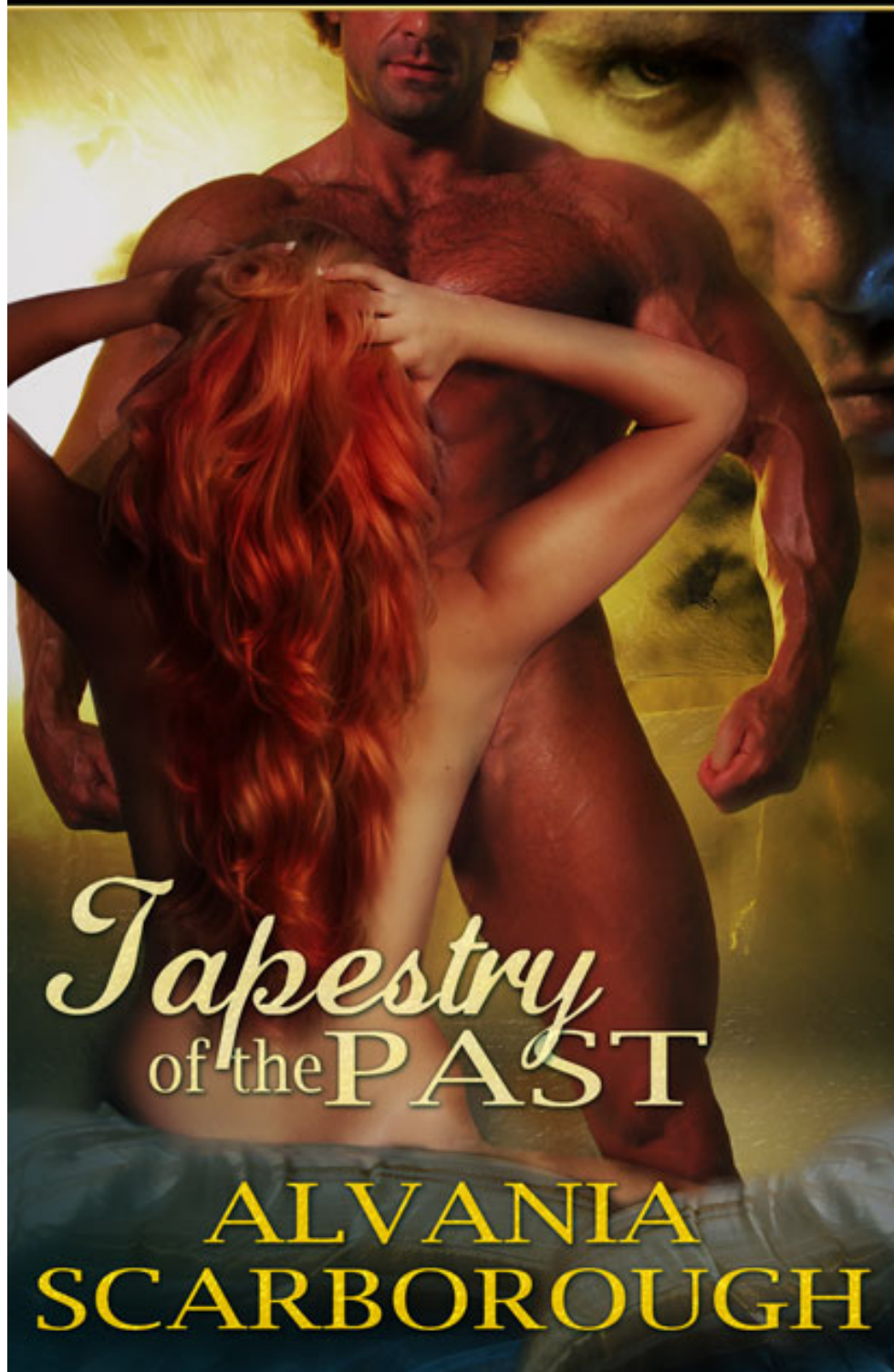


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Tapestry of the Past

ISBN 9781419918025

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Tapestry of the Past Copyright © 2008 Alvania Scarborough

Edited by Helen Woodall

Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication September 2008

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

# ***TAPESTRY OF THE PAST***

**Alvania Scarborough**

### *Dedication*

For efforts above and beyond the call of duty, I would like to thank Bethany Cagle and Tiffany Winget. You ladies rock!

Special thanks to my Dad for pounding into my head “that dreading is worse than doing”.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Carter’s Little Liver Pills: Carter Products, Inc.

Dick Dastardly: Hanna-Barbera and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

Ford: Ford Motor Company

Rambo: StudioCanal Image S.A.

Smith & Wesson: Smith & Wesson Corp.

Suburban: General Motors Corporation

Superman: DC Comics

Volkswagen Beetle: Volkswagen Aktiengesellschaft

## Prologue

He was strapped face down on the table.

His sense of smell and hearing were acutely sensitive. The muffled shuffle of leather against the bare wood floor scraped across raw nerves, while the sound of his own breathing became an unrelenting echo that filled the small room. He smelled the dank rot of jungle, smelled his own blood as it ran, warm and wet, from his wrists and ankles. The scarred wooden table beneath him had its own odor, one permeated with old sweat and infused with anguish.

Inside him, rage battled with fear.

He welcomed the rage. Clung to it and stoked it until it became so hot it burned his mind and scalded his gut. Rage was the one weapon they couldn't take from him and it was all that kept him alive and sane in Hell.

The door closed gently and he forced his eyes open. Ignoring the rush of nausea the effort caused, he lifted his head and squinted from between swollen lids. The soft glint of gold winked at the edge of his vision.

Bitter gall flooded his mouth and the muscles in his back tightened. In the days since his capture he'd learned to cringe from the flash of that ring. The identity of the wearer was a mystery – the man was careful to hover outside the bright circle of light – but five days ago he had caught a glimpse of the ring. He almost wished he hadn't. The design, a dragon swallowing a tiger, haunted him.

The irony of the hunter becoming the hunted hadn't escaped him. He tugged his wrists. He was now the prey. The knowledge was hard to swallow. Trained to be the best in the world, he'd ended up as nothing more than a victim.

That hint of gold flashed and winked as the man gestured just inside the circle of light.

Cold, surgical steel rested for a moment on his back before it moved in slow, precise patterns.

And then pain.

Icy hot.

Intense.

He closed his teeth on the inside of his cheek until salty, coppery blood flooded his mouth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel Steele jerked awake, the taste of blood on his tongue. He thrust the covers off and rose quickly. Shoving one of the French doors open, he stepped onto the balcony.

He gripped the rail with both hands and let the slight breeze, river-cool, dry the sweat from his body. Occasional shudders rippled through him. Dropping his head forward, he drew the moist air deep into his lungs.

“Shit.”

Cold sweat popped out on his forehead as he fought the recollections, the nightmares he had spent nearly twenty years creating. Twenty years spent in the humid, festering jungles of the world, amid blood, death and destruction. Sometimes he wondered if the memories would drive him insane.

Or was he already insane and just didn’t realize it?

Cynicism twisted his lips. His superiors certainly hadn’t given a damn about his sanity. Not as long as he got the job done discreetly and efficiently.

And he’d been very efficient.

His hands clenched on the railing until the aged cedar threatened to crack. The faint plop of a frog jumping into the water from the river bank drew him from the past.

Gabriel drew a deep breath and let the tension seep from his body.

That life was no longer his. He now operated a commercial garden nursery.

Gabriel acknowledged the irony of his choice—creating life instead of destroying it—but gardening possessed a certain...serenity.

He stared out into the night. A faint sheen highlighted the river, turning its shallow waters into a dark meandering snake. Beneath his feet, the wooden balcony creaked and popped as the heat of the day dissipated.

A breath shuddered from his soul.

Serenity was a shadow and, try as he might, he couldn’t capture it.

Combing his fingers through his hair, he dropped into a nearby chair. The rattan creaked under his weight. He noted and separated the sounds of night, cataloguing them as safe.

The echo of a bobwhite sounding in his ears, Gabriel realized what he was doing.

A bitter smile curved his mouth.

Even here, traces of his former life wouldn’t let him be. As naturally as most people breathed, he checked his surroundings for hidden dangers.

Some habits, it seemed, were impossible to break.

## Chapter One

It always began with a faceless body.

A soul-deep shiver worked its way from the pit of Kalesia Brannigan's stomach until she shook with the force of it. She wanted to turn away, to run and hide but couldn't. Slowly, she walked toward the woman's body on the ground.

Wisps of early morning fog swirled about her legs, almost as if it were trying to hold her back. She swallowed and forced herself to take those last steps that would bring her to the woman.

*No! Don't look!*

At the last moment she averted her gaze from the still face and stared instead at the neat round hole that marred the amber silk of the woman's blouse, just beneath the left breast.

Pain exploded in her chest. A choking, enveloping agony that ripped the very air from her lungs. Gritty soil ground into her knees as she hit the earth, gasping.

Dear God. She hated the fact she always felt the victim's last moments. Her knees sagged and she knelt beside the body, unable to tear her gaze from the bullet wound. Such a small, insignificant thing to have effected so much damage. She wrapped her arms about herself and rocked.

She didn't want to know anymore.

*Coward! Look at her face. See the fear she went through before he ended her life without mercy.*

*No!*

Kalesia fought against the insidious prodding, strangely terrified of gazing at the waxen features. She turned her attention to the surrounding area.

Less than thirty feet straight ahead, brown grass and brittle brush gave way to slick, gray mud as the land sloped down toward a weed-clogged pond. The bare hyacinths and cattails in the shallows gave it a stark and forlorn air. Kalesia gained an impression of tracks at the edge of the pond but in the misty light she couldn't quite make out whether they were human.

A prickle of unease sliced through the benign grayness of early morning, sending a cold sweat to her upper lip. The pond, the stretch of woods with huge oaks hundreds of years old, the lightning-blasted pine were all familiar.

A chill hit Kalesia.

Too familiar. Dread and an unwilling fascination made it hard to breathe as her gaze slid from the denuded scrub oaks to the lifeless face of the woman.

"No!"

Gasping for air, Kalesia clawed her way to the surface of wakefulness. Sitting, head bowed against her knees, she drew in deep, ragged breaths.

"Dear God, no." Icy cold chills washed over her in waves despite the warm, humid night. She pulled the covers up until they were under her chin but couldn't chase the cold away. The familiar items in her bedroom took on ominous shapes. She fumbled for the switch to the bedside lamp, pushing damp strands of hair off her face.

She pressed the heels of her hands to her burning eyes and battled for control of her trembling limbs. "A nightmare. It was only a nightmare. Everyone has nightmares." The sound of her voice echoed in the air, startling her. She had to get out of the room, away from the shadows that seemed to lurk, to mock her.

She snatched a thick, terry robe from the foot of the bed and made her way down the darkened stairs to her kitchen. The light over the stove was on, offering a warm circle of safety. Locating the copper kettle, she filled it, taking comfort in the everyday task. In the distance, the faint hum of traffic brought a welcomed normalcy.

"Normalcy". She pondered the concept as she poured water over the bag of Darjeeling tea. Few people would welcome a nightmare as she would, she thought with sudden fierceness. She wouldn't have to fear a nightmare, could shrug it off as an attack of indigestion or blame a scary movie.

Like a normal person.

She opened a jar of honey and drizzled some into the scalding tea. The clink of the spoon against the stoneware mug was overloud in the silence of the old-fashioned kitchen. She gripped the edge of the cool granite counter and closed her eyes. One deep breath and then another. Slowly, she opened her eyes and she focused on her favorite room in the house, hoping it would work its usual magic.

She loved her kitchen. It had a down-home country feel that never failed to soothe. The soft yellows and muted rose and green made her mother wince every time she came to visit but Kalesia didn't care. Her mother needed to accept the fact she'd raised a daughter with simple tastes.

A violent tremor ripped through Kalesia, slicing through her attempt to put off dealing with the truth. Because the truth was, she wasn't a normal person and what invaded her sleep had not been a nightmare. She'd seen another murder. This time, though, was different. This time her own face had stared back.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You want to report what?"

"You heard me," Kalesia glanced at the name plaque on the desk, "Major Harley." Harley was a man in his mid-to-late fifties, tall and with just a hint of a slight paunch. His brown hair, cut military short, had distinguished gray streaks feathering the



temples. He appeared a no-nonsense sort of man with a direct gaze but now he stared over her shoulder. His lashes lowered for a long moment.

Probably asking a higher power for patience, Kalesia thought, feeling a tug of amused sympathy despite the fear knotting her stomach.

Major Tom Harley of the Marion County, Florida, Detective Bureau, cleared his throat and fiddled with the pile of papers on his desk. He looked up and pinned her with shrewd, brown eyes. "Let me get this straight. You want to report a murder?" One finger pushed aviator-style glasses up an uncompromising nose broken sometime in the past. He seemed oblivious when they promptly slid back down.

Kalesia nodded. "That's right. Mine." The knot twisted at the blatant disbelief on his face. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Look, I'm going to be honest with you. I'm having a hard time buying your story. You don't look like a crazy," he waved his hand at her neat business suit, "but I don't get many people in here saying that they've seen their own deaths. At least, not many who are not on meds."

She'd chosen the cheerful yellow skirt and white jacket and pulled her hair into a neat twist for precisely that reason, to lend credibility. Might as well have saved herself the trouble. Some things never changed, she admitted with a sense of hopeless resignation.

"I wonder if you'll believe me when I'm dead." Too bad she wouldn't be around to see the major's reaction. She'd love to see the look of remorse on his face. The bitter taste of defeat choking her, Kalesia reached for her purse. "I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"I'm not trying to make light of your situation, Ms. Brannigan but this office can't act without evidence. As of this moment there have been no threats, no unexplained accidents, no lurking strangers. All you have is what you saw in a dream. I'm sorry, it just isn't enough."

Kalesia straightened in the narrow wooden chair. He actually sounded as though he meant it. "It's all I have. It's all I ever have."

His chair creaked as he shifted. "But I can't act on what you've given me. Even if I were inclined to believe you, I can't tie up the department's resources on the basis of a dream. I really wish I could help but I can't."

A lump formed in her throat. So that was that. Kalesia clutched her shoulder bag and rose. She hesitated and then offered her hand. "Thank you."

"For what?" He stood, his hand engulfing hers, the grip firm and somehow reassuring. Much like the man, himself. It really was too bad he didn't believe her.

"For treating me as a human being and not like a deranged freak or a refugee from a cult. You'd be surprised at how many people don't bother." Aware she was clinging to his hand, she forced herself to let go.

Unable to meet his eyes, to see the pity in them, she smoothed a wrinkle out of the pencil slim skirt. Normally, you couldn't get her near a place like this. She hated the way they looked at her as if she needed professional help but this time Kalesia found herself lingering. *Say goodbye and leave. You can't hide here forever.* Taking a deep breath, she turned to leave.

"Ms. Brannigan?"

Kalesia turned. "Yes?"

"You really think someone is going to kill you, don't you?"

"I know someone is."

"I have a friend." He spoke as if weighing every word. "We used to work together. He's retired now and has started his own business but he might be willing to assist you."

"You say he's retired? Are you sure he's..." She paused delicately, then started over. "Are you sure he won't mind? It could get dangerous." Desperate as she was for help, involving a man in the twilight of his years made her uncomfortable.

Amusement flashed across Harley's face and settled in his eyes. "I think it's just what he needs. If he decides to help, that is." He became serious. "Look, I can't promise anything. He might well refuse to listen. You can never tell with Gabe." He rummaged in the middle drawer of his desk and finally produced a business card. Harley scribbled on the back then passed it to her. "Here are the directions to his place."

Glancing at the card he'd handed her, an odd sensation passed through Kalesia. She shook it off and was halfway out the door when Major Harley called again.

"Ms. Brannigan? Be sure to mention that I sent you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Butterflies fluttered in Kalesia's stomach as she executed a turn onto Highway 27 twenty minutes later. She gripped the wheel of her sporty yellow compact. The sun hovered just barely above the horizon. Glancing at her watch, she groaned. It was already after seven. If she had the sense God gave a goose, she'd wait until morning. Goodness knew what time this Gabriel Steele went to bed. Harley was nearing sixty and this guy was already retired. From the way Harley talked, she could tell the two were close. Hell, the man probably trained the major. Waking him would not be the ideal way to get him to listen. And she desperately needed him to listen. To believe.

Ocala was several miles behind her and a deepening purple twilight cloaked the sky by the time she found the turnoff. A small sign pointed the direction toward Tranquility Nursery. She nearly missed it. Hidden behind uncut Bahia grass and brush, the sign drooped wearily as if tired of trying to attract attention.

Kalesia perked up. In return for his assistance, maybe she could offer Gabriel Steele more than money. As a small businessperson herself, she knew the value of appearance. Maybe he'd be open to a few suggestions.

“Blast!”

The word burst forth as the left tire dropped into a pothole that could have easily doubled for a small crater. Her first suggestion would be to fix the road. She patted the car’s dash reassuringly. “It’s all right. If anything is permanently damaged, we’ll sue the pants off the man.”

Her teeth snapped together as the low-slung car found another pothole. “Maybe we’ll sue anyway,” she muttered, trying to weave a path between potholes and ruts. She just hoped Harley knew what he had been doing when he suggested she look up this Gabriel Steele.

Low growing palmettos and palms crowded the limerock-graveled path like huge, malevolent toads and their minions just waiting to pounce. She fought growing dismay and panic at the general air of neglect. If the man was in no shape to take care of his own place, how in the world was he going to help her?

Rounding a bend, Kalesia stomped on the brakes. A cloud of white dust settled on the car and flew in the window to coat the inside with a fine powder. She blew out a gust of air, waving away the dust.

Amazed, she stared at row after row of precisely aligned potted plants and shrubs. The lawn surrounding the house and leading toward a huge greenhouse flanked by two smaller greenhouses, was immaculate. She doubted there was a mole cricket alive that could muster the nerve to invade that expanse of green.

“Well, so much for first impressions. Maybe Major Harley knows what he’s doing after all.”

Gabriel Steele, it appeared, was a neatness freak.

Easing her foot off the brake, she let the little car roll under a stand of ancient Live Oak. She sat for a moment, soaking in the atmosphere surrounding the nursery. Above, Spanish moss swayed with ghostly elegance as an errant breeze played a silent minuet.

Kalesia rubbed her palms over her forearms as a sudden shiver engulfed her.

Little more than an indistinct shadow against the darker shade under the eaves of the greenhouse, Gabriel Steele watched the woman negotiate the uneven flagstone walkway in fuck-me high heels. He blinked lazily at the outrageously sassy color. The lady’s shoes were a bright, shocking yellow, a perfect match for her car and skirt. Intrigued, he allowed his gaze to travel up shapely calves and settle on a firm ass.

A hard fist of intense desire hit him, catching him by surprise. His cock swelled and hardened as his gaze settled on the gentle sway of lushly curved hips. Gabriel adjusted his jeans. Damn, it’d been years since his body had reacted so fast. His mouth pulled down in a frown. He hadn’t been ruled by his cock since high school. Maybe not even then. He sure as hell wasn’t going to start now. Not even for the rounded curves of a heart-shaped ass, he told himself as he willed the unruly organ to behave. It swelled further, making his comfortable work jeans suddenly too tight.

Son of a bitch.

Leaving the concealing shadows of the greenhouse, Gabriel stalked after the woman responsible for his body's unwonted betrayal.

"May I help you?" he growled.

## Chapter Two

Kalesia, hand poised to knock, whirled around and met ghost-filled gray eyes.

His eyes weren't brown. The incongruous thought flitted through her mind. For some reason, she had expected them to be brown like Major Harley's. Instead, they were a pure crystalline color that left her with no place to hide.

Kalesia froze, pinned by that haunted gaze.

His lashes lowered. The next instant Kalesia was left wondering if she had imagined the ghosts. She searched his eyes but ran up against a wall mirroring reflections but not the soul within. Whatever she had seen was gone. Now she couldn't read impatience, curiosity...anything at all. A quiver ran through her.

"What can I do for you?" Midnight soft and whiskey warm, his voice slid through the evening air and stroked her nerve endings. The unexpected sensation of being licked and enveloped by hot flames shook Kalesia to the core. Her mind went blank. She tightened her fingers on the strap of her purse until the leather cut into the soft skin of her palm. The crinkle of heavy paper reminded her why she was there.

She held out the crumpled business card. "My name is Kalesia Brannigan. Tom Harley sent me."

The man's expression hardened. "And to think it isn't even my birthday." Then, his reluctance obvious, he opened the screen door and motioned her inside the darkened house. "Somehow I had the feeling you weren't here to buy a caladium."

Kalesia hesitated, beset by the uncomfortable sense of entering a predator's lair. She jumped as he leaned in close and spoke in her ear. "Going or staying?"

Her heart hammered in her chest. Did she dare enter?

Did she dare not?

Mouth so dry cotton wouldn't stick to it, she stepped inside.

A work-hardened forearm reached around her, brushing her breast as he switched on a lamp. Her breast tingled from the small contact and, beneath the brushed silk of her shirt, her nipples contracted into small, hard nubs. Oh God. Cheeks hot, she hoped he couldn't see her reaction to the inadvertent touch. She inhaled, trying to get a hold on herself.

Wild, earthy, rain-soaked. His scent surrounded her, wrapped her senses in heady, sexy folds and settled low in her stomach. Her nostrils quivered and her pussy lips plumped and swelled. She closed her eyes for a second. Oh God, she was in so much trouble. Kalesia didn't think she was picky when it came to looks, height or eye color but a clean, feral scent? She was such a sucker for it. And for firm buns. She chanced a

discreet peek. Dead. Dead. Sooo dead. The man had an ass you could bounce quarters off.

With the wave of an arm, he indicated Kalesia should take a seat. Tugging the lapels of her jacket closer together, she fastened it as she sank into the nearest chair. Sweet mercy, she really hoped he'd put down her scarlet cheeks to awkwardness over asking a complete stranger for help, instead of the mixture of embarrassment and lust it was. When he settled in the chair across from her without comment, a tiny sigh of relief slipped free from the bottom of her soul. Until she realized the glow of the lamp fell full on her face but somehow managed to keep his in shadow.

He snagged her gaze.

The hairs on the back of Kalesia's neck lifted. She knew without a doubt that she was in the presence of a predator. It was in the glitter of his eyes, the utter stillness about the large form and the aura of infinite patience that surrounded him as he waited for her to tell him why she was there.

Kalesia ran the tip of her tongue over parched lips, everything inside her tightening when that crystalline gaze followed the small movement. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the man lounging across from her. Night black hair with a few threads of silver running through the short length, it made her think of moonlight on a lake.

The image of that powerful form sprawled on a bed, wearing nothing but the light of the moon, flashed into her brain.

No, no, no. She was so not going there. Just because the guy pushed every button she owned and maybe a few she just rented, did not mean she was going to forget why she was here. And it was not to jump his bones.

Between her thighs, her lace panties grew wet.

She saw his nostrils flare.

Embarrassment, acute and immediate, heated her face until even her ears burned. *Pleasepleaseplease. Tell me he cannot smell his effect on me.* She chanted it over and over, like a mantra.

He shifted in his chair. Without thinking, she looked at his lap.

The dusty, black jeans had a distinct bulge. A very large, distinct bulge.

"I need someone to protect me," she blurted.

"Go to the authorities."

"I did. I told you, they sent me to you." The hard face was closed, his very demeanor anything but encouraging. Kalesia felt that familiar sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. He wasn't going to help. She began twisting the citrine ring on her finger.

Gabriel noted the nervous gesture as he stretched his legs out, hoping to ease the pressure on his erection. "If they can't help you, what makes you think I can?" Across from him, the woman fidgeted, rubbing her palms on the yellow skirt before crossing

her legs neatly at the ankles in a purely feminine gesture. For such a small woman—she couldn't be more than five-two or three without the heels—she had surprisingly long legs. Under his steady gaze, she crossed and uncrossed them again. On a white-gold chain circling one slender ankle, a tiny unicorn with bells for hooves winked at him.

A mythical beast on a fantasy woman. Son of a bitch.

"Because Tom Harley seemed to think you can."

Gabriel sighed, pulling his attention from the slender ankle. "Start at the beginning." Damn, Tom had a nasty sense of humor but he should have remembered payback was hell.

"Someone is going to kill me."

That caught Gabriel's attention. He sat up straight. "And the authorities won't offer protection?" Why the hell had Harley sent her to him? He knew Tom. Not only was the man a dedicated law enforcement officer but he was one of those rare beings who actually gave a shit if a person lived or died. If she were truly in danger, why wasn't he taking care of the problem?

Her chin came up and her bright green eyes offered a challenge. "They can't."

"Why?"

Her gaze flitted to the front door then back to him, a movement so swift that if he hadn't been watching carefully, he would have missed it. Behind those green eyes, he saw thoughts swirling in a chaotic mix. He got the distinct impression she was going to lie, then he saw her breasts lift as she sucked in a silent breath. Her shoulders slumped. "They have nothing to go on but my word."

"Threats, phone calls, near misses?" He would pound Tom into the ground if he was messing with him. More than once the older man had told him he needed to get out and find a woman. Get laid. Something. Anything other than holing up on this isolated bit of property. He couldn't shake the suspicion this whole plea for help was a setup.

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to take her to bed. Just once. After all, Tom had sent her to him.

The insidious thought popped into his head and refused to leave.

She was already shaking her head. "No, none of those things."

"Then just what do you have to go on?" He made his voice very soft. Inside, he went cold. All half-formed thoughts of fucking her evaporated. He hated games and if she was playing one, it was one she'd never play again. Not after he finished with her.

She exhaled a shaky breath. "Mr. Steele, all my life I've had the ability, or curse, depending on your point of view, to be able to see things that have happened."

"What sort of things?"

"Murders."

"Son of a bitch. What the hell was Harley thinking?" Left unsaid but clear in his tone was the fact he thought she was a fake. A sense of betrayal fueled his anger. Tom

knew his history. Most of it at least. He should have known that Kalesia Brannigan was the last woman he'd be interested in.

"Now you just wait a minute!" Pure rage flashed across her face and tightened her full lips. "You haven't even heard me out!" She shot to her feet, the anklet charm tinkling with the force of her anger. "Where Major Harley gets his faith in you sure beats me. He, at least, was willing to listen." Disdain dripped from her voice.

Either she was a very good liar or believed what she was saying. Gabriel studied her. Emotion shimmered in the lagoon-green eyes, intensifying the color. Damn. If he were a betting man, he'd swear she actually believed the nonsense she was spouting. So that left him with a very interesting question, did Harley send her because he thought there was something to her story or because he knew Gabriel would be attracted to her?

"Tom gets paid to listen." Gabriel gave a silent sigh and admitted to himself that he wasn't going to send her away. At least, not yet. He waved to the chair. "Sit."

She glared at him before grudgingly retaking her seat.

"Tell me exactly what you told Harley." If he had any sense, he'd shift her sexy little ass right out the door instead of listening to fairy tales. He needed his head examined, he decided.

"I saw a body by a pond. I didn't want to look at the face, so I studied the area around the body. I recognized it." Back ramrod straight, each sentence was crisp, concise. It was clear she was still pissed at him.

He felt a tug of amusement. "Recognized?"

"As a place where I go often."

"Why?"

"To take photos, walk, mostly to think. It's peaceful and secluded."

"Any chance that you could have seen or photographed something you shouldn't have?"

She appeared to think for a moment. "I don't believe so. I can only remember a handful of times that I even met another person while there. Usually teenagers looking for a place to neck."

"What else was in your," he paused. She glared at him, "vision."

"It was in winter or early spring."

"What makes you say that?" Gabriel watched her like a hawk but each subtle shift of expression and motion all backed up his original assessment. Kalesia Brannigan believed she'd had a psychic vision. A reluctant tug of interest reared its ugly head.

"The woods were bare and the grass brown. I had the impression of winter or early spring. When I," a delicate shudder rippled through her small frame, "looked at her face, I saw mine." Her eyes darkened to almost black as the pupils swallowed the green. Slender fingers twisted together in her lap.

Nervousness or an attempt at control?



"There had been a struggle. She—I—had been shot. Once. Through the heart." Irritation forgotten, she leaned forward and placed a carmine-tipped hand on his. "Please believe me, Mr. Steele, this isn't some sort of a joke."

A trace of magnolia and exotic woods teased Gabriel's senses. Against the ruined flesh of his wrist, her hand was small and smooth. He stared down for a long minute, breath clogged in his throat. He surged to his feet.

"I can't help you."

"Just like that?" Stunned, she stared at him, her eyes huge.

He couldn't do this. He could not have what little serenity he'd managed to carve out of the ruins of his life, taken from him. Rage, pain and need, coalesced in one tangled ball. He focused it all on the woman sitting so still. Gabriel leaned over her, a hand on each arm of the chair. He used his size and fury to intimidate her without compunction. "You're very good, lady but we both know you didn't come out here because of some so-called vision. Trust me. You would have gotten a lot farther if you'd been upfront with me." He was so close he could see the faint trace of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

Somehow, that made him even more furious.

"I guess you do deserve something for coming out here all this way and for putting on such a superb performance." He grinned, a feral showing of teeth.

The pulse in the vulnerable hollow of her throat pounded. For some reason, it didn't give him the satisfaction he'd expected.

Before she had time to react, his mouth covered hers.

Soft. Warm. Moist. His tongue pushed inside, not giving her a chance to regain her equilibrium. Her hands came up to rest against his chest, giving a tentative shove. Gabriel nipped her bottom lip in warning.

She gave in with a soft moan. Her hands slid up to rest against his shoulders, nails kneading the heavy muscles like a cat.

Triumph heated his blood. He rewarded her with a gentle swipe of his tongue to soothe the small sting. One large hand cradling the back of her head, his fingers tunneled into a wealth of red hair beneath the braid. He used his hold to tip her head up for a deeper kiss.

That fast, Gabriel forgot he was trying to make her run away, forgot that she was dangerous to his peace of mind. All he cared about was how good she tasted.

"That's it, darlin'. Open for me. Let me taste you. I need to taste you."

His tongue stroked the sensitive roof of her mouth, danced away from hers only to come back and tangle with hers. The sexy, little, back-of-the-throat sounds she was making drove Gabriel crazy. He couldn't get enough of them.

He fumbled with the over-large button on her jacket, swearing softly into the heat of her mouth as it resisted his attempt to unfasten it. At last he got it open. Immediately,

he cupped her breast. She wasn't wearing a bra! He rubbed his thumb back and forth over the crest of her breast, feeling the nipple peak beneath his touch.

He swallowed her gasp.

He tore his mouth free from hers, seeking and finding the small, hard nub. Gabriel braced himself with one hand on the arm of the chair. The position put unbearable pressure on his erection.

Almost as if she knew, Kalesia popped the button of his fly free. Mouth around the tip of her nipple, he froze, hardly daring to take a breath as he waited for the feel of those soft hands wrapped around his cock.

Slowly, ever-so-slowly, she eased the zipper down. He wasn't wearing underwear so his cock jutted out, thick and proud, from the opening of his pants.

"Commando?" The throaty question went straight to his balls.

Gabriel lifted his head, taking a moment to study the wet circle on her silk blouse. "What can I say? I like to be one with nature." He trailed a forefinger over the damp spot, satisfaction roaring through him when she shivered, her nipple drawing even tighter.

"Trust me, sugar, you are a miracle of nature." Green eyes teasing, she traced an invisible line the length of his aching cock before circling her fingers around it, right behind the flared cap. She seemed fascinated when his cock flexed in her grasp.

Gabriel slid a hand up the inside of her thigh. Halfway up, his palm met warm flesh instead of silky stocking. Son of a bitch. She was wearing garters. Call him old-fashioned but there was something about garters on a woman. He slid his palm higher, until he felt the lace of her panties. Tugging the delicate panel of lace aside, he slipped one finger deep inside her body. The wet heat of her snug passage made him groan.

God, he needed to be inside her.

Wrapping his hand around her neck, he started to tug her up when she turned her head and placed a tiny kiss on the inside of his wrist. Right on the ridged, slick scar that circled it.

What in the hell was he doing? He was supposed to be getting rid of her, not taking her to bed.

Using his thumb to tilt her chin, he whispered into her mouth, "Tell Harley not to send a flake next time."

She went utterly still, then erupted out of the chair. Unprepared for the strength of her shove, he stumbled back a step. She faced him, all spitting fury and feminine outrage. "You bastard."

For a moment, Gabriel thought she was going to take a swing at him. Instead, she leaned down and grabbed her purse but not before he saw the wounded look in her green eyes.

For a moment, he wished she had.

Not looking at him once, she crossed the room and fumbled for the doorknob, her movements jerky. On the flagstone walkway, she hesitated as though she were about to turn around but then, squaring her shoulders, walked to her car instead.

A hard tension held Gabriel taut as she climbed inside. He almost called her back, even lifted a hand to stop her but let it drop when she slammed the door and started the car. He watched her taillights as they winked in and out of the trees as she sped down the drive. Not until after they were long gone did he close the front door.

Tucking himself back in his jeans, he zipped them but left the button undone.

It was for the best. If she knew what that scar meant, she wouldn't kiss it. She'd run screaming.

A humorless smile twisted his mouth.

Perhaps he should have told her the moment she walked in the door. He shook his head. No, he wouldn't have missed the opportunity to hold her, to taste her warmth and light. Not for anything.

Gabriel snapped off the lamp and sat in the dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia stormed into the house and slammed the front door behind her. "The bastard! The low-down son of a bitch. How dare he kiss me, touch me," a hot blush scalded her cheeks as she recalled just how she had let him touch her, "then call me crazy?" She slammed her purse on the nearest chair. "Just who the hell does he think he is?" It'd serve Gabriel Steele right if she called Major Harley and let him know what a jerk he had for a friend.

She sat on one end of the sofa, kicked her shoes off and curled her legs under her. Kalesia dropped her head back against the cushion, her righteous indignation fading as the ramification of Gabriel's refusal to help sank home. She hugged her body to ward off a growing inner chill.

Dear God, she truly had no one to turn to. Her parents believed her visions were dreams, the police thought, at best, she had an overactive imagination and Gabriel Steele wouldn't even consider the possibility that she was telling the truth.

That left only her to stop a killer.

Problem was, she didn't have the slightest idea where to start.

A soft meow drew her attention. Leaning down, she scooped up the worried Siamese. Holding the slender cat close, she scratched its head and stared at the wall. "Tia, what am I going to do?" The Siamese washed her face in sympathy.

Damn, when would she ever learn? You'd think after the *fiasco*, she would know better. Even now, three years later, she winced at how naïve and stupid she'd been. She'd pulled the tatters of her self-respect around her and promised herself never to tell anyone about her visions again.

So, okay, there were extenuating circumstances this time. She'd never had a vision where she was the victim. But, still, the end results were bound to be the same. Disbelief and the subtle easing away, as if she might be contagious.

For some insane reason, though, she'd had the instant innate belief that Gabriel Steele was different. Something about his eyes. Even his initial reaction hadn't dampened that belief. When he'd told her to sit and had begun to question her, she really thought he'd help her even if he couldn't fully accept her knowledge came from a vision.

"Just goes to show you how wrong my instincts can be, huh?" She tickled the cat under the chin. "I reacted to him, Tia," she confessed in a near whisper. "Like I've never reacted to another man. Not even Christopher. Even after he made it clear he thought I was lying." She gave a bitter laugh. "Guess that makes me desperate as well as stupid, doesn't it? You wanna hear something weird? I could swear he was as turned on as I was." She wasn't stupid, past history aside. She knew guys could screw like bunnies without knowing so much as the woman's name. But would a man only interested in getting in her pants have said the one thing guaranteed to send her scurrying like a mouse? And it had been deliberate. Of that she hadn't the slightest doubt.

A big black head butted insistently under her hand. Kalesia scooted back to allow another cat to hop up beside her.

"Why couldn't he be more like you, Hannibal? Starved and injured, you had every reason not to trust humans. Yet you let me close. You gave me a chance." She rubbed her cheek against the long, silky fur of the tom. "It's too bad Gabriel Steele didn't do the same because, without him, I have the feeling I don't stand a chance at all."

\* \* \* \* \*

Stark horror held her rigid as the violence raged, unabated. Rage, fear and hatred swirled about, threatening to encase her in their fetid grip. She couldn't escape. It was going to trap her forever. A scream locked in her throat, the tendrils ripped asunder without warning.

Torn from sleep, Kalesia stared into the diffuse light of pre-dawn, a startlingly real sensation of terror gripping her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Kalesia, you didn't?"

The wail turned several heads. Kalesia sighed. So much for hoping the open-air restaurant would restrain her mother.

"Mom, I had to. This is my life we're talking about, not someone already dead." Bad idea. She needed someone to talk to but a late dinner with her mother had definitely been a bad idea. Her mother preferred to deal with her ability by pretending it didn't exist.

Kalesia glanced at the citrine-studded watch on her wrist. Maybe it would be better all the way around to suddenly recall an appointment.

"But the police?" Della Brannigan smoothed a strand of hair back. She'd allowed a swath of white hair to remain, a striking contrast to the dark auburn she'd given her daughter. But where Kalesia's eyes were Brannigan green, her mother's were tawny brown. Kalesia noticed a gentleman at a neighboring table discreetly eyeing her mother. Even on the backside of fifty, her mother could still turn heads.

Now, however, she looked ready to cry.

"Mom, I didn't know where else to turn." Kalesia reached across the table and gripped her mother's hand. "I know you don't like it when I talk about my visions but this time I had to try to make someone listen."

"Remember what happened last time? You almost ruined your business reputation, not to mention running that nice Christopher Hiser away. You'd be married by now, maybe with children, if you hadn't insisted on telling him."

*Yeah and if I hadn't told him my business reputation would never have been in jeopardy,* she almost told her mother. At the last minute, she bit back the words. No one knew the full story behind her breakup with Christopher.

They'd met when the corporation where he was a top-level manager had hired her to improve their image in the South. He'd been funny, kind and gentle. And, unlike the others in the firm, he had seemed to want to listen to her ideas and suggestions. He had also made her feel that she could tell him anything. Within a week, they were going out on a regular basis.

Kalesia drew circles on the tabletop with the tip of her nail. By the end of the second month, she was retreating to save her dignity and career while he became vice president.

"I agree, Mom. It was a mistake to tell him but not for the reasons you think. I don't want a man who looks at me as if I have suddenly grown two heads. I want one who will believe me."

Her mother's gaze slid away and she looked uneasy. "You know your father and I love you."

Kalesia tried to stop the conversation before they got into the same old argument. "I know, Mom. You guys love me but you just can't bring yourselves to believe me."

"For crying out loud, visions of murder? They're not real. They can't be. It's impossible to know what happened to someone else miles away. Your father and I have told you over and over they are dreams. Even as a child you had a vivid imagination. It's Grandmother Brannigan's fault. She encouraged you."

"Leave Grandma out of this." Kalesia pinned her mother with a determined gaze. "She was the only one who would listen to me when I was a child. She didn't try to convince me I was having nightmares, or send me to a child psychologist, or pretend to the neighbors that I had an overactive fantasy life. She listened. Made me understand that what I saw wasn't my fault."

"Of course it wasn't your fault! No one can control their dreams."

"And I can't control my visions." Kalesia held up a hand, weary to the bone. "Mom, I truly didn't come here to argue with you."

"Then why did you come?"

"I don't know. Just forget it." Shoving her chair back and rising, she leaned over and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek before she could respond. "Tell Dad I'll try to come over next weekend and help him with his garden." She straightened.

"Kalesia?"

"What?"

"I do love you, you know."

Kalesia gave a sad smile. "I know. I love you too." She walked out of the restaurant, her throat too tight to say anything else.

Two hours later, juggling a large sack of groceries and her purse, she kicked shut the front door of her house with a relieved sigh. Turning the kitchen light on with her elbow, she placed the bag on the counter in the kitchen as she mulled over the conversation with her mother. Nothing ever seemed to change. Her parents could not accept she had visions of murder and she couldn't seem to stop trying to make them.

Her mother may have been right about one thing, however. If word ever got out why she had gone to the authorities, she could lose everything. For good, this time.

She'd known she was taking a chance, of course. But she'd been so shaken by the vision of her own death she'd thought it her only recourse. If she had been thinking more clearly, she would have realized the authorities wouldn't believe her. They never had.

She was putting the last can of cat food on the shelf when she realized she hadn't seen the cats. Usually they pestered her for attention and food the moment she stepped in the door. Frowning, she called out.

"Tia? Hannibal?" She checked the downstairs then, thinking they might be asleep on her bed, checked upstairs. Nothing.

"Come on, you guys. Where are you?"

One foot on the bottom step of the stairs, from the corner of her eye she saw the tip of a black tail swish from under the desk in her office. About time. She pushed the door open fully and walked into her office, a smile forming. "All right, what are you doing hiding—" Abruptly, she clamped her mouth shut. Her office door was kept closed at all times. Hannibal had a habit of shredding papers when he was bored or irritated.

The door had been open.

A thin edge of terror began gnawing at her composure.

Dear God! What if her killer was in the house right now? What if he was waiting for her? Without looking, she reached for the sturdy police-style flashlight she kept on the end table next to the French window, holding it at the ready.

Think Brannigan. Think!

When hunting for the cats she'd checked every room, even peeked inside the closets. The only exception had been her office. She sucked in a deep, cleansing breath and slowly lowered the flashlight. Okay, that meant no one was in the house.

Hell, maybe she was getting paranoid. What with the vision and Gabriel Steele's reaction, she'd been distracted as she left to meet with her mother. It was possible, just, that she had failed to shut the office door properly.

A small but persistent pain hammered at her temple. She rubbed at it and sank down on her knees, ignoring the tug of uneasiness that refused to go away.

"Come on, fella. Out from under the desk." She bent lower, making small, encouraging sounds. The huge black cat leveled an unblinking peridot gaze on her. "That's my boy. Out you com—"

The files.

Sitting back on her heels, she stared at the desktop as the vague sense of something wrong crystalized. The files were on the left side of the keyboard. Her heart began slamming anew in her chest. She stood and walked around the desk.

Kalesia stared at the neat pile of manila folders for a long moment.

She touched the folders with the tips of her fingers. Such a small thing. A tiny detail that under normal circumstances no one would notice.

The killer could have been waiting for her to walk in the door.

Her gaze still locked on the files, she reached for the business card tucked under her desk calendar. The phone on the other end rang before Kalesia realized what she had done.

She had dialed Gabriel Steele.

"Hello?"

The voice was as dark and compelling as she remembered. "Mr. Steele?"

There was a long pause. "Ms. Brannigan? Kalesia? What is it? What's wrong?"

She gripped the phone harder. "I-I'm so sorry for bothering you but I didn't know who else to call."

"Don't worry about it." His voice was brisk. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Someone broke into my home."

"Are you hurt? Have you called the police?"

"No. No, I'm not hurt. They were gone by the time I returned home." She looked around vaguely. Police. She hadn't thought to call the police. "I haven't called them. I'll do that now."

"Wait. Don't hang up!" There was a pause. "Are you positive no one is in the house?"

"Yes. I checked." She clutched the card Harley had given her as if it were a talisman.

"Listen to me. I need directions to your house."

His voice rang distantly in her ear. Feeling as if the world were very far away, she gave him directions.

"Okay. Stay put. I'll be right over."



## Chapter Three

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you."

Gabriel stared at the woman blocking the doorway. He noted the white-knuckle grip on the door. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

When he didn't say anything, she began chewing on her bottom lip.

Arms crossed over his chest, he waited until the silence got to her and she looked up. Gabriel snagged her gaze. Uncrossing his arms, he planted one hand on the door and push. Slowly, inexorably, he crowded Kalesia back into the small entryway.

"Look, I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing. This isn't your concern. Honestly, you can go home. I-I reacted without thought."

Gabriel ignored the babble. He reached out and pulled her into his arms. "Hush."

"Oh God, Gabriel, I was so scared." She buried her head against his chest. Fine shivers racked her small frame.

He rested his chin on top of her head, knocking the intricate topknot of hair slightly askew. Complication. Kalesia Brannigan had complication written all over her small, curvy body. Damn, he so did not want complications in his life. He'd sent her away in a manner that he thought guaranteed Hell would freeze over before she would contact him again.

He might have sent her fleeing but he hadn't been able to get rid of her. Her smell, her taste, the feel of her snug sheath around his finger taunted his waking hours and, at night, invaded his dreams.

He'd wake up, hot, horny and sweaty, his hand wrapped around his cock. He gave a tiny grimace. Shit, he'd even woken up once with spunk all over his belly. You'd think he was fifteen, not a man kissing forty.

When he answered the phone and heard the fear in her voice, he hadn't stopped to think. He'd come running.

Adrenaline still pumping unpleasantly in his system, Gabriel held her tighter.

"I need to look around." What he needed was to pull it together. He put her from him, hands still on her shoulders. "You going to be okay?"

She nodded. Fine lines of strain fanned out from the corner of her eyes but she gave him a tremulous smile. For the first time, Gabriel noticed that one eyetooth was just the slightest bit crooked. Son of a bitch. He was in deep when that small imperfection just made her that much more attractive to him.

Gabriel made a short but thorough search. He didn't find anything but then he hadn't expected to. "Tell me what happened."

Moving restlessly to a brightly patterned, overstuffed sofa, she sat down. "I had a late dinner with my mother and then went shopping. When I came home, I didn't notice right away that my cats—I have two—didn't meet me at the door." She played with a loose thread on the cushion. "When they hadn't turned up by the time the groceries were put away, I got a little worried. After searching the house, I finally found them hiding under the desk in my office," she whispered, her expression stark. "That door is always kept shut."

"Anything else to indicate an intrusion?"

"The files on my desk were moved."

"Could the cats have disturbed them?"

"No. I always keep active files on the right side of my keyboard. They were on the left."

"Is it possible you put them there by accident?" Gabriel glanced at the untidy pile of magazines on the coffee table and the books left haphazardly around the room. A pair of bright red high heels peeked out from under the edge of the sofa. Somehow, Kalesia's house with its comfortable clutter reminded him of the woman herself—bright, warm and inviting.

She sat up straight. "Look. Maybe my housekeeping isn't up to your standards but when it comes to my work I am very particular." She crossed her arms under her breasts, the gesture defensive. "It's a habit."

"I'll accept that for now."

"Gee, thanks," she muttered, starting to look pissed.

For some reason, it made him want to smile. Ignoring her sarcasm, he continued, "We need to determine if tonight's break-in is connected to your vision."

"But how?" She shivered, though it had to be eighty degrees out. "I don't have a clue why someone would want to kill me in the first place!"

"What about your files? Is there anything valuable, other than to yourself, in them? Valuable enough to kill for?" Gabriel decided he liked her sarcasm better than this sign of vulnerability.

"Valuable? Maybe to a client's competitor but I doubt the information I have is worth killing for. For God's sake, I analyze markets and recommend strategies for improving the image of a business. Sure, business can be cutthroat and, yeah, some people will stab you in the back to get ahead." A shadow flitted through her eyes, making Gabriel wonder what caused it. "Not literally, however. Besides, my clients are scattered over the state, not just in Central Florida. Some are even in Georgia." Her hands closed into fists. "It's taken me three years to build my business to the point I feel secure. Three years, Gabriel. Not once in that time has something like this ever occurred."

"This is so crazy." She began drumming her fingers on the cushions, a quick, nervous gesture that Gabriel made note of. "Insane. It could ruin me if word leaked out someone was rifling through my files."

"We're not talking national security here."

She jumped to her feet. "You don't understand." She paced the length of the room, unicorn ankle bracelet jangling a discordant note with each step. "Businesses demand absolute confidentiality. Decisions are based on the accuracy of my judgments and experience. If I can't keep their files secure, my reputation is..." She trailed off, staring blindly at the seafoam green wall. "Damn it! It just isn't fair that years of hard work can be destroyed so easily!"

Whoa. Wait a minute. Sure a break-in was a traumatic experience but her reaction was...disproportionate. Later, he would find out why. Instinct told him it was important but, right now, he had more immediate concerns. He stood and headed for the office. "Pack whatever you need and be ready to leave in ten minutes."

"Leave?" she spluttered, following him.

"You're staying with me." He located several heavy-duty storage boxes and opened the first drawer on the filing cabinet. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Kalesia still standing there, mouth hanging open. "I suggest you get a move on."

"But...you refused to help me."

"That was before." Reaching for the next batch of thick folders, he paused. Three were out of order. Those he set aside to go in the box last.

"Before what?" She sounded exasperated.

"Before I had something tangible to go on," he explained, exaggerated patience in his tone. First drawer cleared, he started on the second. Behind him, he could practically feel her seething. He gave a mental shrug. She'd get over it. Or not. Either way she'd have to accept that he needed more than a will-o'-the-wisp to chase. If, strong emphasis on if, someone really wanted her dead, chances were it had to do with her consulting. Why else rifle her files?

"So, my word isn't good enough when I tell you I have visions of murder but it is when I say someone broke into my house. Why? I don't have proof in either case."

He kept filling up the box. "Are you saying you no longer want my help?"

"Well, no," she began.

Gabriel glanced up suddenly, not trying to hide his impatience. "Then pack your clothes and whatever else you need," he glanced at the stainless steel watch on his wrist, "because in eight minutes we're leaving. You're too vulnerable here."

Wariness darkened the brilliant green eyes. "How do I know I'll be any safer at your home?"

The damn woman invaded his solitude with her cockamamie story of visions, worked her way into his very dreams and now she questioned whether he could keep her safe? He closed the file drawer very deliberately. "I give you my guarantee."

It irritated the hell out of him when she stopped to consider his promise. "Okay, I'll go with you."

Damn straight.

She didn't have the slightest idea how close he'd come to either strangling her or fucking her. Goddamn, he was getting soft, he thought as she strolled out of the office. Five years ago the little idiot would've been scurrying to obey his orders.

Gabriel imagined several scenarios where she learned to obey him without hesitation. He put a halt to that line of thought when each one ended with his cock buried balls-deep inside her pussy.

Son of a bitch. Harley was right. He needed to get laid.

Files boxed and ready to be loaded in his SUV, Gabriel turned his attention to the desk and the laptop and monitor on it. He knelt down and reached for the power bar to unplug the equipment. A furious hiss from under the desk had him jerking his hand back. He bent lowered and peered into the shadows. A malevolent green gaze stared back. A huge paw lifted in warning. "Full of piss and vinegar, aren't you, cat? Just like your mistress."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was going to be a long night, Kalesia thought with an inward sigh as she followed Gabriel into his living room. He hadn't objected when she came out of the house with the large cat carrier but the look on his face spoke volumes. Tough. She wouldn't think of leaving her cats behind. Love me, love my cats, she thought with a touch of humor.

Pad of paper in one hand, Gabriel indicated she should take a seat. Kalesia sank down in a staid wingback chair. Head back, she closed her eyes. It was already after ten and she was flat worn out. She cracked an eye when Gabriel started talking in a brisk, no-nonsense voice. The man did like to give orders.

"I want everything you can remember. Doesn't mater how insignificant it seems. We'll sort out later what's important and what isn't. What I'm looking for now is a pattern."

"What do you want first?"

"Tell me about your dream."

She opened both eyes. "Vision. They're not dreams. Dreams I could handle." Her face heated until she was sure it lit up like a neon sign as she remembered the dreams that had been haunting her sleep each night since meeting Gabriel Steele. Damn, she'd hardly ever blushed until she met the man and now she couldn't seem to stop.

Sexy, irritating, infuriating, much as she'd wanted to, she hadn't been able to get him out of her mind.

Each night, the dreams seemed to get more explicit. Kalesia knew she wasn't a particularly adventurous or sensual woman. Christopher and the few other men she'd had relationships with had made that fact painfully clear. She liked sex but didn't need

it. That's why the dreams had caught her so off guard. They made her burn. Not only burn but crave. Crave things she had never even thought of before.

The dreams were just so darn real.

Kalesia resisted the urge to fan her face as she remembered last night's dream of Gabriel sprawled between her legs, large hands cupping her fanny as his thumbs spread the swollen lips of her labia. The man had looked at her like she was a piece of candy and he had a killer sweet tooth.

Oh God, she wished a man would look at her like that in real life.

Like getting a taste of her was the most important thing in the world.

Kalesia's clit throbbed. Just like it had throbbed in her dream when Gabriel had prodded it with the tip of his tongue before taking it between his lips for a gentle nip. Fire arced through her hips when she crossed her legs. Kalesia hurriedly uncrossed them.

Clearing her throat, she avoided his eyes. "Does this mean you believe me?"

"It means I'm not willing to overlook any avenue." His level glance told her not to read any more than that into it.

"There was a body lying near a pond. I didn't want to look at the face."

"Why?"

"I never do." Kalesia stared at her hands. Gabriel believed in things he could see and touch. How could he understand the effect of visions that came without warning? Visions that left fear, panic, hopelessness in their wake? "It's hard to explain. Seeing the face makes the body into a person. A person who lived and breathed. Who loved and maybe was loved."

"Go on," he instructed. At the odd note in his voice, Kalesia dragged her gaze from her hands to his face. It was as hard and impassive as ever. Giving a mental shrug, certain that her nerves were making her hear things that were not there, she continued.

"Her blouse had a hole in it." Without realizing it, her fingers rubbed over her breast, just left the center of her chest. "There was an exit wound in the back." Eyes closed, she slid her hand down to the edge of her brightly splashed dress and tugged. "Her skirt was up above her thighs."

"Was she sexually assaulted?"

Shaking herself free of the pull of the vision, she opened her eyes, thankful he kept the reference to the third person. Foolish and useless as it might be, she couldn't acknowledge the woman in the vision was herself, dead from an act of violence. Not now. Not yet.

"No," she said slowly, chewing on her bottom lip as she searched her memory. "I didn't get that impression. Maybe she struggled and that's why her skirt was rucked up like it was."

Kalesia kicked off her shoes and tucked her legs under her, feeling suddenly vulnerable. When the silence lengthened, she continued. "I started to feel uneasy but in

a different way than I usually feel. I didn't want to look at the body anymore, so I studied the surroundings.

"Tracks milled around the edge of the pond but I couldn't make out if they were human. The scrub oaks were bare and so were the hyacinths. Everything was shaded like a monochromatic painting. It was when I noticed a stand of Live Oak and a lightning-blasted pine that I realized I knew the area. That's when I looked at the woman's face." Nausea swelled, making her stomach hurt. "I saw my own." She swallowed convulsively, forcing herself to concentrate on Gabriel's mouth as he spoke.

"What color were the blouse and skirt?"

"Turquoise and amber. It's one of my favorite outfits." All her strength deserted her without warning. It became an effort just to hold her head upright. She let it flop back against the cushion. She could never remember feeling so drained, both physically and emotionally. Damn, she hated feeling weak. Especially in front of Gabriel. He already thought her, at best, a fake and, at worst, crazy. She refused to act like a stereotypical helpless woman in front of him.

"You said there was an exit wound. What did it look like?"

"About the size of a silver dollar and ragged, I think. I'm not sure. I didn't actually see it." She picked her words with care, hoping against hope that he wouldn't push for further details.

"If you didn't see the exit wound, how do you know the bullet wasn't still inside?" Like a hunter closing in on prey, he probed for weaknesses in her story.

So much for that. She took her bottom lip between her teeth and began to gnaw. How to explain in a way that made sense? "It's not like watching television or a movie where every detail is spelled out by the end of the hour," she began haltingly. "It's more a matter of knowing." Kalesia groaned at the futility of explaining what even she didn't understand. She plucked the throw pillow from between the arm of the chair and her hip and hugged it to her chest.

"Sometimes the images I see are very clear and stark. Other times they come at me in a collage of information and intuitive knowledge that defy order and logic. I know but I don't understand how I know. The knowledge of a gaping hole in her back was just there, in my mind."

"Then why do you have such precise details of her clothing and the surroundings?" His dark voice surrounded her and lashed her with his disbelief.

"Because I saw those details!" She thumped the pillow in frustration. "I knew you wouldn't understand." Her jaw ached as she ground her back teeth together. She had to regain control. Throwing a fit would not incline Gabriel to change his mind. She had to go about this in a calm, logical fashion. She stifled a harsh laugh. Oh God, logical. She wanted to use logic to explain the illogical. Her head dropped forward until she could rest her chin on the pillow. Okay, so logic was out. What next? Somehow, she had to find a way to make Gabriel accept the unacceptable.

How?

Gabriel Steele preferred to operate with facts, that much was clear. Not with dreams come to life. What about intuition? Instinct? Most folks accepted the occasional flash of gut instinct. Even law enforcement officers. Former law enforcement officers, she corrected herself. Gabriel was retired. She huffed out a short, nervous breath. "Some details in my visions rely on instinctive knowledge, not physical."

He just stared at her. The silence grated on her nerves, stringing them tight until she wanted to scream. "I'll accept that for the moment." All her muscles went weak even as she knew without the slightest doubt that Gabriel would return to the subject later. "What was the weather like?"

What an odd question. Still, relieved he wasn't pressing her further on how she gained her knowledge, she answered without hesitation. "It was foggy. A heavy dew coated the dead grass. Moisture beaded on her face. Gray. Everything was gray. The sky, the water, the trees." She licked her lips. "Even her skin was gray."

"Do you remember seeing a car?"

Lost in the image, it took a moment for Kalesia to understand the question. "What? No, I don't think so. The pond is too far from the track to see a vehicle, though."

He scribbled on the pad before prodding, "Was the body placed at the site?"

It worried her that she didn't know where he was going with his line of questioning. She hesitated before answering. "No. She was killed there."

"Is this something else you just 'know'?" The question was slid in with skillful precision.

Her mind went blank for a second as what he said registered. It became hard to breathe. Pain waited in the wings. She shoved it down deeper. "Why do you insist on baiting me?" Chest tight, she struggled with a feeling of betrayal. A betrayal she had no right to feel. Gabriel Steele was nothing if not upfront about his disbelief of visions. She hugged the pillow to her chest with a desperate strength, until the muted pattern was imprinted in her skin. God help her, she felt tight, itchy and ready to come apart any second. "You're supposed to be helping me. I'm not up to any snide digs right now," she warned.

Across from her, Gabriel surged to his feet. In less than a blink of the eye, he was looming over her, large hands planted on the arms of her chair. Pushing his face into hers, he growled, "Lady, you'd better be up to them because if someone really is trying to kill you, this is kindergarten compared to how it's going to get." He was so close each word sent a wave of moist heat over her face. "You came to me. You wanted my protection and help. My skills and ability to keep you alive." A muscle jerked in his jaw. "If you want my help, you'll do it my way."

How could eyes the color of liquid mercury be so cold? Pinned in place by that frozen gaze, Kalesia stared up at him, her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

"Understand?"

Her instinctive protest stilled at the aura of suppressed violence that shimmered around him. This was no dime store cop blustering but a lethal, dangerous predator laying down the law.

She had two choices – accept his methods and cooperate, or walk out the door. Her first instinct had been right. Gabriel Steele was no alley cat open to coaxing but a full-fledged jungle cat with a taste for blood.

She unstuck her tongue. “I know because I saw scuff marks and felt my knees hit the mud.” At her surrender, the large form relaxed, a subtle release of tension that took his muscles from poised for battle to merely alert. “And because I sensed violence at the scene. Part of it is physical and part is like being certain someone is watching you without turning around.”

It was a surrender, Kalesia acknowledged to herself, as the tautness inside her eased in response. Both of them knew that with her compliance she ceded control to him. She waited for resentment. She’d been taking care of herself for a long time. To her surprise, she found it didn’t bother her as much as it should. Before she could ponder that revelation, Gabriel moved back and settled in his chair, continuing his questioning as though nothing had happened.

Three hours later, her temper was fraying.

“Was there any similarity between that murder and this one?”

She drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair and contemplated throwing the pillow at his head. “I told you. That happened years ago. Nothing ever came of it. No one believed me when I reported that woman’s murder five years ago. Just as no one believed me when I reported a child’s murder two years before that.”

She put a hand to her throat, hoping to ease the ache there from the effort not to scream in sheer frustration. The man was worse than impossible. He grabbed on, refused to let go, made her go over each vision time and again. Asked the same questions over and over, as if he just asked often enough, she’d change her story. He couldn’t get it through his thick skull that this was the way it always was. She’d see a murder and then would have to live with the knowledge that no one believed her. That maybe, just maybe, she could have helped to hold someone accountable if only people were willing to listen, to believe.

“Tell me again,” he ordered, ignoring her outburst.

Her hand dropped from her throat to curl on the arm of her chair. “Tell me again. Tell me again,” she mimicked. “I feel like a suspect in a police interrogation. What are you? A cop or something?” The minute the question was out of her mouth, she was ashamed. It wasn’t fair to throw his retirement in his face. Gabriel was still a young man, should have had years left on the force. A man like Gabriel didn’t just change careers without a very good reason. Not that it was an excuse but she was so sick and tired of having to always defend what she saw. Once, just once, why couldn’t someone just believe her?

“Or something,” Gabriel agreed in a neutral tone.



The quiet admission stopped her cold. Gabriel met her eyes squarely, the gray gaze shuttered. Kalesia was shockingly aware of having stumbled onto something dark and forbidden. Something intrinsically dangerous. Something that was better left alone.

Her mouth went dry. She ran the tip of her tongue across her bottom lip.

Swirling hunger filled the crystalline eyes.

All at once the lateness of the hour, the fragrance of orange blossom, gardenia and honeysuckle from the nursery, the intimacy of the warm glow of the single lamp spelled danger of a different sort.

Capturing her gaze with his, he got up from his chair. Most men his size, well over six feet and heavy with muscles from work and not those from a gym, didn't move with lethal, sensual grace the way Gabriel did. It riveted Kalesia. Never failed to remind her of a large cat. Give him green eyes and the resemblance between him and a prowling panther would be startling.

It also never failed to rouse every feminine instinct she possessed.

A deep, wary excitement fluttered low in her stomach. The hand holding the pillow pressed hard against her stomach while the other clutched the arm of the chair as if it were a lifeline. Tiny hairs all over her body lifted just as if she'd stood in the midst of a fierce lightning storm. The sensation caused her nipples to pucker and goose bumps to race over her skin.

Gabriel stopped in front of her, his legs brushing hers. His gaze went to the pillow and the corner of his mouth lifted. It wasn't a smile, his expression was too intense for that.

So what was it?

His gaze met hers and the breath hitched in her chest.

Searing heat. Desire. Need.

Satisfaction.

He knew she wanted him.

Not looking away, he snagged the pillow from her grasp and tossed it over his shoulder. It felt as if he'd just stripped her naked. He planted both hands on the arms of the chair and leaned down until his face was level with hers.

His stance was the same as earlier in the evening when he'd used intimidation to gain her cooperation. Then she'd felt threatened. She still felt threatened but in a way that made her excruciatingly aware she was female and he was male. A way that no other man had ever made her feel.

Common sense told her to flee.

Instead, she ran the tip of her tongue around her lips in a quick, nervous swipe and cast common sense to the wind.

She leaned in until not even a breath separated their lips.

Gabriel went still.

He even seemed to stop breathing.

In the hush, the sound of her heart beating in her ears nearly deafened Kalesia. His lips remained motionless under hers. She almost retreated, embarrassed that she'd misread his interest, then she stiffened her spine. There was only one way she'd know for sure. If she were wrong, she could always dig a hole and pull it in after her. But at least she'd know.

She traced the seam of his mouth with the tip of her tongue.

He released his pent-up breath with a shudder that bathed her face in heat. Long fingers tightened on the arms of the chair.

Encouraged, she teased the moist lining of his lips. Her hands came up to cup his cheeks. She rubbed her palms on the stubble, loving the rasp of evening whiskers against her sensitive palms.

He purred.

That was all she could call the deep rumble that emerged from the depths of his chest. Against his mouth, she grinned. Oh, she wanted to pull that sound from him again.

With the tips of her fingers, she traced the uncompromising line of his jaw, the bold shape of his nose before trailing her fingers up to his temples. On his left temple, she felt a small, irregular scar and smoothed the pad of her finger over it.

He tensed slightly and Kalesia remembered his reaction when she touched the scars on his wrist. She slid her tongue over his, a warm, wet glide that both teased and promised, an unspoken agreement not to talk about his scars. The pulse in his temples jumped.

Kalesia did what she'd been dying to do since she met him, she slid her fingers into the night-dark depths of his hair. She was the one to purr now. Oh God, he felt good. She kneaded his scalp, her mouth frantic on his.

Gabriel sank to his knees.

"Put your legs around me."

Dazed, she stared up at him, trying to make sense of the harsh command.

"Do it. Wrap your legs around my waist."

If she did as he ordered, she'd be wide open to him. Tension hardened the already harsh lines of his face as the seconds ticked past and she didn't move. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

Slowly, she spread her legs.

He surged into the space she created.

"Around me. Wrap your legs around me." Dark color slashed the high bones of his cheeks.

She'd never had anyone want her like this. It was more than a little heady. And scary. What would happen when he learned she couldn't live up to his expectations?

Would he turn on her like Christopher had? Would he flay her with words meant to wound? Her teeth sank deeper into her lip.

He tugged her lip free with his thumb, the work-roughened pad running over the abused flesh. The gesture was oddly soothing. Unable to resist, she swiped his thumb with a quick lick.

Ocean. He tasted of the ocean. Kalesia closed her eyes, savoring his flavor.

Gabriel pushed his thumb in her mouth. Without thought, Kalesia closed her lips around it and sucked.

His groan filled the air around them.

"Come on, sugar, put those beautiful legs around me." Voice thick with desire, he ran his free hand down her leg, from knee to ankle. The delicate silk of her stocking caught on his calluses.

He thought her legs were beautiful? Kalesia lifted her lids a fraction. Looking into the harshly drawn lines of his face, wonder filled her. As amazing as it was, Gabriel Steele thought her legs were beautiful. She shook her head. The man was blind but who was she to correct him?

Maybe it was just passion speaking, maybe he would find her disappointing before the evening was over. No matter. Tonight she wanted to discover if the real thing came even close to her dreams of the past week.

She lifted her legs and locked her ankles behind his back, her heels resting on the muscular swell of his buttocks.

Pure masculine satisfaction turned the silver of his eyes molten. He withdrew his thumb from her mouth slowly, painting her lips with moisture.

"That's the way, sugar." He moved his hands to her waist and pulled her toward him until his cock nudged her damp panties.

Kalesia caught her bottom lip between her teeth again at the tantalizing touch.

"Uh-uh. If anyone is goin' to chew on that bottom lip, it's goin' to be me." Kalesia about melted as a hint of a Southern drawl slipped into the rich, dark tones.

He dipped his head, catching her lower lip between his teeth, the exquisite press of his teeth both persuasion and domination. Excitement and anticipation surged through her blood, heating it. Her heart began pounding, slow and hard.

Kalesia thought it was going to beat out of her chest.

Would he be gentle? Or would he give a sharp nip that bordered on pain?

A single, slow glide of his tongue swept across the tender inside of her lip.

Gentle.

Her hands gripped his forearms, tested the hardness and strength of the muscles beneath the long sleeve tee shirt. Even with the material between them, heat poured off Gabriel. This close his scent, already familiar, played havoc with her senses. She loved the fact that he didn't wear cologne. He smelled of the outdoors and soap and Gabriel.

Then she stopped thinking as he launched a gentle assault against her mouth. He nibbled from one corner of her mouth to the other. He seemed particularly fascinated with the bow in the middle of her upper lip, playing with it until the sensation became almost too much.

She caught his head in her hands. "Gabriel." It was a plea, a demand for him to stop teasing her.

He brushed his lips over her cheek, the tip of her nose, both eyes. "What? What do you want, Kalesia? Tell me," he coaxed, his mouth behind her ear.

Tell him? Was he crazy? She couldn't tell him her name at the moment. She finally managed to unstick her tongue. "I want you to kiss me." There, that should satisfy him.

"How?"

Her eyes popped open. Damn him, he was just toying with her. She opened her mouth to berate him and a tiny growl slipped out instead. "Properly." She gave a sharp tug on his hair, pulling his head away from her neck. Kalesia glared at him. "I want you to kiss me properly."

"All you had to do is ask, baby."

There was not a thing in his voice to indicate he was amused but Kalesia couldn't shake the feeling he was laughing at her. Frustrated and mad, about ready to shove him out of the way and storm up to her room, Gabriel stole her ire by covering her mouth with his. His tongue slid into her mouth. A slow, thorough invasion that sent sparks through her body.

She moaned as his mouth trailed to the pulse pounding in her neck. He bit lightly at the delicate cord running the length of her neck.

So this is what they meant by having your socks blown off, she thought in dazed wonder. She tightened her thighs around his waist, rubbing her pussy shamelessly on his denim-covered erection. Bolts of sensation jolted through her swollen flesh. A flood of moisture soaked her silk panties.

So she did it again.

*Son of a bitch.* Gabriel swore again as Kalesia dragged her pussy the length of his aching cock. It was so hard, he was afraid it would shatter. He grabbed her hips and held her still. He was so close to the edge, all it would take was a couple more strokes of her pussy and it'd be over before he even began. She moved restlessly against him, rubbing her breasts back and forth over his chest. Small pleading sounds broke from her lips.

The feel of the hardened peaks damn near did him in. If he'd been standing, his knees would have buckled. *Son of a bitch.* She was hotter than an August afternoon in South Florida. The woman was going to burn him alive.

Damn, what a way to go.

He felt her hands fumbling at the button of his jeans. He started to reach for his wallet to get a rubber only to remember he hadn't carried one in a couple of years.

He dropped his head back with a disgusted groan. "Son of a bitch." He caught her hands before she could pull the zipper down. Thumb beneath her chin, he tilted her face to his. "We can't, sugar. No condom."

He saw realization slowly sink in. Disappointment flashed in those beautiful green eyes.

Her pussy was still pressed up against his cock. The heat, the wetness from it soaked through the thick material of his jeans. His cock jerked. Gabriel gritted his teeth, furious with himself.

Kalesia started to unlock her legs from around his waist.

Son of a bitch, no! His hands shot to her hips, his fingers digging into the round fullness of her behind, holding her still. Although some said he'd already sold his soul to the devil and most times Gabriel wasn't sure he disagreed, he knew he'd willingly do so now to sink inside her hot, snug channel. He sucked in a deep breath, searching for the control that should have been second nature. After a long minute, he found it.

"No. Stay. Put your arms around me and hold on tight." Without question, she wrapped her arms around his neck. She didn't look away. Using his grip on her fanny, he slid her up his cock. Her breath caught. He came damn near to choking on his at the intense pleasure that shot down his cock, straight to his balls.

On the second downstroke, Kalesia caught the rhythm.

Behind the fly of his jeans, his cock swelled impossibly further. A tingle started down low, at the base of his spine. He dropped his head to hers, clinging for dear life to his control. He'd be damned if he came before she did.

"That's it, darlin', ride me," he encouraged hoarsely. Her breathing was as ragged and rough as his. He shifted his hands, sliding them until he was cupping both full cheeks of her bottom. He lifted her and dropped, letting her slide the full length of his cock.

Kalesia twisted and moaned. She tightened her legs, pressing harder.

Over and over, he let her drop, driving her and himself, higher and higher. The soft sighs and demanding moans coming from her throat were driving him crazy. He didn't know how much longer he could hang on.

He lifted her again, forced her even tighter against him, wedging the ridge of his cock between her pussy lips. The confined head of his cock rubbed hard over her clit when he dropped her this time.

"Gabriel!"

Every nerve stretching to the breaking point, her strangled scream shattered his control. Hands biting into her flesh, hips rocking with relentless need against hers, spurt after spurt of hot cum filled his jeans.

Gabriel forced his eyes open and leaned back so he could see Kalesia's face. Lips parted as she panted softly, her eyes were squeezed closed. "Look at me."

At the rasped command, she slowly lifted her lashes. Only a thin circle of vivid green surrounded the blown pupils. The sight punched him in the gut.

A man could get high on such honest passion.

The thought stopped him cold.

Kalesia seemed to sense the change in him. The expression in those beautiful eyes sharpened, became wary. "Gabriel?"

When he didn't answer right away, she unwound from around him, scooting back on the chair.

Gabriel was absurdly aware of the wet stickiness of his jeans and the smell of spent passion. Shit. He was a full-grown man. He shouldn't feel awkward after making love to a woman.

Especially as they hadn't even gotten naked together.

He clenched his left hand into a fist before straightening it, one finger at a time.

And they never would.

Tonight was a mistake. He'd lost his professionalism, his sense of detachment. Gabriel slanted a glance at Kalesia. She looked as uneasy and awkward as he felt.

For some reason, that stung.

Gabriel got to his feet, wincing as his knees protested the move. He'd have to see about getting carpet if he was going to act like a teenager very often.

Strike that. In the future, whether or not he softened the hardwood floors was not going to be an issue.

Kalesia tucked a loosened swath of hair behind her ears. Then, as if she didn't know what to do with her hands, tugged on the hem of her dress, pulling it down over her knees. Her hands shook, just the faintest tremor.

Gabriel winced. Not that she'd be coming back for seconds after his less-than-masterful performance. That damn cat of hers probably had slicker moves. Turning so the huge wet spot on his jeans wasn't so obvious, he cleared his throat.

"Go to bed. We'll start again in the morning." He closed his eyes. Shit, he couldn't even get that right. He sounded as if he were dismissing an errant employee.

Color crept up from the deep V of her dress until it painted her face. Before he could rectify the situation, Kalesia practically flew up the stairs.

A minute later, he heard the bedroom door next to his close.

Son of a bitch. He wished she had slammed it. He closed his hand into a fist, then slowly opened it. Gabriel turned on his heel and made his nightly round, the habit too deeply ingrained to ignore. After checking the doors and windows, he set the alarm. Only when satisfied all was secured, did he shut off the lights.

With an ease Kalesia would have found mystifying, Gabriel became one more shadow in a room full of shadows.

It had, he mused, proved a useful ability in the past. Yet, now, he found it vaguely disquieting. Pausing at the bottom of the stairs, one hand resting on the aged mahogany, he gazed at the ceiling.

What would it be like to live in the light?

## **Chapter Four**

Okay, she could do this. After all, it wasn't the first time she'd less than dazzled a man with her lovemaking skills. Kalesia placed her hand on the swinging door leading to the kitchen and pushed, only to slam to a halt. Her hand went to her stomach as nerves kicked up a mad dance in her stomach. Gabriel was standing at the stove in a faded denim shirt that clung to his broad shoulders and a pair of dark jeans. Faint traces of rich soil clung to the seat of his pants. It wasn't the evidence that he'd already been hard at work that riveted her attention.

It was the way the denim hugged his rear in a way guaranteed to give a woman hot flashes. Painful heat crawled into her cheeks.

Unfortunately, she could personally attest to that.

What in the world had she been thinking? Well, that was a stupid question. Obviously, she hadn't. She nearly groaned. Even after tossing all night, coming up with excuses and rationales for her behavior, she still couldn't believe she'd behaved so wantonly with a man she barely knew. It was just so out of character. But, dammit, for the first time she'd felt so sexy, so powerful and it had gone straight to her head.

Too bad she lacked the necessary...ability to carry through on her implied promise of satisfaction. She'd never forget the way, the minute it was over, he told her to go to bed. He might as well have been speaking to a stranger on the street.

Humiliation settled in a hard knot in her stomach.

She wanted to run and hide.

Kalesia pulled her thoughts up short. She was a Brannigan, dammit, and Brannigans never ran. Well, almost never, she amended, wincing as she remembered the way she had fled his presence last night.

Well, she'd refuse to discuss her lapse. That is, if he even brought it up. After all, she hadn't exactly impressed him, had she? For the first time since she'd closed her bedroom door last night, a tiny ray of light brightened her mood. Why would Gabriel bring up what had happened? He'd probably forgotten all about it already. Feeling marginally better, she plastered a bright smile on her face and slid onto the white ladder-back chair.

Even though Kalesia didn't think she made a sound, Gabriel turned and pinned her with that silver gaze.

The smile froze on her face.

"Mornin'." He picked up two plates and brought them to the table.

"Good morning," she managed to croak as he set a dish of scrambled eggs and bacon in front of her. Smile. She was supposed to smile.



"About last night," he began, staring at his eggs.

"Let's just admit last night was a mistake and forget about it." Kalesia stabbed an innocent lump of egg with vengeance. She so did not want to dissect what went wrong last night. Been there, done that and it always turned out to be her fault.

Dead silence.

"I want to go over your visions again after breakfast. After that, I need to go through your files. There has to be a reason someone wants you dead. A tie, if you will, between you and the killer. Assuming it isn't totally random, then either your business or one of your visions is the most likely reason." Gabriel chose a gently steaming biscuit and split it with precision before buttering each half. Strong white teeth sank into one half as he met her gaze.

Kalesia was somewhat taken aback by his ready agreement to forget last night and by his matter-of-fact return to the investigation. In fact, she felt a bit insulted. Was last night really that unimportant to him? She drummed her fingers on the white wooden table. His eyes flickered to the movement. She stilled the little, irritated gesture.

Damn. She'd wanted him to forget it. So why was she getting so upset?

Good lord, had a part of her actually hoped he would insist on discussing last night's fiasco? Hoped that he'd declare it—she—meant more to him than a fleeting moment of passion?

If so, those hopes had taken a direct hit with his easy acceptance.

Oh no. She so refused to explore that path. With the strength of will that had allowed her to recover after the disaster three years ago, she turned her attention to his statement that he wanted to go through her files. "Look, I've got to tell you. I am very uncomfortable letting you see my clients' files. I have an obligation to keep their information confidential. They trust me."

Gabriel stopped chewing. "That's the real problem, isn't it? You don't trust me."

Appalled that he'd misunderstood her, she protested, "That's not it! It's not a matter of not trusting you. Exactly," she tacked on as it dawned on her that, in a way, he was right. She kept watch over her clients' files the way a broody hen watched her nest.

"Yes, it is," he said. "It is exactly a matter of trust."

The intensity in his eyes refused to allow her to prevaricate. Kalesia knew what she said next was very important. And not just in the obvious way. "I don't know you. How can I trust you with my files?"

"You're trusting me with your life."

"That's different," she defended, then shut her mouth with an inaudible groan. Really, could she sound any more stupid? "Major Harley said you could help."

Well, hell. Obviously, she could.

To her chagrin, he didn't say anything, just looked at her.

"Well, he's a sheriff's officer! He wouldn't have sent me here if he had doubts about your ability." *Let's just see how deep we can dig the hole, Brannigan. If the man didn't think you crazy before, he would now.*

He lifted a brow.

It was time to call it quits. She was being ridiculous and they both knew it. Besides, she did trust him. Had from the moment she'd met his haunted gaze. It was just that when it came to her files she was like an overprotective mother. It was hard to give them into someone else's keeping. Even temporarily. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't trust you in some way," she muttered. The narrowing of his eyes said he was aware that she was hedging. It wasn't rational and she couldn't explain it but Kalesia couldn't ignore the tiny whisper that warned against admitting out loud the depths of her trust. A therapist would have a field day with her. "You can see them but I want to be there when you do."

He pushed his plate away and pulled a yellow legal pad closer. "You said the vision of your death is your first precognitive one?"

Appetite abruptly gone, Kalesia dropped a half-eaten biscuit and shoved her plate to the side. "Yes."

Gabriel made a note on his pad. "Is this the first vision you've had that pertains to you?"

She nodded. "I don't get visions about winning the lottery, about how to avoid an accident. I get visions about murder after the fact. Death. Violence. Believe me. I wish it was different."

"Any idea why it was this time?"

Kalesia lifted both shoulders in a helpless shrug, at a total loss to explain. Always she got a vision of murder after the fact. Those visions were disturbing enough but if her ability was growing, was beginning to latch onto the violence before the event occurred, Kalesia truly thought she might go insane.

"None. I can't even begin to explain why I have visions."

"According to what you told me last night, there have been nine men, six women and two children. We'll start with the children. Tell me about those visions."

Kalesia winced. After the visions of the children's violent deaths, she'd been physically ill for several days. The unfairness of their deaths, the fact that a child's life could be quenched without a second thought, hit her like the pain of a broken bone. Only this pain refused to heal and go away.

She rubbed sweaty palms on the thighs of her jeans, wishing she could rub the guilt away as easily. Although she knew the children were already beyond help by the time she saw their broken little bodies, she couldn't rid herself of the notion she had not done enough. She began.

By the time lunch had come and gone, a vicious pain throbbed behind her right eye. Each memory Gabriel pulled from her, some she'd thought impossible to remember

after so many years, became a shard of glass in her skull. By the time late afternoon was throwing long shadows on the immaculate lawn, Kalesia was certain she was going to throw up. Bile burned the back of her throat.

Gabriel Steele had to be the most insensitive, unfeeling man she'd ever had the misfortune to meet. Like his name, the man had a heart of steel. He didn't seem to care that these were real people, dead, their murders all but forgotten. He prodded, he poked, his tone so damned dispassionate.

"Did you keep track of the outcome of the murders?"

A serrated edge of anguish knifed through her. "Yes, I did." She hugged her stomach. "All but four were solved."

Gabriel sat forward, suddenly alert. "Which four?"

Something in his voice made her sit up straighter on the sofa. "The little boy, the woman I saw in a limestone quarry, the man found three years ago and the one a year later. Why? Do you really think one of them might have a bearing on the vision of my death?" Sweet mercy, she hoped so. Horrible as it was, she preferred it to random chance.

Gabriel hesitated before nodding. "It's a possibility. At this stage of the game anything is possible. There is a very real chance it will turn out to be a blind alley," he warned. "I'll give Tom a call and see what he can find out about your unsolved visions. I need to call anyway, to see if he found out anything about the break-in."

"When did you call Major Harley?" Kalesia asked, surprised.

"Last night, while you were settling in. I didn't see much point in him getting an officer over there. I doubt the intruder was sloppy enough to leave prints. Besides, there was very little evidence to point to unlawful entry." He shrugged.

Kalesia had no trouble getting his meaning. "You mean you doubt the cops would believe anything had occurred."

"As I said, the perp left very little evidence. Don't take it so personally."

"Don't take it personally? It's not your life being threatened!"

"Neither is yours. Yet." He stood, stretched, then walked toward the doorway.

"Gee, thanks for the words of encouragement, Mr. Steele. I feel much better," she said tartly. Oddly enough, the headache was gone.

Gabriel grinned over his shoulder. "You're welcome."

Struck by the sight of his smile, Kalesia forgot to follow right away.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I have another favor to ask." Gabriel took a sip of coffee that nearly scalded his mouth. He set the mug down on the kitchen counter. He really needed to cut back on the stuff.

"Before this is through, you're gonna owe me big-time, Gabe. I don't usually go around making inquiries for a crime that hasn't even been officially reported."

"Quit complaining. It's your own damn fault." Gabriel felt a flash of amusement as the other man's sigh came through loud and clear on the phone.

"Yeah, so you've already told me. Sending her your way seemed like such a good idea at the time. But you're the one who needs a little chaos in your life, not me."

"Tough." Gabriel had no sympathy. "Turn up anything on the break-in?"

Harley became all business. "Not even her next door neighbor, Mrs. Carstairs, saw anything. And I can guarantee that old lady doesn't miss the smallest detail. Sharp. Are you sure it happened? That Ms. Brannigan didn't imagine it?"

"She says it happened and I believe her." Damned if he knew why but he did. "That's why I brought her back with me. Even if her vision was nothing more than a dream, she's safer here than at her house. At least until I can discover what the guy was after."

"So what's the favor?"

"I need you to see what you can dig up on four homicides." There was a long silence at the other end of the phone.

"More visions?" Harley sounded resigned.

"More visions." Gabriel tried another sip of coffee. "I doubt they're connected to Kalesia's vision of her death but I don't want to take any chances." Gabriel rattled off all the details he had, which, when you came down to it, didn't amount to much.

"That all you got?"

Gabriel heard the swinging door to the kitchen open. Kalesia came to a stop beside him and tapped him on the shoulder. "That's it. I'll let you know if I find out more." She hit him again, harder this time. Gabriel turned his head and glared.

"Tell him they should have reports on the murders," she hissed.

He ignored her. "Okay, I appreciate it, Tom." Gabriel hung up.

"Well? What did he have to say? And why didn't you tell him that an officer took a report each time?"

He shrugged. "Tom said he'll look into the matter. And he heard you."

"He had to say more than that."

"He said no one went near your house last night or today," he told her, knowing his short answers were frustrating her.

"And?" Kalesia planted her fists on her hips. Gabriel hid a smile. Here, in the stark white of his kitchen, dressed in a bright yellow shirt and matching jeans, she looked like an infuriated butterfly. Gabriel discovered an unsuspected partiality toward butterflies. She began tapping her toe on the white tile of the floor.

"He said he'd get back to me when he had something."

"Listen here, Gabriel Steele, I have a right to..." She trailed off as a faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Who would have thought you had a sense of humor," she grumbled.

Certainly not him, Gabriel thought as he felt a small shaft of sunlight enter his soul. He bathed in the sensation as he stared down into her eyes. The woman who had entered his life against his will was a kaleidoscope—vivid, ever-changing, vibrant with passion and life.

His humor stilled. He wanted to kiss her. So bad his teeth ached. And that wasn't the only thing aching. His erection pushed against his jeans. Son of a bitch. Hadn't last night taught him anything? Survival instincts fought masculine instincts and lost. Gabriel lowered his head.

The small, inarticulate sound she made went right to his groin.

Gabriel traced the outline of her lips, just barely touching them with the tip of his tongue. She rose on tiptoe, her arms going around his neck, pulling his head down. Her mouth opened beneath his, a silent command to deepen the light caress.

Even as he called himself every name in the book, he obeyed. Her low, incoherent murmur when he slid inside to taste her was as intoxicating as any drug. A groan slipped out.

The woman was dangerous. The more he had, the more he craved. Gabriel prided himself on his control but, kiss by kiss, it started to erode. Gabriel didn't care. That knowledge should scare him. The fact that it didn't should scare him even more, he realized vaguely.

Pulse thundering, lungs laboring, Gabriel finally gave in to the need for oxygen. He pulled back and surveyed Kalesia with satisfaction. Her eyes were heavy-lidded and languid, her lips rosy and damp.

She ruffled the hair at the nape of his neck. "If that's an apology for teasing me, I accept."

Gabriel nudged her head to one side, dropping a tiny kiss under her jaw. "I never apologize," he stated against the warm silk of her skin. Her hair was wound in a thick braid. The style exposed the delicate line of her neck. Unable to resist, Gabriel traced an intricate pattern behind her ear, smiling when she shivered.

"So," she murmured, leaning her head back, her green eyes deep and mysterious, "you never apologize, do you?" She slid her fingers through his hair. The small, surprisingly sensual gesture sent a chill chasing across his skin.

"Never." Gabriel was aware of her gentle amusement but found he didn't mind her laughing at him. The experience was unique and somehow intimate.

"So arrogant," she breathed, brushing her lips across his.

"We're going to have to talk about your clients."

She stiffened.

Son of a bitch. No one could ever accuse him of great timing. He let her go with reluctance when she shifted out of his arms.

"I'll get the files." Kalesia hurried from the kitchen and up the stairs.

Gabriel watched her go, wishing he knew what she was thinking. He rubbed his chest, hoping to soothe the odd ache there.

Kalesia shoved open the kitchen door, an irrational mixture of hurt and anger keeping her temper on edge. "Here." She dropped the large box onto the white wooden table. She sat and stared at her laced fingers.

"Kalesia, I know how hard it was..."

She held up a hand before he could finish. "Don't. You haven't the faintest clue what those files represent to me." She twisted her lips. "I understand why you feel you must go through them and appreciate your efforts. Really, I do. But I still resent the necessity." She made a slashing motion with her hand. "Just leave it alone. You'd never understand. I'm not even sure I do."

"Your clients rely on you. When you say you'll deliver, they don't doubt it for a minute. They trust your word whereas no one else ever has."

Shock jolted Kalesia at the quiet observation. For a moment, she couldn't form a cohesive thought.

"I'm not insisting on looking at the files because I don't trust your word that your clients are not involved but as a matter of being thorough. Of checking all the angles."

When Gabriel held out his hand, Kalesia passed him the first folder, dazed. Even her parents didn't understand her insistence on being taken on her word alone.

But Gabriel did.

A man with shadows and ghosts haunting his eyes, he understood what she had never quite been able to put into words.

## Chapter Five

Images, like a pack of predators, slipped eagerly through the night, seeking a victim to wrap in the echoes of a sanity trapped in life and death combat. Wild, chaotic and totally lacking in substance, like ghosts they teased and tormented with half-formed touches and whispers of pain, betrayal and rage.

And, above it all, hovered an insidious, malignant enjoyment feeding and growing on the swirl of emotions.

Pain.

Screams.

Excitement.

Blood dripped onto the floor from the table, rippling the surface of the dark, ever-spreading pool.

Light glittered and flashed on the thin blade as it was slowly lowered.

Pain. Sudden, shocking, consuming.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia moaned and stirred in her sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nylon circled his wrists, laced up his forearms, pulled his arms tightly behind his back.

Excruciating pain lanced his chest at the intolerable tension on his shoulders. Wave after wave washed over him.

He screamed.

Over and over, his ragged voice bounced amongst the trees, startling a Florida panther, causing a mule deer to twitch its ears in fright before bounding deeper into the forest.

He was on his knees.

Moonlight filtered down through the pine. The clean, crisp resin fragrance hung heavy in the moist, night air. Inhaling deeply, his starved lungs flooded with the dark peaty scent of a bog.

An ant crawled up his thigh. Sweat trickled down his breastbone.

Hot.

Humid.

Fear.

It permeated the night, hung motionlessly on the still air, soaked him as he squinted up at his captor.

Dirt filled his mouth as he was forced, face down, in the loose soil.

Beneath his cheek, he felt the tiny tickle of another ant, then a sudden sharp sting.

Shrouded by shadows, the second man knelt and slowly slid his forefinger over the bound man's cheek. First the left, then the right.

The small caliber bullet exploded in his brain.

The second man smiled and picked up a shovel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia gasped for air, unable to breathe for the dirt filling her mouth. Scrambling to her knees, arms wrapped tightly around her midriff, she forced herself to take slow, controlled breaths. Her heart was pounding so hard, it was making her sick to her stomach. She reached up and touched her temple, her hand shaking. The phantom pain nearly blinded her.

Sweet mercy, not another one.

The dark closed in on her. The smell of terror and fear permeated the room. Bile burned her throat. Out. She had to get out. Out of bed. Out of the room.

Almost leaping from the bed, pausing just long enough to grab her robe from the foot of the bed, she yanked the door open. Once in the hallway, some of her panic faded, allowing her to think. She really didn't want to be alone. Damn, she wished Gabriel hadn't insisted the cats sleep in the laundry room. Times like this, she missed their warmth, their weight, curled next to her. She eyed the closed door next to her room, shifting from one foot to the other as she weighed her options.

She chewed on her bottom lip. After that kiss this afternoon, maybe it would be better if she just went downstairs and fixed herself something hot to drink.

Safer, in any case.

Anyway, she doubted Gabriel would believe her. He'd made his reservations obvious, despite his willingness to help. Could she bear it if she saw that look of disbelief in his eyes tonight?

She pulled on the robe, tightening it. No. Not tonight. Not with Gabriel. Once before a man had nearly destroyed her with his disbelief. Instinct warned her it would be infinitely worse if Gabriel were to deny her ability again.

She couldn't chance it.

Her decision made, she crept downstairs, taking care to make as little noise as possible.



Unfamiliar with his kitchen, she switched on the light and searched for the ingredients for hot chocolate. Kalesia winced at the over-loud sound of the cabinet door closing. She paused, listening. When the house remained quiet, she breathed a silent sigh of relief.

She went about combining the cocoa, sugar and milk. As she set the pan on the burner, she let the familiar routine soothe her. Somehow, it never failed to comfort her. Tonight she desperately needed that comfort.

A cup of cocoa in her hand, Kalesia turned from the counter and nearly dropped the mug of steaming liquid. Gabriel stood in the darkened doorway, his shirt half-buttoned, one shoulder propped on the doorjamb.

"Couldn't sleep?"

His voice was low and raspy. Kalesia wished he wouldn't sound so concerned. She wished even more that she didn't remember the hot and intense taste of him earlier.

She cleared her throat and tried for a nonchalant tone. "Just restless. I thought something hot might cal—relax me." She groaned inwardly. So much for sounding casual, the tremor in her voice revealed just how tightly her emotions were wound. More than anything, she wanted to walk into Gabriel's arms and have them close about her. She wanted to forget what she had seen.

His eyes went to her hands. Kalesia became aware she was holding the mug as if it were a lifeline. She forced her fingers to relax. He straightened away from the doorway.

"Got enough of that cocoa for two?" He went to the cupboard and took down a cup without waiting for her answer. He poured the last of the hot drink and set the pan in the sink after filling it with water. "Since we're both awake, we might as well keep each other company," he said, snapping off the light and leading the way into the living room.

He didn't bother turning the light on and Kalesia was thankful. Gabriel was too observant and she felt too fragile to keep up the pretense that there was nothing was wrong. Curled up on the sofa, she'd just taken a fortifying sip when he spoke.

"Why do you need to calm down?"

Kalesia choked on the mouthful of hot chocolate. "W-what?" she sputtered.

"I asked why you needed to calm down." He sat there in the shadows, staring at her over the rim of the cup, with the infinite patience of a hunter.

Kalesia thought about lying and then decided he would see through the attempt. "I had another vision," she stated baldly.

"About your murder?" he asked in a noncommittal tone.

"No." Her teeth chattered against the side of the mug as she took another sip. Kalesia hastily lowered it. "No," she repeated, "it wasn't my death I saw."

"Tell me," he ordered.

Kalesia shot a glance in his direction, straining to make out his features. "Why?"

"I need to know."

"Why?" she asked again, unable to banish the hurt and wariness caused by the memory of Gabriel calling her a flake that first night.

"Because to help you, I have to understand what it is you see."

"You believe me, then? When I say I have visions of other people's murders? You made your opinion of visions and of me, clear."

"I don't disbelieve you," Gabriel qualified.

Her mouth twisted. Well, at least he wasn't calling her a flake again. Kalesia set aside the cooling liquid.

"This time was so strange," she began slowly. "It started out smudged, more emotion than detail. Yet there was something about it that, I don't know, felt familiar. Then it changed."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, at first I had the impression of a man and a table and blood. Lots of blood. On the man, on the table, on the floor. I could make out a knife." She frowned. "At least I think it was a knife. Oh, I'm not sure what it was. It's so hard to explain. The images were like a grainy tintype which has sat neglected in a closet for years."

Gabriel set the mug down on the small table beside his chair with great care. "That's different from what you normally see?"

"Oh, yes. While what I see often makes little sense, the images are crystal clear. It's like looking at photographs taken out of time. Sometimes they're in motion, sometimes they're stills. But they are always very crisp." Far too clear for comfort.

"You said at first. What did you mean?" He leaned forward, propping his elbows on his spread knees and clasping his hands between them.

The casual pose didn't fool her in the slightest. She had his full attention.

"I tried to wake up when I realized what was happening." She moistened her lips. "I almost succeeded." She shook off the memory and continued. "It's weird. One moment I got the definite impression of a room but the next I was in a forest." Frustrated, she rubbed her temples. "I don't know. Maybe the room was in a nearby cabin."

"But you don't think so."

"No, I don't think so."

"Tell me what you remember of the second man, the one in the forest."

"Pain. He was in so much pain. His hands were tied behind his back. So tight," she swallowed the lump in her throat, "I could feel the muscles in his chest ripping from the tension of his bonds. He was kneeling in the dirt. The man holding the gun made him put his face on the ground. Then he shot him." She stared at the wall but Kalesia didn't see the bland white wall. Leather shoes filled her vision. Dirt crusted her lips. Expensive cologne vied with the earthy scent of the forest at night.

"It's okay, sugar. You're here. With me. I won't let anyone hurt you."

She became aware of the soothing cadence of Gabriel's voice murmuring in her ear, of his arms wrapped around her as if he'd never let her go. His hand stroked over her hair, his touch soft as the brush of a dragonfly's wing. The fresh, male scent of Gabriel replaced cloying cologne. Leather became denim. Kalesia closed her eyes and absorbed the heat and strength of his body. Finally, she relaxed. For the first time since childhood, since before the visions, she felt safe. She was grateful that Gabriel sensed her need for silence. Seemed content to hold her, to move his hand over her head and down the length of her braid. Over and over.

She wanted to stay that way forever.

A tiny sigh shuddered out. But she couldn't. Head feeling too heavy for her neck, Kalesia tilted her head back so she could look into his eyes.

"What are we going to do now?"

"We're going to see Harley first thing in the morning." His palm shaped the back of her head and exerted just enough pressure to snuggle her face back in the hollow of his throat.

"He won't believe me," she told him flatly.

"He will this time."

"How can you be so sure?" She tried to move so she could see his face. He tightened his hold. She settled back down. Why fight what you want, she told herself, putting her arms around his waist.

"I can be very persuasive."

That was an understatement, she thought with a spurt of weak humor.

"Do you have any idea where the murder took place?"

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against the soft denim shirt. "The Ocala National Forest."

"That's a pretty damn big area to cover."

"I think I can narrow it down." She slipped her hand in the half-open shirt and rested her hand on the swell of pectoral muscle. If flexed beneath her palm. Unable to resist, she petted the hard muscles of his chest. She wanted to purr. His skin was like warm, raw silk. She bit a protest when he covered her hand with his, preventing her from exploring further. After a long moment, she whispered, "Gabriel?"

"Hmm?"

"I wish they were just dreams. Nightmares. It would be so much easier. Dreams I could handle."

## Chapter Six

Something tightened inside Gabriel at the fervent wish.

*Keep your mouth shut. Never let another person see inside you. Remember the creed that kept you alive?*

"Don't bet on it," he countered harshly, unable to stop himself. "Dreams gnaw at a man." *Stop before you say something that can't be taken back. Before you make her too curious, have her asking questions you dare not answer.* "They probe for fine fault lines in the nether regions of the mind so they can slip in faces, places and events better forgotten."

Despair filled Gabriel. Why now? Why lose control now? Was it because he knew intimately the fine thread sanity hung by in dreams that were more than dreams? Knew that the tapestry of the past walked the night to haunt the present and make a mockery of the future?

A fine sheen of sweat popped out on his brow. He wrapped her braid around his hand until his knuckles shone white.

Able to handle dreams? A bitter smile shaped his mouth.

He was an expert on dreams. Dreams that slipped into a man's mind the way a blade slid into flesh...easily and without resistance. A man wouldn't even know he was bleeding until he looked down and saw the blood pooling at his feet.

Maybe he'd be doing her a service if he disabused her of the notion that dreams were better than visions.

"Dreams aren't easier to handle. Sometimes, they're infinitely harder. They play the past over and over, so vividly that a man would do anything rather than fall asleep."

"Is that what they do to you?"

Gabriel refused to answer. Instead he asked a question of his own. "Why do you think dreams would be easier?"

"Because then I wouldn't have to worry whether this time someone will believe me. Because dreams wouldn't chase away someone I..." Her words trailed away, leaving a fraught silence.

Someone I love, he finished silently. It left a sour taste in his mouth. "Who did you chase away?"

Kalesia stirred. "I-I'd rather not talk about it."

"Who did you chase away?" he pressed, the knot in the pit of his stomach beginning to burn.

She tugged on her braid, freeing it and got to her feet. Her arms went around her waist in a protective gesture. "I said I don't want to talk about it. And don't push. You don't have the right," she said, her voice tight.

"The hell I don't. I'm trying to save your life."

"What does that have to do with any previous relationships?" she demanded.

*Nothing. Everything.*

"Haven't you ever considered the possibility that he might be behind the threat on your life?" There had been a man. Gabriel tried to tell himself that Kalesia was a grown woman. That it was only natural she had loved before. The idea shouldn't bother him but it damn well did.

"Why should he?" She rounded on him. "He walked out on me!"

"Why?"

"Because I was naïve enough to share one of my visions, that's why. Satisfied? Believe me, once I confided in him he couldn't get out of the relationship fast enough. Last I heard," she said with strained casualness, "he had married. A nice, normal woman."

Not making eye contact, she made for the stairs. "Look, it's getting late. Since we have to get up early to see Major Harley, I think I'll go to bed."

Gabriel watched as she disappeared upstairs. What the hell had he expected? Kalesia had very high fences around the issue of her ability.

Even knowing that, he hadn't been able to resist, needing to know everything about this woman. She was driving him fucking crazy.

Then, slowly, a smile curved his lips. Her lover was married. The fucking idiot had actually left Kalesia for another woman. Satisfaction, instant and fierce, welled.

Only to have a cold chill douse it just as quickly. What did she feel toward the man now? Pain had glittered in her eyes. Did she still carry a torch for the jerk? Did she lay in bed at night remembering and yearning for his kisses and caresses?

The image made him growl.

If she was going to lie in bed and yearn for anyone's touch, it was going to be his. He remembered the feel of her hot sheath, the smell of her arousal as she set his every nerve ending on fire. He'd make damn sure of that. He'd seduce his redheaded witch with sweet words until she couldn't remember the son of a bitch's name.

Shit, who was he kidding. He'd never been any good with sweet words. A knife, a pistol, a rifle, his hands, but not with the hot, sweet words needed to lower a witch's guard enough to let a man crawl in beside her and warm himself at her fire.

His hand closed into a fist, then slowly opened.

Gabriel put one foot on the first stair tread. It was for the best. The last thing Kalesia deserved in her life was him.

Dear God, he wished it could be different.

At the top of stairs, he paused, staring at Kalesia's closed door.

Wished he could be different.

He shook his head. Too late for that. Years too late. Better keep his mind on the matter at hand. He'd find the killer in Kalesia's vision and then send her back home. Safe. Untainted. From the killer.

From him.

He crossed the few steps to his door, entered and closed it firmly behind him. Not pausing, he went directly to the French doors and stepped out onto the balcony.

Gabriel sank down in the white rattan chair and propped his feet on the rail. The soft shirr of crickets made a familiar song as he rocked the chair back onto two legs and stared at the stars.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I hate police stations." Kalesia dragged on Gabriel's arm, trying to slow him. It was like a Volkswagen Beetle trying to slow a freight train.

"It's not a police station. It's a sheriff's office," he returned. "Quit stalling. You have more excuses than Carter has little liver pills." His grip tightened on her arm and he pulled her along with implacable intent.

"Talk about splitting hairs. You know perfectly well what I mean," she grumbled, nearly running to keep up with his longer stride.

He slanted her an amused glance but didn't slow until he stopped at a desk and leaned a hip against it. "Harley in?"

Deputy Gary Parker looked up from the report he was typing. A wide grin split his face. "Gabriel! Where the hell have you been, man? It's been months."

"Working."

Gary shook his head. "When you gonna learn that all work and no play makes Gabe a hermit?"

"Figured out the difference between English ivy and poison ivy, yet?"

A bright red flush stained the young man's face. Kalesia forgot her own complaint and stared, fascinated.

"Ah, hell. Ain't you ever gonna let me live that down?" The young deputy squirmed under her interested stare.

Kalesia turned to Gabriel, one brow raised in question. "Poison ivy?"

Gabriel just smiled slightly and settled more securely on the edge of the desk.

She turned to Deputy Parker. "Well? Is someone going to tell me?"

Parker ran a finger under the edge of his buttoned down collar. He cleared his throat. "Uh, well. The department needed three people to go undercover in a landscaping business. I, uh, I volunteered." Deputy Parker began to look uncomfortable.

"What he means is that he wanted to get close to Deputy Bailey. Deputy Janet Bailey."

"Yeah, well. As I was saying, I volunteered. Major Harley sent me, Janet and Pompano out to Gabe's for enough training to pass muster." He shot Gabriel an aggrieved glance. "How the hell was I supposed to know it was poison ivy? I'm a city boy. We don't have poison ivy in Portland, Oregon."

"How the hell was I supposed to know you were trying to impress Bailey with your nonexistent knowledge of plants?" Gabriel shot back.

Laughter bubbled up. "I think I'm beginning to get the picture. Was it very bad?" she asked sympathetically.

"He waded into a patch, waist-deep and began pulling it out by handfuls." Gabriel lifted one sardonic brow. "He landed in the hospital."

Swallowing her laughter, Kalesia managed to keep her face straight. "And Deputy Bailey? Did you manage to impress her?"

Gary shook his head ruefully but mischief twinkled in his eyes. "Not exactly. I think she was afraid to let me loose on my own. According to her, she agreed to marry me just to keep me out of trouble."

Gabriel toyed with a pencil on the desk. "So. Is Harley in?"

Gary Parker grimaced. "Yeah, he's in but he's not going to be in a very good mood. He's got a bigwig in his office now."

"Trouble?"

"Nah. Senator Morne's out stompin' again and he wants local law endorsement. Looks good to the voters when you're trying to promote yourself as big on crime. If you ask me, the man's got bigger plans than Florida on his agenda."

"How long before they finish?"

"Reckon anytime now." Parker turned as Harley's door opened.

"Thank you for your time, Major. I'm sure you understand that I need all the support I can garner when that bill goes to the floor."

Tall, with a stern, distinguished face, Senator Morne shook hands with Tom Harley, a practiced smile on his face. He practically exuded power, from the expensive cufflinks to the discreet hint of a gold watch peeking from beneath the custom-tailored cashmere jacket sleeve.

Kalesia watched as he patted Major Harley on the shoulder then, looking neither left nor right, swept down the hallway, giving the impression of an important man on his way to important places. Trailing behind was a small entourage.

A smile tilted the corner of her mouth. Already acting like a future president. He wouldn't give her the time of day unless a camera was trained on her.

She saw a tall, thin man hurry to open the door for the Senator.

Maybe not even then.

Harley grabbed Kalesia's attention when he motioned her and Gabriel inside his office.

Seated behind his desk, Harley leaned back and released an exasperated sigh. "Politicians. They all seemed to think the world revolves around them." He propped an ankle over his knee, his intelligent brown eyes going first to Kalesia and then to Gabriel. "So, what can I do for you?"

"I need you to institute a search for a murder victim."

"Gabe, I haven't had time to search down the old case files of even one of the four you gave me. Hell, man, you just called me yesterday."

"You got time to search for a body?" Gabriel asked, eyeing his friend sardonically.

Harley's foot crashed to the floor. "On what evidence?" he asked, his tone ominous.

"Kalesia."

"Dammit, Gabe. You know I can't do that. If word got out that I wasted man-hours searching for a body on the say-so of a dream, my ass would be out the door before you could whistle Dixie."

"I believe her."

That stopped Harley mid-protest. He stared at Gabriel. "You can't be serious." He seemed to realize how that sounded and turned to Kalesia. "Look, I don't mean to sound harsh, Miss Brannigan but I can't turn men out just because you have a dream."

"You owe me, Harley."

The major's attention snapped back to Gabriel. "Don't pull that on me, Gabe. We're friends but the department doesn't need the publicity it'll get when word leaks out we're conducting a search purely on the say-so of a psychic."

"How about when word gets out the department sat on the information of a murder?"

"You wouldn't." Harley held up a hand. "Forget I asked. Of course you would."

"Gabriel!" Kalesia protested as Harley's anger fairly radiated from the man.

"One way or the other, I'm going to check out Kalesia's vision. I'd prefer to have your help." Something passed between the two men. To Kalesia's relief, Harley's anger faded.

"You can really be a cold SOB when you want to be," Harley said, a slight quirk at the corner of his mouth. "Okay. I'll go along with you. Give me everything you've got."

When Harley finished questioning Kalesia, he tapped the pencil against the yellow legal pad. Abruptly, he shoved to his feet. "Wait here. I'll go arrange for the manpower."

As soon as the door shut behind Harley, Kalesia rounded on Gabriel. "I can't believe you blackmailed an officer of the law," she berated him, outraged.

"Remember that old saying 'careful what you wish for, you might get it'?" Gabriel grinned lazily. "You got it."



"Well, I certainly didn't want to break the law to get someone to check out my visions!" Kalesia fretted, darting a black look in his direction.

"You didn't," he pointed out, much too sanguine for Kalesia's liking. "I did."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you mean, I can't go?"

Harley glanced at Gabriel for help, before turning back to her. Kalesia planted her hands firmly on her hips.

"This is official business. I can't take you."

"You won't find the murder victim unless I go along." She started tapping her toe. First they wouldn't believe her and now they seemed determined not to let her help.

"I have a general location from your description."

"And just how big is the Ocala National Forest, Major?" Kalesia asked sweetly.

Harley again glanced at Gabriel. He glared when Gabriel just shrugged and leaned indolently against the wall. Harley cleared his throat. "Look, Ms. Brannigan. This is going to be hard in more ways than one. To begin with, I have a limited number of deputies with me. Secondly, it's starting to pour out there and is unlikely to let up any time soon. Most of our searching will have to be done on foot or horseback. It'll be miserable going. Lastly, if we do find the victim, it's not likely to be a pretty sight."

Kalesia snorted in exasperation. "To begin with," she copied the major's words deliberately, "without me you won't have the foggiest clue where to search. Secondly, last I checked, I don't melt in a little rain. And, thirdly, you forget I saw the man get murdered. I know just how ugly it's going to be." She matched him stubborn frown for stubborn frown.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Harley muttered. He went out the door, shaking his head. "Backed down by a woman dressed head to toe in yellow."

Kalesia glared at the major's back before allowing a slow smile of triumph to curve her lips. She'd won. For the first time since the visions started when she was five, someone was taking her seriously. Gabriel slid his hand under her arm. She looked up at him.

"Thank you." Putting her hands on his chest, acutely aware of his strength and warmth beneath her palms, she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.

His eyes darkened. He touched his cheek with the tips of his fingers. "See if you still want to thank me if we find the body." With that, he steered her out the door and into a late model SUV.

Rain, punctuated by booming thunder, pelted down on the roof of the four-wheel drive cruiser, making conversation difficult as they crawled along a dirt road over an hour later. Not that she particularly wanted to talk, Kalesia thought, watching the windshield wipers lose the battle against the downpour. Mud splashed the windshield as they bounced into another deep rut. Actually, more a path than a road.

The utility vehicle slid sideways as the tires struggled to find purchase in the slick mud. Kalesia braced one arm on the dashboard and the other on Gabriel's thigh, grateful for the strong arm he wrapped around her. Beside her, Harley grunted as he fought the wheel to keep the vehicle on the track.

"Are you sure this is the right way?"

It was the third time Harley had asked. Each time his voice grew grimmer. He glanced in the rearview mirror as he asked, checking the progress of the other three vehicles. Kalesia's throat constricted. He was on the verge of calling it off. She knew he was. If Gabriel hadn't been with them, Harley would have turned back already.

Before she had chance to answer, Harley suddenly slammed on the brakes.

"Dammit! I knew this was going to happen!" He piled out of the Suburban with Gabriel not far behind.

"Stay here."

Kalesia ignored Gabriel's order and scrambled after them.

The last vehicle, towing a stock trailer with two saddled horses, was stuck in the same rut that had given them so much trouble. The front, driver's side tire of the four-horse trailer was mired down, causing the front end of the Ford pickup to lift partially off the ground. Not a four-wheel drive, the truck couldn't get the traction it needed to free itself because of the weight of the horses combined with the depth of the hole.

The trio sloshed back to the helpless vehicle, rain pouring off their slickers.

"We need to unload the horses," someone said.

"No, we don't." It was the driver of the Ford, a member of the Volunteer Mounted Sheriff's Posse. "If we move them to the back of the trailer, we can use their weight to help jack up the front end."

A gust of wind slanted the rain directly in their faces. The men looked even more resigned but Kalesia was unhappily aware they all knew they were out here because of her.

"What can I do to help?" Her voice was small and thin. She wished she had kept her mouth shut when everyone turned toward her.

Harley must have recognized the misery in her eyes, because his voice was gentle when he spoke. "No reason for you to be out in this. Why don't you go ahead and wait in the Suburban."

Kalesia thrust her chin out. "I would really like to help," she insisted, his understanding having the perverse effect of making her feel worse.

"Don't sweat it, Ms. Brannigan," the driver of the mired vehicle said. "There's a covered campsite a couple of miles ahead. Why don't you let Major Harley take you there? No sense in you getting any wetter than need be. Fact is, all but a couple of you can go on ahead. I just need two guys to lift the trailer enough to get some boards under the wheel. After we're done, they can hitch a ride with Vince and me. That way, if we run into any more problems, we'll have enough muscle."

Thirty minutes later a wooden structure, open on three sides, came into view. Inside were two long trestle tables and four large grills. At each open end was a covered garbage can anchored by a thick chain.

"Well, shall we wait in there?" Harley asked.

Huddled under the overhang with the men, Kalesia gazed into the surrounding woods. Slash pine and scrub oak came to within several feet of the shelter. Sparse clumps of long spindly grass were interspersed amongst the trees. Kalesia didn't recognize the grass. She bet Gabriel would know, though.

Overhead, light gray clouds scuttled beneath darker, more ominous ones. Lightning split the sky, followed almost immediately by a low, prolonged rumble that echoed eerily from tree to tree.

A chill went through her.

"Cold?" Arms enfolded her from behind and Gabriel's warm breath whispered in her ear. She shivered again, this time for an entirely different reason.

"Not really. More like someone stepping on my grave."

"Not while I'm around."

"I know." And she did. If there was one sure bet in this world, it was that Gabriel Steele would do his level best to keep her safe.

So why did she suddenly feel so scared?

"It won't be long before we'll be back home."

"Does that mean I have to give up my slicker?" Kalesia asked with a deliberate whimsical lilt. She was being silly. Gabriel would protect her. He'd said so. It was probably nothing more than the storm-darkened skies that made it seem a pall hung over everything.

"Cold and clammy as it is, I thought you'd be glad to get out of the thing."

"But it's such a lovely color," Kalesia said, only half-joking, stroking the canary yellow material. "Couldn't I keep it?"

Gabriel threw back his head and laughed, seeming unmindful of the startled looks he received. "You're probably the only woman on the face of this earth that thinks a sheriff's slicker is 'lovely'." A deep chuckle rumbled against her shoulder blades.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well, what?"

"Will you ask Major Harley if I can keep it?"

"Ask him yourself." He rested his chin on the top of her head, rubbing his jaw against her hair like a contented tomcat.

"I couldn't do that!" she objected, scandalized. Ask Major Harley for Department property after dragging him out in the rain? No way. She fingered the sleeve. She really would like to keep the slicker. "He's your friend, Gabriel," Kalesia reminded him. "Please," she added for good measure.

He shook his head, exasperated. "And if he says no?"

"Blackmail him. You seem really good at that," she reminded him, her voice just a shade too sweet.

"Sit," he commanded, pointing at one end of the bench. "And don't move." He shook his head. "The things I do for you," he muttered as he headed in Harley's direction.

She sat.

Agony exploded in her brain...

Pain.

Betrayal.

Such a fool.

Black Italian loafers filled his vision. They gleamed. He wondered how he managed to keep the dust off them. It was so very dry. Little puffs of dust marked each footstep.

With an effort, he lifted his head off the rough wood.

He couldn't move.

The pain in his head was excruciating.

He'd been such a fool to think he was in control, to believe he was safe because he was feared.

He should have been more careful.

"Steele! Get over here quick!"

The shout brought Gabriel's head around with a snap. His heart stopped beating in his chest when he saw Kalesia pitch head first onto the dirt floor.

"Kalesia!" Gabriel wasn't aware of his roar as he raced to her side.

He rolled her over gently. Her face was dead white. In the hollow of her throat, a pulse beat frantically.

"Kalesia, wake up. Come on, sugar, wake up." He patted her cheeks. He looked up and pinned the nearest man in place with a glare. "What the hell happened?"

The man looked almost as shaken as Gabriel felt. "I don't know. I saw her as we were arriving. One second she was sitting, the next stiffening up like she was having some kind of a seizure."

"Back up. Give her some air. She's coming around." Harley's words brought Gabriel's gaze back to Kalesia. Sure enough, her lashes were fluttering and, beneath the closed lids, her eyes flickered.

"That's it, sweetheart. Wake up now."

"Gabriel?" The words were raspy and dry. She looked startled at the sea of faces hovering over her and struggled to sit up.

"Shh, easy does it. Take your time." A hand at her back, he helped her. Using his knee as a brace, he cradled her against his shoulder.

"What happened?" She leaned into him, letting him support her weight.

"You passed out. Can you tell me what happened?" He hugged her tighter, his heart just starting to settle down to a normal pace.

She stared at him. "Impossible. I never faint!"

"You did this time. What happened, Kalesia?" he insisted, too disturbed to care what he was revealing to the men surrounding them.

A deep spasm ran through her. "Oh God, Gabriel, I had another vision!"

"You mean another murder?" It was Harley who asked.

She shook her head fretfully. "No, no. It was the same man. He was sitting there," her finger shook violently as she pointed to where she had been sitting. "Someone came up behind him and hit him on the head!" Her voice rose shrilly. She bit her lip, obviously fighting for control. After a minute she continued.

"It was someone he knew. Someone he expected. There was such a sense of betrayal...and self-recrimination."

"Self-recrimination?" That didn't make a lot of sense. Betrayal, fear, confusion, those Gabriel could understand but not self-recrimination.

"I think they were working together. At least, that's the impression I got."

"What else do you remember? Think carefully, Kalesia. Every detail could be important."

"Shoes," she said suddenly. "Shoes. I remember the other man's shoes. They were black and expensive. The shine on them was perfect."

They were all quiet for a moment. Gabriel broke the silence.

"In your first vision, do you remember seeing the same shoes?"

Kalesia closed her eyes, her brow crinkling. "The killer moved next to the body. He crouched as he ran his finger over first one cheek and then the other." Her hand gripped Gabriel's, her short, neat nails biting into his skin. "Yes! Yes, I do. Moonlight glinted off shoes in my vision."

"What did they look like in that vision? Were they shiny or dull?"

"Shiny. Almost as shiny as they were here."

Harley spoke up. "Take her home, Gabe. We'll take over from here."

"I'm not going anywhere. You still need my help," she contended, shooting a desperate glance at Gabriel.

Her look of betrayal slashed through him when he agreed with Harley. He tried to lessen the blow. "You passed out. You need time to recover. Let them handle it from here."

"I'm fine. How are they going to find the body without me?" She shoved at his chest. Reluctantly, he loosened his hold.

"They'll find the body. We know he didn't go very far because his shoes weren't dusty. That limits the search range." Gabriel tried to sound reasonable. He could tell by the set of her mouth that Kalesia wasn't in the mood to be reasonable.

"Hey, Major. Take a look at this." All heads turned.

Harley crossed to where his deputy crouched. On the underside of the wooden table was a small patch of what could be dried blood. He got to his feet, careful not to disturb the area any more than it already had been.

"Hansen, radio for a forensic team. Oh, and get hold of Charlie and tell him to bring his dog. Then take Steele and Ms. Brannigan back to town so they can pick up their car."

"Major Harley..." Kalesia pleaded.

"No argument." His expression softened. "Let me do my job."

Gabriel squeezed her shoulders in warning. "You'll let us know when you find something?" he said to his friend.

"The minute." Harley turned away, his attention already elsewhere.

"Gabriel, I don't want to go home. I want to stay here." She shrugged his arm off. "It isn't fair. I can be of help."

"Harley will let us know what he finds. You can't just ignore the fact you fainted."

"It was just the shock of the vision. It won't happen again."

"You can't be certain of that. The vision caught you by surprise this time, what's to say it wouldn't again." He allowed a hint of impatience to color his low tones.

"It won't," she maintained. "I think I reacted so strongly because of the resonance left by his presence. It triggered my vision. It's the first time I've actually been at the scene of one the crimes."

"That's exactly what I'm driving at. Look," Gabriel gripped her chin and firmly turned her face to his. "It overpowered you when the violence was comparatively minor. What do you think would happen if you stumbled onto his grave? Hell, what do you think would happen if you found the exact spot where the killer pulled the trigger?"

Long lashes lowered, extinguishing the defiant, pleading gleam in her eyes. She sighed in defeat. "All right, Gabriel. We'll go back to your house."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tipped back in his favorite chair, Gabriel stared at the night-shrouded river. Kalesia was withdrawing from him. He could feel it. He closed his eyes against the unexpected pain.

His right hand fisted and then slowly opened.

He knew she was feeling as resentful as hell because they had not allowed her to help with the search. Hell, maybe she even had a point. Maybe she did have the right to

be there when they found the body. All he knew was that when he saw her white face and haunted eyes, he wanted to bundle her up and promise nothing would ever frighten her again.

She'd shrugged off his attempts to explain. Just pled weariness and headed without a backward glance toward her room.

Alone.

The creak of bedsprings carried clearly on the night air. Gabriel glanced at the open window just feet away, a self-derisive grimace twisting his lips. A drape fluttered in the light breeze. No light showed but it didn't stop his imagination.

Just like last night. He had sat out here on the balcony and listened to the small sounds from the woman in the next room.

She made him feel like a damn voyeur.

A strand of night jasmine, trailing down from the hanging pot over his head, swayed in the breeze. He reached up and moved it, taking care not to bruise the soft petals. The sweet, pungent fragrance mingled with the fresh cool scent of the river, spinning a sensual web around his senses. Hunger swirled to life as its exotic scent reminded him inexplicably of Kalesia.

Gabriel shifted, irritated. Son of a bitch. He didn't need this again tonight. It was a wonder he wasn't walking permanently hunched over. The damn woman was going to cripple him yet.

She'd be wild. Passion would make her bottle-green eyes luminous. His mouth went dry as he pictured her nails raking his back, her legs wrapped around his waist.

He shook his head to dispel the image.

Gabriel cursed long and fluently when the fantasy refused to go away. Hell, if she learned how much he craved her, the touch of her mouth and hands on his body, the feel of her moving under him, he'd be handing her a power over him he had never allowed anyone.

The front legs of the chair thudded to the wood floor. He got to his feet. In the hallway, Gabriel told himself that he had the strength to resist even as he came to a stop in front of Kalesia's door, his hand on the knob. Turn around. Leave. Now. His hand clamped down on the doorknob as Gabriel argued with himself. If he left now, Kalesia need never know. All he had to do was return to his room.

The doorknob turned quietly under his grip.

He was just going to check on her, he justified silently. See if she was all right. She'd been upset earlier.

Gabriel padded silently across the room. He noticed with a sense of relief that the drapes weren't drawn.

He was just going to make sure she was safe, he told himself again as he came to a halt beside her sleeping form.

Staring down at her, Gabriel admitted to himself that he'd lied. He wanted to do more than check on her. Much more. He wanted to crawl in bed beside her, hold her, shape her gently rounded form with his hands. He wanted to be inside her. So deep inside he could forget, even if only for an hour.

Forget the faces, forget the blood, forget the taste of pain.

Kalesia stirred, her lashes lifting. She blinked sleepily, then asked huskily, "What's the matter?"

"I can't sleep." Gabriel closed his eyes in despair. It wasn't what he wanted to say.



## Chapter Seven

Kalesia's eyes slowly focused. Silvery light gleamed off a sleek flank.

Gabriel was naked.

Her gaze slid up. Etched on his face was a kind of agony.

She lifted the covers.

Gabriel went perfectly still, then came to her in a rush. "God, I need you so much tonight."

She closed her arms about him, feeling, but not fully understanding, the urgency pulsing through the hard, strong body. All she could do was respond to it. It'd be easier to stop breathing than to say no to this man tonight.

"I shouldn't be here," he muttered against her throat, his mouth tasting, teasing, nipping the sensitive area.

Luxuriating in the gently savage caress, her head fell back. Her hands explored the massive shoulders. She sensed the internal struggle going on within Gabriel and asked, "Why are you?"

"I couldn't help myself."

The undercurrent of disgust that laced the words caught her attention. Knowledge, sharp and clear, burst forth from where it had been hovering on the edge of her awareness.

Gabriel patterned his entire life on the concept of control.

Looking back, she grasped the undertone of his initial rejection. Her talk of visions was the antithesis of everything he valued. Visions couldn't be fitted into nice, comfortable niches. They couldn't be controlled.

Kalesia contemplated the alluring picture of Gabriel out of control.

"I don't want you to be able to help yourself," she murmured, tasting the hot skin of his chest. She wanted him caught in the same welter of emotions that snared her.

He lifted his mouth from her neck and stared down at her. "Oh no, you don't, witch. You're going to be the one unable to help themselves. I'm going to fuck you until all you can see, feel or think about is me. I want to hear you beg to take me inside you. Trust me, Kalesia. Just hold on and leave everything to me." One large hand shaped the soft fullness of her breast. He brushed the roughened pad of his thumb over the nipple.

Kalesia arched beneath the light caress. A delicious ache began in the pit of her stomach as his mouth and hands began to work magic on her. A tiny moan escaped. She shook her head, trying to clear it.

Gabriel wanted to play it safe.

He wanted her trust but was unwilling to give the same in return. She couldn't let it happen, she realized in sudden, sure knowledge. If he won this battle, he would stay hidden behind that invisible wall forever.

Barely able to think, assaulted by the swirling storm he was relentlessly building in her, she clung to one truth.

Gabriel wanted her.

Against his better instincts, he had been unable to stay away tonight. That knowledge gave her the strength to wedge her hands between them.

Startled, Gabriel drew back.

She smiled up at him, a small curve of her lips that was as old as time. He looked instantly wary. She traced the strong line of his mouth with one burgundy-tinted nail. Gabriel had an utterly sexy mouth, a mouth that tempted a woman into contemplating forbidden fantasies. Resting her index finger against his lower lip, she realized his mouth had fascinated her from the beginning. A chill that had nothing at all to do with cold, chased down her spine when he opened his mouth and took the tip of her finger inside. Her nipples tightened when he curled his tongue around her finger.

His eyes glinted in the moonlight, hot satisfaction in them

Fresh determination surged. "Do you believe in witchcraft, Gabriel?" she asked, her voice low and throaty. With the tip of her finger, she teased the sensitive inner lining of his lip, using his moisture to ease her path. His breath hitched when she slipped her finger in and out of his mouth in a suggestive rhythm. She slid her finger down, ever-so-slowly, over his chin, past the hollow of his throat to his chest, leaving behind a thin veil of wetness that glistened. She spread her hand over his heart. It was pounding. Beneath her palm, she felt the small nipple wake and pressed harder, enthralled by the ripple of response that raced over his skin.

He moaned. "You're playing with fire," he warned, the words deep and guttural. He moaned again when she rotated her palm.

"Um-um. Never with fire. Witches aren't particularly fond of fire, you know," she teased, a wonderfully wanton and wicked feeling welling up inside her. Giving a light shove, she was delighted when he obeyed the silent command and rolled onto his back.

She straddled his stomach, supremely aware of the contained strength between her thighs. Like riding a half-broke stallion, all power and arrogant male will. Inch by inch, she slid her nightgown up and over her head. The gown floated to the floor as she tossed it aside.

Gabriel inhaled sharply. God, she was beautiful. The light of the full moon bathed the ample curve of her breasts and outlined the darkness of her nipples. He reached out and cupped one breast, swallowing hard when it immediately responded to his touch. His erection jerked and nudged the base of her spine.

He slid his hands around to cup the sweet curve of her bottom. "If that is the case then, lady, you'd better find a spell to quench this blaze you've started, or we'll both go up in flames," he grated, flexing his fingers in the resilient flesh. He rocked her on his stomach, his nostrils flaring as he scented her feminine arousal.

"Perhaps I'm a new breed of witch, after all," she whispered, twining her fingers between his before pressing their joined hands to the mattress, "because I find I have this insatiable urge to play with matches." She lowered her head and drew his bottom lip into her mouth.

Gabriel couldn't remember ever being so hard. Everywhere. His muscles pulled taut as her pebbled nipples dragged over his heated flesh, flirted with his own nipples. He shouldn't let her get away with this, he thought as a wave of heat enveloped him. Kalesia was supposed to be writhing under him, not the other way around. He was supposed to be the one safely in command.

Except Kalesia wasn't cooperating.

The tip of her tongue danced over his as she explored the depths of his mouth with a soft, feminine aggression. Gabriel groaned and tried to engage it in a duel but she eluded him. This time he groaned in pure frustration. Immediately, she brushed the sensitized roof of his mouth, once, twice, small, flitting caresses that slowly drove him to the edge of sanity. A part of his mind warned him that he was walking on dangerously unstable ground. Allowing Kalesia to take charge was risking losing a part of himself. Gabriel consigned the small, insistent voice to the outer edges of Purgatory.

He wasn't going to fight her! Kalesia sensed it in the subtle shift of tension. Elated, she initiated a tiny duel.

Gabriel immediately accepted the challenge, his tongue twining with, sliding along hers. His breathing changed, became heavier.

His taste, dark, spicy, all male, exploded across her taste buds. God, she loved the way he tasted.

The ache in the pit of her stomach became a slow fire.

He untangled their hands and then Kalesia felt his hands in her braid, loosening and combing through the heavy mass. It fell free in a curtain that flowed past her hips. He seemed fascinated by the silken length.

"I didn't think women still wore their hair this long," he murmured hoarsely, letting it slip through his parted fingers.

"Don't you like it?" Some of her wonderful confidence fled.

His hands clenched in her hair and he used the leverage to pull her head back so that he could look at her. "I love the way it feels on my body, like a waterfall of cool fire."

She gave a brilliant smile filled with relief. "I'm glad. I couldn't bear to cut it." She sat up and placed her hands over his, caressing the elegant strength. "Not everyone likes it, you know," she confided.

He smoothed his hands down her spine, the gentle touch an evocative contrast with the rough calluses on his palms. "I burn wherever it touches me. Can't you feel what it does to me?"

She could. Tension corded his biceps as she literally felt his effort to remain passive. Heat poured off his body in wave after wave of need. Kalesia shifted, lifting until her pussy was just brushing the sculptured muscle of his abdomen, aware of his swollen length leaving a wet kiss against her inner thigh.

It was a heady experience. Bending her head, she kissed the hollow of his strong neck, following the line over to his shoulder. Beneath her lips, Kalesia felt an unusual ridge. Puzzled, she pulled back. Silvery moonlight highlighted a wickedly curved scar. Starting at the top of his shoulder, it curved around in a half moon to end midway down his ribs.

Kalesia traced it with the lightest of touches. The pain he must have endured! She pressed a soft kiss, then ran her tongue along its length, eliciting a ragged groan. She smiled in the darkness and worked her way down his body until she reached the thin line of hair that bisected his torso. She tormented him with deliberate slowness as she followed its rough path.

And discovered a network of scars marring the warm satin of his skin. The crisscross pattern stopped at his groin. Even without the benefit of light, it was obvious that the wounds had been intentionally inflicted. A potent wave of rage and horror washed over her.

Her eyes burned. Who could have been vicious enough to do such a thing?

"Tears?" He brushed his thumb across her lashes, catching one drop.

"The pain... It must have been unbearable. How..."

"Don't think about it. It happened a long time ago." Placing his hands on both sides of her head, he pulled her up so that her mouth was separated only by a breath from his and rasped, "Kiss me."

Kalesia obeyed, her mouth desperate. She broke the kiss to tease a nipple in its nest of dark hair, scraping her teeth on the hard nub, causing Gabriel to arch beneath her. Moving lower, she ran the edge of her teeth over his stomach before salving it with her tongue.

He shook under the provocative assault. Against her thigh, she felt his cock jerk. His hand cupped the back of her head as he urged her lower.

Kalesia smiled against his belly, refusing to hurry. His body fascinated her. It was so different from her own, hard and sleek where she was soft and supple, lightly furred where she was smooth. She knelt between his thighs.

Gabriel went still.

Up the length of his body, her eyes met his. She closed her hand about his shaft. Her fingers didn't quite meet. "So smooth, so hot," she murmured as she lowered her head, keeping her gaze locked with his. She stuck out the tip of her tongue and touched the flared head of his cock.

The gentle wonder in her voice was almost Gabriel's undoing. Then her mouth found him and he arched off the bed. She wiggled her tongue into the slit. A pulse of pre-cum leaked past his control. She caught it on the pad of her index finger and held it to her lips. He couldn't take his eyes from the pearly drop as she opened her mouth and, with one delicate swipe of her tongue, caught it. He groaned. The woman was killing him.

"Come here," he growled. Tangling the hand that had been cupping her head in the silken strands, he tugged.

He pulled her astride him. His stroked her plump lower lip with his thumb, before pressing down, opening her mouth to his. He slid his tongue inside, tasting her. Tasting himself.

"Damn." He nibbled on the left corner of her mouth before working his way to the right corner. He nipped sharply, taking her gasp for his own.

"Gabriel!"

"What, sweet witch? Tell me what you want." He groaned the command as she rocked against him. Her heat scorched his flesh. His hand went to her pussy, forging a path through the coppery curls to trace the swollen lips of her labia.

"So hot," he muttered, his breath ragged. He probed again, separating the slick folds, his fingers dancing an erotic pattern on the sensitive flesh. "And wet." His body shuddered in response to the feminine message. Sliding one long finger inside, he slowly and carefully stretched her. So damn tight. She was going to wrap around his cock like a heated, velvet glove.

"Tell me what you want," he ordered, teasing her engorged clit with the slow, gliding pressure of his thumb.

She arched against his hand. "Please." Her thighs tightened and she threw her head back, her hair tangling around his cock.

Gabriel gritted his teeth. "Tell me what you want."

"You. Inside." A small sob hung on the air. "Me."

Another pulse of pre-cum dribbled past his control. His balls pulled tight against his body.

Shit.

He shifted until he was leaning against the pillows. Moving his hands to her hip, he started to guide her down on his cock. At the last moment, Gabriel remembered he didn't have any condoms.

Goddamn it, no! He slammed his head against the wall.

"What's wrong?"

"No condoms," he gritted out, feeling ten times a fool. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he realized, he'd used the lack of rubbers as a reason to stay out of her bed. Talk about your dumb-fucking-ideas.

Kalesia leaned sideways and opened the nightstand drawer. She fumbled for a minute, muttering under her breath. When she sat back up, she held a small packet aloft like it was a prize. Moonlight glinted off foil.

Gabriel eyed the small foil packet and then her grin. "Uh, you brought rubbers with you?"

She gave a small, husky laugh. "No. I found them in the nightstand when I unpacked the first night. I, uh, kinda wondered why you kept condoms in the guest room." There was more than casual inquiry in her voice.

Was that a note of jealousy? Damn, he sure hoped so. He'd hate to be the only one out here on this limb. "I didn't put them there. Must have been Parker or Sam, a friend of mine who drops in once in a blue moon."

"Oh."

"I haven't needed them in a while." A long while, he amended silently.

"Oh," she said again. He saw the flash of neat, white teeth. "Me either." He heard foil tear. "I hope I haven't lost the knack."

He wasn't meant to hear the muttered aside but Gabriel couldn't resist responding. "Trust me, sugar. It's like riding a bike. Some things you don't forget."

"Idiot," she laughed. Then she proved him right. Small, hot hands smoothed the latex over his erection. His hips jerked and he gritted his teeth. Damn. He was hotter than a firecracker and ready to go off with a bang.

He gripped her waist, fitting her over him the moment she was done. She sucked in a tiny breath, making him excruciatingly aware of the differences in their sizes. Then, she engulfed him in one smooth motion. Gabriel's concerns disappeared on a wave of lust.

She began a deliberate rocking motion, lifting until he was barely inside before sinking back down. He shuddered again, his hips thrusting in a demand she ignored. From beneath lowered lashes, Gabriel gazed at the woman riding him with an exquisitely measured tempo, timed to drive him crazy. Her eyes were closed and she wore a faint look of concentration. The fact that she wanted him so much was a seduction all in itself.

He kissed away the trickle of sweat between her breasts, then nuzzled over to brush his lips across her nipple. She gasped and braced her palms on his shoulders. She was so damn responsive. He opened his mouth just enough to slide her nipple inside. With exquisite care, he closed his teeth on the sensitive tip. She lost her rhythm.

He smiled around her flesh and surged upward, his thrusts fast and hard. His cock slid in and out of her heated depths. His thumbs rested above her pubic mound, right

beneath the small, womanly curve of her stomach, while his fingers gripped her rounded ass. Damn, he loved her softness. It made him want to bury himself inside her, stay there until all the darkness in his soul withered away under her touch.

"No," she moaned.

He didn't know if she was protesting the pace or the fact he'd take control from her. It didn't matter. She was burning him to cinders with her response. Increasing the pressure on her nipple, he dragged the edge of his teeth down the swollen nub of flesh.

She gave a small scream. The walls of her pussy clamped down him.

He groaned.

Damn. He wasn't going to last much longer.

"Now, Gabriel," she demanded, her nails digging into the heavy muscles of his shoulders.

A ragged hiss of air escaped as he closed his eyes and fought the need to fill her with his seed. His heart pounded in his chest and his balls ached with the need for release. Still, he refused to cede control back to Kalesia.

Without control he'd be lost, would slip into the night and finally become a shadow himself.

"No," he grated out.

For a second longer, her nails dug into his flesh. Then, she trailed her fingers down his chest, her nails catching and pulling at the hair on his chest. He opened his eyes. She was waiting to snag his gaze with hers. In the hide-and-seek shadows of moonlight, her eyes burned with an emerald fire.

"Yes."

Before he realized her intention, she reached behind and cupped his balls, her index finger seeking and finding the vulnerable place behind his scrotum. She pressed.

He bucked and came in a rush, his seed boiling up from his balls and jetting into the condom. For a split second, Gabriel wished he was bareback so he could fill her until her tight channel couldn't hold any more. So his seed could mingle with her juices, coating her, coating him. And then her pussy spasmed around his shaft. He couldn't think, all he could do was feel.

She collapsed against his chest, her breasts heaving as she sought to catch her breath.

Hell, he could barely breathe himself. His heart thundered in his ears and his lungs burned. Under the silken fall of hair, his hands found the small of her back. He rubbed slow, soothing circles. He pressed a kiss to the crown of her head, a butterfly touch that he doubted she felt. He sucked in a deep breath. The scent of magnolia, sex and woman filled his lungs, held at bay having to acknowledge that, there at the end, he'd lost control after all.

He let his hands wander up her back, his fingers tracing the delicate ladder of her spine. Son of a bitch, she felt good in his arms. And maybe it made him a bastard but he was going to keep her there until she ran. Gabriel didn't kid himself. She would run.

Just as soon as she discovered what he was.

Until then, he'd pretend that she was his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia awoke with a start. She lay there for a moment, listening, hearing the plaintive call of a whippoorwill, the rustle of the river against the banks, the sound of a breeze in the saw grass and cattails. Reassured, she turned on her side, her hand reaching for Gabriel...and found cold sheets.

She bolted up, her heart pounding, only to slump with relief when she spotted Gabriel on the balcony.

Struck by the utter sense of isolation in his still form, she slipped out of bed and donned her robe. Tying the belt, she walked slowly to the open French door. The light of a nearly full moon turned his body to polished teak. Shadows sculpted the powerful muscles of his shoulders and back, contrasted starkly with the ridged bands of white mapping the glistening skin.

Even from here, she could sense he was withdrawing.

She stepped outside and touched him on the spine. Just a light touch to gain his attention. He exploded into action.

He spun around, his elbow hurtling toward her throat.

Kalesia yelped and squeezed her eyes shut, sure she was going to die.

"Are you out of your goddamned mind? Don't ever sneak up behind me again."

She cracked open a lid and peeked from between her lashes. White lines bracketed the tight lines of his mouth and his eyes glittered. Her lungs started to ache and she released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding in a long, tremulous rush.

"I'm sorry." She placed a faintly trembling hand on his arm. "I didn't mean to startle you. I woke and you were gone."

"I don't like people coming up behind me," Gabriel said, his voice very, very contained. In stark contrast, the pulse in the hollow of his throat pounded.

Instinctively, she sought to soothe him. "I won't do it again," she promised, stroking and kneading his arm.

He watched the small motion. His expression, when he looked up, was oddly vulnerable in the moonlight.

Vulnerable was not a word one normally associated with Gabriel. Stubborn. Arrogant. Dangerous, yes but not vulnerable.

He gave a short, sharp sigh and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, turning them toward the night-shrouded river. "Hell, I shouldn't have jumped down your



throat like that." He canted a sideways glance in her direction and his voice contained a note of hard warning. "I meant what I said, though. Don't ever sneak up on me."

"Don't worry," she assured him, swallowing hard. "I won't." Not even if she lived to be a little old lady of a hundred, would she forget the speed and power of his attack.

"Good." She could hear a smile in his voice. His hand rubbed her shoulder. Kalesia couldn't decide if it was a conscious act or not. When she went to move her hand from his arm, his other hand came up and covered hers, holding it there, the silence between them comfortable.

"Gabriel, do you mind if I ask you something?" she ventured, hating to ruin the companionable mood but needing to know.

"Umm."

Talk about your noncommittal answers. But, she refused to be put off and forged ahead. "How did you get the scars?"

Tension hardened the muscles of his forearm. "I told you before, it happened a long time ago." He slipped his arm off her shoulder. He stared out over the railing. "I'm sorry if they bother you."

"Gabriel!" She was shocked that he had drawn such a conclusion. "I never meant you to think such a thing!" She gripped his forearm and held on when he started to move away. "You have to know they don't bother me." Heat stole into her cheeks. "I've never been like that before, wanting to touch a man the way I touched you."

Gabriel turned so that he was facing her and propped one hip against the rail. He touched her hot cheek with his knuckles. "You like my flawed body, hmm?"

"Don't call it flawed," she said, filled with a sudden fury. "You have a beautiful body and you damn well know it!" How dare he call his body flawed! How dare he even think it?

A slow, wicked smile curved his sensual mouth. Kalesia didn't trust it one bit. He parted her robe at the neck. Lowering his head, he placed a feathery kiss on her neck just under her ear, causing her to shiver. Taking his time, he placed another, slightly lower. The tip of his tongue brushed her skin.

"Gabriel?" she quavered, her eyes sliding shut. She hadn't realized a single caress could be so arousing.

He trailed a path of fire to the curve of her throat, just above her collarbone. Warm breath sent tendrils of flame licking across her senses when he spoke. "Show me how much you want me. How much you like my body."

"You're trying to distract me," Kalesia accused but without any real heat. Already, an ache was starting down low. She shifted her head to the side, wanting, needing to feel his mouth on her neck again.

He lifted his head, a purely masculine grin causing her heartbeat to double. He didn't bother to deny it. "Is it working?"

"Yes, darn you." She sighed, her arms going around his neck. "You're not going to have everything your way, you know."

"Care to make a bet on that?" he asked, his hands dropping to the sash of the robe as his strong, elegant fingers worked on the knot.

Leaning forward, Kalesia touched the tip of her tongue to his flat nipple. "Never dare a redhead." She emphasized the warning by closing her teeth around the hard nub.

"Witch," he growled, his hands clenching into her waist. His eyes glittered in the moonlight. "I never lose." But he seemed to lose patience with trying to untangle the knot and rent the fabric with a casual strength. Kalesia's robe pooled at her feet.

The sound of his breath hitching was almost as arousing as the rough warmth of his palm cupping her breast. His free hand splayed across her lower spine and pressed her into his groin. He ground his heavy arousal against her stomach.

A soft moan slipped past her lips.

"Do you know what it does to me when you make that noise?" he asked, his words ragged as he took the lobe of one ear in his mouth. He bit gently.

Chills shot out from that point, pebbling her nipples and flooding her pussy with moisture. She shook her head, moaning again as his long fingers found the dark cleft of her buttocks.

"It drives me crazy." His fingers trailed lower and she froze as he rimmed her nether entrance with the tip of his finger. A breath rushed from her, whether in relief or disappointment she couldn't say, when his fingers slipped still lower, to the wetness between her thighs.

He gathered her feminine cream on his finger and used it to paint her areola. She couldn't take her eyes off him as he licked it off in one, long, slow swipe of his tongue.

"You're the one trying to drive me crazy. Gabriel!" she cried as he skimmed his tongue down the slope of her breast. He spoke against the turgid tip, each word a puff of moist heat.

"Not this time, witch. This time we're doing it my way. I intend to take my time." He forged his knee between hers, using his thigh to open her to his exploration. He traced random patterns on the soft, inner skin of her thigh, weaving a spell that Kalesia was helpless to resist.

"Gabriel, don't tease me!"

"Do you like this?" he taunted, tracing another intricate pattern, his knuckles just brushing the silky curls. She arched, seeking more.

"Oh God, yes!" She sank her teeth in thick muscle above his nipple when he refused to deepen the caress.

"What about this?" He combed his fingers through the damp curls, the masculine planes of his face stamped in hard lines.

She opened her legs wider. If he didn't touch her harder, deeper, she was going to scream. Her teeth clamped tighter. His skin tasted faintly salty.

"Tell me what you want, Kalesia. Tell me!" he demanded.

"I want you to touch me," she said, her breath coming in uncontrolled little bursts.

"Where? Here?" He slid his palm down her spine. "Or here?" he asked, drawing the tip of her breast into his mouth and sucking strongly.

"Blast you for an arrogant tomcat. Here," she mumbled into his hair, shoving his hands back between her legs.

"Ah, sweet witch. You ask so nicely." Laughter rumbled up from the depths of his chest.

She felt an answering, rueful amusement curve her lips even as she leaned back to glare at him. "Gloating is a terrible thing."

"Don't be an ungracious loser." He kissed the tip of her nose. Passion drowned amusement as he stared down into her eyes. He found her slick passage and pressed inside, then withdrew just as slowly.

A moan of protest formed on her lips.

"Be patient, darlin'," he rasped.

"I can't," she gasped. "I need you too much." She rocked against his hand, only to gasp again as the hair-roughened flesh of his thigh abraded the sensitive folds of her pussy. She threw her head back. "Yes," she groaned, her nails biting into his arms.

He dropped to his knees, his mouth seeking and finding her engorged clit. She did scream then. The musk of his arousal and the softer, more feminine smell of her own arousal, surrounded them. Gabriel used his tongue with wicked effect, rhythmically stroking the very core of her, drinking the flood of wetness that flowed from her.

Oh God, she was hot. So hot it was a wonder she didn't go up in flames. Each rasp of his tongue on her clit stroked the heat that much higher. She buried her fingers in his hair, pulling his face harder against her.

He blew on the swollen nub. "Let go, sugar. Let go. Trust me," he urged.

Everything inside her drew tight. Her back arched as the climax scorched over her.

Her knees were trembling and the only thing holding her upright was Gabriel's hands on her hips. Small aftershocks still assaulting her senses, she mustered the energy to tease. "You follow directions very nicely...for a tomcat."

A startled burst of laughter escaped Gabriel and then he was hugging her close. "Sassy and unrepentant to the end." He shook his head. "What does it take to make you admit defeat?"

"Defeat? If that's your idea of defeat, you have my permission to wage war whenever you want," she purred. She became conscious of the hard thrust of his cock against her belly and trailed a nail down his pulsing flesh.

"I've yet to negotiate settlement. You haven't heard my terms for surrender," he rasped from between clenched teeth as she languidly circled the head of his shaft, spreading around a bead of pre-cum.

"By all means, let's adjourn to a...bargaining table." She closed her hand around his cock. It amazed her that she had taken all that inside her.

"Witch!" The laughing accusation turned passionate in intensity as he swept her up into his arms. When he lowered his head, Kalesia could taste herself and Gabriel's own unique essence.

## Chapter Eight

"Son of a bitch."

Kalesia awoke to a snarling hiss and an outraged curse of pain. A familiar warm weight rested on her chest. Turning her head, she saw Gabriel sitting up in bed sucking on his knuckles. Kalesia groaned as her rapidly clearing brain put together what had happened.

"Oh, dear."

Gabriel's attention shifted to her. "Oh, dear, my ass. Do you know what that refugee from a flea market did?" He glared at the black cat. Hannibal glared back.

"Hannibal's very protective." Hitching herself up higher on the pillows, Kalesia attempted to soothe both males at once.

"Protective!" He showed her his hand. Kalesia winced at the long, angry gashes and numerous punctures.

"He thinks it's his duty to protect me." Gabriel ought to identify with that, the man literally oozed with protective instincts.

His gaze switched back to her. She wished it hadn't. An angry fire that boded ill filled his eyes.

"He didn't want me to touch you. That damn cat wasn't being protective, he was being territorial. Hell, I didn't even know he was here until I reached out for you," he muttered in disgust. Gabriel paused and then asked silkily, "Just what is he doing out of the laundry room?"

Hannibal, sensing something ominous in the quiet tones, bristled. Kalesia sighed. Was it too much to hope for that the two males in her life would get along? The male of the species could be a royal pain in the ass at times, she decided, annoyed.

"I let the cats out last night. He and Tia were pining. Besides, he always sleeps with me," she admitted.

"Not anymore. I refuse to share my bed with that animal."

"Gabriel, he doesn't mean any harm..." Kalesia trailed off as he stared at her in open disbelief. "Well, not usually," she qualified. "I don't know why he doesn't like you."

"Kalesia."

"All right. All right. He sleeps elsewhere." Grumbling under her breath, she rose from the bed, clutching the irritated cat. "I still say it's stupid." She watched as Gabriel got out of bed, her breath catching as the sunlight clearly defined his form. Lord, the man was a sight to behold.

Sugar and spice and everything nice!

Defined muscles slid beneath his skin as he walked to the bureau. Her mouth literally watered as her eyes wandered from the broad shoulders, down the sleek lines of his back, to a tight ass. Memories of that ass moving beneath her fingers, of the muscles clenching and releasing as he drove into her, caused the lips of her labia to swell and her clit tingle with need. Her breath lodged somewhere in her throat when he braced his legs and she caught a glimpse of his heavy balls.

"Elsewhere, Kalesia," he warned over his shoulder as he snagged a tissue and pressed it to his hand to stem the flow of blood. He shot the cat one last, baleful look as he headed out the door.

Kalesia put the huge cat down in the chair next to her suitcase and fanned her hand in front of her face. Whew! What the man did to her was probably illegal in forty-nine of the fifty states.

If it wasn't, it should be.

Ignoring the wetness between her thighs, she rummaged in the bureau and dug out a jonquil tee shirt and blue shorts. She headed into the adjoining bathroom and stepped into the shower. She poked her head around the curtain.

"You old reprobate," she scolded as Hannibal hopped onto the bed. "It wasn't nice to attack Gabriel. He's helping us."

The unconcerned glance Hannibal shot her made it clear he thought they didn't need Gabriel's protection. After all, he'd just won that battle, was here with her while the usurper was downstairs.

Kalesia explained the situation to the battle-scarred tom as she washed. She finished by extolling Gabriel's virtues as she dried off.

Supremely unimpressed, Hannibal began cleaning his seven-toe paw.

Kalesia gave up and dressed, then followed Hannibal when he jumped down and ran out of the room.

The two combatants would have to work it out between themselves.

She only hoped Gabriel survived.

The ringing of the phone, a muffled thud and then a curse, floated up the stairs. The phone stopped ringing.

"Damn cat. What?" she heard Gabriel bark.

Kalesia grinned. Round two to Hannibal. She hurried down the stairs in time to hear a steely note enter Gabriel's tone.

"I see. When?" Gabriel glanced up from writing something down on the pad by the phone as Kalesia entered the kitchen. "I see," he repeated, continuing to write. "Thanks, Tom. Yes, I'll tell her." He replaced the receiver and faced her fully.

"Tell her what?" she asked, obviously trying to sound breezy and unconcerned.

She failed miserably.

"They found a body." Gabriel watched her closely, trying to judge her reaction.

She gripped the edge of the swinging door until the bones of her knuckles shone white against the polished wood. "Do they know who it is yet?" she whispered.

"They ran a check on him. He turned up in the computers almost immediately. His name was John Crump. He was a pro."

"A professional killer? Dear God." The blood drained from her face. She sat in the nearest chair and put her arms around her waist.

Gabriel stifled the urge to slam his hand into the wall. A terrible premonition that everything was falling apart stalked him.

Just like last time.

He gripped her upper arms and hauled her up tight against him. Tension strummed through her body. She was wound so tight he expected her to shatter like old glass.

One hand cupping the back of her head, he used his thumb to tilt her chin so he could stare into her eyes. She felt so damn fragile. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"Promise?" The words were a thread of sound.

"Promise." He knew his tone was harsh but it seemed to reassure her.

"What do we do next?" she asked, moving her head so she could press a kiss into his palm.

"We do what I should have done from the beginning. We get outside help." He framed her face between his palms. "I mean it, Kalesia. I won't allow anyone to harm you. In any way."

Kalesia smiled, her eyes gentle. "I know." She stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips across his. "You're a man of your word, Gabriel Steele. If you say no one will hurt me, then I believe you."

Gabriel crushed her tightly against him and rested his cheek on the top of her head. Inside, he wished he shared her faith. Things were beginning to feel like they had the last time—unraveling and spinning out of control. He inhaled her light magnolia and exotic woods fragrance, letting it soothe him.

This time he wouldn't make a mistake.

He didn't dare.

Because not only was her life at stake but his sanity.

He set Kalesia from him and ignored her questioning glance. "Go on up and start searching your files and computer records for any mention of John Crump or anyone with those initials. I'll be up in a minute. First I need to make a couple of calls." He watched until she was out of sight then reached for the phone.

It seemed a person could never completely escape the past. One way or the other, it always managed to catch up with a man.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia tapped a bright red nail against the pile of folders in her lap. "Gabriel, I checked my records as you requested. I came up empty on references to a John Crump or those initials. Was there any other angle you wanted me to try?"

Would she get a civil answer this time? Heck, she'd settle for any answer. Something was very wrong. Gabriel had grown steadily more quiet and withdrawn as the day drew on and slipped into night.

"No."

Giving an inaudible sigh, she fiddled with the files. So much for using the case to draw him out. She tried to look on the bright side. At least he had answered. The last time he hadn't even bothered to grunt a reply.

Kalesia didn't know which was worse, when he ignored her or when he deigned to look at her. During those few times, she saw a chill in the gray eyes. A chill that deepened with each hour that passed. Sometimes, she wondered if he even saw her.

Or maybe he saw her too clearly.

The shock of that possibility froze her in her chair.

It was altogether too possible that he was debating if she was worth the effort.

A knot of fear that had nothing to do with her vision of murder and everything to do with the fact Gabriel was separating himself from her, formed.

She had to do something. But she had tried everything, everything except...

"Gabriel?"

"What?"

Her fingers twisted with nerves. Not exactly encouraging. "It's time to go to bed." She held her breath.

"Go on ahead. I'll be up later." The curt dismissal hurt more than she thought possible. Getting to her feet, she walked up the stairs. She would not beg. If the man wanted some distance between them, fine. He could have all he wanted.

Gabriel watched Kalesia leave the room, his gut in knots.

He hadn't wanted to make those calls. Throughout his career, he'd insisted on working alone. A policy brought home by his last mission.

To do so now could cost Kalesia her life.

No choice.

Making those calls had been necessary. He needed contacts he no longer had, contacts he had deliberately cut.

No choice.

Fury gnawed at him. Had chewed on his gut all day.

He hadn't wanted to make the calls.



He closed his hand, one finger at a time, until he formed a tight fist. Just as slowly, he opened it.

Never again. He'd promised himself that never again would he work with a partner.

He clenched his left hand then, one by one, straightened his fingers.

Yet, he'd made the calls.

Because, in the end, it boiled down to one simple fact. Either he asked for help or he risked losing the one woman who chased the darkness away and let him bask in light. If only for a little while.

As simple and as complicated as that.

With a muffled curse, Gabriel stalked up the stairs, his body throbbing with a potent mixture of primitive anger and desire.

Opening the door to his room, he stopped on the threshold, taking slow, deep breaths, trying to regain a measure of control.

"Gabriel?" Kalesia sounded unsure, as if she could sense the roil of emotion tearing him apart.

He crossed the room. With a savage twist of his wrist, he flicked the drapes open. Moonlight flooded the area.

"Hiding in the dark?" he mocked. Tonight, of all nights, he didn't want to feel closed in.

She pulled the sheet up to her throat. "What is it? What's the matter with you?" He heard her breath catch as he discarded his clothes haphazardly. Captured in light from the open door, he saw the tiny flare of wariness invade her watchful gaze.

"Funny you should ask that. I've sat downstairs for an hour trying to determine that very thing." He rested one knee on the side of the bed, putting a considerable dent in the mattress.

"You're angry."

"Brilliant observation. You know what? After much consideration, I came to the same conclusion. Care to speculate why?" He shifted, caging her between his arms. He leaned over her, purposefully intimidating.

"I don't have to speculate. I know why," she said, then bit her lip.

"Really?" he drawled. A part of him was appalled at his actions, at his need to see fear in her eyes but he couldn't seem to help himself.

Kalesia licked her lips. He followed the movement, his groin drawing tight. "Yes. You're angry because I've disrupted the calm existence you've carved out for yourself. Because of me, you no longer have complete control."

"Do you also read crystal balls in your spare time, witch?" he asked, a hint of savagery underlying the question. Kalesia saw too damn much for her own good.

Her fists tightened on the sheet, pulling it a notch higher. "What do you want, Gabriel?"

"What do I want? That's an interesting question." Without warning, he snatched the sheet from her hands, flinging it to the floor with suppressed fury. "I want compensation."

"Compensation?" she repeated, sounding dumbfounded. At least he could take satisfaction in the fact she didn't know everything about him.

"Yes, compensation. I want compensation for everything I've given up." He tangled one hand in her hair, pulling her head back, forcing her to meet his gaze. "And I know just how I'm going to get it."

Anger sparked in those brilliant green eyes. "Why, you arrogant tomcat. Go to hell. I refuse to sleep with you because, mmf..."

Gabriel slammed his mouth down on hers, trapping the rest of her scathing comment. "You owe me, woman," he gritted as he lifted his head, "and tonight I intend to collect." He covered her mouth again, his tongue insinuating itself between her lips.

She couldn't turn him away. He wouldn't let her.

Kalesia found her resistance shattered by the flash of vulnerability in Gabriel's silver eyes. A tiny part of him realized he was stepping over the line, that he was demanding what couldn't be forced and feared she would call him on it.

She couldn't fight him, couldn't send him away, reject him. Gabriel expected rejection. She saw it in his eyes.

He needed her, whether he knew it or not.

She stopped resisting, letting her lips soften as she accepted and absorbed his fury. Instead of pushing him away, her arms went around his neck, her fingers finding and tracing the corded muscles.

She would always respond to this man. Kalesia knew that with a certainty that she couldn't explain. Always seek to soothe his pain and anger, arouse his passion. She had no more control over that than she did her visions.

His mouth eased its ravaging pressure, became soft and searching. His whispered groan warmed her lips.

"Hell, I'm sorry." He placed tiny kisses at the corner of her mouth, a silent apology for his earlier roughness. He winced, his eyes becoming bleak as the sliver of light from the hall showed the swollen fullness of her mouth. One long finger traced the outline of her lips. His hand shook.

Kalesia gave a tremulous smile and captured his hand in hers. "Don't look like that. You didn't hurt me. You wouldn't, you swore to protect me."

He shook his head. "You defeat me with your faith. Remember that," he added with an inexplicable urgency. "Remember I would never hurt you on purpose," he said, and covered her body fully as his mouth sought hers in a wild, primitive mating.

He surged into her mouth, finding and conquering her tongue with his. His taste flooded her senses, dark, masculine, clean.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of faint knocking woke Kalesia the next morning. Gabriel was still sleeping beside her. She smiled and stretched. He had kept her awake most of the night. She remembered a recent article that said men over thirty were past their prime. Slipping out of bed, the soft sensual aches contradicted every word of the “experts”. Donning a robe, she hurried downstairs before the insistent knocking woke him.

Kalesia failed to notice the small, pulsing light almost hidden by the door facing, or the touch pad next to it. Gabriel’s precise instructions for utilizing his custom security system totally slipped her mind as she reached for the doorknob. The light began to glow steadily.

Opening the door a crack, she peeked around the edge and was confronted by the sight of three tired, rumpled men. Oddly enough, they reminded her of Gabriel. All three wore a certain hardness, a shielded aloneness, as most men wore a suit. One of the men, a blond giant, offered her a wide, open smile. It almost but not quite, hid the measuring gleam in his hazel eyes.

“Leave it to Gabe to find a looker.”

The insistent burring sound issuing from what looked like a small digital alarm clock, abruptly intensified. Gabriel’s eyes snapped open. Low murmurs floated up from downstairs. He was halfway down the stairs, a wicked blade held by his thigh, when he recognized Sam’s laugh. Gabriel came to an abrupt halt, only then aware he was rushing downstairs stark naked. Jaw clenched, he made his way back upstairs to shower and get dressed.

A damp towel wrapped around his waist, he sat on the edge of the bed, hands held loosely between his thighs and tried to come to terms with the fact he had slept so hard that he hadn’t heard his security system the moment it sounded. The near silent alarm began getting on his nerves. He stabbed a finger at the keypad, silencing it.

He tipped his head back and stared at the dappled reflection of the river dancing on the ceiling. Beside him, his hand clenched. One by one, he straightened his fingers. Once, twice, then a third time. Finally, he released a deep breath and admitted it scared the hell out him that he had slept so hard. Such a thing had never happened before. His uncanny hearing had saved his life innumerable times. So where had it been this morning? he wondered in disgust.

Hell, he hadn’t even heard Kalesia leave the bed. A solid knot of fear lodged in his belly. Had his skills become so rusted that he was endangering her? He scowled at the ceiling. Or had she slipped under his guard to the extent that his subconscious felt it safe to relax around her?

Speaking of relaxing, that second level of tone to the alarm meant that Kalesia had opened the door without deactivating the system. Talk about your stupid risks. What she should have done was wake him at the first hint of strangers arriving. A grim smile twisted his mouth. He planned to let her know the full scope of his displeasure.

Soft feminine laughter drifted up the stairs. He shoved his legs in his jeans.

Right after he found out what was so damn funny.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel stopped just inside the kitchen and took in the scene in front of him. Kalesia, her thick terrycloth robe shaping her rear, was standing in front of the stainless steel stove expertly flipping pancakes. She chuckled at the fast back and forth verbal jabs between Barry and Sam. Wolf, as usual, sat apart, his cool gray eyes not missing a detail.

It was a cozy picture. Too damn cozy if you asked him.

Kalesia turned, a full platter of pancakes in one hand and a dish of scrambled eggs in the other. Her robe gaped, showing the gentle curve of one breast. He wasn't the only one to notice.

"Kalesia, go get dressed," he bit out.

Startled, she looked up. She met his scowl and a slow, intimate smile curved her lips. Not looking away, she put both plates on the table. Gabriel couldn't take his eyes off her as Kalesia sauntered up to him. One hand went to his chest, right over his pounding heart and the other slid behind his head. Right there in the kitchen, in front of God and three of the toughest men he knew, she tugged his head down and kissed him. Not a peck on the cheek. Not a good morning brush of mouth against mouth. But a curl your toes and rock your world, tongue twisting kiss that deliberately evoked memories of hot, humid nights and even hotter, sweaty sex.

It was the action of a woman stamping her claim.

Gabriel had never had a woman claim him before.

It woke a strange feeling in his chest. Gabriel brushed it aside, focusing on the woman in his arms. He cupped her bottom in his hands and hauled her up against his erect cock.

God, he just wanted to sink into her hot, wet pussy, ride her until they were both too tired to move.

A discreet cough jerked his head up.

Shit.

Gabriel let Kalesia slide down until her feet were on the floor. Hands shaping her waist, he stopped her from moving. No doubt they knew he was aroused but he'd be damned if he'd give them physical proof of that fact. He glared at the men.

They grinned back.

Kalesia turned. "You'll have to forgive him. Sometimes he's a tad grumpy." She winked and slipped out of his arms and out of the room before Gabriel could respond to the gentle taunt.

"You got it bad, man." Wolf leaned back in his chair and took a sip of coffee, a speculative look in his eyes.

Gabriel rubbed a hand behind his neck, working the tight muscles. "That woman has turned my life so upside down that I don't know if I'm coming or going." He made a beeline for the coffee pot. He needed a strong dose of caffeine this morning. A snarling hiss and the swipe of a seven-clawed paw marked his passage. He glared at the black cat.

"Damn cat." Hannibal jumped up onto Samuel Woods' lap, his purr mocking Gabriel's scowl.

Taking a long gulp of coffee, Gabriel studied three of the four men he could call friend and mean it.

Samuel Woods, whose blond hair and hazel eyes had caught the fancy of more than one woman, believed in paying his debts. He felt that he owed Gabriel for getting him out of some forgotten Middle Eastern hot spot. Sam blamed himself for the bullet Gabriel had taken in the thigh during the raid that freed him. Now Gabriel desperately needed Sam's skill in electronic communications. There were, he knew, very few systems that Sam couldn't and hadn't hacked into.

Barry Williams, known to his friends as Badger for his nasty and tenacious disposition, had a knack for gathering tidbits of information. His looks were deceiving. Slight of build, Williams looked like he wouldn't know how to duck a punch. He was a counterterrorism specialist and expert in several forms of hand-to-hand combat.

Gabriel scowled. This morning was the first time he'd ever seen Badger laughing and joking with anyone while managing to keep his mouth out of the sewer.

He and Wolf Devlin went back a long way. They'd been in Special Forces at the same time. Dark, lean and deadly, Wolf was a man who didn't trust easily. There was an aura about him that made the more perceptive take care to avoid him. He owned an electronic engineering firm. He was also one of the Agency's best troubleshooters.

Gabriel trusted these men but it was easy to anticipate their reactions to being informed of Kalesia's psychic visions. Especially Badger's blunt comments.

He swung a chair around and straddled it, his arms crossed over the back. He met each man's gaze, his own serious. "I need your expertise."

"We figured that from your call." Sam glanced at the other two men. "You know you've only to ask."

Gabriel nodded his thanks. "Kalesia is here because someone is going to try to kill her."

"Any leads on whom?" Wolf asked, cradling his mug of coffee between his large hands.

"No."

"How'd you get involved?" Badger shoveled the last of his pancakes in his mouth and reached for more. "Goddamn, the lady can cook."

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder to make sure Kalesia hadn't returned. He'd much rather she wasn't within hearing distance the next few minutes. "Harley sent her to me when she had a vision of her murder."

Badger stopped chewing and stared at Gabriel. "You're shitting me."

Gabriel took a long pull of his coffee. "Nope. What's more, she had another vision while here. Harley found the body. A hit man going by the name of John Crump."

"You're buying this fucking story?"

Gabriel sighed. "Not at first. And I admit I still have a few doubts whether or not someone is out to kill her. But I'm not a real big fan of coincidence and I'd have to be to totally dismiss her claim of visions. Kalesia had a vision of her murder and reported it. Within a week someone, pro enough not to leave obvious clues, breaks into her home. She has another vision and the body of a hit man is found."

Badger poured syrup over the fresh stack of pancakes. "Look, Gabe. How do you know she isn't playing you? Didn't kill the man herself?" He stabbed the fork in Gabriel's direction. "I mean, sure, she's pretty and looks like she wouldn't say boo to a gnat. But she's fucking you, man. How can you be sure she isn't fucking with your mind too?"

Gabriel reminded himself that Badger was his friend. Had been for years. The urge to smash his face didn't fade. "Let's get one thing very clear." He spoke very softly. "You will treat her with respect. If you can't, get the fuck out of my house now." He flattened his palms on the table.

Wolf spoke up. "Take it easy. It's a legitimate question."

Gabriel faced Wolf. "Kalesia didn't murder anyone."

"How do you know?"

"My word isn't good enough?"

"You know it is." There was no room for doubt in the reply.

Something inside Gabriel relaxed. "I know because she was with me during the period Crump was murdered." He held up a hand. "And before you ask, she spoke or contacted no one."

"You really think she's psychic?" Sam's hazel eyes were curious.

"Let's just say I'm open to the possibility."

"And she believes someone wants to off her?"

"Yes."

"What do you want us to do?"

Engrossed in outlining his strategy, nevertheless Gabriel wasn't surprised when Kalesia placed a hand on his shoulder. He seemed to have developed a sixth sense, some weird kind of radar, where she was concerned. He looked up, sliding his arm around her waist.

"This a private conversation or can anyone join?"

Amusement lightened his mood at the amazed blink of eyes at Kalesia's attire. This morning she'd chosen skin-tight jeans in a vivid shade of yellow. Her shirt was a loud pattern of turquoise and green. He noted with satisfaction that she'd once again wound her hair in a neat braid on top of her head.

The surge of possessiveness he felt about that silky length of fire surprised him. He didn't want other men admiring it. Not even his friends. Hell, who was he kidding. Especially not his friends. He pulled her closer, choosing to ignore the other men's open amusement at his blatant show of possession.

"We were just discussing how to go about tracing John Crump's movements."

"I need a place to spread out and to set up my laptop." Sam stood. He tossed his jacket over his shoulder and snagged his hard-shelled computer case from beside his chair. Already, his hazel eyes had that familiar intent, focused expression Sam got when on a new case.

"Last room on the right. It has a fax and a dedicated line." Gabriel planned to turn the bedroom into an office. When he got around to it.

"I'll get started immediately." Sam left the room with a swift, silent glide.

A crease formed between Kalesia's brows. "Why do I get the feeling I'm going to seem as graceful as a flounder on a waxed floor compared to everyone else in this group?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Tears streamed down Kalesia's cheeks. Gasping with laughter, she held one hand to her side. "Stop," she pleaded. She wiped beneath her eyes with her fingers. "Did you," she twisted so that she faced Gabriel, on the sofa beside her, "did you really—" She went into gales of laughter again. Gabriel waited with stoic patience for her to regain control. It had been like this since they'd all gathered for supper.

Damn. What was the reason he wanted Sam here again? At the moment, it escaped him.

"Did you really pose as a eunuch in a sheik's harem?" It was clear she was choking back laughter. "I was under the impression eunuchs had gone the way of top hats and dodos. You know, extinct."

"So was I until the sheik found me in his third and youngest, wife's bedchamber."

Sam started chuckling.

A dull heat climbed his neck as Gabriel realized how that sounded. "It wasn't like that, dammit," he growled, a reluctant smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I was

trying to hide hotshot here.” He leveled a ferocious frown at the unrepentant Sam. “I should have left you there. See how amusing you’d have found it when the sheik discovered you under his bed! Tell her the rest. Tell her how you were as weak as a kitten when we ducked into the sheltered courtyard to escape a patrol.” Sam had been beaten half to death and starved. Gabriel had to carry him from the prison after breaking him out.

Sam held up on hand and placed the other over his heart. “Honest to God’s truth. Gabriel only went into her room to save me. Why, you should have seen his face when he came across the lovely lady in her bath. Didn’t even peek once.”

“Shut up.”

“I was just telling her the full story.”

“Well, stop.”

“Ignore him. I want to hear the story.” Kalesia shot Gabriel a significant look. “The full story.”

Gabriel gave in to the inevitable. No one was going to listen to his protests anyway. He settled her more firmly against his side and leaned back. Might as well be comfortable. He had the sneaking suspicion it was going to be a long night.

Over an hour later, Gabriel groaned silently. Son of a bitch. He hated it when he was right. All three men, egged on by Kalesia’s eager questions, damn near came to blows to see who could tell the most outlandish tale. It might have been amusing if most of them hadn’t been about him.

To think he’d worried his friends might embarrass or insult Kalesia. No, he shouldn’t have worried about that at all. Instead, he should have worried about how to keep Kalesia from corrupting his friends beyond recovery.

Gabriel’s attention snapped back when he heard Badger saying, “And then this REMF told Gabriel—”

“What’s a REMF?”

Gabriel slapped his palms over Kalesia’s ears before Badger could answer. He shot his friend a glare that shut the man’s mouth with a snap. “Don’t. Don’t even think about it,” he advised.

Kalesia pulled free. She looked from one man to the other. “I want to know what a REMF is.”

Badger held his hands in the air. “Hey, don’t look at me. I want to live to see morning.” He grinned, obviously enjoying her frustration.

Kalesia turned to Wolf.

“Uh-uh. Not me. I’ve seen Gabe fight.”

“Well, what about you?” she asked Sam. “What excuse are you going to use?”

“Me? I’m a peace-loving guy. I don’t like the sight of blood. Especially my own.”



Kalesia snorted. Before he could stop her, she grabbed his wrist and removed his arm from around her shoulders. She stood and surveyed the group of men. One toe began to tap. "Are you really going to let Gabriel intimidate you all like this?" As one, they nodded.

"Men," she sniffed. "My Siamese, Tia, has more backbone than any one of you. You," she pointed at Gabriel as he gained his feet, disturbing said Siamese curled on his leg in the process, "you can stay here with your buddies. Male bonding and all that. I," she informed him, "am going to bed."

He watched the sway of Kalesia's hips until she was out of sight.

Wolf let out a long, low whistle. "A temper to go with that red hair. Got your hands full with that one." Tia, crackle-blue eyes glaring, jumped onto Wolf's lap. She turned around twice then curled into a ball, her nails out just enough to make it clear she was not going to tolerate her bed getting up and walking away again.

"A witch with an attitude. She'd run me ragged if I let her." Gabriel smiled, a predatory showing of his teeth. "Fortunately, I find that I have an aptitude for witch-taming." Gabriel started up the stairs, the sweet fire of anticipation tightening his gut.

Damn, it felt good knowing she was waiting for him. It was a unique feeling. Strange but satisfying. One that he could get used to all too easily.

One he would miss when she was gone.

Gabriel shoved that depressing thought into a mental closet with all the other depressing thoughts. Thoughts like how much it was going to hurt when she left. If he felt alone before, what would it be like when she was gone? And with still other, more dangerous thoughts, like what if she didn't find out?

He shut and locked the bedroom door. The bedside lamp was on its lowest setting. His clothes straggled in an untidy trail to the bed. Gabriel was in bed, his mouth on her breast when Kalesia said, "Rear Echelon Mother—" He sealed her mouth with his own, smothering her delighted laughter.

Not until laughter had turned to pure, hot need did he lift his head. A hint of lingering laughter vied with passion in the vivid green eyes. "Okay, spill it. How did you learn the meaning of REMF?"

Kalesia scooted down until she could touch the tip of her tongue to his nipple. Gabriel refused to be distracted.

"I," she announced against his skin, "have connections."

His nipple puckered as each word puffed warm air over the sensitive nub. He managed, barely, to retain his train of thought. "Don't keep me in suspense." He restrained a shudder when she bit down with exquisite care.

"I called Tom Harley."

"You what?" Gabriel came up onto both elbows, disbelief pulling his brows together. "At one thirty in the morning?"

"Uh-huh." She sucked on the spot between the swell of his pectoral muscles. "By the way, you better go see Tom and apologize. I might have," she moved to the other nipple, one tiny kiss at a time, "implied you said to ask him." She shimmied to the side, a look of impish innocence on her face.

"Damn, woman, that was just plain mean. After years of working the graveyard shift, Tom likes his sleep. Not to mention," he growled in mock displeasure, "you've landed me squarely on his shi— On his list of least favorite people."

She didn't look the least bit worried. Small, neat teeth flashed. "Oh, before I forget. Is he married?"

"No, not anymore. Why?" he asked. A distinct tinge of wariness sprang to life at the mischievous gleam in her eye.

"Oh dear. In that case, it might be safer if you called instead of seeing him in person. Tom wasn't asleep. Nor was he alone."

Gabriel couldn't help it. He began laughing. He was still laughing when Kalesia slid one silky thigh up the inside of his and pushed on his shoulders. He obligingly rolled over, bringing her with him so that she ended up on top. He cupped one hand around the back of her head and exerted just enough force to lower her mouth so that he could take it.

Slow. Deep. Thorough. He tasted her, teasing her tongue into playing with his. His free hand palmed her breast, savored its weight. She arched, pressed deeper into his palm. Tonight he planned to take his time. No headlong rush into the fire but a long, slow fall.

Gabriel looked forward to the drop.

Lips pressed to his, she asked, "Why are you smiling?"

Smiling? Hell, he was probably grinning like an idiot. Gabriel found he didn't care. He couldn't ever remember being this contented. "Because I want to." Their breaths mingled. The moment had a heart-stopping intimacy he'd never experienced before.

She pulled back little, searched his eyes. "You say that like it is unusual."

"It is."

Her voice deepened, became sultry. "Then let me see if I can make you smile again."

It wouldn't take much, he knew. Already, he could feel a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Hmm." Kalesia folded her hands on top of his chest. She propped her chin on them and stared at him solemnly, as if she were contemplating the mysteries of the Sphinx. Her eyes, though, were sparking with mischief.

"You have to promise not to move."

Now, that sounded downright promising. He spanned her waist with his hands and waited to see what she'd do.

"Can you do that?" she purred, her voice deep and throaty.

Oh, hell yeah. He could do that. "Sugar, I can take whatever you dish out."

One elegant brow arched. "Is that a challenge? Are you certain you're up to it?" Slender fingers twirled and tangled in his chest hair. She acted as though she didn't realize what she was doing. The little witch knew exactly what she was doing. And the effect she was having on him. It wasn't like he could hide his growing erection.

"Up to it?" One of them was up, that was sure. He stifled a groan when she put her index finger in her mouth and sucked on it. He couldn't take his eyes off her mouth as her cheeks hollowed around the slender digit. The inside of his mouth went as dry as dust at the crystal clear memory of the last time he watched her cheeks work around something.

She pulled her finger out of her mouth with a soft pop that made his cock jerk and swell even more. In the muted light of the bedside lamp, her finger glistened. She swirled it over his collarbone, painting him with moisture. She leaned down and blew softly.

Damn, who knew his collarbone was an erogenous zone. Fine chills raced across his flesh and his cock nudged her thigh, begging for attention. He buried his hands in the cool fire of her hair and tried to guide her mouth down to his aching flesh.

"Ah, ah, ah. You moved." Her eyes laughed down at him.

Son of a bitch. That quickly, he'd forgotten. Gabriel dropped his hands back to her waist. "I won't again," he promised.

She was shaking her head. "Too late." She tilted her head to one side. Her hair flowed across his chest, tangled in the dark hair on his chest and pooled across his throat in a fragrant, silken puddle. Gaze bright, she grasped one of his wrists in each hand and sat up. He sucked in a breath when he felt her wet heat against his stomach. This close, he could smell the sweet scent of her arousal, see the drops of moisture gleam in the deep red hair of her pussy.

She shifted forward, urging him to wrap his hands around the carved posts in the headboard. Gabriel heard the slide of a drawer. His attention was focused elsewhere, though. Like the luscious breasts swaying in front of his face, the tight nipples just begging to be taken into his mouth.

"Son of a bitch!" In the blink of an eye, his passion was replaced by cold, lethal rage. *"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"*

Kalesia froze mid-tie, one end of the scarf in each hand. The cheerful yellow and white swirl looked ridiculously feminine against the hair-sprinkled width of Gabriel's wrist.

She looked down, into a cold, completely contained expression. She forgot to exhale.

"Get. It. Off. Me." Each word dripped with lethal intent.

Air rushed out of her lungs as she scrambled to remove the scarf. The tips of her fingers brushed the ridges of old scars as she fumbled with the half-formed knot.

Kalesia closed her eyes in remorse. Oh, sweet mercy. How could she be so stupid?

Opening her eyes, she finished untying the scarf. The delicate material caught on one of the intricate carvings and ripped in half. Just like her heart. Kalesia swore she actually felt her heart tear as, behind the contained rage in his silver eyes, she saw panic. And pain.

*Stupid, thoughtless fool. How could you not remember?* she berated herself as she crumpled both halves of the scarf into a ball, hand clenched into a fist behind her back as if she could hide the evidence of her stupidity. Astride him, his heart pounded like a trapped animal against the inside of her thigh. Each rapid, ragged beat ripped her heart anew.

Kalesia stared down into the eyes of a stranger. No longer the warm, eager gaze of a lover but that of a man struggling to survive. Tears burned the back of her eyes. Dear God, she'd do anything to erase the past few minutes. Take that look from his eyes. As she watched him, she saw his right hand flex, close into a tight fist, then slowly straighten.

Control.

Almost more than he needed his next breath, Gabriel needed to be in control.

She had taken that control away.

Now she had to find a way to give it back.

Kalesia brought her hand out from behind her back and opened it.

The two pieces of delicate silk lay on her palm like an offering. A tiny ray of sunshine to vanquish a nightmare.

Comprehension seeped into the tarnished silver gaze. An understanding that beat back the panic and pain.

Kalesia waited, her heart in her throat. Desperately, she wanted him to understand what she was offering. All she was offering with that simple gesture.

He closed one large hand over hers, folding her fingers over the silk.

Her hand began shaking. It spread up her arm until her entire body was trembling. Did he...did he mean what she thought? She was almost afraid to hope. "Gabriel?" Try as she might, she couldn't read the expression in his eyes.

His grasp tightened a fraction causing Kalesia to glance down. She couldn't look away. The sight of his hand, dark and strong from work, enclosing her more fragile one caused her stomach to flip-flop. He could so easily crush her hand. Instead he held her with a gentleness that brought tears to her eyes. As she watched, he released her and moved until he once again gripped the thick spindles.

One tear ran down her cheek. Sweet mercy. He did.

Beneath her, his rib cage expanded. Breath shuddered from the depths of his soul before he went perfectly still.

But Kalesia felt the hard, staccato slam of his heart against her thigh.

As she selected one silky strip, his eyes followed her every move with an intensity that she could actually feel.

But he didn't shift an inch.

Amazing as it was, Gabriel seemed willing to trust her.

She would not screw up this time. Kalesia placed the piece of torn scarf in his right hand. The ends dangling down and touched the pillow.

The unfathomable expression vanished and his gaze became molten.

Kalesia brushed her mouth over the hard lines of his. Just a quick touch before placing the second scarf across his palm. His hands closed about the heavy, carved spindles, the silk trapped between the wood and his callused flesh.

"Remember, you can't move," she whispered. They were so close, his breath became hers.

"Your bonds hold me." Hot and clean, his breath flowed across her lips, heating her blood until it flowed thick and heavy and pooled down low.

She ached to ask if he referred to more than the thin strips of silk but bit back the question at the last moment. What if she was reading more into the moment than there was? Her track record wasn't exactly something to brag about. Maybe if she had more relationships under her belt, she'd be better able to read between the lines.

Or maybe she was too chicken to ask because Gabriel had the power to do more than batter her heart. He could shatter it.

Kalesia refused to examine that too closely. She shut her mind to anything other than right here, right now. She planted both hands on his chest and slid from his chest to the hard, ridged stomach.

Walking her fingers over his chest to his triceps. Like a blind person just learning Braille, she traced a slow path up the under side of his arm. She found every intriguing swell of muscle, followed the tensile strength of tendons until she finally reached the thick ridge of scar tissue around each wrist. In a deliberate motion, making no attempt to hide what she was doing, she wrapped her hands around his wrists. Her fingers didn't quite meet.

Then and there, Kalesia made a vow to herself.

Before the night was over, not one scar nor one inch of his body was going to be left untouched. From the lace of scars that marked his beautiful back to the tiny nick behind his left knee. She'd give him so much pleasure that the old pain wouldn't stand a chance.

For this one night, she'd give him peace.

There was something so sexy about the patch of dark hair under his arms. She couldn't explain it but it got to her on a purely visceral level. Her breasts tightened.

She sat back. Kalesia didn't know where to start first. Problem was, she wanted to touch him everywhere at the same time. The man was positively beautiful. A tiny grin

touched her lips as she pictured his reaction to her calling him beautiful. Well, it was true. Not in any pretty boy, Hollywood fashion but in a raw, masculine fashion that caught a woman's attention and stayed with her long after the Hollywood pretty boys were consulting high-priced plastic surgeons.

She allowed herself a long, head to toe survey.

Nope. Not a pretty boy but definitely all man.

A shudder of anticipation caused her to slide on his stomach. The thin line of hair that bisected his abdomen rasped deliciously against her clit. She grabbed her bottom lip between her front teeth, stifling a moan. More moisture flowed from between her legs, drenching the hair of her pussy and coating the inside of her thighs, coating his stomach.

Gabriel sucked in a hard breath.

Even that small movement was almost more than she could bear. She bit down on her lip harder. *Concentrate on Gabriel. On pleasing him.* Her clit throbbed and burned. She ground her pussy against his slick flesh.

He arched beneath her.

A small moan wrenched free of her control. The small sound shocked Kalesia into awareness. A tremor went through her. Kalesia sucked in a deep breath. She dug the tips of her fingers into the hard muscles of his chest as she fought with the need to impale herself on his erection.

A pulse pounded at the base of the strong neck, his gaze was blazing and, with each breath, he lifted her. Sweat sheened on his face, made her hands slip on his chest. Whether it was from arousal or the restraint he was imposing on himself, Kalesia wasn't sure.

One thing she was sure of, he wasn't thinking of the past.

She leaned forward and kissed the swell of muscle on his inner arm. She drew a circle with the tip of her tongue.

He hissed.

Kalesia slid down, one slow inch at a time, dragging the length of her body over his cock. She could feel the trail of moisture from his cock on her belly, between her breasts and on her neck.

Gabriel shuddered.

She didn't stop until his cock was level with her mouth. She knew he expected her to take his straining flesh between her lips. So she slid further south.

Kalesia sucked the tender flesh of his inner thigh between her teeth and bit down with delicate force.

His legs shifted apart and his hips lifted.

"Kalesia?"

The harsh groan sounded torn from his chest.

Nope, definitely wasn't thinking of the past. Gabriel was right here, completely and totally with her.

The urge to mark Gabriel, to claim him for her own, was overwhelming. She bit down harder, just enough to add an erotic bite of pain to the pleasure and drew hard.

"Son of a bitch!" Gabriel's hips came off the bed. Kalesia heard the wood of the thick spindles creak.

Kalesia propped herself up on her elbows. A primitive sense of feminine satisfaction filled her at the darkening mark of possession. Dang, this is what a prehistoric woman must have experienced when she let the caveman of her choice capture her. Oh, some sociologists insisted that the choice was the caveman's and the woman had no say. Kalesia wasn't buying that for one minute. The choice of a man to father your children was too important.

The import of her thoughts slammed the breath out of her body and left her dizzy.

She loved the man.

Dazed, she wondered how in the world had that happened?

Her elbows collapsed. She rested her cheek on his upper thigh. The scent of arousal and man surrounded her and filled her lungs. Kalesia inhaled again, drawing it deeper. Giving in to the urge, she raked her teeth over the hair-roughened flesh. The clean, salty tang of fresh sweat tantalized her taste buds.

Clearly, modern humans had not evolved that far from their ancestors. Humans still relied upon the most basic of senses.

Still, whatever the reason, Gabriel tasted right.

He tasted like hers.

From beneath her lashes, she shot a glance at his face.

A hard flush rode Gabriel's cheekbones and his muscles were practically quivering with sexual tension. A muscle in his jaw jumped.

He didn't look like a man caught in the throes of an epiphany.

That knocked some of the wind out of Kalesia's sails.

Then again, he didn't look like a man thinking of the past.

Or another woman.

His eyes met hers. The need there was unmistakable.

He wanted her, with a desperation he didn't bother to hide.

Her.

Just her.

A slow smile filled her soul. She could work with that. Unlike the other men in her past, Gabriel was focused solely on her. Not on what she could do for his career. Not on what he thought wrong with her. He didn't see her as sexually challenged. Frigid, one lover had called her.

Gabriel thought her sexy. Exciting.

Yeah, she could definitely work with that.

She brought her attention back down his body, to his erection. Thick and heavy, it rested against his taut stomach and reached toward his navel. She wrapped her hand around it. Sweet mercy. Talk about your works of nature. Kalesia ran her fingers along the vein on the underside. Gabriel groaned. His cock pulsed in her hand. Fascinated, she replaced her fingers with her tongue. She felt the thump of his heart in the heavy vein.

A whole-body shiver shook Gabriel.

She swiped a drop of pre-cum from the slit.

He drew his knees up and spread his legs wider. "God, sugar. No more teasing." A visible tremor swept his arms, the tendons on the backs of his hands stood out in bas-relief.

Watching him fight his instinct to retake command was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen.

Kalesia knew she was pushing Gabriel but she planned to push him a lot farther.

"Roll over and put your hands back on the posts."

"Kalesia." The low growl was a warning, plain and simple.

Her clit pulsed and throbbed in response. Her breasts tingled. It was an effort but she managed to infuse her order with the right amount of authority. "Over, Gabriel."

He hesitated long enough to make Kalesia wonder if she'd pushed him too far. Her stomach muscles quivered when, at last, he turned over. He put his hands back on the posts, paused, then lifted his right hand. Gabriel shot her a dark, sideways glance as he reached beneath him and adjusted his cock.

It was a look filled with the promise of retribution.

Gabriel was tired of being teased.

It was, Kalesia mused, kinda like teasing a panther you thought safely caged. One wrong move and wham! the panther had you before you knew it.

A nervous flutter had her putting her hand to her stomach. The question was, could she make the panther purr before the urge to pounce overcame it?

When his hands were again locked around the wooden cylinders, Kalesia straddled Gabriel's back. Starting at his neck, she massaged the tight muscles. One by one, she found the hard knots and massaged, working out the tension. Once his muscles were pliant, she leaned down and placed an open-mouthed kiss on the oddly vulnerable nape of his neck. Another on the point where neck and shoulder met.

Beneath her legs, the muscles in his back clenched, then relaxed. Power and need strummed just beneath the surface of his skin.

His neck, the breadth of his shoulders, the tiny patch of skin between his shoulder blades that had somehow escaped abuse, Kalesia ran her hands and mouth over them all. Never in the same spot twice, never where he expected.



Tasting, testing, healing.

Fine tremors coursed beneath her touch.

She blinked back tears, glad he couldn't see her face. He might misunderstand.

These were not tears of pity. He was just so beautiful, like an archangel—bloody, bruised but victorious after battle. A little huff of laughter, altogether too close to a sob, escaped.

Gabriel would think her mad if he could read her mind.

She found that little triangle of skin right above where his powerful buttocks began to separate and scraped her teeth over it.

His hips jerked against the mattress, his legs parting between hers.

Moisture ran down her thigh. Her breath came faster and faster.

Sweet mercy, she loved the way he responded to her. The way he didn't hold back.

It made her want to jump his bones.

She did it again. This time soothing the slight sting with the tip of her tongue.

Gabriel jerked again, harder. His right leg slid out from under hers, drawing up and opening him completely to her ministrations.

Kalesia took the end of her braid in her hand and drew it down the length of his spine. Goose bumps raced after the featherlight touch. The heavy muscles of his thighs flexed, the muscles rippling.

Thighs powerful enough to snap her in half if he felt so inclined.

She'd never felt safer.

One leg drawn up, Gabriel's position gave Kalesia a clear view of the heavy testicles. It also gave her a clear view of his tight anal star.

Kalesia stared.

Never before had she paid much attention to that part of the male form. Heck, if anyone had asked, she would have told them without hesitation that it was the last place she considered irresistible on a man.

Kalesia couldn't pull her gaze away.

A thrill shot through her. Not stopping to think, she spread the cheeks of his ass.

"Kalesia?" A hint of uncertainty laced the unspoken question.

"Trust me." Was that her voice, so husky, so strained with excitement? Please, don't let him stop me. Kalesia couldn't believe how much she wanted this. Couldn't believe she was even considering such a thing.

Her breath hitched in her chest. Her heart pounded in her ears. She waited.

Gabriel gave one short nod. The only sign of discomfort was the bottom lip he drew between strong, white teeth.

Her insides melted like chocolate left in the hot, Florida sun.

She nipped the swell of one cheek, causing Gabriel to jump.

"Witch," he accused, thickly.

"That's Miss Witch, to you," she returned, nipping the other cheek. Unable to resist, she put a hickey dead center of his right cheek.

An odd sound broke from his throat, part moan and part laughter. He twisted so he could look over his shoulder. Silver eyes gleamed with a mixture of disbelief and heat.

"Tell me you didn't just —"

"If you don't want to explain that, you'd better keep your pants up around your waist, hadn't you?" she asked, her tone a tad too sweet. The man was just so damned sexy that she couldn't believe women weren't swarming about him like gnats.

"I don't think Sam, Wolf or Badger are interested in seeing my ass."

"They don't know what they're missing. Trust me, your ass is a work of art."

He snorted. "Yeah, right. You've seen one male ass, you've seen 'em all." He put his head back down on the pillow.

"So," she drawled, "in that case, you won't mind if I peeked at Sam's or Badger's?" She paused a beat. "Or Wolf's?"

His head shot off the pillow. "Do and yours will glow red!"

Kalesia couldn't prevent a husky chuckle from escaping. "Ahah! Then one ass isn't like another!"

A wicked grin caused her knees to go weak. "Sugar, feel free to look at mine all you want. All others are strictly off limits!" Gabriel buried his head back into the pillow as if that were that.

Kalesia didn't mind. There was only one ass she was interested in and it was right in front of her. Better yet, she'd been given leave to explore it to her heart's content.

She smiled so wide her cheeks hurt. Kalesia settled down to do just that.

She fitted both palms over his cheeks and gave a little squeeze. "Even here, you are so strong. The muscles defined and so firm." She sighed. "What I wouldn't give for a butt this firm."

"Leave your butt alone. My heart couldn't stand anything better."

She grinned, absurdly pleased. "Ass man, huh?"

"When it comes to you, darlin', I'm an ass man, a tit man. The whole fu — Damn package."

Kalesia glowed. In fact, she wouldn't be surprised if she could light the entire city of Ocala. "I like that. I like that a lot."

"Let me let go of these damn wooden posts and I'll make sure you 'like' it a helluva lot more than that."

She gave a light smack to his bottom. "Uh-uh. Hush and let me play."

"Now why does the sound of that make me flat-out nervous?"

Kalesia heard the wry amusement in his voice. On impulse, she decided to give Gabriel something to be nervous about.

Sweet mercy, she loved teasing this man. Loved lightening the shadows in his eyes until his gaze was pure, unadulterated, untarnished silver.

"Spread your legs."

Gabriel could have given lessons to a statue. She very nearly checked to see if he was still breathing.

One tiny fraction at a time, he drew his right leg up higher.

Needing to make sure he was okay with this, Kalesia peered at his face. The aroused flush on his blunt cheekbones reassured her. Who knew if he'd ever let her have this much control again. She wasn't about to waste a second. Kalesia went back to her slow perusal.

A man's body was so beautiful. She'd had no idea. Even here—she pressed the tip of one finger to the strip of skin between the heavy sac and his anus.

Gabriel shuddered, the muscles in his buttocks and thighs clenched hard.

Oh, my.

Something else she hadn't known.

She rubbed a little harder, amazed at how soft the skin there was. And sensitive. So very sensitive.

Would he be that sensitive between...

She had to find out.

Kalesia spread his firm cheeks apart once more and, before he had time to object, lashed the tip of her tongue around the small, puckered opening.

"Son of a bitch!" Gabriel nearly shot off the bed. "Kalesia, what are you— You can't mean to—" She loved the way he couldn't get a complete sentence out.

"Playing. And, yes, I do mean to." Lordy, she never dreamed how much fun playing could be. In the past, sex was never fun. Without even trying, Gabriel had broadened her horizons. She grinned. It was only fair she returned the favor.

Kalesia had read of rimming before. In truth, she had not understood its appeal. To be completely honest, just the thought always had an ick factor off the Richter Scale.

Showed what difference a man could make. Now, the idea of pleasuring Gabriel that way, teasing him with her tongue until he couldn't stand anymore, aroused her more than the act of intercourse had in the past.

She ran the flattened width of her tongue over his anus. He tasted clean. Slightly salty, faintly earthy but clean. Somehow, she hadn't expected that. Kalesia stroked the delicate, crinkled skin, first in a circle, then by flitting the tip of her tongue across the opening.

Words poured out of Gabriel. Hot, desperate, pleading words. Each small movement, each tiny wriggle of her tongue, pulled more curses, more pleas from him.

Kalesia didn't think he was even aware of what he was saying.

"Fuck, sugar, that feels so fucking good. Don't stop. Please don't stop." He pushed back.

She nipped.

"Fucking, yes!" Gabriel drew his left leg up and spread his knees to balance his weight as he rocked back into her touch. The position lifted his hips several inches off the bed.

The heavy sac swung between the corded thighs. Kalesia caught it in one hand. Weighed it. Rolled the balls inside on her palm.

Harsh, rough breaths shuddered out of him.

Kalesia latched onto the sensitive flesh of his perineum, worried it gently between her teeth. At the same time, she slipped one slender finger inside his anus. She wrapped her free hand around his cock.

There was a faint cracking sound.

Kalesia ignored it and sucked on the delicate skin. She worked her finger in and out of his anus.

Gabriel began to thrust his cock between the fingers. The heated satin of his hard flesh grew hotter, harder.

Her finger found the small gland inside him. She rubbed hard.

Gabriel's rhythm faltered.

"Son of a bitch, son of a bitch, son a bitch." His hips jerked, a rough, uncoordinated motion.

Though Kalesia didn't think it possible, his cock swelled more.

Kalesia heard a distinct snapping sound at the same time as Gabriel groaned, "Oh, fuck, sugar, I'm coming. Don't stop."

Spurts of thick, hot cum covered her hand, his stomach, the bed.

Gabriel collapsed. With a grunt, he turned onto his back and flung one arm across his eyes. Eyes still covered, he reached down and hauled her up beside him.

Kalesia rested her head on his chest, listening to his heart thunder and his lungs labor for air.

Dang, she wanted to do that again.

Something poked her shoulder. Kalesia tried to ignore it. She wiggled. Gabriel's arm tightened. She wiggled again. Finally, she sat up. Damn and blast, couldn't a girl rest in a little well-deserved afterglow? Kalesia felt among the rumpled sheet until she found the culprit and fished it out. She started laughing.

It was one of the spindles.

Kalesia tossed it to the floor and collapsed back down on Gabriel's chest, chuckling.

After several long minutes, Gabriel threaded his fingers through her hair. He tugged. His gaze, when it met hers, was serious.

"You weren't satisfied."

Just as serious, she told him, "I am very satisfied." It was the truth. She didn't think she'd ever felt more content.

He waved that away. "You know what I mean. You didn't come."

She reached up and gripped two of the remaining spindles. "Make me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I pay you to keep me informed. You begin to disappoint me. I dislike being disappointed." The voice was harsh, arrogant.

"I'm keeping tabs on the woman. Remember, I alerted you to the fact she's a potential problem." The man speaking lowered his voice as someone walked by. He waited until they were out of earshot. "I want more money. Keeping you informed is becoming dangerous."

"You're not worth the money I'm paying you now." Pure ice, the tone sent shivers down the listener's spine.

"No?" he drawled, hiding his fear. "Not even if I could tell you they found a hit man by the name of Crump?"

A long silence filled the air. "Ten thousand more and the information best warrant it. If it doesn't, remember you're not invulnerable." There was a click as the receiver was replaced.

Glancing down the hallway to be certain no one was around, the second man allowed himself a small smile. With luck, he'd wrangle another ten thousand on top of that. He just had to handle the flow of information properly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam was sitting at the table when Kalesia walked into the kitchen the next morning. "You look like something even Hannibal would have the good taste not to drag in." She went directly to the coffee pot and poured two large cups of the dark brew. She nodded good morning to Wolf as she passed him. He nodded back and turned a slice of ham in the frying pan. "A hard night?" she asked Sam, shoving a steaming cup in his hand.

He wrapped both hands around the cup and inhaled with the blissful expression of a true aficionado of caffeine. "Thanks," he mumbled around a cautious sip. "I'm not as young as I used to be. Be an angel and rub my neck. It's killing me." He blew on the hot liquid. "By the way, where's Gabe?"

"Right behind you. And you won't have to worry about growing any older if she touches you."

"Ouch. I thought you'd be in a better mood this morning."

Straddling a chair, Gabriel shot him a hard look. "I'm never in that good a mood. Get me a cup of coffee, honey."

Get me a cup of coffee, huh? she snorted silently. She should have known. Give a tomcat an inch and he'd move right in and take over. Kalesia snapped the requested coffee on the table in front of Gabriel. A river of the dark brew slopped over the rim.

Gabriel eyed the waste mournfully. "Came on too strong, huh? If I ask real nice, could I have a full cup?" He looked boyishly hopeful, a neat trick for a battle-scarred tom.

Kalesia refilled his cup. "See, Sam, he's able to learn."

"Well, I'll be."

"You will be if you don't put a cork in it." Gabriel tossed his coffee-soaked napkin in Sam's direction. "Got anything?"

Sam became all business. "Quite a bit, actually." He paused as Badger trooped in the door. Sam waited until the other man settled at the table to continue. "Seems our Mr. Crump is not the only unsolved murder before and during that period. Took me most of the night to discover that wherever our Mr. Crump happened to be, a body just naturally seemed to turn up."

"He was a hit man." Gabriel shrugged as he grabbed a honey tangerine from the bowl of fruit in the middle of the table. He began peeling it. "Bodies usually turn up if someone is paying." He popped one section of the peeled fruit into his mouth. "Anything to connect the victims?"

Kalesia, her attention on the conversation, jumped as Wolf placed a plate before her. She looked at the ham, egg and toast. Her stomach roiled. She shoved it away, not sure her stomach could handle food right now.

Gabriel shoved it back.

She frowned at him.

"Eat."

Rather than argue with him in front of the other men, Kalesia made a show of putting a tiny bite of egg in her mouth.

He scowled. Gabriel opened his mouth to say something, then shut it.

Sam watched the byplay between the pair, a faint smile shaping his mouth. He picked up the conversation. "The victims all seem diverse. It'd have taken me weeks, if not months, to come up with anything on Crump if the Feds hadn't already been after him." He pulled a face. "Always one step behind."

Kalesia was impressed. Sam must have pulled some pretty impressive strings to get the information so fast.

"As it is, we're left with hundreds of man-hours and no concrete results. The bastard was good, I'll give him that."

"Was he freelance?"

Sam hesitated. "No solid proof but doesn't seem like it."

"Good," Wolf grunted. He glanced at Kalesia. "You said he felt betrayed by someone he was working with."

She nodded.

"Did you get the feeling Crump was the boss?"

Had she? Kalesia did a quick rerun of the emotions Crump had felt when he realized he'd been betrayed. "No," she said slowly. "Just the opposite. I think he worked for his killer. What's really odd, though, he felt superior to whoever it was. He was furious at underestimating this person. I could feel his shock."

"That means his killer is worried. Cleaning up. Worried people make mistakes." Wolf fiddled with the handle of the coffee cup. Wolf looked right at Kalesia. "We'll get him before he hurts you." His eyes were icy.

She'd only seen eyes that cold on one other person.

Gabriel.

She was suddenly very glad both men were on her side.

Sam yawned and stretched. His shoulders were very broad in the same rumpled white shirt he'd arrived in yesterday. "Let me snatch a few hours of sleep, then I'll dig some more. We know Crump's accomplice was in the Ocala area in the last week. I'll cross-reference that with persons of interest in the Feds' investigation. Who knows? We might get lucky." He pushed back his chair.

As if that were a signal, everyone filed out, leaving Kalesia and Gabriel alone. She turned to him. "It really is real, isn't it?" Although it was in the mid-seventies, Kalesia felt cold. A deep down cold that a sweater wouldn't make go away. "It wasn't a mistake. A nightmare instead of a vision. Was it?" She rubbed her arms.

"No, it wasn't a mistake." Gabriel stood, pulled her into his arms. His hands moved up and down the line of her spine.

Kalesia sank into his embrace. Tried to pull his heat inside her. She was quiet for a long while, thinking. Finally, she voiced the question that had been bothering her since the three men knocked on the front door. "Are Wolf and the other men putting themselves in jeopardy to help me?"

His hands stopped their soothing rhythm. She didn't have to see his face to know he was considering lying to her. To her relief, he didn't.

"Maybe." His palms resumed the slow, up and down motion. "But this is what they do. What they're trained for. Trust them. They're the best. They won't do anything stupid."

She leaned back so she could see his face. "What about you? You didn't want any of this. You left law enforcement for a reason." Kalesia swallowed. "I couldn't bear it if I cost you your life," she whispered, aware of the ache in her voice.

"I could have walked away." Gabriel brushed a kiss over each eyelid before folding her close again.

Kalesia listened to the steady, comforting beat of his heart. When he spoke again, his voice rumbled in her ear.

"Listen to me closely. You didn't make me do anything I didn't want to. I'm here, with you, because I want to be." He rubbed his chin on the top of her head. "One other thing you might want to keep in mind. I too, was the best. I give you my word. I'll take care of you. And myself. Believe in me."

She squeezed his lean waist hard. A button on his shirt dug into her cheek. "I do." She thought of his scars. Of the way he sometimes seemed so alone. "And I give you my word. I will always believe in you. Whatever happens, Gabriel, I will be there for you." The promise was fervent and low. She meant it with all her heart.

He cupped her chin in one large, callused palm. With his thumb, he tilted her face up. His eyes were fierce. "I'll hold you to that."



## Chapter Nine

"So? What's next?"

Gabriel settled his hip more comfortably on Kalesia's chair as he answered her question. "We see if the unsolved murder victims have any ties to Crump." A stray ray of sunshine found the fire in Kalesia's hair and set it ablaze. It also highlighted the paleness of her complexion and the worry in her green eyes as she gazed at each man in turn.

"Does this mean you no longer suspect my clients?"

"It means we have four visions of unsolved murders and the dead body of a hit man. Right now, those are top priority. It does not mean I have forgotten your clients. Badger and Sam are running background checks on the people you dealt with in each firm, starting with your current and most recent clients." In particular, the three clients whose files were out of order.

A look of horror flashed over her face. "Gabriel! How in the world am I going to explain when they find out they're under investigation?" She rose to her feet, agitated and began to pace. "This is going to ruin my business. For good, this time," she breathed.

"Take it easy."

She rounded on him. "Don't tell me to take it easy! Don't you understand?" She pointed an accusing finger in his direction. "They'll never trust me again. It's bad enough that I'm mixed up in a murder investigation but when they learn I sicced the FBI on them, they'll go ballistic and yank my contracts!"

He tried to calm her down. "Your business won't be ruined because they'll never know we investigated them."

"Hah! That's what you say now," she muttered, not looking in the slightest bit mollified by his reassurance. She resumed her pacing.

"Gabriel's right. They won't have a clue," Badger said. "Hey, remember, we're pros."

"Professional snoops, you mean."

"At least, lady, we're your professional snoops," Gabriel snapped, insulted. What the fuck had she thought he'd do when he'd insisted that she bring the files?

She had the grace to look embarrassed. "Okay, okay. Sheesh, talk about touchy. It's not as if I called you a thief or something." She jammed her hands in her pockets and studied the racy little boots on her feet. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"Hey, don't worry it about. We all knew what you meant." Badger slanted Gabriel a mean look.

Liar. Gabriel gave him one back just as mean. "Tell me about the vision from two years ago."

"The man in the remote horse paddock?" She sounded resigned at having to go over the vision yet again. "It was either an Arabian or thoroughbred farm. A big one. Lots of huge paddocks. This one had loads of trees and brush. I remember old straw and shavings on the ground, spread out the way some of the farms do after mucking out the stalls. No one had used the field in a while. The man was sprawled, face down, on the ground. Kinda like a puppet whose strings have snapped."

Gabriel heard her swallow. His anger dissipated as fast as it'd come. He forced himself to stay seated instead of crossing the room and taking her in his arms like he ached to do.

"He was shot. Once, to the head. That's about it." She rubbed her palms over her jeans. "Outside of being shot, I can't see a connection between that old murder, John Crump's and mine."

"Where, exactly, was he shot?" Gabriel asked.

"In the..." Kalesia swallowed, a sickly cast to her face. "He was shot in the left eye." She sank slowly onto the sofa and looked from one hard, closed face to another. "But in my vision I was shot in the chest. Surely that means something?" she protested, a shiver running over her.

"Were any of the other victims shot?"

She gave a slow shake of her head.

"Two of the victims in your visions were shot, execution style. We can't ignore the similarity."

"He's right, Kalesia," Badger said, moving to stand behind her and patting her shoulder. "We have to follow every angle." He looked at the other men for confirmation.

Sam concurred. He sat beside Kalesia on the sofa. "At this point, we can't favor one scenario over another."

Wolf claimed the padded arm of the sofa. He picked up her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "We have to be thorough."

*I'll be damned.* Gabriel watched in a state of bemusement as three of the meanest sons of bitches he knew rush to reassure Kalesia. He gave a disbelieving shake of his head. The woman hadn't the slightest clue. When Badger patted her shoulder for the third time, Gabriel decided it was time to break up the small party.

"Badger," he barked. "You and Wolf keep working the client angle. Sam, see if you can cross-reference that murder to anything in Crump's file." He shoved to his feet.

"Going out?" Wolf asked, a too-casual note in his deep voice and a knowing gleam in his eyes.

"You're going out?" She shot a suspicious glance between the two men. "Now?"

Gabriel nodded.

She shot to her feet. "Not without me, you're not." Kalesia skirted the coffee table and stood in front of him, arms crossed.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Satisfaction welled. He reached out and rubbed a knuckle against her cheek. A small electric shock shot straight from his knuckle to his cock. It never failed to amaze him, the effect she had on his senses.

Dawning awareness lit her green eyes. "I think I've been had."

"You," Gabriel curled a possessive arm around her shoulders, "have a suspicious nature." Damn, she felt good in his arms.

"Hah! Comes from hanging around with you. You'd make a nun suspicious. Where are we going?"

"To see a man about a missing person."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sneaky. Real sneaky, Steele," Kalesia mouthed in an aside as Gabriel held the glass door open and motioned her inside. "You know I hate these places."

"Tom will be crushed to hear that." Gabriel steered her around an arguing couple, wondering why he didn't have that tight feeling in his chest that being involved in anything remotely resembling an investigation usually gave him.

"Yeah, sure, right. If he's anything like you, it'd take a two-ton boulder to crush him."

"I'll be sure to tell him that. Right after I tell him how much you like the yellow slicker."

"Isn't it illegal to blackmail a person in a sheriff's office or something?"

"Only if you get caught."

"Gabe! Back so soon?" Gary Parker looked up, surprise written on his plain face. Right ankle propped over his left knee, he finished wiping mud off the high shine of his shoe and tossed the rag into a drawer.

Gabriel squeezed Kalesia's hand as she opened her mouth to respond. Without missing a beat, she gave a warm smile instead.

"Place grows on you after awhile." Gabriel canted his head toward the closed office door. "Harley here?"

Parker grimaced. "He's here. In a helluva mood, though." He jumped as Harley's door slammed open.

"Parker! Do you have that report ready?" Tom noticed Gabriel and Kalesia and scowled. "What are you two doing here?"

"We need to talk."

"Why not? My day's already shot all to hell." He went back inside without another word. Gabriel, with Kalesia in tow, followed.

Harley settled into the chair behind the desk. He threw a pen on the cluttered surface. "Well? And I warn you, Gabe, I don't want any more murders. I have enough on my plate as it is," he grunted.

"How about missing persons or John Does?"

Harley groaned. "You know, Gabe. A fella could get real tired of seeing your face."

"I need to see if you have any matches for a vision Kalesia had about two years ago. You know, one of those I asked you to check into nearly a week ago."

"Don't start. Do you have any idea of the number of crimes that come through this office in a day? This place is like a madhouse. I have more to worry about than possible murders more than two years old."

It was the first time Gabriel could remember hearing Tom Harley sound defensive. But, then, being around Kalesia could do that to a man.

"Even after Kalesia led you to a body?" Gabriel asked, lacing his tone liberally with sarcasm.

Harley nodded. "Even after. Right now we're assisting in the search for two children who disappeared. On top of that, the body of a hiker was found handcuffed to a tree in the forest." Harley's voice deepened. "Yeah, you could say I had more to worry about." Their eyes met in a look of mutual understanding. Harley cleared his throat. "Any special reason to wonder about that particular vision now?"

"What caliber bullet was Crump shot with?"

Harley gave him a hard look. "9mm. Why?"

Gabriel nodded, his hunch confirmed. "The man I want you to run a check on was shot in the head with a small caliber round."

"And that makes you suspicious?"

"Hell, yes. Anything that has even a remote resemblance to what's happening currently makes me suspicious."

"You're grabbing at straws," Harley warned.

Gabriel leaned back in his chair and pinned the older man with a hard look. "That's why you sent her to me, isn't it? Because I'm so damn good at grabbing straws?"

Kalesia looked from one man to the other, a frown pulling the delicate, wing-like brows together.

Harley snagged a yellow legal pad and a pen. "Give me the details again. I'll see what I can do."

When he finished, Harley asked, "You're sure that's all you can remember?" The question was aimed at Kalesia. She nodded.

"That's it. Even though that vision took place over two years ago, the details are very clear in my mind. It's hardly something I would forget."

Harley reclined back in his office chair and steepled his fingers over his stomach. The chair groaned alarmingly.

Gabriel waited for the rickety swivel chair to collapse. When it didn't, he decided it was much like Harley, himself—a little used, a little battered but completely dependable underneath it all.

"Okay. That's enough to get me started. If I turn up anything, I'll give ya'll a holler. What is it?" Harley barked, when Parker knocked once and stuck his head inside the door.

"Senator Morne's on the phone again. Line three." Gary Parker delivered the message and ducked back out.

"Shakespeare was dead wrong," Harley grumbled. "It's the politicians we need to get rid of, not the lawyers."

"I read somewhere that most politicians are lawyers. Some are even law enforcement officers," Kalesia murmured to Gabriel. He hid his grin at the wild blush that covered her face when Harley switched his gaze back to her.

"Which goes to show you what a model of efficiency looks like. By getting rid of the politicians not only do they become an extinct species but the lion's share of lawyers do likewise." Harley grinned, showing a lot of teeth. "Those who are cops are exempt."

Gabriel grabbed her hand and hauled her to her feet. He, better than anyone, knew the little witch fought dirty when cornered. And, damn, she looked like she wanted to sink through the floor. This time, he didn't hide his grin.

Harley shifted in his chair. If he were a betting man, Gabriel decided, eying his friend, he'd bet Harley felt bad about teasing her. She seemed to have that effect on men.

Gabriel waited, counting off the seconds silently. Sure enough, in less than fifteen seconds Harley took pity on Kalesia's embarrassment.

Tom made a short, shooing motion, the ghost of a smile on his mouth. "Go. Get. Let me tend my headache in peace." The smile faded. He rubbed at his temple with one hand and picked up the phone with the other.

"I see you made it out alive," Gary Parker greeted them after a quick check to make sure the door was closed.

"Barely." Kalesia gave the young man a wry smile. "Somehow, I get the feeling your major doesn't care much for the political system."

"Now, ma'am, whatever gave you that notion?" Gary Parker grinned back. "The boss is a good man but politicians tend to give him a rash." His expression turned serious. "Morne's been riding the major pretty hard. Seems like he's been appointed the head of some crime task force. That, along with his bid for reelection, means he's been hanging around here tighter than a tick on a wet hound dog."

"He's finding fault with the Department?" Gabriel asked, his attention on the deputy seated behind Kalesia. He glared at Henry Pompano, who seemed altogether too interested in Kalesia. The young deputy, finally sensing the malevolent regard aimed his way, finally pulled his gaze from her ass. Gabriel pinned him with a lethal

glance. Pompano went white. Ducking his head, he opened a file on his desk with shaking hands.

He should have beaten the shit out of the little twerp when he used weed killer instead of fertilizer on the seedlings.

"Not really. At least I don't think so. It's just he's asking all kinds of questions and sticking his nose everywhere. Making us all kinda nervous. I'll be really glad when the election's over." Another deputy walked up, a sheaf of papers in his hand, diverting Gary's attention.

Gabriel gathered Kalesia with a hand under her elbow and started toward the door. "Bye," she called back over her shoulder.

"See you, Miss Brannigan," Gary and Pompano called out at the same time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gut-wrenchingly real images slid through Kalesia's defenses like a thief through an unlocked window.

Unable to move, he waited for the pain.

Ghost-like fingers slithered down his spine, leaving blood in their wake—tiny droplets that turned into a river that welled into a carmine cascade.

Agony exploded and saturated the night...

"Wake up, Kalesia. Damn it, wake up!" Gabriel commanded, fear making his voice rough. He reached up and snapped on the lamp.

She woke with a start. For a long moment she stared at him, not seeming to recognize him, then she flung her arms around his neck. Underneath his palms, quivers racked her slender frame. Her gown stuck to her body. His own skin, he knew, was cold and slick with a thin film of sweat from his own dream.

Finally, a long moment later, he gripped her upper arms and held her slightly away. "What the hell was that about? You nearly scared me to death with your moaning and flailing about." Gabriel swallowed a hard lump, remembering the tortured groans that had rent him from his own restless sleep. God, he would never forget the sounds. "I thought someone was killing you!" he ground out, unable to prevent his hands from roaming over her. Needing the feel of her warmth to assure himself she was in one piece.

"Oh God, Gabriel! They were torturing him."

He stiffened. "They were torturing whom?" he asked, each word shaped with undue care.

"That poor man. The one I saw tonight."

"You had another vision?"

"Yes. No. Oh God, I don't know," she stammered, tears trembling on the tip of her lashes. Her head fell forward and pressed against his damp chest.

"Calm down and tell me what you saw." He rubbed soothing circles on her back and stared over her shoulder, seeing a growing darkness that had nothing to do with the night.

Kalesia took a shaky breath. The sound cut straight through Gabriel. "This poor man was strapped to a table and they were torturing him."

The darkness expanded. "Who was torturing him?"

"I don't know." Her voice broke. "I couldn't see their faces."

"What about the man being tortured? Could you see his face?" The darkness prowled. Searched for fine fault lines. If it found them, he'd shatter. Like a poorly repaired bowl. Malicious laughter echoed in his ears. It knew. Knew it was only a matter of time.

"Crimson. Everywhere." She burrowed closer. "Table. Floor. The man."

"His face. Did you see his face?" he asked again, forcing his mouth to work. Gabriel felt weird. As if a paper-thin sheet of crackle glass separated him from the real world. He could see it. Could almost touch it. But was apart from it.

Darkness crept closer.

Once it found the spiderweb of cracks, the darkness would spill out. Swallow him whole.

He'd be trapped. A shade, able to see life but unable to touch it. Forever.

Kalesia shook her head against his chest. Long strands of her hair caught and clung in the dark mat of hair covering his chest. They gleamed like strings of silken fire against the ebony darkness. "His face was too covered in blood and bruises for me to see any details of his features. I'm sorry," she whispered, her breath tiny pants, searing the icy coldness of his skin.

"Shh, don't apologize. You can't help what you do or don't see." His voice was a harsh rasp. He sounded like a man too long without water. Or one who had screamed himself hoarse, Gabriel thought in that distant part of his mind that still functioned.

"So much pain. Waves of it." Her fingers dug into his sides. "Gabriel?" There was a tentative lilt to the question.

He needed to answer. To say something. But he couldn't. So he waited.

"I know this doesn't make sense but," she tilted her head back and looked at him, "I could almost swear it was the same man I saw in my vision about Crump."

The darkness receded. Crawled away, snapping and snarling. Everything became sharp and clear again. "I thought you decided it was Crump both times in that vision."

"I did," she agreed slowly. "I'm not so sure now. There's something very familiar about that man in my vision tonight." She gave a shaky laugh. "Sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

Sweat dampened his underarms. He tucked her head back under his chin. "Still could be Crump. That would explain the sense of familiarity."

"But why would I have another vision about him? We found his body." She sounded skeptical.

Gabriel searched for a logical explanation. "Don't know. Because his murder is somehow linked to the vision of yours?" Shit, that was weak but it was the best he could come up with.

To his surprise, she considered it. "How do we find out for sure?" She smoothed a finger over his nipple, then traced the wickedly curved scar that stretched from shoulder to ribs.

Gabriel caught and stilled her fingers. He knew she wasn't aware of what she was doing. The gesture was absentminded. But he couldn't think with her touching him like that.

"I'll ask Harley tomorrow for the result of the autopsy."

"He's not allowed to give you that information."

"I have no scruples about blackmail, remember?" He forced amusement into the statement. He was rewarded with a watery chuckle.

After a long while, she stirred. "Gabriel? If the man in my vision isn't Crump that means someone else is in danger, doesn't it?"

"In danger? Not dead?" The lid slammed shut on the darkness. He closed his eyes in relief.

She froze. "In danger." She spoke slowly, as if she were working it out in her head. "I did say that, didn't I?"

"Whoever it is, he's not dead, is he?"

"No," she said, very softly. "No, he's not dead."

"Yet," he amended.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What did Harley say?"

At Kalesia's impatient query, Wolf Devlin looked up from sorting stacks of official looking paper into manageable piles. His glance slid from her to Gabriel.

"Crump wasn't tortured before he was killed. At least, not beyond his arms being bound." Gabriel ran a hand behind his neck in frustration. "It seems that no sooner do we find a lead to follow than it sprouts ten more shoots."

"Am I missing something?" Wolf asked in that slow, deep drawl of his that gave the impression of a sloth, slow to anger, even slower to move. An impression that was immediately shattered when you looked into his eyes.

Sam and Badger looked at each other in puzzlement and then turned toward Gabriel. "If you are, so am I," Sam said.



"I wasn't sure until I talked with Harley that I had anything to tell you." Shit. He'd really, really hoped that Harley would tell him Crump was tortured. That, somehow, last night's vision was a loop of Crump's.

"Now that you've talked to Harley?"

"Let me explain." Kalesia crossed and sat next to Wolf on the sofa, careful not to disturb the papers. "Last night I had what might have been a vision." She stuck her hands between her knees and rocked back and forth. "I say might because it was different from usual. I didn't see a death. I saw a man's torture. Where it gets really confusing is I think I've had a snatch of this vision before. When I saw Crump's murder."

"Jesus H. Christ!" Badger shot to his feet. "Kalesia, why didn't you say something earlier this morning?"

"Because I couldn't be absolutely certain that it wasn't Crump. Ever since I had the vision of my own death, my visions have been erratic, strange. Before, there was at least a consistency in the manner in which they occurred. Now, sometimes I see through the victim's eyes, while at other times it's like I'm watching from the sidelines. Don't you see? The last time I saw this man I believed he was a fragment of the Crump vision. One blurry and out of focus because I was fighting it so hard. I didn't want to say anything until Gabriel checked it out with Harley."

"So now we have another body to find." Sam's voice was grim.

Gabriel felt a great deal grimmer. "No. Now we stop the person behind the threat before the man in Kalesia's vision becomes a body."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel and his friends disappeared upstairs to the room Sam was using, an air of dark urgency about them. Restless, Kalesia wandered around the house. The men had rejected her offer of assistance in no uncertain terms, telling her that she'd be more hindrance than help at this point. She had neither the training nor the objectivity needed. Protest, Kalesia had quickly discovered, was futile.

Despite knowing they were trying to protect her, she couldn't help feeling a bit resentful. They were her visions. It was her life that was in danger. She should be helping, not twiddling her thumbs. Heck, she couldn't even work on her business. Not only did they have all the files but she wasn't to contact any of her clients until this was over.

About to go stir crazy, she stalked from living room to kitchen and back again. In the middle of the living room, she came to an abrupt halt. The silver unicorn on her ankle tinkled wildly. She didn't feel like cooking and she was too wired to sit and read. So that left what? Kalesia racked her brain and came up with zilch. In desperation, she studied the large room. A wild idea began to form. It was rash, reckless and certain to piss Gabriel off.

A wicked smile curved her lips.

Perfect.

Even that first night she met Gabriel, the bleak austerity of his home had disturbed her on a very basic level. The neutral furniture and stark white walls struck her as...wrong somehow. Instinct told her Gabriel needed warmth, light.

She turned an assessing eye on the house. Her palms literally itched. His home could be magnificent. If she had to guess, she'd say it was well over a hundred years old. It reminded her of a gracefully aged Southern belle. No matter the passage of time or fashion, you could not completely hide the elegant bones or innate grace.

She grimaced. In this case someone, who in her completely biased opinion ought to get a load of buckshot in their *derrière*, had sought to bury its charms under a coating of generic modern. The result was as inviting as a cheap motel room.

Not Gabriel. No, Gabriel wasn't the culprit. Kalesia pondered her certainty for a minute. She shrugged. Okay, so she had no proof. She just knew.

Kalesia turned in a full circle. It definitely needed a splash of light, airy color and clutter. Something besides dust to fill the nooks and crannies. Kalesia planted her hands on her hips, disgruntled. Well, okay, so there wasn't actually any dust. Gabriel was a better housekeeper than she was. Which brought up another point. It just could not be healthy to live in a house this neat and...and mundane.

Take that floor-to-ceiling bay window on the side wall. It cried out for a window seat. A place where you could sit and watch the sun set. A place to relax and daydream.

It was harder to picture Gabriel utilizing the window seat. She grinned. Somehow, she thought he'd still prefer sitting, stark naked, on the balcony. Hmm. Come to think of it, she preferred that too. All that male flesh. Mmm.

She fanned her face. Okay, enough of that. Concentrate, Brannigan. Priorities, here. First a little creative mischief. Strictly for his own good, of course. Lord knew, if there was ever a man who needed a homey, inviting atmosphere, it was Gabriel.

She could jump his bones tonight.

In the ancient garage, Kalesia struck the proverbial gold mine, can after can of paint. And, miracle of miracles, several of them were not white. She chose one that was the bright, cheerful yellow of a crepe myrtle.

Drop cloth spread to catch any stray drips, she set to work with a will on the wall with the bay window. She'd start with just this one wall, pique his curiosity. And maybe mute his anger at her meddling, she admitted to herself as doubt began to stray in. Placing the paintbrush on the edge of the can, she stepped back to survey her work.

What if Gabriel hated it? How mad would he be? She swallowed and consoled herself with the thought that the guys wouldn't let Gabriel strangle her. At least, she was fairly certain they wouldn't.

"Damn," she said under her breath. Her mother had warned her that one day that the streak of impulsiveness she'd inherited from Granny Brannigan was going to be her

downfall. Well, it was too late to stop now, the wall was over half-finished. She picked up the brush.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

The wall finished, Kalesia returned to the garage to see what else she could find. Tucked away in the very back, wrapped in protective clear plastic, she unearthed some throw pillows in bold, jewel colors, a very old hand-sewn magnolia-pattern quilt in a frame and several beautiful hand-blown pieces of glass.

Why in the world had they ever been relegated to the garage? She shook her head. Imagine taking the chance that weather or bugs could ruin them. It boggled the mind. A ray of sunlight was caught and trapped in a ruby and amber bowl. The sheer beauty of the glowing glass robbed Kalesia of breath. She knew the perfect place for it.

Over an hour later, Kalesia stopped to admire her handiwork. Excitement bubbled up, her earlier doubts banished. How could Gabriel not love it? Against the backdrop of the newly painted wall, the faded but still bold blues, greens and creams of the quilt drew and held the eye. Tucked in a seemingly random pattern, the glass bowls and vases were brilliant spills of color. Even the forgettable beige sofa took on new life once the equally bland throw pillows were replaced by the jewel-toned ones, inviting one to sit and curl up.

She glanced at her watch, wondering if she dared start painting another wall. Nah, she decided. Better not. Who knew how much longer he'd be up there. Her mouth quirked. Besides, small doses might go down better. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to know Gabriel didn't accept change well.

Out of the corner of her eye, Kalesia saw a plume of dust race up the road and recognized the mail truck. Mindful of Gabriel's instructions, she waited until it left before walking out to the box. Enjoying the smell of just-cut grass and the earthy, freshwater scent of the river, she automatically sorted through the mail as she strolled back to the house.

Odd. One of the letters was addressed to her. Frowning, she tapped the legal size manila envelope with one thumbnail. Perhaps Tom had found some information he believed useful and sent it along.

Back inside the house, out of the broiling heat, Kalesia studied the envelope more closely. There was no return address but it was postmarked yesterday. Almost shaking with a combination of excitement and dread, she opened the envelope and shook out the contents.

Several black and white photographs drifted to the floor before she could prevent them. Kneeling, she reached out a hand to gather them only to use it to cover her mouth instead. Nausea rose, threatening to choke her at the vile images.

Images of graphic scenes of torture and death were scattered like confetti on the hardwood floor. Her legs refused to support her and she half-fell, half-sat on the cool surface, her mind vehemently denied what it was seeing. Feeling dazed, she remembered the envelope.

Hand shaking, she reached for it and opened it again. Inside she found several reports. Bile burned the back of her throat as she read, making her eyes water.

Or was she crying?

Kalesia shook her head. It didn't matter. What mattered was what she held in her hand.

Unable to believe her eyes, she reread the reports a second and then third time, forcing herself to absorb the typed words. They didn't change. She gathered the damning evidence, making herself look at the pictures again, one at a time.

The evidence was irrefutable.

The truth was spelled out in black and white.

A slight sound caused her to look up from the horrifying pictures. Gabriel stood at the base of the stairs. From his stillness, Kalesia knew he realized something was drastically wrong.

Her stomach lurched. She put her hand there, rubbing the ache. He had been lying to her all along.

Gabriel Steele hadn't been a police officer, undercover or otherwise.

"You were an assassin."

## Chapter Ten

A shutter dropped like a stone, veiling the gray eyes of all emotion. Gabriel glanced at the reports and photographs clutched in her hand. Kalesia hadn't the faintest idea what was running through his mind. It was almost as if she were back at their first meeting, confronted by a stranger who eyed her with cold dispassion.

"Is that what you believe?" Gabriel sounded as if he didn't care one way or the other what she believed. He looked almost bored.

"Can you deny these?" she choked out, her hand shaking as she waved the damning pictures in the air. Gabriel moved to take them and Kalesia shied away from him before she could prevent it. A flicker of emotion moved in his eyes then but it was gone too quickly to read. He took the sheaf, careful not to touch her. Kalesia held her breath as Gabriel studied them thoroughly. Maybe she had jumped to a conclusion, she thought, unable to prevent the tiny flame of something not quite hope.

Gabriel handed them back impassively. "Would you believe me?"

Something vital in Kalesia shriveled and died. A lie. All a lie. The man she had trusted more than any other, the man she had learned to depend upon, was a lie. A façade. Bitter, hysterical laughter welled up. Kalesia bit her lip, determined not to allow Gabriel to see how devastated she was. Unable to bear the pain, she lashed out, wanting to hurt him as he had hurt her.

"You lied to me," she accused in a tight whisper.

Raw, naked agony slashed across his face, shattering the controlled mask for a single instance.

Hot, burning triumph filled Kalesia. So he wasn't totally immune. Before she could resume her attack, a mask of hard indifference replaced the agony.

"Yes, I lied." Abruptly, Gabriel turned on his heel. Kalesia was left wondering if she had imagined that harsh, barely audible, "I lied to both of us."

Kalesia was shaking violently as she watched him leave. She felt emotionally and physically drained. Her mind shut down, protecting her from a reality too awful to contemplate. Not even the initial rush of mingled pain and anger was there. Kalesia was thankful for the numbness that insulated her from the soul-searing anguish sure to come.

Like a wounded animal seeking a place to hide, she went to her old room. A distant part of her was grateful not to see the men, grateful she didn't have to face them and hide the rift between her and Gabriel. She doubted she could, in any case. All three were trained observers, far too experienced not to know something was wrong.

The rest of the afternoon crawled past as she sat, motionless, in the rocking chair. Not even the familiar weight of Tia in her lap melted the icy cocoon wrapping her. She stared out the window, seeing nothing. Where was the pain? The hurt? Her eyes burned as she watched Gabriel cross the yard to the herb garden he was creating. Head down, he put hoe to ground with a single-minded intentness that was almost scary in its viciousness.

Why couldn't she cry?

Hours later, she saw Wolf approach Gabriel. Though the window was cracked open, they were too far away for her to hear their conversation. Suddenly, Gabriel shook his head adamantly. Both men turned to look at her window. Gabriel shook his head again, with finality. Wolf's hand cut the air once before he stalked off.

Kalesia couldn't even summon the energy to be curious at the conversation between the two men.

Less than fifteen minutes later, a low knock came at her door. She ignored it.

"Kalesia?" The voice was dark and low but not Gabriel's. "Kalesia, it's Wolf. Is everything okay?" Concerned laced his voice. She wanted to ignore the query. Ignore everything.

"Kalesia?" he persisted, with a hint of impatience.

She wished he'd just go away. If she had the energy, she'd tell him so. Kalesia heaved a little sigh and gave in to the inevitable.

"I'm fine, honest. Just a headache." Lies. The damn things crept into every facet of her life lately. A quiver of agony stirred to life. Kalesia quashed it ruthlessly, preferring the numbness.

There was the slightest pause. "Do you want me to bring you something to eat?"

Her stomach lurched at the notion of putting food into her mouth. "No, I'm not hungry. I'm sorry I forgot to fix the meal," she added as she remembered she had taken over the task of evening meals.

There was another, longer, pause. "Don't worry about it. It won't be the first time we've fended for ourselves. Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

Feeling all right? Kalesia stuffed her fist in her mouth bit down on her knuckles. Of course, she wasn't feeling all right. The beautiful little dream she'd been weaving was rent in two. The man she'd let in her bed turned out to be a killer. All right? She didn't think she'd ever be all right again. She wanted to scream at Wolf that the man responsible was his friend, Gabriel.

Kalesia did nothing of the kind. Instead, she politely reassured the man standing on the other side of the door. "I'm sure. Nothing wrong that a night of sleep won't cure." Must always be polite. Wasn't that what her mother had drilled into her head? That it was the mark of good Southern breeding to remain polite, even in the most trying of circumstances. She waited for Wolf to push some more. He wasn't the type to give up.

Silence.

Her head, suddenly too heavy for her neck, dropped forward into her palm. She cradled her aching forehead. That, at least, wasn't a total lie.

More silence.

With a sense of relief, she realized he'd moved away, as silent as his namesake. Just like Gabriel. Neither man made a sound unless they intended to.

The numbness protecting her cracked. A tear slid down her cheek. Then another. And another.

She buried her face in her hands and cried.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia leaned closer to the mirror and tried to convince herself it was just the stark lighting making her look like death warmed over. Her skin, usually a delicate ivory, was so pale as to be almost bloodless. Fine lines bracketed her eyes and the corners of her mouth. She grimaced. Makeup was not going to hide the damage. Perhaps if she claimed she still had a headache?

Oh, who was she trying to fool? All three were trained observers, she reminded herself. They were bound to notice something was wrong. All she could do is hope that good manners would prevent them from questioning her. Kalesia sent up a quick prayer. She just couldn't talk about what she'd discovered.

Not yet.

Unable to stall any longer, she went downstairs. Her knees wobbled when she saw Gabriel wasn't in the kitchen with his friends. Kalesia sat before her legs gave out. "Morning." She turned a bright smile on the men. A glass of juice appeared in front of her. Her hand shook when she took a sip.

"Mornin', beautiful. Better?" Sam leaned back against the counter, his hazel eyes gleaming with blatant appreciation.

"Much better, thank you." Good heavens, she must be a better actress than she thought. She started to relax, certain now she could pull this off. When Wolf offered her a basket of muffins fresh from the oven, she took one and automatically glanced up to offer her thanks. A gray, predatory gaze snagged hers.

Not for one minute had her little act fooled him, she realized. Wolf silently raised one black brow. Kalesia gave a small shake of her head. He nodded. The other men didn't seem to notice the byplay. Or, if they did, they didn't mention it. For which she was thankful. She still hadn't figured out what she was going to tell them.

Kalesia concentrated on buttering the muffin. "Find anything useful?"

Sam closed the refrigerator door, a large bowl of mixed fruit in his hands. "A couple of things," he said, placing it in the center of the table. He popped a huge strawberry in his mouth as he opened his napkin. His eyes were thoughtful as he chewed. "We'll figure it out. And until we do, we won't let anything happen to you."

Tears filled her eyes. She sniffed into her napkin, hating being so emotional but unable to stop it.

Sam's eyes crinkled in mischief. One arm snaked out and pulled her, chair and all, close to his side. "Hell, if you'll let me have another orange-nut muffin, I'll trail along at your heels like a Chihuahua with a Doberman complex." He gave a hopeful grin. "I'll even sleep at the foot of your bed."

Kalesia sputtered on a laugh. The hated tears dried up. Grateful, she hugged Sam and gave him a peck on the cheek. "If you're not housebroken," she chided, "I wield a mean newspaper!"

No one noticed him standing there.

Not that it surprised Gabriel. Hell, he'd be more surprised if they had.

He watched the easy horseplay between the pair. His hand clenched into a fist at his side. Slowly, finger by finger, he opened it.

She never laughed like that with him.

On the outside looking in. It was a familiar sensation. One he'd accepted and lived with all of his life.

Until Kalesia.

On the outside looking in. Blood pounded in his veins.

"What's the matter, Kalesia? Can't stay out of a man's bed now that you've found out what you've been missing? Which one will you place under your spell this time? Or are you trying for all three?" Gabriel placed each word with lethal precision.

Her head jerked in his direction, her face dead white at the insult. Beside her, Sam started to surge to his feet. Without breaking her glance from his, Kalesia stood, her hand on Sam's shoulder. "Don't. This is between Gabriel and me."

Mere feet separated them. It might have well been an ocean. When she spoke, each word was spaced deliberately apart. "Trust me, Gabriel, your performance in bed does not make me inclined to seek solace elsewhere."

Gabriel stared pointedly at the slender hand holding Sam back. "It was good enough to keep you coming back for more."

"Gratitude makes a woman do strange things," Kalesia countered with icy steadiness.

"Don't try to tell me it wasn't more than gratitude, damn you!"

"Wasn't it?" she asked, before stepping around him and leaving the room.

Gabriel, lost in a strange mixture of fury and pain, stared after her. He started when Wolf spoke.

"Do you get pleasure from pulling the wings off butterflies?"

Gabriel focused on Wolf. The need for battle coiled his muscles. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about."



"Don't I?" Wolf murmured, his question a clear taunt. "I've seen you treat the enemy with more kindness than you just treated Kalesia."

"Shut up. Just shut the fuck up." A fierce joy welled at the thought of combat.

"Wouldn't it be simpler just to let the murderer find Kalesia than to kill her a little piece at a time?"

"No one," he grated, "no one is going to hurt her." Just the thought blinded him with rage.

Wolf tipped the chair, balancing on the two back legs. "No," he agreed softly. "That pleasure is reserved for you."

Pain exploded in Gabriel's right hand as it connected with Wolf's chin. The chair hit the floor. Wolf lifted up on one elbow. He touched his fingers to the trickle of blood running down his chin, grim satisfaction in his eyes.

Shocked, Gabriel stared at his friend. He couldn't believe he'd allowed himself to be provoked into losing control. And the provocation had been deliberate. Wolf hadn't even attempted a counter. For the first time in twenty years, he'd violated one of his most fundamental tenets. He'd let another person dictate the rules of engagement.

A cold sensation seeped into his bones. He turned on heel. "Go to hell. All of you, go to hell."

Badger waited until the screen door slammed. "Well, what the fuck was that supposed to prove? Besides the fact Gabe was ready to kill you?"

Wolf rubbed his jaw. "It proved that whatever is wrong, it's tearing Gabe up just as much as it is Kalesia."

"Interesting," Sam commented.

"Yeah, ain't it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well? What have you heard?"

"Nothing. Not one word." One eyelid twitched at the sound of a door shutting. "I don't like this."

"Nothing?" The question was sharp, biting. "I would have thought..." The arrogant voice trailed off.

"No one's talking."

"Find out if the woman is still with Steele."

"Why wouldn't she be?" There was an undercurrent to that faceless voice that made him suspicious.

"Do it," the man ordered.

"It'll take me a couple of days. I have to be careful not to make anyone suspicious."

"Three days." The line went dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia stared at the jumbled mess of letters on the computer screen. She'd been compiling her own list, hoping to find something, anything, that she'd missed. It was useless. She couldn't concentrate on anything but the situation between her and Gabriel.

It had been four days since she'd confronted Gabriel with the packet. As impossible as it seemed, matters between them had deteriorated. Mealtimes were now undeclared war zones. They couldn't even be in the same room without sniping at each other. Kalesia propped her elbows on the desk and massaged her temples. She could not go on like this. Her nerves couldn't stand the strain.

Sweet mercy, what would she have done without the support of the other men? They had a knack for diffusing any given situation before actual blood was shed.

Her stomach lurched. Bad analogy. Gabriel specialized in spilling blood.

Then why did he avoid going to bed until three or four in the morning?

The slender tendril of thought scattered when the bedroom door opened after one short, hard rap. Wolf entered and closed the door behind him.

"We need to talk."

Kalesia shut her eyes for a moment, trying to rally her defenses. Reluctantly, she lifted her head and faced him. She hadn't wanted this confrontation and had done everything within her power to avoid it. Evidently, he'd finally had enough of her evasions.

"Talk to Gabriel."

"I tried. He told me to mind my own business."

Hoping he'd take the hint, she turned back toward the computer. "Listen to him." She so did not want this conversation. Her fingers flew over the keyboard. Too bad she hadn't the slightest clue what she was typing. She sucked in a shocked breath when Wolf grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. He caged her with a hand on each armrest. He leaned in until they were practically nose to nose.

"One of you is going to tell me what the hell is going on. And you're neither quick nor strong enough to stop me."

Kalesia felt her eyes widened at the implicit threat. "Why?" she whispered, her throat aching with unshed tears. "Why should you care?"

"Because I see two people I like and respect, tearing each other apart."

Her head pounded. Her muscles ached with fatigue. She couldn't remember the last time she'd actually slept. Kalesia wanted nothing more than to confide in Wolf. Have him dismiss her concerns. But that was just a fool's dream. No matter how much she wanted to, she just couldn't erase what she'd seen, what she'd read. Gabriel had so few friends. Did she have the right to risk his friendship with one of them?

"Tell me." The genuine worry in his keen regard scuttled her defenses as if they didn't exist.

"How," she moistened her bottom lip. "Exactly how familiar are you with Gabriel's past?"

He pulled back a fraction, a subtle stiffening in his massive frame.

"Familiar enough."

"Then are you aware that Gabriel was an assassin?" Kalesia blurted out. God, even to her own ears, it sounded melodramatic.

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"The fact that Gabriel hired out his skills to the party with the most money. That he deliberately killed and mutilated when the price was right." Her voice dropped. "Men. Women. Children."

"Lady, you don't know what the hell you're talking about," Wolf snarled, the very softness of his words making them more frightening. "You are out of your tiny little mind if you believe Gabe capable of such acts."

Hard as it was, she met his eyes with a steady gaze. "I have proof."

"What proof?" Wolf demanded.

"Pictures, reports. There is no doubt. Gabriel was paid to kill. He didn't care for whom, as long as the price was right."

Wolf gripped her chin and jerked her face up to meet his. "I don't know where you got your so-called proof, lady, but one thing I can assure you—it's all a pack of lies. Gabriel Steele is one of the most honorable men I've ever met."

Kalesia wished she could believe him. "I asked him."

"Gabe?"

"Yes. He didn't deny it. In fact, he admitted he lied to me." She removed her chin from his grasp, her eyes dropping to her laced fingers as aching pain lanced through her. She had been so wrong. She, also, had thought Gabriel a man of honor but where was the honor in wanton killing?

Wolf sank down on his haunches with a dark grace. A scowl hardened his face into a mask that had more than a passing resemblance to his namesake.

"You're telling me Gabriel admitted he was an assassin? He actually came right out and said he sold himself to the highest bidder?"

"No," Kalesia hedged, "not in so many words. Still, when I confronted him he didn't deny it." It hurt. Oh God, it hurt. Despite her vow in the past not to trust anyone, she'd really believed Gabriel was the one man she could trust. With the truth of about her abilities. With her life.

Wolf recaptured her chin on the edge of one hard palm. "You're a fool." His gray eyes captured her gaze and refused to let go. "Gabriel's a hard man. Even a cynical one. But he's no murderer. I know. I was wrong about you." Wolf shook her. "I thought you

were good enough for Gabe. If you can actually believe he's an assassin, then fuck you. He's better off without you. You'll only hurt him. Gabriel deserves someone who will believe in him, not just use him." He rose to his feet with that same lethal grace and stalked out.

Kalesia was stunned by the unexpected attack.

Slow tears welled and fell unnoticed. She ignored the concerned meows of her cats at her feet.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You are one stupid, hardheaded son of a bitch."

A brilliant light exploded in Gabriel's skull as he turned, startled, into Wolf's lightning-quick left. The bitter taste of copper flooded his mouth as a right followed. Astonishment kept Gabriel rooted to the ground as Wolf stood over him, rubbing his reddened knuckles.

"You are just too damn proud to defend yourself, aren't you? Can't lower your pride to explain," Wolf sneered. "No, instead you give up without a fight the best thing to walk into that sorry excuse of existence you call a life. I hope you're going through hell. You deserve it. Any man who can't bother bestirring himself to keep a woman like Kalesia, doesn't deserve her. She's a woman a smart man would kill to keep. Who knows," Wolf taunted, "maybe I'll decide to fight for her myself." He left without another word, the threat hanging on the air.

Gabriel wiped blood from the corner of his mouth on his sleeve as he climbed slowly to his feet. The pain in his jaw and mouth was nothing compared to the knifing agony eating at his soul.

Damn Wolf. He hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about. He hadn't let Kalesia go. Didn't Wolf understand she'd never been his to begin with? He'd known it deep down but hadn't been able to prevent himself from reaching out for a small taste of her warmth, her compassion, the fire that seared a man to his soul but left him whole. He had deceived Kalesia and he had deceived himself into thinking there might be more, that he could live in peace.

How could he lie to Kalesia and tell her she was wrong? That he'd never been an assassin? However the paper pushers wanted to dress it up, that's exactly what he had been.

How could a man defend himself against the truth?

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you sure you have to go?" Kalesia kept her eyes downcast as she played with the food on her plate so she could avoid Wolf's steady gaze.

"Positive. There are several things we need to track down physically." It was Badger who answered. He'd been uncharacteristically quiet all evening.

"When do you have to leave?" She pushed a tiger shrimp around on its bed of rice and delicately flavored vegetables.

"After dinner."

The shrimp skidded off the plate. "So soon?" What would she do without them as a buffer between her and Gabriel?

Wolf's expression was the epitome of innocence. "The sooner we leave, the sooner we can find out who is behind the threat to you."

"Why didn't you tell me what you had planned?" Gabriel asked with a dangerous softness.

"You didn't ask," Wolf smiled, taking a large bite of sweet cornbread.

Kalesia didn't like the almost baiting tone to Wolf's voice. Nor the way he eyed the swelling of Gabriel's lower lip and the puffiness of his cheek. A small frown pulled at her brow. If she didn't know better, she'd think the two had been fighting. She opened her mouth to ask, then snapped it shut. Some things she was better off not knowing.

"We'll talk later."

"Sure," Wolf agreed easily.

Bent over, putting the last of the dishes into the dishwasher, Kalesia froze as she heard the sound of an engine turning over. No. They wouldn't. Not without saying goodbye. Not when they, or at least Wolf, knew the situation between her and Gabriel. A sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, she hurried into the living room, wiping her hands on the dishtowel.

Gabriel stood in the open doorway, a stack of forgotten papers clutched in one fist. "Fuck. I, of all people, should know better than to trust Wolf when he's affable." He slammed the door shut. "The sorry son of a bitch sent me out of the room on a wild goose chase to give him and the others the opportunity to take a powder." He turned, restrained fury in the taut line of his lean body. From across the room, his gaze pinned Kalesia.

"Get out," he growled. "Do us both a favor and get the hell out of here."

Kalesia dropped the towel and ran up the stairs. She shut and locked the door behind her. Her knees gave out. Slumped against the solid strength of the door, she put her hand over her pounding heart.

Sweet mercy, Gabriel looked like he'd wanted to kill her.

Shoving away from the door, she stumbled toward the bed. A wave of weariness swept over her. She was so tired, she thought, sinking down on the edge of the bed. Tired of the tension. Tired of all the conflicting thoughts swirling around in her head. Tired of being afraid. Tired of learning that trust was just a mirage.

Trust, hah! She had trusted Christopher and look where that got her. But did she learn her lesson like any smart woman? Oh no. She turned right around and trusted Gabriel. A hard hand squeezed her heart. She'd trusted Gabriel in a way she'd never trusted anyone else.

Fate was a fickle bitch with a capricious sense of humor, she decided bitterly. How else would you explain relying on a cold-blooded killer to keep you safe from a murderer?

Hand raised to push her bangs off her forehead, Kalesia faltered.

Safe. From the moment she'd met Gabriel, she had felt safe. Never doubted he could protect her from the killer haunting her nights. Not once. Not even after holding the damning evidence in her hand.

Her hand dropped to her lap as she stared, unseeing, at the wall. How could that be? Why hadn't she hightailed it out of his home the moment she'd read the reports? Remembered snatches of recent conversations replayed in her mind. One in particular stuck.

Badger had been speaking with Gabriel, trying to get him to take a break. "Gabe, why don't you rest? You've been at that for thirty-six hours straight, man. Shit, even with a clear head, the photos Harley sent over aren't the most pleasant way to spend an evening." There had been real concern in Badger's voice.

"Don't worry about Gabriel, Badger. I'm sure that in his line of work a few grisly photographs won't unsettle him." Kalesia cloaked the barb in a bland smile.

Gabriel lifted bloodshot eyes.

Kalesia couldn't look away.

His voice was dark and roughened with weariness and something Kalesia almost swore was pain.

"Let it be, Badger. When the lady's right, she's right. In my line of work, photographs of murder are not the stuff of nightmares."

The weight of Badger's disapproval still made her squirm.

Not only had she not run, she'd taunted Gabriel at every opening. Her head spun. An awful thought entered Kalesia's head and refused to go away.

What if she'd been wrong all along?

Hard on the heels of that thought, Wolf's disgusted lecture came back to haunt her.

But Gabriel hadn't denied it, she cried out silently, wrapping her arms around her waist.

Did you give him the opportunity? Really give him a chance?

Kalesia desperately tried to recall every word from their confrontation that day.

Bile burned the back of her throat. Oh my God. She hadn't. She'd thrust the pictures at him and practically dared Gabriel to refute them.

She began to rock on the bed. Think. She had to think. Unbidden, images formed. Of Gabriel, holding her after making love. Of his face, stark and ravaged, as he stared at the moon. She remembered his uncertainty about her acceptance of his scars, of the nightmares he refused to acknowledge haunting his sleep.

Fine fractures raced across the ice encasing her heart.

*Remember I would never hurt you on purpose.*

*Would you believe me?*

*I believe in you, Gabriel and no matter what happens, I'll be there for you.*

*Believe me?*

*I'll be there for you.*

Could the portrayal that was in that packet of a hardened, cold-blooded killer be the other face of the scarred and haunted man she knew?

Only if every word uttered, every touch and action had been premeditated and calculated to deceive.

The ice shattered.

No!

No, she refused to believe that the man who had come to seduce hadn't been instead seduced.

Whatever lies there were, they were not about hiding the fact he'd once murdered for a living. She had to believe that. Otherwise, nothing made sense.

That meant another explanation besides the obvious for those photographs and reports.

Dear God, how could she have been such a fool? Why had it taken her so long to see the man, not the monster created by some coward hiding behind anonymous information? Kalesia sprang off the edge of the bed. She had to see Gabriel, apologize, talk to him. Get him to explain. This time she would listen, not hurl accusations.

Pure certainty filled her and for the first time in days she wanted to laugh. This was right. At the bedroom door, she paused. Her hands went to the hem of her shirt. She peeled it off. Her jeans, bra and panties quickly followed.

There was an inquisitive mew. Kalesia glanced down at the Siamese sitting by the door. "Sorry, Tia. I need to do this by myself."

A niggle of worry crept in. What if Gabriel wouldn't accept her apology? What if he refused to listen?

No. No more doubts. He'd hear her out. After all, Gabriel was a reasonable man.

A secret smile curved her lips.

If he proved stubborn, she'd just have to seduce him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Arms behind his head, the white sheet bunched at his waist, Gabriel stared at the flickering reflection of the river on his ceiling.

He'd kill Wolf for this stunt. Throwing Kalesia and him together had been an asinine idea. It was not going to erase the fact she had finally found out he was a monster.

All it did... All it did was... Gabriel swallowed the painful lump in his throat.

Damn Wolf for allowing him hope.

Gabriel sensed rather than saw the presence of another person. Adrenaline surged through his bloodstream as he gathered his muscles to strike. A split second before he launched his attack, the scent of amberwood and magnolia drifted to him.

The faint, sensual fragrance went straight to his cock.

Son of a bitch.

He lifted one knee and hoped to hell the sheet hadn't slipped, leaving him waving in the breeze.

The sheen of moonlight on roundness of a hip, then the smooth length of her thigh caused Gabriel's breath to catch in his lungs and his erection to strain for attention.

He'd check. Just as soon as he could take his eyes off the woman moving across the room toward him.

She didn't stop until she was directly beside the bed.

Muscles unbearably tense, Gabriel waited, a tight lid clamped on the insidious slide of longing.

"I can't sleep."



## Chapter Eleven

Without speaking, Gabriel lifted the covers.

She rushed into his arms. "Gabriel, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have —"

"Shh, later," he growled as his mouth closed over hers, tasting, exploring and relearning the honeyed depths of her mouth with a savage need. Heat exploded through him as she sank frosted-tipped fingers into the depths of his hair, returning his caress with all the fierce strength she possessed.

He arched up into her, his body already aching. Son of a bitch. If he didn't slow down, he'd come before he was ever inside her.

Sucking in a deep breath, he rolled over, pinning Kalesia beneath his taut, aroused frame. Unable to resist the sensual, feminine scent of her skin, he nuzzled behind her ear before stringing tiny, stinging kisses down her neck to the curve of her breasts. "Oh God, sweet witch," he muttered against her soft skin. "Do you know how much I need you? Need you to bring warmth and chaos into my life? Need you to chase away the shadows?"

He tasted between her breasts with the tip of his tongue and groaned. God, she tasted so good.

They needed to talk. Settle things between them.

Kalesia wrapped one leg around his hip.

Gabriel fought the sheet for a moment, before sweeping it to the foot of the bed. He clamped his hand around her leg, just above the knee and placed it back around his hip. The hell with it. There was only one thing he needed to know. The rest they could work out later.

He lifted his head and met her eyes, all pretense seared away. "One last chance. If you're not sure, absolutely sure, this is what you want, walk away now. Because if you stay tonight, tomorrow I won't give you a choice." Propped up on one elbow, his shoulders held tight, he waited for her answer. Son of a bitch, he felt naked.

Her hair spread like a dark flame across his pillow, Kalesia smiled, eyes gleaming in the muted light. "If I hadn't been sure, I never would have come to your room. Make love to me," she pleaded, the passionate demand in her voice a siren song he had no desire to resist.

Gabriel closed his eyes. He dropped his forehead against her. He opened his eyes. "Son of a bitch, I've missed you, sugar," he admitted.

"Would you have really let me walk out of this room tonight?" she asked, her breathing light and rapid.

Gabriel slid his hand slowly up the outside of her leg, loving the feel of the smooth, resilient flesh under his palm. "I thought I could when I asked." He shook his head. "I was just fooling myself. I knew that the moment you said you'd stay," he confessed starkly. "I could never let you go." He claimed her mouth in a deep, tongue-tangling kiss. "Not if my life depended upon it."

Hot. So hot. He could feel the heat from her pussy just inches from his fingers. Her position left her open to him. Gabriel moved his hand a fraction of an inch and stifled a groan against her throat as he found pure liquid fire.

Shit.

Son of a bitch.

She was going to burn him alive.

He tasted the skin where her neck and shoulder joined before biting down gently and sucking. Hell, he'd never felt this primitive with a woman but something inside him demanded he mark her, leave evidence for everyone to see that she was his.

Kalesia moaned, a breathy, husky sound, her arms coming up to hold him tight. "Yes."

He thrust his leg up, rubbing against her mound.

"Gabriel!" His name broke from her lips at the rough demand of his leg.

His tongue traced a wet path to the peak of the other breast. The nub stood up, hardening in anticipation.

"What, sugar, tell me what you want!" Half plea, half demand, he teased her with the tip of his tongue, never quite hard enough, never quite long enough.

Kalesia sank her nails into the firm muscle of Gabriel's buttocks in sensual retaliation.

A harsh groan tore from his throat and he let her feel his teeth on the tiny, hard bud.

"Don't. Don't tease me. Not tonight. I want you too much." Kalesia ran her foot down the back of his leg.

He arched, rubbing his cock against her thigh. He slid one finger inside, testing her readiness.

Hot.

Wet.

Heaven.

Aw, fuck. He couldn't take it slowly if a gun was pointed at his head. "Good." Gabriel clenched his teeth against a moan when her inner muscles tightened around his finger. Blindly, he opened the drawer on the nightstand and withdrew a small, foil packet.

Unable to wait any longer, he shifted, replacing his finger with the head of his cock. He surged into the hot, clinging depths. Gritting his back teeth together, he stilled, just managing to hold still to give her time to adjust to his length inside her.

"Next time," he promised. "Next time I'll take all night."

Kalesia locked her legs around his hips and smiled up at him, passion and understanding glittering in her eyes. "Less talk, more action."

The last shred of his control disintegrated. Fingers biting into her hips, he withdrew until just the tip of his cock was inside her, before surging back inside again. In and out. Faster and faster.

He wasn't being a considerate lover, Gabriel knew but damned it he could help himself. The fact that Kalesia had come to him, had trusted him, was the most powerful aphrodisiac in the world. He wanted to overwhelm her, drive from both their minds the harsh words of the last few days.

His heart pounded. A drop of sweat ran down his temple. Leaning down, he took her bottom lip between his teeth and nipped sharply. Kalesia arched upward, her head thrown back, her eyes squeezed shut, a strangled scream of fulfillment escaping.

Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch.

The base of his spine tingled. He pumped his hips harder, pure animal instinct driving him. The first hot spurt of semen jetted from his cock and his vision grayed out. At last, he collapsed on top of Kalesia, his breath rasping out of his lungs in harsh pants.

Oh God. His balls were broken.

Long, slender fingers trailed up his spine and back down, petting and soothing him. A low, contented rumble broke from his throat. "Umm, now I know why Hannibal fights so hard to sleep in your bed. Your fingers are pure magic. Pet me some more and I might even purr." Gabriel felt like tomcat after a busy night, all sated and lazy and content. He knew he should be a gentleman and get off her.

He grinned in the dark. Good thing no one ever accused him of being a gentleman.

Unable to resist the plump mound under his mouth, Gabriel dragged his tongue across the damp flesh, tasting salt and woman.

Kalesia dragged her nails up to his nape, leaving a trail of goose flesh in her wake.

Perhaps his balls weren't broken after all.

"Chaos?"

"As in wild, primal, unorganized." Gabriel smiled as Kalesia sifted her nails through the short strands of hair at the nape of his neck. "Like what you did with my living room."

"I resent that," Kalesia defended, lazy amusement in her voice. "I am not unorganized. Just because I didn't arrange things with surgical precision does not make me unorganized."

"I notice you don't object to wild and primal."

She laughed and moved beneath him, a faint musical chime from the charm on her ankle accompanying the shift. She ran her hand down his side before slipping it between them so she could tease his stomach, halting within a hairsbreadth of his cock.

It filled, reaching for her touch.

"I like wild and primordial. It makes me sound exotic and exciting."

"Trust me, sugar, if you got anymore exotic and exciting, my balls would never recover." An aching need that had nothing to do with sex sprang to life.

"You weren't a cop, were you?" Kalesia smoothed one finger over his eyebrow.

Somehow, Gabriel met her gaze without flinching. "No."

"How much of it was true?"

Pain flickered like the serrated edge of a blade across his soul. "Most of it."

Instant denial washed across Kalesia. "I don't believe it." She set her mouth in a stubborn line. It didn't matter that it had taken her days to see beyond the façade created by the anonymous sender. Because now that she had, nothing would convince her that Gabriel was a soulless killer.

"Believe it," he told her harshly, surging to a sitting position. She sensed, rather than saw, him take care of the condom.

Kalesia sat up too, finding and pulling the sheet across her legs. She pleated the starched cotton as she considered Gabriel, her head tilted to one side. "I believe you're capable of killing but not as an assassin interested only in money."

"Trust me, I earned my paycheck. Whether you're working for the government or freelance, you are getting paid to kill," he grated. "It's all the same."

Although she disagreed, Kalesia held her tongue, sensing that arguing would cause him to clam up. "Tell me about it."

He shot her an enigmatic look. "Are you sure you want to know? You might find in this case that truth is worse than fiction."

"I need to know. You tried to hide the truth before and look where we wound up." Nothing, absolutely nothing could be worse than imagining. She shuddered.

"Once I tell you, we might very well be in exactly the same situation. Or, this time you might run from me."

"Trust me," she said without thinking.

Though Gabriel didn't say a word, Kalesia could see he remembered her previous avowal of faith. She placed a hand on his arm, feeling the hard tension in the muscles beneath her palm. "I believe in you, Gabriel. Please believe in me."

He went utterly motionless. Even his breath seemed to stop. Suddenly, his hand shot out to cover hers, almost crushing the bones of her fingers.

It was the only sign of his agitation. Still, it shocked her as Gabriel was always unfailingly gentle with her.

"I have to. But God help us both if what I tell you drives you away." He paused, looking uncertain. "I don't know where to start."

"The beginning. Start at the beginning. It won't drive me away," she promised, a burning sensation in her chest. She braced herself, knowing it must be bad.

His hand still gripping hers, he took a deep breath. "The beginning. Okay. I was a loner as a kid and didn't mingle well, not even with my parents. Hell, they didn't know what to do with me but they tried. They were good people. Everyone always commented on how much they loved each other. It must have been hard on them to have a kid like me. After a while they quit trying to understand me. Honestly? I can't blame them.

"I had a reputation for looking for trouble. Nothing really serious. Fights mostly. But I scared the other kids because I'd do whatever necessary to win. One of a long line of counselors recommended the military." Gabriel shrugged. "He probably saved me from prison."

A stray gleam of moonlight highlighted the wicked, curving scar on Gabriel's shoulder as he shrugged again. A wry smile twisted his lips. "My parents were more than willing to sign the necessary papers. So, I upped with the Army. I liked it, liked the sense of order, discipline it gave me. As much as I liked it, I still felt something was missing. That changed when I was approached while in jump school. It seems I caught the attention of one full bird in particular. The Colonel thought I had the makings of a Ranger."

"I take it you accepted?"

Gabriel gave her a look that questioned her intelligence. "Hell, yes, I accepted! Here I was, a boy from backwoods Florida, being given the opportunity to be part of the elite branch of the Army. It meant that for the first time in my life somebody thought I was special. You bet your ass I jumped at it."

It had meant more than that, Kalesia thought, a peculiar lump jamming her throat. Even now, years later, there was something in the timbre of his voice. It took her a moment to place it. When she did, she almost smacked her own forehead it was so obvious. For all of Gabriel's prosaic recitation of his family life, it was easy to see he hadn't felt wanted. His parents had each other, they didn't really need a kid. The Rangers, however, wanted him.

They gave him a home. A sense of belonging.

"Took to the training like a duck to water. I was good, very good. Rifle, knife, or hands, it didn't matter but I had a special affinity for rifles and an eye that allowed me never to miss. It was inevitable." He let go of her hand and clenched his into a fist until the knuckles shone white.

Kalesia frowned. She'd missed something. "What was?"

He speared her with a hard glance. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Yes."

"Remember, you asked." He took a deep breath and, one by one, straightened his fingers. "I became a sniper."

The blunt statement managed to catch Kalesia off-guard. God, she hoped the darkness hid the look of utter shock she was sure was on her face.

"For the first couple years we did more training than missions. The Rangers hadn't long undergone restructuring. Still there was enough action to satisfy a young man's yearning for excitement that I was determined to re-up."

Kalesia slipped her hand back into his. He closed his fingers about hers with desperate strength.

"I was asked to volunteer for a black mission. We were to infiltrate and bring home captured soldiers from a leftist camp. What we were going to do was not sanctioned by the military or the government as officially we were not involved in that conflict. The long and short of it is we were sold out and I was captured."

Kalesia gasped but Gabriel didn't seem to hear.

"The rest were killed." His hand spasmed, squeezing her fingers until the bones ground together.

Kalesia bit her lip to muffle the tiny, involuntary sound of pain.

"You're trained to cope with the possibility of capture," he drew an unsteady breath, "but the reality is something else again. I wanted to die. There are so many ways to inflict pain, ways a normal mind can't comprehend."

It was as if a dam had burst, the words just kept flowing out of Gabriel in an unstoppable flood.

"Small things, innocuous in themselves, can be the worst," he whispered. "Mosquitoes on bloody flesh. The agony of river water sliding down a throat raw from screaming."

A hard shudder went through Gabriel as he seemed to pull himself back to the present. When he continued, his voice was devoid of all emotion. "After a while I no longer wanted to die. I wanted to kill. Kill the shadowy figure behind my torture. I lived for the moment I could put my hands around his throat. Dreamed of it, held onto it by sheer force of will when the knife cut my back, when the wire around my wrists, wrapped so tight I couldn't bleed, cut to the bone."

Kalesia's stomach roiled and she swallowed convulsively. But she didn't say a word, unwilling to risk Gabriel pulling back inside himself. As painful as she found it to hear, she knew he needed to tell her.

"After two weeks I escaped. Managed to make it back to the alternative rendezvous point, more dead than alive." His thumb stroked the back of her hand. He stared straight ahead, unblinking. "He broke me. Damn near killed me with his torture. The doctors expected me to die. I didn't, though. I couldn't. He had given me a reason to live."

"Before I was even out of the hospital, the CIA recruited me." Gabriel looked down at the rumpled sheet, avoiding her gaze. "It seemed the perfect hunting ground for tracking down a traitor. Each lead was investigated with meticulous care but the bastard always managed to elude me. Along the way, however, I gained the reputation as the best. When you come right down to it, our friend behind the anonymous packet is damn close to the truth. I was an assassin. The fact that it was for the government doesn't change the fact that I killed for a living.

"You know," he continued in that same flat voice that sent chills down her spine, "after a while you learn to push the faces into a closet deep in the back of your mind, close the door and go on to the next job. But night," Kalesia heard him swallow, "night has a way of creeping up on a man. A way of sneaking in and making you remember — the heat, the stifling smell of rotting vegetation in your nostrils, the scarlet lace of blood, the faces captured in death."

Kalesia slid her hand free of his, wrapped her arms around him. She stroked his back, the scars beneath her fingers tiny brands that seared. He didn't resist but buried his face in the side of her neck. One long, hard tremor racked him.

What could she say? Her visions of murder didn't even begin to compare to what Gabriel had gone through. As personal and real as each one seemed, when you came right down to it, they were still secondhand. Tears burned her eyes as she hugged him fiercely to her. She buried one hand in his hair, kneading his scalp, as the other stroked down the muscled length of his spine. Beneath her palm, his skin was damp. At last Gabriel spoke.

"Do you hate me?"

"God, no. No. I don't hate you. I could never hate you. Oh God, Gabriel, haven't you realized yet?" She framed his face in both hands. "I love you."

Shock jolted through Gabriel with the force of a live wire. "What did you say?" he asked hoarsely, not daring to believe his ears.

Love reflected in her gentle gaze as she touched a forefinger to his mouth.

"I said I love you," she repeated, her breath puffing against his lips.

His eyes slid shut. An aching hunger woke. He'd never thought to hear those words. He cleared his throat. "I-I..." Frustrated, he trailed off.

"Shh, don't. I don't need words."

"I don't deserve you," he rasped and gripped the soft flesh of her upper arms. Gabriel knew he was probably bruising her but couldn't seem to make his fingers turn loose. The feel of Kalesia under his hands was the only thing that anchored him in the storm of emotion buffeting him. "But, dear God, I can't bear to let you go." His mouth crushed hers as he pulled her to lie on top of him.

She opened her mouth, giving him everything he demanded and more.

His breath rasped painfully from his lungs when he lifted his head. "You won't regret loving me."

"I know."

Something inside Gabriel was soothed and reassured by the quiet promise. He tucked her face into the crook of his neck and ran his hand down the silky length of her hair, patiently untangling knots his passion had put there.

Love. It was such a foreign concept. His world knew much of death, of betrayal. He understood and valued honor and loyalty. They were the codes he lived by, had survived by. But love? Gabriel felt totally inadequate when it came to that emotion.

Against the side of his neck, Kalesia's breath slid into a slow, steady cadence as she fell asleep. His heart turned over at the utter trust it showed after what she'd learned tonight.

Could he learn to love?

A hard knot formed in his stomach. Hell, he wasn't even sure the damn thing existed.

The woman in his arms stirred sleepily, her hand falling over his heart.

Kalesia believed in love.

She had come to him, believed in him, when by all rights she should have run screaming in the other direction. Freely confessed her love after hearing his horror story. She hadn't demanded proof.

The knot slowly eased to be replaced by wonder. Perhaps such a thing as love existed, after all.

Was he capable of it? Feeling it. Giving it.

Or had all softer emotions been burned from his soul?

It was a tangled question, one for which he lacked an answer. All he knew is that he wanted it. Wanted the woman in his arms to love him.

Hungered for it.

Hungered for her belief in him—even if he didn't deserve it. Or her.

Would he be dragging her into the black pit where his soul lived if he accepted her love?

His heart stopped.

Could he do that to her? Kalesia lived in the light. Wasn't of the night as he was.

Maybe he should let her go once she was safe.

Denial, instant and harsh, scorched through his blood, seizing and stopping his heart at the thought of living without her. Of night without her light, of utter blackness without the promise of sunshine and laughter.

A small hand, warm and soft, petted his chest. Came to rest directly over his heart.

Even in sleep, she sought to soothe his pain.



Gabriel, careful not to wake her, lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles before folding it back over his heart and covered it with his own scarred paw.

Content, Gabriel started to drift off to sleep. A man would kill for Kalesia's love. He'd like to get his hands on the bastard who had sent her that damn package.

Gabriel's eyes shot open. "I wonder how he knew to use my past against us?"

"Shit." He had screwed up. He should have seen this angle sooner. That the discord between him and Kalesia had distracted him and that he'd been busy tracking down the murdered man from two years ago, was no excuse. Gabriel ground his teeth together, biting back a blistering epithet.

Kalesia stirred against his side. He felt the instant she woke fully.

"It would mean that whoever it is, knows you're helping me. It means," her voice trembled, "that now you're a target."

Gabriel brushed her concern for his safety aside, the deeper meaning behind the act more important. "I can take care of myself." He turned on his side to face her. "My cover was very deep."

She grasped the implication at once. "You mean..."

"Yeah. Someone has power. The kind of power that has access to restricted files and can convincingly alter them." He sat up. "He knew you were here. With me. Son of a fucking bitch."

"I don't understand," she said, but he could tell she did. Horror strangled her voice. "Only the sheriff's office..."

Every nerve in Gabriel's body was tipped with fire and there was a familiar tightening in his gut. It had been well over a year since he had felt the sensation but Gabriel had no doubt what it was. Every hunter instinct he possessed was screaming to life.

"Yeah, only the sheriff's office. I find it odd that the day after we go see Harley about another vision, a packet designed to make you distrust me arrives. In fact, the timing stinks." He thought for a moment. "But if someone on the force is involved, why now? Why not two years ago when you reported the murder?"

"Maybe because two years ago I wasn't a threat."

He turned that over slowly in his mind. It made a kind of sense. As much as anything about this case made sense. "Why are you a threat now? Why not then?"

"Maybe because no one would take me seriously then," she suggested.

"Or maybe," Gabriel drawled, "someone has a reason to fear you might link him to that murder and the murder of Crump."

"If I can link him now, I could link him then," she argued.

"Not if he didn't know of your first reporting."

"That means more than one person is involved," she whispered, a fine trembling settling into her limbs.

With a harsh expletive, Gabriel threw back the sheet. "Get dressed," he ordered, pulling on a pair of jeans.

"Where are we going?" Kalesia demanded, wrapping one of his shirts around her.

Even now, some primal, animalistic part of him roared in satisfaction that, just as his shirt swamped her curvy form, so did his scent. Another part demanded her obedience. "To see Tom Harley. I said to get dressed."

"I am," she snapped. "My clothes are in the other bedroom." Kalesia marched out of the room, chin held high.

"Well, hell," Gabriel muttered in disgust buttoning the fly of his jeans swiftly. "And don't be long," he yelled after her. He slipped his arms in a sweatshirt. "Damn cat!" he roared as Hannibal took the opportunity to slither in the open door and attack his bare ankle.

In the other room, Kalesia didn't even try to restrain the grin that tugged at her lips when Gabriel's yell echoed down the hallway. He really was going to have to do something about Hannibal – surrender came to mind.

It was a short drive to Harley's home. The house was dark.

"Wouldn't it be more polite to wait until morning?" Kalesia said, uneasily aware that she was the reason the major's night was about to be disturbed. Again.

"No."

And that was that. There was no arguing with Gabriel when he spoke in that tone. Kalesia trudged after him, more than willing to let him face Tom Harley first.

"It's three-damn-thirty in the morning." Harley glared at Gabriel, his short hair spiking in all directions. "This had better be important." Hand planted firmly on the edge of the front door, he lowered his voice and growled, "Make it fast, Gabe."

Gabriel pushed his way inside, dragging Kalesia along with him. She smiled a weak apology at the rumpled man as she slid past.

"Someone on the force is dirty. I intend to find out who."

Gabriel's words dropped like a rock in a river. Tom Harley did a slow double take and shut the door. "I think we'd better sit down." He led the way into a comfortably furnished room and turned on a lamp. "Got any proof?"

"Nothing written in blood – yet. I want him, Tom."

The even tone raised every hair on Kalesia's body but Harley just raised a brow, waiting for Gabriel to elaborate. For the first time, she realized how alike the two men were.

Gabriel passed the other man the packet containing the pictures and letter.

Palms sweating, Kalesia watched as Tom skimmed the contents once and then once more, taking his time the second perusal.

"Nasty bit of work."

"I don't like it. Kalesia goes to you for help because of a vision of her own murder. She leads you to a murdered hit man. Then, a matter of days later, after we ask about a previously reported vision, she receives this. I think I know why."

"You suspect me?"

Kalesia's mouth went dry at the sudden tautness between the two men.

"If I had, I wouldn't have brought Kalesia with me."

Harley stared at Gabriel's set expression for a minute longer and then relaxed. "It's damn little to go on."

"I'm at my best with little to go on. How many times did you tell me that?"

The corner of Harley's mouth lifted in a small smile. "I remember. That's why I sent her to you. I knew if anyone could protect her, you could. Okay." With a quick glance down the hall, Harley heaved a sigh. "Let's go over this again."

After discussing it from all angles, a half hour later Harley agreed, albeit unwillingly, to go along with Gabriel's plan to leak false information to smoke out an informant.

"If there is one," Harley amended.

Kalesia felt sorry for him. It was easy to see he hated to admit there could be a dirty cop on his force.

"There is one." Sure, cold, dangerous.

Harley didn't flinch. "Your plan is dangerous. Especially if someone in the department is on the take. Look, no matter how much care we take, it's chancy to spread rumors that you think your government sold you out on your last mission and because of that you've sold your services to a South American cartel, just to see if that information gets back to Kalesia. It could very well stir up unanticipated complications."

"What complications?" Kalesia asked uneasily.

"Like someone taking the opportunity to off Gabe and blame it on a drug war."

"No!" She whipped around. Chill bumps chased along the skin of her arms as she saw his savage grin of anticipation.

"It's supposed to stir up complications. That information fits right in with the rogue image created to scare Kalesia away. By tailoring the story to each person you tell, we can pinpoint the dirty cop." Gabriel leaned forward, his expression intense. "It feels right, Tom. The bastard likes to hide in the background. Let others, like Crump, do his dirty work. You got to admit, it's perfect. He won't be able to resist the urge to make Kalesia bolt into the open. If he knows that much about me, he knows his only chance to get her without exposing himself, is if she leaves me." His gaze became glacial. "Once we know who is feeding him information, I will find out who is behind the threat to Kalesia."

"I won't break the law for you, Gabe," Harley warned.

"Won't have to."

Fear and fury twisted her stomach into knots. "Tom, you can't mean to go along with this insane plan! You and I both know Gabriel is setting himself up as the target. He'll think Gabriel is onto him. He'll have to take him out and you will have given him the perfect opening to get away with murder. Well, I won't allow it."

"Hush, sugar. It's the only way. Time is running out. I feel it. That packet to you is the only mistake he's made so far. We need to push him."

She rounded on Tom. "You agree with this?"

He nodded. "I do. Right now we don't have a clue who the killer is." Tom's warm brown eyes hardened. "And I will not tolerate a dirty cop in my department."

Kalesia knew she was licked. There was no talking common sense into either man. But she didn't like it. And when they got home, she'd make very sure Gabriel understood that. "One little scratch and I'll have your hide, Gabriel Steele." At Harley's poorly concealed chuckle, she froze him with a frigid glare. "I promise this now, Tom Harley. You let him get hurt and I'll peel the hide from your body and let the fire ants have what's left."

She expected a smartass comment. Instead he studied her for a moment.

"I promise that if it is within my power, I won't let him get hurt." His tone was almost gentle.

Tears burned Kalesia's eyes. Before they could fall, Harley flicked a quick glance down the hall.

"If I agree to plant the information first thing in the morning, can I get back to bed?"

Kalesia caught the sound of a faint rustle from the bedroom. She knew Gabriel had too, when a sardonic grin spread across his face.

"You sent her to me," he said. "Into every life a little chaos must fall. It's only fair you experience the aftershocks too."

"Now is that any way for him to treat a friend?" Harley appealed to Kalesia. He turned back to Gabriel. "Bug off, I've got better things to do with my night, or rather, what's left of it, than trade barbs with you."

They were trying to make her feel better, lighten the atmosphere. As much as she hated to admit it, it worked. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and frowned at both of them. "It's impolite to insult a person as if she isn't present."

Gabriel stood, hauling her up beside him with an easy strength. "She has a temper too."

"Goes with the hair," Tom observed.

"Tom," Kalesia began, her voice a little too sweet, "go to bed."

"Bossy little thing, isn't she."

Kalesia raised her voice, making sure it could be heard all the way down the hall. "But, Tom, she'll have to find out sometime—mmf." A hard hand clamped over her mouth. She bit it, hard. Gabriel yelped and snatched his hand away, sucking on the pad

of flesh beneath his thumb. "What it's like dating a dedicated officer of the law." Kalesia stuck her tongue out at Tom's horrified expression.

Gabriel grabbed her arm and propelled her toward the front door.

"I forgot to warn you," he said over his shoulder, "witches fight dirty."

"Night, Tom," Kalesia sang out as she was hustled outside.

"Witch," Gabriel muttered.

"Who me?" She batted innocent green eyes at him. "What did I do?"

Gabriel leaned down for a short, hard kiss. "Don't act so modest. You know very well that you turned a hardened veteran into a nervous wreck. Talk about ruining a man's love life," Gabriel said with a heartfelt masculine sympathy that Kalesia thought entirely misplaced. "It's a good thing they outlawed burning at the stake."

Kalesia sniffed. "Men, they can dish it out but they can't take it." She giggled, ruining the effect. "He did look as if he wanted to dig a hole and pull it in after him, didn't he?"

Once more back home and in bed, Kalesia sobered. "Gabriel?"

"Hmm," he mumbled, nearly asleep.

"What happens if the story Tom plants doesn't smoke out the killer?" She couldn't keep the worry out of her voice.

Gabriel fitted her body to his, closing both arms around her. "Then we'll think of something else. He's made one mistake. Sooner or later, he'll make another." Despite his confidence, she knew Gabriel recognized the fact they had to wait on the unknown assailant's time schedule. He was too intelligent not to immediately realize the disadvantage in which that placed them.

"But what if—"

He nipped her ear. "Wrap your arms around me and tell me again that you love me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"My vision is different." Kalesia dropped the comment with the subtlety of a nuclear warhead. She waited for the explosion.

Gabriel snaked his head around. He had a smear of dirt on one cheek. "Different? How? When?"

"Four days ago." Kalesia kept her attention concentrated on the dark, rich potting soil as she transferred seedlings to bigger pots. They were in the largest greenhouse. At Gabriel's urging, she was helping him this morning. Though he hadn't said so, Kalesia figured her incessant pacing had driven him crazy. She couldn't help it. Harley was going to plant the different versions of the story this morning. She wanted results now. Waiting, she was learning, was hell on the nerves.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?" he demanded silkily.

"Because we were barely speaking. Because I wasn't sure if you'd want to know."

The muscles in Gabriel's throat worked. "I wanted to know."

She concentrated on packing the dirt around the raspberry sage seedling so she wouldn't have to meet his eyes. She hated knowing she'd hurt him. "I'm sorry."

With that silent tread that was so much a part of him, Gabriel moved until he was right beside her. One broad, battle-scarred hand, palm up, settled in front of her face. Her heart beat in her ears. Once. Twice. It was a hand that could wield a knife with deadly efficiency or cup the blossom of a crepe myrtle so gently he didn't ruffle a petal. Kalesia placed her hand in his. It closed over hers and Gabriel pulled her to him. That same hand caught her chin on the edge of his palm. "You had reason." This close she could see the threads of darker gray in the silver. Feel his heart beat against her.

"It wasn't that I didn't trust you. Even then, a part of me knew I could." She pressed her forehead against his chest. Today, she was wearing her canvas sneakers so she didn't even come up to his collarbone. His scent surrounded her, made her feel safe. "I was angry," she confessed in a rush, "and wanted to punish you." She'd felt betrayed.

"I hurt you."

"No," she denied, realizing it was the truth. "I hurt myself. I let a pack of anonymous lies come between us."

He curved his large hands over her shoulders and tried to move her back a bit. Kalesia wound her arms around his waist and refused to move. God, it was hard enough to admit her stupidity to herself. She couldn't look him in the face, not in the bright, early morning light. It was so much easier last night.

"But it wasn't all lies, was it?"

The lingering hint of pain propelled Kalesia out of hiding. "Gabriel! Don't. You were doing your duty."

He laughed, a bitter sound that raked claws down her spine. "Duty."

"Yes," she said, firmly. "Gabriel, listen to me. The picture he painted of you, of what you did, was a lie. I know that. A part of me knew it then. He took what you did and twisted it." She could tell he didn't agree.

"How is your vision different?"

Kalesia wanted to protest the abrupt change of subject. The remote expression on his face said argument was futile. "My death didn't happen by the pond." By sheer force of will, she kept her voice steady as she recanted the new vision of her murder. "It was odd, really. I have the impression it was inside a building. I'm not sure exactly but I think it was a barn. I remember seeing hay." Depression lay in her chest like a lead sinker. It was even less to go on than before.

"Were you still shot? Has that changed?"

Although the new version of her death was, in many ways, less clear, the details less defined, almost out of focus, that fact remained the same. "I'm still shot. I still get

the impression of an exit wound." She shivered, a sense of helplessness washing over her. "What I don't understand is why my vision changed. That's never happened to me before."

He didn't answer right away. "The only reason I can come up with is that my involvement has changed the equation somehow. Maybe in your original vision, I wasn't a factor. Hell, I don't claim to understand it but there's a possibility that as long as I'm involved, what happens is in a constant state of flux. The trick is making it go the way we want."

## Chapter Twelve

Wolf, Sam and Badger returned to Gabriel's house dead tired. Gabriel met them at the door. Arm outstretched across the entrance, Gabriel simply stared at Wolf. The other man stared back, a hint of wariness on his austere features.

"Let him in, Gabriel," Kalesia ordered, sounding exasperated. "You can't hit a man because he was right." Slipping under the barricade, she hurried out onto the small stoop and hugged Wolf. Gray eyes met gray eyes over her head. Wolf smiled faintly and held one hand out in a peace offering.

Gabriel retrieved his woman, conscious of the other man's quiet amusement at the gesture. Once she was safely ensconced under his wing, he shook the proffered hand.

"I wasn't going to hit Wolf because he was right," Gabriel objected mildly. "I was going to deck him because of his method of achieving his objective."

"You always did hate being backed into a corner," Wolf agreed.

"Anything new, or did you just come back to bury the bodies?" Gabriel laced the question with mild sarcasm.

"I found a few things of interest." Wolf pushed past him and entered the house. In the living room, he dropped into a chair, exhaustion clearly written in the drooping line of his broad shoulders. He rubbed his face.

Badger and Sam, following close behind, sank down onto the sofa and closed their eyes. Tired as they were, Gabriel knew they were listening to every word.

"We have some news too." He put his arm around Kalesia's waist as she sat on the arm of his chair.

Badger cracked opened one eye. "Yeah? Good or bad?"

"Depends on your point of view. Someone knows enough about my past to twist it and use it against me. And he knew where to find Kalesia."

Wolf stretched his legs out in front of him with a groan. "I take it you two got things straightened out. She's still here."

"She," Kalesia said pointedly, "is still here because she finally remembered he was one of the good guys. I may be slow but I'm not stupid."

Wolf grinned, just a faint movement of his lips. "Never thought you were."

"Dirty cop?" Badger asked, ignoring the byplay to focus on the implications of Gabriel's statement. "Damn, how the hell did that slip by us?"

"Looks that way. There's something else to be considered. The murderer not only knew where she was but got his hands on pictures and reports."

"Hell's bells! That moth —"



Gabriel aimed a frown at him.

Badger's mouth snapped shut and he looked sheepish. "That means the asshole has friends in high places." He gave a "what?" look as Gabriel leveled a glare.

Kalesia patted his thigh. "Don't worry about it," she whispered.

Later, he resolved silently. He would have a little chat with Badger later.

Wolf stacked his hands over his stomach, a thoughtful look on his face. "Or a well-placed partner."

"That would explain the lack of information I found," Sam interjected. "Each alley seemed to turn into a dead end. I'll be honest. I've never come across such a complete nonexistence of information. In today's world, it's damn near impossible to avoid leaving some sort of trail, paper or electronic." He sounded disgruntled and betrayed by the absence of computer-generated footsteps.

"Interesting," Gabriel commented.

"Ain't it just," Wolf agreed. An air of grimness settled over the drawn faces.

Gabriel laced his fingers with Kalesia's. Her fingers tightened around his. "I had Harley bait a trap. We'll know in a few days if I caught anything."

"Plan to use our cop with the big mouth to catch bigger fish?" Wolf asked.

"Uh-huh." Gabriel thought hard for a minute. "Maybe we're coming at this from the wrong angle. Sam, see who has accessed my files lately."

"Workin' on it," was the laconic reply as Sam reached down and pulled his laptop from its case.

"What line is Harley going to drop?" Wolf asked curiously.

"That I believe I got screwed over by the government on my last mission and as a result, I'm working for a South American cartel. Each version is going to have one key difference. In one I dabbled in running drugs and arms in South and Central America. In another, I sold out our military to various governments during my years with the Agency." He felt Kalesia start and sighed inwardly, knowing she wouldn't like it that he and Harley had refined the plan without telling her. But, hell, setting traps was his area of expertise.

Wolf whistled softly. "Better walk softly on that one, friend. There's still a lot of bad feeling. A lot of guys lost buddies and they remember."

"Call it off. We'll find another way to make the informant reveal himself." Kalesia gripped his thigh. He winced as her fingers dug into the muscle. He pried her hand loose and laced it with his.

"Wolf's exaggerating. Harley's making sure no one else will know."

She glared at him. "Don't treat me like I'm stupid and don't you lie to protect me!"

He groaned. She was too damned smart.

"I knew you two were hiding something from me. It stops now! I will not be insulated from the truth." Fire lit her emerald gaze. "And this idiotic plan stops now."

Damn. This was exactly why he hadn't told her. "There's some danger involved," he admitted with reluctance, "but Harley is taking every precaution he can. This is the quickest, most expedient method of finding out who is behind the threat. And it's my choice."

"No, it's my choice. I'm the one who's being threatened."

"You wanted expert advice and help. You're getting it."

"And if you get killed, what then? How am I supposed to live with the knowledge that your death was my fault?" She tried to wiggle her fingers free.

"I knew the risks going in," he reminded her, tightening his grip. "If," he stressed the word, "anything happens to me, it won't be your fault." Gabriel raised his free hand to brush her cheek with his thumb, a light, tender caress.

Kalesia flinched.

Pain flickered across his soul. "It has to be this way. Time is growing short and we needed a solid lead."

Her shoulders slumped and her eyes glittered.

Tears? God, he hoped not. He could handle anything but tears from his woman.

To his relief, no tears fell. The relief was short-lived when she got up without saying a word and headed up the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia tossed and turned, aware of low murmurs from downstairs. Why wouldn't Gabriel listen to reason? Didn't he understand she couldn't bear the thought of him saving her life at the risk of his own? Tears burned her eyes and a painful lump closed her throat. He'd been hurt so much already. It'd kill her to know she'd brought harm to him. Why couldn't he see that?

She sat up and thumped the pillow before flopping back down on it, staring at the ceiling. The man could be so damn hardheaded at times. He also had an overgrown sense of protectiveness. He'd do anything to keep her safe.

Even at the cost of his own life.

A small sigh slipped out in the dark. If she were truthful with herself, she'd admit she'd known what his reaction would be. Gabriel wouldn't back down from what he saw as his responsibility. Kalesia turned onto her side and punched her pillow viciously. A woman's fears or tears wouldn't deter him from what he felt he had to do.

Damn male honor code!

Men could be so blasted stupid at times. As if she wanted her safety at the cost of his own. She snorted, clinging to her anger so she wouldn't burst into tears.

Sleep claimed her but it was a fitful rest until Gabriel slid into bed and gathered her close.

Hours later, she snuggled closer to his warmth, seeking a safe harbor from the images forming in her mind.

She turned, the hay rustling softly under her feet. He was waiting for her. A gun rested casually in his fist. It wasn't pointed at her. Not yet. But it wouldn't be long before the short, ugly snout spat a bullet that would rip through her. She couldn't outrun death.

His hand lifted. Gold glittered in the muted light falling through the cracks in the barn's roof.

A sharp crack split the air...

Kalesia screamed and bolted upright, her breath catching painfully in her chest as her hand touched her ribs, expecting to find the wetness of blood.

Beside her, Gabriel surged up, alert, his hand reaching under the edge of the bed. "What is it? What's wrong?" His head turned the barest fraction as he searched the shadows, the question a hard whisper that barely reached her ears.

Someone an arm's length away wouldn't have heard him. Light gleamed dully on the knife he held in his hand.

Kalesia shuddered and stared down at her hand, unable to believe that her fingers were actually dry. "Oh God, Gabriel. It was awful."

The bedroom door suddenly slammed open and Wolf came across the threshold, down low and fast. Badger and Sam covered his entrance from the doorway, guns drawn.

Kalesia froze, afraid the slightest movement might trigger an instinctive response. Unable to speak, hardly daring to draw a breath, she waited.

"I counted a full eighteen seconds until you arrived. I suppose better late than never," Gabriel drawled.

The tension broken, she dragged in a lungful of air, aware her fingers were shaking as she smoothed back the tangle of hair from her face.

Wolf tucked the small, lethal weapon into the waist of his jeans at the small of his back. White teeth gleamed in the dark as he retorted, "Be thankful for small favors. We could have caught you at a particularly vulnerable moment, deflating the mood as it were."

Kalesia felt her face flame. Thank the lord it was too dark for the men crowding her bedroom to see the heat searing her cheeks. "Enough! Both of you!"

"Yeah, where the hell are your manners? There is a lady present," Badger objected righteously. He flicked on the overhead light and leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb. "Ignore these two uncouths. Obviously, their mommas neglected an important area of their education." He grinned maliciously at the two men.

Sam stood, arms crossed over his chest, enjoying the show.

"Badger, the day you can give me lessons in manners is the day you can..." Gabriel began.

"Why do I sense this conversation is about to become unfit for decent folks?" Kalesia muttered as it sank in that the men's banter was meant to give her time to compose herself.

"This from the woman who tracked down the meaning of REMF?" Gabriel reminded her dryly.

"That was totally different." She sniffed, an unwilling smile tugging at her lips as she remembered Gabriel's reaction.

Sam cleared his throat. "If I might interrupt this fascinating conversation with a mundane question. Why the scream? It took years off my life."

Her smile changed to a glare.

Wolf chuckled.

Gabriel shot the other man a dirty look. "No, it wasn't what you're thinking."

Wolf grinned wider.

Gabriel bent over and replaced the knife in the scabbard secured to the underside of the box springs. "I'd like to hear the answer to that one myself."

Kalesia cleared her throat, uncomfortable. "I'm sorry for the uproar. It was nothing, really."

"Tell me." The demand was implacable.

Kalesia chewed on her bottom lip. "It was my vision," she admitted at last. Half-expecting ridicule from the now silent men, she lifted her chin and dared them to make a cutting comment.

"Was it the same as the last?" Gabriel asked, his voice gentle.

Stupid tears again burned her eyes. Lord, they were going to think she was a watering pot at this rate. Ducking her head, she drew random circles on the sheet by her thigh. "Yes, it was the same. I was shot."

"Exactly the same?"

Her brow creased at his persistence. "I'm not sure." She hesitated, then added, "I think so."

"Tell us what you remember." Gabriel reached over and stilled her hand. She twisted hers around until she could clasp his with desperate strength. His closed about her smaller one with reassuring firmness.

"It's all right, sugar. Tell us everything you can remember." He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

How to explain? To convey to men rooted in brutal reality the inevitable feel to her visions now, despite their fuzziness. "I remember hay under my feet. It made a rustling sound in the silence. I sensed I was no longer alone and turned. He was there, waiting for me."

The quiet horror in her voice affected Gabriel as nothing else ever had. Over her head, he glanced at his friends and saw they were equally moved. Hardened, accustomed to violence in all its applications, they lived with it, used it, yet, still, he could see they found the idea of Kalesia touched by violence's embrace, obscene.

"What did he look like?" Wolf inserted quietly. A muscle in his throat worked and he met Gabriel's gaze, deadly promise in his.

Gabriel nodded, accepting the unspoken pact to keep Kalesia safe at all cost.

Her brows dipped and there was bewilderment in her huge, emerald eyes. "I-I don't know. I'm sorry. I'm really trying to remember but his features always remain blurred."

"Don't worry about it. We'll find him. Go on," Gabriel urged, restraining the urge to gather her close, protect her from outside forces. To hide from the truth would have devastating results.

"I saw the gun this time."

"What did it look like?"

"It was small enough to fit in a jacket pocket. The bore was smallish. It had a clip." Kalesia played with a fold in the sheet. "That's not much help, I know."

"Hey, every little bit helps. Tomorrow we'll have you look at some pictures of pistols and see if anything rings a bell." Badger gave her a confident grin.

"When he lifted the gun and aimed," Kalesia drew an uneven breath before continuing, "I could feel the impact. I have the impression the bullet shattered. But that doesn't make any sense." She halted in obvious frustration.

"It does if the bastard used a soft point," Wolf said, his gaze unfocused as if he were deep in thought.

"Soft point?"

"Or hollow point. They're bullets designed to expand on impact, allowing for the maximum amount of damage. They are very effective, especially if they fragment."

Kalesia paled.

Gabriel sent Wolf a black look. "It won't happen. I promised to protect you."

She smiled wanly. "I know. It's just so...so horrible. I trust you, it's just hard to shake the effects of the vision."

"You're doing great," Sam reassured her. "Now, get some sleep. We'll start working on them in the morning."

"You can trust them, you know," Gabriel said as the door closed behind the other men.

"I do trust them. It's just," she hesitated, "it seems that no matter how my vision changes, one thing remains constant—my death." Fine shivers raced beneath her skin.

Each one sliced into him. He looked down at his chest, half expecting to see blood. "I'll stop him."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, do any of them ring a bell?" Badger spread out a series of pictures. Kalesia studied each one but her gaze kept coming back to one. She tapped a photo. "That one. That's the one I saw in my vision."

The weapon she pointed to was a 9mm modified Smith & Wesson Model 39, what the Navy called Mark 22, Mod.O Pistol. During the Vietnam War, the Navy sponsored development of the silenced pistol for the Seals.

It had another, less formal, name – the Hush Puppy.

Wolf spoke up. "John Crump was killed with a 9mm."

Gabriel's expression grew even more grim, if that was possible. "Sam, what did you find out about the other murders?"

"That there were more than we originally thought. I found several outside the U.S. that match our M.O. It's going to be hard to prove they're our guy's, though. The killings range wide, from South and Central America to Africa. Hell, for all I know, there might be more. All were killed with a 9mm. There are other similarities. All the victims were either involved in drugs or arms and all killed in the same manner. They were—"

"Kalesia," Gabriel interrupted, "this is going to be a long morning. Why don't you go make some coffee?"

It was patently obvious Gabriel was trying to protect her from the more gruesome details. While she appreciated his intent, she wasn't about to be left in the dark. She pinned him with a level look. "I can handle it. I'd rather know the facts than have to imagine them." Gabriel tried to stare her down. When she refused to look away, he nodded for Sam to continue.

"They were shot once, in the left eye." Kalesia winced. "Their wrists were laced tightly together behind their backs and they were kneeling when shot. The really odd thing, though, is the marks on their cheeks. Three black slashes. More than one account likened them to a tiger's stripe."

Wolf made a sound. Sam stopped and tilted his head inquiringly.

Wolf ignored everyone except Gabriel. "Sound familiar?"

Gabriel's lips thinned. He nodded shortly. "Yeah. Quang Nam."

"What about Quang Nam?" Kalesia glanced from one man to the other. She'd never seen quite that expression on either man's face before.

Wolf deferred to Gabriel. "Southeast Asia was a hotbed of drugs at the time of the Vietnam War. It wasn't that unusual for some industrious soldier to start a sideline business. The military frowned upon such extracurricular activity but was virtually

helpless to prevent it. There was this one operation the Army was determined to shut down. Every time they got close, however, someone wound up dead."

A chill of premonition slid down Kalesia's spine. "They were shot in the," she hesitated, "eye after their hands were tied," she guessed, keeping her voice steady with an effort.

"Not just tied but laced to the elbow, with parachute nylon. And they had three stripes on each cheek. And the caliber was 9mm. By my time, the story was equal parts myth and legend. Every so often, the barest hint of rumors would surface of similar murders in Africa and South America. I always put it down to someone resurrecting that old story and using it to scare gullible new recruits. Kinda like the Boogeyman." Gabriel's right hand slowly closed into a fist. "I should have put it together a lot sooner. Crump. I saw the coroner's pictures, read the report and still missed it." He slowly straightened his hand.

Kalesia had the impression he wanted to crush something and was just barely controlling himself.

"Are you saying that after almost forty years, the same man murdered Crump?"

"He had the stripes and was bound to the elbows with cord. Nylon. There are too many similarities even to try to put it down to mere coincidence." Badger answered Kalesia's question.

"Damn." The succinct curse hung on the air.

"What is it? What's wrong, Wolf?" Kalesia demanded.

"The story Harley dropped. The killer is liable to believe Gabriel knows more than he does." He crossed his arms over his chest. "He's coming after you, Gabe."

She looked from one man to the other, not sure she saw Wolf's point. "But we knew that."

"Yeah but now we've given him a reason not to stop until Gabe is dead."

"Knock it off. Nothing's changed." Gabriel said quietly, a chilling expression in his eyes. "We wanted to spook him. This just plays into our hands."

"We were supposed to be rooting out an informant by seeing if he passes along the information," Kalesia denied hotly. Gabriel infuriated her by shrugging casually.

"Damn you, Gabriel Steele. If you get hurt, I'll—I'll kill you myself!"

He pulled her into his lap with casual strength. Kalesia resisted for a moment and then buried her face against his neck. "No, you wouldn't, little witch," he contradicted. "You'd cry and rant and rage and then you'd patch me up."

"Hah!" she muttered, the words muffled against his throat. "Mangy tomcats don't need a woman's care."

"This mangy tomcat does," Gabriel corrected, close to her ear.

Something inside Kalesia unfurled. Gabriel had come close to saying he loved her. She couldn't lose him now. She wouldn't lose him now, she vowed to herself. "Promise you'll be careful?" she asked urgently.

"Promise," he murmured, lowering his head to take her lips.

"I think I'll go outside and watch the plants grow. I'm too young to witness this." Wolf settled deeper in his chair.

"Hit me, Samuel," Badger begged theatrically, pointing to his chin. "I could use a little TLC."

"Knock it off, clowns," Gabriel growled, a hint of red on the hard cheekbones.

Kalesia started to get off Gabriel's lap, highly embarrassed that she had forgotten the presence of the other men but he pulled her back, refusing to let her go.

"If you two need a little quality time, I could go check the mail," Sam offered, tongue-in-cheek.

"One more crack out of anybody and I'll take him out for some quality time behind the greenhouse." Gabriel threatened with lazy menace.

Color high, Kalesia wriggled out of Gabriel's lap, avoiding his outstretched arm. "So what now?" She ignored the huge grins the men wore.

"Now we keep digging." Gabriel turned to Sam. "Did you find out who's been accessing my files?"

"No one that I can tell."

"Jim's tearing the office apart, on the QT, of course," Wolf added. "Danielle can't remember anyone requesting authorization for your records. If anyone would know, she would. She's been Jim's right hand for the last ten years." Gabriel shot Wolf a sardonic glance. Wolf shrugged. "I know. I know. It's highly unlikely whoever is behind this stopped to ask permission but you never know. Jim will go just so far without going through official channels," Wolf warned. "You know him, he leaves breaking the rules up to the rest of us. As long as it doesn't come back to haunt him. The moment something concrete turns up, he wants it official."

"Who are Jim and Danielle?" Kalesia allowed Gabriel to pull her back to his side.

"Jim Wright is my old boss. Danielle Eastman is his assistant."

"They haven't found out anything at all?" She couldn't keep the disappointment from her voice.

"Kalesia, whoever he is, the guy's a pro." Gabriel's voice was exquisitely gentle.

"I know. I just wish this whole mess was over."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I own you."

Anger tightened the listener's throat even as he shifted from one foot to the other. He swallowed a hot rush of words. More than money restrained him. A deeply ingrained desire to continue living held him back.

"Look. I'm doing everything you ask. I told you about them investigating her vision from two years ago, didn't I? And I broke into her house to see if she kept records of her



visions. I even told you the info Harley dug up on Steele. At some risk to myself, I might add."

"Don't ask for more money," he was informed coldly. "I might begin to regret our bargain."

A frisson of fear slid down his spine. Sometimes, he wished he'd never gotten involved, had turned down the money. There was something innately sadistic about the other man's cultured tones. But he was in too deep to quit now.

"Is the woman still with him?"

"If she is?"

"Make her leave."

"How am I supposed to do that? Steele has her locked up tight."

"Do it. Otherwise, I might begin to wonder if the information I'm buying is worth what I'm paying."

"I'll take care of the matter," he said angrily, the mocking tone on the other end of the line making him forget where he was. A bead of sweat slid down, tickling his cheek as he remembered. He lowered his voice. "It might take a bit. She might be afraid to leave."

"For the sake of your health, she'd better have a change of heart. I want the investigation stopped."

"What about my money?"

"When I'm sure you've done the job properly."

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Gabriel's eyes opened abruptly. He laid perfectly still, waiting for a repeat of the slight noise that had jarred him out of a sound sleep. He felt a small surge of irritation even as his knife slid smoothly into his hand.

A sound sleep was still novel enough to be treasured. The small electric device at the head of the bed made another, near soundless, burring noise. Kalesia stirred in her sleep, moving until her bottom was snuggled firmly against him.

With a silent thud, Hannibal landed on the foot of the bed. Slinking soundlessly until he was next to Gabriel, the huge, black cat crouched low beside him. He was staring intently in the direction of the double French doors. A growl vibrated deep in the cat's throat.

Disentangling himself carefully from the slumbering woman, Gabriel placed a warning hand on the cat's back. Hannibal's tail whipped back and forth but he subsided.

Gabriel had lived too long with danger not to recognize the symptoms. Even as he watched, the door opened without sound. There was the subdued sheen of polished metal. Gabriel threw the knife and, in one smooth motion, followed it across the room.

A painful yelp was quickly cut off.

The sound of a struggle startled Kalesia awake. Disoriented, it was a second before she located the source of the battle. She heard Gabriel grunt and then the sickening sound of flesh striking flesh.

Kalesia scrambled desperately for the gun she knew Gabriel kept in the nightstand, forgetting her distaste for weapons in her need to protect him. She was aware of loud screaming and distantly realized that she was yelling at the top of her lungs. Just as her hand closed on the surprisingly heavy pistol, one of the men on the floor gave an agonized shriek.

"Gabriel!" she screamed.

"Honey, do me a favor. Point that thing the other way. I'd hate to get shot while buck-naked." Gabriel straddled the man, the knife resting with casual menace against the man's throat. The intruder, not being totally stupid, didn't move a muscle. "While you're at it," he added in an afterthought, "turn the light on so we can see who we've got."

Gabriel shook his head mournfully. "Damn, just when I was getting used to sleeping the night through."

The soft light of the bedside lamp flared.

"Well, well, well. Who would have guessed?" Gabriel looked up as the bedroom door crashed against the wall. "One of you had better get Harley on the horn. Our little pigeon found us." Badger made an about-face immediately.

Wolf crossed the room to crouch beside the pair. He studied the fallen man's knife wound dispassionately. He raised one brow. "The thigh?"

"My aim was off. I threw across my body while lying down. Sue me."

Wolf gave a low whistle as he got a closer look. "What the hell happened to his face?" he asked, studying the numerous scratch marks.

"Courtesy of my partner." Gabriel tilted his head in the general direction of Hannibal who, once he had taken care of the threat to the one person he idolized, was washing his paw.

"Hard to believe you two were actually on the same side of a conflict."

"Yeah, ain't it just. Life is just full of improbabilities lately. Want to keep an eye on Goldilocks here, while I get dressed?"

"My pleasure." Wolf smiled maliciously down at the sullen man, silently inviting him to try to escape. "You know, Sam," he began conversationally, not taking his eyes off his prisoner as he spoke to the man leaning against the wall. "I've come to the conclusion you and I lead boring lives. When's the last time you had so much excitement in your bedroom?"

Hazel eyes crinkled in thought. "Well," he drawled, "there was that brunette."

"The expert in hand-to-hand?" Wolf shook his head sorrowfully. "Damn, everybody gets to have a little fun but me. I need a vacation."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harley arrived in less than half an hour. He shot a sour glance at the apprehended deputy. "I had hoped to hell you were mistaken, Gabe. What happened?"

"It seems Deputy Pompano had orders to give Kalesia additional impetus to leave my tender, expert care."

"From whom?"

"Claims he doesn't know. Actually, I kinda believe him. It's about the only thing about his story that I do believe."

"Let's ask Rambo over there how he made contact," Badger said, contempt on his face at Pompano's jungle suit and painted face.

"It wasn't from the S.O. unless he used a disposable cell. I ran a check on all repeating numbers. Incoming and outgoing," Sam commented from the depths of a chair.

"You obtained a record of the department's calls?" Harley asked, incredulous, anger darkening his face.

Sam's face was all innocence. "Now that would be illegal without a court order, wouldn't it?"

Harley glared.

Gabriel stopped the incipient argument. "We'll go into the legality later. What did you find out?"

"I cross-indexed it with our list and came up with nada."

"We'll definitely talk later." Harley turned to face his deputy, restrained anger vibrating through his taut form. "What Agent Woods found out does, however, bring up an interesting question. Just how did you make contact? Before you answer, let me read you your rights. You're familiar with the procedure, aren't you?"

Pompano's eyes darted about. He looked like he wanted to run. Wolf casually got to his feet and positioned himself within an arm's length of Pompano. Samuel did the same thing on the other side. Pompano sank back in his chair. "I never initiate contact. He always calls me."

"At the department?" Harley's voice was sharp.

Pompano nodded. "Every two or three days. I'm never quite sure when to expect a call."

"What about payment?"

"He tells me where to pick it up. It's never the same place twice."

"How long have you been selling out?" Harley balled his hands into fists, his knuckles turning white. His need to pound Pompano's face into a bloody mess was clear. Gabriel knew exactly how he felt.

"Two years, give or take."

"Son of a bitch! You've been selling out the department that long? Right under my nose? Who else have you placed in danger? Besides the deputies you work with, of course."

Pompano refused to look his boss in the eye. He hung his head. "Just Miss Brannigan."

Gabriel tensed beneath the restraining hand Kalesia placed on his arm. His voice was a black pit of promise when he asked, "Why Kalesia?"

"I don't know." Pompano raised a panicked hand as Gabriel stirred. "It's the truth, man. You've got to believe me." He licked his lip nervously. "This is the first time he's told me to keep an eye on a person. Usually, it was investigations the S.O. was working on. Things like drug busts and arms." He cringed from the hot look Harley shot him.

"Hell, it was just by accident I told him of Miss Brannigan's visit. I wouldn't have mentioned it, if Murphy hadn't remembered her coming around a couple of years ago with some story about a murder. Honest. We'd just shared a laugh about a psychic reporting her own murder when he called. I guess it was on my mind, so I told him. I didn't expect him to take it seriously." Pompano didn't see Kalesia's baleful glare. Maybe he ought to turn her loose on the man.

"Why were you here tonight? To kill Kalesia?" Gabriel gathered himself, prepared to launch across the room to throttle Pompano if he answered yes.

"Hell, no! I'm not a murderer," Pompano protested indignantly.

"Just a miserable little snitch. A cop on the take," Wolf murmured, his dark voice filled with sarcasm. The deputy had the grace to redden.

"You don't understand. It was easy money. A cop's salary doesn't buy a damn thing in today's world."

"Not even loyalty," Badger snarled, disgust for a man who would sell his honor lacing the rough comment.

Pompano looked at the floor. "I wasn't going to kill her. Just scare her a little. Make her run."

"That's why you brought a gun? To scare her a little?" Gabriel's hand fisted and then slowly opened. First, he'd reach down Pompano's throat and pull his balls out through his mouth. Then, he'd settle down to some serious hurt.

Pompano opened his mouth and then looked wildly around at the sea of closed, dispassionate faces. He abruptly shut his mouth and refused to say anything else.

"Breaking and entering. Felonious assault. I'm sure if we dig a little deeper we can come up with conspiracy to commit murder and accessory to murder. Who knows what other interesting tidbits will turn up?" Harley reached behind him in a smooth, practiced motion for the handcuffs.

"Unless," Wolf drawled.

Harley turned back inquiringly. "Unless?"

"There's reason to believe his boss's crimes are both federal and international in scope. The government might be willing to cut a deal if Pompano can help deliver his boss."

"He'll kill me!"

"The way I see it," Gabriel said, "you're dead if you don't talk. When news of your arrest becomes public, he is going to assume you sang like a nightingale." He bared his teeth. "I'll personally make sure that impression is given. And your boss, whoever he is, doesn't strike me as the type of man to leave loose threads. You, Deputy Pompano, are a very prominent thread, one that threatens to unravel the whole operation."

Pompano looked at each man, finding no hope of mercy in the set faces. His gaze finally landed and settled on Kalesia. "You've got to believe me, Miss. It was never my intention to kill you." He sounded desperate.

Gabriel saw her face soften. In disbelief, he realized she was falling for Pompano's pitch. Goddamn, he wanted to tear the slimy bastard apart. He settled on squeezing her hand.

She shot him an irritated glance before returning her attention to the other man. "No," she agreed quietly, "you were leaving that up to your employer. And to kill me, he would have to kill Gabriel. Because of you, Gabriel would have been dead."

The deputy dropped his eyes. "What kind of deal?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel stood just inside the open door and watched as Kalesia flew out the door. The smell of heat and dust lingered on the air. Damn, would she never learn? He'd told her he'd get the mail. Hell, she'd barely waited for the mail truck to get around the bend.

He ought to tan her hide. How the hell was he supposed to protect her if she reacted without thought? He scowled as she opened the large, square mailbox. Head down, she thumbed through the stack of mail as she walked back to the house. Not once did she look around to make sure she wasn't being observed. The killer could have been standing within touching distance and she wouldn't have noticed.

Damn, foolish woman.

He reached for the screen door. Kalesia looked up.

Gabriel's stomach muscles tightened.

He'd taken the bait. Gabriel didn't need to see the manila envelope on top of the pile to know. The strain in her face was all the confirmation he required.

He opened the screen door. Kalesia walked into his arms. "He fell for it, Gabriel." She held up the large envelope. In bold letters was her name. Her hand shook.

"Give it here. I'll read it."

Kalesia pulled away and squared her shoulders. "I'll read it. I refuse to let this man continually terrify me." In silence she opened the envelope and read the contents. Her face showed her relief.

"He's overplayed his hand. Not only does he mention you being a hit man for one of the major cartels but he goes into great details about you running arms to insurgents." She passed the ten-page report to him, budding excitement in her face. "He must be getting desperate. He's more open in his suggestion that I leave you."

Inside, the lid he kept on the darkness rattled. Fine fractures formed. A bone-chilling cold crept over him. Gabriel didn't think he'd ever get warm again.

He stared at the report in his hand. It was more than the story he and Harley had concocted. So very much more. It went back nearly twenty years. In an instant, he was there again.

Heat.

Humidity.

Pain.

Neat surgical slices.

Always the pain.

Blood slid off his back. Ran down his side. Formed ever-widening crimson pools.

He started as Kalesia covered his hand with hers.

"You were right. He's either arrogant or getting desperate. He's making mistakes. First he sends Deputy Pompano and now this." She flicked the papers in Gabriel's hands with a nail.

Gabriel barely heard her.

Seeing the details of his torture spelled out in exquisite detail made Gabriel's stomach muscles clench in protest. But, God, worse than that was seeing the subsequent revenge he had taken played out on the pages in black and white. A knife twisted in his gut.

Now Kalesia knew exactly to what depths he was capable of sinking.

He had skipped letting her know the details of his escape, hoping to protect her.

Or had he been hoping to protect himself?

Had he been afraid that if she knew the full story, she'd be horrified? Possibly have second thoughts about staying with a man whose hands were steeped in blood. A man who killed as easily and efficiently as most men shaved. Knowing what has happened to a person, knowing abstractly that they had committed acts of violence, was very different from having the finer points of the deed slap you in the face.

How could Kalesia not believe the report? It presented a tale of fact and fiction so intricately woven, the strands twisted together so expertly, that if it were not his life Gabriel wouldn't have hesitated for a moment to believe it. It also neatly tied in his torture as punishment for double crossing his illicit partners. Nice of him to be so thorough, Gabriel thought, bitter bile on the back of his tongue.

He reread the last page. Now Kalesia knew.

Gabriel Steele, killer of children.

"Do you believe him?" What a stupid question. Of course she did. Numb, he waited for her to turn away from him.

"Believe him?" Kalesia asked, sounding distracted. She glanced at the paper. "Oh, you mean that story about you killing your partner and a child who witnessed the murder?" The heat from her palms burned the chilled skin of his face. Her lips seared him as she brushed a soft kiss across his mouth. "Of course I don't believe him. You would never kill a child."

Raw pain flashed across his nerve endings, leaving them exposed. He pulled her hands from his face. "I did. I did exactly that."

Shock flashed across her face. For a full minute, she didn't move. Didn't even breathe.

It was the longest minute of Gabriel's life.

Once more, crackle glass separated him from the rest of the world. From Kalesia. Darkness seeped onto it. Found the fine lines and ran into them. Behind the glass, Gabriel caught a glimpse of endless night. It seethed and roiled, impatient. It knew. Knew its time had come. The glass shattered. Darkness surged toward him.

Gabriel stoically waited for it to swallow him. Odd but he felt no fear. Just a deep regret that he hadn't met Kalesia sooner.

She stunned him when she freed her hands and put one palm over his heart. "I know you," she said gently. "Your natural instinct is to protect those smaller or weaker than yourself. You will never convince me you meant to kill that child. Tell me about it," she coaxed.

Light sizzled on darkness. A deep tremor shook him as the deep, burning cold in his gut slowly melted. The sensation was almost painful.

Concern began to replace encouragement in her eyes. Though it was the last thing he wanted to do, he brought her attention to the papers clutched in his fist. "This pretty much covers it. It happened in Central America, just as it says. Jim, my boss, insisted I team up with the new guy. I didn't want a partner, hadn't worked with one since I left the Rangers. Hell, no way did I want to have to look out for anyone other than myself. I was right. Dan would be alive if I hadn't caved.

"What it doesn't tell you is that when Dan's head disintegrated, I turned and dropped to the ground and fired... Sugar I swear I didn't realize it was a kid until I went over to check on the status of the gunman. I kicked his gun away. When I turned him over, I looked into the face of a kid." He heard a faint rustling sound and realized he'd crushed the papers.

Unshed tears swam in her eyes. "How old was he?"

Dear God, he didn't deserve her sympathy. But Gabriel knew he'd take it. He was just too damned weak not to.

"Eleven. Twelve. Maybe a little older. Does it matter? Christ, I killed a kid! What it comes down to is I killed a kid. Just a child," he whispered, the same savage disbelief ripping through him that had dropped him to his knees that day.

"Hardly a child." She wrapped each small hand around his biceps and shook. "Gabriel, he had just killed your partner and was going to kill you. Of course you returned fire. You acted purely out of self-defense, the same way anyone else in that situation would have done."

Bullshit. He should have known, sensed somehow, that the shooter was a kid. Goddamn it. He should have known.

Some of his turmoil must have shown through. She quit trying to shake him. Her fingers rubbed over the rigid bands of muscle in a soothing rhythm. "Was that when you decided to retire?"

He wanted to hold her so badly, he ached with it. Gabriel refused to allow himself that comfort. "The decision had been creeping up on me for some time. That last mission simply brought it to a head. I was determined not to be put in such a position again. I didn't join to make war against children."

"Gabriel, if he was capable of surprising two experienced warriors, killing one, it seems reasonable to assume he hadn't been a child for a long time."



Gabriel thought about her statement for a moment, stunned to realized he'd never put it in that perspective before. "Maybe." Even if she was right, the fact remained that the boy would be alive if he hadn't an aptitude for killing. For that, he could never forgive himself. But if Kalesia could forgive him for killing the boy and for the revenge he'd taken, then maybe he owed it to her and to himself, to learn to live with himself.

Now that he wasn't anticipating her reaction, he allowed himself to consider fully what he'd just read. One thing stood out. "Whoever wrote that report must have been present when Chavez interrogated me that last time."

Kalesia stared at him. "Why do you say that? We already know he has access to your files. He could have gotten the information from them again this time."

"No, he couldn't. Not this time. I didn't describe all that was done to me. And nothing I did to Chavez and the man I thought of as Straps was in any report. When debriefed at the hospital, I deliberately made no mention of my actions. On top of that, I know for a fact that no other teams were sent in to confirm the kills. The mission was a one-shot deal. Politically, it was too hot to attempt again. That means whoever wrote this," he opened his hand and tried to smooth the crumpled pages, "was either there and hid or he had reason to go back. Unofficially. Let's go find Sam. I have some work for him before Pompano receives that call."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well?"

"She's still there. I haven't been able to get close to the woman."

"I'll find someone else to do the job."

"No! Wait!" Pampano wiped his hand over his mouth. "Tomorrow afternoon. I'll have a chance tomorrow afternoon. I heard Harley talk about bringing Steele in for questioning. Since he found out about that other stuff, he's beginning to wonder if Steele knows more about Crump's murder than he's saying. He should be here several hours. I can get to her then."

"Do so. Convince her that it is in her best interest to leave Steele."

"Not a problem. I even have the perfect place for her to go. I'm taking care of a friend's house while he's gone. It's next to the National Forest and isolated. Steele will never find her there."

"It had better not be a problem. I expect results."

"You'll get them." Pompano cleared his throat. "Uh, about my payment..."

"Don't worry." There was a smile in the other man's voice. "I'll see you get payment in full. I'll call again tomorrow for details." There was a click and the dial tone sounded.

Pampano hung up the phone and turned, his hands shaking. "You haven't forgotten our deal, have you?"

"No, I haven't forgotten our deal," Harley said, distaste in his voice. He glanced over his shoulder at Deputy Parker. "Put him back in the cell and put a twenty-four-hour watch him. I don't want anything happening to him."

Harley waited until Pompano was out of hearing distance. "And so it begins. Now who gets to break the news to Gabe?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"The hell you will!" Gabriel roared.

"Be reasonable, Gabriel," Kalesia tried, already knowing he was going to be difficult. "At least hear them out."

"I'm listening." He crossed his arms and shifted on the arm of the chair so he could glare at the four men in the room.

"Pompano received the call an hour ago. We've got to convince this guy that Kalesia has actually moved out if we hope to catch him. He's a smart bastard," Wolf admitted grudgingly.

"You couldn't complete the trace." It was a statement.

"For all we know he could be one mile or one hundred miles from here." A muscle ticked in Sam's jaw. It was easy to see he was furious over the fact they'd failed.

"Damn it all to hell," Gabriel swore, straightening, switching the glacial glare to the man in uniform.

"As Wolf said, he's smart. He's not going to come out of the shadows if Kalesia doesn't actually leave your protection." Harley didn't flinch at Gabriel's harsh expletive. Kalesia wished she could be so sanguine.

"You don't know that for sure." Gabriel's face could have been carved out of granite.

"Are you willing to chance Kalesia's life that I'm not?"

"Isn't that what you're asking me to do?"

"Gabriel, don't! You know they wouldn't risk my life." Kalesia reached up and brushed rich loam off his cheek. He'd been working in the greenhouse when Sam and Wolf returned with Harley from the sheriff's office. "They're your friends. What's more, they're also my friends. Gabriel," she began, searching for the right words to convince him, "he's been maneuvering to get me to leave. If I don't, he'll just go even deeper underground, then we'll never know when he'll surface to strike. You can't protect me twenty-four hours a day for the rest of my life. We have to do this."

"No."

"What if another deputy is on the take?" Sam's quiet question drew Gabriel's wrath.

"You aren't checking?" Gabriel asked Harley, his voice much too soft for Kalesia's comfort.

"You know he is," Wolf interjected. "You also know that in a situation like this, by the time he finds out, it might be too late. I understand your anger. Hell, man, I'd feel the same way if it was my woman involved, but we are not your enemies."

"Forget it." His hand slashed the air. "We were supposed to force him into making a move on me. She is not bait."

Badger spoke up for the first time. "Think with your head, Gabe, not your dick. He knows you're on alert every minute Kalesia's here with you. He'd be a fucking idiot to try anything now. And, whatever else that asshole is, he's not an idiot. If he believes she's bolted, he'll do one of two things—make a move against you, thinking you're distracted, or against Kalesia, thinking she's vulnerable. Either way, we've got the bastard."

It was a sign of Gabriel's agitation that he didn't immediately jump Badger's case for the language. Kalesia touched Gabriel's back in a silent plea, feeling the tension in the rock-hard muscles. "Listen to him. This might be our only chance to catch the killer."

His eyes went hard. "No. You," he leaned over Kalesia, caging her between two steel arms, "are out of your pea-sized brain if you think I'm going to let you go out there on your own. This isn't some kind of game, woman. This guy plays for keeps. He's already killed a professional hit man. I absolutely refuse to let you set yourself up as bait."

Waves of quivering outrage and implacable denial washed over Kalesia. The gray eyes were no longer a polished mirror but molten as silver in a fiery crucible. They singed her as Gabriel brought his face closer to hers. Suddenly, it was hard to breathe, as if all the oxygen was sucked up by Gabriel's fury. To her disgust, her voice trembled as she sought to make him see reason. It wasn't fear, she assured herself. Gabriel would never hurt her. But he could be very...intimidating when he wanted to.

"I know it's not a game. However, we won't get another opportunity like this one."

"No."

Her own temper, never shy, flared. "What do you mean 'no'?"

"I mean, no. No, you will not leave this house. No, you will not stay at an isolated cabin by yourself, I don't care how secure it supposedly is. No, you will not be setting yourself up as an unprotected target," Gabriel gritted, his voice as dark as midnight and as rough as gravel.

Kalesia drew a deep breath and reined in her ire. One of them had to remain calm. His anger was coming from fear for her safety, she had to remember that. But he had to understand it was her decision. She refused to live her life looking over her shoulder, waiting for a bullet from an unseen marksman. "I won't be unprotected. The way Tom explained it, men will be hidden around the property and a base will be set up nearby. They've been there since before Pompano said that was where he'd take me. One way or the other, someone will know my movements at all times. Besides, it's not your

choice to make." Kalesia stared, fascinated, as the pulse in the hollow of his throat beat a rapid tattoo.

"Wanna bet?" His hand snaked out and captured her chin. The rough texture of his fingers threatened, promised pain if she struggled.

Kalesia didn't move as she stared into his eyes.

"I could crush you with very little effort. If I decided to tie you to my bed, there wouldn't be a damn thing you could do to stop me. You're not strong enough." His fingers tightened, adding just the slightest fraction of pressure.

Kalesia met his gaze with absolute assurance. "But you won't, will you?"

Gabriel tried to stare her down. Didn't she understand that no matter how close an eye they kept on the place, there were no guarantees? It would tear him apart if she was injured but if she was to get killed, he'd go crazy. Not just insane but gut-wrenching, soul-tearing crazy. It'd be a pain worse than any he suffered while tortured.

"I won't let you be hurt!" he snarled, recognizing defeat and bitterly furious about it. An unfamiliar anguish knifed through him, twisting his mouth.

Her hand curved about his and the emerald green eyes were as warm as a lagoon on a summer afternoon. "I know you won't."

Where the hell did she get her belief in him? He exhaled heavily, letting go of his anger with an effort. "I'm going to regret this."

"No, you won't, because I'm going to be fine."

Gabriel released her chin and extended his hand, palm up. He waited.

There was a question in her eyes. She stared at his hand and then back at his face. He didn't say anything, just held his hand out.

Kalesia put her hand in his.

Relief coursed through him. He closed his fingers about hers. Such a small hand, he thought in amazed wonder, to hold his happiness. And it was a hand that wouldn't falter.

Kalesia believed in honor. Not many did anymore but Gabriel knew, without the slightest doubt, that she would never betray him. He could trust her with his honor and with his life.

Gabriel spoke over his shoulder without turning his head. "This cabin had better be as secure as you say."

"It is," Wolf stated. "I designed the security system myself."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia watched Gabriel as he got ready for bed. The shirt was thrown over the chair. She loved the fact he never tried to hide his scars from her. He sat down and took off his shoes and socks. The wallet hit the dresser and slid across the polished surface.

His keys, watch and change were placed with a little more care. He stood and stepped out of his jeans.

He was starkly, heavily aroused.

She stared at his erection as it jutted from its nest of hair. A rush of liquid fire heated her pussy. With an effort, she brought her mind back to the topic she wanted to address. He'd been brooding all day and enough was enough. "I'll be fine, you know."

Gabriel tossed the covers to the foot of the bed. He came down on top of her, caging her between his arms. "I can't lose you." Raw savagery glittered in his eyes.

"You won't lose me." She touched the muscle jumping in his jaw. "As Deputy Parker would put it, I'll stick tighter to you than a tick on a wet hound dog," she said, trying to lighten his mood.

"That tight, huh?" Some of the tension left him.

"Uh-huh. You'll have to peel me off if you want to get rid of me." His hands went to her hips. Out of the blue, she remembered the second thing she'd wanted to discuss. Her gown slid up to her waist. Maybe it could wait until morning. She moaned as he nibbled at her collarbone. What if it's important? Oh, shut up, she told her conscience. But the mood was broken. She sighed. She had to tell him now.

"Gabriel? I doubt this means anything but I remembered something else."

Gabriel lifted his head, expression suddenly intent. "From the vision in the barn?"

She nodded, running her hands restlessly from shoulder to the bulge of muscle in his upper arms and back again. "I honestly can't see how it will help but I recall the flash of gold on the killer's hand. A ring."

Beneath her palms, his muscles rippled. "Could you see what it looked like?"

She didn't know why but the answer was very important to Gabriel. Kalesia closed her eyes and tried to visualize it. Frustrated, she shook her head. "Not really. All I get is the impression of an intricate design. Maybe two animals," she hazarded, all too aware it wasn't much to go on.

Gabriel pulled away, rolling over to lay with one arm behind his head. He stared at the ceiling. Tension thrummed from the still form.

"What is it? What did I say?" Confused, Kalesia shifted to her side. Propped up on one elbow, she stared down at his face. "Gabriel?" she tried again when he didn't answer. She touched his chest.

He jerked upright and swung his legs out of bed.

Kalesia felt her mouth drop open. What the hell?

He crossed to the French doors, jerking the drapes aside until they were fully open. He stood, one arm braced on the seam where the two doors met. His reflection was crystal clear in the glass. She saw his fist close and open slowly, one finger at a time.

Kalesia got the distinct impression he was struggling for words.

The muscles bunched beneath the sleek shoulders. "Do you know," he said, leaning his forehead against the glass, "the first time I remember seeing it was on a night much like tonight—hot, humid but with a slight breeze to make it bearable. It's amazing how quickly a man learns to appreciate simple pleasures. The cooling relief of rain after a day spent baking in the sun, a slight breeze as it dries the sweat on your body. The absence of pain..." he whispered.

"I had gone through the usual bull, them telling me of my crimes against Chavez's pseudo-government and trying to extract a written confession and apology in return for release and me resisting. It was a psychological game. I was still sore from the last beating but not too bad. They had left me alone for an entire day to reflect on my sins. I wasn't too worried when they came for me again. Figured it was going to be another bull session." He spread his fingers on the glass.

Kalesia's throat ached and a sharp pain ripped through her chest. She thought she had an idea of what was coming next—torture.

He laughed, a harsh grate of sound. "Talk about being wrong! I was cocky, sure I could stand whatever they cared to dish out. I was still a hardass, I guess. After all, hadn't I survived all they had thrown at me without breaking? They took me to the Teacher's hut. Teacher was my nickname for Chavez because he carried a swagger stick and used it to point at things, the way a teacher does. They manacled my wrists behind my back. I was wary because this wasn't part of the normal routine but not yet afraid. Talk about stupid! I was a total jackass."

"It was dark inside. I heard the door to the hut open. They slammed me to the floor. I tasted blood as my lip split. Things wavered for a moment as my head impacted with the floor. From the corner of my eye, I caught the flash of gold as a hand waved. One guard had his knee dug into my back. I could barely catch my breath from his weight. Then the other guard began tightening the manacles. They were the old-fashioned kind that screwed shut. You know, the kind that doesn't stop for a little matter like flesh? They don't stop until they hit bone.

"Using nylon strips, they began lacing my arms together, from wrist to elbow. I was lucky," he reflected too caught up to notice Kalesia's sick horror at the story unfolding. It was so much worse than she had expected.

"I've seen men's arms dislocated and bones separated from sternums with that little trick. That's when I discovered I wasn't Superman. I screamed and sobbed like a baby."

"It's a misconception that a person always passes out when pain becomes too intense. I would have given my balls to be able to pass out. I prayed for it. Then I prayed to die." Gabriel shrugged. "I lived. I also stayed conscious. I never heard the man with the ring speak but, dimly, I understood that the Teacher was asking questions at his direction. The entire time I was captured, the worst sessions were when he was present." Gabriel's hand flexed convulsively on the glass, then he dropped it to his side. "Not that Chavez wasn't creative on his own."

"I'm so sorry," Kalesia whispered, horrified. She'd never dreamt that mentioning the ring in her vision would garner this.

He turned. "You have nothing to be sorry for, sugar. It's simply an old enemy coming back to haunt me." Moving until he was standing next to the bed, he reached out one tentative hand and smoothed a strand of hair from her face. "Actually, I should be the one to apologize. I shouldn't burden you with ancient history." Aching need replaced the bitterness of past memories on his face. He placed one knee on the mattress.

"Don't," she pleaded, her insides tightening at the sensual promise in the gray eyes. Dear God, how she wanted him. "Don't hide things from me. I want you to share what hurts you. I'm stronger than I look."

He studied her. "Yes, you are. Much stronger. Oh God," he muttered darkly, burying his hands in her hair, "give me some of your strength tonight, sweetheart. You have no idea how much I need it." His mouth came down on hers.

She responded with every fiber of her being to the naked power and need, unable to do anything else. She was dazed by the force of his passion. He was coiled and leashed as tightly as a panther. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled him down on top of her.

One big palm skimmed up her thigh under her nightgown. Kalesia arched uncontrollably at the caress. She nipped his shoulder in passionate demand. She was already burning.

"Now, Gabriel!"

Impatient hands tugged at the hem of the gown, pulling it over her head and throwing it to the floor. She tried to tug him back down. He resisted and Kalesia heard the nightstand drawer open. Within less than a minute, his large form settled over hers. Kalesia welcomed the heavy weight. Her hands sought the small of his back. Gabriel was extra sensitive there she'd learned. She feathered her fingers over the area. A shudder went through him. Spreading her fingers, she raked her nails lightly down the firm muscles of his buttocks. The tip of one finger strayed into the cleft that defined them. Dark words of encouragement spilled from his lips.

"Fuck, sugar! Harder. I want to feel your hands all over me tonight." He rocked against her, the hard, hot length of his cock sliding between her pussy lips.

Kalesia caught her breath. She nipped his shoulder again. Hard enough to leave a mark. His hips flexed, a short, hard stroke. A jolt of pleasure stole her breath when the head of his cock lodged against her clit.

Tension spiraled higher. The edge of his teeth raked her nipple. Lights exploded behind her lids. She arched, her nails sinking into the taut muscles of his ass.

"Tell me you love me, Kalesia," he muttered against her breast. "I need the words."

Gabriel was well aware he wasn't being fair. He couldn't return the words but, son of a bitch, he needed them more than he needed his next breath. He licked at the bead of sweat pooled in the delicate hollow of her throat. The salty, hot taste of woman exploded on his tongue. Her pulse there fluttered frantically. "Tell me," he commanded, heart pounding in his chest.

"I love you." Her voice caught in the back of her throat. The soft, wildly sexy sound ignited a white-hot blaze.

"Again, tell me again." He fisted one hand in her hair. "I want to hear you say it." Greedy. He was goddamned greedy. He stared down into her emerald eyes, demanding, compelling, needing the words. Hearing them was fast becoming a fucking obsession.

Understanding lit her gaze. Her eyes became warm and tender. "I love you. I'll always love you, Gabriel."

She was his. No one would know her touch, her sweet trust, her honesty. He nipped her neck wresting a broken cry from her. The spicy, feminine scent of her arousal surrounded him. He untangled his hand from her hair and slid it down her arm, until he could tangle his fingers with hers. With his other hand, he found the swollen nub of flesh between her thighs. Slick moisture coated his hand. God, she was so hot, she was burning him alive. He circled the delicate bud with his thumb and forefinger and pinched.

"Gabriel!"

Her hips thrust in unconscious demand, her fingers tightening around his like a vise. Gabriel set his teeth to her nipple, working and worrying it until it was reddened and engorged. Another small scream rang into his ears. Her pussy wept more thick cream. He could feel her pulse and, if possible, her clit swelled further.

Gabriel grabbed his cock in his hand and swirled the head in the thick moisture. He gritted his teeth, the pleasure almost too much to bear. He entered her, feeling the tight muscles of her pussy give way as the wide head of his cock stretched her. He sank to the hilt. Lightning streaked up his spine.

He slid his hand up her belly, searching for and finding her hand, sliding his fingers through hers. He brought their hands up until they rested by her shoulders. Head to toe he covered her, but the only places they actually touched were their palms and where her hips cradled him as if he were a part of her. Eyes locked with hers, Gabriel began to move, stroke the humid warmth of her feminine core. Each thrust rubbed his pelvic bone over her clit, wringing a gasping little moan from her. Gabriel loved the small sounds she made when they made love. Each one told him she loved what he was doing to her. He thought he might be able to live on the husky, little murmurs.

He touched his lips to hers, causing the hair on his chest to rasp her hard nipples.

"Gabriel!"

The feminine muscles fluttered around his cock, clenching him like a silken fist.

"Faster, Gabriel."



The little witch could never resist trying to command him. He grinned against her lips. Not this time. This time they were doing it his way. His desire for immediate satisfaction had changed to the need to imprint himself on her. He needed the knowledge he was so deep inside her that she could never be free from him. That he was as deep inside her as she was in him.

"No," he whispered against his lips, his breath mixing with hers.

"No?" she moaned, eyes closed, arching so she could rub her breasts more firmly against his chest.

"No. My way. My pace." He pressed his hips to hers, then pulled, so slowly, from her until just the wide tip of his cock remained inside. Just as slowly, he sank back into her heat.

Her eyes shot open. "No?"

He circled his hips, wringing a moan that was half-growl from her. "No. Not this time. This time it will be slow, so very slow, until you can taste me, feel me, with each breath." He freed her hands so he could cup the back of her head in both palms. Her arms went to his back. Her fingers traced the bumps in his spine.

His hips surged forward.

Kalesia gave a sultry chuckle, her hands resting in the dip above his buttocks. "Wanna bet?"

The urge to tease was still so new that Gabriel wanted to stop time and savor it. Instead, he scraped his teeth down the side of her neck, feeling chills erupt over her flesh. "Yeah, I wanna bet. What do I get if I win?"

"Me?" Her breath caught as he soothed her skin with his tongue.

"I have you."

"Mmm. Yes, you do, don't you? Interesting conundrum, isn't it? Win, you get me. Lose, you get me. Which would be more fun? Your way or mine?"

"Let's find out."

He slid out of her again, his teeth nibbling on her neck, her ear. He grinned, pleased, when she could barely find the breath to speak.

"Umm." She arched, her hands digging into his hips. "Did I tell you —"

He nibbled on her ear again, distracting her. "Yes?"

"Umm?"

"You were saying?" It was becoming harder to remember what he meant to say as the scent and heat of her body enveloped his.

"Oh. Oh yes." She pressed tiny kisses on his shoulder, using her teeth to nip. "Did I mention I like to win?" Her fingers drifted from his hip to the dark cleft separating his buttocks.

Gabriel's heart actually stuttered.

He clenched his teeth as she trailed the tip of one slender finger down, down until she could circle the tiny pucker. Sensation exploded as she dipped just the tiniest bit inside.

He threw his head back. "Aw, shit," he mumbled, knowing he'd lost this round. He began pounding into her. As the first of the small, gentle convulsions tightened her inner muscles around his shaft, a guttural groan was ripped from him as he felt his balls draw up tight against his body. Over and over, he thrust.

"I love you, Gabriel." Breath hot on his throat, Kalesia gasped the words.

He came.

Gabriel collapsed, shattered but whole, on top of her.

"Gabriel?" Kalesia murmured long minutes later.

"Hmm?" he answered too drained to lift his head.

Kalesia kissed the side of his neck tenderly. "I'm glad you didn't."

Making a supreme effort, Gabriel raised his head from the pillow. "Glad I didn't what?" His breathing was slowly returning to normal. God, he felt great, able to conquer entire worlds single-handedly. Loving Kalesia always gave him that feeling of supreme contentment. When she stretched sensually beneath him, he became excruciatingly reminded that they were still joined. Maybe he wasn't as tired as he first thought.

"Give up your balls."

Gabriel gave a great shout of startled laughter. Hugging her tight, he rolled over until Kalesia was draped over him. "Lady, will you never cease to amaze me. To think I was afraid Badger would corrupt you." He shook his head, still shaking with laughter.

"You're the only one I want to corrupt me. Gabriel?" Kalesia propped her chin up on crossed arms.

"I'm afraid to ask what," he confessed dryly, amusement still lurking with a renewal of passion.

"We ought to check, you know."

"Check what?" Gabriel watched as Kalesia licked her lips in a seductive manner. His cock stirred in response. In the soft light of the lamp with her long hair passionately tangled, Kalesia looked like a sensual wood sprite. Especially since her eyes were twinkling mischievously. Gabriel braced himself.

"That everything is where it belongs and still in working order!"

Gabriel did his best to supply solid proof.

A long time later, Kalesia kissed his shoulder and sat up.

"It was you, wasn't it? In my vision?"

## Chapter Fourteen

"Yes."

"Oh God, Gabriel. Why didn't you tell me?" She had been wrong. Nightmares were not necessarily easier to deal with than visions. She knew that now.

Gabriel had taught her.

He shifted until his shoulders were propped against the headboard. He brought his knees up, putting his arms on them and letting his hands dangle between them. "I didn't know I was the man in your vision at first."

"Not even when I had it the second time?" Kalesia's stomach cramped. Not until this moment had she comprehended the full severity of the torture he had undergone. But she knew now. More than anyone outside Gabriel himself. She had lived through a portion of that torture with him.

"I had my suspicions. Until you mentioned the ring. That clinched it for me."

"How can you be so sure? It could still be another man." Kalesia hugged her arms about her middle.

Gabriel nodded. "It could be. But it isn't. Ironical, isn't it that after years of searching, the man in the shadows has instead found me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Gabriel, I warn you," Kalesia hissed the next morning as Gabriel shoved the swinging door to the kitchen open. "I'll want the whole story, all the bits and pieces, when this is over."

Last night, after dropping his bombshell, he'd refused to say another word. She was very much afraid she knew why, Gabriel was on the hunt and he wanted to protect her from that aspect of his personality. Well, she wouldn't have it. Like it or not, they were partners and partners shared the bad as well as the good.

"Is everything in place?" Gabriel asked as they joined the group around the table. Disapproval coated his voice.

Wolf passed him a cup of coffee. "We've got security in place around the cabin. Men, locals and Feds, are posted in the woods, with full view of all entrances. Electronic surveillance has been set up in and around the house and barn. Since we want Kalesia to appear as vulnerable as possible, I've arranged to bring in a horse so she'll have a reason to leave the cabin on a regular basis. If our man is as smart as we think, it'll take him only a few days to discern her pattern and come to the conclusion that the barn is his best bet," Wolf finished with satisfaction.

Gabriel's knuckles turned white on his coffee cup. "Why the hell didn't you consult me? You know her vision has her getting killed in a barn. This way, the damn thing reeks of setting up matters for Kalesia's vision to come true."

"Because you're too close. You've lost the necessary objectivity, Gabe." Tom Harley looked tired. A plate of untouched food was in front of him.

"Bullshit. I've never been that close to a mission." Gabriel's voice could have cut steel.

"You've never cared this much before." Harley's voice was understanding but final.

"If anything happens to her, I'll make each one of you pay," he stated coldly.

Kalesia put her hand on his arm, hoping to soothe him. "Don't blame them. The choice was mine."

"And don't think I'm not all too aware of that little fact," he bit out.

Kalesia gnawed on her bottom lip. Gabriel was not in the mood to be soothed. She racked her brain to come up with something, anything, that would take the coiled tension from his large form.

"Ease up, man. Don't you think we've added in the danger to her? We don't want her hurt any more than you do. Hell, if something does go wrong, I'll give you my knife to cut my throat." Wolf's quiet promise sounded all too sincere to Kalesia's ears.

That was it. "No one is going to get hurt, so this conversation is a moot point. Is that clear?" she challenged with a defiant glare at Gabriel, then the others. To her satisfaction, the conversation returned to the details of the trap.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everything slid into place with a polished efficiency that was uncanny. It seemed almost too easy, Kalesia mused as she looked out the bedroom window of Wolf's cabin three nights later.

Dammit, she wondered, irritated, as the long twilight faded and night slipped through the woods, why hadn't Gabriel warned her about the sheer boredom of waiting?

The sighing of long-needed Australian pines reinforced the cabin's isolation.

Gabriel had probably neglected to mention it just to make her regret her insistence on being the bait, she decided morosely.

Kalesia shivered in the warm evening air. To think she had actually thought it would be something of a relief to get away from Gabriel's continual lectures and reminders. The man was nothing if not persistent. And vocal. Especially once he learned of the barn.

Trees and a slight rise blocked her view of the empty house the men were using as a base but just knowing they were only minutes away kept her from feeling quite so alone.

Reluctantly, she closed and carefully locked the window, shutting out the tempting evening air. Throwing herself down onto of the bed, Kalesia fervently hoped something happened soon. Waiting, she discovered, was hard on the nerves. Besides, she missed Gabriel.

Kalesia grabbed her laptop off the nightstand and opened the latest futuristic erotica e-book she'd downloaded. She'd started it before the first vision about her death and, what with one thing or another, had not finished it. It was set in a matriarchal society in which women were warriors and men, slaves. A slow, mischievous smile curved her lips. Kalesia began reading.

Out loud, in a low, husky voice.

*Ranni's mouth went dry. It was time for the bedding and she realized just how badly she wanted Dakor. She forgot about her witnesses, didn't hear their ribald comments and advice. With hands that trembled slightly, she untied the cape and let it drop to the floor. Her hands measured the breadth of his massive shoulders, the thickness of the hair on his chest and the leanness of his hips.*

*He was magnificent.*

*Both hands cupped his face and she pulled his head down to hers. Her mouth covered his, her tongue tracing the shape of his mouth, her teeth nipping at the bottom lip. Impatient to be joined with him, she used the tip of her tongue to insinuate her way inside so she could sample the dark, erotic musk of his mouth. Her hands went to the sonic locks and fumbled.*

*"Damn." She tore her mouth from his so she could see what she was doing. She had to try three times before she got the combination right. The belt fell from his hips, his manhood slipping free from its confinement. Her hand closed over him. Ranni heard a strangled groan and wondered if it came from Dakor or herself.*

*He had used the depilatory for the ceremony. His flesh glistened with a faint sheen of oil. Ranni ran the tip of one nail the length of the underside of his cock. It quivered and swelled. She smiled. One hand went between his legs and cupped the heavy sac. Ranni began massaging it gently. The other hand stroked and shaped his shaft, coaxing it to swell and lengthen further. Nuzzling his chest, Ranni latched onto a nipple and sucked hard. Dakor bucked beneath her hands. His hands came up to hover tentatively at her shoulders.*

*She was on fire. Never had she responded so quickly to a man before. Ranni ached to taste his straining cock but regretfully decided to wait until he was more comfortable with the act of making love. Still working his cock and balls, Ranni lifted her head, inviting Dakor to take her mouth. His head swooped. Eager but unskilled lips sampled Ranni's in imitation of the way she had his.*

*His hips began a counter movement against her hand. Panting, Ranni gripped his hips and avoided his mouth.*

*"Julina, do you have the dagger?" His green eyes were almost black with passion, the pupils swallowing the irises.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ye gods, would you listen to this!" The FBI agent manning the tapes in the nearby house snatched off his headphones and pushed a button. A sultry voice began purring over the air. Within seconds four men crowded around the console, complaints of night duty and battery acid coffee forgotten.

"I'd be more than willing to take her off Steele's hands. Hell, that little lady could do me with an entire hostile army closing in."

"Not me. I'd want lots of time. And privacy," the second man, not more than twenty-five, added as an afterthought, tugging on the collar of his suddenly too-tight shirt. A sheen of sweat glistened on his brow.

Badger walked by the open door in time to hear the last of the first man's statement. Curious, he poked his head inside.

"Her tongue traced the ropy veins up to the tip. She closed her mouth..."

Badger jerked his head back out. Christ! Gabe was going to burst a gasket. He pelted down the short hallway.

"Sam! Wolf! Get hold of Gabe before Kalesia starts a war. Or finds herself in the middle of one!" Rapidly, he outlined the situation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel answered the phone in the middle of the first ring. He had been in the house for less than an hour. It had been a long day made longer by his inability to be near Kalesia. Warned to keep near home in case the unknown suspect went after him first, he'd worked methodically on building the frame for his latest greenhouse just as if he didn't realize she was gone. It helped keep his hands busy and off his cell phone. The urge to check constantly and see if the thing was in working order was damn near overwhelming. Especially as day slid into evening.

God, he hated trusting her safety to other hands.

"Steele," he barked into the receiver.

"Gabriel, you better get Kalesia on the phone double-quick. She's got four of my best men slobbering worse than a bulldog after a French poodle in heat." Sam hung up, leaned back in the wooden office chair and grinned hugely. "Stick around, boys. The fun is about to commence."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kalesia had one eye on the screen and one on the clock beside her bed when the phone rang. She grinned. She'd have to remember to thank Wolf for reassuring her that the electronic bugs would pick up the slightest sound.

The phone rang three times before she picked it up.

"Yes?" Her voice was sugary sweet.

"Lady, you'd make a pacifist a firm believer in capital punishment," Gabriel grated on the other end.

Kalesia set the laptop aside, sat up in bed and curled her legs beneath her. She smiled wickedly. Less than four minutes since she started reading. "I've always believed pacifism overrated."

"Really?"

"Um-hmm. I mean, it's understandable how a person could be motivated toward a little violence. Under the right circumstances, of course." Kalesia barely restrained a chuckle.

She actually heard Gabriel grind his teeth.

"You might feel it safe to bait me now but I'll remind you of that later," Gabriel pledged, his voice as smooth as Carolina shine and holding the same promise of hidden fire.

Goose bumps lifted the fine hair on Kalesia's arms and a tremor slithered sensuously down her spine. She twisted a lock of hair around her finger and lowered her voice to a seductive whisper. "Promise?"

"Count on it, lady. I will definitely remind you of this conversation. In the meantime, quit reading that goddamn book!" The receiver slammed in her ear.

She rubbed the offended appendage. "Quit reading?" she mused out loud. "Oh, I don't think so. It makes life so much more exciting." She found another passage, this one twice as provocative as the one before.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was exactly 8:05 the next evening when a slight rustle in the hay told Kalesia she was no longer alone in the barn. She was singing off-key, a sexy, country ballad about slow hands and long, easy loving. Kalesia turned, already knowing what she would see.

"At least I don't have to listen to Gabriel say 'I told you so'."

## Chapter Fifteen

"You really shouldn't be so ready to believe all you see and read, my dear." Senator Clayton Morne, sixty-two and the picture of clean-cut American manhood, smiled, showing perfect white teeth. Held rock-steady in his hand, was an exact duplicate of the pistol she had pointed out to Badger.

It was a pity he was rotted so black on the inside, Kalesia thought. The difference between Morne and Gabriel was that as between night and day. Both men were lethal and dangerous. Yet where Gabriel used violence as a last resort, taking no pleasure in the act, Morne enjoyed the fear he invoked in his victims. Intuition told her he was capable of kissing a woman even as he slit her throat.

Gabriel's violence, at least, was honest.

"Senator Morne." Kalesia nodded her head with cool acknowledgment at Florida's senior senator. "I suppose this is the part where I'm supposed to beg for mercy," Kalesia speculated with a poise she didn't feel, bending to pick up the feed bucket with what she hoped was an absentminded air. She straightened, the metal pail held loosely in her right hand. "Then again, begging isn't my style. It's so undignified."

Morne threw back his head and laughed but his eyes were cold, the cold of liquid nitrogen. The kind of cold that burned to the bone. There was something else in his eyes, a sensual speculation that turned Kalesia's stomach with disgust and more than a hint of sick fear.

"You've put me to a great deal of trouble, my dear. I would enjoy seeing you beg. You might even learn to enjoy it. With a little practice, most women do." He ran a hand suggestively down the barrel of the gun.

The last light of the evening filtered through the cracks in the roof of the barn. Dust motes danced in the waning beams.

Kalesia closed her mind to the reality of her vision coming true. Now, of all times, she had to keep her wits about her.

Her hand tightened on the pail's handle. *Cool it, she warned herself, he's trying to spook you. You're not alone. Every word he says is being heard and recorded. Get him to talk.*

"If you don't mind, I think I'll pass." Kalesia racked her brain for a way to lead the conversation in the direction she needed it to go.

"Pity. I would have enjoyed it." The barrel of the pistol tilted slightly.

Kalesia rushed into speech. "Why? Why me?"

"Come, come. You're a reasonably bright young woman. Surely you've drawn a few conclusions?" The gun never wavered. He smiled, showing all of his teeth.



Kalesia decided that she hated that phony smile. She much preferred the smile of a predator that stalked in the open, rather than from the shadows.

"No. That's one thing I could never understand. Why me? We'd never even met!"

The Senator preened, enjoying his power over her. Kalesia began to feel more secure, certain now she had a handle on what made the Senator tick. Or, at least to control him long enough to allow him thoroughly to implicate himself.

"It is so simple. Most brilliant plans, I've learned, are simply conceived. Long ago I discovered that the key to success is information, inside information. I found a deputy susceptible to—how shall I put it?—a little pressure. He fed me the information I needed to keep my business in operation. You'd be surprised," Morne put in with macabre humor, "how law enforcement frowns on true entrepreneurship. A few drugs coming into the country here, a shipment of arms outward bound there." He shook his head in mock sorrow.

"So short-sighted. No vision. Well, as I was saying. I bought insurance. You know," he told her meditatively, "you should never underestimate the hand of fate. Two years ago you reported a vision of a murder. No one saw fit to inform me at the time but, voilà! you reappear with a vision of another murder, this time your own. A memory is jogged, my man relates the tale to me, more in amusement than anything else. Suddenly, you've become a threat. See how simple that is?"

"But it doesn't make sense. No one believed me. People think I'm crazy when I tell them I have visions. What harm could I have possibly done to you?" she cried, appalled at how casually he dismissed her life.

"You disappoint me, Miss Brannigan. I expected more intelligence from you than this. Because," he explained as if she were a particularly slow student, "the chance existed that, one day you would make someone wonder. And, if they began to wonder, they might have begun to investigate.

"My worries were well founded as it turned out. I cannot allow any further investigation. If that happens, they'll find more deaths. And from there they might discover a trail leading back to me. I simply cannot afford past baggage to encumber my presidential bid," he confessed matter-of-factly. "Really, my dear, a child could have reasoned that through.

"I admit, I hadn't expected you to turn to Gabriel Steele. That hurried my timetable a bit. I knew once he got his teeth into the Crump case, it wouldn't be long before he discovered my connection to a certain South American drug cartel. The man is most tenacious, as I have reason to know."

For an instant, Kalesia was thrown into the middle of a nightmare. A nightmare she recognized with sick horror. Again she was overwhelmed, pounded with images of pain, blood...and a deep, perverse enjoyment. Desperately, Kalesia waged war with a past that wasn't her own.

"You're mad," Kalesia whispered. She balanced her weight on one foot, ready to throw the bucket and sprint for safety.

Displeasure flashed briefly in the brown eyes. "Insults, my dear?" He shook off his anger. "It will be most tragic, I assure you. Most tragic," he reiterated with mocking mournfulness. "The press will have a field day with it. 'Poor young woman takes own life after discovering lover's secret identity as an assassin.' Then again, the poor thing was never too stable. Thought she was psychic, you know. I have the suicide note right here." He dug into the inside breast pocket of his suit.

Kalesia's eyes were drawn to the single sheet of white paper covered in dark, neat computer print as if it were a lodestone. It required a monumental effort of will to tear her gaze away.

"That stuff you sent me about Gabriel? I assume it was you?" She waited until he nodded his head. "Was it true?" Kalesia was curious. Would he admit he lied or continue to taunt her?

"Oh, yes, it was true...for the whole. Just not as I presented it." He seemed pleased that she had asked.

"How did you get hold of the information? It seems pretty obvious that some of it was classified."

"My dear, you really must not underestimate me or my sources. People in high places are not immune to persuasion. For some it is drugs." He gave a careless shrug. "For others, past associations that could prove embarrassing if made public."

"No one will believe I killed myself," she said. "Major Harley sent me to Gabriel. He'll be more than curious if I suddenly turn up dead," Kalesia insisted, unable to keep a quaver from coloring her voice despite her knowledge help was only seconds away.

"Ah but he didn't know of Mr. Steele's past. He'll be just as shocked as everyone else when he learns he sent you into the proverbial lion's den, probably exceedingly guilty too. He strikes me as that type of man. Dedicated to making life safer for others and all that."

"My friends and family know I hate guns. They'll never believe I'd shoot myself." Where was Harley? Surely they had enough to convict Morne by now? What if the wire wasn't working? And what of Gabriel? Where was he? She had half-expected him to burst in before now. Kalesia had a sudden, sickening thought.

Dear Lord in heaven, what if Morne had already found Gabriel?

Morne looked truly shocked. "Did I say I was going to shoot you? How remiss of me. Don't worry, nothing so crude as that. No, my dear, you are going to become another drug-related statistic, I'm afraid. The problem of drugs in this country really is epidemic, you know. No one will think twice about it."

He waved the gun. "Be a good girl and put down that bucket." Morne reached into the pocket of the expensive Italian jacket and removed a hypodermic.

"You're getting sloppy, Crenshaw. Ah but it's Morne now, isn't it?"

Morne whirled around, the gun coming up.

Stepping out of the shadows of a stall, Gabriel waited, hands held loosely by his side.

Startled by Gabriel's silent arrival, it took Kalesia a full minute to realize Morne had forgotten entirely about her.

Gabriel shot her a glance from under lowered lashes.

She understood at once what he wanted her to do. Looking about, she dived behind a low stack of hay. Her hiding place was only two bales high and two bales deep but Kalesia figured beggars couldn't be choosy. At least it hid her from view. She tried not to think how easy she would be to find.

Peeking from between the bales, Kalesia saw a change come over Morne when he realized Gabriel was alone.

"How obliging of you, Mr. Steele. I was coming to find you next. You were the one person I feared might actually ferret out my identity when I learned that you were inquiring into Crump's death. There was a good possibility that you might link the manner of death of those he killed back to my days in Army Intelligence. I really shouldn't have given in to the impulse of resurrecting those days. I won't make that mistake again." Morne's assurance grew. He gestured. "Very foolish of you to come unarmed."

Gabriel's gaze flickered off to one side, just the minutest movement but Morne saw.

"Oh, don't worry about the woman. I shall find her later. She's trapped. She has to get by me to escape. No, I'm much more interested in you, Mr. Steele. If you want to know the truth," he confided with the air of revealing a state secret, "I've been fascinated by you for years. Ah, I can see you understand my meaning." Morne's innate cruelty surfaced and he taunted the younger man.

"Just as I've always fascinated you. Only you didn't know my identity, did you?" Morne answered his own question. "Of course, you didn't. I took extreme pains to conceal it."

"I knew I'd left someone alive when that second packet arrived." Gabriel appeared relaxed and at ease, just as if he were engaging in a conversation with a friend.

Kalesia knew he was deliberately projecting that image, hoping to keep Morne convinced that he was no threat.

Morne laughed and the sound sent a chill straight through Kalesia. "Oh yes, I'm very much alive. And I intend to stay that way. Pity it can't be the same for you and your whore." Gabriel's jaw clench and she silently begged him to ignore the insult.

"You're helpless to save your whore now," Morne stressed the epithet, digging the knife in a little deeper. "Just as you were unable to save yourself twenty years ago. You were helpless, Steele, helpless to prevent the flesh from being sliced from your body. Oh, the screams. My ears rang for days. I wonder if you'll plead and sob this time? I do hope so."

"You compromised our mission and got the rest of my men killed," Gabriel stated flatly.

From behind the bales, Kalesia wondered about Morne's arrogant confidence. If he knew Gabriel as well as she did, he would have pulled the trigger then and there instead of continuing to boast. But the man had grown very confident over the years.

"It was necessary. Your team leader, Lt. Colonel Downing, might have let slip the details he learned of my activities with Major Chiang and the Golden Triangle and my new association with General Chavez. He overestimated his hold over me. My position in Intelligence made it ridiculously simple to get myself on the team as advisor. I, of course, notified the good general of the team's objective. But you survived." Morne looked aggrieved for an instant. "I had to be absolutely certain you were not aware of my involvement and, in case you were, whether you had managed to contact base.

"I really should have killed you then," Morne conceded. "Just imagine my astonishment upon learning the woman had run to you for protection. To think that after all these years, your path again crossed mine...and was again a threat." He waved the gun in a short arc and, in the late afternoon light, there was a flash of gold.

"I remember your ring."

Morne looked surprised. "This?" He raised his hand, highlighting the intricately worked dragon swallowing a tiger.

"Whenever I saw it, I knew a traitor was present."

Pure fury twisted Morne's face into an unrecognizable mask. "I knew you suspected something. There was a peculiarity about the way you would search the shadows." His face smoothed out, a wide, politician's smile replacing it. "It's just as well I'd decided you were again expendable, now isn't it? You might have recognized the ring when I began campaigning for president."

"Your presence is definitely fortuitous. It will make the mop-up much more tidy than my original plan. You will kill your whore." Noting Gabriel's body tightened, Morne bowed mockingly and substituted, "Ms. Brannigan, for ferreting out secrets better left buried. You, in the process, will be fatally wounded while trying to make her death appear a suicide. Indeed, she will be found with the incriminating evidence clutched in her hand. While you, I'm afraid, are going to be thoroughly implicated in Crump's murder. Having the murder weapon by your prostrate body will make the crowning touch. Nice and neat, no loose ends to come back and haunt me this time."

Kalesia saw Gabriel shift his weight a bit and hook a thumb in his belt. He was watching Morne's eyes, gauging the man's intentions with the deadly accuracy of a born hunter.

"What about your informant in the sheriff's office?" Gabriel reminded Morne.

"Ah, yes. Pompano. I am most disappointed with his performance. No matter," Morne shrugged again. "He was scheduled to die regardless. I think an accident. Yes, a most tragic accident will do. I haven't had much experience with accidental death. If his goes well, I may utilize it one more time." He shrugged again. "Time will tell which

method has the least complications. Now, Mr. Steele, despite my appreciation of your most excellent skills, you have left me no choice." Coolly, Morne aimed.

Kalesia panicked. Dear God, Gabriel was defenseless against a gun. She erupted from behind her barrier, all thought of personal safety abandoned. She snatched up a pitchfork and rushed Morne, screaming.

"No, you bastard! I won't let you hurt him any more!"

"Kalesia, don't! Dammit, woman!" Gabriel yelled as Morne, caught off-guard, turned and fired.

With the ease of years of training and practical use, Gabriel's hand slipped to the small of his back. He threw the hidden knife and, in one smooth, continuous motion and launched himself at Morne before the man hit the ground.

Kalesia looked down, astonished, at the stinging pain in her side. She couldn't have been shot. There should be blood, lots of it. And agony. Not the sharp burn of a wasp sting.

An odd noise raised her head.

Gabriel's hands were around Morne's throat. The odd noise was a choked scream.

Good Lord. Gabriel was going to kill the bastard while law enforcement caught everything on tape!

Forgetting all about her injury, she hurried over. "Don't," she said in a low tone. "Don't let him win." Eyes fixed on Morne's red, puffy face, his attention never wavered. Did he even hear her? She'd never seen him look like this. Not even when Pompano had broken into their room.

"I know you have every right. But not like this, Gabriel. Not in cold blood," she whispered, anguish knifing through her. Dear God, what if she couldn't stop him? He didn't need another face haunting him.

"Please." She put her hand on his forearm. The muscles bulged with the pressure he was exerting. Relief rushed through her when he spared her a glance.

"He tried to kill you," Gabriel grated. She barely recognized the harsh voice. It was as deep and rasping as granite grinding against granite. Morne's face acquired an odd blue tinge.

"But he didn't." Fear for Gabriel made her voice tremble. "Please. Let Harley handle him."

"Shit. You aren't going to let me, are you?" He sounded disappointed.

Her knees went wobbly. Lord, for a minute she'd thought he was going to ignore her. He glared down at the nearly unconscious Morne. From the expression on his face, it was clear he regretted capitulating.

Not being stupid, she circled his broad wrist and tugged, urging Gabriel to his feet. No one had to tell her that, given half a chance, he'd change his mind.

He came up in one fluid motion, ignoring the commotion of men bursting through the barn doors. He stood close to her. So close that not even a breath could come

between them. The silver eyes burned with emotion. He reached out and traced the line of one brow with a shaking hand. A light, feathery touch that she felt to her soul.

The shaking spread from his hand, to his arm and then to his whole body. He yanked her to him and molded her body to his as if he wanted to absorb her. His arms were like steel as he held her, feet dangling off the straw-strewn floor. "I almost didn't stop," he rasped, voice dry as desert sand. "I wouldn't have for anyone else."

Her throat burned with tears. "I know." And she did. Morne owed his life to her. Kalesia didn't know how she felt about that. She wrapped her arms around Gabriel's neck, letting the warmth of his body, the frantic beat of his heart, reassure her that they'd both survived.

"I thought I had lost you." Another hard shudder racked Gabriel. "I love you."

A misty smile curved her lips and Kalesia buried her face into the side of his neck. She inhaled the unique, earthy scent of the man she loved, letting the familiar scent steady her nerves. "I know."

Abruptly, Gabriel set her on her feet. He shoved her away to arm's length, his fingers miniature iron bars as they curved over her shoulders. "What the hell do you mean you know? I didn't know it until minutes ago." He sounded more than a little put out that she hadn't met his declaration with more appreciation.

Kalesia met his scowl with confidence. "You stopped short of killing Morne because I asked. You wouldn't have unless you loved me." To forestall any further argument, she stood on tiptoe and placed her lips on his.

His mouth clung, his tongue sliding between her lips. All too soon, Gabriel lifted his head. "Just what was that stunt all about?" he demanded, eyes blazing with a mixture of rage and anguish.

"What was all what about?" It had been too good to be true. She should have known he wouldn't let her get off scot-free. Kalesia braced herself for a few hot and heavy minutes. Gabriel did have the right to be somewhat upset, she decided, feeling generous. Must have been nearly as frightening for him when Morne fired at her, as it had been for her when Morne had aimed his gun at Gabriel.

"Don't play the innocent with me, Kalesia," he warned, warming, she thought, all too easily to his theme. "You could have been killed. I had Morne under control. You took a stupid risk charging him. You could have gotten us both killed. Don't you care about your life?" he ranted. "A few moments more and Harley and Wolf would have been here. In any case, I had matters under control."

"That's why he was getting ready to shoot you?" she asked, sarcasm leaking through her decision to be generous. He wasn't the only one who'd had a scare, Kalesia thought, indignant. The Lord as her witness, if she lived to be a thousand, she would never erase the sight of Morne's finger tightening on the trigger.

"I had a knife."

"Well, bully for you. A knife against a gun. What good is that?" Kalesia threw her hands up in outraged disbelief. Impossible man!

"I had an offensive strategy in mind. Which, I might add, you totally destroyed. It was a stupid stunt, dammit. I really ought to make sure you can't sit for a week this time. You deserve a beating for what you put me through tonight and by heaven, I'm going to enjoy every minute of it," Gabriel informed her, his voice growing louder and more irate as spoke.

That fast, Kalesia grew tired of hearing how foolish she'd been to try to rescue him. The man was like a one-song record. Besides, that stinging in her side was turning into pain. Yes, it most definitely classified as a pain now. She bit her lip to hold back a tiny moan. Damned if she'd tell him when all he could do was yell at her.

Kalesia was aware she was being unreasonable but didn't care. She had a right, dammit.

She ground her back teeth together. How the hell did men manage to look so damn stoic when shot? It must be a defect in the male mentality, she decided as the agony in her side swelled.

Ignoring the furious pacing in front of her, Kalesia lifted her shirt to inspect the damage.

It took Gabriel a couple of paces before he sensed he'd lost his audience. Damn woman. This time she'd gone too fucking far. He meant it. This time he'd turn her over his knee and blister her ass. And, damned if he wouldn't enjoy every second of it, he vowed stopping back in front of her. Ready to continue berating her, something in her pose made him pause. His rage evaporated and his heart slammed into his ribs.

That crimson splash on her shirt was blood!

Gabriel swayed with the impact.

He swooped in and swept her off her feet. The startled looks on the deputies and agents barely registered as he damn near ran past them. He had to get her to the hospital. For the first time in years, Gabriel prayed.

"What's wrong, Gabe?" Wolf broke away from the knot of men, lengthening his stride to catch up with Gabriel's hurried pace.

"Kalesia's been shot," he said, his jaw locked in an effort to suppress his agony and rage. "I'm taking her to the hospital."

"I'm not going to the hospital." Both men ignored her.

"Shot!" Wolf opened the barn door wider, barely getting out of the way before Gabriel barreled through the opening. For all his hurry, though, Gabriel was extremely careful not to jar Kalesia.

"I wish someone would listen to me," Kalesia muttered, sounding peevish. "I don't want to go to the hospital."

Gabriel didn't even spare her a glance. "You're going."

"I'm not hurt that badly. It's barely a scratch," she protested, a hint of panic in her voice. "I hate hospitals. A few aspirin and I'll be as good as new in the morning," she told him, a mulish expression on her lovely face.

"Kalesia," Wolf said, coming into the conversation. "You're bleeding. You need to see a doctor."

"Some friend you are," she retorted, her voice gaining spirit for a moment. "Friends are supposed to listen, to help, not force their friends into hospitals against their will. You're on Gabriel's side, not mine." Her bottom lip trembled.

"Don't listen to her," Gabriel advised. "She'll drive a man daft." He slanted a glance down at the suspiciously quiet woman. "You're going to the hospital if I have to bind your hands and feet and bodily toss your ass into the emergency room," he threatened to hide his surge of relief. His witch was up to fighting with him. She was going to be all right.

"Don't you just love it when he goes all autocratic and stern?" Kalesia asked Wolf. "Kinda reminds me of Hannibal when I first got him. Of course," she continued, a hint of acerbic tartness in the husky tones, "I cured Hannibal of that bad habit by neutering him."

Both men paled slightly at that image. Satisfied she'd made her point, Kalesia lapsed into silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I told you, Gabriel. I hate hospitals," Kalesia stated several hours later. To emphasize her complaint, she poked one finger against his broad chest. Gabriel captured her hand, refusing to let go even when she tugged.

"Quit whining. The doctor wants to keep you at least overnight. You're staying."

And that was that, she thought, disgruntled. The master had spoken. She peeked at him from beneath lowered lashes. If arguing didn't work, maybe a little sugar instead of spice, would. She let what she hoped was a beguiling smile curve her lips. "But I feel so much better. I'd rather be at home, with you. Besides, I want to find out what happened with Senator Morne."

A wide grin softened the severe lines of his mouth.

Kalesia cursed her spurt of truthfulness. The man wasn't above blackmailing her into doing as he wished.

"Fluttering your lashes at me won't work," Gabriel told her dryly. "Even though it's just a deep crease, the doctor wants to be certain you don't go into shock."

"But, Gabriel..." she began.

"No."

"Oh, all right," Kalesia conceded with a decided lack of grace. "But all they'll want to do is stick needles in me and take my last drop of blood. Vampires every one of



them." She picked up the hand lying on her stomach, kissing the scarred knuckles, pleased when she heard Gabriel's indrawn breath.

"At least tell me what you found out."

Gabriel sat on the side of the bed, his thumb caressing her lower lip with open sensual pleasure. "They said no excitement," he reminded her perversely.

"Trust me. If you don't hurry up and tell me what you found out, things are liable to get downright hot around here," Kalesia threatened, glowering at him.

"Promise you'll give no more arguments about staying here until the doctor releases you?"

"Oh, all right. I promise, not another word." Blast. She knew she shouldn't have made that slip.

He relented. "Harley found out the identity of the man killed two years ago. His name was Daniel Pressman."

"Why was Morne so worried? He'd gotten away with murder for over two years."

"At the time of his death, Pressman was under investigation for smuggling drugs into the county. He used an isolated pasture as a landing strip. We suspect Morne used him to move the drugs from South America. With Pressman's death, a lot of pressure was taken off the case. Harley just didn't have the manpower and the DEA had other cases needing immediate attention."

"So," Kalesia said slowly, working it out in her head, "Morne feared exposure if the Pressman case was reopened?"

"That's about the size of it."

"How did Morne know so much about your career?"

"You heard him say he was in Intelligence?" Kalesia nodded. "Once our paths crossed, he made it his business to keep tabs on me. The power he garnered enabled him to do so. He was head of the Senate Arms Committee and sat on the committees that handled Central and South American affairs."

Kalesia considered that. "So, not only was he able to make sure you posed no threat to him but the Senator used the contacts he formed to run an arms and drug empire?"

"That's about it."

"What about Morne now?"

"He's being held on a number of state and federal charges, not the least of which is murder and attempted murder. His arrest has already made the news services. From what I hear, several countries are screaming to get their hands on him. The courts will have to sort out who gets him first. As long as they leave him to rot in a cell, I don't care." Gabriel dismissed Morne with a shrug.

"What about what he did to you, Gabriel?" Kalesia asked, worried. Could he really let it go just like that?

His eyes hardened. "If he's lucky, he'll rot in prison. If he gets some slippery-assed lawyer to get him off, I'll personally book him a passage to Hell."

"Are you sorry I stopped you from killing him? I know how badly you wanted vengeance." It worried Kalesia that one day Gabriel might hold her actions against her, begin to hate her for not allowing him the revenge he had dreamed of, no, lived for, for so many years.

Gabriel brought her palm to his mouth, pressing a soft kiss directly in the center. His tongue tickled the sensitive palm.

She felt a reflex quiver of desire down low in her stomach.

He met her gaze squarely. "I have enough blood on my hands in your eyes. I don't need his. Not anymore." His traced an intricate pattern before teasing the soft pad of flesh at the base of her fingers, setting Kalesia's nerve endings on fire.

"Even if you had killed him, I would still love you. I did it for you, Gabriel. You didn't need another face in the dark." Her fingers curled at the sensations he was so expertly eliciting. He knew her so well.

Kalesia could feel her lashes begin to drift downward as the painkiller a nurse had given her earlier started to take effect. She struggled to keep them open.

"Go to sleep, sugar." He bent and brushed her lips with his.

She blinked hard, fighting the medication. "You won't leave me?"

"I won't leave. When you wake up, I'll be here," he vowed softly, brushing aside the hospital's regulations.

"You never did tell me where you stood on pacifism," Kalesia mumbled.

"I'm more the fire and brimstone, retribution and justice sort of fellow, myself," Gabriel growled, sounding stern.

"Mmm. Tell me more." Her eyes closed. She snapped them open, blinking several times.

"On our wedding night," Gabriel said, a wealth of promise in the simple statement.

"Gabriel? I love you."

His throat worked. "I love you too, witch."

## Epilogue

Lying on the bed, arms crossed behind his head, Gabriel waited for his wife to come out of the bathroom.

"Wife."

Gabriel savored the sound on his tongue. "Wife." He'd never get tired of saying it. It'd take more than forty or fifty years to get over the wonder of actually possessing a witch. Not many men were so fortunate.

A small chuckle escaped as Gabriel remembered the wedding. He'd be willing to bet a full year's profit from his nursery that it was the first wedding where the bride wore bright, sunshine yellow.

Her mother had seemed resigned.

Della Brannigan was, much to his surprise, very like her daughter. He had expected someone cold and distant. Had been prepared to dislike her on sight. Instead, he was charmed and saddened by both her and Kalesia's father. The reception had been the first time he had been alone with the woman. She appeared at his side, her eyes on her daughter as Kalesia, to her mother's bewilderment, was surrounded by a sea of intrigued men.

The small, dainty woman sighed. "At least she had the sense not to have those cats in the wedding party."

Gabriel looked down at the woman. It was obvious that Mrs. Brannigan loved her daughter. She just hadn't the slightest idea of what to do with her. "I explained that being surrounded by so many strangers would upset Cannibal."

She chuckled. "Smart man." She slanted him a glance from the corner of her eye. "Cannibal? I thought his name was Hannibal."

"It is." He shrugged his shoulders. "I decided Cannibal suited him better. God knows, that damn cat draws my blood every chance he gets." For a while there, he had actually entertained the idea that they might possibly get along. He was willing to bend that far to please Kalesia. Besides, Hannibal had fought on his side against Pompano. Gabriel guessed he had forgotten to inform that seven-toed beast of his change of heart.

"What does Kalesia think of the new name?" Della asked her new son-in-law, a curious tilt to her elegantly coiffed head.

"I haven't told her yet," Gabriel admitted with a quirk to his mouth. She started laughing.

Della became serious, pinning Gabriel with a very direct gaze that was more than a little reminiscent of Kalesia. "Take care of my daughter, Mr. Steele. She deserves some happiness." She hesitated. "I know I haven't been the best of mothers. I never could

understand that psychic stuff. But she loves you. I've never seen her so supremely confident. She has absolute trust in you, Gabriel Steele. Make her happy or you'll have to deal with me."

"I intend to." Della Brannigan would blanch if she ever began to comprehend the bond between Kalesia and him. However, that wasn't something he was willing to share, not even with Kalesia's mother. The unique bond he and Kalesia had was private.

Kalesia had actually experienced his pain and rage. The fact that she had literally crept into years-old emotion, his emotion, still amazed him.

Gabriel took a healthy taste of the punch and had to suppress a fit of coughing. The pink concoction packed a hidden wallop. He made a mental note to tell Wolf to keep Badger away from the punch bowl before the reception turned into a drunken brawl. Kalesia would never forgive him if he allowed her wedding day to be ruined.

"My daughter has made some unusual acquaintances lately," the older woman began delicately.

Gabriel smiled, appreciating her tact. "Badger?" he asked, a slight wheeze in his voice. "He was honored to be Kalesia's maid of honor." Waiting at the altar, Gabriel had held his breath when the minister caught sight of the crusty CIA agent preceding the bride. The minister had blinked once, twice and then again at the neon purple cummerbund and matching jacket. To his credit, he had recovered his aplomb and begun the ceremony with hardly a pause.

"And his colors went so well with my daughter's," she said, a dry note of amusement in her musical voice.

Even in her fifties, the woman was a knockout. She smiled, reminding him again of Kalesia. She possessed the same impish amusement.

"But that isn't exactly what I meant. I may be naïve, Mr. Steele but even I can tell there is something most unusual about the majority of the guests present. Most of them seem cut from the same piece of dough."

Gabriel choked on the cautious sip of punch he had just taken. Wait until Wolf heard that some of the government's best agents were lumped together with raw cookies! His eyes sought out Kalesia wanting to share his amusement with her.

A dark frown wiped out his amusement. He could barely see her surrounded as she was by wave after wave of remarkably similar suits.

Della was right. They all did look alike. Gabriel saw the curiosity and fascination on the men's faces as they listened to Kalesia's every word.

And he knew the reason.

They wanted to meet the woman with the warm, husky voice who dared to read erotic love scenes when she knew local and government authorities were recording every word.

Gabriel had done his best to kill the interest and speculation but, despite his best efforts, word had gotten around about that stunt. Of course, Wolf, Sam and Badger hadn't helped one iota. The idiots had laughed themselves sick relating the way he had damned near crawled the walls because he couldn't monitor Kalesia's reading habits.

As a result half the sheriff's office plus the government personnel involved in the operation, had begged, borrowed or stolen invitations so they could see firsthand the woman who was capable of putting Gabriel Steele through the loops. Thank God only a privileged few knew exactly what a feat his new bride had managed.

And Kalesia just laughed and smiled with them all. He'd wasted his time giving her a lecture on the value of propriety. Obviously, nothing he'd said had made the slightest impact. He'd have to do something about that later.

And there was still that matter of explaining his stand on a little judiciously applied retribution.

Gabriel rubbed his forefinger up and down the cool glass. He looked forward to "discussing" the matter with her.

With a start, he remembered Della. "They're just paying their respects because she was critical in apprehending Senator Morne." Gabriel deliberately left the impression that was the whole story.

"Uh-huh," she agreed with a distinct air of disbelief.

It was with a sense of relief that Gabriel saw Harley motioning to him. He excused himself with more haste than grace. Kalesia and her mother definitely shared some traits. It made a man uncomfortable the way they looked at him with clear gazes that saw more than the surface.

"Thought you might like to know the Feds are going after Morne first. It's doubtful he'll be extradited out of the States but because of the ballyhoo that's been raised, it's even more doubtful Morne will live to see freedom. Too damn embarrassing for the government." Harley looked even more cynical than was his wont.

Wolf soundlessly joined them. "What I don't understand is why Morne thought you didn't know Gabriel's background. He admitted following Gabe's career."

"Probably because I was on my way out by the time he had enough power to actually keep tabs on Gabe. He had no reason to look for me." Harley turned toward Gabriel. "He was interested in your current movements as they concerned him, not your past. What he failed to take into consideration was that fate is a fickle bitch. She delights in using the most insignificant action or fact when least expected. Morne never even considered that I wouldn't believe the scenario he planned to set up."

"I'll tell you what I wonder," Gabriel said, pensive. "I wonder the identity of the person he planned Pompano's accident as a run-through for?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel was jarred out of his reverie by the sound of the bathroom door opening. Backlit, Kalesia stood there in a silky nightgown before, an uninhibited laugh echoing on the night air, she ran across the room and sailed into his embrace.

Gabriel grunted as he caught her and his arms closed about her. Laughing softly at her exuberance, he smoothed the diaphanous material of her gown, searching for the silken flesh under it. "Don't you own any other color?" he demanded, nuzzling the still damp skin of her throat. The fragrance of exotic, oriental woods and magnolia tantalized his senses.

Kalesia glanced down, a rueful arch to one elegant brow. "Too much, huh?"

"You did wear a yellow wedding gown and a yellow garter," he reminded her.

"Umm, so I did. That reminds me, however. Talk about a mean and lowdown trick to play on Badger...tossing him my garter. The poor man turned absolutely crimson. I was afraid he was going to melt into a puddle and seep between the cracks of the floor."

"He deserved it," Gabriel defended righteously. "I thought his behavior was too good to be true. He minded his manners during the ceremony like a perfect gentleman. That should have been the tip-off. If I had used the sense God gave a sand flea, I would have hustled him out the door immediately after the service."

"So, what was so strange about that? It was my wedding. Badger is my friend. He wouldn't embarrass me for the world." Kalesia played with the hair on his chest. She leaned down, tasting him delicately with the tip of her tongue.

His stomach muscles tightened violently in response. He had to pull his mind back to what he was saying. "No," he agreed. "He wouldn't embarrass you but he wouldn't hesitate a split second to have a go at my expense. Badger was on his best behavior because he had discovered a fresh audience for his outlandish tales. He didn't want me to catch him until it was too late to put an end to them."

Kalesia tilted her head. "Outlandish tales."

"Your 'maid of honor' was busy as a bee after the ceremony regaling your entire family with several, highly colorful and totally improbable, exploits. I fully expected to find your father coming after me with a shotgun."

"It was too late for that. Shotguns and weddings only go together if the groom is unwilling. As I recall, you threatened dire harm to my body if I wasn't at the church on time. In fact," she drawled, eyes brilliant, "one might get the impression you were nervous about being left at the altar." She grinned. "Speaking of my family, my mother, in particular, did I misunderstand her when she said you called my cat Cannibal?"

Damn. He was going to have to speak to Della about telling tales out of school. "It's more suitable," he defended. "That cat has a decided penchant for blood. My blood." He sipped at her lips, tracing them from one upturned corner to the other. His cock perked up and began to pay attention. He stripped the filmy nightgown from her impatiently.

"Finish telling me about Badger. I didn't mean to disrupt your train of thought," Kalesia panted when he let her lips free again.

"You disrupt my train of thought by simply being in the same room." He buried his lips in the curve of her shoulder, tickling the soft, fragrant skin with the tip of his tongue. "Anyway, thanks to his meddling, your mother now regards me as a cross between Rambo and Dick Dastardly. Mostly, I get the impression, the latter." Gabriel shuddered as she found his nipple with her fingers, teasing it to a hard point.

"Mmm," she breathed as she moved to nibble his ear. "I've always found the bad guy sexier," she said, and sank her teeth ever-so gently in his lobe. She tugged. "There's something irresistible and sexy about a black hat."

Gabriel reacted as if he'd touched a live wire. He twisted, pinning her beneath him. "Is that so?" he asked, feeling happy and carefree as he gave her a wicked grin. "Then come closer, my dear, so I can show you just how bad I can be!"

He swept his hands down from her shoulders to her knees, lingering at the full swell of her breast, the indent of her waist and the lush curve of her hip. Then followed with his mouth, intent on igniting a need that would slowly drive Kalesia out of her mind.

"Gabriel!" she moaned, her breath catching in the back of her throat as his tongue dipped into her navel. The sound was a siren's sigh.

"Do you like this, sweet witch?" he asked, brushing his cheek on her stomach, knowing the masculine rasp of his skin would drive her crazy. In response, she raked her nails down his spine, causing him to arch heavily against her thigh, the damp head of his cock marking her as his as he braced his fists on either side of her.

"Oh, yes, I like that." She teased his nipples, nipping and raking her teeth across the hard nubs.

Fire shuddered down his spine, tightening his balls. He closed his eyes. God, she truly was the witch he named her. It should scare him, how vulnerable he was to her. Maybe it would have if she hadn't been just as vulnerable to him.

Warm, slender fingers found his aching cock, tracing the veins up the length of him, to just under the cap. She molded him in her palm. White-hot need exploded behind his closed lids.

"Gabriel, is this part of your promise to explain your stand on fire and brimstone?" Kalesia whispered, nipping a little viciously at the padding of muscle covering his shoulder.

"Definitely. It may take all night to get my viewpoint properly across." All thoughts of teasing flew out of Gabriel's mind as the reality of the day settled over him.

"Damn, sugar." Feeling all-powerful, he settled between her thighs and entered her, tormenting them both with a long, slow, exquisitely thorough joining. The smell of aroused woman, the feel of hot, silken wetness as she enclosed him in her welcoming grip, tested his will. He wanted to pound into her, a mindless thrusting that would bring them both to orgasm. He grabbed the last of his will and waited, letting her adjust to his size, the depth of his need. Tonight was her wedding night. He would make it special.

Even if it killed him.

Her nipples were flushed dark rose and swollen with need. He took one hard bud between his teeth and bit down with exquisite care until her breath caught. Mmm. She tasted so damn good. He sucked, swirling his tongue in the tiny indent in the middle of her nipple. She moved restlessly, small, erotic moans coming from the back of her throat. He let her flesh go with a soft sounding pop.

He moved his hips, withdrawing until the head of his cock was just inside her entrance. Slipping his hand between them, he found her clit and gave it a flick before using her own wetness to moisten his finger. He rubbed circles around the engorged flesh. Her nails scored his hips as she pulled him hard against her.

"Damn you, don't play with me."

"But I like playing with you. It's not every man who has his own personal witch to tease."

Her hand slipped between his legs, cupping his balls.

His breath caught. Son of a bitch! She was hot. So hot she was burning him alive. He loved every minute of the sweet torture. He wrenched his mouth free, breathing heavily.

Sweat sheened his shoulders, his arms trembled. He fastened his mouth on hers, tasting, teasing, seeking her sweetness the same way he sought his next breath. He slid back inside her, feeling the walls of her pussy close about him, gripping and milking his aching flesh as she sought fulfillment. A pulse of pre-cum slipped past his control. His lower spine tingled in warning. He was so close to coming.

She caught a bead of sweat on the tip of her tongue as it ran down between his pecs. The small sensual gesture loosed the reins on his control. He pulled back and thrust hard, his fingers moving faster on her clit. Almost immediately, he remembered his vow to make this night special for her. He slowed the rhythmic thrust of his hips.

She moaned a protest.

"Gabriel, I need more. Move," she ordered.

A gaspy laugh burst past his lips. "You were the one who wanted to know all about my version of brimstone and retribution," he reminded her. "I owe you for that scare you gave me."

"Now? You intend to chastise me for that now?" Her words ended in a note of raised disbelief.

He dropped his head beside hers on the pillow and huffed a chuckle into her ear. "You did ask."

She put both hands on his cheeks and made him look at her. What she saw there must have reassured her. "Arrogant tomcat."

"You like cats."

"Yes," she agreed, her arms going about his neck. She played with the damp strands of hair there. "But I love you."



## About the Author

Tall, willowy and drop-dead gorgeous, that's me. Hey, it's my fantasy! Actually, I'm a short, mumble-ty something, Southern girl. From the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where ghost and pirate tales reign, an over-active imagination is bred into my genes. When not writing, you can find me reading, riding my Arab or lost in a daydream.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)