



Loose Id

Dept
57

Crystal Captive

LYNNE CONNOLLY

DEPARTMENT 57:
CRYSTAL CAPTIVE

Lynne Connolly

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Chapter One

Domenici Serafino gazed through his Ray-Bans at the azure Sicilian sky. Maybe time to put on more sunscreen. He should really be enjoying himself, lying on a private beach outside a luxury villa, but the need to keep his body in a constant state of awareness made him too tense for relaxation. This whole situation could erupt into action at any moment.

His stomach muscles tightened at every breeze, every change in the atmosphere. He kept his mind open, his psi senses constantly scanning for a new presence.

The only reason for anyone to trespass on this private beach was to get to him, and only one set of people wanted to get to him right now. Or had the opportunity to do it.

His cell phone rang, blaring out the first few bars of AC/DC's "Back in Black," and instead of picking up the sunscreen spray, he changed direction, reached for the unit, and thumbed it on.

"Yeah?" "Back in Black" meant it was the Department, specifically, a message from the leader of Team Crystal.

"Anything?" Bryn sounded as impatient as Dom felt.

"Not a thing. Nobody, nothing. I've been here five days, man. I've walked into town, eaten in nearly all the restaurants, lain on the beach until I'm cooked --"

"It's a hard life," his team leader sympathized.

Dom chuckled. "Yeah. Hey, but you might like to take this place on."

"Why would I want that?"

Domenici grinned, knowing Bryn was still coming to terms with the changes in his life. "Your honeymoon. It would be great for that. I'm wondering whether to turn the villa into smaller apartments or renovate it as it is."

"I thought your company specialized in the luxury end of the market?"

Dom grunted. "I do, but some people prefer a smaller place, something more intimate. So I'll either renovate this one or turn it into apartments." He huffed. "It was redone all of two years ago, and the market at this end is fickle and fussy." His interest grew as his business acumen rose to the fore. Much better than lying around waiting for something to happen. He'd never acted as bait before and never been so on edge and bored at the same time. Making plans for the villa where he was staying, even if the plans never came to pass, would be better than that. "But that means I'll close it at the end of the season. If you and Crys want to take it on for a week or two, I can do it for you at a great rate."

Bryn laughed. "Ever the businessman, eh?"

"Well, I was thinking of nothing. Call it a wedding present."

Silence, then Bryn cleared his throat. "Thanks." The single grunted word told Dom how difficult Bryn was finding the transition from being half of a same-sex couple to an engaged man with heterosexual bliss stretching before him. Not that he found that part difficult, and he adored Crys, but the adjustments in the change of lifestyle were taking something out of him. Dom suspected more than that. "Missing the active life, are you?"

"My life is active enough."

"Sure it is. I meant you being in the office most of the time." Dom's cell phone was secure, but cells could always be cracked, so Dom chose his words carefully. Bryn had recently moved from active fieldwork to office-based work, electing to go in as team leader, which meant he coordinated and planned rather than kicked ass and fought. Dom wondered if the adrenaline rush from frequent great sex made up for the lack of it in other areas, then decided he didn't want to know. He liked the fighting part.

"I'm getting used to it." Then Bryn, man of action, said something Dom had never expected to hear from him. "It's totally worth it."

Wow. What love did to a man.

A movement at the corner of his eye made Dom look in that direction, and he bared his teeth at the sight. "Later, man."

Bryn caught on immediately. "Yeah, later. Good luck."

"Thanks."

Dom disconnected, then tossed the phone aside without checking where it would fall. He propped himself up on his elbows so he could watch the woman walking toward him. If he was bait, then the hook was coming his way. And she was one fuck of a hook.

Nicole faltered when Serafino sat up, leaning on his elbows, and watched her. She'd faced celebrities and players, but somehow this man had more presence than anybody else she'd ever met. And that was saying something.

She recovered by trying to describe him for the article she'd write later. *As I approached villa owner and handsome playboy Domenici Serafino...* No, too bland. Besides,

“handsome” didn’t begin to describe him. Powerful, devilish, darkly sensual, that sounded better. And he reminded her of a bear in a way. Wearing only a swimsuit, his chest darkly shadowed with hair the same near-black as that on his head, he looked like a bear of the dangerous variety, not the tame, golden-furred, cuddly ones lovers gave to each other, maybe with a red velvet heart clutched between its paws. If Domenici Serafino held a heart, it would be the pulsing, bleeding kind. The man looked barely civilized.

She couldn’t see his eyes behind the dark sunglasses, but she felt the intensity of his gaze. Or maybe that was the sun pounding down on her back. She prayed she wouldn’t suffer too much for her reckless decision to go without a cover-up. She’d made sure to bring her camera and her notebook. Those were far more important.

She tried hard not to stare at his crotch and the impressive bulge that filled the front of his swim shorts. She managed a couple of comprehensive glances, and she was sure he wasn’t erect, or semierect, but still, he filled the only garment he wore impressively.

Not a celebrity himself, he’d become one because of the women he’d dated and the men he hung out with. And his own spectacular looks. Nobody could overlook Domenici Serafino. He towered over most people, his broad body frequently clad in Armani and Hugo Boss or chinos and soft shirts. The photographers loved him.

Much to his embarrassment, or so he claimed.

Nicole snorted. Yeah, right. But he rarely gave interviews, never spilled any secrets about the people his company catered to by providing apartments in cities and secluded villas in the world’s beauty spots. Added to that, every property he handled gave away a complimentary week’s stay to a charity, usually a children’s charity. At peak times of the year sometimes.

An interview with this man would give her flagging career the boost it needed. A more lasting connection would be even better. But she wasn’t shooting for that right away. Just the interview. She’d use the techniques she’d honed over years as one of the world’s best gossip journalists: ask questions first and get permission later; but her boss and ex, Gary, wouldn’t like it if he knew she meant to take any refusal seriously. She could hear his voice in her head: “Just get the goods, Nicole. The dirtier the better. Nice spicy stuff. Then, just before you leave, tell him where you work. He won’t play along at first, but you’re guaranteed to charm him into something.”

That depended. Nicole had her own code of ethics and that included keeping her word, assessing her subjects to see if they played the game, and not sleeping with them just to get information.

Gary thought she slept with all of them. She’d led him to think it when they split. Which caused her something of a dilemma, because if this guy asked, she probably would. And it wouldn’t have anything to do with journalism.

Ever since she’d seen his picture, ironically in the celebrity gossip magazine where she now worked, she’d had a secret yearning to meet this man in the flesh. He’d even featured in

some of her favorite fantasies, the ones she used her BOB to help along. She'd always loved the tied-up and fucked ones, where a big, strong man did what he wanted to her, and she had no say in what he did. Not Dom/sub games, but maybe along those lines. For her fantasies, Domenici Serafino was just about perfect. Big, strong, nothing delicate or gentle about him, just a big brute of a man. Her favorite.

Thinking of those fantasies right now was probably not a good idea. Her bikini didn't cover a lot.

Walking up the beach toward where he lay waiting turned into a bit of a marathon, and by the time she reached him, she was out of breath. She'd thought she managed to hide it pretty well before his head lowered a little, his gaze obviously going to her boobs where her heavy breathing made them move.

"Very nice." He paused and took another deliberate look, his eyes behind those dark glasses scorching her skin. "You're a big improvement on Omar Sharif."

It took her a moment to realize what he meant. Although her Italian was fluent, it was still a foreign language to her, and she had to mentally check her translation. But Omar Sharif was Omar Sharif in any language. *Lawrence of Arabia*, when Omar Sharif had taken at least ten minutes to ride up to where Peter O'Toole waited for him. One of the best entrances in cinematic history. She hoped hers was as good, but she doubted it.

Domenici sat up and leaned his elbows on his knees. At least she had somewhere else to look. His mouth firmed into a hard line. "Well, now you can turn around and go back the way you came, and I get to look at your tush instead of your tits and decide which view I like best. Thanks for the show."

He lifted his head and confronted her. The blank stare was somehow worse than if she could see his eyes properly. But she felt a tension about him, something in the set of his shoulders or the way he braced his feet firmly against the soft sand of the beach.

"I'm sorry. I just walked, and then I didn't realize where I was."

"You're on a private beach. My beach to be exact. You can leave the way you came."

"Oh."

Shit. This man dated some of the most beautiful women in the world, so how could she compete? She spent her time on the other side of the camera, interviewing. She could dress for success, but she'd never bothered with the pinned and tucked world of celebrity. It took too much time. She was fine, nothing to be ashamed of, but next to the buffed-up, toned-down, cosmetically enhanced bodies of women who had the leisure and the expense to indulge themselves, she didn't stand a chance, and for once in her life, she actually cared about that. He probably went for big boobs and tiny waists. If her waist was small, it was a mixture of genetic luck and a twenty-minute run most days, not hours in the gym and another few hours at the plastic surgeon's.

Not that she wanted that. She just wanted him. Or had, until the sheer power and presence of the man had overwhelmed her. And the sheen of ice that somehow covered him, despite the heat of the day.

"I'm sorry. I-I should go." Admitting defeat to Gary somehow seemed better than facing this man. Gary's sarcasm and threats of dismissal were part of her life, and she always gave as good as she got.

But not like this. He didn't want her here, every line of his taut, muscular body told her that. And he knew what she was doing here. "I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere."

"Yes, you must have." His mouth straightened. "I've seen you before, haven't I?"

She shrugged and winced. Whoops. Maybe stripping down to a bikini hadn't been the best of ideas, but while she wouldn't sleep with anyone for information, she had no objection to teasing a little. Even if she wasn't exactly supermodel material, she could still strut her stuff.

She hadn't been prepared for the sheer presence of the man, powerfully affecting her so much she felt her crotch dampen when his heated stare traveled over her. And she'd thought to flirt the information out of him? She must have been mad. But even worse, her thoughts went straight past flirtation to something much hotter.

She lifted her sunglasses, and he did the same. She and met his level stare, squinting a little against the light of the sun. "Nicole Cipriani from *Gossip* magazine. I just thought I'd ask for an interview. Your terms. Name the time and place."

He regarded her for a moment without speaking, making her squirm inwardly. "I appreciate the straightforward approach. That'll get you further than any other way." His dark eyes swept up and down her barely clad body, and she felt every touch. "Okay, I'll think about it. Give me your number."

She pulled a card out of her bag, reminding herself not to babble. She hadn't been this nervous for years. "Thanks. I'd appreciate it. I thought something like a tour of the villa, a few harmless stories about the people who've stayed here. You know, summer filler stuff." That would be a start. Afterward, she could try to get more out of him. But she had the feeling he didn't let his secrets out easily. "I'll leave you to your newspaper."

Before her wild thoughts of being naked, tied to his bed, overwhelmed her, she turned away and took a few steps back in the direction from which she'd come. It seemed a lot farther away now.

"Wait."

She halted, but waited a moment before turning around. She felt his presence around her, rather than hearing him rise from his nest on the sand.

He frowned down at her. "Did you walk here with no cover-up?"

"It doesn't matter; I'll be fine."

“Oh, it matters.”

A shower of loose sand scattered around her with sudden force as the heavy weight of a cloth covered her shoulders. “What...?” She spun around to face him, only to wince as something scraped against her sore flesh. Shit. She’d hoped her hair would be enough to shield her for the half hour she’d need to walk here from the beach outside her hotel. She hadn’t realized the day would be so hot, so she had not slathered herself in sunscreen before she set out.

He stood so close she could have touched him, tunneled her fingers into the black curls covering his chest, but his expression didn’t invite touch. He scowled down at her. “What were you thinking?” He waved a hand toward the cloudless sky. “This is the hottest day of the year so far.” With a sound halfway between a growl and a huff, he turned away. “Come with me. You can’t go back like this.”

If she’d realized a touch of sunburn would get her in, she’d have stayed in the sun another half hour. Stopping only to sweep up his belongings -- a spray bottle of lotion, a cell phone, and a newspaper -- he led the way to the house overlooking this stretch of the beach.

The villa, painted a shade of dusky pink popular on this little island, had a small garden leading to a yard with a hot tub half sunk into the stone-flagged surface. Nicole marveled at how well the other half lived. Crammed into a high-rise hotel farther up the coast, Nicole had thought her double-bedded room comfortable enough, but this was something else.

The coolness of the air-conditioned house swept over her like a welcome breeze as he led her through the large, country-style kitchen and then an open-plan living area to the stairs at the end. He glanced back to see her still following him, and at his scorching stare, she knew immediately where she wanted to go with him.

Straight to the bedroom.

And that was where he took her. To a room decorated mostly in white, with a terracotta tiled floor, dominated by a huge white-draped bed with gauzy curtains swagged above it, like the resting place of a fairytale princess. No sign of cupboards or chests of drawers, only a full-length mirror along one wall and two small plinths on either side of the bed.

It had a virginal appearance she doubted it deserved, considering who was currently living there and who had been there in the past. Her real targets. The celebrities who stayed here and at the other places owned by Serafino and Co. Not even a fancy name to attract customers, because they didn’t need one. Serafino’s never advertised, but its villas and apartments were rarely empty. Word of mouth proved far more effective than the most expensive TV advertisement.

The towel scratched her back. It must be full of sand to irritate like this. When she moved her shoulders to ease them, she cried out at the shot of pain.

He turned back to her immediately, but instead of whisking the towel off her, he lifted it carefully. She could see his face in the full-length mirror opposite them and his concern

when he frowned and bit his lip. Unfortunately, she also saw how reddened her shoulders were.

"I might be able to help you; I think we've caught it early." Not to her way of thinking he hadn't. He frowned down at her. "Okay, come with me."

He opened the next door, and she drank in the sight. A huge bathroom, bigger than the whole ground floor of her condo back home, lay spread before her. She lagged behind, trying to memorize the sight for a later written description, while he headed for the large tub in the center of the room, flicked a switch to send the faucets pouring, and then continued past the tub to a walk-in shower.

The air-conditioning kept the temperature cool but not chilly, and the textured ceramic tiles underfoot gave her a good grip on the floor. The room's porcelain fittings were a cool ivory with what she suspected were precious metal decorations. "These aren't real gold, are they?" she asked, unable to keep quiet any longer. Too vulgar, her mother would say, and in this case, she agreed with her parent.

He chuckled low in his throat, the sexiest chuckle she'd ever heard. "Gold plated. The kind of people who stay here like a bit of ostentation. The refurb will be pink marble or something like that."

"People with no taste stay here?"

"Yes." She loved that he didn't bother to argue with her. "They want flashy stuff. They don't necessarily live with this kind of flash every day, though."

She knew differently. "I've been inside some of the homes of the rich and famous. I've seen more than gold-plated faucets."

He chuckled. "Come here. We need to cool your skin down fast." She glanced at the shower and he frowned. "No. Too rough for the way your skin is right now."

She walked across to him, and when he held his hand out to her, she slipped her own into it. Almost friendly.

Ostensibly, it was to help her into the bath, but the contact sizzled through her with the velocity of electricity. She drew her hand back, shocked, and stared at him to find him gazing at her, dark eyes wide, mouth slightly open, white teeth gleaming like a predator's.

It lasted less than an instant, but she'd remember that split-second moment of recognition forever. As if they'd known each other before, but forgotten, only to recall it in an instant out of time.

Of course, it could be anything. Even static. She could no longer deny how much she wanted him. Just because he was tall, dark, and handsome. For no other reason.

Nicole forced herself not to show any more vulnerability and reached for his hand again. This time she avoided his eyes when she gingerly stepped into the tub.

She heard his quick intake of breath when he got a good look at her back.

“Hell, that doesn’t look good. Sink right down under the water. Let it get to your shoulders.”

There was room in this tub for her to duck down, so she slid under until the lukewarm water lapped her chin. Domenici kept the water flowing until the tub was almost full. “Wait there,” he ordered.

At least he hadn’t asked her to take her clothes off. Although if he had, she probably would have done it.

She looked at her bag where she’d dumped it by the door. In it lay her camera and little minidisc recorder, as well as an MP3 recorder. She should really go over to it and hit Record, but the relief of sitting in the cool water had her melting. In any case, the bag was too far away. He’d see the wet trail, and she’d lose the small amount of trust she’d won. Just as well she had a great memory, and if she got a few quotes from him, she could intersperse them with some photos and make an article, although she knew Gary wanted more.

At the moment, she didn’t care. Courtesy of her mother’s family, her fluent Italian got her the job here, away from the States. Very few of her relatives had set foot in Italy, but they considered themselves denizens of the Old Country for all that. And Sicily was where most hailed from.

She leaned back and closed her eyes, reveling in the cool touch of water against her skin. A feeling of being watched came over her, and she opened her eyes to find Serafino’s gaze disconcertingly fixed on her. He was smiling.

He carried a pile of clean towels, in a cream shade slightly darker than the bathroom fittings. They looked good against his tanned skin. He still wore his bathing costume; not as brief or as blatant as a Speedo, but it didn’t need to be for her to see and admire his superbly toned body.

Their gazes met and touched, as intimate as a caress on her naked flesh. “How are you feeling?”

“Not as hot. I hadn’t realized quite how bad the sun was.”

“What were you thinking?”

Here it came. “About you.”

He put the towels down on the space between the two washbasins before he turned and walked over to the tub. He knelt and their eyes met, on level with each other. “Tell me more,” he purred, his pose as lethal as a crouching panther, his eyes as dangerous.

That must be why she felt like prey. “You know what I was doing here. I want an interview; that’s all. You know, the lives of the rich and famous. I’m looking for a series of fillers for the magazine. No scandals unless you feel like letting me in on a few.”

“I’ve been hearing things about you.”

“What?” That was too sharp, but she couldn’t help it.

"That you missed out on a scoop. You had dinner with Courtney Southern a few nights before the story about her mother's assisted suicide broke in a rival mag. Tell me about that."

Maybe she could turn that disaster around after all by using it to gain his confidence. But for all the consequences, she wasn't sorry for what she'd done at the time. "A year ago, I was a top feature writer. I could name my price. I had an arranged interview with Courtney Southern. She had a new film coming out, so we did an interview about that and about her love life. But during that dinner, she got a phone call about her mom. Courtney knows the score -- she plays the game -- but after that call, she lost it, and she fessed up to me without going off the record. Her mom had bowel cancer in its last stages, and she'd just tried to kill herself and failed. Courtney wanted to help her mom to die. There was nothing but pain and suffering ahead, and her mom told her she wouldn't wait for that, but now that the hospital knew she was a suicide risk, they were limiting her opportunities. So for the rest of the evening, I talked to Courtney like a friend. She needed somebody."

"So you had nothing to do with the other magazine breaking the story."

"Are you crazy?" When she began to sit up, he made a gesture with his hand and she sank down again. She snorted in derision. "I have a certain standard. Without it, I wouldn't get half the stories I do. So we went off the record once I reminded her. Off the record means just that."

"That's about what Courtney told me." His mouth firmed. "She should have come to me. We don't know each other too well, but she knows I'd help her."

"They went to Switzerland to do it. I got the details for them." She shot him a dark look. "I shouldn't have told you that, you know? Anyway, after *Steam* magazine broke the story, Courtney became bad news in certain quarters, blacklisted from two major studios, and hate letters arrived with every mail delivery. The moral police came after her with all guns blazing. She knows it wasn't me now, but for a long time she thought I'd done it. In fact, we both knew who did it -- one of her domestic staff who snooped in her laptop when she forgot to close it down. And then *Steam* found out I'd interviewed her the week before and pilloried me for it. So I'm demoted. An office worker on summer specials for now. I have to earn my way back to feature work."

"So you were banking on this interview to help you."

She shrugged and winced at the resulting sting. "I'll come around. Another six months. I was planning to go freelance anyway." The drop in salary would mean minuscule living quarters in a rough part of the suburbs, but she'd known a lot worse.

He studied her, biting his lip, his eyes contemplative. "I thought you people made things up, didn't bother investigating them."

She laughed. "No, we investigate. I do, anyway."

"Why pick on me? Italy's full of the rich and famous."

“Isn’t it obvious? You rarely give interviews. You know these people. You mix with them. You cater to them.”

He didn’t seem as upset as she’d thought and not half as aggressive as he had been to her on the beach. “Go on.”

“I found out you were here in Sicily, so I thought it was worth taking a chance and trying to contact you. You could show me around this place, let me take pictures before you renovate it, tell me a few things about the people who’ve stayed here. Good publicity for you and our readers would lap it up.”

“So you want stories?”

“And pictures.”

“I see.”

He got to his feet, strode to the towels, picked one up and came back to her. “I appreciate your honesty.”

She felt the blood rush to her face, and she wanted to shrink away. “I planned to flirt with you and listen to your pillow talk. Not that we’d get that far. I don’t fuck for favors. The minute I saw you, I knew that wouldn’t work.”

He looked at her through lowered lashes that were impossibly thick for a man. “It might. Why don’t you try?”

Chapter Two

Domenici liked her. He really liked her. That was the real bitch. She was honest enough to intrigue him but not naive enough to turn him off. Gorgeous figure -- which he'd had a good look at -- red hair that blazed in the sun, and green eyes a man could drown in. The killer had been her scarlet shoulders and upper back that brought out his protective instincts, and he gave in.

Everything about her drew him: her body, her pride, the vulnerability she tried so hard to conceal. But it was all a sham, and a clever one at that. It had to be.

Because she had to be PHR. Domenici was there as bait, trailing the tale that he'd be alone and vulnerable today, staying at a villa where security had been disabled prior to refurbishment. He'd let them capture him. Then his team could follow him to the PHR cell and close it down. They knew the cell would want to keep him alive to get photographic proof of the shape-shifter, because a small video clip had appeared on the Internet showing a blurry film of a barghest shape-shifter transforming from man to large, shaggy, wolflike dog and back again. Most of the comments scorned it as poor CGI, but the techs at Department 57 had tracked the origin of the upload here. And Team Crystal had been sent in. They had found the body of the barghest a week later.

Nicole Cipriani wasn't just a reporter hoping for a gossipy story for a trashy magazine, but a member of an organization sent to kill him, maybe torture him to get more information before they did so.

That infuriated him. Not that she'd do this; the PHR had done worse. But that he'd be drawn to one of them, the people who hunted his kind down and destroyed them without mercy. And now they wanted him.

Domenici tried to send a mental probe into her to confirm his suspicions, but she had a barrier so strong it confirmed what he'd believed. She had to know how to build a barrier

like that and keep the forefront of her mind so carefully arranged. All he read was what she wanted him to know.

He'd have to take her in, but not before she paid for taking *him* in.

There she was, lying in his bath, her breasts spilling out of the too-tight bikini top, the bottoms barely covering her pussy. It didn't surprise him that she would tempt him, and then when she mentioned flirting, he knew it. It would contaminate her to do more, and she'd be far too naive if she assumed anything less than full-on sex would persuade him to part with any secrets, but a PHR agent would be reluctant to have sex with what they called a deviant, and what he called a dragon.

Well, fuck that. Or more accurately, fuck her. He'd play along, try to penetrate more than her pussy, maybe let their captors discover them in bed together. That would totally destroy her reputation with her buddies and give them something to hold over her. And he needed the extra connection. His telepathy was enough to communicate while in his dragon form, but little more than that. If he had sex with her, the extra intimacy could give him the leverage he needed to get inside her head as well as her body.

She was trying the maiden in distress with the dragon act. Well, sadly for him, he was a dragon, and it was working. Maybe there was something to the myth, after all.

Hell, of course there was. Here he was, ministering to a woman he had every suspicion was a spy for the organization dedicated to destroying himself and his kind. A sexy, soft woman. Would he never learn?

He held out his hand to help her from the half-sunken bath. She put her hand in his, and a shudder rippled over his skin, but he had no idea why. Skin and gazes met in a shiver of recognition.

She got to her feet, and water poured off her body, making her look like some sea creature emerging from the waves. He threw a soft towel around her but didn't bother to wrap her. Too much pressure on her back could make that burn worse. "You need to dry it without rubbing it. Here." He whipped the towel off and replaced it with another, dropping the wet one on the floor. "That should get rid of the worst of it." Before she could do it herself, he brought the towel forward to wipe her front, the relatively unaffected part of her.

At first, he concentrated on drying her, and then he let his gaze drift up to her face. He stilled his movements. He switched to English, deliberately, hoping to catch her off balance. "You know, you'd dry quicker if you took that bikini off."

She cast her eyes downward, and he found the movement enchanting. He suspected he was supposed to. But he made his mind up. She might have ethics, but where the lives of his fellow Talents were concerned, he didn't.

Her mental barrier remained rigidly in place. So he tilted her chin and met her eyes.

Green eyes the color of a summer meadow gazed up at him, the pupils large. She couldn't fake that reaction. He watched her, let her see the desire in him before he slowly lowered his head and kissed her.

The first touch of his lips on hers, gentle though it was, exploded through him like electricity. Soft, ripe lips crushed against his with a texture that made him groan under their pressure. He kept his hands on her hips to hold her steady and deepened the pressure of his mouth against hers.

She opened for him. Not reluctantly, but not eagerly either, just enough so he had to work for it. When he flicked his tongue against the inside of her lips, she took a sharp breath through her nose, the sound hissing in the hush of the villa.

He plunged his tongue deep inside for one taste and almost stayed before he remembered he was seducing her for a reason. Gasping, he withdrew. His hands remained on her hips, and he left an inch or two of clear air between them, although he wanted to feel more of her, wet or not.

Her eyes flickered open, and she blinked a couple of times. "Wow."

"Uh-huh."

Slowly, she lifted her hands to the front of her bikini top. He watched her, his gaze dropping. She released the clasp and the release of tension made the cups spring apart. Not quite far enough. The material clung to her skin, still damp from the tub. She helped it along and peeled the cups away.

She had the milky skin of a true redhead, but not the freckles. Instead, pure white skin crowned with rose-colored nipples, the tips peaked and hard.

As slowly as she'd released the fastening, Domenici slid his right hand up from her hip, registering the sweet curve of her waist before gliding it across and onto her breast. His hand, dark from days in the sun, curved around the lower part, testing the weight and softness, insistent pressure against his hand.

"Only a B cup," she said, her voice hoarse as if she hadn't used it recently.

He looked up at her, smiling. "But all you."

Her puzzled gaze cleared. "Oh, I see what you mean." She looked down and swallowed. "Yes, no surgery; nothing like that."

When he feathered his hand across her breast and squeezed, so her nipple strained between his two middle fingers, he felt a thirst that had nothing to do with water. He bent and licked.

Her responsive shudder and low moan showed him he'd done something she enjoyed. Hell, so did he. He opened his mouth against her and took it in.

So soft, the peak adding a delicious change in texture. He licked the tender tip and felt the skin crinkle against his tongue. Like his flesh, rapidly hardening even more than when she'd first unclipped her bikini top.

After one long suck, he let the nipple slide from his mouth, reluctant to let it go but knowing another awaited his pleasure. And this part was pure pleasure. He loved a woman's curves, every inward slide, every outward pout.

Do his job, enjoy the woman but keep completely separate. He needed to penetrate her outer mental shields, and this was the most effective way he knew of doing it. If he tried to do it forcibly, he would hurt her, and she'd know for sure he had a Talent, even if she didn't know already. He had stealth ingrained in his nature, impressed in him from childhood up, and it was too late to try to alter that now.

Her breath grew ragged, and she let out one long sigh. But her mental barrier was still impenetrable. He tried before he lifted his head and stared into her eyes.

She stared back, dazed now. He gave a small smile. "Hey."

"Hey."

Slowly, he turned her around. She went, and he hooked his thumbs in his shorts, hauling them off, careful to ease the fabric over his taut, sensitive erection. He looked at her, the clean, smooth line of her backbone, and almost salivated.

If she knew what he was, she'd know he couldn't give her a disease, nor could she give him one. And at this time of the month, he couldn't impregnate her. Shape-shifters only had three days every month when they were fertile, and this wasn't the time. Let this be the first test. Would she panic and insist on protection?

He stepped forward and slid his arms around her waist, taking care to keep away from the angry-looking skin on her upper back. Her hair, brushing just below her shoulders, had helped shield her, but her shoulder blades and upper arms would be painful come the morning.

He'd be there, but on the other side of a thick pane of one-way glass, watching a Sorcerer break her. If he didn't do it first. He didn't want her to go through that unless she made it impossible for them to do anything else. For all he knew, she was a low-ranking cell member, a grunt sent in to do something she didn't quite grasp. Or at least, she didn't understand how dangerous the task of breaking a Department 57 operative was, especially a mature shape-shifter in full control of all his powers.

Domenici concentrated on her, waiting for the first sign of weakness, the first fissure in her mind. For the rest, he wanted to see her other fissures.

He hooked his thumbs inside her bikini bottoms and tugged them down, following them to the floor and urging her to step out of them by nudging her ankles. He took a moment to caress the slender shape, bones prominent against lightly tanned skin. Any part of a woman could be sensitive, and he loved searching out the less obvious ones.

She shivered when he stroked her ankles, and he wished he had more time to explore. But if his cock could talk, it would be screaming at him. It always did. He'd just gotten better at forcing it to do what he wanted.

This time it was a damned close-run thing. He wanted this woman with an urgency that reminded him of the thirst after a fast.

Domenici had to bend to reach her. He tapped the inside of her leg, and she opened. He liked that. "Hands against the wall, sweetheart."

She lifted her hands and braced them against the wall in front of her. He'd chosen this part of the bathroom because a section of mirrored tile faced them. He saw her face, the way she took her bottom lip between her teeth, the way her eyes, wide with apprehension, met his reflected there.

"I shouldn't --"

"Neither should I." His voice rumbled through his body, and he felt his fingers tremble as he slid them up her thighs into the paradise waiting for him at their apex. "Don't think about it. Don't spoil it. Whatever happens next, we have this."

She made to turn her head, but he nudged her so she turned back to face the mirror. "Look at me that way."

He bent his knees, took his cock in hand, and guided it to the wet, soft depths shadowed by her ass. He brought his other hand around the front, slid it into her cleft. He didn't have to search hard to find her clit. It pulsed against his fingers. She was so ready.

So was he. He slid his cock against her and met sweet resistance. Enough to show her he was there, but her juices soaked him, dripped against his cock, already damp from his precum.

With a moan of surrender, he pushed inside.

Not all the way, not yet. He wanted to touch her, feel his way, learn her. Domenici loved women, loved exploring the ways they were so different, so unique. Each woman was built differently; each had things she hadn't yet learned about herself. Well, before Nicole learned the hard parts, he would teach her the joy. Then he'd take it away from her, maybe use it to taunt her, because they needed to know.

They'd been chasing the bastard who ran this cell for months now, but he was elusive. With any luck, they'd get him now. Through Nicole.

At the thought, a new strain of viciousness ran through Domenici, and he drove hard into her.

Nicole screamed as he pierced her, and only when she felt his flesh against hers did she remember protection. Had he used a sheath? She assumed so, but this was the first time, the very first time, she hadn't made absolutely sure before she'd slept with someone. His mesmerizing dark eyes, his presence, his sheer strength, all had taken her off balance, made her believe she'd entered some kind of fairy tale.

The magazine, her job, her worries, all faded away with him. When he bathed her, she'd felt his hands all over her, something she hated strangers doing -- she hated to be touched unnecessarily. But every touch this man gave her was necessary. Needful.

He tweaked her clit between thumb and finger, pulled it, and then pushed. It took her a minute to realize what he was doing. Treating it like a penis, drawing it out, manipulating it. His cock tunneled inside her, and she lost her mind.

She pushed out her ass and pressed against the mirrored wall, gaining purchase to meet his hard, driving thrusts. His body slapped against her when he shoved his cock inside her. Deep, deep inside. Time disappeared, replaced by the imperative to move, to meet him, accept him inside her. Accept his seed.

Jesus, what was she thinking? But when she jerked forward, her mind dragged back to the present; he followed her movement, didn't let her go. But he still didn't touch her upper back. It felt hot, and she knew she'd burned, but the sensation melded with the fierce fucking. She felt him everywhere, every part of her body. As his fingers masturbated her, he drove inside in sync, driving her so far up she soared free.

Her breath caught and came in short, hard pants. She hadn't bargained for this. Not when she'd said she'd take the assignment, not when she looked at the pictures of him online and in the gossip mags. Oh yes, he looked hot, but not like this. When she stared into the mirror she saw a different man -- less civilized, harder, demanding, his mouth slightly open, his lips curved, his eyes glazed with passion. But inside, she saw steely intent, something cold, and she realized she'd stepped way past her comfort level.

This man had fucked some of the most demanding, most experienced women in the world, and rumor had it he'd never been dumped. Now she knew why. No doubt by nightfall she'd be a dumpee if she didn't dump him first, but she'd remember this experience for the rest of her life.

Now all she had to do was enjoy it.

As the thought bled into her mind, she felt something else there, something she'd never felt before. Like an alien presence, hard to describe, something warm, hard, and...masculine. It eased past her defenses, defenses she hadn't known she possessed, and hit something hard, like an outer shell. It hurt, stabbing through her like the pain of a migraine, but as soon as it hit, Domenici cursed, and it was gone, leaving her free and open. And screaming with orgasm.

No longer able to control her body, she jerked back against him and lost her footing on the ceramic tiles. He grabbed her around the waist, still buried inside her, and his hot breath warmed her shoulder even more. "Easy, *cucciola mia*. Take it easy, I've got you."

She couldn't manage anything more than a few gasps. Her orgasm, then the slide on the tiles, had rendered her temporarily speechless.

Only when he withdrew did she realize he'd come inside her. Liquid oozed down her leg, and it wasn't all her. He grunted and swung her into his arms, still careful to avoid her

sore shoulders. He stepped into the tub and sank down, but this time she rested on his lap. She needed to talk to him, but she felt as weak as a kitten.

"I'm not on the Pill or anything."

His dark eyes narrowed as he studied her, his expression remote. "You know that doesn't matter."

"It does. You didn't use a rubber." She wanted to move away, but he clamped her close, one arm around her waist, and reached for the washrag.

He sighed. "If you want to play the game, we will. I can't get you pregnant, not at this time of the month, and I'm clean."

"What game? And how do you know what time of the month it is?"

"For me, not for you." He dipped the cloth in the lukewarm water and wiped her legs almost matter-of-factly. "You're good, Nicole. Haven't you done your research?"

What the hell did he mean by that?

Having cleaned her, he dropped the cloth and brought his hand to her chin, turning her to face him. "Let me in, Nicole. Tell me what all this is about."

She tried to chuckle, but it sounded pathetic, even to her. "I told you I work for *Gossip* magazine. My boss, Gary Rizzo, asked me to come here and ask you for an interview, maybe ask you to work with us. I'm one of the few Americans working for the magazine in the States who speaks fluent Italian." She glanced away. "I wanted to be an interpreter, but the journalism got in the way. Or rather, Gary did."

"What do you mean?"

"Gary and I are -- used to be -- engaged. He's still my boss."

He shifted her, then stood, his legs straightening as if he held nothing in his arms. "And he sent you here?"

"Well, kind of." She stopped struggling. He might drop her. He walked out of the room, grabbing a clean towel on the way out, but he didn't let her down until they reached his bedroom.

He laid her on the bed and she felt smaller. "This bed is huge."

"It's housed more than four in its time." He chuckled when he saw her face. "Not me, *cara*, one of the more illustrious residents."

"Who's done it on this bed?" she asked in all fascination, only realizing when the words left her lips what meaning he'd take. Before he could reply, she turned her head away. "I'm sorry. If I do an interview with you, I want it to be aboveboard. I won't say anything you don't want me to." She felt uncharacteristically vulnerable, but then, she'd just done something so out of character she didn't know herself anymore.

He came down beside her. To save her back, she lay on her side and he urged her into his arms, drawing her to lie on her stomach over his chest. "So tell me about Gary."

She wanted to lie there and sleep. Doze, until he woke her up with kisses. But that was for lovers. They weren't lovers. Barely fuck buddies.

She stroked her hand over his chest and tunneled her fingers into the dark fur that covered it. One ambition fulfilled, then. "He's new to the Italian branch of the magazine, like me. In New York, we had a...thing." Strange, she'd never been ashamed of what she did and who with.

"A thing? Is that what we have here?"

After considering holding her words back, she decided against it. "No. All we did was fuck." She looked up at his face in a sudden panic. Way to impress him. She should be lying there cooing over his prowess, begging him for more, but his brutal, fast possession had taken all the breath from her and she needed to think and regroup. The intensity of the sex, his total ownership of her, took her so much by surprise she needed a break. "I'm sorry. What we're doing now may lead to a thing, a relationship."

His mouth thinned. "I'd say we had relations."

Which returned her to her main concern. Now she'd remembered it, she found it hard to think of anything else. "What happens if I'm pregnant? Am I on my own?" She wanted it straight. Next she'd ask him about the danger of disease. She still couldn't believe she'd been so stupid.

"You're not pregnant, and you're not diseased. If, by some miracle, you are pregnant, I would want to know as soon as you do." He glanced down at her, and the hard expression on his features softened. "My people are proud of their children. We treasure them."

Before this statement, she'd thought his command of English perfect, but the phrase "my people" sounded strange. She assumed he meant his family. But he was here, so it must have worked sometimes. "So you'd welcome it."

"I would." He smiled at her, but it was a tight, hard smile. "I didn't mean for this to happen, you know. I meant to wash you, smooth some lotion over you, and leave you to sleep for a while. Have dinner with me?"

That sounded good. She might get her interview yet. "I'd love to. But we'd have to stop at my hotel first."

"Where are you staying?"

"The Plaza."

He grimaced. "A chicken coop."

"It's one my company can afford. Sicily's expensive at this time of year."

He laughed. "They can do better than that. You should have held out for more."

"With the screwup I made with Courtney? Sure." She had to succeed in this one, or she was out of the top league, and she'd descend down the ladder, from interviewing A-listers, right down to C and D. If a Z list existed, she'd be interviewing them before too long. She'd seen it before, the slow slide from star to mediocrity. And yet, she got the feeling she could

trust him, more than almost anyone else she knew. She felt comfortable with him, content when he wasn't driving her to ecstasy, mindless when he was. So she shrugged and said, "It's convenient. And I get to hear the gossip. I'm working, not on holiday."

"Even more important that you have somewhere comfortable to work." He played with her hair, and she felt him tug at one of the damp strands. "I'll give you something. Not the hot stuff your editor wants, but something. And I'll give you some photos of this place. I won't give any other journalist the scoop, and I won't betray anything my clients don't want me to. Off the record means just that."

Nicole cleared her throat. "Thanks. That's not why --"

He used her hair to pull her up so she had to look at him. "Then why?"

Faced with the stark question in his eyes, she had to answer him. "Because I wanted you. You must know you're pretty hot stuff."

A smile curved his kissable lips. "I've been told that, yes. But you never know, do you?"

She smoothed her hand down his chest, toward his navel. "You should."

Tired of talking, she stroked him. His skin, smooth under the slight abrasion of hair, responded to her touch, and she heard his soft moan. "That feels good, cara."

Whatever happened next, she had this. Determined not to waste this experience, this moment, Nicole lifted up, ignoring the tension between her shoulder blades. She'd peel for sure, despite his care of her, but she was past caring about that. Tomorrow she might care. Today, *nada*.

When she lifted up, she felt his hand, tangled in her hair, tense and then relax. He'd decided to let her do what she wanted, but when she looked up at his face, she saw his dark gaze on her, his eyes glinting behind the half-closed, slumberous lids.

He kept his hand in her hair, as if he needed the contact. She let herself believe that. Meantime, she'd enjoy this man with the body of a Viking and the touch of an eighteenth-century exquisite. He'd probably take her out to dinner, make her wish for something she could never have, tell her some anecdotes for her article, and then take her back to her hotel. She'd never see him again.

So she'd have him now.

She moved down his body, kissing and tasting, trying to commit everything to memory for the nights when she was back in her tiny, bleak apartment in Rome, waiting to record the next celebrity event, the next first night. Always on the outskirts, never to have a life of her own, but watching other people's. But for today, she had a life, and she'd take it.

He smelled of male musk, a light cologne, and something spicy and enticing -- him. Under his skin, muscles came into play, flexing when he moved, each a demonstration of his superb physical condition. She lingered over his stomach, ribbed with taut muscle, his sharp gasps telling her when she caressed a particularly sensitive part. Around his navel, which

intriguingly dimpled his skin, lighter against the tanned expanse. Nicole didn't see any lessening of the tan as she moved down his body, which meant he sunbathed in the nude.

So why was he wearing a bathing suit today, just as if he expected someone to arrive?

Perhaps he was. Perhaps someone would still arrive. She'd cope with that when it happened. Right now, she was in the driver's seat.

She touched, kissed, and caressed, always moving down for the treat she knew lay ahead of her.

Domenici had one of the most beautiful cocks she'd ever felt. She'd guessed it was thick and about average in size, from the way it felt inside her, but she was wrong. It was long too, longer than Gary's. She hated herself for making comparisons but was honest enough to do it. She remembered a boyfriend from her college days. His was as long, but not as thick at the base. Her mouth watered when a drop of precum seeped from the slit at the end, and she couldn't wait any longer. She tasted him.

The taste reminded her of his scent. Musky, male, dominant. That spice still eluded her, but whatever it was, she loved it. Domenici Serafino could become addictive just by his taste. She'd never particularly enjoyed giving head before, but she wanted all of this man -- to taste him, to suck him down, consume him. Take him inside her where she could keep him.

No. This was her time, her moment. She ran her tongue from tip to root, enjoying the change in texture, from the impossibly soft, sensitive skin at the head to the rougher texture lower down. He moaned and tensed. She loved that, the way his balls clenched in the sac. She tasted them too, took her time, sucked them into her mouth one after the other, and licked her way back up, trailing her tongue along his flesh, tracing the big, pulsating vein along the whole shaft, like following a river to its source.

When she got back to the head, she traced around it, tasting the rim, curling her tongue under it. His whispered, "Oh cara, that's it. Don't stop!" Urging her to taste more, take more. When he finally groaned, "Enough teasing," and tightened his fist in her hair, she opened her mouth wide and took him in.

He filled her mouth as if built for it, and he'd filled her pussy the same way. His cock was hers; she wanted it, she claimed it, shoved the ephemeral nature of this encounter well to the back of her mind. He tasted perfect, salty, male. When she pushed her mouth down, deliberately working the skin over the hard-as-nails erection underneath, he jolted, forcing her farther down the bed, to tilt her head back and take in more of him. He thrust into her, and despite her best efforts, her gag reaction forced him back out.

Immediately, he sat, grabbed her under her arms, and dragged her up the bed. His mouth took possession of hers, and his cock, wet from her mouth, nudged between her folds. Before she could protest, he'd pushed inside her, blindly driving.

His hands went to her buttocks, where he spread them and pressed down, forcing her to take every inch. Her legs splayed wide on either side of his, it exposed her fully, to take

him and let his hair-covered balls meet the sensitive area between her ass and her pussy. His eyes looked wild, dilated, and eager. Hers must look the same.

He drove hard inside her; his eyes held hers captive, but she remained on top, although he'd taken control. Part of her felt anger that he hadn't allowed her to take him as he'd taken her, but the overwhelming, surging miniorgasms he gave her forced her into submission. She didn't know if she could call them orgasms, but each one drove her a little higher, and with each thrust, he gave her a touch. She never wanted this to end.

Until she convulsed. His hold on her tightened, forced her to respond by taking more of him, harder, higher. "I don't know -- Domenici --"

He stopped her protests by kissing her.

Their first kiss pushed her into orgasm. His tongue drove into her mouth in counterpoint to his cock in her pussy, and the dissonance drove her over the edge. He didn't release her when she cried out, took her in as he possessed her body and her mind.

He owned her.

Her ultimate submission, something she'd never done before, felt right. But if he brought her this kind of bliss, she'd give everything up to him.

Chapter Three

Domenici watched the lady sleep. She'd fallen almost instantly into slumber after he'd come, so hard and long he'd thought it would never stop.

What the fuck had he gotten himself into this time? That kiss, that damned kiss. He should have kept his lips to himself. Right up until then he'd been fine, detached, all his senses still his own.

His unit had been planning this operation for a good six months, and they couldn't afford for this to fail. Yet when she'd surrendered, he had the overwhelming urge to take her away from any danger, not let her lead him into it. What they were about to do would lead her into a situation she'd be lucky to get out of alive.

Everything in him was screaming at him to make sure she was safe. In the old days, the legends had it that a woman existed for every dragon, a maiden he would instinctively shelter and protect. Well, God help him if the legends turned out to be true, and she was it. Because the futures of many Talents depended on his unit taking down the cell to which she belonged. His only hope was that she was relatively innocent.

She could be a dupe, he realized with growing hope, not the PHR operative they'd all been expecting. Or even exactly what she said, a journalist looking for a story. It wouldn't be the first time a woman had hit on him for what he could tell her about the people he knew. His mouth firmed as he imagined her in that role. No, not that cold, not after the Courtney story. He'd had proof of that from Courtney herself, but just because she'd helped someone, didn't mean she couldn't still be a PHR agent.

When she'd surrendered, he should have remembered his mission and driven right into her mind when her defenses were down, but once he realized her barriers were so strong and he'd caused her serious hurt, he'd caressed her mind with his, enveloping it in a way that protected and coddled it, accepting her surrender rather than taking advantage of it. He'd

have to wait until he could get her into the hands of a Sorcerer, who could examine her mind with much greater skill than he had and discover what they needed to know without half killing her in the process.

He didn't know who he was more angry with -- her or him. She'd used that surrender to win his loyalty, and he'd given it, like a beginner, a fool who hadn't been deceived before. But her presence overwhelmed him, made it hard for him to think straight.

However, he had a mission, and he would go on with the plans. When he'd entered her mind, he'd read enough to convince him that she was either more highly skilled than any one of his team had suspected, or she was in ignorance of the existence of Talents. He couldn't believe they would send someone in who knew nothing. Too much of a risk to take. Or maybe they just didn't care.

Uncertainty annoyed him. But he would go forward with the plan.

He left her sleeping. He unwound her legs from his, slid out of her arms, and felt deep regret when he did so. To lie here with her, to sleep, and then take her again before they went out to dinner, that sounded like his kind of day. But he had a job to do.

The bottles scattered over the floor of the bathroom reminded him what they'd done there. He picked them up and flipped the water on in the shower, rinsing his body efficiently and quickly. In his dressing room, he found slacks and a dress shirt, something he could move in, or even discard without concern if he needed to. Shape-shifting to the dragon meant he either had to strip or say good-bye to what he was wearing. He hated the Green Giant act, but sometimes it became necessary.

Time to roll. They'd come to take him soon, he was sure of it, so he made a quick call for a car, knowing they'd most likely intercept the call and send their own. If they didn't, he'd get a meal with her before the cell picked them up.

Rhodri had been monitoring them, working deep undercover as a new convert to the bastards. Domenici had no idea how he did it. Not something he could have done. But Rhodri should be waiting for them there. If he wasn't, they'd manage somehow.

After months of undercover work, Rhodri had finally gained acceptance into the Sicilian cell, and tonight they would both discover the headquarters. The few messages he smuggled out intimated that he was getting closer and closer to the center of the cell, and then they'd received the phone call that signaled go. Rhodri had the in, and they'd send someone to ensnare Domenici soon. Just a call to a local number, asking for a particular kind of wine, and that was all they'd heard, because Rhodri couldn't risk any more contact.

Domenici bared his teeth in a feral grin. With two of them inside the fortified headquarters, they'd take the place apart, but the difficult bit was saving the records for the Department. Most of them, they'd discovered from previous operations, were set to self-destruct at the barest suggestion of attack. It made the PHR a frustrating opponent. And a dishonorable one, preferring to slink away than stand and fight.

His gut told him one thing, his mind another, but he had no choice but to go ahead with the plan. He went upstairs to wake his sleeping beauty.

When she heard her name, Nicole woke with a start. She'd slept deeply and dreamlessly, the first time in God knew how long. First the stresses of a job she had to turn around, then the hard, thorough fucking...

She felt well used, and damn, when she moved her shoulders against the admittedly high-quality sheets, sore there too. She blinked and Domenici's face came into focus. He was shaved, his wavy hair brushed straight back off his forehead, and he wore a white shirt and black pants. He still looked delectable. She must be a mess, sunburned, hair tousled, the scent of sex heavy about her. "Time to shower and dress, cara. I've ordered a car to take us to the restaurant."

She could take a hint. She sat up and slid off the huge bed. "It's been great. I've never known anything like this before."

He came around the bed and lifted her chin with one crooked finger. "Hey, you're talking like this is it."

She hated that, having to spell it out. "Because you're you, and I'm me, and we had a great afternoon, and hopefully, a good dinner."

A slow smile curved his mouth, and he pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "Keep thinking that way."

"Will you still give me an interview?"

"Do you want me to?"

"It would help." She bit her lip, and he smoothed his thumb over it, forcing her to release it. "No, no, I don't want that. I don't want to use you."

He lifted a brow, and a cynical, distancing look appeared in his eyes. One she didn't like. "You won't be." Abruptly, he turned away. "I'll get you something to wear. We won't call at your hotel; I'll take you somewhere you don't need to dress up."

When she emerged from the bathroom after her shower, she found a loose-fitting sundress in a heavenly blue. With the matching sash, it would fit most sizes. She had no underwear, and her bikini lay in a sodden heap on the bathroom floor. She wished she'd thought to drape it somewhere to dry, but she'd been otherwise occupied at the time.

Only when she slipped the dress over her head did she realize it was fine, soft silk, perfect for her sore shoulders. She tied the wide sash around her waist and let the ends drape to one side, over her hip.

She didn't hear him enter the room, but she felt it, his presence as much a brand on her skin as the sunburn.

"Perfect." He came up behind her and put his hands on her waist. "You look beautiful."

“Thank you. I don’t have much makeup.”

“Leave it. The evening’s hot, and you look gorgeous without it.”

Despite that, she stopped to apply some eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick from her bag before she slid her feet into her sandals, which she had found in the bathroom. She borrowed a brush for her hair. The heavy weight swung just past her shoulders in unruly waves and stood out in frizzy splendor. She really needed her hair serum, but she hadn’t found anything in Domenici’s bathroom that would work, and she wasn’t desperate enough to use baby oil. That would take days to wash out.

Domenici waited for her downstairs. She hadn’t taken much notice of it earlier, but now she noted the spacious interior, the neutral colors with the occasional highlight of hot pink or bright blue. “I could get used to this,” escaped her lips before she realized what that sounded like.

“So could I,” was his dry response. “This is how the millionaires of this world live.”

“Don’t tell me you’re not a millionaire.”

“If we were still using lira, I would be.”

Laughing, she let him usher her out the front door of the house, where a limousine with shaded windows awaited them. The Citroën C6 was discreet, black, and undoubtedly expensive. The driver, a dark-haired, dour-looking man with sunglasses on got out to open the back door for them. Nicole gave him a smile, but Domenici didn’t spare him a glance. The driver took his place behind the wheel, and Domenici leaned against the leather-upholstered seat and kept his gaze on her.

Although she didn’t like being watched in that way, especially the way he heated her blood, she bore it and sat stiffly upright. Domenici chuckled before he leaned forward to press the button that erected the privacy screen between them and the driver. “Come here. I want to touch you.”

His low tones fired her, but she tried not to show it. She went into his arms and lifted her face for his kiss.

Cradled against his shoulder, she felt vulnerable and fragile, something she wasn’t used to feeling. She wasn’t sure she liked it. But she did like his kiss. Lingering, he took his time, tracing her lips with his tongue before he touched her jaw, urging it open so he could feast inside.

Nicole gave up and grasped his shoulder, which flexed powerfully in the cup of her hand.

He explored inside, searching and stroking. When she brought her tongue into play, caressing his in turn, his low groan found its way from his throat to hers, reverberating in harmony. Touching him like this, exchanging caresses, Nicole felt their rightness, their togetherness, but that little voice of reality inside reminded her that it was nothing of the

kind. Ships in the night, strangers meeting to exchange lonely greetings, desperate for connection. At least, she was.

He lifted away but stayed close so she felt the heat of his breath on her damp lips. "You know what happens next, don't you?"

"We go to dinner?" But when she raised her eyes to his, she saw no humor, no pleasant anticipation. Only gravity and serious intent.

"I'll do my best to help you, but I wish you'd trusted me more."

None of what he was saying made sense. She'd told him everything, all she knew. "I was supposed to flirt with you. Gary said to do everything necessary, but when I did it, when I saw you, I didn't want to. You became human."

"You weren't just supposed to get an interview, though, were you?"

She sighed. That must be what he meant. "No. He wanted you to be a regular contact for the magazine." She tried to keep the pleading out of her eyes, to just ask him. "Will you?"

"If I did that, how long would it be before I was found out?"

She bit her lip, but he moved closer and licked it. "Every time you do that, I want to soothe it better." He smiled. "You're not what I expected."

"You expected me?"

"I thought you'd be harder, more predatory."

"I should be. I usually am."

He lifted her and settled her on his lap. She liked it there. His warmth, his obvious desire for her, made her wish to stay there. "Some of them have different personas, the ones they show or allow to be discovered, and the ones they keep to themselves. Some open themselves completely, and they're the idiots."

"Mmm." She felt sleepy, her mind drifting.

"That's it, baby. Go to sleep now. We'll see what's waiting for us on the other side, hmm?"

Mists drifted into her mind, and when she opened her eyes, trying for one last bit of awareness, she could have sworn she saw a curl of smoke in the air. She opened her eyes wider. Yes, she saw it. Not smoke, some kind of gas. No smoke without fire. Maybe it was fairy dust.

With that last, whimsical thought, Nicole gave up and slipped into unconsciousness.

Domenici settled Nicole more firmly on his lap and breathed the fumes deeply, just twice, then held his breath. He had to let them render him unconscious, but he wouldn't stay that way for as long as they expected. Not long now, and he'd join her in oblivion. He checked and found the link with Esti Hart, Team Crystal's resident Sorcerer. The link disturbed him, although he knew it necessary, but Domenici kept his inner self strictly alone

and apart. Even being a member of a team made him feel uncomfortable. Relying on others made him paranoid.

Still, it was there, though as soon as this operation concluded, he wanted it removed or obliterated or whatever she did. It should be over soon, because this was it. He'd let the PHR put him under, knowing he'd come around and knowing that his team would track him down. Then he could do his job and obliterate the whole cell. He prayed that didn't include the woman nestling so sweetly in his lap.

Chapter Four

Nicole came around with what felt like a hangover. When she groped for memories, a cloudy sense of not drinking floated in her consciousness, and then her stomach growled, though she wasn't yet sure if it was from hunger or nausea. Either way, she decided not to move for the time being.

Her head throbbed. She prayed she'd find herself in her bed at the hotel. Alone.

No such luck.

The surface under her back felt hard and gritty, bumpy. When she dared to move a fraction, pain shot through her head, and she moaned.

"Nicole?"

The voice startled her, so much so her eyes sprang open and her head jerked to one side, toward the sound. "Oh." Even that small word took all her effort. Her mouth felt as dry as the bottom of a parrot's cage.

Light forced its way into her, hard, fluorescent white rays that increased the intensity of her headache. She hadn't thought that possible a moment before, but now she found it was. Immediately, arms surrounded her and hauled her onto a warm chest. "There, cara. Just rest. Let me in."

"I did."

"Into your mind. I can help with that headache."

"What are you talking about?" She retched and tried to turn away, but he held her firmly against him. "Stay where you are. Remember when we had sex? Just relax your mind like you did then."

She felt an alien presence. Wow, this was so weird.

He sighed. "Relax."

"I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what you're doing. I'm dreaming, aren't I?"

His hands grasped her shoulders, and he drew her back. She stared up at him, trying not to throw up. All real, the dark, intense eyes, the soft lips, the sinfully strong jaw shadowed with unshaven growth. He stared at her as if he were drinking her in. "You really don't know much, do you?"

"It depends what you mean." She knew plenty. Just not about this.

"Can you speak to me like this?"

This time the jolt nearly succeeded in tearing her away. But he wouldn't let her. Braced for her shock, he held her steady. She found her voice. Which was more than he'd done. "You're a ventriloquist?"

"Telepathic."

"Wh-what?"

"You heard me. Now look around."

She rolled onto her back, and supported by his arms, she looked around.

The light wasn't exactly fluorescent; it came from a shimmering curtain around their cell. Their *cage*. The dazzling light flooded in from all four sides, the bars of the cage illuminated brightly. At a guess, their enclosure was about eight feet square, but she couldn't see beyond it because of the light striking off the gleaming bars. He sighed. "Those bars are silver, or silver plated. My Talent reacts to it, can't stand its presence. You might say I'm allergic."

"What do you do with silver jewelry?" She'd asked the question before she wondered at the rest of the sentence.

"I don't wear it, but small amounts don't affect me like that. It blocks my Talent. I can't communicate beyond those bars, and I can't pass through in my other form."

She was beginning to think she'd slipped into some kind of parallel world. Or her headache was affecting the way she was hearing. "Okay, hit me with it."

"Not yet. We need to deal with your headache."

The pain incapacitated her so badly she needed to do something about it, and she didn't see any painkillers around. "What happened?"

"They pumped gas into the car. The lack of oxygen brought on the headaches. I came around about ten minutes ago and cleared mine. Let me help you now."

She felt that weird presence in her mind again, and now she knew that it was him.

He touched her temple, the drift of his strong fingers incredibly gentle. "Try not to resist. Let me in."

"What happens now?"

"I'll help you with your headache and remember my way in. I might need it later. They won't leave us alone for long. When you feel your body resisting me, fight it. Try to keep that barrier down."

It sounded like nonsense to her, but when she felt the presence pushing, melding even deeper inside her, she remembered what they'd done earlier and opened to him. Just as her body had opened under his hard, demanding cock, now she let him invade her mind. She couldn't even think straight.

"Keep it down, cara. Let me in."

She tried, and she felt him slip inside, in the kind of intimacy she had never felt before. He murmured to her soothingly, nonsense phrases that kept her barrier down. A barrier she hadn't been aware of before. And miracle of miracles, he soothed her headache, as if he were actually stroking it. A delicious internal massage that soothed all the pounding away.

"Better?"

"Much." She opened her eyes, squinted against the bright light, and smiled at him. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

His dry tone surprised her because it sounded as if *she* had offended him, not their situation. "What's up?"

"You mean apart from the bars and the captivity? Oh, nothing much. Just you."

She frowned. "But I'm not responsible for any of this. I'm in as much shit as you are."

"I doubt that very much."

She sat up, something she couldn't have done five minutes ago, and faced him, lifting her chin defiantly. Which was difficult because he was just as gorgeous as ever. The white shirt's top two buttons were undone, revealing a few curls from the hair covering his broad chest. Fuck it, she'd met gorgeous men before. Any number of them, and she'd never had this problem. "So what is this? Some kind of publicity stunt, a weird sex game?"

"Let me in. Right in." She knew what he meant, but she was sick of his mind games. She couldn't care less about this scam he was running. *Out of here, now*, her brain screamed at her.

Despite that, it seemed that once he knew the trick of penetrating her mind, he could do it again. She felt him, actually *felt* him entering. "*We're in danger. Or I am. An organization called the PHR -- stands for Perfect Human Race -- wants to eliminate me and my kind.*"

"*Racists?*" Hey, she hadn't realized she could do that. Talk back to him. Wow, fuck *Gossip* magazine; this would hit the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. She'd have an auction for the story.

"*Kind of. Yes, racists. I'm a shape-shifter, and they want all of us dead. This is an attempt at genocide that's been going on for centuries.*"

She held up a hand, palm out. *"Stop. Backtrack a bit there. Shape-shifter?"*

He smiled, actually smiled, a slow grin of genuine amusement. *"What do you think happened to all the dragons? You think we died off? Think again, baby. You just slept with one."*

"You are shitting me." What did he take her for? A reporter for the *National Enquirer*?

"No, I'm not. Look around you."

She did as he told her, taking more notice of their surroundings. The cage was empty. Bare concrete floor, bars on all four sides, she could see nothing outside, plain ceiling. And... Oh, right. Cameras. Dark shapes that moved when they did, no doubt recording everything.

"So why do you think they're there?"

Her attention returned to him. *"Security?"*

"You know that's not right."

"Why would I know anything?"

He frowned, and she felt the pressure in her head increase. But it wasn't the kind of pressure that came from a headache. More actual pressure, like a finger pressing on her skin. She allowed it and felt a warm, masculine presence invade her mind. How she knew it was masculine she couldn't say, but it was male for all that.

He closed his eyes. *"You're a patsy."*

"I'm sorry?"

That was when the lights flashed off.

Domenici gripped Nicole's wrist to steady her. He felt the jolt as she started, but then she relaxed.

Additional lights came on, softer and more normal. He watched her wipe her eyes, staunching the tears the bright lights evoked. She drew up her knees and rested her chin on the top of them, and because of their deeper connection, he felt the fine silk of her gown chafe her sore back. He noted it and longed for some lotion to smooth on the burn.

Not long now before their captors confronted them. The silver bars were as effective as a force field. He couldn't sense or affect anything outside them, and if he wanted to pass by them, he couldn't do it in his dragon form. Which was exactly what they wanted.

He allowed his softer feelings for Nicole to take hold. Once inside her mind, he found nothing to suggest she was anything other than what she claimed. Either someone had used her to take him off guard and draw him out of his home, or she had arrived just as everything began. As far as he was concerned, she was one of the good guys. And he'd protect her with everything he had.

The silhouettes of three people stood beyond the bars of the cage. Nobody spoke for at least a minute. Then one finally said something. *"Which of you is the dragon?"*

Domenici placed his hand on the side of Nicole's waist to steady her. "Who wants to know?"

"Just thought we'd keep it civilized. You know who we are. People. Unlike you, and people who consort with you. Animals."

"And proud of it," Domenici answered, his voice level and calm. "Let the woman go. Why did you want her?"

"We didn't." A female voice this time. The owner of the voice stepped forward, under the muted light. Blonde hair with darkly tanned skin, full breasts, and a tall form. He smiled grimly. Just his type, if what he said in the press was anything to go by. They'd taken a pattern and made it real.

The woman gave Domenici a contemptuous stare. "You were supposed to have me. Then I would have knocked you out in your bed. But the car worked too."

"Yes, it did. So let the woman go now, before we go any further. She knows nothing."

He squeezed Nicole's waist when she took a breath. *"Do me a favor and act dumb, okay? We might be able to get you out of here that way."*

She sighed, but she agreed. *"I'll do my best. Should I call the cops if I get out?"*

"Do what you think is best."

Someone stepped forward, keys jingling from his belt. No doubt taunting them. A small hatch opened at the side of the cage, and someone shoved in a tray. "Food and drink. And a lubricant and condoms."

Lubricant? Condoms?

"No." Domenici knew what they wanted, and he wouldn't do it.

"I guarantee the food and drink isn't tainted. Besides, some of you deviants can tell. Use the condoms. We don't want any chance of you reproducing. Strip and shape-shift. Then fuck. You do that; we let the woman go."

"No."

"You say no once more, and we'll kill her. We can find another woman -- or man, if you prefer. But most of you dragons prefer maidens, don't you?" The woman glanced sideways at the men, and they sniggered. "Hard to find virgins, so you'll have to make do with this woman."

"Leave us to talk."

"Sure. You have twenty minutes."

The woman's flat tones invited no argument, no dissension, and he knew he had little choice. He had to stall until the team got there, and this seemed to be the only way.

Without warning, the blinding lights *thunked* on again. Nicole hid her face in her arms.

His arms went around her. He ached for her distress. "I'm sorry. You walked into a scene you weren't supposed to have anything to do with. And I thought you were..."

She lifted her head, slitting her eyes against the light. "You thought I was her. I'm not even blonde. And I'm certainly not stacked like her."

"I know who I'd rather have in this cage."

She gave a mirthless laugh. "Well, gee, thanks."

"No, it's not you. I want her. So I can beat her senseless for doing this to you." He tightened his grip around her. "I'm so sorry."

"Say that after you've taken me to dinner at the most expensive restaurant in Sicily. Oh yes, and posed for pictures outside."

It was his turn to laugh, though his had more humor. "I promise. I owe you, Nicole. Big time." He met her eyes, decided to tell her the truth. "I thought you were the bait, sent to get inside my house to take me. I'll do everything I can to get you out." He paused. "Sane."

"That will be difficult, the way things are going. So tell me. Start with what they think you are."

Domenici switched to telepathy, so naturally that Nicole nearly missed the change. But his voice sounded in her head now and not outside it. *"Listen, just listen. I'll answer all your questions, prove it to you if I must. I'm a dragon shape-shifter. These people want proof of that. They know I won't do it to order because of the cameras. My people have remained hidden for centuries, and we're not about to dance for the cameras now."*

She left her other questions for the one that had really puzzled her. *"So why the lubricant?"*

Anxiety shadowed his eyes. *"Because they think we need it. They want me to show my form, and sometimes during sex, I do that. Not always. They're bigots; you got that bit right. All they want is to kill me and everybody like me."*

"Why?"

"Because they're scared. Dragons have been persecuted for nearly all our existence. That's why we just went underground. We call ourselves Talents, because there aren't just dragons."

"Unicorns?" It was the first creature she could think of, but also the one she'd loved in her childhood. All her My Little Ponies had unicorn horns. She wanted unicorns.

"Sure, but they're rare. There are more dragons."

But she wasn't a child anymore, and she'd stopped believing in dragons years ago. *"Am I supposed to believe this?"*

"If you don't, what you see after this will drive you mad. Accept it, Nicole, or at least accept the possibility. Please try."

"I used to love Alice in Wonderland."

He growled softly against her hair. *"Whatever gets you through this. We might have to do some of what they want."*

"Strip and fuck?"

"Even that. But be sure I'll get you out of this, and none of the film will ever reach the public."

Startled, she sat up and winced when her sore shoulder hit his chin.

"Oh baby, I'm sorry. We'll cope with that too. I should have asked them for some lotion."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does." Even now his consideration moved her.

He remained silent behind her, allowing her time to think. For the first time, she tried contacting him telepathically, but she couldn't. It was as ephemeral as when she'd tried to do it at school, along with a bunch of psychic experiments that either didn't work or scared the shit out of everybody. The Ouija board was the worst. But she didn't need one of those to communicate with the big man sitting with his legs outside her body, his arms around her waist in a protective pose that won her heart. *"Can we pretend?"*

"Yes, we could. I'll pretend if you want to. Just to win us some time."

She sighed. *"No. That increases the danger, doesn't it?"*

"My guess is that they want something more sensational they can put online. They've tried showing shape-shifters changing form, but nobody took much notice; they put it down to special effects or camera trickery. But what they want us to do would freak you out far too much."

She realized she didn't know what language they were speaking, English or Italian. Perhaps there was another language, a kind of mind-speak.

He read that too. *"Something like that. Don't worry about it. You've been plunged into this, Nicole, and you don't deserve to lose."*

She didn't want to behave like a wuss. *"Just do what you have to do."*

A pause followed, but he interrupted it. His heavy sigh ruffled her hair.

He didn't laugh or try to lighten the atmosphere. Instead he began to tell her things she found hard to believe, but her new resolution reminded her. *"I'll just accept. For now, I'll accept and believe I'm going to get out of this."*

"Listen to me. Believe this for now, if it helps. We'll sort it out later, but we need to string them along until my team gets here. I lost contact with the person tracking me sometime when I was unconscious, but they will find us."

"You have a team?"

"They're on their way. A long time ago, Talents like us, shape-shifters, vampires, and other beings, decided to go underground and not to tell humans about us. Humans outnumber every other humanoid by a thousand to one. Probably more. For obvious reasons, nobody's ever worked it out on a census. We're just different. So we have organizations to help us stay hidden and places we can go."

She caught on one word. *"Vampires?"*

"Yeah. Just go with it for now. One of the reasons we decided not to announce our existence is the organization that has us now. I told you about them, the PHR. Purists, racists, bigots, whatever. They've killed many Talents, and they've only gotten better at it. But we're not taking it; we're fighting back."

"So why don't you just come out?"

"What, and fight all those battles too? Get recognition, rights, go for all the things we already have?" He snorted. *"Sure. But as long as the majority wants it, we stay quiet. You've probably walked past a dragon or a vampire many times in the street and just not known. We don't look any different."*

Nicole unsuccessfully tried to hide her appreciation of how different he looked.

"Thanks for that."

Her turn to snort.

"You have a strong psychic barrier, and I thought that meant you'd been trained to resist telepathic probes, but you just asked for an interview on the wrong day, didn't you?"

She recalled the beginning of the day, when Gary had called her and suggested the sunburn ploy. "It's going to be a good day for you to try that. Not hot enough to burn, but you should pink up nicely. Go for it, Nicole." So it hadn't been entirely her choice.

"I only broke through your barrier a little, so I can be sure nobody is overhearing us now. I'm talking to you deeper down than we usually use. We all have an outer mind, where day-to-day exchanges take place. Telepathic conversations, and our sigil -- the identification symbol we all carry -- is there too."

"Where's yours?"

"I keep it hidden most of the time, but here it is."

And blazing through her mind came the perfect image of a red and black dragon, its tail curved under its body like a swirling flourish to a signature. She closed her eyes. *"That's beautiful."*

"Thank you."

Reality had to include men who turned into dragons, or who thought they did, and other people who thought they did too and hated them for it.

She'd seen some weird shit in her time, but nothing like this. And if she wrote this in the magazine, nobody would believe her.

"Do you think they'd really kill me if we don't do as they say?"

"In a heartbeat." Well, at least he wasn't trying to be kind. "They'd drop you in the ocean, fake a car accident, and nobody'd know any different."

That part she understood. She suspected that had happened in more than one celebrity scandal. Not that she'd assumed the people involved were shape-shifting dragons, of course. More like adulterers and thieves. Yes, they'd kill her and get away with it. *"What about you?"*

"They'd kill me anyway. Given the chance. Listen, there's a drug called Cephalox that stops us from shape-shifting. Our scientists developed it to stop the compulsory shift during surgery, or in other situations, but it's highly addictive and hallucinogenic in high doses. Usually they'd shoot me full of the shit as soon as they had me, but they haven't. Which means they want me to shape-shift. Equally, they're reasonably sure I can't escape this cage in my other form. I'm much stronger as a dragon, so these bars are laced with silver, which I'm allergic to. The pictures will burn up the Internet like you wouldn't believe. If it ever got that far. We have an operation in place, but we can't spring it yet." Another pause. *"A friend is coming, but he won't be here until sundown."*

They must have a plant, a double agent or whatever, here. This time Domenici didn't seem to pick up on her thought. Either that, or he refused to respond to it, to confirm or deny. *"So how many hours until nightfall?"*

"Around three."

"If we can spin it out for three hours, the sex is the thing?"

"Better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

"They inflict a mortal injury on you. Then I have to watch you die or convert you. That would suit them, but it's not as dramatic as the sex. And it's totally unacceptable to me."

She sat in the shelter of his arms and thought, and however she stacked it up, he had the answer. Shit. The journalist who was known for having some integrity, the one gossip journalist celebrities could trust, was about to violate her strongly stated words. If she fucked Domenici now, and some film did get out, everybody would know.

He picked up on that thought. *"They won't get the film out."*

"Shit, can you hear everything I think?"

"No. I told you, I only went down so far. I can show you how to delve further, to keep your inner thoughts private."

"They always used to be," she grumbled.

He laughed, and she felt him touch the top of her head in a kiss. *"When we get out of here, I owe you dinner."*

"At the best, the swankiest, the most expensive restaurant in town."

"I think that's pretty much a given."

"Oh well, at least I'll get a hot boyfriend out of this, if only for a little while."

"As long as it takes," he said, and yes, she knew what he meant. He wanted to show her all this...this topsy-turvy world she'd slipped into that had started with a short walk and a straight request for an interview. By rights, she should be sitting in some beachside café, enjoying a spot of local cuisine. Not as expensive or as exclusive as the ones Domenici wanted to take her to, but damn, she'd swap the experience without thinking about it. Back to her safe little world where all she had to worry about was if she still had a job. Small potatoes next to this swamp of shit.

Even if she had to lose the experience of sleeping with a man who could make her come inside and out.

That was the worst bit.

Not that she had the choice.

Chapter Five

She moved, and he released her, but she wanted to see him. He linked his arms around her waist, loosely, so she could break away any moment she chose to. "Okay. Let's do it."

He bent forward and touched his mouth to hers in a gentle kiss. "Okay." *"I swear we'll destroy all the film. And we'll start out human. I'll do a slight shape-shift, nothing more. If you get scared or repulsed, I'll stop, and we'll deal with it some other way."*

"It's okay." Although it wasn't. It really wasn't.

"Let's get some of that food, hey?"

"Won't it be drugged?"

"Only with aphrodisiacs." He leaned forward and snagged the edge of the tray, then pulled it toward him. "You missed your dinner, so you need to get some food inside you."

"I'm not hungry." The headache had eliminated her hunger pangs. At least she thought so until he lifted the lid of a dish and discovered a beautifully arranged fresh fruit salad. He picked up a fork and speared a piece of pineapple, but instead of eating it himself, he held it out to her. "Try."

His uncompromising command held no room for denial in it, so she opened her mouth and let him feed her. The pineapple tasted good. "Are you sure you weren't joking about the aphrodisiacs?"

"Maybe. But I don't think they'd drug the food. They want us fit, for now anyway. And this food is made for food sex." He pulled a jug full of chocolate sauce toward them, then looked at her and waggled his eyebrows comically.

Nicole was surprised to discover she could still laugh.

Before she realized it, she'd eaten most of the salad and managed a sandwich too. After the first few bites, her appetite returned, and she was too hungry to want to play with her

food. Although the thought of Domenici's beautiful cock adorned with chocolate sauce did make her wonder if she had room for dessert.

"Maybe another time," he murmured, his breath hot against her skin. She hoped so.

She took her time once she'd sated her appetite, knowing they needed to kill three hours. Although "kill" probably wasn't the right word to use, considering the circumstances.

They both ate. Then he lay down and drew her down with him. "Sleep for a while. You still have the remnants of that gas coursing through you. I'll stay awake and watch over you."

"But I thought --"

"Delay -- let's use this too. I promise I'll stay awake, keep you safe."

Nicole was convinced that nothing could make her sleep, but she felt his presence in her mind, like his arms around her, soothing her to sleep. She fell asleep feeling like a pampered cat.

* * * * *

When she awoke for the second time in the cage, she knew they weren't alone. She felt it, the creeping feeling along her spine. But when she stirred, he held her in place and entered her mind. She found it disturbing, how quickly she'd accepted his presence there. *"They're waiting for us to wake up. I've not been asleep at all, but I pretended I was. And even if they have sensitives, they won't be able to penetrate that silver barrier easily. I'll know the instant anyone enters my mind. You're safe, piccola."*

Strangely, she felt safe. It was completely insane, considering they'd been snatched and their captors had already threatened to kill her, something Domenici certainly took seriously. Because he'd known it before. What kind of life did he live?

"Hush, baby."

"I'm not a baby, and I'm in deep shit here. They want to kill me as well as you."

Even inside her head, his voice turned grim. *"They won't."*

"Not without a fight anyway." No way would she die without fighting back first.

Someone outside the cage cleared his throat. Nicole had her face buried in his shoulder, but she heard the *clunk* when they turned the glaring lights off. "Time to party."

She heard the tray scrape as someone removed it. She didn't move until a shrill whistle blast jerked her out of his hold.

"That's better," the shadowed figure behind the bars said. "Now give us a show. Don't forget to smile for the camera."

A line of chairs stood behind the bars of the cage, and as she watched, figures filed in and took their seats. One person crossed his legs. At least she thought it was a he. It was hard to tell, since the slim black pants were pretty much a uniform, it seemed. She had no problem guessing what they were doing there. She was to perform for them.

Could she do this? She had no choice. Well, yes, she did. Do this or die. They didn't have to repeat the threat for her to understand it. If these deluded fucks wanted to see a show, then they'd see one.

"One thing. I'll do a partial shift, but I'm still me. Believe me; I would never hurt you. Never. Understand?"

"Sure."

Well, if it was a choice between dying of sex and dying of a bullet, she knew which one she'd choose.

Sadly, the soft dress he'd given her was now crumpled and soiled from lying on the concrete floor. She realized he'd supported her while she slept; by holding her, he'd spared her the worst of the floor. But she still mourned the dress. Not for long.

"Let's get this done." She came up onto her knees and undid the sash around her waist. She felt it drawn out of her hands, but she didn't look. Instead, she kept her eyes on the audience, the six people she could only see in shadow. She couldn't even be sure if they were male or female, except for the one man who spoke to them. In Italian.

Domenici's hands gripped her hips. "Are you sure, cara?"

She wouldn't take her gaze from their tormentors. "Oh yes. I'm sure." *"How long until sundown? Until your man gets here?"*

"About half an hour, as far as I can tell." He paused, and she knew he was holding out on her. Whoever he was protecting would know to the minute, to the *second* when sundown occurred. She picked that up before he tucked his thoughts away, and she wondered at it. Why the precise timing?

God, she hoped she was right. She hoped she was on the right side and that she wasn't in the cage with a complete nutjob while the doctors calmly sat outside and observed.

Without allowing herself another minute to think, she grasped the hem of the dress and tugged it over her head.

She was completely naked underneath.

She forced herself to stare at the people she could see dimly. Her audience. Bastards. And maybe she could make one of them look away. With a *clunk*, the floodlights came back on. Her spotlights.

"I'll handle this." Hot hands gripped her hips, and when he pressed his body to hers, she felt the whole length of his buff, naked body press against her back. His erect body.

"Wanna bet?" She squirmed against him, deliberately rubbing herself against his cock. It felt so hot, so hard; her mouth watered to taste it. She leaned back against him and heard his low groan, a surge of triumph going through her at the sound.

He kissed her neck, his tongue flicking out to taste her. His chest hairs tickled her back. All her nerve endings prickled with awareness, the danger adding an excitement of its own. She must be sick to think that way.

“No, baby, you’re not. Excitement, fear... It spikes adrenaline. Take it, use it, channel it.”

She leaned back so her head lay on his shoulder and she could see his face. “Let’s give them a show, big boy.”

“Sure thing.” He spoke English now. American English to be precise. With a Midwestern accent. It sounded as natural as Hugh Laurie’s, with a different twist.

“You’re American?”

“I was, once. I’ve been around a long time, and I’ve had time to blend with the natives.”

“I like the Italian accent.”

Immediately he reverted to the Italian-accented English she found so sexy. “Italian was the way I originally spoke, but some of us are natural mimics.” He touched the pulse point at the base of her throat with his tongue, and she gasped at the burst of sensation that fractured through her body. “You’re very sensitive.”

“It’s the way you touch me.”

“No, I think it’s more.” He reverted to telepathy. *“You like this, don’t you? Something about this turns you on. You’re popping like a firecracker.”*

“No, it’s you.” A couple of hours before, she wouldn’t have dreamed of telling him this, but now she couldn’t see it as any other answer. It had to be. Otherwise she was a plain pervert.

“So what’s perverted about enjoying something a bit different? Go with it, cara. Give in to the feeling, and don’t ever censor yourself.”

Censor? Was that what she was doing?

Every time he touched and caressed her, she felt him more than any other lover, but when she thought of their audience and the cameras, her feelings spiked. She still wasn’t sure if the heat coursing through her was embarrassment or a turn-on like she’d never known before. And she was beginning not to care. It just felt so good.

He pulled her back so she sat on his tightly closed thighs. “Let go, relax.”

Relaxing wasn’t something she thought she could do right this minute, but she took a deep breath and let go, opening her legs wider so she could straddle him. Still facing the now invisible but definitely there audience members, she lifted her head from his shoulder and imagined them just beyond those bright lights, legs crossed, or maybe tightly gripping erections and pussies, her presence the turn-on they needed. Wanted.

She controlled them and their reactions. She pressed her pussy down onto his thighs, feeling her juices escape and seep down onto his legs. He groaned. “Oh God, you’re hot and wet; I want you.”

“Now?”

“Oh yeah. I have no problem with an audience.” At the reminder, a gush of hot liquid escaped from her.

He slid one hand from her hip onto her stomach, widening his fingers to encompass all the flesh he could. She felt small, possessed, and she loved it because she knew she controlled this. If she told him to stop, he’d do it, whatever state of tumescence he’d reached, however desperate he was to take her.

But then, they’d kill her because she wasn’t any further use to them. She believed that much. No, she accepted it. Accepted it all, but she didn’t want to think about it now. Except that it sent heat spiking through her. Sick or not, the thought of all those people watching her, seeing her flaunt her naked body, burned through her, made her want to do more.

He gripped her stomach, pulled her hard against him so his cock lined the cleft of her ass, pushing the muscles of her anus apart. Anal play had never interested her before. Tried it once, didn’t like it. But now, she felt her muscles relax in preparation for him.

Perhaps they had put aphrodisiacs in the food after all, because she’d never felt like this before, never so uninhibited, never so free. He’d told her to go with it. Okay, that sounded good to her right now. His hand went lower, slid between her legs, and she put her head back and groaned. Lifting one of her own hands, she cupped her breast, pulled at the nipple, and then stilled. What would this look like to her audience? Maybe they’d like more. Maybe she’d give it to them.

Domenici slid his fingers through her cleft, and then he thumbed her clit. Shudders racked her, but she held back. She cupped her other breast, holding both of them as if in offering to the people on the other side of the bars. When she glanced up, she caught the movement when one of the cameras followed her hand. Deliberately, she smiled at it. *“There you go, boys. Take a good look.”*

Her partner tugged her clit, exposing all the nerves to his touch, and she temporarily forgot the cameras, forgot the watchers. Nothing existed but this beautiful man, making her feel like she was all that mattered to him.

“Right now, you are.”

His words rocketed her into the stratosphere. She adored this; she knew it. The spiking tension only added to her pleasure. *“Where did you learn to do that?”*

“Every woman is different; each one has her own special place. I don’t think I’ve found yours yet, but I’m getting close, aren’t I?”

He switched back to speech, and when she heard his words, she understood why. “Want more than one, baby? Want man after man to enjoy you, to take you? Or maybe you just want to show them what you can do, what you give to me, and what they can’t have.”

That was it. She felt her juices flow out of her, and he groaned once more. “Widen those beautiful thighs. Show them what you’ve got. Exactly what they can’t have.”

Hair shielded her pussy, but not a lot of it. A severe bikini wax reduced her curls to a narrow strip at the front, so when she opened her legs and leaned back, the observers could see it all. The pink inner lips, the pinker flushed secret heart of her, and the darkened recesses, which weren't for sale or for hire. Hers. Under it, she felt his balls, bulging against her opening, and his cock rigidly straining against her ass.

She wanted him, but the wanting was in itself exquisite and excruciating at the same time. "Oh God, fuck me," she murmured.

"Louder, so the camera can hear you," came a dispassionate voice from the dark behind the lights, but Nicole heard a tremble in that voice, very slight but there. She was getting to him.

She ignored him. But Domenici chose that moment to drive a finger deep inside her. Without warning, she gasped and felt an orgasm ripple through her. She gripped her breasts until he made a soothing sound and licked her neck. "My little firecracker. So good."

Her backbone tightened and she lifted off him but didn't dislodge him.

He continued to croon to her, louder than she'd whispered to him. "So beautiful, so hot. Feel me, baby. Think of those people you're driving mad wanting you. But they can't have you, can they?"

"Noooo!" The word ended in a high-pitched scream, short and hard, as the waves rippled through her. "Dear God, Domenici, make me come properly!" Because each surge took her part of the way, but however much she strained against him, he wouldn't plunge too deeply inside and bring her to a complete climax. She knew he could. He'd given her orgasms earlier. Why not now?

"Because we've only just started." The words reminded her why they were there, but it was too late. Nothing could stop the heat now bursting inside her in little sparkles, like those packs of Pop Rocks she used to eat when she was a kid.

His fingers slid out of her, and he brought them up to the light. She watched, mesmerized, as they gleamed in the light, and a trickle of clear liquid coursed down the side of his hand. He brought it to his mouth and licked it off, making a sound of appreciation deep in his throat like a man consuming a particularly succulent morsel. Then he licked the side of her neck with the flat of his tongue, broadly sweeping it up to her ear. He lingered to nibble. "Domenici, please, please!" She pinched her nipples until they hurt, but she found no relief. Only he could give her that.

Without warning, he lifted her off him and turned her around to face him. She stared down. His legs were matted with dark hairs that were soaked with her essence. "I may never wash again." His dark eyes flashed fire.

No, it wasn't her imagination. They really did. His dark brown eyes had gained a rim, dark red, gleaming with intent. She knew she'd never seen that edge of fire in his eyes before.

"I'm letting the dragon out," he murmured, so quietly. But it didn't matter if anyone heard. That was what he was supposed to do.

He reached for her, and she went to him without hesitation. Whatever he was, she felt safe with him. Safer than outside, somewhere without him.

That annoying throat-clearing sound again. She'd heard it before. Of course she had. About ten minutes ago when they entered the room. It sounded more like a nervous tic than a real throat problem. But Domenici didn't give her any more time; he drew her close so his lips brushed hers. But he didn't kiss her. In her mind, she heard him. *"Kisses are for us alone. Not for show."*

She understood. He wanted to keep something private. As long as they showed everything else, that was.

He jerked her close so her breasts crushed against his chest, giving her some relief. But not enough. "Open your legs."

She straddled him, never looking away from his eyes, sparking fire at her. She blinked, a long, slow blink, and he laughed. "Witch." When he lifted her, she used her knees to rise up above him and at last -- at last! -- he used one hand to guide his cock to her entrance.

"Say my name."

"Dom-en-ici!" On the last syllable he drove inside her, pushing until his balls met her body, relentlessly taking her. Her scream rose inside her, outside her, hard in her body. He lifted her and dropped her back onto him, flexing harder, longer. His long groan reverberated through her, his hands gripped her harder, tighter, until she couldn't breathe. But that was okay too. Ripples turned to waves, traveling up her spine and bursting through to her head.

Warm, hard skin snaked around her waist, holding her safely, while she rode the waves. She'd never come this fast before, didn't think it possible before she'd met Domenici. His hands tweaked her nipples, the shots of light pain adding to her fierce joy.

Wait. When she looked down, she saw his hands on her nipples, his clever fingers working the hard tips to points. But when she leaned back, she felt him. She swallowed and looked farther.

A long, curving snake of scaly skin encircled her waist, but it felt warm, and it was beautiful. Black scales, gleaming red in the light touched her, stroked her. "Nicole, look at me."

"I am looking at you."

"Don't be afraid."

She lifted her eyes then to meet his anxious gaze. "I'm not." And amazingly, she wasn't. "What is that?"

He gave a one-sided grin. "My tail."

He shifted them both so they were side-on to the onlookers. From there, they might get glimpses of his cock deep inside her but not the grandstand view they'd had to start. Anxiety shadowed his eyes as he watched her. She felt the anxiety in his mind too, just a touch, and she knew why. He was afraid she'd freak out, afraid she'd reject him. And not because of the operation or whatever the hell this was.

Because he cared about her reaction to his shape-shift.

She thought it was weirdly fantastic. He was still Domenici. She felt his personality, his mind, strong in hers, and she also felt his courage. He was facing her rejection, and he had enough respect for her that he didn't hide the truth.

Watching her carefully, he shimmered. That was the only way to describe it. His skin shimmered black, scales clearly delineated on the markings, each scale edged with red. The red gleamed, like some primeval ruby.

"Cool," she murmured, almost forgetting his hotness in the amazing effect, but when he moved inside her, he shot her straight back.

She nearly jerked back when she heard a new voice in her head. *"I jammed the recording. You had one live link, but I don't think any of it got through. You're only performing for the present audience."* Male, but a different accent, one she wasn't familiar with, but she liked the gentle lilt.

Sunset.

When she felt Domenici's mind relax, just as if he'd sighed in relief, she realized this must be another Talent and one he recognized. The vampire. Vampire? What the fuck?

Domenici's voice came clear and strong. *"His powers are here. And unlike me, he's not allergic to silver."*

She was too far gone now to worry about anything except what he was doing to her. *"Can we just finish this first?"*

There was nothing telepathic about his sudden, fierce hug and subsequent drive deep into her. He lifted his hands to her breasts again, leaning forward into her so they didn't overbalance. "I love these. I could fondle them all day."

"Play your cards right, and I might let you."

Her laugh ricocheted back at her when her vaginal muscles clenched around him, and he cried out. His tail still held them together firmly, and he brought his mouth to her nipple to bite and suck. The nip he took before he drew the tightly furled tip into his mouth sent her over the edge, the extra tweak of sensation forcing her to a swift, hard orgasm that left her body devastated, racked with pleasure. Her scream could have raised the dead.

Her head tipped forward, and she rested her forehead against his shoulder. She trembled, and for a precious moment, she felt him close and warm, holding her. Sometime during her orgasm he'd retracted his tail, and now his arms held her. She wanted to stay there for a good long time. Then she wanted to do it again.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” Although her voice was a little thready, it was still there. His hands caressed her back, and only then did she remember her sunburn, when he skimmed over the sore area. All through the wonderful sex, she’d only been aware of one thing -- pleasing and being pleased, exchanging pleasure.

Amazing what good sex could do. It could even cure sunburn. Or at least take her mind off it for a while.

He snagged her dress and urged her to sit upright, so he could slip the silken sheath over her head. At the same time, he turned his head and confronted their audience. “That what you wanted?”

When he lifted her gently off him, she almost wailed at the loss of his body, and a flood of their juices escaped her. While normally she would rush for the bathroom, now she had no choice but to accept the mess, but the musky scent reminded her of what they’d done and made her long to do it again.

Shamefully. She’d just been forced to have sex in front of strangers. And yet her body had thrummed with excitement, such as she’d never known before. She’d enjoyed spreading her legs, taking him in, and knowing people were watching, and for all she knew, getting off on her performance. She found herself hoping so, even though the spectators were probably evil bastards intent on their deaths. It was a measure of her skill, nothing to do with them, in an odd way.

She felt him in her mind again, and it felt as if he wove a warm blanket around her thoughts, her arousal. *“Leave the forefront of your mind clear for the operation. If you don’t want anyone to share your thought, try to block it.”*

He was right. She didn’t want to share that with anyone. In fact, she felt sorry he’d found it, but her feelings had been so overwhelming she couldn’t have hidden them. *“I’m sorry.”*

“What for? You were spectacular, baby, and you won us the time we needed. Stand by now. Stick with me; we’re moving out of here.”

Chapter Six

With an ominous groan and a whine, one side of the cage began to grate upward. Nicole ignored her trembling limbs, a mixture of the great sex she'd just had and adrenaline from fear and anticipation. This could mean they meant to kill her. Or the undercover agent had succeeded.

When she saw four bodies slumped in chairs, two of them holding their hard-ons, she knew it was the latter.

She blinked, trying to clear the temporary blindness caused by the dazzling lights. She could only see silhouettes. Until she heard a soft growl behind her. More a muted roar than a growl.

Slowly, she turned around. The man who had fucked her so thoroughly had gone, replaced by the big, bad monster.

Black, glimmering red where the now-muted light hit him, a dragon crouched behind her. A real, live, honest-to-goodness dragon. Its feet ended in hooked black claws that could rend a person apart with one swipe; the eyes gleamed at her from a face creased with menace.

Those eyes gave her the greatest shock because, although changed in shape, they were still Domenici's eyes. She saw him behind the brutal facade and knew for sure he was real. It was real.

"Still a he."

"Can you -- oh forget it!"

"Yes, I can, but I don't. Not usually, anyway. Move forward. This cage beats at me. I want out of here."

The dragon or the vampire. A hell of a choice.

Before her stood a dark figure, holding a hand around the throat of the one remaining PHR member still alive. The PHR man's fly gaped open, but his dick lay flaccidly inside his pants, only held up by the button fastening. The dark figure -- a man with short, near-black hair and eyes that glittered in the gloom -- lifted his gaze to her face. She saw interest and admiration. Not what she thought she'd see. "Well done, little sister. You even got me going there." The low voice sounded more menacing than any she'd heard raised in anger.

"You killed these people?"

He spared a glance to the men in their chairs. "They won't be telling anyone that their last moments were pretty good ones." When his gaze returned to her, warmth entered the icy gray depths. "Very pleased to make your acquaintance, *caridad*. Follow us, do as you're told, and we'll get you out of here in no time."

She stepped out of the cage and moved away so the dragon could pass through. His scales quivered when he paced under the silver barrier, now held high in the air. "*I hate those things.*"

"You've been in one of those cages before?" Nicole asked.

"*Once or twice.*" His voice was harsh. Not something he'd choose to do, and yet she knew why. Situations like these, to save others.

"So what now?"

The vampire spoke. "Stay behind me." He glanced at the dragon. "Shape-shift and put some clothes on. We'll try getting to the computer room first."

"The team?"

"Two teams on their way. ETA thirty minutes. But as soon as this cell realizes these cameras are out, they'll send people down here. We need to be out of here, fast."

Startled, Nicole turned around to face the creature, only to find it gone and Domenici back. He was busy stripping one of the bodies and putting on the dead man's dark suit. It took him three minutes. She knew because she couldn't stop glancing at the clock above the doorway, a plain office model with black figures on a white background. She'd remember the way that clock ticked the seconds away until the day she died. Which might not be long now.

She choked down her fear. No time for that now.

She'd seen Domenici look better, but he'd pass. Rough stubble on his chin added to his sinister look, and since he usually went clean-shaven, might help to disguise his identity. Not everybody read the gossip magazines, but Nicole remembered her magazine's circulation and grimaced. If this place contained an office, it probably contained a copy of *Gossip* somewhere. And in it, there was a strong chance that somewhere there was a picture of Domenici attending a premiere or escorting yet another big-breasted celebrity to a party.

Dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, Domenici could pass as a bodyguard. Almost. But that wicked red ring still encircled his iris, and he was still the sexiest man she'd ever seen.

Events were happening so fast now, she was finding it hard to keep up. "Why did you need me? Why did you do this?"

"Later." Domenici turned her, not roughly, so she faced the door. "Now we need to get out of here."

She refused to move. "How come you're here?"

The vampire, although she hadn't seen any proof of that, met her gaze. Wasn't there something about meeting a vampire's eyes? Ah well, too late now. She had that overwhelming feeling that she wasn't there, that this was all a dream, but she had no choice now but to go with the flow. She trusted Domenici, man or dragon, so she had to trust his judgment and accept that this vampire -- *vampire!* -- was on their side.

This vampire had gray eyes, dark and extravagantly lashed. He opened his mouth and smiled, but she saw no irregularities about his teeth. Then he curled his upper lip up, in a way no human she'd ever seen could, and she saw two bumps at the tops of his upper eyeteeth. And from those buds crept two razor-sharp fangs, growing before her eyes.

Oh-kay, so he *was* a vampire.

The fangs disappeared, retracted into the buds. "I've been with this cell for months, but they're paranoid. It's taken this long to gain their confidence and discover the location of this place." He glanced at Domenici. "You didn't tell her about me."

"No."

With an exasperated "Tch!" the vampire turned away, but then turned back to her. "Then he didn't give you my name, either. I'm Rhodri Tryfanwy."

She smiled, and then he smiled back. This particular vampire had a smile that could dazzle. She'd bet he had a full social life. She nearly missed his next words. "And for the record, I would have switched places with Dom here in a heartbeat."

The heat rose under her skin, the flush she hadn't known once in that cage returning to bathe her in heat. Luckily, in this relatively dim light, they might not see it.

Behind her, Domenici growled. "Okay, I'm ready. What's the plan?"

"We're out of here now. We secure the computer center and then wait for reinforcements. When they realize we're not their captives any longer, they'll try to smoke us out, so we head there, set the copiers going, and hold out." He glanced at Nicole. "Any good with computers?"

"Some."

"If you can't do it, say so, and we'll find another way. Ready to roll?"

A grunt from Domenici was the only verbal response. Nicole, still stunned by the speed of the action, people alive then dead, public sex for God's sake, realized the only way she could cope was to go along with it, let it take her. Just as she did on particularly frantic premieres, a part of the job she hated because of all the yelling and rush on the journalists' side. But it was part of her job, and she willingly took part in it. This was just a particularly weird premiere; that was all.

Yeah, right. But it worked. Her tension subsided enough to make it possible for her to move. And to listen to instructions, something she knew would have to do if they were going to get out of this place alive.

So she followed Rhodri out of the door and into the unknown.

Outside lay a disappointingly bland hallway, but then, what did she expect? Something different. So many strange things had happened recently, an ordinary hallway came as something of a letdown. They didn't stay in it long. They took a door a bit farther up into a makeshift office. It appeared they were in a house because the remnants of a living room lay under the clutter, an empty fireplace, and a couple of pictures on the cable-festooned wall. The computers stood on cheap tables, put in the room where they would fit, with a selection of office chairs. The window was shuttered from the outside, and a central light bulb illuminated the room. She took quick stock while Domenici stationed himself by the door. "I'm on point. Where exactly are we, Rhodri?"

"A farmhouse on the mainland," he answered briefly. "You were out for around three hours. You came around; you did what you did."

"Which would make this around ten," Domenici said.

"More or less. Boot up the machines. I have flash drives and e-mail addresses. We need to empty the machines."

"Then we should set one to image, and the rest to get the relevant information. And I suggest we take the hard drives of one of the towers."

Domenici grunted. "They're often set to blow if they're moved, so we'll take what information we can off them first. Take the hard drive off one."

At least she knew her way around a computer. Nicole booted up the nearest laptop and moved on to another. Altogether there were two towers and four laptops in the room. She left one laptop and one tower closed down and plugged in thumb drives, hastily setting them to copy.

While the computers booted up, she grabbed a handy screwdriver off a nearby table and set to extracting the hard drive from a tower. It took her less than three minutes, and it didn't blow. When she stood, holding the hard drive up triumphantly in one hand, Rhodri, busy at the other computer, copying the data, murmured, "Way to go!" and held out a canvas backpack. "Use this." She dropped the hard drive in and turned to the laptop she'd booted up first.

An old, slow laptop. It would take forever to extract the information. "Tell me the address."

Rhodri rattled off a couple of e-mail addresses. Nicole got busy, plundering the laptop and sending information out. Rhodri got to his feet and grabbed the cold laptop, shoving it none too gently in the bag with the hard drive. "Bastards. Hey, can I take that over?"

"Better you come over here," Domenici said tersely. "We didn't hear an alarm, but I'm betting there was one. There's movement."

Nicole listened. Scurrying feet and a yell, sounding alarmingly close. "Break out the weapons!"

At the same time, Domenici lifted his head, as if sniffing the air. "They're here." He glanced at her. "Time's up. Nicole, get over here. We're going out. Rhodri, check the window."

Rhodri nodded and crossed to the window where he flicked up the blind. If Nicole had still been at the desk, she would have been right in front of it. And of the splinters of glass that burst into the room when the bullet hit it.

"Shit! Down!" She didn't need anyone to tell her twice. She flattened herself on the hard industrial carpet that covered the floor, wrinkling her nose at the smell of mold and age. Not that she planned to take her face away from it anytime soon.

Explosions came from outside and the men glanced at each other, then at Nicole. "Remember what I said, Nicole. Stick with us."

"Here." Rhodri tossed something onto the floor that landed on the carpet with a soft *thump*. "Can you use this?"

She turned her head. A gun. It gleamed blackly at her. "Yes, I've done some target practice."

"Don't bother to aim too carefully."

She felt Domenici's eyes on her when she picked up the weapon and checked the loading. Locked and loaded, a round chambered, and being a Glock, that meant it was ready to go. She wasn't really familiar with any other weapon, but her father had kept a Glock in the house and made sure the family knew how to use it. She glanced up at Domenici, and he nodded. Anything less like the glamorous man who had friends in the A-list was hard to imagine, but a hard core of integrity ensured she would never take this man for granted, whatever he looked like. That was the reason she chose to trust him and Rhodri instead of their enemies. She'd always relied on her instinct; it made the difference between a good story and a headliner. She still thought if she'd broken the story about Courtney, it wouldn't have done her career any good in the long run, but Courtney was an operator, and she could have been lying. Except she wasn't. Any more than Domenici and Rhodri were now.

"Come to me," Domenici ordered. "We're moving."

As he said it, the door to the room burst open, and Nicole met the eyes of the craziest person she'd ever seen. Wide, bloodshot, and staring, the eyes belonged to a man who looked equally demented, his hair straggling out from a ponytail, his face streaked with dirt, and his mouth open.

"You should be dead!" He pointed his weapon at her, a bigger, more badass version of the one she held.

Somehow it came easy. She lifted the Glock and just made sure it was pointing the right way before she pulled the trigger. The man screamed and fell to the floor. Nicole got to her feet, surprised to find her trembling had gone, although her arms thrummed with the recoil from the firearm.

Rhodri leaned forward and picked up the gun her opponent had aimed at her. Because she hadn't aimed, she had the edge on him. A useful lesson. Rhodri pocketed the gun. "H and K. Fancy."

"A bullet is a bullet, whatever the gun firing it."

"Yeah."

She saw rather than heard his answer, because by then, chaos had erupted. She had enough sense to roll away from the door opening, ending lying to one side of Domenici. She scrambled to her feet.

When the next explosion came, she heard Domenici's voice in her mind. "*Grab the backpack and let's go!*" The bag lay close to her so she shoved one arm through a strap and hoisted it onto her back. Only then did the sunburn remind her of its presence, but she ignored it and kept her mind open. That was becoming easier for her to do as she became aware of the layers in her mind as never before. "*Keep between us. Your job is to guard the backpack.*"

She sent an affirmative, and as Rhodri shot through the door, laying down covering fire, Domenici darted through it, and she watched the scales ripple over his body. He shape-shifted. If she hadn't seen the dragon before, she might have stopped and stared, but every fiber she possessed was intent on doing this right and getting out of there alive. Nothing else mattered. Not now, or rather, not yet.

Domenici stayed man sized but a dragon. The clothes, donned so short a time before, tore off his body or hung in tattered rags when his body shape changed to the bulkier dragon form. And he was still beautiful. A tinge of amusement touched her mind before it disappeared.

Behind them, Rhodri growled, a sound more animal than human, but for all that, Nicole felt safer there with them.

Domenici raced down the hallway, away from the sounds of shouting and curses, toward a small door at the end. Nicole followed, the adrenaline still surging through her system, giving her feet wings, making the backpack, weighted with a hard drive and laptop,

lighter than air. The comedown from this would be horrendous. She only hoped she'd be alive to feel it.

The dragon hurled himself at the door and then through it as if it were made of paper, which it assuredly wasn't. The old oak door, a couple of inches thick, shattered like a glass pane. Splinters whistled past, but she wasn't about to stop now. She hurtled through, followed by the vampire.

They landed in an untidy heap in the grass, and Nicole became aware of yells and shots. One pinged off the ground at her feet.

Domenici's answer was a roar of fury. He rose behind her. And kept on rising until he grew to a monster around ten feet high. Nicole gasped and shrank back, fear rushing in on her as if all she held back threatened to overwhelm her.

Behind her, Rhodri's reaction was entirely different. "No need, Dom. Shape-shift back and I'll flash us out of here. I just got the word to evacuate. That whole building's going to blow."

This time she watched the dragon change back into Domenici. The creature shrank, changing as it did into the tanned, wholly gorgeous, if filthy, Domenici. She'd never seen Domenici Serafino less than immaculate, but that all changed now. A small revelation in a day of big ones, this one somehow stuck with her. He looked as gorgeous tousled and grimy as he did immaculate.

And naked. Very few sights compared to that. And she'd seen every video of every celebrity ever released on the Internet.

In the middle of hell-broken-loose, when any moment a bullet could rip through either one of them, they exchanged a look of pure lust.

Mad. She was completely mad. Either that or this was a nightmare she'd wake from any minute.

Chapter Seven

Domenici didn't bother to announce his presence. The discreet building close to the Vatican held only a jewelry factory and warehouse, but he passed through the exterior offices without pause. Only when he reached the entrance to the factory part of the building did he turn aside and press his hand against the scanner that silently slid out of the wall. He bent to peer into the iris scanner. Modern technology, the old ones said, couldn't compare with psi abilities, but Domenici begged to differ. A combination of both was even better.

Not that he worried about technology today, at least, not that part of it. He strode through the new suite of offices that opened before him, not looking to either side, feeling the tingle that came when many people with psi abilities gathered together. The stimulation perversely soothed him, made him remember he wasn't on his own. Something he found it hard to be sure of sometimes after so long on his own.

He slammed into the conference room, finding the team already there. Kai Murdoch -- his long silver hair confined in a ponytail, his blue eyes calm and hard -- dressed in something expensive and discreet. Much like the suit Domenici himself wore. Rhodri Tryfanwy, in jeans and pale blue polo shirt, had his feet propped up on the glass conference table, two cups of coffee before him, one empty, one steaming, a camera and guidebook by his side. Bryn Murchison, who used to be Kai's lover and was now engaged to Crystal, who currently sat on the other side of the table, although to Domenici it didn't look as if that caused either of the mermen problems.

And Esti Hart, prim and perfect, blonde hair glossy and perfectly styled, feet tucked primly under the table. Esti used to drive Domenici mad, because he knew passion lay under that icy exterior. Sorcerers learned from an early age to keep their emotions under severe control. Esti was that rare thing, a virgin Sorcerer, so she never let go, never unwound. As far as Domenici knew, she wore her business suits all year, all day, and probably only took them

off to change into the flannel nightgowns she must use at night. Not that he'd ever seen them. But he knew they existed.

It was Esti he addressed now. "Did she resist the mind-wipe?"

Esti nodded. "Nicole was a difficult subject. It took some time to ease her barrier down far enough for me to plant the false memories."

He hated the prim, emotionless tone. He'd insisted on being present when the Sorcerer examined Nicole and reconditioned her memories, even if it was the other side of a thick sheet of glass. Although he'd protested the decision, they claimed he was too close to her to be rational. He'd already said he didn't want to continue with her permanently, so they'd insisted on the change. At least he'd made Esti modify her conditioning from the painful excision to a less agonizing modification, but he wanted to tear her throat out now. Or his own, for denying Nicole.

Now, Domenici took a seat next to Kai and reached for the insulated coffeepot and a clean mug, forcing himself to remain as calm as he could manage. He poured himself a dose of the powerful Italian coffee and ignored the cream jug that Kai pushed across to him.

"She thinks what happened to her was a dream," Esti said. "Too many people know about us as it is. We have to be more careful who we trust."

"A dream?"

He didn't turn around. He knew who had entered. Viviana Rossetti, who ran the Rome office of Department 57. Always the same, a woman supremely confident and aware, with an air of such superiority that few people had pierced the skin to the woman underneath. Domenici was one of them and counted Viviana a friend. Outside the office. She had discovered him, brought him in, made him realize he wasn't a lone freak but part of a community. For that, he'd always be grateful to her, but today he was mad.

Esti gave Viviana a cool nod, which was returned. "She's rationalized it as such."

"Then we are safe."

"And that's all you're concerned about?"

Viviana took her time walking to the head of the table, hips swaying slightly under her slim pencil skirt, enough to remind everyone of her essential femininity, not enough to suggest anything else. Tantalizing. Domenici had seen her use this many times before, but he thought it was because she found the tactic natural to her essential nature. Lucky the man -- or Talent -- who managed to interest her. He'd not even tried. Their friendship was enough for him, though at one time...

Come to think of it, this was the first time he'd looked at Viviana without her inherent sexuality calling to him.

Right now, he found her decidedly cool and thought of what Nicole, an innocent bystander, had gone through for him and with him. All she had to show for it was a second-string story for her magazine and an afternoon of shared pleasure.

His groin tightened at the remembrance. He wanted more, although he shouldn't. She already had vague memories she thought of as dreams. Any further exposure could confirm the reality for her.

Viviana regarded him, a small crease between her perfectly plucked black brows, pencil thin and elegant, arching over her dark, expressive eyes. "Should we be concerned about anything else?" She opened the folder Bryn pushed over to her and glanced at the papers inside. "It seems you've succeeded in your mission and closed down the cell. How many prisoners?"

"Four." Rhodri glanced up at him. This being daylight, Rhodri was human, but he still had a strong presence, still filled a room with vitality. He grinned. "Today I'm a tourist. I'm going out of here and taking all the pictures of St. Peter's that the place will stand."

"Drawing fire?"

"Something like that. They saw me, may have me on their cameras. This will find out if they do. Esti is tracking me. If anyone recognizes me, we'll know I'm blown."

"We're closing this operation down after that check," Bryn said. "Good work, all of you. Nice, fast, and clean, just as we like it."

"Typical," Kai grumbled. Although English, his Italian was excellent. "I arrange to work on one of the most boring projects of my career just so I can take part in this takedown, and I arrive when the action is over. I'm working on a housing project in the City area. Nothing much I can add to it." Kai worked as an architect with particular interest in making buildings as environmentally friendly as possible. As a merman, he'd been one of the first to see what damage was happening underwater, and he'd done his best to alleviate it. But he did enjoy his work for Dept. 57, and his grumble was 100 percent genuine.

Domenici gave him some hope. "If we only caught four, we didn't get them all."

"Probably not." Bryn glanced at Kai and grinned, reverting to English. "Sorry, pal, but we're closing this down. The facility's in our control, we have the hardware, and although we missed at least two, we'll get them next time."

The PHR operated in cells, each of which had two "daisies," the link to another cell, daisy-chain-style. Apart from the daisies, the cells were run on a need-to-know basis that meant they had to be closed down cell by cell. The daisies were vital for catching the next in the chain.

"Sure this isn't so you can start your honeymoon, Bryn?"

Bryn shot him a smile. "You know better than that, Dom. But yeah, we're hoping to get away soon."

"Drop by the office before you go home. I might have something for you."

"Thanks."

Domenici liked Bryn, enjoyed his company. Although he didn't know Crystal Miller very well, the fact that Bryn had chosen her and Kai approved worked well for him. He

wished the couple well, without once wishing he was in Bryn's place. Kai must feel the same, because he'd walked away from the relationship. For all Domenici knew, he could have stayed and they would have become a threesome. But Kai had never remained anywhere very long. If he'd been gay, Domenici had the feeling he and Kai could have forged something pleasurable to them both. Solitary individuals, coming together when they wanted to.

He was used to that, not the communing of two spirits that had disorientated and disturbed him on that one afternoon with Nicole. Best avoided and definitely not for him. At least, that was what he kept telling himself.

Viviana got to her feet. "You're perfectly capable of handling this for yourselves. I was asked to give an opinion, and since you're now in regular teams, we need to keep an overview so we can see how effective it is. I told Cristos this would work, years ago." She strolled to the exit, and Domenici knew she knew the eyes of every male in the room were riveted on her hips. For the first time, he began to wonder if Kai was as gay as he claimed. From where he sat, the silver-haired merman was doing a good impression of lust.

Kai's attention swung to Domenici, his eyes glittering with understanding. *"You shouldn't think so loud, my friend. But yes, I've had female interests before now. I prefer men, for the most part."*

"Any reason, or just the way your interest works?"

"I don't fall in love with men. If they think they're falling for me, I can walk away before it's too late."

Domenici understood that completely. If it had worked for him, he would have preferred it that way too. All the sex he needed with none of the messy emotional stuff. Somehow, he didn't like emotional entanglements. Maybe he'd been alone too long for it to ever work.

"I want someone to keep an eye on our Nicole Cipriani." Bryn looked at Domenici, who held up his hands. "Just until she's clear."

"No, man. I can't do it. I'll meet her one more time. Then I need to back off. Sorry."

"I'll do it." Kai drew Bryn's attention. "You just want observations done, right? I've got to stay in Rome for another week or two at least, so it'll be a diversion."

"That works." Bryn made a note.

A pang of wholly unreasonable jealousy hit Domenici. If anyone protected her, it should be him. No other man, not even one who watched from a distance. Ridiculous, just the backwash from an intense twenty-four hours, he told himself, but it didn't help fill the void he'd never noticed before inside his mind. A void she had filled nicely.

"I decided to turn this holiday into a real one. I'm available, once I'm cleared," Rhodri said.

Shit, they were all lining up to watch what should be his woman. Every instinct he had told him that, and yet he knew he couldn't. Instincts didn't always work, and he had to keep away from her. "I can't do it."

"Best you don't." Bryn's gave him a far-too-perceptive glance. "You might trigger the full recovery of her memory. So how did she come to have such a strong psychic barrier?"

Esti looked down her long nose at him. "It's natural; she must have come into contact with a psi or two in the nursery, when the natural barrier forms. That would be enough to stimulate her into developing a stronger psychic barrier than usual."

"I thought it was artificially formed. I thought she was the hook, sent to catch me." He finished his coffee, more for something to do. It wasn't good coffee, and the overly bitter taste lingered at the back of his tongue. "My bad." From this end of the investigation, he didn't know how he could ever have made that mistake. He hated that he'd ever doubted Nicole, especially after seeing her courage in the operation. Something she'd never remember, now.

"Hey, you had a good afternoon," Rhodri said.

Domenici had the urge to push Rhodri's teeth to the back of his throat, fangs and all. That was nobody's business but his and the lady's. The film was destroyed, along with the rest of the cell, so the only pictures left existed in his head.

Rhodri held up his hand in a placatory gesture. "Sorry, but she's a fine-looking woman, and one I wouldn't mind talking to."

Domenici grunted. "At least she remembers me from reality. Esti left her with the memory of the earlier part of the day. If you appear, she'll know her dream was real."

Rhodri grimaced, the corner of his mouth turning up in a wry half smile. "I know. I'm taking the next flight out, since she arrived back in Rome yesterday."

"You're watching her already?" Domenici hadn't meant his voice to rise like that. Now it was too late. He sat back in his chair. "We're here to protect people's rights. People's, not just Talents. How is keeping her under surveillance doing that?"

"Two of the cell escaped. If they saw her, they'll go after her." Esti's words cut through him like an ice dagger. If they saw her. Rhodri had killed the spectators to their little show, smashed the cameras, but until they knew for sure who the last two members of that cell were, Nicole was in danger. And he couldn't do it. Could he? "Okay. So what do I do?"

"Stand by," Bryn told him. "Keep in touch."

He hated that. He wanted to be by her side, looking after her.

Christ, he was in deeper than he'd thought.

* * * * *

Nicole woke up. Blinking, she turned her head to check the time. The digital clock told her it was 09:15. She'd slept in. She rolled over and winced. Shit, what the hell --

With a jolt, she sat bolt upright, both hands going to her head, which swam giddily, so badly she briefly debated heading for the bathroom. No need. Her head settled, and she blinked.

She sat in her own bed, her clothes tossed over the chair near the window. Outside, the sun blazed down, just as it had done in Sicily, though the heat had abated a little, and she could hear the murmurs of a busy residential area. Laughter from outside, the sound of traffic from the road, and the clang of metal dustbins. And she was alone. Of course.

So was it all a dream, that weird adventure? Had she somehow had her own version of the Alice story? Now she understood why Alice was so caught up in Wonderland and the Looking Glass. She wanted to go back there, to the crazy world where men turned into dragons and vampires existed.

Sighing, she eyed her laptop, lying on the table by the window, silently accusing her of failing to get a story. Shit, if she didn't get anything at all, she'd be out of *Gossip* and on the slippery slope to the lesser magazines. Or freelance. That was always an option, but not one she'd planned on taking for a year or two yet. Not until she'd networked enough to be able to place phone calls to A-list celebs and be sure they'd take them, not until she had a few more scoops with her byline. Domenici had promised to call, but he had to go back to Rome urgently, or so he'd said in the one phone call she'd received, so she'd come back too. Not much point staying. Shit, if he didn't call her, she knew where his office was.

She swung her feet out of bed and winced. Her back felt stiff and sore, as it had yesterday. The sunburn was faded, compared to what it had been the day before, but it still reminded her of its presence.

When she glanced down at her leg, she saw a nasty bruise, one she didn't remember picking up, but she'd done that before. Either from banging her leg against one of the seats in the airplane -- she remembered doing that clearly and praying it wouldn't bruise -- or when she went down in that little room where the computers were.

No, that was the dream.

Her next thought was roofies, date rape drugs, but she dismissed that almost as soon as the thought had arrived. She remembered hot, screaming sex with an incredibly sexy man. She wouldn't remember any of that, and in any case, the Domenici Serafino of her dream didn't need date rape drugs.

She headed for the shower and, on the way past, opened her laptop and pressed the key to boot it up.

The bathroom was pretty small compared to the huge expanse of marble she had -- or hadn't -- used before. But it did its job. Afterward, she wound a towel around her wet hair and turned her back to the mirror, peering over her shoulder.

Not too bad. She reached for her skin lotion. A shame she didn't have anybody to help her put it on, but she managed the best she could and then wandered back into the bedroom, scrubbing her hair partially dry. She glanced at her laptop and hit the button to get the mail up.

Lots of e-mails. She sat down on the uncomfortable chair in front of the desk and scanned them. Several from her editor, one of which she answered with a vague "some progress" mail, keeping her fingers crossed all the while, which was tricky when typing, but she needed all the luck she could get. Try as she might, she couldn't work out when reality stopped and fantasy took over. That was one hell of a dream. She decided it must have been when she was in the car heading for dinner with Domenici, a dinner that only remained in her mind as a vague memory, shadowed with the alcohol or the effects of their torrid afternoon. But it could have all been fantasy, one long, vivid dream, maybe generated by sunstroke. After all, she had the sunburn, so why not the rest?

Whatever. Now she had to find a story.

She clicked on the next mail and hastily maximized it to make sure she was reading it right.

I hope you got back to Rome okay. I owe you lunch. I guess you caught more of the sun than was good for you, and although you said you were fine, I wanted to check up on you. So how about lunch? I know just the place. A little trattoria off the Via Corso. Let me know.

Later,

Domenici

She read it several times before breathing out one long sigh of relief. He kept his promises. She sent back an e-mail, saying she'd meet him there at one.

As for the rest of it -- the weird-ass room, the public sex, and the escape, and most of all the dragon and vampire shit -- that had to be where the dream started. Domenici reminded her of some big, scary creature, but he could be a teddy bear.

She let her mind wander back to that glorious afternoon of no-strings sex. That she remembered in luscious detail. That she never wanted to forget. Not that she'd be writing anything about it.

Revitalized, she spent an hour working at her laptop, picking up gossip, finding out what events were set for today in Rome, who was arriving, who leaving. Domenici would probably know that kind of thing too. More than her, because he knew where they'd be staying. At one of his apartments in a far more fashionable district than this one.

Hell, if he wanted to feed her information, she'd willingly cut him in, but he'd have to be careful. His clients trusted him to keep their privacy, or at least tell them when it was going to be breached so they could take appropriate steps, whether that be rolling out the red carpet for a star interview or setting the dogs on the intruder.

She'd known both. Just as well she could run fast.

* * * * *

She chose her outfit a bit more carefully than she would have otherwise done. She found an ivory silk shell top that would hide her unsightly sunburn without scraping at it too much and opted to go with only a light, gauzy bra underneath. A pair of wide, loose pants in a slightly darker shade meant she would look reasonably classy, enough that he wouldn't be ashamed of her, and her best string of New York glass pearls, with a pair of real pearl studs, her father's present to her on her twenty-first birthday. She should call her folks soon. She'd last contacted them a month ago, doing her best to do the excited-to-be-in-Italy act without letting them know how badly the Courtney incident had hit her career. One good story, one scoop, and she would be out from under. It wouldn't be much longer. She knew she was good at what she did.

A pair of cream leather sandals with gold braid trim completed the outfit. They weren't right, a bit too bling for the classy effect she was going for, but what the hell? They were all she had right now, so he'd have to suck it up. She'd learned long ago how utterly stupid it was to try to vie with the people she interviewed, and how counterproductive. They didn't want to be ashamed of being seen with her, but they were supposed to be the ones to dazzle, not her. So she used the classic, understated look most of the time, and it seemed to work.

She packed her large bag, the elegant cream leather one with room for her personal recorder and camcorder, as well as her camera and notebook. She'd gotten quite good at photographs in the last few years, after more magazine budgets left her without a permanent cameraman. These days, the camera work was arranged separately, or the celebrities provided their own. If she managed to land Domenici as a regular correspondent, they might give her another big celebrity wedding to cover. She preferred the more investigative work, but the weddings were the bread and butter of the magazine, and in any case, the networking could be fabulous. Not that the A-listers ever went anywhere except surrounded by their personal entourages.

She wondered where Domenici fit. A maverick, someone with a real, honest-to-goodness job, and one who never traveled *with* an entourage. Cramped his style, maybe. He'd seemed to be alone in the villa, although she didn't doubt that he had dailies calling in, a cook and cleaner at the very least.

Today she wanted more. She wanted to work it a bit harder, make him realize -- what? That she was special, more than his usual bed partners? Who was she trying to kid? She snorted. Certainly not her. Yes, she knew her body was okay, her face reasonably attractive, but she couldn't spend all day buffing and polishing, and it showed. Close up, the people she interviewed glowed. That was their job, just as hers was to chase them for stories, and the best were the ones who understood that.

She checked her watch. Time to go, ten before noon.

With one last check in the mirror, she spritzed herself with cologne, picked up the cream bag, and left the room.

* * * * *

At first Nicole didn't see him. This little trattoria, out of the tourist circuit and away from the celebrity haunts, was discreet and nicely appointed, but coming inside after the dazzling brightness outside blinded her for a moment.

Then Domenici got to his feet, and everything receded into insignificance. She also understood why so many people lingered in the bar here.

His magnificent figure dominated the area. Her senses sharpened, but only for him. He took the few steps separating them and leaned in to kiss her cheek, at the same time taking a deep, appreciative sniff. He drew back and took one of her hands in his. "You smell wonderful."

"Shalimar," she managed.

"No, not that. You."

She just stared. Way to go, Nicole. You're bound to get a great interview that way.

"Shall we?" He curved his arm around her in a deliciously possessive way and guided her to their table, set toward the back of the room. He seated her before he sat down, waving the waiter away, and stripped off his jacket, then hung it on the back of his chair.

The way this man treated her was off the scale. Already she wanted to carry on with their affair, but she guessed she was an amusing diversion for him. As soon as this was over, he'd forget her or relegate her to the status of friend, someone he'd e-mail from time to time, answer her phone calls, but he'd put her off from anything more intimate. These people were experts at handling people. And if they weren't, that said something about them too.

Preparation helped. If she didn't expect too much, she wouldn't do anything embarrassing with this devastatingly sexy man, like make too many phone calls, send too many friendly e-mails, her desperation showing more with each one. She'd done that once, only once, and the man she'd chosen was, luckily for her, very nice in his "Dear Jane" letter and didn't tell anyone else.

Domenici's hand touched hers, and she jerked, almost pulling away in her shock. She turned her head to meet his eyes. She must have been showing more of the whites of her eyes than usual, because he smiled like someone trying to reassure. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She saw an edge of concern in his face and something else, something that looked a bit like fear or apprehension. She wondered at it, but she tried to reassure him because the last thing she wanted him to see was her insecurities. So she smiled and said, "Nothing."

"You seemed a bit preoccupied."

"And I'll bet that's something you're not used to!"

At least she made him laugh.

He picked up a folder by his side. "Here, this is for you."

A plain manila folder. Just what every girl wanted. She bit that comment down and opened the folder. Oh yeah. Actually, this was perfect. Photos of the villa, all the rooms, including that fabulous white-draped bedroom. She leafed through them, and under them, she found a couple of sheets of A4.

Glancing through them, she smiled and lifted her gaze to his. "Thank you."

"Better than a bunch of roses?"

"Better than a hothouse full of orchids." He'd saved her job. "With this, I can make good. I owe you."

He covered her hand with his. "You owe me nothing. We had a great day together, and we're going to have another one."

"And then?"

He sighed. "Then I have to go home."

Well, this was a better kiss-off gift than she'd ever received before. "Yeah. With this, I've got to get busy too. Here." She fumbled in her purse and found her card. "My personal card. The one with my private cell phone number on it."

"Thanks." He pocketed it before he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it in an old-fashioned gesture guaranteed to touch her heart. He must have known that it would.

"My, you're good."

"So I'm told. I decided what to do with the villa, the new style for it. You can use all these and the stories I've jotted down for you."

"Don't suppose you'll tell me what style?"

He shook his head. "Not a hope."

She joined in his laughter. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

By the end of the meal, Nicole had more or less sorted out what she'd done the day before and what she hadn't. Her memory faded after she fell asleep in his room, following the best sex of her life.

She wondered about the drugs again and sniffed her wine before she took a cautious sip. Not that it would help. She'd had a glass of it already. Deliciously crisp, with a touch of effervescence. She'd like to bet it was the top of the wine list.

Maybe one day she'd stop counting dollars, or more precisely, euros, but old habits died hard.

"You think I drugged you?"

She was quick to reassure him. "No, of course not. Just that... My memories are really vague."

He frowned at her. "Sunstroke is a nasty and underrated thing. It's likely that's what it was. We were near the equator in Sicily, and you were worse than reckless when you took that walk to my beach. Did you do it on purpose?"

She nearly choked on her wine. The game was up. "Yes, a bit. But I didn't intend it to be quite that bad. I just wanted a touch of pink." But due to Gary's information, she ended up worse than that.

"Instead of the scarlet you ended up with." His mouth straightened with exasperation. "Baby, that was plain stupid." His voice softened. "Were you that desperate?"

"You noticed." Time for more confessions, it seemed. "I'm in disgrace. That Courtney affair nearly ruined me. So did finishing the affair with my boss. We were a couple for a while, but it didn't work out. At least, I thought it didn't. He had other ideas." She could still remember the embarrassment of his bullying in front of the whole office. She'd worked hard and she deserved better than that, but he did it anyway. When she hadn't walked out, her colleagues knew she was up shit creek. "I can live it down, but I wanted to do a few more articles before I went freelance."

"And you need people to trust you again, like they used to. Does Courtney Southern think you betrayed her? Could she be spreading rumors?"

She shrugged. "She hasn't spoken to me since, even though she discovered the culprit later. No, I don't think she's spreading rumors." That hurt. Of course Nicole couldn't blame Courtney, but she wouldn't take her calls and probably sent her e-mails straight to the trash. It probably reminded her of an incident both would rather forget. Nicole could never decide which was worse -- losing her hard-earned integrity or losing someone who'd needed friends at that time in her life.

Water under the bridge. Courtney's mother was dead, and Courtney had moved on, although to Nicole's eyes she was still frighteningly skinny. Not that she got closer than the press barrier these days, and Courtney took care never to get anywhere near her.

Being human, yes, it hurt, but being tough, she never showed any of it. And only one person saw below the shell she so successfully erected around herself. The man sitting opposite her at the intimate table for two. He took her hand. "Nicole, that has to suck."

"Yeah, well, it happens." She tried to shrug, but she couldn't quite manage it.

"I guess it does."

She flashed a grin at him. "And that dream I had, the sunburn dream -- well, if I don't make it on the magazine I can always write a book. I've heard there's quite a market for them."

Instead of laughing, as she meant him to, he seemed even more concerned, a frown marring his brow. "What dreams?" He leaned forward to top off her glass and forced a smile, but she saw the way he forced it.

“Weird ones. About you turning into a dragon, about a secret organization dedicated to killing creatures, about us being forced to have sex in front of cameras.” She gave a nervous laugh. “Stupid, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” He picked up his glass and took a deep draft of his wine. “Completely.” He reached across the table and took her hand. “I wouldn’t believe dreams. Although sex for the cameras, now...” He raised a brow and smiled.

Heat suffused her cheeks. “You’re into that?”

“In the right circumstances, I might be. I haven’t anything to be ashamed of. Or have I?”

“God, no!” she exclaimed before she thought over her words, and then the heat increased and spread. She hated that her skin showed her emotions so easily, but there wasn’t much she could do about it.

“I think you might have some thoughts in that direction.” His dark eyes held promises, or maybe threats. “I wouldn’t say no.”

Had she just turned some afternoon delight into something a little more prolonged? She found herself hoping so, even if a camera did have a part in it. Insane. Her name wasn’t Paris or Britney, and she definitely didn’t have youth on her side. Or a battery of assistants and personal groomers. Chance would be a fine thing.

He released her hand when she pulled it away. “I have your e-mail and your cell number, and I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.”

Her heart sank. She was right. An afternoon was all she’d get, and he’d have forgotten her name in a fortnight. She wouldn’t forget him so quickly. Not that she’d let him see that.

She got to her feet and smiled down at him, careful to let him see only what she wanted him to. “I enjoyed it. And thanks for the story. That’ll be enough to get me back on top.”

The last three words echoed between them. He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to. His dark bedroom eyes said it all. He still wanted her. And they hadn’t yet done it with her on top.

She blocked it, although looking into his eyes reminded her of what he felt like speaking into her mind. Like rough velvet, abrasive and yet smooth and soft.

But that was part of her dream. He had to be right. Sunstroke had hit and blurred out the last part of their time together, giving her instead vivid dreams she was only too glad to wake from. Mostly. The danger she could live without, but the sex had been spectacular.

“I’ll visit the powder room. Then I’m ready.”

“I’ll be waiting for you.”

She wished. But she had her story now. She’d go home, write it, e-mail her stuff in, and go into the office tomorrow with something to show that shit Gary.

Chapter Eight

Nicole found a parking space reasonably close to her office. As usual, early workers had packed the small lot allotted to the magazine with their vehicles, so she drove past and found her own space. Driving in Rome meant her car came predated, which saved her some time. A year ago, she'd never have dreamed of driving through the city, and even crossing the road made her scared for her life, but now, with a little care, she could drive her little Fiat right past the Victor Emmanuel Monument without screaming more than once. Italian drivers tended to keep going until they couldn't go any farther and took every corner with a panache rarely met elsewhere. Crossing major roads on foot was akin to walking across Niagara Falls on a tightrope; one wrong move and you were dead.

Gripping her briefcase tightly, a futile gesture because the article she'd written was backed up online and at home, she stepped out, hardly noticing the screaming, blaring cars and nearly being struck down by a scooter buzzing past. But unless someone nearly struck her down by a scooter, her day hadn't really begun.

The magazine had offices close to the main shopping area of Rome -- the Via Condotti. The daily temptation sometimes drove her to therapeutic shopping, but she tried to avoid this end of the Via Condotti, where the boutiques and designer shops clustered in elegant display. She used the other end of the street, the bargain end, and sometimes the knockoffs available there were as good as the real thing.

Though she'd kill for a real Prada bag, she had to wait. Her mistake with Courtney had proved very expensive, and this job paid peanuts, although she knew it would increase if she worked it properly. She gritted her teeth and forced a smile when she pushed the glass doors to the office. The doors and the wall above the receptionist's head were emblazoned with *Gossip*, in a bold sans serif font. Although other businesses inhabited this place, people spoke of it as the *Gossip* building.

The receptionist hardly raised her head. As usual, under the strong surface she presented to the world, Nicole quaked with fear and trepidation. She had no intention of backing down, though; she'd work until they fired her. But Domenici had ensured that was some way off yet.

She took the elevator to the third floor, where she faced another receptionist. This one spared her a brief smile. She didn't smile back but headed for her desk, one of a number of small cubicles in the main office. She always preferred that. Even in her heyday in New York, she kept her desk in the main office. There, nothing could happen without her noticing, from high-level board meetings to office chitchat. Half her stories came from that.

The other half came from her spies and her diligent and rigorous personal standards. That was what really hurt. Her spies had melted away, no longer trusting her, and her personal standards were damaged. Not destroyed, though. She wanted to prove that she wasn't the person who'd done Courtney's story, and although it had gone out under an anonymous byline, one of the nonexistent reporters usually known as a sock, everyone reading it thought they'd known where it had come from.

No sooner had she sat at her desk and opened her computer than she heard the stentorian tones fill the office. "Cipriani! My office! Now!"

She exchanged a glance with Giorgio Whitaker, who occupied the cubicle next to hers. He grinned and lifted a sandy brow. "Back to reality."

"Oh yes. Any good scoops lately?"

He snorted. "Another footballer wedding and a pop star breakdown."

"Business as usual then." Sighing, she picked up her folder and headed for Gary's office. Bastard thought he was going to catch her on the hop, did he? He should know better than that.

Even if she hadn't achieved anything from Domenici, she would have dug something up. If she had to climb a tree to take some snaps of the swimming pool and resurrected old scandals, she would have done something. The whole reason for staying at a tourist hotel was to pick up scandal, and she had notes on a midnight orgy by the hotel pool, and a scandal about an underage tourist guide giving free blowjobs for good reports.

She'd keep them in reserve. She had names and numbers and photographs the art department could do something with, and if necessary, she could turn something out. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to. Those kinds of stories made her feel, if not dirty, then certainly grubby. But at least she'd make some money, bring it to the public's notice, and let the authorities deal with it. Probably more effective than complaining directly in any case.

Gary waited for her inside his office, leaning back in his leather chair with his feet up on his desk. The top half of his office was glazed so anyone passing by could see. Body language was important. So she tossed the bright orange folder in front of him and sat down opposite him without being asked. "I e-mailed you the copy, but just in case you didn't have time to check, I made you a paper copy too."

He swung his feet down and gave her a sardonic glance before he picked up the folder and opened it. Nicole had sat before he'd invited her to. If she hadn't, it would have given him the advantage, keeping her standing while he read, as he did for the newbies. He glanced up at her over the top of his black-rimmed oblong spectacles but said nothing. She met his gaze without a qualm. She would do a lot to keep her job, but kowtowing to the editor and behaving like a subordinate wasn't one of them.

Despite knowing what a shit Gary could be, she could still appreciate male beauty when she saw it. Lean and mean, not exceptionally tall -- but then Brad Pitt barely clipped six feet -- Gary had all Brad had, and a mean streak to add to it. Square-jawed, with tousled, dirty blond hair and killer brown eyes, Gary had most women at his feet, even after they learned what he was. She watched them come; she watched them go.

Nicole was better than that, but only just. Six months ago, she'd thought she had his measure, until he gave her story to someone else. Crossed the line between public and personal, although he claimed he hadn't, said he'd sent the right person for the job. Like hell he had. She'd done the research, set up an interview, and then he sent someone else to do it, someone he thought needed a break -- or rather, one of his bimbos. He had a succession of admiring women only too eager to share his bed in return for a chance at the magazine, and he let them think they were in, but Gary was nothing if not professional. Either they'd have gotten the job anyway, or they wouldn't; the sex was a bonus.

While they had been a couple, Nicole had told herself repeatedly that the bimbos meant nothing and bought into his philosophy of an open relationship. She was right; they didn't, but it seemed she only ranked marginally higher. But he never stopped asking her for dates, never stopped putting himself in her way. She had no idea if it was to annoy her or if he really wanted her. And she kept telling herself she didn't care.

Gary put the paper down and riffled through the photographs. "Are these up-to-date?"

"Yes, completely. I went inside the villa that day, saw just that."

He grinned. "Even the bedroom?"

She bit off her answer, that she'd used the bedroom, as if she had to defend herself against something. Instead, she contented herself with a terse "yes."

"Okay. And these anecdotes. You have corroboration from the people involved?"

She rolled her eyes. "I did what was required. I sent them all e-mails yesterday, gave them the bit of the story that features them, and told them they had the right of reply with a termination date. That do?"

"It always does." He went back to the article. "We'll make a series of it. A dribble every week." He looked up. "You know this isn't headline stuff?"

She nodded.

"But it's useful filler. You know why I'll make it a series?"

This time she shook her head, letting him take the lead. She knew he would like that, and it might make him reckless. Once he thought he was in control, especially if he'd won that control, Gary could get careless and let out more than he meant to.

"Because I want you to contact Serafino again. He'd make a fantastic nark."

She frowned at the word. "Pardon me?"

He laughed, but she sensed an edge of discomfort in the sound. "An informant."

"Oh, right." Still pondering on his discomfort and the definite edge of Cockney that entered his voice when he said the unfamiliar word, she almost missed it. But she perked up, realized he was trying to sucker her into agreeing to something she had no intention of doing. "No, oh no. The success of his company relies on his discretion. I won't do anything to harm that."

He gave her a look of total derision, one designed to shrivel her. But she knew exactly where her barriers lay, and she wouldn't cross them, so what might have reduced a novice didn't touch her. "That's why you'll never be a top gossip writer, Nicole. You can't afford morals in this world."

"Yes, you can. And have you noticed that the longest-lasting journalists are the ones that have some kind of standard?"

He snorted. "Sure. And the richest, the ones that got out early, don't care."

She shrugged. "The difference between a career and a useful moneymaking device."

"You think I care?" Holding her article, he leaned back in his chair and propped his feet back on the desk. Shiny, expensive shoes made to look like handmade, but not.

She knew those details. They made all the difference in her world, from someone who was still trying to make it to someone who'd arrived. So did filthy, down-at-heel sneakers, for that matter. They were often the ultimate expression of wealth and success, the person who snubbed his or her nose at the world and said, "You think these things matter?" She preferred the last type, but she'd rarely met one, especially in this arena, where celebrities were primped and coached to show their image all the time, not to let out what was happening inside. All a game. But a very profitable one. And one that still fascinated her. Because it showed how people reacted, what they were like, the little signs that revealed so much.

Gary's held his claim to belong, but he was as likely to turn up in filthy trainers as he was in shiny Guccis, so today he must have an appointment somewhere. His tailor-made shirt and expensive wool slacks, together with the jacket that hung from a hanger on the back of the office door, proclaimed that. She wondered where, but it was probably a lunch with the owner. If she knew Gary, the first thing he'd do was try to get his feet under the shareholder's bed, male or female.

Her own work clothes were expensive, simple, understated classics, hopefully classless and holding no clues about her. Investment clothes. She'd often suspected she had a hidden

Goth, but she'd never let her out to play. It might be fun, one day. But not today. Not now. Never now, always tomorrow.

"Rewrite me the first story, the one about the bedroom, for the next issue. We'll feature a room a month. You keep doing that or write them in advance. But I want you to call Serafino. Get a date, do what you have to. I want him on board."

She sighed. "Why do you want this so much? What's special about him?"

He cast a look of sheer derision. "You know better than that, babe. A feed like that could make you. Like getting a job as a maid in a sex club where celebrities hang."

Yes, she'd done that. But she'd sent them word before the story went out, and in enough time for them to object or file suit or whatever. Most times, she'd levered a different story out of them. The sex club worked well, but she'd found it depressingly staid. They arrived, they went into separate rooms, they did whatever they did, and then they went home. Straight one-on-one sex for money. Not much of a story there, if truth be told, but the leverage had been invaluable.

Gary was right. She needed another break like that one. And maybe, one day, she'd happen on something that really mattered. She'd done that once or twice. Not enough to make a bona fide journalistic career, but she kept working toward that, never forgetting her original intent. But as far as she was concerned, this world of gossip was the bunny slopes compared to the world of politics. Not because of the content or the story or even the significance, but the level of sleaze in the political world beat anything she'd dealt with on the celebrity circuit.

She still wanted it all. The bylines, the Pulitzers, everything, but the target grew further away every year. She'd settle for a six-figure salary and a successful freelance career. Or even a chance to write that novel like she'd always wanted. God knows she had enough material for half a dozen now, and she could make stuff up without worrying about legal comeback.

Shove the Pulitzer; she'd go for a Nobel.

She got to her feet. "Okay, I'll call him. Use my charm on him. See how far I can get." There was no harm in that. She knew she wouldn't get very far, but she could ask. She'd probably get no further than his secretary.

"That's my girl."

Despite the irritating, proprietary attitude, Nicole smiled at Gary. She needed him, for now, anyway, and to be honest, he was proving a good editor with a sharp sense of current obsessions. In about a month, the Italian football season would be starting, and he already had his spies out, looking for likely stories, with a couple scheduled for the next month's issue. Italian footballers were superstars, and some of them modeled for fashion houses like Armani in their spare time. Good copy.

But Nicole wasn't thinking of the admittedly gorgeous sportsmen. Irritatingly, she couldn't get Domenici out of her mind or her dreams. One good fuck and she was a goner, she thought disgustedly. That had never happened to her before, and she couldn't imagine why it would happen now. For that, if for nothing else, she wanted to meet him again and understand what it was that turned her on about him. Because she was, and he wasn't the first gorgeous male she'd ever met. None of them had swept her off her feet before.

Chapter Nine

“I thought you’d call.”

For once, Nicole felt exposed at her desk in the main office. Even his voice stripped her raw.

“Did you think I’d let you go after one date?” She forced a flirtatious tone into her voice and smiled for the benefit of anyone watching; that would be everyone at their desks. Word got around fast.

To be truthful, she hadn’t expected to get past his PA. Anyone studying Domenici’s reputation, his way of life, knew he avoided permanent commitment. He kept his private life tucked away well. And suddenly, she wanted to know why.

He’d taken her call and kept her waiting a bare thirty seconds. She could almost forgive his smug certainty. Almost.

“I wanted to check in, see if you can spare me a little time.”

“Lunch?”

“You took the words right out of my mouth.” She leaned back in the chair that tilted to accept her. “Shall I meet you there?”

“Where?” He didn’t let her answer. “Maybe L'Edera. You’ve been there?”

The latest place to eat, the place the footballers, fashionistas, and assorted movie stars claimed was the only place worth eating in Rome these days. “A bit public, isn’t it?”

“You’re worrying about that?” He sounded incredulous, and truthfully, she could see why. The more people who saw them together, the better she should be pleased. It might even bump her series up a little if she could get some good paparazzi pictures of them. And nobody better to do that. The fact that he was willing to go into a restaurant notorious for its

clientele meant he didn't care if pictures of them together found their way into the press. Fair game, in fact.

"Not worried at all. What time?"

"I'll pick you up at one. At your office, though don't expect me to come inside."

She laughed. Already that easy connection between them was back. If he weren't who he was and she weren't who she was, then she'd like nothing better than a lunch with him at a good restaurant. But she wanted laughter and conversation, not negotiations and a good interview.

Suck it up. You chose this; you take it. The only person who ever talked honestly to her these days was herself. And she sure needed it. She could churn out the sentiment if needed, but she couldn't afford it in her career. Once she'd gotten past this glitch, she'd go as far as she could. She was good enough, she knew it. She'd had her lucky break when the magazine had taken her and she'd happened on her first story, in the same nightclub as a wildly popular pop star when he'd had his first meltdown on Ecstasy and cocaine, just before his then wife had walked out on him. Nicole crossed the floor, snagged the first interview, and overnight she changed careers from political journalist to gossip mag. Not much different, really. Just a different angle.

Life was beginning to perk up.

* * * * *

When he saw her walking toward him in the lobby of her office building, her calm eyes and bright smile told Domenici all he needed to know. Damn Americans, he should have known better than to trust one. Or maybe that should be damn women, or damn humans. Damn everything, for that matter.

He watched her walk toward him and compared her to the image on the Internet that he'd seen that morning. With him behind her, both of them naked. So now the world knew they were a couple, and they had nothing to hide anymore. This was in the nature of a damage reduction exercise. He was surprised she could appear so calm.

He'd managed to quell his temper, but it surged up again when he saw her coming closer. Why his brainless organ rose to attention every time he saw her passed his understanding, but his cock didn't rule him, and it never would. It had landed him into enough trouble already.

Her smile broadened when she reached him but faded when she saw his unsmiling face. "What is it?"

"You might be laughing, but I'm not."

"Why?"

He slanted her a glance. "I'd like to talk it over when we get there. If we're going to be an item, then we'd better start somewhere."

“What?”

He ignored her openmouthed innocence and took her hand to drag her out to the car. Cameras flashed, and he growled. He'd never felt his dragon so close to the surface before, ready to emerge and roar at the intrusive media. He'd never asked for it; he didn't like all this attention. Not his job, but the job of the people he worked for, people who courted this kind of treatment.

When she got into the car, he gave her a deliberately lingering look, totally unlike the one in the lobby. But this was public. The sleek limo had a wide backseat with an armrest in the middle, strongly in his mind when he'd hired it. No way did he want his usual vehicle and its purposely anonymous license plate exposed to all this. Before, no one had chased him, only snapped his picture when he appeared in a public place with a public personality. This level of pursuit sucked. Well, if this affair panned out as he wanted, it wouldn't last.

The drive to the restaurant didn't take long, and they were pursued all the way. The ubiquitous mopeds and scooters in Rome chased them, but this limo had darkened windows. He daredn't talk to her. If they had an inkling of his fury with them or with her, the story would only become more desirable. So he turned away and stared out of the window, ignoring her small sounds of puzzlement until the car drew up outside L'Edera.

The usual mob waited for them, photographers and reporters, including, he noted with interest, a couple from *Gossip* magazine.

He got out of the car and extended his arm to help her out, afterward curving it around her waist. He didn't look at her, but even her scent aroused him. It didn't remind him of anything, but for all that, his nostrils flared when he caught the hint of woman under the light floral scent. It took a dragon to sense it, the enhanced sense of smell he had when he partially shifted, as he did now, but it was there, and it turned him on instantly.

He hated it, couldn't bear the way her body manipulated his. Control was his mantra, his way of life, and she brought out a spontaneity he'd forcibly suppressed years ago. If he took her hard, now, against the door of this public restaurant, his craving for her might be assuaged, but he doubted it.

She turned her head in his direction when he squeezed her waist in an action he hadn't been aware of, and he managed a smile. Her gasp told him she'd seen the expression in his eyes, the dark need resting deep inside. A savage pleasure gripped him that he wasn't alone.

This meal was what this was about. She couldn't get away from this, and he wanted to know why. If necessary, he'd take her into the Department, but he hoped it wouldn't come to that. Despite his anger at himself, at her, he didn't want to subject her to the questioning of a Sorcerer. It would hurt. More than hurt, if that strong barrier of hers was anything to go by.

The maître d' met them and took them straight to their table. In the public area, as he'd requested. Intending not to repeat this, he wanted maximum publicity, maximum exposure. No, wait, they'd had that already.

When they were seated, he picked up the menu. "Shall I order for both of us?"

"Please do."

In her simple, classic, and well-cut black pants and pale green sleeveless blouse, she fitted there. Hair curled in loose, shining waves around her face, that glorious auburn dimming the other people at the tables around her. Her jet jewelry gleamed against the burnished curls, and her makeup, discreetly applied, enhanced her natural beauty. He wondered how long she'd taken to dress that morning and guessed it wouldn't be anywhere near the hour or two most female patrons of L'Edera habitually took to ready themselves for a public appearance. She could still wipe the floor with most of them.

Already people were staring at them. Nicole glanced around, and he saw that panic in her eyes again, but when she looked back at him, she revealed nothing of it.

"Not used to being on this side of the camera, are you?" Though with her recent performances, he wasn't entirely sure about that.

She gave him a tentative smile. "No, I'm not. Why are they staring?"

"You don't know?" Deliberately, he turned away to the waiter and rattled off his order. Asparagus, although out of season, was available, salmon, and an elaborate salad, and then they'd take dessert. A balanced meal, but hellishly difficult to eat. He wanted the photographs of them eating to be embarrassing for her, to give her some of the heat she'd given him when he opened his e-mail that morning and found the message that had taken him to the site where around a thousand people had been before him.

Besides, this restaurant was a place to be seen, not necessarily a place to eat. He made small talk until the asparagus came, and when it did, his mouth watered. Maybe they'd hired a new chef, because this looked good, even if it was hothouse asparagus. They'd have something with strawberries for dessert, the last fresh English strawberries of the season. If they lasted that long. With what he was about to do, she might not last the first course.

He waited and watched her attack the asparagus. Shit, she did it well. Unable to resist the tender stalks drizzled in olive oil, he took up his fork and followed suit. He'd half wished she'd pick up the dripping stalks and try to hit her mouth without spilling anything, but she didn't. Eating asparagus entirely with the fingers might have been all right for their parents, but these days, habits had changed and it was allowable to use cutlery. Cut the stalk in half, eat the soft half with a fork, and then the tip with a fork or fingers.

Nicole managed beautifully. Both proud and chagrined that she hadn't made a fool of herself, Domenici decided to eat his portion before he broached the subject he wanted to discuss with her, but he realized he was putting it off. Fury swamped him all over again. Procrastination wasn't in his nature, but here he was, trying to enjoy his last minutes with the woman before he wrecked it all. Maybe he wanted to fuck her again. Yes, there it was, that movement in his pants he was beginning to accept as normal with her.

Time to get this over with. Stop the torture. The press had their pictures, and with any luck, this would be over soon. He'd piss her off, she'd walk away, and he'd stop it going any

further. If she saw him much more often, the mind-wipe wouldn't hold, and he'd have to watch it all over again.

It was the best thing for everyone. Except for him. Because that feeling of protection came on him as strongly as the need to fuck her.

"Okay, so what made you do it?"

She finished her bite before she spoke. "What?" Her bewilderment filled her eyes.

"Oh, very good." Careful to keep the expression of affability and care on his face, he entered her mind, slipped in.

She gasped. She shouldn't have sensed it. Esti swore she'd taken the memory of him from her, but Nicole lifted her head to stare at him, shock filling her outer mind and her face. "What did you do?"

"What do you think I did?"

And what the fuck was going on here?

He leaned across the table and caught her hand in his, stroking her palm with his thumb. From his peripheral vision he caught a couple of light flashes from the bar area and felt some satisfaction. He'd asked the management to put them in range of the paparazzi in the bar. This place would be nothing without them, but this was the first time he'd consumed a meal so publicly. Too late to worry about that, considering what had been beamed across the world last night.

"You tell me, princess." He switched to English. He didn't want to sully his own language with this dirty truth. English was robust enough to take it. "I never took you for a total exhibitionist. But wow, you surprised me. Do you have the rest of the film?" He gripped her hand when she tried to pull back, but to any onlookers -- and there were plenty -- it would still appear as a caress.

She hadn't faked that shock in her eyes because he felt it in her mind too. And when she spoke, her voice came shriller, the soft, low tones destroyed by emotion. "What film? What are you talking about?"

"The cell and what we did there. Haven't you seen it yet? I feel sure that if I ask the management here, they'd project a copy on the walls. You look almost as good on the screen as you do in real life, sweetheart, but you know that, don't you? Displayed so beautifully, your legs wide open so everyone can see my cock driving into you." He didn't bother to disguise his words in any way. They'd seen it all, so any lip-readers among them wouldn't learn anything new. And he'd positioned them so they were both profile-on to the bar, where the paparazzi waited on their every word. Bastards.

"What?" Now her hand trembled in his.

Something was wrong here. No triumph, not the right kind of shock, no excitement mingled in with it, as she would if she thought she'd won, that the PHR had the evidence they needed. He had to push this a bit further, make sure for himself. He'd prevailed in the

heated discussion at the Department office earlier today and had permission to do this, to question her first. If they hadn't agreed, he would have done it anyway. He needed closure on this woman who'd duped him so well; he needed to know how she'd done it, so he could close that gap in his protective shield, deal with it. Because he'd really believed she didn't know.

"I had my people analyze the source of the film. It came from your office. To be precise, from your desk."

"H-how can you tell?"

"Sophisticated computer techniques. Not so sophisticated, as it turns out. Plus an e-mail with your IP address helped, or so I'm told."

He couldn't tell if the alarm rocketing around her mind was because she didn't know or because they'd found her out. But it had the effect he wanted. She was going to have to leave this place followed by all the media. Alone, because he'd piss her off so much she'd get up and leave.

That was the plan. Then one of the team would pick her up, and they'd take her in. Because that film meant she knew, that Esti's mind-wipe hadn't worked at all.

Not that she'd ever forgotten, just used that powerful mental shield to fool them that she had.

He hated the way she'd used him, hated her trickery. Most likely, his team was right and he was wrong. Nicole was a plant, bait, and she'd taken him in, made him perform. Invaded his privacy, the shield he held so far against him that it was like a second skin, so natural he never thought about it anymore. Until something or someone forced him into it.

He relaxed his grip, but only to stop her hand from turning white from lack of blood. She'd bruise, carry the imprint of his fingers for days. It might remind her of his power, that she shouldn't try to fool a Talent. He could only hope so.

"What made you so arrogant you thought you could get away with this? Did you think we wouldn't find out?"

Her eyes glistened, but she blinked and the extra moisture went away. "Who? What?"

The waiter chose that moment to return so he released her to allow the man to clear the dishes and lay their next course in front of them. Nicole glanced down at her plate. "I can handle messy food. I've watched the best cope with tricky dishes for years. I suppose I should be glad you didn't order lobster."

Despite the tension coiling in his gut, Domenici found himself smiling. He might have known she'd notice. Her lips quirked in response, but she controlled it and the alluring curve disappeared as fast as it had come. "So are we staying for the main course? It looks pretty, but I bet it doesn't taste too good. You can't go out there with your breath smelling of garlic or onion. And that asparagus was overcooked. Definitely flaccid."

Now it was his turn to stop his smile. He needed to get control of this situation, fast. “You’re right about the asparagus. So what do you want to do with the film?”

“What film?”

“The one of us in the cell fucking for the cameras. It stops just before the best part, but I bet you have that down too. One of the live feeds must have bypassed our security.”

He watched her eyes widen and fear turn to outright horror. At the same time, he felt something inside her freeze and then a fissure opening. Shit. When he saw what it contained, he knew it had to be the fissure Esti had sealed shut. Memories flooded back. Her hand trembled, and her fingers curled around his, gripping hard before she pulled away. She’d used him to stop shaking, firming her grip to gain control.

“Why did you do it, Nicole? Why did you release that film onto the Internet? It came from your desk, so either someone sent it to you and you uploaded it, or you were in with them all along. Are you so far gone in fanaticism that you had to do this?” Mindful of the watchers, he stopped there. He wanted to drag her back to his office, or better still, his apartment, and shake her until she saw sense. Not submit her to the Sorcerers’ ungentle treatment, then see her locked up until she ceased to be a danger to Talents. If Esti and one other deemed her a permanent danger to them, they might decide to kill her. Or she could die under interrogation.

Something pulled at his heart when he thought of that.

Her eyes wide with shock, she shoved back her chair and stared at him. He could see she wasn’t in her right mind, that she’d forgotten where she was and what the repercussions would be. She’d leave the restaurant, the photographers would take pictures of her leaving the table, obviously at odds with him, and someone from Team Crystal would pick her up on her way back to her office.

That was the idea, anyway.

It got him off the hook, so the press wouldn’t expect to see them together again, and it would make her the object of derision, not him. He just happened to be the lucky sap who’d been caught on film fucking her senseless. A shame the camera had caught his face; he’d spent much of the clip kissing her neck and shoulders, but they’d waited until he lifted his head before they cut the film.

The Department had to get hold of that film clip. At the moment, it was blowing in the wind, but it showed him shape-shifting. Sure, they could explain it as CGI, like they had before when film clips had found their way onto the Internet, but it added to the stock of evidence their enemies were collecting. Evidence that could force Talents into the open one day, before they were ready, before they wanted to expose their existence to mankind.

Nicole got to her feet, her jerky actions revealing her distress. Her face creased, and because he was in her mind, he felt her distress. And also the way she was putting things together. She hadn’t done it. Her shock beat at him in a way she couldn’t fabricate.

It was no good. He couldn't let her leave here in this state, just couldn't. Cursing his stupidity, his chivalry, his overwhelming desire to protect her, he stood too.

Chapter Ten

Nicole stared at this man -- dragon -- man... What the hell? What did she call a man who turned into a dragon at will?

It was real; it was all real. Everything she'd dismissed as a crazy dream. Her world shifted sideways; she felt it, like a seismic shudder in the bowels of the earth. How could this be? How could she live all her life and not know about these -- creatures, people? What the hell did she call them, anyway?

"We're people, Nicole. Just as much as you are. But we're a different species of human."

She started at the words, so clear in her head, just as she remembered, dreamed them. Woke up longing for them in the dead of night, so she wasn't alone any longer. She'd thought it a by-product of a vivid imagination. Not reality. Perhaps she was dreaming now.

The voice came again. *"I wish. Then I could prove it to you."*

Abruptly she turned around to leave. To face a phalanx of photographers. Tears stung her eyes. Why here, why now? She forced her face into a semblance of normality, although smiling was far beyond her capabilities.

The pause gave him the moment he needed to reach her side. Their food lay untouched on the table, but even the scent of it made her feel ill. "We go together," he murmured, bending to kiss her ear.

"Where?"

"My place. Eventually. Trust me."

She had no choice. Yes, she had. She took one step, and then he laid his hand on her arm and drew her easily back to his side. When she tried to shake him off, he dragged her closer and slipped his arm around her waist. "Got everything?" Wildly, she checked. Yes, she had her bag. She hadn't brought a jacket. Too hot and her outfit was dressy enough without

one. Not that she'd cared much if it wasn't. And she hadn't expected this place when she'd dressed for a day at the office.

She couldn't get away now without causing a scene, and if she did that, she was dead meat. But she wanted nothing more than to be on her own, work out what the fuck was going on, and deal with it. There was film of her having sex with a man, a scene she could have sworn was all in her mind? And if it wasn't in her mind, it meant that dragons existed, weird creatures she'd somehow remained ignorant of all her life and so had everyone else she knew. Unless she was the only person in the world, and everyone around her was a dragon.

"Stop thinking. Let's get through the mob first. Don't forget we're a couple, and we're together. Don't give them any reason to think otherwise."

"Why not?" Her mind worked rapidly over the last hour. Dazed or not, she saw the pattern. "You wanted me to walk out, make a scene, or you wouldn't have brought me here, would have taken me somewhere more discreet. This is the eating place of choice. It takes months to get on the list for a meal here." She turned her head, met his eyes. "How did you do that?"

He gave her an easy smile, but she saw the strain in those dark eyes. "The same way the manager here managed to get a week in one of my villas this summer, even though several Hollywood stars wanted it. Contacts, quid pro quo. Don't worry, baby, at least not until we get somewhere private."

"I want an explanation."

"I promise I'll give you one."

"The truth."

"Yep."

He slid his arm until his hand rested on the small of her back in the classic gesture of protection and ownership. She had to allow it; otherwise she would face the wolves on her own. And face hell back at the office.

So she left with him. The dragon, the man she couldn't fear or hate, however much she tried. She'd seen him naked, and God help her, she wanted it again. He guided her outside and into the limo. There'd been enough delay pushing through the crowd of reporters outside, some of whom hadn't the faintest idea who she was, she was sure, but they knew if they hung around here long enough one of the people arriving or leaving would make their day.

Outside she was numb, her face frozen into a stupid smile. She didn't speak to anyone, although she recognized a couple of the people gathered there. She didn't know if she could speak if Domenici asked her to. Luckily, he didn't. He passed through the crowd, laughing and dropping a word or two, but he didn't give anything away. She could have sworn that at one point he told them they were "just good friends."

The limo waited outside, and he bent and spoke briefly to the driver before he ushered her inside. The car pulled smoothly away from the curb, and Nicole stared past his shoulder at the buildings outside.

Rome consisted of old, narrow streets and aching wide thoroughfares. The limo entered the flow of traffic by the Victor Emmanuel Monument, if not without incident, then without gaining dents in its bodywork. Normally Nicole viewed the way people drove in Rome with a mixture of amusement and horror, depending on her situation within it, but now she regarded the noisy, bustling horde with indifference. After all, her dragon could fly her out of it should they come to a complete standstill, which often happened in this city.

They headed into one of the narrow streets and halted outside a nondescript multistory car park. Domenici hadn't tried to speak once in the car, hadn't touched her, but they'd barely traveled ten minutes. He took her hand and drew her out of the vehicle, nodding at the driver who pulled away.

In the car park, he took her to a black BMW, gleaming balefully in one corner. The lights flashed briefly when he unlocked it. Somehow, the normal activities soothed Nicole, helped her to glide back down to earth and regain some control. But the truth remained. He helped her into the car and took his place behind the wheel. "We can talk now," he said. "That was a hired limo. I didn't want the press getting my license plate too easily, and I didn't want you talking where we might be overheard. Not about this."

"So --" She cleared her throat. "So what was the plan?"

"To get you to walk out through the crowd, to get me off the hook. The film proves we've been together, but if you left me at the restaurant, it would show you weren't with me anymore. Then the Department would pick you up and question you." He stared straight ahead at the Citroën occupying the space opposite them. "I couldn't bear that."

"Why not?"

"It would hurt you. And when you realized you hadn't had a particularly vivid dream, when your mind opened to me, I knew that, somehow, you've been set up for this."

"For what?" She gripped her bag, just for something to hold on to, and faced him. "What is all this?"

He sighed, and his head dropped a little before he straightened again. "Let me get you home. Then we'll talk."

"You live in a cave or something? Isn't that where dragons are supposed to live?"

He let out a bark of sharp laughter. "Anywhere warm and safe." He gunned the engine and started the car. "I promise I'll tell you. Let's just get there, okay?"

She should have guessed. Domenici Serafino lived in one of the best suburbs of Rome. The Olgiata contained gated communities and luxury villas. This might be another of them. Nicole used the half hour it took him to drive there in getting some of her head straight, trying to make sense of what was happening to her. He glanced at her occasionally, his eyes

filled with concern, but she ignored him. She watched the Coliseum as they passed it, wondering how much those stones had witnessed. Maybe dragons killed in the arena for sport. If the ancient Romans had known dragons existed in their midst, that would undoubtedly have been their fate.

After sliding his card into two entrance portals and having the wrought-iron gates silently open for him, Domenici pulled up in front of a moderate-sized villa. Painted white, with roses festooned over the trellis surrounding the front door and black wrought-iron balconies adorning some of the upper-floor windows, the villa presented a picturesque facade. Not to mention expensive, Nicole thought grumpily. Only the best for the dragon.

He drove around to a carport by the side of the house but didn't put the car in the garage set a little farther back. Instead, he exited and came around to her side, then opened the door for her like a perfect gentleman.

"Welcome to my cave," he murmured. The bright sunlight didn't dim the wicked gleam in his dark eyes.

Still gripping her bag, she got out and waited for him to lead the way. He touched her elbow and paused until she looked up into his face. They stared at each other before she turned her head away. Too raw, too open.

She turned away and strode off, not caring if she was going in the right direction. He caught up and guided her to the front door, where he used an old-fashioned key to unlock it. She glanced up and saw the small camera half hidden by the greenery. "Yes, I do have more sophisticated ways of entering and monitoring the house. Do you recognize this house?"

She shook her head.

He took her into a spacious, ceramic-tiled hall. She'd never been here before, or she would have remembered the graceful lines of the wrought-iron balusters on the stairs and the breathtaking modern chandelier, spiraling all the way from the skylight at the top of the house to a few feet off the floor, its smooth crystal drops gleaming in the sunlight. He didn't pause but grasped her hand and pulled her to a door at the end of the hallway. It led to a kitchen, the spotless pans and equipment glinting as Domenici and Nicole passed through, and then, with a pause to turn another lock, outside and past a courtyard to a kidney-shaped swimming pool. "Know it now?"

She did. The pool, the partly shaded veranda, and the lounges were instantly recognizable to anyone who read the gossip magazines. Here, one lucky paparazzo had snapped the scoop of a lifetime. A famous Hollywood couple, newly married, bathing and making love, completely naked. She glanced up and saw the poplar trees on the skyline, where the photographer had camped out for four days while he recorded the course of a marriage. He'd seen the arguments, as had the rest of the world, and the way the woman, a hot Hollywood property, had left when her bridegroom had introduced two of his women friends with the hope of an orgy.

"Oh yes," Nicole said. "It didn't do their careers any harm, especially when the public saw exactly what Megeara Smith had to offer under her bikini."

"Although it held up Ken Courier as a laughingstock." His grim voice showed her what he felt.

She shrugged. "They chose to hold their lives in the public eye. Ken's teeny penis was just the cream on the doughnut."

"That stunt nearly cost me my business. And nobody will stay here now, even though the trees and house are better guarded than any of the other well-guarded houses in this development."

"Spiteful, was he?" She swung around to face him, grimly satisfied with the look of chagrin on his face.

"Violently so. If you remember, he attacked me in a restaurant at Cannes a few weeks later."

Now it was her turn to smile. "I remember. And that didn't do you any harm, did it? Megeara ran straight to you."

He grunted. "To complain. Although I won't deny that after the shock Ken brought her, she needed some soothing."

"A Hollywood babe, is she? Spoiled and stupid?" In her experience, the earlier film stars gained prominence, the worse they were for behavior and the less in touch they were with the real world. Megeara had been a star since she'd left drama school ten years before, although now her appearances weren't as frequent as they used to be.

"No, I like her. Very down-to-earth. But that article didn't just break up her marriage. It nearly broke her."

"Poor baby." Her usual mocking response to the reactions of the rich and famous, but for once, a twinge of conscience pulled at her heart. As far as she was concerned, it was open season on anyone who flaunted themselves before a camera, unless, like her nemesis, they came to her and asked for discretion. Not all journalists behaved like that, and she had to admit they sometimes had better results, if sleazier ones.

He grabbed her arm and swung her to face him. "Don't you ever care about the people you hurt?"

She scowled up at him. "Let go of me! No. Why should I? You're picking on the wrong journalist here, Serafino. If I'd been the one in that article, I would have sent them a couple of snaps and told them we were going ahead, given them a chance to bargain for something else. Exclusive pictures of their first baby, something like that. I've often bargained a small, flashy piece up to something more substantial. But I always give them the chance to answer back before the article goes out."

His lips tightened. "Well, now you have the chance to find out what it's like on the other side of the fence. Come with me."

This time he took her through the kitchen back into the hall and up the sweeping staircase. He didn't look to left or right, though she wanted to linger and study the small sculptures set in niches. All gleaming white marble, they appealed to her in a way she hadn't known before, as if they held secrets to be unlocked. But she didn't have a chance. Perhaps later.

The office he took her to was another surprise. Relentlessly modern, its steel and glass interior reflected light from the window that looked out over the pool and the back of the house. Everything was in place, ruthlessly tidied. Even the mouse pad in front of the state-of-the-art computer screen was placed at a precise angle. And plain. She thought of her office cubicle, plastered with sticky notes, the computer keyboard worn from use, a jacket hung on a hook just inside the entrance to be hastily slipped on if she had a visitor or the day turned cold. Nothing personal here. No paperweights, calendars, or even notes. Perhaps he didn't work there, but that computer was serious equipment, as was the printer in the corner and the microphone and pristine keyboard. He flipped on the computer, and the gentle, familiar hum filled the silence of the room. "Sit." He pulled out the leather desk chair for her, one of those that could be swung back and set in various ergonomically correct poses. She sat, suppressing her sigh when the soft leather gave way and cradled her body. It was always a pleasure to sit in a chair like that.

The screen flickered into life, and he leaned over her to bring up the browser and tap an address into the keyboard.

Nicole tensed when she realized what the address was. A popular video site, but one for porn and sex videos, well-known among aficionados, one that came up in all the search engines if the filters were switched off.

Without checking or hitting a link, he typed in a page. That showed how well he knew the clip. When it loaded, he hit the button for full-screen display.

On his large computer screen, Nicole watched. Watched herself rise up on her knees, saw a shadowy form behind her that quickly resolved into the form of Domenici Serafino. Both naked. He nudged her legs apart, and the spectator could easily see how aroused she was, her folds glistening with her juices. Under the bright lights in the cage, every crease showed up, bright and needy.

She watched, fascinated, and felt strange warmth in her mind. One she'd felt before in her dreams. The dreams that weren't dreams. His hand swept over her skin and down, inevitably, to where her essence waited for him.

"I remember how you smelled then. Like no other woman. I wanted you, and it was your scent that drove me."

"Not that they were going to kill us?"

"I wasn't thinking of anything else at that point."

She felt her panties dampen with fresh arousal, and his voice whispered through her senses. "Just the way you're smelling now. Inviting, gorgeous. I want you now, Nicole."

A spell wound around them. Where she expected embarrassment and anger to take hold, instead she felt arousal, pure and simple. Nothing else. She tried to reach the shamed part of her heart, but she couldn't. Where this man was involved, she seemed to be beyond it. She couldn't understand it.

She watched as he pushed his cock inside her, watched her flesh open and suck him in, enveloping him inside her.

That voice came in her ear again. "You know what the sexiest part of this film is? Your face. Look at your face, baby."

Lost in the moment, head thrown back but not so much that she couldn't see the rapturous expression as he drove inside her willing body. "Oh God!" she choked out.

She hadn't realized the chair would turn until it spun around, leaving the image of the couple on the screen and confronting her with hard reality. His eyes blazed with need, fury, and despair, and she didn't begin to understand it, forgetting to care when he dragged her close to him and took her mouth in a hard, fervent kiss.

Her mouth opened willingly to him, and it was like coming home. Terrifying, unbelievable emotions that had been building deep inside her since she'd first seen him in the lobby of the *Gossip* building. She wanted him, but something about him repelled her while it fascinated her at the same time. Irresistible. She plunged into the fire. Let it burn.

He dragged her out of the chair and over to the window behind the desk, a long French window leading to one of the balconies she'd noted earlier at the front of the house. His arms went around her waist, yanking her against his hard erection, burning into her as if nothing lay between it and her naked body. He stroked her from breast to hip, making her shudder; then his hands went to the buttons fastening her blouse. He spoke again, the low, husky tones she knew from before in the cage, in his bedroom at the villa in Sicily.

"You like it in public, do you, hmmm? Oh baby, you're a man's wet dream. That video is there for anyone to see, and the links to it are growing all the time. Does it turn you on to think of all those people getting off on watching you?"

Her head went back, found its place on his shoulder. "Don't. I never --"

"Never fucked in public?" He slipped the first button free, went on immediately to the next one. This blouse only had four buttons, but she did nothing to stop his inexorable progress. "Baby, I employ gardeners. People pass by here all the time, and we're high enough up for them to see us. And what if we missed a photographer? Shall we go for an encore?"

She moaned when he cradled her silk-covered breasts, giving her nipples temporary ease as they pressed against his palms. "We shouldn't --"

"We already have. We're performing for free online. People are watching us right this minute..." He nuzzled her ear, licked around the rim, his hot breath raising goose bumps on her neck. "You never did this before? Performed in public?"

Heat rose wildly inside her, and she writhed against him. "You can't do this."

“Hmmm.” With a flick of his thumb and forefinger, he opened the front fastening of her bra.

Nicole whimpered, and her nipples tightened even more. She leaned forward, but just before she could cool them against the glass of the window, he reached around and took each one between a thumb and forefinger, pinching them to the edge of pain. She cried out and he growled in response. Using her breasts, he dragged her back against him. His heart pounded against her back, his cock pushed into the upper cleft of her ass. “Domenici!”

“Oh yes, keep saying my name just like that.”

One hand left her breast, but he pushed them together, palming one nipple and pinching the other. He slid down her body, gliding over her flesh. She knew where he headed. She should stop him slipping the button through its hole, pushing the tab of the zipper down. With relentless intent, he eased his hand under her pants, shoving them down until all that remained between her and him was his clothing and her panties, a tiny thong today, to avoid a VPL on the summer-weight pants.

“You shouldn’t do this...”

“Shouldn’t do what, baby? Damn, but you smell good. You know dragons have superior senses? My superior sense says you’re flowing rich and free for me.” Pushing aside the thin silk, he insinuated his fingers into her cleft. “Oh yeah, and was I ever right!”

“You shouldn’t -- we shouldn’t -- I thought you wanted me to leave you --”

“Let’s just say I changed my mind.”

Even his deliberate reminder that he was different, that the whole dragon thing wasn’t a dream, didn’t stop her. She watched someone stroll by across the street, a portly, middle-aged man walking a dog. If he’d crossed to this side of the street, he might have seen through the wrought-iron gates. As it was, he’d be able to see over the wall if he just turned his head.

The dog stopped to sniff something on the pavement, and the man watched the pooch, waiting for it to stop, but when the dog headed for the wall and lifted its leg, he dragged the animal on. He stayed in view for an agonizing length of time.

“You see him? All he has to do is look our way. He’ll see you, my fingers opening you for him to see how wet you are, how swollen your little clit is.” Without warning, he pinched her clit, and she howled and tried to twist in his arms. Her knee banged the glass, and the man outside lifted his head sharply.

Nicole caught her breath, realizing two things. If he saw them, he might report Domenici. She wondered how he dared do this. And that his sudden alertness sent sparks of awareness down her spine.

At last, he released her breast. “Lift up your hands, sweetheart, cup those pretty breasts. Thumb your nipples; showcase them for the audience.”

She shuddered, her eyes half closing, but she did as he said, cupped and lifted her breasts, forced them together to deepen the cleavage, pinching the nipples as he had a moment before.

He scissored his fingers, opening her to anyone who cared to look. Outside, their audience tugged at the dog's leash, drawing the animal away. She should have sighed in relief, but somewhere deep in her mind, she pleaded with him to come back, to watch the way Domenici stroked her flesh, teased her sensitive clit, drawing the fluids out of her body until she was so wet drops trickled down her legs.

The sound of a zipper intruded on her consciousness. Not hers, he'd already undone it. His. She held her breath, waiting. Then the rounded, hot head of his cock slipped between her thighs, teasing her with its own wetness and readiness.

She would die if he didn't fuck her now, but he took his time, sliding forward in her wet heat until his cock head teased her clit. He used his hand to push it against the tiny opening at the head of his cock, the change in pressure making her release her breath in a sob of wanting.

"What is it, sweetheart? Tell me what you want me to do." His soft voice, hot breath against her ear, added to her sensitivity, pushed her higher. All that existed now was Domenici. She didn't care who watched and who didn't anymore. She just wanted him.

"Fuck me. Please, Domenici. Put it inside me; force it there." It felt almost too big to fit inside her, but his whispered words and his wicked hands had made her feel wide open. Wide open and empty.

When he pushed his cock into the very entrance of her vagina, he slipped his arm around her waist, holding her hard against him. His shirt brushed her back, the fine fabric rough against her sensitized skin. "Ready for me?"

"I don't think I could be more ready."

"We'll see about that. Another time." With a brutal shove, he plunged deep inside her.

This time her cry was full-bodied. Anyone outside could hear, but she was past caring. She didn't care who saw now or who heard. She needed this so badly. The tension of the past few days disappeared in one deep plunge, the slap of flesh meeting flesh as his stomach made contact with her ass. This was what she'd missed, the reason her mood was so down, her depression so deep. She'd thought it hadn't been real, any of it. That they'd spent an afternoon together and he'd sent her on her way.

Because she knew nobody would feel like this, nobody would understand her wants, her needs before even she did. And then provide the answer.

He gave no quarter, pounding against her; the only thing keeping her from colliding with the full-length window in front of her was his arm around her waist. He pulled her tightly against him, his lower body setting up a rhythm she had to accept. His wicked voice, short of breath now, continued to taunt her.

“Who’ll walk past now? A few tourists with cameras, maybe, or a couple on an afternoon stroll. Perhaps what we’re doing will give them the idea, and they’ll get down and dirty right outside the gates. Maybe we could ask them in, join in with the fun and games. Form a sex theater just for them.”

Finally she understood why some film actors enjoyed stripping for the camera, why some porn stars enjoyed their jobs.

“You want to make a film? I’ll do it if you will. We could sell it this time. Think how many people would get off from that. Think how many are getting off now.”

“Domenici, don’t!”

“Don’t what? Don’t let you get hotter than that beach in Sicily, wetter than the sea hitting the beach, steamier than the humidity at midday? Don’t fuck you until you can’t stand? Ask all you like, baby, but I’m not letting up until I come hot and hard inside you.”

At that, she jerked away, and sensing her fear, he gripped her relentlessly. “Don’t worry. You know what I am. Because of that, it means I can’t get you pregnant, can’t give you anything.”

When he’d told her before, she’d just put it down to part of the dream, wishful thinking maybe. She gasped and gave up trying to wrench free. This was far too good to pass up, too good to miss. Whatever this made her, she’d be it willingly for the pleasure tearing through her body, making her unable to resist, unable to think.

He drove her up, higher with each stroke, until all she could do was clutch at his arm with shaking hands. Her breasts bounced with each stroke, and she saw their shadowy reflections in the glass, his heavier body outlining hers, ruthlessly taking, while she gasped and cried out, desperately pushing her rear against his hips, wanting all of him in all of her.

With a groan, he froze for the brief half second before she felt the semen, hot and thick, surging up his cock to erupt deep inside her. She could have sworn she felt the liquid pouring into her, and then it seeped down, adding to her wetness, making something uniquely theirs.

The scent wove its way up and around her senses, and she slumped against him, completely spent.

He gave a gasping laugh, and with a sudden energetic surge, lifted her into his arms. Her pants dangled off her legs, effectively crippling her, although she hadn’t noticed until then.

She had no choice but to link her arms around his neck and hold on. He smiled down into her face, but she wasn’t at all pleased. “What the fuck did you think you were doing?”

“Baby, how could I resist? You were so hot, so fast; I couldn’t stop you taking me with you.”

She shook her head, weary now. “We’ll be all over the papers in the morning.”

The reminder made her lift her head, but the computer screen had long since gone blank. "I don't think I saw the end. Did it -- did you --"

He laughed, but it wasn't a joyful sound. "No. The film fades out just before I shape-shift. They want to hold it against us. We're waiting for their demands."

She lifted her head and met his eyes, which were harder than they'd been a moment ago. "And you thought I --"

His mouth tightened and he strode across the room to the door. "They thought you had it done. I thought it too, until I had you in that godforsaken restaurant. Then I knew it couldn't be you. If you'd done it, then all my judgment is awry, and I shouldn't even consider doing my job, much less work for Talents in the Department."

She'd followed it all but the last part. "What department?"

He took her through the door and along the hallway outside to a door at the end. "Shower. Then we'll talk."

She recovered enough to force some of her mind back to working order, and when he put her down, stripped herself while watching him. That hair-dusted chest she remembered touching came into view and then the powerful thighs. She'd already reacquainted herself with what lay between them. It wasn't properly flaccid even now, the head emerging from the uncircumcised foreskin. She wanted more. She wanted to spend weeks just enjoying it, exploring it.

This bathroom wasn't as ostentatious as the one in the villa in Sicily, but just as well-appointed. Gleaming chrome replaced gold plate and shining white porcelain with touches of blue and smudge-free plate glass met her eyes. She went to him when he held his hand out to her, leaving her stained and creased clothes on the floor. What other choice did she have?

The look in his eyes was warm, protective, and made her think things she had no right to. Like this was more than convenience, more than pure lust.

She had to admit it was for her. Every time she met him, the feeling increased, a feeling of belonging, of rightness.

Idiot! Nicole gave him her best lighthearted smile and stepped under the shower with him. He drew her close for a kiss, but instead of the passionate, visceral one she expected, she received a tender touch, a gentle exploration that made her feel fragile and precious. And she couldn't shake it off, give him the sassy retort and cheeky grin he probably expected from her.

But instead of that, he drew back and gazed into her eyes before he reached for the shampoo. "You have beautiful eyes, you know that?"

She gave a shaky laugh. "No, I don't. I make them up every day, add some drops if they're tired, but apart from that, I don't take much notice."

"You should." He concentrated on pouring a puddle of the lemon-scented liquid into his palm. "Or maybe you'll let me do it for you. Turn around."

He gave her a head massage she would have gladly paid an expert to do for her. He eased his fingers through her hair, rubbing the scalp with his fingertips, and made her groan as she relaxed into his body.

"Just let go now." His touch moved to her neck, easing the muscles still tense from the day. "Let me take care of you."

She would have retorted that she was quite capable of taking care of herself, but somehow the comment seemed crass. Rude, even. So she contented herself with, "You shouldn't."

"Yes, I should." She heard a different tone in his voice, but she couldn't identify it. More intimate than before, as if he was letting her further in.

At the thought, her eyes snapped open. That was what bothered her. In the villa in Sicily, she'd expect to see an impersonal place, something a cleaner would maintain. But this was his home. She'd seen three rooms -- the hall, the study, and this bathroom -- as well as the hallway in between, and nowhere had she seen any sign of a personality. She knew Domenici had a decided one, so where did he hide the objects everyone collected, the things that meant something to him? In the hall outside, the pictures were uniform, attractive watercolors of the Italian countryside. Here in the bathroom, the bottles were lined up neatly, but with no sign of anyone moving them or using them. Just like one of the photographs of a celebrity's beautiful home in *Gossip* magazine. Very often, the pictures were of a temporary home, or a hired house, not the place the celebrity in question preferred to spend most of his or her time. Occasionally, they were photographed in a hotel suite, and the implication left that they were in their home, though in those cases no definite affirmation was made.

If this was his home, it showed no signs of personal touches, and that worried her. What kind of person lived in his house like it was a hotel? Were his closets crammed with items, or was everything neatly arranged in them?

She was almost afraid to find out. If he had nothing, maybe that meant he was nothing, although the vitality of him, the sheer power of his presence, drew her like no other man had before. But she couldn't be in love with a cipher, a figurehead.

Could she? Her mind raced, deciding to start working again after the two big shocks she'd had recently eased, and she assimilated them, accepted them into her. Dragons existed. One held her in his arms right now, gazing at her with a softness that slowly sharpened.

"What's wrong?"

She gave a shaky laugh. "What do you mean?"

He smiled, the twitch of his lips not hiding the anxiety in his eyes. "Just now, I sensed a change in your thoughts. You're worried about something. What is it?"

She moved, but he didn't let her down. Instead he gripped her harder and lifted her. She couldn't look away. The warmth in her mind shifted, deepened until she felt an edge of pain. Then he withdrew.

"Tell me, baby. Please." The warm water rained down on them, rinsing them clean.

She'd never liked anyone calling her that, but in his voice, it sounded somehow different. His American accent was soft, gentle, Midwest maybe, and she loved it. It gentled her far more than it rightfully should. But with his capacity to sense her thoughts, he'd find out eventually. Better now than later. "Put me down, please."

He bent and placed her on the floor, not sliding her down his body or holding more than her hands. He laced his fingers with hers. "Will you tell me?"

Naked and honest. She met his gaze unflinchingly and reverted to Italian. His English seemed too intimate, too close, and she needed distance. "Domenici, you're so sexy you make my eyes cross. Michelangelo's *David* has nothing on you."

He laughed, sharp-edged but genuine amusement coloring his tone. "Have you seen how poorly endowed the sad man is? Seventeen and a half feet of gangly peasant boy and a tiny dick."

She was forced to join in his laughter. He was right. "Maybe I'll think of something else, but you don't really need comparisons. Anyway, you might have met Michelangelo."

He shook his head. "I'm not that old. But you don't get off that easily." Damn him, he was still speaking in English. "Tell me what's up. I want everything clear between us before I take you in. I'm going out on a limb for you, and I don't want any doubts."

She swallowed but continued to use Italian. "Would you go out on a limb if we weren't...involved?"

Slowly he nodded. "I read you more deeply than I read most people. I have telepathy, but I use it mainly for communication. I don't even intrude into the area most Talents allow. So yes. I know you're not guilty, so although it was our closeness that drew me to believe you, that made me read you. The answer is yes, if we weren't...involved...I'd still support you."

She was about to enter a world she knew nothing about, a world where she'd be the newbie, the innocent, and she hated it. A world she couldn't do any research about. She'd never gone into anything without doing her research first, and this time she couldn't. She only had this man she had unaccountably fallen in love with.

The thought shocked her to the core, but used to separating her feelings from her actions, she put it aside. She couldn't distract herself any more than she wanted him distracted.

"I don't know if I have any right --"

His mouth tightened. "Just say it, okay?"

He was right.

“Is this your home? Because if it is, where are your personal things? The cook pots you like best, the shampoo you always use, the pictures of your family or yourself? Domenici, there’s nothing. Nobody can tell anything about you from this house, not even your taste, because you could have employed someone to do it for you.” She carried on, despite the hard edge entering his expression, the way the skin over his cheekbones flushed and his mouth remained in a hard, tight line. Maybe she’d gone too far, but she needed to know why, how he could do this. If he had a real home somewhere else. If there was anything to learn about him.

He looked at her for a full minute. She knew because she counted, slowly. His dark eyes remained unreadable, his expression still.

Although an expert at reading faces and expressions, she couldn’t read his. He drew a deep breath. “I’ve lived a long time, Nicole, much longer than a human lives. All Talents, except the ones called Sorcerers, have longer life spans, and we’ve learned to disguise it, to move from life to life. Some become their own children; some choose to start something completely new. The government agencies help us, the few who know about us, and some choose to go their own way, as they’ve always done. I’m on my second life, and I never knew my parents. Talents don’t come into their full gifts until puberty, and I don’t remember anything before I was thirteen years old. As far as I knew, I was newborn at thirteen, except I knew how to care for myself and make some kind of living. I was a child of the streets in Rome, like all the others, except that I changed into a dragon for three days every month.” He stepped back and grabbed a towel from the rack, then leaned back in to switch off the water. She stepped out and let him wrap her hair in the towel. He continued to talk while he rubbed her hair.

“I soon learned to hide it. I didn’t know who I was. It happens sometimes, when children are born of a mixed marriage. Since the Talent doesn’t become obvious until puberty, the mortal parent freaks out and dumps them. The Talented half of the partnership wipes the mind. Either that or something happens in our early lives that we don’t recall. Nobody knows for sure. But I was born as Domenici Serafino on that street in Rome. I chose my own name, I struggled, and I survived.”

He turned her around. “I never had a bed to call my own until I was nineteen years old. You don’t want to know what I did to survive, but eventually the inevitable happened, and another Talent recognized me as one of his kind and brought me in. By then, I’d been working the hotel circuit. As a fixer. I knew people, restaurants where the owners had taken pity on me, hotels with tourists looking for good places to eat. There are a lot of terrible restaurants in Rome, and a few very good ones. I married the two and took a commission from both sides.” He held her shoulders, and she had the feeling he needed the contact as much as she did. His words seared through her soul, made her realize what it must have been like to have no one -- no one -- on your side, no money, no safety net. “So all my life I’ve lived in hotels, villas, temporary places. I don’t do personal possessions, never had anything I wanted to hold on to. Until now.”

She didn't want to ask, but the way his eyes softened to pure velvet tempted her beyond what she could bear. "And what now?"

"You." He smiled, a brief quirk of his lips, but she saw the real warmth, none of the hardness she'd seen in him earlier. "I want to keep you, or at least give us a try. Until yesterday, I thought I didn't, but when I saw you again, you threw me into a tailspin. Then, when I saw the film this morning, I thought you'd betrayed me, so I agreed to see you again and set you up for a fall. I couldn't do it. You broke, and I had to catch you."

"But we...we don't know..."

He drew her closer, and the warmth enveloped her. She knew. She wanted this. Wanted him until she couldn't think of anything else.

"Yes, we do. Deep down, you know we do. We know, baby."

She couldn't remember when she'd given up her attempt to use Italian. Now they spoke in low murmurs, but in her native language and what sounded like his. But he said he'd lived in Rome. Enough for now. He'd told her why he didn't do personal possessions, made her see the man under the veneer of sophistication. Made her realize why she always thought of a wounded animal when she looked at him. He'd been a street urchin, abandoned, used, and she was sure he was skipping a lot of the horrors he'd experienced on the streets.

She rested her head against his chest before pulling back. He'd been brave. The least she could do was match it.

"I've been scared, Domenici. I didn't know you well, only what I read and researched. The first afternoon at the villa, that was never meant to be anything more than a brief encounter, was it?"

He chuckled and kissed her forehead when she lifted her chin to look at him. "Come and lie down. We'll talk there." He grabbed another towel and threw it around her shoulders, babying her, patting her dry with gentle strokes. She snuggled closer, although usually she preferred to bathe and dress alone after a sexual encounter, especially one as intense as the one she'd just had. To get her head sorted and gather herself back up. But not now. Now she wanted to rest and love him again.

Considering the ferocity of their previous session, that urge shocked her to the core. Because of that, she needed time to think and rest, and Domenici offered her shelter, offered her solace. And more. She wanted all he had.

Oh God, she was in deep. Far too deep to back out now.

Chapter Eleven

Domenici babied her, dried her, and put her into bed. Then he scrubbed himself dry with one of the towels he'd used on her and slid in next to her. She went to his arms without hesitation, lifting her mouth for his kiss.

Nobody had ever kissed her in quite that way before. Gentle, deep, thorough, and as if he really cared. And as if he'd be there tomorrow, something she still didn't quite believe. But she was beginning to.

He drew back and touched her chin with two fingers. "You are so beautiful."

"No."

"Yes, you are. Inside and out." He kissed her again but drew back after a sweet, closemouthed caress. "You ready to hear more?"

"Shouldn't you be taking me in?"

He chuckled. "Let them wait. We both need a bit of R and R, and we're safe here. Besides, we have more to sort out."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I can think of a few things." He bent to kiss her again, longer this time, and he licked her lips, urging her to open for him. She cooperated with enthusiasm, opening to taste his addictive spice as he groaned into her mouth and swept his tongue inside.

When he drew back, his eyes sparkled, burning into hers. She could have sworn she saw flames in them. Nothing seemed important anymore, even madmen who wanted to kill them. If he said they were safe, then she'd have to trust him. Except they'd fucked in front of a window. The thought spiked between them, and his eyes softened.

"Sweetheart, I have to confess something. It's one-way glass in the study window. Nobody saw. We saw them; they couldn't see more than a few shadows. Disappointed?"

She let out a sigh. "Relieved. Once you let me think, I couldn't see how you could get away with behaving like that in an area like this. And reporters lurk everywhere."

"But are you disappointed? Do you want to do this for real?"

A strange emotion, a combination of excitement and shame, swept through her. "I'm not sure."

"I'll be here when you make up your mind. And I'll help you fulfill the fantasy if you want to." He stroked a lock of hair back from her forehead. "Even damp, your hair burns. I adore it." He looked from her hair to her eyes, and what she saw in them took all her breath away. "Can I say it yet?"

"No!" He couldn't say he loved her. "You don't know me properly. I don't know you." She frowned, searching for a change of subject. He let her do it, although his eyes sent her a message she wasn't yet ready to hear. "What you said about your early life. From what I read, that was your father. Not you. Did you lie to me?" But deep inside, she knew he hadn't, and she remembered what he'd said about Talents having long lives. She wanted him to tell her freely, wanted that trust from him. She'd felt the sincerity, the freshness of his pain because he didn't attempt to hide it from her, and surely he wasn't lying about that.

"No. That was me." His gaze drifted back to her hair, and he took a curl in his hand, twisted it between his fingers, and played with it while he spoke. "I was that boy on the streets during World War II. Then I went to the States and started working there, and after the war, the United States was a place of milk and honey. I worked hard, made money --" He bit his lip. "Married, although it didn't last long. She wanted the money I was making, not me." When Nicole lifted her hand to his chest, he gave her a bittersweet smile. "I wanted to have someone of my own. We misunderstood each other. I did what Talents often do, and in the fullness of time, with the help of the authorities, who were sympathetic to Talents, I became my own child. I married another Talent; we had two nonexistent children and divorced. That marriage was purely to give ourselves the records of children, one for her, one for me. A pleasant woman, but a business arrangement. That's what you read, isn't it?"

That Domenici's father married twice, once when he'd made his fortune in the States, once later in life. Nicole nodded. "And so you don't have any family."

He stared at the lock of fiery hair twined in his fingers. "No. It's only me." He grinned, but she felt no response. "All alone."

"Didn't you ever want someone?"

"Sometimes. Like now."

She nearly missed the implications of his last remark, delivered in such a quiet tone he might have been talking to himself. And she understood him. Ruthlessly self-sufficient, never letting any of himself out into the world, not even with personal possessions, Domenici never allowed any of himself free. Not that he had nothing, just that he held it within himself. So what had he given to her?

He stilled, then moved over her until she lay under him, putting their bodies into intimate contact. His cock, hard again, burned into her lower belly, but he didn't try to move it down, to caress the dampening folds of her cleft. "I have to explain about mind contact. You've let me in, but you have a hard barrier. That's why I thought you were with the PHR. They cultivate that, teach all their members how to resist telepathic contact. But I think yours is natural, or you built it subconsciously. Every baby is born open to all contact. Walk into a nursery and feel it if you can. But during the first month or so of life outside the womb, the barrier grows, and the baby builds it until it becomes bearable. Most don't know it, any more than they realize that the plates in their heads are knitting together. And something happened to you that made yours harder to breach than any I've come across before."

He lifted his hips, and his cock slipped down, easing between her legs. As if she hadn't had wild sex with him just a short time before, Nicole sighed in relief. She needed him there. "I don't understand any of this. Fuck me, Domenici. Just shut up and fuck me."

"Oh no." He lifted one hand to frame her chin, held it so she had to look into his eyes. "I think we've reached the making love stage, don't you?"

She couldn't do this. Instinctively she backed off, refused to let him make contact, and she realized where her barrier had come from, why she was so hard to get through. For the first time in her life she wanted to open, to make herself as vulnerable as Domenici had just made himself to her. To honor him and the trust he had in her, that she, a gossip columnist, wouldn't go and make a fortune off what he'd just told her.

Nicole bit her lip and jerked her head in a nod.

"Don't be scared, sweetheart. Just go with it. Let me make love to you, and everything else will just fall into place."

She couldn't stop herself grinning, and he grinned too. She loved the way his lips curved, tightening the soft flesh just enough. "Oh yes, that too," he said before he lowered his head to kiss her.

If Domenici Serafino fucking her was intense, when he made love to her she thought she'd die from the concentration of emotions. His mind entered hers, welcomed there, enclosed her in heat and drifted images of her body and his, entwined and sweaty. Images he'd memorized from the video, from their encounter that morning and the one in the villa in Sicily. Once he'd engaged her senses, his kiss turned greedy as he devoured her mouth, not leaving any of it unexplored.

He pulled away with a lingering reluctance, finishing with a soft caress, a brush of his lips against hers before he opened his eyes and met her gaze with an intimacy that frightened her. But his unspoken dare couldn't go unmet or ignored. So she lifted her arms and wound them around his neck, letting her hands drift downward to caress the muscles of his upper back. His spine flexed under her touch as he slid down to kiss her neck, lick the hollow at the base of her throat, and tease the pulse point at the side. Her hands drifted through his

hair when he continued his journey of discovery. He'd been there before, touched her, tasted her, but not like this. Not with this intensity, this concentration that opened her up to him and him to her.

He spoke to her in the intimate way she craved. *"Enter me, sweetheart, just as I'm entering you. Come into my mind. I don't have any secrets from you."*

Tentatively, she concentrated, which was difficult considering what he was doing to her body, kissing small circles around her left nipple, teasing her with possibilities. When he entered her mind, she felt warmth, gentle persuasion, and once she'd felt something hard, like somebody pushing. That gave her the clue. She tried it, pushing out, and she found something.

She found him. Intensity, heat, and...a strange sign, a tiny dragon, swimming at the forefront of her thoughts.

"That's my sigil. Remember, I showed you before. All Talents have them. It tells other Talents what I am, and it's a form of greeting."

His lips paused in their gently seductive movements. He whispered next to her skin, making the sensitive flesh contract and peak. "My dragon likes you and he's come out to play."

Delight filled her when he continued. *"Some of your innate telepathy remains. Do you like it?"*

She tried her inner voice, like trying new muscles, sending out to him instead of letting him remain in her mind and read her thoughts there, as they had done before. *"I think so."*

"Good. Stay with me, baby."

"I don't want to go anywhere. I want to be here, with you."

For that, she got her nipple enclosed in hot, wet suction. She arched in immediate response, her body tightening against the nerves bunching in her body. Every inch of her felt sensitive. His tongue curled around the tip of her breast, tickled, and then he sucked hard.

"Oh God!"

"Just me, sweetheart."

His intimate communications added another dimension to their lovemaking. Yes, lovemaking. Although she shied away from the ultimate commitment -- *too soon, not yet* -- she accepted the other word. And let her mind dwell on it.

He lifted his head and met her eyes. "By the time we leave this house, you'll say it. And so will I. Be sure of that."

She wasn't sure of anything anymore. Not in this brave, new world.

He kissed her stomach, lingered to tease her navel. *"Be sure of me."*

When he reached the cleft between her legs, her mind scattered, and she couldn't form a thought, verbally or otherwise. Heat scorched her, and he swiped his tongue, once, over

her clit, leaving her begging for more. But he leaned up on his elbows. "Beautiful. The hair here is slightly darker than the hair on your head. Curlier too." He lifted a hand and teased her curls, barely disturbing them. "Do you shave or wax?"

She laughed. "Wax."

"Don't. Get the bikini line done but leave the rest. I love it." With his thumb and forefinger he carefully parted her labia and gazed at her. Nicole wriggled, but he made a tsking sound between his teeth. "You're gorgeous here. Plump and inviting."

"Nobody likes to be called plump."

"They should." He touched her clit, and she whimpered. "There, baby, there. You like that?"

Oh yes, she liked it, especially when he sank onto her and took her clit into his mouth. He sucked, his tongue exploring and invading her, and she loved every lick, every caress. He kissed the very tip, where the nerves opened, yearning for his touch, and he did something nobody had ever done to her before. Tickled the tip of her clit, the hard beaded end, with the tip of his tongue, stimulating without fulfilling, and she went wild.

When she would have twisted her body away from him, his hands clamped down on her hips, holding her steady. And he carried on tickling her to torture her, she was sure. Reaching down, she grabbed his hair, tried to pull him away, but all she got was a chuckle as his flickering licks traveled down the length of her clit and back. Touches that were gone as soon as her oversensitized body recognized them, touches that tantalized and brought her to the edge of reason.

Only when he'd reduced her to an unthinking, yearning mass of nerve endings did he dip that fraction lower and suck her clit. At the same time, he brought his hand off her hip and pushed two fingers straight into her pussy. Her involuntary jerk drove him deeper, and she screamed, loud and long.

"Baby, you taste so good when you come. Keep coming and I'll keep drinking. Save it all for me, sweetheart."

His words in her mind, his mouth on her clit, his fingers inside her, and the way he curled his thumb into the cleft between her buttocks to touch and rim her anus drove her higher than she'd thought possible.

Mindless now, she watched as he rose up over her. His mouth glistened with her juices, and he swept his tongue over his lips to capture every last drop. She no longer cared that she was completely open to him, her body and her mind. If he brought her this kind of ecstasy, he could do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. All the time.

But she couldn't speak right now, only try to get her breath back and reach for him, unable to bear his absence. He smiled and sank down into her welcoming arms, his cock finding its way home without help.

He entered her, pushed his body into hers until she thought there could be no end. He felt deeper, harder, than she'd ever known him before. Ever known any man, for that matter. Not that she was thinking of anyone else now. Every man in her life faded into insignificance next to the blazing reality of Domenici Serafino. Man or dragon, whatever shape he took, she was his.

She should tell him, try to rouse herself into some kind of coherence, but she found the effort almost impossible. He touched his lips to hers before pushing her lips open with his tongue and taking her with a savagery that expressed his own need. Then he let his mind open into hers. She read him and knew.

Any attempt to keep herself apart from him, from this, disappeared in the wake of this ferocity. His single-minded need humbled and amazed her. He wanted her that much?

He rolled so she lay on top and then rolled again, putting her back under him. The pressures against their bodies drove him deeper, and when he finally finished the kiss, he lifted his head and touched her eyelids with his lips. She licked, tasting herself on him, and the flavor set her burning again.

"I'm putting myself inside you, right inside. You'll never be alone again. I want to care for you, take care of you, and I want to make love to you and fuck you until we're both blind."

"You...how can you say this? You...have so many barriers."

He kissed her again, and his deep, driving thrusts became rhythmic, almost as if he did it to music. Graceful, powerful, like the best kind of waltz. "I can say it because you've made it possible. If I stop to think, I scare myself stupid, but the rewards when I love you, when I open, are worth any fear."

"Fear?" How could a man so powerful be afraid? His body was so big it engulfed her. Anyone entering the room would only see her hair spread over his pillow and her legs, her knees raised either side of his.

"We all have fears, cara. But we'll agree to leave them on the other side of the bedroom door. Okay?"

That sounded good to her. "I'll try."

"You don't have to do anything right now. Just -- lie there."

With a wicked grin, he pushed up until his arms were straight and looked down to where they joined. She followed his gaze and watched him withdraw, the thick stalk of his cock glistening with her juices. Then he plunged into her again. His arms strained with effort, and he gritted his teeth. Because she still had access to his thoughts, she felt him fight his orgasm. He was going to come and he didn't want to. Not yet. She slid her hands up his arms and across his broad chest, reveling in the hard, hair-covered expanse of muscle. "Do it."

“No.” Sweat glistened on his forehead. “I want to feel you come around me. I want all that beautiful liquid bathing my cock in your cum. Give it to me, Nicole.”

He came down onto his elbows to claim another kiss. This time he took her, ravaged her mouth, and drove his mind deep into hers, seating it so she knew he'd never be out of it. Ever. And she didn't want him to be.

That thought, even more than the thrusts of his cock into her wet and willing body, spiked her so that all the sensations coursing through her met in one wild climax, rocketing through her until nothing mattered any longer.

* * * * *

“Move in with me.”

“What?” She looked up at his face, startled by his sudden demand. They'd dozed, and he made her eat something. The tray with the remains of the salad he'd brought up from the kitchen lay by the bed.

“You heard. Move in here.”

“Don't you think it's --” His request overwhelmed her. Domenici Serafino, eternal bachelor, rigidly private, could ask her that? “Too soon? Maybe we should wait. I-I thought we'd had a fling, that's all, and when I called your office you astonished me by answering my call. Today you want me to move in with you?”

He leaned up on one elbow and reached across her to the glass of wine that sat on the nightstand. He toasted her with a teasing tilt of the glass before he took a drink and returned the glass to its place, but he remained leaning over her. “I want it. Isn't that enough?”

She narrowed her eyes. She felt a restriction, a tightening in him. He was keeping something from her.

“Damn, you're good.” He sighed and dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. “Do you know how addictive you taste? All over.”

She flattened her palm on his chest. “Just tell me.”

“I think you're still in danger. Or you will be once it becomes clear you remember everything and you're with me. I can't keep away from you, cara, so I want you with me, where I can look after you.”

“Are you going to tell me what exactly is going on?”

He touched her cheek and stroked down to her neck. She shuddered at his touch but she didn't lose her concentration on what she wanted to know. “Tell me, Domenici. Please.”

He sighed and his mouth flattened. “I thought we were leaving our worries outside the bedroom.”

“We can get up and dress if you like.”

He laid his leg across hers. "No, you don't. Okay, I'll tell you." He sighed. "I want to finish this."

Shock lanced through her like a physical pain, but when she tried to get up, he wouldn't let her. He pinned her to the bed with his leg and caged her with his arms. "No, not that, not us. The operation. The danger you're in by being with me. I won't give you up unless you want it. I want to see what we have, and I want to keep you with me. But if we do that, they'll know, and they'll come after you. They always attack what they see as the weak spot, and you, being a human and not being a trained agent, are that weak spot."

She hated anyone seeing her like that. "I thought you caught them all, closed the cell down."

"No. There are two people out there. The daisies."

She frowned. "Daisies?"

"The link to another cell. If we let them go, they'll carry the operation to the next cell in the chain and tell them what they know. Whoever it is has the film of us, and we have no way of knowing if it really did cut off at that point, or if it contains the part where I shape-shift."

"So you have to get it back."

"*We* have to get it back." He kissed her and paused, his lips hovering above hers. "On second thought, I have places on quite a few island retreats. What do you say we take the next flight to Mustique and let the rest of the team get on with catching the bad guys?"

She laughed. "Some of us have to make a living."

"So we do. That, in case you hadn't noticed, is *my* living."

Chapter Twelve

Outside L'Edera again, the cameras snapped, and reporters yelled questions in their direction. Domenici held out his hand and helped Nicole out of the car. To his prejudiced eyes, she looked wonderful. A deceptively simple pale green dress today, with a slim gold chain around her neck and tan leather accessories. He'd helped her pack the things she'd need, and once he had seen her woefully tiny apartment in a not-so-good suburb, Domenici decided she was never going back there. If she didn't want to stay with him, then he'd find her something else.

Already he knew he wanted her in his life, but he didn't know how she'd take that. If he took it day to day, eventually she'd realize it had happened. Because he wasn't letting her go when this operation was over.

They slowed and let the photographers take the pictures, but Domenici refused to answer any questions. Today they weren't on show. And today they'd choose dishes they actually enjoyed.

So many things had changed. A kind of tranquility had descended on him, an emotion he wasn't familiar with, but he loved it so far. He'd woken that morning with Nicole in his arms and felt a sense of rightness. Usually he welcomed the new day, but not like this, not with that completeness.

Maybe he had a few things to get used to, as well. Nicole was coping magnificently. Esti would implant a sigil into her head, one that simply informed another Talent that although human, she was to be trusted. He had no intention of letting her out of his sight during the procedure. It would hurt, but he'd bear it all for her, if he could. He still hadn't forgiven himself for allowing the first procedure to take place. His own cowardice, his fear of involvement, had held him back and stopped him from taking responsibility for her in the Talented community. He should have done it from the start.

He didn't release her hand and, with a gentle tug, guided her toward the entrance. The maître d' waited for them and took them past the public area, right into the private part of the restaurant where their host awaited them.

When they approached the table, he got to his feet. Golden, dazzling Laurie Friedland was a star football player, and in this country where football was second only to Catholicism, that meant he would have preference over the president when booking places to eat. It didn't hurt that he was so easy on the eyes. Not for the first time when confronted with this golden god, Domenici wondered if he was entirely heterosexual after all.

Laurie wore a dress shirt and slacks. He'd slung his jacket over the back of his chair, far too carelessly for an Armani original. He hadn't even turned the coat so the label showed, as many of his colleagues were at pains to do, but it didn't take that for Domenici to know the cut and style. He didn't go in for quite so much ostentation, but he'd unearthed a good enough outfit. Just something he wouldn't mind seeing all over the Internet and the newspapers, since he guessed that they were still a story. After all, this was July, when most celebrities took the month off for real, no leading the press to hideaways where they knew damned well they'd be snapped and watched. So in default of juicier stories, they were it.

Just as well they didn't know that two out of the three people at the table were Talents, with another Talent about to join them. That would send them into orgasms of delight.

The phrase recalled what Nicole looked like stretched out under him, her hair flowing over his pillow, her eyes filled with delight. He'd never seen anything more beautiful in his life. He wanted to see her again and again, and he knew for sure he'd never tire of the sight. Or the beautiful little sounds she made sometimes when she came. Nicole made a sound low in her throat, breathless and caught in ecstasy. He loved it and each sound only urged him on to drive her to more of them.

Before his cock could decide it wanted more now, he gave Laurie an easy smile and asked him about his health.

Laurie raised a brow. "Asking a footballer that could make news. But I'm fine, ready for the new season."

"Wherever that is?"

Laurie glanced at Nicole. "Are we on the record here?"

A qualm of concern crossed her face. "You trust me? Plenty of people think I betrayed Courtney Southern. I didn't."

Domenici remained on the outside of Nicole's mind, and he felt Laurie's gentle presence there. He had every right to be, but he still felt like ripping the footballer's handsome face off.

He initiated a private message. "*Back off, Friedland.*"

The answer shot right back. "*Insecure, Serafino? I need to know if she's telling the truth, that's all.*"

"She's telling the truth; you have my word on it. Now fuck off."

Laurie's presence left Nicole, and Domenici glared at him, not concerned with how his actions must appear. All his instincts told him to keep her clear of anyone but him.

"Domenici?"

Nicole must have sensed the tension that rose between them. Get a dragon and a griffin to sit at the same table and trouble followed. Although Laurie and Domenici behaved well most times, respected each other, even shared a grudging liking, their essentially predatory natures made them difficult teammates, so Laurie wasn't part of Team Crystal. Instead, his shape-shifting teammates were creatures of a more laid-back nature, although they had their own fire and tenacity when they needed it.

Now Laurie gave Nicole his most charming smile. "I trust you. Besides, I think Serafino here has an idea that might benefit both of us."

She gave him an astonished, wide-eyed smile, which only made his dick harder. Just as well the waiter distracted them by coming to the table to take their order.

"Esti asked me to order for her," Domenici said and picked up the menu. This time Domenici didn't try to influence Nicole's choice, and he settled for beef olives and salad, or whatever they were calling it today. Something French and fancy, but for all that it remained one of the better choices on the menu. Nicole chose something with chicken. He didn't concern himself with Laurie's choice, but knowing him, it would be something large and bloody.

"So why did Ted allow you time off?" Domenici drawled, knowing Laurie wouldn't like it. Ted was the manager of Manchester Rovers, the club Laurie played for.

But Laurie only smiled. "I took the time. Besides, I don't know how much longer I'll be with Rovers."

He didn't have to look at Nicole to know how her senses sharpened. "Do tell. Are you being poached?"

Laurie didn't look at Nicole either. "Maybe."

Nicole laughed, but it sounded forced. "Everybody knows Roma's interested in signing Laurie."

Laurie glanced over Nicole's head, drawing Domenici's attention to the entrance of the private part of the restaurant. The relatively narrow opening, framed by fragrant oregano plants, shadowed, but only slightly, when Esti's slight figure passed through it. The waiter brought her over, and Domenici and Laurie stood to greet her. After the cool kisses on each cheek, Domenici introduced Nicole, and Esti favored her with a slight smile.

Esti, cool, confident, and totally underwhelmed by their presence, sat at the table and gave Nicole a frosty smile. "It's good to meet you, Nicole."

"Yes, you too." Nicole could meet coolness with iciness of her own if she thought it necessary. Which she obviously did in this case. When Domenici sensed the edge of jealousy in her mind, he smiled with delight but turned it into a smile of greeting for Esti.

She turned a clear blue stare on him. "So I'm here to help with your little problem?"

"Yes, please."

"You vouch for her?"

Even Laurie's easy smile disappeared.

Without hesitation, he gave his assent. "Yes, completely." Without that, Nicole would have to subject herself to a complete examination. He'd heard the examinations Sorcerers gave described as rapes of the mind. No way on earth would he ever subject her to that. He'd considered letting her go through it with him to shield her, but he found he couldn't even consider that. And they wouldn't allow it, anyway.

He wondered if she realized what he planned to do. He hoped not. In effect, he was offering his life for hers. If she betrayed the world of Talents, made it public in any way, he would take her punishment, which in this case was death. No appeals. Sometimes he wondered why Talents bothered to hide themselves so carefully and protect their identities. The whole situation was coming to a sticking point, he could feel it, sense it. Until all Talents agreed to reveal themselves, they were all bound to this limited exposure. Hence, Nicole had to suffer the pain of a mental branding.

He realized that the tension he felt came from Laurie too. When he lifted his gaze, he met Laurie's clear blue stare. Oh yes, the man felt this, perhaps as much as he did. And it had nothing to do with any rivalry for Nicole's attention. Just the chivalric instincts of two men, misfits who had made places for themselves.

The first course arrived.

Esti ate a little of her soup and put her spoon down precisely on the wide rim of the dish. "I think if we get this over with, we'll all be more comfortable. And you two men might stop trying not to growl. If you need to, let it out. I'm sure we weak women can cope with your manly displays of territorial possession."

Nicole laughed, and Esti branded her, right there. Domenici felt the instant of searing pain, and he entered Nicole's mind, soothing and covering the site.

"Neat." The remark came from Friedland, who wisely remained away because, had Domenici been in dragon form, he'd be pacing around Nicole, refusing to let anyone near her.

He wanted to rip Esti apart for what she did. Nicole bled distress and bewilderment, so unlike her usual confidence he wanted to howl. What had he done to her, bringing her into this world? He should have sent her away on that beach in Sicily, let her walk away from him. He knew who she was; he could have caught up with her or let her move on into her own world. He'd dragged her into danger; now he'd caused her pain.

"I'd do it all again. For you."

Pride surged through his veins. She'd initiated the telepathic contact, and she was fighting to reassure him through the miasma of her pain. He stopped to soothe it and surround her with comfort and love. *"That's it. It's all over now."*

"Not quite." She slanted him a mischievous smile, a sweet curve of her lips. His Nicole bounced back fast. She picked up her spoon and attacked her soup with relish. "This is good. Better than the asparagus we had yesterday."

"They'll be talking about you, Domenici. Eating here two days in a row tends to indicate you have considerable power."

Domenici glared at him. "We're your guests today, Laurie. Just coincidence. And don't tell me you didn't pick up the phone at nine this morning and hear them pant for you."

Laurie shrugged, an elegant movement of powerful shoulders. "I don't get off on that. Though I was glad they could fit us in. You wanted to come here."

He didn't have to look at Nicole to feel her surprise. "Yes, I did. I wanted...people...to see and know that Nicole is under my protection. Yesterday we left that in doubt."

He turned his attention to his food. And his lady. He felt her tension, but the pain seemed to be largely gone now, so he relaxed the shield he held against her. When he did, she glared at him. *"I could have borne that pain myself. It wasn't too bad."*

That was because he'd shielded her from most of it, but he had no intention of telling her so. *"Yes, but I didn't see why you should."*

The other two looked up at her derisory snort but didn't comment, probably because the waiter arrived to remove the first course and replace it with the entrée.

In any case, Domenici and Nicole were communicating at a deeper level than the outer surface, so their telepathic exchanges were purely between them; the others couldn't eavesdrop without them realizing someone else had intruded. At least Domenici thought so, but Esti Hart was an amazingly powerful Sorcerer, so he could never know for sure. She made him antsy, with her immaculate appearance and cool temperament. He'd worked with her on some angst-ridden cases, but she'd never lost her temper or her cool. He suspected she couldn't. The training Sorcerers went through made boot camp look mild, especially the ones trained as virgin Sorcerers, resulting in emotionally detached, ice-cold people who controlled every part of themselves, all impulsive behavior gone.

His fiery, impulsive Nicole beat every Sorcerer hollow. No contest.

Laurie chatted to her, and Domenici, aware of his previous display of jealousy, pretended to allow it, but the primal urge remained strong, especially when Laurie turned on the charm. The griffin knew how to prod and provoke him, and he wasn't about to allow it. Not here, anyway. He wanted to leave this place in total accord with Nicole, and if he put her back up by getting all territorial, she wouldn't be too happy. But that didn't stop him wanting to rip out the footballer's throat. With his bare teeth.

If Talents ever went public, the average citizen would have to get used to watching battles in the sky. Perhaps they could turn it into a blood sport.

In an effort to turn the conversation from flirting to more general topics, he tried talking about Laurie's other passion. Apart from women. "So will you be house hunting in Rome soon, Laurie?"

He took the bait, but Domenici knew he was ready to. He didn't want to push Domenici too far. "Maybe." He took a bite of his steak, so Domenici followed suit. A little chewy, and the sauce was definitely too acidic, but it was edible. He'd take Nicole to a place with great food next, somewhere more discreet. They could leave this place in the dust, together with Laurie fucking Friedland.

Laurie took a sip from his glass of water. "It's too early to tell. Talks are ongoing. But it'll drive my price up."

"What are you worth now?"

If Domenici knew Nicole, that wasn't an idle question.

"Around thirty million British pounds. I want to hit thirty-five."

"All for a game." Esti's disparagement sounded sincere, and Domenici had no doubt it was. The Sorcerer would have no time for leisure activities, even ones as high profile and expensive as European football. Something she no doubt called "soccer," American-style. Domenici had no clue why Esti was even here in Europe, because until recently, she'd belonged to the New York office.

As if he'd spoken the words aloud, Esti answered his question. "I became too settled in New York. It threatened my personal objectivity, so I requested a transfer. I don't wish to become attached to any one place."

Chilling. But something in those icy eyes warned him off, an edge of aggression. Emotion, something he wasn't sure until now that Esti Hart possessed. Something more than that had happened in New York. Domenici felt sure of it. He'd taken part in a few operations there himself. His company gave him the excuse to travel all over, so he could use that as a cover. Plus, that horrendously showbiz apartment he'd acquired for Laurie gave him an excuse to go there.

Now he had to house hunt for the bastard all over again. He sighed. "So what are you looking for, Laurie?"

"Something a bit more tasteful. I'm sick of the footballer look." That meant no more gold-plated bath fittings, extravagant white leather sofas, and draped four-posters. That would make a change. Laurie raised a brow. "What, you think I live in those places out of choice? Remind me to invite you to my place at Alderley Edge. Nobody from the press gets a look in there. It's all mine."

Domenici believed it. Older than he, more experienced, and from everything he'd read about the man, more cynical, Laurie Friedland was an enigma as far as sports stars were

concerned. He only let the press see what he wanted them to see, and like his brother Josh until recently, he played the dating field, keeping his real private life rigidly private. He was one of Domenici's best customers, as long as his privacy wasn't compromised.

"So you want something private in Rome?"

"Yeah. Preferably outside it. If I end up at Roma. Nothing's set in stone yet, and Ted's got his mad up, so he might well decide to hang on to me." He carved into his steak with relish. "So I have to keep my strength up."

Perhaps he could rid himself of that villa. "Would you object to the villa that was Ken Courier's downfall?"

Laurie stared at him and pursed his lips. "Nope, because you'll have vetted it and made sure it'll never happen again." His eyes narrowed, became glittering slits of blue. "Wait. Don't you live there?"

He shrugged. "One house is much like another. I have a few more on the books."

"I bet you do." His attention turned to Nicole. "How do you feel about that? Do you want to keep the villa?"

Right at that moment, Domenici forgave Laurie everything. He should have asked it, but business got in the way, and he'd never thought of the villa as home. Or anywhere else, come to that. He didn't feel the loss, but she might.

"What does it have to do with me?"

"It's your home too now. Do you like it?" The thought warmed Domenici, that he could make a home with her.

"I --" She took her time finishing her bite of chicken before she met Domenici's gaze, but even then she flushed, and he loved it. He'd never seen her overcome before. He wanted to peel that neat dress away from her body and see how far the flush went. Not just see, but kiss it, touch his tongue to the pink flesh and taste the difference between that and the hot flesh below. "I don't mind. I have my own apartment."

His mouth tightened. "If you can call it that." He didn't push it any further, but sooner or later she'd realize the only reason she was going back to that place was to pack the rest of her things. "Do you love it, or could you put up with another place?"

"I...I didn't fall instantly in love."

Domenici ignored the others at the table. Only Nicole mattered now. "We'll go through the books, and we'll find somewhere you really love. There's bound to be something."

"Domenici?" When she turned her gaze to his he knew, knew for sure, that she hadn't looked at anyone like that since her teens. So guileless, open, and trusting, he could have fallen for her right then and there, if he hadn't fallen already.

But he also knew she wouldn't appreciate him drawing attention to the fact. Because she was vulnerable, he wanted to protect her in the way she'd appreciate most. So he gave

her hand a squeeze and turned the conversation lighter. "If Laurie moves to Rome, he'll want something quiet, like the gated community. But I have more than one."

"He collects houses, Nicole. Get used to it." The laughter in Laurie's tone invited smiles and he got them. "He seems to be looking for the one."

He nodded at Laurie and said, "The villa's yours if you want it. I'll even sell it to you."

Laurie burst into laughter, surprising the waiter who had come to remove their plates. "I bet you won't even sell that place in Sicily you went down to view."

Domenici shrugged. He thought not, since that was where he'd first made love to Nicole. Shock lanced through him. He'd let a place get to him? It appeared he had, because he actually felt a pull to the villa. He wasn't sure he liked the thought.

"I have to go." Esti shoved back her chair.

Laurie was quick to lift his finger to summon the waiter and stand to join Esti. When Laurie touched her waist, she flinched away. He didn't pursue the contact. "Do you want me to ask them to get you a cab?"

"No, I'd rather walk. The office isn't too far. Thank you." The last sounded choked out, but at least she managed it. Domenici watched her carefully. There was something wrong here. He'd sensed emotion in Esti, and now she did it again. That made twice he'd seen it, and he'd known her five years. Twice in five years. And all because of Laurie. She wanted to get away from him, and he wanted to know why, though it was doubtful she'd confide in him.

"I'll see you to the door," he suggested. "I need to talk to you anyway."

The waiter arrived, and Domenici smiled at him. "Miss Hart's leaving now. By the back door."

"Very well, sir."

He glanced at Nicole and then Laurie, who stared back dispassionately, his blue eyes guileless. Then Domenici guided Esti to the private door, the one the photographers knew about but didn't use. One day they would, but for now the truce held.

They had to traverse a narrow hallway before they reached the door. "Esti. Don't even bother to tell me nothing's wrong."

She bit her lip and refused to meet his eyes, both very much unlike the Esti he knew. "I might have to leave Team Crystal."

"If Laurie Friedland comes to Rome? Tell me, dammit. You know I won't say anything unless it affects the case." He paused. "Or Nicole."

This time she looked up, and he discovered her shields firmly back in place. "You love her." She didn't bother to make it a question.

"Yes, I do."

“What if she turns out to be the mole? We still haven’t cleared her, you know. Not properly. She stays on the list of suspects.”

He grunted. What more did they want? “She’s not the mole. But that list is a long one, and we still don’t have a clue. Except that the daisy in London, Geoff Wilkinson, came here, and we only know that because of a fluke.” A standard security photograph of passengers embarking at Heathrow for Rome and a corresponding one at the other end. Then nothing. The daisy would have changed identity as soon as he got through customs in Rome. A quick visit to the bathroom and voilà.

“We’ll find them. We got most of the cell in Sicily, and that daisy got away too. To Rome. Would you know him?”

He shook his head. “Not a chance. They had me in a silver cage. My senses went no further than the bars until I got out. But Rhodri can ID him.”

“Yeah. We have to hope. Two would have been better.”

Only then did he realize what Esti was doing. Distracting him from the sticky subject of Laurie Friedland and her links with him. New York. Laurie loved visiting the city, one of the few places in the world where he could walk around the streets without being mobbed, and Esti had worked in New York until recently.

He’d get nothing from Esti now. She’d reerected her shields extremely efficiently, and he knew she’d only let him see what she wanted him to see. So he took her to the back door and checked that the coast was clear. He gazed down at her flawless complexion and reflected how much more appealing he found Nicole. He couldn’t imagine that the vital, primal Laurie Friedland could possibly want Esti Hart, the ice queen. Or maybe she wanted him. It would be typical of a Sorcerer to try to get away from a disturbance, anything that would break their concentration, their complete isolation.

But did it go two ways? He’d have more chance of finding that out from Laurie. He stared at the door, now closed again, before he turned around and went back to the table.

Where Laurie was sitting far too close to Nicole, teasing her about something because she looked up at him, laughing. Perhaps Domenici’s idea wasn’t such a good one, after all. Maybe he’d take her away before Laurie could mention the notion that had crossed his mind when he’d called the footballer.

But it was too late. “You want me to do it?”

Laurie gave him a wicked grin as he took his place again. Domenici grimaced back. “He told you then?” he said to her.

Nicole turned a smiling face to him and spun him around all over again. He’d do anything to keep that smile on her face. “Laurie suggested I work for him as a ghostwriter on his autobiography.”

He tried to think of a reason why she shouldn’t. “What about your job on the magazine? Are you still dreaming of going freelance?” What had seemed to him a great

solution that would remove the tensions caused by their jobs turned to a nightmare before his eyes. He hadn't thought it through, but he knew how well sports stars' biographies sold, and he knew Nicole had more than enough skills to write them.

She nodded. "This way I get to go freelance, and we don't have any problems. You know your job involves a lot of secrets, and if I work for the magazine, you can't tell me any of them."

Yeah, that was pretty much what he'd figured. And after she'd finished with Manchester Rovers, she could move on to the two other Manchester teams, then maybe Arsenal, Roma, Milano. The tennis stars -- why had they become so good-looking all of a sudden?

Maybe she'd like to concentrate on the women. "I know a couple of female sprinters who might be interested..." He trailed off when he heard her laugh.

"Is that it? You think I might get tempted? Domenici, you should know that's impossible." He registered the gentle scrape of the chair as Laurie left the table. At least the man had some sense. Nicole didn't look away at all, and that gave him some kind of pride. "If any of them did entice me away, then we wouldn't have much anyway, would we?" He opened his mouth, but she didn't wait for his reply. "But he wouldn't. I like him, and I can appreciate how damned good-looking he is, but when I look at you I see heat and power and home. Not in him."

He liked her American-tinged Italian, liked the way she crossed her fingers over his, just the fingers, so their hands lay next to each other but didn't touch. That delicate contact made him yearn for more and appreciate what he already had.

"I'm not the possessive kind," he told her. "Not usually. Because of the reason you said, because if they preferred someone to me, then it wasn't much of a relationship to start with. But you. I want you all to myself, and I'll take you away from anyone who tries to steal you. Forgive me; I'm not used to feeling this way. I'll come around in time."

Her eyes glistened, and when she moved to look away, he could have sworn he saw moisture glisten on her cheek. "Don't you dare, Domenici Serafino. You've worked your way into my heart, and I don't want to go anywhere." She looked back at him. "I'd die if you did."

And there they sat, the bustle of a busy restaurant going on around them, chatter, laughter, the *chink* of cutlery, and it meant nothing. All that mattered lay in her eyes.

Domenici got to his feet and folded his hand around hers. "Then let's go home."

She laughed. "I thought I was going into the office?"

"I changed my mind. I'm taking you home, and I'm not letting you out of my bed for days. When you leave it, you won't be in any doubt that I want you, or how long I want you for." He didn't tell her, but he kept nothing back now, opened everything he had for her to take.

"You think a good fucking will sort my mind out for me?"

Sassy woman. “Yeah. And a good loving too.”

She didn’t have a comeback for that.

Chapter Thirteen

When she stepped into the office five days later, cameras flashed, but this time the flashes were followed by raucous laughter. Nicole gave them a broad smile, and they snapped that too. "From one side of the camera to the other!" Giorgio called.

"Oh yeah. Come on, guys. It's only Domenici Serafino. It's not like he's a film star or anything."

"Just runs around with them all. Do you think Gary'd let you have five days off if it wasn't for your new boyfriend?"

She groaned. "I e-mailed a story in."

Jack grinned. "I know. I've never seen Gary actually smile before, but he came out of his office with a grin broader than the window at the back of a bus."

Gary's usual bellow came from the office at the end. "Cipriani! Now!"

She went straight through, casting a glance at her desk, where a mist of dust shrouded her computer screen. Somehow, she felt nostalgic about the chair, and she wondered what she would do now. In the time they'd spent alone at the restaurant, Laurie assured her he was sincere about his offer, and she knew ghostwriting for sports stars paid extremely well. It wasn't lost on her that it would also remove the conflict between Domenici's job and hers. That, for her, almost made her mind up. Almost.

Still, the story she had should do well, the one Gary liked so much.

The small doubt that remained in her mind was the runaway train part. This was happening so fast, she needed time to get her breath back, to stop and assess her life, what she wanted, and if this was it. Everything she took for granted had changed, and she'd met someone every part of her said she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, but her reason told her it couldn't possibly happen this fast. She'd seen so many celebrity couples meet,

marry, and divorce before a year was out. Thanks to her and her compatriots, the whole world had seen it.

Nicole schooled her features to remain composed and calm, carefully keeping everything away from her boss. And her ex, curse him. He knew her moods, and he could spot what she hid from other people. Sometimes she wondered what had gotten into her, letting him drag her into an affair. Then she knew. Gary was good-looking, charming when he wanted to be, and inventive in bed. It was the commitment stuff he sucked at. And she had to be honest; he'd never promised her forever.

The fault didn't all lie on his side. She'd found him with someone else and walked out without looking back. If she found Domenici in bed with another woman, she'd kill him. Hell of a difference.

Gary leaned back in his chair and tucked his hands behind his head. "Hell of a result, Nicole."

She shrugged and sat without being asked, but he didn't object today. She knew he wouldn't. "Sure it is. I deliver, Gary. You play fair with me, and I'll get you the stories you want."

"I got your last article in before we went to press. It's headline, too good to miss, and there's a picture of Friedland on the cover. Droolworthy. That picture we got last year, in his little tighty-whities, heads up your piece. You know the best thing? The timing. We scooped the rest of the media on that story of the transfer. I've had them on the phone since the story broke. Fantastic fucking work. You got your own byline again, Cipriani. Happy?"

Inside she had fireworks, but she worked to keep her exterior demeanor cool. "Reasonably. I had a choice, you know."

He raised a brow, so she explained.

"I could give you the story, or I could write Laurie Friedland's autobiography. Ghostwrite."

Gary's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. "Shit, that would have paid. What made your mind up?" His eyes narrowed. "Or should I say who?"

This time she let him see a little chagrin. "Domenici acts like a caged wolf around Laurie Friedland. Laurie has more charm than a man with a flute and a basketful of cobras." Let him think that. Gary wouldn't question her desire to defy Domenici, because that was the kind of choice he would have made.

"About as poisonous if what I've heard about him is true."

She shot him a sharp look. He couldn't possibly know anything else. Although she'd sensed an inner, banked fire about Laurie when she'd met him, it was his behavior with Domenici that had given him away. Friedland was a Talent, just like the other two people at lunch nearly a week ago. Now she was officially branded or marked or whatever, she could know these things. And Domenici had been working with her, drawing out her telepathy,

still not very strong, but she could contact him if she wanted to and other people, if they were close.

Interesting that Gary's mind was as closed as her own. Probably the same reason -- naturally strong. Other emotions cascaded through his head, running in a combination, never still, never steady. If she'd known that when she'd been with him, she would certainly have thought twice before accepting his invitation to share his life for a while. The thread running through the whole was a burning ambition, but that didn't surprise her much. She didn't need telepathy to know that.

"Now get me something I can sell in the States."

She grinned. "Maybe." The Friedland story, beefed up with a few tidbits he'd let drop during that lunch and afterward, was a killer. Not only would it drive Manchester Rover fans insane, it would get the Roma crowd going, not to mention Roma's rivals, Lazio. And the stuff about the sex was brilliant. Nothing obvious, all hinted, until the last part of the piece, when Laurie had admitted to seeing one of Italy's favorite women, a model called Topaz. All in the past, now Topaz was married to the formidable Jasper Lebec, but after Topaz broke Friedland's heart, he moved on to the queen of the night, Ciecherella, star of the latest craze sweeping the film world, the revived vampire film. Urban fantasy, rivaling the superhero movies of a year or two ago, the sexy vamps, so long the stars of romance novels, had now hit the screen. One of Ciecherella's was up for an Oscar or two, or so rumor had it. Too early to tell yet, but the gossip hadn't done her any harm.

And she was hot, both in appearance and marketability. So far, the rumors didn't have anything to go on, but Nicole had it from the man himself. "Did you get the pictures?"

"Thanks to you, yes."

She still didn't know if Laurie wanted her to know which discreet restaurant he was taking Ciecherella to that night, but it wasn't on the celeb circuit, so Nicole was sure the photo they had was a scoop.

"I'm holding the villa stories back. We'll use them as fillers when you don't have anything new."

That sounded reasonable. And she'd gained a holiday in Sicily out of it, although she could have done without the way it ended. She felt like putting her own feet up on the desk, in the pose Gary favored so much. But if she knew him, the sleaze would just try to look up her skirt. And since today her skirt was part of the light sundress, which was all her body could bear on this hot day, he wouldn't have much of a problem.

So she stood up. "I have work to do."

"You sure do. The presses wait for no man. The e-version's in the usual place, your copy is on your desk, and we're on the next issue." He gave a heavy sigh. "Lucky *Vogue*, most of its issue is planned months ahead. We're the other way around, our topical stuff is hot, has to be." He glanced up with a wicked smile. "But you have a column, if you can deliver two more stories like that one. And the film, of course."

She groaned. "I hoped people would have forgotten that by now."

"The reporters hanging around Serafino's house didn't clue you in? That villa's been the center of hot action before, and the guys know the ropes."

Nicole closed her eyes, remembering a couple of days before when Domenici had fucked her in front of the window overlooking the front of the house. Again. This time, reporters had clustered outside, and he'd reminded her that they had special cameras these days. "Who knew what they could do with those cameras?" he'd muttered hotly into her ear while he'd thrust hard and deep, daring her to lean against the window, touch one part of her body to it.

She nearly did it too, just to rile him, until he'd growled and dragged her back against him. Only afterward had he told her he could do something called fuzzing, spread a mental aura of confusion around them both. "Otherwise, how would shape-shifters have hidden themselves for so long? People see what they expect to see. We just enhance it a little."

"Well, in this case, they expect to see us fucking. So how does that help?"

"They don't expect to see us flaunting ourselves at the study window. And I confused their minds a little." He'd kissed her then, scattering what was left of her senses. "I've decided I want you all to myself. Unless you decide otherwise. Your call, baby."

He pushed deeper, making her groan. "When you do that, you can do anything."

"Hey!" A sharp rap made her blink. "Hey!"

"Hmm?"

Gary smiled in the slow, sensual way that used to drive her wild, but now only one man's smile did that to her, and it didn't look like his.

She got to her feet. She could daydream at her desk.

"Keep the stories coming, darlin'."

The slow drawl nearly made her turn around. They spoke Italian in the office. Gary said he wanted to improve his Italian, and it was good for morale. But he came from an Italian-American family, spoke it like a native, apart from the American accent he kept because it made women mad for him, or so he claimed, plus an interesting sprinkling of Cockney from his grandmother, a GI bride. Drove women crazy, he claimed. So she'd always wondered. And now she realized the language was just part of his mind games, the ones that pissed her off. When he used the language they'd always used when they were a couple, it brought them closer, more intimate. Italian, although they both spoke it fluently, wasn't the language they thought in.

What a bastard. He'd use everything to control everyone he came into contact with. Even his own wife. Not that he'd had more than one of those, to her knowledge.

Nicole didn't look back. She walked slowly to her own desk, taking her time, not allowing anyone to rile her. In truth, she doubted anything would. She seemed surrounded by her own aura, but this one of love and warmth, and occasionally, a lot more steam. Okay,

quite a lot of steam. She'd spent most of the last five days naked with her naked boyfriend, exploring, loving, getting to know him. In every way.

She wanted to spend some more time with him, but she had to come back to the office on press day. Except these days, the issue was compiled on-screen, once "The Book" was settled, the master copy only Gary owned and saw in its entirety. Oh, and his assistant, and maybe a few of the tech guys.

The day the magazine hit the bookstores was always a good one. Nicole never lost the frisson of excitement every time she saw it and knew she had something to do with its production. Even better, when her name was on the front. She fired up her computer and watched the screen saver come up, impatiently waiting the few seconds it took for her to navigate to the folder on the network where the electronic copy of the magazine resided.

Oh yeah. A big picture of Julia Roberts, the interview of the month to coincide with her new film, but at the side, on the panel running down on the right, one of those pictures of Laurie Friedland that made him look like a movie star, and underneath, SCOOP! WHERE YOU'LL FIND LAURIE NEXT YEAR! and her name and the page reference. Right after the Roberts story, and she'd bet a lot of the readers would go to her piece first.

With her regular pieces rescheduled, she even had a bit of breathing space. At least she wouldn't have to hand in her resignation just yet. And yes, she would do that. When she balanced the magazine with what she could achieve with Domenici, he won. Although he might not have if she didn't have another prospect on the horizon.

If she wrote Laurie's autobiography and got it out quickly, if the publisher agreed to fast-track it, she'd make a reputation for herself, and she'd find people knocking on her door. She should find a literary agent if she was going into books. She should do many things, but today she intended to gloat.

Bryn had called them the day before, saying he was satisfied that the cell in Rome had been brought down, and while the daisies had escaped, they'd be sure to catch up with them another time. But she didn't have to look over her shoulder all the time. They were gone. There might be, almost certainly were, people in Rome who knew what Domenici was and what that meant about her by association, but the Department's intelligence said none of the known members of the PHR were gearing up to strike.

So, Domenici said, they were free to plan their wedding. Although he'd accepted her laughing rejection of the idea, she knew he'd been serious. He hadn't even told her he loved her yet, but not for want of trying. She'd interrupted him any way she could. She just couldn't do that kind of commitment. Not yet. She wanted a little breathing space, just a little longer to accustom herself to the idea.

Just as she reached for the computer mouse, her phone rang. The one on her desk. Time was those phones rang off the hook, but these days it was more likely her cell phone callers used. That was why she had two, and only her friends had the second number.

She picked it up. "Hi." She wasn't about to announce her ID. Although the girl at the switchboard would have screened it, there was only so much she could do, and cranks got through to them every day. She wedged the receiver between her shoulder and her cheek, and hit her e-mail symbol on the computer.

"Hi." At Domenici's husky tone, a drop of wetness seeped from her pussy.

She sat up and forgot her e-mail program, now busy filling with the day's correspondence. "Can't keep away, hey? I only said good-bye to you a couple of hours ago."

"I wouldn't have let you go if I'd seen the magazine first."

Without wondering about the terse tone she thought she detected, she let the sunshine in. "Isn't it great? They found some wonderful pictures of Laurie; he looks like everyone's idol. I got my name back on the front page!"

"Is that so important to you?"

This time she marked the tone, and a little shadow entered her world. "You know it is. I've never pretended anything else. I have a career, Domenici. Deal with it."

"I thought I had. Until I saw the magazine."

She flipped up the front cover of the magazine on her screen and then went to the page that held her article. Nice beefcake picture of Laurie. She began to skim the article. "What's wrong? Tell me."

"You don't know? What does 'off the record' mean to you?" He sounded angry, hard, and the little girl in her shrank back, but she was used to dealing with that brat.

"It means I know where to draw the line."

"So Laurie telling you that the news about his transfer was off the record? Remember?"

"Yes, I remember. Let me explain --"

She looked up to see Gary's finger on the phone, cutting off the call. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Gary looked as angry as she imagined Domenici was now. "Never, never explain. Not to anybody. You were going to try to talk him around, weren't you?"

"How did you know who I was talking to?"

"I've been standing behind you for the last few minutes."

The primary rule of gossip columnists. Don't complain; don't explain. Shit. What had happened to her?

She'd fallen in love. She was about to tell Domenici why she'd put the story up. She would have told him if Gary hadn't stopped her, and she intended to tell him later. But not here, not in the office where everyone would hear. And in this world where face was more important than reality, that would have labeled her some kind of easy mark. Since she wanted to keep her reputation intact, the open office definitely wasn't the place to explain why.

When she met Gary's eyes, she saw the same expression in them as she must have in hers -- puzzlement tinged with anger.

"Come out for lunch. I can't stretch to the swanky places your boyfriend manages, but I know a nice little place just off the Via Corso. It only opened a couple of weeks ago. You'll like it."

It seemed like a plan.

Chapter Fourteen

Domenici stared at the phone in disbelief. She'd hung up on him? That only made his temper worse. He wanted to understand why she'd broken another confidence and put out the story about Laurie's defection to Roma. Wanted so desperately to believe there was a reason. But he'd heard Laurie say that was off the record. Only later, with the fluff about his girlfriend, had Laurie lifted that.

He shoved the papers on the desk away so they fell to the floor. They could rot there for all he cared.

She'd blown the deal with the ghostwriting. He'd pulled a few strings to get her that one, and Laurie had liked her, more than his reflex flirting mechanism let on and the real reason Domenici had gotten so possessive at the end of the meal. He was used to Laurie hitting on every woman in his vicinity, even used to him winning them over, but not Nicole. His own reaction had shocked him, but Laurie backed off, and only then had he realized how rabid he was getting. From the moment he'd stepped into that restaurant, his hackles had risen. Although he had no intention of letting Laurie win. The easygoing Brit had shown his true colors for a few minutes, then let go of his tight hold on the beast that defined his nature much a part of him as the man did. But Domenici had his own beast, and he had no intention of letting go of his treasure.

Until now. But he doubted Laurie would want any part of her after this. The whole transfer market was a minefield, bluff and counterbluff keeping teams busy all summer, and the fact that, before today, not a whisper of the supposed talks had hit the media meant this was a serious bid. And it was also considered wrong to poach so directly. Managers were supposed to approach other managers, not the player. The manager of Roma could lose his job by talking to Laurie first, before he approached Ted.

She'd damaged all those people. Domenici felt sick. The first time he'd let someone into his heart, she'd trampled all over it and left it in the dust. He revised his opinion of the whole Courtney business that had landed Nicole in this mess. Maybe she had broken a confidence then as well.

He felt sicker when he recalled some of the stories he'd told her over the past few days. Just to make her laugh. He'd trusted her to know the difference between on the record and off, and she'd just shown she had no such distinction.

All journalists were cut from the same cloth. None of them could be trusted. He should have known better. What was worse, he still loved her. His stupid body couldn't get enough of her, not just as a good lay; he could get over that fast enough, but to hold at night, share meals, baths, evenings... Perhaps he should do what his dragon ancestors had done, kidnap her, tie her to a stake, and keep her captive. That way, he could enjoy her without her threatening anyone else. After this, it was the only way he could have her.

His cell phone rang, and he groaned when he glanced at the caller. But he couldn't put it off. He answered it before AC/DC drove him to drink. He'd have to change that dial tone. And how "Back in Black" could be anyone's idea of a love song beat him, but it had played as he'd seen her for the first time.

"Hi, Laurie. Listen, man --"

"My God, did you see it?" Laurie sounded ebullient, but fury might be lending his voice that color. "She's good, your girl. Front page!" And he laughed.

"You're laughing?"

"Yeah. Tell her a million thanks from me and a huge hug. That's if you let me near her. You have to look after this one, Domenici. She's good. And straight up."

The world spun. "You're not pissed with her for breaking the story about the transfer to Roma?"

"Pissed? Are you insane?" Laurie paused and came back with, "She didn't tell you?"

Carefully, Domenici relaxed his death grip on the phone, concentrated on stopping the skin covering his muscles whitening. "Tell me what?"

"Oh wait. You weren't there, were you? I thought she might have told you later, but maybe you made all those thoughts disappear for her." Another pause. "Tell me you didn't get mad with her. Just tell me. On the other hand, do tell me, and I'll give her a call. I owe her dinner and then some."

Domenici thought back to the lunch and the aftermath. "She wrote the story as soon as we got back. She laughed, said she'd tell me later, but we weren't exactly discussing work..." He recalled what he'd done as soon as she'd closed her laptop. Picked her up and headed up the stairs. He couldn't wait another minute to get her naked. No, he hadn't exactly given her much time to talk.

“We cooked this up, Ted and me, but even when I arrived in Rome, all they wanted to know about was my girlfriend. I needed to get the news about the transfer in the public eye. It’s all over the papers in the UK this morning. I’m hanging on in Rome for a few days more. Then I’m headed home to Manchester.”

A deep foreboding clutched his heart. “Tell me all about it, Friedland.”

Laurie’s jubilation came right down the line. “Ted wants to sign Bartolomeo Gambino. He’s a young player for Roma, huge potential. So tomorrow he’s going to call Roma, very angry, and accuse the coach of poaching me. If he finds proof, and I do have it, he can get them disciplined by FIFA. They talked to me without going to him first, you see.”

“That’s serious?” Although Domenici enjoyed watching a few games, especially in a VIP box and with a few cold cans of beer, he wouldn’t call himself a fan.

“A big fine and maybe a penalty if they want to. It puts Roma at a disadvantage, where Ted wants them. And I didn’t make the first approach. That was Ficcolo at Roma. When I got the call, I contacted Ted, and he asked me if I minded going along with it for a while. When he told me what he wanted, I said fine. I’d love to work with Gambino, but at Rovers.”

“I see.” So they had used her, had they? “And you told Nicole to repeat it?”

“More or less. I told her that the off-the-record comment didn’t count. She could say what she wanted to, and she’s a good enough journalist to see a good story when she wants one. Ted is over the moon with the result. FIFA is very interested, should be contacting Gambino this morning.”

“What’s in it for you, apart from a new teammate?”

Laurie’s voice lowered a little, and Domenici sensed rather than heard the tinge of anger there. “He broke the rules. He’s done it before, and that time he got away with it. Poached half Villa’s first team, and FIFA ignored the appeal. There’s no love lost between Rovers and Villa, but those rules are there for a reason. If we let him get away with it, it will lead to bullying. Managers bullying players. A lot of them are young kids, barely out of school, and some of them keep their brains in their feet. They’d be a pushover if a free-for-all started. And anyway,” he continued in a milder tone, “I owe that bastard Ficcolo. Now, Ted will contact Ficcolo, tell him that if he gives us Gambino for a reasonable price, he’ll say he gave permission for me to talk to the manager. I’ll turn down the offer, no foul. We’ll get him on the pitch when Gambino scores his first goal against Roma. And Ficcolo will be on his way before the end of the season.”

“So Nicole was part of your plan?”

“A willing part. It did both of us a favor.”

“I see. I’ll pass on your thanks.”

“I’ve already thanked her. Tell her I owe her.”

“I will.”

Domenici rang off.

The whole affair made him dizzy, but one thing became clear to him. Nicole hadn't broken confidentiality. She'd broken the story with Laurie's permission. He put his head in his hands and closed his eyes.

Shit, he'd really blown it this time. His fury, his edginess, had betrayed him. Deep down, he didn't trust anyone, nobody in the world, and he'd taken a chance, let Nicole in when he felt the connection he'd never felt before. But he'd never done it before, didn't know what was expected of him, what he should do, and he felt so fucking vulnerable that it made him angry. With whom, he didn't know, but he'd directed it at her.

Not that she'd care. He knew she wouldn't. Maybe that was the reason he'd angered other women when he'd tried to let them down lightly. They'd let him in, and he blew them off, not even aware of what they'd done. One or two told him they loved him, and when he heard those words, he walked and kept walking.

He owed them an apology. Too late to try to make amends, they'd probably moved on, but if they felt like he felt now, he'd done them a deep disservice. And he knew he'd never move on until he apologized to Nicole.

In the time he'd known Nicole, he'd entered her body and her mind, read her, felt her, and she'd opened to him completely. She shouldn't have to feel upset because of his behavior. Even if she pissed him off completely, told him to get lost, he would see her and tell her.

He got up and grabbed his jacket, calling to his assistant as he left the office. "I've done what we need; I'll get to the rest another day. I won't be back today." He didn't miss the woman's openmouthed astonishment before she masked it. Domenici rarely left work early, and when work waited for him, he didn't leave the office until it was done.

He'd just climbed into his car when his cell phone rang. He leaned back in the soft leather seat and thumbed the Answer button. "Yeah? What is it now, Laurie?"

The footballer's tones were different now. Gone was the jubilant, bantering tone of his previous call. "I've just seen Nicole with her editor, having lunch. I stopped at their table to say hello, just to confirm what I thought. I've seen him before, Domenici. He's PHR."

A sick feeling clutched his stomach. "Where are they?" He wedged the phone between his ear and his shoulder while he gunned the car into life. The BMW sparked with a low, dangerous rumble.

"Outside the city, in a new place. The Bottega del Madrid, it does tapas and sherry, that kind of thing. You know it?"

"Nope. Tell me where. And get her out of there."

"I can't. The place is seething with PHR. I think we've found a cell."

He disconnected and hit the speed dial for Nicole's number, but it went straight to voice mail.

He steered the car out of the underground garage that belonged to his office and clamped his teeth together when the red-and-white-striped barrier silently came down in front of him. The damned security guard was a new one. Domenici dropped the phone on the passenger seat while he fumbled in his pocket for his ID. He flashed it at the guard, who nodded and took what seemed like half an hour to get to the switch to raise the barrier.

Domenici could have sworn the barrier skimmed the top of the car as he drove through and grabbed the cell phone again. Sure, using the phone wasn't allowed while he was driving, but they'd have to catch him first. He called Laurie. He swung the car up the narrow road leading to the Via Marghera and, without checking too closely, pushed down the pedal, ignoring the frantic honking from the vehicles around him. If they didn't make any noise, then he'd worry.

"Didn't they capture you once?" He remembered Laurie's brother, Josh, frantic with worry, appealing to the Department in the United States for help. Cristos obliged, and it had nearly finished the Department for good. They were still rebuilding in San Francisco. When he remembered that time, his stomach clenched.

"That was the Corporation, not the PHR. I'm calling Esti, Kai, and Rhodri, since they're on this case. And a few others. None of my team are in town, but Viviana's organizing something."

"Rhodri's only effective at night."

A low, evil chuckle came down the line. "I wouldn't say that. He can still kick some ass, even without the vampire in him."

"Tell me where you are. I'm taking to the air." He swung the car into an alley he knew on the edge of town. He could land there without being noticed if he fuzzed. Even though he could have changed in town, the sight of him stripping to the skin before he shape-shifted might have raised a few brows. Here, nobody would see. He couldn't fuzz everything or guarantee that everyone would accept it.

Laurie gave him the directions and added, "We're the advance guard. Our orders are to hold the situation until the others get here."

"Okay by me as long as Nicole's in no danger. Otherwise, fuck the orders."

"Figured you'd say that."

"See you there."

He hung up and pulled the car to a halt, then leaped out as soon as he yanked the keys from the ignition. He grabbed the canvas bag he always had with him and stood outside the car to strip, ripping off buttons in his haste and nearly breaking the zipper on his pants. He threw the shirt and pants in the bag and quickly rifled the pockets of the jacket, adding his wallet and car keys. Then the rest went in the trunk, where he collected the small firearm from its secret compartment in the base, and he hung the long straps of the bag around his

neck before taking to the air. He transformed and fuzzed in flight, not something every shape-shifter could do. He was glad for the skill now.

The bag hit his chest as he created his own wind currents, surging up to the free airspace above the tall buildings that formed the alley. From up here, the view of Rome beat anything, but he wasn't exactly enjoying the view right now, only using the landmarks as his guides to ensure he left the city in the right direction. Over the suburbs sprawling around the Seven Hills and across to the countryside. His journey didn't take long, barely ten minutes, but all the time he set his mind on his objective, working hard to find her, the one thing that mattered in all this mess.

Telepathy worked from around a ten-mile radius, but the deeper Talents went, the stronger it worked. He found her and relief rippled over his body. But he couldn't get through to her. She'd blocked herself off -- good because it helped protect her against sensitives and Talents not working with them, bad because it cut him out too. He'd never made himself a back door, a way into her mind that nobody else could use. They hadn't gotten that close. Yet.

He had to believe in the "yet" because without it, he would cease. The spark she'd awoken inside him would subside, never to be revived again. He'd make sure of it. He'd been right after all to push all emotion from his life, to try to keep himself inviolate, alone, because this hurt too much. So badly he wondered if the moments of joy she'd given him were worth it.

Of course they were.

He hoped nobody saw the black form streaking through the sky, but he didn't much care. Unless they saw him coming. The bag bounced against his chest when he slowed, but he ignored it. It rather marred the image of the noble beast, but at least he wouldn't be naked and unarmed at the other end of his journey.

The taverna came into view. His eyesight sharper in this form, he saw the little Spanish flag decorating the exterior of the building, set by itself by the road. He circled, flying lower. At least ten cars sat outside, so there had to be at least eight people present, most likely more. He couldn't see Laurie, but when he reached out for him, he felt his presence. *"I'm here. Hiding out back. Come in reduced, we need to plan."*

"Can you see her?" He didn't bother defining the "her." There was only one who mattered.

"I've seen her. They've taken her indoors, but she seems to be fine. Can you get into her mind?"

"No."

He left it to the last moment to shrink to bird size because of his bag. He ducked his head, and it fell to the ground behind a bush bordering the property. He swept down behind it and reduced his size, so he'd look like a blackbird to anyone who couldn't penetrate the mental shield he put around his body.

The building in front of him appeared closed, shutters over the windows and locks on the doors. Outside, the benches were deserted, despite the bright summer day. Domenici wondered how they'd rid themselves of their usual customers, but he left the thought on the outside of his mind, in case they had a sensitive who could use mind persuasion.

"They announced they had to close early and folks left."

"When was that?" How long had the bastard waited there before he'd contacted him? *"Why aren't you in there with them?"*

"What good would that do? This is a cell, Domenici. If we try to take them on our own, not only is it likely they'll kill us, but they'll run before we get a chance to catch them."

What he said made sense, damn him. They should wait. But one thing stopped him taking more precautions. Or rather, one person. *"Okay, we wait. But I'm getting in closer in case she needs me."*

He hopped over the fence surrounding the property, to most eyes a blackbird looking for worms. He took care not to hop directly to the place he wanted to be, closer to the spot of warmth where he sensed Nicole. Instead, he pecked at the ground, seeking, although he didn't have a beak, only a snout with nostrils that filled with earth when he pushed them into the uncomfortably loose soil. A worm slithered past, and he shoved some dirt over it to hide its presence. A blackbird would tug it out and devour it, or fly away to its nest, and neither of those alternatives was acceptable to him.

Another hop brought him closer, and half a dozen more closer still. He wasn't particularly empathetic, but he couldn't sense any rise in the tension that already surrounded the building like a thick black cloud. He spread his senses, concentrated. One, two, three, four, five presences close to her. Another three, four, maybe five spread around the building. One left the building, walked outside, flipped a switch.

Shit. Oh shit. Behind him, around the fence, a humming invisible barrier spread and stretched around the top of the taverna. He pushed to contact Laurie, but he couldn't reach him. A sonic barrier to inhibit telepathic communication. They knew company was coming.

This was a trap.

A hand closed around his body and lifted him. Domenici fought to regain his immediate senses. His concentration on the other presences, on spreading his psi senses, had disoriented him some, but he came back with a power that threatened to burst his efforts to remain small. He always found the skill difficult, probably because he didn't understand how he could do it, but he did it all the same. Now he had to fight to retain the fuzzing as well as the small form.

"Aha," said an unknown voice. "Very skilled. You can keep trying if you want. I have you now, and on your own, we can kill you."

Spotlights came on as he began the process of swelling and growing in an effort to break free, and almost too late, he realized what had happened. Fucking cameras again. He

saw them now, sheltered in the bushes and trees, invisible from the other side. And he couldn't contact Laurie, and he had no idea when the cavalry would get here. Twenty minutes, half an hour, tops.

So he stayed small and had to deal with the indignity of being carried inside the low, two-story stone building. He could have flown up, but that would have left Nicole in that building on her own, and he had no doubt they'd kill her long before help arrived. So he let them pick him up, pinch his wings close to his body, and take him inside.

Into the main area, where they'd tied Nicole to a chair. Light flooded the room, and two men held two small camcorders. Another three held cell phones, no doubt with built-in cameras. They wanted to immortalize him shape-shifting.

The only person without a camera held a gun to Nicole's head. She was bound, eyes and mouth covered with black scarves.

He tried going in deep. *"Are you okay, cara?"*

"Yes." She sounded pissed. *"Why didn't you get away?"*

He loved that she thought of his well-being, but she should know him better than that. *"You have to ask that? Hold on, there's help coming."*

"They know. That's what they want."

"We worked that one out." He would have been stupid to imagine all they wanted was him. They'd draw out all the Talents they could, using him and Nicole as bait. His gaze went to the man holding the gun on her. A man he'd seen before. He let his mind drift, just enough to remember.

London, a small room near a museum and a woman lying spread-eagled on a table. This must be one of the men who got away. He risked spreading his senses. He worked with Nicole on a level only they could reach, deeply hidden in both their minds, but he lifted his awareness and met --

A deliberately manufactured wall. Now he could tell the difference between Nicole's natural barrier and this monstrosity.

The man smiled as if they were meeting at a social situation. "We meet at last. Of course, I've known who you are for a long time now. You've proved elusive, Domenici Serafino." He lifted a brow and tossed his head to flick the overlong hair back from his forehead. Domenici watched. "Surprised we know who you are? Don't be. What better cover to search out celebrity deviants than a gossip magazine?" He grinned. "Didn't hurt that I seem to be good at it."

Now he recognized him for sure. Shit. The one that got away. Now he knew how. How the fuck did he manage the double life he must have led?

Gary stroked the trigger of the dully gleaming black weapon he held to the back of Nicole's head. "Shape-shift. You know what will happen then. If you don't, she dies. Of

course, she might die anyway. You'll just have to take the chance. But if you don't, she's going to die sooner."

He had no choice, not right now. Domenici shape-shifted with the cameras recording his every movement. He did his best, fuzzed while he was doing it, but fuzzing depended on people *not* understanding what was happening. And they would be sure to inform people beforehand. No doubt one of the cameras was a live feed, going to an Internet video site. He wished he could sense which one because he needed to concentrate on that one and take it down. Unfortunately, his telekinetic ability was shit. He picked one at random and sent a drop command to the operator, just to be sure.

At least that worked. With a "Fuck!" the man dropped the camera. Maybe he'd got the right one, and maybe they expected it. Gary's smile broadened. "That the best you can do?"

The man picked up the camera and shook it before exclaiming "Ha!" and pushing the button again. Great. He stood stark naked in front of several men with cameras. Well, there was one thing he could do. He closed his eyes so he could concentrate.

He wrapped his hand around his cock and concentrated. One thought of Nicole's delicious body, and he felt it twitch and harden. He gave it a hard stroke from tip to base and heard a suppressed gasp. Then he opened his eyes and stared straight into the nearest camera, smiling with a feral intensity he didn't find difficult. "I can guarantee the image just disappeared from a lot of sites." With the recent clampdown on porn on the Internet, they would. The previous clip had disappeared from the big sites a day after it had appeared for the same reason. "And fuck, there goes another one. You want to fuck me, cunt?" The language should take care of a few more. Just as well his business didn't depend on his clean reputation, but with any luck this film wouldn't find itself anywhere but in the fire.

"We'll sell it. A dragon masturbating."

Slowly, he shook his head. "Nope. Just a man." He pushed his hips toward the camera. "Want some more?" At least he might be able to stall until the team got here.

At the thought, his cock wilted a little. He felt it go slack in his hand, but he gripped it more firmly and pumped it. He was losing it, fast. Until he looked at Nicole. Helpless, tied up, he deliberately imagined her tied up in a different situation. To his bed, where she'd be at his mercy, her legs spread wide for him.

Gary yawned. "Stop it. You wouldn't get very far in the porn business."

"Just as well I make my living another way then." He swung his head around in a way his dragon usually used, but he kept the beast well hidden. Not a hint of scale showed on his skin, although he felt it under the surface, ready to break free. He might be trapped inside this place, but they were here with him, and at the very least, he could take them out with him.

But he didn't want that. With all his heart, he wanted to free Nicole and take her with him, somewhere private, somewhere nobody could reach them. Another shock rippled through his system. The fear of death had left him years ago. Now it was back, but it didn't

weaken him; it served to strengthen his determination. Someone threw a pair of jeans at him. He let them fall to the floor.

"Put them on." Gary lifted the gun from her head and aimed it at his balls. "Otherwise you'll be in too much pain to shape-shift."

Domenici let his mouth curl up in a sneer and bent to pick up the garment, never taking his gaze off Nicole. "*Keep going, baby. Hold on.*"

But now he knew what Gary was, he didn't want to say too much. Just in case. He shook out the jeans and climbed into them, talking as he did so. Anything to distract attention from Nicole. Gary shifted the gun against her head, but he didn't follow the action of the weapon.

"Do your friends know what you are, Gary? Or maybe I should say Geoff?"

Gary's chin went up. "Gary."

It had been a long shot, but he read no recognition in Gary's mind. Gary wasn't Geoff Wilkinson. But the bastard must be nearby, although he couldn't see him, so he kept on talking. "I was in that room, remember? That little room near the British Museum. Oh yes, it's all coming back to you now." Gary's eyes slid to the side, shifted, and immediately came back to him, but that small telltale sign let Domenici know he was right. Geoff was present. "The PHR stands for Perfect Human Race. Do they know you're not quite human, Gary?"

"Shut up." The sound came low, menacing, but using his peripheral vision, Domenici saw he'd had an effect. "I'm as human as they are. More human than you'll ever be."

"We're all human, Gary." He zipped the fly on the ill-fitting jeans but didn't do up the button. If he shape-shifted, he didn't want any impediments, and he could shuck out of these fast enough. "Everybody in this room is human." Just that the human race encompassed more than most people knew. He forced a quick grin, one of the smiles the press loved, an I-love-to-be-alive one. He'd worked it out. Geoff was in this room; he just looked different. "I've never met a metamorph before. Either they're rare, or they're shy, I don't know which. But I'm a bit shy myself. Don't like to reveal all my assets at once, so to speak."

"Shut the fuck up." It must be hard to speak through clenched teeth, but the guy managed it. Geoff was reasonably tall, dark hair, slightly overweight. This version had a thready auburn hair, was shorter, easier to ignore. A foxy snarl marred his sharp-featured face.

"Geoff?"

"I said shut up! And my name's Giorgio." Domenici gave him a sly smile. Now he'd identified him, he'd bide his time. Geoff-Giorgio wore the worst comb-over Domenici had ever seen. And yet he could still pull off sinister. He would have bet against that.

"Okay. How about if I tell the camera all about Talents?" Buying time.

One of the men snorted. But they listened. He started to talk. Really talk. "Vampires, shape-shifters, you don't know when you've walked past one in the street. And we

intermarry, produce children. If we were different species, we wouldn't be able to do that, would we?"

"It's a freak of nature," one of the other men said.

"No, we've lived among you forever. You know we have. My father made a point of rescuing princesses. My mother guarded the family treasure, coiled around it in the cave where we lived. We only ever lost one thing, a ring, as I recall..." He let the words trail off suggestively, but he was only just beginning. He moved, took a step to one side, unthreatening, then moved back. And he began to tell stories.

Chapter Fifteen

By the time he got to his second story, something about a knight and a dragon, Nicole realized what he was up to. By telling stories, especially in such a dramatic way, he was rendering the film useless. Even if they had the live feed they claimed they had, even if they'd filmed him shape-shifting, it wouldn't matter. In the plethora of films littering the Internet, this was just another one.

And by the sound of his voice, he was moving. Just a little, but she heard the slight change in cadence when he moved. She wished she could feel him, just one more time, the hard body, muscles shaping him in that delicious way that was his alone. His mind was seated firmly into the depths of hers, giving her a security she knew had to be false. Dragon or not, they had the guns, and even if that hide of his was bulletproof, hers wasn't. They'd kill her before they'd let her go, she knew that.

Halfway through the second tale, Giorgio growled. She hadn't understood what Domenici had said, not all of it, anyway, but enough to realize that Giorgio was a Talent. Maybe not the person she'd thought him. But she couldn't believe he could take her in so thoroughly. "That's enough. Time to die, dragon. Before your friends get here. Or didn't you realize we knew why you were stalling?"

Nicole had known, because all the time he was telling his stories, he was in her mind, soothing her, stroking her mind with his. In any other circumstances, she'd find the sensation unbearably erotic, but right now, all she felt was calm. She let herself sink into the sensation, until one of the men suddenly said, "What's a metamorph?"

"Turn off the camera and I'll tell you."

A *click*. One of the men must be holding the camera. "There," he said. The voice came close to her, about a foot to her left. Not as close as Gary. She felt the gun, the barrel no longer cold, warmed by prolonged contact with her skin. The feeling terrified her.

“How do I know that’s the only one?”

“You don’t.”

Stalemate. Domenici began to explain. “A metamorph. It’s a kind of shape-shifter. Someone who can’t change into another creature but can change his appearance. Some can only do it a little; some can only change the appearance of their age. The rarest can change radical parts of who they are. They really do it. We can all fuzz...that is, confuse people, but this is different. A metamorph can really change.” From his voice, she knew he’d moved to one side, and he stayed there. She stretched out all her senses, wishing she could see.

“I can let you see through me, through our link, but that would confuse you. Let me do this, sweetheart.”

She curled her mind around the endearment, treasuring it, taking strength from it.

Domenici continued to speak. “He’s fooled you all. A Talent in your midst, when the most you’ll allow is a sensitive, someone whose barrier is weak. You know you all have psi abilities, don’t you? You just won’t give way to them, that’s all.” Like this, his voice wove a spell around her. She knew it wasn’t anything psi; it was just Domenici, his voice, his presence, holding them all captive. “Giorgio, Geoff, or whatever his name is, is using you. He has an agenda of his own, but he’s using you to achieve it. Fooling you.”

“Shut up.” Giorgio again, his voice flat after Domenici’s magical deep velvet tones. “One flaw in your reasoning. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never heard of a metamorph, and after all the research I’ve done, I would have. You’re lying, trying to split us apart.”

“I don’t know.” That came from her left and a murmur from behind her. So she knew where some of her captors were situated now. She couldn’t work with her psi senses. Although Domenici had broken through her barrier, she was still coming to terms with them. But she had the reasoning part of her mind and the strength of her hands and feet. Her biggest break was that they’d used rope to tie her instead of plastic ties or handcuffs. She had no idea why. But rope had a give to it, and she was working it for all she was worth. Her wrists were slender, and they’d tied her hands just above the smallest part. So she had a chance. Rope burns or not, it was the only one she had.

Domenici’s voice came again, so soft she nearly missed it. “Now.”

Attuned as she was, through Domenici, to the psychic world around her, Nicole felt the breach. It was as if a slim blade thrust into the barrier that separated them from the world outside and sliced down, creating a hole that widened when others grasped it and pulled. She felt pain, but not deathly pain.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. A body fell across her lap, pushing her chair off balance and tumbling them both to the ground. Warmth seeped across her stomach, the hot, thick trickle of blood gushing over her. Not her blood. Shots rang out, and then she wriggled her head, realizing the fall had loosened her blindfold. She gained a viewpoint, a crack in the blackness surrounding her, and light rushed in.

Domenici, his eyes reddened with fury and the half shift he'd allowed himself, black scales rippling across his skin as he leaped across the room to take Gary down in a tackle that jarred the boards under her head. Pain flashed through her, and she realized he'd caught her hair in the fall, probably pulled some of it out. Small pain compared to what the others were feeling. Men and women fought with a cold ferocity that spoke of professional training, both sides trading blows. She saw a gun on the floor near her, but she couldn't reach it, not with the heavy, dead weight pinning down the lower half of her body and her hands still restrained. She fought to free herself, but despite the tearing pain in her wrists and the wetness of fresh blood -- this time her own -- she couldn't do it. Had to lie there, helpless, while the fight went on around her.

Hands at her wrists, tearing at her bonds. Then her upper body was free. Domenici pulled the blindfold off and dragged her clear of the body on her legs. "You're safe now."

Hardly. She caught sight of Laurie and wouldn't have recognized the suave, handsome playboy in the fury that tore into his opponent. Where Domenici had scales, Laurie had soft, golden fur, but like Domenici, he'd only partially shifted, retaining the form of the man, but the strength of the shape-shifter that was also Laurie Friedland.

Another man, his long white blond hair loose around his body, long and lean where Domenici was all power, lashed out at a man who grunted under the impact but came back swinging. And Esti, wearing an obviously expensive dark wool trouser suit and crisp white blouse, kicking out with lethal, spike-heeled shoes.

Domenici left her, and when she turned her head, she saw him using the ties that had fastened her to truss up Gary, who was still conscious, glaring at her in pure fury. She forced a smile, sneering at her erstwhile captor. "You're not that good then. Bastard. You used me, didn't you?"

His head lay within a foot of hers; otherwise he wouldn't have been able to hear her over the racket of crashing furniture and the occasional shot. Only one person was still armed now, and the man with the long hair leaped over the body he'd just felled to get to him.

She saw this from the corner of her eye, because she concentrated on Gary. After this, she'd never see him again; she knew it. "Why did you do this? Really? Forget the PHR stuff; that isn't what drives you."

He flashed a look of pure fury at her. "For the story. Because I thought it wasn't real. Then when I found that it was, I knew it could make my name."

That made sense to her the way Domenici's accusations didn't. Gary was a newshound, a hack, a journalist, to the very tips of his toes. Since the day she'd met him, his one drive had been the story, finding that one big scoop that would make his name. Even when he'd turned editor, he'd kept up the other side, writing the occasional story, making sure his journalist senses weren't dulled at all. The idea that he was some kind of Talent, using the job

to find the creatures the PHR detested, or having something else, a hidden agenda, underlying everything he did, didn't make sense. Because his hidden agenda *was* journalism.

A sudden, blinding pain in her lower back effectively stopped all thought. Only pain remained now, flashing up her spine to her head, invading, taking over. Even Domenici's constant presence couldn't block it out. Then the sound, as if from far away, of his voice. "She's been shot! Oh God, help!"

Chapter Sixteen

Light. She felt it through her closed lids, and when she opened her eyes, it hit her full force. Sunlight, through a window. She lay still, trying to think.

Memory rushed through her mind. The kidnapping, Domenici's arrival, then the confusing mass of noise and aggression. Then the pain. She'd been shot. Was she paralyzed, perhaps? She knew she wasn't dead because the ivory-painted ceiling didn't have angels floating across it.

Hospital then. She listened, waited for all her senses to return. The depth of her awakening told her she'd been deeply unconscious, perhaps drugged from a general anesthetic. Sounds returned to her, but she frowned, knowing something was missing. She heard birds outside, the gentle sound of her own breathing. Then she realized what it was.

No beeps, no heavy-sounding breathing machines. When she dared to move her arms, she found no restrictions from the drip she should have in the back of her hand or her inner elbow.

She'd been shot, and the shot had been a bad one. Lower back, maybe her spine, so she should be in hospital if she wasn't dead. Could she have been out for months, maybe?

No, it felt like summer still, although the room she lay in must be air-conditioned, but the golden light spoke of sun and warmth.

At last, she moved her head and realized where she was. Domenici's house outside Rome, specifically his bedroom. Specifically, his bed. Staring out of the window, she gave herself time to think. The trees waved outside, blessedly normal on this very strange day. She could see the fresh green fronds as the breeze blew them in and out of her vision.

The door opened, and without thinking, she sat up, taking the bedsheet with her. Well, that answered another question. Not paralyzed, because she'd used her feet for purchase when she'd sat and felt her thigh muscles flex with the movement.

Domenici, dressed in an open-necked shirt and jeans, stood in the doorway. The tray he held wobbled, but with an apparent effort, he regained his hold on it. He laid it down on a table by the door without taking his gaze away from her. "Oh thank God!"

Crossing the room in a couple of strides, he came down on the bed and swept her into his arms. She clung to him, felt his strength, warm and secure, close around her. He drew back after one fierce hug and sat on the side of the bed, staring at her, smiling, his eyes suspiciously bright.

"So how did I get here?" Although she tried for lightness, tried to keep her voice steady, she didn't quite manage it.

He stood up and retrieved the tray. "I brought juice for you and a sandwich. I didn't know what else to do, but they told me you'd be hungry when you woke up. An hour ago I felt you stir, and I knew it couldn't be long before you came around."

"Tell me." At the faint scent of chicken, her stomach stirred. Well, "they" were right about one thing. She was starved. She reached for the sandwich, and Domenici obligingly brought it closer to her, balancing the plate on her lap. With the sheet still firmly anchored under her armpits, she began to eat. Delicious. The best chicken salad sandwich she'd ever tasted.

He watched her and smiled when she began to devour the food, but she sensed an edge of uncertainty.

"You were shot," he said. "Lower back. You were going to die. I couldn't allow that, wouldn't." There was no mistaking the anguish in his eyes now as he recalled what she could not. "You passed out, and I had to make a decision." He swallowed, as if he, not she, were eating. She reached for the juice. "I converted you, Nicole. You're a dragon shape-shifter now."

She found her voice. "Like you?"

A slow smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. "Yes. Except you're more red than black." He caught her hand, the one that wasn't holding the juice glass, thankfully, but he didn't seem to care. She suspected if she'd thrown it at him he wouldn't have hesitated. "You're beautiful, Nicole. In both your forms. We had to shape-shift you so you could heal. It didn't take as long as I thought -- the bullet hadn't gone in far, but it doesn't have to at that point of your back. But shape-shifters heal faster. It was just to give you the choice, cara. In your human form, you would have died for sure. Now you can at least decide. But you want to stay, don't you?"

His dark eyes pleaded with her, and as she watched, a single tear slipped from the corner of his eye and slid down his cheek to his strong jaw.

That sight affected her like nothing else could. Her dragon wept. True, Italian men were less ashamed of their emotions than other races, but still, she knew Domenici kept

himself in check, kept himself so private he didn't even allow his homes to show any of his personality.

Until now. That was the difference that niggled at her. The bedside table held a glass, his alarm clock was pushed aside to allow for space for his watch. Clothes lay in a haphazard fashion on the chaise by the window, and a towel lay on the floor. She knew his whole attention had been on her, and he'd relaxed enough to allow it.

As much as the tear, these small signs told her how much he'd let her in, past his guard. And she knew -- dragon, person, or whatever she was now -- that she loved him. "I feel the same," she ventured.

He smiled properly now, and his shoulders slumped as tension left them. "You will; it won't make you feel any different until you're ready to assimilate it. We'll take it slowly for a while. You'll feel the compulsion to shape-shift when the new moon arrives, and your body will take over. That's the way most youngsters learn, by listening to what their bodies do and mimicking it again."

She could do this. With Domenici by her side, she could. But one quibble remained, one doubt. She wanted him for always. No way could she tell him now. It would make her needy where she wanted to learn to be strong. But one thing she wanted. Having eaten and quenched her thirst, she wanted him. There were other things she wanted, like lots of hot water, but first, above everything else, was Domenici.

She lifted her arms and let the sheet drop, vulnerability sweeping over her in a hot wave. But the heat she felt after that was all from him, all Domenici. His gaze swept over her in wordless adoration, and his smile broadened, the light in his eyes joining the dawning joy on his face. "You want me?" He sounded hesitant, and she realized this was the very first time he'd been less than sure.

"Always." She said it without thinking, without reckoning what the consequences of saying that might be, but he didn't seem to show any hesitation now.

He leaned forward and took her in his arms. Gently at first, his hands sweeping over her back and lingering low down, where the bullet must have struck her. She pushed the thought out of her mind. Enough for now. She knew if she let this new life enter her instead of pushing it and trying to learn everything at once, she could accept it better. She smiled at the thought. She, who had always pushed everything, eager to press on to the next goal and the next. Perhaps a new tranquility came with the change in her state.

Domenici felt like nobody else, the hard, hot body pulsing with life, his muscles flexing under her hands. He murmured, his breath heating her neck, her ear. "Let me take care of you now, Nicole. Lean on me all you want. You can't lean hard enough to make me fall. Dear God, to think I nearly lost you!" He paused then, and she felt his lips press softly to her neck, just under her ear. His tongue licked the pulse, and her libido rose to greet it like a living thing, expanding through her body until all she wanted was him over her, loving her. Or fucking her. Or both.

He kissed farther down her neck, soft, hot kisses that made her fingers curl. "Both. Definitely both."

He pulled away and undid the first two buttons on his shirt, enough to allow him to drag the garment over his head and toss it heedlessly aside. "If you don't mean it, say so now. I've tried so hard to keep separate from you, to give you the choices you should have. I kept out of your mind except for necessary checks, and I'll give you all the time you need." He stood up and undid the first button on his fly. "Tell me now."

"Come to me. Please. Enter my mind and every other part of me."

At her words, a hot, darkly possessive glow entered her. She felt it, but not in her head. In her heart. And farther below, where she could feel her body preparing itself for him. Dampness trickled between her thighs, and heat gathered there. She separated her legs a little to try to get some cool air there.

His gaze went to the movement on the sheet, and when he looked back at her face, she couldn't mistake the red glow of passion, a nimbus around the dark irises. It should have scared her. It didn't.

Instead, she reveled in the dark promises he made to her. She opened her legs wider.

Domenici undid the rest of the buttons on his jeans's fly and shoved them down, taking his underwear with them. He didn't stand up; instead, he reached for the covers and dragged them back, exposing her to his avid gaze.

"Sweetheart, kitten, my little dragonlet," he crooned, climbing in next to her.

"Dragonlet." She laughed and welcomed him, reaching around him to caress his back, sliding down to his buttocks. "I like that."

"Good. You'll be hearing it a lot in the years to come."

Years?

He didn't allow her to articulate her thoughts this time, but took her mouth in a deep, sweet kiss. He kept it slow and easy when she wanted to grab and tear, but she let him take control, knowing he needed to do it, reaffirm his position in her heart. He lifted his hand when he finished the kiss and brushed a strand of hair off her face. "I love the way your hair burns. There's a new shade of red in it now. Did you know that?"

"No mirror." She didn't care, but it might be an intriguing sight later.

"I'll set one up. Have the whole room mirrored. Would you like that?" He smiled when he saw the heat in her eyes. "Oh yes, I can see that you would. Consider it done. If we stay here."

"We?"

He cupped her breasts and feathered his thumbs over her nipples, making her whole body tighten in response.

"We," he said firmly. "Most definitely we."

When he pushed, she allowed him to lay her against the crisp ivory sheets. He took a moment to look at her, and she perused him in return. No bruises, no injuries. Talents healed awfully fast. Strange how she accepted all this, but as long as she was with Domenici, few other circumstances mattered. She supposed they would, in time, but she wanted him there when she hit the stumbling blocks and learned to cope with her new life. And it would be completely new.

He bent to kiss her breasts, lavishing attention on them, tracing the areolae with his tongue before sucking them into his mouth, one after the other, to tease them into hard peaks.

By then she was groaning, little sighs leaving her mouth with every breath. She wanted him so much, but she held back, let him taste her, explore her. Not just sexual need, but the need of a man to ensure his woman was well, happy, and more than ready for him. She felt it when his mind slid into hers, and used to his presence now, she opened for him. Mind and body.

When he mounted her, deliberately nudged her legs wider so he could see everything she was offering to him, it was his turn to groan. Impossible to tell him what he had come to mean to her. He touched her but didn't linger to taste, although he licked his lips and she read the intent in his mind. He looked up at her face and smiled. "Later. We have all day. All week. All month, if you want it."

"What about...?" She never finished her sentence.

When his cock touched her clit, she arched up to him in instinctive response, and when he entered her, she was crying his name. He filled her, and she brought her legs up to clasp his waist, hold on as he took her flying.

She didn't need to be a dragon, or any other winged creature, to know what soaring through the air felt like, because every time they made love, he took her there, made her forget everything else but him, even her surroundings. She had no idea if clouds surrounded them or sheets, and she cared even less until the fleeting thought took her -- what would it be like to really make love on the wing?

"I'll show you. Everything you want, baby. Anything."

His voice inside her, reverberating through her, added to their intimacy, heightened it. *"Domenici, you feel so good!"*

"So do you, cara; so do you."

She felt the care he took, the strain he put himself under holding back for her, to make love to her slowly, and she wanted more. "Domenici, make me feel alive. Take me hard, as hard as you want."

He lifted so he could see her face, his eyes questioning. But she held her resolve, inside and out. She wanted total possession. So he gave it to her. He plunged deep, took her up with a suddenness that had her gasping, beyond words now. Except for his name. She cried out with every thrust, every time his cock touched the sweet spot deep inside her, the one she'd been unaware of before. She'd thought every woman only had one G-spot inside her body, but in this, she'd been so woefully wrong, because Domenici found another. Maybe no other man had discovered it before because they didn't care enough, or they didn't wait to discover what would do it for her. Or maybe she loved him so much that his very touch opened new spots in her body.

That sounded so good, but her body froze as he took her up another notch, closer to nirvana. They teetered on the brink, held for the delicious moment out of time when everything stopped and nothing mattered anymore except this bliss, and then over to the explosion she'd hoped for, prayed for.

He went over with her. Small detonations burst like the precursors of heaven, before one large happy birthday of an explosion took her completely.

* * * * *

Nicole had no idea how much time passed before she opened her eyes. But when she did, he was waiting for her. They stared at each other, sharing wordless communication before she said what she had to say. "I love you, Domenici."

"Ti amo, Nicole."

No ifs, no conditions, just as it should be.

He drew away, taking her with him, and she ended up lying on his shoulder, nestled in the crook of his arm. He smiled down at her. She loved his smile: warm, loving, and intimate. She tried to return it. It seemed she succeeded, because he bent to touch his lips to hers in a gesture that was somehow as intimate as anything they'd ever done in this bed.

His next words were shaded with anxiety, as if a purple shadow entered her mind. It would take her some time to get used to this. "So you'll stay with me?"

She couldn't deny him and didn't want to play games. "If you want me."

"Every minute of every day." The way he was looking deep into her eyes, she had to believe him. "We have that. We can work everything else around that. I can run my business from almost anywhere, as long as I have access to the Internet and a reasonably big city." He laughed. "No, that's not true. I don't need to be close to a city. I prefer cities, that's all. I like to visit the country occasionally."

"We know so little about each other. I like the city too, but how do we know that we're compatible?"

He took her mouth again and lingered, taking his time to taste her, caress her with his tongue and his hands. "We have this. It's enough, more than enough, to build on."

"And you'll let me drop my briefcase on the floor and my newspaper on the nearest table when I come in at night? Scatter notes all over your living room when I'm working?"

"Anything."

When he said it in that tone of voice, she believed him. Deep down, this felt right. Nothing jarred in her mind; nothing caused her to doubt anything he'd said, so her jaded, cynical self had no choice but to believe him. She stroked him, collarbone to hip, and not yet daring to go farther, back up again. "And you won't mind if I take the job with Laurie Friedland?"

"No. Laurie's a good man. He'll take care of you when I can't."

She arched a brow. "Take care of me?"

"Witch!" He followed his word with a soft kiss to her forehead. "Don't tempt me. You're not planning to go back to the magazine?"

She would have sat up, except he held her firmly to his side. "What happened? What's happening to the magazine now Gary has gone? Has he gone?"

He laughed, a free, joyous sound she could listen to for a long time. "He's gone. We took him into custody, and our Sorcerers are questioning him." He glanced down at her when she took a quick breath. "Don't ask. All in good time. Gary was PHR, a regular card-carrying member, sent over here for his expertise in sensing shape-shifters. But our metamorph got away." His voice hardened. "The bastard slipped out under our noses because we were too eager to secure Gary, who fought like a son of a bitch."

She stroked his chest, trying to bring some sense of calm to his agitated senses. "How would you know that? You said these creatures were very rare. Have you ever met one before?"

"Once." He put his hand over hers, enclosing it in warmth. "The magazine sent someone else to take Gary's place. He resigned, according to the official version, stress from overwork. You have a few days' leave; I told them you were injured from a fall. Sprained your ankle, I said, and the doctor ordered you to rest. So you can make up your mind. Baby, you can do what you want, free and clear. Whatever your decision, I'm not letting you go."

She told him her decision. In effect, she'd made it days ago, and she felt peace descend on her once she told him. Confirmation that she was right. "I'll ghostwrite Laurie's autobiography. With that, I'll get more work. Maybe I'll specialize in sportsmen; I don't know. Whatever turns up. But that book will give me a kick start, and with the contacts I made on *Gossip*, I can do well. I know I can. Better than grubbing around for scandal. I'll be working with them, not against them, and we can be a couple for real."

“We already are.” He smiled down at her. “No way are we anything else. Nicole, you’re mine, all mine. Forever.”

She leaned up to kiss him, warming when she felt his close attention on her body. “Forever. However long that is.”

 THE END 

Lynne Connolly

Winner of two EPPIEs, for Romantic Suspense and Paranormal Romance, Lynne Connolly is the best-selling author of dark and edgy paranormal romance. She describes her Dept 57 series as “James Bond with claws and fangs,” and it's received five star reviews and recommended reads from major review sites and blogs all over the Net.

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