

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



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Rescuing Clarice

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RESCUING CLARICE

Anny Cook

Dedication

For Janet, who dared me. Here it is!

Author Note

This romance is written in third person omniscient point of view. I'm an incurably nosy writer and reader and insist on knowing what everyone is thinking. In following in Jane Austen's footsteps, I find myself in the very best company.

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Chapter One

That is one primo ass. Otis Larssen leaned over the counter watching the pert backside encased in a tight blue skirt sway from side to side. *The owner is at least a nine,* he speculated. *Maybe even a ten.* Of course he would have to see the rest of the body currently hidden under the desk to really make an informed decision. Her legs were long but the sensible red pumps would have to go. He was a high-heel man himself.

There was a muffled thump below him followed by a muttered curse. The ass wriggled as the body moved further under the desk. Based on the staid clothes, he was pretty sure her normal work duties didn't include crawling under desks. He checked his watch and sighed. While it was entertaining to watch the woman wiggle her enticing ass, his eleven o'clock appointment with the office manager was in five minutes and his one ironclad rule was never to be late.

Under the desk the dust in the narrow dark space was making Clarice's nose itch. She glared at the tiny internet outlet just beyond her reach. There wasn't enough room for her to move closer. She blew a stray strand of hair away from her face and accepted the unpalatable truth. She wasn't going to be able to fix the stupid connection.

Above her, Otis impatiently rapped on the counter to get the woman's attention. Immediately, he realized his actions might have been ill considered when there was a sharp *thunk* followed by a low whimper. Dismayed he watched the back half of the body under the desk shift alarmingly. "Miss? Are you all right?"

A low groan under the desk prompted him to quickly move around the extended counter until he reached the inner work area just as the woman was slowly backing out on shaky knees. He watched as the rest of her appeared, carefully inching back until her head finally cleared the desk.

Clarice flinched when a huge hand appeared from the blue. Her head was pounding, her hands were filthy and the computer connection still wasn't working. So much for fixing it herself. With a sigh of resignation, she accepted the offer of support and clambered to her feet, irritated with her disheveled appearance. Her silky cream blouse was untucked and if she wasn't mistaken, her panty hose had a run in one leg.

Reluctantly, she glanced up, prepared to thank her savior. Her voice froze as she took in the hunk standing next to her. *Top grade alpha male*, she thought as she squeezed her eyes shut. She knew this alpha male very well. She'd lusted after him for the past three years whenever he breezed past her desk for a brief visit with her boss. Unfortunately the man standing next to her was O.Q. Larssen, her new interim boss who was replacing his uncle, Shamus Dooley. Shamus was out on long-term sick leave preparing for surgery.

Shoving her disheveled dark curls back from her face, she straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath, inflating an already impressive chest. "Mr. Larssen. You're here already." His nostrils flared. When he nodded with a very peculiar expression on his face, she continued briskly, "Wonderful. I'm Clarice Meriwether. If you'll give me a minute, I'll be right with you. In the meantime, your office is through that door on your right. Would you like coffee?"

Otis opened his mouth to turn down the coffee, then promptly clamped it shut when he noticed the bright red drops of blood staining her blouse. Obviously, she had more than a minor bump on the head. He rolled her chair closer and urged her to sit down. "First we'll have a look at your head," he announced firmly. Normally, he was very good in an emergency but the idea that he was responsible for her injury unnerved him.

A harried young woman backed through the office door, her arms loaded down with a precariously stacked pile of printouts. "Did you fix it, Clarice?"

"No." Clarice frowned as her new boss shifted strands of her hair with gentle fingers. "What are you looking for, Mr. Larssen?"

"You're bleeding." He turned to the young woman who was staring open-mouthed at her normally pristine supervisor. "You! Fetch some damp paper towels. And the first aid kit!"

The woman dropped the printouts on her desk with a thump and hustled to the supply room to find the first aid kit. In a few minutes she returned with a wad of damp paper towels and a small metal box. "What happened?"

"I bumped my head under the desk," Clarice answered shortly.

"Obviously there's a cut," Otis added. He moved the dark strands of hair aside until he located the small injury. He sighed with relief. "Towels?"

The young woman shoved the wad of paper towels at him and backed away.

"What is your name?" he asked impatiently.

"Patty."

"Well, Patty, I would be pleased if you would hand me one of those towels since the desk is too far for me to reach," he pointed out.

"Oh!" Patty snatched a towel and practically threw it at him.

Clarice intervened before Mr. Larssen could explode. "Patty, please call the nurse's office and report this to Mrs. Allen. I'm sure she'll be right down." Under her breath she muttered, "Patty doesn't do well with blood. Trust me, you don't want to deal with her passed out on the floor."

"No, you're right. Lift your feet."

Automatically, Clarice obeyed and found herself rolling forward until her desk was within reach. Calmly, he continued to deal with the injury until Mrs. Allen came bustling through the door.

Fifteen minutes later, quiet descended on the office as Clarice stood and wobbled toward the hall. A quick restorative visit to the restroom was in order, though she had no idea what she was supposed to do about the blood on her blouse.

Otis intently watched her walk away, having determined one thing in the past few moments. When his interim time was completed at this company, Miss Clarice Meriwether was going to be his. He wasn't sure why he'd never noticed her before but she had his complete attention now. It was probably a pitiful statement of him as a man but he'd been hard pressed to keep his hands off Miss Clarice. Every time she took a deep breath, his eyes had focused on the lift of her generous breasts—breasts that required firm underpinnings—lacy underpinnings according to his keen observations.

A hint of her sultry scent lingered in the air, making his mouth water. He wanted the touch of her dark silky hair brushing his loins as her sexy red mouth sucked his cock. The lush curve of her ass cried out for him to cushion his cock there as he took her from behind. Getting a grip on his vivid imagination, he firmly subdued his unruly libido as she stiffened and then stopped dead, slapping her hand over her breast.

After a moment, she moved but not before he noted her bra strap snap over her shoulder like a stretchy snake. He had a primal urge to remove the bra altogether so that he could cup those gorgeous breasts in his hands. She straightened her spine and marched primly for the door.

Suddenly she halted again and squeezed her legs together. With fascination, he watched the band of her pantyhose slowly inch down beneath her snug skirt until it was bunched level with her crotch.

Then as though to punctuate the disastrous morning, her skirt button flew off, bouncing across the room before disappearing in the narrow crack between the wall and one of the desks. The rest of the staff watched in breathless interest as the zipper on the tight skirt descended with a hiss.

A deathly silence fell over the room. Otis made his first executive decision at his new job. "Miss Meriwether? I believe you should take a mental health day today. We'll see you tomorrow." Then he went into his office and closed the door before he did something irreversible.

Clarice's face flamed with embarrassment. Her normally unflappable personality was nowhere to be found. Paralyzed with humiliation, she paused long enough to gather her thoughts, then she requested Patty to bring her purse and coat to the restroom before she rushed down the hall to the ladies room.

In a stall, she hastily stripped off her pantyhose and zipped up her skirt as she frantically considered alternatives to ever showing her face again at work, particularly as long as O.Q. Larssen was in charge.

She was stuffing her discarded pantyhose in the trash when Patty breezed through the door with her coat and purse, animatedly chatting, "Oh, my god, I would be soooo embarrassed. I'm glad that stuff didn't happen to me."

"Thanks, Patty."

"Hey, ya want me to pin your bra strap? I brought a couple of pins just in case."

Clarice turned to face Patty. "Thank you for offering," she repeated far more sincerely. "I can do it."

Tugging her blouse from the snug waistband of her skirt, she turned so Patty could slide the broken strap up far enough for her to snag it with trembling fingers. In a few minutes, the bra strap was firmly pinned in place. Clarice left her blouse untucked but soberly accepted another pin from Patty and fastened her skirt.

"Did Mr. Larssen say anything else?" she asked with morbid curiosity.

"He opened the door long enough to ask for the number of the IT department. Then he slammed it shut." Patty suddenly giggled. "If you could have seen his face."

"No thanks." Clarice shrugged her coat on and grabbed her purse from the counter. "I'll see you tomorrow, Patty. Thanks for the help." She flung open the door and rushed down the hall to the parking lot as though demons were snapping at her sensible red pumps.

When she reached the car, she wasted no time unlocking the door and sliding onto the cool seat. With the loss of her pantyhose, she was very conscious of her pantyless

state. The scent of her arousal seemed obvious to her. Mortified, she wondered if Mr. Larssen was able to tell that he turned her on.

She bowed her head on the steering wheel, inadvertently pressing against the horn. When it blared, she jerked her head up and thought that things couldn't get any worse. But she was wrong.

Nothing happened when she turned the key in the ignition. A faint clicking noise filled her with dread. Why did all things mechanical hate her? Whatever was broken on the car, she didn't have the money to pay for it to be fixed. She pressed her hand to her belly as it roiled with nerves. Then after taking a deep breath, she slowly climbed back out of the car, popped the hood and stood looking at the interior as though it could explain the chaos of her morning.

Pacing the cold sterile office that was his temporary home, Otis was laying down the law to the IT department head when the blare of a car horn interrupted him in mid-rant. Patty had explained that the reason Clarice was under the desk was the seven to ten day estimate before the IT department would show up to fix the system. That was plainly unacceptable. When Otis identified himself and demanded action, he was assured that someone would be dispatched immediately.

Otis tossed the receiver onto the telephone cradle and went to the window to see who was honking so he could report them to the security department. With a complete lack of surprise, he observed Clarice slowly open her door and climb out as though the weight of the world was on her shoulders. A moment later, she popped the hood and surveyed the engine. *Uncle Shamus, you sneaky dog, what are you up to?* With a sudden flash of insight, he knew why Shamus had insisted he fill in for him during his sick leave.

With a deep sigh, he grabbed his overcoat and left his office, heading for the parking lot. A very black cloud was obviously following his woman around. The fact that she didn't know she was his woman was irrelevant. Deep in his bones he knew she was and that was all that counted. The rest would all work out. In the meantime, all he

had to do was restrain the urge to free his fire element to work on her poor excuse of a car. He didn't think a fricasseed vehicle would help matters at the moment.

"Trouble, Miss Meriwether?"

For a moment, just a moment, she prayed to every deity she could think of — prayed that she would just drop dead on the spot. But of course, that didn't happen, so she shot Mr. O.Q. Larssen a laser look that should have leveled him and replied, "No, Mr. Larssen, nothing is wrong. I usually take time to look at my engine before I start the car. You can never tell. Someone might have placed a bomb under the hood while I was working." *Get a handle on it, Clarice. You can't kill your boss! At least not on the first day... Besides, my element is water. It would be damn difficult to drown Mr. Larssen in the corporate parking lot.*

"With your luck, I can see how you would want to be cautious," he observed solemnly. "However, I don't see anything that resembles an explosive device."

"It won't start," she replied flatly. *Damn, he must think I am an idiot.*

"I see. Well, you've had a hell of a day so far, so I suggest that I take you home. I'll call a garage. Perhaps it's something minor that can be repaired without a tow."

Of course he has to be the helpful type, she thought in despair. Why couldn't he be one of those oblivious types who ignore everything around them? After a long moment, she turned to face him. Taking a deep breath, she admitted, "I have exactly four dollars and seventeen cents until payday. That's two weeks from now. My sister cleaned out my bank account and took off. She's a drug addict." She dropped her head in shame. "I don't know when she got her hands on my bank card but it's all gone. I cancelled all my credit cards yesterday. My back rent is due tomorrow. And the electric company is going to cut the power because my check bounced. *Because the bank account is empty!*"

Otis thought of all the things he could say or do. Abruptly, he stuffed his hands in his trouser pockets to prevent himself from grabbing her in the parking lot. He needed privacy for what he wanted to do. Time for that later. "Get your purse. I'll take you home. We'll talk about it on the way.

“Mr. Larssen—”

“Clarice,” he interrupted. “My name is Otis. I would like to hear you say my name.”

“O-Otis,” she stuttered.

“Excellent. Now go get your purse.”

Silently, she obeyed him, following wherever he led until he halted next to a big black truck with an extended cab. She eyed the seat which was too high for her to reach in her slim skirt and shook her head. “I can’t possibly climb up there.”

“While I admit that it would be exciting to catch a glimpse of what that sexy skirt is hiding, I actually planned to pick you up myself,” he explained as he suited his action to his words, gently settling her on the seat. Her legs splayed open awkwardly as she squeaked with surprise.

Clarice suffered brain freeze for a few seconds at the thought of Mr. Larssen peeking up her skirt. “I don’t have on any panties,” she blurted out before turning a deep red with embarrassment.

That was too much for Otis. Moving slowly enough for her to object, he stepped closer to the truck, insinuating himself between her legs. “Clarice,” he murmured softly before he covered her lips with his.

Dazed and overwhelmed, she numbly afforded him complete access to her mouth, totally blanked out as he gently explored. His big hands cupped her breasts. Her nipples tightened immediately, poking between the two fingers that tugged them into aching points as he deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue in her mouth, demonstrating exactly what he planned to do with his body. She whimpered as she burrowed closer.

With a deep groan, he gentled his movements, far more aware than she was that the corporate parking lot just before the midday lunch rush was not the place for what she clearly needed.

Suddenly her foggy brain cleared. She sat as upright as a poker and stared at him in appalled panic. "What am I doing?"

Otis bit back a pained grin. "Until a few moments ago, you were kissing me with passionate abandon."

Clarice slapped both hands over her face and moaned. He stepped back, calmly rearranged her legs so they were both safely inside the truck and slammed the door. Moving to the driver's side, he swung into the truck and fastened his seat belt. "Put on your seat belt, Clarice," he prompted as he inserted the key in the ignition.

"What?"

"Fasten your seat belt. Or shall I help you?" She squeaked and started scrambling for the seat belt. She was fumbling for the clasp near the center console when her eyes fell on his lap. The clear outline of his erect cock beneath his suit trousers stunned her into immobility.

"It rarely bites," he assured her drolly as he shoved the belt locks together with a snap. "Only on request."

"Oh, my god."

"Nope. Just Otis here." He backed out of the space as the first employees were drifting from the building in search of lunch. "That was excellent timing," he observed as he turned right on the service road and accelerated into traffic.

Clarice cleared her throat. "I live the other direction."

"That's good to know. I, however, live this direction. We need to talk and I want someplace where no one will spy on us or interrupt us."

"I'm not going to have an affair with you."

"I don't believe that I asked you to have an affair. Actually, I haven't even suggested you have sex with me. So relax."

She buried her face in her hands and muttered curses. "What kind of alternate universe did I wake up in this morning? I am not here. This is some kind of erotic

nightmare. I'll wake up in a little while and discover that Mr. Larssen is a vampire or something." She peeked through her fingers as he turned into an underground parking garage.

"Vampire? I was thinking more along the lines of a werewolf. An *alpha* werewolf, naturally. Alpha werewolves seem to be popular in women's fiction if the books my mother reads are anything to go by." He whipped the truck into an empty space and turned off the ignition.

"You're insane. Who let you out of the asylum, anyway?" she snapped. Then it occurred to her that she was talking to her new boss—the man who would be deciding whether or not she received her raise—and she moaned again.

"Haven't you heard?" he asked. "The inmates are in charge of the asylum this week." Otis opened the truck door, happy that he'd chosen to bring the truck instead of his low-slung sports car when he agreed to fill in for Uncle Shamus. Clarice wasn't likely to jump down from the truck and take off. When he made it around to the other side of the truck, she was still hunched over in the front seat. He opened her door, released her seat belt and lifted her down to the pavement making sure she had her purse, all without her saying a single word.

After slamming the door shut, he took her hand and led her to the elevator. When they were finally inside his condo with the door locked behind them, she stood in the living room uncertainly while he loosened his tie and slipped his suit coat off, tossing it over the couch arm. "I'll make some coffee," he said. "If you want to freshen up, the bathroom is just down the hall."

She turned away, moving as though she was sleepwalking. Otis frowned while he made the coffee and set out sandwich fixings on the counter. If he wasn't mistaken, Clarice was very close to the end of her resources. With her bank account depleted and no money coming in until payday, her options were nearly nonexistent. According to the employee notes Shamus had sent him, Clarice was alone, except for her younger sister, with no family network to fall back on.

By the time Clarice reappeared, still quiet and withdrawn, Otis had lunch on the table. "Ah, there you are! How do you take your coffee?"

"Cream and sweetener." Her voice was low, a bare breath of sound.

"Fine. Have a seat."

Following his brisk, no-nonsense direction, she set her purse and coat on one of the chairs and sat down. He deposited a steaming mug of coffee in front of her, added a cream pitcher and bowl of pink sweetener packets and went back to retrieve his own mug of black coffee. More to have something to do than because she wanted coffee, Clarice added cream and sweetener and stirred until it was a pale au lait color.

With a small grin, he watched her stir as though her life depended on it. "If you don't like the color of that mug, I have others," he observed quietly.

"What?"

"No need to scrape the color off. If you would rather have a different colored mug, I'll be happy to exchange."

Startled, she realized that she was nervously stirring the coffee so vigorously it sounded like she was mixing a cake. She froze, staring at him in paralyzed embarrassment.

"Clarice," he said firmly. "Eat your lunch."

Wordlessly, she picked up a sandwich quarter and began eating. When that portion was gone, she sipped at her coffee, apparently deep in thought while he ate his own lunch.

He finished and sat back with a sigh, regarding his guest with such intensity that she finally frowned at him and asked, "What?"

"Nothing. I've just been considering your options. You're in quite a tight spot."

He was deeply relieved when she seemed to snap out of her unnatural resignation. She set her mug down with a thunk on the table. "Really? What was your first clue?"

"Now, Clarice—"

"Don't you *now Clarice* me! You're not the one with four dollars and seventeen cents to your name! You're not the one sitting at this table with a broken bra and no panties! You don't have to worry about whether or not you'll have electricity!"

"No, I don't," he admitted. "That doesn't mean that I'm not worried or concerned."

"Concerned? *Concerned?* Are you crazy? What am I going to do?" Tears trickled down her face as she stared at him in bewilderment. "What the hell am I going to do?"

Otis swallowed the last of his coffee as he studied her thoughtfully. He suspected that she was not going to take his suggestion well but he wasn't inclined to let her escape when he held all the cards. There would never be a chance like this again. Fighting the urge to gather her in his arms and assure her that everything would be all right, he sprawled back in his chair, folded his hands over his flat belly and dropped his bombshell.

"I think that you should marry me."

Chapter Two

"What? You're nuts!"

Otis winced when her voice rose in a near screech but drawing on his famous iron control, he calmly pointed out, "As you just said, you've run out of options."

"So naturally, your solution is for us to get married? I was right! You've escaped from the loony bin." Abruptly she stood up, snatched her coat from the chair and put it on with quick jerky movements before grabbing her purse and marching to the front door.

"Going somewhere?" he inquired lazily.

"You are going to take me home!"

"You *are* home." He rolled to his feet and followed her down the short hall, effortlessly pinning her against the door. With a dull thunk, her purse dropped to the floor as he captured her wrists, holding them over her head. "You're my woman," he murmured before covering her trembling lips with his warm mouth. While he explored her lush heat, flicking his busy tongue over her soft lips and tangling it with her tongue, he unbuttoned her rumpled blouse with his free hand.

With delight, he discovered her bra had a front closure with a row of tiny hooks between her breasts. Seconds later the bra was barely clinging to her breasts as he unfastened the last hook. Brushing it aside, he cupped the soft springy weight of one breast, gently tweaking the tightly furled nipple between his thumb and finger.

She whimpered, arching away from the door, pressing her belly against the hard ridge of his cock. Otis growled impatiently as he stripped off her coat before suddenly sweeping her up in his arms and heading for the bedroom. He'd be damned if the first time with Clarice was going to be up against his front door.

"Otis?" she queried breathlessly. "What are we doing?"

"Clarice, I'm sure it will come to you, eventually."

"Uh, Otis?"

"I want you in my home. In my bed. Naked, in my arms." He tossed her lightly on the bed and tugged off her pumps, stripped off her blouse and bra, before struggling to deal with the pin at her waist. "What in the hell is fastening this skirt?" he demanded in frustration.

"I'll do it," she said, pushing his hands away.

While she located the pin and unfastened it, he stripped off his clothes, flinging them in the general direction of a chair in the corner. Absently, as she wriggled on the bed, trying to shed her skirt, she noted that most of them didn't make it that far, ending up in crumpled heaps on the floor. When Otis was finally naked, he grabbed her skirt by the hem and yanked it down her legs and fired it toward the same corner.

Before she caught her breath, he leaped on the wide bed, pinning her in place with his heavy body. "Mine," he declared with satisfaction. His head dipped slowly as he nibbled and licked her rosy nipples.

She shoved her hands through his flaming red hair, mindlessly delighting in the sensuous feel of the silky strands. An errant thought skittered through her mind—just for a brief moment she wondered at her strange eagerness to follow Otis' lead—but then Otis slid his fingers over the slick wet folds between her legs and the thought went away. From the corner of her eye, she caught a flicker of deep blue as incredible pleasure flooded over her, washing all her anxieties and worries away. In his strong arms there were no bounced checks, late rent payments or broken down cars.

Clarice was stunned at the voluptuous sensations zinging from one spot to another as Otis sucked her tight nipples, letting her feel the bare hint of teeth. He plunged two fingers deep in her wet pussy while he massaged around the edges of her clit with his thumb. She arched her hips, frantically searching for more.

"Shhh. Shhh, sweetheart. I'll give you everything you need. Just hold on." He soothed her, sliding up so he could nibble on the soft skin under her ear. "I'm going to

get a condom and then I'm going to fuck you until you can't breathe," he muttered just before he nipped her earlobe.

She cried out his name, lifting her hips as she tried to capture the heavy cock sliding between her thighs, teasing her with the promise of fulfillment. She whimpered when he pulled away, sitting up on his heels while he swiftly unrolled the condom. Clarice's eyes widened in anticipation as she watched him cover the thick length. Needing to feel him inside her, skin to skin, she wanted to demand that he remove the condom.

Almost as though he was fighting the same impulse, Otis leaned forward, directing his cock to her slippery opening and thrust in, filling her even as her legs wrapped around his waist, holding him tight.

"Clarice," he groaned as the little muscles in her pussy contracted, grasping him in a tugging grip.

Shocked at the way he stretched her almost to the point of pain, Clarice's pussy clenched harder, squeezing the unruly intruder, trying to resize it—to no avail. To her astonishment, his cock expanded, pulsing and lengthening until she was stuffed like a Christmas turkey.

Time stopped. Gasping in amazement, they lay unmoving on the bed, linked together like a lock and key. She squeezed. He expanded. Inevitably something had to give. Otis shifted his hips, dragging his cock across her erect clit, setting off a dazzling salvo that zipped directly to her pussy. It was too much. With one final clench her pussy clamped his cock in a barrage of steely contractions as she came, screaming his name. Otis shouted as his cock jerked once, twice and then again as his hot seed jetted out. Exhausted, they dozed off in a satisfied tangle on the tumbled coverlet.

* * * * *

She stood alone in the barren landscape. Icy tundra stretched out as far as her eyes could see in all directions. Wasteland, all around her. Then far off to the north, she

thought she saw an old man. Squinting against the stinging snow, she tried to focus on the smudgy image as it faded into the gray horizon.

Trudging forward in the snow, compelled by a force she didn't understand, she searched the surroundings for any sign of the old man. Where was he? Where had he gone?

A mighty roar jerked her attention from the search for the old man to the reality of a huge polar bear standing in the distance. She halted in panic. And then turned and ran.

* * * * *

When Clarice eventually opened her eyes, Otis was sprawled next to her, watching her with startling attentiveness. Uncomfortably, she observed, "Well? Mr. Larssen I seem to be in your bed. Naked."

"Naked is good. In my bed is good. But my name is Otis. I don't intend to have the kind of marriage where I'm addressed as Mr. Larssen. I plan on something a bit friendlier."

"How much friendlier?" she asked with rampant curiosity.

"Naked in the bed friendlier."

"Oh."

"What? No objections?"

She looked down at her damp nude body. "I seem to already be naked in your bed. I'm not sure I can dredge up any objections at this time. Maybe tomorrow—if I can walk." She rolled from the bed and tottered into the bathroom. "You know, this isn't like it is in my erotica books. They don't talk about what happens *after*." When she returned, he was partially dressed with his pants, socks and shoes on. In one hand, he held a shirt for her and in the other a fresh shirt for himself.

Though she took the shirt he offered, she asked, "And this is?"

"A clean shirt for you to wear while you put your blouse in the sink to soak. The shirt will do until we get back with the rest of your clothes."

Clarice sat down on the bed and watched him finish dressing. As he knotted his tie, he asked, "What?"

"Otis. It's a lovely dream. You're a wonderful lover and you obviously ring every bell and whistle I have. But getting married is not the answer to my troubles."

"No it isn't. It's the answer to my prayers though. I want a wife. Obviously, I want you with amazing urgency. If you're my wife I'll have you in both my bed and my life. It's a nice coincidence that it will also take care of some of your troubles." He leaned down, brushing her lips with his. He captured her hand and pressed it against the hard ridge beneath his zipper. "I would rather stay here in bed with you but you will be more comfortable if your things are here so we'll go to your apartment and you can pack. Now put on the shirt and your skirt so we can go."

She shrugged. It would be easier to get rid of him when she was in her own place. With a sigh for all the things that couldn't be, she started hunting for her clothes. Her bra and blouse were hidden under his discarded shirt. Holding up her blouse for inspection, she had an idea that it would never be fit for anything except cleaning. Her bra strap had actually torn her bra when it broke so she doubted it could be repaired. The zipper on her skirt had broken. In short, her entire outfit was pretty much trashed.

She bundled the blouse and bra together, yanked on the skirt and pinned the waist and slipped on her shoes. Finally, she pulled on the soft shirt Otis had given her and buttoned it up, leaving the tail out to cover the gap from the broken zipper. Grabbing her clothes from the bed, she trotted out to the living room in search of her coat and handbag.

By the time she'd stuffed her blouse and bra into her bag and shrugged on her coat, Otis was waiting for her by the front door. They went out to his big truck. As he lifted her onto the seat, she blushed in remembrance of the last time he'd done so. Had she really had sex with her boss?

Otis flashed a quick glance at her as he settled behind the wheel. "No need to get upset. We're going to get married."

“Otis—”

“Just consider all the advantages while I take you home. Then we’ll talk about it,” he suggested as he backed up and drove out of the parking garage.

Except for the necessary directions, Clarice didn’t say a word until they parked in the lumpy potholed parking lot for her apartment complex. Otis surveyed their surroundings without comment but after a quick look at his face, Clarice decided that one expression was worth a lot more than a thousand words. She sighed as he leaped down from the truck, slamming the door behind him. Otis was clearly unimpressed by her living quarters. He opened her door and lifted her down.

She straightened her coat as she glanced at his face. Nope, he wasn’t happy. “You don’t have to come in, Otis. I’m perfectly able to take care of myself.”

“Clarice, you really don’t want to annoy me right now,” he pointed out softly. “Let’s just go pack whatever you want to keep.”

Since it didn’t appear that he was going to give up, she shrugged and led the way across the parking lot to the small lobby of her building. The entryway smelled of foreign cooking odors and strong laundry soap. They climbed two flights of dusty stairs to Clarice’s landing where they were confronted with a yellow form taped to her door.

After a quick glance, he said, “Eviction notice,” as he ripped it from the door.

“Perfect. So far it’s been a perfect day.”

“Thank you.”

She struggled to fit the key in the lock but it refused to go in. Otis took the key from her and examined the lock. “Something’s jammed it.” He wiggled the doorknob and the door slowly swung open, revealing a room that looked as though a tornado had blasted it.

Clarice gasped and then blurted, “Oh my god what happened?”

Otis had a very clear idea of what had happened. The scent of death was unmistakable but he saw no reason to mention the terrible truth. She would have to face that soon enough when the police arrived.

When she would have darted inside, Otis prevented her, blocking her with his body while he jerked his cell from his pocket and dialed 9-1-1 to report a break-in. By the time he finished giving the pertinent information Clarice was sitting on the top step of the landing, shoulders hunched while she tried to grasp the magnitude of the newest disaster.

Otis sat down next to her and pulled her on his lap. "Clarice?"

"Euphemia."

"Your sister?" he inquired as he cuddled her close. "What has she to do with this?"

Clarice turned her face into the hollow of his strong neck and breathed in his scent, a unique smell of spice and the outdoors and man. "Either she did it."

"Or?" he murmured as he rubbed her back in gentle circles.

"Or she pissed someone off badly enough that they did this in retaliation."

"Perhaps she stole something from someone," he suggested quietly.

Her shoulders hunched as though she could ward off the blow. "Yeah. She would do that," she admitted. "That's exactly like something she would do—especially if she needed a fix."

Below them, the door slammed in the lobby followed by heavy footfalls coming up the steps. Soon two uniformed officers stopped on the landing below them. "You the ones that reported a break-in?"

Otis tilted his head toward the open door. "In there. We didn't go in. The door was unlocked—probably because they broke the lock getting in."

The officers came up the last flight, passing them to get to the open door. In silence they surveyed the mess. "I was going to ask if anything was missing but I'm not sure

how you could tell," the older officer declared before clicking on his mic. "We're going to need a team. This place is a mess."

The younger one sniffed and added, "Tell them we need homicide detectives."

Hours later when Otis lifted Clarice down from the truck in his parking garage, she was too weary and heartsick to argue or protest. He grabbed the shopping bags from the backseat and led her to his condo. Once inside with the door locked, he nudged her down the hall to the bedroom where he proceeded to strip off her clothes. After starting the water in the tub, he dumped in some bath salts and urged her into the tub. "Relax. I'll be back in a minute."

When he returned, he offered her a warm mug of tea. "Drink!"

She took a hearty gulp and promptly choked on the fiery liquid. "What the hell?"

"Good," he declared with satisfaction. "You were beginning to worry me. Now drink the rest of it. A little slower."

"What is it?" she demanded with tears rolling down her face.

"Tea. Bourbon. Honey."

"I'll get drunk."

"And this would be bad? I don't think so. Drink." Otis knelt down, plucked her washcloth from the side of the tub, squirted on some of the bath gel he'd just purchased during their whirlwind trip through the local Wal-Mart and proceeded to wash her from head to foot.

Using the hand shower, he wet her hair, then shampooed it and rinsed it thoroughly, taking special care with her injury from that morning. After wrapping a towel around her head, he helped her out of the tub.

Somewhere in the blurred mess that was her mind, Clarice knew that it was extremely out of character for her to surrender so much of her control to a relative stranger but there had been too many shocks in this one disastrous day for her cope.

There were too many one-two punches for her to fend off. She stood in docile silence while Otis swiftly dried her body before bundling her into one of his soft t-shirts.

He shut the toilet seat and nudged her shoulder. "Sit down." It didn't take long to comb the tangles from her wet hair and blow it dry but for every second spent caring for his broken woman, Otis' rage simmered.

The destruction in her apartment was total and wantonly deliberate. Otis was pretty sure that everything that had escaped the rampage would fit in a single shoe box. That loss would have been enough to deal with. But the detectives' discovery of Euphemia's body in the bedroom had been the final blow. Clarice had flinched and collapsed in Otis' arms. His grim declaration that they would wait in the truck met no objections. Detective Andresen was relieved to have them out of the way. As they sat in the truck, Otis had time to think about what could have happened if Clarice's car had started that morning and he went cold with fear. He'd been fighting the shakes ever since.

With a kiss on top of her head, he urged her to her feet. "Bed."

"Okay."

When he heard her soft colorless reply, Otis wanted to punch a hole in the wall. Over the hours in one day, he had witnessed many sides of Clarice. This defeated, weary face broke his heart and burned his soul. He determined that nothing would ever threaten her again.

Otis stayed with her until she slid into the oblivion of sleep. Then he went to his office and sat in the dark, considering the steps he needed to take. When he had as many of his ducks lined up as he could at that point, he started making telephone calls. The first was to his cousin Harken who just happened to be a master mechanic.

"Yo."

The deep voice always made Otis think of a concrete mixer. "Sorry to wake you up, Hark. I need your help."

He heard Harken's low-voiced conversation with his wife, Fayellen. Then, "Okay, I'm back. What's up?"

"I need you to tow a car to your garage. Tonight." Without any hesitation, Otis filled in the story for the entire day. "I'll pay you for your time."

"Nope. You're family and now, so is your woman. I'll roust Skull and Neemer. We'll go now. The sooner we get the car behind a locked gate, the better I'll feel. Once I've checked it out I'll let you know."

"Thank you, Hark."

"Night."

His next call woke his uncle Shamus. Not surprisingly, Shamus was not amused. "Somebody better be dying," he growled.

"Somebody already died."

After a brief moment of startled silence, Shamus asked, "Who and where?"

Again, Otis went through the day's events without pausing for Shamus' frequent sputtering comments. "And no, I don't want to hear it. I have no doubt in my mind that you knew exactly who Clarice was to me, so stow it. I may be slow but I'm not completely stupid."

Silence hummed on the line. "Well, I didn't expect you to be so precipitate, boy."

"Is that so? I would think that was a family trait, Uncle Shamus. Isn't that what we're known for, even among the rest of the *kindrell*?"

"Does she know?"

Otis' laugh was harsh and impatient. "Exactly when do you think I had time to explain, Uncle?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Get married. Tomorrow. My next call will be Uncle Bain." Otis waited for the inevitable explosion.

"You're going to *Rolla*? Who's going to run the department?"

"Not a problem as long as we don't leave the state of Missouri. As for the department, my wife and I will be on bereavement leave."

"Son of a bitch."

At that fervent expression, a tired smile lit Otis' face. "I'm pretty sure Mama would like to know your true feelings." He disconnected the phone.

The next call was both easier and more difficult. On one hand, his Uncle Bain would be delighted that Otis had found his *muirne*, his *beloved* but his rush to marry – well, Bain would not be so delighted about that. Like all ministers, he counseled decorum and time to reflect. When his uncle answered, Otis plunged in.

"Good evening, Uncle. I am calling with a personal request."

"You found her, eh?" Otis could swear that a smile lurked in Bain's calm voice.

He took a deep breath. "Yes, Uncle. We need to marry. Tomorrow."

The silence grew heavy for several long moments as Bain considered all that he knew about his nephew. "What time will you arrive?"

"Before the courthouse closes. Clarice has had a terrible day today. I will let her sleep until she wakes on her own." Suddenly, weariness and grief weighed on Otis' shoulders. It colored his scratchy voice. "Her sister was murdered. Her home was destroyed. Everything she owns could fit in a cigar box. Someone may be trying to kill her."

"We will be waiting. Now get some rest."

"Thank you, Uncle Bain."

* * * * *

The wind howled across the dark icy tundra. Again she was alone in the wasteland. Then in the distance, a light glowed, beckoning her with its warmth and welcome. Wearily, she trudged forward, head bent against the stinging sleet and ice.

Chapter Three

Switching off the light, Otis sat in the dark study for a few minutes more before finally conceding that there was nothing more he could do tonight. He rose and padded down the dark hall to the bedroom where Clarice was sleeping. He was very tired but still elected to take a shower before crawling in the bed. There wasn't much of the night left and tomorrow would certainly be another long day.

The hot spray helped relax his tension-tight muscles. Reluctantly he turned off the water and stepped out of the shower to dry off. Then he switched off the light and went to join Clarice.

She was twisting restlessly in the covers, muttering disjointedly. When he gathered her close in his arms, she calmed immediately, snuggling against his chest. With her warm body curled next to him, he dropped off the edge of the world in spite of his expectations.

The next thing he knew, a sliver of bright sunlight was hitting him in the face. Blearily, he glanced at the clock, shocked that he'd slept until after ten. The sound of the toilet flushing wiped away the last of the sleepy cobwebs. *Clarice.*

A few minutes later, the door opened and she faced him warily. "Good morning." Her voice was still husky from crying the day before. "Thank you for taking care of me."

Otis tossed back the covers and rolled to his feet. Her eyes flickered over his naked body before settling on his face. Deliberately he moved close enough to tuck her against his chest. "It's a crappy morning, sweetheart. But we'll get through it together."

"Why are you doing this?" she asked fretfully.

Resting his chin on top of her head, he sighed. "Clarice, we're going to be married. As a matter of fact, my Uncle Bain is expecting us in a little while. After that, we'll deal with everything else. I promise."

"We can't get married. I don't have any clothes." It was only after the words escaped that Clarice realized how inane they sounded.

"I don't care if you marry me stark naked. But since it will make you feel better, we'll stop on the way to Rolla to buy you a dress. In the meantime, put on the clothes we bought last night and we'll go get some breakfast."

"But—"

He placed a large finger over her lips. "Trust me. It's all going to work out. Get dressed while I go shave." With a pat on her butt, he released her and stalked into the bathroom.

Clarice sat on the side of the bed and wished she didn't feel so muzzy-headed. She vaguely remembered Otis feeding her a hamburger last night though she wasn't sure whether that was before or after they stopped at Wal-Mart. There was something very odd about his insistence that they get married.

She yawned as she shoved her hair back from her face. She'd washed her face and brushed her teeth but forgotten to comb her hair. With a deep sigh, she stood up and went to rummage through the stack of canvas shopping bags in the corner. The one vivid image she had from the evening before was the confused expression on Otis' face when she suddenly objected to the use of plastic shopping bags. Fortunately, the checker had calmly presented them with the canvas reusable bags. Otis had willingly seized on the solution. Only God knew why she had focused on the shopping bags.

Clarice emptied the bags, sorting them out on the bed, unaware that a small sad smile tugged at her lips while she removed tags and stickers and plastic wrap from a growing pile of colorful panties, bras and socks. A sweat suit, two pairs of jeans and four knit tops completed her total wardrobe. After a moment of contemplation, she

noted the absence of nightwear and concluded that would be why she was currently wearing Otis' t-shirt.

With a shake of her head, she turned to the small pile of toiletries, liberating the packaged items from their cardboard and plastic containers. When everything was ready to use, she was left with one pair of slip-on slippers and one pair of sneakers. And of course, her red pumps. Staring down at them doubtfully, she somehow couldn't see them as appropriate for a wedding.

The bathroom door opened letting out a small cloud of steam and Otis appeared stark naked except for a small towel around his neck. Immediately, he went to the dresser and emptied two drawers for her clothes. "This should do for the moment. We'll make arrangements for more room as we replenish your wardrobe."

"Otis, you can't just keep buying things for me," she replied patiently. "By the way, I expect to see the receipts for all this stuff."

He turned and padded over to the bed. Tilting her chin up, he kissed her—not a gentle, tender brush on her lips but a bold possessive claiming involving teeth and tongues, nipping and soothing until she surrendered. Then he gentled his touch, wooing her until she was meeting him, thrust for thrust. Reluctantly, he pulled back and disengaged, holding her tightly. "Not now," he panted. "We're running out of time."

Confused and dazed, she shook her head. "What?"

His lips brushed hers once more. "Get dressed. We have a lot to do today and little time to do it in." He straightened up, went to the closet and returned with a small duffel. "Pack enough stuff for an overnight stay. We'll be back here tomorrow."

Clarice frowned at the bag. "Where are we going?"

"I told you. We're getting married. Now hustle." He pulled on soft blue boxers and a pair of faded jeans.

"But—"

Otis stopped dressing long enough to take her chin in his hand, tilting her head so their eyes met. "Pack. Get dressed. We leave in fifteen minutes." There was no give in the laser-blue glance.

Capitulating reluctantly, she finally nodded. "All right."

Thirty minutes later after a whirlwind trip to the bank to collect her birth certificate from her safety deposit box, they were facing each other over steaming mugs of coffee in a secluded booth at the local pancake house. In that thirty minutes, Clarice's brain had cleared quite a bit. Her normally sharp intelligence had kicked in and started picking apart Otis' rush to wed.

She cleared her throat. "So, you want to tell me what the hurry is?"

He shot her a thoughtful look before nodding. "You're back."

"Excuse me?"

His shoulder jerked in a sharp shrug. "When he conned me into taking his place, Uncle Shamus assured me you were a very bright woman, Clarice. Yesterday knocked you off balance but now I can see you're back. Or, nearly."

Her dark eyes studied him intently. "What does that have to do with your insistence that we marry?"

"Someone is trying to kill you." His flat statement hung in the air between them for a long moment. Their plump waitress appeared and plopped down steaming platters of eggs, bacon and pancakes plus pitchers of hot maple syrup. After ascertaining that they had everything they wanted, she went away leaving them in peace.

Clarice spread the melting butter over her pancakes and carefully drizzled syrup on top. Plucking a crisp rasher of bacon from her platter with two dainty fingers, she took a bite before using the rest of it to point at him. "Why do you think that?"

"My cousin checked your car. Your brake lines were cut."

"Huh." She cut a wedge of pancake and ate that while she thought about his revelation. "He's sure?"

The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stiffened in alarm. Clarice was taking his news far too calmly. "He's sure. Why aren't you upset about this?"

She shot him a direct look that froze him in his tracks. Deep in her dark eyes he saw cold retribution and something far scarier. A fierce predator was staring at him—a predator who was no longer hiding. "Hmph. I've never found it productive to be upset. Now, angry? Yeah, that helps. And determination to thwart their plans? That helps too."

"What are you?" he demanded very softly.

"What am I?" she mocked. "Now you want to play show and tell? Let's start with you, bucko. What are you?"

The hair all over his body bristled in shock from a question never posed before in his life. While he grappled for an answer, she tilted her head to one side, obviously studying him.

"I would say that you're one of the Irish elementals. One of the lesser fae, perhaps?" When he remained coldly silent, she picked up her bacon rasher and took another bite. Chewing meditatively, she stared off into the distance. "Not a leprechaun. You're far too tall. And not an elf...no pointed ears. I've never met even one of them who could truly disguise their ears. Brownies and gnomes wouldn't even be as tall as your knees."

Suddenly she straightened up and clapped her hands. "I know. Damn, I should have paid attention to all that fiery hair. You're a draconian elemental!"

Otis leaned toward her, with a flame flickering deep in his sapphire-blue eyes. Before she divined his intention, he grasped her forearm, carried it to his mouth and nipped the soft skin with his teeth, sucking the blood that welled up from the little wound. At her gasp he licked the wound shut and sat back. "My *muirne*," he declared with satisfaction. "I claim you now. *Draconian elemental*, indeed, as you would know since you are one yourself."

In fascination, Clarice stared down at the two tiny punctures just above her wrist as they healed in seconds. In their place a small flame, brilliant blue with gold accents

appeared. "Damn." Memories assaulted her with devastating force. That glimpse of blue on his shoulder that she'd forgotten in their rush to mate. "Your mark. It's on your left shoulder."

Otis cocked one eyebrow. "Yes. And yours?"

"I'll never tell." Slow heat spread up her arm. Fighting the urge to scrub at the tingling flame, she bent her head and addressed her breakfast instead. How the hell was she going to get out of this mess? Compared to the permanence of a claiming, marriage was insignificant.

She tried to remember what the laws were regarding a claiming. Sex, bite, ingest blood, state the claim. Was there something else? *Think, Clarice, think!*

"You will not escape me, Clarice," he assured her gently. "If you run, I will find you. Count on it."

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're archaic?" she flared up resentfully. "I didn't ask to be claimed!" She grabbed her bag and slid from the booth.

Otis caught her wrist in his firm grasp, detaining her long enough to say, "I offered you marriage though we both know now that it's unnecessary—especially after a claiming. If you're honest, you'll admit that's the truth."

"True or not, I don't have to like it!"

His nostrils flared as her scent engulfed them. Anger, certainly but far more prevalent was the sting of arousal. "Already, you are wet for me," he crooned quietly. "Shall I take you someplace private?"

"Damn you, Otis! We don't have time for this crap!"

"Never doubt that I will *always* have time for you." He softly brushed his thumb across the blue flame on her arm, taking note of the heat that flared in her eyes. "Always." Releasing her, he turned back to his breakfast while she strode off to the restroom.

Jerk! Why were all men such jerks? As she neared the restroom door, a heavy body stumbled into her, knocking her off balance. A thick arm wrapped around her waist as something hard was shoved into her rib cage. "If you want to live, you'll come along like a good girl," the man said huskily.

She nearly gagged on the smell of stale beer and cigarettes. Without a pause, she lifted her right leg and stomped down on his foot with all her strength at the same time that she screamed loud enough to attract the attention of every patron in the place.

Otis was up and barreling toward her before she ran out of breath. The man jerked and twisted trying to hold on to her but Clarice wasn't going down without a fight. Her foot wound around his good ankle and yanked. They tumbled to the floor with a thump, taking an unoccupied table with them.

His low growl broke abruptly into a soprano howl when her heavy bag slammed into his balls. A nearly empty syrup jug rolled from the table and conked him on the forehead before leaking syrup down the side of his face into his ear. Otis arrived in time to kick the assailant's gun out of reach but since Clarice seemed to have things under control, he stood back with the other patrons and enjoyed the show as she leaped to her feet and delivered the final blow with a kick to his chin.

Her handbag clutched in her arms, she was standing over her attacker when Otis gathered her close and kissed her. "That's my woman," he murmured. "Definitely kick him when he's down." He tucked her shaking body against his chest. "Did anyone call the police?"

"I did." The manager, a short stout woman with thinning gray hair hustled over brandishing a broom in one hand. "The minute she screamed, I called." She looked down at the unconscious man with a sneer. "Imagine the gall. Are you all right, honey?"

Great shudders racked her body. Otis held Clarice tighter and pressed her head against his shoulder. "Shhh. You did great!" He peered at the name tag on the

manager's ample breast. "Uh, Madge? Could you please ask our waitress to bring a cup of tea for my fiancée?"

"Sure thing, honey. You just go back to your table and she'll bring it right over."

The sirens that had been signaling the approach of the police cut off abruptly and several officers rushed through the door. Wriggling free, Clarice bolted into the restroom to throw up while Otis turned to deal with the police.

It took quite a while before everything was settled and the groggy assailant was hauled away by the police. Detective Andresen had heard the call and stopped by, interested in the details. By the time Otis and Clarice left—without finishing their breakfast—it was well into the afternoon. Otis had the forethought to order some bagels with cream cheese and coffee to go. While Clarice dozed as he drove, he listened to the radio and munched on his bagel. The attack in the restaurant disturbed him on a lot of levels other than the immediate question of her safety.

He had a hunch that they were being trailed. In order for an assailant to be in place, someone had to be observing them close up. He wondered which of the concerned restaurant patrons was part of the group? Surely there had to be more than one.

Seventy miles later a huge sign loomed on the side of the Interstate advertising a Cracker Barrel. He had already resigned himself to the fact that they were not going to arrive in Rolla in time to obtain their marriage license that day. Whistling softly, he exited the highway and pulled into the parking lot. Their minimal breakfast had long since worn off.

Clarice stirred and yawned. "Where are we?"

"Cracker Barrel in St. Robert. I figure we should eat before we go on to Rolla. It's too late to worry about a marriage license today, anyway."

"Food. Yeah, I could do that." She rummaged in her bag for a hairbrush, ran it through her tangled mop and stuffed it back in her purse. "Okay, I'm ready."

He smiled at her, relieved that she was feeling better. "Just a quick suggestion. We don't go anywhere alone. We'll stop at the restrooms on the way in—and on the way out—but no individual trips."

"You think they're following us?" Her brow wrinkled in a frown.

"I don't know, honey. But one abduction attempt is enough for me today. Okay?"

"No arguments from me," she assured him. "Can we go eat now?"

They were just ahead of the dinner crowd so their meals were produced very quickly. As they ate, Clarice perked up. "Isn't there a Wal-Mart at this exit?"

"Uh-hmm. Do you need something?"

"I want a dress. It might be a small wedding but I want to wear a dress. Can we make a quick stop?"

Otis shrugged. "I don't see why not. My aunt and uncle aren't expecting us until they see us. I would be happy to take you to a dress shop when we hit Rolla, though."

"Otis? Can we do this one my way?" she asked. "Just this once, I would like to pick out my own dress."

Capturing her hand in his, he waited until she looked him in the eye. "I don't care where you buy your clothes. I don't care where you buy your shoes. For that matter, you can replace everything in our condo if you want to. As long as you're with me, that's what matters."

"Oooh, that was pretty," she teased.

"Just for that—where is your elemental mark?"

"I'll never tell. I'll never tell," she caroled. "Heh. I bet you'll never, ever find it!"

"Ah, a challenge. Well, I've already seen pretty much all of you. Hmmm. What's left?" Otis' blue eyes were dancing with amusement.

"All right, that's enough. Are we ready to leave?" She drank her last swallow of coffee while she ran her eyes over the sudden flood of customers in the dining room.

"Yep." They went to the register, Otis paid the check and after a quick pit stop they returned to the truck.

The temperature had dropped significantly while they dined so Clarice was very glad she'd worn the dark blue sweat suit. It only took a little while for the truck heater to start working. Otis pulled out of his parking space and slowly drove out to the road, noting the cars in the lot as he went. When he passed the Wal-Mart Clarice held her tongue. Then he turned down a narrow track that curved around, ending in a small clearing as misty rain closed in. He jockeyed the truck until he was facing toward the road and turned off the engine.

"What are we doing?" she asked curiously.

"Stay there." He leaped out, opened the back door. After tossing the blankets and pillows on the backseat onto his seat, he folded the back bench seat down. Then he spread a blanket over it and tossed the pillows back in the corner. "Come back here."

Well, what's a girl to do? Clarice joined him in the backseat. He closed the doors and locked them. "Otis?"

"Take your pants off, Clarice. I can't wait anymore." The rain fell harder, drumming on the roof as Clarice wriggled in the dark, working to slip her sweatpants off. "Panties too," he reminded her as he unbuttoned his shirt and shoved his jeans down far enough to free his cock.

"Hah. I'm ahead of you. I took them off in the restroom at the restaurant! Neener, neener."

"Oh yeah, that's my woman! I knew I could smell your sweet heat. Come over here and dress me, honey." He handed her the condom and helped her onto his lap. While she rolled the condom on, he slid his fingers over the wet folds spread wide as she straddled his thighs. "Damn, you're wet."

Clarice arched her back, unzipped her top and released the tiny hooks that fastened her bra between her breasts. When the last one was free, his hands were there cupping her curves, gently tweaking her hard nipples.

She whimpered and seized his cock, lining it up exactly where she needed it. Then sinking down, she took him inside her with a needy gasp. "Otis!"

"Right here, sweetheart." His mouth found hers in the dark, warm and wet and eager. Tongues tasted and savored. His fingers plucked at her nipples, pinching with exactly the right amount of pressure.

Clarice rode his cock, moving slowly up and down, luxuriating in the hot hard flesh that filled her with fiery pleasure. Each agonizing withdrawal was rewarded with the voluptuous sensation of his cock filling the aching emptiness on her return.

Otis desperately longed for her to complete their mating with her own claim. A growl clawed up from deep in his chest. "Bite me!"

Clarice nipped his chin and chuckled. "Here? It would serve you right to walk around for the rest of your days with my mark on your chin."

"I don't care!"

"Or maybe I'll bite your ear," she gasped as she sank down on his cock, feeling it brush across delicate nerves that were screaming with carnal delight.

"Anywhere," he groaned. "Just put me out of my misery."

When she bent her head and sank her teeth into the skin above his left nipple, his roar filled the shadows around them. She delicately sucked the few drops of blood and licked the small wound. His taste filled her senses, inflaming her so that her pussy demanded more. More heat. More pressure. She bounced up and down, desperately trying to take his cock in deeper, farther.

Heat flamed down Otis' spine to center in his cock. His balls drew up in readiness. He grasped Clarice's hips, holding her in place as he pounded deep and hard, needing to bury himself until neither of them knew where they began or ended. She angled her hips forward rubbing her clit in the wiry curls at the base of his belly and arched her back, tugging her nipples with nimble fingers. With shocking suddenness, her pussy clamped down milking his cock with wave after wave of pulsing convulsions.

“Bite me,” she whimpered breathlessly as she collapsed on his chest.

He gripped the muscle high on her shoulder with his teeth, bit down and surrendered in his own release, his cock jerking in the tight fist of her pussy as his bite tossed her over the edge again.

Chapter Four

As they snuggled together beneath a blanket in the dark, listening to the rain beating on the roof, Otis brushed his lips over her dark curls and said, "I love you, Clarice."

Her body stiffened before she sat up on his lap. She still held his semi-erect cock in her pussy. Peering at his face in the shadows, she sighed. "You don't have to say that, Otis. We're well and truly mated. We're stuck with each other forever."

"No. I don't have to say it. I wanted to tell you, even though I knew you weren't ready to hear it yet," he admitted quietly. "I don't know what will happen in the next few days or weeks so I wanted you to know how I feel."

"Otis, we don't even know each other," she protested. "How can you love someone you don't even know?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that you're more important to me than everything else in my life. Now put your head back on my shoulder and cuddle with me for a few minutes." He nudged her against his chest with a warm palm on her back. "Always rest at every opportunity."

They dozed for a little while until Otis realized the rain had changed to sleet. There was an ominous hiss to the pellets hitting the windows. Reluctantly, he woke Clarice. "Time to move, honey. The weather is getting worse."

She moved to sit next to him and searched for her clothes, dressing quickly while he disposed of the condom in a tissue and stuffed it in the trash bag hanging from his console. When they were both dressed, he unlocked the doors and they moved to the front seats with weather-driven haste. Otis started the truck and turned on the heater. "I think we should drive on to Rolla before the weather gets worse. I'll take you to the Wal-Mart there," he promised.

"That's fine with me. With our coats in the back with the luggage, I can't say that I'm anxious to jack around in this weather. Maybe it won't be so bad when we get there. Damn! Isn't it supposed to be spring soon?" She shivered as the wind picked up and the sleet pummeled the windows. "Just drive carefully."

"Fasten your seat belt." He flicked on the lights and drove carefully down the narrow track until he reached the road. When a break in the traffic came, he turned onto the road that would take him back to the Interstate. Within minutes, they were rolling down the dark highway as a stream of lights passed on the other side.

The sleet turned to snow, icing on the pavement. Otis slowed as the traction deteriorated. When Clarice picked her bag up and set it on the floor behind her seat Otis pointed to his wallet sitting in the console. "Toss that in your bag, please. And the rest of the condoms."

She shoved the wallet and condoms in her bag, zipped it shut and replaced it on the floor in the back. Neither of them discussed the possible reasons as both had heard horror stories of people injured in crashes by the objects in vehicles that had turned into lethal missiles when cars or trucks veered out of control. Clarice reached out to turn the radio on, thinking that there might be a weather report.

There was a muffled thump in the rear of the truck and suddenly Otis was fighting to maintain control as the truck slid into a dizzying spin before leaping off the pavement and rolling down the embankment. He caught fractured images as the truck tumbled and then everything went dark.

Hanging sideways in her seat belt, Clarice slowly opened her eyes. Far off, she thought she saw flashing lights. A face appeared at the window, grinning like a jack-o'-lantern. He pointed a gun at her, pulled the trigger and the blackest night fell.

* * * * *

Otis was shivering with cold when he woke. He frowned, trying to understand why the covers were missing. When he rolled in the bed, stretching his arm out to find the

blankets, he tumbled from the narrow cot onto an icy concrete floor. At that point when his bare butt hit the floor, it occurred to him that he definitely was not in his bed at home. Things seemed to be very blurry in the shadowy room but his eyes finally focused enough to pick out the body in a cot across the small room. *Clarice!*

His legs refused to work when he tried to stand so he crawled until he reached her, halting frequently whenever he felt the urge to pass out. His head was pounding so hard that he couldn't tell if she was breathing or not. Finally, he rested his head on her chest with his ear pressed against one breast, groaning with relief when he heard her steady heartbeat.

She stirred restlessly under the weight of his head, brushing her nipple against his lips. Ah, the little devil wanted to play! It was a damned silly time to play, he thought. For one thing, it was too cold. But he didn't want to disappoint her so he clamped down on that frisky nipple and sucked in.

For his trouble, he got a fist in the chin. Unfortunately, it jolted his teeth into soft flesh. Clarice folded up like an accordion, screaming like a steam whistle. Otis sat on the floor, clutching at his pounding skull while she beat him about the head, whimpering and crying. That's when he realized they were really in trouble.

"Clarice," he groaned. "Please stop hitting me. Clarice!"

It took her a long moment to process what he was saying. "Otis?" she whispered.

"The last time I looked," he replied. "Where the hell are we?"

"Someplace very cold."

"Yeah, that part I figured out."

Very slowly, she sat up on the cot and blearily looked down at him. "Why are you on the floor?"

He thought for a minute. "I fell out of bed."

She frowned. "What bed?"

Waving aimlessly toward the cot on the other side of the room, he muttered, "Over there."

With sudden clarity, she announced, "I'm going home."

Otis stared at her owlishly. "How?"

"Like the wind." She leaned over until her nose nearly met his. Her eyes crossed. "Do you know that you're nekkid?" she whispered.

Way back in the deepest part of his brain, alarm was increasing by leaps and bounds. While he was certainly sore, his mind wasn't reacting like it would after an injury. Neither was Clarice. They were acting like they were silly drunk. He cautiously levered himself up until he was sitting next to Clarice on the cot.

"Clarice. Hey, Clarice. We're acting strange, aren't we?"

Her eyes opened really wide as she thought about that. "Yep."

The room started to spin. "What's wrong with us?"

She giggled. "Musss be th-those shots they give us." She began to sing. "The eensy weensy spider went up the water spout..."

It was a fine time for Otis to discover that she couldn't carry a tune in a wicker basket. He clapped his hands over his ears as a throb settled low around the back of his head. "Clarice, honey. Don't sing." Adrenaline surged as he wrestled to figure out where they were. The last thing he remembered was the crash. Slowly, painfully, he pieced thoughts together. "When did they give us shots?" he demanded.

She leaned against his shoulder and sighed mournfully. "I don't know. Today? Yesterday? Tomorrow?" She burst into another fragment of song, "Tomorrow, tomorrow —"

Otis clapped his hand over her mouth. "Shhhh. I'm trying to think."

"Wha?" she mumbled around his fingers.

"We have to get out of here."

Peeling his fingers from her face, she soberly informed him, "I have to go to sleep now." Then she promptly turned and curled up on the cot with her head in his lap facing his belly. Naturally, she was nose-to-penis. A few seconds later, her tongue flicked out as she lapped at everything within reach. Predictably, his cock rose to the occasion.

Since she was being quiet, he left her to her amusements while he struggled with his foggy brain. *Shots*. What kind of shots? What would make them act so loony? No, don't go there.

Door. They needed to find the door. He focused on the wall next to Clarice's cot and was pleasantly surprised to discover the door close at hand. Okay.

Open the door.

Clarice was sucking and licking up and down the length of his cock. It wasn't *completely* erect but Otis suspected it would get there if she kept up her ministrations. In a faraway vague fashion, he wondered if the drugs were slowing his usual speedy response. He was enjoying Clarice's attention but something kept nudging him toward the door. So with regret, he separated his cock from Clarice's mouth and urged her to move her head off his lap.

Then he took the all important step of standing up. His head wobbled and the room whizzed around. His knees threatened to give way but he steeled himself against the weakness that seeped in his joints and made his way to the door, one shaking step at a time.

Wide-eyed, Clarice watched his tottering progress until he reached the door. It took him a moment to recall what he needed to do. Then he twisted the doorknob and pulled it open. Stupefied, he stared at the door, unable to decide what he needed to do next.

Clarice sat up and hissed. "Look outside!"

Otis fought the muddled thoughts. He peeked through the door and saw...nothing. Icy, snowy wind blew through the opening dousing him with a cold shower. Inhaling sharply, he backed up a step and shut the door. "It's dark. And cold."

She tried to smack her forehead in frustration but her aim was off so she slapped her shoulder instead. After a moment while hysteria fought with tears for dominance, she sighed. "Otis. We have to get out of here."

He leaned on the concrete block wall next to the door. "I know that."

"So *look* outside. What can you see? Where are we?"

With a game nod, he opened the door again. There was the glint of faint light on metal. Squinting against the wind-driven icy rain, he made out the outlines of his truck. Something was seriously wrong with it. It was completely the wrong shape. Then it dawned on him. His truck was totaled. Sadly, he shut the door.

"Well?"

"Truck's toast," he informed her.

There were little men inside her head beating on little drums. She closed her eyes, trying to decide why anyone would toast a truck. The *truck!* Restraining the urge to whack Otis in the head, she asked, "Are you telling me your truck is outside?"

"Yep. All gone." Mournfully he shook his head, immediately regretting it.

"Clothes, Otis. Our clothes are in the truck." As soon as she could walk without falling down, she was going to kick him. The startling flashes of coherence in the murk were annoying. She would almost rather be totally out of it than deal with the seesaw of idiocy and intelligence. So far clarity of thought hadn't attained much.

"All right." Sharp rationality snapped in though his motor skills were for crap. Otis opened the door again and studied the truck. It was close by. He thought he could probably make it there and back. "I'll go now," he announced.

"Wait! I'm going with you!" Galvanized, Clarice struggled up from the cot and staggered toward him. "You're not leaving me behind."

Otis grabbed her arm, preventing her from barreling into the wall. "Both of us don't have to get wet," he protested.

She leaned against him, shivering in reaction. "I think," she panted, "that damn drug is wearing off. That means they'll come back soon. We're better off out there in the storm than in here if that happens. Right now we couldn't fight off a newborn kitten."

After sluggishly considering her points, he agreed. "Okay. Hold on to me. We'll see what we can do."

Like drunken sailors, they lurched through the door, faltering briefly in shock when the full brunt of the wind hit them. They swayed and then determinedly reeled across the narrow clearing, fetching up against the side of the truck with a dull thump. "Made it." Otis patted the icy truck like it was a long lost friend. "Okay. We're closer to the cab. Maybe the blankets are still there." He fumbled his way toward the yawning driver's door and peered in. "Ah-hah!" He caught the corner of a blanket and tugged. When it unexpectedly came flying out, he stumbled back, tripped over his numb feet and landed on his butt in a pool of slush. Howling, he scrambled to get up without dropping the blanket. "Fuck, that's cold!"

Clarice smothered her giggles as she inched down the length of the truck to offer a helping hand. He shoved the blanket in her hands, held on to the door for balance and tried to brush the worst of the ice off his backside. The cold bath accomplished one important thing. The shock threw off most of the effects of the drug.

In the meantime, Clarice wrapped the blanket around her. She held it open. "I'll share. Come in here."

He shook his head. "I'm already wet. I'll finish and then we'll check out the back. He fumbled the keys from the ignition and wrenched open the door to the backseat. Her handbag and the other blanket were stuffed down almost under the seat. With them tucked under his arm, they made their way back to the covered truck bed.

"I can't feel my feet."

"I can't either," he said, grimly surveying what was left of the cover. The back tire was flat so the truck tilted to the passenger side. The light cover for the truck bed was snow-covered and crumpled on both sides but the middle peaked high enough for

them to fit inside. When he pried the tailgate down, he spied their missing clothing tossed on top of their coats and duffle bags. He lifted Clarice up on the tailgate. "Crawl in there and get dressed."

"What about you?"

"I'm right behind you. Hurry up." He patted her on the ass. "Move it, honey. The faster we get dressed, the faster we'll get warm."

When they were both under cover, he hauled out the emergency box he kept in the back of the truck and found the ratty towel stored it in.

"What are you doing?" she asked as her teeth chattered a mile a minute.

He held up a threadbare holey towel. "It's supposed to be a rag but it'll work just fine to clean the worst of the water and mud from my backside and our feet. Dressing is going to be difficult enough with cold numbed fingers. At least we'll be dry and clean." Their cold fingers fumbled desperately with fastenings but eventually they had on dry clothes, socks, shoes and coats. Otis warmed his fingers by stuffing his hands in his armpits until they were limber enough to tie their shoes. Wrapped like mummies in the blankets with Clarice so they shared the little body heat they had between them, Otis assessed their situation. "We're dry and dressed. Now what?"

"We're cold."

"Think positively. We're warmer than we were." He opened their coats and shifted her so that the front of her body was nestled against his chest. "We don't know where we are. And we don't know when our kidnappers will return. And it's dark."

"W-what's the good news?" Clarice asked as she burrowed her cold face in the slightly warmer hollow under his chin.

He tugged the corner of the blanket over their heads. "If we weren't draconian elementals, we'd be dead from the cold by now. The drugs are wearing off. I think they are, anyway. The fuzziness seems to be going away."

"What if the kidnappers aren't coming back?" she wondered.

Otis frowned. "Why wouldn't they? Otherwise what was the point of crashing my truck and bringing us here? And that's another thing. Why tow the truck here? Why not leave it where it was?"

She puzzled over that for a while as she slowly thawed out. "If they left the truck there, someone would eventually report it to the authorities. Then they would start looking for us."

"What did they accomplish by hiding us?" Numerous bruises and aches were clamoring for his attention as he warmed up. "Why aren't we hungry?"

Clarice yawned and kissed his neck. "I don't know," she confessed. "I'm so tired. I could sleep for a week. Mmmm, you are so warm."

Suddenly, he remembered something that had been bothering him since the first time they made love. "What erotica books?"

"What?"

Patiently, he reminded her, "The first day we were together you said something about erotica books. What erotica books?"

"Oh. Um, I have quite a few erotic romances. And they never explain what happens after the couple finish."

"Finish?"

"You know. *Finish*."

"Ohhh. *Finish*. Huh. Maybe because that's not as exciting."

"Well, when I write my book, I'm gonna put in all that stuff." She yawned again and burrowed closer to his chest.

He shook her gently as another thought occurred to him. "Clarice! Why don't we have an urgent need to find a toilet?"

Warmed by his body heat, she snuggled closer with her eyes shut, just a breath away from sleep. "Um, 'cause they did that when they changed the IVs."

"What IVs?"

"Hmm?"

He shook her again. "What IVs?"

"What?"

"Wake up, honey and talk to me. What IVs?"

She stifled another yawn. "I think they had us on IVs. I sorta remember something about going to a bathroom 'cause that man insisted on staying with me while I peed. Pissed me off."

The hair on his head bristled in rage and alarm. "Clarice, sweetheart, listen to me. It's important for you to try to remember."

"Okay. Let's sit up, then. If I keep lying here, I'll conk out for sure." She struggled to loosen the blankets.

Otis helped her and they sat up propped against the truck cab with the blankets tucked around them. "Now. Tell me everything you can remember."

Her eye fell on the shadowy shape of her bag. With a soft cry, she grabbed it and set it on her lap. "Um. Well, we went off the road right after there was a thump in the back of the truck."

"Huh. I didn't remember the thump. Okay. What else?"

She pawed through the contents of her purse until she found a crumpled granola bar. Peeling the plastic packaging back, she broke off a bit and offered it to Otis before breaking off another piece for herself. "There were flashing lights. Then there was a weird face in the window." Clarice concentrated on the foggy memory. "Then he shot me."

"What?"

"He had a gun. Then there was a pop."

They chewed in silence while they contemplated the meaning of the fragments. "Anything else?" he asked at last.

"I think one of them kept asking me about Granny's diary. I don't know anything about her diary. Didn't even know she had one." She sighed. "Otis, if they wanted this diary they were asking about, I couldn't help them. Do you suppose that's why they trashed my apartment?"

He munched the crunchy granola bar, finding it slow going because his mouth was so dry. "Well. It's kind of farfetched but they clearly want something from you." He looked out the back of the truck noticing that their surroundings were getting brighter. "It must be close to daybreak. We should get out of here in case they do come back. What do you think? Are you up for a walk?"

"I'm up for a cup of coffee."

"Same thing, right?"

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

They sat watching it get lighter and lighter. Finally Clarice groaned. "All right. Time to move before I stiffen up so much that I can't. After you."

"Oh, now I'm the leader?" he grouched.

"You were the one who started us on this little jaunt."

Reluctantly they unwound the blankets and crawled to the back of the truck, pleased to discover that the precipitation had stopped for the moment. Otis shook out the blankets and folded them in tight little rolls that he stuffed in his duffle bag.

"Is my wallet still in your purse?" he asked without much hope. With pleased surprise he watched her produce it from the jumbled contents.

"Here. You can take the condoms back too. I don't think we're going to need them at the moment. It's too damn cold out here to play around." She plopped a string of foil packets in his hand. Folding her purse into the smallest bundle she could manage, she stuffed it in her duffle bag and zipped it shut. "I'm as ready as I'll get, I guess."

"All right. We'll stick with this track unless we hear someone coming. Then we'll hide in the trees. Thank goodness it wasn't snowing when we woke up."

"Why don't you have a cell phone?" she asked curiously.

He slapped at his coat pockets. "I do. Ah, here!" He flipped it open. "Dead." He closed it and shoved it back in his pocket. "I have the terrible feeling that we're too far from a tower even if it worked."

"Probably," she agreed, not really wanting to admit that she hadn't thought of that.

"Come on. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll find help."

"The sooner we'll find coffee."

Chapter Five

By the time it was full daylight, they reached a narrow ribbon of blacktop. Otis scouted around the entry to the dirt track, noted that all of the tire tracks were from the left and they set off in that direction. They were of two minds about accepting any help offered by passing motorists. While Clarice feared that the motorists might be their abductors, Otis was quite interested in getting his hands on the people who had wrecked his truck and kidnapped them.

When mid-morning arrived without even a crossroad in sight, Otis called a rest halt and led Clarice to a group of stone slabs near the road. He brushed the slush from a level stone ideal for sitting, broke off a couple short branches from a cedar bush for cushioning against the cold stone and indicated that she should sit down. Setting his bag next to her, he scrounged around on the ground nearby for dead wood, piled the pieces on another nearby slab and blew gently on the wood. A *whoosh* was the only warning she had as with a roar, flames shot up from the wood in a ten-foot pillar before settling down to a briskly crackling fire.

"Well, there's my pitiful bit of talent," he declared. "I have no control over it so it's not good for much unless I want to burn down a building or three. For damn sure I can't light a candle if I want any wax left when I finish."

Chuckling, she held her hands out to the fire. "No one showed you how to dial that back a bit?"

"Well, they tried," he admitted, "but I can't seem to get it right."

"You're supposed to visualize a tiny pinpoint of flame." She hunched over, trying to get a little closer to the fire. "The smaller the pinpoint, the smaller the fire. At least that's the way it works with water."

"Ah-hah! You're a water elemental!" he declared in pleased discovery.

"Well, yeah. Why else would we be paired?"

Otis cocked his head in thought. "My dad was a Norse air elemental, not water."

"That must have made for some hot times in your house. An Irish fire elemental paired with a Viking air elemental?" She choked back a laugh. "Oh, my goodness."

He chuckled. "Well, it was interesting. Mama carried that red-haired temper to an entirely new height."

"You know your control problems might be because you have a hint of your dad's air talent." She tapped her chin. "Have you tried calling fire without blowing?"

"No. I—" He broke off at the sound of a powerful engine approaching. When a husky SUV with flashing bubble lights appeared around a curve far down the road, he relaxed infinitesimally. An open jeep followed close on its tail.

The two vehicles ground to a halt on the shoulder near their rest stop and men piled out with guns drawn. In the lead by a bare yard, a tall blond state trooper led the way.

While the men surrounded them, Otis turned to Clarice. "If I had realized that a fire would bring us help this quickly, I would have started one sooner."

She nodded thoughtfully. "I wonder if they have any coffee."

"Nah." He studied the group with care. "I suspect this bunch drinks something stronger... like rocket fuel."

The trooper glared at them. "What the hell do you fools think you're doing? This is a restricted area. How did you sneak on the base?"

Abruptly wheel-kneed, Otis moved closer to Clarice, nudged his bag out of the way and slumped down next to her. "If you drive down that direction," he pointed back the way they'd come from, "about three or four miles..." he shrugged, "or maybe more, you'll find a dirt track on the right hand side. If you take that dirt track, you'll find a concrete block building and my wrecked truck."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Because we were run off the road, abducted and drugged." Otis frowned. "I don't know how long ago that was."

Planting his hands on his hips, the trooper scowled. "You wouldn't by any chance be O.Q. Larssen, would you?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"People have been searching for you and the young lady for nearly a week. A Detective Andresen has been hounding my office for the last three days." He sighed. "Stay put. We'll be right back." The group gathered next to the vehicles and plunged into an animated discussion. Then one of the troopers joined the MPs in the jeep and it roared off toward their erstwhile jail while the two remaining troopers talked for a few more minutes. Finally the original trooper rejoined them while his partner waited next to the SUV.

"Why don't you come with us?" the trooper proposed.

Otis scratched his chin. "I hope you don't take this wrongly, officer but we would like to see some ID. We've been chased, mugged, drugged and my fiancée's sister has been murdered. Quite frankly, I'm more inclined to just keep walking until I reach civilization on my own."

Without hesitation, the trooper fished a leather folder from his back pocket, flipped it open to the window with his Trooper's ID and handed it to Otis. Dismayed, Otis discovered that his eyes wouldn't focus on the tiny print. "Clarice, honey, my eyes aren't working very well. Can you see this?" He handed her the wallet.

She squinted and held the wallet at arm's length. "Brad Thompson. Looks like him," she grudgingly admitted before offering the wallet to the trooper. "Hard to read those little letters."

"Good enough." Otis stood up, grabbed his bag and promptly measured his length on the damp ground next to the slab he was standing on. "Shit."

Clarice's eyes widened as she slowly slid to the side. "Damn. I think they're back."

Trooper Thompson cautiously approached them. "What's wrong with y'all?"

"Stooopid drugs," Otis growled. "You think they're gone and poof, they're back."

"Yeah? What kind of drugs?"

"How the hell would I know?" Otis closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "Something they gave us in an IV."

Trooper Thompson squatted next to Otis. "Joe? Call for an ambulance."

"They're on their way." Joe, a huge bear of a man, answered from right behind him. He hoisted Otis up by his armpits, brushed the worst of the slush off his back and set him down on the end of one of the rock slabs, tucking his bag under his head. "No need to get any colder than you already are."

Clarice was sprawled with her head hanging off the end of her slab, gently snoring. Joe shook his head. "Whatever they're on, it may take a while to wear off. This is acting like a hallucinogen. Those damn drugs have flashbacks."

Feeling like a boneless ragdoll, Otis listened to a conversation that sounded like it was taking place in the distance. He wanted to tell them the few conclusions that Clarice and he had drawn but he couldn't seem to make his mouth work correctly. Everything just came out in a drooling moan.

Joe squatted down next to Otis and held his hand. "Take it easy, son. Help is on the way." He watched his partner check the woman's pulse. "Vinnie said they found the truck. One of the MPs think the back tire was taken out with a rifle. He said it's purely a miracle that they lived through it. He called that Detective Andresen and let him know that we found them."

"What the hell do they know that's so important?"

"I can't imagine. Vinnie said they walked over seven miles. That is some determination, Brad."

Otis slid down the dark well of sleep, unable to stave it off any longer.

* * * * *

When he next opened his eyes, he was in a brightly lit room with the low beep of machinery and the stink of antiseptic cleaners. *Hospital*, he deduced. With more guts than sense, he rolled so that he could see the rest of the room. Instantly, the beeps picked up like a roadrunner on speed. A man and woman in scrubs rushed into the room. *Nurses?*

"You're awake!" A small tag above the woman's breast declared her name was Julie Smith. She deftly checked his pulse while the man watched.

"Thaaaa." Otis was annoyed that the word didn't sound right. Struggling to make his mouth work correctly the next time, he shaped the word in his mind. "Yessss."

"Excellent. Now I'm going to check your blood pressure while Desman removes the heart monitor. Just lie still."

"Ookay." Angry and frustrated at his failed attempts to communicate, Otis scowled at Julie Smith. "Whaaader?"

"Thirsty, eh?" she noted knowledgably. "Just a minute. We'll get you all squared away and then Desman will bring you some water and help you to the bathroom."

"Clarrie?"

"Your fiancée is in the other bed. The police said it would be easier to guard you if you were both in the same room." She jotted down information on his chart. "Your mother is here. We sent her down to the cafeteria to eat lunch." After imparting that bit of information, she whisked out of the room.

Desman, a light complected black man with freckles, helped Otis sit up. "Dizzy?"

"Nnnoo."

"Good. Don't worry about the speech thing. That will get better." Desman slid some disposable slippers on Otis' feet, draped an extra hospital gown over his shoulders to cover his bare ass and helped him to his feet. "Hold on to the IV pole. All right!"

They shuffled over to the bathroom. Otis felt surprisingly good—physically. The speech problems did worry him but he was relieved to find that everything else was working pretty well. While he washed his hands, he looked at himself in the mirror and shuddered. “Bruhhh,” he declared firmly as he contemplated a limp auburn lock.

“Tell you what. You wash your face and I’ll brush your hair when I get you settled in a chair in the other room. Then I’ll change your bedding.” Desman grinned. “Man, you look one hundred percent better than you did when you arrived.”

Otis’ lips drew back as he examined his teeth. “Tee?”

“Hold on a minute. I’ll get your toothbrush and toothpaste.” He disappeared but came back quickly, handing Otis his dopp kit. While Otis brushed his teeth, Desman went to answer a knock at the door. When he came back, he plucked Otis’ brush from the kit. “Hold on. I’ll brush your hair now. You have a bunch of visitors. Troopers and a Detective Andresen.” With gentle hands he brushed the tangles from Otis’ hair. “Okay. Good enough.” Returning everything to the dopp kit, he zipped it shut. “Ready?”

With a weary nod, Otis agreed and they left the bathroom. Desman steered him to a comfortable chair with a blanket draped over it. “Sit here.”

Thankfully obeying his directive, Otis sat and studied his visitors. Detective Andresen he recognized without difficulty. The troopers looked vaguely familiar. Someone had opened the curtain so that bright sun flooded the room. Clarice was stirring restlessly in the other bed. Desman swiftly changed Otis’ bed, carried the soiled bedding out to the hall and brought back an ice-water-filled pitcher with a plastic cup. He set them on a low stand next to Otis’ chair. “You’re all set. I’ll be back in a bit to help you to bed.”

“Thane yoo.”

“You’re more than welcome.” Desman went out, softly closing the door behind him.

Detective Andresen poured some water in the cup and offered it to Otis. “You and Clarice have had quite an adventure.”

Otis grunted assent.

One of the troopers crossed his arms on his chest. "Do you remember meeting us?"

Otis cautiously nodded.

"We found your truck. And the place where they held you. And we're pretty sure we've found the spot where they ran you off the road. What we need to know is why?" The trooper shifted and leaned against the wall.

Thompson. Brad Thompson. Otis remembered Clarice trying to read his Trooper's ID. Irritably, he wondered how he was supposed to talk to these men when he could barely get one intelligible word out of his mouth.

As though he'd read his mind, Detective Andresen pressed a small spiral notebook and pen in his hands. "Try writing," he suggested quietly. "My dad had a stroke and I remember how frustrated he was when he couldn't talk."

In the best of times Otis' handwriting tended to be illegible. He opted to print, which was slower but at least he could read it. *They wanted Clarice's grandma's diary.*

Detective Andresen read his words out loud. "Where is it?"

She doesn't know about any diary.

"Huh. Did they say what made the diary so important?"

If they did, she didn't remember. Or she didn't tell me.

"The coroner confirmed Clarice's sister had been tortured. Two nights ago, someone broke the seal on the apartment and searched it again. This time they ripped the walls open—and the ceilings. Whatever is in that diary must be something damned important." Detective Andresen paced to the door and back. "I don't think they found it and that means that they'll be back, looking for answers."

We have no answers. We don't even know what the questions are. Otis scowled as something occurred to him. *Euphemia was an addict. Maybe she tried to trade the diary for drugs.*

Trooper Thompson looked grim. "If she did, the deal didn't go through. Otherwise, they wouldn't be looking for it still."

Otis shrugged. *I don't know what else to think. All Clarice and I wanted to do was get married.*

Detective Andresen took back his notebook. "Well, we'll keep working on it. If you think of anything, please call me."

Trooper Thompson handed Otis his card. "Or me." They filed out.

"Where the hell are we now?" Clarice asked crankily.

"Hopital," Otis croaked, while thinking that it figured that she would wake up with everything working full speed ahead. What the hell had he ever done to earn such bad karma?

"Shit. One of these days I'm gonna wake up in some place I recognize." She slowly sat up and stared at him in consternation. "You look like hell."

"Yep." He was shocked at how relieved he was that she was awake and coherent. Well... maybe he would reconsider the coherent part. His chest tightened as he thought of all the things that could have gone wrong for them.

"Don't you dare tell me I look that bad."

"Kay." Suddenly Otis grinned evilly. "Wore."

"Worse? Really?" Clarice shoved her hair back from her face. "You could have lied," she said, her dark eyes full of reproach. "A true gentleman would have lied."

A soft *shush* heralded Desman's return, with Otis' mother and Bain Dooley on his heels. Desman went to Clarice at once, checking her pulse while Otis' mother subjected him to an excited hug. "You're awake!" she declared delightedly. "I thought you would never wake up!"

"Deirdra, quit moaning over the boy." Bain glanced over his shoulder at the woman watching the reunion with sad eyes. "Come on. Let us say hello to Clarice."

Desman went to fetch the blood pressure machine.

At once, Deirdra straightened up and turned to stare at her son's intended. Her heels clicked like angry castanets on the tile floor as she walked over to Clarice's bedside. Then she saw Otis' mark on the young woman's forearm. Her eyes widened in surprise. Thrusting a hand out, she announced quite unnecessarily, "I am Deirdra Larssen, Otis' mama."

Gravely, Clarice took her mother-in-law's small hand in hers. "I'm Clarice Meriwether, Otis' mate."

"You marked him?" Deirdra gasped.

"Did you doubt it?"

Bain bit his lip hard to prevent the laughter that struggled to escape. Otis, however, was not so nice in his notions. For the first time in days, he laughed without restraint. God, he loved Clarice! His mama had finally met her match.

* * * * *

Three days later, Otis and Clarice were comfortably installed at home in Otis' condo with bodyguards keeping an eye on them. The day after they woke in the hospital, the doctor pronounced them well enough to go home.

That first night they spent at Bain's home. Early in the afternoon he'd helped Clarice arrange a funeral service for her sister for the following weekend. Then in the evening, Bain officiated at their marriage ceremony. It was a very quiet celebration with Otis' parents, Bain's wife, Dulcie, and Shamus Dooley present. Once Deirdra accepted Clarice as her son's mate, she arranged the wedding with Dulcie's assistance. In a matter of hours, all was ready including an elegant creamy silk dress and comfortable shoes. Gorgeous calla lilies for her bouquet and a delicious wedding supper rounded out the preparations. Clarice had to admit that Deirdra had thrown her whole-hearted support into providing a stylish but simple wedding. Otis' family had proved to be a warm, welcoming circle.

On their way to work, Otis gently teased Clarice, "I wonder if the IT guys ever made it to the office? If not, you might have to crawl under the desk again. Only this time, I would rather you tried mine."

She shot a meaningful look at the two men riding in the front seat. It unnerved her to have strangers with them everywhere they went. Their only privacy was in the bedroom. A hot flush of color spread over her face as she remembered their wedding night.

"What was that blush from?" Otis muttered in her ear. "What are you thinking about?"

"Our wedding night," she confessed.

Blood rushed to his cock. "You liked that." A wealth of satisfaction colored his voice. "We'll do that again."

"Otis!"

"Clarice!"

Torn between embarrassment and arousal, she turned her head to look out the window at the snowflakes lazily drifting down from an angry gray sky. "I don't understand the way you make me feel. I've never wanted a man like I want you."

He rubbed his hand absently over her mark on his chest. The three dark blue wavy lines lightly burned when he recalled how close they came to dying. "It goes both ways, you know. I never had such an instantaneous response to any other woman. From the moment your hand touched my arm when you crawled out from underneath that desk...well, you'll never know how much restraint it took not to bend you over that desk and fuck you then and there." Her soft gasp was music to his ears.

"Otis, we're not alone," she protested as her head turned so that her eyes met his.

"No, we're not," he agreed silkily. "If we were, we would be parked on the side of the road with you riding my cock."

She dropped her hand in his lap and lightly squeezed his erection. "I think I would like that," she confessed softly. "I love the way you fill me when I'm on top."

Taking her hand in his, he carried it to his mouth and nibbled at her fingertips. "I'll have to keep that in mind in the future." He leaned so that he could whisper in her ear, "Of course, it's even better when I fuck you from behind when you're on your knees, isn't it? We'll have to try it that way with your hands restrained." Her hips shifted restlessly in the confines of the seat belt. "I can smell how hot that idea makes you."

Her knees edged apart as his hand landed in her lap. "Otis..."

"Something else for you to put in your book," he purred in her ear.

"We're here," their driver interrupted.

"So we are. Thank you, Jack!" Otis flicked the releases on their seat belts. "I'll call when we're ready to leave." He opened his door and climbed out, grateful that his overcoat would hide his raging erection. His sexy wife had much to atone for and he planned to collect immediately. Fred, their other bodyguard had assisted her from the SUV so she was waiting on the sidewalk when he walked around the vehicle. Taking her arm, he led her into the building and headed directly for a janitor's closet.

"Otis?"

"Uh-hmm?"

"What are we doing?" she asked with nervous excitement.

He unlocked the closet with his master key, cracked the door and urged her inside the dark little room. "I'm going to fuck your brains out. You'll need to be very quiet, Clarice," he pointed out calmly. "After all, you wouldn't want a custodian to find us in a compromising situation, would you?"

"N-no."

He flicked on the overhead light. In the harsh glow, he turned her to face the sink. "Bend over and hold on."

With trembling hands, she obeyed him. "What if someone comes?"

"You will not move. You will trust me to protect you. Do you understand?" He folded her coat up over her back and hiked her skirt up until the curves of her ass were bared. "Ahhh. No panties. I think you wanted me to fuck you at work, didn't you?"

"Y-yessss." She shivered as the cool air in the closet brushed her wet pussy.

He squatted down behind her, widening the space between her thighs and buried his face in her slick folds, noisily licking and sucking her cream. She flinched when his tongue brushed her tight rosette. "Clarice?"

"W-what?"

"I'm going to fuck your ass sometime soon."

"O-okay." She stood on her tiptoes, shifting so her belly leaned against the sink ledge. Her ass trembled as his tongue flicked the sensitive skin and she fought to hold still for the forbidden caress.

Otis slid his tongue in her pussy, fucking deep before retreating to suck her clit. "Open your coat and blouse," he muttered. "Undo your bra."

"What?"

"I want you to pinch your nipples while I fuck you."

With shaking fingers she did as he commanded. He watched her moves over her shoulder in the mirror. When she released the front catch on her bra, he tilted his head so that his slick cream-covered lips touched her neck. "Push the fabric back. I want to see your breasts."

Hastily, she shoved her clothing under her arms. "Okay."

"Oh, that's pretty. Tug on those pretty nipples for me." The heavy sound of breathing filled the small room as she played with her breasts for their joint pleasure. He groaned and straightened up.

With quick jerky movements, he freed his cock and rolled a condom over it. Then with one thrust, he plunged in to the hilt as he reached up and pulled the light cord, immersing them in darkness. A bare thread of sound escaped her as he stood

motionless behind her, pressing deep while grasping her hips in his hands. "Squeeze my cock with your pussy," he commanded.

Helplessly, she obeyed, unable to resist the lure of the hot hard flesh filling her. There in the dark, her entire body focused on that one point of contact.

"Again," he demanded as he slipped his fingers over her mound and massaged her clit.

Her orgasm slammed through her as she bit down on her coat-covered arm to muffle her scream. Her pussy frantically milked his cock in powerful pulses.

With a low, nearly soundless groan he came, pumping his hot seed in the tight grasp of his wife's slick channel. "Mine." Her body tensed as she climaxed again, seized by the carnality of his undeniable claim.

After several long moments of breathless silence, he slowly withdrew and helped her rearrange their clothing. He snapped on the light and tugged her into his arms, kissing her with aching tenderness and passion. "I love you. I know you don't want to hear it right now but that's too bad. I plan to say it so often that you'll eventually believe it."

"Otis..."

"Shhhh." His mouth covered hers as he thrust his tongue between her lips. When he lifted his head, he sighed shakily. "Let's go take care of business so we can go home." He turned the light out and opened the door.

Half a dozen people stood in the corridor staring open-mouthed at the couple in the closet doorway. Otis' eyebrows flew up as he surveyed them and then asked, "What? Haven't you ever heard of closet sex? We're newlyweds." Without another word, he took Clarice's hand and strolled down the hall to the elevator.

Behind him, one of the men snickered. "Hey, Larssen! Don't hold up the elevator until mid-morning," he advised. "If the secretaries don't make it to their offices, nothing will get done!"

Chapter Six

While Otis was closeted with Shamus, going over the projects for the next few months, Clarice waded through the piles of reports in her overflowing inbox. If there were a lot of muttered curses, well that was just too bad. It had been a hellish ten days for her and she still had Euphemia's funeral to deal with. She was definitely too busy and too tired to spend much time considering her quickie in the custodial closet, even if her body was still pulsing with satisfaction. She had a notion that she would never pass a custodial closet in the future without wondering who might be fucking inside in the dark.

Sorting through the accumulated piles of paper, she crankily wondered what would have happened if she hadn't returned. What if Otis and she had died in that cold concrete hut? Would the work just keep piling up until the company closed down? Grumpily, Clarice studied the piles. At least a third of the work on her desk wasn't even hers. With an anticipatory gleam in her eye, she started dumping the piles of folders and papers on the appropriate desks. By the time she was finished, she'd cut her new workload by half.

Sighing with disgust, she sorted through the snail mail and swiftly got rid of everything she could. Then she turned to the electronic mail, thankful the IT department had fixed the connections so she could forward those things that rightfully belonged in someone else's inbox. When she had everything organized, she skimmed through the spam, just to make sure something important wasn't in it by mistake. Halfway down a lengthy column of offers for penile enhancements and declarations of her winning lotto number, she saw a very odd exhortation—"Don't die!"

The sender was *blowing_wind*. Uneasily, Clarice clicked on the e-mail.

So Clarice! If you received this, I'm gone. Well, I could say that I'm sorry for all the crap I dumped on you but we both know that would be a lie. I've pretty much hated you all my life and I don't plan to change at this late date. I left you something in our hiding place. Oh yeah, just in case you're worried, there's no tricks or booby-traps. Didn't have time to think up anything good and besides, you're already in a world of hurt, girl, if you're reading this.

Hey! Don't mess around with a funeral. Cremation's the ticket. Besides there's no one to come to the funeral but a bunch of druggies. I damn sure don't feel like putting on a show for them.

Euphemia

Numbly, Clarice read the e-mail twice. Trying not to think about the hurtful words too much, she clicked on the print icon and waited impassively for the paper to slide in the print tray. Once it appeared, she placed it on her desk face down, closed the e-mail program and took a deep breath. She focused on the beautiful wedding ring that Otis had presented her with, a circlet of red gold with Celtic knotwork engraved around the entire circle. "I love you," he'd told her firmly when he slid it on her finger. "Every time you doubt it, look at my ring. It's a reminder." Finally, she stood, picked up the sheet of paper and went to knock on Shamus' door.

Otis opened the door took one look at her face and hauled her inside before closing the door. "What is it? Clarice, honey, what's wrong?" With trembling hands, she offered the sheet of paper. As he scanned the short note, he urged her closer, tucking her against his chest with his arm around her. After a moment, he cursed. "Your sister was a full-press bitch, wasn't she?"

"What do I do?"

"We'll go to this hiding place and retrieve whatever is was that she left for you...unless it was in your apartment. From what Detective Andresen told us, it might not be there anymore."

She shook her head. "No, it's in the park."

"The what?"

"When we were younger we pretended we were spies," she explained patiently. "We set up a drop box in the park."

Shamus chuckled. "That's our Clarice. Well, don't stand around here. Go get it!"

"But —"

Otis was already talking to Jack on his cell phone. "We'll be right down." He closed his phone and pocketed. "Get your coat, Clarice."

She pursed her lips while she mutinously stared at him. One eyebrow went up as she waited.

"Please."

Without another word, she opened the door and went to retrieve her coat and purse. Sometimes you just had to stand your ground. If she allowed it, he would roll over her like an avalanche. By the time she slipped on her coat, he was waiting for her by the office door.

They went out and rode down in the elevator in silence. Clarice's face colored when she remembered the man in the hall implying that they would have sex in the elevator. She suspected that elevator sex would be even more embarrassing than closet sex. Then she noticed the tiny camera eye in one high corner. Definitely more embarrassing!

When they were in the SUV, she directed Jack to the tiny park not far from her old apartment. On the way, they had a lively discussion regarding the proposed plan of action when they arrived. Otis wanted Clarice to tell him where the drop box was located so that she could stay in the vehicle while he retrieved whatever Euphemia had left for her.

"No."

"What do you mean, *no*? I'm perfectly serious. I don't want you outside the vehicle."

"Tough. You can come with me. But I'm going to personally retrieve it."

His eyes blazed with anger. "Dammit, Clarice! Someone's trying to kill you!" She could almost smell the waves of testosterone that rolled off him.

"I'm going," she replied firmly. "If you want to come with me, you can help. If not, I'll take care of it myself."

"Why are you being so stubborn?" he demanded in frustration.

"Why is it when a woman refuses to give in, she's stubborn?"

Quiet fell over the car. Then Otis caved in. "All right. What do you need me to do?"

She handed him a folded piece of paper. "When I tell you, drop this on the ground. And then allow me to pick it up."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Jack slowed and turned into the small parking lot for the park. "Where are we going, Mrs. Larssen?"

Still not used to her new name, Clarice flinched in surprise. "The playground."

Jack parked the SUV and turned off the ignition. "Okay. Everyone out."

When they were out of the car, Otis took Clarice's hand in his. "Which way?"

"Toward the little log cabin. Just meander along until we get closer."

They slowly walked along the blacktop path that wound in and out through the playground until they drew near the miniature log cabin with a plaque on the front wall next to the door. Snowflakes caught in his auburn waves as Otis halted in front of the plaque and read, "*Crotch Log Cabin, gift of the Crotch Creek Junior League. Replica of first cabin built in Crotch Creek, Missouri by Elmer Crotch.* Well, now. I wondered where the town name came from. Elmer Crotch."

"Jack, when Otis drops that paper, I would like you to accidentally lean against the left side of the plaque. Otis, drop the paper and then while I make a big production of picking it up, you retrieve whatever is hidden behind the plaque." Clarice shot a quick

glance along the woods that lined the playground clearing. "Now would be a good time."

Just like clockwork, Otis dropped the paper which caught in the breeze and fluttered a few feet away. In a noisy pantomime, Clarice and Fred pursued the scrap of paper across the slush-covered grass providing quite a distraction as Otis and Jack retrieved a crumpled envelope from the tight space behind the plaque. Swiftly, Otis stuffed it in his pocket before casually moving to join Clarice who had just triumphantly captured the errant scrap.

"You got it?" she murmured quietly as she slapped the paper into his hand.

"You doubted me?" His eyebrow flickered up as he smiled and bent his head to kiss her. "I will not fail you. Shall we continue with our walk?"

"Of course."

Strolling along as though they had no cares in the world, they completed the circuit around the playground. The snow had been light, barely a flurry but just as they reached the SUV, it began to fall thickly with huge flakes that quickly began to pile up. Otis opened Clarice's door and helped her in before jogging around the vehicle to the other side. In moments they were all strapped in and rolling out through the gates to the narrow road. When Otis would have withdrawn the crumpled envelope, Clarice shook her head. "No. Wait until we get back to your office."

Twenty minutes later, Jack and Fred patiently waited while Otis and Clarice quickly left the SUV in front of the corporate entrance and went inside. A custodian mopping up snowmelt in the lobby glanced up at their entrance. Clarice flushed bright red when she met his twinkling blue eyes.

"Good mornin', Miz Clarice. Heard y'all inspected my closet this morning," he teased. "Hope you found everything to your likin'."

Mortified, Clarice didn't know where to look but Otis calmly stepped into the breach. "It's a fine closet that you keep, George. Very neat and convenient." With a friendly nod, he urged Clarice into the elevator.

She faced the corner and slowly, deliberately thumped her head against the wall. "My reputation is in shreds," she moaned.

"Nah. Not at all. Now if we fucked in the elevator..."

Whirling around to face him, she shook her finger almost in his face. "Don't you even think about it! They have cameras in the elevators!"

He caught her finger between his lips and gently nipped it with his teeth. "I know. That's why I chose the closet." His statement was so outrageous that Clarice couldn't think of any suitable retort. He crowded her back in the corner, tilted up her chin and brushed his cool lips over her hot red cheeks before claiming her warm mouth. She squeaked in protest before melting into his kiss. Only Otis could make her completely forget her surroundings.

With a jerk, the elevator stopped and the doors slid open. The people waiting for the elevator started clapping. Clarice moaned as Otis lifted his head. "Remember I love you," he whispered. Then taking her hand in his, he turned with a cheerful smile and led her past the small group waiting for the elevator. "All yours!"

When they were safely ensconced in his office with their coats hung up and the door locked, he placed the crumpled envelope on the desk in front of Clarice as she sat across from him. "Let's see what Euphemia left in her will."

Reluctantly, Clarice smoothed the wrinkles and slit the envelope. A small key tumbled onto the desk. She peered in the envelope and spotted a thin sheet of paper. Pulling it out, she unfolded it and spread it on the desktop.

Well, I sure hope that you're the one reading this, Clarice. If not, we've lost more than an inheritance – we've lost the elemental heritage. The key is for a locker at my second home. You'll find the inheritance I stole from you when Gran died. It was supposed to be yours but it pissed me off when Gran called me a bastard slut. I don't know whether I would have given it to you otherwise or not.

Do you know how hard it is to be talentless when everyone else is an elemental? I grew up thinking there was something wrong with me until Gran told me that Papa wasn't even my father. Seems our mama had a little fling when you were two years old and I was the booby prize. Oops! That's why Papa left, you know. He was tired of Mama screwing around. I guess she was tired of being a talentless nobody too.

Anyway, you go find your inheritance. Study it carefully and it might lead you down the glittering path to the shining circle at sunset. At least, that's what Gran said to tell you. Euphemia

Tears glittered in Clarice's dark eyes, waiting to spill. "Is anything the truth?" she burst out in anguish. "Why did no one tell me?"

"Secrets." Otis cursed under his breath. "Do you know where she's talking about in this letter?"

She sucked in a deep breath. "Of course. There's only one place that could be. From the time she was old enough to get a job, she practically lived at the mall."

"The *mall*?" Otis stared at her as though she'd lost her mind. "Your sister hid your inheritance at the *mall*?"

"If you knew Euphemia, it would make perfect sense to you," she said tiredly. "Perfect sense. She was a mall rat before that expression was even coined." Abruptly, she laid her head down on the desk and wept. Otis grabbed a box of tissues and set them on the desk. Then he went around, picked her up and sat down in the chair with her on his lap. And held her while she cried. Looking back, he realized that she had never mourned. Not when her apartment was trashed. Not when Euphemia's body was discovered. Not when they were kidnapped. So it was past time for her mourn. And she had more than enough to mourn for.

* * * * *

Later in the afternoon as Jack silently drove them to the mall, Otis explained the contents of the letter to Jack and Fred. Fred grunted in reaction as a heavy silence fell over the car. Then Fred asked, "What was your Gran's name?"

"My grandmother's name?" Clarice frowned. "Why do you want to know?"

Fred shrugged. "Perhaps the people chasin' y'all are connected to your Gran."

"I don't think so," she said doubtfully. "But her name was Annora McNamara."

Fred slewed around in the seat to stare at her in astonishment. "You're part of the McNamara clan?"

"Holy cow! No wonder everybody and their brothers are after you!" Jack declared from the front seat. "We need more men, Otis."

With his cell phone already in his hand, Otis was punching numbers in rapidly while muttering a steady litany of curses.

"Otis—"

He cut her off with a sharp cut of his hand. "Bain? Clarice's grandmother was Annora McNamara."

Clarice could hear Bain's exclamation of shocked surprise over the phone.

"No, we're on our way to retrieve whatever her sister left hidden for Clarice. Then we'll go to our condo."

There was another long rattle of words. Clarice was pretty sure that they were not happy words, either.

"I'll call when we leave our destination. I don't want to say anymore over an open cell line." Otis folded the phone and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Otis. What is going on?" she demanded with considerable annoyance.

"You're a McNamara."

"So?"

"You're a descendent of old Aonghus the sea dog," he replied as though that explained everything.

Possibly it did for him but she had no idea why that should produce such an unhappy reaction. She practiced her deep breathing from her yoga classes but it didn't seem to help. Finally, she requested with cool civility, "Will someone please explain why this Aonghus the sea dog was important and why this is a problem?"

For the first time, the three men in the car considered an aspect of the problem they hadn't even contemplated. Clarice didn't know her family history. Otis wondered how he was supposed to tell her that her family was outlawed. Every single member had a price on their head—even the youngsters. "Clarice, didn't your grandmother tell you anything about your history? Your family background?"

"Sure," Clarice replied dryly. "She told me it was none of my business."

"Swell." Fred hauled out his gun and checked it. "Obviously she didn't believe in preparation or defense."

A well of acid pumped in her stomach. Pressing her hand against her cramping belly, Clarice observed, "Now would be a good time, Otis. Obviously, you know something so I think you'd better tell me."

"Your great-great-grandfather, Aonghus Cú Mhara, stole the elemental water key. When he was killed when the council attempted to retrieve it, his daughter, Moira, concealed it with a spell. The entire family vowed that the elemental council would die if they tried to make Moira reveal where it was. Well, of course, the council didn't take that lying down. Moira died under their questioning. And the McNamara clan wiped out the council."

An uncomfortable silence filled the SUV while Clarice weighed Otis' recounting of her family history. Then she said, "It sounds very one-sided to me. Why did Aonghus steal the key? What kind of questioning causes death? And why was the entire clan willing to fight to prevent the council from retrieving the key?"

"I—" Otis broke off and reconsidered his point of view. "I don't know the answers," he admitted at last. "Actually, I'm ashamed to say that I never questioned the story until this minute."

"Well, until you have some answers, don't you think you might suspend judgment? The entire thing sounds fishy to me. In the meantime, we'll go find out what Euphemia locked away for me. Perhaps it will answer the questions. But I'm not counting on it. Euphemia wasn't always rational because of the drugs," she warned.

The tension in the truck lessened considerably. "Fair enough," Jack growled.

"And you will do what I tell you," Otis added. "Someone out there still wants whatever Euphemia left you. And they want it badly enough to risk killing you."

She stared at him while she thought about it. And then she decided she wasn't going to act like a too-stupid-to-live heroine so she shrugged and inserted her own caveat, "As long as you don't treat me like I'm a complete idiot."

At the mall, they were met by four men and two women. Three were dressed in Crotch Creek Police Department uniforms. Escorted by the new group, Clarice and Otis briskly walked down the wide mall to the locker room while Jack and Fred waited with the SUV.

When they reached the lockers, Clarice slapped the key in Otis' palm and stood back. He found the locker after a brief search, unlocked it and opened the door. Inside there was a canvas shopping bag filled with leather-bound books scrunched next to a rough wooden box. A tiny padlock secured the hasp. Sitting on the box were two odd items—a golden crystal ball and a long slender cobalt blue glass tube with a faceted red jewel on one end.

Lifting the glass tube with infinite care, he handed it to Clarice. "Aonghus' wand," he commented briefly before picking up the crystal ball and placing it in her hand. "Moirá's focusing crystal."

"Focusing crystal?" Clarice felt more and more as though she had tumbled down a rabbit hole. "What is a focusing crystal?"

"I'll explain everything when we get home." Otis plucked the wooden box and canvas bag from the locker, inspected the interior to make sure nothing was missed and slammed it shut. "Let's go home."

Surrounded by their guardians, they swiftly returned to the waiting SUV where Jack and Fred were prepared to roll as soon as Otis and Clarice were belted in. The trip to their condo was accomplished in total silence except for the single phone call Otis made to Bain as soon as they pulled out of the mall parking lot. When they arrived at the condo parking garage, a small contingent of guards was waiting to escort them to the condo.

Clarice had not been idle on the journey from the mall to the condo. She'd spent the entire time trying to remember every possible hint to her past that her grandmother might have given her. Surely, there was something. Try as she might, she couldn't remember even the most obscure mention of their family history. Frustration with her parents and grandparents welled up. "Why didn't they tell me?" she cried as Jack turned off the engine.

Otis didn't ask who she was referring to. "Perhaps they thought they were protecting you," he pointed out gently. "Perhaps the answers are in the books."

"Some protection. It didn't save Euphemia's life."

"Or perhaps she died because she knew something," he replied. "If they really questioned you using the drugs, then your lack of knowledge may have saved our lives." He opened his door. "Come. Let's go up to the condo and examine the books and box. Hopefully, they will contain the answers you seek."

Bain, Shamus and Deirdra were waiting in the condo for them. Shocked gasps hissed out when they saw the wand and ball that Clarice carried inside. That was nothing to their reaction when Otis placed the rough wooden box and bag of books on the coffee table. "The key!" Bain burst out.

"Ah? I wondered if that might be so," Otis said calmly. He took the wand and ball from Clarice and set them on the table with the other things before tugging Clarice's coat from her shoulders. "Sit down, sweetheart. It's time for us to unearth your past. Bain, close the drapes against prying eyes. For this, we will require privacy."

Chapter Seven

The doorbell rang. Otis flung her coat on the bench that sat in the corner and went to answer the door. When he recognized Detective Andresen and Trooper Thompson through the peephole, he quickly opened the door and ushered them into the living room.

Immediately, Deirdra protested. "The police? They're outsiders!"

"They're investigating the death of Clarice's sister and our abduction," Otis countered sternly. "It will be impossible for them to solve those crimes without sufficient information."

"But —"

"Enough, Deirdra!" Bain shot her a black look. "Let the boy speak!"

"Boy? Surely I'm past that point?" Otis jibed before introducing his family to the officers. "I asked these men to join us so that explanations could be shared all at one time. First we need to quickly examine the books. Mama, would you mind making coffee while Clarice and I do that?"

Deirdra tossed her head, got to her feet and stalked into the kitchen, her heels clacking sharply as she moved. After a moment, Shamus quietly joined her. The low murmur of their angry conversation was a humming background to the silence in the living room as Clarice and Otis swiftly opened and perused the flyleaf of each of the old books.

As Otis had suspected, they were journals and all but three of them belonged to Aonghus Cú Mhara. The rest belonged to Moira. After Otis arranged them in chronological order, he chose the last one of Aonghus' journals, certain that it would have the information he needed. "When was the key taken?" he asked Bain. "What date?"

“August 1057.”

Turning the fragile pages with care, Otis found the entries dated August 1057. With an intense frown on his brow, he skimmed the cramped entries, scrawled in ancient Gaelic. “Your ancestor had execrable penmanship!”

“I can try,” Clarice offered.

“Not unless you read old Gaelic.” He turned another page. “Ah-hah! I knew it!”

“What? What is it?” Bain longed to hold the journals in his own hands but restrained himself with difficulty. After all, the journals were not his to read.

Just then, Shamus and Deirdra appeared with two trays of mugs, coffeepot and cream and sugar. “Did you find something?” Deirdra asked breathlessly.

“I did. I will read the entry once everyone is settled with their coffee.” Otis poured coffee and handed mugs out. All of them except Clarice took theirs black so the process didn’t take long.

When everyone was settled, Otis set his mug down and picked up the old journal. After clearing his throat, he began to read.

“Third day of August. My heart fails me at what I have learned this night. The council members have fallen under the influence of Quatio Dammider and agreed to use the key to conquer Greater Eire. The heinous plan calls for the murder of all males and the ravaging of females, thus leading to many hybrid elementals to do Dammider’s bidding.

I must not allow this to happen! Tomorrow I will consult with Moira. Together we will think of some way to prevent this tragedy.

“Ninth day of August. Tonight I spoke with Jorble. As head of the council, I thought that surely he would not agree to Dammider’s plan. All was for naught. Greed has blinded him to the evil Dammider plans. Though Moira and I have devised a solution, I had hoped not to need it. Alas, I see no other way.

"Fourteenth day of August. I have taken the key and placed it beyond Dammider's reach. The council members are enraged. Dammider has sworn that I will die. It matters not. In any case the key is safe, protected from his wicked plans."

"That is the last entry in his journal," Otis said quietly. Silence filled the room as they contemplated the scope of the ancient evil elemental.

Finally, Detective Andresen coughed and asked, "Exactly what does this have to do with Euphemia Meriwether's death? Or your abduction?"

Bain straightened up and met the detective's eyes. "We belong to a group called elementals. The key, as you might imagine is quite valuable and has been lost for centuries. Apparently, it's been successfully hidden by Clarice's family all this time."

"And now someone suddenly discovered that?" Trooper Thompson scowled at Bain. "That doesn't wash. Why would they kidnap Mr. and Mrs. Larssen?"

Shamus shot a cautious look at Clarice and at her tiny nod, he said, "Clarice's sister, Euphemia was a drug addict. The materials on this table were all supposed to be Clarice's inheritance from her grandmother. Euphemia stole them and I suspect that she tried to sell them. If so, she attracted the attention of a rival group who happens to be less...shall we say, civilized?"

"So this other group wanted this key?" the detective demanded. "Enough to kill?"

"Many people have been killed for far less," Otis replied.

"Who are these people who are willing to kill for the key?" Trooper Thompson inquired. "Do you know?"

Otis shrugged. "Not exactly. But I believe that they are the descendents of Quatio Dammider. I know there is such a group. They use the name *Sons of Dammid*."

Both law officers jerked as though stung. "Sons of Dammid? That's a terrorist group out of Ireland!" Trooper Thompson leaped to his feet. "If they're operating in the states

we need to notify Homeland Security. They're suspected of hundreds of crimes and assassinations."

"As I said, I don't know for sure that they are the ones who are involved," Otis cautioned them. "After reading the journal, I suspect that they are but certainly there's no proof."

"We still have that bozo in custody who tried to grab your wife in the restaurant. Maybe we'll have a chat with him. In the meantime, I suggest that you find a safe place to keep the key and the rest of Mrs. Larssen's inheritance." Detective Andresen placed his empty mug back on the tray and stood up. "I have enough information at this point to work on. How about you, Brad?"

Trooper Thompson nodded and got to his feet. "They've given me quite a bit to think about. I'll be in touch with you later, Mr. Larssen, if I have more questions."

Otis escorted them to the door. "Thank you for coming, gentlemen." When he made his way back to the living room, the others were quietly contemplating Clarice's inheritance.

"What am I supposed to do with this stuff?" she asked in desperation. "Obviously I can't just leave it sitting around to collect dust."

"Put them in the vault at the council house," Bain suggested calmly. "They will be safe until you decide on a more permanent solution."

Shaking his head, Otis sat down next to Clarice. "That's a possibility for later but not practical right now. The council house is too far away. The logistics of transporting just the key would be mind boggling. We must come up with some other solution for now. Until they are safely hidden, we are all in danger. The Sons of Dammid won't hesitate to use violence to get what they want."

Clarice stretched out her hands and picked up the rough wooden box. "Exactly what is this key?"

"Don't open it!" Shamus shouted.

"If we don't open it, how will we know for certain that the key is inside?" she asked reasonably.

"The box should be warm. If it's truly the water key, then you should sense it without opening the box." Bain cocked his head to one side. "I must admit that I didn't even consider the possibility that the box was empty."

Beneath her trembling fingers, Clarice felt a low humming vibration. "*Something* is inside."

"Then leave it be. Until you've read all the journals to find out how Aonghus hid it, it would be best if you don't open the box. The key is very powerful. Without the shields from the box..." Shamus' voice trailed off before strengthening. "Well, it could do immense damage."

"An unshielded elemental water key would kill the rest of us." Otis' flat statement convinced Clarice of the deadly danger she held in her hands.

Very carefully she set the box back on the coffee table. "What the *hell* are we going to do with it?"

"Return it to the 'shining circle at sunset'. Isn't that what Euphemia's letter said? I suspect that is the home of all the keys. In the meantime, we will place the key, the crystal and the wand in the safe while we read the journals. Hopefully, Aonghus or Moira left a hint in their journals." Otis rose and went to the painting that hung over the fireplace. When he swung it back, Clarice noted the hinges that allowed him to open it like a door. Hidden behind it was a large safe door. Punching in the code, Otis opened the door revealing a space big enough to hold all the items, including the journals.

On impulse, Clarice suggested, "Put everything in there, Otis. Keep out Moira's first journal while we study it, but I think everything else should be placed in the safe."

He nodded. "Bring the box to me first. Then all the journals. Everything will go in the safe tonight. We'll study it tomorrow."

While they secured Clarice's inheritance, Deirdra and Bain cleared away the coffee things. "We'll leave you to it," he observed as he slipped on his coat. "Be very aware,

Otis. If the Sons are truly the ones behind your abduction and your sister-in-law's murder, they won't give up now."

"I know." Solemnly, he watched them prepare to leave. "The same goes for all of you. They will use you if they can."

Bain herded his brother and sister toward the door. "We'll be very careful. I promise."

When they were gone, Otis double-checked the locks on every door and window in the condo. Then he led Clarice into their bedroom where he proceeded to undress them both.

"Otis? What are you doing?"

He went into the bathroom intending to fill the tub. "I have a desire to unwind with you. We'll relax in the tub...have some wine and a snack. Listen to some romantic music and then we'll make love by candlelight." Unable to resist watching her reaction to his ideas, he hovered in the doorway.

"Oh, that sounds lovely!" She stretched, bent to touch her toes revealing her glistening pussy and abruptly found herself sprawled across the bed on her belly.

"On the other hand," Otis muttered as he burrowed close, "perhaps a little appetizer to start with would make it even more special." He spread her legs wider apart as he nudged her damp folds with his cock. "I love the way you get wet for me."

Clarice spread her arms out to each side and reveled in his touch. The lightly furred muscles of his chest blanketed her back. The tight curls at his groin tickled the sensitive skin between her legs. She wriggled from side to side, trying to entice him closer. "Put your cock in my pussy," she whispered. "I want to feel you inside me."

"No hurry," he reproved. "I like the way this feels. My cock is rubbing along your slick pussy. Your luscious ass is cushioning my belly. And I can hold your breasts in my hands and play with your tight nipples."

"I can't move." She whined as she squirmed helplessly. They both knew her protest was mostly for form.

"And that's a problem?" he teased. "When you are free, everything moves too fast. I want to enjoy the feel of your body beneath mine. Your pussy is getting wetter so I know this is making you hot."

His cock was hot and thick. Clarice shivered as it rubbed against her clit, striking sparks of pleasure that lit a fire in her belly. She moaned into the bedspread. "Otis!" she pleaded. "Give me your cock!"

"Where, sweetheart?"

"Anywhere."

Her total surrender set Otis on fire with a new desire. He pulled back and nudged her rosette with the tip of his cock. "Even here?"

She trembled at his request, then silently admitted that the very idea of his possession there was incredibly exciting. "Anywhere," she reiterated with a whimper.

For several long moments the fat head of his cock pressed and pulsed against her anus. Then he withdrew, admonishing her to be still. "I'll be right back."

Cool air flowed over her wet swollen folds emphasizing her complete exposure. She wasn't sure why she found this particular position so naughty or so carnal. Perhaps it was simply the knowledge that Otis was going to fuck her ass. Clarice fought the urge to squeeze her legs together to ease some of the swift surge of heat that rippled through her belly. Then Otis was back, tossing a couple items on the bedspread next to her hip.

He grabbed two pillows from the head of the bed. "Put your knees on the edge of the bed," he said in a gritty tone. "I want to tuck these pillows under your belly. Keep your legs spread." There was warning and dominance in his voice.

Clarice felt another spurt of arousal at the stern tone as she obeyed his directions. He stuffed the pillows beneath her and patted her ass gently. "Good girl. Now close your eyes and relax."

Relax? Was the man crazy? Nevertheless, she closed her eyes and waited with increasing tension for the next step. Several drops of warm fluid dribbled squarely on her sensitive rosette. Involuntarily she flinched in surprise.

He smacked her right ass cheek lightly. "Hold still."

Then she felt his fingers gently rubbing the fluid all around the opening before he slowly inserted one finger. She was shocked at how huge his finger felt as he carefully fucked in and out. A warm tingling sensation spread both inside and out. Unable to help herself, she pushed back.

That was the signal Otis had been waiting for. He added more oil and inserted a second finger at the same time he slid his condom-covered cock into her eager pussy.

She froze, motionless as he worked his cock in to the hilt. His fingers slipped deeper in her ass. Then he was quiet, waiting as she adjusted to the tight, heavy sensations. "Otis?" she whispered.

"Relax, Clarice. Feel how I fill your body," he reassured her. "Nice and slow."

"I need to come," she wailed.

"All right." He slid his other hand beneath her, found her clit and gently plucked at it. "Come now."

Tremors rippled down her spine. Her belly clenched down hard as her pussy squeezed his thick cock. Her anus contracted tightly around his fingers. Heated sparks seemed to zip all through her body as she came harder than she ever had before in her life. Shuddering under the pressure of his body, she cried out his name.

When she was quiet at last, she was startled by the realization that he was still in place, still patiently waiting for her to relax. And though she had just had the orgasm to end all orgasms, she could feel her body gathering in readiness for another. She felt his fingers rubbing against his cock through the thin separation while he softly brushed her clit with his other hand.

"Ready?" he inquired lovingly.

"What are you doing to me?" she demanded in reply. "I've never come that hard!"

When Otis chuckled, his cock jerked deep inside. "Don't you think it's time to change that, then?"

Her pussy squeezed his cock hard in response as she panted. "Fuck me, dammit!"

"Um, not yet. I want you to come again. Then you'll be ready for me to fuck your tight ass. That's something I've wanted ever since I watched you wiggling under your desk," he confessed with a groan. "I wanted to bend you over your desk and fuck you blind."

"Then do it!" she goaded desperately.

"After you, darling."

Time stopped as her body tensed. Then in an explosion of the senses she spun free, trembling as endless little contractions rippled through her pussy, clasping his cock in greedy lust. Icy heat flashed up her spine to center in the back of her skull. Helplessly her entire body tightened and then abruptly released.

Immediately, Otis withdrew from her tight grasp and centered the tip of his cock on her relaxed anus. With careful restraint, he pressed forward until he was partially buried in the hot, slick clasp of her ass. Little tremors still ran over his sensitive cock like ghostly fingers. He shuddered and fought to remain still as he waited for her body to accept his invasion.

She shattered his tenuous constraint when her hips rocked back against his belly, sheathing the rest of his cock in one slick move. She buried her face in the tumbled covers and moaned as she savored his possession.

With agonizing control he withdrew most of the way before sliding back into her tight passage. "Are you all right?" he grunted as he struggled to hold off his approaching climax.

"I will be – when you start moving," she replied recklessly. "Fuck me, Otis. I want to feel you!"

Accepting her passionate demand, he stroked deep, meeting the roll of her hips as flesh met flesh. Abruptly, Clarice stiffened in climax driving him to his own. Slowly, he collapsed along her back, chest bellowing as he struggled for breath. He helped her turn on her side as they curled together on the edge of the bed, sated and sleepy.

When he felt himself dozing off, he carefully withdrew and went to clean up. In the bathroom, he extinguished the lone candle he'd managed to light before he was side-tracked from his seduction. After he gently washed Clarice with a warm cloth, he straightened the covers, making sure that she was comfortable, returned to the bathroom to turn out the lights and finally crawled into bed, cuddling up with his wife.

It was dark when Clarice woke with her heart pounding and ears ringing. Her muscles were tense though she was safely curled in Otis' arms as he gently snored in her ear. Adrenaline surged as she sought out the threat that dragged her from her dreams. Then she remembered.

* * * * *

An old man with long gray hair was beckoning her to the sea. The sea wasn't the warm inviting waters of the Caribbean. It was cold—bitterly cold and ice covered at the edges.

Clarice shivered.

The old man's tattered cloak whipped in the howling wind as sleet sang and hissed around them. Though he was barefoot, he ignored the ice beneath his feet.

Clarice stared at the barren surroundings. No trees. No buildings. They were alone in the stark landscape—just the sullen sea and endless ice. Then from the corner of her eye, she caught the faintest of movements. A polar bear stalked across the bitter white wasteland.

She tried to shout out a warning but the words were frozen in her mouth.

The bear lumbered up to the side of the old man and stood tall and fierce on his hind legs as he roared. Then he slowly stretched out on the ice, curling his heavy white body around the old man's legs.

The man summoned her once more, waving the cobalt-blue wand. In the bleak storm, the great ruby jewel on the tip glittered as fiery sparks shot out, resting on the glassy sea. Wherever they touched, a transparent form in the likeness of a woman surfaced. Each bore a sigil on her bare breasts. Some were flames, others were spirals to signify earth or thunderbolts to signify air. As her eyes lit on each figure, she came to the realization that none bore the sigil for water. Where were the water elementals?

And then the stunning truth washed over her. *She* was the last of the water elementals – the very last one. Without the return of the key, there would be no more.

As the old man waved his wand once more, the earth changed. The ice melted. The bear roared in protest and died. Cities disappeared beneath the encroaching seas. And the other elementals sank into the rising waters.

Their salvation was up to her. She must return the key to its watery home underneath the ice cap at the top of the world. Only she could change the future. Only she could avert disaster. And she must do it all alone.

Chapter Eight

"I have an errand," Clarice announced at breakfast.

Otis merely lifted one brow as he sipped his coffee. "Is it something we can take care of on the way to work? If not, we'll have to do it afterward."

"Actually," she ventured, "I was planning to run out at lunch time on my own."

"Uh-huh. What are you up to, Clarice?"

"Excuse me? All I want to do is run to the store by myself. Is that going to be a problem?" She shoved her chair back, gathered her dishes and carried them to the sink while he watched her with an assessing glance.

He finished the last of his coffee and rose to carry his dishes to the counter. Once he set them down, he gently grasped her shoulders and turned her to face him so that he could look her in the eye. "Whatever it is, I want to be with you. You were restless all night and I know that you didn't sleep well. Please tell me what's wrong, sweetheart."

Clarice rested her head on his shoulder and sighed. "Are you going to spend your life rescuing me, Otis?"

"That's my plan," he replied firmly. "I love you. I'll do whatever I have to do to keep you safe. I'll admit that so far, I haven't always been successful but that won't keep me from trying."

"What am I going to do with you?" she whispered in despair. "I have a very important mission to complete and you can't come with me."

He held her closer and rubbed the tense muscles in her back. "Tell me about it. Then we'll work it out."

Standing in the kitchen next to the dirty dishes in the sink with his arms wrapped around her, she haltingly shared her dream. "I have to go there, Otis. I have to return the key."

He tucked her head beneath his chin and considered. "I tell you what. While I understand the urgency you feel from the dream, I believe that we have enough time to study at least the first of Moira's journals. I would feel better if we found some confirmation before we hare off to the North Pole. I grant you that it could be the *shining circle* Euphemia referred to but she also mentioned *sunset*. I'm not even sure if they have daylight this time of year. What if there are other conditions? Are you willing to at least wait long enough to read the journals?"

As she stood in the sheltering circle of his strong arms, she had an epiphany. The world's future might truly hang in the balance. Just possibly she might be the only hope for the future. But for the first time in a very long time, she wasn't alone. Otis had pledged himself as her rescuer, lover and partner. Only now was she beginning to understand the face of her future. She unbuttoned the collar of his shirt and gently kissed his throat. "Thank you."

"You can keep doing that all day long."

"Yeah? Isn't it a shame how work interferes with the important stuff?"

"Uh-hmm. What do you think about a weekend getaway?"

Clarice tilted her head back so that she could see his face. "Is this going to be like our last getaway? Kidnappers, drugs and woodland hikes? And who's going to keep an eye on the safe?"

"Jack and Fred and some of their cohorts will stay here while we steal away for some private time." He nibbled at her lips until they parted in invitation, then settled in for some serious kissing. Her tongue flicked out to meet his in a slick, sinuous duel.

Bells rang.

Abruptly, Clarice realized it was the doorbell. "Damn..."

"Hold my place." Otis went to find out who had the nerve to appear at their door at seven thirty in the morning.

When he peered through the peephole, he saw a male stranger. Making sure that the security chain was on, he cracked the door. A short, rotund man with a thinning comb-over and thick glasses shot him a nervous myopic glance. Otis placed him at about fifty as he noted the rumpled corduroys and the plastic pocket protector. "How can I help you?"

The man's hand trembled as he smoothed his hair. Then, evidently working up his nerve, he blurted, "You can stop making so much noise in your bedroom! I was up all night long!"

One eyebrow shot up as Otis silently slid his eyes over the man's groin. "It doesn't look that way to me."

"Well, I never!" the man burst out angrily.

"Likely not," Otis agreed with a smile. "If you want some pointers, I have a couple of videos I could loan you."

Clenching his fists, the man threatened, "I'll speak to the management about this! Decent people should be able to sleep at night! You ought to take your floozy to a hotel!"

"What is it?" Clarice asked as she tiptoed down the hall in sudden curiosity.

"Are you my floozy, darling?"

"Of course. Yours and nobody else's."

"This gentleman is complaining about our noise in the bedroom."

Clarice wound her arms around his waist and peeked over his shoulder at the visitor. "Sorry about that. Otis is such a fabulous lover, I just can't help myself."

"Jezebel!" the little man shouted. Vengeance gleamed in his icy blue eyes.

Otis unhooked the chain and swung the door open. "That's my wife you're yelling at," he coolly informed the man. "What we do in our bedroom or living room or even

our balcony is our business. I suggest that you run along and complain to the management at once."

As he slammed the door closed and twisted the lock, a blast in the living room, followed by tinkling glass captured their immediate attention. "Call 9-1-1," he shouted as he plunged toward the living room.

She raced into the kitchen and grabbed the phone from the counter, frantically punching in numbers as she sneaked a glance around the corner into the living room. Otis was battling two intruders in front of the fireplace.

Rattling off the address, she yelled, "Intruders! Come now!" before tossing the still-connected phone on the counter. Snatching up the spatula and square griddle she'd used to make breakfast, she rushed to help Otis.

The intruders had him down on the hearth, systematically taking turns kicking and punching Otis while he fought back fiercely. Clarice smacked one of the intruders in the face with the greasy spatula, then bludgeoned the other over the head with the griddle. The second man slumped to the floor, cracking his head on the coffee table on the way down.

In the meantime, Otis grabbed the cast-iron poker from the rack beside him and stabbed at the first intruder. While the attacker was distracted, Clarice took the opportunity to belt him with her handy-dandy griddle. He keeled over, falling through the broken patio door that they had used to enter.

A third man leaped over him, heading directly for Clarice with gun in hand. Otis whacked him behind the knees with the poker. Clarice swung her griddle at his mid-section. As he collapsed from the one-two punches, she finished him off with another strike to the head. When his gun hit the floor, she had the presence of mind to kick it under the sofa.

Sirens blared. Someone was pounding on the door. Clarice saw blood dripping from Otis' arm as he slowly crawled to his feet. "You're hurt!"

"It's not bad. See who's at the door," he said wearily.

Clarice limped down the short hallway, only then aware that she'd lost one of her shoes in the melee. She kicked the other one off impatiently before peering through the peephole. If it was that squirrely asshole from before, she had a few things to say to him! To her everlasting relief, she saw one of the police officers, Mary Stillwater, who had served as their escort the day before at the mall. Unlocking the door, she opened it, thankful that the police had arrived.

"Do you know how many complaints we've received about the noise you're making? Your neighbors all called in a domestic dispute," the male officer grumbled while Officer Stillwater calmly noted the signs of a violent struggle in Clarice's stance.

Brushing past her partner, Mary marched into the living room took one look and started confirming the need for reinforcements and an ambulance. "We weren't notified of *your* 9-1-1 call until we were pulling into the garage," she explained as she walked over to check Otis who was sitting hunched over on the couch with blood dripping from his arm.

Ignoring the officer at the door, Clarice followed Mary down the hall. When she realized that Otis had done nothing to stop the bleeding, she went to the kitchen for some towels to stanch the blood flow. She couldn't resist a sour little smile when Mary's partner swiftly changed his tune after discovering the reason for all the noise. She nodded her head in satisfaction, hoping he felt like an idiot. She understood the feelings of officers responding to domestic dispute calls, but as far as she was concerned, she was thrilled to death that so many complaints were made. Clearly they could be thankful to the neighbors for the rapid response by the police.

While she rendered rough first aid to Otis' arm, he heaved a deep sigh. "You're a bad influence, woman. So far, since I've met you, I'm been late, missed entire work days and left early, more than I ever have in my life. At this rate, they'll fire me before I get in a full week of work!"

"Nah. It could happen to anyone." Clarice chuckled under her breath as she applied pressure to his wound. "Ask any woman."

"Come on, now. We missed a whole week because we were kidnapped. Then we got married. Your apartment was trashed. Euphemia was murdered. Now we're attacked in our condo—on the fifteenth floor! It's ridiculous. It sounds like a bad movie."

"You're absolutely right. We need a vacation."

Otis stared at her in disbelief. "A vacation..."

When the EMTs arrived and took charge of the emergency care, Clarice started answering the officer's questions. Jack and Fred arrived, followed by Detective Andresen who just looked around at the mess and shook his head.

Well after noon, Otis and Clarice straggled into work on a limp and a prayer. Clarice had a spectacular black eye from a blow she didn't remember receiving and a twisted knee. Both of Otis' eyes were deep purple and he had twenty-one stitches closing his *it's not bad* slash on his arm.

The intruders were all under lock and key. Jack and Fred were overseeing the security, repairs and clean-up at the condo while they set up round-the-clock outside guards. Two federal agents had shown up to interview Clarice and Otis when the intruders proved to be linked to the Sons of Dammid.

The division director was waiting in Otis' office, no doubt to blast his work performance but after one long look, her lips flattened in annoyance, she suggested that Otis and Clarice go back home.

"I'm here, more or less in one piece. I may as well see if I can accomplish something," Otis protested. "Who knows what will happen next?"

"If your uncle wasn't vouching for you, you would have been out on your ass after the first day!"

"Do you think I don't know that?" Otis demanded in disgust. "Even I would fire me. I told Clarice earlier that our lives are like a bad movie."

“Good.” Director Shadwell sat upright in the chair behind Otis’ desk. Briskly, she continued, “Then you’ll understand when I say that you’re to take off the rest of this week and next week without pay, to get your life in order. By then, I expect you to be ready to work! When you come back, Clarice will finish her two weeks of notice.”

“Her notice?”

“Certainly. I’m sure that she’s aware of the spouse clause.”

“The spouse clause?” Otis had a bad feeling about this.

The director frowned. “We don’t employ spouses. One of you has to go. Clearly, Clarice is more expendable than you are at this point.”

Otis stomped over to the window. “That’s not right, ma’am. Clarice has been here a long time. I’m temporary. I was hired specifically to be temporary. Surely some exception can be made.”

“Even if that was possible, she cannot work here while you are employed. She would have to agree to a leave of absence.” Sighing, the director rose and went to summon Clarice, wondering why everything had to be so complicated. When Clarice joined them, Director Shadwell laid it all out for them.

To Otis’ surprise, Clarice agreed at once to tender her notice in writing. “This will be my opportunity to move to a more responsible position. While I’ve enjoyed working with Mr. Dooley, I’ve always known that the *company* didn’t really value my services. I’ll have the letter on your desk before the end of the day.” With that said, she smartly retreated back to the outer office.

With a quiet chuckle, Director Shadwell observed, “Your wife has hidden depths, Otis. I foresee her going far, whatever she chooses to do. I’m sorry I didn’t get to know her better before this.”

“Yeah, well. Uncle Shamus is going to throw a fit when he finds out that she’s gone. She’s the reason he agreed to the surgery.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Actually, she’s the reason I agreed to stand in for him. I was confident that I could keep things going because she knows as much about the job as Uncle Shamus.”

With a nod, the director stood and moved to the door. "That will be something to consider when I receive her letter of intent. In the meantime – go home!"

On the way home, Otis kept waiting for Clarice to upbraid him about the loss of her job but she was fiendishly cheerful about her impending freedom. Finally, he could stand the suspense no longer. "Why aren't you upset?"

"About what?" she queried with maddening obtuseness.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, he spit out, "Losing your job!"

Sweetly, she replied, "But Otis! You've pledged to rescue me, haven't you? I think I'll enjoy just staying home, watching soap operas and eating bonbons."

"Bonbons?" He flashed her an incredulous look. "This from the woman whose major sin is drinking coffee? I don't think so."

Abruptly, she began laughing. "Otis, love, you are soooo easy."

"I am not."

"Yep. You are." She looked out the window at the snow-covered landscape and wondered when spring would finally arrive. Soon, she hoped. She was so tired of snow.

"Why do you say that?" he demanded in a snit.

Turning back toward him, she reached out with one hand and tucked dark red strands of hair behind his ear. "Because you always expect me to react like all the other women you've known. I'm not them," she pointed out gently.

"Well, duh. You think I haven't figured that out?" He grabbed her hand, turning it so that he could kiss the palm. "Seriously, why weren't you upset?"

"Oh, that. Well since I have you to help me with my research, I figure now's a good time to write that book I told you about," she said cheerfully. "I have a feeling that you'd be especially good with the kinky stuff."

For once in his life, words completely failed Otis. His mind went blank as her statement sank in. He had visions of her critiquing his performance in bed and couldn't

think of a single thing to say. Uneasy silence was the name of the game the rest of the way home.

* * * * *

In the dark hours before dawn, Otis woke to find himself alone in the bed. Alarmed, he jumped out of bed and went in search of his missing wife. He found her in his office, sitting stark naked in his leather chair, intently pounding away at the computer keyboard. Her reading glasses were perched on the end of her nose, his battered copy of *The Synonym Finder* was spread open on the desk and she was tunelessly humming as she briskly tapped at the keys.

"What are you doing?" he demanded sleepily from the doorway.

She stifled a shriek as she turned her head to look at him over her shoulder. "Writing," she answered hesitantly. "I had an idea that I wanted to write down before I forgot it."

Dumbfounded, he stared at her. "It's three o'clock in the morning."

"Yeah, I know." She went back to her typing, staring intently at the screen. "If I wait until later, I'll forget what I was working on. I have the dialogue all worked out in my mind."

It occurred to Otis that he was looking at his future life. Some people knitted when they were worried. Some people chain-smoked or drank. Some people cleaned house or went for a walk. Clarice was a writer so naturally, that is how she would deal with stress. And the goddess knew Clarice had certainly been under a lot of stress. Then a terrible thought crossed his mind. Suspiciously, he said, "You're not putting me in that book. Right?" When she didn't immediately answer, he asked louder, "*Right?*"

She started chuckling. "Come over here, stud. I'll sit on your lap and you can read while I write." She stood up, daring him to accept her offer.

Otis knew a dare when he saw one. But more than that, he noted the trembling fingers and the worry in her eyes that she sought to hide from him. There was little they

could do until she journeyed with Angus through her dreams again. Until then, as he saw it, Otis was responsible for offering her whatever comfort and solace he could. He left the doorway, joining her behind his desk. When he was seated in the sturdy leather chair, warmed by her body heat, she plopped down on his lap, planted a wet kiss on his lips and wriggled until she was comfortable. The undeniable fact that his penis was firmly captured between her damp thighs was not lost on him. Hmmm. Maybe there was more involved in writing erotic romance than he'd thought.

He peered over her shoulder at the monitor screen, waking up with a rush when he realized exactly what he was reading. "What the hell?"

"Shhh. I'm writing here."

"I'll say. Have you ever done that?"

"Well, no. But I figured that we could try it out, just to make sure I got it right."

"What? Are you crazy?"

She twisted until she could see his face. "Are you saying that you won't help me test this stuff for accuracy?"

"Pierce my dick and nuts? Are you insane? No one is sticking a needle anywhere near —"

"I didn't mean that," she interrupted impatiently. "I meant using the ropes."

"Ropes? There are ropes?" Swiftly, he skimmed the rest of the scene. "Ropes, eh? That could be interesting."

"I figure we could try them out on each other," she added with calm practicality. "I can kind of see it in my mind but who really knows? Maybe it wouldn't work the way I think it will."

"Both of us?" He had to think about that for a moment. "You're a damn kinky woman. Where will we buy the ropes?"

"Charley's Adult Toys and Videos," she replied absently. "He's got everything you ever could imagine in there. The last time I was in there, he even had a sofa with a built-

in dildo. I meant to ask him how it worked. I mean, you would have to be able to remove it to clean it, right?"

For the second time in twenty-four hours, words failed Otis. He didn't consider himself unsophisticated but it had never occurred to him to visit Charley's Adult Toys and Videos, let alone question the owner about the merchandise. Finally he asked, "Do you go there often?"

"Nope. But sometimes I need to do research for my notes."

"Your notes?"

"I have a list of ideas for stories."

"Ah. How many books do you anticipate writing?"

She stopped typing and turned to look at him. "Does this bother you?"

"No."

His firm reply relieved her, even though she was certain that there was an unspoken *but* in there somewhere. "So what's the hang-up?"

"I think I'm wondering how many nights I'll wake up alone in bed," he replied hesitantly.

A very naughty grin lit her face as she squeezed his stiffening cock between her thighs. "I bet I can make it worth your while," she teased. "Wanna see?"

Unable to resist her tempting offer, his blood flowed south, instantly filling his cock. He shifted in the chair, pressing upward.

With a little excited murmur, she bounced on his lap before standing up between his legs. Rummaging under the opened book on the desk, she triumphantly brandished a foil-wrapped condom. "I knew this would come in handy! It pays to be prepared, doesn't it?" Ripping it open, she swiftly dressed him before straddling his rigid thighs. "Put it in me, Otis!"

"Just who is making it worthwhile for whom?" he demanded as he held his cock in his fist while she slipped it into the wet heat of her excited pussy.

She groaned as he filled her. "Okay, you win."

"I win?" He settled her on his lap with his cock filling her, balls deep. Reaching around her, he cupped her breasts, teasing her stiff nipples. "All right. Type away."

"What?"

"Type, woman. We're gonna play wicked millionaire boss and his sexy submissive secretary."

"Otis," she whimpered as she squirmed on his lap. "I promise I'll be good. I'll stay in bed from now on. Really."

While tugging gently at her nipples, he bent his head and nibbled on her neck. "Sweetheart, I don't care if you get up every damned night, as long as you're willing to play. Now, woman, type away or I'll have my way with you."

When she attempted to close her legs, he nudged them farther apart with his knees. "Uh-uh. Leave them open."

"Fiend!"

"Type."

Chapter Nine

"Where is Dudley Do-Right when you need him?" she whined as she shakily typed a string of nonsense words on the computer.

He pinched her nipples just hard enough to get her attention. "That's not even a complete sentence, Nell. That won't save you from my wicked intentions!"

"Oh, Snidely, please don't punish me! I'll be good!" She tightened all the tiny muscles in her pussy, grasping his cock in her close grip.

"Dammit, Nell! If you keep squeezing me like that, I won't last long enough to punish you!" Small, gentle contractions caressed him as her soft climax washed down his length. "I felt that!"

She covered his hands with hers, enthusiastically tugging at her nipples while she vigorously rocked up and down on his cock. "More!" she cried.

He slipped his hands from beneath hers, leaving her to play with her breasts while he stimulated her clit with one hand and wrapped the other around her belly to hold her in place. The chair creaked loudly as his touch set off the fireworks she was begging for. Together they strained until they reached the peak, shouting out with delight.

Fighting for breath, Otis held her close as she shuddered. "I love you, Clarice," he whispered in her ear. "I'll always love you."

"Otis..."

"Oh, I know you're not ready to hear me but if I keep saying it, one day you'll believe me." He cradled her in his strong arms as they snuggled together in the comfortable chair in the early pre-dawn silence.

Finally, she cleared her throat uneasily and said, "I believe you. I, uh, just can't seem to say the words back to you."

Briefly his arms tightened, then relaxed as realization flashed through him. "Do you think I have to have the words, Clarice? No!" Gently, he shook her. "Your touch tells me everything I have to know. When you finally feel comfortable enough to tell me how you feel, it will be all the more special." With a sigh, he shifted in the chair. "Are you ready to go back to bed now? I want to hold you under the covers...in the dark." His voice deepened. "With my cock filling your pussy."

She shivered as she reached toward the computer. "I love your plan. Let me save my file." Minutes later they were spooned together in the warm bed. As Otis relaxed into sleep, she watched the sky lighten in the early dawn and wondered what really held her back. Why couldn't she simply tell Otis that she loved him? And how long would his patience last? Even as she puzzled over the conundrum of her feelings, she escaped into the safety of slumber.

* * * * *

The old man stood barefoot on the icy shore, offering her a battered leather book. In the cold wind, the cover whipped open and pages fluttered like so many frozen butterflies. One page tore loose, flying through the air in great whirling circles until it landed nearly at her feet. She bent to pick it up but something prevented her from touching it.

No!

Puzzled she realized that the man shivering in his tattered, threadbare cloak wasn't offering the book to her but to the dragon patiently waiting beside her. From the corner of her eye she studied the shimmering cobalt beast glittering in the fiery arctic sunset. The dragon ignored the man and his offering, allowing her to decide the fate of the book. With a weary nod, she indicated her acceptance of the old man's offer.

The dragon slithered ponderously across the ice, his heat leaving a slick trail in the barren snow. To her surprise, rather than taking the book as offered, he lifted the old man in his arms, cradling him against his warm chest and carried him across the ice

until he stood in front of her again. When she looked into the dragon's eyes as he carefully sheltered her shabby ancestor, she recognized Otis gazing out from the wise dragon's golden eyes.

A deep sigh welled up from her chest. The way forward was clear. Otis' choice was clear. Relieved acceptance swept over her as she rested her head on the dragon's belly. Together, they would return the key—together as her grand-ancestor had ordained. Peacefully, she offered her trust and love to the great dragon.

The old man leaned down until he could touch the wayward page in the snow. Snapping it up, he imperiously offered it to the dragon, demanding his acceptance. With an unblinking gaze, the dragon solemnly took the page. Immediately, the old man faded from existence, leaving her alone with the dragon in the vast wasteland.

* * * * *

Clarice struggled up from the suffocating well of sleep, fighting heavy bedding and the secure grip of Otis' arms.

"Clarice! Calm down!"

"Up! We have to get up! I know which page we have to look at!" she sat up on the side of the bed, her breath shuddering in and out like a heavy bellows.

He rubbed her back, waiting patiently for her to catch her breath and fully wake up. When she woke him fighting to get away, it had scared him in a way that he hadn't experienced in a long time. Inhaling deeply, he worked to subdue the adrenaline pumping through his veins. "We'll go look at it together in a moment. Take a few minutes to calm yourself."

She glanced at him over her shoulder as she shoved her tangled hair back from her face. "How do you do it, Otis?"

"Do what?" His puzzled frown made it obvious that he had no idea what she was talking about.

"No matter what I throw at you, you just take it in stride. If I tell you that you are the solution to returning the water key, you will no doubt simply smile and agree. Doesn't anything ever throw you?" Irritated, she stood up tossing the covers to one side. Butt jiggling in the most delightful and enticing way, she stomped into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

Watching her in bemusement, he simply shook his head. "No, I'm definitely not smiling. The arctic is not my idea of a vacation but something tells me that's where we're headed," he muttered. Obviously, they were finished with the sleep-and-make-love portion of the morning. With a shrug, he climbed out of bed and yanked on a pair of flannel lounge pants before heading to the kitchen to make coffee. He had a notion he was going to need a strong dose of caffeine when Clarice shared her latest dream.

When she finally made her appearance in the kitchen, he was relaxing at the table with his heavy mug of coffee perusing the newspaper. "We made page one again," he pointed out calmly. "I counted up. So far, we've been on the front page six times since I met you. That has to be some kind of record for two shy and retiring elementals like us."

Clarice snorted in derision as she tossed two slices of bread in the toaster. "Retiring? Shy? What did you put in your coffee, Otis?"

He turned to study her as she moved around the sunlit room. "You don't think we're shy and retiring? Hmph. How would you describe us?"

"Lost and terrified." The toast popped up and she grabbed the slices, slapping margarine on the crunchy bread. "At least I am. You...well you seem to be so laid back you're flat. I'm still waiting for you to explode. Or walk away."

Silence echoed in the small room after her unwilling confession. Then he stood up and went to her, wrapping her in his arms. "I will never walk away."

"Never?" she whispered.

"Never. Cringe, maybe. Set something on fire by accident, maybe. But I'll never willingly leave you."

Her arms crept around his waist as she burrowed against his warm chest. "I'm so scared."

"Yeah. I am too. But we're together. Whatever it takes, we'll get through the bumps in the road. Now come sit down and tell me about your dream."

With a gasp, she leaned back in his arms and looked at his face.

"What? You thought I wouldn't know you had another dream? Call me vain and stupid but I'm pretty sure you weren't fighting *me* in your sleep!"

With an abrupt laugh, she nuzzled his nipple before kissing his chest. "No, vain dragon, I certainly wasn't fighting you. By the way, your dragon form is gorgeous. I've always loved cobalt blue."

"I was in your dream?" he demanded, intrigued.

Moving away, she carried her breakfast to the table and sat down. "Yep. All fifteen feet of you, twitchy tail and beautiful ruby crest included." Her brows wiggled in interrogation. "Aren't you going to finish your coffee?"

With a nod he rejoined her. "Sure. I can't wait to hear this dream."

In between sips of coffee and meditative bites of toast, she described her dream. He sat quietly, mulling over the hints in the dream while she finished her toast. "And then he disappeared?"

"Yeah. That freaked me out and I have no idea why. After all, the dragon didn't faze me. Neither did the polar bear in the other dreams. Why did this bother me?" She scratched her chin. "He definitely made it very clear that you were the one that the book was supposed to go to."

"Uh-huh." Otis cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Well, let's go find this page he wanted me to read. Somehow..." He shot her a sour smile. "Somehow, I have an idea that there's more to the story than we've ever dreamed."

Coffee mugs refilled, they adjourned to the living room where Otis retrieved the journals, handing them to Clarice, one by one. Her fingertips tingled so that they nearly burned when she touched journal three. "This one."

"All right." He returned the rest to the safe, conscientiously locking it. "Now what?"

For a moment, she nibbled at her lower lip in thought. "We try to find the page. I guess we'll just turn the pages and hope that one of us recognizes it."

"Okay." With a nod of agreement, Otis joined her on the rug in front of the fireplace. Both of them rested their hands on the book for a moment. Then Otis carefully opened the cover and studied the flyleaf.

"*Winter 1055.*" He turned the first page, wishing he knew what they were looking for. There was no hint of sensation from the page, so he turned the next, continuing on until they were nearly a third of the way through the journal. Abruptly, heat and the scent of lavender rose from the page they touched as they inhaled sharply in shock. Carefully marking the page with a bit of torn paper, Otis closed the book and leaned back against the side of the hearth.

"Well," Clarice observed. "I think we found the page. Now what?"

"Now we take a break."

"What?" She looked at him in appalled protest. "We can't stop now!"

"Yes, we can. We've been at this for hours. It's well after lunch time. First we eat. Then I'll see if I can translate enough of the page for us to understand what old Aonghus was trying to tell us." He rolled to his feet, picked up the journal and replaced it in the safe. "Come, Clarice."

Reluctantly, she allowed him to pull her to her feet. "I suppose you expect me to make lunch," she accused lightly.

"Actually, I don't. Believe it or not, I survived quite handily before you came along. I have a yen for salmon salad sandwiches. Will that do for you?" A small smile tugged at his lips as he studied her tired face.

Her mouth watered. "Yum. What do you want me to do?"

"Slice some of the yeast rolls Mama brought over yesterday while I put together the salad." Companionably, they worked in the kitchen, assembling the sandwiches for lunch and making a pitcher of iced tea.

When they were sitting at the table, enjoying their lunch, it seemed that they deliberately put away the puzzle of the journals, taking a much needed breather from the stress of the previous weeks. They talked of inconsequential things until Otis slyly asked, "So tell me, where is your elemental mark?"

She eyed him with cautious respect. "That was really sneaky. I told you I'm not going to reveal that information. You'll just have to find out on your own."

He chewed the last bite of his sandwich while he considered possibilities. "Have I ever mentioned that I really love a bare pussy?"

Fighting the urge to smack that knowing smile from his face, she replied woodenly, "No, I don't believe that subject's ever come up before."

"Are you going to allow me to shave your pussy?" he nudged cautiously.

Tossing down her napkin, she stood up in surrender. "Fine. You are a sneaky, devilish fiend, Otis Quentin Larssen!"

Leaping to his feet, he tugged her in his arms and kissed her pouting lips. "I'm also the man who loves you beyond distraction. Come, let us take a little break time before we save the world."

She bent her head and sharply nipped his bare nipple. "All right, mister smarty pants. Let's do that. But I think if you get to shave me, then I ought to be able to shave you."

Dubiously, he studied her face. "What exactly were you planning to shave?"

“You’ll see.”

Thirty minutes later he sprawled on the shower floor under the cooling spray while she shaved a large artistic heart on his chest baring the patch of skin where he proudly bore his elemental mark. He had to admit that he really couldn’t object to her turning the tables. She’d cheerfully lain on the bathroom floor, legs spread wide so he could remove the curls that hid her personal elemental mark.

Then of course he had to take the opportunity to sample her bare pussy. The smooth, pink, silky skin enticed him so that Clarice didn’t get around to her turn with the razor until they had romped to several climaxes, including one memorable orgasm with her stretched out on the vanity counter with her legs wound around his neck while he enthusiastically pounded her pussy until they both came, screaming at the top of their lungs.

While Clarice traced the edges of the heart on his chest, he idly wondered if their neighbor had been disturbed by their noisy bout of afternoon delight. Then, he forgot all about the neighbor when Clarice straddled his hips, swallowing his cock in the tight, heated depths of her slick pussy. She tightened the muscles in her belly, squeezing his staff so that it pulsed and swelled until he rocked his hips up, groaning at the exquisite sensations.

They should have been fucked out, he thought hazily as she slowly rode him, grinding her bare mons against the wiry patch of hair at the base of his cock. And yet... She paused a moment, her eyes closed, clearly savoring the way they fitted together. Abruptly, she began to move on his cock, taking her own turn as she used him just as thoroughly and vigorously as he had only moments before. Their climaxes left them exhausted and wrung out so that they lay uncaring as cold water showered down on them.

Eventually, wearily, Clarice sat up and reached for the faucets, turning off the cold water. Then, unable to muster the energy to go any further, she flopped back down on Otis’ chest where she dozed off.

When he woke, the house was dark and silent and he was freezing except for one vital portion of his anatomy. His cock was rock hard and buried in Clarice's greedy pussy. He woke up in a hurry when it occurred to him that they had fucked all afternoon without once using a condom. How had that happened?

Clarice turned her head on his shoulder so that she could brush his jaw with her cold, soft lips. "I know," she whispered. "Are you angry?"

"Hell, no." Suddenly, deep in his soul, he knew he would never regret the outcome of the afternoon, whatever it was. With his hands pressing her hips closer, he strained to plunge harder, deeper, meeting her thrust for thrust. This time, when they finally came, it was slow and sweet, with both of them conscious of the possible consequences.

Otis helped her to her feet and turned on the faucet so they could quickly clean up. They dried off and bundled up in warm clothing. "I'm hungry," she said softly as she ran a wide-toothed comb through her wet, tangled hair.

"Me too. What about take out from the Dancing Panda?"

"Chinese?" she leaned up and kissed his stubbly jaw. "I would loooove Chinese!"

A tiny grin tugged at his lips. "Have I found your secret vice?"

Innocently, she shot him a look while she swiftly braided her hair in a long plait. "Me? I have no vices."

"No? Then who was that wild woman who had my cock down her throat? You know the one who tortured me while she hummed and sucked like she was devouring her favorite sausage?"

"Sausage? *Sausage?*"

"Beefstick?" he substituted mildly.

Clarice rolled her eyes and sashayed out of the bathroom. "I'm going to get the take out menu."

He took a last swipe at his own wet hair before following on her heels. In the kitchen, they debated choices from the menu before settling on sesame chicken for him

and *moo goo gai pan* for her. While she called in the order, Otis straightened up the kitchen before checking in with Jack and Fred. Jack volunteered to pick up their food on his way to check in for his shift.

Since they had a while to wait before dinner arrived, Otis retrieved the journal from the safe and they sat at the kitchen table making notes as he translated the difficult script. Halfway down the page, he stopped dead, staring at the script in disbelief. Again, he silently read the spidery words, mentally translating the words as he went.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

"Un-fucking-believable."

"What?"

"Moira Cú Mhara's lover was Fionntán Ó Dubhlaoich!" He rubbed his tired eyes and looked at the tiny script one more time.

Her hand rested on his comfortingly. "What does that mean, Otis?"

"Fintan Dooley," he translated in a low voice. "I bet my ancestor aided your ancestor in stealing and hiding the key because he was Moira McNamara's lover."

"Ahhh." Clarice didn't need him to draw her a diagram. "Well, Aonghus wouldn't have led us to this page unless there's more there. Continue on, beloved."

It took him a moment to realize what she'd said. His head whipped around so that his eyes met hers. "Beloved?"

Capturing his face with her palm, she gazed deep in his eyes. "Can you doubt it?"

"No," he denied instantly at the tenderness on her face. "No, I doubt it not."

"Well, then. Continue on. Let us see what else we must know."

Twelve pages later, they found the second statement that stopped them dead in their tracks. Moira was pregnant. A hasty joyous marriage guaranteed that the unexpected baby was born on the right side of the blanket, so to speak. Aonghus made it clear that Fintan and Moira were overjoyed with their prospective child.

Otis and Clarice sat for a while contemplating the latest turn of events in silence. Then with renewed determination, Otis bent over the book again. His concentration was broken by the peal of the doorbell. His eyes flew to Clarice's face. Their agreement was instantaneous. Immediately, he marked his place, gathered their notes and placed everything back in the safe.

Then he went to answer the door. As expected, it was Jack with their dinner. While they ate, they speculated about the possible influences the marriage might have exerted on the theft of the key. After everything was put away from dinner, they sat down once more to work with the journal.

For Otis, it was a matter of nervously waiting for the other shoe to drop. He slowly scanned each page, afraid that he would miss the vital clue. Then near the end of the journal the rest of the story fell into place.

Harvest 1055. September 9th. Moira has been delivered of two babes, a son and a daughter. They have named them Aodh and Muireann.

"Odd names," Clarice murmured.

"The boy was named Fire. And the girl was named Fair Sea," Otis explained absently as he scanned the next page.

Yule 1055. Moira and I await Fintan's return with increasing anxiety. He is long overdue from his journey to inform his family of their marriage. Moira worries that he has been attacked by bandits on the road. I confess that I am more worried that he has come to harm at the hands of his unforgiving family.

Winter 1056. January 10th. Fintan's naked body was returned to us last evening, thrown in a tumbled heap at the gate. He had been most grievously used before death. I fear for Moira's sanity.

Summer 1056. August 17th. The raiders came last week. My grandson Aodh was stolen. I was forced to confine Moira else she would have followed them to their homeland to steal him back. I have seen the enemy. Brónach Ó Dubhlaoich will pay a terrible price.

Reluctantly, Otis looked up. "That's the last entry in the journal."

"What do we do now?" she asked in puzzlement.

"I don't know. Clearly, Aonghus wanted us to know this." He stretched and yawned. "It's late. Let's get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll start on the next journal."

Chapter Ten

The glow of moonlight filtered through the slats in the blinds with a dim scattering of illumination in the bedroom. Otis curled his big body around Clarice, holding her tightly as he mulled over the shocking things revealed in the journals. What had happened to Aodh? Why was there such enmity between the McNamaras and the Dooleys even before the key was stolen?

He recalled Clarice's words in the car when she first learned about the stolen keys, how she pointed out that surely the story was one-sided. Uncomfortably, he fought the urge to writhe in embarrassment at his own willingness to accept the story as is. Across the centuries how many others had failed to search for the truth?

When Clarice stirred in her sleep, wriggling until the soft curves of her ass were plastered against his groin, he wondered if she was dreaming about him. Or was she alone on that cold icy plain? His cock was hard and aching, eager to find a home in his woman's warm, wet pussy. A vision flashed over him of Clarice's face as she came, riding him to completion on the floor of the shower in the cool mist and instantly, his hips thrust forward, hitting his cock in her slick pussy.

She murmured and pressed back, taking him deep and tight. "Harder," she whispered.

"I'll never get enough of you," he confessed in a quiet rumble. "Never."

"Neither will I. Even before I finish coming, I want you again and again."

"Clarice." His hand gently cupped her breast. "I want to hold you all night."

With a soft caress, her pussy grasped the hot length filling her. "I'll hold you while you hold me," she promised before drifting back to sleep, reassured with their physical connection on a deep unspoken level.

* * * * *

Though the wind whipped with vicious fierceness around them, she was strangely comforted and warmed by the great dragon's presence. She stood with her back resting against his belly, with his arms sheltering her from the cold. They were joined as one in the final battle for the earth's survival, opposing evil with a united front.

Ranged on the icy white plain in front of them the host of elementals who had pledged their souls to Dammider waited impatiently, snarling with anger and hatred. The evil one stood in the forefront, a terrible smile on his lips as he taunted the old man who waited calmly wrapped in his tattered cloak at the center of the plain.

"Aonghus Cú Mhara, surrender the key!" Dammider's roar echoed across the plain.

Snorting contemptuously, Aonghus negligently flicked his fingers at Dammider. A small stream of water shot out, striking Dammider in the chest. He flew back, crashing into the front line of his host, bowling them over like so many pins.

Leaping to his feet in a rage, Dammider rushed toward Aonghus, murderous intent on his face, flames flaring from his upraised hands. When Clarice would have gone to Aonghus' defense, the dragon prevented her.

And then she saw a most miraculous sight. Between Aonghus and Dammider rose an enormous host of elementals from the four clans on the world – wind, water, fire and earth. And they were led by a silvery female water dragon partnered with a golden male fire dragon.

"*Stop!*" The command rolled across the plain with such terrible power that the very air seemed to tremble. Dammider froze in place, restrained by the ringing feminine voice of command that reverberated with the vibrations of a million chimes.

Across the plain, the tundra split open in thousands of cracks zigzagging beneath their feet. Icy water bubbled up through the cracks, flooding the tundra and the land disappeared until only the tiny island remained where Clarice and her dragon companion stood shivering in despair.

They were too late.

* * * * *

Clarice woke with tears on her face.

"Why are you crying?" he asked with dread.

She slowly described the dream. "We were too late."

With sudden determination, Otis sat up, tossing the bedding out of the way. "No. We will not be too late. Come, Clarice!" he declared, with a gentle slap on her bare hip. "Get up. We'll find the answer now!" He rolled from the bed and strode to the bathroom, leaving her to contemplate her husband in the dim light. When he returned, he yanked on his lounge pants, tying the string at the waist with fast, jerky movements.

"Well? What are you waiting for?"

Sleepily, she yawned and sat up. "I'm so weary. When this is over —"

"We will win, you know. When this is over, you're going to sleep for a week, if I have to tie you to the bed."

She stared at him, noting the stubborn tilt of his chin. "When this is over, we'll rest. In the meantime, why don't you go make the coffee while I get dressed?" Without a word, he stalked from the bedroom to carry out her wishes. She shook her head and muttered as she climbed from the bed. "At least he'll never be boring."

"I heard that!" he yelled from the kitchen.

"I meant you to hear it!" she called back before disappearing into the bathroom and slamming the door.

When she arrived in the kitchen, wrapped in his warm heavy robe, she glanced at the clock and inhaled the smell of fresh hot coffee appreciatively. "Four a.m.," she sighed.

"We'll take a nap later if we can spare the time." Otis set mugs on the counter before rummaging in the cabinets for a mixing bowl and measuring cups.

"What are you doing now?"

"You need to eat something and it's too early for eggs and bacon. I have a taste for coffee cake and it won't take long to make," he replied absently as he fetched ingredients while she poured her coffee and dumped a sweetener in it before adding a dollop of cream. "After you've eaten, we'll get out the books and find the clues we need. The cake will be ready in about thirty minutes. Nuts? Or not?"

"Nuts. What kind?"

"Pecans." He sprayed the pan with a baking spray before pouring in the batter. "This is a simple recipe that you will enjoy – especially warm from the oven with butter. Once we find what we need, we'll fuel up with protein."

"It looks delicious." Clarice sat down at the table with her coffee as she watched him finish his preparations before sliding the pan in the oven. "Bring your coffee and sit down, Otis."

"In a moment. I'll clean up this mess first."

"You know – I'm not sure I can live with a man who insists on doing the dishes. You need a few vices. Maybe the occasional dirty sock on the bedroom floor or whiskers in the sink." She sipped her coffee as he whisked the last of the dishes into the dishwasher. "I could even go for a dirty coffee mug in the sink."

"Huh. You could go that far?" He ran a damp sponge over the countertops before picking up his coffee mug and joining her at the table. "My mother was a real terror with the housecleaning when I was a kid. I learned really early that her way of dealing with a mess was to throw everything away. If I wanted to prevent my stuff from permanently disappearing, then I had to make sure it was put away."

"Whoa! What would have happened if you ran out of clothes?"

"Then you do without," he answered matter-of-factly. "I spent one entire school year – I think I was in fourth grade – going commando. I was so desperate not to let any of the boys know that I wasn't wearing underwear that I never went to the bathroom at school even once that year."

"Otis, that's not right!"

“Well, I for damned sure ensured that my underwear was in the dirty clothes hamper after that.”

Clarice studied his expressionless face with growing anger but when she spoke, it was with deep tenderness. “You’ll make me a fine wife, beloved,” she twitted him gently. “A fine wife.”

He shot her a swift glance before commenting, “Just as long as I get the fringe benefits...”

They drank their coffee in silence until the timer dinged. Otis checked the cake, determined that it was done and removed it from the oven to cool while he set out small plates, silverware and napkins. When they each had a fresh mug of coffee and the steaming coffeecake in front of them, Clarice observed, “You’ve had enough time to mull things over. What’s your plan?”

“Well, obviously the short version is that we’ll take the key to the Arctic Circle and return it to its rightful place.” He scooped up another bit of coffeecake on his fork and contemplated it thoughtfully before sticking it in his mouth.

“And what would the long version be?”

“I’m still working on that.”

* * * * *

Just before noon, Otis found the solution to the key’s return. They’d rapidly worked through the other journals by the simple expedient of Clarice holding them in her hands. If a journal felt warm, they searched it for clues. If not, they returned it to the safe and tried the next one.

Harvest 1062. I fear that the key will never be returned. How long must we wait for the clans of McNamara and Dooley to rejoin? Forever, I fear. The enmity between the clans is so fierce that I do not foresee the time when there will be peace again. Two from the houses must

join. Two must carry the key home. Two must place it in the deep together. Ah, I despair for the world!

Otis nearly dropped the fragile journal.

Finally Clarice said, "Well that seems clear enough."

"I don't know how to swim."

She patted his hand and choked off the laugh that threatened to escape. "I'll swim and tow you. You get to hold on to the box and hold your breath."

"Cute. Very cute," he said with a sour smile.

"Do you have a better solution?"

Closing the journal with an air of finality, Otis shook his head. "No, I must admit that I don't have a better solution. Now we'll have to figure out how we're going to get there. And at sunset, yet."

His words rang a chord in her memory. Then, "*the glittering path to the shining circle at sunset!*"

"What?"

"I think I know how we will get there, Otis. I need to see Moira's journals! And her crystal ball." She jumped up and ran into his office and turned on the computer. "Oh yeah! We need to know when sunset is today!"

Otis grabbed the journal and followed her to the office. "What are you talking about?"

She was clicking the mouse with maddening haste, surfing through the choices presented by the search engines. "Ah! Here we are! Great! We have time." Shoving the big leather chair back from the desk, she grabbed Otis' hand and tugged him back down the hall to the living room. "Crystal ball and journals please."

Hoping that she would explain before he went mad, Otis moved to obey her request. Surely, it couldn't be as simple as she seemed to think it would be. When they

were seated at the table once more with the journals stacked in front of her, she took turns holding each one until she reached the most recent one. Setting the other two aside, she opened the third shabby leather book, closed her eyes and very carefully touched each page until she reached the one that felt warm. No, not warm but blazing hot. The illusion was so powerful that she opened her eyes and stared, certain that the page must be burning.

“This page, Otis. Read this page.”

Taking the journal from her hands, he scanned down the page until he reached a section that resembled a recipe.

glassy sun

wand of power

casket of fate

three sprigs of rosemary

three oak leaves

pure white candle

Light candle. Burn sprigs of rosemary. Burn oak leaves and sprinkle ashes on casket of fate. Connect glassy sun and casket of fate with wand of power. At sunset clasp hands and step onto the glittering path to the shining circle.

Frowning, Otis looked up from the book and asked, “What makes you think this will work?”

Silkily, she replied, “What makes you think it won’t?”

* * * * *

At sunset, they stepped to the space they’d prepared and shifted to their alternate elemental forms for the final journey. Two resplendent dragons stood side by side in the crowded dining room. Otis took a deep breath. They were down to the last step. Clarice cradled the crystal ball with one hand while she held the wooden box with the other. With a delicate touch, Otis lifted Aonghus’ cobalt-blue wand and connected the crystal

ball and the rough wooden box containing the key. There was the loud rush of a cold, howling wind and then suddenly a silvery path appeared in front of them.

Clarice's eyes met Otis' with shadowy fear. He smiled and touched her hand. *Shall we?* he queried in her mind.

The sound of his voice set her at ease. *Yes*, she replied, suddenly calm and sure. Together, they stepped onto the path and were instantly transported to the icy shore of her dreams where Aonghus the wizard waited with increasing impatience in the fiery sunset.

"Come, come," he urged testily. "We must hurry!" He snatched his wand from Otis' hand and instructed Otis to take the crystal ball from Clarice and set it at his feet. "Yes, yes."

Now what? Otis demanded with a ferocious frown.

"Take the box. Return it. Now!" Aonghus whirled his wand in a flamboyant circle, muttering in a language unfamiliar to his descendents. Suddenly with a mighty shout, he pointed the wand at the sea. As though pushed back by an unseen hand, the sea parted revealing a liquid staircase that went down, down, farther down than the dragons could see.

"Go!"

Hand in hand, Otis and Clarice descended the stairs, each step turning solid at the touch of their feet. When the trembling of Clarice's hand captured his attention, Otis held it more securely, offering his comfort and support. She drew a deep, settling breath. Otis her mate and rescuer was with her. All would be well. Eventually, at the bottom of the stairs they saw an icy altar with a rectangular depression in the center.

While Otis waited, Clarice walked forward, gently set the box in the depression and backed away until Otis' hand rested on her shoulder. Turning to him then, she lifted her head until their eyes met in the glow of the sacred altar.

I love you. I will always love you until the end of time, whatever may come our way, she vowed before placing her head on his shoulder. Their tails entwined. Their eyes closed in homecoming. Their hearts beat as one.

Otis' strong arms enfolded her as she listened to the beat of his heart and she realized they were no longer in dragon form. When her eyes fluttered open, they were standing in front of the hearth in the living room.

"Home," Otis sighed happily. "At last we are home."

* * * * *

They slept in peaceful contentment, curled together as one. Clarice stirred lightly when she recognized the icy plain of her dreams, though there were clear differences. Polar bears gamboled in the snow. A sea lion poked his inquisitive nose from the lone opening in the frozen sea. The old man rested on an icy hillock wrapped in his warm cloak. And he was smiling.

About the Author

Anny Cook learned to read at five years old. Learning to write was a natural extension. Through her adult years while a wife, mother, grandmother, fast food cook, warehouse book packer, Girl Scout and Cub Scout Leader, perpetual college student, executive secretary and adult education teacher, writing served as the anchor that kept her sane.

Well, maybe not exactly sane, but close to it. Today, after thirty-five years with kids, cats, dogs, guinea pigs and hamsters, she and her husband are empty nesters. Sigh. Finally, there's time – and quiet – to write in peace.

Anny welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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