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*Para Naughty*



# *Para Naughty*

*Alice Gaines*

*Misty Simon*

*Francesca Hawley*

Draumr Publishing, LLC  
Maryland

ParaNaughty

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# *Foreword*

*by Eileen Wilson*

In my mind, I picture the perfect heroine and she's unabashedly curvy. When on a date with the man of her dreams, she eats what she wants, including that deliciously decadent cheesecake. She wraps her voluptuous body in fun, stylish clothing that reflects her sassy personality and emphasizes her bodacious cleavage and scrumptious junk in the trunk. Her lingerie drawer is filled with soft, silky peignoirs that entice her dream man to touch her and whisk her off to the bedroom for a wild romp.

The perfect heroes for these plump beauties think the women have great personalities but, more importantly, can't keep their hands off the lush packaging. The men can be devilishly handsome or the clean cut boy-next-door type, but the one thing they have in common is their appreciation for the Rubenesque heroines.

I've waited years to see these kinds of heroines and heroes in romance, especially in erotic romance. Slowly but surely, authors are beginning to incorporate such characters into their stories. Zaftig women everywhere can stand up and cheer because more and more writers are heeding the call to create real-sized women in real-life situations, meeting and falling in love with men who celebrate their curves.

The stories in this anthology are another step in the right direction. Sit back, relax and curl up with some hot men romancing voluptuous women.

Eileen Wilson is the author of "An Unforgettable Kiss", available in the "Love at Large" anthology.





*With Many Thanks*

To Eileen Wilson for her assistance in editing this great work of  
paranormal erotica.



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*The Devil, You  
Say*

*Alice Gaines*

## *Dedication*

For my Rebel Sisters. “Living well is the best revenge.” - George  
Herbert

# Chapter One



The woman looked like an escapee from a fashion runway in hell. Draped in expensive clothes and with every hair coifed into submission, she was thin enough to bend in ways the human body wasn't meant to bend. Worse, she was going to be Cynthia Redmon's new boss, dammitall.

Cyn had worked her tuchus off for months to get this promotion. Fat chance. After he'd all but promised the job to Cyn, Stewart had hired someone from the outside. Now, he sat leering at his newest acquisition as if he'd already figured out a way to get into her pants. Maybe he had. Who knew? Maybe he'd hired her as payment for services rendered.

"Carole will be transitioning into her new management role on Monday," Stew said, in his usual pseudo-business gibberish.

"That's Carole with an 'e,'" the new boss added.

Cyn nodded. Both of them had told her that. Maybe the extra vowel got Carole a few thou more in salary.

"I'd like you to prioritize your calendar so that you can show Carole the scope of her new duties," Stew said.

"I have to train her?" Holy excrement. The bastard didn't re-

ally expect her to train the woman who'd gotten the job she'd hoped to win for herself, did he?

"You've been here a while, Cyn." Stew gave her an oily smile.

"Six years." Six long years of scrimping and saving in hopes of buying a piece of the American dream—her own house—only to watch the ridiculous real estate market snatch her dream away from her time after time. This promotion had offered her only real hope to make enough to get a mortgage. Damn Stewart and his obsession with leggy, skinny blondes.

"I look forward to working with you, Cynthia," the skinny blonde said. She didn't look as if she looked forward to it, though. The slight lift to her eyebrow and curl to her lip looked as if she didn't quite approve of Cyn. As if she planned to deliver mini-lectures on the "epidemic of obesity" and leave low-carb diet sheets around the office.

"I look forward to it, too, Carole," Cyn said sweetly. She hoped. "Say, I wonder if I might have a word with Stewart alone."

Carole's eyebrow went up even further, and she glanced over at Stew for guidance.

His beady eyes narrowed in disapproval. Then, he gave Carole a slick smile and gestured toward the door. "Would you excuse us?"

"Of course." Carole rose and walked to the office door. She paused with her hand on the knob. "Lunch later?"

"Sure, doll."

Doll? He called his new accounts manager "doll"? He'd put Cyn off her feed if he ever called her anything like that. It didn't seem to bother Carole, though, because she smiled and let herself out, closing the door behind her.

"That was pretty rude," Stew said, his pointy weasel nose all a-twitch. "You're going to have to interface with Carole on a daily basis, you know."

"How could you do this?" Cyn demanded.

"Do what?"

"How could you hire someone from the outside when you promised the job to me?"

"I never bottom-lined it for you." More nose-twitching. Stew-



art always got that rodent look on his face when he lied, and that was a lot of the time.

"You told me all I had to do to prove I was manager material was to run the department for a while. I did that, and I did a damned good job of it."

"I appreciate your task-orientedness," he said. "But it's time to sunset that work modality for you and look at what's best for this company at the end of the day."

"Speak English, Stewart."

His eyes narrowed even further. "Carole has more experience than you."

She also had pert boobs and non-existent hips. Swimsuit model material. Worse, she put up with being called "doll." Stewart's dream of a seductive yet compliant female employee.

"Besides," he said. "She's an asset, brand-wise."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We have a company website, you know."

"I ought to," she grumbled. "That was my special project *last* year."

"Carole's picture there projects an image. It speaks."

What did that mean? She stared at Stew for a minute. "What does a picture on a website say?"

"It says, 'this is a company with a winning paradigm.'"

"Excuse me?"

Stewart took a deep breath. "It says we have our feet on the ground, our nose to the grindstone, and our eyes on the prize."

*And our head up our ass.* If only she could find the courage to say that out loud.

"You wanted eye candy on the website," she said.

"You're being counterproductive, Cyn," Stew said. "You need to stay on goal."

"Oh, I'm *on goal*." She rose, planted her fists on Stew's desk and looked down at him. "And my goal required me getting a promotion. A good one."

"The company has plenty of opportunities for advancement." He glared up at her. "Don't blame me if you haven't utilized the right career paths."

Dammit, she ought to shake the little weasel. Her fingers itched

to do exactly that. That wouldn't get her a promotion, though. In fact, it'd probably get her fired. She'd already skirted pretty close to insubordination. So far, Stew hadn't threatened her because he knew he needed her to train his new acquisition. Heck, she ought to quit on her own, but she'd looked at the job market. Good opportunities didn't pop up everywhere these days, and most folks were happy to earn a paycheck, even from a boss like Stew the Poo.

"Now, maybe you'd better get back to work," the Poo said. "I still need the project implementation projections."

Cyn did a not-so-slow burn. The creep had dangled the carrot of a promotion in front of her for months, then, he'd hired someone from the outside. Next, he'd ordered Cyn to train the new person. Now, he'd dismissed her. If she stuck around another minute, she'd say something she'd regret.

So, she stood and looked down at him. "Fine."

He gave her an oily smile. He'd won, and he knew it. "You're a team-player, Cyn. That's what I like about you."

"Right," she said from between clenched teeth. Before either of them could say another word, she turned and left the office.

Once in the hallway, she pulled the door closed carefully, rather than slam it, as she'd really like to do. Then, she pounded her head on the wall a few times.

*Bam.* There had to be another job somewhere that would pay her more money. But, she'd have to leave her pension and 401k if she left.

*Bam.* There had to be a way for a regular single person to qualify for a mortgage. But in Oakland, decent houses *started* at half a million dollars.

*Bam.* She'd move to the boondocks. But then, she'd have a multi-hour commute on freeways that looked like parking lots at rush hour.

*Bam.* There had to be some way. There *had* to be.

"Why are you doing that?"

"Huh?" Cyn looked up to find Midge, the receptionist, staring at her. Midge's eyes were wide with alarm, and she'd let her mug dangle until coffee threatened to spill over the side.

"Why are you pounding your head against the wall?" Midge

righted her cup.

“Because it feels so good when I stop.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

Damn it, she knew it didn’t. Still, what could she do?

“Calories,” Cyn mumbled. “I need calories.”

“Okay, who died?”

Cyn set down her menu and looked up at her best friend. “You don’t want to know.”

Jenny shrugged out of her coat and draped it over the seat opposite Cyn’s. “You never ask me to meet you at Romero’s unless something really bad has happened.”

“Sit down and help me decide,” Cyn said. “I plan to order half the menu.”

“Wow.” Jenny pulled out her chair and sat. “That bad, huh?”

“I’m going to start with aguacate and eat my way through zapato.”

“You’re going to eat a shoe?”

“Maybe, but I think I’ll have some guacamole first. How about you?”

Jenny reached over and put her hand on Cyn’s. “Tell me, honey.”

“In a minute. I need to fortify myself with some refried beans.”

“We’ll go for ice cream afterwards.”

Bless Jenny. She never looked disapprovingly when Cyn dared to put something besides rabbit food into her mouth. The rest of the world acted as if she had no right to eat because she wore a size twenty-two. It got pretty tedious after a while.

The waiter showed up, pen poised. “Do las señoritas know what you’ll have?”

“We’ll want to split some guacamole,” Cyn said. “And I’ll have the number three.”

Jenny didn’t even look at her menu. “I’ll have the same.”

The man smiled, took their menus, and walked off. Cyn dipped a tortilla chip into the salsa and raised it in a toast. “Over the teeth and past the gums. Look out, buttocks, here it comes.”

Jenny crossed her arms over her chest. "Why do you do that?"

"What?" Cyn put the salsa-laden chip in her mouth and chewed.

"Why do you make fun of yourself like that?"

Cyn swallowed. "You think it's *not* going to my buttocks?"

"I think your buttocks are gorgeous."

Cyn stared at her. Jenny wasn't skinny by any means, but she didn't have to shop at the specialty stores. She ate what she wanted and stopped when she wanted and seemed perfectly comfortable inside her own skin. If only Cyn could do the same.

"You're the best, Jenny," Cyn said. "But you need to have your eyes checked."

"You're in fabulous shape, Cyn."

Cyn ate another chip and thought about that for a moment. "I do exercise."

"I'll bet you were at the gym bright and early today."

"Of course," Cyn said.

"You're strong. You have great muscle tone."

"I guess." In fact, that very morning some sweaty guy had had to lower the amount of weight on one of the machines after she'd used it.

"Your skin glows," Jenny went on. "You radiate health."

"Yeah, yeah. I glow and radiate. I'm a regular x-ray machine."

The waiter reappeared with a bowl of guacamole and more chips. Cyn dug into it. "Here goes weeks of dieting."

"No one can live on carrot sticks and low-fat salad dressing," Jenny said.

"I can." Rather, she could if the world would cooperate. The world didn't seem to want to.

"You can exist on that," Jenny said. "Not live."

"Okay, then, I exist."

"That low-fat dressing is vile. I don't know how you swallow it."

"Look, Jenny, you can eat what you want. I can't."

"You could, too, if you'd let up on yourself." Jenny huffed. "It isn't working, anyway. It isn't making you thin. It's making you

miserable.”

“I don’t need any help in that regard.”

“So, will you tell me what happened? Why did I have to meet you here on no notice?”

“I didn’t get the promotion.”

Jenny’s eyes got wide. “What? Has Stewart lost his ever-loving mind?”

“I’m not sure he has one.”

“Who could he have given it to? No one’s more qualified than you.”

“He hired someone from the outside. A size eight. Or six.” Or four. Who knew?

Their food arrived. A huge platter of beans and rice. An enchilada and a taco. A chile relleno. More guacamole. Sour cream. Cheese—gooey, melting, fattening cheese. A cloud of spices floated over the whole thing. All this and ice cream, too.

Jenny didn’t even pick up her fork. “I can’t believe he’d do that. Even Stew the Poo couldn’t be idiotic enough to hire someone who doesn’t know the company.”

“Don’t underestimate him. He gives idiots a bad name.” Cyn picked up her fork and dug into the beans. They oozed calories. Was it possible to smell lard?

“That’s so unfair, honey,” Jenny wailed.

Cyn ate the beans and followed them with a bite of enchilada. “Eat your lunch. It’s delicious.”

Jenny finally helped herself to some guacamole and watched Cyn eat for a while.

“Did he give you any reason he hired the woman from the outside?” Jenny said.

“He said he wanted someone who’d project the right image on the company website.” Cyn finished her chile relleno and moved back to her beans. “You know how Stewart is about weight.”

“You should have slapped him by now for some of his remarks.”

“I imagine he wants to pork this woman, too, if he isn’t doing it already.”

“Well, you don’t want any job where you have to pork Stewart,” Jenny said.

"Ewww, Jenny, I'm trying to eat."

"Good point." The two of them ate in silence for a while.

Damn, she'd counted on this promotion. Without it, she'd have to spend years scraping together a down payment.

"So, what are you going to do?" Jenny asked.

"I don't think there *is* anything I can do about Stewart, and I doubt I could find another, better job."

"Why not?" Jenny said. "You're so well qualified."

"The whole world's the same as Stewart about weight. They all want stick women to adorn their offices."

"That isn't true, hon. You just have to find the right company."

Cyn set aside her fork and wiped her mouth with her napkin. "I have another idea."

"What?"

Cyn reached into the pocket of her jacket and found the brochure from the clinic. She slid it across the table to Jenny.

Jenny took one look at it, and her eyes got wide again. "No, honey. I mean it."

"The surgery is very successful at helping people lose weight."

"Not surgery, Cynthia. You can't."

"I called them this morning. I can have it done in a couple of weeks."

Her friend crumpled the brochure into a wad and set it on the table. "Don't you dare even think of such a thing."

"Why not?"

"Surgery's dangerous. Just an anesthetic mistake can kill you."

"Lots of people have had it done."

"People who need it," Jenny said. "You don't."

"I'm desperate here," Cyn said.

"If you're in good health, it's completely unnecessary," Jenny said. "I won't let you do it."

"Nothing else is working." Cyn rested her palms on the table and leaned toward her friend. "At this point, I'd sell my soul to be thin."

"Oh, honey, I know you're hurting, but..."

“I mean it, Jenny. I’d sell my soul.”

The room got funny all of a sudden. The walls leaned inward, and the floor shook. Jenny didn’t seem to notice but sat, staring at Cyn.

“Whoa,” Cyn said.

“Are you all right?” her friend’s voice came out distorted as though it was being played in slow motion.

Everything started to spin around Cyn, and she pressed her hands to her eyes. When she removed them again, everything had gone black.

When Cyn’s vision returned, she found herself in some kind of anteroom. Rows of straight-backed chairs lined the walls. Bare vinyl floors. An empty metal desk stood in front of an unadorned door. The walls held no pictures and no windows. The décor went way past minimalist to bleak. If she’d sold her soul to the devil, the Prince of Darkness ought to be able to do better than this place.

She *was* in hell, right? She wasn’t in Kansas anymore, for sure. Nor Romero’s Cocina Mexicana. She’d just vowed to sell her soul in exchange for a svelte figure, so the devil must have taken her. She looked down at herself. Beelzebub hadn’t kept his part of the bargain—every extra pound on her body had followed her here.

“Well, Satan, or whoever brought me here, I don’t have to endure any lakes of fire if you haven’t made me thin.”

“Come in, Cynthia.” It was a male voice that seemed to come right out of the walls.

She looked around. “Huh?”

“The door, Cynthia. There is only one.”

She did a complete three-sixty. The voice was right. Only one door—the one behind the desk. She must have materialized inside the anteroom. Either that, or she’d had a wicked reaction to MSG, if they used that at Romero’s.

“I’m waiting,” the voice called again.

Oh, what the hell? Oops, now that she was in hell, maybe she’d better stop using it as a curse word. The landlord might take exception. Whatever. She walked to the door and tried the knob.

It opened easily.

The room she entered was as sparse as the anteroom, maybe even more so. The same vinyl floor, the same metal desk. A man sat behind this desk, though, on the only chair in the place. He hunched over a keyboard, his face obscured behind a huge computer terminal. Although he must have called to her to enter, he acted as if he didn't know she'd come in. He typed and stared at the screen while she fidgeted.

Finally, she cleared her throat.

"Cynthia Redmon?" he asked.

"You were expecting, maybe, Britney Spears?"

"What would I want with her?"

"What do you want with me?"

"Have a seat," he said. "I'm almost finished here."

She looked around. "The floor looks comfortable."

"Sorry." A hand appeared from behind the terminal. Masculine with long fingers, it pointed at a spot beside her, and a chair appeared. Oh-kaaay. Definitely not Kansas. Cyn sat in it and put her hands in her lap.

After a minute, he pushed his swivel chair from behind the screen and looked at her. Cyn's breath caught on an audible gasp before she got control of herself. He was easily the most unusual looking man she'd ever seen. And the most handsome. His skin had a dark glow to it, in contrast to the ice blue of his eyes. High cheekbones and bushy eyebrows made his face look harsh, almost animalistic. Yet the whole package worked in an otherworldly sort of way. Could this be the face of Satan himself?

One of his bushy eyebrows went up. "Looking for something?"

Horns, maybe. His hair was long enough to hide stubs of horns. It came to a prominent widow's peak in the front, which also made him look devilish. Oh, those eyes...

He glanced back at his screen. "Cynthia Abigail Redmon. Born 25 years ago. Single. Assistant accounts manager for a mid-sized publishing company. Height, five-seven. Weight..."

"Hey, wait a minute, pal." Cyn raised a hand to stop him. "I don't discuss my weight with anyone."

"Really? I thought you were doing exactly that right before



you called to me.”

“I called to you?”

He looked back at the screen. “Your exact words were ‘I’d sell my soul to be thin.’ You said it twice.”

“I didn’t sign anything, so you don’t have a contract.” She looked at her watch. Rather, tried to, but her wrist was bare. “Okay, I don’t know what you’ve done, but it must be time for me to get back to work.”

“Your last physical was excellent. Blood pressure 110 over 80.” He smiled at her. “Very nice.”

“I didn’t know men cared about women’s vital signs.” The only vitals men cared about, in her experience, were 36-26-36. Or 40-18-22 these days.

“You live alone in a nice apartment and make a good salary.”

“Not enough to buy a house in California,” she said. The way her life had gone so far, she wouldn’t get a husband’s help with the down payment any time soon.

“That’s why you were so upset to lose that promotion,” he said.

“How much do you know about me?”

The fire in his eyes flared briefly, making him look truly dangerous. “As much as I need to know.”

All right, enough. She got up from the chair, walked to his desk, and rested her fists on the top. From this close, his eyes and the glow of his skin could hypnotize a woman of lesser determination. In fact, a more susceptible female might lean toward him, hoping for a kiss from... Damn, his lips were as luscious as the rest of him. Full and curved. She shook herself.

“Look, I said something in haste,” she said over the hammering of her heart. “But I didn’t make any promises, and I didn’t sign anything.”

He smiled. Smugly, the s-o-b. He knew what effect he had on women, obviously. In another time and place, she might entertain fantasies of a man like that giving her a tumble. But he was Satan, and this was Hades, and she had to get the hell out.

“You called out for help,” he said.

“Help?” Was the man nuts? “An offer to sell my soul is a cry for help?”

He gave her a cat-and-canary grin. "So, I'm right. You did offer your soul."

"Don't break your arm patting yourself on the back," she said. "I offered my soul in exchange for something. You didn't hold up your part of the bargain, so you get nothing from me."

"What if I want to give you something, instead?"

Call for help? Give her something? This made no sense. When had Satan gone into the psychotherapy business? Maybe this was a con. She'd offered her soul, and he'd blown the deal. So, now he thought he could seduce her into turning over the goods, anyway. He looked seductive enough, but if she wanted to surrender, she wouldn't.

"If you want to give me something, give me my freedom," she said. "Send me back to Romero's."

"To that orgy of self-loathing? I think not."

"What business of is it of yours?"

"A soul is a very precious thing, Cynthia, not to be bargained away for something as trivial as body size."

Easy for him to say. He didn't have an extra ounce of fat on him. He could probably eat three Romero's number three specials without putting on a pound. Come to think of it, she'd always suspected that mortals who could do that might be the devil's spawn. Maybe she'd been onto something.

"I lost my dream job because of my body size," she said. "With that, I lost my hope of owning a house."

"There are other jobs. Better ones."

"Like I'd get one of those in my size twenty-two muumuu's." She threw her hands into the air. "For pity's sake, I don't even have a sex life."

"Ahhhh..."

He gave her that smug smile again. Did she dare try smacking Beelzebub?

"That, at least, is something worth sacrificing for," he said. "But, I can help you with that."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Exactly how do you think you're going to do that?"

"Really, Cynthia, that should be obvious."

She stood and stared at him for a while.

"I'm a man," he said finally. "If you want sex, I'll give it to you."

"Whoa, now *there's* a smooth line if I ever heard one. Very romantic. I may swoon."

"Forgive me. You were so frank about sex, I thought you'd appreciate frankness from me. Is this more agreeable?"

He waved his hand around the room, and everything changed. The plain walls disappeared to be replaced by drapes of red velvet. A fireplace stood on one wall, and several logs blazed in the hearth. This looked more like hell. Except, maybe, for all the plush furniture around the room. A recliner and ottoman in one corner, a conversation pit against the wall, a chaise in the same red velvet—all of it designed for maximum comfort. Next to the chaise stood a low table with a bowl of fruit and two crystal wine flutes on it. Next to that, a tripod held a wine bucket with what looked like a bottle of champagne sticking out of it.

The man now stood next to the fireplace, lounging with one elbow on the mantle. He wore formal attire—a cutaway jacket and tails—which made him look even more devilish. And more delicious.

"More romantic?" he asked.

"In an early bordello sort of way."

"One more thing." He made another gesture, and the light in the room dimmed until only the fire filled the room with warm illumination. It cast his form into shadow and made him look even taller and more imposing than he had before.

Just a moment ago, he'd offered to fix her sex life. Her knees wobbled.

"You look absolutely ravishing, by the way," he said. His eyes widened as he looked her over, from the top of her head to her feet and back to her—ohmigod—breasts. They responded as if he were stroking them with his fingers. They felt achy and heavy, and the nipples hardened against the flimsy material.

Hey, wait a minute. Flimsy material?

She looked down at herself. Somehow he'd replaced her business suit with a long, flowing negligee of perfectly sheer, black gauze. It revealed—no, showed off—every bit of flab and cellulite on her body.

“What in hell did you do?” She ran behind the chaise and crouched low to hide herself. Hell, indeed. This hell business was finally starting to make sense. She’d come here to a den of iniquity with a man who looked good enough to eat, but she had to expose herself to his ridicule. She’d spend the rest of eternity horny beyond human endurance, and he’d keep telling her she turned him off.

“Why are you hiding, Cynthia?” he said.

“If you have any mercy in your soul, don’t do this.” She really ought to laugh at that one. Mercy from the devil.

He approached the chaise. “Do what?”

She crouched lower. “Make fun of me.”

He stopped where he was and stared down at her, a look of honest puzzlement on his face. “Telling you how ravishing you look is making fun of you?”

“It is if you don’t mean it.”

“You think I’m not attracted to you,” he said.

“Bingo.” The man had a keen grasp of the obvious. She didn’t move but glared at him from her safe spot behind the chaise.

He held out his hand toward her. “Come out from behind the furniture.”

“It doesn’t matter whether I think you’re attracted to me or not, I don’t get naked on the first date. I’m old-fashioned that way.”

“False modesty,” he said. “I’m going to give you one more chance. Come out from behind that chaise.”

Her heart started pounding again. After all, this man was the devil, and he’d delivered a direct order. Twice. What would happen to her if she continued to refuse? The tortures of the damned? Pillars of fire? Locusts? But honestly, he hadn’t kept up his part of the bargain. How could he say he owned her soul?

That fire came back to his eyes. “Three. Two. One.”

The chaise disappeared. Just plain disappeared. One second it was there, and the second second...pfffft. Without the support, she collapsed onto the floor.

“I was thinking more of the couch,” he said. “But if you prefer the carpet...”

She scrambled to her feet and raced to the side of the room. She could hide behind a drape. Of course, running away from the

most beautiful male she'd ever seen—a man who claimed she looked ravishing—didn't make a whole lot of sense. But she'd started on that path, and by gum, she'd stick to it. What part of "no" didn't he understand? The stupid drape didn't budge, though, no matter how hard she tugged on it. So, there she stood in a black gauze negligee, yanking on velvet.

That was, until she turned around and saw him walking toward her. Slowly. With a determined gleam in his eye. She flattened herself against the wall and watched him approach.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Cynthia," he said softly as he walked ever closer. Carefully, as if he were coaxing a frightened animal to trust him.

"Isn't that your job, tormenting people?"

"Why would you think a thing like that?" He stopped right in front of her. So close, the fabric of his suit almost rubbed against her breasts. They started aching again. Traitors.

He placed his hands on either side of her face and leaned toward her. Heat radiated off him. Maybe that really came from the fire in the hearth, but the man himself felt like a furnace. In the dim light, his eyes glowed. He was sin incarnate, but then, he was the devil, after all. He was built for sin, and oh, was he built.

"Don't be afraid of me, Cynthia." His voice sounded like warm chocolate. His breath was as sweet as honey. The man was a walking, talking, breathing dessert. Yum.

"I'm not," she said. Or croaked, rather. She cleared her throat to try again. "It's just..."

He stroked the side of her face. His fingers were hot, too, but pleasantly. "Just what?"

"This has all been a little hard to understand," she said. "A few minutes ago I was in a Mexican restaurant having lunch with a friend. And now, I'm here, wherever here is."

He sighed, a deep, reluctant sigh. "I see. You have been through quite a bit today."

"So, if you could send me back," she said. But did she want that, really? "Give me my regular clothes first, of course."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that." He didn't look sorry, though, not the least bit. "You have to stay here a while."

"How long?"

“Until...” His voice trailed off, and he continued to look into her eyes. His lips were so close that the tiniest movement toward them would get her a kiss. For pity’s sake, why didn’t she just do it?

He backed away, finally. Not far. He still had her pinned up against the wall, but she had some breathing room now. Some.

“I tell you what,” he said. “Let me give you a little sample of what I’ve offered you. I think after that, you’ll want to stick around for a while.”

“Okay.” She took a few deep breaths. “I guess.”

He smiled, a very sweet smile, considering he was the devil himself. Then, he took her hand and led her to the couch. When they sat on it, it expanded under them until it was the size of a bed.

“How do you do that?” she asked.

“Do you really want to know?”

She patted the mattress beneath her. It seemed normal enough, but what if it was cursed or something? “I don’t think so.”

“Good,” he said. “Lie down like a good girl.”

She did, and he stretched out beside her. He still wore his very formal evening attire, and the negligee still covered her body. He made no move to undress either her or himself, so she lay, looking up at him as the firelight played in his black hair.

Lord, but he was gorgeous. Tempting. She couldn’t have taken her eyes off him if her life depended on it. He was the stuff that the hottest of erotic dreams were made of. The kind of dreams that aroused her so completely, she’d have to fish for the vibrator behind her bed before she could go back to sleep.

Now, a man that handsome lay in a bed with her and promised her a sample of what he could do for her. If only she had her vibrator right now.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered.

“Um...”

“Shhhh.” He put his finger against her lips. “Don’t talk.”

Talk? Words? How could she even think of something to say with him next to her, looking down into her face with those eyes? His lips only inches from her own. She could hardly breathe. She wasn’t likely to produce speech any time soon.

He removed his finger and smiled. After a minute of that heart-stopping beauty, he closed his eyes and his mouth moved toward hers. Slowly, so slowly. She could have died from the anticipation. The minute he kissed her, the room began to spin.

Damn, but it was good. Damndamndamn. He caressed her gently, the pressure of lips on hers as light as a feather and as deep as an ocean. Her heart pounded, and her blood thrummed in her veins. This beat anything from her dreams, never mind reality. After a few heartbeats of heaven, she whimpered into his mouth and answered his kiss, begging for more.

He pulled her against him and claimed her lips with more authority. All along the length of her body, his heat burned into her flesh while he claimed her breath, her sanity, with his caresses. She ran her arms around his neck and surrendered.

Images exploded in the back of her mind as she grew more and more aroused. The two of them lying in a field of warm grass, with the sun beating down on them. Naked. Him parting her thighs and positioning himself between them.

The two of them splashing in water so clear it was transparent. He'd take her hand and place it around his cock. His huge, engorged cock. His eyes would get unfocused with pleasure.

The two of them on a king-sized bed like this one, hung all around with lace curtains. The tip of his sex entering her slowly, followed by the bulk of his shaft. One glorious inch at a time.

All that lay inside his kiss. How could he do that? He did own her soul, after all. At least for this brief moment, he owned every bit of her—flesh and spirit. Dear lord, what was happening here?

She sank back into the cushions and pulled her mouth away from his. "You really are the devil, aren't you?"

He grinned wickedly at her. "Thanks. I like to think so sometimes."

"No, I mean it. Really."

He laughed. "I've been called a lot of things."

"Seriously, who are you?"

"Why is that important?"

"I just let you kiss me within an inch of my life," she said. The kiss had only been half of it. Oh, those images. If she'd let him, he could have brought her to orgasm merely by kissing her.

Impossible.

“And you’ll let me do a lot more before we’re through.” Grinning again. The smug devil was back. He knew the effect he had on her. He’d probably thought up those images to tempt her to stay. He’d won.

“Won’t you?” he prompted.

Damn, she shouldn’t surrender. He hadn’t kept his part of the bargain, and she could demand that he release her. But, if she did, she’d miss out on sex so good it was unworldly. She might not be the most beautiful woman on Earth, but she wasn’t stupid.

“Anything you want,” she said.



## Chapter Two

Cyn awoke in the same room where the devil, or whoever he was, had kissed her into insanity. Somehow, covers and a pillow had materialized on the couch while she slept. Maybe he'd covered her up, or maybe he'd waved his hand to make the bedding appear. She really ought to get used to that sort of thing, or she'd go nuts. She'd need all her wits to convince the guy that he hadn't paid for her soul, and he might as well send her back.

She sat up and rubbed her hands over her face. The fire had gone out, but cracks of light slipped in between the drapes. One of them fluttered in a warm breeze. What the heck? Last night, they'd stuck to the walls so firmly she couldn't budge them.

She got up and walked to the drapes. When she grabbed two of them, they parted easily to allow bright sunlight in.

"Now, you cooperate," she grumbled. "Fat lot of good you did me last night."

Great, now she'd started talking to fabric. At least, it didn't answer.

She glanced outside. Whatever she'd expected of hell, this wasn't it. On the other side of an open pair of French doors, a

flagstone terrace ran along the length of the room. Past that, a rose garden held dozens of plants, all in full bloom. Beyond the roses, perfect lawns sloped outward and downward toward a stand of trees in the distance. The breeze hit her smack in the face, bringing the perfume from all those flowers. Birdsong in the distance made the whole scene something straight out of heaven, definitely not Hades.

Then, another smell wafted into the room. Coffee and bacon. Her stomach rumbled. Despite her vow to consume several thousand calories the day before, she'd actually only eaten a few bites before she'd offered her soul and ended up here. She needed to eat something, or she'd pass out with hunger.

She turned and discovered that a door had opened at the other side of the room. The food smells came from there. The couch had returned to normal size, and the bed clothing had disappeared. A black lace robe lay over the end of the couch—the rest of the peignoir set. It wouldn't cover her much better than the gown, but the two of them together might give her a bit of modesty. She walked to it, slipped it on, and then stepped out the door to go looking for breakfast.

She found a long corridor with thick carpeting on the floor. Wooden occasional tables stood here and there, and each held a huge vase full of flowers. Roses from the bushes outside, no doubt, but also calla lilies, snap dragons, and an assortment of other blossoms. They relieved the monotony of the pale walls, making the whole area bright. She walked along and turned a corner. Another door appeared to lead to a greenhouse, and the luscious food smells wafted from there. Cyn's mouth started to water.

She crossed the threshold and found her devil sitting at a wrought iron table in the middle of a room full of exotic plants. He wore a silk robe with the collar of his pajamas peeking out. He looked up as she entered and smiled.

"There you are, finally," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," she answered automatically. But it was true. She'd slept better than she had for years. Ever since she'd gotten her job working for Stewart. He'd wrecked her sleep, and she hadn't even noticed.

"Good," the devil said. "You must be hungry."

“Who are you?”

He wiped his mouth with a napkin. A plate of half-eaten breakfast sat in front of him. Bacon, eggs, and a muffin. A smaller plate of fruit lay next to that. Beelzebub ate breakfast like normal folks?

“Why is it important for you to know who I am?” he asked.

“It would be nice to have something to call you besides ‘you.’”

“I’m the only one here.”

She crossed her arms and did her best to scowl. Unfortunately, the movement pushed her breasts up and out, and the man’s gaze focused on them as his smile grew wicked.

“You said you wanted to make love to me, didn’t you?” she asked. Actually, he’d offered to spice up her sex life. The two things weren’t the same at all.

“I think you agreed to let me,” he said.

“I like to know the names of men I sleep with. I’m funny that way.”

“Do you sleep with a lot of men?”

“You know damned well I don’t,” she said. “I told you that yesterday.”

He rested his elbow on the arm of his chair and stroked his chin. “Ah, yes, you did.”

“Look, you know everything about me. The least you could do is tell me your name.”

“Sam,” he answered.

“Sam?” she repeated. “That’s it? Just Sam?”

He smiled at her. Pleasantly, darn him. “Do you need any more?”

Sam. What in hell kind of name was that for a devil? Sam sounded like a next door neighbor. A dorky one with a run-down pickup truck and a beer belly. This guy didn’t look like any Sam she’d ever met.

“Now that we’ve been introduced, wouldn’t you like some breakfast?” he asked. He gestured toward a sideboard full of some of the most glorious food she’d ever clapped eyes on. How had she missed that? She’d been looking at the glorious hunk at the table, that’s how. Sam.

She walked to the buffet and picked up a plate. Poached eggs sat over a steamer along with Canadian bacon and English muffin halves. A chafing dish next to it held hollandaise sauce. There were other hot dishes, too—sausages, bacon, hash browns, waffles and hot syrup. Chilled bowls held strawberries, melon slices, and grapefruit sections. A whole array of pastries filled the rest of the surface; croissants, muffins, coffee cakes, and—ye gods—even a cheesecake. All this for two people.

She scooped up a poached egg, added half of an English muffin, and gave herself some melon and grapefruit. After pouring herself a cup of coffee from the carafe, she took the whole thing to the seat opposite him and sat down.

“Do you have any artificial sweetener?”

One of his brows went up as though she’d mortally offended him. “I do not.”

“Fine. I’ll drink it black.”

He gestured toward the sideboard. “I offer you all that, and you’re only going to eat one egg, dry toast, and some fruit?”

“Slaved away over a hot stove, did you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he answered.

“Then, I’ll eat what I want.”

“That isn’t what you want.”

“Now you’re an expert on what I want?” She took a sip of her coffee and did her best not to make a face. Maybe she ought to relent on the sugar.

“No rational human being looks at this,” he said, pointing to the sideboard, “and decides she wants that.” This time he pointed at her plate.

He was right, of course, but she’d never admit it. So, she glared back at him.

He harrumphed, tossed his napkin onto the table and rose. He walked to her, and before she could stop him, he picked up her plate.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she said. “That’s my breakfast.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“My, my, we’re feeling contrary today, aren’t we?”

“Speak for yourself.” With that, he set the plate onto the sideboard with a clatter and picked up a new one. Onto that, he placed

two English muffin halves, added Canadian bacon and poached eggs, then covered the whole thing with half a gallon of hollandaise. Eggs Benedict. Her stomach fairly groaned in anticipation.

After heaping the rest of the plate with sausages and hashbrowns, he brought it back to her.

“Eat that, and I’ll let you have some fruit,” he said as he slapped the plate down in front of her. He glared at her some more before reaching to the sugar bowl at the center of the table and pushing it in front of her coffee cup.

“What happens if I don’t?” she said.

“Eat, Cynthia.”

She did her best interpretation of a military salute. “Yes, sir!”

He went back to his place at the table, picked up his fork, and stared at her. “Go ahead.”

She took a bite of her eggs. And then another. Wow. She’d had eggs Benedict before, but this stuff was a revelation. The eggs melted on her tongue, and the sauce tasted buttery and bright with lemon. She tried the sausage next—just the right amount of spice to get her taste buds to dancing. The potatoes were toasted on the outside and fluffy inside. Whatever he’d done to this breakfast had made it into perfectly heavenly food. Heavenly food in hell. Wasn’t that a kick in the head?

He watched her shoveling food into her mouth and smiled. “Now, isn’t that better?”

She mumbled her agreement. Speaking would have kept her from eating.

He laughed at that—an honestly pleasant sound. He had a gorgeous smile when he wasn’t smirking or scowling. She could get used to it if she ever got to trust him. But they still had one major issue to settle. He’d brought her here as part of a bargain in which he was supposed to make her thin. Instead, he’d coerced her into consuming more calories in one meal than she’d normally eat in an entire day. And he still wouldn’t return her to her normal life.

He finished eating his own meal while she plowed through hers. How odd it was to sit across a breakfast table from a to-die-for hunk in a greenhouse full of—whoa!—orchids. Even odder, the man insisted she eat huge portions of the best eggs Benedict, sausages, and hashbrowns she’d ever tasted. Hell? It felt more like

heaven. There had to be a catch.

She ate the last bite of sausage and pushed her empty plate away with a satisfied sigh.

He gave her another one of his sweet smiles. "Good?"

"'Good' doesn't begin to describe it."

"It's fun to watch you enjoy it."

"I can't eat like this every day, Sam. I'd blow up like a blimp."

"How do you know?" he answered. "Have you ever tried eating what you want and stopping when you want?"

"Not since I was five."

His eyes got wide. He looked absolutely horrified. "You've been dieting since you were five?"

She shrugged. "Probably."

"That's absurd. That's no way to live."

Jenny had said pretty much the same thing. Thin people didn't understand.

"Life is a banquet, Cynthia," he said, "and most people are starving."

After a moment, she got the reference. "Auntie Mame to Agnes Gooch. You're quoting old movies now?"

He blushed—actually blushed—and looked sheepish. "I didn't think you'd be old enough to remember that movie."

"I saw it when I was a kid."

"The sentiment still holds," he said.

"As I remember, Agnes Gooch ended up single and pregnant. So much for banquets."

"I won't get you pregnant."

Great. Back to sex. Her breath caught. She'd agreed to this the night before, and only a woman made of stone would turn down the opportunity. Still, she'd met him yesterday and hadn't learned his first name until this morning. She didn't know if he *had* a last name.

She cleared her throat. "You promised me fruit if I finished my breakfast."

An evil glint entered his eyes. "That I did."

Eating fruit wouldn't buy her much time, but if that melon tasted as good as the eggs, she didn't want to pass it up.

He rose from the table and strutted to the sideboard. Like a cowboy moseying up to a bar. Or a rooster patrolling his hens in the barnyard. He lifted a brow as he picked up another plate and loaded it with fruit. Then, instead of serving her, he sauntered back to his own place and sat down. "Come and get it."

It. Why did she get the feeling he wasn't talking about grapefruit?

Well, she could strut, too. She set aside her napkin and rose slowly. Her knees might have trembled a bit as she walked toward him, but he seemed not to notice. His eyes widened as he watched her approach, and his nostrils did their little flaring thing. Signs of masculine appreciation, if she could believe the books she read. The ones with the half-naked people on the cover. Ohmigosh, was this going to be like the sex in a romance novel?

*Life's a banquet, Cynthia. Hot damn.*

When she reached him, he held up a strawberry—just a bit out of reach of her lips. She bent to catch it between her teeth, and he pulled it down farther. She moved closer, and he yanked the strawberry completely away and stretched up to press his lips against hers.

*Whoa, Nellie, and here we go again.*

His lips hadn't lost any of their sweetness from the night before. He moved them slowly, teasing and cajoling as they left a path of warm honey over her lower lip and then the upper one.

She swayed into him and answered. She kissed him with everything she had and slid the tip of her tongue into his mouth. He groaned and reached up to cup the back of her head. His fingers twined into her hair and pulled her to him.

Miracle of miracles. He wanted this, too. The shallow puffs of his breath, the way he held her fast, the seeking movements of his mouth didn't come merely from pleasuring her. He was getting as hot as she was. Amazing. She pulled back and looked down into his face.

His eyes were half-closed, and his breath came hard. He gave her a lazy smile. "Very nice."

If she were wearing buttons, she'd bust them with pride. She gave him a smug smile right back. "May I have my strawberry?"

He lifted the berry to her lips, and she took a slow bite out of

it. Its sweetness took her breath away almost as much as his kiss. She took another bite. Some juice ran over his fingers, and she lapped it up with her tongue.

He moaned and pulled her down into his lap. "You're taking me apart, lady."

"Really?" The word would hardly come out.

"You denied me last night, and now..."

He took her hand and pressed it against the front of his pajamas, pressing it into the full erection that strained against the silk. She ran her fingers along the length of him, measuring the dimensions of his cock. The very impressive dimensions of his cock. Thick and long and as beautiful as she'd imagined it the night before. What an instrument.

She stroked his shaft and rubbed her thumb against the tip. His eyes closed in pleasure, so she slipped her fingers inside his pajamas and ran her fingers over the velvet of his flesh. He was heavy and hot and full of sinful promises.

"Easy, lover," he moaned. "I need to maintain some control."

"Life's a banquet, Sam."

"Yes, and my dessert will come in a rush if you don't let up on that."

"You really want me?" Lord, where had she found the courage even to ask that?

"Can you really doubt that?"

She squeezed him again, and a shudder ran through his whole body. He took her hand and moved it away. "I'm not kidding, Cynthia."

"Neither am I."

"Now, then...where was I?"

"You were feeding me fruit," she said.

"Enough food," he answered. "Let's satisfy some other appetites."

A ripple of warm sensation went through her, all the way to her core. It pooled in her sex until she'd grown wet and she could scarcely get air into her lungs. Just like the night before. All he had to do was kiss her, and she was close to orgasm. Still, she needed to hold on or she'd miss something marvelous. Everything she'd experienced since she'd landed here in hell or wherever had held



an incredible sensual charge. The heat of the fire, the scents of the roses, the taste of the food. Even her sleep had felt deeper and more restful.

That same sensual charge promised lovemaking beyond normal human experience. Only an idiot would hurry through that. Cynthia Redmon might be chubby, but she was no idiot.

He started with her cheek. The most innocent of touches, as he grazed the back of his fingers along the side of her face and then along her jaw line. She turned her head and planted an equally innocent kiss on his hand. He rewarded that with a smile tender enough to rip even the hardest of hearts out. If he could manage sweet and sexy, there'd be a lot more at stake here than sex.

Before she had a chance to worry about that, though, he lowered his hand and pushed aside the top of her robe. His fingertips felt like flower petals as they caressed her shoulder blade and the top of her breast. Her nipples got sensitive and achy again, and when he slid his hand inside her gown to tease one, it hardened under his touch.

"You have such beautiful breasts," he murmured.

"I guess big boobs are one nice thing about carrying around extra fat."

"Don't do that," he snapped.

"Do what?"

"Belittle yourself. It's not attractive."

For the love of...the man actually looked angry. He'd looked irritated before but never angry.

"I'm only being realistic," she said.

"Well stop it," he answered. "I'm making love to you. If I want realism, I'll read a magazine."

Before she could make up a comeback about *Hell Weekly* or *Devil and Demon*, he scooped her breast out of her gown and bent to take the nipple into his mouth.

She gasped. Oh man, what a feeling. Ohmanohmanohman. He sucked gently, circled his tongue around the stiff peak, and then sucked again. In a moment, she was whimpering and holding his head against her chest to beg for more.

He cupped the other breast with his hand and stroked that nipple, too. All the wind went right out of her, and all she could

do was hang on while a voice that sounded like hers made little mewling noises of need. Nothing, in her entire lifetime, had ever felt this good.

Finally, he lifted his head and burrowed his nose into her neck. "No more wisecracks, all right?"

"Okay," she whispered with what little breath she could find. "I'm...oh, man...with the...program. Oh, hell, just do whatever comes to you."

He chuckled, but a groan came out with the laughter. "Interesting choice of words."

She'd chuckle, too, if she had the strength. But all she could manage was to hold onto his shoulders and work for air.

"Can you feel what you're doing?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"You're rubbing yourself against my thigh."

Sure enough, she was moving her hips. Not much, but the movement pushed her sex against his leg. Over and over.

"You need to come, lover," he whispered. "You're past ready."

"Don't rush it, Sam. It's so sweet."

"There are plenty more orgasms to come. I promise."

"Please, make it last."

"I'll do my best," he said. "But you're so close."

"Please."

He reached down and bunched up her gown in his fist, exposing her legs to the humid greenhouse air. Then, he parted them and stroked her inner thigh. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the movement of his fingers as they traveled slowly from the inside of her knee to the lips of her sex. Warm liquid pooled there, soaking her skin and the fabric beneath her. Soaking his pajamas! But she was past embarrassment. Her hips kept moving, reaching for his fingers. He could stop the aching, the throbbing, the need.

He touched her, and her whole body went rigid. Her head fell backward, and a cry floated out of her. He stroked her gently, and then parted her lips to find her clit with the pad of his finger.

She ought to pull back. Resist. Draw out the pleasure. But her hips wouldn't let her. Even her thighs pressed together in rhythm with his stroking.

"You're so hot, lover," he moaned. "So wet. I want you so much."

"Get inside me, now."

He slid a finger into her and then a second. She couldn't fight it any more. The tension was building, and she'd snap any minute.

"Inside me, Sam," she gasped.

"If you came on my cock, I'd come, too," he said. "This is for you."

"Please, oh please. Do something."

He did. He continued probing with his fingers while he rubbed her clit with his thumb. Fast and hard. Light shattered behind her eyelids as her whole body went up in flames. Her sex squeezed him and tightened, tightened, tightened. Then, the climax washed over her in waves. She shrieked in pleasure while her sex convulsed around his fingers. Once, twice, and again and again.

Finally, she collapsed against his chest with a whimper while the storm inside her subsided to a fluttery aftermath. She put her head on his shoulder and let the peace of perfect relaxation settle over her.

He removed his hand, rearranged the folds of her gown, and then stroked her back. "Was it good, lover?"

She licked her lips. "'Good' doesn't begin to describe it."

He laughed, and the sound came to her through his chest. "Like the breakfast?"

She sighed. "Like everything."

"I aim to please."

"I've never felt like that before." She raised her head and looked into his face. "Where did you learn to make love like that?"

"We haven't even begun to make love, Cynthia."

She looked at the fire in his eyes, the flare to his nostrils, and her heart lurched. Of course, he'd give her more. She hadn't even ridden that enormous member of his yet. If he used that half as well as he used his fingers, she was in for a wild ride, all right. Oh, my.

He looked into her eyes as if he could read her mind. "Ready for the next course of our banquet?"

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“You *did* read my mind.”

“I take it that means yes.”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“Good, because my cock is about to burn a hole in my pajamas.”

## Chapter Three



The next course took place outside, or so it appeared. Sam opened a door that led to the flagstone terrace and went out, still wearing his pajamas. Cyn hung back.

“Shouldn’t we get dressed first?” she asked.

“We don’t need clothes for what I have in mind.” He gave her a lascivious grin. The expression looked good on him.

“But what if someone sees us?”

“There’s no one here but us.”

She looked around. The estate, or whatever it was, appeared to cover several acres. It would need a whole staff to maintain. And someone had cooked all that glorious food. Or, had someone?

“No one?” she asked.

“We’re completely alone.”

“You do all this yourself?” She gestured around at all the opulence—the house, the lawns, the roses. “How?”

He sighed. “Do you really want to discuss physics?”

“I took physics in college. This ain’t physics.”

“All right, then, metaphysics.” He huffed. Irritated looked cute on him, too. “I still have an enormous erection. I’d rather talk

about that.”

An enormous, hard, beautiful erection. Her knees threatened to give out on her, and she caught the doorjamb for balance. “Okay, anatomy. I’m good with anatomy.”

“I’ll just bet you are.” He smiled again. “This way, please.”

She stepped across the threshold to join him, and he took her hand in his to lead her to wherever they were headed. The sunlight had warmed the stones beneath her bare feet, and out here, the perfume of the roses made her senses swim. When they got to the edge of the terrace, he bent over a bush, picked a crimson blossom, and presented it to her with a little flourish.

She took it, dropped a tiny curtsy, and felt her skin heat in embarrassment. Who was she kidding? She was no delicate lady accepting a token of devotion from her lord. But with this man on this beautiful day, she could let her imagination run wild.

He smiled down at her. “That’s very appealing.”

Her skin got even hotter. “What?”

“Your blush. Few women blush any more.”

“I’ve always done it. Curse my fair skin.”

“Well, don’t stop.” He bent and kissed her. No great heat there. Just tenderness. She rested her hand against his chest very daintily, exactly like the women in her books. In her real life, that would be laughable. With Sam in this place, it felt righter than right.

After a minute, he straightened and turned. As he headed across the lawn, he wrapped her arm around his. The gesture was quite formal, actually, but also quite intimate. She rested her hand against the silk of his robe and moved closer to him as they walked.

If Cyn had ever seen a more glorious morning than this, she sure couldn’t remember it. Maybe the fabulous breakfast had something to do with her perception of things, and maybe the incredible orgasm did, too. Food and sex like that would lift the spirits of anyone but the most jaded of sophisticates. Sophistication didn’t fit her, given her stature and station in life. But if *Weltschmerz* meant missing out on these experiences, you could keep world-weary. She’d take wide-eyed and grateful any day.

They walked along in silence. If Sam had an uncomfortable erection in his pajama bottoms, he didn’t let on any. She’d do her

best at the first opportunity to make it all better for him again, yes she would. In the meantime, the perfectly manicured blades of grass tickled the bottoms of her bare feet pleasantly, and the sun warmed her skin through the black lace of her peignoir.

Eventually, they reached the corner of the huge house and turned it. On the other side lay an even more ornate garden than the roses next to the terrace. It radiated out in spokes from a central point in the distance. There, low marble balustrades surrounded a circular terrace, with statues of imps and fantastic animals adorning the tops of the walls. They were hardly hellish images, but then, nothing about this place jibed with any idea of hell she'd ever had before. She'd probably never make sense of the place, so, she might as well relax and accept it.

Whoosh, a warm glow rushed through her at that thought. Accept it? Gorgeous surroundings, gorgeous food, and a gorgeous man about to put his gorgeous cock at her beck and call. Who wouldn't accept that?

"You're quiet," he said.

"I'm overwhelmed," she answered. "It's all so..."

He chuckled. "It is, isn't it?"

As she glanced down, a sight from her childhood made her stop right where she was. She handed Sam the rose and bent to touch the velvet pouch of a lady's slipper.

"Amazing," she said. "I thought these only grew in the wild."

"You like them?"

"They were my favorite wildflowers when I was growing up."

"I'll cut some for you later."

"You will not," she said, gazing at the flower's perfection. "Never pick a lady's slipper. They're too rare."

"I didn't know you were a botanist."

"I'm not. But I know a rare and precious flower when I see it."

"So do I."

His tone sounded oddly like awe. Or, heaven help her, affection or even love. She straightened and looked into his eyes. He had a sly, little smile on his face—almost bashful again. And his

gaze zoomed in on her as if she was more precious and rare than any ladyslipper. Men didn't gaze at her like that, especially men who looked like he did. It made her stomach jump and her heart race. In another minute, she'd be blushing and fidgeting, so she looked away.

"So, are we going to stand here talking about flowers?" she said. "I thought you had something else in mind."

"I'm not talking about flowers."

"Well hey yeah, sure you are."

"Cynthia..."

"If you're going to screw me, maybe you ought to call me Cyn," she said. "We are going to screw, aren't we?"

"We're going to make love," he answered. "There's a difference."

She threw her hands up in the air. "Then, why are we talking? I thought you were horny."

"Just when I think I've seen it all."

She looked up at him again. "Huh?"

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her the way Freud must have studied a particularly fascinating neurotic. "I thought only men used vulgarity as a defense against intimacy."

Her jaw dropped. "You do this with men, too?"

"Don't be dense. I know about men because I am one, in case you hadn't noticed."

She'd noticed all right, and how. Whether or not he was a mortal man was another question. He didn't act like Satan, unless she'd misunderstood the legends pretty badly. So, what did that make him?

"What I meant was that I've never met a woman who used sex as a defense against vulnerability before," he said.

"I'm not doing that."

"Oh, really." He huffed again. "Then, let's see if you can accept a compliment without making a crude joke or statement about it."

She huffed right back. "I can do that."

"Fine, then. Look me in the eyes."

She lifted her chin and stared at him. Her head might have trembled a bit, but she didn't break eye contact. He'd compliment



her, and she'd thank him. No biggie.

"You're rare and precious, Cynthia." He lifted the rose and stroked her cheek with the petals. "A gift to any man you'll have."

"Thank you." That wasn't so hard. If he could fake sincerity, so could she.

"And you're very beautiful," he added. "Every ounce of you."

"That's a stretch, don't you think?"

He took her chin between the thumb and forefinger of his free hand and held her face close to his. "You're beautiful. Now, say 'thank you.'"

She stared at him. He wasn't going to back down, so she might as well do what he wanted. She took a breath. "Okay, thank you."

"Repeat, 'Thank you, Sam. I am beautiful.'"

"Thank you, Sam."

"'I am beautiful.' Say it."

It sounded silly. Not even her own mother thought she was beautiful. Her mother loved her just fine, but she kept sending diet books. How could a knock-out of a man she'd met yesterday find her beautiful?

"Say it," he ordered.

"All right, all right. I am beautiful."

"Good, now let's make love."

They continued walking, arm in arm, toward the terrace past flowers of every color and form. Snapdragons, foxgloves, irises, and other blooms she couldn't even name. It was a fairy tale garden, and she was an enchanted princess. She was beautiful.

They arrived at the pavilion and climbed the two steps to the surface. Marble benches circled the center of the terrace, surrounding a pool about the size of a hot tub. The water in it was so clear as to be nearly invisible. Just like the water she'd imagined during the incredible kiss of the night before. Had he read her mind and seen those images? Had he planted them in her mind to begin with? More importantly, would he recreate one of them now? Hot damn.

"You approve?" he asked.

“How did you know?”

“Know what?”

She walked to the pool, sat at the edge, and dipped her hand into the water. Again, like her image, the water was warm. She’d pictured them together in this exact place while she stroked his cock. Now, she’d actually do it, and he’d make love to her. He’d promised.

He crouched next to her. “How did I know what?”

“How did you pick this place for us to make love the first time?”

“It’s my favorite,” he answered.

“Really? You didn’t pick it to make me happy?”

“I want to make you happy, of course,” he answered. “But I’m doing this for myself, too.”

“You do want to make love to me, then. It’s not just part of your job.”

“I want to make love to you more than any man has ever wanted a woman before. I’m burning for you, lover. Why is it so hard for you to believe that?”

“Because...” Oh, shoot, she’d never find the words. Or if she did, she’d never force them out of her mouth. If he was truly a man, as he kept insisting he was, he’d have to see that no guy in the world would want to make love to her except out of desperation. A few guys had, but they hadn’t stuck around afterwards, despite implied promises that they cared for her. She’d gotten used to knowing that she wasn’t much to look at. She and her vibrator got along just fine, thank you. Now, Sam had complicated things. In a minute, he’d make her believe she really was beautiful, and how would she get back to reality then?

“Because why?” he prompted.

“Because no man who looks like you has ever wanted me, that’s why.”

“Then, they were stupid and blind. And I’m going to prove it to you.”

“Do your damndest.”

“That’s my girl.” He set the rose aside and reached to the robe of the peignoir set. He pushed that off her shoulders, and she shrugged out of it. Finally, he helped her out of the gown. Lifted it

over her head, and tossed it aside.

His eyes widened, and his nostrils did their little flare as he sucked in a breath. "Damn, Cynthia, you're luscious."

She shivered, despite the warmth of the sun on her skin. "Do you really mean that?"

He trailed his fingers over her shoulder and down to the side of her breast. "You're rounded and lush, and your skin puts the petals of my rose to shame."

"I know I'm soft." That was an understatement.

He leaned toward her, and stroked the outside of her thighs with his palms. "Heaven. I wish I could use these as a pillow for the rest of eternity."

"They're soft, too."

"What magnificent curves," he said. "You're all woman and all for me."

"You wouldn't rather have someone thinner?" There, she'd said it.

"Making love to a skinny woman is like snuggling up to kindling. No thanks."

She laughed in delight. He'd seen her—all of her—and he not only found her acceptable, he looked as if he wanted to devour her.

"I'd like to look at you, too," she said.

His eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Why not undress me?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

She undid the belt of his robe and pushed it over his shoulders and down his arms. The buttons on his pajama top took a bit of doing, but eventually, she had him out of that, too. His chest was finely muscled and covered with dark, curling hairs. They felt springy and tickled her palms as she stroked him. When she rubbed one of his nipples with her thumb, he shuddered slightly.

"And you thought I was beautiful," she whispered. "You're amazing, Sam."

"No more amazing than these," he said as he reached out to cup her breasts. His touch worked the same magic it had on her in the greenhouse, making her flesh feel hot and achy. She purred her approval as he teased her nipples to stiffness.

He still wasn't naked, so she untied the drawstring to his paja-

ma bottoms and pushed them down on his hips. He shifted quickly to free himself of the silk, and in a moment he was naked.

If Cyn had ever expected to see a Greek god come to life, it would be Sam. Even his feet were beautiful, with long toes and high arches. Yards of legs, with sculpted calves and thighs, and at the base of his torso...oh my. Oh, my, my, my.

Apollo could hardly sport a more impressive phallus. It arose, thick and proud, from a base of midnight curls. The shaft went on forever and ended in a smooth head of superhuman proportions. A drop of moisture glistened at the dimple at the end. He hadn't lied. He was fully aroused. In fact, near climax, if she understood men at all. And he'd waited all this time for completion. Imagine the self-control that took.

He smiled at her and lowered himself into the water. She joined him and walked into his embrace. They half-floated in the warm water as he pulled her against him and kissed her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and kissed him back, letting her lips explore every corner of his. She couldn't get enough of him, no matter how she sampled him with her tongue and even gentle nibbles with her teeth.

He groaned into her mouth as his hands moved over her back and down to her buttocks. He kneaded them with his fingers, and the action tugged at her sex, opening her to the heat of the water. Her own heat rose, and she grew wet, aching for his sex inside her. If she shifted a bit, she could guide herself onto the tip of his cock and lower herself over him.

Before she had a chance to sink onto him, he reached over her ass and between the cheeks from behind. His hand found the heat at her core, and he slid one finger inside her and then a second.

She closed her eyes and hung onto his shoulders. This was exactly what she'd imagined the night before. The water, the feel of Sam, the climax moments away. She'd had sex before, but nothing like this. She couldn't talk, couldn't think, could hardly breathe.

And yet, she'd imagined more last night. She'd imagined the same arousal, but she'd also imagined loving Sam's cock. Until she'd done that, she wouldn't feel fully satisfied.

So, she mustered all her restraint and strength for one word. "Stop."

His fingers stilled. "You want me to stop?"

She rested her forehead against his shoulder. "Stop for a minute."

"Doesn't it feel good?" He sounded hurt. She'd make it up to him.

"It feels too good. I don't want to come yet."

"I was planning to draw it out a bit for you."

"I know you would." She took a calming breath and looked up into his face. "But first, I want to explore your cock."

He groaned. "Does that mean what I think?"

"I want to take you into my mouth."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea," he said. "I'm ready to explode. I might not be able to control myself."

"But you will, won't you?" she asked. "For me?"

"For you? Anything. Just stop the minute I tell you to."

"I promise,"

He released her, allowing her to stand in front of him. He backed up to the edge of the pool and hoisted himself out of the water to sit on the edge.

She waded to him and rested her arms on his thighs. From here, the head of his cock was only inches from her mouth. She ran her tongue around the tip.

He jerked at the contact, the movement pressing his cock against her lips. She opened her mouth and took him inside. To give him even more pleasure, she grasped his shaft with one hand and stroked the sac beneath with the fingers of her other hand. His flesh throbbed beneath her palms.

He seemed to grow even larger as she sucked and petted him. His breath came in loud rasps. He was fighting his climax because she'd asked him to. He wanted to surrender, wanted to come, but he'd hold off for her sake.

He'd been right. This was lovemaking, not sex. He'd do anything for her pleasure, he'd proved it. Something inside her snapped at that knowledge. She could trust him, not only with her body, but with her heart.

She pulled his cock out of her mouth and squeezed the tip gently. He made a strangled sound in the back of his throat, and another droplet appeared at the tip of his member.

“Now, lover.” He begged. “I can’t wait any more.”

She moved back to give him room, and he dropped into the water. He pushed her to the other edge of the pool and turned her around. “Bend over. I want to look at your glorious ass as I enter you.”

She didn’t have to think about it. She did as he asked, resting her arms on the marble. He spread her legs and pressed himself against her, the huge tip of his cock nudging her open for him.

“It’s going to be rough, lover,” he moaned. “I can’t manage gentle.”

“Do it, Sam. I want it.”

He pressed into her. As big as he was, she had to stretch to take him, but she was wet and ready for him, and each inch brought her more pleasure. More. She needed more.

“Do it, Sam,” she cried. “I want it all. Please.”

He roared and surged forward, filling her. He impaled her with that amazing instrument, and she almost shattered with the pleasure.

He started to move. Hard, long strokes. Pulling nearly out of her before plunging back in again.

“I wish you could see this,” he whispered. “Your lush ass and my cock going in and out between your thighs.”

“Don’t talk, just move.”

“I’ll show you.”

Suddenly, an image appeared on the backs of her eyelids. Her buttocks—rounded, ample, but firm—and his member entering her over and over. He was trembling as he moved, and his shaft had turned a deep crimson. She’d never in her life dreamed of anything so erotic. As he thrust, he pushed her closer and closer to her own orgasm. In a moment, they’d come together.

He bent over her, reaching around her hips to find her sex. He parted her lips and found her throbbing clit. His thrusts grew frantic as his fingers rubbed her and rubbed and rubbed.

“Don’t stop,” she sobbed. “Oh, Sam...I’m going to....don’t stop!”

He stroked her harder. Inside and out. More and more, and the climax rushed over her. She shattered into pieces, as her sex broke into spasms all around him.

He shouted and pounded into her until his whole body went rigid. He came with her, the pleasure going on and on as they soared together.

After several heartbeats, her breath went back to normal as she slumped against the marble under her cheek. He rested his body over hers and sighed his satisfaction.

"It's never felt like that before," he said.

"Ditto." That one word was about all she could manage. He'd turned off all of her brain except for the happy neurons.

"Thank you, lover," he said.

"You're welcome." Two words that time. Maybe she'd recover enough for three words in another half hour.

He straightened and pulled out of her. Without his support, she almost collapsed into the water, but he caught her, turned her around, and held her against his chest. She burrowed her nose into the curls there and drank in his scent. He even smelled good.

"I don't approve of selling souls," he said after a moment. "But I can't help but be glad that you offered yours."

"Me, too." She floated in his arms until brain function returned to almost normal. "Does my ass really look like that to you?"

"The image I shared?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's what your ass looks like, lover. It's world-class."

World-class ass, huh? Now, there was a concept. "Can you read my mind, Sam?"

"No."

"Then, how did you...?"

"We were connected. I shared."

Connected. They'd been connected, all right. She still felt connected. Would she ever get loose?





## Chapter Four

Cyn felt Sam come into the room before she heard him. The feeling was a tickle at the back of her neck, like a breeze or a brush of lips. She sat perfectly still, staring at the computer screen in front of her. After a moment, he cleared his throat.

She didn't turn, but continued looking at the screen. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long."

"I hope you don't mind that I looked into your computer," she said. "I figured you owed me some explanation. Heck, I don't even know where I am."

"You couldn't have gotten in here if I didn't want you to."

"I figured that, too." She swiveled in the chair. Here they were. Back in the same empty room where they'd met. That time, he'd sat behind the screen. Now, she operated the computer.

She looked up at him. "You meant for me to see all this, didn't you?"

"Did you learn anything?"

"I've never read scientific journals before. I didn't understand it all."

"But you got the gist," he said. "Tell me what they said."

"The main finding seemed to be that our bodies know what size they want to be and fighting our bodies is an uphill battle."

He smiled. "You understood. Good."

"And it's as difficult for a thin person to get big as it is for a big person to get thin," she said. "Isn't that a kick in the head?"

"But everyone loves thin, so no one tries to get big," he answered. "What else?"

"Exercise is good to raise your metabolism, but it's good for you in general."

"And you already exercise, don't you?" he asked.

"Not since I got here. I need to start again."

"You will."

Something in his voice sounded final on that last comment. He didn't say "we will," or "I'll show you the exercise room." It sounded as if she'd be doing her exercise on her own again—soon. The expression on his face got wistful, too. He seemed to be looking off into the distance and not entirely liking what he was seeing.

No, she had to be imagining that. She'd been here with Sam for days. He hadn't uttered a peep about when she'd leave or their time coming to an end. They'd spent the entire time laughing and making love as if they could go on forever. Now...

She turned back to the computer and closed the file. The wallpaper came back up—a picture of her in the black peignoir. Sweet.

She pointed at the picture. "How long have you had this on your computer?"

"A while." He didn't say anything else for a moment. "I've grown very attached to you, Cynthia."

She turned back and stared into his face. "You're making that sound pretty past tense, Sam."

"Present perfect, actually."

"Don't get pedantic with me. What's up?"

He wouldn't meet her gaze, not really. He looked at her, but not into her eyes. The whole thing seemed pretty grim.

"Sam, what's going on here?" she asked.

He held out his hand. "Let me show you something."

She stared at his fingers for a second. Where did he plan to take her? Somehow, this whole thing sounded like something that would be good for her, and things that were good for you invariably stank. Still, he'd never given her anything but pleasure before. How could she stop trusting him at this point?

She rose, walked to him, and took his hand. He smiled at her. Wistful again.

"I want to show you something I've never shown anyone else." He turned and led her out into the corridor, along the carpet and past all those vases of flowers. They arrived at a wooden door she'd never noticed before. Sam opened it and motioned for her to go inside.

By any reckoning, a place that a guy as remarkable as Sam had never shown anyone else before ought to prove more exciting than an ordinary bedroom, but that was, in fact, where he'd taken her. "Ordinary" might not cover it, really, as the place was gorgeous. But all the laws of nature seemed intact in here. French doors that went from floor to ceiling looked out over a private balcony and to the gardens in the distance. Lace curtains fluttered in the breeze. Graceful antique furniture stood around the room. A bureau, roll-top desk, and settee. The bed was a four-poster with a canopy of eyelet lace and more lace curtains hanging at the corners.

She walked to one and lifted it in her fingers. The thread felt as fine as spider webs. "What is this place?"

"It's my bedroom," he answered. "My own personal space."

"And no one else has seen it but me?"

"Only you."

"A lot of lace for a guy," she said, looking back at him.

He smiled shyly. "I made a few modifications with you in mind."

She looked around some more. A huge quilt in a starburst pattern covered the bed, and on the table near one pillow was a picture in a gilt frame. A picture of her. Just a head shot with flowers in the background.

"What's going on Sam? Why did you bring me here? Why do you have my pictures everywhere?"

"Let's make love first and talk later."

"Who's using sex to avoid intimacy now?"

He walked to her and pulled her into his arms. “You know me too well.”

Right about now it would be good to know him a little less well. He gave off mental energy that had “good-bye” in it. The way he stood, the way he held onto her as if he didn’t dare let go. She had to think he meant exactly that, and she’d wasn’t ready to let go. Maybe she’d never be ready to let go.

She leaned into his chest and hugged him. If they had to separate today, she wouldn’t ruin their lovemaking by getting all weepy. Or, would she?

“Let’s get naked,” she whispered.

“Your wish is my command.” He tugged her peasant blouse out of the waistband of her skirt and lifted it over her head. In the regular world, she’d never wear something with a waistband, but Sam insisted he liked to see her in clothes that showed off her curves. Then, the silly man had insisted on the most innocent of clothes—frilly blouses and skirts that fell in flounces to mid-calf. And underneath all that sweetness, she wore nasty undies. Who could figure men—or devils—out?

After the blouse fell to the floor, he pushed the elastic waistband of her skirt over her hips, and the skirt hit the carpet, too. That left the tiny bra that didn’t entirely cover her breasts and the bikini panties with pristine rosettes embroidered in the silk.

“You always stop my breath,” he murmured, looking down at her.

“Your lovemaking always takes mine right away.”

“I hope I’ve made you happy.”

Present perfect tense again. Not, “I make,” but “I’ve made.”

She reached up to twine her arms around his neck. “Oh, Sam.”

He undid the front clasp of her bra, allowing her breasts to tumble free. He cupped them gently in his palms. The way he always did—with reverence. She watched his face. His eyelids lowered as he gazed down at her, following the movements of his fingers over her flesh. Slowly, and with perfect concentration, he teased her nipples with the right pressure to draw maximum response. Her heart began to race as he worked.

What miracles he could work on her. After their time together,

he knew every spot where his caresses turned her on. He knew exactly how to touch her—not too slow or too fast, too rough or too soft. Every stroke of his fingers sang of devotion. Even love.

She loved him. She had from the first moment he'd put his hands on her. She always would. He loved her, too. They'd never used the word, but no one made love the way they did unless the feelings went both ways. Amazing.

She lowered her arms, and the bra fell to the floor. Now free of the silken straps, she reached around his ribs and pulled herself to Sam's chest. He rubbed his hands up and down over her back. The action warmed her skin and pressed her nipples into the linen of his shirt. She tipped her face up for a kiss.

He closed his eyes and touched his lips to hers. Soft, slow, and sweet, his kiss held a world of tenderness in it. Every time his mouth claimed hers, he made it different. Today, he poured his heart into coaxing her to respond.

She lifted herself on tiptoe to bring herself closer to his body as she kissed him back. The movement caused her to rub against him everywhere. She parted her lips under his so that she could dart her tongue into his mouth.

He trembled in her arms, and even through the fabric of his pants, his erection pressed against her hip—large and hard. But even aroused as he was, he held himself back and continued kissing her gently. Every woman's dream of seduction—a man willing to let his lover set the pace for her pleasure. If she didn't love him already, this proof of his devotion would push her over the edge.

She pulled back and gazed up into his face. "You're amazing, you know that?"

He smiled and bent to nuzzle her nose with his. "You inspire me."

"Should we try out the bed?"

"Are you ready for that?"

"I'm always ready for you," she answered.

He bent further and scooped her up in his arms. He lifted her as if she weighed nothing at all and carried her to the bed. She put her arms around his neck and smiled up at him while he crossed the carpet.

She'd always dreamed of her bridegroom doing exactly this.

She might never have that in real life, but at least Sam made sure she felt cherished while they were together. She'd never feel totally alone again. No matter what.

He set her on the bed and tugged the bikini panties over her hips and down her legs, leaving her completely naked. Physically and emotionally. She didn't try to cover herself. She didn't need to anymore. If Sam found her beautiful, no one else's opinion mattered.

"You're still dressed," she said.

"I'll fix that in a minute. Right now, I want to look at you."

She stretched her arms out by her sides. "Here I am."

"So you are. And perfectly beautiful."

She lay there for a long moment, gazing up into the face of her devil. His dark skin and blue eyes. His high cheekbones and sensual lips. He thought *she* was beautiful.

She raised her arms. "Come to me, lover."

He reached to the buttons of his shirt and quickly undid them. After he unfastened his cuffs, he shucked out of the garment and tossed it aside. Now, she could admire his broad shoulders and the sculpted line of his collar bone. He unbuckled his belt and unzipped his fly. As his pants fell over his hips, the outline of his erection showed through the cotton of his briefs. Again, what every woman dreamed of. A gorgeous man, marvelously proportioned and intent on satisfying his lover. He'd be inside her soon, loving her with his cock. Lordy, how she wanted him.

"That look always gets me," he said.

"How do I look?"

"As if you can't wait for me to ravish you."

"Is that what you're going to do?" she asked.

"Do you want me to?"

"I want you to make me whole."

"Then, that's what I want, too." He slipped out of his briefs and finally stood by the side of the bed where she could let her gaze roam all over him. From his shoulders, over his muscled chest, to his narrow waist and hips, and finally to his cock. Heavy and engorged. Just looking at it—imagining it inside her, filling her—made her throb for him.

He circled the bed, drawing the curtains at one side and then

at the foot. That done, he sat on the other side of the bed and drew those curtains, too, isolating them inside a cocoon of white lace. He stretched out and pulled her into his arms, hesitating briefly before capturing her lips with his own.

His hands moved over her as they kissed. Down her arms, over her back, to her buttocks. She explored his mouth with her lips as he touched her, massaging and kneading her flesh. Every place he touched her tingled, leaving her hot and hungry for more. She whimpered and pressed herself against him, even throwing her leg over his hip. He moved his pelvis, pushing his hard member into her belly. She clung to him, rocking to increase the friction. Soon, they were straining against each other as their tongues danced together in a blistering kiss.

Sam growled in the back of his throat and rolled her onto her back, following her down to press her into the mattress. She looked up at him, as she continued thrusting her hips up to keep up the pressure against his cock.

His eyes closed in pleasure, and he bit his lip while his own hips answered. In a minute, he'd enter her. He'd have to, and she was ready. Her sex had grown wet and eager for him. He'd take her, and they'd come together. In another minute.

But he didn't enter her. He slid his body along hers slowly, his hands continuing to smooth over her sides. He planted kisses on her skin as he moved. First on her shoulder and then over her chest. Kissing, sucking, even nipping at her. Each touch of his mouth set a tiny fire where it trailed. Dozens of tongues of flames danced on her skin. At her collarbone, between her breasts, on the underside of her breasts. His hands cupped them and teased the nipples as he moved lower. His tongue trailed each rib, one at a time, while his fingers continued their magic. She lay back, looking through the lace to the sunlight beyond. A bird called outside, and the scents of flowers washed over her while Sam loved her body with his mouth. To her navel and below. His hands moved to her hips, pulling her upward, bringing her sex to his mouth. She moaned and surrendered her body and her soul to him.

His mouth closed over her pussy, and her hips jerked upward in response, the pleasure was that intense. He licked at her, teasing her clit with his tongue. He knew how to make her climax,

and she'd do it any heartbeat now. Delicious, undeniable. Hot, burning. Damn, but she was going to come. As she'd never come before.

He nuzzled her lips with his nose. "You smell so hot."

"Sam," she gasped. "Oh, Sam." *Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop.*

He pressed his mouth back to her sex and sucked her clit into his mouth. Now! The tension coiled and soared inside her. It raced through her, stealing her breath. Her whole being centered on her clit for a long moment, and then she shattered in climax.

She sobbed as she convulsed, her body jerking. Over and over until she was spent. Finally, she rested back against the mattress, too weak to talk.

Sam joined her, rolling onto his side and pulling her into his arms. She tucked her face under his jaw and breathed in his scent.

"That felt like a good one, lover," he whispered.

"Um," she murmured back.

He let his finger tips trail down her back. "You make me so proud."

"Oh, Sam," she sighed.

"I'm glad I brought you here to my room."

"Me, too."

"You'll always be here now," he said.

Finality again. The way he said she'd always be here made it sound like the exact opposite—that she'd be gone soon.

She pulled back and looked into his face. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

He wouldn't meet her gaze straight on. "I thought we agreed to talk later."

"It is later."

"We're not done yet," he said. "Not even close."

"I know, but..."

"No but's." He rolled her onto her back again and stared down into her face. "I'm not through loving you yet."

He placed his hands along the sides of her face and looked into her eyes. One surge of his hips, and he entered her. She gasped in surprise and pleasure as he filled her.



He smiled. "You weren't ready for that."

"I'm always ready to love you."

He moved inside her—long, slow strokes. In a moment, she found herself floating on a cloud of sensation. The birdcalls from outside, the fragrance of the flowers, the sunlight filtered through the lace of the curtains, and Sam's body sheltering and worshipping hers.

He moved faster now, his eyes closed as his sex stroked hers. She knew what his pleasure looked like now, and his face radiated with it. She arched up into him, meeting his thrusts with thrusts of her own. The muscles of his back tensed and bunched under her palms, and a thin sheen of exertion formed on his flesh as he worked to bring her joy.

Over and over, deeper and deeper. He pushed them both to the brink of consciousness. His breathing grew ragged, and he moaned as he approached climax.

He'd come with her this time. The two of them would reach heaven together. Already, she felt the pressure building inside her again. The aching, throbbing readiness.

She gasped with each thrust and whimpered her surrender as his movements grew wild and urgent. They merged into one being as she closed her eyes and welcomed the orgasm. His, hers, theirs—bigger than both of them together.

When it hit her, it sent her to another place. There was only Sam, plowing into her as she spasmed. Sam, roaring as his own climax hit. Sam, spilling his soul inside her in one last, massive thrust.

And then, Sam, collapsing on top of her while their bodies were still fused.

"Sam," she whispered.

"My love," he murmured back.

"That was..." She hesitated. How could she put a word to what had just happened between them?

He pushed himself up on his elbows and stroked her face. "Unworldly."

"Yes." She looked up at him, at the glow in his eyes. Everything here was impossible—the house, the gardens, the man. He stared down at her, his gaze moving from her hairline to her eyes

and finally down to her mouth. Such intensity.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Like what?”

“As if you want to memorize my face.”

“You have a beautiful face,” he answered.

“But you can look at it any time,” she said. “Unless...”

He sighed and looked away from her.

“Sam?”

He pulled his body from hers and sat up, facing away from her.

She reached over and trailed her fingertips down the crease at the center of his back. “Talk to me.”

“We’ve—you’ve—accomplished what you came here to do.”

“Which was?” she prompted.

“To learn to love yourself.”

“I’ve fallen in love with you, I know that,” she said.

“Loving yourself is more important.”

“I love you, Sam, and I think you love me, too.”

He tipped his head up and bit his lip.

“Don’t you?” she said.

“I care about you, more than I’m supposed to.”

“Love, Sam. Say it.”

“I love you, Cynthia,” he said. “And it’s time for you to go back.”

There it was. He’d send her away. After everything they’d shared. He’d made her love him, and now he’d send her away.

“Don’t do this, please.” Her voice wavered and threatened to break. She clenched her jaw until it hurt. She would not cry. But, oh...he was sending her away.

“I have no choice,” he said.

“You can come with me.”

“No, I can’t. I don’t belong in that world.”

“Why not?” she asked. “What are you?”

“You don’t have a word for what I am. I’m sort of a cross between a fairy godmother and a guardian angel.”

“I don’t want to lose my guardian angel.” A sob escaped her chest, even though she tried to hold it in. Tears filled her eyes, and her chin wobbled.

He looked at her, his own eyes moist. "Don't cry, love. Please."

"What am I supposed to do? I'll never see you again."

"You'll always have me. I'll be inside you."

"Not the way that matters," she said. "I need you with me. Physically with me."

"You have everything you need to be happy now."

"No," she said.

"Trust me on this, Cynthia, or nothing we've done here matters."

"Sam," she cried. Damn, she didn't want to beg, but the man was breaking her heart. He was a fairy godmother or a guardian angel. He had to be able to make things right. He had to.

He stared at her, his face a mask of pain. And determination. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." *No, no, no.* "Of course, I trust you."

"It's time for you to go back."

She let the tears come then. As if she could have fought them, anyway. She lay there, looking up at the man she loved while his face grew dim.

Everything around her darkened—starting at the edges of her vision and working inward. The posts of the bed, the lace of the curtains, Sam's shoulders, and then his face. Only the glow of his eyes lingered until everything had gone black.

"Cyn." Jenny's voice. "Cyn, what's wrong with you?"

"Huh?"

"You zoned out on me, and now you're crying."

Sure enough, her cheeks were wet. She brushed away the tears with both hands. What in hell had made her start bawling? Something sad, for sure. Something heartbreaking, as if someone had cut a hole in her chest. But who or what? Could losing a promotion have made her that miserable?

"What is it, hon?" Jenny asked. She looked frantic with worry.

"I don't know." Something inside her knew, though. Somewhere in the back of her mind was a link to something. Or some-

one. If only she could find that link.

“You can’t let Stewart get to you like this,” her friend said.

“Stew the Poo?” Cyn answered. “Screw him. He’s an insignificant worm. He’s a parasite in the gut of an insignificant worm.”

“He had you upset enough to consider this.” Jenny lifted the crumpled mess of a brochure. The one from the weight loss surgery clinic.

“Screw them, too,” Cyn said. “I’m not going under the knife to make other people like the way I look.”

“Well, thank heaven for that.”

“I don’t know what even made me consider it.”

“Losing the promotion?” Jenny asked.

“Screw the promotion. Screw the company. Screw everything.” She’d lost something more important than any of that, if only she could remember what.

Jenny’s eyes got wide. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Never better.” To prove it, she dug her fork into her enchilada and took a huge bite. Boy, did that taste good.

“All right.” Jenny tossed the wadded brochure over her shoulder. It landed on an empty table behind them, luckily, and not into someone’s frijoles refritos. “After this, the ice cream’s on me.”

“When I’m through demolishing this lunch, I won’t have room for ice cream. Let’s get a newspaper, instead, so that I can look at the help wanted ads.”

Jenny raised her hands in the air. “Glory, hallelujah!”

“Amen, sister! Stew the Poo has taken advantage of me for the last time.”

That caused a bit of a murmur as other customers glanced over to see what the celebration was about. Including one very interesting and attractive man sitting all alone at a table in the corner. His blue gaze focused on hers for a moment, and he smiled.

She smiled back. Why not? A little flirting never hurt anyone.

He lifted his water glass in a toast. His eyes sparkled, and his nostrils flared.

Well, hot damn...actual male interest. What had gotten into her? She never flirted.

Cyn blushed and looked back at Jenny. “Maybe we should

celebrate a little more quietly.”

“Let the whole world stare,” Jenny said. “I’ve been waiting years for you to come to your senses.”

“I guess I finally have. I’m going to find a better job for more money so I can buy a house.”

“I want to help you shop.”

“And I’m never taking crap from anyone again. Especially about my weight.”

“I don’t know what Romero put in the salsa today, but he ought to bottle it and sell it.”

“It’s called self-love,” Cyn said. “Powerful stuff.”

“Oh, hon, I’m so happy for you.”

And Cyn was happy, too. For the first time in years—maybe ever—she didn’t give a fig what anyone else thought about her. Talk about freedom. No one would ever bring her down again, because they wouldn’t have the power to.

“Chow down,” Cyn said. “I want to go out and get a copy of the Tribune.”

“That may not be necessary.” A male voice, deep and warm. Cyn glanced up to see the man who’d smiled at her from his table a few minutes ago. Her flirt. Her wickedly handsome flirt.

“Oh, hey,” she said. “I hope we didn’t disrupt your lunch.”

He laughed, and his blue eyes sparkled. The color was so striking, surrounded as it was by his dark skin and black hair. High cheekbones and bushy eyebrows. He ought not to be handsome with those features, but he managed nicely.

“Not at all,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind that I’ve been eavesdropping.”

“As loud as we were, you’d have a hard time not listening.”

Jenny looked from Cyn to the man and then back and gave Cyn a wise-assed grin.

The man reached into his inside coat pocket and produced a business card. “I’ve just opened a professional employment agency. It sounds as if you’re looking for a job.”

“That I am.” She accepted the card he held out to her. It read, “Devlin Recruiting: Samuel Devlin, CEO.”

“Drop by my office this afternoon. I’m sure I can find something you’ll love.”

“Thanks, Mr. Devlin. I think I will.”

“Call me Sam.”

She stuck out her hand for a shake. “Thanks, Sam. I think you’re going to be my guardian angel.”

## *About the Author*

Award winning author Alice Gaines has published several sensuous and erotic works. She prefers stories that stretch the imagination, highlighting the power of love and sex. Alice has a Ph.D. in psychology from U. C. Berkeley and lives in Oakland, California, with her collection of orchids and two pet corn snakes, Casper and Sheikh Yerbouti.  
Visit her website at <http://home.pacbell.net/halice/>.





*When the Moon  
is New*

*Misty Simon*

## *Dedication*

To Rida for TAST, encouragement and all the other wonderful things you are.

And to Daniel—who calls himself the “technical expert”—for inspiration.

# Chapter One



Grant Evans ground to a halt on his motorcycle as the road abruptly ended at a gravel drive. All the loose stones made him cringe for the bike's paint job, but he didn't have much choice other than to brave it out. He could turn around, but didn't know where else to go. The map that had seemed so simple when he'd started out on his journey five days ago, now read like a foreign language.

This far from the city, no streetlights competed with the bright glow of the full moon. He'd left Philadelphia little more than an hour ago and, according to his directions, should have reached the small town of Kestle, Pennsylvania, by now. His eyes were gritty, his stomach rumbled, and now it appeared he could add lost his list of concerns.

"Damn." He took his helmet off and ran a rough hand through his hair. "Where the hell am I?" A squirrel darted across the road and he followed its progress until a light caught his eye. Down at the end of the gravel sat a small house he hadn't seen until now. It was nestled in the woods as if it had sprouted there. The silhouette of a woman walked across the muted light of the big, curtained

picture window.

Grant made up his mind. He'd hoof it the rest of the way down the drive. That curvy shadow intrigued him and perhaps the owner of the womanly shape could steer him in the right direction. Looking at his watch, he saw it was midnight. He hoped the woman inside didn't own a shotgun and would be able to play GPS assistance. He also hoped she wouldn't freak as he crunched his way up to the house.

Light from the window and pools of moonlight bathed the front yard. Natural, unstructured flowerbeds sat in gray stillness as he walked from the gravel driveway to the short cobblestone path. A fountain gurgled in the night, an odd accompaniment to the notes of a sad song coming from inside the house. Such loneliness, he thought as the soft voice unexpectedly pulled at his heart and ran down his spine. Both the words and the voice were haunting.

It felt like an intrusion on something sacred to knock on the door. Despite the calendar marking this as the beginning of April, a brisk wind rose from the east and blew over him. A California boy, born and raised, April meant the beach and great waves, not this chill in the air his leather jacket couldn't keep out. He raised his closed fist to knock on the door when the singing stopped and the front door flew open by an unseen hand.

Grant stepped back instinctively. A woman—all tousled red hair, rounded curves and miles of legs—came running from the back of the house, stopping no more than a foot away from him. They stared at each other for a heartbeat, neither saying anything until she broke the connection by tilting her head to the side and batting incredibly long eyelashes over the greenest eyes he'd ever seen.

"Can I help you?" she asked with a lot more composure than he'd have been able to pull off under the circumstances.

He stood motionless and speechless for another second before he remembered himself. "Um, yes. Sorry. I was down at the end of the drive." He pointed toward the road and felt like a schoolboy with his first fumble at a girl in the backseat of his dad's Bel Air. Get a grip, he lectured himself and tried speech again. "I was wondering if you could tell me how to get to Kestle? I'm pretty

sure I'm lost."

She gave him a look he couldn't read, and then let go with a tinkling laugh. He didn't have time to think about her odd reaction because she'd started talking in a sultry voice that danced along his nerve-endings.

"If you get back on the main road and go to your left, you'll come to a fork. Take the road to the right and you'll follow that for a little while, maybe two miles, before you come to a stop light. It's the only stop light in town so you can't miss it. Take a left there and you're in the heart of Kestle, such as it is."

"Thanks," he said, grateful that of all the people he could have stumbled across, he'd come to a house with someone who knew how to give directions and looked damn fine doing it. She was what he called a "hand talker", arms moving and pretty hands swishing through the air as she gestured left and right. "I appreciate it. I'm Grant Evans, by the way. I'll be running the Bread and Basket for the month while my uncle and aunt are out touring the country." Now *that* sounded stupid, he thought. *Real suave there, guy.*

But the smile wreathing her face brightened, even though he wouldn't have thought it possible. If he'd been a fanciful guy, he would have sworn the flowers opened under all that sunshine.

"You're more than welcome, Grant. Have a safe journey."

"Maybe I'll see you around town?" Another sparkling bit of conversation.

"Oh, I'll think you'll be seeing me," she said before closing the door.

It wasn't until he was on his bike, the big machine purring under him and all the windows dark in the cottage, that he realized she'd never told him her name. Well, name or no name, he had a feeling he had a new star for his dreams.

Morlana Remington leaned back against the inside of her front door and listened to the rumbling of Grant's motorcycle fading away into the darkness. Her heart thumped wildly and she felt slightly lightheaded.

"Holy cow," she said to the cat peering at her from under the

old coffee table. "Did you see that, Jezebelle? That was a prime cut of Grade A Man beef."

Pulling the pure white cat from her hiding place, Morlana did a quick mambo around the room. "And he's going to be working in town, not five minutes from here. Serious eye candy, my dear."

Jezebelle meowed.

"You are absolutely right. I'll have to go into town tomorrow for some bread. I'd go even if I had a freezer full of the stuff. Gee, and while I'm there maybe I could ogle him some more."

Laughing at herself, she felt freer than she had in the eight months since her grandmother had died, leaving her the house and business. Life had been so busy over the last year she'd had no time for fun...or ogling. She'd apprenticed to her grandmother before she passed away, then carried on after the funeral. She'd had no time to actively pursue friendships and no one had sought her out because of her occupation. Only those who were desperate came to find her, and even then it was usually when no one else would know.

Maybe this guy would be different. Jezebelle yowled as they continued to dance in ever-widening circles around the living room. His aunt and uncle were always nice to her, and it would be so nice to have someone to talk to besides the cat. If only she could keep him away from the gossiping women in town long enough to tell him her side of the story.

"But how will I do that, Jezebelle?"

Then it came to her. It was daring. It was bold. It could possibly be the stupidest thing she'd ever done. "Nothing ventured, nothing experienced," she said, walking into the blue and cream kitchen where she rummaged through a tall shelf of reference books.

"Let's see, let's see." Pulling out a leather-bound book, she opened it and ran one ringed finger over the contents of the old tome. "Not in here." She put the first book on the table and grabbed another and another until she found the one she needed, hidden on the bottom shelf. "Yes, yes, I have that," she muttered as she began preparations for the trickiest spell she'd ever cast in her eight months as a full-blown witch.

"I hope I won't be fully blown up before it's done," she mumbled, pulling jars of cinnamon and clove from the cabinet above the stove. She wrestled her little cauldron from under the sink and set it on the ancient stove's back burner. Glancing at the faerie calendar on the wall, she lit a vanilla-scented candle on the counter. "Thursday, hmmm." Going back to the book she read Friday and a full moon would make the spell stronger. Morlana contemplated waiting as Jezebel wound between her ankles, purring. "Alright, kitty, we'll wait until tomorrow to do our casting. Twenty-four hours isn't so long, but as soon as the moon is up tomorrow it's back to business."

It occurred to her she needed to get out more if she was talking this much to her cat. Well, maybe everything would change after tomorrow night. A tingle started at the base of her spine and she rode out the delicious thrill, thinking of the gorgeous man who'd shown up unexpectedly on her doorstep. Change could definitely be a good thing.

The following afternoon, after a busy day of covert requests, Morlana led her last customer to the cottage door then turned to walk along the perimeter of her property to stretch her legs. Her full skirt swished around her legs, the light breeze flirting with the long hem. Grass tickled the bottoms of her bare feet, and she took a moment to lift her face to the sky and bring the clean, cool air into her lungs. A brushstroke of pink lit the horizon to the west. This was her favorite part of the day.

She could hear the crunch of tires as her satisfied customer drove away. There would be a smile on the woman's face and a song in her heart. Tonight she would bake a marvelous cake, the main ingredient a small bottle of love potion with strawberry extracts and finely ground cinnamon. And finally, after five years of wishing, she'd get that ring on her finger. Morlana sent up a quick prayer to the Goddess that this one would work better than the last time she'd attempted a love spell.

"Oh, well," she sighed to the falling darkness. "Hopefully, he's already in love with her and it won't matter." Wearily, she stepped back into the house and shut the bold green door behind

her, closing out the swish of bat wings on the air and the light of the full moon filtering through the dense trees.

Walking through her cozy house, Morlana's feet made almost no sound on the polished wood flooring. The blended scents of rosemary, thyme and old roses filled the kitchen. The herbs and flowers hung in clumps from the windowsill, drying for her to bottle later. A bowl of stones in a variety of colors sat in the middle of the sturdy pine table. Candle wax was set out and ready for the special blend of fragrances she created to set certain moods for the people who came to her for help.

Despite her ineptitude with spells so far, business thrived. The influx of tourists to the neighboring little town of Dublin, Pennsylvania, made for good business. The town of Kestle didn't have much to show them, but it had become quaint to travel to the back country in Bucks County. Few Kestle residents complained since increased tourism meant more money for the town.

She wasn't complaining either, but she wished she knew more about her craft. Grandmother had left her the house and business long before Morlana was ready. So now she was supposed to be this great herbalist with only a few months training.

"Enough," she said, taking a deep breath. There was little time for dilly-dallying. Besides candles, she had several orders for talismans, a batch of lotion and soaps to produce to restock the cabinets – and one very personal spell to cast.

She sighed again, thinking of the long night ahead with no end in sight to the many tasks filling her days. If only her life included more variety, she thought. Instead of work, work, work, for once she'd like to go on a date or an evening out for coffee with a friend.

But until Grant, no men had knocked on her door. No one was brave enough. And as far as women, they were quick to come to her or call if they wanted someone's hair to twist into knots to ruin a date, a charm to make their nails grow stronger, perhaps a certain man to notice them. But invite her out? On the town where everyone could see them rubbing elbows with her? Hadn't happened yet and she'd been here for almost a year. Long enough to make friends and yet no one thought of her when it was time to party. Only if they needed some small magical help with the



preparations. Sometimes witching was a thankless job.

He rested on a huge bed covered in blood-red satin. Naked as the day he was born, Grant felt the slide of the material against his back as his body twisted and turned in ecstasy. A hot and talented mouth traced a sweet path from his balls to the head of his shaft, making him shiver. With a bird's eye view that made him feel as if he was in his body and yet also floating above it, he looked down and saw the bright copper hair of the woman he'd met yesterday. It fanned over his thighs and glowed brightly in the light of a hundred candles.

He watched his hand reach down and rest on the crown of all that thick hair, so soft and warm. Then he groaned, "Yes."

She gave a little giggle that hummed all the way to the tightly contracted muscles of his stomach. "Such a big boy," she said against the inside of his thigh. "So ready for me. And I'm ready for you."

Sliding up the length of his body in one fluid move, she came to rest with her plump breasts flattened on his chest, her mouth within kissing distance.

"Come here." He wanted to call her name but found he didn't know it.

With a jerk, a sweating and frustrated Grant sat up in the chintz and lace covered bed his Aunt Betty had made up for him the night he arrived. It wasn't any more comfortable tonight, but now he had damp sheets to contend with, too.

"Damn," he said, flipping over onto his side. The digital read-out on the small travel alarm clock read half past eleven. He had to get up in exactly five hours.

He was so hard he could probably roll out the pastry dough all by himself. But his frustration was due to more than the fact there was no hope for release in the near future. It also stemmed from not knowing the name of the lady who starred in his latest dream. In the hustle of the day, trying to get the hang of the routine before his aunt and uncle left for their RV trip, he hadn't found a single moment to ask anyone who she was. Then Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune were on, and if you interrupted either of those shows

it was at your own peril. Shortly after that, goodnights were said and everyone in his relatives' house went to bed because the next morning came all too soon.

Throughout the day, while baking and helping with customers, he'd thought of the woman in the woods. He could easily recall her nicely rounded ass and pretty green eyes, the laugh that ran through him like electricity. But what was her name?

Now, with the dark night and twinkling stars outside his window, he turned on his side and willed his erection to subside. He scoffed at taking a cold shower like some teenage boy, but he needed more sleep. Punching the pillow, he sank his forehead into the stiff material trying to blank his mind. If nothing else, he would ask tomorrow. He'd find the time to pin someone down who could tell him what to call the goddess he'd met in the light of the full moon.

Morlana said the last few words, closing the spell she'd cast. A plume of smoke burst from the cauldron on the stove and she coughed as Jezebelle wound her way between her mistress's ankles. "Done," Morlana said to the white feline and headed to bed while the grandfather clock in the hall sounded out the hour of midnight.

## Chapter Two



A rooster crowed, startling Grant from another erotic dream. “It’s too early,” he groaned and pulled an uncomfortable, decorative pillow over his head. “Stupid bird will have to go.”

He thought about rolling over and trying to go back to sleep, but then he heard heavy shoes clomping down the hallway. He bolted from bed, hopping a little as his feet hit the frigid floor, and headed toward the bathroom. Being a baker meant getting up before the crack of dawn, and he was probably the last one up. Normally he didn’t even need an alarm clock to get up on time, but his dreams had made for restless sleep. The lingering effects of the last one were presently tenting his boxer shorts. “Time for that cold shower.”

Stepping into the small shower, Grant changed his mind about a cold shower, instead he turned the water as hot as he could stand. Steam misted the air, surrounding him in a warm cloud. He squirted some shampoo into his hand, thinking about how he came to Kestle to help his aunt and uncle. They’d called him to see if he could help with their bakery while they took a jaunt around the country in their RV. So many things had been up in the air in his

life, it seemed like a good idea to get away. That good idea turned into a great one when he'd met a beautiful woman. All he had to do was find out her name.

The smell of baking bread and the sweet scent of doughnut glaze reached him in his bedroom. A short trip down the stairs would bring him to the source of those scents. How cool was it to have work so close and convenient? No more long drives across L.A.

Shower done and his lust finally put on the back burner for the moment, he threw on a pair of blue jeans and a black t-shirt. He bounded down the back stairs and tugged an apron from the hook on the door leading to the kitchen.

When his aunt had first called about filling in for them, she'd warned him people traveled for miles to buy the goods from the bakery. Yesterday confirmed her warning and today was another round of controlled chaos. He stepped into the shop ready to work hard. The bustle behind the counter, the line of customers, the occupied tables, all combined in his mind, making him wish he owned the shop. Doing this every day was his fondest dream – well, except for the new one about the red-haired vixen and her soft mouth.

Moving behind the counter fronting the kitchen, Grant watched white bags literally fly over the chest-high glass case separating him from the crowd. Another satisfied patron wove her way through the throng of people and walked out of the bell-rigged door. Almost immediately another customer came to take her place.

He didn't know how he was going to run this place all by himself, but he was certainly willing to jump right in and find out. Though it was sure to be a challenge, he was looking forward to it. Along with the hope a certain voluptuous woman would find herself craving a loaf of fresh bread.

Because he'd opened his eyes twice craving her.

Morlana woke up sprawled on her couch craving fresh bread. It didn't take a genius to figure out where the need came from. The baker and his firm buns that she had drooled over as he'd walked

away from her house two nights ago. Erotic images of all that broad shouldered, golden flesh hovering above her, whispering naughty things as he whirled his tongue along the shell of her ear, filled her dreams last night. Her spine quivered thinking about it.

And the spell should have taken hold by now.

Morlana dislodged Jezebelle from her leg, then gave the cat a kiss on her pink nose before padding upstairs to search through the closet for the perfect “come hither” outfit. She always dressed carefully before taking her once weekly trip into the main part of town, but today she wanted something a little spicy instead of her usual sedate outfit meant to deflect attention. Few townspeople acknowledged her outside of her house and it hurt, so she dressed down to blend in. But not today. Today she was going for maximum impact because she wanted to turn Grant’s head. Also, the owner of the bookstore in town had expressed an interest in carrying her lotions and dressing in “normal” clothing might help her chances there.

Her black handkerchief skirt fell to right below her knees and her stack-heeled shoes gave her an extra couple of inches in height. The short-sleeved plum top accentuated her curves while skimming her upper arms.

A swipe of blush and a dab of her specially blended perfume later, she was ready to walk out the door. Throwing her knapsack into the passenger seat of the Range Rover, she climbed behind the wheel and cranked the engine. This moment seemed to call for a little something out of the ordinary so she popped in a Blondie CD and sang along about her heart of glass on the two-mile drive into town.

An hour later, the bell jangled as she opened the door to Bread and Basket. People stood five deep at the counter, so Morlana sat at a round table in the corner to wait for some of the commotion to die down. She inhaled the tantalizing aroma of fresh baked breads, drooling a little. Maybe she would break down and order something.

She had the whole day free now that the business at the bookstore was complete. Harry, the owner of The Book Nook, had de-

cided not to carry her lotions, and although she was disappointed, it was not enough to ruin her interest in what she'd find at the bakery. It was time she found out if the spell had time to work on Grant yet.

Crossing her ankles under the table, she sensed someone's gaze—and not just any gaze. Looking up toward the counter, her eyes met Grant's and it was as if fire burned along the invisible connection. According to her books on magic, this was a good sign the chanting and swirling had worked. Now she had to get him to keep her little package of herbs in a place where he would be near them often, then the spell would be unbreakable by all but her. Not that she would ever wish to break the spell, but if it became necessary...well, she didn't even want to think about that.

"I'll be right back, Uncle Ernest," she heard Grant say. She watched him pull the apron over his head like he was in a trance before slowly walking in her direction. His mumbled apologies were barely audible as he took the shortest path to her, bumping patrons waiting in line. At one point he even tried to walk through a table.

Morlana worked hard to suppress a giggle. It wasn't necessarily funny that her spell had worked so well, but it was gratifying to watch a grown man stumble into furniture in his haste to be near her.

"Hello, again," he said, stopping right in front of her table. He rested a broad hand on the back of the chair opposite her and stared. Stared like he was waiting for any or every word that might come from her mouth.

"Hello, Grant. Business seems good today."

"Yes, business. Uh, business is good." He shook his head and maybe it shook a little sense into him because he appeared to come out of his trance. He smiled a smile that shifted the planes of his face from handsome to devastating.

A little twitch went through her stomach. *I hope this isn't going to backfire on me.* Well, there was no going back now. "Would you like to sit down?"

Grant fell into the sunshine yellow chair with all the grace of a lion. Muscles bunched and contracted in very interesting ways under his plain black t-shirt, setting her heart to beating like a

caged bird behind her breastbone.

She struggled to keep her eyes on his face when the way he sat—sprawled in the wood chair—made his assets evident and available for her viewing. Her mouth went dry while her panties became wet. Find a topic to keep him here, she thought, frantically searching through, and discarding, things to say. She finally settled on, “So, how’s your first day going?”

*Idiot!* She was so mad at herself she missed the first part of his answer and tuned back in after she heard the word “lust”.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” she asked.

“Just that I’m looking forward to seeing all these people every day and hope their lust for bread doesn’t abate when the baker changes for this month.” The smile flashed again making her toes curl.

Ernest glanced their way over the heads of the crowd. Betty and Ernest Hern always had a kind word for her and she didn’t want things to change because they fell behind today from her visit.

“I brought you a little something,” she said softening her voice, “as a welcome to the area present. It’s a scented sachet. I hope you’ll keep it near you to make your days pleasant.”

“Thank you.” He took the packet and the line of fire from their gazes meeting earlier was nothing compared to the shock of lightning running up her spine when their hands brushed. She was almost positive he felt it, too, and gratified when he jolted in his chair, nearly tipping it over.

Her smile rivaled the cat with a feather sticking out of its mouth when she sauntered out of the shop, her generous hips swaying. His gaze was a tangible thing on her rear end, making her tingle all over again.

Not bad for the first official meeting after casting the spell. A little extra zing popped into her step when she heard him ask a customer for her name.

“Morlana,” Grant whispered later in the afternoon. Packaging all the day-old bread and bakery items that hadn’t sold, he discounted them for the next day. One of the nice things about the

shop, they closed at two in the afternoon leaving him free to have a life after hours to pursue other interests. And he knew exactly what...*who*...he wanted to pursue.

Even with the full moon the other night, midnight had still been dark, making it hard to see anything. So this time, during the full light of day, he was able to enjoy the sights and smells of spring in rural Pennsylvania as his motorcycle roared down the road.

Maple trees held gentle shoots and flowers waved from the roadside, moved by the breeze created by his bike's passing. He found the gravel road again without trouble and pulled his bike to the side under an enormous oak that provided leafy shade.

Uncle Ernest had told him how peaceful and quiet it was around here. Grant believed him, but still knew how tempting a powerful motorcycle parked alone could be to some joy rider. He'd have to figure out a way to get the beast down the drive without dinging it.

Five minutes later he approached the overflowing flowerbeds again and, with the sun shining overhead, could see the colors the moon bled to gray. On either side of the bright green door, a rainbow of color and shapes took over the ground. Blues rested against purples and were dwarfed by reds. He had no names for the individual flowers but the overall picture was pretty and a little wild. He hoped the flowers reflected the woman.

This time he was able to knock on the door and it didn't open on its own, which made him wonder if he'd imagined the energy he felt surrounding the house in the woods two nights ago.

But when the curvy and luscious Morlana finally answered the door, all thought flew from his head. Now here was a woman he could sink into. He couldn't think of a better way to spend his off hours.

From her scrying bowl Morlana knew Grant was on his way, but a thrill went up her spine anyway when the knock sounded on the door. She'd changed ten times before settling on a pair of comfortable jeans and a moss-colored top that complimented her flame-colored hair. She wasn't normally vain and the spell would



have made her attractive to him regardless, but she did have some pride.

When she pulled the door open, she couldn't help the little catch in her throat. He was magnificent with his broad shoulders and close-cut sand-colored hair. Glaze gleamed on one of his hair-dusted arms and it was all she could do not to lean forward and run her tongue over that very spot.

"Hi," he said, shifting from foot to foot.

Her gaze dropped down to his legs and the nice firm thighs hugged by his jeans. Goddess have mercy, she was going to have to work hard to keep the drool in her mouth. She mentally counted to ten, trying to control the lustful tremor working through her humming body. "Hi. What brings you out here?"

He must have seen her gaze drift to the glossy spot on his forearm again, because he looked down then gave an embarrassed laugh while scratching at the glaze. "Sorry. Hazard of the business."

He had such a nice laugh. Morlana joined in and felt lighter than air. For a brief moment she wished she could have given him a chance to seek her out on his own, making the spell unnecessary. But she wasn't willing to leave anything to chance because men like him weren't generally interested in rounder women like her. Plus, he was new to town—someone who didn't know what or who she was—and she wanted so badly to have someone to talk to, have fun with, and yes, be intimate with, even if she had to manufacture it. Which didn't say much for her right now, but she'd worry about that another time.

"Not a problem at all." She gestured him inside and saw the sachet hanging from a loop on his belt—her job became a little easier. She smiled, and he smiled back. Very nice indeed, she thought, closing the door behind him.

His presence filled the front room of her little house, seeming to suck all the air from around them and focusing all her attention on the width of his chest and length of his legs. At that moment she would have sworn she was the one under a spell.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Her own throat was desert dry.

"Sure." Grant shrugged off his coat and hung it on the coat

rack in the corner of her foyer. "I hope you don't mind me dropping in like this. Normally I would have called first but I didn't have your number." One corner of his mouth kicked up in a boyish and mischievous way, touching off a smile of her own.

She walked into the kitchen and opened the white enamel refrigerator from the sixties. Bending over, she examined its contents. "I can offer you orange juice, milk, water or a beer." She swiveled her head to hear his choice and caught his eyes on her butt.

Like one coming out of a dream, he licked his lips and blinked his eyes. She would have laughed if watching his tongue smooth his full lower lip hadn't shut off the breath to her lungs. Goddess above, did she know what she was getting herself into?

"A beer would be great." He turned one of her mismatched chairs around, the electric blue one, and straddled it, his strong thighs gripping the sturdy wood.

Morlana's thoughts raced around her head like errant children. How would it feel to have those strong legs between hers? The wide hands gripping the sides of the chair wrapped around her wrist as he tortured her with his tongue? She barely suppressed a shudder and wondered when the spell would finish its work so she could jump him to find out.

## Chapter Three



What followed was an enjoyable afternoon, but Morlana wasn't sure if the spell had actually worked. Times like these made her wish her grandmother had lived longer. Morlana needed a guide, someone to help her as she stumbled along the path of witchcraft.

Grant had been nice and certainly attentive before he headed back to the bakery, but it didn't feel like any of the magic was working. He didn't appear smitten by her, didn't follow along after her like a puppy, begging for a kiss or a romp in the hay like she'd thought he would. Her cat, however, had been a nuisance when she wouldn't stop trying to jump up into Morlana's generous lap. Jezebelle wouldn't take no for an answer for some reason and it was starting to drive Morlana up the wall. Maybe it was because they finally had a male visitor.

Wiping off the pine table and clearing away the empty bottles of beer from the afternoon, she thought hard about the spell she'd cast. "I used the right ingredients. I'm sure of it," she said to Jezebelle who meowed and wound her way between Morlana's ankles. Morlana picked up the cat and gave her a kiss on the nose.

Jezebelle had calmed down a little since Grant had walked out the door.

The book was right on the bookshelf in front of her, so she pulled it down again and flipped to the correct musty page. Running her eyes over the list of things needed for the spell yielded nothing. She'd put in the correct amount of every thing on the list. The spell allowed for several different colors of candles during the casting, she'd chosen red and that was right too.

"So why wasn't Grant overcome with lust and trying to jump my bones?" She kept reading and saw an arrow at the bottom of the page she hadn't seen before. Carefully turning the page, Morlana saw another set of directions that went with the spell.

"This can't be good." Sinking into a chair, she put the book flat on the table and squinted to see the small, spidery handwriting.

"Once the charm has been received," she read from the old text, "and the lover chosen well, kiss the one and unleash the power of the spell."

She looked for other instructions but there was nothing more. "Huh. I guess I have to kiss him for it to truly work. Dammit. I should have done that today."

Tomorrow would be soon enough, she thought while preparing for sleep. Jezebelle purred from the center of the burgundy comforter on the big iron bed. "What are you doing up there?"

The cat meowed then walked in a tight circle, looking for a place to rest. Kneading the comforter with her claws, Jezebelle curled into a ball on a pillow and closed her eyes.

"You're not supposed to be up there. Don't you ignore me. Get down."

Jezebelle's opened her bright blue eyes and stared at her mistress. She meowed once more.

Too tired to fight, Morlana gave in. "All right. For tonight, then." Crawling into the big four-poster bed draped with multi-colored scarves, she pulled the covers up to her chin. Jezebelle curled tighter near Morlana's head. "Good night, sweet kitty."

Thoughts and images ran through Morlana's mind as she tried to fall asleep. One image continued to repeat itself over and over. That first kiss and what it would be like when she planted one on

Grant's firm lips.

The next morning proved busy. Morlana custom-made a perfume for a middle-aged woman who wanted to spice up her love life and delivered a special poultice for a child with a gash on his leg from a rusty fence. She was more confident in her abilities as an herbalist; it was the magic she hadn't yet mastered. But she was getting better at it. Just this morning she'd run into the customer who had been looking for a love potion and a ring on her finger. Morlana admired the solitaire on the woman's left hand then moved on quickly, not wanting to make the customer uncomfortable in public.

It was nearly one in the afternoon by the time she headed back to her cottage in the woods, too late to catch Grant at the bakery. Her to-do list was incredibly long and the time to complete everything was limited if Grant arrived at the same time as yesterday.

Walking in the front door, Morlana was greeted by Jezebelle, which wasn't unusual. But then the cat followed Morlana around as she put clothes in the washing machine and prepared a light lunch. Odd. Jezebelle had her own life outside the cottage and now that Morlana thought about it, she hadn't seen the cat go outside for a while. The doorbell rang and the thought flew out of her head when she looked at the time. Three o'clock, same time as yesterday. She smiled.

When she opened the door, her breath backed up in her throat. He was so unnervingly handsome, leaning on her doorframe with his hard pecs and broad shoulders shown to perfection under a tight t-shirt. She wondered for a brief second if she had somehow reversed the spell and love-cursed herself.

Morlana ended up inviting him to stay for dinner. All afternoon they teased each other in between thoughtful conversations about the environment, movies, art, growing her herbs and his love of baking. So much information in such a short time, yet she felt as if she'd known him forever. They had some things in common, but the more interesting parts of the conversation involved

their differences. Defending their choices was fun and arousing to her mind as well as her body.

The sun began to sink on the horizon as Grant stood at her tiny kitchen island cutting up vegetables to steam while she put chicken in the oven. They'd switched from iced tea to a bottle of wine she'd unearthed from a cabinet in the far side of her basement.

"Today was so busy," he said. The knife moved in short chopping motions and round slices of carrot joined the cauliflower and broccoli in a strainer. "I wasn't sure how I was going to handle it all on my own, but I found myself looking forward to trying. And everyone got their order on time today—score a point for me. I hope my Uncle Ernest and Aunt Betty are having a good time and aren't worrying about leaving the shop in my care. They left early this morning."

"I'm sure they're doing great. They've been talking about taking a trip around the country in their RV for years. And don't worry about the amount of people, I'm sure some of the crowd was there checking you out." She closed the oven door and set the timer. Lifting her wine glass from the counter, she took a sip then held the glass, twisting the delicate stem between her hands.

"Is that right?" That corner kicked up on his sexy mouth and she wanted nothing more than to take a bite out of him. Forget the chicken and vegetables, if she had her way, she'd live off the taste of his skin.

"That's right, and I don't think I need to stroke your ego. Just be careful," she said playfully. "There are some real aggressive women in this town. If you don't watch out, you'll end up with a freezer full of casseroles and a standing invitation to every single woman's table."

"Are you included in that statement?"

"Are you asking if I'm single?"

"I don't think I have to. If you were seeing someone, I don't think I'd still be here. Since I am, I have to assume you're single and the men in this town are stupid. But fortunately, their ignorance is my advantage." He took a sip of his wine. "What I was asking is if there's a chance I could have a standing invitation to your table."

Well now, he could have a standing invitation to anything she

had, but she didn't say that out loud. Right now they were in a very enjoyable flirty stage. And as much as she wanted to jump him, she was finding she liked him, too. This was how she had always imagined her life would be—preparing dinner with her partner, exchanging heated glances while rosemary-sprigged chicken filled the kitchen with its fragrant scent. For a brief minute she wished there was a spell to bind him to her forever. But even the spell she'd cast on him would weaken and finally dissipate as he traveled farther away from her, along his way back home to California. She wouldn't think about it now. Because now she had him in her kitchen, drinking her wine, their laughter blending together.

"I think something can be arranged," she said, picking up the thread of the conversation again.

"I'd like that."

Their eyes met and held. Desire flared again and Morlana was finding it hard to breathe. Her insides started to melt, sending heat straight to the needy place between her thighs. She forced her watery legs to take a step forward with the intention of finally laying her lips on his when Jezebelle attacked her calf.

"Ow," Morlana yelled, shaking her leg and trying to get the cat to release her.

Grant came over to help and Jezebelle hissed at him. "I don't know what you want me to do. Should we hose her down?"

"No," she said through clenched teeth. "Give me a second." She reached down to pet the white cat and spoke softly to her, stroking her furry head. "Jezebelle, let go of me right now or I will make doggy chow out of you." The cat retracted her claws slowly and purred low in her throat as Morlana's hand continued rubbing.

"Good kitty. Now, I'm going to hold you for a second." Morlana walked to the kitchen's back door, soothing words falling from her mouth as she tried to figure out how she was going to get the cat out of the house. In the end, she opened the back door a crack and unceremoniously dumped Jezebelle outside, then closed the door quickly.

Listening to the cat yowl and scratch at the back door, she turned back to Grant but the moment was lost. "Sorry about that,

I don't know what has gotten into her lately. She's never been this aggressive. She usually comes in the house after the sun goes down, but recently I can't seem to shake her. She's also never clawed me before."

"It's all right. If I had you for a mistress I think I'd be possessive too."

Morlana flushed at his words. She'd love to be his mistress, but first she had to make sure the spell was working. She walked toward him again, wanting to take this moment to give him that kiss she'd been dreaming about.

She stopped a mere foot from him and gazed up into his beautiful eyes, and...the timer for the chicken buzzed. *Dammit*. She could ignore the chicken and take her kiss now, or she could wait and take the time to do it right without worrying dinner would burn. She chose the latter and sighed as she gathered the items she needed from the old refrigerator. After tossing together a salad full of more vegetables from her backyard garden, Morlana pulled the chicken from the oven and set it on the table. Along with it she set out the steamed carrots, cauliflower and broccoli, and a loaf of French bread Grant had brought with him from the bakery.

Her insides liquefied as she listened to the soft rumble of his voice telling her everything looked and smelled wonderful, including her. She decided this was enough for now.

An hour later, Grant reached for the last crust of the bread and buttered it. Morlana was so full of good food and excellent company, she watched him with a kind of wonder. She'd never eaten with someone who could pack it away more than her. She giggled for no apparent reason and his head whipped up, his eyes meeting hers.

"Something funny?"

"Oh, um, nothing," she said, once she got her breath back. It had been so long since she'd laughed freely and it left her feeling lighter than air, which made her laugh again.

"It doesn't appear to be nothing. Share it with me." His blue eyes twinkled but his expression was sober.

She wrestled with the right words for a minute before going with her heart. "I haven't had this much fun in a long time. Living out here can be lonely." She wouldn't tell him everything



because she didn't want him to turn away from the witch before he got to know the woman, spell or no spell. "Anyway, I enjoyed today and was thinking I've rarely ever eaten with anyone who can pack it away more than me. It struck me funny."

He laughed with her. Again the deep rumble of his mirth blended with the light, airy sound of hers. It lifted her heart into the vicinity of her throat. This was the life she wanted. But she knew she only had it for the duration of a month, so she'd make the most of it.

As the thought flitted through her mind, she leaned across the corner of the pine table and kissed him. His lips were firm enough and dry enough for a pleasant kiss. But then somehow she lost control of the moment as he took the kiss further than the gentle peck she'd intended.

What started out as a natural enough response to Morlana's soft lips on his turned into a yearning Grant didn't think he would ever truly be able to fulfill. Her lips were so soft and pliant under his. Their fullness enticed him, causing him to add more pressure. Who knew simply kissing someone could make his head go light?

Other than the increased pressure of the kiss, Grant didn't move. He generally liked to take his time with a woman, but this time he felt like he had to. Like he must savor her. All day, something about her pulled at him. Her fragrance teased his senses now, as it had when they'd walked around her property earlier in the day. Her laughter was music to his ears and still rang there even though they weren't laughing. Now was for passion and a deep feeling in his heart that made him dream impossible dreams and think impossible things because he was due to leave in less than four weeks.

But it didn't matter, somehow. His tongue darted out to lick at the corner of her mouth. A soft sound reverberated from the back of her throat, making his cock instantly hard. He shifted to accommodate his sex, not wanting to take time away from her delicious mouth to move. The table was still between them as he licked again at her lips. She finally parted them on a sigh, closing

her eyes at the same time.

“You taste so good,” he murmured against her mouth. “Like wine and sunshine.”

She moaned again and he swallowed the sound. Delving back into the kiss, he took it a step deeper, leaning more fully into the table to get as close to her as possible.

And still only their lips touched as his tongue explored her mouth for the first time. Her taste was heady as her tongue met and matched his stroke for stroke. There wasn’t the usual awkwardness of where their noses were supposed to be, no clinking of teeth. It was a passionate and erotic flash of fire in his stomach.

His hands came up without conscious thought to rest on either side of her face. Very slowly, he drew away from her to come up for air. But he didn’t want to lose all contact, so he kept her face cradled in his palms.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, smoothing a thumb over her full lower lip. Her eyes fluttered open and in that moment he could have sworn he fell over some invisible precipice.

## Chapter Four



Grant went home hard as a rolling pin. Walking to his bike proved an awkward experience and the vibration of the motorcycle between his thighs nearly sent him over the edge. He supposed he could have taken the passionate embrace a step further, but something about Morlana made him want to cherish her. Jumping her bones the fourth time he saw her would not accomplish that goal.

As he rode to her house the next day, he thought about the explosive kiss they'd shared. Hell, he hadn't thought of much besides her all day. And his sleep had been filled with dreams of a stunningly naked Morlana under him, over him and next to him, writhing in ecstasy.

By now Grant had a system for taking his motorcycle down to the house without causing any damage. He pulled to a stop at the beginning of the drive and flung his leg over the bike's seat. If he stuck to the strip of grass and dirt on the side, he didn't have to worry about kicking up gravel into the underside of the bike. Already he was a pro at it. He'd known the lovely Morlana a handful of days, but he felt like she'd been in his life for years. He

didn't know what he was going to do when his month was up. He wouldn't think of that now. He still had weeks before it became an issue.

When he'd first seen her, he'd wanted her. Not just as someone to talk to, though she was funny and fun to be with, but as someone to be with. She was beautiful, not in a starving model way, but in a womanly way. Like the old paintings he'd always admired where the women were women, round and full. Luscious like ripe fruit.

Man, was he waxing poetic. At least he hadn't said anything like that to her. He wanted to take things slowly with her. She meant something to him already even though they'd known each other a short time. Something about her was very special and he didn't want to take advantage of her in any way. But it was getting pretty hard to keep his hands off all that creamy flesh. Pun intended.

The front door was already open on the mist-gray cottage, but he gave a perfunctory knock. He heard her sweet voice again, lifted in song. This time it wasn't a haunting sad melody, but one that reminded him of high clouds and blue skies.

He followed the sound to the kitchen and stood for a moment unobserved, drinking in the sight of her settled at the big pine table, immersed in her work. Grant still didn't understand what she did. It had something to do with lotions, soaps and sachets like the one he kept at his waist, but he'd never seen her sell any of her things. He supposed she could have a thriving business through the Internet as many did these days. Or maybe she sold her products by snail mail catalog. He'd never seen anyone at her house and he knew she didn't have a shop in town.

That train of thought was cut off abruptly when she seemed to sense his presence and turned in her chair to look directly at him. As she rose from the chair, her green eyes stayed on him. The air stilled. The world held its breath as she walked the short distance to where he was standing in the doorway connecting the living room to the kitchen.

She stood on tiptoe, close enough for her full, lush breasts to brush against the front of his white t-shirt. The contact almost caused him to rock back on his heels, but he didn't want to miss

a second of the promise shining in the mesmerizing depths of her eyes.

It was now or never, Morlana thought, desire and anxiety pulsing through her veins. Rising as far as her body would stretch, she realized they hadn't even spoken yet—not even a hello—but maybe it was better this way. They could say hi after she kissed him and found out if the spell was fully on him after their kiss yesterday. Her eyelids fluttered shut as her lips brushed his soft mouth, once, twice. She felt his swift intake of breath and hesitated for a split second. Was she going about this all wrong?

Then all doubt flew out of her mind when his strong arms came around her and one large hand cupped the back of her head, fingers spearing into her mass of hair. He drew her closer, settling his mouth on hers in a possessive gesture that left her feeling devoured and loving every second of it.

His tongue was masterful, sweeping into her mouth, licking along the sensitive roof and playing with hers, then sweeping out to dart back in playfully. His other hand journeyed up from the full curve of her waist.

She whimpered when it didn't stop on the swell of her breast as she'd hoped, then sighed in satisfaction when it too tangled into her hair. He cradled her head, all his attention seemingly focused on the act of kissing.

Her head spun while being held in place by his wonderful hands. When he bent toward her, she was able to stand flat on her feet again. He changed the angle of the kiss, sipping at her lips while he tugged playfully on the full bottom one. The sensation shot straight to her womb.

They broke apart, both breathing hard. "Wow," she said, immediately feeling stupid. *You'd think she'd never been kissed before.* She breathed in a lungful of his woodsy cologne and tasted him on her lips. Maybe she hadn't been truly kissed until Grant.

"Wow is right. I didn't even have the manners to say 'hi' first."

Her hands had mussed his hair and it made him look sexier. A laugh bubbled out and he joined in. "Hi," she said, snickering

around the word.

“Hi, um, how’s your day been?”

“Great, now that you’re here.” She was flustered after the words popped out because that was supposed to be his line. She was not the one under the spell.

“Me, too. I mean, great now that I’m here with you.”

They smiled at each other and Morlana was at a loss as to what to do now that the kiss was out of the way. How long did it take for the spell to completely take him over? A whole night? A couple of days? Should she serve him dinner while she waited for him to find her irresistible?

She wished the spell had been more specific with respect to the time involved. A day had passed since the first kiss and the spell should be fully unleashed, but he wasn’t falling all over her. How confusing was that?

“So,” she said, standing less than a foot from him.

“So.” He closed the distance and took her back into his arms.

In the end, she couldn’t recall the individual steps on how they made it back to her bedroom. All she knew was that somehow they ended up naked and on her bed in a nest of comforters and velvet pillows. And she didn’t feel awkward at all. The light from a handful of candles cast a soft glow in the shadowed room and the scent of gardenia permeated the air.

It had been a while since she’d been with someone, and if sex was like riding a bicycle then this was like riding a motorcycle. Grant had literally ripped her bra off her, popping the clasp in the back in his haste to get his mouth on her flesh. But once they’d frantically shed their clothes and fallen on the bed in a tangle of arms and legs, he slowed down to an exquisite pace.

“I want to savor you,” he said as her eyes drifted shut with anticipation. “All of you.” His hand moved from her collarbone to the crest of one breast. Feathering fingers brought the nipple to a hard peak. Every nerve she possessed seemed to end in the center of that peak and every single one of them melted when he replaced his fingers with his mouth.

The same velvet tongue that had teasingly stroked inside her

mouth now licked her flesh, wetting her nipple before he gently blew cool breath across her sensitive breast. The alternate temperatures made her back arch off the bed. He repeated the process on the other breast until she couldn't stand it anymore and clasped his head in her hand, silently begging him to suckle her. Sifting her fingers through his blond and brown hair, she arched as he sucked her nipple into his mouth, clamping his teeth lightly at the base of it and flicking his tongue over the raised peak.

She moaned.

"Good?" he breathed over her and she couldn't do anything but nod—not that he could see it. He seemed to understand, though, because he continued his exquisite torture.

One of those delicious hands snaked down her torso, across the curve of her belly and lower. He unerringly went right for her core and used the pad of his thumb to circle her clit as he put first put one finger inside her tight sheath, then another.

"Yes," she sighed, almost rising off the smooth, cool bedspread. A moan answered her.

When his head pressed into her soft side and he placed open-mouthed kisses on the underside of her breast, she shivered. His fingers moved in and out of her in a rhythm that had her panting in time. The erotic aroma of her sex and his sweat filled her nostrils, heightening her arousal.

Her vision narrowed to the strands of his sandy hair resting against her stomach as he journeyed farther down her body. His mouth settled on her sensitive center and she groaned and shifted, allowing him better access. Then her whole body went rigid and throbbed as the most incredible orgasm of her life swept her up and over the edge of desire. She drifted back down into what she didn't yet know was the very center of love.

Grant watched as Morlana's head fell forward and her eyes went blurry with her orgasm. He'd never seen a more beautiful woman than at that very moment, when her climax had unleashed a series of contractions. He replaced his tongue with a finger and felt the walls of her sweet pussy clench and unclench.

When her breathing slowed, he settled her back on the bed.

His cock was still hard and he wanted desperately to be inside her tightness, but he wanted to drive her wild more. He moved back up her body and licked at one of her nipples, watching it harden into a rose-colored peak.

“Grant,” she said.

“Yes, Morlana?”

“I want you inside me.”

“Anything you say.” He followed words with action. Rising above her and steadying his weight on his hands, he found his place between her thighs. He nudged his erection into her welcome heat and entered her slowly, inch by tortuous inch.

Her eyes widened and she stretched to accommodate him. “Oh,” she said a look of pure joy and wonder in their depths.

“Yeah.” He pushed all the way in and waited for a moment to enjoy finally being inside her. An eternity passed in that moment during which he wondered at how right it felt to be with her, inside her, one with her in the most intimate way possible.

The feeling lasted as he began to move. At first he simply rocked back and forth enjoying the friction caused between their bodies. They both glistened with a healthy sweat and his hard stomach slid against her soft flesh.

When her nails scratched the length of his back, he increased the pace. His orgasm welled, tightening his balls, setting him on the edge of control. He tried concentrating on the glow of the candles in the room to slow things down, but she felt too damn good.

“Come with me,” he said softly into the delectable shell of her ear. Her muscles clenched around his cock this time instead of his finger. She was so tight and wet, so perfect. They fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Her whole body tightened like a bow and he knew she was about to climax again. They peaked together and soared into the sky.

Wednesday afternoon arrived and Grant was due any moment. Morlana bustled around the living room humming to herself and the cat, who wouldn’t stop winding between her ankles. Straight-



ening magazines and lighting a few candles to enhance the late afternoon light, she looked at the clock again and sighed in anticipation. Grant was a wonderful lover. Thoughtful and caring, he submersed her in ecstasy and she melted under his expert fingers. She loved when he took his time, licking her body, exploring each and every inch of her. Just as exciting though was when he rocketed into her, slamming into her body as if reaching for something just out of his grasp. She loved his guttural groans when her pussy clenched tight around his rigid cock. And thinking about all this was making her so hot she thought she'd spontaneously combust.

She was saved from dying of lust when the doorbell rang. Practically flying to the door, she wrenched it open and stared at the object of her fantasies. All six foot four of him stood in her doorway, blocking the sinking sun.

"Hello," she said, right before he swooped down on her and gave her the most amazing kiss.

Their tongues dueled. His plunged into her mouth as if she were water and he were desperately in need of a drink. One big hand cupped the back of her head while the other went directly to the buttons on her shirt and started unfastening each one. When her shirt was half open, his long fingers delved into the lace cup of her bra and plucked at her peaked nipples.

She moaned into his mouth, her hands going to his big bulge and stroking him through his jeans. The bulge grew and her panties dampened even more. She wanted all of him and she wanted him now.

"Take me to bed," she said when she came up for air.

"That's where we're going." He walked her backward until they'd gone through the house and into the bedroom.

She felt the edge of the bed hit the backs of her knees and sank down into its pillowy softness. The kiss went on and on as he bent from the waist to keep contact with her lips. She tried to lie back on the bed and take him with her, but he countered her move and she stayed sitting, which was fine with her, too.

This was the perfect position for her to go back to fondling his cock through his jeans. She danced her fingers along the length of the placket and reached the top button at the waistband. Yanking the button from its hole, she popped the next and the next, going

through all five before his cock sprang forward, tenting the fabric of his boxers.

Swallowing his groan, she slipped nimble fingers through the front enclosure and stroked silky smooth skin stretched taut over steel. He felt wonderful in her hand, the smell of him so masculine in her nostrils. She explored every inch of him, from the heart-shaped head dewy with pre-cum to the thick root nestled in his thatch of wiry hair. She lightly scraped her nails over his sac and even that wasn't enough. She craved the taste of him in her mouth.

When she broke the kiss, he tried to capture her lips again, but she evaded him. Planting her hands on his chest, she pushed him back to a standing position.

"Morlana," he said, his voice harsh with need.

"Patience, Grant," she answered, working the button open on his boxers and allowing his cock to settle fully in her hand. She licked her lips while stroking his length.

"I have no patience right now. I need you." He cupped her elbows in his hands and tried to bring her to him.

But she was having none of it. She wanted him, in her mouth, throbbing with tension. Dragging his pants and boxers to his knees, she flicked her tongue over the head of his erection. He groaned and feminine power flooded through her as she took the head in her mouth and sucked. That powerful feeling increased when his hips bucked under her ministrations.

She was incredible, Grant thought as his hands sunk into Morlana's wealth of hair. He shook from the pleasure of being inside the wet cavern of her mouth, his knees almost giving out when she created a gentle suction, rhythmically pulling at his engorged cock.

"I can't take much more of this," he said.

In answer, she hummed, sending vibrations straight through to his balls. She took more of him into her mouth, moving back and forth, creating sweet friction.

The sight of her red hair swaying as she worked on him with her mouth was finally too much. He was going to come and he'd

wanted to be inside of her. "Please. I can't hold out."

Again she didn't answer him except to increase her pace, taking him until he felt his cock nudge the back of her throat. She grabbed his ass and kneaded her fingers into the flesh until the pleasure was almost unbearable.

"I'm going to come."

"Mmm-hmm," she mumbled around him.

The vibration of that small sound triggered his orgasm and his body jerked as he spurted into her mouth. The legs that barely held him upright during her sensual assault gave out. He sank to his knees on the floor, his cock slipping from between her wet lips.

"Wow," he said, still shaking a little.

She giggled. "Wow? That's pretty intelligent there, Grant."

"I think I may have lost a couple of brain cells." He rested his head on her supple thigh and breathed out. God, she was sexy. He could smell her own personal musk from his position and he wanted to pleasure her as she had him. In fact, when his head stopped spinning, he would work on that.

"Were they important ones?"

The spinning stopped, but he was still a little lightheaded. "Ha ha. No, I guess they weren't, but I'm about to see if I can make you lose some, too. Then we'll be even."

His fingers trailed up and over the swell of her stomach, reaching for her breast. He found the nipple already hard, begging for attention. Rolling it between his finger and thumb, he enjoyed her sharp intake of breath then a sweet, sweet moan when she exhaled. Her thigh quivered under his head, making him smile. She was his for the taking.

Her open blouse was tucked into a knee-length skirt, which showed off her dimpled knees to perfection. With his one hand still working her taut nipple, he trailed the other from the flirty hem of the skirt up her soft skin. Nudging her thigh he said, "Open for me."

And she did, moving her feet apart on the floor to allow him access to her moist center. Her unique fragrance reached his nose and he inhaled deeply. He moved between her thighs in one swift motion.

"Scoot forward." Wrapping his hand around her leg, he helped

her move so her beautiful ass was positioned right on the edge of the dark red bedspread. With his fingertips he smoothed the flesh of her right thigh up, up, up to her center. And found she wore no panties. Feathering his knuckles over the curls covering her sex, he used his fingertips again to smooth the flesh of her left thigh. "So pretty," he breathed, bringing his mouth within inches of her.

She drew in a quick breath and shivered. "Oh, Grant. Please."

"Soon, love, soon. I love that you're not wearing any panties. So hot." He flicked his tongue out, barely touching the tight knot of nerves winking out at him from the lips of her pussy. He blew on her clit and she shivered. Again, he flicked out his tongue and brushed against her.

"Yes," she sighed.

"You are so wet," he said, seeing the glistening juices coating her hidden flesh. "So beautiful here."

"Please, you're killing me."

"I'm getting there, sweetheart."

Each puff of breath accompanying Grant's words made Morlana shudder more as she sprawled on the edge of the bed. She wanted him to come into her. Now. But she knew how wonderful it was to pleasure him with her mouth and she wanted this if he did, too.

Placing her palms on the satiny comforter, she'd barely situated herself when his lips settled more fully on her clit and made her bottom rise off the bed. He sucked on her nubbin of flesh and a corresponding tug echoed in her stomach.

With deft fingers, he parted her lips and inserted a finger in her slick passage. He pumped into her while continuing to massage her with his tongue. In the next moment, a second finger joined the first, then a third joined the others, filling her as he began to suck on her clit relentlessly. Her body tightened, the walls of her passage becoming unbearably sensitive and taut before she leapt off the cliff of bliss. Screaming his name, she came violently, muscles spasming around his thick fingers.

"Yes. Yes. Come for me, baby, come for me."

“Mmm, Grant.” The ripples subsided and she fell back on the covers. They hadn’t even gotten to the good part yet and already she felt languid and well used. Trailing a hand down her chest, she reached for his hand to pull him closer.

The mattress dipped as he slid onto the big bed. But instead of a gentle glide, he yelled and bounced down next to her, rolling her off the end of the bed.



## Chapter Five



“*S*hit!” Grant yelled again, shaking his rounded behind. “Jezebelle! Get off Grant now, you nasty cat.” Morlana swatted at the cat, who hissed at her then jumped off the bed. “Oh, Grant, I’m so sorry. I’ll be right back.”

Pulling her shirt together in front, she hustled out of the room, chasing after the errant feline. “Dammit,” she mumbled under her breath. “Stupid, freaking cat ruined some of the best sex I was about to have.”

She found Jezebelle crouched under the sofa and yanked her out from her hiding space. “You are a naughty, naughty cat,” Morlana said as she held a now purring Jezebelle to her chest and walked through the house to the kitchen. “You are going outside and will stay outside until I decide to let you back in. Bad kitty.”

She heaved Jezebelle outside and slammed the back door before the cat could run in again. What was she going to do now? She’d apologized to Grant, but even that might not be enough to get back their mood, spell or no spell. “Dammit.”

Back in the bedroom, she found him standing in front of her full-length mirror trying to inspect his backside.

"I'm so sorry," she said, walking up behind him.

He turned around quickly, embarrassment flashing across his beautiful eyes before he masked it. "It's no big deal."

"It is a big deal and I'm prepared to make up for it." Sauntering over to him, she let her shirt fall open again and drop to the floor. One flick of her wrist behind her back and the lacy cups supporting her big breasts joined the shirt on the floor. "Is there any way I can make it up to you?" she asked playfully, rejoicing at the rekindled arousal in his eyes and his jutting cock.

"Well, now, I might be able to think of something."

Stepping in front of him at the mirror, she tugged the elastic waistband of her skirt over her hips. Because she still wore no panties, she was left naked.

She watched in the mirror as his cock bounced once, thinking how sexy it was to see his reflection reacting to her. "Very nice."

"And it's all for you, but watch out for my ass."

She laughed and put her arms behind her to give him a hug. The move pulled her breasts up higher, pushing them out. His hungry gaze followed the movement.

"Very nice," he echoed her, lifting his hand to trail one long finger down her chest, grazing her nipple. "Watch," he said.

Tracking his movements in the mirror, she grew wet when his hand moved from one breast to the other, tweaking the nipples. Then the hand moved down, over her rounded stomach and nestled in her nest of curls. She widened her stance to allow him greater access.

His fingers slipped over her, his thumb circling her clit, moving through the slickness he'd left behind before he was attacked.

"God, Morlana, you're still so wet."

"All for you," she said and got a laugh from him.

But the laughter didn't last long as he began to move his fingers in and out of her slit, stroking her clit in both directions. She threw back her head and moaned as he continued to work his fingers in and out of her.

"No," he said, "keep watching."

She opened her eyes and was fascinated with the way looking at her flushed breasts and full hips moving in time with his thrusts excited her. She licked her lips and his eyes darkened with each



new movement.

The chair from her vanity stood directly to her left and he asked her to grab it and position it in front of the mirror. She did as he asked, her legs weak as her climax drew nearer.

“Now kneel on the chair, facing the mirror and spread your legs for me.”

Again she did as he asked and all the while he never stopped playing with her. He continued stroking her even as he pulled his fingers from her body and replaced them with his cock with one swift movement.

“Oh, yeah,” she sighed, right before he picked up a rhythm and started pounding into her, taking her with a roughness that thrilled her. Breasts dangling over the back of the spindle chair, she watched their movement as well as Grant’s busy fingers, still on her clit. The images blended with the feeling of him inside of her and she came with a burst, tingling and pulsating around him.

With a groan he gave in, too, and came, shouting her name.

Jezebelle, who couldn’t seem to leave Morlana alone for more than a minute anymore, wound her way between Morlana’s ankles as she clipped thyme and rosemary from the little garden behind the house. Morlana loved the cat, but was forced to lock her out when Grant visited now. After the Great Ass Clawing, the cat wasn’t allowed in the bedroom anymore because Morlana didn’t want her lover injured. Grant had said he was pretty fond of his backside and didn’t want claw marks there unless they came from Morlana, which made her giggle. She giggled a lot lately.

One week had passed since she’d cast the spell on Grant and she couldn’t be happier. The moon was moving through its cycle of shadows tonight and she had plans for the half-light it would provide. Grant was coming over again.

Humming softly, she went about her work. Gently, she pulled the essence of her trade from the ground she’d turned and prepared on the solstice. Her crop was plentiful this year and she thanked the Goddess for the good weather and gentle rain that made it possible.

The month of May would be here soon—her busiest time of

the year as some girls in town hurtled toward their weddings and others envied them the tradition and certainty of the love of one man. Grandmother told her May never failed to boost the charm business. Many of the bridesmaids wanted some of that love for themselves so they'd come to her, confident a bottle of this or a bag of something else would find them that elusive person who was the other half of their whole.

Morlana hadn't kept track of how many times the potion or spell worked. When she'd first started practicing the ways of Wicca she'd failed miserably. Grandmother taught her a few things, but they'd had so little time. And books could only help so much. But she'd begun building her strength and her library and become more confident in her abilities. There were still spells that went awry but the number of those had gone down in direct proportion to her confidence in herself and her abilities.

A knock on the door brought her out of her musings. When she answered, she knew she was going to be dealing with some serious trouble.

Frannie was a beautiful woman. The only mar on her pale and lovely face was the bruise blooming on her left cheek, brutal in the kitchen's bright light.

"What can I do for you?" Morlana asked, though she already knew what Frannie's request would be from the fierce glare in her good eye. A teakettle sat steaming on the stove while Morlana rummaged through her pantry for a soothing tea to make for the frightened and angry woman.

"I want a hex, Ms. Remington. A hex and any other horrible thing you can come up with. I'm done with all this shit." The last two words came out garbled through the tears thickening the woman's voice and streaming down her smooth cheeks. "I'm done."

"I'm sure you are, Frannie, but I can't help you this way." It certainly wasn't her first request for an evil spell, but so far she'd been able to turn the others away. This was the first time she truly wanted to bend the rules, but in her heart she knew she couldn't. "There are other ways to make the abuse stop. Other ways that

have nothing to do with magic or hexes.”

“But this is what I want,” Frannie wailed.

Jezebelle howled with her.

The situation was getting out of control. Morlana wanted to help the poor woman, but she couldn’t cast a spell and turn Frannie’s husband into a frog. She’d sworn an oath to harm none, and she intended to keep that promise.

A little voice at the back of her mind niggled her about her promise and how she’d disregarded it with her quest for Grant. But she shoved the thought aside. This was different.

How is it different? the voice asked.

It just is, she thought and shut the door on the voice.

“Why don’t you leave him?” Morlana said out loud.

Frannie’s sobs subsided and Morlana handed her a tissue to wipe her eyes. “I...I can’t. I’m afraid of him. He always said he’d kill me before he let anyone else have me.”

“Is there someone else you want?”

“God, no. I only want to be left alone. No more hitting, no more cowering in the corner.” She shredded the tissue she held. When she realized what she had done, Frannie quickly swept the pieces into her open hand. “I’m so sorry, Ms. Remington. I shouldn’t have made a mess of your table.”

“Frannie, please call me Morlana. And don’t worry about it, you haven’t made a mess.” She stilled Frannie’s hand and waited for her to look up. “I have a solution for you but it may not be one you like.”

“I want the hex.”

“I know you do. I don’t think you know what you’re asking for though. If I were to put a hex on your husband, it may come back to you or me three times stronger. Do you want to take that chance? Do want to risk your life when there are ways to take care of this, ways to remove yourself from the situation without such severe consequences?”

“What can I do? Fred down at the police station has been out to the house a handful of times after one of the neighbors have called about the noise and screaming. But Fred and my husband, Jason, always end up drinking beers and sweeping things under the carpet. What else can I do, Morlana?”

"I'll tell you what we can do," said a decidedly male voice that sent shivers of delight running up Morlana's spine. She would have taken a minute to enjoy them, but the look on Frannie's face, the stark terror there, had Morlana shaking the sensual feeling away and concentrating on introducing Grant before he scared the woman next to her.

"Frannie, this is Grant. Grant, Frannie."

"H-Hello, Grant," Frannie stuttered. Morlana, holding her hand under the table, gave a reassuring squeeze.

"Frannie." With a scowl on his handsome face, Grant straddled the yellow chair in front of him and sat down with a thud. "I don't want to intrude, but I heard about the police not taking notice of your trouble and that concerns me. Now, I don't know what all is going on but I'd like to help."

Morlana recapped Frannie's story. His face became more and more stern, causing Frannie to squeeze Morlana's hand so hard, she was afraid she'd lose circulation. He must have seen the tension in Frannie because he turned to her and smiled gently.

"Please, don't be afraid of me, Frannie," he said, pulling a hand down over his face. His scowl remained but was softened by the concern in his eyes. "The reason I'm scowling is not in any way your fault and I would never harm a woman under any circumstances. My own mother was abused by my stepfather and I had to sit by and watch it until I was old enough to fight back for her." He sighed. "I take this kind of thing very seriously, to say the least, and I want to help in any way I can. Now, tell me where he is so I can go talk some sense into this man."

His admission nearly broke Morlana. To live in a house full of violence and end up being the strong, wonderful man he was, was a miracle. His face was so serious and his tone so gentle, Morlana's heart did a slow flip in her chest.

Sure, he sent her pulse soaring when they made love. It was during those times she feared she was half in love with him, but now she knew for sure her heart was his. And in knowing, she also knew she would have no choice but to set him free from her spell. Her heart had betrayed her. She'd fallen in love when he was supposed to be fun. There was no way she could hold a heart so pure with force.

## Chapter Six



Over cups of steaming tea, they discussed what to do regarding Frannie and her abusive husband. Thank the Goddess, there was no more talk of evil enchantments. They all finally decided to take Frannie back to her house and have Grant put his foot figuratively on Jason's throat. After quite a bit of smooth talking, Morlana dissuaded him from literally putting his size thirteen boot in Jason's face.

When the three arrived at the rundown house off the corner of Main and Third, they found Jason sitting on the porch, his head in his hands. Morlana felt no sympathy for the oversized bully and worked hard to squelch the desire to step on him herself.

"Oh, thank Jesus," he said, a quaver in his voice. "I didn't know what happened to you, Frannie. Where have you been?" He posed his question in a weary voice, but Morlana sensed an underlying anger there. Was he mad Frannie had taken their problems to an outsider? Would he punish her for this? Not if Morlana could help it. And from the fierce expression in Grant's eyes, not if he had to take the man to the police unconscious and slung over his back.

"She's safe, now. No thanks to you." Grant stood at the bottom of the bowed and faded steps. His arms crossed over his impressive chest and his feet planted wide, he cut an impressive figure. If Morlana didn't know his inner goodness and generally kind disposition, she'd be afraid of the man glaring with hot eyes at Jason. Instead, she felt the heat of desire burn through her veins, her nipples hardening as she thought of the power Grant exuded standing there.

This was not the time for a sensual reaction but her body betrayed her much like her heart betrayed her earlier.

"I don't need you to tell me how to run things in my house," Jason said harshly, apparently forgetting his earlier pitiful act.

"I wouldn't have to tell you how to run anything if you were taking care of your wife and home instead of destroying them. I've seen men like you before and you're cowards. You're all bluster and noise when it's your woman you're attacking. What's wrong, you can't stand up to someone your own size, scum?"

"Bastard." Jason spat on the ground right in front of Grant, standing up into a fighting stance. Frannie told them earlier he'd only known violence from his parents and never tried to break the cycle. "You want some of this? Come and get it."

Grant straightened to his full height, balancing his body on the balls of his feet like a boxer. As he stood stock still, she knew he was anticipating his chance to show a bully what it was like to be on the receiving end of a punch from an equal. Morlana almost hoped Jason would soon sport a shiner to rival the one on Frannie's pretty face. Violence wasn't the answer, but it hurt to look at Frannie's bruises. In her heart, Morlana wanted Jason to suffer for the damage he'd caused the warm and kind woman.

But before Jason could take that fateful step, before he could walk off the porch and into a fistfight he wouldn't win, Frannie stepped forward. Watching her stiff spine, Morlana saw matching expressions of shock on Grant's and Jason's faces. She prayed Frannie had finally found her self-worth now that someone had offered to stand up for her.

"Don't you dare take a step off that porch, you idiot," she said, fierce enough to have Jason fall back and stumble up a step. She stalked after him, power of her own radiating from her. Fierce

eyes bored into his. "This is not the way I ever envisioned myself living and I won't do it anymore. You want a punching bag? It's not going to be me. I want you out of the house and away from me within the next thirty minutes. Yes, thirty minutes," she said in response to the look of horror on his face. "You have a half hour to pack your shit and get the hell out of my life. You'll move fast if you don't want me to go to the hospital so I can have them document these latest bruises and press charges against you at a police department where you don't bowl with every guy on the force. I suggest you take me seriously."

Frannie's body visibly vibrated as she took a deep breath. Morlana was so proud of this woman whose face was battered, but whose will hadn't been crushed. "I'm worth more than this. Unfortunately it took me too many beatings and too many years to figure it out, but I know now, Jason. I know there are people out in the big bad world you've always warned me about who won't treat me like this." She pointed to her cheek. It wasn't as swollen now but still full of color. "You made me into this and I let you by not standing up for myself. But that ends today. I'll have a restraining order, the locks changed and a gun cocked and loaded by the time you finish gathering your stuff. And if you come into the house, looking to punish me for my latest inconvenience to you and happen to step in the way of one of my bullets, it will be self-defense. So don't test me. Your thirty minutes start now."

Jason's face took on a pasty white color. It was obvious that he understood Frannie and her threats. Even Grant's size thirteen shoes couldn't have put the fear in his eyes Frannie's words achieved. Right then and there, Morlana made a vow to accompany Frannie to the police station. She'd make the police take Frannie seriously, no matter what she had to do. And if Jason ever came back, she might be persuaded to rethink her stance on that hex. She gave him the evil eye as he turned to the house, presumably to get his things.

When they'd finished at the police station—where everyone took Morlana and Grant very seriously as they detailed the abuse they'd witnessed along with Jason's attitude—Frannie was shaken

but calm. Morlana was weary.

Staring down Fred and making him take the pictures documenting this latest abuse, Frannie had stood up for herself wonderfully. The blow to her cheek wasn't the only bruise blooming color. When Frannie lifted her shirt in the station to show her ribs, no one could hold back a gasp. Old scars were layered under the new black and blue mass of contusions ringing her torso.

The restraining order was served in moments. Fred personally delivered it to Jason as he was coming out of the house on Main Street, a knapsack on his back and a garbage bag at his feet. He tried to apologize, but every single person in the front yard ignored him, from Morlana and Grant, to the police, to the man who was there to change the locks.

"I suggest you leave town," Fred said to Jason's retreating back. "Your kind isn't welcome here."

Yes, thought Morlana, it was an abrupt change of attitude for Fred who used to sit and drink beer with the other man, ignoring the previous rounds of abuse. Frannie, however, confided she'd never actually tried to show the officer what Jason did to her. It was always Jason's word against hers and the fight went out of her to be heard. Until today.

"Thank you, Morlana," Frannie said. A sob escaped her, but she smiled through the tears coursing down her cheeks. "I never could have done it without you. You gave me strength even when you couldn't help with the other. This was a much better way." Turning to Grant, she took his big hands in hers. "And thank you, Grant, for showing me there are men out there who care. I would never have found the strength to stand up to Jason if it hadn't been for you standing behind me. I appreciate you holding back and letting me do things my own way. It gave me hope for the first time in a long time and that's not something I'll ever forget." Standing on tiptoe, she placed a kiss on his cheek and turned back to Morlana. "You are one lucky woman."

Morlana felt a blush working up her throat. *Was she lucky? Or was it all the spell?* The bigger question was, if she released him from the spell would he stay or leave? Could she risk everything to see if the answer to that question was stay?



Back at the house, Grant's mood was sedate while he helped with dinner. Chopping vegetables and throwing them in the waiting pan, he seemed focused deep inside.

Morlana didn't want to interrupt his thoughts, whatever they were, but the pan started to smoke and she didn't want to set off her smoke alarm, either.

"Grant?"

He kept on chopping, head down, concentration on the task before him.

"Grant," she said with more volume and force.

He lifted his head and the look in his eyes nearly broke her heart. A mixture of sadness, horror and anger burned from inside him.

In that moment, she didn't care if it was the spell binding him to her or not, didn't care if they had today or a lifetime. Because she knew in her heart and in her soul that she loved him. In fact, she had never known anything truer. And where she loved, she had to comfort. Dinner could wait. She clicked off the burners on the stove.

Going to him, she wrapped her arms around him. The soft flesh of her melding to the taut lines of his chest, stomach and thighs. She aligned her body to his, from shoulders to feet, and pulled him into her embrace.

"Talk to me," she whispered from his collarbone. She knew he heard her when she felt his whole body stiffen. "Talk to me."

He knew that Morlana wanted him to talk to her but Grant didn't know how to put what he felt into words. She was so generous, so caring, so filled with goodness he didn't know where to begin. But he'd try.

"When I stood with you against that guy today, I wanted to get in front of you and beat him down. When I saw the bruise on Frannie's face I wanted to hold you tight and promise nothing like that would ever happen to you while I was with you." He sighed and felt some of the tension leave his body as her lush curves cradled him. His sex throbbed and he closed his eyes to keep from

acting on his desire.

“I didn’t do anything special. I listened and helped a friend like any other person would.”

“But that’s just it.” Placing a hand under her soft chin, he lifted her beautiful face to his. “You didn’t have to do anything special. You simply took the time to listen to someone else’s problem and then went to help where you could. Not everyone would do that.” He knew from his experience with his mother. It wasn’t until he was old enough and big enough to take on his stepfather that he could do something. And then it was too late because the man escaped punishment by dying in a car crash. But he still remembered hearing his mother sobbing in another room and listening to her feeble excuses about walking into doors and tripping on nonexistent ripples in the carpet.

Cradling Morlana’s head in his hands, he bent down to give her a gentle, simple kiss, meant to show her how truly special she was, being there for a hurting soul. But that brief touch ignited a fire deep in his stomach and the kiss turned into so much more in the blink of an eye.

Soft lips yielded under his. Tongues tangled and hands roamed as the kiss heated from gentle pressure to erotic thrust and parry, an act mimicking the sweet love they’d made yesterday and the day before.

His hand followed the line of buttons on her cotton, collared shirt. Undoing each button until the last, he punctuated each new bit of flesh revealed with a kiss to her eyelids or neck or cheek. Her nipples hardened into taut peaks against his chest. He couldn’t get enough of her and now he knew he never would.

Slowly and deliberately he backed her down the hallway to her bedroom. “You are a remarkable woman,” he said, licking the underside of her jaw. “Truly incredible.”

“You flatter me,” she said between gasps.

“It’s not flattery when it’s true.” He smiled against her skin and nuzzled the underside of her chin. “You smell so good right here.”

She hummed low in her throat, loving the feel of his whiskers

against the soft skin of her throat. Morlana never felt so womanly, so sensual, as when Grant praised her body. His words may have been reverent at times but his intent was always wicked. Her heart beat faster at the thought of the pleasure they had brought each other throughout the last days. But would this be the end? she wondered. She shut away the thought immediately. Now was not the time to worry about it; now was the time to touch and be touched. And love like it was the last time.

She felt the bed at the back of her knees, and they fell together onto the comforter. She made room for him between her legs and his arousal pressed against her through their clothes. She could barely wait to feel his skin, on her, inside her.

Yanking his shirt from the waistband of his usual jeans, she pulled away from the kiss for one second to whip the shirt over his head. Tongues dueled again as her hands ran over the hard muscle of his shoulders, the firm expanse of his back. The skin was smooth over the hard steel. Testing, she lightly scraped her fingernails over the corded length of his back and her heartbeat picked up when he moaned.

Long scarves draped the four-poster bed to create privacy from the world as she slept. Now they seemed to have a new purpose and her smile turned wicked as she thought of new ways to torture him this afternoon.

But first...

Palms on his lightly furred chest, she pushed against him until he kneeled on the floor and she could sit up enough to shrug off her shirt. His clever fingers unhooked her bra with a quick movement, leaving her bare to the gentle breeze from the open windows and his intense eyes.

"You are so beautiful," he said, leaning forward to stroke one breast with his blunt fingers. Her nipple hardened further, pebbling under his touch. He ran his other hand, open-palmed, from her throat to her belly. A shiver raced after his touch. He had the best hands. A little roughened from his work, but right for a contrast against the pampered softness of her skin. One of the best things about the time they'd been together so far was the love marks he left behind. Marks she could look at in the mirror and know he wanted her with an intensity that made him forget to be

gentle all the time.

His head bent to her other breast and she reveled in the next shiver working its way down her spine. His tongue was like rough velvet and had her melting inside instantly. He swirled his tongue over the peak, then used his teeth to pull gently. Heat shot straight to her core, arching her back and making it damn near difficult to breathe. "Yes," she said into the afternoon sunlight drifting over the polished wood floor, lending a lemony scent to the room. "Yes, please don't stop."

"Never."

If only it could be true. But, if nothing else, she could take her pleasure and give him his today before removing the spell, which wouldn't happen for hours yet. And perhaps she wouldn't actually have to remove it. Her sexually hazed brain liked the sound of that. He moved his wonderful mouth to the other breast. In fact, maybe there was a spell she could perform to bind him to her for always.

Grant pushed Morlana back on the bed. Knees bent, she lay like a feast before him and he didn't hesitate before taking his fill. His mouth fastened on her luscious breast; his hand trailed along the hourglass figure of the woman he desired more than he'd ever experienced before. It was like she was in his blood and he had no intention of letting her go.

Her pants came off with one tug and he was so impatient he tore the panties right off her body. She let out a gasp and as he looked into her eyes, he saw his desire reflected back at him. She was as turned on and ready as he was. But he wanted this time to last, to take all afternoon if he had his way.

He moved from her hip to the plush inside of her thigh. Stroking fingers trailed from her knee to the core of her. His sex, already heavy and ready, throbbed inside the confines of his jeans.

"You're overdressed," she complained in a sultry voice that had his cock bobbing.

"That's what I was thinking."

Her clever fingers went to the button on his jeans and flicked it open, pulling the zipper down in one smooth motion. She reached

inside his boxers and pushed all of his clothes down with one forceful shove. Then he was naked next to her, their bodies gleaming in the late afternoon light.

With slow, measured strokes he brought her to the point where she vibrated, touching all the places he knew she liked. The backs of her knees, the insides of her thighs and finally the secrets nestled in the flame-colored curls at the juncture of her legs. He loved to watch her come and this time was no different. Her eyes drifted shut and she bit the full lower lip that made him wild simply by looking at it.

He didn't know what it was about her, but sometimes he didn't know where she began and he ended. He rose above her, his arms supporting his weight. With soft fingers, she reached between them and guided his shaft to the place he craved. She was wet and ready for him.

He took his time penetrating her. Their bodies like one well-oiled machine, they found the rhythm that worked for both of them. He strained against her, hips pumping as she ground into him. Her scent enveloped him, heady and sumptuous, and took him straight into oblivion when he felt her inner muscles begin to tighten and clench around his cock. Her voice called his name and he followed her over.

They fell into a pattern of warm days being together and hot nights spent satiating each other. Morlana still thought of reversing the spell but found she wanted one more day with him, then one more after that until it was Tuesday evening.

After a wonderful late dinner, Grant left. She hated to see him go, wanted him to spend the night, but understood he needed to be at the bakery first thing in the morning. Even though she wasn't far from town, it still made for extra driving time when he could walk down the stairs.

With each passing day, she realized she truly loved this man. He had shattered the calm boring rut her life had been in and opened her up to new possibilities. But she was still uneasy about the spell; she thought constantly about removing it. But when she went to her leather-bound spell book in search of the counter spell,

she found herself flipping through another section. The section that would make the spell permanent and bind Grant to her forever.

Temptation was a living thing in her breast as she sucked in a breath. She could do it. She'd need a lock of his hair and a tear from his eye, but she could do it. The dream of being with Grant for the rest of her life was so enticing. They could live in her cottage and he could run the bakery. Maybe she would finally be able to talk to him about her work and they could set up a special section in the store to sell her lotions and soaps.

They'd be partners.

Of course, there were two major problems with this dream, not to mention all the minor ones. Grant didn't own the bakery and was in fact only filling in for Ernest and Betty who would be home in a little under three weeks. The other problem was, she couldn't take away Grant's free will by casting a spell to bind him to her for all his life. He'd have no say in whether he wanted to be with her; she would never know if he truly loved her.

Could she live like that? The answer, the true answer coming from her heart, was no. She couldn't do it to him. But did she have to take the spell from him tonight? Couldn't she enjoy the rest of their time together, then let him go?

She was so torn it took a moment to hear the doorbell. Her first thought was Grant had returned, but it was nothing so pleasurable. In fact, her guest was the last kind of person she'd ever expected to see.

## Chapter Seven



“Can I offer you some tea, Mistress Blackthorne?” Morlana’s hands shook and she tried desperately to hide them in the folds of the long, flowing, mulberry-colored skirt. Who was this woman, and why now, after eight months of living here, would the high witch of the local coven come to visit her? Morlana hadn’t been aware there *was* a coven, much less a head witch. Why hadn’t they contacted her before this? She could have used some help when her grandmother had passed away. The thought transformed her nerves into an anger she struggled not to show. She had manners and would use them. This woman would say whatever she came to say and then leave—no amount of anger would help Morlana at this point other than to keep herself from crying over her loss. So she had asked Mistress Blackthorne to come in, bottling her emotions and acting the perfect hostess.

But then another idea struck her and it drained her anger and left her frightened. Was this woman coming by to welcome her to the area or for something more? Something to do with the spell she’d placed on Grant? Oh, Goddess, help!

“Tea would be very nice, Morlana. And please, call me Me-

lissa. We've known you were here for the last eight months, even though you haven't sought us out." She said the last with a gentle rebuke, but the smile on her lovely face softened the sting of her words. Black hair fell in waves around high cheekbones and eyes the color of the sea. Her alabaster skin was flawless and Morlana spent about one second wishing for that perfection before her mind veered back to the reason for the unexpected visit.

"The tea will be a moment," Morlana said, excusing herself to the kitchen. Thankfully, she'd made some cookies two days ago and could put together a barely presentable plate of snacks.

When the little kettle on top of the stove whistled, she jumped. With her hand on her heart, she willed her nerves to calm the hell down. Maybe Melissa was here to say hello. Unlikely, but not completely out of left field.

Once Morlana had wasted all the time she could and put off the inevitable for as long as possible, she walked on liquid legs back into the living room with the tray balanced on shaking hands.

"Be at peace, Morlana." Melissa took the laden tray and gave Morlana a small smile.

But that gentle smile did nothing to quiet the thundering of Morlana's heart. "I am."

"I can tell that's not true. There is no reason to be troubled, I have a simple request for you and a warning. I wanted to talk to you before this went any further."

Morlana sat down in one of the big cushioned chairs and took a deep breath. Okay, a warning wasn't the worst thing that could happen. A warning meant some sort of choice was available. And a request could be denied. Not that she had any intention of denying a priestess anything, but the option was still there.

"What can I do for you?" Morlana watched fascinated as Melissa put enough sugar in her herbal tea to stun a large horse.

"I saw you cast a spell on the full moon and wanted to make sure you knew what you were doing. I'm concerned with the ramifications. Do you know what can happen on the path you've chosen?"

"I do." Her back stiff, Morlana waited to hear what the priestess would say in response.

"Are you sure? This is a hard road you've chosen. There are



other ways to accomplish the same thing without a spell.” Melissa set her teacup on top of the end table and focused her full attention on Morlana. “I want you to be happy as I want everyone to be happy. I’m aware of how lonely you must feel after losing your grandmother. I’m sorry we weren’t able to offer you assistance at that time but I have a strict policy about interfering where I am not asked. A policy I am breaking now because I have a responsibility to make sure you are aware of the danger. This spell may have answered your need for companionship temporarily, but there’s still time to back out with diminished consequences. Think about using the counter spell, Morlana. It’s tough being lonely, but the alternative could be worse. A spell like the one you cast can whip back on you threefold, as I’m sure you know. Love can become profound possession, then unhealthy obsession, turning what you originally wanted into something ugly and disastrous. The feelings you’ve manufactured are very strong and would be stronger on you if you don’t reverse it.”

Morlana nodded, still not sure what she was going to do. She could release Grant, but at what cost? What if he turned completely from her and woke as if from a dream where he couldn’t remember the words of endearment he’d whispered in her ear when he was deep inside her? Could she bear to see him for three more weeks, knowing he’d never experienced the deep feelings she had for him? Was she willing to take the chance she’d be so horribly obsessed with him she wouldn’t be able to eat or sleep? What if he left and she stalked him? Was that what she wanted for her life?

Melissa cut into her thoughts. “The request I have is to lift the spell. You have two days to decide. If the spell isn’t lifted during the traditional time before the new moon, there isn’t anything I can do for you. But if you cast the counter spell within the next two days and release the energies, the backlash won’t be as bad.” Melissa tapped one elegant finger to her chin. “You may progress to possession but sometimes that can be healthy in a relationship, making you aware of how much you have to lose if you don’t take care of the commitment you’ve made. But please think on it, Morlana. I know you’ll do the right thing.” Melissa left her cup on the table, rising from the couch. Her midnight blue cloak swirled around her ankles as she turned toward the front door. “I do want

you to be happy, but I need you to be careful also. From what I've witnessed, you could be one of the most powerful witches I've seen in some time. I'd hate to lose a new friend and fellow witch over something like this."

With a backhanded wave, she strode to the door then stopped at the entrance. "We would like to see you at one of our get-togethers, even if it only shows you who we are and what we do. You never have to feel alone again, Morlana, but I will leave that decision up to you. Know we are very sorry for your loss and it's our loss, too. Your grandmother was a kind and gentle person who is sorely missed." Walking out the door, she never looked back.

A terrible weight pressed Morlana into the cushions of the chair. She didn't get up to see Melissa to the door, which went against everything she'd ever been taught. But right now, right this instant, the pressure around her heart was so enormous she couldn't move her arms much less command her legs.

She would remove the spell. She didn't need the two days to make the decision when it had already been made. She didn't want Grant with her against his will. She would have to believe in a greater power to keep him with her. She'd cast the counter spell and wait to see if Grant ever had any feelings for her beyond those she'd created.

Another part of her mind warred with that quickly made decision. Did it have to be right now? Now, when everything was going so well? She hated giving him up and ruining a truly wonderful thing. Maybe she wouldn't actually have to go through with her decision right at this moment. She could take the two days and enjoy them, fill them with precious memories and experiences to last her a lifetime after he left.

Goddess, why was life so damn hard?

Thursday night arrived, bringing Morlana closer to the two-week mark since she'd cast her spell and the night a decision must be made. The last sliver of the moon hung in the cloudless sky, making the night nearly as dark as the shadows in Morlana's breaking heart. She wanted to give Grant his freedom back, but a part of her, the part that had finally come alive with him, wanted

to throw caution and warnings to the wind and suffer the consequences if she could stay with Grant for the next two weeks until he left. Pulling her satiny robe tighter around her body, she wrapped her arms over her chest.

Would obsession be so bad? Would it be so different from what she felt now? She knew it would, but her mind kept coming back to ways to duck out of casting the counter spell.

The doorbell rang and she walked on unsteady legs to answer it. Grant stood framed by the blackness outside, making her mouth water. She still had tonight and she was going to make the most of it. She had hours to make the decision, hours in which she could take him in her arms and savor every touch, every caress.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"Are you going to invite me in?" he asked, a look of puzzlement mixed with amusement on his face.

In answer she leaped forward, landing in his arms and forcing him back a step. She planted her lips on his and gave him a kiss filled with all her longing, all her love, all her desperation.

He kissed her in return, his tongue entwining with hers. He moved into the house, backing her up step by step. After he kicked the door shut behind him, he wrapped his arms around her and ran his hands over the silk of her robe from the nape of her neck to the curve of her behind.

"That was some welcome," he said when they came up for air.

"I missed you. I've been thinking about you all day." Literally. "And when I saw you standing there in the doorway, I couldn't stop myself."

"Please don't ever try to stop yourself. I want you anyway I can get you."

His choice of words pierced a small part of her heart. He wanted her, but had never said he loved her. And even if he did declare his love for her, would it be real or manufactured by the damn spell?

To keep from dwelling on her doubts and thoughts on what would probably be their last night together, she kissed him again and did some of her own backing up as she led him into her bed-

room. Once inside the comfortable room, she couldn't wait to share the surprise she'd prepared for him.

Candlelight gave a soft glow to the room, which she had decked out with flowers and potpourri. A white sheet lay over her bedspread.

He saw the sheet and turned to her with a question in his eyes.

"I thought perhaps I could give you a massage tonight. I know how hard you've been working and thought it would be a good idea." All the sudden she was shy and didn't know why. She'd seen him in every possible light and every possible way since they'd become lovers almost two weeks ago and yet the thought of hovering over him, her hands working some very ordinary magic on his back, made her tremble. Maybe because it was less about sex and more about intimacy this time. They wouldn't rip their clothes off and devour each other, instead she would spend time giving him pleasure beyond the purely carnal. Her hands would tell him she loved him as she caressed the flesh of his back. The question was whether or not he would hear her unspoken words.

"Why don't you rest on your stomach on the sheet," she said when he continued to stand there. "Unless you don't want me to massage you?"

"God, no," he said, his voice rough and low. "I would love a massage. I guess I'm overwhelmed you'd think of it. I feel like I should do the work though, since we're always here eating your food, using your home and you always seem to be the one doing everything."

Her heart melted even more. Why, oh, why did she cast that spell? Maybe he would have come to her on his own and then this conversation wouldn't be tinged with her doubts. But she smiled instead of crying the way she wanted to; she would not ruin this last night with him.

"I appreciate the thought," she said. "But you'll have to take your turn after me. I want to get my hands on you."

She undressed him, taking her time and savoring each inch of him revealed as his clothes fell away. Her fingers trailed twisting paths over his torso before she bent to kiss one of his nipples. She memorized his face with her eyes and fingers, tracing his beautiful

lips and the fringe of his eyelashes.

Emotions clogged in her throat when she inhaled the scent of him, so uniquely Grant. Only her strong will kept the tears at bay. She needed to get him face down on the sheet before she started blubbering like a baby.

“Go ahead and get on the sheet, Grant, while I get the lotion ready.”

He moved to the bed and lowered himself to the white fabric. Stretching out on his stomach, he folded his hands to pillow his head.

He looked so scrumptious on the bed, she wanted to jump him right then. But she told herself she wanted tonight to last—at least until she had to send him home—so she took her time. Squirting some of the strawberry scented lotion into her hands, she briskly rubbed them together to warm the lotion.

All of his glorious body, from his adorable feet, to his incredible ass, to the strong column of his neck, was waiting for her to touch him. She placed her hands on his shoulders and began kneading his back with sure fingers. His groans filled her ears and she dug deeper, pressed harder to release a knot under his left shoulder blade.

“Good?” she asked.

“I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“Not quite yet.” She gathered her satin robe and straddled his back, putting her core in direct contact with his warm, moist flesh.

“Yes,” he groaned.

His muscles contracted under her thighs, and pure joy flowed through her. Here was a man she could sit on and not be concerned about hurting him. He made her feel so feminine and almost dainty. She loved him for it and so many other things. Dammit, why did he have to be so perfect and yet so completely out of her reach after tonight? Tears threatened again and she forced them back. She would be damned before she ruined their lovemaking with tears she couldn’t and wouldn’t explain.

Concentration refocused on Grant and his spectacular back, she slid down his body until she sat directly on his rear end. The position gave her the leverage she needed to work the fragrant lo-

tion into his lower back.

“Oh, that feels so good,” he said, clenching his butt under her.

The movement sent sparks of desire shooting up and into her sensitive core. Her clit twitched and her juices began to flow. “Roll over,” she said in a raspy voice. Goddess, this was going to feel as good for her as it was for him.

She rose on her knees to allow him room to turn onto his back. His hip rubbed against her swollen nub and made her moan. But when he was on his back she moved forward to sit on his chest instead of on his cock like her body wept for. She wanted to prolong the pleasure and sitting on his cock right now would certainly not accomplish that.

With her knees under his armpits, his hair tickled her skin. She giggled and he smiled up at her through half closed eyes. Stroking his chest with its fine layer of hair, she rubbed him from his shoulders to where his waist tapered into his hips. His moans spiked her need and made her core soften for him. Who knew a massage could be this effective as foreplay? Not her.

Finished with his chest, she slid her crotch from his stomach to the part of him she wanted filling her.

“Yes, yes. Take me inside you.”

“Ah, Grant.” Using her still lotion-slick hands, she slid her palm up and over the head of his cock then wrapped her fist around him. She was positioned to plunge down on him when he stopped her.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he said.

“No.”

“But I haven’t touched you yet.”

“Grant, I’m about to explode. I need you inside me. There’ll be time to touch later.” With those words, she slid down his length, spearing herself with one thrust and feeling him deep inside. Was there anything more thrilling than having his big cock touching every part of her, filling her to completion? She knew it would get even better when she started to move.

She lifted slightly and began to ride him. The friction made her inner walls contract and he groaned under her as she increased the pace. With her eyes closed and her head thrown back, she

clenched and released him with each up and down motion. Her heart beat harder and a thin sheen of sweat gathered on her skin. Goddess, he felt fine and so big. He stretched her to the limit and she loved it, loved him.

Grant watched the ecstasy on Morlana's face and wanted her to experience more. He thrust his hips up as she came down and forced her to take him to the hilt. She gasped and it was music to his ears. Taking her hands from the bed, he placed them on her breasts and encouraged her to circle her own nipples for a moment before pulling his hands away and putting them to good use circling her clit. She gasped again as his fingers started working that little bundle of nerves in earnest.

"Come for me, Morlana. Come for me. I want to feel your muscles clench around my cock when you come. I want to hear you scream my name as you go over the edge."

It wasn't long after that she came apart, screaming, "Grant!" Two more thrusts and he went with her, her muscles clenching as he knew they would, milking him for all he was worth.

Breath still heaving, he cradled her to him and thought about how very much he cared for this incredible woman who had shown him much more than the way to town.

An hour later, after a quick snack in the kitchen and a tussle with Jezebelle, who streaked into the kitchen when Morlana opened the door, Grant got ready to go. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have leave early tonight."

"It's fine," she said, but something in her voice wasn't right.

"Are you sure? You aren't upset are you? I have a delivery coming in tonight or I'd stay."

"I know that, Grant. I understand you have a business to run. Don't worry about it."

"If you're sure."

"Of course, I'm sure. I have some things I have to do tonight anyway."

"All right," he said, still not entirely satisfied everything was okay, but he needed to help the deliveryman with the shipment. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

“Yes, tomorrow.”

“Are you really okay or is there something bothering you? Your voice sounds odd.”

“No, Grant, nothing’s wrong. I’m tired is all. I think maybe I’ll turn in early. But I’ll be fine. I’m fine now.”

“If you insist.”

“I do,” she said, shooing him out of the house.

“I hate to leave like this,” he said, pulling her in for one last lingering kiss. “I’ll see you tomorrow when it’ll be my turn with the lotion.”

Morlana’s heart cracked and shattered as she watched him leave her little cottage in the woods for the last time. She was doing the right thing, so why did it hurt so much? She couldn’t keep him under false pretenses. She couldn’t keep him at all. It would all be over in a few hours and her exciting and fulfilling life would return to its boring and staid existence.

With a heavy heart, she dragged her tools out into the backyard and prepared herself for the end of something beautiful.



## Chapter Eight



*A*t the stroke of midnight, with the waning moon hanging low in the sky, Morlana went to work. She gathered the ingredients she needed and walked to where her cauldron waited in the far corner of the garden. With heavy steps and an even heavier heart, she began the process of releasing Grant from the spell she'd worked two weeks before. He would no longer be enthralled with her. His will would be returned to him and the blinders to her flaws would be removed.

A tear dropped on the kindling she had arranged in the bottom of the cauldron. Once the fire gained some light and began consuming the other wood, she stepped back and let it flare.

"I know I have to do this," she whispered, trying to give herself a little courage. It was almost unbearable, but she had to do it.

Into the cauldron fire she dropped a bakery bag with the Bread and Basket logo on it, the rest of the ingredients from the special sachet she'd made for Grant, and the remains of the panties he ripped from her body. The panties were the last to go and the hardest to let fall into the blaze. He'd loved her that day, telling her

over and over of her beauty inside and out. “I release you, Grant. I release you from the spell and take the web of enchantment from your eyes.”

In the deepest place in her heart, she knew she would never find someone like him again. Gone would be the adoration in his eyes and the murmured words of love. The long looks and whispers would be lost to her forever. Every time she said his name during the spell, her heart broke a little more. Soon there would be nothing left.

But, she told herself, at least he would be free. And that was more important to her than anything.

There would be no need to make a new sachet for him when she was done with this new spell. All of their time together would be lost and with it, her heart.

Finally she held one last item over the fire. She read aloud from the small piece of parchment she’d used from the kitchen drawer. Her voice wavered and each word was like a sharp knife in what was left of her heart. “My relationship as lovers with Grant is through.”

Over the burning paper, herbs, and material, she tried to focus her will as she chanted a spell to release all the energy gathered when she cast the first spell. “Transforming power of flame, change this relationship. We are now f-f-friends, not lovers. The ties that bind are severed. I love you enough to let you go. Be at peace and be free, my love.”

Collapsing on the ground in a heap of grief, Morlana wept as the moon continued its journey and stars twinkled in the night sky.

Grant jumped out of bed before his alarm clock sounded. His internal alarm was always set for four in the morning, anyway. He only used the clock to make sure he didn’t roll back over and indulge himself by trying to recapture the dream he’d been enjoying. Strangely, he couldn’t remember any dreams this morning. He’d had such vivid ones for the two weeks he’d been sleeping here, but this morning, nothing.

Grabbing a pair of jeans, he pulled another of his t-shirts from

the single drawer he'd cleared out to use. It would be great to get back to a place where he could always fold his clothes into a set of drawers and hang his pants in a closet. He made a mental note to call a friend on the West coast and ask about the storage unit he'd stuffed his things into before driving the motorcycle east.

After a quick shower and shave, he walked down the stairs with his mind fixed firmly on a new recipe he wanted to try out on the locals. He'd found it in a tin in some old boxes from the basement. The recipe was for light-as-air doughnuts and he wanted to see if he could make them float.

Flipping the switches in the kitchen, the stainless steel gleamed in the harsh fluorescent light. Baking was where he belonged and when he found a place to settle maybe he would open up his own shop. It had been his dream for so long.

Perhaps it was time he took the maybe to a definite. Something about today felt different, like life had started over and he could be and do anything he wished. On the tail end of that thought, the phone rang and his entire world changed over the course of one conversation.

Morlana woke up craving fresh doughnuts. "Figures," she said to the white cat relaxing on the pillow next to her head. Grant's pillow. A stab of pain sliced through her again. Apparently she had been mistaken when she thought she'd cried herself out last night and early this morning.

Foolishly she'd called Grant at five a.m., wanting to hear his voice one more time. And frankly, she was curious to see if the banishing spell had worked its magic. It had, faster than she'd thought possible. He was distracted when he answered the phone and it didn't get any better in the one-minute conversation she'd suffered through. He was aloof and finally it was too painful for her to continue. Hanging up, she'd cried for the second time.

She still had some tears left now it seemed and they leaked out of her eyes onto the pillowcase. Wasn't the third time a charm?

Curled in on herself, she sobbed. Her heart was broken, jagged shards poked at her again and again as a steady stream of memories ran through her mind. Grant laughing, joking, teasing

her. Grant touching, pleasing, stroking her. Grant's blue eyes sparkling as he told her about a funny customer. Those same blue eyes darkening to midnight in the throes of passion.

If only she hadn't cast the spell the first time. Maybe he would have fallen for her anyway in the natural progression of things. But she'd wanted so badly to have someone to spend time with, someone to share things with after being alone so long, she let her common sense fly out the window. She'd wanted a companion and the lovemaking was a bonus, but now all of it was gone. Grant would wonder what the hell he'd been thinking getting involved with her and she couldn't answer him.

"Damn." She punched her pillow but still didn't feel any better. Maybe she should go to town and torture herself some more by getting those doughnuts. She could almost swear she smelled them in the house.

Seconds after punching her pillow, she heard a muffled curse come from the kitchen and she sat up in her bed. Heart pounding, she listened for any other noises. Could an intruder have come into her home?

No one ever came out this way, which made her lax about locking the door. She might regret the laziness today. Another curse came from the kitchen, this one a little more distinctive. The voice was Grant's.

Getting out of bed as quietly and as quickly as possible, she froze at the door of her bedroom. Pulling her robe tighter, she listened intently to Grant muttering something about awakenings. What the hell was going on?

She had two options. She could cower in the doorway, afraid to witness his uninterested eyes, or she could barge out into the kitchen and confront the man who had intruded into her home and her heart.

Option one was safe. But between all the crying she'd done over the last half-day and the anger swelling in her chest over his presence in her house when she was mourning the death of their relationship, safe was not an option.

Who did he think he was, brushing her off this morning on the phone and then coming to her house only hours later? She'd released him from the spell; he shouldn't be here at all.

Bare feet didn't make for very loud stomping, but she gave it her best try. When she reached the kitchen, Grant turned from the small butcher block where fresh flowers stood in a crystal vase she'd never seen before. How dare he bring her flowers?

"Good morning, Morlana," he said, his face grave but a twinkle in his blue eyes.

How rude of him to twinkle. But some of her anger melted when she stared into those blue eyes and revisited all the memories she'd sorted through last night. Something must have gone wrong with the banishing spell.

"Why are you here, Grant?" she asked, curious now. She tightened the belt at her waist and crossed her arms over her ample chest.

"Do I have to have a reason?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, you do."

He paused for a minute, obviously taken aback at the tone of her voice. He looked at her, some of the twinkle leaving his eyes.

She felt horrible for taking his good humor away, but the hurt ran too deep to continue any small talk.

"Okay. I thought I would surprise you with breakfast in bed. I figured your door would be unlocked and I tried hard not to wake you up before everything was ready. I closed the shop for the morning to come over here."

"Why?" Her question was short, sharp even, and made his eyes narrow a bit. Who cared anymore? she thought.

His back went rigid. "I didn't realize I had to have a reason to be here."

Why was he getting defensive when she was the one hurting?

"It's not...I can't...you shouldn't be here."

"Why not?"

She didn't answer him immediately, instead she tried to remember what exactly she'd done the night before. "But I released you." She said it almost absently. *Could it be she'd done the banishing spell wrong?* There was one way to find out.

Apprehension tightened Grant's gut when Morlana paced the

kitchen as if in a fog. He was confused. What was she talking about and why was she wandering over to her shelf of recipe books at a time like this? They had the beginnings of a good relationship started, and the thought of leaving her at the end of the month troubled him. But the call this morning had changed everything.

Morlana grabbed a book, seemingly at random, and began flipping pages that crackled with age. What an odd recipe book, he thought. Then he looked closer at the cover and something clicked in his brain.

The silence in the kitchen, other than the continued crackling of the pages, was deafening. But in his mind a cacophony of thoughts were tangling and unraveling at warp speed. A friend of his in Los Angeles was a practicing Wiccan and herbalist. She also had many people come to her to fix their problems and she made lotions, soaps and sachets.

It would make sense as to why Frannie came to Morlana when they didn't appear to be friends. Or weren't until after the confrontation with Jason.

Morlana flipped more pages. Finally her beautiful green eyes rested on one and he watched as she read the page quickly. She glanced up at him and then back at the page several times before he decided to try to end the turmoil so visible in her face.

"What's going on, Morlana?"

"Nothing."

"It doesn't look like nothing," he said, mimicking their conversation from days before. But this time wasn't about laughter, it was infinitely more serious.

"I did something and it doesn't appear to have worked," she said, gnawing on her bottom lip.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Are we going to go through this every time I ask you a question? It doesn't sound like nothing."

"I don't want to talk about it."

So she was going to be stubborn, was she? Two could play that game. "Well, you're going to. Whatever it is, we can work it out. I enjoy spending time with you." He walked to her, placing his hand over hers on the book. Being several inches taller than

her gave him a certain advantage. He could look down at her and out of the corner of his eye see the words on the page. Banishing spell. "I want to spend more time with you, but I can't if you continue to be so vague. Talk to me."

A faintly confused look replaced the skepticism on her face. He tightened his grip on her hand when she tried to close the book. Looking deep into her eyes, he asked again, spacing each word precisely. "What is going on?"

Like a dam breaking, it all came out. "I don't know what happened. It was only supposed to last a little while, long enough for your month here, then it would fade. But that woman came and said I might get into trouble, so I tried to take it back or get rid of it and now it doesn't seem to be working." She took in a heaving breath. "I'm the worst witch in the world."

Time froze for Morlana the instant the words were out of her mouth. *Oh, my Goddess, did I say that out loud?*

Apparently she had, and managed to scare Grant into speechlessness at the same time. Any moment now the dazed look in his eyes would turn to revulsion and he would run from her house like a demon was on his tail. She wouldn't blame him. Nothing was working out as she'd expected. He was supposed to stay far away from her, not come around trying to fix breakfast and act as if he belonged here with his flowers and his vases and his sexy voice. Maybe she would want him with a hunger she'd never experienced before, as Melissa said, but all effects of the spell should have been reversed for him.

*Dammit.*

"Well, that explains a few things," he said in a calm voice.

She searched for hints of sarcasm or disgust and found none. Wary of the answer, she plunged ahead. She'd never know if she didn't ask. "What does it explain?"

"It explains Frannie running to you when it didn't appear the two of you knew each other. And all the dried herbs you have around the house. All the books I'm only now seeing titles on."

"And how do you suppose it answers all that?"

"Few people go to another person about spousal abuse until

it's the last straw and then it's most likely someone they know enough to confide in. Also, last straws usually call for desperate measures. You had denied her some way to have what she wanted and I didn't think at the time what that could be because we were all so focused on her immediate problem.

"As for the books, whenever we were in the kitchen I was watching you and my fingers so I wouldn't cut them off. My mind was so filled with you, I didn't take the time to read any titles on your books."

Raking his light hair back with agitated fingers, he hesitated for a moment. "But the releasing part? That's one thing I don't understand. What does it mean?"

Why did she say that part out loud? Should she explain herself or dismiss him? Agony twisted in her heart. This was a chance she hadn't thought she'd be offered. If she explained things to him, would he understand? Would he turn from her? He hadn't yet, even though he knew she was a witch, but that was no guarantee he wouldn't be angry with her for using him. Indecision tore her apart.

"I..." She started and faltered after the one word. Looking into his blue eyes, the love still shining there baffled her. How was it possible? She'd confirmed through the book of spells she'd done everything right. The moment she put out the fire, the spell released him. And he *had* ignored her on the phone this morning. Everything was so confusing.

But her love for him gave her the strength to go on. If nothing else, she could give him this. "I cast a spell after I met you," she said, staring at the plain oak floor beneath her feet. It would be too painful to look at him while she spilled her secrets.

"When I gave you the sachet as a gift the next day in the bakery, you needed to keep it near you for the spell to gain strength. Then I kissed you to bring the spell to completion. I used you to fill the loneliness I've been experiencing lately." She took a deep breath that verged on a sob and whispered the rest. "You'll never know how sorry I am."

And then the most amazing thing happened. She felt his thick fingers lift her chin with a gentle touch. She kept her eyes downcast, afraid he would see how hollow she was inside.



"Please look at me," he said, his voice rough with emotion.

But still she couldn't raise her gaze. He would hate her and it would shatter what was left of her heart.

"Morlana, my love, please look at me."

With that declaration, her eyes snapped up to his. *My love?* It wasn't possible, and yet she couldn't help the swell of hope rising in her chest. "What did you say?"

He sighed and shook his head slowly. "I called you my love. If you cast a spell at the beginning of our time together, I can't see where it affected me. I think I fell in love with you the minute I heard you singing in the dark of the night—sad and so damned beautiful. I followed your voice and found the most alluring woman in the world."

She tried to duck her head away from his hand. His words were a knife to her soul. He couldn't be telling the truth. She had cast the spell, she knew she had.

"I couldn't stay away from you," he continued, firmly holding her in place. "Not because of a compulsion or force outside myself. I don't know how all that works, so I don't have the right words, but I know everything I felt for you, everything I feel for you now, has all come from inside me."

However it was possible, she felt the truth of his words in her soul and fat teardrops rolled down her rounded cheeks. Her heart was overflowing and the dam finally broke. Sobbing in his arms, she let go of every fear and every thought beyond him as he lifted her up and carried her to the bedroom in his strong arms. Happiness welled over along with the flood of tears.



## Chapter Nine



*W*ith exquisite care, Grant placed Morlana on the big iron bed in her room. He kissed her full, sexy lips, stroking one hand from collarbone to rounded hip, savoring the hills and valleys of her lush body.

To think he'd almost lost her. It would have been agony. He didn't know about this spell and counter spell business, but he thanked whoever was listening it hadn't worked.

"So soft," he whispered into the shell of her ear. Taking a little nibble at the lobe, his body absorbed her shiver. He vowed to make love with her as slowly as possible. Gliding fingers whispered over skin like satin. He buried his face into the curve of her neck and breathed her in.

"Touch me, Grant. Touch me and make me believe."

"I will in a moment. First I want to look at you." His hands journeyed from her mass of red hair to her rounded shoulders. With long, slow strokes, he moved from her shoulders to the tips of her fingers. He raised her left hand and took each fingertip in his mouth, one after another, licking and sucking, swirling his tongue along the sensitive flesh between each one. She moaned and it was

the sweetest sound.

Her fingers touched the hem of his t-shirt and his stomach muscles contracted in anticipation. He shuddered when her gentle fingers feathered along his skin. Then he groaned and her wicked laugh answered him.

They teased each other, playing and loving at the same time. Reveling in finding each other and the wonder of truly loving another person after so short a time.

Breaths shortened and they strained toward each other when all their clothes were discarded onto the floor. Her skin glistened and she moaned again when his finger unerringly found her clit. Finding the rhythm that made her pant, he continued his torture, keeping her on edge by slowing down when she was ready to fall apart.

“Now, Grant. Please.”

“Sweetheart, since you asked so nicely. Come for me.” He watched her eyes glaze as he felt her whole body tense and release in an orgasm.

Guiding her with murmured words and strong hands, he brought her to her knees and turned her to face away from him. She straddled his thighs and slowly lowered herself onto his waiting shaft. Inch by inch, he penetrated her, his hand on the curve of her hip. Her hair hung nearly to her waist and it swayed sensually against her back, brushing her flesh as she rose above him, almost to the end of his cock. Then she plunged back down, seating herself fully on his length.

“Again,” he said.

She lifted herself again and her inner muscles clenched around him. When she rose all the way to her knees, he thrust up as she plunged down, much as he had the last time they’d been together. After that their lovemaking was a flurry of action as they moved in tandem. She rode him hard and he surged up with her every movement.

A heartbeat before they came together, she turned her head to look at Grant from over one sexy shoulder. “I love you,” she said.

He couldn’t help but go over the edge himself.

"You look awfully smug," Morlana said, snuggling down into the crook of her lover's arm.

"Well, with everything that's happened since I started breakfast this morning, I forgot to tell you my good news."

She tried to wait patiently while Grant looked down at her in silence. Would he tell her he was staying? Should she offer to go with him when he left for California? She didn't want to be away from him.

After a couple of seconds, she couldn't stand it anymore. "What is it?"

"What is what?"

She pinched him on the sensitive flesh under his arm.

He yelped, then laughed. "Have you always been so vicious?"

"Yes, cross me at your own peril. Now, tell me what your good news is."

"Okay, okay."

When he hesitated again, she twitched her fingers near his side and he started talking fast.

"When you called this morning, I was distracted because I'd just hung up with my aunt and uncle. They called to check in and see how things were going. I told them about my new recipe and how well it was working, then thanked them again for the opportunity to help them and myself in the process."

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "There seemed to be a hesitation on the line and I thought maybe I had lost them through a tunnel or something. But then my uncle cleared his throat and told me he had another favor to ask. I told him to shoot and he laughed, saying *I* might want to shoot *him* when he told me the favor." Grant laughed and shook his head. "So I waited. Much more patiently than you, by the way, and after a lot of hemming and hawing, Uncle Ernest asked me if I wanted to buy the Bread and Basket. He said I could pay them in monthly installments over the next ten or so years."

She was speechless. The impossible suddenly became very possible.

"So I told him I'd love to stay and buy it, but asked him why.

I guess they're having such a great time on the road, they don't have plans to come back for another year or so. They want to drive across the entire country."

Dumbfounded, her tongue continued to stick to the roof of her mouth. *Grant. Here. Forever.* It was her wildest dream, and yet not so far-fetched anymore.

"So I came over to make you breakfast to celebrate and tell you, but then you hit me with all that magic and releasing spells stuff and then we made love and it slipped out my head."

"Slipped out of your head?"

"Yep, slipped out of my head." He laughed again as she reached behind him, yanked the pillow from beneath his head and began to whack him with it.

Hours later, as the sun was setting in the sky and the horizon dimmed to the black velvet of night there was a knock on the door. Morlana was making the fragrant brown gravy for her pot roast, so Grant answered the door.

"Can I help you?" he asked the elegant woman standing on the front stoop. She was dressed all in black and there was something otherworldly about her.

"I'm here to see Morlana, if she's available."

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable in the living room and I'll go get her. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you, this won't be an extended visit. I'll only take a moment of her time."

So formal, he thought as he trotted back to the kitchen. He wondered who she was.

"There's a woman waiting in your living room for you. She's dressed all in black with a dark cloak over her shoulders. Seems pretty formal to be some kind of traveling sales person."

At the mention of the cloak, Morlana's heart raced. Quickly, she wiped her wet hands on a kitchen towel and smoothed the front of her shirt. Would she be punished for not releasing the spell right? Or had there been a spell at all? She was still so confused about what exactly happened.

Morlana entered the living room, trepidation in her heart, Jezebelles whirling around her ankles. "Good evening, Melissa."

"Good evening, Morlana. I came by because I wanted your assurance you were still planning on lifting your spell tonight."

Morlana was baffled. "Um, I already lifted the spell, or tried to at least. And you said I had two days to do it. That would have been last night not tonight."

"I lied about the timing, Morlana," Melissa said. "I wanted to give you every opportunity to make up your own mind before there was no way I could help." Melissa's smile had a little edge to it, but Morlana blinked and it was gone. "Which banishing spell did you use?"

Morlana told the witch what she had done and Melissa settled back in the fluffy, burgundy chair.

"That sounds like a good enough spell. I wonder why it didn't work. This puzzles me. Take me through each step."

Morlana did. When she came to the part about writing out Grant's name on the scrap of paper, Melissa held up her hand and Morlana immediately broke off.

"Why did you write down Grant's name?"

"Because it was Grant I cursed."

Melissa laughed. "Is that why you agonized about the banishing spell? The reason your last spell didn't work is because your first one went the wrong direction. Didn't you notice any other creature that didn't seem to leave you alone for a minute?"

A little miffed, Morlana shook her head, not sure what to say.

"Honey, you cursed your cat, Jezebelles, the first time around. There never was any spell on Grant to banish."





## Epilogue



Morlana and Grant stood under the darkest sky of the lunar cycle. They expected the new moon tonight and held hands as they walked out to the small arbor Grant had put up in the backyard. Several townspeople were there, including Frannie who stood off to one side, her face healing slowly but surely.

In the arch of the white arbor, Melissa stood behind a table covered in white and green satin, surrounded by four members of the coven Morlana planned to join. Maybe it would make a significant difference in her output once she had a chance to pick their collective brains. Hopefully with their help, she would stop bumbling around so much.

Her life was so full of people now between the coven and the townspeople who were coming to accept her since she'd helped Frannie. She and Grant were committing their lives to each other tonight and she was thankful to be surrounded by her friends. Since tonight was the best time for new commitments and adventures of the heart, Melissa would lead the hand-fasting—which would last a year and a day—then they would have a legal wedding. But Morlana knew this day would always stand in her mind

and her heart as their anniversary.

Grant and Morlana tied the first knots into a special ceremonial cord and said all the correct words. But more went on between them as they stared intently into each other's eyes. Promises were made and met in those few moments that would bind them forever to one another. Then Grant kissed Morlana with a passion that rocked her back on her heels.

The small gathering went wild as the kiss lasted and lasted, long past public moderation. Then Grant swept Morlana into his arms and said, "Good night folks, we have some celebrating to do and then doughnuts are on me tomorrow morning."

"I could arrange it so doughnuts are strategically on you this evening," Morlana whispered into his ear and licked his earlobe. He shivered and his cock twitched next to her hip. In her heart she knew they would be together, loving each other, pleasing each other, forever.

## *About the Author*

Misty Simon loves to tell stories, especially the ones she types on her computer. Sharing her quirky sense of humor through her full-figured heroines is a dream come true and she hopes readers take something away with them from every story.

Misty recently relocated to Central Pennsylvania with her husband Daniel and her daughter Noelle, where she is currently finishing her next book while fixing up their new (to them) house from the 1820s.



*Predator–Match.com:*

*Alpha v. Alpha*

*Francesca Hawley*

## *Dedication*

I want to thank my mother for being my number one cheerleader and my bestest friend. She believed I could write long before anyone else thought I could. Even me. Without her support, my life would have been a very different one. She's gone, but still loved and missed.

I want to thank my "honorary aunt," Valda. When my mother left this world, Valda was there to be my best friend and cheerleader. She encouraged me and told me that I was important, even when there were times I wasn't sure about that. Valda, you're the best!

I also want to thank all of my friends in the SCA, and outside it. My friends believe in me; they make me smile and feel special. I treasure that, and I treasure them.

# Chapter One



Serena Goldwolf looked up from her computer screen with a frown. Her olive green eyes flashed in annoyance as she heard an altercation in her outer office. She brushed her dark blonde bangs off her forehead and sighed. A male voice was all but roaring in anger out there and she knew her secretary wouldn't be able to handle him. Her cousin, Kara was a good secretary, but she was an omega, and an omega female at that. Even omega males dominated her. Serena sighed again, saved her web page design and headed out to confront whichever male jerk was browbeating her cousin. She opened the door in the midst of male outrage.

"What the hell kind of outfit is this? You people set me up with some stalkarazzi bitch!" A tall black haired man, with dark brown eyes was glaring intently at Serena's cousin. He was wearing a very expensive, black Italian suit, black Italian leather loafers, a crisp white shirt and red tie. The ultimate in power wear for the busy executive. He looked like an escapee from Fashion Week. Serena barely held back a snort.

She glanced around and noted heads hanging out of office doors, but no one else was coming to Kara's rescue. That's what

she got for hiring betas. The females all wanted him and the males would jump to follow his orders. She could smell female musk from some of her employees, but especially from Lea Redcat, one of her partners in the Mate Matching service for shapeshifters known as Predator-Match.com. To the outside world, it looked like a web site for finding mates for zoo animals. To the shapeshifter community, it was a way to find a lover or a life partner. Serena sighed. Lea was always ready for a tumble and male wolves seemed rather fond of her lean form.

"I'm really sorry, sir. We do our best to match our clients up with the best fit for them." Kara cringed behind her desk and wouldn't meet the man's eyes. Serena felt sorry for her cousin, because Kara avoided men like him like the plague. She was tiny and delicate and aggressive men scared her. Most males, even the alphas, wanted to protect her from everything, but this man appeared to be oblivious to Kara's charms.

"Are you saying you think I *deserve* a psycho bitch as my Mate?"

Unable to suppress her anger at his arrogance, Serena growled. His gaze flashed to her and she felt it all the way to her womb. Damn, but he was handsome. Life was *just not fair*. His shoulders were broad and filled his suit to perfection. His wide chest narrowed to his hips and she would bet money that his belly sported a six-pack, and not of the beer variety. He had the kind of face that artists wanted to sculpt and women wanted to sit on. His eyes were the piece-de-resistance; large, dark brown, and thickly lashed beneath perfectly arched brows. In short, a god or a male model. This was the kind of male who never looked twice at Serena because she wasn't tall and thin, or tiny and doll-like. She had yet to meet a male wolf who wanted a woman with curves, but this kind of wolf was *the* worst. They expected perfection from their females and tended to get it. These wolves wanted trophy bitches.

At least the bears seemed to value curves in their females, the more dangerous the better. Bears would go that extra mile for a little T & A. She had dated a couple of bears, but since she wanted children they hadn't gotten serious. Shapeshifters could only produce offspring with their own species. Oh, sometimes a human



could partner a shapeshifter and produce young, but it didn't seem to work between many of the other crosses.

In her experience, wolves always seemed to want athletes or china dolls for their Mates. She'd given up on finding a Mate long ago, but it was the impetus for Serena, Lea, and Gwyneth Whitefalcon to create this web match service. It was easy to find a *mate*; a shapeshifter for a sex partner, but a Mate was different. A Mate was someone you stayed with for life and had pups or cubs or fledglings with, depending on your species. Finding a good match for a shapeshifter was difficult in the best of circumstances; but Yahoo, and even eHarmony.com didn't work well.

She lifted her chin in challenge when the bastard stared her down. How dare he try to intimidate her? She was an Alpha female, damn it!

"Who are you?" his voice cut the air like a knife.

"Who are you?" she returned, tilting her head. She wouldn't back down from this one. The man needed to be taken down a peg.

He scowled at her and his eyes narrowed. The bastard was an Alpha from the tips of his perfect black hair to the bottom of his highly polished loafers.

"Damien Blackwolf." He stood up and faced off against her, obviously waiting for his pronouncement to have effect. He said it as if she were supposed to curtsy to him. Not only was he an Alpha, but a Blackwolf Alpha. An alpha was a dominant male, but an Alpha was the heir of a clan, or the leader of one. This male definitely had or would found his own clan group one day.

Serena was not fond of Blackwolf males; they were too arrogant by half, and this one seemed to think he was God's gift. She had to admit he was a beautiful specimen that made her wet just to look at him, but she wasn't about to admit that to him. He smiled the smile of the male who knew a female was reacting to him. Shit. She shouldn't have come into work today. She was too close to coming into heat, and her scent must be broadcasting. He licked his perfect full lips. Males are *not* supposed to have lips like that. Double shit.

"I'm Serena Goldwolf, one of the co-owners of Predator-Match.com. What seems to be the problem?"

“Your *much acclaimed* psychology matching service paired me with the psycho bitch from hell!”

“Well, considering your abusive attitude with my secretary, it would seem our ‘much acclaimed psychological matching service’ did just dandy.” Serena countered with a smile.

He growled and took a step toward her. She tensed but stayed where she was. The worst thing to do when a predator challenged was cringe or run, and this man was definitely a predator. If the bastard thought she was that easily intimidated, he was in for a rude awakening. She raised her brow in arrogant challenge and he paused, dumbfounded. He looked as perplexed as a pup trying to figure out why he tripped over his tail. Damn it, that made him adorable. Serena shook her head in disgust at herself. Alpha males are not adorable, they’re royal pains, emphasis on both royal and pain.

When she did date, she dated betas because they were easier to manage. Serena blinked. Why the hell had she thought *that*? A Mate was a partner for life, and a mate was good for a tumble. This male didn’t come close to fulfilling her needs for either role. She might be an Alpha female, but she was damned if she was going to take an Alpha male as her Mate.

“Miss Goldwolf...”

“Ms.”

“What?”

“Ms. Goldwolf. I’m not some untried adolescent, Mr. Blackwolf, and I would appreciate if you would acknowledge it.”

“*Ms. Goldwolf...*” his sarcastic growl was deep and made her nipples harden. Damn it. She pretended it didn’t affect her, but she knew he realized it did. Why did he show up here, today of all days? He glared down at her. “This is a business, *Ms. Goldwolf*, and I am a very dissatisfied customer. I have friends that I’ve told about this company who could very easily pull their custom at my request. I suggest you moderate your tone.”

That was it. Serena saw red as only a female close to heat can. She stalked over to him and poked him in the chest with her finger while she stared up into his black eyes. “Listen to me, you arrogant wolf! You come in here, guns blazing, and abuse my secretary then threaten me. Pull your custom if you want. Tell your friends

to take a hike, too. I don't give a flying fuck! I will *not* be treated this way by you or anyone!" Serena felt like she was floating outside of herself, watching her own actions in horror. She was never like this, even when she was fully in heat. Oh, she snarled and clawed at males, but she'd never attacked anyone before; she sure wanted to attack this one, though. He smiled grimly and only then did Serena realize his last speech had been a deliberate taunt. Oh...shit.

He grabbed her waist and lifted her easily. Taking two strides to the nearest wall, he pushed her against it while wrapping her thighs around his hips. He pressed his hard on against her.

She moaned, letting her head drop back. When she heard him snarl, she realized she'd closed her eyes and once she opened them, she saw the triumph in his. "Oh, fuck," she muttered. She'd bared her neck to him submissively and she could see he intended to follow this to its conclusion.

"Oh, yes." He dropped his head and sniffed her neck, then tasted it. She shivered as his teeth grazed her jugular. He could kill her with a single bite and they both knew it. She also knew that the last thing he wanted to do right now was tear out her throat. No, he wanted to fuck her until she couldn't walk, then fuck her again. The worst part was that was what she wanted, too.

Oh...shit.



## Chapter Two



Damien looked down at the hot Alpha female in his arms while he took a deep breath to imprint her scent in his olfactory glands. Those weren't the only glands on which she was imprinting herself. Why the hell hadn't that idiot beta psychology profiler for this place matched him with this female? She couldn't fit him better, physically or mentally. He couldn't stand a female that cringed around him; that little doll behind the desk had set his teeth on edge from the minute he'd entered the room. If he'd said "jump," she would have asked, "How high?" Not this one. She would have told him to take a flying leap.

He ran his palms up her thighs and under her skirt. They both whimpered when he hit bare skin at the top of her stockings. When was the last time he'd dated a woman who didn't wear panty hose? He couldn't remember right now; he couldn't even think. All he could do was feel that taut, round ass. He cupped it in his large hands, lifting her harder onto him. Her arms snaked around his neck and her fingers stabbed into his hair. She pulled his head back then inhaled sharply before licking his neck. He almost came, then and there. He leaned his head toward her again.

"I'm gonna fuck you hard and deep, she-wolf, and you'll beg me to come. Maybe if you beg long enough, I'll even let you." He whispered into her ear.

When she moaned and rocked her hips against him, he lowered his mouth to hers. He was tempted to lay siege to her lips, but he knew she'd melt for him if he teased instead. He nipped at her full lips and lightly licked her. She opened her mouth to him and tugged at his hair to pull his mouth to hers. He sealed her mouth with his and started the pleasurable task of memorizing her taste. Meanwhile, his hands kept exploring. He found silk panties hiding under that boring gray business skirt she was wearing. He'd bet money the silk was black or red. He ripped the panties out from under her skirt and looked. Sure enough, black silk. He grinned as he looked down into her fevered green eyes. She had to have on a matching bra beneath the gray business jacket. He reached for it to find out.

"I'm sorry, sir. But we can't have this sort of thing happening in the reception offices of our business." The voice was smoky and seductive but it did absolutely nothing for him except piss him off. He turned his head to look at the sleek redhead in the skintight sweater-dress, then snarled. His wasn't the only snarl.

"Fuck off, Lea, he's mine. You can try him out when I'm done, *if* I don't kill him in the process." He burst into surprised laughter, but his hot little Alpha turned to frown at him. "You're going to finish what you started, wolfman. If you run off now, I am going to hunt you down like the dog you are."

He hid his wince at the insult she blithely tossed his way. He knew she'd said it merely to taunt him. Most wolves loathed the whole werewolf thing, and he was no exception. "Fear not, my fine bitch. I have *never* left a female in heat to be mounted by another male, and I don't intend to start now."

"You're in heat? For God's sake, Serena, what were you thinking? You *know* we agreed to never come in here at that time of the month." The redhead crossed her hands over her chest and tapped her toes in irritation.

"I am *not* in heat." Serena glowered at him.

"If you aren't in heat at this minute, you are damn close." Damien taunted her. He marveled at himself. He couldn't remember

finding that kind of volatility attractive in a female before, but every time this female shot sparks at him, he caught fire.

“Whether you’re in heat or not, Serena, fucking a client in the reception area is *not* good business practice.” Lea was still tapping her toes, but now added fingers drumming on her arms to the ensemble. She was broadcasting not only irritation, but sexual frustration. He could smell it. It was funny, but unlike some of his cousins, he had never found skinny women terribly attractive. If he could see ribs on a female, it completely turned him off. Maybe it was those years working in Africa as a Peace Corp volunteer when he was just out of college that had done it, but even in his teens he’d wanted a woman with curves. Serena had curves enough for any man, and the sweetest ass he’d held in a good long time.

“Lea, I was *not* going to fuck him out here.”

Smothered laughter from across the room met her patently obvious lie. Damien looked over and saw the beta who’d set him up with the psychobitch from hell. He pointed at the male. “You! You’re the idiot that set me up with Joyce Blackwolf.”

Suddenly, Serena went still in his arms. “He set you up with *whom*?”

“Joyce Blackwolf.”

Serena’s legs dropped to the floor and she stepped away from him. He felt a sense of loss as she moved away. He could sense her rage as she turned and hunted the male across the room. Damien growled when she cornered the other male. If she started to fuck that one, he was going to get violent.

“Quillen Goldwolf, are you *trying* to sabotage this company? We dropped her for a *reason*!” Serena screeched, her voice reaching the upper registers. Damien winced as did most of the others present. Quillen appeared to be cowering before her wrath, and with good reason.

“I’m sorry, Serena, I thought it would be funny. He’s such a prick!”

“I don’t care if he’s the biggest prick on the planet! No one deserves to have a run in with a sociopath who is in desperate need of intensive psychological therapy!”

“But Serena...”

“Wasn’t it bad enough she almost killed your brother? Jeez,

Quillen. You are *so* fired. Pack your shit and get out. *Now!* Before I rip you a new asshole!” She strode away from him and only then did everyone else in the room take a breath.

Damn, but she was magnificent, Damien thought to himself, and he had to have her.



## Chapter Three



Serena took a deep breath of dismay. No wonder the hunk on the other side of the room had been so irate. She would have been, too. Six months ago, Joyce had applied via the website for an exclusive and rather expensive psych profile to find the perfect Mate. Not just some male to bed, but rather a male for life. The profile had been so contradictory that a good match had been difficult to find. Not only that, but Joyce's shopping list for a Mate included good looking, wealthy and demonstrably fertile, as well as virile.

Not many males were willing to provide a sperm sample for that particular test. Only Serena's cousin, Quinn Goldwolf, had fit Joyce's very specific criteria. Serena still suspected that Joyce had somehow figured out how to get herself set up with him, and had come here with that purpose in mind. Joyce had kidnapped him and held him hostage when she went into heat. She had intended to get herself with a pup and force money from him to give the pup to him to raise. Joyce had been banned from their service, and had received some rough justice from the Goldwolf clan, but only after they were sure she had she failed to conceive.

Serena couldn't believe Quillen had committed such a heinous act. Now she had to go over to the arrogant bastard and grovel in apology. If Quillen didn't get his ass in gear, she *was* going to rip him a new asshole! She crossed the room and stood before the hottest, most arrogant SOB she'd ever met. She swallowed, looked up into his black eyes and tried to speak.

Nothing came out. She cleared her throat. "Mr. Blackwolf, I most heartily apologize for the damage done by one of my employees. I can assure you he will never darken our door again, no matter how much he pleads."

The man crossed his arms over his chest and raised a brow at her. She wanted to smack him. It was hard enough to have to apologize, but he was *not* helping matters. "What can we do to make amends?" she finally choked out. As soon as he smiled, she knew she should *not* have asked that question. His smile widened to a wolfish grin. No male should be that damn gorgeous.

"There's only one thing that will do. I want the Mate I should have been paired with when I walked through that door." His deep voice made her cunt start to weep again.

"Of course. I will have our best psych profiler provide you with the appropriate partner." She swallowed down acid. "At no charge, of course."

"Serena!" Lea hissed.

Serena turned to glare at her. "Do you have a better suggestion?"

Lea blinked her hazel eyes and looked at the man. She smiled her best feline smile and murmured, "No, I don't."

Serena inhaled slowly and counted to ten, so that she wouldn't be tempted to commit murder for the second time that day. He was looking for a Mate, with a capital M, which meant he wanted pups. To get pups, he needed a she-*wolf*, not a she-*cat*. Lea was be out of luck. With her ample curves, Serena knew that she was, as well. He might tumble her when she was in heat, but she had far too much experience with this type of male to think she would appeal to him in any other way. She turned back to him and waited.

"I don't want just any Mate, *Ms. Goldwolf*."

Serena grimaced. "I am aware of that, Mr. Blackwolf. We will provide you exclusive service to find the proper female for you.

Predator-Match.com has a guarantee of satisfaction.”

His grin widened further and he leaned toward her. “Good. Because I definitely want satisfaction,” he all but purred in her ear and she felt her juices seep onto her thighs. She realized in consternation that he still held her black silk panties in his right hand. He lifted them to his nose, inhaled, and licked his lips. Serena whimpered before biting her lip to silence herself. He took a step closer. She could feel the warmth of his body radiating toward her and knew she was on the brink of a heat more intense than any she’d ever experienced before.

The only other time in her entire life she had felt this way was when she’d come into heat the first time, shortly after her eighteenth birthday. An alpha in her pack, who wasn’t related to her, had initiated her and it had been the most amazing sex she’d ever had, before or since. She just knew that if this wolf mounted her while she was in heat, it would make her first experience pale in comparison.

“I’m sure we can satisfy your needs. Let me get a profiler for you so you can get started.” Serena turned to walk away from him and preserve her sanity. She froze when he caught her arm and stopped her. He stepped up behind her and she could feel the burn of him against her back. Oh God, she wanted to bend over so he could mount her. It took every ounce of willpower she had not to do it.

“I don’t need a profiler to find me a Mate. I managed that on my own. I’m just surprised someone on your staff didn’t figure it out immediately.”

Serena stiffened. Who? Who was he talking about? She looked at the other females panting for him and wondered which of them he wanted. She turned and looked up into his dark eyes. “Who did you have in mind?”

“You.”

“Me.” She blinked in complete shock and turned around to face him.

He nodded. “I want you.”

“You want me for your mate.”

“No, I want you for my *Mate*.”

Serena’s mouth dropped open and formed an “O”. He lifted his

left hand, the one *not* holding her panties, and with his forefinger, gently closed her mouth. He cupped her cheek and lightly began to caress her lips with the tip of his thumb. Her eyelids fluttered closed and her nipples grew tight under her jacket. If he kept that up for long she was going to come...just from having her lips stroked. She moaned softly.

"I want you, Serena Goldwolf. I require the best; I won't settle for second rate."

Serena's eyes popped open and she frowned. "I am *not* trophy bitch material."

"If I wanted a trophy bitch, I wouldn't have come here to look for a proper Mate. I can get that kind of female companionship any day of the week."

She bet he could, the conceited wolf. She wished he would quit rubbing her lips because she couldn't think when he did that. Hoping to give herself some space, she tried to step back but he followed. He slid an arm around her and pulled her tight against his body. Her hands came up to settle on his chest and she looked back into his fathomless eyes, seeing determination there. He was certain, that much she could tell. *Damn.*

"I'm not in the dating pool of this service, Mr. Blackwolf."

He frowned. "Why? Are you already Mated? If so, I don't think much of how he cares for you. No Bitch of mine would be running around in public without protection this close to her heat cycle."

Serena growled. "I am *not* Mated, but even if I were, I wouldn't let some patronizing male dictate where I could go and when I could go. No way!"

He caught her hair in his hand and gave her head a gentle shake while he stared into her eyes. "My Bitch does *not* go running around unprotected when she's close to heat. Learn it. Know it. Live it."

"I'll make sure I tell any female that we propose to pair you with about your 'requirements' for her behavior," Serena taunted him. How dare he suggest she had to get permission to go somewhere?

"The only female to tell is you. *You* are my Bitch, Serena. Get used to it."

She snarled at him, and brought her knee up. He turned just enough not to get nailed, but she caught his thigh...hard. "I am *not* your Bitch, Damien. I belong to me. I will not let anyone dictate to me. Ever."

"Serena, you're being unreasonable and you know it. If a group of males caught you when you went into heat, they'd mount you no matter how you felt about it. And you'd let them just to get relief. It's a matter of protection for a female, not domination."

"Bullshit. You'd want to make sure any pup I had was yours. It's *all* about domination."

His eyes flashed. Before she could think twice about challenging him, he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. "Let me show you domination, sweetheart. Maybe then you'll have something to compare it with."

"Put me *down*!" she shrieked. He headed for the door and she began to struggle. He slapped her ass...hard. She winced, but moaned at the same time. His slap turned her on even more than she was. He went through the entrance door and she looked into the room before the door closed behind them. She would have laughed at the various expressions on the faces of the staff, if he hadn't put one of his hands under her skirt just then and slid two fingers into her dripping cunt. She gasped in shock, and clamped down on the invading fingers. "Stop! For God's sake, Damien, stop!" She moaned and wiggled as he pushed his fingers deeper despite her inner muscles fighting the penetration.

"You pushed me as far as I'll go, Serena." He stopped walking, but his thumb found her clit and stroked it. She whimpered. She heard elevator doors open. He walked in and turned around to face the front. She looked to her left and saw a young red-haired man standing there staring at her. She knew him; Sumner Redwolf. He was an intern for the criminal law firm on the top floor of the building; they only took the really *big* cases. What was the name of that place?

Just then Damien slid the two fingers out and reinserted three. She closed her eyes and almost passed out. Oh, God. She was going to come in front of this guy. She was so close she knew she wouldn't be able to stop. She arched her back and spread her thighs a bit. Damien took full advantage and began a steady in and

out stroke with his fingers while his thumb circled her quivering clit. She bit back a moan. Her hands clasped fistfuls of his jacket while she pressed her face into his back.

She opened like a flower and took his fingers in greedily. She didn't care who saw her come right now. Damien could fuck her in the lobby of the building and she wouldn't care. Her skin was on fire and she began to thrust back onto his fingers. She shuddered under the onslaught. When his thumbnail grazed her clit, she mewled, bucked, arched her back and came hard. She could feel her cunt juice leak out of her body and coat her thighs. Her cunt muscles clamped down on his hand as he stabbed his fingers in and out of her. Still, she kept on coming. Her belly muscles quaked. Her nipples were so tight they hurt; the silk of her bra was almost too rough on them.

Serena expected her body to ease off, but it didn't happen. He'd quit playing with her but she came again, just because his fingers still filled her. She sobbed and tried to stop yet another orgasm from raking her body. She couldn't.

The doors to the elevator opened, but Damien didn't move. She opened her eyes and found herself staring into Sumner's dazed eyes. He was licking his lips and looking shellshocked, but it was nothing compared with how she felt at the moment. She was still right on the edge of another climax. All it would take was for Damien to move a single finger and she'd come again. She was thankful when he didn't. She'd never felt anything this intense in her entire life.

"I think you were getting out here, weren't you, Sumner?" Damien asked the man, which caused Serena to start panting. The vibration of his chest when he spoke put her over the edge again. She jerked in his arms and shuddered in yet another orgasm.

Sumner blinked like he was awakening from a dream then he looked at Damien. "Oh. Yes, sir. Sorry. I was...distracted."

"So was I." She heard the laughter in Damien's voice, growled, and hit him right between the shoulder blades. He stabbed his fingers into her pussy which effectively shut her up. She quaked helplessly on his shoulder.

Sumner stumbled out of the elevator and Damien followed him. "Where are we going?" she cried, then turned to look forward

over her shoulder.

“Someplace private to finish this conversation.” He kept walking down the hall, following the young wolf. Sumner kept looking over his shoulder at them and tripping over his feet.

“We aren’t talking.”

“No, we aren’t.” The finality of his tone made her tense despite his continued stroking of her clit. That definitely didn’t sound good.

The man opened the door and held it for Damien. As they entered the office, Serena caught the sign: Blackwolf, Goldbear, and Whitehawk, Attorneys at Law. She closed her eyes.

“Oh shit,” she muttered. He was one of the partners in that fancy-ass law firm on the top floor. Her ass was grass. No wonder he wore a power suit. This firm was the terror of the District Attorney’s office, and these guys were sharks. Or to be more accurate, they were shapeshifters. She was doomed.

“Oh shit is right, sweetheart,” he growled as he carried her down the hall to one of the offices.





## Chapter Four



Damien took a deep breath as he continued down the hall, then wished he hadn't. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other because he was starting to lose control. He needed to mount her...soon. If he'd had any doubt that she was 'The One,' they'd been dispelled by the smell of her as she came. Once he'd gotten her onto his shoulder, her scent had enveloped him. He'd known it. It was a smell he'd been waiting to find all of his life. She was his True Mate and he had no intention of letting her get away from him. He needed to fuck her so bad, he ached. His cock was hard enough to cut diamonds right now and he didn't care who saw it.

"Damien!"

He turned to the right to look into Kenyon Whitehawk's office. Both of his partners were in there.

"We have an appointment with...a client in ten minutes." Chase Goldbear reminded him.

"I won't be there. I'll be otherwise engaged for the next several hours."

"Several *hours*?" Serena squawked from his shoulder. He

pressed into her tight pussy and found her g-spot. When he massaged it, she tried to get away from him. "No. Damien, stop it. *Please!*" He paused and she subsided.

He met Chase and Kenyon's eyes and he saw lust in both of them. He bared his teeth in a silent snarl. She was *his* Bitch, damn it, and he didn't share. His partners exchanged a disappointed look and shrugged.

"We'll take the meeting, and tell your assistant to cancel all your other appointments today. Let us know when you're available again," Chase told him.

Damien nodded, before turning and heading for his office.

Just before he got out of earshot he heard Kenyon say, "Damn good thing he went to the expense of installing sound proofing in here. Those two will be howling in no time." Damien grinned, especially when he felt Serena tense. She was due for a serious lesson in submission to her Mate, and he was just the wolf to give it to her.

He walked past his assistant. "I'll be unavailable until further notice, Rosalie. You can leave early today if you want." Entering his office, he closed the door and locked it. He crossed to his desk. As he pulled his fingers out of Serena, she came again. He eased her off his shoulder and onto her feet, but he kept an arm around her waist as she seemed unsteady. He licked his sticky fingers. Damn but it was good; like licking honey. Finally, she looked up at him. He could see she was angry at him, but he didn't intend to let her get her balance.

When he took a step back, she almost fell but caught herself on his desk. "Damn you, Damien, how could you publicly humiliate me like that?"

"Strip," he ordered, as though he hadn't heard a word.

She blinked. "What?"

"I said...strip."

"I am not going to bow and scrape like some omega!" her voice rose.

"I'm holding on by a thread, Serena. Either strip, or I'll rip off every stitch of clothing you're wearing. Don't think I won't do it." He pulled the ripped panties out of his pocket as proof. She swallowed hard and licked her lips nervously. Good. It was about

time she realized that he was an Alpha, too.

She might be nervous, but she was also aroused. Obviously she enjoyed it when he dominated her. He restrained a smile at that. They really were made for each other. They would be partners in life, but he'd be dominant in their bedroom.

She reached for her skirt, intent on getting her clothes off.

"No, sweetheart. Do it right." Walking around the desk, he sat down in his chair and propped his feet up on the desk.

"What the hell do you mean, do it right?"

Her snarl was music to his ears, so he smiled. He could see her temper start to flare. "I mean strip for me. Tease me. Make me hot."

"This is ridiculous. I'm out of here." Serena turned and headed for the door.

"Take one more step, my sweet Bitch and you'll wish you hadn't." She whipped around, confusion and anger clearly stamped on her features. "Come here, Serena and strip for me. Strip like you mean it."

"I'd really rather not." Her voice was subdued, and color suffused her cheeks.

He began to get an inkling of the problem. She was shy about him seeing her nude and the thought made him want to howl with frustration. She was the sexiest female he'd ever met and she didn't seem to realize it. He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes.

Opening his jacket, he made his rather large hard on obvious to her. He ran his hand lightly over the place where he tented his trousers. "Do you think I get this hard for just any female?" Her eyes fastened on his cock and he smiled lazily at her. Oh yeah. She wanted him. She wanted him inside her and driving her insane.

"Frankly, yes. You're a male wolf, Damien. If a female goes into heat, you're right there."

He shook his head. "Not like this. I want to bury myself in you and not come out for days. I want to take you again and again. I want you to beg me not to stop, then beg me to stop. Then, I want you to just beg and not even know what the hell you're begging for."

Serena shivered and licked her lips, but still she shook her head. "AMS."

“AMS?”

“Alpha Male Syndrome.”

Damien groaned. “Fuck this shit. Just strip for me and we can have this argument later.”

“I am not going to strip...”

“If I have to walk over there, Serena...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ll regret it. Yada, yada, yada.”

“That’s it,” he snarled. He was out of his chair and grabbing her almost before she finished saying the last ‘yada.’ Ripping her jacket open, he pulled it off then threw it across the room. He tore her skirt down one seam and tossed it too, enjoying a thorough perusal of her exquisite form. She had magnificent full breasts rising from her half cup bra, which left her pink nipples barely exposed. Her pussy was covered with a golden down and she wore a garter belt, sheer black stockings and black stiletto heels. She was sex on wheels. He could definitely work with this wardrobe. Sweeping his desk clear with his arm, he picked her up before she could start to fight and laid her down on the desk.

“Don’t move from that spot, Serena,” he warned her while staring into her eyes intently. Over at the windows, he grabbed the tie backs from both sets of curtains, then crossed to the desk and looked down at where he’d left her. She did have a sense of self-preservation; she hadn’t moved.

“What are you doing with those?” her voice quavered. He might have thought she was scared if he hadn’t been able to catch the scent of her musky arousal growing stronger. She was turned on and getting hotter.

“Exactly what you think I am.” He tied first one then the other of her ankles to his desk then did the same to both her hands. She was spread eagled on top of the shiny wood and ready for more. She looked like a sacrifice to the gods. It was a good look for her. “I think its time to play, don’t you?”

“Damien, what are you going to do to me?”

“Don’t you remember what I told you in the office, Serena? I’m going to make you beg. If I like what I hear, maybe I’ll even let you come.” Her hips jerked in response which made his erection throb.

“Damien! Don’t make me wait. Fuck me now!”

He leaned down between her spread thighs, opened his mouth slightly and breathed through both his mouth and nose. His sense of smell told him all he needed to know; she was fully in heat and ready to be mounted. He looked up and met her eyes. Her face was flushed with excitement and the color was spreading to the rise of her breasts. He could feel the heat rising from her skin.

"I don't respond to demands, sugar. Beg me nice, and I might consider it."

*"I don't beg!"* she shouted as she tried to pull loose from the restraints.

He smiled at her attempts and shook his head. "Did you think I wasn't really tying you down? Of course, I was. It's time for you to learn to submit to your Mate, and I look forward to your instruction."

She tugged on the ties, shrieking in rage. He reached between her thighs and carefully parted her cunt lips. Her juices were pungent and plentiful. She shivered as he slid his thumbs lightly up and down her swollen labia. Her cunt lips were pouting and begging for his touch. He stroked her, barely grazing skin; enough to arouse, but not enough to satisfy. She began to whimper in frustration. This was good and would only get better.



## Chapter Five



When she got her hands on him, she was going to kill him. How dare that bastard taunt and tease her like this? She was on the edge of an orgasm even more intense than the ones in the elevator, but he wasn't giving her enough to get there. Serena lifted her hips to try to get closer, but every time she rose up, he pulled away. If she stayed still, he petted her, but not enough to get off. She watched him lean forward and wet his lips. Serena moaned and closed her eyes. Oh god, what she'd give to have that tongue on her.

"You're my Bitch, aren't you Serena?"

She almost nodded, but stopped and opened her eyes. He was trying to trick her. "I'm *not* your Bitch, Damien."

"Yes, you are." His growl caused her juices to slip out of her already sopping cunt.

"No!"

"Yes, and until you admit it to both of us, you aren't going to get any relief."

She looked at him in horror. She knew she was in heat now; she'd figured that out once he'd set her down in his office. A dog

or a wolf had a heat cycle and if they weren't mounted, they would pass out of heat. A female shapeshifter was different, she stayed in heat until she had an orgasm while she was being mounted by a male. "You can't do that to me!" she cried.

"I don't want to, but I can. And I will, Serena. Bow to the inevitable. You belong to me, and you know it."

She shook her head. She wasn't going to give in to blackmail. "No! Damn you, *no!*"

"Then get prepared for a very, *very* long heat cycle, sweetheart."

Serena screamed in rage, "I won't be blackmailed."

He looked saddened for a moment, then he dropped a light kiss on her hip bone. "It isn't blackmail if it's the truth. You know it, you just don't want to admit it."

She closed her eyes. He couldn't be right. He couldn't be her Mate...not her True Mate. Could he? She felt his finger caress her swollen clit. The touch was so light that it tantalized, rather than fulfilled. She shivered and opened her eyes. She met the dark brown depths. His intent was clear and he wouldn't be moved, but she was damned if she'd just cave in. His fingers delicately parted her swollen folds so that she was spread open to his gaze. Serena felt exposed in a way she'd never experienced before and it excited her intensely. She couldn't cover herself, or hide her desire in any way. She was bare to him, literally and figuratively.

He leaned in and lightly began to nibble at her cunt lips like she was a fine delicacy. She mewled helplessly and tossed her head.

Her hips bucked. He lifted his head, but continued to stimulate her with his forefinger. "Who do you belong to, Serena?"

She shook her head.

"Are you my Bitch?"

"No!"

He flicked his tongue lightly against the underside of her clit and she shrieked. "Are you mine, Serena?"

She continued to shake her head, and he continued to torment her. Over and over, he brought her to the brink. She felt like an overwound wire, but God it felt good. She wanted more. She wanted to come, but she also wanted him to ratchet up the tension



until she couldn't take any more.

"Oh God, Damien. Please...."

"Please what, Serena?"

She tensed when she felt his two fingers at the entrance to her pussy. She tried to spread her thighs wider to encourage him, but she didn't have enough play in the ties he'd used. He had her at his mercy, but showed her none. She sighed when his lips grazed her nipple, then opened her eyes and met his. He flicked her rigid nipple with his tongue.

"Damien..." she whispered.

"Who do you belong to, Serena? Admit it and I'll mount you the way you long to be taken."

She shook her head. He slipped two fingers just inside her cunt and she moaned.

"Are you my Bitch, Serena?" he asked gently, his fingers inching into her tight, wet slit.

"I can't!" her cry seemed ripped from her. She wanted him and she didn't. She couldn't tell what was up and what was down.

"Yes, you can." He caught the edge of her bra with his teeth and tugged the fabric off of first one breast then the other, leaving them framed in black silk. He groaned. "You're so incredibly sexy." His voice was husky and she could see a flush rising in his cheeks. Serena wasn't the only one who was aroused, thank God.

"Fuck me, Damien. You know you want to. Lower your zipper and plunge your cock deep inside my wet pussy." If he could taunt her, she could return the favor. He growled at her, obviously wanting to shut her up. Serena clenched her pussy muscles on his searching fingers. They felt so good buried inside her. "Imagine that's your cock, Damien. Imagine my muscles milking it. Clasp around it." She demonstrated by tightening again. His eyes closed and he tensed. His hips started to dry hump the air. She could see he was so close to losing control, she only had to find the right button to press and he would take her. Leaning her head forward, she licked a drop of sweat from his temple. The instant her tongue touched his skin, he grunted and his fingers pressed down inside her. He smelled incredible, and the taste was even better. She wanted to lick that stunning body from top to bottom, and then do an extended, scenic tour of the very impressive landmarks.

He abruptly pulled his fingers out of her and stepped back. She roared at him, and a slow smile spread on his face. "Oh, no, sweetheart. You won't catch me that easy. But it was a damn good try."

He shrugged out of his jacket and dropped it to the floor, then loosened his tie but left it draped around his neck. He began giving her a lesson in how to strip like you really mean it, and he was a very good teacher. She bit her lip as he reached up, his hands damp with her juices, to ease a button loose. As he slowly loosened a second button, she sighed. Even his throat was sexy. She caught just a glimpse of hair where his shirt parted. He loosened two more buttons and she could see that his pectoral muscles had a light mat of black hair on them. She loved a man with chest hair.

Easing his belt open, he pulled it out of the loops and leaned forward to drape it across her belly. The smooth leather still held his body heat. Serena gasped as she felt her cunt juices seep down her pussy lips and onto the desk below. He smiled wickedly, dipped a finger in the small, but growing pool, and carried the damp finger to his lips for a taste. He sucked his fingertip and it was as if he'd sucked her clit into his mouth. She arched up from the desk top with a cry. He opened the button on his trousers and carefully eased the zipper over his prominent erection. She could see his cock pressing against his white silk shorts and when she met his eyes, he traced a path back up his shirt front to ease open more buttons. He bit his lip and she could see that not only had his cock elongated, but so had his teeth. His canines now resembled those of a wolf, rather than a man.

"Yes," she hissed as she realized her teeth had lengthened, too. She wanted him to bite her, and she wanted to bite him in return. She wanted to mark him as hers. His rumble of arousal nearly undid her resolve not to beg. He ripped off his shirt. She'd been right about that six-pack; his body was as ripped as the shirt lying on the floor. He stepped out of his shoes, pulled off his socks, then he let his pants drop to the floor before he kicked them aside.

She whimpered. He really was a god. Nobody should look like that unless they'd been airbrushed first. "Damien..." her hoarse whisper trailed off as he moved toward her again. He took the tie from around his neck and trailed it over her taut nipples,

making her jump at the sensation left behind. He leaned over her, delicately tracing her areola and nipple with his tongue. He blew a gentle breath against the damp flesh, and the already tight bud began to throb.

She shook her head helplessly. He was going to drive her insane and she wanted to go there. What was he doing to her? His tongue made a rapid fire tattoo on her nipple taking her right to the edge, yet again. He stopped and she shrieked in rage.

"You have the power to end your own torment, Serena. All you have to do is admit you belong to me. We both know that you do, you just have to acknowledge it."

"No!" She shook her head violently. Why did he demand this from her? "You are such a bastard! An arrogant bastard!"

"Stop being so damned pigheaded. I want to mount you and you want to be mounted. Make it happen, Serena. Tell me you are my Bitch. Admit it."

"I belong to me!"

"No, you belong to me. You are mine to care for and protect. You are mine to fuck, mine to fight with, mine to give me pups, and mine to love."

Serena froze and stared into his dark brown eyes. "You don't love me. You don't even *know* me."

"I know you, Serena. I know your scent. You are my True Mate, as I am yours." She shook her head in disbelief, which he must have taken to be denial because he growled. "Yes, you are. Damn, but you're stubborn."

He covered her mouth with his and sucked her tongue into his mouth, nipping it. Their tongues dueled and she twisted so that her breasts rubbed his chest. He moaned into her mouth, wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight against him. She could feel him pressing his thick cock against her sensitive pussy through the silk shorts he still wore. His leather belt teased both her belly and his as he ground against her. She wanted to touch him, but she was still restrained, increasing her desire and her frustration. His mouth slipped to her neck and she bared it to him without a single worry. He nipped her throat teasingly, while rolling his pelvis into hers. She was so close to an orgasm she could almost taste it.

"Damien, for god's sake, fuck me. Please! I need you to fuck

me!” her cries were mindless and she didn’t even realize she was begging.

“Do you want to be fucked, Serena? Do you want me to thrust deep inside you and pound into you until you can’t walk?”

“Yes!”

“Beg me, Serena.”

Serena shivered at the command, unbearably aroused by his dominance. “Please, fuck me, Damien.” He caught her hair in his hands and pulled her head back and bared her throat. He bit her, just barely breaking the skin. She had to come. She had to have him fuck her. She couldn’t take this anymore! “Please, Damien! *Please!* I’m begging you!”

“Are you my Bitch, Serena?”

“Oh, god.”

“*Are* you?”

“*Yes!*” Serena shrieked.

“Say it!”

“I’m your Bitch. Now, fuck me, damn you!”

“Yes!”

She heard fabric ripping, felt a jerk on her legs then they were thrown over his shoulders and he thrust into her cunt hard and fast. She screamed and he howled. Her cunt began to spasm painfully with the onset of the most intense orgasm she’d experienced in her entire life. She lifted her pelvis up to take his deep, intense thrusts and threw her head back as her body flew apart. Her womb jerked and she felt a jolt from her clit to her nipples and back again. She still couldn’t wrap her arms around him but she could reach his shoulder. She sank her teeth into the muscle there and held on tight. The coppery taste of his blood was so good. It was like a drug rush.

He roared and his cock jerked inside her body shooting his semen deep inside her. As it hit her womb, she clamped down and bucked under him. Her belly was trembling and her body was on fire. Even so, it wasn’t enough. She needed him to mount her. He relaxed slightly, but his cock didn’t. He dropped his damp forehead to her shoulder, and lay gasping against her. He hadn’t mounted her properly, so they hadn’t locked together. She needed to have him locked inside of her so that he was as trapped by her

as she was by him.

She snarled and kicked him in the back. "Mount me, damn you!"

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "What?"

"Untie me, flip me over and *mount me, dammit!*" she screamed at him. Her skin was on fire. If he didn't mount her she was going to go insane.

"You're still in heat."

"Of course, I am. You fucked me, but you didn't mount me, you idiot!"

He smiled and she hissed at him, kicking him in the back again. "I said what you wanted me to say, so keep your word! Mount me!"

He frowned. "What do you mean, you said what I wanted you to say?"

"Damien!" she shrieked. "Now. Damn it. Mount me *now!*"

"Serena..."

She lunged upward and bit his lip. A perfect droplet of blood welled from the bite and she licked her lips. He reached above her and tore the ties free, then pulled back. She scrambled off the desk and onto the carpeted floor where she got onto all fours. When she looked back at him, he was staring at her red, swollen flesh like a man coming off a six day drunk. In the next instant, he tore off his silk shorts, staggered and dropped to his knees.

"You have such a fine ass." He rubbed his hand over the curve of her ass, then he brought his palm down sharply and she moaned as the sting turned to heat. He slapped her ass cheeks twice more and she came. Serena spread her knees further apart and lifted her ass up to him. He groaned and buried his face in her cunt, sucked her clit into his mouth and bit it.

"More. Give me more, Damien." Serena pressed her head down to the floor and kept her ass high to entice him. She sighed as she felt his fingers penetrate her claspings pussy, searching for that sweet spot deep inside and finding it with little difficulty. He deepened the internal massage and she opened for him, taking his fingers deep. She was so wet, she knew she could probably take his fist if he gave it to her. Suddenly, she gasped and her womb tightened and jerked. She felt the jolt through her entire body as

she came, barely noticing when he pulled his fingers out. But when he began to tease her entrance with the tip of his cock, she definitely noticed that.

“Yes, Damien. Mount me! Please!”

“What did you mean, Serena?”

“Huh?” She thrust her hips back but he drew himself away from her. “Stop it! Don’t tease me anymore. I need you!”

“What did you mean, ‘you said what I wanted you to say’?” He rubbed her tight clit with the head of his cock.

“Son of a bitch. You are going to argue about that now?” she screamed.

“No time like the present.” He was pissed; Serena could hear that in his growl, but she just needed to be mounted. Why did he have to be difficult?

She arched her hips as he slipped just the head of his cock into her cunt. She tried to thrust onto him, but he evaded her. He continued to torment her clit and the entrance to her pussy. “Damien, please, I’m begging you. I need to be mounted.”

“Are you my Bitch or not, Serena?”

“Why do we have to argue about this now? I need you inside of me!”

“Do you belong to me?”

“*Damien!* Why *now?*”

He eased into her cunt, but only half way. She tried to clamp down on him but he wasn’t far enough inside for them to lock together. “Because you’re fertile, Serena.”

“Every female in heat is fertile.”

“That’s not entirely true. There is a short period of time when your body is actively fertile. That time is *now*, Serena, I can smell it. When we lock together, I am going to plant my pup in your womb. So, what I want to know is, are you my Bitch, or not?”

Serena was panting. She needed to come, but what he said finally sank in. He rubbed his palm over her lower abdomen right over her womb. She could feel it tighten in response and looked over her shoulder into his dark eyes. He was in as much pain from denial as she was, but this was important to him. *She* was important to him.

“Yes, Damien. I’m your Bitch, so would you *please* plant your

pup in my belly?”

A smile grew on his face and she could see joy in his eyes. “It will be my pleasure sweetheart.”

His fingers dipped between her legs and he plucked at her clit with his fingertips. He rubbed while she pressed into his hand. She panted and she closed her eyes tightly to focus on the feelings he was dragging from her tense body. His fingers circled her throbbing clit as he pressed his cock deeper into her tight cunt.

He eased out then entered again, edging deeper; in and out, just outside the range where they would lock together. The friction at the entrance combined with the teasing of her clit. She shrieked; her cunt clamped down as yet another orgasm swept through her. Damien thrust deep, hitting bottom. She felt his cock change shape while her cunt did the same. Her muscles tightened down and spasmed uncontrollably. He howled as his seed spurted into her. Just as Serena thought they were done, his cock jerked inside her and let loose another stream of sperm into her waiting womb.

His hips jerked and he grasped her shoulders in his hands. She felt his breath on her neck then his teeth clamped down on her shoulder. He bit deep and she knew he was marking her as she’d marked him. He held her in place with his teeth as he continued to orgasm. Each time his cock erupted more come into her, her cunt walls constricted on him to milk him for more. Serena was trembling, barely able to keep her hips lifted for him, but still she continued to come. He sighed and fell heavily onto her driving her down to the carpet beneath him. Serena couldn’t move, and neither could he. They were still locked together; Damien’s cock shuddering inside her. He retracted his teeth from her shoulder, and licked the wound until it quit bleeding.

Serena tried to move her hips away from him, only to find them still bound together. “How long are we stuck like this?”

He sighed. “At least half an hour, maybe more.”

She groaned, as little quakes of climax rippled through her body again. “I’m still coming.”

“So am I.” He sounded sleepy. He buried his face in the curve of her neck and shoulder, cupped one of her breasts in his hand and hooked a leg over her hip. Even as his cock continued to send off little explosions in her cunt, She could sense him slipping into

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sleep. Typical male. It was the last thought she had before she, too, slept.



## Chapter Six



Serena was hot so she tried to push her blanket off, but it wouldn't move. She slowly opened her eyes, feeling disoriented and sore in places she hadn't been in a very long time. Just then, a soft snore buzzed past her ear. It was at this point she realized there was a half-hard cock nestled in her very damp cunt, and a large male hand was holding her breast like it was a life preserver and they were on the Titanic. The male clinging to her so possessively sighed in his sleep. She slowly turned her head; she knew that face. Shit.

"Damien..." she breathed. He nuzzled into the curve of her shoulder with a half smile on his face. Why did he have to be so damned beautiful and why did she have to want him so much? He'd said he wanted her for his Mate, but did he? Really? She wasn't sure. Turning her head, she looked out the windows where the sky was pink tinged with the edges of sunset. If Damien woke up now, Serena knew she wouldn't get out of this room until dawn.

Even sex with Stefan, her first lover, hadn't been as good as fucking Damien. Waking up beside Stef should have been a great experience because in her limited experience he had been quite the

catch. But when she had made commitment noises, he'd confessed her father had set it up, then he'd headed for the hills...literally. When she found out that her father had practically ordered Stef to initiate Serena when she had her first heat cycle, she had been devastated. She'd never quite forgiven her father for it.

She looked back at Damien's sleeping profile. What guarantee did she have that Damien wouldn't wake up and start backpedaling about her being his Mate? She could almost imagine it...

*"I'm sorry, Serena. You were in heat and I wanted you. That's all. Don't make a big deal out of it."*

She lifted her hand and rubbed her eyes; it would be so humiliating, and so reminiscent of the past. She didn't need or want to take the chance. Damien was deeply asleep, and if she could somehow ease out from under him without waking him, she could leave. No harm, no foul.

She gingerly reached down and tried to pry his fingers off her tit. His hand felt glued on, so she eased it off her one finger at a time. When she had finally peeled his hand away, she sighed. He moved in his sleep and wrapped his arm tight around her waist, then shifted his hips and thrust his semi-erect cock deeper into her pussy. Gasping, she closed her eyes and counted to ten. Damn him. He started nibbling her neck and she looked at him, but she sensed he was still asleep.

She tried to crawl away from him, but he muttered in his sleep and pulled her closer. She wanted to scream. She wasn't used to sleeping with a male; definitely not one as possessive as Damien. He made her feel caged; she was surprised to feel protected rather than irritated by his dominance. She didn't *want* to feel protected. He'd wake up and not really want her, then she'd be left feeling like a fool. She was damned if she'd experience *that* again. All of her lovers since that miserable experience had been betas and she kicked them out of *her* bed, not the other way around.

Serena made a concerted effort to ease out from under him and finally succeeded. The hardest part was easing his cock out of her cunt. She hadn't wanted to separate; his cock felt like it belonged inside her. It was as if some vital piece of her soul had been ripped away when she'd pulled away from him, but that was crazy.

It's a cock, not a religious object. Granted, sex with Damien

was a spiritual experience, but his cock was just a cock. Gazing down at his erection, she cursed. It was so hard the head had turned a dark red that was almost purple, and it glistened with his ejaculate and her juices. She wanted to taste him; she wanted to take his cock in her mouth and savor it like the work of art it was. Sliding down to his hips, she took a deep breath through her mouth and nose. The smell of him aroused her intensely. She glanced up at him to make sure he was still asleep. He was.

Serena nipped and nibbled, making his cock jerk in response. She flicked her tongue against the underside of the glans and covered the head with her mouth, memorizing the taste of him as she sucked gently. He groaned and thrust his hips, driving himself deeper into her mouth. She froze and closed her eyes, holding him still. What in hell was she doing? Oh, now this was brilliant. She was supposed to be trying to get away from the man, but instead she was letting his cock hypnotize her.

Disgust swept over her. *Serena, you are an idiot.* She opened her mouth, letting his erection slide out as she eased away from him. Forcing her gaze away from his stunning body, she surveyed the room. She noted where the shreds of her clothes lay heaped in a pile. Except for her bra, garter belt, hose and shoes, everything was ruined. Damien had effectively destroyed them when he stripped her. There was no way she was leaving the room half dressed. Pulling her bra back over her breasts, she eased the straps onto her shoulders. She needed to get cleaned up, then she needed to get out of here *before* he woke.

She stood silently and crossed the deep carpet to his bathroom. Once inside, she pushed the door closed, locked it and then turned on the light. Wincing as her eyes adjusted to the light, she flinched at the view in the mirror. She looked like a well used prostitute after a bachelor party. Her mouth was swollen and there were bruises, scratches and bites from their intense coupling in various spots. She whimpered, because the look of her body was turning her on again.

“Fuck!” she hissed, ripping off the few clothes she had left. She looked around the bathroom and almost whistled. The place was done in dark marbles and there was a shower. Along one wall there was a double door. She opened it and found a clean change of

clothes hanging on the left—yet another power suit—and towels and wash clothes on shelves on the right. Stripping off her clothes, she grabbed a couple of towels then climbed into the shower and scrubbed herself thoroughly. As she dried off, she felt better but she was still covered in his scent, though it was his shampoo and soap smells now, instead of his come. She snatched his suit out of the closet and pulled on the shirt and jacket. Knowing her butt would never fit into his pants, she carried them with her anyway. In return, she left her own things hung up in the closet on his hanger. She smiled grimly at that. Let *him* wear the damn stockings, bra and heels home.

She turned off the bathroom light and cracked open the door. He was snoring softly so she tip-toed into the room, scooped his clothes off of the floor and crossed the room to the door. She looked back at him sleeping so peacefully. Should she wake him and see if he would disappoint her? No, why put herself through the pain of it. If he did want her though, what then?

She thought of her mother, Ginger. Her mother had left all her dreams behind when she'd met Drew Goldwolf. Ginger hadn't finished college; she'd submersed herself in being his Mate. She'd given up so much of herself, and Serena didn't want to lose herself in Damien that way. She yearned for a True Mate, but she couldn't imagine obeying anyone without question the way her mother obeyed her father's edicts.

No, this way was best. He'd forget her easily enough, even though she'd never forget him. She eased open the office door and stepped into his secretary's office, crossed that room and cracked open the door into the hall. She could hear voices, but only a few. It was after 6pm, so only the most dedicated or most trod upon employees would still be here. She only hoped that she'd be able to get into her own offices. Lea usually left at 5:30pm, and as pissed as she'd been, Serena could imagine her taking great pleasure in locking Serena out.

She slipped silently down the hall, carrying Damien's clothes. It would take him awhile to find replacements unless he shifted. She held back a sigh. Whether she got into her offices or not, she'd probably have to shift to get home. She peeked into the reception area and into the hall by the elevator. It was deserted, so she

ducked out and pressed the elevator button. Biting her lip, she prayed that when the doors opened the elevator would be empty because explaining her lack of clothing could present a problem. The elevator dinged and the doors swept open. She breathed a sigh of relief. It was empty. Now, she just had to worry about someone getting on before she got to her floor. She pushed the button and huddled into the corner, praying desperately for a quick descent.

For once, luck was with her and she made it to her floor with no stops. The hallway outside of the office was silent, but when she ducked over to the door, she found it locked. She swore. Lea would have set the alarm, so if she broke in, she'd soon have visitors. She looked around the room and saw a light under a door, then almost screamed with relief when she saw Lea coming out of her office, obviously ready to head out for the night. Serena knocked on the glass and Lea nearly jumped on the table. Typical flighty cat, Serena thought.

Lea crossed the room and let her in. "Where the hell have you been? I've been waiting!"

"Where do you think?"

"You were having sex this whole time?"

"No, after some really great sex, we both fell asleep. Of course, I wasn't going anywhere anyway, at that point." Serena shrugged as she went into her office and turned on the light. She breathed a sigh of relief. From here, she could manage.

"Why not?" Lea asked as she followed her.

"We got locked together; then the bastard fell asleep on top of me." Serena shook her head in disgust. She had to admit she hadn't slept that well in a long time. It felt right to have him locked inside of her while he cradled her in his arms. She threw his clothes into a chair with a strangled scream. She was getting all sentimental! He was a damned Alpha male who was just getting his own back after the mess with Quillen.

"Did that idiot get his stuff packed up? I don't want him coming back here."

"Quillen? Yeah." Lea laughed. "He was feeling all aggrieved because you promptly ran off to go fuck the male that he loathed."

"Ran off? Was he struck blind or something? Damien picked

me up and carried me out of here!” Serena huffed as she rounded up her purse, keys and various other necessities. She put her wallet, checkbook, cell phone, PDA, and keys in a small back pack. Pulling open her desk drawer, she drew out a necklace with a tag on it and fastened it around her neck.

“Are you going to shift to get home?”

“How else am I going to get there? I don’t have a second set of clothes here and nothing you have would fit me. Once I shift would you help me get my pack on? I hate wearing the damn thing but it convinces humans that I’m a lost dog and not really a wolf.”

“Is that why you’re wearing tags, too?”

Serena grinned at her. “You bet. The last time I had to run around in the city, I got picked up and put in the pound. I can assure you, it was *not* a happy experience.”

Lea chuckled. “I don’t have that trouble, but I do have to worry about animal control shooting me with a tranq gun. Pumas make people nervous.”

Serena pulled Damien’s shirt and jacket off and threw them in the chair. It gave her a perverse pleasure to mistreat his expensive Italian suit that way. She just *knew* it would make him cringe. He had to be one of those guys that carefully folded the jacket in half and laid it over a chair, if he didn’t immediately hang it up. Of course, he had tossed the jacket when they were having sex, but she knew he’d be upset with himself later. She wasn’t sure how she knew it, but she did.

“Why are you running away? He’s the hottest male I’ve seen in here in ages.”

Lea’s question made Serena pause. She looked at her friend. “Ever been dumped?”

Lea paused in thought. “I don’t think so. I usually do the dumping.”

“Then you probably won’t understand, but it’s better to dump before you get dumped. At least that’s my experience.”

“He didn’t sound like he had any intention of dumping you. He sounded like a male declaring ownership of a Mate.” Serena raised her brow questioningly; Lea frowned. “Male cats are just as dominant as you wolves. My cousin found his Mate and he

sounded all macho like that.”

“Maybe. If so, then that has its own perils. My mother is the Mate of an Alpha. I’ve never heard her make a decision in all my life. Dad makes pronouncements and Mom nods. I can’t imagine turning into a female who says ‘Yes, dear’ all the time.”

“Don’t think much of your mom, do you?”

Serena paused at the accusation. “I love her, and I respect her. She seems happy with her life, but I don’t want to be her. The idea of doing whatever Damien says for the rest of my life is against my nature. I’ve never heard my parents have an argument. I’ve heard other couples have arguments, but not them. They have staring contests, and then she always looks away first.” Serena shuddered.

“You’re scared.”

Serena shrugged. “Maybe. But I don’t want to lose myself to make him happy. I couldn’t live like that, I’d be miserable.” She sighed, then closed her eyes and remembered the look on his face when she said he could plant his pup in her belly. He’d been so happy; she started to feel guilty. Damn it. He hadn’t meant it and there was no guarantee she was already pregnant. Still, she was glad shifting didn’t cause problems, just in case she was. “I’m going to shift now. Can you help me with the pack once I’m in wolf form?”

“Sure.” Lea leaned on the desk and waited.

Serena formed the image of herself as a wolf in her mind, then superimposed her human image over it. She could feel the change move through her body; lengthening in some spots, compacting in others. She knew that anyone watching only saw a sort of shimmer around her as she shifted, but she knew what was happening. She could almost feel the fur growing. She paid close attention to her womb, just in case, but she didn’t notice any changes in her body. It might be too soon. If he did get her pregnant, she wouldn’t be able to shift in the last three months of her pregnancy. She’d have to assume one form and stick to it. She knew one female who had chosen to remain wolf because she thought the birthing would be easier. It was, but the female was subtly altered after that. It just didn’t work well to remain in animal form for too long a stretch of time.

Serena surveyed her form to make sure all was well, then cocked her canine head at Lea and barked. Lea shrugged, grabbed the pack and helped her into it. Then she fastened it so it wouldn't fall off.

"Well, good luck making it home. Will you be going up to see your folks?"

Serena thought a moment and nodded her head.

"Okay. I'll see you Monday. Have a good weekend. Maybe your mom can explain how to handle being Mated to an Alpha."

Serena shook her head, licked Lea's hand affectionately and left. It would take her a while to run home, because she'd have to avoid people as much as possible. She went home this way from time to time, but it wasn't her preferred method for getting around in Denver. She sighed as she ran. Maybe her mother *could* explain how to deal with an Alpha male, just in case she ever needed the information.



## Chapter Seven



The first thing he thought as he slowly surfaced from sleep was that something was missing—something vital. Damien sighed and his eyes gradually opened. His office was dark and he was alone. That was wrong. He shouldn't be alone. Despite the darkness, his night vision easily compensated. He rolled onto his back and sat up. The clock on the wall said 8 p. m.

He looked down, noting that he was quite nude. As he tried to orient himself, and as the scent of his Mate hit him, he realized what was wrong. He looked around the room. There was no light on in the bathroom that connected to his office. Feeling the floor beside him, he recognized that it was absent of her body heat. She'd been gone for quite some time, and the Bitch hadn't bothered to wake him up. In fact, she'd probably gone out of her way *not* to wake him. He swore.

Getting to his feet, he looked around for his clothes. They weren't here. *Damn Serena to hell.* He went into his bathroom where he kept a spare suit and found that missing, too. In its place her bra, garter belt and stockings were hung, with her heels sitting on the floor beneath. He slammed his fist into the door. When he

got his hands on her . . . yada, yada, yada. He smiled, then started to laugh. She really was something. How completely she'd turned the tables on him! Damn, but he was a lucky wolf.

Chase or Kenyon might still be here, so he tried a joint call to their offices. "Hey, are either of you guys still in the building?"

"Yeah, we're here. What's up?" Chase responded via the intercom.

"Do you guys have any spare clothes?"

"Spare clothes?"

Damien sighed as he heard the barely suppressed laughter in Chase's voice. They were *never* going to let him live this one down. "Yes, clothes. You know those fabric things that humans require we wear in public?"

"Yeah, I do." Damien heard Kenyon respond in the background. At least he and Kenyon were about the same size. Chase was a head taller than both of them, and he and Kenyon both stood 6'2". Chase also outweighed them by 50 pounds, too. He looked like he'd be more at home in a wrestling ring than a court of law.

Damien was leaning against his desk with the light on, when his partners opened the door bearing clothing.

"Gah..." Kenyon paused on the threshold and shook his head. "Jeez. There's enough musk in here to perfume half of France!"

"Birds! Too fastidious for my taste. Smells like hot sex in here. *Very* hot sex. I like it." Chase took a deep breath to fill his rather expansive chest with the smell of Damien's mating with Serena. Damien scowled at him. "That's one hot Bitch you found for yourself, my friend. Was the sex as tasty as it smells?" He eyed Damien from head to foot with an insolent grin.

"It was better. Will you please quite ogling me like an adolescent and hand me some clothes? She ran off and I need to track her."

"As strongly as she's scented, that should present few problems." Kenyon wrinkled his nose and handed over a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. Damien looked at the clothes and gave a long suffering sigh. Kenyon wouldn't know fashion if it hit him in the face. If he could get away with jeans and flannel shirts in court, that's what he'd wear.

"I need shoes and socks, too." Damien told him while he

pulled on the clothes he'd been given. It would have been nice if Kenyon had thought of underwear, but that didn't appear to be a fashion accessory for the Hawk. Damien carefully eased the steel trap around his cock as he zipped the fly and adjusted himself until he was comfortable. Or at least, as comfortable as he was going to be in Kenyon's clothes.

"You could have shifted, it would have been faster," Kenyon drawled.

Damien glared at the Hawk. "Right, and have some idiot call the cops because they saw a feral dog? Now *that* would be smart. It would be a bit easier for a hawk to shift and get out of here with none the wiser, but Chase and I would create hysteria in the streets." Damien shook his head.

"Oh...right. You poor, pathetic landlubbers." Kenyon shrugged with little concern, hiding his smile.

"Better a landlubber than an airhead." Chase elbowed Kenyon nearly knocking him over. The bear rarely pulled a punch with another male, regardless of species.

"Gentlemen, while I enjoy the Stooges as much as the next man, your entertainment value is rapidly deteriorating."

Kenyon rolled his ice blue eyes at the Bear and they turned their gazes back to Damien.

"So how are you going to find her?" Chase asked him.

Damien opened his mouth to respond, and found he had nothing to say. He could probably scent her for a while, but he was willing to bet that she'd made a run for it. He might be able to track her back to her office, possibly even to her home, but he was sure she wouldn't stay there.

"Damn, I'm not sure."

Chase sighed at his stupidity. "She obviously marked you." He nodded at the scabbed over wound on Damien's shoulder. "By the way, put on a shirt, will you? Females pant for you but the chest really doesn't do anything for me. I've seen it before."

Damien grabbed the sweatshirt and pulled it on. He looked at the front. It was a picture of Pikes Peak and the caption read, "Rocky Mountain High." He sighed. He had to go home and get changed before the bad taste rubbed off.

"So what's your point, Chase?"

“Knowing you, and I do, you marked her, too. Right?”

Damien nodded.

“She’s your True Mate?”

“True Mate? Whoa...” Kenyon whistled.

“Yes, she is. Cut to the chase...Chase.”

“Just for that, I’ll let you figure it out.”

“Just spit it out, Bear!”

“If you marked each other and you’re True Mates, you’re going to start sensing each other. Feel each others emotions . . . thoughts. If you focus, you’ll know exactly where your Bitch is. If you’re *very* lucky, she won’t realize what’s happening and you’ll get to her before she starts focusing on you.”

Damien smiled, then he grinned, then started to laugh. She was *so* screwed and she didn’t even know it! He was going to find her and when he did, he was going to make sure she never left him again!

“How do I do this?”

Chase shrugged at his question. “I haven’t found my True Mate, either, you know, but I know my parents never had to talk about anything. They would just stare at each other, then look at us cubs, and there’d be hell to pay.”

Damien tried to reach out for her and picked up a flash of an image. She was grabbing clothes out of drawers and throwing things on a bed. He could see that she was packing an overnight bag. She seemed a little frantic, almost scared. He frowned as the image slipped away. She shouldn’t be scared of him. Damn it, he didn’t want that!!!

“Unpleasant thoughts?” Kenyon’s deep mellow voice brought him back to reality.

“Shit. She seemed scared. I don’t want my Mate scared of me!” Damien scowled.

“It must have been some *seriously* hot sex. I’ve known females that can’t deal with the aftermath of hot sex. They get all freaked out and run off,” Chase assured him.

Damien cocked his head and thought about Chase’s observation. Could it be the intensity of their mating she was frightened of, or was it him? He focused on Serena again. She seemed to be done packing and was staring around the bedroom lost in thought.

He tried to focus on what she was feeling. Confusion, he could definitely feel that. Desire, she was blushing and he knew she was thinking about him. He waited to see if she would realize he was connected with her. She didn't. She licked her lips, but then shook her head. Again he felt a wash of fear from her.

Fuck! Maybe it *was* the sex that was freaking her out. Yet, it didn't feel like it was sex that scared her. It seemed like there was something significant about sex with *him* that was the issue, but he'd only caught the edge of it. He reached for her again. She grabbed a purse and went through the front door. She locked it and headed for her car. He could feel a driving need in her to go home and talk to her mother. Somehow, her mother could explain everything.

He blinked as he felt himself shoved from her thoughts. He reached again but found she'd blocked him. Had she realized? No, there hadn't been anything like that in her thoughts. He realized that she had focused on driving and that had pushed him away from her. All he had to do was give her some time to get out of the city, and he could find her again. In the meantime, he could probably look up the Goldwolf family on his computer and find out where they lived and follow her home.

"I know that look. He's got something." Kenyon nudged Chase.

"She's going home to her mother," Damien told them absently as he sat down at his desk and started his computer. He drummed his fingers as he waited for it to load.

"She has sex with you and then goes home to her mother?" Chase hooted with laughter. Damien shot him a death look, but Chase only said, "Don't threaten me, boyo. You'd need your whole pack to take me out."

Damien growled, and shook his head in disgust. He focused on the computer and pulled up the internet to start his search for an address. He kept running into blind alleys. He found a link, then it would be nothing or it would be broken. He wished Rosalie was here to do this searching, she was much better at this kind of shit. She always told him that she was underpaid and underappreciated, but cousins are *supposed* to say that. Apparently, she was correct. Just when he was ready to throw the computer across the room, he

got a hit. He found an address out in the middle of nowhere for a Dr. Quinn Goldwolf. When he found a listing at the same address for a slew of other Goldwolfs, including Andrew and Ginger, he knew he'd found her lair. He just knew at gut level that Andrew and Ginger were Serena's parents.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. She had relaxed and her mind let him find his way back. He winced. She was singing along to John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High". She had to be a country music fan, didn't she? Life was not kind.

"What's wrong?" the Hawk asked.

He looked at Kenyon, looked down at the design on the shirt, and sighed. "You wouldn't understand."

# Chapter Eight



Serena pulled up to the gates of her Clan's ranch with a sigh of relief. She'd gotten here before he caught her. She didn't know why she thought he was following her, but somehow she knew he was. She'd started to feel like that while she was packing to head home. It was like she'd gotten this emotional flash that she could run but she couldn't hide. It scared her. She didn't want to deal with him right now.

She sighed and drove into the compound. It was 9 p.m. and she was as safe as she was going to be. If Damien showed up, her father would hand her over without a murmur, let alone a bark. All Damien would have to say was he was her Wolf and she was his Bitch. It would be more than enough for her father. Still, she had needed to come home and see her mother. She wasn't sure why, except that her parents were True Mates and maybe her mother could help her get used to the idea of submitting to a male, if Damien really was her Mate. She still wasn't sure though.

Through the years, she'd watched her mother always do whatever her father had decreed, and it bugged Serena. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life living by Damien's commands.

How could her mother stand it? Serena needed to know the answer to that question if she had any hope of surviving this relationship as an independent female. What terrified her the most was that she wouldn't have a choice. She'd just bow to his orders and lose herself in him and never be Serena again. The thought alone made her shudder.

She'd rather be dead.

She followed the winding road onto Clan lands with a sense of homecoming. Heading west, she passed various small homes housing the Hawk and Wolf families that lived on the lands. She waved when she saw those she knew. She reached her parent's place, a large old Victorian, in the center of what passed for a town on the ranch. Her parents had hoped to fill it with pups, but there'd been just her. She knew her father regretted not having a son, despite designating her cousin, Quinn, as his heir.

She parked and went up to the house. As she opened the door, voices floated out to her from the back of the house where the kitchen was located. Quillen's whine rose up from the others and she strode through to the kitchen just in time to hear him blaming her for the whole mess.

"Serena fired me for *no* reason! It isn't fair! I'm a good worker and I was doing a really good job this time, Quinn. Really! It's all *her* fault that Wolf was complaining."

"My fault? You lying little *worm*!" she shrieked and she crossed the room to stand over her cousin.

"What's going on, Serena?" Quinn looked tired as he brushed lank dark gold hair off his forehead with a sigh.

Serena frowned because he looked like hell. There were circles under his eyes and he seemed nervous. It was so unlike her cousin that she stopped wanting to kill Quillen. She wanted to go over and hug Quinn, but paused because she knew he wouldn't want her to draw attention to him. "Your whiny little brother set one of our clients up with...someone completely inappropriate. So, I fired him."

"Serena, you gave him a chance before. Can't you try again?" her mother asked from the kitchen sink where she was calmly washing dishes.

Serena bit her lip to keep from screeching. She was still too



tense for this dramatic crap. “No, Mother, I can *not* give him another try.” She turned to her young cousin. “You brought this on yourself with your ill-timed and idiotic sense of humor.”

“Just because some bitch was inappropriate, doesn’t mean that Quillen should be fired,” Quinn countered as he leaned against the wall behind Serena’s father.

Serena took a deep breath. She hadn’t wanted to go there because she knew how it upset Quinn, but it would seem she had no choice. “Inappropriate doesn’t begin to cover it. Does it Quillen?”

“He’s a prick. He deserved it. Just because he screwed you blind today doesn’t mean anything!” Quillen smirked at her.

She was going to slap that smirk off his face. “I don’t care if he is the most arrogant bastard on the planet, and he is. That is *no* excuse for setting him up to go out with Joyce Blackwolf.”

Quinn stiffened as if shot. The look he shot his younger brother made Quillen cringe and look for cover. “He did what?”

Serena winced. Quinn hadn’t shouted, he’d gone quiet. *That* was a very bad thing. If Quinn shouted and blustered, he could be managed. When he went quiet, there would be hell to pay. Thank God it wasn’t her that would be paying it.

“He set Damien Blackwolf up with Joyce Blackwolf. They aren’t from the same family Clan so he had *no* idea what he was getting into. You might have heard of Damien Blackwolf. He’s the Blackwolf from Blackwolf, Goldbear and Whitehawk.”

“The criminal lawyers?” Quinn hissed.

Serena nodded.

“You bloody, frigging *idiot!*” He turned on his younger brother. “Why? Because he’s a prick? So what? You’ll be lucky if the bastard doesn’t sue you or get the DA to charge you with attempted murder with a deadly weapon.”

Quillen looked rather pathetic and Serena felt sorry for him. “It’s not my fault, Quinn. Really.”

“What did I do wrong? I tried to raise you right after mom and dad died. What more could I have done?” He dropped his head into his hands and pulled on his hair. It was typical that he would accept responsibility for Quillen, but this behavior wasn’t at all like him.

Serena frowned in irritation. "Let him take the consequences of his own actions, Quinn. It's time for Quillen to fix his own mess. He has been irresponsible for far too long." She turned to Quillen. "I gave you a chance when everyone else had given up and you do this. It's time for you to go out into the world and try to survive on your own. Go to college. *Do* something. You've been a pup long enough," Serena told him.

He frowned at her. "You aren't my pack leader. I don't have to do what you say."

"She's my daughter, pup. Give her respect!" Drew barked. "She's also right. I suggest you get your things together and start the application process to college. If you are accepted, I will contact a Goldwolf pack to provide you some assistance; but assistance only. You will *not* sponge off them."

Quillen gasped and ran from the room. She tended to forget he was so young. He was twelve years younger than Quinn and it definitely showed. She sighed.

Quinn did, too. "I'd better go calm him down." Her cousin shook his head and went in search of his errant younger brother.

Serena looked at her parents. They were gazing at one another. Her father raised his eyebrow and shrugged. He stood up from the table and came over and gave her a hug. "I have a feeling you need to talk to your mother. I'll leave you to it. Your bed is where you left it. Stay here tonight." He kissed her cheek and left the room.

"He is very good at declarations, isn't he?" Serena commented as she picked up dirty dishes from the table and brought them to the sink.

"It's one of his many talents, yes," her mother responded.

Serena studied her. Ginger Redwolf had come to Denver to go to college and met Drew Goldwolf. She dropped out when she got pregnant within two months of their meeting. She'd never gotten her degree and had settled down in apparent happiness. Ginger was still a lovely woman with red gold hair and amber eyes. She didn't seem submissive, and yet she always seemed to do what her husband said. Serena just didn't get it.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Serena finally burst out, as she set the dishes on the counter.

"What, precisely?" Ginger asked her daughter as she took the

plates and began washing them.

Agitated, Serena paced the room. "Always doing what he tells you to do! I can't live like that. I just can't."

"Ah." Ginger nodded, and waited for Serena to continue.

"I don't want to be the submissive little Mrs. I'm not June Cleaver. I'm not going to say 'Yes, Ward.' I just can't *do* that!"

"Is that what you think I do, Serena?"

Serena looked at her mother in dismay. "I'm sorry. No, I didn't mean it. I just..." She shook her head. She'd put her foot in it and didn't know how to get rid of the muck she tramped in. Her mother didn't look angry or hurt or anything else, but then Serena had always had trouble reading her mother's moods.

Ginger put down the wash cloth and pointed to the table. "I think we need to sit down."

Serena settled herself at the table and her mother sat beside her. Ginger poured herself some coffee. Serena reached for the pot.

"I think you would do better with some water, or milk dear," she told her daughter as she took a sip of coffee.

A look of horror crossed her face. "Milk?" Was the woman out of her mind? That sounded nauseating.

"Water, then."

Serena poured herself a glass of water and added ice. She sat down again and took a gulp. Much better. "Why do you always obey him?"

"I don't."

"You do, too. I've never heard you argue and he always makes his decrees with which you *always* agree."

Ginger laughed. "No, dear. You've never *heard* us argue. It's one of the advantages of being True Mates. He left the room just now because I told him to."

Serena blinked in disbelief. "You what?"

"I knew you wanted to talk to me and he didn't need to be here. I told him to leave."

"But you didn't say anything."

"You didn't *hear* me say anything, but I most assuredly said something to him." Ginger shook her head. "I have been sadly remiss as a mother. I thought you had been taught by the pack

instructors about what it means to have a Mate.”

“Yes, you choose to be together and have pups together.”

“I don’t mean Mates. I mean True Mates. When you meet your True Mate you recognize each other’s scent. When you Mate, you are compelled to mark each other. It’s almost a ritual and it is instinctual. After you mark each other, you gradually connect mentally and emotionally. You can sense each other’s feelings. You can feel how near you are to one another. After awhile, you hear each other’s thoughts. Your father and I have been together quite some time. We have conversations, debates, and even arguments without saying a single word.” Ginger took another sip of her coffee while she watched Serena process the information she’d just heard.

“You mean you don’t always obey him?” Serena was incredulous. This was a revelation to her. All her life, her father made his proclamations with her mother standing silently at his side.

“Good heavens, no. Sometimes he obeys me.” Ginger grinned and winked.

“I don’t have to become a Stepford Mate?” Serena asked.

“I wouldn’t *want* a Stepford Mate, Serena.”

Serena jumped and turned to where Damien stood in the doorway. She should have known he was there. She could smell him, and her mother was right, she recognized the scent. It was as if she’d always known it. She turned back to her mother. “Why didn’t you ever say anything, then? Why was it always him?”

“My dear, your father is the leader of this pack. His word is law out there. In here, we are partners. Out there we must speak with one voice...his. Were you in line to lead this pack, Damien would be standing at your back as your Lieutenant and yours would be the voice that spoke. However, since you have never had any interest in being pack leader, your father chose Quinn as his heir.”

“I thought it was because he wouldn’t allow a female to lead the pack.”

The kitchen door was pushed open and Damien was shoved bodily out of the way. Drew entered. “My grandmother was pack leader here. It’s been done before. You just never wanted it. It’s a

damn headache.” He turned and looked at his wife. “Where is the rolodex? Quillen is crying pathetically and I want his ass out of here. Quinn is blaming himself, as usual, and I want to shake him. There are times I really hate this job.” He turned and met Damien’s dark gaze. He studied him from head to foot and snorted. “Damn, you’re one pretty boy. I hope you hunt as well as you look.”

“Dad!” Serena was scandalized. How dare he insult her Mate!

*‘Let me handle this, Serena.’* Serena heard in her head. She blinked and looked at Damien. He’d talked to her.

She frowned in concentration. If he could do this, so could she. *‘He’s my father.’*

*‘Yes, and he is challenging me as such. Let me speak for myself.’* She frowned but gave a slight nod. He smiled. “I caught your daughter, didn’t I?”

“Tracking isn’t catching,” Drew countered. Ginger handed him the rolodex from the desk in the corner of the kitchen and he went through it before finally pulling out a card.

Damien growled. “She belongs to me.”

“Mounting a Bitch doesn’t grant ownership, son. I suggest you learn that now, or you will be due for a life of frustration.” He gave Ginger a wink and kissed her cheek.

Serena could see Damien tense and his face went still. Oh dear, this wasn’t going well at all. “Dad, he’s my Mate.” The tension seemed to flow out of Damien at her statement.

Drew turned his olive gaze to his daughter. “He’d better be. He planted a pup in your belly.”

“How do you...”

“You reek of him, honey. Your mother can sense the pup, she’s a midwife. Quinn could smell it, too. He’s a doctor, after all. They both told me about the little one.” His olive gaze met Damien’s dark eyes. “You’d better take care of them both or there will be hell to pay.” He crossed to Serena and kissed her forehead. “He can share the bedroom upstairs, but we don’t have sound proofing in here so do your mom and me a favor. Be quiet!” He turned and left the room to go deal with Quillen.

Serena could see Damien swallow. Shit, he’d been nervous. She reached out mentally and felt his intense relief, both that he’d

found her and that her father had accepted him. She blinked as she looked at him.

Ginger looked from one to the other and smiled. "Much better. I'm going to go find Quinn. There is something wrong he won't discuss and it's time to find out what it is." She kissed her daughter and stopped in front of Damien. "Treat my girl well, or I will gut you. I am *far* more dangerous than my Mate is." Rolling up onto her toes, she kissed Damien's cheek before leaving the room.

"Why did you run out on me, Serena?" His quiet voice betrayed his hurt. She looked down at her hands.

"I was confused. I thought..."

"You thought you'd have to give up your identity to be with me?"

She nodded and looked back up as he crossed the room.

He knelt in front of her and set his hands on her knees. "I wouldn't want you to be any different than you are. You challenge me and you excite me. Why would I want you to turn into some damn china doll? Your strength is what I want in a Mate."

"Also, I wasn't sure you'd want me as a mate."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"It could have just been that you wanted me when I was in heat. It's happened before."

Damien snarled, "Who hurt you? I'll gut him."

"That won't be necessary. I'm over it."

"You can't be too over it if you ran away from me because of it. Why would you think I wouldn't want you?"

"What about Kara?"

"That cringing little omega?" The dismay in his voice told her all she needed to know.

"You don't want a doll size female? Or a slim, athletic girl like Lea?"

He laughed, until he realized she was serious. "Get this perfectly clear. You are incredibly hot, Serena. If your father hadn't told us to be quiet, I'd fuck you right here and now."

She met his eyes and saw truth reflected there. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she said coyly, "I see you found a suit to wear."

"I had to go home to get one."

“Did you have to shift?”

“No, Kenyon had spare clothes, but you owe me big time for that. Kenyon’s idea of fashion is a bizarre combination of western and hippy.” Damien shuddered.

Serena laughed at the extravagant gesture. “Poor baby.”

“Where the hell are my suits?”

“Balled up in a chair in my office.” Serena giggled when he winced.

“Those suits are Italian, Serena!”

“They’re just fabric.”

“Oh, god. Why me?” he wailed theatrically.

“Life is hard,” Serena taunted him.

“Damn right.” He took her hand and set it on his very hard crotch. “Now, I’m going to take you to bed and fuck you until you can’t walk. You’re going to beg for mercy and eventually I may give it to you. Are we agreed?”

“Yes, we’re agreed.” *Oh how she loved this man.*

“And I love you, too, sweetheart, but I’m still going to make you beg.” He kissed her hard, stood and threw her over his shoulder.

She shrieked as he went through the kitchen door and headed for the bedroom upstairs. Serena waved at her mother with a grin on her face.

Ginger winked as Damien climbed up the stairs to take Serena to bed.

## *About the Author*

Francesca Hawley is a 40-something single woman who works as a librarian in central Iowa. In her spare time she is active in the Society for Creative Anachronism. She has been writing romances since she was in her teens, when she would spend her lunch hours with a granola bar, a diet Pepsi, and her pen. Her love of reading started with Regency romances and Harlequin contemporaries and has expanded as the romance genre has expanded. When she first began to write, Francesca tried to copy her favorites. Later she chose to weave new tales into the stories she loved. She continues to embroider and knit new narratives for the amusement of herself, her friends and her readers.





