

*Kate Hill*



**Blueberry  
Muffins**

*Changeling Press*

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**After years of working some of the seediest city areas in Grimton City, police detective Joel has become quite cynical. Dylan is an Elf with a shady past, but now he dedicates his life to his shelter that helps magical folks in need.**

**When a case involving stolen Elfin coins leads Joel to Dylan, it's the beginning of a relationship neither man ever dreamed possible, and a danger neither suspects.**

## Chapter One

When Dylan learned that a friend had robbed his apartment he decided not to alert the police. The stolen money had come from a charity drive for the shelter he ran for magical people in need, and unfortunately the thief was a young man he'd rehabilitated. Correction. Thought he'd rehabilitated. Cass had done so well since he'd severed his ties with his tricktus suppliers on the streets of Grimton City. Tricktus powders enhanced magical abilities and provided temporary ones while at the same time destroying the user's physical body.

For months Cass held down a regular job in a greenhouse as he developed his talent for working with magical plants. It shouldn't have come as a shock to Dylan that he'd slipped back to his old ways. Sometimes it took several tries for people to overcome their addictions, but Cass had done so well that Dylan had hoped he'd be different.

Dylan's roommate, Antjuan, had been furious about Cass robbing their apartment. Yet Dylan knew much of that fury was because he felt just as badly about Cass's relapse.

After finishing his shift that evening, Dylan walked to his apartment above the shelter. He could scarcely believe it had been fifteen years since he'd opened the shelter right in the heart of Grimton City, one of the most populated areas along Hot River. That river flowed through and connected the magical world. Hidden from outsiders, human and non-human magic users mingled in the world of Hot River.

Unfortunately not everyone with supernatural gifts used their powers responsibly. Sometimes misuse was intentional and other times it wasn't. Like everyone else, magical people had their share of problems. Dylan knew that firsthand. Problems had driven him from the homeland of his Elfin ancestors. Making a place for himself

outside of the only world he'd ever known hadn't been easy. Once he'd gotten his life together, he decided to open the shelter to help others. Maybe that had been his purpose all along. He was proud of the work he'd done and pleased with the friends he'd made, friends who had become like family.

Thoughts of his friends, specifically Cass and Antjuan, filled his thoughts today. He couldn't help worrying about Cass in particular. Though his day hadn't been any busier than usual, he felt emotionally drained. By the time he finished climbing the stairs and unlocked the door to his apartment, he decided not to bother cooking dinner.

What he needed more than food was a long, hot shower and a short nap to clear his head.

He was surprised to find the apartment empty. Usually after finishing work at his dance studio, Antjuan stopped home, even if to change his clothes or eat dinner. Maybe he decided to practice later than usual. With a dance contest coming up at the end of the month, he'd been quite busy. He knew Antjuan had been upset about Cass reverting to his old ways. Antjuan seemed to identify with the boy, perhaps saw himself as a wayward youth. No matter what he'd promised Dylan about leaving Cass alone, Antjuan wouldn't let the young man off the hook so easily.

In the kitchen, Dylan drank some iced tea then he walked to his bedroom and undressed. He decided that after he took a shower he'd call Antjuan's studio and find out if he was still there.

It felt good standing under the stream of warm water. Dylan braced his hands against the tile, letting the water soak his elbow-length black hair. Beads of moisture dripped from his neatly trimmed, silky goatee and trickled over his body. He closed his eyes for a moment then opened them and reached for a bottle of herbal shampoo. Though he had relinquished the elfin habit of shaving his beard, he'd kept the customary long hair. He knew his black mane was one of his best features, or so he'd been told. By elfin standards, his features were considered too harsh to be traditionally handsome.

After Dylan finished washing, he stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel. He'd just started drying off when someone pounded on his door. Muttering under his breath, he wrapped the towel around his waist and walked down the hall, leaving wet footprints on the wooden floor.

The pounding continued and he shouted, "Who is it?"

"The police," replied a stern, masculine voice.

Dylan's stomach clenched. Why were the police at his door?

"Open up," the cop ordered.

Had something happened downstairs at the shelter? An accident involving Antjuan, or maybe his cousin Shane, who ran a nearby shop with his wife?

Not even considering that he was wearing nothing but a towel, Dylan opened the door. He scarcely had time to glance at the tall, bald guy with hawkish features before his unexpected visitor shoved him into the apartment and forced him face-first against the wall, his arms twisted behind his back. He felt the cool, hard handcuffs snap on his wrists and Dylan's heart pounded with pure rage and a hint of fear.

"What the hell is going on?" Dylan snapped.

"By order of the Grimton City Safety Department you are ordered to be taken for questioning."

"For what? What's the charge?"

"No formal charges at this time."

"Who the hell are you anyway? Where's your ID?" Dylan probably should have asked for that before opening the door. With all the shady people he'd dealt with over the years, he should have had more common sense than he'd just showed moments ago.

"Detective Joel Tristan." He tugged Dylan away from the wall and held a round steel badge in front of his face. "Tell me where your pants are."

"My pants?"

"Unless you want me to take you in wearing the towel."

"Down the hall. The first door on the right."

The cop guided Dylan roughly toward his bedroom where he took jeans from the closet. Dylan had to admit he felt pretty stupid having someone else help him into his pants, at least under these circumstances.

"Tell me why I'm being questioned."

"When we get to the precinct," Joel said curtly.

This bald bastard was really starting to piss Dylan off. He nearly called up an elfin spell to knock him on his ass, but decided that wasn't a wise idea. Attacking a cop, no matter how much he deserved it, was never a good thing.

Worst of all, in spite of the humiliation and very real danger of the situation, Dylan found this cop attractive in a rather crude way.

The detective took a pair of sandals from the closet and dropped them in front of Dylan who shoved his feet into them. His long, wet hair stuck to his face, rendering him half-blind. He tried tossing his head and blowing the strands from his eyes, but it didn't quite work.

"Here," the cop said gruffly and brushed the hair from Dylan's face. Finally able to see again, his gaze locked with the detective's and Dylan's stomach tightened even more. Fuck, this guy had gorgeous eyes -- wide set, blue, and large yet slanted, almost like elfin eyes.

They stared at each other for several heartbeats, then Dylan muttered, "Thanks."

Joel gave a curt nod and guided Dylan out of the apartment.

They were silent for the entire ride. By the time they arrived at the precinct several blocks away, Dylan had worked up a high level of anxiety. He'd done absolutely nothing illegal, so what the hell was going on? Joel had said there were no formal charges, but unless he thought he was guilty of something, why the handcuffs and scare tactics?

Police in Grimton City had more authority than in many other places in the magical world. They had to have it due to the high level of crime. Unfortunately it meant that they could pick up just about anyone they wanted, whenever they wanted.

In spite of how he felt, Dylan remained calm and collected as Joel escorted him through the office. He wouldn't give this cop the satisfaction of seeing his naked emotions.

As expected in the heart of Grimton City, the precinct was teeming with cops and criminals. Dylan hated to admit that shirtless, wearing his old jeans and sandals and his hair unkempt, he looked seedy. Not that it mattered. Most cops in this part of Grimton City looked tougher than the criminals.

Joel took Dylan to an interrogation room furnished with a table and two chairs. He pushed Dylan into a chair and unfastened his handcuffs. Dylan resisted the urge to rub his wrists. Instead he placed his hands on the table. Joel placed a piece of white paper with red lettering in front of him.

"This is a consent form that allows me to interrogate you using touch questioning," Joel explained. "This session is also being recorded."

The ability to know if a person was telling the truth by touching them was a coveted skill. By law in Grimton City, police officers with the ability needed to be registered and while they could use touch questioning on anyone, evidence secured by it was only admissible in court if the person signed a consent form.

Since Dylan had no intention of lying, he didn't hesitate to sign.

Joel sat across from him. "Extend one of your hands."

Dylan slid his hand halfway across the table and Joel rested his over it. An indescribable thrill shot through Dylan. The cop's touch was warm yet dry. His palms were callused, yet the fingers long and almost graceful. Dylan couldn't help thinking they looked like the hands of a man born to play the piano but who worked in construction instead. Or maybe he did both. It was difficult to tell. For some reason Dylan got the feeling Joel was a complex man.

What was wrong with him? The bastard had arrested him and he was trying read into his soul?

Antjuan always said that far too often Dylan gave people the benefit of the doubt. Still, Dylan couldn't help believing that if given the chance most people could be decent.

"What is your connection to Cass Palmer?" Joel asked.

Cass. Dylan should have known this had something to do with him. It seemed he was in even deeper trouble than Dylan thought. "He's a friend and he works for me."

Joel lifted one of his wickedly arched, reddish-brown eyebrows. "He works for you?"

"Yes. What's the problem?" Dylan couldn't figure out the look of surprise on the detective's face.

"What kind of work exactly?"

"He does my laundry."

Joel's brow furrowed. "Let's make this clear. He launders money for you?"

"What? I didn't say that!" Dylan exclaimed, this time unable to keep from losing his cool. "I said he did laundry, as in washing towels and stuff at the shelter I run. He came to us about a year ago to get rehabilitated. At first I paid him for odd jobs while he got his life together, now he works at the Grimton City Greenhouse and does volunteer work at the shelter."

"I see," Joel said.

"Will you at least tell me what all this is about? I know Cass was involved with some nasty people at one time. If he's in some kind of trouble --"

"If? You think he is?"

"I..." Dylan paused and glanced down at Joel's hand that still rested lightly over his. The last thing he wanted was to admit that Cass had stolen money from him, but this damn cop had the power to sense the truth through touch. There was no lying to someone with this kind of magical gift.

"If you know something, you better tell me," Joel said, his piercing blue gaze locked on Dylan's. "If Cass is your friend, you're not helping him by keeping his secrets. I believe he's involved with a very dangerous criminal. For the past few weeks

I've been watching Cass as part of a case I'm working on. That's why I picked you up for questioning. He spends a lot of time at your shelter and I know he made some kind of pick-up at your place last night."

"Then why didn't you arrest him?"

"Because I'm more interested in nailing whoever it is he works for. Cass is a pawn and if you hide what you know, then so are you. This is serious. I can't force you to tell me the truth. I can only determine if you're sincere in what you choose to tell me. If you don't want to help me, then at least help Cass."

Damn, this handsome beast had a way of putting things that was hard to resist. Dylan didn't have the power to detect lies, but he was a good judge of people. Something in Joel's intense blue eyes told Dylan he was trustworthy.

"All right. If you know about my shelter then you probably know we had a charity drive. Last night the money was stolen from my apartment. My roommate and I were rendered unconscious by compulsion dust. Cass admitted to stealing the money, but I know he doesn't have the skill to make compulsion dust of the quality used on us. It was undetectable. None of the usual red haze. Nothing. Someone supplied him. I also know Cass didn't steal that money for himself. Whether you believe it or not, he's a good person."

Joel sighed and Dylan sensed his skepticism.

"I'm not lying," Dylan stated, anger churning inside him. Who was to say that just because Joel could sense the truth he would admit it? If he wanted to cause trouble for Dylan, Cass or anyone else, he had the power to do so.

"I know you believe he's a good person," said the detective. "And I'm not doubting the sincerity of what you've told me. However, nothing you've said has helped me get any closer to the person Cass is working for. Can you give me the names of his old connections? Do you have any idea who he might be working for now? You're an elf, does he have connections to any other elves?"

That last question in particular piqued Dylan's curiosity. "Why the interest in elves?"

Joel removed his hand from Dylan's and leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his angular face. Strangely, Dylan missed the sensation of Joel's hand on his.

"Do you have any names for me?" pressed the cop.

The last thing Dylan wanted to become was a snitch, but one of his friends was in trouble and he felt obligated to do whatever he could to help him.

## Chapter Two

Dylan was only able to provide Joel with names of some insignificant tricktus pushers. They had no connection to the case he was working on regarding a collection of rare and powerful elfin coins.

Once he'd finished the interrogation, Joel sat back for a moment and studied Dylan. As a cop in Grimton City, it was easy to become cynical. It was rare that he came upon someone like this elf -- truthful from the first and sincere in his desire to help others. Usually during an interrogation it took time for Joel to peel through layers of lies, but not this time.

Joel had little experience with elves. Dylan was the only full-blooded elf he'd met in Grimton City. Most elves dwelled in the Wicked Wild and rarely left their villages. Crime was rumored to be non-existent among them, but Joel found that difficult to believe. Elves were known for being truthful and non-violent, but in every society there was someone, somewhere, who enjoyed causing trouble.

His brow furrowed as it occurred to him that maybe Dylan was the troublemaker. What else was he doing here, away from his fellow elves?

Looking into Dylan's amber eyes, he saw flames burning beneath their cool surface. A smile tugged at Joel's lips. It had been a long time since someone sparked his interest and aroused him as much as this elf.

Dylan was tall and lean with broad shoulders and a body of supple muscle. He had strong features for an elf. They tended to have delicate faces, but Dylan had a longish nose and a strong jaw, accentuated by a neatly-trimmed goatee. Also unusual; elves tended to be clean-shaven.

He also had that long, black-as-ink hair. Joel found it incredibly sexy and hadn't been able to resist touching it earlier. Yes, it had been under the pretense of brushing it

out of Dylan's face when he'd been bound by the handcuffs, but the gesture had been as much for Joel as for the elf.

Even now he had the urge to take Dylan's face in his hands and kiss him. He wanted to know how those full lips would feel against his.

This was insane.

Never in his life had Joel fallen for someone he'd picked up for questioning. When working, he was all cop. He discarded his personal life when his shift began and didn't return to it until he stepped into his apartment. Usually by then he was so sick and tired of people that all he wanted to do was eat dinner, work out and relax.

Lately he hadn't even been able to fully unwind. His current assignment preyed upon his mind, leaving him restless and constantly turning over the facts. Danger surrounded these particular elfin coins. Grave danger.

"May I go?" Dylan asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes." Joel stood and Dylan also rose to his feet. "I apologize for earlier. At that time I had no idea you --"

"No problem," Dylan interrupted. "You were just doing your job."

"I'll give you a ride back to your place."

"Thanks."

"Wait here for a minute." Joel collected the consent form and left the interrogation room.

When he returned a few moments later, he carried a long-sleeved black T-shirt in his hand.

"Here." He tossed the shirt to Dylan who caught it and pulled it on, covering his lean, chiseled torso.

"Thanks," Dylan said.

A few moments later, they were back in Joel's car.

Joel's gaze scanned the streets, taking in the people walking down the sidewalks, the neon signs, streetlights and headlights. By now the habit of looking for potential trouble was ingrained. Maybe it had been from the first. He'd been born with the

magical gifts that made him the ideal choice for a lawman. He could determine truth from lies with a touch and he could call up a magical body shield to protect him from weapons.

He also had personal reasons for his battle against crime. Being a cop meant more to him than a paycheck. He believed in what he was doing and he believed that people everywhere, even in Grimton City, had a right to be safe. When he was younger the latter had been easier to believe in. Nowadays he often felt like he was fighting a band of frost giants uphill in a snowstorm. It seemed there was no way to win, not when so many people seemed perfectly content to hurt each other.

Someone like Dylan gave him hope, though. Since following Cass, he'd learned about Dylan's shelter and the help it offered to magical people in need. At first he thought it was a cover for something underhanded, but after questioning Dylan he knew he was legit.

"I want to talk to you about something," Joel began.

Dylan had been gazing out the window, but he turned to Joel and said, "I told you everything I know."

"Yes, but I need your help for something else. You asked me earlier why I was so interested in elves. The case I'm working on involves some rare elfin coins. Yours wasn't the only money stolen. Some people have even been killed because of the coins."

"What coins? I did have elfin coins with the money, but why would someone want to kill for them?"

"Because they can use them to drain power from the elves."

Dylan wrinkled his nose. "No way. The coins I had are rare because they're made by a clan that never leaves the Wicked Wild, but they're simple currency. Nothing magical about them."

"Then they're not the coins I'm looking for."

Again Dylan turned back toward the window, then glanced sharply in Joel's direction. "Are you talking about The Puzzle?"

Joel's interest rose. That was exactly what he was talking about.

"You know about it?" Joel asked.

"Of course. It's an old elfin legend among many clans. Long ago, many coins were created by all the elfin clans in the world. Each coin was a different shape and they fitted together to create a puzzle that displayed a map leading to a hidden branch of Hot River that supplies elfin magic."

"And according to legend, anyone who finds this source can drain the power of all elves, using it for himself," Joel said.

"You think that's what someone is trying to do?" Dylan looked skeptical. "That's just a legend. No one knows for sure if the coins, or the power source, exist."

"Regardless of whether or not it's true, someone believes it's real and they've killed for these coins. The thefts and murders will continue until this person is caught. And think of the repercussions if it's true. Elfin magic is powerful, but your people can handle it. Imagine if it fell into the wrong hands."

Dylan closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "I don't want to think about it."

"Then help me."

"How?"

"You're the only elf I know. Grimton City authorities have tried to work with the elves, but they refuse."

"We like to handle our own issues."

"This isn't just about elves anymore. It affects everybody. Maybe if one of their own kind, like you, will speak for us --"

Dylan gave a wry laugh. "Someone like me? If I got on so well with my people, what am I doing here in Grimton City?"

Joel sighed. "Good question."

"You didn't ask it during the interrogation."

"Will you tell me now?"

"Don't you want to pull over for some touch questioning?" Dylan said with a hint of sarcasm.

"No. And if I touch you again I hope it has nothing to do with questioning." The words were out before Joel fully realized what he was saying. His gut tightened. How would Dylan react to a come-on like that? Surely he couldn't take Joel's comment any other way.

Joel felt Dylan's eyes upon him and glanced in his direction.

"What?" Joel demanded rather gruffly.

"Nothing," Dylan said, his voice even lower and softer than usual.

They fell silent and moments later they arrived at Dylan's apartment.

"Thanks for the ride." The elf stepped out of the car and started to pull off Joel's shirt.

"Keep it," the cop said.

"Do you want to come in?" Dylan asked. Joel couldn't help noticing the flames in his amber eyes had grown brighter. "I think we still have some stuff to talk about."

"Yeah." Joel turned off the car and stepped out. Why was his heart beating faster? "I think so too."

They walked to the side of the old brick building and took the stairs up to the apartment located directly over the shelter.

"I know you finance this place yourself," Joel asked. "Where do you get the money, other than donations?"

"When I came here from my homeland I had an inheritance from an uncle. Not a large one, but enough to get me started in the cleaning business. I own the place down the street that specializes in cleaning magical cloth."

"Yes. I know."

Dylan glanced at him over his shoulder and offered an exasperated smile. "If you already know this stuff, why ask me?"

"Habit."

"Always suspicious? I guess that's why you're a detective." Dylan opened the door to the apartment and a pang of concern darted through him. Antjuan still hadn't

come home and by glancing around the place there was no sign that he'd even stopped by after work.

"I also know you donate your time and spells at the fertility clinic associated with Grimton City Hospital," Joel continued. "You could get paid well for such a service."

Dylan glanced sharply at the cop. "If you think I'd accept money for that, you know very little about elves. Our fertility spells are among our most precious gifts. They're not something to be sold to the highest bidder, but are meant to be shared with those who value life as much as we do."

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"It's all right. I don't know about all elves, but I find the fertility spell to be among the most energy draining to perform. That's why I have to be careful in using it."

"I see." Joel glanced around. "Where's your roommate?"

The two men stood in the kitchen.

"I have no idea," Dylan replied, washing his hands in the sink.

"He's a dancer, right?"

"I'm sure you know all about him."

Joel gave a snort of laughter. "How long have you two been together?"

"We've been friends for about ten years."

"Friends?"

"Yes, detective. Friends. Never lovers. Don't you know that already?"

"How? I don't have your place bugged."

"Do you want something to eat? I'm starving. I was about to eat when you busted in here. I'll tell ya, I never thought I'd hate the idea of a big handsome baldy slapping me into handcuffs, but the whole arrest thing wasn't part of the fantasy."

For the first time in a long time Joel wasn't exactly sure what to say. He was accustomed to women flirting with him and it didn't faze him much. Every now and

then guys showed an interest and if he found them attractive he'd fuck them once or twice, but it never amounted to anything more.

Dylan was another matter. This guy made him feel things on a whole different level. Joel wasn't simply aroused by the elf, he liked him.

"Sure. Why not?" Joel said.

"I'm out of leftovers, so what do you want?" Dylan opened a cabinet above the sink, revealing various cans and boxes of food.

"How about I order Chinese?" Joel suggested as he headed for the phone. "It's the least I can do after dragging you out of here half-dressed."

Not that he would mind seeing Dylan half-dressed again. He'd prefer naked and if things kept going down this track, no doubt by the end of the night he'd get his wish. But as usual with Joel business always came before pleasure. He needed to enlist Dylan's help on this case. Not only that, even though the elf wasn't connected to the crime boss Joel was after, he was still in danger. Cass did have connections and he was a friend of Dylan's. At the moment anyone close to Cass was in peril. The kid didn't realize who or what he was dealing with. Or maybe he did and couldn't care less.

Joel sighed. He knew it wouldn't take long for his cynical side to rise again.

"Sounds good," Dylan said. He closed the cabinet door.

While Joel dialed the phone, Dylan reached into a drawer, pulled out an elastic and bound his long, black hair at his nape.

Joel had the urge to run his hands through that hair again, this time enjoying the feel of it. As if sensing his heated thoughts, Dylan met his gaze. The elf moistened his full lips with the tip of his tongue and Joel's cock leapt in his pants.

Then the person from the restaurant answered the phone. Joel ordered and from the corner of his eye he watched Dylan put a teakettle on the stove.

"All right," Joel said after hanging up the phone. "You said we should talk. What about?"

Dylan gestured toward the round wooden table and the men sat across from each other.

"You asked why I live here instead of with my clan," Dylan said and though his voice remained as calm and soft as usual, there was no missing the tension in his face. "I don't like to talk about this."

"Did you do something illegal?"

"Not really." Dylan sighed deeply. "More like immoral, at least according to elfin tradition. Our marriages are usually arranged and must be approved by our families. I had a lover. We were promised to different people, so of course our families didn't approve. We could have followed through with our marriages and been content to see each other secretly. Affairs aren't uncommon among my kind and they're preferred to going against the customary matched marriage."

"You told your family to shove it then?"

"I did. My lover, Cary, wasn't prepared to fight tradition. But stubborn idiot that I was, I kept pushing him. I should have realized he couldn't choose. He took his own life. His family, as well as my own, blamed me."

Joel nodded. He knew by the tenseness in Dylan's face and the look in his amber eyes that his past still grieved him.

"It wasn't your fault, you know. If he took his own life, he had to have deeper problems than just your desire to fight tradition."

"I know, but I should have seen it. I shouldn't have --"

"Maybe, but his family should have seen it too. They were pushing him just as hard, am I right?"

Dylan's eyes flashed and when he spoke there was an angry edge to his voice. "That might be true, but none of us were right. People in trouble need help and understanding, not judgment."

"You have a point there. It's just in my job I see so many people in trouble who don't want help. It's fine if someone wants to fuck up his life, but why take other people down with you? Look at you and your shelter. You said you rehabilitated Cass, but now he's right back where he started."

Dylan closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened them and met Joel's gaze again, he wore a look of disbelief. "You sound like Antjuan."

"Antjuan might have a point."

"I've worked with enough people to know that not everyone gets it right the first time. Am I supposed to give up on the ones that clean up their act just because a few don't make it?"

For a long moment they stared at each other, then Joel sighed yet again. "No. Someone like you can't do that. And unfortunately they're not enough people like you in the world. Most are like me. Walk through enough shit and you start to stink too. It's nice to see somebody who hasn't given up on the good in people."

Dylan grinned. "I have my moments. But I don't think you're as heartless as you say. If that was the case, you wouldn't be here with me right now."

"Maybe I just want to solve this case to further my career."

"Perhaps, but I don't think so. I might not be able to touch you and know for a fact that you're telling the truth, but I've been around long enough to be a good judge of character. You're a good man, Detective Tristan."

Uncertain of how to respond, Joel continued staring into Dylan's eyes. Hell, a man could lose himself in those beautiful elfin eyes.

The kettle whistled and Dylan turned his attention to making tea.

Joel released a pent-up breath. He shouldn't get emotionally involved when working on a case, but it would be difficult, if not impossible, with Dylan.

"Thanks for being so candid about your past," Joel said. "I was hoping you might be able to convince the elves to talk to me, maybe help me on the case, but now that I know your history, maybe you can't."

"I still have connections to my clan," Dylan said. After a moment's hesitation, he added, "I'll do what I can to help you. I didn't know people had been killed because of the coins. To tell you the truth, I don't believe the legend, but if people as powerful as you say do believe, they have to be stopped."

"Thanks." Joel approached Dylan who turned to him. They stood so close that their chests almost touched.

The men were about the same height, though Dylan wasn't as powerfully built as Joel. Yet he looked wiry and elves were known for being stronger than they appeared.

"You're welcome," Dylan said. The movement of his lips as he spoke fascinated Joel who lifted a fingertip to his mouth and gently caressed the elf's firm, warm lips. The silken hairs of his goatee teased Joel's finger. Dylan's amber eyes seemed to burn with desire and without bothering to think about whether he should or he shouldn't, Joel grasped his shoulders and covered his mouth in a kiss.

Dylan tensed slightly at first and Joel thought he might try to pull away, then he relaxed. Pressing closer, Dylan rested his hands on Joel's hips.

Encouraged, Joel thrust his tongue into Dylan's mouth, relishing its warmth and wetness. Dylan's tongue met his, returning each hungry stroke with equal desire. His hand slid around to Joel's backside and Joel smiled in the midst of the kiss. He wrapped an arm around Dylan's lean waist and reached up to pull the elastic out of his hair. Then he buried his hand in the long, silky mane.

The kiss broke and they remained in each other's arms, their intense gazes fixed on each other and their breathing much quicker than before.

They didn't seem to need words or even magic to know what the other was thinking. Again their mouths met, this time in a kiss so hot that Joel felt sweat break out on his brow and back. His cock swelled and Dylan's cock, also stiff beneath its denim cover, pressed hard against him.

Joel hadn't been this turned on in longer than he could remember. He wanted to rip off both their clothes and lick Dylan all over. Then he wanted to claim this sexy elf's ass. Just the thought of it sent his heart beating out of control.

Dylan groaned with pleasure and thrust harder against Joel. His slender hands gripped Joel's ass hard, his fingers stroking and reaching further beneath each taut butt cheek.

Then the damn phone rang.

The kiss broke and for a few seconds they stared at each other, Dylan's expression as frustrated as Joel's.

The elf stepped away and reached for the phone. Though Dylan's back was to him, he knew by his end of the conversation something was wrong.

When he hung up, Dylan turned to him, his face etched with worry. "That was Cass," Dylan said. "He and Antjuan are at Grimton City Hospital. Antjuan's been shot."

## Chapter Three

When Joel and Dylan arrived at the hospital, Cass, a muscular blond youth of average height, already waited there. He approached, his face pale and concerned.

"How's Antjuan?" Dylan asked.

"I just talked to the nurse. The doctor is still working on him."

"What happened?" Dylan demanded.

"He got shot."

"Yeah, I got that part. How?"

"Dylan, I have to get out of here," Cass said, his gaze shifting toward the door.

"The cops will be here any minute."

"They already are," Joel said.

Dylan cast him an annoyed look, but said, "Cass, this is Detective Joel Tristan."

A look of sheer panic crossed the young man's face. "What the fuck? You brought a cop? Dylan, I thought you said --"

"At this moment, Cass, I don't give a rat's ass about anything except Antjuan."

"You think I'm not worried about him? I brought him here. Because of his interference, my family is probably going to get killed."

"What do you mean?" Joel asked.

Cass's gaze met his, but he refused to speak.

"I have more than enough to arrest you right now," Joel said.

"Joel, please." Dylan gently touched his wrist, then took a step closer to Cass who backed away.

"You don't understand, Dylan."

"You said the same thing when Antjuan and I found out you broke into our apartment and stole the money. I know you're in trouble. You're probably in deeper than you think."

"I fucking know how deep I'm in," Cass said.

"Then talk to us. Joel doesn't want you. He wants the guy you're working for, right?" Dylan glanced at the cop.

Joel sensed Cass was on the verge of losing it, but Dylan seemed able to keep him under control.

At that moment, two cops wearing the black and silver uniforms of Grimton City police officers strode into the ER. A nurse pointed in Cass's direction and the cops approached.

"Joel," Dylan whispered.

"It's all right," Joel stated.

"Detective Tristan," said one of the officers. "We got a call to come down here."

"I know. I've got this one, though."

The officers nodded and left without hesitation.

"We can talk here or I can take you in," Joel said to Cass.

"Either way I'm fucked," Cass muttered. He glanced at Dylan. "I'll talk if you stay."

At Dylan's questioning look, Joel said, "That's acceptable."

"First I have to call my mother and sister. Those guys said if I didn't work for them, they'd kill me and my family."

"This way," Joel said and guided them across the ER to a smaller, private waiting room. He stepped out for moment and spoke to the nurse then returned and closed the door.

Dylan was seated in a chair but Cass was pacing anxiously.

"Sit down," Joel told him. "I'm going to use touch questioning."

Cass glanced at Dylan who nodded. The younger man sat beside Joel who placed a hand on his wrist.

"Who said they'd kill your family?" Joel asked.

"Jarv and Gawain. I used to work for them before I met Dylan. A few months ago they contacted me again and said unless I came back to work for them, they'd kill my mother and sister. I was supposed to meet with them tonight, but Antjuan interfered. He thought he was doing me a favor. That's how he got hurt." Cass's gaze locked on Joel's. "I have to warn my family."

"Let's do better than that." Joel took a cell phone from his pocket -- not just any cell phone but a magically enhanced one used by most city detectives. He called his precinct and asked them to send an officer to Cass's home.

"Thanks," Cass said, a disbelieving look on his face.

"He said he'd help," Dylan said softly.

"What kind of work did you do for Jarv and Gawain?" Joel continued.

"I used to make tricktus deliveries, but mostly I stole. That's what they've got me doing now."

"Why did they want you in particular?" Joel asked.

"They said I was their best thief." Cass closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "Look, I don't expect you to understand how or why I got into this. All I care about is my family. I thought now that I cleaned up my life everything would be okay."

"It still can be," Dylan told him.

Cass shot an angry look in his direction. "You don't get it, Dylan. Your friend here is going to arrest me. With my record, I haven't got a chance."

"Everyone has a chance," Joel stated.

"What do you know? You're a cop. All you care about is burying people like me. What do you know about my life? What do you know about being on my end of the tricktus dealers?"

"More than you think, kid," Joel said.

"Yeah. Right."

"I was born addicted to tricktus powders because both my parents were users," Joel said.

Both Dylan and Cass stared at him in surprise.

"You expect me to believe that?" Cass scoffed, though Joel sensed his confusion. He wanted to trust Joel but was filled with fear and skepticism. That was easy to understand.

"It's the truth. As long as you're not back on the powders, I want to help you. I believe what you told me about working for those guys because your family was threatened."

Cass glanced down at Joel's hand still resting on his wrist. "You have the touch, right? You really can sense if I'm telling the truth?"

"Yes, I can. Now are you using or pushing tricktus?"

"No," Cass stated, his eyes gleaming. "I *hate* that stuff. It fucks you up and it fucks up everyone who cares about you."

"All right. Now I can help you and your family by getting you all into protective custody. Do you know who Jarv and Gawain work for?"

Cass shook his head. "I've only dealt with them directly. I know someone is over them, though. They mentioned their boss, but never used a name."

"How about a place? A business name. Anything."

"Sorry. All I can tell you is they're afraid of the guy, whoever he is."

"I want you to tell me everything you remember about Jarv and Gawain and about the jobs you've been on."

A nurse tapped on the door and then stepped inside. "Your friend can have visitors now," she said.

Dylan stood. "I'll go. Cass?"

"I'll be okay," Cass said.

While Dylan went to see his roommate, Joel continued questioning Cass. Unfortunately none of the information he provided helped him get any closer to solving the case. At least not at the moment. Joel knew that sometimes seemingly worthless info ended up being important later.

\* \* \*

That night Antjuan was released from the hospital and Joel took him and Dylan home, then he took Cass to pick up his mother and sister. Joel had arranged for them to enter protective custody that night.

Once alone with Joel, Cass became even more suspicious and didn't relax until he knew for certain he wasn't going to be arrested. Other than Dylan, he had been hired to steal coins from other criminals. That was why Jarv and Gawain had been adamant about recruiting him. Cass was one of the few thieves with the skill to successfully steal from others of his kind.

Joel found himself liking the young man and he hoped this time Cass would be able to keep on the right path.

Once Cass and his family were settled, Joel returned to Dylan's apartment. He'd feel better sticking around, especially now that whoever was behind those tricktus pushers hiring Cass knew he was off the streets. If they could no longer target the boy's family, they might very well target his friends.

Besides, Dylan had asked Joel to return regardless of the time. It was past midnight when Joel made his way up the stairs to the apartment. Dylan must have been watching for him because Joel didn't even have to knock before the door opened.

His eyes locked on Dylan's and the elf smiled slightly. Joel greeted him with a kiss then stepped inside.

"Where's your roommate?" Joel asked.

"Asleep. The injury took a lot out of him."

Joel nodded and sat on the couch. He stretched his legs out in front of him, leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

It had been a long day.

Dylan sat beside him and Joel opened his eyes. Smiling slightly, he straightened his posture, cupped the back of Dylan's head and drew him closer.

"We got interrupted before," he said against the elf's full pink lips.

In reply, Dylan kissed him. Joel opened his mouth to Dylan's searching tongue and gave a low groan of pleasure as the elf's long, slender hand caressed his inner thigh. He stroked higher, cupping the front of Joel's pants.

Joel tightened his hold on Dylan, his buttocks tightened and his hips thrust into his partner's stroking hand.

Dylan broke the kiss. He stood, a teasing look in his amber eyes, and said, "I'm going to the bedroom. You coming?"

"A few times, if we're lucky."

Chuckling, Dylan led the way to his room, taking off his shirt on the way.

Joel reached into his pocket and tugged out a packet of magical seeds. Harvested from fairy flowers, the seeds were a popular method of sexual protection among magical people. Joel ate one and offered another to Dylan who swallowed it as well.

In the bedroom, Joel closed the door behind them and reached for Dylan who had unzipped his jeans, exposing his dark pubic hair and stiffening cock. Joel's cock twitched in response. His hands biting into Dylan's sinewy arms, he covered his mouth in a crushing kiss.

Their tongues met, hot, hungry and thrusting in time. Hell, it was as if he and Dylan were made for each other.

Joel brushed Dylan's long, black hair behind his ear and took the lobe between his teeth. He nibbled and sucked it.

"You know I've never done it with an elf," Joel said, his lips still teasing Dylan's ear.

"That's all right." Dylan tilted his head to the side as Joel swept his tongue along the side of his neck then covered it with kisses. "I've never done it with a cop."

Joel chuckled and curled his fist around Dylan's cock. He stroked lightly at first, then tightened his hold. The elf's eyes closed and he groaned with pleasure. It didn't take Joel long to figure out that Dylan liked it on the rough side, which was perfect because that's what Joel liked too.

He handled Dylan with the same pressure and rhythm he enjoyed on himself and the elf's hips bucked, his lean, hard body straining from the pleasure.

Exciting Dylan turned Joel on too. He loved hearing the rasp of Dylan's breath and the look of pleasure on his handsome face as he gazed at Joel's hand on his cock. As the elf grew more aroused, his sharp cheekbones, neck and chest flushed an enticing shade of pink. Still stroking his cock, Joel kissed him hard, backing him against the door. He pushed down Dylan's jeans and slid his hand around to his backside, grasping one hard, rounded ass cheek.

Joel's cock strained within the prison of his trousers, but he could wait a while longer.

Maybe he could, but Dylan couldn't.

"We better slow down or else I'm going to come," the elf panted and Joel didn't exactly need his magical touch to know he was telling the truth.

He slowed his stroking then clamped his hand around the base of Dylan's shaft. Panting, the elf closed his eyes and seemed to will himself to relax.

When Joel sensed he'd gained enough control, he began stroking him again, driving him to the brink then stopping.

Panting, Dylan stared at him, his amber eyes gleaming with passion. "You need some payback."

"I think so."

Dylan stepped away and kicked off his shoes and jeans while Joel undressed too.

Sliding his arms around Joel's neck, Dylan pressed his naked body close. Joel shut his eyes and ran his hands down his lover's back to his ass. He couldn't get enough of Dylan's warm, hard body. Everything about him, from the feel of his skin to his sexy, herbal scent turned Joel on.

Dylan dropped to his knees and clasped Joel's cock. He took the bulging head between his lips and rolled his tongue over it, then flicked it along the sensitive underside.

"Ah fuck," Joel gasped, burying his fingers in Dylan's hair.

The elf's skilled lips and tongue teased him lightly at first, then he sucked harder and deeper. Even the tickle of Dylan's goatee against his flesh turned Joel on. His warm, wet mouth devoured Joel, who quickly forgot everything except the sensations rolling through his body. He'd shifted into fuck-mode and nothing mattered except pleasure.

"No one's ever sucked my cock this well," Joel panted.

Dylan made some inaudible sound because his mouth was too full of Joel to speak clearly, but Joel sensed it was a positive comment.

If this sexy elf kept it up much longer, Joel was going to explode. After a final suck, Dylan released Joel's cock.

Dylan rose to his feet and kissed Joel, who responded by grasping his face in his hands and thrusting his tongue into his mouth. Then he pushed Dylan onto the bed. The elf stretched toward the night table, took a container of lube from the drawer and handed it to Joel who had already joined him on the bed.

As Joel lubed his cock, he watched Dylan stretch out on his stomach. Joel swept aside his lover's long hair and trailed his tongue down his spine. He lapped Dylan's lower back while at the same time lubing his ass. Dylan groaned, his sphincter throbbing against Joel's teasing fingers.

"Fuck me, Joel," Dylan panted, rising to his hands and knees, presenting his ass to Joel like a gift. "Fuck me."

Kneeling behind him, Joel grasped Dylan's hips and slowly worked his thick, hard cock into his tight ass. As he thrust, he reached around and grasped Dylan's stiff cock and fondled him.

By now neither man wanted to wait any longer. They thrust and bucked, their breathing ragged as passion grew. Joel tried to keep his eyes open so he could enjoy the sight of Dylan's gorgeous ass and strong, supple body as he pounded into him, but sensation overcame him. He closed his eyes and let the pleasure wash over him like the fierce waters of Hot River.

Dylan came first, his cock leaping in Joel's hand and his ass pulsing around Joel's rigid shaft. That was enough to hurl Joel over the edge.

Grasping Dylan's hips, he pumped faster, his heart pounding as he exploded in the most intense orgasm of his life.

The men collapsed onto the bed, breathing hard. To Joel this was almost like the first time he'd had sex, the sensations were that powerful and exciting. One thing he knew for sure, this elf was something special.

Thoroughly satisfied, he surrendered to the warm, sleepy feeling that followed his climax. Dylan lay just as limp and satisfied. Joel placed his hand over Dylan's and the elf's fingers entwined with his. Smiling slightly, Joel drifted into a contented sleep.

\* \* \*

A while later, Dylan awoke and stared at Joel, whose eyes were still closed, his rugged featured relaxed and his breathing even. Dylan lightly traced his lover's abs with the tip of his finger.

A smile flickered across Joel's lips and he turned his head toward Dylan, meeting his gaze.

"Were your parents really tricktus users?" Dylan asked. There was no delicate way to put the question, but considering all he'd told the cop about his past, he figured he had the right to ask.

"Yes," Joel stated.

"It must have been hell for you growing up in that environment."

"I was lucky to have a grandmother who raised me."

"You never knew your parents?"

Joel shrugged. "My father overdosed on tricktus a few months after I was born and my mother disappeared soon after. She came back when I was eight and cleaned up her act, but it didn't last. For the next few years she'd come and go. I was sixteen when I last saw her."

Dylan felt guilty bringing the subject up. He took Joel's hand and threaded his fingers through the cop's. Again he noted the strength in the cop's long, slender hand. The backs of them as well as the wrist were sprinkled with pale freckles and dusted with reddish-brown hair. Such beautifully masculine hands. They led to sinewy

forearms, powerful biceps and steely triceps. The cop's whole body had a natural yet athletic look that Dylan found irresistible.

"I'm sorry," Dylan said.

"It's okay. I learned to deal with it long ago. I think she finally cleaned up for good. I heard she's married again with a few kids and lives on the outskirts of Hot River Campground."

Dylan couldn't help feeling irritated that she was able to be a mother to those children but had neglected Joel. It wasn't his place to say so and Joel seemed fine with it, or at least accepting of it. He was better off than letting resentment fester inside him. For a long time Dylan had allowed resentment to get the better of him -- resentment of himself, his family and even Cary. Only when he started the shelter was he able to fully come to terms with his past. Maybe Joel had become a cop for the same reason.

"You know I have to be up early tomorrow," Joel said. "And it's real late."

"You're right. Good night, Joel." Dylan rolled onto his side, his back to his lover. More than anything he wanted to sleep in his arms, but he wasn't sure if Joel's last comment was meant as a brush-off.

A moment later, Joel slid nearer, his body pressed close to Dylan and his arm draped over his waist.

A slight smile tugging at his lips, Dylan closed his eyes and leaned into Joel, enjoying the warmth of his lean, hard body as he drifted to sleep.

## Chapter Four

The following day, Antjuan left Grimton City to spend a long weekend recovering from his injury with a trip to the Wicked Wild. The fresh air and relaxation would be good for him. This left Dylan alone in the apartment, and he and Joel intended to take full advantage of it. Not that they couldn't go to Joel's place if they wanted privacy, but Dylan spent so much time at the shelter that living directly above was convenient. Joel was happy to accommodate him.

That same day Dylan contacted his brother, an elfin scholar, who arranged for Dylan and Joel to speak with one of his teachers, Eirik. Eirik was one of the oldest and most respected history scholars in the entire elfin community.

When Joel stopped by the shelter for lunch that afternoon, Dylan could scarcely wait to tell him the news. "Without elfin connections, it would be impossible for an outsider to meet with Eirik," Dylan said. "We're very lucky."

"Don't I know it. Your people are polite and seemingly passive, but stubborn as hell. Can't they see it's to their benefit to work with Grimton authorities on this one?"

"As you said, they're stubborn. Elves aren't opposed to other races, but have found them too violent to mix."

"But sometimes they do mix. The guy who runs the magical salve shop down the street from here is half-elf and half-Wildman. Talk about a bizarre combination."

"That's my cousin, Shane. Well, my distant cousin," Dylan said. "How do you know him?"

"I made a master list of anyone with elfin blood in Grimton City. Your cousin, huh? He was low on my list to interview because I assumed someone with Wildman blood wouldn't be in with his elfin relatives."

"You assume wrong," Dylan stated. "His father is from a neighboring clan to mine, and you're right in that he had trouble to contend with when his people found out he'd mated with a Wildwoman. But he persevered and finally gained acceptance for Shane."

"That's amazing."

"It's certainly the most unique match for any elf I've ever known."

"Would he help us contact elves from his father's clan to see if they can offer any information about the coins?"

"Most likely. We can talk to him now if you want. He and his wife should be at the shop."

A short time later, Dylan and Joel stepped into a quaint shop called Shane's Salves. Neatly labeled jars containing various herbal compounds rested on polished wooden tables and shelves. The aroma of herbs and flowers lingered on the air. The store also stocked incense, medicinal teas and powders.

Shane stood behind the counter, making notes in a thick, leather-bound book that Dylan knew was filled with recipes for his magical products. To some, creating salves might seem an odd vocation for the tall, powerfully-muscled half-Wildman, but those close to Shane knew differently. Though he had inherited many physical characteristics of his Wildman relatives, he was as gentle as any elf Dylan had ever known.

Shane greeted the men and, after the introductions were made, invited them to join him and his wife, Charity, for lunch.

"She's in the kitchen," Shane said, then called, "Charity! We've got guests. Please make two more subs."

A moment later, the lovely redhead stepped through a door toward the back of the shop. Though presently in her human form, Charity was a werewolf.

Once the introductions were made, Charity returned to the kitchen while Joel and Dylan began discussing the elfin coin case with Shane. The Wildman readily agreed to learn all he could about The Puzzle from his elfin relatives, though among his clan it was considered little more than a children's story.

After thanking Shane and Charity for a tasty lunch, Joel walked back to the shelter with Dylan.

They paused outside the door and Dylan asked, "Do you have to get back to work right away?"

"That depends. I can spare a few minutes for a worthy cause," Joel replied with a playful grin.

"You'll be saving me from this painful erection. How's that for worthy?"

Joel's blue gaze dropped toward Dylan's bulging crotch and his chest expanded as he drew a deep breath. "I'm all for a mission of mercy," Joel said.

Dylan led the way around the side of the building and up the stairs to his apartment. They headed directly to the bedroom and wasted no time tearing off their clothes. Joel pulled Dylan into his arms and kissed him. Closing his eyes, Dylan held him tightly, savoring the feel of his hard, rangy body and the taste of his kiss. He squeezed Joel's gorgeous ass and massaged the muscles of his back, then caressed his smooth, sexy scalp.

Joel's arms tightened around Dylan and he broke the kiss only to nuzzle his neck. He ran his tongue along Dylan's shoulder and gently nipped it, then once again buried his face against his neck. His hands slid down to Dylan's ass and he fondled it, kneading the tight muscles and sliding a long, slender finger along the indentation. He toyed with the sphincter, making Dylan's heart pound and cock swell even more.

"This is what I call a lunch break," Joel teased. Taking Dylan's face in his hands, he kissed him again, and Dylan thrust his tongue into the cop's warm, wet mouth.

Dylan's cock swelled and he felt the pressure of Joel's erection against him. Still locked in each other's arms, they edged nearer to the night table. Joel reached into the drawer for some lube. He twisted Dylan's arm behind his back, not hard, but almost mimicking the arrest of a resisting criminal. This really turned Dylan on.

Joel pressed him face-first on the bed, then released him. His heart pounding with anticipation, Dylan braced his hands against the mattress, waiting for Joel to claim his ass.

The cop stood behind him, placing his warm, callused palm against Dylan's back. He slid a long, powerful leg between his lover's, spreading them farther apart. He stroked Dylan's ass. Lube-slicked fingers teased his sphincter. Dylan's cock and ass pulsed and his breathing quickened.

"You have a fucking gorgeous ass," Joel said. He squeezed the taut cheeks then slapped them.

Dylan groaned and thrust his butt toward his lover. There was no doubt he belonged to Joel. The sexy cop had claimed him, aroused and fucked him like no man ever had before.

His cock eased into Dylan who moaned and tightened his fists on the sheets.

Joel pumped, his hands feeling Dylan all over. He stroked his back and hips and reached around to pump his swollen shaft. It didn't take long for Dylan to explode and Joel came soon after.

They climbed onto the bed and lay there for several moments. Dylan curled close to Joel and rested his cheek against his shoulder. The cop stroked his hair and trailed his hands over his side.

"As much as I hate to go, I need to get back to work," Joel said.

"I know," Dylan sighed. "And I have to go back to the shelter, too."

They reluctantly climbed out of bed.

A short time later, they left the apartment. Joel kissed Dylan, then jogged down the stairs and drove off. Dylan watched him go.

It was funny that no matter what you told yourself or how you vowed to take things slowly, you seemed to know when you found the right person. Dylan had never imagined falling for a cop. He'd never dreamed of meeting someone like Joel. Not that he didn't think he'd ever find another long-term lover, but he thought he'd outgrown the fantasy of lust striking like a bolt of lightning.

A smile touched his lips. Yeah, Joel turned him on, but it was more than that. For some people beauty was skin deep, but Joel's beauty was soul deep.

Sighing, Dylan walked down the stairs. He couldn't spend the day standing there thinking about his lover. There was work to do. Besides, he'd see Joel again in a few hours.

When Dylan stepped into the shelter, two of the regulars approached him. Kronus, an enormous, granite-faced man of ogre ancestry, and Wheeler, a slender, dark-skinned Incubus, were among the more difficult people Dylan worked with. Even after several years of visiting the shelter, they couldn't seem to decide if they wanted help or not. Dylan was willing to give them all the time they needed, but today it seemed trouble was on their mind.

Across the room, Sabrina, a young fairy who helped him manage the shelter, cast him a concerned look. She brushed her wavy blond hair behind her ears and glanced back to the paperwork on her desk.

"What was that cop doing here?" Kronus demanded, his bushy eyebrows knitted so that lines marked his wide forehead.

"Joel is a friend," Dylan stated.

"The words cop and friend are a contradiction," Wheeler said, curling his lip and revealing a single, pointed tooth protruding from his upper gum line.

"Here we don't judge anyone without knowing them. That includes cops," Dylan said. Irritation festered inside him, but as usual he kept his cool.

"We thought we could trust you," Wheeler continued.

"You can. If you don't know that by now, there's nothing I can do about it. This place is for everyone. I wouldn't turn away a friend of yours. I expect the same courtesy. Is there anything else?" Dylan glanced from Kronus to Wheeler. When they didn't respond, he brushed past them and joined Sabrina at the desk toward the back of the shelter's main room.

The two men joined a group of people seated at one of the long tables.

"They like to stir things up," Sabrina whispered to Dylan. "Everyone knows that, but they weren't the only ones talking about your friend Joel. Having a cop around makes some of our regulars nervous."

"I know, but they'll get used to it."

A knowing smile played around Sabrina's lips. "You mean they'll have to?"

"Pretty much."

"Well, he's sure cute," Sabrina said. "I like the bald look and those eyes... Can he cast spells with a look?"

"He's cast one on me," Dylan admitted.

At that both he and Sabrina chuckled.

Dylan was a bit concerned about the effect his relationship with a cop might have on the shelter, but he wasn't going to let that stop him. This was the first time since Cary that he'd considered a long-term relationship. If Dylan was lucky enough for another chance at love, he wasn't going to let it pass him by. Not with a guy like Joel.

\* \* \*

After the events of the past several days, Dylan thought nothing more could surprise him. Then Antjuan returned from his long weekend in the country with a new snake-shifter boyfriend. Though Seth seemed nice enough, especially for a snake-shifter, and Antjuan was mad about him, Dylan felt a little uneasy.

It wasn't until he introduced Seth at the shelter and witnessed other people's bias against him that he took a good, hard look at himself. Similar to elves, snake-shifters had segregated themselves from other magical species. Seth's kind were even more exclusive, however, and due to their appearance and powers, inspired fear in most people.

If Seth had the courage to leave the safety of the snake-shifter kingdom and mingle in Grimton City, Dylan would support him and Antjuan. Just by the attitudes of the regulars at the shelter, they'd need all the help they could get.

Joel shared Dylan's initial suspicions about Seth, not because he was a snake-shifter but because the cop had a suspicious nature. He agreed, however, that Seth should be considered innocent until proven guilty of something.

With a snake-shifter as well as a cop coming and going from his apartment, Dylan found himself torn in several directions. Many from the shelter had trouble

accepting Joel and Seth, but Dylan remained firm in his rule about everyone being welcome.

For the first time since starting the shelter he felt a bit resentful of the regulars there. He'd invested his whole life in making a place for people who thought they couldn't fit in anywhere else, and now those same people seemed to be judging him, turning on him because of his choice in friends.

Usually if he felt the need to talk out a problem, he'd turn to Antjuan, but his roommate had enough on his mind. With the dance competition coming up quickly as well as trying to introduce his new boyfriend into a magical melting pot, he was under plenty of pressure. Not to mention that deep inside Antjuan probably still questioned Dylan's acceptance of Seth.

No. There was no talking to Antjuan about his troubles this time, and Dylan also had no desire to burden Joel. The cop's obsession with the elfin coin case spilled into his private life. He knew Joel had trouble sleeping. He'd often awakened to find the bed empty beside him, Joel pacing the floor or staring out a window, his thoughts obviously churning.

Though he was unable to disclose particular details about the case, Dylan knew two more murders had been committed in connection with the elfin coins.

At the end of the week, they were due to travel to the outskirts of the Wicked Wild to meet with Eirik. Hopefully he would be able to help.

## Chapter Five

On Wednesday, Dylan had an afternoon shift at the shelter, so after Joel left for work, he went back to bed. The extra sleep refreshed him and when he stepped into the shelter, he had already decided that nothing was going to sour his attitude that day.

Some of the regulars were separating clothing donations that they would distribute throughout the city. One of the councilors sat by the desk toward the back of the shelter, talking to Sabrina.

"Hey, Dylan," Sabrina said. "Things have been really quiet today. There haven't been as many people dropping in this week as we usually have."

Dylan knew she was insinuating that Joel and Seth were to blame, but he refused to bite. "They'll come around when they want to," Dylan replied. "As always, our door is open to everyone."

"I didn't mean it wasn't. How's Joel?"

"That was real subtle, Sabrina. He's fine. And before you feel the need to ask, Antjuan's snake-shifter is fine too."

Her eyes widened. "I didn't mean... maybe I did, but I agree with you, Dylan. I think in time Seth will fit in really well. He's personable and already getting along well with the dancers at Antjuan's studio."

"Joel is another matter, though."

She shrugged. "I think it's great to have connections to a police officer. It just makes some people uncomfortable."

"I know what you mean, but the purpose of this place is to help people with their lives. Just because we're tolerant of certain behavior doesn't mean we encourage it. Joel is out to keep people safe. All people. That means he's out to protect us too."

Casting her eyes down to the paperwork on her desk, Sabrina didn't reply.

"You can leave at any time," Dylan told her.

She looked up sharply. "I never said I wanted to leave. I like working here."

"Damn, I must be acting pissier than I thought. I meant you can go home for the night, Sabrina. I'm ready to take over the shift."

"Oh. I'm sorry --"

"No. It's my fault. I've been a little on edge lately. Lots on my mind."

The fairy stood and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Dylan, I understand. After all you've put into this place, you shouldn't have to get flack from any of us because of -"

He lifted an eyebrow.

"Dylan, I like Joel. I really do. He's a little rough around the edges, but I think he's a nice guy. Not to mention he's easy on the eyes."

"You don't have to tell me that," Dylan said softly, a smile flicking across his lips.

"It's just going to take a little time."

"Some of these people are looking at me like I'm a traitor. All I can do is keep this place running as we've always done."

Picking up her shawl and bag, Sabrina held his gaze and said, "You're no traitor. See you tomorrow." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek before leaving.

Dylan sighed and sat behind the desk. He had some calls to make, and he needed to go over the books for his cleaning business. His customer base was getting smaller. With new magical cleaning solutions and more durable material for cloaks and supply bags, not as many Grimton City residents brought their belongings to be cleaned by professionals. Of course some older folks as well as museums still hired people like Dylan and his employees to care for their ceremonial costumes. Yet their patronage was scarcely enough to keep the business and the shelter operational as well as pay for living expenses.

The shelter depended on volunteers, so Dylan realized the repercussions of driving people away. Most of the volunteers had previously come to the shelter for assistance. Like many people with magical gifts, they preferred to use their powers as

they saw fit and disliked the authorities. Yet because of people like Jarv, Gawain and their boss, police were necessary. Many communities in the magical world had laws and people to enforce those laws.

Perhaps due to the population, Grimton City police and residents viewed each other as enemies all too often.

When Dylan returned home that night, he had a throbbing headache. At least the apartment was quiet. Antjuan and Seth were practicing late at the dance studio and Joel had called to say he was following a possible lead and would stop by later.

Another problem with dating a cop was worrying about whether or not he'd get killed while following leads like this. Sure Joel was tough and experienced. Yes, he could summon a magical body shield, was trained in hand-to-hand combat and was an expert marksman, but he was still flesh and blood. When dealing with a criminal so powerful that he managed to hide his identity while other people did his dirty work, anything could happen. No matter how much magic he wielded, Joel was still a mortal man. He could be hurt or killed like anyone else. How often had Grimton City police been struck down in the line of duty? Dylan felt badly when he heard about such incidents, but the victims had always been strangers. Now, having a cop for a lover, the reality struck much closer to home.

He was seated on the couch drinking a cup of medicinal tea for his headache when Joel knocked on the door. Dylan let him in, and no sooner had he stepped inside than Joel wrapped him in a firm embrace and covered his mouth with a penetrating kiss. Moaning with pleasure, Dylan held his lover just as tightly. His hands massaged Joel's rock-hard shoulders then slid down his back and grasped his buttocks. Joel had the most gorgeous ass and legs Dylan had ever seen or felt.

When the kiss broke, Joel stepped away and rolled his shoulders. He rubbed a hand over his smooth scalp and sighed deeply. "What a day."

"Any luck with that lead?"

"No. Another dead end. How are you?" Joel lifted a hand and caressed Dylan's cheek. "You look tired."

"I'm all right. Are you hungry?"

Joel unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off, revealing the pale blue tank top beneath. Normally Dylan would have taken some time to admire his chiseled shoulders and arms, but the large bandage wrapped around his right forearm stole his attention.

"What happened?" Dylan asked, stepping closer and examining the wound. "Fuck. This case is probably going to get you killed."

"Cool down. This didn't happen on the coin case. This happened when I was called in to help capture a young griffin that was loose in Love Potion Park. The laws are strict about having exotic pets in the city, but some people never fail to do something stupid."

"A griffin? How did you finally get him?"

"Workers from the city zoo helped us trap him under the bridge. They're going to check him out and then release him into the Wicked Wild. One of his talons gave me a nice cut, though." Joel glanced at his forearm. He grasped Dylan's chin in his hand and held his gaze. "Hey, it's all in a day's work. I'm fine. Are you?"

"Sure," Dylan stated.

He had the mad urge to embrace Joel again, but didn't. Instead he walked to the kitchen. He hadn't eaten dinner yet, either. After a meal they'd probably both feel better.

"You didn't tell me the truth just now," Joel said, stepping into the kitchen.

Anger flared inside Dylan. He spun and glared at Joel. "You used touch questioning on me?"

"Not intentionally. I was touching you when you answered me, so it just happened."

"This is great. Every guy's worst nightmare. A lover you can't lie to."

Now Joel looked irritated. "So you're accustomed to relationships based on lies?"

"I was being sarcastic. Can you tell the difference, or do you need to touch me to figure out everything I say?"

Joel raised his eyes to the heavens. "Yeah. That's something people like me get a lot. That's why it's easier to fuck and run."

"So why haven't you?"

"Because I liked you. My mistake." Joel strode out of the kitchen.

Dylan closed his eyes for a moment, his heart pounding almost as hard as his head. He followed Joel, who had already shrugged on his shirt and was almost to the door.

"Wait," Dylan said.

The cop turned to him, his rugged features tense and his blue eyes ablaze.

"I've had a lot on my mind," Dylan said. "Didn't mean to take it out on you."

"Yeah." Joel's angry expression faded. "So have I."

"I know. Do you still want to leave?"

"Do you want me to?"

Dylan shook his head and when he spoke his voice was husky with emotion, "No."

"Good because I don't want to go, either." Joel strode toward him, buried his hand in Dylan's hair and kissed him.

Closing his eyes, Dylan clung to Joel tightly, loving the feel of their bodies pressed close and the sensation of their hard cocks trapped between them.

"Will you tell me the truth now?" Joel asked against his lips.

"It's just work stuff. I'd rather forget about it."

"Maybe I can help?"

"Help me forget? Probably." He kissed Joel again, sliding his tongue between his lips. Joel's met it with demanding thrusts that made Dylan's heart pound.

"Fuck, you're a great kisser," Joel said breathlessly. He grasped Dylan's buttocks in both hands and squeezed, pressing him even closer.

"So are you."

Maybe the tea was working or perhaps it was just the pleasure of being with Joel, but his headache started to fade. Sexual desire rapidly overtook any remaining tiredness and he tugged Joel toward the bedroom.

Joel was the first to shed his clothes. He sprawled on the bed, his sinewy arms folded behind his head and his long, muscular legs stretched out and spread languidly apart. A dusting of reddish brown hair scattered across his lean chest, thickening toward its center. It left an enticing trail down his chiseled stomach and flared into a thatch of flaming red pubic hair. His thick cock with all its enticing veins and ruddy head that looked ready to burst was enough to make Dylan's pulse race.

The cop was so gorgeous that Dylan could admire him all day, like the most amazing piece of art. The only thing stopping him was the desire threatening to burn him alive. He needed to feel Joel even more than he wanted to look at him.

"Get over here," the cop practically growled. Obviously he felt the same way.

Dylan joined him on the bed, draping his body halfway over Joel's. Their legs entwined and Dylan rested a hand on the cop's chest, feeling his heart beating against his palm. His pulse was quick like Dylan's and lust gleamed in his slanted blue eyes.

Lifting his head, Joel captured Dylan's mouth in a kiss. He took the elf's lower lip gently between his teeth and sucked on it, then thrust his tongue into his mouth.

Closing his eyes, Dylan responded, wanting nothing more than to lose himself in the moment. He'd had problems on his mind all day and what he needed was to surrender completely to physical sensation.

Their lips parted and the lovers held each other's gaze.

"Joel, I --" Dylan began then drew a sharp breath, his heartbeat quickening not from desire this time, but from something just as exciting, though more terrifying. Surrendering your body was one thing, but turning over your heart was another.

"What?" Joel whispered, burying his hand in Dylan's hair and caressing.

"I need you."

The cop nodded slowly, the expression on his ruggedly handsome face softening slightly. He kissed Dylan again, harder than before but with even more emotion.

He pushed Dylan onto his back and kissed his neck, then moved lower on the bed. Settling between Dylan's legs, Joel grasped his cock and swirled his tongue around it. He licked it from root to crown. Then with one hand clasped around the shaft and the other kneading his balls, he sucked Dylan's thick cock head.

Closing his eyes and sighing with pleasure, Dylan lost himself completely in Joel. The cop stroked, licked and teased him, sending Dylan's libido into overdrive.

His heart beat mercilessly and every nerve in his body seemed alive, especially in his cock. Reaching down, he clutched Joel's smooth scalp and ran his hands over his rock-hard shoulders.

Joel flicked his tongue along the underside of Dylan's cock, in that place that made him lose all reason.

Dylan's entire body tensed. His ass clenched and he thrust his hips toward Joel. Heat rose in his face and neck and he lost control of his breathing. Panting hard, he moaned and bucked as his talented lover sucked him to completion.

Afterward Dylan lay limp, his body bathed in the aftermath of unimaginable pleasure. It was hard to open his eyes, even halfway, but he did, knowing that Joel hadn't enjoyed their game as much as he had.

The cop knelt by his feet, his slanted blue eyes narrowed to slits and his lips parted as he panted, his hand stroking his cock.

If Dylan hadn't just come, the sight of Joel whacking off would have given him a gargantuan erection. At the moment all he could do was watch and appreciate the erotic beauty of his lover.

Within seconds, Joel gasped and groaned, his cock spurting and body straining in orgasm.

"Thanks," Dylan murmured, smiling slightly.

Joel grinned and headed toward the bathroom.

Thoroughly satisfied, Dylan drifted into a deep sleep.

## Chapter Six

Dylan's clan lived on the edge of the Wicked Wild. Their land included forest area as well as lush meadows. Though his main interest was in interviewing the ancient elfin scholar for info about The Puzzle, Joel couldn't help being swept away by the beauty of the land. It wasn't often he left the city to enjoy such freedom. He could only imagine how difficult it had been for Dylan to leave this behind.

The wistful look on his lover's face told him that, in spite of the life he'd made for himself in Grimton City, part of his soul would always belong to this magnificent land.

Maybe the return here had something to do with the sadness and distress he'd sensed in Dylan over the past few days. Though they hadn't known each other long, Joel wished his lover trusted him enough to confide. Still, feelings weren't easy to discuss, in particular for a man like Dylan who liked to be in control. In many ways the elf was a contradiction -- a sensitive man who cared deeply for others, yet one who liked to guard his own emotions.

Dylan's brother, Harald, met them at the ferry on the section of Hot River that ran through their clan's territory.

Like Dylan, Harald was tall and slim. He was smooth-shaven, though, his hair rich brown instead of black, and his features more delicate than Dylan's.

"Mother and Father are away, but they send their love," Harald said after greeting his brother and Joel.

"How are they?" Dylan asked rather stiffly.

"They're well."

"And you?"

"I'm fine. It was good to hear from you, Dylan. You've been missed."

"I doubt it."

"It's the truth. Would you and your friend like to rest before meeting with Eirik?"

Dylan glanced at Joel who said, "If it's all the same to you, I'd like to speak to him as soon as possible."

Harald nodded, his expression serene. Though dressed in the style of modern elves -- black trousers and a gray shirt with a round collar, he wore the traditional cloak of an elfin scholar. Joel knew from talking with Dylan that his brother had worked hard to earn the right to wear such a garment, yet even he wasn't as knowledgeable as the man they were about to meet.

The elfin scholars spent their days in a silo-shaped building made of stone they called their Sanctuary. It was located in a field about a mile outside the main village.

They paused outside the building and Harald said to Joel, "You are among the few outsiders who have been invited inside our Sanctuary. We ask that you not make us regret our decision."

"I respect your people," Joel replied. "My only interest is in finding a way to stop the violence currently associated with The Puzzle."

"It grieves us that the story of The Puzzle has attracted violence," Harald stated. "Eirik is willing to share his knowledge with you and see if it can help. Please follow me."

Harald led the way inside. They made their way up a winding staircase running through the center of the building. Each floor consisted of a single, spacious room, round in shape and filled with books and tables. Elves, speaking in whispers so as not to disturb each other, mingled or sat at the tables reading and writing.

Tapestries hung on the walls and from the ceilings and on one floor dozens of wooden easels held priceless elfin art.

At the very top room of the Sanctuary they found Eirik seated at a polished oak desk, his pale, slender hand holding a silver pen as he wrote in a parchment book.

He glanced up, brushing his long, blond hair behind his ears. Fine lines about his eyes and mouth revealed his age, yet in spite of it he was still remarkably beautiful.

"Welcome," Eirik said, his voice soft but shockingly deep for an elf.

"Sir." Harald bowed his head respectfully. Dylan and Joel did the same.

"You are the outsider who wishes to know about The Puzzle legend," the ancient scholar stated.

"Yes. I appreciate your help, sir," Joel said.

The faintest smile touched Eirik's lips. "Come closer. You may touch me so that you know I speak the truth."

Joel and Dylan both looked surprised.

"You know about his gift?" Dylan asked.

"A scholar of my level has learned many things. It's not just books I study, but souls. Dylan and Joel, you have overcome much in your short lives." His pale gray eyes fixed on Dylan. "Your heart is still elfin, but you're a shepherd whose flock lies outside our land. You should be proud of what you've accomplished."

Dylan's brow furrowed and Joel didn't need to touch him to sense the old elf's words affected him deeply.

"Thank you," Dylan said softly.

"And you." Eirik turned his gaze to Joel and held out his hand. Without hesitation, Joel stepped closer and gently grasped the ancient one's hand only to be surprised by the strength of Eirik's grip.

"You are a warrior of old battling in a modern world. There are few left like you - strong of body and mind with the power to know the truth. I'll tell you this, Knight of Grimton City, The Puzzle is but a legend. While elves have received our power from Hot River, there is no way to drain it, no way for all elfin gifts to be stolen by one. The coins spoken of in the legend symbolize the union of the elfin clans long, long ago when the world began. There are no physical coins to be had. This power seeker who has stolen lives and money has done so in vain. Use your gift of insight, Joel. Find this person, be he monster or madman, or else more lives are sure to be lost."

Joel knew Eirik spoke the truth. The fear of one person using the power of all elves was shattered. Yet the very real danger of the man or woman seeking that power still existed.

Eirik released Joel's hand and once again picked up his pen.

"Thank you, Sir," Joel said.

"You're welcome. Good luck."

Without another word, the ancient elf bent his head over his book and continued writing.

The three men silently left the Sanctuary.

Once outside, Joel said to Harald, "Thank you. This has been very helpful."

"I hope you're able to find this criminal," Harald said. "And Dylan, regardless of what you believe, you have been missed, at the very least by me."

Smiling, Dylan said, "That's good to hear."

"I realize you'll be wanting to return to the city soon," Harald said. "But at least stay for dinner. The last ferry stops here at eight in the evening."

Dylan glanced at Joel who nodded in consent.

"In the meantime, I'm going to show Joel some of my old hangouts," Dylan said.

"Enjoy yourselves," Harald said. "I'll see you at the cottage later."

The brown-haired elf walked off, leaving Joel and Dylan alone.

"Do you mind taking a stroll down memory lane with me?" Dylan asked.

"I'm looking forward to it."

Joel spoke the truth. He wanted to know more about this part of Dylan, the elfin part that meant so much to his lover even though he'd felt compelled to abandon it.

They walked through the village, stopping by shops and restaurants Dylan used to frequent. They walked along the banks of Hot River and strolled down forest paths.

Finally they ended up in a lovely yet secluded blueberry patch on the edge of the woods.

"I used to come here a lot to think," Dylan said. He opened his duffel bag and pulled out a couple of plastic containers. "Let's pick some of these so we can take them back to the city. There's nothing like wild blueberries."

They stooped by a bush and began selecting fat berries.

"Here's a nice one." Dylan held up an especially large berry. He placed it to Joel's lips.

Joel took the fruit, sucking Dylan's fingertips at the same time.

The elf smiled and slowly withdrew his fingers from Joel's lips. He turned away and from the corner of his eye, Joel watched his lover. Dylan bent over and reached for a berry and Joel couldn't resist the sight of his gorgeous ass thrust toward him.

He grasped Dylan's hips and thrust his pelvis against him, rubbing his stiffening cock against his taut buttocks.

"Hey," Dylan grunted, glancing over his shoulder. In spite of his tone, the smile on his lips revealed his desire. Not that Joel didn't know it just by touching him. His power was odd. Sometimes he didn't simply feel the truth through touch, but sensed people's emotions as well.

"What are the chances of anyone else coming here?" Joel asked.

"Slim to none. There's a huge blueberry patch on the other side of the woods that almost everyone harvests. That's why I brought you here. It's quiet and secluded. We're alone."

"Good," Joel said, rubbing his cock in circular motions against Dylan's ass. "Because I think all this wilderness is getting to me. Right now I have the mad urge to fuck you in this blueberry patch."

Dylan drew a sharp breath, his amber eyes gleaming with lust. "What a coincidence. I happen to have the mad urge to be fucked in this blueberry patch."

Chuckling wickedly, Joel pulled Dylan to a standing position, turned him around and covered his mouth in a passionate kiss.

Dylan tugged Joel's shirt out of the waistband of his pants and unzipped his fly. Joel's cock was so hard and ready that Dylan easily guided it through the flap in his briefs, curled his fist around it and stroked.

His heartbeat quickening, Joel groaned with pleasure and deepened their kiss. Trapping Dylan's tongue between his lips, he sucked on it. His hips followed the rhythm of Dylan's hand. The elf squeezed and stroked fast and hard, like Joel liked it.

The elf tore his mouth from Joel's and knelt in front of him, pulling down his pants. Joel grasped his cock and pulled it back through the flap so his lover could easily slide down his briefs. His eyes closed and he braced his hands against Dylan's shoulders as the elf began licking and sucking his cock.

No one sucked cock like Dylan. The man had it down to an art. His lips, tongue and teeth did things that nearly made Joel's eyes cross from the pleasure.

When his hot, wet mouth drew Joel's cock deep inside so that his cock head swept the back of his throat, Joel knew that in a few seconds he'd be at the point of no return.

As if sensing his lover's slipping control, Dylan pulled back.

"Come here, you sexy cock-sucker," Joel said, his voice so husky with emotion that his words couldn't be taken as anything but complimentary. He guided Dylan to his feet and tugged him toward a nearby tree. Placing a hand to the back of Dylan's neck, he firmly but tenderly positioned him in front of the tree. Dylan pressed his hands against the trunk and wiggled his ass in invitation to Joel.

Grunting with desire, Joel reached around and unfastened Dylan's pants. He slid them down far enough that Dylan could brace his legs apart in a solid stance. *Good, because he's going to need it.*

Joel grasped Dylan's hips and eased his cock, still slick from his lover's mouth, into Dylan's ass.

Moaning, Dylan lowered his head even more. Joel pushed his hair aside and gently ran his teeth down the back of Dylan's neck, then licked and sucked it. He began

thrusting slowly at first, then quicker as passion overtook him. He reached up and placed his hands over Dylan's which were still clutching the tree trunk.

Dylan's ass and hips matched his rhythm. A cool breeze fanned their heated bodies, carrying with it the aroma of herbs, flowers and sun-warmed earth.

Joel came and Dylan followed, their cries of rapture echoing in the wilderness.

\* \* \*

When they returned to Grimton City, Joel threw himself into the case even more fervently than before. As the days passed, Dylan's concern about Joel and the case only increased, yet his other worries diminished. Seth, who had become a favorite among Antjuan's students, helping them learn the art of snake dancing, was fitting in surprisingly well. The dance students' acceptance encouraged others to do the same. The regulars at the shelter started dropping in again and things returned to normal.

Dylan's main worries now were Joel and his case, and raising money to replace what had been stolen. The dance competition loomed closer and Antjuan was more determined than ever to win the prize money so he could donate it to the shelter. Dylan knew he also had another reason for wanting to win.

Last year Antjuan had tied for first place in the singles division of the yearly competition. His arch-rival, a magical dancer named Theo, was as obnoxious as he was talented. Yes Dylan hoped Antjuan would win not only because they needed the money, but also because his friend would put the rich, arrogant brat in his place.

The day after they returned from visiting the elves, Dylan took an early shift at the shelter, and then stopped by his cleaning business to talk to the manager before driving to the fertility clinic. He had an appointment with two couples that day.

When he got home it was almost dinnertime. Antjuan and Seth were still at the studio and Joel would hopefully be arriving soon. Dylan ordered pizza then decided to bake something with the wild blueberries he and Joel had collected during their trip.

As he washed the plump purplish fruits in the sink, he couldn't help smiling as he recalled their memorable afternoon in the blueberry patch.

## Chapter Seven

After about an hour, Dylan recovered from the lethargy that followed conjuring the fertility spell. Hunger really kicked in and he was about to eat a muffin from the finished batch when Joel arrived.

Unable to resist, Dylan took a muffin and munched it on his way to the door. He opened it and Joel's blue eyes riveted to the half-eaten sweet. Without speaking he grasped Dylan's hand, lifted it to his mouth and took a big bite of the muffin.

"I'm starving," Joel mumbled.

"You're spitting muffin chunks at me." Dylan laughed and brushed off the front of his shirt. "Pizza is on the way."

They walked to the kitchen where Dylan started filling a muffin tin with batter. Another batch was in the oven and the delicious aroma of muffins filled the entire apartment.

"Are these our blueberries?" Joel asked with a lustful grin.

"None other."

"I never thought picking blueberries could be so much fun." Joel wrapped his arms around Dylan from behind and nuzzled his neck, then rolled his tongue around his ear.

Dylan's cock sprang to life and heat flooded his body, especially when Joel reached down and unzipped his fly. The elf rarely wore underpants, so his cock popped right into Joel's hand. He loved the sensation of the cop's callused palm and long, slender fingers against his flesh. Joel used the perfect amount of pressure and knew just how to stroke him.

"Oh hell." Dylan closed his eyes and arched his head backward as his hips thrust into Joel's hand. After a few moments of that squeezing and stroking while the cop's

warm lips and wet tongue teased his ear and neck, Dylan was on the verge of exploding. His cock ached with the most wonderful, frustrating need and his heart threatened to leap through his chest.

While one hand teased Dylan's cock, Joel's other hand kneaded his tight balls. Dylan felt the cop's erection pressing against him from behind, and he knew his lover was as aroused as he was.

Dylan dropped his hold on the spoon he was using to distribute the batter. At the moment the last thing on his mind was baking.

Joel tugged Dylan toward the wall and the elf braced his hands against it while the cop yanked his pants down to his ankles. Grasping Dylan's ass, Joel squeezed rather hard, making his lover's cock swell even more.

Straining to see over his shoulder, Dylan saw Joel pull a small black and purple tube from his pocket, then unzip his jeans and tug them down, freeing his big, hard cock.

"What's that?" Dylan asked, unable to keep the huskiness from his voice.

"Love lube," Joel said with a crooked grin. "I picked it up in a shop across town earlier today."

"What were you doing in a shop like that, Detective Tristan?" Dylan teased.

"There was an assault." Joel lubed his hands and cock. His nostrils flared as he took a deep breath, a look of raw lust on his face. "The tube said this stuff is supposed to magically enhance sensation. It works."

"Really?"

"You'll see." Joel chuckled and lubed Dylan's ass.

In his shop, Shane sold a similar product, but not as strong as this. Dylan's ass pulsed and ached, similar to how his cock felt just before he came. Groaning, he dropped his head to his chest and leaned harder against the wall.

"I hope that stuff doesn't kill us," Dylan breathed.

"What a way to go."

Joel grasped Dylan's hips and eased his cock inside him. Within seconds both were bucking and writhing, unable to keep from moaning with desire. Joel's hands roamed all over Dylan. They clutched his hips, caressed his rippling abs, rubbed his chest and pinched his nipples. Then he stroked his cock again.

The sensations overtook Dylan and he bellowed in the throes of the most intense orgasm of his life. For a moment he wondered if a person could black out but remain standing, because that's exactly what seemed to happen.

Joel came just as hard, his body straining and hot. The intensity left both men sweaty and trembling. For several moments they rested against the wall, catching their breath and letting their minds clear.

Then the smell of burning muffins penetrated Dylan's overloaded senses.

Cursing softly and not even bothering to pull up his pants, Dylan grasped a potholder and pulled the overcooked muffins out of the oven.

Grinning, Joel wiped off his softening cock with paper towels, then hitched up his jeans.

"I'll finish cleaning up here," Joel said. "You better go clean yourself up in the bathroom before Antjuan and Seth walk in on us."

"Right. The last time they did that we were fucking in the living room. If Antjuan sees us fucking in the kitchen too, I don't think he could handle it." Dylan laughed.

While Dylan was in the bathroom, the pizza arrived around the same time as Antjuan and Seth. When Dylan stepped into the living room, he saw all three guys seated near the coffee table on which rested two open pizza boxes. Antjuan had popped in a video of last year's dance contest, and he and Seth were busy studying the competition, specifically Antjuan's arch rival, Theo.

Dylan grabbed a slice of pizza and sat beside Joel on the couch.

Antjuan's gleaming black eyes fixed on the screen, his face tense. No doubt he was completely focused on Theo, seeing how his skills measured up against Antjuan's new routine. Seth wasn't quite as obsessed. His blue snake eyes shifted to Dylan and he smiled in greeting. Dylan had grown accustomed to the snake-shifter's unusual

appearance. Even in his current human form, he had white snakeskin and sharp teeth. As he ate the pizza, his little forked tongue occasionally flicked over his finely-shaped lips.

"He gives an interesting performance," Joel commented. Theo's magical gift was to conjure lights as he danced. Dylan hated to admit he was talented, though he believed Antjuan was even better, lights or not.

"Yes, but Antjuan's moves are more graceful as well as more masculine," Seth said. "If that makes sense."

"It does," Dylan stated. "And I agree."

Antjuan's jaw tightened visibly and he smashed his fist into his palm. "I wouldn't care about tying with him last year, hell, I wouldn't even care if he wins this year if it wasn't for his bad attitude. And of course our need for the money."

"You should forget about the money," Dylan said. "If you win it, fine, but if you don't we'll be okay. We always are."

"And you shouldn't let his attitude problem get to you," Joel added. "Concentrate on yourself. Fuck him."

"I wouldn't fuck him if he was the last guy on the planet," Antjuan scoffed.

Joel grinned. "I didn't mean that."

"I know. Just trying to keep my sense of humor," Antjuan replied.

The men finished the pizza then Dylan brought out the muffins.

"What happened to these?" Antjuan asked, picking up a burnt muffin.

Dylan met Joel's gaze and they shared an intimate smile. "I forgot to set the timer and got distracted."

"Still, there's nothing like wild blueberries," Antjuan said.

"I can't argue there," Joel said and winked at Dylan.

It was at that moment Dylan realized he'd fallen in love with Joel.

\* \* \*

The night of the dance competition, Joel picked up Dylan directly after leaving the precinct. They arrived right before the first performance. Watching a dance

competition wasn't exactly Joel's idea of fun, but he and Dylan wanted to be there to support Antjuan and Seth.

Joel found himself enjoying the show more than he'd imagined. Though many talented magical dancers performed that night, Antjuan and Theo were clearly the best. The judges must have agreed because once again the men tied for first place in the singles division. In the partners division, Antjuan and Seth easily took first place. Wildly erotic, the performance of snake-shifter and man was the highlight of the evening.

After the competition ended, Joel and Dylan went backstage to congratulate their friends. Theo, obviously enraged by having to share first place with Antjuan yet again, stormed toward the exit, nearly crashing into Dylan and Joel. Joel was forced to reach out and steady the furious, black-haired dancer as he stumbled.

Touching Theo was like a savage attack on Joel's senses. Whenever he touched someone, his magical truth-telling power always stirred his emotions. Depending on who he touched, the sensations could be pleasant or unpleasant, but always controllable. This was like an assault of confusion, hatred and wickedness such as he'd never felt before.

"Let go!" Theo jerked away from Joel's hands and adjusted his black silk shirt. His gaze met Joel's briefly and another strange feeling hit Joel. This guy was trouble.

Theo tore out of the room in a huff.

"What a loser," Dylan said, staring after Theo, then he turned to Joel. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Nothing's wrong," Joel lied.

Though he spent the rest of the night celebrating with Dylan and his friends, he couldn't shake that bad feeling about Theo.

Even when he and Dylan slipped into bed and the elf fell into a deep sleep, Joel was unable to join him. He lay, staring at the ceiling and trying to ignore the sounds of Antjuan and Seth making love in the next room.

Usually his powers were limited to knowing whether or not someone told the truth. What he'd felt from Theo had been similar, yet different. More like a premonition. Without evidence, he had no reason to follow the man, but his instincts told him something was very wrong with Theo. Why did Joel have the feeling he was involved in something criminal?

He finally drifted into a restless sleep. In the morning, as he sat in the kitchen drinking coffee with Dylan, his thoughts still focused on Theo.

"Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?" Dylan asked.

"It's probably nothing."

Dylan's brow furrowed. "Is it about us?"

"No." Joel reached across the table and covered Dylan's hand with his. "Not remotely. It's that dancer, Theo. The other night I got this strange feeling when I touched him."

"Should I be jealous?"

Joel snorted. "It wasn't that kind of feeling. I'd rather whack off than take him to bed. I think he's crazy."

"He's an asshole."

"It's more than that," Joel murmured, then shook his head. "I'm not being logical. My powers enable me to find the truth. I don't get premonitions."

"Powers sometimes change or expand. Remember what Eirik told you? He said to use your gift of insight."

"I know, but he meant to use it on the coin case. Right now that needs to be my main focus. I can't justify wasting time on Theo when all I have is an inexplicable sensation. It was probably nothing anyway."

In spite of what he told Dylan, Joel couldn't shake his suspicions about Theo. That day at the precinct, he checked him out in the computer and made some calls. The man was cleaner than a new car that hadn't left the showroom. Theo came from a wealthy, respected family and was a direct descendant of Dionysus, which explained

his talent for magical dance. He had no criminal record. Not even a parking ticket, let alone any charges of magical offenses.

Learning this should have made Joel feel better, but it didn't. The feeling he'd experienced upon touching Theo couldn't be ignored, so despite what logic told him, he decided to go on instinct. For the next week, he found out what he could about Theo, from his business interactions to recreation to when he went shopping for underwear. Thongs. Flashy colors. A complete turnoff to Joel. It made him grateful for Dylan's preference for commando or the occasional blue briefs.

About a week after the dance contest, Antjuan and Seth left the city and traveled to the Realm of Snake-Shifters in the Wicked Wild.

Since they spent most of their time at Dylan's place, it was nice to have the apartment to themselves. Joel had been thinking about asking Dylan to move in with him, but he wasn't sure if the elf wanted to leave his apartment above the shelter. Still, Joel's place wasn't too far away and it would give them so much more privacy. No doubt Antjuan and Seth would like having a place to themselves too. He'd have to talk to Dylan about it.

The day Antjuan and Seth left, Joel had to work a late shift. It was nearly nine o'clock that night and Joel was staked out near Theo's mansion, which took up an entire city block. The dancer hadn't left all night and Joel realized he'd been a fool to waste so much time on a man who was obviously not involved in any criminal activity. He was about to drive away when the tall iron gates in front of the house opened and Theo sped off in his little black sports car.

Joel's curiosity overtook him and he decided to follow. This would be the last night he'd spend tailing Theo.

Theo drove across the city to one of the high-class dance studios his family owned. The place was beautifully designed in the style of a medieval tower. Though the studio was closed, another black car was parked in front of it and a dim light shone from a room on the top floor.

Theo entered the building, but when Joel tried to follow, the door was locked behind him. A fire escape wound around the side of the tower and Joel jogged up it. When he glanced in the top floor window, his heart nearly leapt through his chest.

Dylan was chained to the stone wall. By the way his head drooped, his black hair covering his face, he'd either been beaten or drugged. Two oversized men, apparently of ogre ancestry, stood in front of him, their backs to Joel.

Theo strode into the room. Through the glass window, Joel strained to hear the conversation.

"Look at me," Theo ordered. When Dylan didn't respond, he grasped a handful of his hair and jerked his head up.

Joel's stomach tightened at the sight of Dylan's bleary eyes.

"The compulsion dust must be wearing off by now," Theo said. "Tell me how you did it."

As Dylan's eyes focused, fire burned in their amber depths. He whispered a few words and Theo fell onto his backside as if he'd been pushed.

"Try that again, elf, and my companions will shoot you full of enough compulsion dust to kill you," Theo said.

The pair of ogres aimed handguns at Dylan.

"Puzzle or no Puzzle, I'll kill you if you force me to," Theo said.

Joel knew he needed to act quickly. He edged away from the window and called for backup, then glanced inside.

"There is no Puzzle," Dylan stated, twisting his hands in the manacles.

"I wasn't certain at first," Theo said, pacing in front of Dylan. "I thought it might be legend. Then I realized that The Puzzle in the legend is merely a symbol for a single living source. You are the soul of all elfin magic, Dylan, and I've been searching for you for a long, long time. I've stolen and killed to find you and now you're mine."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Dylan snapped.

"No matter how many elfin coins I found, none fit the ancient description. It wasn't until the night of the dance competition that I realized the truth. Your power is

the only thing that could have enabled Antjuan to tie with me two years in a row. Your elfin powers enhanced his performance."

"That's what this is about? A stupid fucking dance competition?" Dylan's lips curled in disgust.

Joel wished he could signal for him to keep his temper. Why did his calm, collected lover pick now to lose his cool? Theo was psychotic and Dylan's best chance for survival was to humor him.

"It's about power." Theo curled his fist and pressed it to Dylan's throat.

"Think about it, Theo. If I had the kind of power you're talking about, why am I chained here?"

"You're wily. Cunning. That's why you've been chosen to hold the power of all elves."

"I don't have any --"

"You will give it to me, just like you gave it to Antjuan."

Theo's fist smashed into Dylan's face.

Joel's entire body tensed with rage. He couldn't stand seeing Dylan handled like this. More than anything he wanted to bust in there and beat Theo senseless. Yet he needed to keep calm. If Joel impulsively made the wrong move, neither he nor Dylan would survive this night.

Now that he knew for sure Theo was behind the elfin coin case, he realized it wasn't only Dylan who was in danger if he fucked up this arrest.

Dylan spat a mouthful of blood and glared at Theo. "All right. The reason I can't give you the power is because of the manacles. Untie me and we'll talk."

*Smart, Dylan. Humor him.*

Theo cocked his head to one side, as if trying to decide if Dylan was telling the truth. The dancer paced in front of his captive, his chin lifted. Theo's slim, supple body was poured into snug black pants and a fitted shirt. Even now, off stage, he pranced around as if in performance. No doubt the man was crazy, but he was rich, with plenty of connections, which explained why he had been able to cover his tracks so well. If Joel

hadn't taken Eirik and Dylan's advice, Theo probably would have gotten away with everything. Worst of all, he would have Dylan and no one would know about it. By the time Joel worked out the case the traditional way, his lover might have been dead already.

Theo motioned for one of his minions to release the elf. No sooner had the ogre removed his manacles than Dylan whispered another spell and sent him flying across the room. Dylan ran.

The second ogre raised his weapon, but Theo bellowed, "Don't shoot him! Stop him! I want his power."

Joel knew he couldn't wait for backup. Dylan needed help now. He summoned his magical body shield, an invisible power source that covered him from head to toe.

He kicked in the window and glass shattered. Everyone turned in his direction. Dylan, who had nearly reached the door, also paused.

"Run, Dylan!" Joel shouted.

"Shoot him!" Theo ordered.

Both ogres fired at Joel. The impact nearly knocked him off his feet, but the shield held. He drew his own weapon and fired. One of the bodyguards fell, but the other also had a body shield.

Joel positioned himself between Dylan and the others, using his body to protect his lover.

Theo picked up the dead ogre's weapon and, hiding behind his shielded bodyguard, fired at Joel.

"Dylan, get downstairs. My car is outside."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Backup is on the way. I'll be fine," Joel lied.

Summoning the magical body shield was a tremendous drain on his energy. Attacked by rapid fire from two weapons, his power had already begun to fail.

"Fucking go!" Joel shouted.

Dylan finally did as he was told and raced out of the room.

Joel grunted as one of the bullets pierced his shield and struck his upper arm. The bullet was of course loaded with compulsion dust.

Fighting the waves of sleepiness, he returned fire and managed to hit Theo as he emerged from behind his bodyguard to take another shot at Joel.

The dancer gave a shout of pain and flopped onto his back, clutching his shoulder. Joel staggered toward the door, but not before another bullet pierced his body shield, striking him in the back.

Just before blackness took him, he heard Dylan's voice whispering another spell, then the sound of glass breaking.

\* \* \*

No matter what Joel said, Dylan had no intention of leaving him to fight Theo and the ogres on his own.

Weakened by the compulsion dust Theo's minions had used to put him to sleep so they could abduct him, each spell Dylan had used drained him even more. He needed a few moments to recover before he could assist Joel. If he remained in the room, no doubt he'd only distract the cop and probably get them both killed.

When Joel collapsed in the hall, the ogre behind him, Dylan knew he had no time left. Summoning all his power, he hit the towering beast with a spell so strong it knocked him out a nearby window.

Seconds later, Dylan was vaguely aware of the loud thud as the ogre's body hit the pavement below, but the elf's main concern was his lover.

Joel had been shot twice and was scarcely breathing. He pulled the cop's cell phone from his pocket and called for an ambulance. Two uniformed officers raced into the corridor, probably the backup Joel had called for.

Luckily the cops carried injections of a potion that counteracted the effects of the compulsion dust. Even so, Dylan knew Joel's injuries were serious, possibly fatal. While waiting for help to arrive, Dylan and the cops did their best to stop the bleeding.

"The guy responsible for this is in there," Dylan told the cops.

One nodded and went to arrest Theo. The other remained with Joel and Dylan until the paramedics arrived and took him to Grimton City Hospital.

\* \* \*

Joel awoke to sunlight on his face and the aroma of herbal tea. He was aware of soreness in his arm and back and the lethargy that followed an attack of compulsion dust.

"Dylan," he murmured. Though he couldn't see the elf, he sensed his nearness.

"Joel?" Dylan approached.

Gazing into those familiar amber eyes, Joel felt a wave of relief. At least his lover was all right.

"What happened to Theo?" Joel asked.

"He's in custody. How did you know he'd abducted me?"

"I didn't, but Eirik told me to listen to my instincts so I did. I'd been following Theo for days."

"I'm glad. You saved my life and you solved the coin case, but you nearly got killed in the process." Dylan sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over, brushing Joel's mouth with a kiss. "Loving a cop isn't easy."

A smile tugged at Joel's lips. "Love, huh?"

"Yeah. Love."

"Then I guess now is a good time to ask if you'll move in with me?"

"You bet. I'm sure Antjuan and Seth will be glad to hear it when they get back from the Wicked Wild."

"Then we can fuck in the kitchen any time we want," Joel murmured, his eyes growing heavy.

"I think you need to wait for the full effects of the compulsion dust to wear off first," Dylan teased.

"Right. Dylan?"

"Yes, Knight of Grimton City?"

Joel's brow furrowed. "Are you making fun of me?"

“Never. Eirik was right about you. You are like a Knight. Brave. Noble. Sinfully gorgeous.”

Joel gave a snort of laughter. “I seem to remember you whispering a spell that saved my ass.”

“So I guess that makes me your squire,” Dylan teased.

“You know something?” Joel reached up, ignoring how the motion made his injuries smart, and cupped the back of Dylan’s head. His fingers sifted through the elf’s silky black hair. “I love you too.”

Dylan’s amber gaze met his and he nodded then covered his mouth in a kiss far more healing than any treatment, medical or magical.

Joel had never imagined that a case would lead him to the love of his life, but in a world touched by Hot River, anything was possible.

## **Kate Hill**

What do trips around the world, endless nights of breathtaking sex, and a muscular, 6-foot 3-inch, brown-haired, blue-eyed significant other have to do with Kate Hill? Absolutely nothing, but she can dream, can't she? In reality Kate is a single, thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who loves writing romantic fantasies. Visit her online at [www.kate-hill.com](http://www.kate-hill.com), [www.myspace.com/katehillromance](http://www.myspace.com/katehillromance), or join her newsgroup at [groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill). Stop by Kate's Amazon blog at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).