deserve your attention."

"Except try to lure you away from me." She lifted a hand and pointed a finger at Ben. Despite the pretty polish that now decorated the nail, he felt as though she'd hooked the tip beneath his skin. She crooked her finger, and he jerked. Pain blossomed in his shoulder. He gritted his teeth.

And she laughed again. "Now he sees. I will not be stolen from."

"Stolen from? What'd I steal?" He wanted to press the heel of his hand against his shoulder. When he stubbed a toe or smacked his knee on something, pressure always made it feel better somehow. If he could put some weight on that pull in his shoulder, he was sure it would stop throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

"Nothing." Peter sounded like he was speaking through his teeth. "You haven't stolen anything because there's nothing to steal." He took a step forward, toward the woman, away from Ben, and Ben felt oddly like he'd been left exposed.

"Nothing," the other man repeated. "And now it's time for you to leave. You have no reason to be here."

"And yet, here I am." The woman -- Baba Genie, if Ben's ears hadn't failed him, and if a witch from the nineteenth century really could be standing in the here and now -- this one stalked in a slow circle around Peter. She trailed her fingernails across his shoulders. Peter's back arched, and he made a strangled sound.

"Something has changed," she purred. "My ties are not so binding. Something" -- she turned to face Ben again -- "that has to do with them. Not magic." She prowled closer. "Magic is too easy. This is something more important. More potent."

She stood so close Ben could feel her breath now. He still couldn't so much as twitch or scratch his nose, but he felt heat radiate off this woman's body in waves. She leaned closer, almost tracing the curve of his cheek with her nose. She made a low, pleased sound then, and drew back so he could watch her pupils shrink to a normal size. She wet her lips, tongue gliding over them provocatively, and despite himself, Ben felt his cock harden. If he could have squeezed his eyes shut, he would have, just to concentrate on something else.

She laughed and moved away, leaving a chill behind. "Love," she proclaimed. "The poor fool is falling in *love* with you." She circled Peter again, then stopped before him with her hand on his head. "You don't really think I'll let that happen, do you? You don't get away from me so easily."

The witch closed her eyes and tipped her chin up. Her lips moved and sound bubbled out of her, but what she was saying, Ben couldn't tell. Peter, though, jerked into an even stiffer position. His fingers twitched, flexing faintly.

Ben dragged in a slow breath. It took effort to fill his lungs. It was a lack of oxygen making his eyes burn, making Peter's body seem to take on a glow that blurred in an outline around him. That was the reason he heard the low hum like a high power line suddenly come to life above him. That was the only explanation there could be.

Because magic, real magic, didn't exist. The woman who he thought he'd seen transform was a hallucination. Maybe he'd hit his head on a table while setting up. She wasn't holding him helpless in one place. She wasn't torturing Peter where he stood.

And she hadn't, as Ben's eyes had informed him, made Peter disappear with a pop of sound and a sudden flare of light. It was dizziness that made spots of color swim through his vision while he gasped for suddenly available air, bent double with his hands on his knees to keep from falling to the floor.

She had not become an old woman again, either. It was impossible for the curvy beauty to have bent and wizened between one heartbeat and the next. And yet, there she went, pacing away on bowed legs, age-spotted hands once more clasped behind her back.

She paused in the hall's doorway, turning back to look at Ben. The corners of her mouth twitched, and she shook her head. "Poor fool," she said again, her voice now thin and reedy. "If you want what is mine, you'll have to work harder to have him. Find him, Benjamin. You and the girl. Make a wish, and maybe it will come true." She laughed and started moving again. She was gone before she reached the front doors.

Chapter Six

“What do you mean he's *gone*?” Takara stared up at Ben in disbelief. “He left? He's running errands?” She frowned until she felt an ache in her forehead. “This isn't the time for jokes, Ben. Is he coming back?”

Ben sat listlessly in the overstuffed recliner Takara kept in her office. She claimed it was for comfort, to those who asked. The truth was that it made a tidy place for a catnap when she couldn't afford to climb the stairs to the apartment overhead. Right now, it looked like it was doing all the work of keeping Ben upright.

“Talk to me,” she insisted again, leaning forward to catch his hands. Her frown deepened when she felt how cold his fingers were. “Baby, something happened. Would you just tell me already?”

“I *told* you.” He tugged one hand out of her grip and rubbed his face. “I told you. This...woman showed up, did something to both of us so we couldn't move, then she put her hand on Peter's head and he disappeared.”

“People don't just *disappear*,” Takara told him for the third -- no, fourth -- time since he'd come back. “Walk away, run away, duck out of sight, maybe, but disappear?”

"Taks." Ben met her gaze levelly. "Do you really think I'm messing with you? Do I look like I'm kidding? I don't know how she did it, I don't know where he went, but I'm telling you I crawled every inch of this place, and Peter isn't here."

Takara let go of his other hand and sat back in the chair she'd claimed. Smaller, it hugged her shoulders. Some days it felt restrictive. Right now, she needed the false embrace. Gone. Peter was gone when she needed him most. "Why would he leave now? With the feast tomorrow...we should go to the police."

Ben laughed. "And tell them what, Takara? Officers, hi, this guy who came from nowhere a few weeks ago suddenly disappeared again last night. We think it was foul play? And you said I sounded crazy."

"Don't say that." She regretted the words, the tone, as soon as it slipped out. It had been sharp and angry. She saw her own surprise reflected in Ben's expression.

Then it hardened. "That's the nice version of what people will say if you try to tell anyone about this, Takara. We're trying to get rid of your family's wacky reputation, right? Aren't we?"

She nodded slowly. "We are." She'd struggled hard to be the Duncan who redeemed the family name. So far she'd managed. She couldn't afford to mess up now. "I just..." She sighed. "I'm worried."

"I know." Ben nodded. "I'm worried, too." He took another breath, like he'd say something else, then stopped, frown deepening again.

Takara reached again for his hands. "Tell me."

"What?"

"Whatever that was, whatever you were going to say. If it'll help us figure this out, or feel a little better, at least."

He smiled, wry and almost apologetic. "I don't know if it will, Taks." He let go of one hand to push a spiral of hair away from her face. "It's just something the woman said."

“Baba Genie,” she prompted.

“Heh. Yeah. Baba Genie.” He paused again, shook his head, and explained. “She said we couldn't have what was hers. Then she said...she said *I* was falling in love with him. I mean, yeah, okay, I liked the guy...”

“Liked *a lot*,” Takara pointed out, ducking her head to catch his gaze. “You never mentioned liking guys to me before, Ben. That means something big had to change.”

His shoulders shifted. Something like discomfort swept through his expression. “Yeah, well, I guess.”

Takara sat forward on the edge of her chair, leaned in and kissed him sweetly. She bumped her forehead against his when their mouths parted and closed her eyes. “It's okay. I was falling in love with him, too.”

Whoa. She'd admitted it. Out loud, without reservation. In front of her boyfriend. Now that the words were spoken, she was a little afraid to open her eyes. She squeezed his hands for a second, then sat back. She opened her eyes slowly. He hadn't started shouting. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

His gaze blazed into hers when she met it. Intense and searching, yes, but not angry. Takara sighed, letting her shoulders drop a notch. She didn't need a fight with Ben today, not on top of everything else.

“We have to find him.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Didn't I just say that?”

Ben shook his head. “That's not what I mean. I just remembered something Baba Genie said. If we want what's hers, we have to work harder to find him. Me and the girl, she said. Make a wish, and maybe it'll come true.”

“Make a wish?” Takara squinted at him. “How does that make any kind of sense? You can't wish someone into being here or...” Her heartbeat kicked up, suddenly pounding hard

and fast beneath her ribs. "Yes, you can." She sat forward again. "That's how it works with him. That's why he came in the first place."

She lifted the pendant around her neck, showing Ben the jewelry he'd seen a thousand times. "Wish, Ben. This is what she means. When Peter first came, he said that the necklace brought him to us, remember? Because we needed him."

Ben slid his hand beneath hers and she let the pendant fall against his fingertips. "I remember," he admitted, then glanced up. "So if we wish again."

Takara folded her hand around his, forcing his fingers into a joined fist with hers. "Then he has to come back. We have to try. Close your eyes."

She folded her other hand over both of theirs, closed her eyes again and tried to remember what exactly she'd said, what she'd been thinking when she summoned him that first day. "I asked for someone to help me. Someone who could keep things under control. I didn't know about the feast then, but --"

"Takara." Ben waited until she'd looked at him again. "That's not the wish we need to make. Things *are* under control, aren't they? The feast's tomorrow. The pies are baked. Dinner's ready to go. We don't need Peter for that."

He had a point. The feast Peter had helped them plan, had suggested, and set up and organized, was just a side benefit. It might have brought him into their lives, but it wasn't why she -- why *they* -- wanted him to stay. So she nodded, took a deep breath and tried again.

"I wish we could have Peter back because he was right. I need him. I need him in my life. I need his laughter and his ideas and his frustration when he has to explain something I should have learned by now. He makes me happy. He makes us complete."

"I need him to help take care of Takara," Ben added when she'd finished talking. "I need him to take my side when it's us against the girls. I need him to tell me when I'm being

a bonehead and about to do something to hurt Takara's feelings. I need him because there's no one else like him, and I've never felt like this before.”

“Because we love him,” Takara offered.

One corner of Ben's mouth lifted in his familiar crooked smile. “Yeah. Because we love him. We need him back. Please.”

Nothing happened. The room was silent. Takara wasn't sure what exactly she was expecting, but it had to be something more than silence. She shifted her weight and crushed her eyes closed, squeezing their joined hands tighter around the pendant. *Please*, she added silently. *Please send Peter back to me.*

The phone rang. She felt Ben's hand jerk in hers. A second ring and they both looked at the handset then at one another. Ben quirked an eyebrow.

On the third ring, he let go and stood to cross the room and answer the phone. Heart racing, hardly daring to breathe, Takara pulled her feet into the chair with her, pressed the pendant she still held against her mouth and put her head down against her knees.

“Everything's ready for tomorrow, yes, ma'am. We're glad the Mayor's still planning to be there. We were expecting he might want to say a few words, yes. We've got a microphone and everything. There'll be TV coverage. Yes, ma'am,” Ben said again. “We're excited, too. All right then, we'll be waiting. Thanks for checking in. Goodbye.”

The sound of the handset being replaced sounded heavy. Disappointing. Takara didn't lift her head. “It wasn't him.”

Ben sighed and her desk creaked, a sure sign that he'd sat down on the edge. “It wasn't him.” He was silent for a moment. “She said falling in love was too easy. That we'd have to work to get him back. We'll find a way. I'm not giving up yet.”

Hot tears pricked Takara's eyes. If she lifted her head now, she thought she might cry. But crying felt like giving up, and she wasn't ready to do that just yet. Instead, she sniffed

them back, gathered herself and straightened. “*We’re* not giving up,” she told her boyfriend. “One way or another, if it takes a year, we’re going to get him back.”

Ben smiled, a full-blown warm shift of expression. “That’s my girl.” He stood again and offered his hand. “Come on, let’s go upstairs and get some rest. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

Takara uncurled and slipped her hand into his gratefully. She let go of the pendant, trying not to flinch when it landed, cool and hard, against her chest. It would work. The day that Peter came back, she’d take it off and never think of it again. She wouldn’t trade it or sell it. It would never fall into someone else’s hands.

That was a promise she would keep.

* * * * *

The hall was packed. Hundreds of people had turned out, just as they’d expected. Just as they’d hoped. The attendees ran the gamut, from family member to friendly neighbor, to the sponsors and participants, to the Mayor and his family. Every seat was filled, every table packed. The waiters Takara had hired bustled down the aisles between them, constantly moving, always refilling glasses, taking away plates and replacing them.

The conversation in the room was a steady rumble of sound, almost a physical thing. The heat from so many bodies certainly heated the room. No one would be cold tonight. One table broke out in laughter as Takara passed and the infectious emotion spread to her, making her smile in response.

She’d pulled out all the stops tonight. She’d bought a new dress, dark red and floor-length. The inset panel was champagne gold, a flash and flare of contrast color to catch the eye and make her feel special when she caught glimpses of herself. She’d put on pearl earrings and pinned her hair up. Her mother, upon seeing her, slipped off the pearl bracelet she’d been wearing and put it on Takara’s arm. She felt elegant and grown-up, completely in control.

And lonely.

She nearly laughed at herself for the thought. How could she feel lonely on a night like tonight, when it seemed like the whole town of Wexford Bay was seated at an event that had her name all over it? She'd already been handed half a dozen cards and been promised business from half a dozen more families. Birthday parties, weddings, family reunions. Peter had been right. Thanksgiving was launching her career. Thoughts of new locations, bigger restaurants and better equipment swirled through her mind.

How could she be lonely with Ben here? The big guy cleaned up nicely, not that she'd doubted that for a second. Though the tuxedo he wore was rented, it looked like it had been made just for him. The jacket hugged his shoulders, showing off their width and her boyfriend's strength. The vest he wore matched the red and gold of her dress, tying them unavoidably together. He spent the night grinning, making the rounds and laughing with the families.

The turkeys cooked up moist and flavorful. Bowls of mashed potatoes, stuffing, and sweet potato casserole circulated like a carefully choreographed display of color. There were green beans and cranberry relish and baskets heaped with oven-warmed rolls. All in all, it should have been a dream come true.

And yet, she missed him. Peter. His absence cast a shadow over the night's festivities. She knew she wasn't alone in feeling that way. Ben had caught her eye more than once as they chatted with their guests. His crooked smile, the slight nods he gave her, let her know he understood how she was feeling. When they came together, and he slid his arm around her waist, he let her lean against him and pressed kisses into her hair. He understood.

It didn't make the longing any easier. She caught herself glancing toward the windows and doors for a glimpse of Peter's hair. Listening, straining to catch Peter's accent, or his laughter, woven in among the rest. She had a few moments when she thought she'd spotted him, but each time had crashed back into disappointment. He hadn't come. There was no sign of him. He really was gone.

And now the Thanksgiving diners were gone, too. She sat at an empty table, elbow just missing a puddle of spilled gravy, her cheek pillowed on her hand. The carcass of a turkey dressed the table before her, picked and cut and carved down to the bone. The other tables were similarly decorated. Signs of a good and satisfying meal. Proof of her success. Lonely.

“Hey.” Ben touched her back before he settled on the bench beside her, straddling it so he could face her. He grinned when she looked over, and tugged on a spiral, letting it spring back into place. “So I see fame and fortune headed your way. A chain of restaurants across the country. Maybe next year we’ll try to feed the state.”

Takara groaned before she laughed and tilted sideways to thump her shoulder against his chest. “You’re trying to kill me,” she protested without heat. “Can we plan next year tomorrow? Or next week? Sometime that’s not tonight?”

Ben wrapped his arms around her and planted a kiss in her hair. “Sure. Ixnay on the turkey talk for the rest of the night.” He relaxed and sighed. “It went really well, Takara. We did good. *You* did good. I’m proud of you.”

She made a quiet sound of pleasure and stretched a bit to steal a kiss. “I’m proud of me,, too,” she promised. “Of us. Right up until the last second, I wasn’t sure we’d make it. I thought someone would get upset.”

“Psh, with my magic graham cracker crust on the pumpkin pies? No way.”

She nudged him lightly, grinning in return. “Gingerbread. You’re never going to learn, are you?”

“Give it time. A little practice and I’ll be a gourmet chef.” He settled her against his chest again. “Tired?”

“Exhausted,” she confessed. She hesitated before adding more, but she knew it would come up eventually, and his mention of magic had made the ache start up again. “I really thought he’d show tonight. If he was ever going to come back at all.”

"C'mon, Taks," he murmured into her hair, lowly. "We agreed we weren't going to give up, didn't we? It would have been cool if he'd been here tonight, no question. I kinda wanted that, too. But just because he didn't make it doesn't mean he'll never show again."

Takara nestled her cheek against his chest, comforted a little by the steady beat she could hear. "Since when are you the optimist in this relationship?"

Ben chuckled. "Since someone has to be." He kept her cradled safely against him, but he moved, reaching for something. "Here. We'll try again."

Something swam into view, caught between Ben's fingers. Takara caught his wrist and pushed it away until she could focus. Then she looked up at him. "A wishbone?"

"Sure, why not," he answered. "It counts, doesn't it? And it was just sitting there. Guess this table missed it. This was my favorite part of Thanksgiving as a kid."

"Picking pieces out of someone else's turkey?"

"Har har," Ben returned, grin appearing again. "Making wishes. You only get the chance to make this kind of wish once a year, you know? Well. Unless you're really in to turkey."

Takara groaned. "No. No turkey. Never again. Next year we're having ham. I can hate pigs for the year after that." She glanced up again. "If I do this, can we leave the cleaning crew here and go home?"

"I'll carry you to the car myself," he promised, and presented her with the forked bone again.

She still wasn't thrilled about touching someone else's left-behinds, but she gripped one side of the wishbone. Waited for Ben to give her a nod, then closed her eyes and pulled.

"Bring Peter back home."

Chapter Seven

Disoriented didn't begin to cover how Peter felt. The world spun around him, making his stomach threaten to rebel. He felt as though he'd been dangled by a string and twisted around, then left to spin until time or momentum ran out. He didn't dare open his eyes. He didn't want to know what he'd see. Whirling scenery wouldn't calm his stomach or his nerves.

When the snap came, he felt it like a bone shifting deep inside. Like a satisfying, pressure-relieving crack of a knuckle. He took a breath, a little deeper than he'd managed for who knew who how long. When he exhaled, he realized he didn't feel like he was spinning anymore.

More to the point, he could feel what was beneath him now. Soft and yielding, he dared to move his hands. His fingers bumped over soft fabric, tunneled into the folds and peaks of...what, exactly? He had to open his eyes.

He did so cautiously, one at a time. He saw the ceiling first, lighter than the rest of the room despite the shadows. The light came from the foot of the bed, faint and warm, though it gave off no heat. Peter pushed to his elbows slowly. A bed? He was on a bed. In a bedroom, of course, but one that he'd seen...

Home. He was home. Not Russia. He hadn't spun back through time. Home now, here, in the present. Not a cold, abandoned cottage. An apartment above a small café. Takara's apartment. This was her bedroom. This was their bedroom, hers and Ben's.

He'd come home.

He swung his feet off the side of the bed and stood, but just for a moment. Dizziness struck again. His heart raced, and he pressed his hand against it, willing it to slow down. Willing the feeling to fade away. He held it hard against his chest, weight delving deep into the bone, and as he did, he realized that that, too, had changed.

Where before there'd been a heavy sensation, a knot beneath his skin that he'd come to think of as the center of Baba Genie's curse, he felt nothing. Skin and muscle, tissue and bone, but the knot itself had disappeared. Was he dreaming?

A door beneath him opened and closed. He heard voices, low and impossible to understand, but his heart sped again. When he stood this time, he took his time getting to his feet. Footsteps crossed the floor toward the doorway. Peter held his breath.

And lost it all when Takara stepped through. She hadn't seen him yet, her head turned back to finish whatever she was saying. With light coming through the doorway, she was silhouetted there for a moment, the soft lines of her body a very welcome sight.

Peter found his voice. "I knew you would be beautiful on this night of all nights."

She flinched and whirled toward him. Even in half light, he could see her eyes were wide. Then she broke into a broad, gorgeous smile, flung her hands upward and let out a high-pitched sound of pure joy. He caught her when she crashed into him, wheeling around with her as she kissed his cheeks and nose and forehead.

"You're here," she said between kisses. "You're here, you're real; you're really here! You don't know. You don't know how hard we wished, Peter. You don't know how hard we prayed to get you back. I thought you were gone. I thought we'd lost you." She caught his

face between her hands and met his gaze, direct, eye-to-eye. "You," she told him, suddenly sober, "are never leaving us again."

Then she kissed him in earnest. Not the happy, excited dots of a moment before. She gave him a kiss that filled him with joy, sweet and lingering and heartfelt. She pressed close, and he curled his arms around her, basking in the warmth of her body. He slid his hands down her spine and fanned them out toward her hips, tucking her even closer while his body woke.

She didn't pull away when the kiss ended. She twisted, just enough that she didn't deafen him when she shouted for Ben. Peter felt the floor vibrate beneath the other man's hurried footsteps and he watched the door, waiting for the moment when his form would fill the space where Takara's had been.

He wasn't wrong to anticipate it. The relief and happiness he felt at recognizing those shoulders, the familiar hulk of Ben's size, was bright and sweet. They stared at one another for one long moment, then Ben laughed and stepped forward. Takara moved out of the way, and Ben folded him in a tight embrace.

His voice was low and rough when he murmured, "Welcome back, Pete." Then he too caught Peter's face between his hands and kissed him, a fierce, possessive sort of kiss.

There were a thousand questions Peter wanted to ask. How they'd managed to bring him back. What had happened after Baba Genie took him. In the face of their welcome home, however, questions paled beside the need to touch. He was home. He was whole. He was with the two people who meant the most to him. After centuries of service, and hours of catering to someone else's whims, he was free to choose for himself.

And the choice was easy. He kissed Ben again. He licked deep into the other man's mouth and shivered at the rumble of pleasure he coaxed free. When he turned to Takara again, she met him halfway, her kiss nearly desperate. Her fingers knotted in his shirt and tugged, lifting upward without regard for buttons or cuffs.

They undressed each other that way -- the three of them, tugging and pulling at fabric that didn't give as quickly as they might have hoped. Peter's hands were tangled with Ben's as they lifted Takara's dress off overhead. Peter undid the last button on Ben's shirt while Takara peeled off his pants and kissed his hip.

Peter took his time exploring Ben's body. He knew the satin softness of Takara's skin already. This was different, exciting. He flattened his hands against Ben's chest and let his fingers wander over the sprinkling of hairs that shadowed the muscles beneath.

Ben was warm, almost hot to the touch, and when he murmured appreciation, the vibration buzzed against Peter's fingertips. Peter laughed and Ben grinned up at him, cocking an eyebrow as he asked, "Are you laughing at me?"

"No." Peter answered with a quick shake of his head, then paused and amended, "A little, yes. In a good way."

"Wasn't complaining," Ben told him and pulled him down into another kiss. He slid a broad hand down Peter's back, curling his fingers over the curve of Peter's ass and tucked him closer, the hot length of his erection like a brand against Peter's thigh.

"Hey." Takara tapped Peter on the shoulder. When he looked up, she had her bottom lip thrust out, pouting playfully. Her eyes danced. "What about me, you two? I'm feeling all left out."

"Can't have that," Ben rumbled. "Now can we?"

She fit between them neatly when they made room again. Naked and warm and eager, Takara traced designs on Peter's shoulder while he skimmed a hand down her stomach, his touch feather light, to watch her shiver beneath his hand. She let Ben urge her legs apart, his fingers against the inside of her thigh, echoing the patterns hers made on Peter's skin. She cried out when Ben slid through the tight curls between her legs and pressed a finger into her.

Peter rested his forehead against her side, taking a moment to compose himself. No need to rush. He had time to explore and enjoy. The spell had been broken. He would be here tomorrow and the next day, to learn where the best places to touch her might be. To figure out how the three of them would love together.

Ben was less patient. Peter heard him murmur something, then felt his hand. The bigger man curled his fingers around Peter's, then fit both of them together, palm to palm. When Peter met his gaze, curious, Ben just smiled, shook his head in amusement, and moved their hands again. Now, two fingers filled Takara, and she writhed, lifting her hands to grab handfuls of both of their hair. Her back arched and her velvet heat clenched tight around their fingers. "God, *yes*."

"Yes," Peter echoed immediately, shifting closer to her. To both of them. Yes. This was perfect. He met Ben's gaze and leaned in to kiss him again. Their tongues warred desperately while Takara curled her fingers against both chests and panted their names.

Then Ben fit himself between her legs, and Takara curled a silken hand around Peter's erection, stroking him as Ben thrust into her, begging for kisses from both men. When they came, it was together, voices mingling in ecstasy. When they collapsed, sweat-slick bodies sliding against one another, Peter knew that he was truly happy.

"And you'll stay," Takara murmured again, sometime later, half-asleep while Peter tugged idly at her hair. "You'll stay with us, won't you?" Ben drowsed behind her, nose against the nape of her neck, one arm banded around her waist, his legs tangled with hers.

"I'll stay," Peter promised. "For as long as you both wish."

Ben rumbled, amused, and lifted his head. "Don't count on her letting you go any time soon. Girl knows what she wants and goes for it."

Takara flattened her hand against Peter's chest, brow furrowing. "What do *you* want? You're the one who hasn't been able to choose all this time."

Peter studied them both, the man and the woman, and knew he'd never want anything else. "I've made my choice," he told them. "I'm happy here. Forever." He kissed them both to seal the statement.

Ben chuckled and lowered his head again. "Forever's a long time. Be careful with that wish."

 THE END 

Sienna Black

Sienna Black is a thirtysomething author living in northern California with her partner and a handful of animals, large and small. She's been writing since she was small, but she's a relative newcomer to the world of m/m fiction. To say that she's thrilled to have found an audience would be an understatement.

She writes primarily paranormal romances for her boys, but there's no telling where they'll lead her next.