



After the Fire

A Granier Falls Novel

Diana DeRicci

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Chapter One

Liar. Fake. Fraud. Deceiver.

The accusations buzzed through Shar's mind like the largest swarm of locusts, the intense drone driving all sane thought far away. Drunken shouts and swearing made aching pain rise and fall in an obnoxious rhythm while the clang of steel doors being thrown into their locks reverberated in her ears. Up and down the cells the crude noise echoed. Being a woman, she had her own private chamber of hell. Lucky her.

Her hangover pounded on as the morning darkness crawled past her. Disgust warred with nausea when she counted just how many hours she'd been trying to erase those flung curses, especially considering who'd said them. The man who'd deceived *her* in flying colors. One by one they marched like a line of tromping ants across her thoughts. Shar was forced to listen to their mocking sound.

Liar.

She swallowed hearing its guttural sound over and over in the silence of her accommodations-for-one tomb. She'd never lied about her ability, never let the words of denial slip past her lips. Omission though, that she knew she was guilty of. It was paramount. Humans, people in general, had *never* warmed to her kind.

Fake.

Ah, yes, another flung taunt. She was so far from fake. She was better than lab-created reality. She *was* the real thing. Not that it mattered now. None of it would help her in her current situation. Which led her to not being a fraud obviously, at least not the kind Lawson had accused her of being. She so easily could use her magic to get out of jail, and be on the nine o'clock news in the morning as the latest sensation. She snickered in silence.

But that last—*deceiver*. Yeah, that one hurt. That one *burned*.

She'd intended to tell him the truth about what she was—today in fact. She knew she was running out of time. She thought he trusted her. She *thought* he loved her. He had asked her rather impetuously to marry once already. What a load of bull. Derision iced her thoughts. It didn't feel any better than the bitter headache.

He'd proposed in style this time with the ring and like an idiot she'd accepted it first. The cruel truth slapping her like that had been the only small blessing she'd received because the rest of her day and her night had promptly fallen into a hellish wormhole of misfortune.

The musty, sour stench of previous inhabitants reeked back at her from the grim furnishings of the jail cell she was at the moment calling home. She prayed it was for only a *very* short stay. Abused brick walls looked like they'd been repeatedly painted by the numerous signs of peeling. The two-inch thick steel door with nothing but viewing bars sandwiched between polyurethane plastic sheets preempted any attempt to try to escape. The guard on the other side would shoot before she got three toes on the other side.

After a humiliating strip search—for God only knew what—the police had left her alone for most of the evening. She knew exactly who she was going to waste her one phone call on. And the bastard better answer his phone if he knew what was good for

him. She had no choice but to wait for dawn, the best chance of reaching him at home. It also gave her more than ample time to replay the night before, the reason behind her forced stay in county hospitality to begin with.

* * * *

“Shar!”

She whirled at the shout of her name, and spotted her best friend twisting through the crowd outside the front of the club. Far from angelic beneath midnight dark hair and eyes models craved, Maddie emerged from the throng. *Mystic* was the only place to be on a Saturday night. The large blue neon letters blazed over the dark entrance; an entrance into another world, at least if you were Kin. Either way, inside or out, it was always busy on the weekends.

“Hey Maddie.” She looped an arm through her friend’s and together they walked into the fog and neon haven. She forced a smile, not wanting to talk about why she was there alone when just six hours ago, she had been nearly engaged. In fact, for a brief few minutes, she *had* been engaged. Until her eyes had been opened to the man she’d believed loved her.

“Boxer, give me something flaming, will you?” she ordered from the tattooed guy behind the bar in a near shout. Bass beats vibrated the air, booming loud and rocking the house like a frat boy’s wet dream. Scantly dressed women danced all over. She drew a deep breath, soaking it all in. It’d been a while since she’d been to the hot spot. She’d been doing more normal things with Lawson. She realized she’d missed being with her own kind.

“One Flaming Star, coming up,” he said, not missing a stride, as if it wasn’t an unusual order for her. She turned and propped her butt against a barstool. Her gaze sliced one way then the other across the undulating bodies packed on the dance floor. She tugged on the leather corset she wore, more out of irritation than for modesty. It fit her like a glove, and matched her attitude. Black, lethal and screaming ‘I’m one hot single babe’, because as of three that afternoon, there was no doubt she was *not* getting married.

“Flaming Star?” Maddie asked, her eyes wide against her porcelain skin. Deep blue, they reflected the neon glow and scattered fragments of the disco balls on the dance floor like fireworks in their depths. “Shar? What’s wrong?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “What could *possibly* be wrong?” she said with a snide undertone. She hadn’t anticipated running into Maddie, but she wasn’t going to turn down the shoulders of one of her best friends. Memories of her afternoon still burned. It was the biggest reason she was in the mood for leather tonight. And Flaming Stars.

“Um, you don’t drink for one, and you ordered a Flaming Star. Two sips and you’ll be on your ass.”

Maddie was right, but she refused to admit it. Instead, she focused her attention on the sea of bodies in front of her.

“Here you go,” Boxer said, sliding the drink toward her on the hardwood bar. She turned to watch the show. A pool of something dark green and sweet-smelling was layered over the base crème liqueurs of the drink. He snapped his fingers and the pool ignited with a cerulean flame. “Make your wish before you blow it out. It’s the only way to drink a Flaming Star.” He winked then turned to get more drink orders filled.

She grimaced. Her wishes would likely get her into more trouble because they

involved the maiming and torturing of a particular male. Thankfully no one would think of reading her mind because even without actually making the wish, it was *really* hard not to *think about* making that wish.

Maddie spoke up. "What happened Shar? You didn't answer me."

Shar frowned, envisioning her now ex's face melting in the glowing flame. He silently screamed as his face solidified in the arc of light, melting like hot wax. "I found out Lawson's been using me." *Oh, fuck it.* She made her wish and blew out the flame. Maddie's jaw fell open. Carefully cradling the tumbler she blew on it, waiting for the glass and liquid to cool enough to sip at the heat-candied liquor layer on top.

She looked across the dance floor to the few tables and spotted Braden and his friends at one. The table next to them was just being vacated. "Let's go grab it," she said.

Once they were situated, Maddie tilted her chin to talk privately, but there was no mistaking the shock in her voice. "But you two are engaged!"

"Nearly engaged. We were nearly engaged," she corrected. Sans one ring, it was pending. She refused to call herself engaged to that jerk.

A choking sound came from Maddie. Shar's gaze stayed locked on the liquid in her drink. Looking up might have disastrous results. The people on the dance floor should be thankful she'd learned control at an early age. The urge to let it out was incredible. A small explosion. Just a small one. She would feel *so* much better, expelling the pent up rage she was silently wallowing in. She forced restraint on her temper instead.

"He popped the question over a month ago. I thought all that was left was the ring. Did he buy the ring?"

A lip lifted in a snarl. "He bought a ring all right." She'd even had a few minutes to enjoy it and the way it looked on her finger before the truth hit her with the force of megaton comet. The painful expulsion of air she'd suffered wearing the glittering diamond had knocked her down. Waves of anger and humiliation made the air shimmer around her. She forced calm back down her throat, along with the first sip of the concoction in her hand. One sip to go and oblivion would be hers. At least for tonight. "Did you know he could block his mind?"

Maddie shook her head, her eyes bulging with what that meant. Lawson knew she was a witch. "How would he know?" she demanded. Her eyes glowed brightly from the inside with indignation, sparking from more than the lights from the strobes hanging from the ceiling. Shar didn't know how Lawson had figured it out, or if he'd known all along. She never got the chance to find out.

It had been a hell of a shock for Shar, that was for damn sure. After a year, she'd had no idea. Talk about being a fool, and he'd accused *her* of being a deceiver. The irony still made her want to scream. She'd been silent for her own protection. That had been the least of his reasons.

"Neither did I. The ring was charged with his aura and I slipped right in behind his protections before I even knew what had happened. I wasn't expecting it at all. I think he didn't believe I'd find him out, definitely not so easily. He's had training to protect himself. He's probably known all along that I have powers. He was after something."

"Oh, Shar," Maddie said with sympathy.

"I'm not, or wasn't, his only girlfriend either." She controlled the shudder when she was forced to acknowledge just how unfaithful he'd been. He'd been playing with her, pretending to care. She'd thought the proposal had been real. He just didn't have the ring

when he'd asked her, his blushing face giving away that it had been spur of the moment. The ring hadn't been that important to her. He'd asked her to marry him! She had been ecstatic. Amazing how well he could act. Derision burned at the memory. She thought the emotion had been real too. It hadn't meant dick to Lawson. The proof was all the women he'd shared his bed with since she'd known him. Let Maddie think it was just one. She could live with that, rather than the reality.

This time the squeak of outrage was much louder. "You're kidding, right? He couldn't have been that stupid."

"Apparently he is."

"Shar, honey. I'm so sorry." Still dumbfounded, she murmured, "I can't believe he'd lie like that. He fooled all of us, then." The note of support coming from Maddie eased the pain knifing through her. "I had no idea. None of us knew him before he came to Granier Falls. He always seemed so damn honest." It was against the Kin laws to probe minds. Just once she should have done it. She'd have saved herself a year of humiliation.

She shrugged again, more than ready to put the whole relationship behind her. "I don't think anyone did." She took another sip, savoring it slowly. She didn't blame anyone but herself for following along, believing in his handsome faced lies.

"He's a scumbag," Maddie said staunchly. Shar had to agree, emphatically.

Getting over the deceitfulness of the man she'd almost married though, that might take her a while. She couldn't believe it. She'd been preparing herself since the original proposal to tell him about herself, to explain her ability and what being a member of the local clans meant, but it hadn't been necessary. He'd guarded himself especially well to keep her from sensing his intentions. He'd slipped somehow with the ring.

Partly he'd been after her father's money, of which yes, she had a little, but she still worked, still earned her own. Her shop in downtown Granier Falls suited some of the sexier feminine wishes. She personally loved the butter-soft leathers she special-ordered for some of her biker friends and their wives. The specialty shop had grown into a full lingerie clothing line and women's leather accoutrement store. With that going on, there wasn't any need to take over her father's finances until it was physically a necessity, and the way her old man was going, she had a long while to wait. Locals knew her lineage. She didn't hide it, but she didn't flaunt it either. Only Kin knew she was a witch, following the family tree for several generations. She'd never suspected Lawson had such a hunger for what she had waiting for her when her parents finally needed her to take over the accounts. Scumbag was actually too kind for him.

The multiple lovers thing... The air shimmered again, a little brighter, a little hotter. Her hair sparked and fluttered as the energy gathered. She'd almost managed to *not* think about that.

"Easy, Shar," Maddie whispered, her shoulder to her own in solidarity. "Be mad, but not in here."

She nodded at her friend's advice. Maddie had some incredible energy strengths herself, but nothing that she'd earned the reputation like Shar had over the years. Family spells helped her a lot. She was also one of the best scryers in Granier Falls. Lose your diamond ring? Call Maddie. Shar's lips twitched at that. She'd seen her do it. Wench, even though it was thought with deep affection. Her sonic-level energy ranged from having the lightest touch of power up to being able to topple a temple with one finger. Shar envied her that. Maddie's apartment was never dusty. Shar on the other hand...

She was well known for her flare-ups, but had learned over the years to keep them under wraps. She wasn't lacking for control most of the time, but this was one of those circumstances where letting loose—even just a little—would feel *so* good. It was like having a good cry, or a hot bath or even both. She'd been so wired since this afternoon, she hadn't thought of doing anything about it. Until now. And this just wasn't the right place for it.

She took another drink. A full one. To hell with sips. The warmth from the candied liquid on top along with the raw burn of the alcohol sliding down her throat made her eyes water. Sweetness and something peppery blended on her tongue, coated her all the way down to her stomach. One more swallow and the lowball glass was empty. Damn but those went down easy after the first shock.

Braden turned and spotted them. Probably because she'd tossed sparks, and anyone who knew Shar knew when she was throwing a temper.

"Hello ladies!" Braden grinned, leaning over the leather of the bench seat, a couple of pals and their dates hovering. "What's going on? Haven't seen you in a while Shar." He said it with a taunting grin. "Set anything on fire lately?" His mouth held a wicked smirk. The gleam in his dark brown eyes seemed to catch the lights and glow with his amusement. It was those same eyes and the sexy taunt of his mouth—and his knowledge of how to use them—that kept his datebook filled with other orderlies and nurses from the hospital where he worked.

She glared at him, then put on a face of sultry decadence. "Just your dreams, lover," she replied in a throaty tease.

A round of howls ensued. Maddie gave her a worried glance, but Shar was feeling pretty impervious. She pushed the empty glass toward Maddie. "I want another one."

"Shar..." She eyed the glass and Shar knew she was studying the moment, searching for the right balance. Really looking for a way to stop the inevitable.

Braden picked it up. Actually, he called it to him, levitating it off the table to hand it to one of the others sitting with him. "Bring the lady a Flaming Star," he ordered. "Tell Boxer not to light it. I want that privilege."

Maddie groaned, but Shar didn't care. Braden had always pushed Shar's buttons. Summer seasons spent training together for their education in the magical arts had proven one thing. There was no one better than Braden.

Except Shar. And it ate at him like a vicious dog, swallowing his common sense in one bite. Even drunk Shar knew she was better, better skilled, with more control.

She stood from the table. She swung her hair back and absorbed the sound of the night, the heat of the bodies in the club. It was its own high. She licked her lips. Leather gleamed in the dance floor lights and arching an eyebrow at him she told him, "Bring it on."

Chapter Two

Trajan rolled over to the shriek of his phone, carefully disengaging the slim arm hanging over his chest. A glance at the clock told him it was seven in the morning. He dragged a hand down his face, silently cursing the idiot on the other end when he answered.

“This better be important.” His voice was rough and deep from sleep. He’d had a long night, a male grin forming to *why* and how delicious of a night it had been, but the voice on the other end made his mouth turn down immediately.

“Trajan, I need you to come to the station. I’ve been arrested.”

“Shar?”

“No, the Sta-Puff Marshmallow Man. Yes, it’s Shar, and I only have two minutes, so get your ass down here.”

He snapped awake at her scratchy, tired and undeniably pissed tone. “What are doing in jail?”

“Just come down here. And stop by my place and grab a credit card. I might need bail.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “Which station?”

“Eighth street.”

“Fine. You better be ready to explain this one.”

“Sounds fair, just ... do it Trajan.”

He heard the soft plea in her voice. He knew she’d never actually beg him for his help, so asking for it to begin with had to make this a big deal. She was a tough lady, and smart. Then why did she call Trajan instead of Lawson? Not her parents, and not her fiancé. He shook his head.

He let the air out of his lungs, sliding from the bed. A soft whimpering murmur reminded him he wasn’t alone. “Sissy, could you lock up when you leave? I have to go help a friend.”

She blinked large emerald eyes at him, lifting a little on one hand. The sheet drifted further down her back to uncover the curved side of her breast as she rose from her stomach. Memory filled in what he’d done with those breasts just a few hours before. She wasn’t one of his kind, and he preferred it that way for these kinds of relationships. No entanglements. Dating one of the Kin lead to presupposed outcomes. He knew he wasn’t looking to marry and ruin a perfectly good bachelorhood existence. Intermingling was allowed and many did marry outside of the Kin, but this was his own rule and he lived by it. Saved himself from a mile long list of questions and matchmaking that would go nowhere.

His skin stretched as he stood, working muscles into wakefulness with reaching movements. He detoured for a quick shower, leaving his warm bed and an even hotter blonde in it. He dropped a kiss to her pouty mouth, confirming she would be gone by the time he got home, albeit regrettably, because he’d been looking forward to a morning goodbye. He shook his head. Shar better have a damn good reason for this one.

Arrested? Shar Brenna wasn’t the type to get arrested. So what had she done to be arrested *and* need bail?

He rode his Black Nightmare, an aptly named black and chrome chopper, toward her apartment. He didn't need a key to get in, which helped, the metal in the lock obeying his commands. He found her purse on the kitchen counter and after a minute of digging through her wallet, spotted a Visa. Her apartment was like many others, simple in color, furnished with only a few things; an entertainment center and TV system, a couch, side chair and coffee table. He grinned when he thought of all the times he'd teased her about her bedroom back at her home, loaded with unicorns and fairies. She'd been quite the girlie girl growing up. She was definitely all woman now. He frowned, wondering why the thought of her grown up now should even matter. It was too early in the morning for shit from Shar, that was the problem.

With the card in his pocket and her door locked beneath his fingers, he drove downtown, pushing away the thoughts of her grown-up self.

The station was morosely quiet for a Sunday morning. He looked at the guy in blue behind the glass. A normal guy, tired and probably at the end of his shift. Trajan caught his stare and held it. Something about his behavior told him all was not well in Oz. Must have been a long night. "Is she under suspicion for something?" he asked, requesting information about her and if there was bail.

The teller rolled a shoulder. An officer nearby shook his head when the teller looked to another in a blue uniform. Trajan didn't know this officer. He was older, had probably been on the force for his whole life, just not around there. Trajan recognized a lot of them. He knew a few of the Kin were on the force, but this wasn't the right time to try to find one.

The cop motioned to Trajan to bring him over. He wasn't surprised when he didn't offer a handshake. "No bail. She hasn't been charged. Yet."

The teller pulled the clipboard Trajan had signed toward himself and started the release work ignoring the lowered conversation going on nearby.

"Then why is she being held?" A lick of anger flared through his gut, but he held it back. She'd spent the night in jail for nothing?

"She's a witness to last night's fire." The officer rocked back on his heels. "She could be a suspect depending on what's found, if she remembers anything," he said with meaning.

Dark eyebrows rose. "Fire?" *Ah, hell, Shar. What did you do?* There was more, he was sure of it. Information Trajan wasn't going to find out without a lawyer. He just wanted her out of that slime hole. That was the priority.

"Yeah, the *Mystic*. Went up hard and fast. Several units are down there this morning searching the rubble. Looks like one hell of an accident."

He swallowed. Shar? Responsible for arson? That was the definite vibe this cop was giving off. Trajan's lips thinned into a grim line. That did not sound right. How did Shar get picked out of a crowd for starting a fire? He could only imagine. "I'm a friend of the family. She's not going anywhere." He'd only find out by talking to her.

The steel in his voice must have been very convincing. The officer didn't blink an eye, just nodded and walked away. The teller moved to the thick door leading to the rear cell hallway. He pushed an intercom. "You can bring out the redhead. Her ride's here."

Trajan's gaze locked on that door. Just what the hell did she get into? This was not like Shar. For as long as he'd known her, she'd been safe and sane. Arson? She had a temper and had been known to have little blow ups, but to torch the nightclub? That

couldn't be right.

The sight of her red hair when the door opened made his eyes narrow. The golden-red thickness lay in disarray, attesting to the long hours she'd been running her hands through the fine silk reaching down her back. The black leather bustier she wore held her breasts like loving hands, pushing the ivory mounds upward, stretched like a second skin around her ribs and waist. The bottom hem stopped just shy of the waistband of her pants, delivering teases of a flat stomach and her navel as she walked forward. It wasn't just the bustier she wore either. The pants were leather too, painted on with a hedonistic brush, hugging every inch of her long legs and sweetly curved hips, ending in a wicked pair of black-heeled boots. Damn, but she must have been in a mood yesterday. He rarely saw her dressed like this.

It was a good thing, too. He had a hard time keeping that younger sister label on her when she did. They weren't related, not even close. They'd grown up together, had the same summer instructors, and several Kin functions where they'd always paired up to hang out and he'd never thought of her as anything but his own sister except on rare occasions. This was one of them. That black leather had his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, wanting to run it from the arch of her boot all the way up to the juncture that he knew would be hot. Shar didn't know how to be any other way.

He sucked in a breath finally rising up the length of her body to meet her eyes when he felt he could. Tired but defiant. The officer opened the panel in the hip high wood barrier and she walked trustingly into his arms.

"Thanks for coming, Trajan," she whispered into his chest. His arms encircled her automatically.

Taking a deep breath, he brushed her hair away from the silk of her skin. She was pale with exhaustion but she looked unharmed.

"You owe me an explanation," he reminded her, his voice filled with his annoyance. Not only with her situation, but they'd held her overnight for no reason. Not any reason they'd given him. Maybe she had a better one.

She nodded. His fingers tingled where they brushed against the bare skin of her back.

"Miss Brenna, here's your ID."

She slid it into the rear pocket of her pants without giving the teller a look. "Is that everything?" Trajan asked her.

"Everything but my dignity," she replied for his ears only. A shiver rolled across her shoulders. He noticed all the men had stopped to watch her leave. Not that he could blame them in that skintight leather man-trap outfit she was wearing. The corner of his mouth lifted in a silent snarl and one by one they blinked or turned away from her. "They searched me," she whispered, the sound wavering with her own disgust and humiliation. "I didn't do anything."

He shook his head, the clip of his boots sharp in the morning stillness surrounding them. She'd never been arrested. Another shred of innocence destroyed. Although he doubted she was all that innocent anymore, but it kept his thoughts from going down roads he didn't even need to consider when it came to Shar. And all that damn soft leather.

Instead of pulling her close again, he told her, "Come on," swallowing when his voice was still gruff. The want to curl her into his body, to protect her not only from the leering stares but from the memory of the night he was sure she'd spent cooped up behind

bars was unbelievably overpowering. It kept him moving them both out through the front doors of the station. It was the brother reflex. He knew it. Except she didn't look like anyone's sister this morning.

She looked like heaven wrapped in sin.

She slid onto his bike and waited. He shook his head dismissing the arousing thoughts, hitting the starter and leaving the station for her apartment.

He'd had a woman sitting behind him just the night before, but the heat of her lean leather clad thighs pressed against him made his heart race. He clenched his jaw. What the hell was going on? Shar was taken damn it! She was his little sister. It was the safest column to put her in. Getting yanked out of a warm bed, and out of warmer arms fed the frustration she was causing. He growled at her to get off, barely able to control the irritation of what he'd had to leave back at home by the time they reached her complex.

She glared at him, then tossed her head, throwing her long red wave of hair behind her as she marched to her front door. It opened two paces before she reached it, making his eyes narrow. Damn but she was pissed. She never threw around careless magic. He pocketed the key to his ride and followed her into the apartment, closing the door the usual way. With his hand.

"Shar?"

His voice sank into the numb quiet. Rustles came from her bedroom. He strode to the doorway where he found her. She sat on the edge of her bed, rubbing her scalp with stiff fingers. "I didn't do anything," she said, her voice low, her eyes closed.

"What happened?"

It wasn't until he heard her sniff that he realized why she wouldn't look at him. Her body shuddered as she took a deep breath. "Maddie is dead."

Trajan blinked. "Maddie?" *Dead?*

She nodded and her fingers continued. Another deep breath lifted her shoulders, filled her body. Her voice was hoarse, fighting tears. "She was there with me. She was on the dance floor when the first explosion happened." Her words wavered. "I was drunk, but I didn't cause the fire." She swallowed, her voice saying she just wanted someone to believe her. "I swear I didn't have anything to do with it."

Misery coated every syllable. He understood her concerns. Shar's talents were born from the natural elements. Wind, water ... fire. She was a walking fireball most days, but had learned how to control it. There hadn't been an incident of any magnitude since she was seven. But the *Mystic* was *their* hangout, others—non-magic users—weren't typically in the know to find it, much less get in. They only got in if they were with someone and were known. It was a precaution, and it was necessary. There weren't many clubs in Granier Hills that were Kin-only, but the *Mystic* had been.

"A lot of people knew I was mad," she said, a forlorn admittance to a guilt he knew she didn't want, praying that even drunk, she wasn't to blame.

He knew what she was saying, but knew better than to charge in and demand answers. He'd leave with singed body parts if he did, and it wouldn't be the first time. "Did it have something to do with you getting drunk?"

A firm blush rose on her skin and she tilted, using her hair to cover her cheeks. "It had everything to do with getting drunk."

"Shar," he groaned.

She whipped up, and her light blue eyes impaled him. "I did not cause the fire." She

stood to her feet and his mouth went dry.

Okay, he had to admit it, even if only silently. Shar was hot. Wild, thick red hair, eyes that reminded him of cloudless spring skies sparked with her anger like whips of lightning, and soft lips that deserved kisses for hours parted. He didn't dare look at that leather again. His mind seemed to desert him thinking of what was under it, of how it looked hugging her body and the sweet curve of her breasts. Usually she was in jeans and something not screaming sex. Thank God she was engaged and wasn't in any way his problem.

She stalked up to him and jabbed a finger into his chest. "Don't 'Shar' me," she snapped. "People *saw* me."

His hands shot out and gripped her shoulders. "Others?" A fresh flash of anger had him digging his fingertips into the pale white skin beneath his touch. She was a sex kitten dressed the way she was. It was making it hard for him, in more than one way, to stay focused on the problem at hand. It had to be because he'd had to leave Sissy back in his own bed. Shar had ruined his morning plans. It wasn't all that surprising, he guessed. She also had the knack for riling him into a hot anger. She winced as his thoughts tumbled faster and his fingers tightened. He relaxed the instant he realized the marks he saw on her skin were from him.

A sigh, one full of regret slipped past her lips. "No. I don't think there was anyone but Kin in the club." But he could tell by the evasive glances she slid passed him, she couldn't guarantee him that either.

"Damn it, Shar. You know better. You're twenty-eight. And I know you have better control than that. Hell, you don't even drink."

She smacked his hands away and glared up at him, the heat in her gaze damning him for bringing up the obvious. Even in those sexy as sin black boots, she only came to his chin. He couldn't resist and slid his palms up her arms onto her shoulders again. Her skin felt warm and silken against him. Fire raced up his arms. It was a sure sign she was furious again.

"And why did you call me? Why didn't you call Lawson? Where was he?"

Pale blue eyes rounded then closed, a sharp pain slicing through her expression before she hid them entirely from him.

Chapter Three

Shar swallowed, fighting to not collapse where she stood. The drain of the night was catching up to her. Her emotions slammed into repeatedly, the abuse taking its toll until she was barely able to do more than breathe. She'd lost her best friend, been used by the one man she'd completely trusted and loved, and had barely survived the night with her life. Add in more than twenty-four hours without sleep and she felt absolutely vacant inside. Lifeless. A huge void sucking all her energy and every breath out of her body.

Trajan stood glaring at her like she'd given up the secret code to King Tut's tomb. She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. She couldn't answer him. She was barely thinking in coherent thoughts anyway. What could she tell him without making herself look worse?

She didn't know who, if anyone else had made it out of the burning club, because someone had pointed her out and she'd been arrested as soon as the fire crews and emergency vehicles had arrived. She assumed she'd been accused by witnesses for starting the first explosion. It wouldn't be the first time she had been fly-off-the-handle furious and caught at it. She had been looking for Maddie in the rush of people escaping the club when she'd been stopped and cuffed. She never found her and the people scattered on the street outside were a throng of bodies. It wasn't everyone. It couldn't have been. She knew people had been trapped inside. Shar watched the collapse of the fire-engulfed roof through the bulletproof glass of the patrol car. She'd screamed watching sparks rise and timber fall, tears of hopelessness streaking her face as the last of the building disappeared in flames. The whole night had been one blur, a fast-forward movie that had caused any drunkenness to dissipate with an unrelenting hand of chilling reality.

"Shar?" His voice lowered, but she still heard the snarled, barely controlled impatience. He wanted an explanation.

She swallowed down the bile in her throat. It was too fresh. Losing Maddie was a huge ripped tear across her heart. Friends since the fourth grade, it was like she'd lost an appendage. The flare of the explosion and the inky smoke that it caused were burned into her worst nightmares.

Her continued silence must have clued him in, in some small way. The weight of his hands on her shoulders lightened, his thumbs stroking her, caressing as he stared at her, waiting for her to answer him.

"What happened?" Seconds dragged by when he finally let out a harsh breath, feeling the way he searched her with his gaze. The weight of his probing was a constant sensation, any hint, any clue to her thoughts. He didn't ask again, or push. She knew this was only a short reprieve but right that second, the support, the comfort of his embrace when he pulled her forward into his body was the most blessed gift she could have received.

His fingers began a soothing dance up and down her back. Her cheek pressed against his chest where the tumbling thud of his heart drummed. Reassurances. Sanity. Trajan had always been her steady block when she'd needed him. That was why she'd called him, and not her parents. They'd have flipped finding her in jail, guilty or not. And there

was no way in hell she was calling Lawson for anything, although informing the dog-catcher he was loose had potential.

“Better?”

Trajan’s voice was like rough velvet as its timbre slid down her spine, a whip of heat following it and her lips parted in surprise. She felt her nipples harden in answer and shuddered at the sensual stroke of his touch on her skin. *What was that?* The drag of his fingers along her spine created waves of heat, trailing after the rush of his voice on her nerves.

Too long of a night. Too many shocks. Too much going on. Had to be.

With a deep breath, she nodded and he let her go, a final touch as he wrapped her hair once and gave it a gentle tug. Just like when they were kids. Green eyes darkened for just a heartbeat as he stood over her. They were a summer green flecked with a silver-grey she’d always admired.

A solid knock on her front door had his hand falling away. “I still want to know what happened, Shar,” he warned her. “You didn’t explain why the cops are watching you now, or what made you so mad. They might have reason to accuse you if people did see you throwing your temper around.”

Closing her eyes, she knew he was right. It galled her he knew her well enough to know exactly why she was in trouble. The knock sounded again. “Let me see who that is.”

He followed her out of the bedroom, standing near the kitchen break wall to watch her. Whoever it was, she’d get rid of them and maybe in the next ten minutes, convince Trajan to go home too, without an explanation. She really needed to be more coherent to sound believable. She was ready to fall apart and she wanted to do it in private.

She swung the door open and gaped in absolute silence for several disbelieving seconds.

“Maddie?” It was a shocked squeak.

The woman before her nodded, her big blue eyes glistening with tears. Shar squealed and pulled her into a tight hug. “I thought you died in the fire!” She dragged her into the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Laughter and tears fell from them both. “I was released from the hospital less than an hour ago. I called home and told them I was fine, but I couldn’t find you.” Real concern and worry colored her voice as Maddie watched Shar. “So I came here.”

“I spent the night in jail,” she explained, rather bitterly.

“No! Why?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Trajan came to my rescue this morning.”

Maddie looked behind her and smiled. “Hi Trajan.”

Warm fingers found the back of her neck, giving her a tender squeeze as he came forward. “Call me this afternoon when you’ve recuperated.” The actual statement was *I still want an explanation, but I can wait for this*. There was no mistaking his looks, or his voice. Surprisingly though, he understood and relinquished his need for questions with Maddie back and among the living.

She threw her arms around his neck and planted a huge kiss on his cheek, inhaling the familiar scent of his skin. A familiarity she’d had most of her life. “Thank you Trajan. Really.”

Strong arms held her close, lifting her up and into his solid body. A sudden intimate

heat gathered where he touched her, front and back, up and down. Unexpectedly the leather she wore seemed much tighter, and much hotter than she remembered.

He was slow to put her on her feet sliding her down his front, his gaze intent. The friction created new sensations, only confusing her more. "Call me, or I'll be back," he warned her. She watched his gaze flicker over her face until he released her completely, her hands sliding down the firm wall of his chest. She nodded, feeling the tiny shocks of his fingers on her skin. The door clicked shut behind him, and the roar of his bike followed just a moment later.

* * * *

"So what the hell happened?" Maddie asked, sipping tea together after Shar showered and changed. They sat on her couch, Maddie being careful of the bandaged bump on her temple. Only the occasional wince when she moved too fast showed her pain. Shar had spotted the raw looking scratches on her arms and could only think how grateful she was that Maddie had escaped the fire.

"I don't know," she murmured, blowing the lazy steam from the top of her cup. "I don't remember a whole lot, and after I was arrested, it blurred."

Maddie shook her head. "I knew you getting drunk was a mistake."

Shar frowned, refusing to believe she'd be that careless. She knew she wasn't. "I didn't start the fire."

Maddie took a deep breath, and her onyx bangs flitted off her forehead when she blew it out. "Honestly, I know that," she said. "But you were pissed last night. I can't remember seeing you that mad."

Shar blinked, and felt a lump in her stomach. It was hard and her stomach didn't like it in the least. "What did I do?"

The wide blue of her gaze jumped to stare at her. "You really don't remember, do you?"

That lump grew hot and leaden. She swallowed and shook her head. She wiped her palm on her leg, willing the knot to go away. It didn't listen.

"Braden challenged you."

Her head fell back with a thump to the back of the couch. *Not a challenge*, she moaned silently to herself. Hadn't they all outgrown those at their age? She must have been rip-roaring out of it to fall for a juvenile taunt like that. Okay, so dares like this were normally harmless, but if you're Kin, it's almost expected that the challenged *has* to accept to prove their ability. Classic one-upmanship on a magical scale. Just very, *very* juvenile. She did know better. At least on any other night she would have. She groaned, glancing at Maddie. "Please tell me I turned him down." Maddie's look said otherwise. "What did we do?"

"You both started with a lightshow," she began hesitantly. "Ceiling fireworks in a corner. It kind of grew from that."

The next groan was louder. "Inside?"

Maddie nodded.

"So it's possible I did start the fire," she muttered, feeling worse and worse.

Maddie sat and thought in silence. "No more than Braden could have. Honestly, I don't think either of you did. The fireworks were under control. Even Braden said so, and it was an explosion, near the rear. The first one took out half the back wall and knocked a

lot of us off our feet on the dance floor. I remember getting yanked to my feet and hauled out through some door, or maybe another wall fell.”

God, what had she done? The *Mystic* was their hangout, but it wasn't completely unlikely for someone not Kin to be there. And she'd been showing off, needing to regain some sense of self after Lawson's betrayal. It was a huge, reckless chance that she'd taken. *Stupid, Shar, sheer stupid.* “What happened to Braden?” she whispered.

“He escaped. I think he was at the hospital too, but I didn't see him.”

Shar nodded. God, her life was going to hell in a handbasket fast. “Any idea if anyone died?” she finally managed through numb lips. She really didn't want to hear this part. A chill settled over the lump creating a glacier of ice, thick, cold and slow moving through her veins.

“I really don't know but I'm hoping we all got out,” she replied, her voice low and shaken. “The blast was huge and it took out a support wall. It collapsed.” She looked over at Shar, her eyes growing wide. “You didn't do this! I know you didn't.”

“How can you say that?” She'd never taken chances like she'd apparently taken last night. Playing with fire in a building, around gallons and gallons of alcohol and contained canisters of gas, endangering lives, using her magic in public. *Exposing herself to anyone not Kin.* Being Kin was how they referred to magic users in any given town. They were all Kin because they shared some form of magic ability, even though those powers and abilities could be anything from telekinesis to healing. Being part of the Kin as a whole made any resident a member of the town clan, and she was part of the Granier Falls clan and had been all her life. If any member moved, they simply transferred their status, like registering your car for county taxes, or getting an address for another city.

“Do you think the council will get involved?” Shar asked with a timid squeak.

Maddie gave her an incredulous look. “You know the council isn't going to do anything. They'll let it play out, see how close they get to being exposed *and then* pretend they are the all-mighty council.” She sipped at her tea. “I don't blame you for being worried, but honestly, this is beneath them right now.”

The council oversaw the clan, but not individual issues. Unless it jeopardized the entire clan and exposure. Councils were underground governing bodies. Their rules were very similar to most and many of their laws ran parallel to everyone else's. Unless it was huge, it was considered personal or for the normal world to intervene. That also meant most Kin were expected to use common sense and avoid *any* chance of exposure.

This was where she knew she'd screwed up. The *Mystic* had been special to the Kin. It's also why they both knew the council wouldn't get involved with the fire. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary to anyone who didn't know the truth. To the world, it was just another club.

If it got back that it went up because of flagrant abuse of magic rules though...

She wanted to sink into the couch cushions. She was guilty. It was only a matter of time before everyone else realized *how* guilty she was for them to come and haul her away. She drew a deep breath to keep that chunk of frozen shame in her stomach.

Trajan was going to have her ass on a platter once he heard about this. She licked her lips, sliding a pleading look to her best friend. “Could you not tell Trajan?”

Maddie yawned, lifting a hand to her mouth. “I won't say anything, but Shar...” Her eyes fluttered and she sank down further on the couch. Maddie wasn't going anywhere for a while. Shar wasn't about to let her leave or even think of driving anyway. They

were both exhausted.

“What Maddie?” she said, standing to let her friend have the couch to stretch out on. Shar tossed a folded blanket over her friend as she plumped one of the throw pillows for herself.

“If you didn’t cause the explosion and Braden didn’t, who did?” Shar froze, looking at her friend. She heard the silent question even as Maddie drifted off to sleep without it needing to be spoken: *And why?*

Chapter Four

Trajan glared at the clock on the wall then he turned an impatient stare back to his worktable, getting angrier by the minute. It was after three and she still hadn't called. The wheel design he was working on for the next bike project wavered before his vision. Patience had never been his strong suit, least of all with Shar. She still owed him an explanation.

Regrettably his house had been empty by the time he walked back through the front door that morning. So much for his morning goodbye. Sissy definitely had some talented fingers. He promised himself to call her in a week or two. It was an easy relationship between them, neither interested in more than a few hours of sexual relaxation. With his leisure plans destroyed, he grabbed a coffee and walked the short distance to his garage behind his property, where he'd set up his design shop for custom rims and artwork.

The house sat on not quite four acres, his nearest neighbor up the hill and not very talkative, which was how he preferred it. He'd gone into the Army right after graduation, spent his four years and declined re-enlistment when his father passed away. Losing his last family member had reminded him what was important. With a few fond memories of his service days, he thanked the military for the down payment on the old farmhouse, and the education in computer detail to support himself doing what he loved.

A lingering smell of gasoline and oil, dry cement and paint filled his working garage. Occasionally, there was the sound of a newborn exhaust on a motorcycle that he helped design. It was a hungry sound, impatient, ready for anything. He commiserated quite well with that sound.

He had standing relationships with three different chopper shops in town. One had even offered to have him come on permanently, but he liked working in his own space. And on days like today when he couldn't think beyond a particular infuriating redhead, it was for the best he did work alone.

It had taken a long time to get this business up and running, and being distracted by black leather and a flash of baby blue eyes was not helping him any. Frustration made him snarl deep in his throat.

What had Shar been thinking? What had she done? He really wanted to know because he needed to avoid her when she was like she'd been this morning. All fire and anger. Temptation.

He clenched his jaw, reminding himself she was engaged and he had no reason to be lusting after her like this. She was his little sister in his heart. He couldn't name why he'd seen her this morning and felt like he'd been slapped with a horny stick to begin with.

He had known Shar since she was five and he was nine. They'd had the same instructors during several training seasons. He had a natural talent with metals and could form or design shapes better than most cutting machines. It coupled easily with his desire to design the unique rims he was known for. He was doing design on several specialty bikes and thrived on the idea of seeing those same ideas come to life on his private obsession. Trajan had nurtured a private love of motorcycles his whole life, and now with the shop and his painting on the side, he could thoroughly enjoy them. His own cruiser was one of the first bikes he completed the styled rims for, and he hadn't stopped

working since.

A heavy gulp on his coffee helped his mind focus again. He brought the blank pages forward to trace out the design for the mock-up he'd planned for his latest idea. It wasn't due for another week, but he wanted to work out any design problems before delivering on it, full scale on sixteen-inch rims.

An hour had passed the next time he looked up and caught the time again. "All right, Shar," he muttered. His patience snapped and he stalked to the office and reached for the phone. It rang beneath his hand.

When he held it to his ear, her voice on the other end skittered across his nerves and he raked a hand through his hair. He blamed the fire snapping over his nerves on her taking her sweet time with calling.

"About damn time Shar."

"I was asleep!" Indignation screeched across the phone at him. "Just because you slept last night, or *not*," she ground out with meaning, "doesn't mean I did. Besides, Maddie passed out on my couch. She needed sleep too."

"Well, you're awake. Talk."

Her breathing was the only thing he heard for several seconds and for just an instant, he could swear he felt her hot breath racing over his neck. He shook his head, pushing it away, wishing he could convince the pressure in his jeans to do the same. Just what the hell was going on with him?

"Maddie swears I didn't do it. She said the explosion ripped out a wall, and I was on the other side of the bar from where it happened."

He leaned a hip against his desk, his eyes narrowing as he listened. What wasn't she telling him? Knowing Shar, a lot.

"Why would people think you had anything to do with it at all, Shar? Why would the police pick you up as a witness?"

Silence again. For the first time, he felt a pang of worry. "How drunk were you last night?" Shar didn't drink, and if she was drunk enough to not remember... And where was her fiancé during all of this? He knew it was only a matter of the ring between them since he'd already popped the question. He hadn't realized it, but he'd almost been avoiding her since he'd heard about it. He just wished he could be happier for her.

Lawson was an alright guy, not a magical that he remembered in the once or twice they'd crossed. Someone else was about to be responsible for the red-haired trouble waiting to happen. For Trajan, it couldn't be soon enough. Last night was proof.

"Pretty drunk," she admitted, sounding repentant. "I had a Flaming Star. That's all I remember until about five this morning, clearly. I think I had more than one," she told him, obviously not wanting to. He heard her swallow, hearing the apprehension as easily as if she stood right in front of him.

He groaned. "Those things are not for lightweights." God, no wonder she couldn't remember.

Snide mockery rifled back to him. "Thanks for pointing that out to me, Trajan Lee. I've learned my lesson," she admitted. "Never again."

"Why Shar? What were you doing?"

"I don't remember," she whispered, a touch of fear lingering in her voice.

"Does Maddie?"

"No!" She was quick to divert him away from questioning her friend, very quick.

He rubbed his eyes, checking the time. If Maddie had slept at Shar's until she called him, she should be at home now too. "I'll be by later tonight to check on you," he warned her, already planning on stopping by Maddie's to find out just what had happened. Shar wasn't going to tell him anything, even if she did know. It was stubborn of her, but he should have expected it.

"I'm fine, Trajan. Thanks for this morning. Now I just want to take some aspirin and survive the rest of my day."

He chuckled not feeling much sympathy for her lingering discomfort. She was too old now to read the riot act to, but... "You should've known better, Shar." He wasn't her 'older brother' and friend for nothing. It did have its perks.

She sighed. "I did Trajan, and I did it anyway."

Her answer made him grin more. "Well, stay put. I'll be there in a couple of hours."

"Bring Chinese?" Her smile was back in her voice.

"I can do that."

He hung up and picked up his truck keys. Time to check up on Maddie at her place.

* * * *

He knocked on her door about half an hour later. He heard a cat's meow on the other side. *Doorbell*. Lass was as good as a watchdog, just not vicious enough.

"Shoo," he heard as the lock turned. "Trajan?" Her eyes widened when she cracked the door. "Is Shar okay?"

He nodded and walked in when she opened the door all the way. "How are you feeling?"

Closing the door, she replied, "Like I was mauled." She held up her hair. "Look at this." She showed him the long ends, looking ragged and uneven, scorched and burned.

"Two inches won't make you less beautiful Maddie," he reassured her. It was exactly what she needed to hear. It was hard to miss the bandage where it partially covered a large bruise. It snaked into her hair from her temple. She gave him a grateful smile. "You are alive," he said quietly a moment later. "I don't think your hair is going to be a life deforming problem."

"I know." She shivered, and rubbed her hands together, then up her arms. "It was so surreal, Trajan." She sauntered over to her couch and sat down. He followed, watching as Lass jumped up between them when he did.

"What did Shar do?"

She kept her eyes lowered, stroking her cat. "I know she didn't cause the fire," she told him.

"Madelyn." He turned her to look up. "I know Shar. I want to know what happened."

She gulped. "I know, I know. She made me promise not to tell though."

"And when she's picked up by the police again to question?" He shook his head. "I need to know."

Maddie's eyes widened. "You don't really think ... I mean, w-would they?"

"I don't know, but someone pointed her out as a witness last night. Someone saw her do something that looked like it could have been cause."

"Dang it," she muttered. She dropped her gaze, picked Lass up and put her on her lap. After a moment of conscience searching, she said, "Braden challenged her. But she was careful!" He pinned Maddie with a hard stare, and she gave in. "All I know is the big

explosion came from the corner off the dance floor. It shattered inward, and the wall collapsed. She wasn't near it."

"Inward?" It had been a while since he'd been to *Mystic*, and was envisioning the interior from the bar to the dance floor to the rear walls.

She nodded.

"Was there anything against the wall? Anything a stray power arc or a spark could hit?"

Maddie thought back, then said, "No, not that I can picture."

Had someone set up something outside? He doubted it. He'd seen some of Shar's temper tantrums. She earned her red hair. All the time.

He rubbed Maddie's shoulder. "You going to be okay?" he asked a moment later.

"I think so. If you talk to Braden, he'll tell you the same thing."

"I just don't understand why she'd do something like this to begin with." She broke at least two Kin laws that he knew of, and it was never acceptable to be arrested to begin with. It put scrutiny on all the Kin.

"Just, Trajan," she said, dumping Lass back down to the floor, rising when he did to open the door. "Don't be too hard on her. It wasn't her fault."

"We'll see," was all he said walking out to confront Shar.

Chapter Five

Shar sprawled on her couch with another cup of tea and the bottle of aspirin within easy reach, as comfortable as she could be in a pair of bikini shorts and an exercise top. The remnants of her hangover were refusing to dislodge themselves and leave her alone. She'd paid her price, several times over. Had it only been one Star or the two she thought remembered? Trajan was right, she was a lightweight, she huffed with disgust.

With a light tap, her door opened and Trajan walked in carrying a plastic bag and containers. *Speak of the devil*, she grouched. He barely looked at her as he locked her door and set the bag on the counter.

With his back to her she could think about how she was going to handle this, and what she was going to tell him. She couldn't stomach admitting Lawson had lied about so much. About his affections, about loving her. Not to mention the women. *That* made her skin crawl. He wasn't from their Kin circle, so no one knew him well. Someone would have picked up early on his ability to hide everything and keep his thoughts under wraps, but not many had met him, Maddie and Trajan only in passing. She'd spent more time with his friends and doing what he wanted.

Maybe he really just knew how to slip a blind over his thinking. She wouldn't be surprised at all if that were true. Some normal humans did have the ability. It could also explain why he'd been so shocked when she *had* found out his plans. What was worse was he made her doubt herself so badly. The ring was important to him, it proved his ownership over her, one step closer to the plans he'd laid. It held a lot of his aura because of its importance, and it had been a direct link to him and his wants. Regardless, it still made her feel cheap and used. So much for love, trust and all that rot, she thought bitterly.

A strong back stretched as Trajan leaned over the counter and pulled plates from the rack. Suntanned arms moved, biceps flexing with each twist of a shoulder from the sleeveless t-shirt he wore. Her eyes followed the muscular lines from his shoulder down to his waist. And then did it again.

She sucked in a short breath when she realized what she was doing. Trajan had always been sexy, it was just one of those givens. The obnoxious sister and the handsome-as-sin brother. He'd definitely helped create the package image during all those training seasons of their youth. It had afforded her some protection, because there weren't many who would challenge Trajan with or without magic. They were the best of friends, always able to rely on each other no matter the situation.

He shoved her feet off the couch and she sat up to make room for him with hardly a look directly at her, just a snarling presence, which said as much as if he'd spoken to her. When he started eating she followed, thankful he wasn't going to grill her first. She'd have to ask Maddie if she'd had anything other than that Flaming Star, because if only one drink knocked her on her ass like this, she was definitely done with drinking to get drunk.

She glanced down several minutes later when his thigh brushed and bumped hers, naked skin rubbing against his denim. His warmth seared her leg and she shifted, swallowing a sudden lump in her sesame noodles. Desire pooled, weaving lower.

Okay, she was not drunk now. What the hell *was* that? She shook her head and purposely took a bite. He cleared his throat and she noticed he'd inhaled his food. Great. Her reprieve was over. He stood, taking his plate to the kitchen and putting it in the sink then just stood and stared at her over the pale cream kitchen counter. She wanted to squirm but resisted the urge.

"Okay Shar. You've had all day to come up with an excuse for last night."

She walked into the kitchen to join him and put her plate with his.

"Wait!" He slapped a hand to her shoulder and held her steady, studying her stomach. His eyes narrowed.

"What?" She licked her lips when her voice cracked. That warmth was still in her stomach, and it was growing on her skin where he held her.

"What the hell is that?" he demanded, using his thumb to run along the top of her bikini shorts, nudging it lower. "A tattoo? You got a tattoo?"

She shrugged. "A couple of months ago," she explained, dumbfounded as he continued to edge the waistband lower to see the small fiery red and gold flaming heart on her hip. Her skin quivered where he touched her, the light scratch of his thumb seeming to make her skin sensitive in its wake. "It's been a while since you've even called, Trajan. I don't have to tell you every little thing I do, you know."

He grunted, not looking at her, staring at the tattoo, lightly running his thumb over the band and the top of her thong tracing the top of the colorful mark.

"I know," he finally said, relenting enough to let her go. "I've been busy at the garage. I got two new accounts, and one of them is huge, a distributor in St. Louis."

"Really?" she said with a genuine squeal of happiness for him. "That's great!"

He folded his arms across his broad chest, bulging biceps drawing her eyes. "You're not going to get away from this Shar. People saw what happened last night, and there's a chance that they weren't all Kin..."

Shame made her tuck her chin inward. "I know."

"Maddie told me Braden challenged you. Why didn't you tell me that yourself? Why didn't you tell me you were putting on a light show for the crowd? What made you think you even *should*? You were inside!" Anger vibrated beneath his snarled questions.

"Why did you go and ask her?" A flash of indignation stiffened her back, and his gaze sparked. "She's recuperating. She has a head injury. Leave her alone."

He leaned in a little. "She was willing to tell me the truth," he bit out, his hands flexing at his side. "You weren't."

She winced. She'd hoped Maddie wouldn't tell, but it was difficult to not spill every sin when Trajan decided he wanted to know something. She'd been the focus of his gaze more than once in her life.

It was hard to meet the demanding heat in those eyes, the tightness around his lips confirming just how mad he was with her. Her gaze rose from the floor and seemed to stick to the front of his t-shirt. It was as far as she could go, not wanting to see the anger anymore. Or the disappointment.

"All I know is I didn't cause it," she whispered.

"But you can't *remember*," he stressed.

She pushed her fingers into her hair. "No, I can't. But what does that leave me, Trajan?" The air was heavy between them, filled with uncertainty, anger and worry.

His fingers looped her wrists and pulled them out of her hair. "It means if Maddie is

right, and the wall came down from the outside then someone had plans to bring down the building with everyone inside.”

“But...” That was insane! Someone *wanted* to take down the *Mystic*?

A shiver rolled up her arms where he caressed her wrists with his thumbs. “Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know, but if you want to make sure you don’t have any last vendettas against you for this, it needs to be cleared up. You don’t want this hanging over your head,” he advised her.

She nodded and his fingers spread, loosening from around her wrists.

* * * *

Trajan was having a hard time keeping his mind in gear, namely because of Shar. *When did she grow up? When did she get old enough for tattoos and sex kitten leather?* The image of her in that black leather outfit was destined to haunt his dreams.

A tattoo. He swallowed his groan. Just the idea of it was driving him insane. He’d been very ready to tear into her and find out what she planned to do to get her name cleared. Yet with only being a witness to the cause of the fire and no one coming forward to claim she’d been playing with fire or magic inside, maybe she could skate under the radar for breaking the rules. No Kin would report her, which only left if someone *else*, an *other*, did instead. If no one actually pointed her out, she might skim through this unscathed after all.

She was scared and worried, but watching her standing in front of him, he couldn’t seem to keep his mind on why.

He inhaled and the sweet silken scent of her showered body invaded him. All he could see for miles was shimmery, pale skin from the edge of her throat where her pulse beat, all the way down to screaming red painted toenails. Rising up her body, he found the long, heavy fall of her hair, the color of a cinnamon sunset. Her arms were crossed beneath her breasts now, pushing them up beneath the grey, skintight almost-not-there top she wore. He felt more than his tongue grow thick with the sudden desire to see what they tasted like, how they would feel against him. To roll his tongue over their softness, in the valley between them. The round mounds he’d seen in her black bustier just that morning. Delectable.

It hit him hard and fast. The little girl he’d always known and had teased growing up, the young woman who’d made a name and a place for herself running her own shop was gone. A successful, beautiful, incredibly hot vixen stood in front of him. And she was engaged.

A void exploded from inside of his chest. The woman he hadn’t known he wanted was already out of his reach.

Crystal blue eyes fringed in dark golden lashes lifted to his. Something surged between them, a spark, a lightning bolt. It didn’t matter but he felt it. Blood rushed against his ears at the intensity, and he felt his cock pressing against his jeans, demanding. Her hair sparkled as the energy gathered around her. Both of them staring at the other in her small kitchen. Desire. It was in her eyes, in the tentative parting of her lips. Lips he suddenly had to taste.

His hands grasped her hips, his thumb knowingly fitting right over that damn tattoo. Just the thought of it being there made his heart race. He wanted to taste it so badly,

craved to drag his tongue over the indent of her hip until she was mindless for him. She squeaked when he lifted her easily and sat her on the counter.

“Damn it Shar,” he growled just before he claimed her lips. He pushed her knees apart and sank between them, holding her prisoner beneath his hands, his fingers anchoring her solidly before him. She gasped in shock, stiff and unyielding beneath him, those crystalline eyes wide with surprise staring at him. “Kiss me, Shar. Just this once.” Her breath panted against his mouth, turning his lust on its ear.

He had to have one before he realized his mistake and let her go. Forever.

She whispered a moan and he shuddered. Between one breath and the next she went pliant, leaning into him and he plunged between her succulent lips. The kiss was an assault, an all or nothing claiming. He couldn't do this again. He knew that, but he had this moment and he wanted all of it. All of her.

She heated beneath him like gasoline thrown on a bonfire, the blaze of her own desire sinking into his flesh. It was seconds away from causing him a complete malfunction. Instead of pulling back, he wrapped his tongue around hers and caressed her until she made a hungry whimper deep down in her body. The pressure beneath his zipper became immediately painful at the low sound. Liquid desire licked at his nerves and he pressed harder, yanking her closer until her pelvis fit right against his cock, her legs wrapping around his body, mindlessly desperate for some kind of relief. His eyes crossed behind closed lids at the feeling of her.

Her ankles hooked behind his thighs, tugging him even tighter, pressing him urgently into the heat between her legs. The searing touch of her fingers surprised him with their heat as they traveled upward, framing his chest then his shoulders. He pushed into her palms when she dug her fingertips into his hair, grasping him as tightly as he held her.

He sucked on her lower lip, delving between the lush pair with a relentless rhythm wanting to recreate the same tempo over and over, in many more ways, in more delicious places. She was sweet and seductive to his senses, her tongue dancing against his. She pulled him into her own mouth and suckled on him like a lollipop, her tongue dancing over his with wicked intent. He felt reasoning explode at the exquisite torture, imagining her mouth wrapped around his throbbing flesh and repeating until he couldn't think of anything but the heaven she was giving him.

He leaned back with a harsh groan, gulping air, barely achieving a scant inch between their bodies where she held him anchored to her. Pebbled nipples strained against the stretch cotton of her halter, pushing toward him, begging for attention. He felt compelled to comply. He dipped down and swept his tongue over one. She cried out at the contact and he acted on instinct. He wanted to hear her cry out again. He wanted her to cream. Hard. For him.

He latched onto the hard nub with his lips and pulled her into his hot mouth. She shrieked on a half gasped, half moaned breath. She quivered beneath his controlling touch, ecstasy flaring off of her in arcs. Harsh pants fluttered over his head as he licked and sucked at her pert breast through the fabric, teasing the point back and forth over his teeth and whipping it with his tongue.

He groaned, envisioning doing the same thing to her clit, licking up and down her body, thrusting to taste her. His erection strained, wanting to feel her velvet softness swallow him whole as he plunged deep into her heat.

“Shar,” he moaned, barely able to think beyond her body and his. He sucked her

breast again, harder, deeper, pleasure and pain blurring as her throaty moans and cries sharpened. His thumb drifted down. Fire hit his bloodstream like a lava flow when he found the crease of her shorts hot and damp with her desire. He was getting in over his head, and he didn't want to be saved. He'd never felt so consumed by a woman as he was right then with Shar beneath his fingers.

He clamped down with a tender bite on her jutting nipple and she jumped as if she'd been shocked. Claiming his moment in hell, he pressed his thumb against her hot slit, rubbing with purpose as he pulled her deeply into his mouth.

With a shattering cry, she came apart with a wrenching orgasm. Rising to her lips, he kissed her, swallowing every last whimper of bliss, cupping her greedily in his palm. She ground against the heel of his hand and he groaned again. Hard shudders rocked her for several moments while she rode her release, his kisses turning tender and lingering. His heart pounded against his ribs as he held her close, feeling the shudders race up and down her body while he waited for her to come back down to earth.

He cursed silently even as he stroked the hair hanging down her back, a red silken banner. He should have stopped with the kiss. He should have stopped *before* the kiss. But he hadn't. Now with the scent of her desire soaked into him and each burning memory of her body pressed against his, he hated himself with every breath he drew. Because he wanted more. He wanted all of her. Not just a forbidden kiss and taste.

Somehow he had to find a way to get her away from Lawson. The one woman he never thought he'd be interested in had him burning like an inferno for her touch. And even as badly as he wanted to take her to bed right that instant, he refused to cut in on another guy's territory. He'd already gone too far on so many levels.

He brushed her hair back from her face. Her lips were swollen, rouged from his kisses. What could he say? Sorry for kissing you? He wasn't. Sorry for making you come? Not in this lifetime. He gusted a single breath and helped her down from the counter, dug his hand into the fall of her hair and tipped her back.

He swept his lips to hers, watching the dazed light of comprehension in the pale blue of her eyes. She knew he was going to leave. He couldn't say a single word. He closed the door carefully behind him, silently cursing his recriminations. He didn't stop even after he was back in his own home.

Chapter Six

Shar took a deep breath as sunlight streamed in the windows of *Dressed to Kill* Monday morning. There was nothing like the musk of leather to her senses. She pulled the packing tissue off the latest delivery, a lightweight set of chaps for women and placed them on the counter to be inventoried and added to the racks. A stack of new corsets rested nearby and further down were beribboned underwear, not leather, but sexier than sin in black satin, with a cross-tie red ribbon begging to be 'untied'. Several more in varying colors were nearby. More boxes waited for her on the floor.

Tossing the box into the back hallway, she started tagging. The door opened a few minutes later. Amber strolled in, flicking her cigarette back out the door.

"Morning," she called.

Shar smiled. "Hey."

Amber ran a suntanned hand down the latest delivery. "Damn. Where do you find the leather for these?" She sighed her approval, then flipped through them with a wistful look. "Any in my size?"

Shar grinned, aware her co-worker's fetish ran a little deeper than just working in the shop. "I ordered two pair. One's just for you."

"You're the best." Amber chuckled.

"Hey, gotta keep my help happy." Shar finished the stack under her hand. "Take over here," she said. "I need to receive orders to fill and check with *Sassy's*. Diane said she wanted to talk numbers this week."

Amber's smile broadened. "Does that mean they're going to carry your bustiers?"

"It's looking more and more promising." It was a good message to get on a Monday after the weekend from hell.

"Well hot damn!" Amber gave Shar a high five. "You rock. And I can say I knew you when."

Shar laughed at her optimism and handed over the pricing gun, leaving the blonde at the front counter to start marking items again. In her office, she printed out orders to fill then pulled up the design program for her latest bustier. She carried her own designs alongside the more decadent leather accessories, from leather garments and sexy lingerie to satin and lace. Some might have thought it an odd selection, soft and sexy next to riding chaps and vests but it worked. It also fed Shar's personal love for both. Now she was starting to get more shops interested in her personal designs.

Unfortunately it didn't take all that long to do the weekend orders and when she called, Diane wasn't due in until after lunch. That left her way too many hours between to think about the weekend.

She let out a breath looking over her office. She needed to call Braden. She knew he was going to gloat, but damn it! He'd caught her when her defenses were down, feeling raw and abused. Being drunk didn't help. Otherwise she really wouldn't have accepted his challenge. Regardless of what Trajan thought, she *was* smarter than that.

She lifted a hand toward the door on the other side of her desk and it swept closed with the motion. Amber didn't need to hear what she was about to discuss.

After looking for his number, she made herself dial. It rang, then his brisk voice

clearly came through.

“Hey there, Feisty and Sexy,” he said when she said hello. She dropped her head into her palm, already regretting this. A stifled groan was impossible to hide. “What’s the matter baby? Lose your lighter?”

“Grow up Braden!” Air filled her chest and she plunged on. “I need to know what happened Saturday night.”

A male teasing chuckle raked her ear. “You were smokin’ *hot* baby.”

“Damn it, Braden, I mean it. I was picked up as a witness to the fire.”

His tone changed instantly, losing its teasing cadence. “I didn’t know that. When? Why would they you pick up?”

“I don’t know. I got fingered for some reason.”

It didn’t last long. He purred. “Sounds sexy to me.”

“Braden!” she bit out through a stiff jaw.

“Sorry.”

She doubted it. She’d swear he was grinning but couldn’t prove it. “Look, Maddie said you and I were going at it. How much did we do?”

“I love it when you talk dirty.” She closed her eyes and counted to ten. “All right. You’re not being any fun. I’ll do it your way.” *Finally*. “It wasn’t all that bad. Just a few power sparks and colored flares that danced like they were on Broadway. We weren’t racing over the ceiling or anything.”

“So it was confined?”

“Between two tables and a wall, and one mirror.”

Relief flooded her.

“Where did the explosion happen, Braden?”

He fell silent for several seconds. “You know the curve of the bar and the wall where it breaks to the offices? Back there. It took out the rear wall and half the office with the first one.”

“There was more than one explosion? God, how did we get out?” Shivers had her shaking, her head pounding realizing how lucky they’d been to get out at all.

His voice softened. “You really were drunk, weren’t you? Shar, baby, you’re a pain in my ass, but I wouldn’t have let you die.”

“You?” she squeaked, amazed, and just as shocked that Braden had a sense of humanity after all.

“Yes, my little fire witch,” he replied. “Yours truly saved your luscious can. Why the cops would have picked you up...” He mused for a brief moment. “Did you think it could have had anything to do with that screaming ‘fuck me’ outfit you were wearing?”

“My what?”

“Baby, you looked like sex reincarnate in that leather getup.”

“A prostitute?” She stifled the next groan.

“Well you were drunk, at a club,” he pointed out. As if she could forget. “It was crazy there for a while. Maybe they took you in for drunk and disorderly.”

She declined further comment about her state of mind at the moment, or her attire. And thinking back over the grey clouds of her memory, she *had* lost it when the building collapsed. Maybe it was as much hysterics as anything. From what he was saying, anything was possible, except she hadn’t started the fire. Neither had he if he was coloring in the whole picture. He could be a sexist jerk, but he’d never lied to her. She

was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and believe he wouldn't lie to her now, either. She relaxed in her chair, relief almost making her *like* Braden.

"Maddie said you spent some time at the hospital too. Are you okay?"

A tender note hit his voice, the friend beneath all the one-upmanship and jabbed teasing peeking through. "Yeah, got banged up a little. I'm now sporting a cast on my left arm, but I'd have done it again if my friends needed me. It doesn't interfere too much, but they put me on light duty at the hospital because of it. Speaking of which, my lovely fireball, I have to get ready for my shift. It takes a little longer to dress over this thing. Unless you'd like to come help. I'd stay naked just for you." Picturing his blond good looks, she knew he was wiggling his eyebrows at her over a broad, and grinning, sensuous mouth. Too bad he'd never appealed to her. She was sure it was a good thing for him. She'd have killed him by now.

"Uh, no that's okay. And thanks Braden. I owe you."

"You can take me to lunch, just no barbeque."

"Goodbye, Braden." She hung up on his infectious laugh, ignoring the superior sound.

She rubbed her temples. She wasn't to blame for the fire at *Mystic*. There was huge relief in the knowledge that she'd had nothing to do with it.

Then what caused it? Was someone behind it? Had it been an accident? Was someone trying to frame her, or was it just dumb luck that she had been playing with fire when she shouldn't have been?

A knock at her door some time later had her popping up to see Amber looking in. "Someone's here to see you. If I wasn't already taken..." She made a 'rowr' noise and grinned. Her tanned skin was lightly freckled from too many motorcycle rides in the sun and wind, her long blonde hair swinging around her shoulders in punctuation, but Amber didn't care. The effects of too much sunshine didn't detract from her playful nature. "Hell I might try anyway," she said in good humor.

"It's not Lawson, is it?" Anger that he'd think to step foot in her shop ever again made her lips thin.

"No. This one is taller, and gorgeous. And the way he said your name..." She shivered in delight. "Never mind. Bart won't care if I flirt. I'll help him." She spun to shut the door, driving Shar's curiosity through the roof.

She heard his voice before she'd cleared the corner back out into the store and the air froze in her lungs. Her feet stuck to the floor.

Trajan.

A sudden tingling exploded between her legs as her memory replayed every last second of their kiss—all of it—from the day before. She stopped and swallowed. Damn it! What was he doing here? He never came to the shop. She didn't think he'd been there since the beginning when she'd bought it and transformed it into her own closet paradise. She wasn't ready to face him yet. She hadn't completely managed to dissect the kiss, the orgasm, or why he'd touched her at all.

Hell. He probably still thought she was responsible for the fire. That's why he was there. Of course. Because she's the fire-throwing temper on legs. She doubted it had anything to do with the kiss. She'd always been the younger sister to his protective older brother domination. He's the reason she didn't need a brother. She already had an honorary one who excelled at the job. From pulling on ponytails and thwarting fire darts

with ice sheets to changing her dog into a duck. All because he found out she was purposely putting bullfrogs in his school locker—she had learned from the master, after all—for insulting her skills the previous summer. It had been one prank after another. She let out a slow breath. Maybe Braden’s obnoxious confidence really wasn’t all that bad when she thought about it. So of course it had nothing to do with the kiss, or anything else that happened. It had been a fluke. He’d been mad as hell at her, or something. The chances of it ever repeating were nil. They’d both lost their marbles. Considering the weekend’s ups and downs, she had already been working with a shortage.

Firming her shoulders she walked out just as he started to shout for her.

“I’m right here. Please don’t shout. This is a business,” she informed him with a raised eyebrow and authority in her voice, glad when he actually snapped his jaw shut. Green eyes sparked at her tone, staring right at her. He *would* respect her place of business. She met his frowning glare with a cool glance. *Unaffected, I’m unaffected*, she told herself, even though it was a fat-assed lie.

Amber said it. Looking at him like a man—a man who could kiss her socks off—and not the guy who used to turn her sandwiches into ice blocks at lunch, he was calendar model hot. Faded jeans hugged taut hips, ending over his riding boots with a dark t-shirt firmly pulled across his chest and flat stomach, tucked in at the waist. His black hair lay swept back. Her fingers tingled remembering the heavy thickness of it on her skin. Unfortunately it wasn’t the only thing tingling. She cleared her throat, pushing *that* ache out of her mind. He stepped forward and the reawakened wanting only increased. Her heart sped up. She took a breath to calm it.

“Amber,” she said, keeping her voice calm. “I’ll only be a minute.” She refused to let her reactions show.

Shar knew Amber was disappointed when she didn’t get to help him but she didn’t wait for an answer, turning around to lead him back to her office. Considering his expression, Shar was certain there wasn’t much Amber would be able to do for him anyway. He shut the door behind him and she frowned.

He wouldn’t stop staring at her. *That* stare, the one that said she’d done something. Again. “Trajan, what do you want? I have a busy Monday today.” Which was true. Any excuse to get him gone was all she wanted. It just wasn’t working.

He blocked the door, which meant he wasn’t leaving until he got what he wanted. “The club.”

Of course, she knew it. She gathered her hair and tossed it to one side. For some reason she felt deflated. She leaned backward against the side of her cabinet on the wall, crossing her arms over her chest. The lace she wore beneath the half vest lightly scratched her arm, but only because it wasn’t meant to be felt from the outside of the garment.

“I talked to Braden. He told me what happened. Neither of us were to blame, and *neither* of us were endangering the people inside,” she stressed. *Take that*, she thought.

The news seemed to catch his attention. “You’re sure? Nothing that could catch fire?”

“Actually, tons,” she egged him. *Fabric, wood tables, wood paneling, leather...* “But I’m better than that. Even drunk apparently. So cut me some slack.” She shoved against his chest, but he didn’t budge. He never would respect her level of control.

The thunderheads in his gaze didn’t lighten. “Then why were you picked up?”

She looked away. This was a little harder to admit to.

“Shar?”

She answered, accompanied by a shrugged shoulder of indifference. “Apparently I looked like a hooker, probably drunk and disorderly. I can see them not booking me with no previous record, and in shock from watching what I thought was the death of my best friend, a touch hysterical. That would mess with anyone’s head.”

That seemed to appease him. He nodded. “That’s probable.”

“Yeah, I thought so too. That only leaves finding out what really happened,” she said. “If it was a random accident or a planned assault on the Kin.” She could live with being a coincidental bystander rather than the cause.

“That’s not all,” he said. Her gaze whipped back up to him at the timbre of his voice, rumbled and hungry. His eyes had grown dark, intense. He didn’t blink once. He leaned forward. Her heart tripped, then thudded against her ribs, painfully. “There’s this.”

He flattened his hands on either side of her head and found her lips. He pressed into her, molding his body down her front. She gasped taken by surprise, just like yesterday.

She whimpered his name, no less confused then the day before and not quite as swept away yet. She pressed stiff palms to his chest, but there was no give. He was solid. He burned her skin.

Firm lips teased and molded to hers, deftly obliterating thought with one tender swipe of his tongue against her bottom lip. “Open for me, Shar.”

Chapter Seven

Trajan's common sense had been left somewhere out on the store floor because he'd sworn he wouldn't be kissing her sweet mouth again. He was mad at her. He had to be if he wanted to stay away, to not touch her. He'd made that rule a thousand times last night.

He'd always sucked at making rules and keeping them, though. Rules were meant to be broken. And since Shar's kiss the day before, he was bound to break a hell of a lot of them. He'd barely slept the night before imagining her delicious body naked and under his. He was walking in lusty agony because of her.

He'd intended to go to the club and the police station to see if he could find out anything about the fire and her arrest, but hearing it from her just made his day move faster. Once he knew she was really likely in the clear, he didn't hear much else.

He couldn't look at her without wanting to taste her. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since their first kiss, that first feeling of her in his arms and he had to have more.

Leaning in, he found the corner of her mouth, discovered soft warm skin under his tongue when he touched her lips. She trembled and the sensation seared his lips. *Damn it.* She was taken! With a slow fog of need clouding his mind, that fact seemed to have less and less importance.

Yellow lace hugged her breasts beneath a sleek leather half vest, the pale flash of skin slipping beneath it when she moved. Deep gasping breaths made the material of both jump. He bit his tongue when he realized she wasn't wearing a bra. Heat gathered and spread like wildfire all over.

Her jeans clung like a second skin from her hips to her thighs. Casting a quick glance, he spotted the same black boots she'd worn with the leather he couldn't erase from his memory.

He tossed a mental command. A click sounded behind him.

"What was that?" she said, breathless and surprised. Her eyes shot open, staring up into his.

"The lock." No sense in lying. He had to get her out of his system, or he'd never sleep a sound night again. He was already in over his head. No point in trying to stop.

"Trajan?"

"Shut up, Shar," he breathed just before he swept in and plundered her mouth. She moaned, a low growling sound that enflamed him.

Don't do this, he cautioned himself. *She's engaged.* Anger at his lack of control made him kiss her like his life depended on it, dominating her, rough and thorough. He couldn't keep doing this. The voice of reason tried one more time, weak and defeated. He pushed it away with a quick snarl when it dared to speak at all. Her response to his kiss was electric. She lifted her arms over his shoulders, pulling him closer, just as hungry for his raging desire.

He dropped his hands into her hair, thrusting into her mouth, hearing her whimpers grow. He shifted, bringing her flush against him, pinning her against the cabinet side. She gasped when he ground his erection into her.

Plump breasts cushioned him and he dropped a hand cupping one in his palm. Her shape filled his palm and he flexed his fingers around her, forming to her luscious

softness. She shuddered, a hot, panted moan rifling between them at the contact. He caressed the hard peak with his thumb and she went liquid beneath him. "You're so sensitive," he murmured against her lips.

She managed a half nod, lost in oblivion. He loved when a woman was sensitive to his caresses. He released her enough to push the vest off her shoulders and lift her lace chemise. Two peaked breasts appeared before him. He tore her top over her head, uncaring of anything but the bounty he was about to feast on.

"Trajan?" she moaned, a sound of lust and confusion. The husky sound sent lava to his groin.

He didn't know how to answer. He didn't know what he was doing either.

He did know what he wanted though. He bent and found one hard tip with his mouth. She swallowed a shriek. Swirling his tongue around the flush nipple, he ran his hand down her ribs, caressing her stomach. She quivered beneath the light strokes, holding him tight.

She whimpered his name full of pleading desire and he froze, his fingers on the snap to her jeans. He'd undone them, well on his way to making love to her, or at the very least, finding some sort of relief. Deep breathing filled the office space, both of them caught up in the moment.

He cursed, clutching her top off the floor where it'd landed and thrust it back at her. He slashed a hand through his hair and stood straight, backing up until he felt the door at his back again.

She was staring at the floor, her chest rising and falling as she calmed down, clutching the shirt in shaking white-knuckled fingers. She slipped on the thin lace again, pulling her hair free. When had he ever thought she wasn't beautiful? She was striking with her long red hair, soft rounded shape and breasts that he'd never get enough of. Everything about her was unique to Shar.

"Trajan, I know you're mad at me." Rough and hurt, her voice reached him. "Please quit whatever this is, whatever this punishment is. I get it."

He dragged a hand down his face, completely rocked off balance. "Punishment?"

She slid her vest back on and lifted to watch him. "That's what it feels like," she said, quickly dropping her gaze away from his. She lifted a hand to her lips, her fingers trembling over the rosy curves. "You're mad at me for using my magic in the club. I get it."

"Shar." Was he still mad at her? "I was, but I'm not now."

Confusion carried in her blue eyes when she glanced up.

"I shouldn't have kissed you. Period."

Hurt replaced the confusion. "I see," she murmured, staring at the floor. Apparently it was far more interesting.

"Damn it, Shar. I do have some honor. You're engaged. It's my own fault," he finished, realizing he was too late and hating himself. He didn't have the right to take her from Lawson. He felt like a class heel for what he'd already done to her.

"No, I'm not."

He zeroed in on her, unsure if he'd heard her right. "You've been dating Lawson for almost a year. Didn't he ask you?" Maybe he was wrong.

She snorted and relaxed against the cabinet again, a snarl on her mouth. "He asked all right, but he forgot to tell the other women he's been screwing he was going to get

married. I broke it off with him on Saturday.” She dug her toe into the floor. “He’s why I was wanting to get drunk. He was cheating on me and he had mental guards. He used me for something, and I have no idea what. I never tried to pry.”

“It’s against the law.”

“I know.” She ground out the sound, shooting him a disgusted look for even thinking she would stoop that low.

He softened his reprimand by saying, “I know you wouldn’t have done it.”

Unsatisfied knots of lust untied as he leaned more on the door. “He wasn’t Kin,” he pointed out.

“No, he wasn’t. He did know I was, though.” A flash of pain crossed her eyes and she lowered her lashes, concentrating on the tile of the office floor beneath her toe. “I never told him. I was waiting for the right moment. He found out, or suspected and when I read his aura on the ring, I confirmed it.”

This time when he approached her, he put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her forward. She tensed and he murmured into her hair.

“I’m sorry Shar. I know you cared for him.”

An exhalation raced across his chest but he tied down the rush of desire with a fierce control. Not the right time.

“I did. He accused me of lying about what the ring had told me, as if he were innocent. I was in shock, and threw it at him. There were a few more things said, and it boiled down to the fact that he knew something about me, but wasn’t expecting me to find out he was hiding things from me. Or believing I would still marry him even though he was cheating on me.”

“What an ass.”

She snuggled into his embrace. “A big ugly one.” He chuckled. He wondered how hard it would be to find her ex. A couple minutes alone is all he’d need. Her voice floated up to him, stopping his visions of pain on Lawson. “I just don’t know what he was hoping to accomplish, especially if he did know I was a witch.”

“Did you do anything to make him suspicious?”

She paused to think about it. “I don’t think so.”

“Did you ever...” He drew a breath, a raw anger rising swiftly at the image of her and Lawson naked. He fought to calm himself. Her ex didn’t deserve her.

She caught what he meant. “We dated for a year, Trajan,” she told him. “But I was careful. Always. Condoms and the pill.” She giggled hiding more, embarrassed to admit it to him. “I didn’t sleep around, Trajan, but I’m not a dummy either.”

His stomach churned. Hell. Smashing Lawson was looking better and better. “And he was cheating on you?” Something was burning through Trajan’s gut and it wasn’t lust. Maybe he should still go by the club after all. What if there was a connection? What if Lawson tried to frame Shar? What if Lawson had been suspicious of her? Hiding something and she was just handy to blame? The explosion had been deadly, intentional, and was too convenient to dismiss completely. He frowned as an even worse scenario entered his thoughts.

What if they were hunters? Witch hunters were uncommon, but they were still out there. Like most fanatics, they had misinformation and that bred fear, usually by the generation. Not all Kin were good people. It did happen, just like any other, but not in Granier Falls. He may not know everyone living there, but he knew the basis of the

town's heritage and the Kin who started to call it home when it was still nothing but a small roadmap dot. If a Kin had led the hunters in then they weren't from the original families. It had also been a very long time since he'd heard even a whisper of them in Granier Falls.

She nodded mutely. "I really don't know why he wanted to marry me. He didn't love me. He lied to me. I can't believe I'm telling you." She rocked against his chest, miserable, hurt and embarrassed, more of her pent up feelings in the words now that she had a chance to actually let out some of the pain.

He tipped her back, desire rushing at the trusting look in her gaze. "Why? You know you can tell me anything," he told her.

She shrugged. "Because you've always been like my brother. And you're asking if I slept with him." She crossed her eyes, teasing him. "I don't want to know who or how many, or..." She fell silent, her cheeks fading to pale cream. She licked her lips. "Never mind. Not my business." Her lips thinned when she pressed them together and she ducked into his chest again, covering her expressive eyes from him.

"Are you jealous, Shar?"

She made a harsh sound into his chest, her arms wrapped around his waist. "Of course not. Why would I be jealous?"

Something didn't sound right. Whether it was the faked disinterest or the annoyed scorn like she was talking through a mouth full of glass, it made him grin. He buried it in her hair, just enjoying the feeling for a few moments. So many things he'd nearly missed out on, that he'd overlooked about the girl in his arms. No, about the *woman* in his arms. He dropped a kiss to the top of her head. "Shar." He found her chin and tugged her up again, supporting her with his palm. He caressed her cheek with a thumb, marveling at how soft her skin felt against his. "There's no way I could look at you and see a sister." *Not now, not any longer*, he whispered silently in his thoughts.

"But-" she blurted. Pools of moisture hit her eyes, bright pain coming to life at his admission. He knew the fear behind that look, that he was suddenly deserting her after years of friendship. He couldn't wait to prove her wrong.

He dug his fingers into her hair, pulling her back further, exposing the creamy length of her throat to his view, refusing her the chance to hide again. His grasp held her prisoner. "I couldn't do this to my sister," he murmured, brushing his lips to hers.

She trembled beneath him, her lips parting with gentle persuasion. Desire, thick and hot, raced through him again. He didn't ravage her, although he desperately wanted to taste and please every inch of her until she was breathless and weak and replete with satisfaction. He licked her lips, teasing them with full strokes, tracing their smooth edge from corner to corner. She was sweet and soft against his body, curved like a bow into his chest. He drifted from her lips, nipping tenderly at the edge of her jaw, following the curve of her neck, sucking at the sweet-smelling skin at the base of her throat.

"You smell so good, Shar," he breathed, licking upward until he was swirling her earlobe between his teeth. An enticing feminine scent filled his head, like cotton candy and cinnamon, sweet and spicy, she infiltrated his senses.

He found her lips again and lost himself.

* * * *

Trembles shook Shar, bringing her tighter to Trajan's broad chest. He tipped her

further, bending her like a supple branch beneath his commanding lips. He sipped at her, pulling at skin gently, striking fire to already aroused nerves.

He let her go slowly, those silver flecks in his eyes glinting like sunlight on calm water. "I have to go," he said, sipping and flicking at the tender skin beneath her ear. He flipped her hair to one side to run his fingers through it, curling his tongue over her exposed ear. She shivered at the tender heat. "Come over when you close up. I want to talk to you about Saturday night." His breath snaked over her skin, sparking as it slid down her shoulder.

"Oh." Right, the club. What else could it be? Why else would he even be there? He hadn't stepped foot in her shop since she'd opened it. He didn't wear what she offered. She loosened her fingers from his t-shirt then felt the flex of his muscles in his back as he straightened, letting her stand up. His arms fell away and she felt the loss of his body's warmth.

Sooner or later, she'd have to find out where the hell she'd misplaced those damned marbles because she couldn't let Trajan keep kissing her. She'd discovered he was incredible at them, and she wanted more.

"Sure. I can do that." She nodded, pulling herself back together. "I have a meeting today. I need to get ready for it." She prayed Diane was available. She had to get out of that office.

A hungry heat returned to his gaze, and he looked her up and down. "Have you ever done a private show?"

She shook her head. She guessed he'd seen what she had out on the floor for sale. "The women can use the dressing den in the back, but I don't model." The den was an enlarged changing room that customers secluded themselves from the store if they wished to share a private showing. There wasn't any way it could be completely private, but the ladies who frequented her shop often brought their husbands, leaving with knowing and promising smiles as often as the lingerie they modeled.

He stepped up, immediately filling her vision. Tingles raced across her skin and her breath caught. A wicked smile lifted his sensuous mouth and she had to calm her heart. "That's too bad," he purred, "because I bet you'd make one hot model." Before she could stop him, he found her lips one last time, then he turned and swaggered through the door.

Chapter Eight

Trajan stood at the rear alley of *Mystic*, or what would have been the rear alley if the building had still been there. It currently lay in a pushed-together pile of rubble, blackened cinder and debris, the rest of the parking lot in full view on the other side. He walked as close as he could to the building's remains. It was still roped off for safety and security reasons, but he could do what he needed to from that distance.

He walked down the rear of the building a pace at a time studying the damage. He curled his fingers then crouched running his hand over the ground, searching for telltale signs of metals. Iron. Steel. Copper. Individual ores resonated differently with him. Metals reacted in different ways to excessive heat. Excessive heat caused from an explosion would leave a different imprint for him than a shard or panel that had simply burned down to the ground. It took work, but he could find even the smallest fragment if he searched for it. What would likely take weeks for the CSI crews to determine, he could do in one sweep.

The sensations were like a physical radar, the material imprint visible to his mind in image form. The intimate way he felt about metal was probably how sculptors felt about clay or stone. It just wasn't the kind of skill they taught in metal-shop. He'd spent a lot of seasons with instructors learning how to control his talent, to turn it into a skill rather than just an addition to his physical presence. Not all of the Kin did. Rather than finding purpose, they drifted through with the normals, disconnected from their heritage, ignoring their gifts.

He stood and walked further. Sunshine warmed his shoulders as he paced, meticulously scanning for anything that looked out of place or felt out of balance. A light breeze lifted hair off his neck, cooling him as he studied the ground. The city block was oddly quiet with very little traffic for mid-morning. *Mystic* had sat for a decade on this block, with little competition. Most of the bars had congregated closer to downtown where the higher foot traffic centered. This location was for the locals. It was their hideout, and now it was gone.

Remodeled at least three times since he was a kid, it had been bought by a Kin clan member at the last change of hands and word soon reached the clan they had a home to hang out. A place to feel comfortable if they occasionally let loose with a little flair or levitation. There were rules for the Kin and everyone had to obey them regardless of where they were. But there was safety at the *Mystic* too, like the secret handshake tree-house club. And now it was gone.

After Maddie's explanation and Shar's reassurance of her own innocence from Braden, he was more and more convinced the club had not been an accident. And both had said there was more than one explosion. A contained fire wouldn't have knocked out the whole building. Something big had been the initial catalyst. It was possible it was something as simple as human error, a pressure valve to one of their CO-2 canisters left open somewhere in a storage room or a careless bottle not disposed off that could ignite an entire case or more of aged alcohol.

His gut was telling him otherwise. Looking around and behind himself, he didn't see anyone in the area, a few parked cars, and not much else for the time of day. He crouched

down ignoring the yellow caution tape surrounding the block, focusing on the ground under his touch. He didn't think he'd need to dig through the pile to find any more evidence to prove his worries were right. No sense in breaking the law if he absolutely didn't have to.

He frowned as vibrations traveled up from his fingertips. Fine dust, a mixture of nearly incinerated debris and something finer, a silver metallic powder, coated the tips of his fingers and his fingernails. Granules glistened in the sunlight in the mixture, and fine fragments. Metal splinters. Rubbing his fingers together feeling the texture, he closed his eyes then placed his palm flat on the ground. He hunched over, focusing his power.

Sounds disappeared as he concentrated outward. Vibrations carried up his forearm. Like tuning forks being rung the sounds sang in his ears, each ping and hum different. Some were louder, or lasted longer. He tilted his head, listening closely.

After several minutes, he drew a deep breath and opened his eyes. The lingering stench of burned everything hung on the morning breeze. Left over puddles from the firefighters made inky black pools across the haphazard terrain of floor, roof and everything that had once been in between. There were scratches in the pavement where he crouched, and marks in the nearby stonewall segments that he could find without physically moving anything. He ran his finger along one in the pavement. A very strong blast would leave that kind of history. Dark, radial lines. Fragments of a casing biting into the solid walls like it was butter. And it happened late enough in the evening that the club would have been packed. It wouldn't have been hard to hide a small box in the shadows of the building either. Whoever had set the explosives had murder on their mind.

To Trajan, there wasn't a damn thing accidental about that.

* * * *

Shar closed the door of her car with a bumped hip, still smiling. It was hard not to after the way her day, for once, had gone. Her meeting with Diane had been a blast over coffees at her office, with designs and examples of what Diane wanted to add to *Sassy's* inventory. She'd picked nine different items and was extremely interested in several more. The possibility of Shar growing her leather, lace and accessories line was a dream come true. She floated up to Trajan's door. Waiting for him to answer the door didn't even dampen her high.

However, waiting and knocking three times was getting annoying. "Come on Trajan," she muttered.

Giving up, she circled to the rear of his house where his work garage stood. The windows were tinted to keep prying eyes from getting too nosy, but even without being able to look, it was the only logical place he'd be since he was supposed to be waiting for her.

She nudged the wooden door open, slipping in without making any noise. She spotted him, his back to the door, hunched over a table. A blue light was illuminating his shape and a sound, like the hum of a bumblebee reached her.

He was crafting something. An awed shiver hit her skin. She'd rarely seen him do it, but there was something so beautiful in what he could do, how he could manipulate metal to any shape. Biting her lip, keeping quiet to stay undiscovered, she slunk in to watch him.

The piece he was working on was recessed in a well, held up by spokes on a rotating

wheel so he could do different sections. There was a faint sheen along his hairline, sweat that attested to his concentration for perfection. Muscles rippled beneath his t-shirt as he moved ever so slowly, a dance of timed orchestration with his hands over the metal blank in the well. His boot heels were hooked to the bottom rung of the simple black stool he sat on, his thighs thick and taut in the press of his faded jeans.

This time she licked her lip rather than bite it, feeling her heart pick up in appreciation of the male form. Black hair was pushed back, nearly to his shoulders. Her fingers tingled remembering it, the way it felt, the heat that had seared her as she'd held on to him.

While he'd kissed me. Her lids fluttered closed, and more than the memory of her hands in his hair returned. She drew a steadying breath, surprised with herself. What was going on? Since when had the sight of Trajan in jeans ever made her feel gooey inside?

The immediate thought of him *out of those jeans* made her quiver. She swallowed. It had to be that damn kiss. Okay, all of them. The man had something going for him, that was for sure. She'd hoped after he'd left her that morning she'd ensured she'd located all her lost marbles misplaced from their first kiss in her kitchen. From the look of things, and damn but did they look good, her marbles were gone for the duration.

Biceps twitched. The light extinguished and he let out a breath. He reached upward stretching and Shar got a full side view of his torso. He stood and stripped the t-shirt, stretching once more then sat down. Adjusting the rim blank in the frame well then locking it into place again between the spokes, he focused again.

Blood pulsed against her skin, warming her as he began to work. He was beautiful. The sheen on his back made him look god-like. Muscle and sinew moved and danced in unity with the precise motions of his hands. The slow, graceful tension of his hands as they sculpted the image mid-air, coercing his magic to duplicate his wishes into the metal. It was mind over matter and there wasn't an ore or metal on the planet that wouldn't fall to Trajan's persuasion. Some could bend water, or even create heat or freezing cold like her own ability, yet what he did was phenomenally rare among their clan. The sheer creative genius was what created a demand for his work. She knew what he did was strenuous, but the visual looked effortless, as an edge, then a shape on the rim blank began to appear beneath his hands. Pieces fell free with a muted clang as cuts and trims created debris, falling into the basin of the frame.

She hated to disturb him, knowing she should have when he'd stopped. She didn't want him to have an error either because she had to break into his concentration.

Instead of calling out to him, she slowly walked up his side, where he'd see her in his peripheral vision, closer and closer until she was sure he had to know she was there. His focus was relentless though. He never looked up.

"Trajan?" she whispered.

The light and the precise cutting stopped at the same time he shot out a hand and captured one of hers beneath his.

She squealed in surprise.

He yanked her to his side, pinning her against his taut body. "Bout time you said something," he growled. The roughness in his voice sparked down her spine like a livewire. He found her chin with his other hand and tipped her up. Before she could speak, he claimed her lips.

She blinked and tried to pull away. Okay, she did have a few marbles left. That was

good.

He shifted on the vinyl seat, bringing her between his thighs, then dug his fingers into her hair. "Did you like to watch?" he murmured, running his tongue up the slope of her neck until he found her earlobe, nipping at it gently. She wondered if he meant that the way she heard it. Just how long had he known she was there?

She felt herself weakening as his tongue continued its torture with little flicks. Her hands clawed into tight muscles when he sucked on her earlobe. "You're incredible," she admitted. "It's beautiful." She looked to the rim on the wheel frame. The jagged shape repeated twice, the third nearly complete. It resembled a lightning bolt.

A low hum of desire escaped his lips, falling into the curve of her ear. "Damn, you still smell good." He buried his nose into her hair, his lips lingering on the side of her neck. Soft nips made her shiver where she stood. He tilted her back, reaching for the arch of her throat beneath her chin. Slowly, he brought her back down to his lips. He teased her with merciless brushes of skin, taunting her lips with promises of more.

Her fingers clutched denim when he slid the tip of his tongue between her lips brushing against her teeth, teasing, tasting, probing at the sensitive skin inside. The strength of his fingers kept her still, but never hurt her. She whimpered.

"You know what you have to do Shar," he told her.

She gave in, looping her arms around his trim waist and leaned in for his kiss, opening for him.

He groaned, and she felt the muscles between her legs quiver with want. Okay, just suck it up and admit it. She had the hots for Trajan. No idea how it happened, but there it was. Enjoy it while you can girl, her voice told her, because she knew his *modus operandi*. Two weeks, three tops and he'd be moving on. He didn't want to marry. There was no secret to this, which meant his relationships weren't relationships at all. They were flings. Minor diversions in his routine. Nothing serious, ever. Nothing he would feel committed to.

One of his hands swept around, caressing her back, pushing her into the hard line of his erection where he sat on the stool and the rest of her thoughts fluttered away under his touch. Whispered moans floated between them as he drew her hunger higher. For the second time that day, her vest was eased over her shoulders and disappeared.

"Shar," he breathed, dropping sweet sucking kisses down her throat to her collarbone. She shivered at the heat of his tongue, the wisp of his breath against her skin. Inner muscles clenched and she felt dampness pressing at her.

Tantalizing skin jumped when she dared to spread her fingers along his waist, reaching upward for his ribs. Hot skin molded to her hands beneath her questing touch, learning the shape of his body. Gasps slipped between her lips as he trailed his wicked tongue across her shoulder.

She purred when he brushed a thumb against a nipple through the lace of her chemise. Stars exploded on her eyelids as pleasure wound tighter and tighter.

He stood and started to back her up.

"Wha..."

He swooped in and kissed her again. By the time he let her go, she could barely breathe, and thinking had taken the wrong exit. A door clicked shut and she looked around his shoulder with a quick glance. White walls. "The paint room?"

His grin turned roguish. "I wanted to see the way your hair would gleam against the

white, the way your skin shimmers with all this as your canvas.“ He ran his fingers through the tresses, letting the length spill freely down her back. His touch caressed her nape then her shoulders. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I think you’re going to like my idea.”

Her heart tripped at the devilish glint in his gaze, the rough sound of his voice. She moaned. Liking it wasn’t the problem. She feared she was going to love it.

Chapter Nine

He pulled the chemise over her head and tossed it in the corner. Desire swirled in his eyes. His throat moved when he swallowed, his gaze locked on her breasts and she felt herself sinking into the moment. Trajan's naked chest beckoned to her. She leaned forward and flicked her tongue to a nipple. He speared a hand into her hair with an audible moan, holding her while she repaid the pleasure-filled torture he'd given her, twice.

Nails dragged over skin and he shuddered beneath her, his flat stomach quivering with each breath.

She hardly felt it when his fingers snapped her jeans loose, nudging the zipper down. His fingers worked beneath the strap of her thong, caressing hot skin. She gasped as his nails scraped delicately against the top of her pelvis. His groan was deep as he slid closer to her heat.

She felt his fingers fan out against her skin and freeze, and knew what he'd found. "God, Shar, I love that." She smiled into his chest. She preferred being bare. The smile was swiped clean though when he touched her naked pussy, found the heat screaming for fulfillment.

He shuddered, sliding a finger between sensitive folds. He groaned. There was no doubt what else he'd found. She was on fire and achy from her teeth down. He cupped her chin and found her mouth, plunging between her lips with his tongue at the same time he entered her channel.

She screamed, so close to coming apart.

"Do it." His gasped order was like dynamite, setting her off with a firm thrust. She obeyed with mindless abandon, arcs of light whipping around her, sending her further over the edge. The orgasm was hot, sending waves of shocks up and down her body. Before she'd fully recovered, he dropped to his knees, yanking her jeans clear of her hips.

"Sweet." His voice was raw. She planted her hands on his shoulders, weaving, trying to catch her breath. The boots were pulled free, and the jeans went the same way. He cupped her ass in his hands, tilting her toward his mouth. Lightning struck her hard. He licked her tattoo like candy, sucking at it like it had its own flavor, long, hard strokes that sizzled against her skin. She moaned then whimpered when he slid away from it.

The whip of his tongue against her clit was excruciating bliss. She couldn't stop the orgasm. It built like a volcanic eruption, hot and raging, moving with only one direction to go. His tongue never stopped, thrusting, kneading, lapping.

Her head snapped back and she moaned, long and low, keening sounds rushed from her throat as she detonated. His fingers anchored her, kept her steady when her legs trembled and threatened to buckle. The waves crashed over and over, leaving her gasping.

Tenderly, he eased her down in front of him. His mouth seared her, dropping kisses on flushed skin as she sank to her knees. Her arms slid over his shoulders. His kiss was slow, passionate and mind blowing.

It was as she feared. She was totally loving it.

* * * *

Trajan felt her fingers slide over his skin and burned. He tried to pull in some control, but Shar was slowly melting his mind and his intentions into a puddle of desire that pumped through his blood like fire.

Sweet heaven, she was a sex kitten. From the leather and lace, to the heart tattoo, to the silky smooth heat of her slit, he was going mad to feel himself inside her. The intention he'd had to enjoy each other and get rid of this itch was turning into something a lot hotter, a lot sexier than he'd ever imagined.

He swept his tongue over hers, caressing her, bringing her up with him again to ride the wave. With one hand palming her head to hold her to him, he held her steady where she kneeled, dropping the other between her thighs again. She moaned into his mouth at the first flick of his finger against her swollen nub. He'd never had one sweeter, drinking in every single drop of her pleasure. He massaged her gently, sucking on her bottom lip as he teased and drifted back and forth over her flesh with deft strokes of fingertips and knuckles. Harsh gasps grew, her body coming alive like a loose electrical current. Her skin warmed where she brushed against the wall of his chest, her nipples dragging against him. The hard peaks struck his flesh like flint.

"You're so hot, Shar," he groaned into her mouth. "Come for me again." He had to have one more. It was becoming a necessity. He had to please her. She had to reach rapture.

She rocked against his hand, mewling with need. He slid a finger into her hot pussy and she whimpered. Heat darted up his spine when he felt her muscles tighten around him. The control he'd held with a tenuous grasp slipped completely free. "I'm going to make you fucking come." He ground his hand against her and she went wild, bucking against him as he plunged and pushed as far as he could with hard fast strokes, doing the same thing with his tongue, thrusting and plunging in unison.

She shattered. Ecstasy blazed from her blue eyes and a fine tremble rolled from her lips. Panting gasps made her breasts heave as her channel held and wrapped his fingers in its molten heat. He dipped down and kissed each turgid peak, undoing his jeans with a shaking hand. His cock jumped from the confines as he lowered them, as if seeking the heat he craved. He kicked off his boots and shucked his jeans. With careful movements he laid her down.

"Shar, I'm asking. Do you want me to wear a condom?" He would, but he wanted to feel her skin to skin. He was dying for that feeling.

"Is there a reason you need one?" she whispered, her eyes daring him as she swept a thumb over his lower lip. He found the tip with his teeth, nipping at it, sucking her into his mouth.

He released her, saying, "None."

With sensual ease, she fed her fingers through his hair and pulled him to her lips, giving him her answer between one kiss and the next. Her breath taunted his control incessantly with those kisses.

He held her firmly between his palms, moving between the firm, pale length of her legs. It was as though she was made for him, her body supple and giving beneath his as he entered her with agonizing slowness.

Wicked grins quickly turned to ragged pants of desire as he filled her. She was beautiful, wrapped in the wonder with her head thrown back and her lips rosy red from

his kisses. He felt her body move, convulse in invitation and he withdrew to hear a tiny whimper of complaint. Thrusting again, heat coated his skin. Desire flared with each motion.

She held him tight, clutching him as he repeated the movement, watching, waiting. Time vanished as he rocked against her. The sounds of her whispered gasps, the mewling of her desire filled his ears. He watched as pleasure raced over her features, her soft lips parted for each moan, a temptation that deserved his attention.

He kissed her slowly, moving with firm thrusts of his body into the silken heat that wrapped him like a glove. He closed his eyes and groaned when he felt the first wave building. She cried out and he lifted himself over her on his palms. "Let me feel you baby," he gasped, barely able to say a coherent word, she felt so good. "You're ready, aren't you?" He thrust deep, controlling every moment. Wanting it to last, needing to feel her come apart.

She moaned, clawing at his shoulders. Her hips rose up and he let out a shout as the pressure increased. He'd never felt so explosive. When she did it again, he wasn't able to hold on. The need to fill her, to crawl into her with his orgasm wrung him inside out.

Her cries filled the room, her legs locked behind his ass, clutching him to her as she reached the pinnacle and fell over it with a rush of liquid heat. Her juice coated him as he pumped his seed into her, each blissful release a breath of heaven.

He groaned once more, sliding down to rest on his elbows feeling languid in every muscle, covering her sweat-slick body with his. He kissed her shoulder without opening his eyes. Her hand drifted into his hair, twining the length through her fingers.

"Didn't I invite you for dinner?" Trajan asked with a slow chuckle a few minutes later.

"Something like that," she answered. The smile he heard in her voice fell flat when she continued. "You wanted to talk about what happened at the club."

He rose up to look at her. Right. The club. He let out a breath. "Shar," but she didn't let him continue.

"Trajan, I don't know what happened." Powder blue eyes opened, a tinge of hurt in them now. "I wish you'd believe me."

He brushed a knuckle to her temple. "I do believe you, Shar. The problem isn't you, or what you did that night."

Her eyes widened. "It's not?"

"No."

He caressed her lips, a lingering kiss; a kiss of promise before he pulled himself away from the heat of her body. "Let's go inside."

Once dressed he tugged her hair to get her attention and she whirled, the golden-red of her hair glinting beneath the roof lights like the fire of a summer sunset as it fanned out. The way it settled stole his thoughts for a split second. He stood there, unable to remember what he was going to say.

"What?" She waited, a small frown on her brow, pulling her hair out of his reach.

He mentally shook himself, while she watched him.

"You're such a kid, Trajan. Haven't you outgrown the need to pull my hair yet?" Her frown amplified.

Nearing her so she had to look up at him, he reached around and fisted his hand into the silk of her hair. With a gentle pull, he tilted her head until her lips were right where he

wanted them.

“No,” he breathed just before he kissed her, long and hard. “And don’t you dare cut it, either.”

A breathless ‘oh’ slipped out when he let her go again. With an arm around her, holding her soft curves against his, he led her to the house.

Chapter Ten

“How well did you really know Lawson?” Trajan asked, putting together sandwiches for them.

She stopped pouring tea into the two waiting glasses, stunned at the question. “How well?” He asks *this* after they just made love?

He glanced over his shoulder, and shrugged. “Yeah, like how well? Did you meet his friends, know his hangouts, that kind of thing?”

She tilted her chin and finished pouring. She needed a minute to gather her thoughts on this one. Replacing the tea pitcher in his refrigerator she answered, “I guess as well as any other couple dating. I met a few of his friends. We usually hung out at his apartment. Dinner, movies, easy dates. We weren’t living together. Hadn’t even talked about it.” Leaning against the counter, she watched as he reached behind her for napkins. He’d put his T-shirt back on and it was sinful how damn good he looked in it. And out of it. “Why?”

“I stopped by the *Mystic* this morning. You and Maddie or Braden even said there had been an explosion.” He turned carrying two sandwiches to the table. “You were all right.”

She yanked out a chair and plopped onto it, gaping at him. “We were?”

He didn’t appear happy to know the cause of the fire. “Unfortunately.”

“Why unfortunately? That mean’s someone is guilty of arson.”

He shook his head. “No, it means someone is guilty of attempted murder. The grand guess is if they knew the club was Kin or not. After what happened with you and Lawson, if he knew...”

Her lips popped open on a quick gasp. He left the statement hanging. She felt the color leach from her face at what he was saying.

“Then others could have known too,” she managed through a mouth that didn’t want to work. “But it was just that afternoon-”

“That you learned he knew.” His gaze was locked on his sandwich even though, like her, he hadn’t started to eat. He rested his elbows on the table, clasped, thinking. “Shar, did you ever throw sparks when you two...” He dragged a hand down his face, a frown of distaste on his face as two and two clicked for her.

“Throw...?” She searched her memory then shook her head hard. “No, I never have.”

Relief filled him and the tension in his shoulders left him, but he still didn’t look at her. A smirk lifted the corner of his mouth and she had a bad feeling about what he was about to say.

“Shar, trust me. You do. Brilliant, colorful sparks. You’re like a fireworks sparkler on steroids.”

She sat back, frowning. “Not funny,” she bit out. She sucked in air, trying to stay rational. She’d settle for calm, maybe. “Okay, let’s look at this a minute. I knew when I got emotional, yes, I threw sparks, but I *know* when it happens, I can control it. It’s never been an issue. I never associated it with...” She swallowed again. “With sex, because I didn’t know it could happen. It never has,” she finished on a whisper.

He fell silent, contemplating. She was grateful when he didn't push that line of questioning. "What else did you find when the ring let you get behind his defenses?" He offered a sympathetic look. "You never really said."

She picked at the crust of her sandwich, pinching bits to drop onto her plate. "Oh, not much really," she said, trying to hide her humiliation with disinterest.

He covered her hand, stopping the nervous sandwich demolition. "Baby, it's okay. You *can* still talk to me." A playful grin traveled across his mouth. "We've just hit a place in our lives where certain benefits have been explored. Believe me, I'm far from done with exploring them too. But the fire..." He shook his head, his thumb running over the skin of her hand. She had to watch its movement because it felt as though he were the one causing sparks as he swept back and forth. "If it weren't for the few there who had displacement ability like Braden, more would have been hurt. It's a miracle no one died considering it was a planned explosion."

She shivered. But Braden had been hurt. Had he been hurt helping her? Tears threatened and she gulped to not let the sob out. "I don't remember anything that happened." She swiped a tear away before it could fall. He stood and pulled her into his arms. She tucked herself into his chest like it was the only place to be.

"It's okay, Shar. We'll find out what happened." Soothing hands looped up and down her back. "Do you remember what you found in Lawson's brainpan?"

She sniffed and closed her eyes, hating to say it. "Women. A lot of women. He also knew *who* I was. He had a very strong interest in my father's bank accounts."

He swept her hair up and out, letting it fall in a flowing stream. "Stupid. Your father is going to stay alive just so no one else *can* get to his money."

"He's not that bad," she chided him with a light punch to his shoulder. "He's earned it, worked hard for what he has. It's his right to play with it, invest it however he wants to." She tipped back. "He did write my loan for the business. I haven't missed a payment yet. And you know he wouldn't have given me a penny if he didn't think I could pull off my own business, or my own clothing line."

"Yeah, your dad's one smart guy." He pressed a kiss to her forehead and let her sit back down. "So he had women, and wanted the money, which leads to the question how and why he knew to have mental guards unless he knew before or shortly after meeting you that you were a witch."

He took a big bite of his sandwich, and if for nothing else than to appease the grumble in her stomach, she did the same.

He finished a few minutes later, drinking down half of his glass of tea before speaking again. He wiped his mouth and set the napkin on the table by his plate. "I'm willing to bet he knew what you were before he knew you personally."

"You think so?" She guessed it was possible. There would have been no way for her to know. It was against the law for them to pry, whether the person could or couldn't, it didn't matter. It was not allowed, period. Only people who had granted permission, like married couples, had the allowance. The ring incident was an accident, but probably wouldn't have made the elders happy just the same if they knew it had happened.

He nodded then frowned again. "Shar, promise me you'll be careful. The fact that he had interests in your background, lied to you, and the club went up the night you tossed him out with the trash makes me worry."

She leaned forward on the table. "It has to be a coincidence, Trajan. He was furious

with me when he knew his dirty little secrets weren't secret anymore. He called me a deceiver, that I had lied and played *him* by not telling the truth immediately." She made a rude sound. *Like I would.* She began to pick at the leftovers of her sandwich again. "I don't think he knew, but maybe he guessed I was *something* and I shocked him when I proved him right." She felt sick to her stomach again. She'd been played by the man. For a whole year. "He asked me more than a month ago. He waited until Saturday to give me the ring."

"Why?"

She lifted a shoulder. "He proposed in style with the ring now that he had it. He told me he had plans for the night. A fancy dinner and surprises." She looked up when she felt Trajan's gaze boring into her.

"Surprises?"

"He said something about introducing me to his Uncle Nick. That they were looking forward to it. I don't see how any of it can matter."

"And that was when you put it on?" His voice was low, understanding.

She tossed the crumbs on her plate and dusted her hands off on a napkin, leaning back dejectedly in her chair once more. "Yeah. Guess I got through the guards because that ring meant so much to him. I don't think it was the actual ring for *me* that mattered. It was what that ring would get him." She let out a hard breath and looked up. "Can we talk about something else? There isn't much left to tell anyway."

He stood. "Yeah. Let's go watch a movie for a while."

She thought that sounded pretty good for the moment. She kicked her boots back off and made herself comfortable on a side of the couch. He held up two cases, one was an action the other was a comedy.

"Whichever," she said.

He turned and set one up to play, joining her on the couch. When the music started, he stretched out, laying his head on her lap. It was comfortable to rest a hand on his shoulder and he slid a hand under her thigh. His skin was warm under her hand, the firm muscles curving and solid as she stroked up and down in slow sweeps.

His thumb was repeating the motions on the inside of her thigh. Back and forth. Her mouth was going dry with want. They used to watch movies all the time on this couch, but the way she was beginning to feel with his touch sensuously stroking her felt anything but friendly. Suddenly the temperature in the room was rising as though a furnace stood behind her. She twitched. It was impossible not to.

"Comfortable?"

She choked on the words. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Then he dared to move, and he wasn't rubbing her thigh. The movie was lost behind lowered lashes as he scratched a nail against denim. Right where it counted. He shifted and bit at her thigh and she quivered.

A low sound rumbled up from him. It caused a shiver to cascade down her skin. Her fingers found their way into his hair, holding him, caressing. Shar remembered just what his mouth was capable of, and she couldn't deny she wanted him.

In a deft roll, he slid from the couch and landed on his knees in front of her. The hunger in his eyes shot through her like the candied liquor of that Flaming Star, sweet and heady.

"You should probably stay," he told her, swiping the vest from her shoulders. It

landed on the back of the couch. She feared for the chemise the way he yanked it over her shoulders exposing her to him, but the desire in his gaze turned her on. There was an urgency in his eyes. A fiery heat settled in her stomach and made her ache. “You can’t seem to keep your clothes on around here.”

She had noticed that problem, but couldn’t find a complaint about it.

The jeans were next, sliding free with a swift pull, her underwear going with them, until she sat naked on the couch.

She swallowed, feeling her heart pounding against her chest.

“That’s more like it. You should definitely be naked.” His hands followed her skin from her ankles, over her waist, cradling her breasts until he found the curve of her shoulders, down her sides to her hips, his thumbs stroking at her nipples on the way. She sucked a gasp at the contact, her nipples puckered and hardened as his hot breath raced over each.

He slid an arm under each knee and pulled her forward. A moan slipped out.

He leaned in and sipped at the flaming heart, dragging his tongue over it, savoring it. “That’s just fucking hot,” he breathed, whisking his tongue around the edge and into the soft skin of her hip.

It was hard to sit still under the heady pressure. She quivered all over with each touch of his hot mouth. She clutched at the thickness of his hair when he dropped his wicked tongue, delving into the damp heat between her legs. She moaned.

“Like that?” he asked her, teasing her with light strokes. The next few moments passed in a blur of feeling. Everything felt so good; the whip of his tongue, the teasing slide of his fingers up and down her body. She whimpered when he only teased her more.

“Come for me, Shar. I want to taste you.”

He sucked her clit into his mouth and she screamed. The fire of his fingers plunging into her was like hitting her with an electrical current. She ignited. Her body tightened, tingled all at once, and colorful sparks circled in her vision.

She felt herself floating, her skin hypersensitive to everything, the only thing keeping her grounded was Trajan’s wicked tongue lapping against her, thrusting to get every last drop. She felt absolutely drained.

She’d never hit that plateau before. She wasn’t even sure she was still in her own body. All she was certain of was that he was relentless, one orgasm after another. Constant pleasure. Her fingers dug in the cushions of the couch as he took her over the edge. Bordering between pleasure and pain sometimes, but always leaving her gasping, crying, craving more.

She feared what she would find when he was done, if she was still in possession of all of her soul.

As he stripped in front of her, his male beauty being unveiled to her own ravenous appetite, she wondered if he hadn’t already claimed it, never to be seen again.

Chapter Eleven

“Where were you last night?” Shar heard Maddie’s voice along with the bell chime of the front door.

“Over at Trajan’s. Why aren’t you at work?” she answered tightening a screw without looking from her perch on the stool behind the register.

Maddie strolled up to the counter, shouting a hello to Amber who even Shar could hear in the dressing den trying to put up an extra privacy blind. Satisfied with her work, Shar set aside the display shelf, grabbing yet another rack to put together. “I have a doctor’s note for the week because of my head. I’m feeling better, by the way. Thanks for asking.” She snickered when Shar finally looked up at her.

“I’m sorry!” Shar dropped the shelf on the counter. “You cut your hair!” That explained the impromptu drop-in. “It looks wonderful.”

Maddie beamed. “Thank God! I was terrified to get it cut this short. But Manuel promised it would look amazing on me. He was right. I love that man.” She fluttered her lashes in faux adoration.

Shar shared a grin encouraging Maddie to twist to show off the new bob and waved cut.

“Thanks,” she said with heartfelt meaning a moment later. “But that doesn’t explain why you were at Trajan’s yesterday. I gave up after ten, but come on.”

Shar purposely didn’t meet Maddie’s gaze, looking for the bolt and nut packet to her shelf set.

“Shar?” she asked, in a stage whisper. “Oh my God! You didn’t *go* home last night at all, did you?”

Shar quit pretending to look for the absentee kit and nodded, feeling like the biggest idiot or at the least, a nominee for the year’s award. “I am so screwed. I like Trajan. We’ve been friends forever and now this. If I fall for him...” Sadly, Shar could see it happening all too easily. The man already knew how to push her buttons to the Nth degree. She propped her elbows on the counter to talk quietly. “He doesn’t do relationships. He does diversions. He’s perfected it.”

“And he’s gorgeous,” came a quick add from the den.

Shar groaned, pressing her forehead to her palm. Maddie laughed. “So? Give. Details. The single life sucks donkey-ass.”

She evaded the deeper part of the question, using Trajan’s worry as a camouflage. “There are no details. He’s more interested in the club and if the Kin clans are now under surveillance. If there’s a connection between the club and Lawson.” Which meant if there was a connection between Lawson and Shar. At least his suspicion of her guilt had been laid to rest.

“Well, it’s not like we hang signs out to announce it, you know.” Maddie gave her a disgusted look.

“Announce what?” Amber asked, lugging the now empty blind box back to the front to toss out into the alley. She tromped the box down to size and straightened her shirt. “I’ll take it out when I have my smoke break.”

“No problem,” Shar said.

“Sounds to me like you have ex-man problems,” Amber stated. Shar had told Amber about the Lawson break up the day before.

“Yeah, kinda. Maybe. Honestly I don’t know. Nothing else has happened since Saturday to either me or any place that would be considered my kind of hang out.” She shrugged looking at Maddie. “It had to be a coincidence.” She prayed it was, anyway.

“Oh! Damn it. I forgot. This came for you while you were at *Sassy’s* yesterday.”

Amber lifted the cash tray out of the register, popping it shut with a jingle, holding a plain envelope in her fingers. Shar’s name was scribbled across the front. “I got busy with that engaged woman and her maid of honor and totally blanked it out.”

Shar’s fingers hardly shook when she accepted the envelope. She was proud of herself for not showing her own trepidation at seeing the envelope. She stared at it, a bad feeling twisting up her spine. “I’m pretty sure I’m about to eat my words,” she muttered. “This wasn’t mailed. Who brought it?”

“Just some guy. Said it was for the owner.”

“Like a delivery service?” Maddie asked.

“I don’t think so. He didn’t make me sign for it or anything.”

Crap. “Okay.” She stuffed it in her back pocket. “I’ll look at it later. I have four more shelves to get up before we leave today.” She did *not* want to read the letter with anyone else nearby.

The front door opened and a couple walked in. “I’ll help them then take my break.”

“Sure.” Shar waved Amber on.

“Hey, he’s kind of cute,” Maddie whispered leaning close. Shar looked up. Not bad for all American tall and sexy next door. She nodded in appreciation.

“But it looks like he’s taken,” she said, nodding toward the woman with Amber.

“I don’t think so. Look closely. I think they’re brother and sister.”

“Man he’s got guts to come in here with his sister,” Shar teased, nudging Maddie.

She laughed, quietly though. “I’m going to see if he needs any help.”

“Good luck,” Shar said, smiling at Maddie’s mischievous grin.

She watched Maddie approach the guy leaning on a rack and when he smiled at her, Shar knew Maddie had been right. She shook her head, reaching for the shelf. A few minutes later the door chimed again. Shar assumed it was the customers leaving, engrossed in trying to get her bolts to line up when the caffienated aroma of dark roast hit her senses.

A masculine hand waved a large cup under her nose.

She smiled, really unable not to. “Hi Trajan.”

“Hey there,” he said, a slow drawl in his voice. The one which used to infuriate her because he used to tease her so badly, usually prefaced by some taunt in that exact tone of voice. Not anymore. Now it made her melt as much as the coffee. “Thought you could use one, since you didn’t stay long enough this morning to share one with me.”

She snapped up and gave him a warning glare, looking behind him to see if anyone was close. “Shh! I had to go home. Clothes. Kind of need them.”

He tipped over the counter and eyed her outfit for the day. A thigh-high dark denim hip-hugger skirt with knee high boots and a soft yellow silk shell. She had added a snakeskin belt and a gold roped arm cuff as accessories. She was positive she heard him groan.

“They shouldn’t let you out in public like that.”

She frowned. "I do not look bad."

His smile was down right evil. And sexy. "I didn't say you looked bad, now did I?" He pushed the cup at her again. "Here." She picked it up cautiously, watching him with a perplexed look, then sipped at the coffee when he didn't say anything more about her outfit for the day. He walked around the counter and watched for a moment then picked up the next kit and began to help her.

She slowed, gaping at him as he started putting the next shelf together. She shook her head when he slid her a look. She wouldn't tell him not to help. The kits were a pain in her ass.

"Where are they going?"

She lifted and pointed. "One each below the displays and then two more on each wall. I've already marked the walls."

He nodded and started on his set. She was finishing up hers and looked up. Maddie was talking easily with the guy, and after a few quick glances from the woman he'd come with, she'd ignored him to shop. She peeked at the man next to her and felt her heart speed up a notch.

There was no doubt jeans were made for his body. He filled them out like he was poured into them. He'd tucked a dark t-shirt into the waist, a leather belt cutting him in half; upper and lower heaven. She licked her lips thinking about what was under the clothes. A nearly ab-ripped stomach, a chest that was solid and thick, and shoulders that if she'd ever stopped to look before, would have knocked her flat. That was all aside from those knockout green eyes of his. She sucked up the sigh before she let it out. Why the hell did she have to have the hots for Trajan? She knew she was doomed no matter what happened after last night.

"I need to borrow this," he said, reaching for the screwdriver in front of her on the solid wood counter. He turned with his mouth hanging right at her ear. When he spoke, his breath curled over her skin and she shivered at the heat. She felt the air hitch in her chest when he dragged his arm along hers, the stiffer hair on his forearm rubbing her skin until it tingled. "Mmm. You smell good," he breathed, teasing her lightly with a quick whip of his tongue on her earlobe. "You smell like cotton candy. Must be why I love to eat you."

She had to bite her own tongue to not groan.

A few minutes later, he kneeled to put the shelf with the others on the floor. Except he didn't come up from his crouch. The flirting feel of his fingers running up the leather of her boots made her shake. "Trajan!" she ground out as quietly as possible, keeping an eye on the people in her store, thankfully far too engrossed to realize she was getting felt up behind the counter. A little pressure on her calves had her turning on her stool, just enough for him to nip at the soft skin of her inner thigh. A tease. Torture was more like it. She slowly let the air in her lungs out, managing to not groan like an old oak tree in a high wind when he did it to the other side.

He stood, slowly, his face calm, but a hungry, devouring flame in his eyes. "What can I say?" He leaned over to whisper just for her. "You're fucking hot in leather, Shar." He reached up and grabbed her hand, placing it over a very prominent erection behind his zipper. Her heart raced. "I can't lie about that."

So what if it was only sex? Unbelievable, mind blowing, orgasmic out of this world, sex? Damn, he had that part *down*. She sucked in air when he nudged against her,

throbbed into her palm.

“Trajan,” she pleaded. “This is my store.”

He nodded. “I know. But you left this morning before I got to tell you goodbye. This is your fault, and then...” He sliced a look down her body, like he wanted to undress her then and there. Considering his expression, he probably was. And she’d never felt sexier in her life. He shook his head, slowly taking a deep breath. “This is going to be the longest damn day of my life,” he muttered.

“Oh. Why?” she challenged him. What could she say? She was used to playing with fire.

He turned to her, no mistaking the hunger, the desire lying in those green eyes of his. The heat was obvious in his gaze, deftly banked, but easy for her to see. She feared her expression mirrored his. She’d have been more surprised if it wasn’t as apparent. “Because I’m not leaving without you. The next thing I do with you is going to take several hours, chocolate icing, whipped cream, and whatever else I happen to think of between now and then.” This time his grin was broad and oh so daring. “And believe me,” he whispered, leaning in close, leaving no doubt to anything he was thinking. “I have one hell of an imagination.”

Luckily Amber arrived with the woman’s purchases and further discussion between herself and Trajan was cut off. It was a good thing too. She was tempted to see if his imagination and hers had anything in common. She predicted she’d be finding out soon enough.

Looking at the clock, she realized it was going to be a very long day for her too.

Chapter Twelve

Trajan made room for the tall blonde at the register so she could make the sale.

She smiled and said ‘thank you’ then turned to Shar. ‘I’ll be out back, break,’ she said then turned and winked at Trajan. He fought the grin. She wasn’t fooled in the least.

‘All right Amber. I’ll holler if I need you.’ She nodded and sauntered out, dragging a large box behind her.

He was going to ask if he should help her, but thought better of it. Amber looked perfectly capable of beating a box, and anything else, into submission.

The customer left with a guy Trajan had hardly noticed in tow. Maddie was smiling as she approached. ‘Hi Trajan.’

‘Hi Squirt,’ he said then laughed when Maddie gave him the finger. ‘How’s your head?’

‘Better.’ She focused on Shar. ‘I’m going to go meet up with Rob for lunch. He’s dropping his sister off at a salon next. She’s got some big wedding she’s going to and he’s bored out of his mind.’

Shar chuckled. ‘You work fast, honey. Rob? Lunch?’

Maddie buffed her nails. ‘What can I say?’

‘Be careful. Try a busy place for the first date,’ Trajan offered. Maddie had been Shar’s best friend forever, so it wasn’t unusual to dole out brotherly advice now and then.

She saluted Trajan and twirled, leaving just the two of them in the shop. And he had to focus, because alone with Shar was just dangerous territory to be in. He’d replayed last night over in his mind so many times, he’d been a walking ache *before* he’d arrived at her store. Seeing her and the outfit of choice had only ensured he’d remain that way for the day.

His gaze immediately went back to her legs, the flash of creamy skin between the skirt and the top of those boots made his mouth water. The thoughts he was having... He’d be struck by lightning, even if she was the one to inspire them all. He’d never envisioned the temptress she was now back then in the long ponytails and ragged jeans she used to wear. He enjoyed the way leather looked on a woman, and when Shar was added to the equation... He let out a short breath, dropping his gaze back to the shelf in his hands.

It wasn’t helping any that he could envision her dressed in everything in the store either. Her hair draped over some backless black and red number, only needing a flicked wish to pop open and show him the beautiful pearl tips of her breasts. Or something in leather, which reminded him she *had* something in leather and how much he loved that too.

He reached for his coffee to try to distract his heated thoughts and accidentally brushed against her hand when he did. She zipped back out of his reach, her lips parted slightly as her shoulders rose with a sharp intake of breath. The contact zoomed right to his groin.

There wasn’t any part of him immune apparently. Getting his mind back to the shelves, he helped her complete setting them up, then when they were done, he started the wall mounts for them.

“Here, hold this here,” he told Shar, positioning the shelf to screw the support down. He dropped the screwdriver though when he turned, his eyes automatically finding the peaks of her breasts pressing against her top. Her arm stretched the fabric across them. Braless breasts. He hadn’t noticed with her back to him earlier. His tongue felt thick and it wasn’t the only thing. She was going to pay for today. He couldn’t think of the last time he’d gone a whole day with a hard on like this.

People came and went during the day. Amber was subtle playing dumb in front of Shar, but Trajan knew there wasn’t anyway to fool her keen observation. He laughed when she gave him a saucy look right after lunch when he’d snuck a quick feel of tight denim and warm skin on his fingertips, Amber’s expression completely missed by her boss. Shar was killing him in her skirt.

After an excruciating day of watching her walk in tight denim, her cute little rear cupped so lovingly in it and making as many X-rated fantasies as he could to include those boots, it was finally time to close up the store. He groaned with relief when she told Amber to set the store alarm so she could lock the front door.

“Why did you stay all day, Trajan? You didn’t have to.” Shar was slipping a small purse over her shoulder, gathering her keys and turning out the lights. “I don’t think you’ve been here this much since I opened.”

He put a hand to her back. He never had told her why he’d come to the shop for the day. The coffee was just an excuse so she wouldn’t think to ask. Staying all day had been for his own masochistic self. There had been a legitimate reason for coming to her store, but when he’d awakened to an empty bed, he’d been positive she had bolted. He wasn’t about to let her out of his sight again.

Especially now. Not if her life was in danger.

“You’re probably right. I don’t think I have.”

She shot him a look from the side. “Then why today, and don’t give me some bull about the club. We both know I had nothing to do with it.”

He nodded, walking to her car in a side parking lot. His bike was close by. He searched the lot but there weren’t many cars left for that time of the early evening.

“I got a phone call from Braden this morning.”

She unlocked her car and tossed her bag in. “Okay.”

“Did anyone leave you a message in the last two days?”

Her lips pursed and she nodded. She reached around to a back pocket and held an envelope between them. “I got this at the store yesterday when I was at *Sassy’s*. Amber forgot it until this morning.”

He reached for the letter. Anger made his jaw clench as he quickly scanned, already knowing and being proven right to what it said. “I guess Lawson’s been busy. Braden got the same letter.”

She stood on her toes, trying to read it. “What does it say?”

“Lawson was in the club Saturday night. He has proof against the Kin. He’s threatening blackmail against you and Braden.”

She frowned. “How the hell did he get in? He’d never once gone with me.”

“Does it really matter? He knew enough to get in and then get out because he wasn’t anywhere near the club when the wall came down. And he knows you have the money to pay the demand.”

Shar sagged against the car. Trajan watched her face pale, then fall into misery. “Or

he exposes the entire clan circle in Granier Falls,” she supplied, devoid of emotion. Her pale gaze beseeched him, the wound reopened and painful. “Why? Was there anything he didn’t lie about to know me?”

Trajan reached around and folded her into his embrace. “There’s more than just this to it, I think. He had mental guards. Not because he was Kin, but because he thought you might *try* at some time to see into him. He knew you were a witch. Then you are at the club, he’s there, sees you and Braden and it blows up, but he’s not there when the crews arrive. And you’re the only one you saw who was arrested for anything.” He shook the letter in his hand. “Then these arrive. I think he has a contact on the force, and they were holding you. Period. They didn’t Miranda you, so you weren’t technically under arrest.”

They both knew Kin were on the force but not by name. It would take some work to find someone he felt comfortable giving this fight to. Because if Shar had been picked up and Lawson had friends, then he’d be leading this asshole right to the Kin. Again. He wasn’t going to do that. This was his fight now. He continued to stroke her back. “Shar, baby. I’m not saying this to scare you, but I think he’s a hunter.”

She gasped and froze but didn’t try to escape his embrace. “I wouldn’t be surprised,” she muttered. “I was so mad Saturday and then Saturday night happened.” She groaned, rocking her head against him. “I don’t remember a whole lot of it clearly.”

“I know.” He kissed her temple. He’d try to see if she remembered any details about when they were dating, even as much as he hated to know them himself. He didn’t want Shar to see anyone else. He swallowed before he added any mental addendums to that decree, surprised how quickly and easily he was wanting to add them. Those were the kind of thoughts he’d avoided for thirty-two years. It surprised him to have them come up now, over Shar. It was just best to stay on track and keep her safe. Worry about tomorrow, like sometime next week. “Come on. Let’s go back to my place. I have ideas on how to square this.”

She tipped back and he got a full view of powder blue eyes ringed in honey gold lashes and soft lips. He’d behaved all day—he knew he’d earned at least a kiss by now. He could wait until he had her at home and naked for the other things he had on his mind.

She tasted like sweet candy when he licked those perfect lips corner to corner. She shook, whimpering, craving and he felt himself ignite. It only took a step to lean her against the car and mold his body to hers. Her arms lifted and circled his head, jutting her nipples right into his chest. He was positive his eyes rolled to the back of his head at the intoxicating pressure.

He took one look over the hood of the car, making sure the car blocked them from the street view, then slid his thigh between her legs, nudging them apart. “You should wear skirts all the time,” he said, then thrust his tongue between her lips. It drove him insane today watching her parade around in the dark denim. He couldn’t wait to get home. He needed this, just a taste.

He felt her curves as he slid his palm down her side, landing on a thigh and he squeezed, gently kneading the flesh under his touch. She squirmed but he laughed, a low growling sound. “No way, baby. I get this one. I’ve waited all day.”

“But someone will see,” she said, blinking up at him with worried eyes that even then were glazing over with desire.

“And be jealous.”

He moved under the hem of her skirt and rubbed a knuckle against her pussy. She

squirmed and whimpered. He was willing to bet he could hit zero to bliss in three seconds flat as hot as she was, but there was more to this than just release. He wanted her to soar. There was nothing like watching her explode.

She was already growing damp under his fingers. He moved the patch of fabric she wore out of the way and delved between the smooth skin of her labia. Harsh pants filled the air.

She moaned softly, deep in her throat. He increased the pressure, rubbing back and forth until she began to claw at his shoulders and hang onto his hair, like she was drowning. A slow methodical tempo designed to drive her out of her mind. The way she clung, rubbed against him, panted in short gasps, quietly yearning proved it was working.

He nipped at her ear, her neck, her chin, meandering in his assault until he hovered over her lips. As one, he filled her channel and thrust his tongue into her mouth to swallow her heated cry. He flicked his thumb against the soft swollen edges of her pussy, eliciting breathless moans driving him deeper into her heat. Her reaction was immediate, tensing as she orgasmed for him. He groaned deeply, feeling hot wetness on his skin. He was going to spend hours tonight seeing her come apart like this. There was no comparison to the pure desire in her gaze, the soft pout of her lips, or the satisfaction he felt when she did.

A few moments later he lifted his hand and licked his fingers and her eyes sparked in a sultry way he'd only seen in Shar. He purred. Had any woman drove his body, his desires so thoroughly? Had any woman made him crave this hungrily for complete satisfaction? He couldn't name one. Except this one.

He dipped down and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips, still quietly gulping air. "I'll follow you," he said, leaving it clear she was to go to his house.

"Trajan," she tried to object. He kissed her again, leaving her breathless.

"Just put your cute butt in the car, Shar."

"Fine but I can't stay."

He decided it was better to see how the night went than to argue about it before it had begun.

She adjusted her skirt, shimmying her hips to fix the non-existent underwear she wore. He'd be the last man to argue against thongs on women. She had soft hips and a flat stomach, which accentuated the bare part of her that he couldn't seem to get enough of.

The setting sun shone from the side and bathed her in an arc of amber light as he stepped away to let her slide into the car, and his breath caught. The fiery red of her hair looked like it was a flame, lightening the paleness of her skin to pure cream. Her eyes stood out, sky blue but striking against the cream and fire of her coloring.

He sucked in a breath.

The sudden shattering of her rear door window on the other side had him yanking her down to the ground, covering her with his body. She screamed as the ricocheting echo of the fired weapon bounced off the building behind them. Another shot took out the other window. Glass flew in all directions, covering the car's interior and ground in a showcase of glitter.

He opened his senses and peeked over the car, taunting the shooter by being obvious and waited for the next bullet. He wasn't disappointed. As the firing vibration hit his senses, he enveloped the car within a wall, an anti-magnetic charge that would deflect the

bullet. It plunked into the side of her car in the opposite fender, but he found the heat of the steel on the rifle it had been fired from. The shooter was down the block, wedged between another building and a dumpster. He lifted enough to look over the car hood and sent a shot of cold, freezing the firing mechanism on the rifle. It would jamb it long enough to get out of there in one piece.

“The bike!”

She reached for her purse and slammed the door for the good it did, eating a couple valuable seconds then hopped on behind him as he started the motor. “Hang on!” Her arms encircled his waist in a death grip. The roar of the motorcycle was the only sound Trajan heard as he sped out of the line of fire. Thankfully, the shooter didn’t try to make any wild pot shots as he drove them away from the parking lot. He didn’t draw an easy breath until he was well passed the corner and speeding out of range.

Chapter Thirteen

“What was that?” she screamed at him over the wind of the motorcycle’s speed, ignoring the whipping of her hair behind her. He shook his head. She tucked back into his shoulder and hung on. He was flying over the road he was going so fast, so she didn’t try to distract him again.

Who the hell was shooting at her? She wanted to scream again, but in rage. A cheating ex who was trying to blackmail her, witch hunters and now a maniac shooter. What was going on? What happened to just leaving work and living a boring life?

Trajan’s warm hand covered hers where she clutched his middle and she felt a little better. She exhaled, working on calming a racing heart.

He slowed for a stop sign, well out of the business district for Shar’s shop, and leaned to ask, “You doing all right?”

She sniffed. “Yeah, hunky dory. I make high speed shoot out getaways a regularly scheduled part of my week.”

He chuckled, reached back and ran his hand along her cheek, then let it fall to rest on her leg once he was moving again. She sighed picturing her car, closing her eyes with her head resting between his shoulder blades, not wanting to think about the damage waiting for her insurance company. What she really didn’t want to think about was the fact that someone had been taking shots at her, and Trajan.

She stiffened, her eyes widening as the possibility took hold. What if the shooter had been aiming for Trajan? Why would they shoot at him? Thankfully they had been a lousy shot. She snuggled a little tighter, glad he hadn’t been hurt. His fingers kneaded her thigh in answer and she didn’t mind at all.

He pulled into his driveway coasting to the back instead of stopping out front. She jumped off and lifted the garage door when he asked. He brought the door down and locked it, wrapping an arm around her waist to walk her to the house.

“I guess you’re not interested in sandwiches two nights in a row?” he asked, tossing his keys into a bowl by the front door. He sat down and kicked off his boots.

She dropped her purse by his keys, wishing she had a change of clothes, but knew she was out of luck.

“Whatever,” she said morosely, plopping down on his couch. It was hard to avoid the memory of what had happened on that couch the night before. She swallowed, and let her head fall backward. “Can someone please tell me what the hell just happened?”

He sat down next to her and tugged her over against his body. “You sure you’re okay?” He ran his hands down her arms, she guessed looking for any road burn from when he yanked her down to the asphalt. She turned this way and that, but didn’t see anything.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She curled up into his shoulder and closed her eyes. “So what do you think?” she asked a few minutes after he’d turned on the news with a lowered volume, the remote tossed back to his side.

“Honestly?”

“No. Feel free to lie to me so I won’t feel like the ducks on the shooting gallery line-up.”

“Shar.” He shook his head with a quiet chuckle, running his fingers through her hair. “I’d forgotten how sarcastic you can get when you’re pissed.”

She took a deep breath. “Well, you asked.”

“Teach me,” he murmured. Her nerves prickled because what she heard in his voice was not exactly the same tone to what she thought they had been discussing. She rapped her hand against his stomach.

“Come on, Trajan, stay with me on this one. Someone just *shot* at us, or do we need to go back and do a replay?”

“I’m not sure what we can do except make a police report, but I have my doubts about making one because I’m positive Lawson has friends on the force.”

“So it was either Lawson, a cop, or a hunter firing at us?”

“Not very good odds if you ask me,” he said. “It could have been one and the same, but you’ll have to tell me if you feel Lawson would stoop to murder when he’s already trying to blackmail you.”

His voice was graveling out. She heard the distaste in his voice whenever he mentioned Lawson’s name. She rubbed her head against his body and he tightened his arm around her. “I’m thinking it’s just the blackmail for him,” she replied a moment later, giving it some careful thought. “It meshes with the ring incident.”

His fingers continued to move, either stroking her arm or combing through her hair. It had a very soothing effect on her nerves. “Then someone we don’t know was shooting at you, me or us. Would he be mad enough to shoot at someone with you?”

She noticed he didn’t qualify himself in relation to her, a boyfriend, a friend, a lover. A blunt reminder she was still just a diversion. She needed to keep reminding herself of that fact.

She shook her head, not sure she would say the right thing as disappointment soured her throat. Who would have thought after only a few days she would even *care* how he thought of her? When she could speak, she told him, “I do need to make a police report though. I have to file for the insurance.” And it was something she could do without thinking in the terms of herself, and Trajan, and when it would be over between them.

He reached for the remote and turned up the volume. “You might want to wait before making that phone call, Shar.” She moved and focused on the television.

“...the woman escaped on a motorcycle. Her accomplice was wearing...” She gasped listening to the news report and looking at the face of one of the officers as he answered questions.

“I recognize him. He was there Sunday morning when I picked you up.” Shar barely heard him, her stomach tossing like the seven seas listening to the bullshit spouting out of the man’s mouth.

The information bar beneath his face gave the name Lieutenant Nickolas Warton. She gasped. “That bastard! That’s Uncle Nick! Turn it back up,” she demanded.

The news lady faced the camera. “Well, that’s the report from the parking lot of *Dressed To Kill*, a clothing store of the woman identified as the owner caught in a shoot out with the Granier Falls police not even an hour ago.”

She listened to the rest of the report, but didn’t have to hear it. “I don’t even own a gun!” she snarled. “I can’t believe this. What are they doing? I didn’t shoot a friggin’ thing!”

Trajan turned the television off. “Looks to me like you’re being framed sweetheart.

There's no way you can go home now. We have to figure out where the hell Lawson is." He fell silent, letting the news report sink in, when he asked her, "How did you know that was the Uncle Nick he'd meant Saturday?"

She rubbed her eyes hard until they teared. "I met one of his cousins, Jimmy Warton. He'd told me his father was a cop. I thought he meant somewhere else because he made him sound like a big shit, a public hero. Not here. That man's no hero. I've lived here long enough to know I've never heard him." She groaned, feeling like a fool. "So I guess that means you're right, and that's how they warped the news story. But why are they trying to bring down a witch clan? What the hell have we done to anyone in the last hundred years? Nothing," she miffed. "I couldn't have done anything."

"I don't think it's the whole clan."

She groaned, not wanting to move. "Does it really matter? How am I supposed to fix this? They're still blackmailing Braden and me." She lifted up from his chest with a hand on solid muscle, a cold fist gripping her from the inside. "Braden! We need to make sure he's okay."

Trajan reached for his phone and made the phone call, holding a finger to her lips when she demanded to talk to him. He shook his head, keeping the conversation short, explaining what had happened in the parking lot and making sure Braden kept his eyes open.

"Why didn't you let me talk to him?"

"Because if someone is listening to the call, they'll know you're here. He's fine, freaked out over the news report but not playing stupid."

She swallowed. "Oh, God. Trajan... If they think I'll pay, they'll go after him." Her stomach heaved for real this time and she raced for the bathroom, terrified for her friend. She wavered on her feet, holding herself steady against unappealing porcelain as stress and shock rolled through her body, her stomach losing everything it had in the onslaught. Breathing seemed like a chore in itself as wave after wave wracked her body, dumping misery on top of everything else. She sat on the edge of the tub a moment later, rubbing her temples finally able to do more than just gulp for oxygen. Trajan leaned against the door-jamb sympathy in his expression.

"Well, baby, I guess we need to fix this then. The question is: are they both hunters or just one? If Lawson has the balls to blackmail you, and all dear Uncle Nick wants is a dead witch, then we have a problem, because I can see the cop covering Lawson's ass even with the letters. He'll cover it up to keep his chances open for one of us, whether he knows for certain there's more or not. We need to get both of them together, find out who else if anyone is involved and keep you and Braden from getting hurt in the process."

She nodded, feeling miserable. She swore she'd never use her magic again if everyone got out of this alive. "I'll do whatever I have to do, Trajan. I don't understand how it got so out of control." She was close to tears and hated herself for it.

"Don't worry, Shar. We'll get this taken care of."

She moaned in misery, shaking where she sat, her emotions on overload.

He reached for her and tugged her into his hold, soothing her with softly spoken words and gentle hands on her body. "It's okay, Shar. You just fell for the wrong guy."

She sniffed, swallowing the tears. The problem was, she knew she was falling for the wrong guy all over again.

Chapter Fourteen

The phone rang a few minutes after he'd brought her back into the living room when she'd had a chance to regain some of her composure and rinse her mouth. She'd finally regained some color to her cheeks and wasn't hiccupping in misery. He kept an arm around her, feeling her tremble against his side. He heard Sissy when he answered the insistent ring.

"Hey sexy," she purred. "Tied up for the weekend?"

"Yeah, I'm going to be swamped." He adjusted the phone on his ear, not wanting to let Shar loose.

"How about just dinner then?" she asked.

He knew what it was code for, and honestly wasn't interested in that either. "Sorry Sissy. I have a full plate this weekend." He felt Shar stiffen next to him then slip from his hold, avoiding his fingers and his looks when he tossed her a questioning stare. He watched her turn and walk from the living room with a tight back, the back door opening and closing with a sound thud.

"All right. Give me a call when you can." He nodded, unaware if he even physically answered her.

He frowned, although not entirely sure why when he hung up. He hadn't thought of Sissy since he'd seen her, and usually if she was willing, he'd have her over, no qualms, but something kept him from telling her yes. He thought of her lush body, the full breasts and none of her charms did anything for him.

He turned on a heel and looked to the back of the house, seeing in his imagination red hair, pert breasts and a tattoo that scrambled his mind and he was suddenly aching toward arousal.

Damn it, but Shar was messing him up good. He needed to get Lawson and his attempt at blackmail straightened out, then get the damn witch hunter off of her because he couldn't keep her around forever. All he'd done was get her naked, and keep her there, since he'd found out she'd broken it off with Lawson.

His frown deepened when the naked images hit him square again.

But did he really want to let her go?

Unable to give a definite answer to his own question, he strode to his kitchen and grabbed a couple beers. He found her on the back porch curled up on the lounge chair staring off into space.

"I'm sorry I'm keeping you from your life," she said, idly plucking at loose threads on the canvas cover. She didn't look when he held the beer down by her shoulder. He set it on the porch, then sat behind her.

"You're not, Shar."

Her hair hung around her face, hiding a lot of her from him. She didn't say anything to him, but he felt her disbelief. It was in the tautness of her shoulders, the evasive glances refusing to meet his. He was surprised to find that actually bothered him, when she wouldn't look at him.

"Well, I think I figured out what Lawson's game is, or was," she said in a very matter of fact voice. "I'm sure the sooner this is over, the better. I'm sorry you're now

dragged into this mess.”

He ran a hand up and down her back, knowing she meant the apology. He didn't blame her for what had happened. But he didn't like the fact she thought she was being a problem, even if only a moment before he'd have agreed. He tipped the bottle and sipped then asked, “What do you mean? What do you think he's up to?”

He watched as she reached for the neck of the bottle and imagined her fingers doing the same thing to his cock, lifting him ... er ... it to her lips. Her tongue licked her lips when she was done, the moisture glistening with a sheen sending his pulse pounding. He pushed against the zipper of his jeans and shifted to relieve a little of the pressure. Changing his position really didn't help much.

She shrugged, and he tried to focus. “I've been bothered ever since Saturday about the fact Lawson had mental safeguards, then accused me of lying to him or at the least deceiving him because I didn't tell him right away. I think he got mad to throw me off. He did know I was a witch, like you said. I just never thought of it one way or the other because he didn't make any weird mentions of it, you know, picking at me, or insinuating anything. Most people don't even think people like us exist. Why should I expect the guy I'm dating to think any differently? So I guess the thing is to find out why he had mental safeguards, and if his uncle and Lawson are on the same side of the fight. I still think he's just after the money,” she muttered.

He heard the hurt confusion in her voice and nodded, still trying to get his tongue to work for speaking. At the moment, it was out of service, at least of the speaking variety.

“Okay.”

She looked over her shoulder and frowned. “Never mind. I thought you were worried, as in *listening*. I'm sorry I ruined your weekend with Sissy. I'll go stay at Maddie's until I can get back to my apartment. Who knows if they are actually even watching it? It's probably not even on their radar if all of this news bullshit is just a screen because they were firing at us, you know, like innocent people being shot at. I'll have her drive by and see what she can find out.” She launched from the canvas lounge but he was quicker, snapping out an arm and hauling her back down to his lap.

“Let me go!” she demanded, sounding very pissy. He hid his smile in her hair, just holding her until she quit struggling.

He waited her out, his arm around her middle, massaging her neck with the other. When she quieted he told her, “You didn't ruin anything, baby.” He flipped her hair out of his way and dropped a kiss on her shoulder. “Call Maddie, but tell her to bring you clothes. You're not going home until I know you're perfectly safe there.”

“Then I'll just stay at Maddie's.”

He shook his head. She sure was stubborn. “I don't think so. I'd feel better if you stayed here. It will take a little time to plan and set the trap...” He arched an eyebrow at her. “Assuming you were planning on exposing them both.”

“I have a plan!” She crossed her arms and huffed at him, plainly ignoring his attempts to soothe her.

“I thought as much,” he murmured, brushing kisses to bare skin. He scraped his thumb to the underside of her breast where he held her. “But we're not doing anything about it tonight. It's already dark, neither of us have eaten since lunch and depending on what the craving is, one of us hasn't *eaten* in even longer.” He licked his lips giving her a ravenous grin to go with the growled voice. Yeah, she wasn't leaving. Not now, not

tonight. He still had an entire day's worth of fantasies to explore.

He saw her cheeks redden and her lips part with a low gasp of desire.

"You're insane," she told him, shaking her head at him. "You're harboring an 'armed and dangerous' criminal." She lifted her fingers and did the quotes in the air motion. "Or did you miss that part of the news bulletin? You're better off without me anywhere near you. Especially if people are going to be shooting at me."

He shook his head. "You're safer here than alone in your apartment. Braden will be fine. He knows how to take care of himself. Those two are clowns," he said bluntly. "The rest is just getting them to do something stupid where it'll be witnessed."

She sagged. "I was thinking the same thing."

He nuzzled against her, pushing for the win. "So stay. We'll work out the details and see how tomorrow goes. I'm willing to bet by this weekend, this will be all behind us."

"That's what I'm afraid of." It was a very quiet whisper, so quiet he wasn't sure he was even supposed to have heard it. He pulled her in closer, and lengths of red hair twirled around him.

"You know what? You should probably call Amber instead and tell her to take the day off until we do get this behind us. Your shop is going to be a hotspot until the police air a retraction or an apology." And it worked in his favor for her to have less to worry about. He was positive they'd have this cleared up in a day or two at the most. He wasn't about to let some half-cocked asshole try to hurt Shar, and the witch hunter had simply chased the wrong woman. He'd make sure he saw his mistake in Technicolor.

She groaned, sinking further into herself in misery. "Yeah. That's true. Hopefully Diane at *Sassy's* didn't catch the news report. She just agreed to start carrying my lingerie. All the work I've done, and it's going to fall apart."

Pressing kisses to her skin, he shook his head. "No. This will clear up. You'll see." He slid her from his lap and grabbed the bottles, urging her back inside. "Call Amber."

He dropped the bottles into the recycle bin and listened as she spoke, walking up behind her. Her voice was pitched low, explaining as little as possible and answering even less.

He spanned his fingers around her waist, his thumbs rubbing against the tight roundness of her ass in the denim. She tossed him a glare, but he didn't stop.

"Call Maddie," he urged before she could build steam to argue with him when she was done giving Amber off the next few days. "You should probably have some clothes, but none at all suits me."

She smacked his chest, that adorable disturbed frown reappearing. Before she could dial, he wrapped his hand through her hair and tipped her back, exposing her throat. Her skin was warm beneath his lips and a sigh wisped from her. He kissed those luscious pink lips, holding her captive.

With knowledgeable fingers, he undid her belt. "You better call her. You're running out of time before you're naked," he taunted her.

He had slid the belt free and worked her shirt loose by the time she'd finished asking for Maddie's help.

"She'll be here about ten. She wants to wait until later to try to go to the apartment."

He nodded, no longer caring what or when, when it came to Maddie's arrival. He swept her hair to the side, sucking on her shoulder. She inched backward, grinding against his crotch. He swatted her gently.

“No, baby. I’ve had all day to plan this. You and those boots, this skirt.” A hungry growl rose from his chest. She had no idea how sexy she looked. He slowly dropped the zipper by feel from behind her, his arms wrapped around her waist, already envisioning what he would find. “You were driving me nuts, all day long.”

“Short trip,” she quipped.

He tugged her hair in reprimand and she laughed. Damn, but she was sexy, staring at him with those blue eyes where he held her captive, all seductress, but he had to wonder who was the one captured.

Was it any wonder he couldn’t stop touching her, couldn’t stop kissing her when she teased him with daring looks? When she licked her lips with that tongue? She had a wicked mouth on her, in more ways than one.

With a purposeful shove, he sent her forward to the couch, bending her over the edge, her ass sticking out at him, lined up beautifully on the black heels of her boots. He swatted her again, not rough, just enough to say he was in charge and she moaned. He couldn’t wait to see how she took being tied down on his bed. Not even Sissy took his playful control in stride. The thought of the other woman didn’t faze him—he couldn’t even picture her face in his mind. Not with the temptation of Shar’s body filling his vision.

He formed his palms to her, running from her shoulders down her spine until he cupped her sweet rear in his hands. He slid the skirt down and exposed her fully, feeling her tremble beneath his touch. She stepped clear of the denim and the scrap of satin. Unable to resist the smooth globes before him, he bit down on the dent of her back, soothing her when she quivered in reaction. “Don’t move.”

It only took him a moment to dim the lights, leaving only a single lamp burning to illuminate the room. He sauntered to the kitchen, finding the items he wanted, leaving her right where she was. He sucked in air sharply when he returned and she hadn’t moved. Not so much as an inch. The shock of what it all meant hit him hard.

She trusted him. Really absolutely trusted him to not hurt her, to not do something he wouldn’t give her the final say in. She was an incredible woman. He had plans to show her how incredible all night long. He hadn’t found a cure to the itch she’d created, but he was enjoying trying to find it.

Sinking down behind her, he ran his tongue upward behind her knee, nipping at smooth skin. She quivered under every single touch of his lips and tongue. With a firm hold, he wrapped his fingers around her ankles sliding them upward and felt singed by the slick leather encasing her legs. She trembled and he inhaled, already finding the heady scent of her sex growing heated. With her at his mercy, he tipped and whipped his tongue against the edges of her slit, feeling her quake in reaction. He was just starting his evening.

Standing once more he shoved her shirt upward out of his way then lined a stripe down her back and she shivered at the cold feeling.

“Whipped cream? You were serious?” she whispered, her voice throaty with desire and shock.

“Only the beginning,” he replied licking it off with long sweeps of his tongue. He kneaded her rounded flesh in strong fingers as he dined off of her skin. She gripped the couch cushions in reaction, arching with each stroke of his tongue. Relinquishing the sweet globes of her ass, he reached beneath her body and alternately tugged and played

with her ripe nipples as he licked her clean. He felt her quiver against his chest as he worked his way down her spine. She pushed into his hands and against his tongue and he felt his blood heat like nothing else. He urged her to stand when he'd thoroughly licked her clean and stripped the shell over her head, turning her in his arms.

She gave him a wary look, not meeting his eyes.

"What's wrong? You didn't like it?" He thought she'd liked it. Now he wasn't so sure.

She bit her bottom lip between her teeth, saying, "I feel weird. The boots..." She tried to cover her breasts but he clasped her hands and brought them to her sides. With a gentle hand under her chin he tipped her up to look into her eyes.

"Shar, you have no idea what those boots do for me. You're sexy as hell in them. Just like this. I love the way you look in leather."

A glimmer of laughter appeared in her gaze, her confidence restored. His heart raced when her lips lifted, her look growing daring and sensual. "I had no idea you had a kink and fetish side."

Relief made him smile. "It's young. Want to help me explore it?"

With a hand under each breast she teased him. "Where's the whipped cream? I feel naked."

He groaned then edged her backward until she was on the couch again, daring him with a look that made his blood surge.

Chapter Fifteen

He dropped a dollop of whipped cream on each peak. “Perfect,” he told her before licking them clean. He purred at the hot taste of her skin and the cool sweetness of the cream. She writhed beneath him as he steadily worked his way to the juncture he craved like a junkie seeking his next fix. She squealed when he dipped his tongue into her bellybutton, licking her like the treat she was.

Using the canned cream, he outlined the treasure between her legs, making her his own Shar sundae, cherry included. He nestled it right at the top of his sundae swirl, the bright red peak right over her tempting clit. He dribbled a couple drops of the juice on her skin and she giggled, watching him. “How does that feel?”

“Cold.”

“Mmmm. I better warm you up then.” He dipped down and cleaned the first pink trail away with a deep moan from her in appreciation. He lingered over the second, gently sucking up the moisture, following the trail to lap up the last straying drops.

“Do I get a turn?” she asked breathlessly watching him with an intensity that dared to steal his air when he looked up to gauge her reaction.

“Do you want to?”

She nodded, her eyes slumberous and sultry, her gaze bold. He almost came right there. Like he’d tell her *no*? He couldn’t believe he was actually going to get to have his fantasies... And eat them too. He swallowed, finding his voice. “Shar, baby. Anything.”

Her eyes fluttered and her pelvis rocked in front of him. The cream was warming, dripping between her swollen lips and he wasted no more time.

The cherry slipped down between her plump labia lips and he gripped it between his fingers, licking the cream away from her wet folds. She moaned and rocked and quaked with each flick of his tongue. He split the cherry, rubbing it on her clit and she cried out, shuddering in pleasure.

Cherry flavored Shar. Life couldn’t get any better. Pulling her legs up and over his shoulders, he dove, thrusting his tongue into her honey, sweetened from the cream, slick and cool. She bucked against him, mindless as he took her over the edge. She shocked him with the force of her orgasm, jetting into his mouth with a rush of liquid. He savored it like a fine wine.

He let her relax, tenderly licking at the glistening drops while little earthquakes traveled over her in ripples. “God,” he groaned, unable to stop his tongue she tasted so good. “I could do this to you forever.” His voice was a ragged whisper to his own ears, raw with desire. He blew a stream of air over her and she jumped in his hands.

“I’d never survive,” she gasped.

Giving her a moment to catch her breath, he stood and stripped, unashamed of his arousal or the way he couldn’t stop looking at her. He wiped his chin and hands on his t-shirt then tossed it aside.

Slowly she sat up and licked her lips, devouring him with her eyes the same way he’d just devoured her. Completely. Fully, and it was making him harder and hotter by the second. He gripped a hand over his length, demanding some self control. He had a feeling what he was about to receive was going to test his limits and then some.

She studied the flavorful arsenal he'd acquired from the kitchen, hovering with indecision. "You need oils," she said, then lifted her chin to look him in the eye. He swallowed wondering when he'd stepped through heaven's gate because he sure as hell didn't remember dying. "I like to make my own."

He groaned, long and low, his mind easily filling in the erotic pictures. "Shar, you're going to be the death of me."

That sweet pink tongue flicked to her bottom lip, a daring, heated look in her gaze again. "Then I better make sure you go down with a smile," she said. Her voice flowed over him, low and smoky enough to make his toes curl. "Lucky for you, I still love chocolate pops."

He sent a silent prayer for strength when she thumbed the top off the unopened fudge icing. He'd bought it on a chance along with the whipped cream and cherries after he found out Lawson was out of the picture, after those hotter-than-sin kisses they'd shared. He'd never met a woman interested in adding a little play to lovemaking. Shar was steadily blowing his mind with her willingness and her own sense of adventure. At this point, he'd make sure they were a regular shopping staple from now on.

The cover was ripped free and all he could do was watch. And enjoy.

She curled a finger into the chocolate and then smoothed it along his stiff cock with easy, slow strokes. His head fell back unable to watch as she coated him from the swollen tip backward. The feeling alone was driving him insane.

Hot breath on the head of his shaft snapped him back to paying attention in a heartbeat. He released a slow hiss of air when she flicked out her tongue and delivered a delicate lashing, lapping at him. He felt as he thickened, craving, to the point of pain.

"Thank God I'm not on a diet," she teased, eyeing him playfully.

He plied his fingers through her hair, cupping the back of her head gently. "You don't need to diet baby. You're perfect."

She blinked up at him from where she kneeled, staring as if he'd stunned her. He stroked a thumb against her cheek, not at all surprised he meant it. She looked so sweet and innocent, but the boots turned her into a sexy siren, and he found himself completely at her mercy. Whether she knew it or not. Her gaze dropped and he waited, giving her time to decide and he wasn't disappointed. She exhaled a breath against him, then she slowly drew his pulsing length into her mouth. He watched her as she bobbed in a slow rhythm, licking the icing off with swipes of her tongue with each motion.

His eyes crossed when she did some sort of twisting motion with her lips, reversing the pressure with a hand at the base. His legs trembled. She kept doing it, taking him deeper and deeper until there was no other feeling, just the intense pleasure of her mouth on his cock and the rhythm of her sucking. The scrape of nails along the bottom of his penis where he was the most sensitive and against his sac dragged a groan out of him that he knew came from his feet.

"Shar." He wanted to warn her. He was so close to the edge of that cliff. Silken hair wound over his other hand, and he tried to slow her down, using his palms to try to halt her movements. Air slammed in and out of his body and tingles raced up and down his spine. Skin tightened around his erection and testicles, like a cauldron was heating and she held the match. "I'm going to come if you don't stop," he managed, gasping as she doubled her assault. She made a sound, a purr or a growl—he wasn't sure—but it vibrated against his skin and he felt his restraint slipping. She clutched at his leg with her

nails digging in, refusing his insistence to make her stop. Muscles clenched when he felt her swallow his whole length down the back of her throat. Watching her take him deep was one of the most erotic things he'd ever seen. He lost the willpower to do anything but watch.

Her lips and tongue waged a spell over him. He groaned and let her take control, pistoning his cock into her hot little mouth, matching her tempo. He moved between her lips, each stroke raking his skin with the velvet rasp of her tongue and constant suction as she drew him deep. She felt so fucking good. Hot and tight. She purred and moaned and the vibration sent shocks to his testicles, making them tighten. She lifted a hand and cupped him. He hissed with pleasure, air slamming out of his lungs in time to the mouth on his flesh.

He rocketed right past the point of no return and never even saw the warning signs as they flew past.

He shouted, tensing as the top exploded off the end of his cock. Shudders rocked his body, her tongue dancing over his skin like he was some kind of divine dessert, swallowing every drop as he pulsed his orgasm into her. He felt his body fall in on itself, as though she had sucked him dry.

"Mmm," she murmured, wiping away a stray bit of chocolate at the edge of her mouth. "Yum."

He shook his head, unsure how he was able to stay standing. He offered her a hand. He needed to move or he was going to fall over like a felled tree. "Come on. Bedroom." She rose to stand with him. "I need to rest a moment."

"Then what?" she asked, completely comfortable in her nakedness next to him as he looped an arm around her body. She fit perfectly against him.

"Round two?" he asked, running his hand over the smooth skin of her ass. He loved hers. It was perfect for him. He was already envisioning the fantasies he still had to share with her. When she looked up with a questioning stare, he told her, "Don't worry. I'll take care of Maddie when she gets here. You just need to stay naked and gorgeous." The rest of the night was wide open from there for him. And he'd just begun.

Chapter Sixteen

Shar hung up the phone glancing back over a shoulder. "The bait is laid."

Trajan caressed her neck, seeing the tension in her expressive powder blue eyes. "Don't worry. You were very believable."

She shuddered in distaste. "I can't believe I agreed to marry that worm. He wasn't even trying to fake he'd lied to me. It all boiled down to money."

He pulled her around to tuck her into his chest. Dipping down to the curve of her shoulder, he inhaled her sweet scent, a scent that would always be Shar. It made the blood in his body run with a renewed heat. With a gentle nip, he convinced himself to stand straight. It was a reluctantly obeyed order, at best.

"You're fine, baby." He wasn't convinced it was just the money. He feared once Lawson had even a penny, the witch hunter would take his turn at the woman in his arms as well, and he wasn't positive it was just one. He wouldn't allow anyone to hurt her, but they had to catch the ones who had set her up and remove any threat to the Kin in the process. Nothing would happen to Shar, he wouldn't allow it. She shivered just the same. Soft skin floated under his touch and the scent of her filled his nostrils. Even after spending hours loving her, she still excited him unlike any other.

"Do you really think this is going to work?"

"I think so. Believe me, I don't like you being the bait anymore than you do." He lifted her to look into her eyes. "I know you can handle yourself, and I'll be just a step behind you, the entire time."

She nodded. "All right then. Let's do this."

With a hand to the small of her back, she picked up the designer bag Maddie had brought her clothes in, now filled with newspaper and together they strode to his truck. She got behind the wheel plunking the bag on the seat between them and he sat on the passenger side.

The sun was setting with night fast approaching. It had taken some time to get everything planned for her to meet with Lawson.

He put a hand on her shoulder and she looked at him, her face drawn. He leaned over and found her lips, a fast, deep kiss. The lingering memories of the last few days were replaying on his eyelids as he kissed her, making it hard to let her go. When he did, her lashes fluttered up and her pulse beat beneath her skin. The banked heat in her eyes was intoxicating. She started the truck on the next heartbeat and pulled out to drive to the drop point Lawson had demanded.

"I wonder why he wanted to come out here," she asked, breaking the silence sitting between them. Her hands were tight and twisting on the steering wheel. "The old mill is hardly even a building anymore. It's kind of creepy." She slid him a look. "Kind of like one of those old movies. The unsuspecting person is led to the lair or whatever, and it's always in this old, dilapidated building."

"Too many old movies, Shar." But her appraisal still had him watching ahead of them carefully.

When it came into view, he told her to slow down. "I'll leap out and they'll never know you aren't alone. Try to keep them together if it's more than Lawson."

She nodded, purposely slowing as the last turn of the road appeared before them. He slid from the truck, rolling into the bushes as she grabbed the door and slammed it closed, leaving him in the dusty trail of the truck. She stopped a moment later, turning off the headlights, plunging the wall of the mill into darkness.

He slid along the shadows, brushing leaves off his clothes. He heard the truck door slam, barely able to see her ahead. He watched as she walked, carrying the bag toward a door.

“Hello Trajan.”

He swung around, finding himself face to face with Braden. And a very lethal handgun pointed right at him.

* * * *

“Lawson?” Shar licked her lips when her voice broke. “Are you here?”

She crept closer to the door before her, the window broken out and the hinges on the side rusted.

The deathly quiet of the building crept her out. Goose bumps were finding any exposed skin and making a home. Letting out a breath, she aimed for the door. “If you’re in there Lawson, come out. I’m not going in there.”

Silence.

Come on, jerkwad. Where are you? She grimaced, opening the door further. It creaked and groaned, but gave when she pulled. It was darker in there than outside. She looked up. No moon yet. Of course. The sound of the stream, which had once fed the massive wheels their energy, gurgled in the background. The sound was idyllic considering the tension she felt. Her fingers tightened around the handle of the bag, misgivings about not bringing real money making her stomach pinch and toss. She could’ve gotten it. Her dad would’ve just wanted an explanation.

The creak of wood made her jump. “Lawson?”

A hand landed on her shoulder and she spun, ready to scream. “Hi Shar,” Lawson said, his smile light. “Glad you could make it.”

“I brought the money.” She motioned to the bag, but he didn’t even look, holding her gaze with his eyes. He wasn’t in a hurry to see it. How had she ever thought she’d cared for this man? He was good looking, but the man inside was a snake. He’d used her. Anger made her jaw hurt, keeping herself from screaming at him.

Or toasting his cookies. She could make sure he wouldn’t be using any part of his equipment for a very long time. Sometimes Kin laws should just be broken. The repercussion for physical harm though wasn’t one she wanted to face.

“There’s someone you need to meet,” he was saying. Confusion rifled her body, her heart racing just as a stabbing pinch hit her neck. Seeing his greedy, smiling face was the last thing she saw before she went under.

* * * *

“What the fuck?” Trajan snarled watching as the cop snuck up behind Shar. He watched through the darkness as the cop dressed in civilian clothes lifted a hand to her shoulder, then gaped as Shar slumped. The man caught her then tossed her over his shoulder.

“Too bad you got pulled into this, Trajan. By the way, thanks for inviting me to the party.” Braden’s smile was cruel. “I already had a special invitation. You’re going to make it a hell of a night.” He prodded him closer to the mill with the gun.

“I can’t believe this, Braden.” He swore silently, not comprehending what Braden was doing, or how he was involved. He’d discussed the plan with Braden before they’d come out, in case they needed his help. But he was already here. Why?

Lawson hefted the bag onto a knee and ripped the zipper open. “Shit!” He dug in and yanked out sheets of newspaper, flinging them to the ground. “Fucking whore! Where’s my money?” He threw the bag away.

“You were the one trying to get the money out of her,” Trajan heard the other man say. The cop. “Braden told you she wasn’t an idiot.”

Trajan’s fingers tightened into fists. He refrained from looking Braden. The bastard had double-crossed them.

“You’re wasting time,” Braden reminded them. “Take her. I have to do something with him.”

“Bring him.” With Shar on a shoulder, Nick carried her inside the building. The door fell off the frame when he pushed it open the rest of the way it was so rotted.

“Nick,” Lawson said. “Two?”

Nick shrugged. “Makes no difference to me. Two less.”

“Then why not Braden?” Trajan asked. “Or did he tell you he isn’t Kin?” A hiss of anger slid past his ear.

Nick grimaced, as though there was a sour taste in his mouth. “Shut him up Braden.”

“I think you should listen,” Braden warned, leaning closer to Trajan. “We all get something out of this.” He snickered, sending a look after Lawson. “Well, almost all of us. He shouldn’t have tried to blackmail her.”

“He was blackmailing you too.” Just whose side was Braden on?

“No. Shar’s weakness has been and will always be her friends. If she thought I was in danger...” He chuckled, amusement coloring his hard gaze. “And it worked. Except for the money. But Lawson will get over it. He’s got more pussy to play with than any man alive. That’s as good as money for all that I care.”

“What the hell is going on Braden?” He snarled the question, being forced to follow the trio into the darker insides of the old mill. Only a single light on the wall gave any illumination. Then it clicked. “You were the one who taught Lawson the mental protections.”

“You’re catching on. Keep walking.” Trajan was slow going through the door, trying to piece it all together, letting his eyes adjust. Shar was already in the process of being chained to a wall. He had to do something to slow this down, find all the answers. Too bad there wasn’t any cavalry around.

“Why the *Mystic*?”

Braden shrugged, moving, relaxed. “That was Nick’s idea. Take out a Kin place. Drive the rats from the ship kind of idea.” He held the cast up. “The timing was off. Shar made such a lovely distraction.” A thick, lusting timbre colored his voice. “When Lawson met her, he asked all kinds of questions, which turned Nick onto her when Lawson became suspicious of her. He’d already planned on bringing in more hunters. He knows Granier Falls is a Kin town, but he doesn’t like to share.” He shrugged, giving the story in an indifferent tone. “Lawson wanted to fuck her, then he wanted her money when he

found out she was loaded. So he delayed Nick's plans. That's the only reason he lasted a year with her. To get in good with her. He played her out, found out how to get her to give him what he wanted." His gaze strayed to the female form strapped to the wall, being pulled taut in a spread eagle fashion. "He got to play, then would hand her over. She was actually supposed to be here Saturday," he taunted, swinging the gun around to punctuate his point. "He screwed it all up though. He's a greedy shit."

"And that's why you were there, to keep her in the club long enough to get busted by someone, Lawson, for using her magic." Not to mention attempted murder by the power of ten.

Braden nodded, uncaring to tell Trajan anything, half of his attention on the redhead being chained to the wall in front of them. "Pretty much. All the Kin knows when she's throwing a temper and she was so easy to rile up. She actually gave a hell of a show." He gave an unconcerned grunt. "Made the blackmail part much easier. A lot of witnesses if that had been needed. Lawson is determined to get his money. He swears he wasted a year screwing her scrawny ass. His words, not mine," he added. "The things I could do to her." He sighed, pure unadulterated lust gleaming in his hard eyes.

Trajan was seeing a side of Braden he'd had no idea had even existed. Warped, sexually obsessed. But the conversation had given him more information, and time. In increments, he'd slowly frozen the firing pin on the handgun he held.

He shook his head, looking around, looking for anything he could use. The mill was stripped, nothing but wood planks. The chains that held Shar looked new. He had to figure out a way to get them out of there without getting shot. So far, Braden's was the only gun he'd seen. He doubted his was it. "What are they going to do to her?"

He gave Trajan an apathetic smile. "She's a sacrifice tonight, or she will be once they're done with her. One by one the clans will be removed from Granier Falls." He came close again. "See, I've already been paid off to leave. I have no stake in this stupid little town. I want a big city, not this excuse of Podunk people like you and Shar can call home. I never wanted to move here, but I had no choice. I want to go back to the city life, big city life," he taunted, as if Granier Falls was a chuckwagon stop on the dusty trail. Trajan never knew he thought so badly about Granier Falls. A town of well over a sixty thousand was still big enough to appease appetites. Just not Braden's. "The hunters want the city cleaned out—no Kin, no clans, and honestly, I don't care. They can have it."

"You're sick Braden."

He chuckled. "Maybe, but I'm a rich, sick man."

Braden looked up just as Nick lifted a hand to rip open Shar's shirt. A look of hunger fed by jealousy crossed his expression. He sliced a glaring stare to Trajan. "Do it Nick," he shouted.

That was when all hell broke loose.

Chapter Seventeen

Trajan was knocked off his feet as a sidewall imploded, shattering into the center of the mill. Dry wood cracked and shards flew in all directions as rotted planks split like toothpicks. The light died a fast death. Dust rose like a thick cloud through the air, making it nearly impossible to see through the murkiness. He shook himself, then rolled to leap to his feet, trying to find his way. Movement to his left warned him someone had located a gun as it scraped along the ground, the sharp metallic edge grating on his nerves. He sent out a pulse blindly. The sound of a dull click was followed by a low shouted curse.

Uncaring of the havoc behind him, he reached Shar, still suspended on the wall. The links on the chains rattled and reflected bits of lights from the people invading. The chain's newness was completely out of sync with the rot of the building. He didn't think the wall itself was going to last much longer either. He had to get her down.

Precious seconds were wasted as he found the first chains and where they were attached to her. A shout was followed by a loud crash. He lifted an arm, protecting his face, covering Shar as much as he could with his body as splinters rained down on him. A section of the roof had fallen in. "Shar," he choked out, coughing on all the dust and flying debris. No answer.

He put a palm over one of the manacles and it split open, then did the same to the other three until she was sliding down to the ground. He caught her against his body. "Wake up baby." She was breathing, but out cold.

"Freeze! No one move!"

"About time you got here! Arrest him!"

"Shut up Nick. You're on thin ice." The new voice held furious authority, and was not taking any chances. "Cover him. Find his weapon." The tromp of boots sliced through the thinning swirls of dust. "Where're the other two?"

An unexpected voice spoke at his side. "Is she okay?"

"Maddie?" He whirled in shock, crouched by Shar where he'd set her to check her for any other damage Lawson and Nick might have done when they'd chained her to the wall. He kept a hand on her to keep telling himself she was safe. Maddie blinked big blue eyes up at him from his shoulder.

"What? You didn't think I'd let you guys have all the fun did you?"

"How?"

She put a hand on his shoulder. "I have friends too." He leaned over and smooched her on the forehead.

"Thank God for friends." He slipped his arms under Shar, standing with her cradled close to his chest.

"I found Lawson sir!" a voice shouted over the melee going on inside of what was left of the mill. Lawson stumbled back in, with his hands on his head being pushed none too gently from the rear by a uniformed officer to join the group inside once more. Someone slapped cuffs on him.

"Where's Braden?" Trajan looked around at the snarled question and spotted only the two other men. Maddie looked up at him, and her expression was saying the same

thing.

He'd vanished.

* * * *

Trajan held his hands up, asking for quiet from the clan and Kin encircling him in his living room, including Shar's parents. He'd been asked questions for twenty minutes, after already answering everything once by the chief of police at the mill when they'd stormed the rickety old building. Shar was resting, sleeping off the temporary tranquilizer they'd injected her with, but he had answers he needed too.

"How did you get into this Maddie?" he asked the woman sitting next to him.

"I followed you two. I knew there was something going on when I brought the clothes yesterday. Shar can't lie to me, we've known each other too long." She shrugged, no apology in her voice as she explained. "And I called a few of my own friends. Being the Mayor's niece does have some benefits" She gave him a sly grin. "He wasn't happy when I told him what had been happening on his city police force." She gave a pointed look to the room to see if they were still listening. "I saw Braden sneak up on you, and then Shar collapse. I couldn't see what had happened to her, but I recognized Lawson. I told them what was happening, the blackmail, and the fact they were harassing her, shooting at you guys..."

"I had guessed that was who was behind the shooting," Trajan interjected. He just hadn't wanted to burden Shar with the knowledge.

At his frown, she nodded. "Yeah, the cops didn't like that at all once they got the right facts on the story when they heard it. One of their men shooting at people in the streets. I was promised a full apology in case they didn't think to mention it." She gave him a gentler grin, as if she knew how much hearing all of this was tearing him apart because Shar had been the target. "They wanted Shar to be an example to the Kin for those that chose to stay. Nickolas Warton has apparently been looking for the chance to start this for some time and knew he had a opportunity to set it in motion when Lawson started dating Shar. Lawson was just an idiot to think he'd actually get money from her. Braden just wanted her gone. I knew he was jealous of her ability. He was downright obnoxious on Saturday trying to best her any way he could. It didn't hurt that I amplified him for them to hear his confessions." Her grin turned impish, her eyes sparkling. Maddie had a handy family spell that could be used to amplify sounds, provided she knew where they were coming from.

He met her grin with one of his own. *That's right*, he thought in agreement. "Nice. You did the wall?"

She beamed with pride. "You bet I did. I pack a wallop, don't I?" She winked and he laughed.

"Is she going to be all right?" Shar's mother was hovering near the edge of the group, close to his side listening to the exchange, getting comfort from friends in the group. Her parents were one of the first to arrive at his house once the call had gone out about the uproar at the mill.

Her mother had stopped pacing, and seemed to have relaxed once she had a chance to physically see her daughter, even if she was passed out in his bed.

"She'll be fine, Mrs. Brenna. It was a knock-out drug they gave her. The syringe is in evidence now, but it wasn't any stronger than what you get at the dentist or doctor for an

outpatient procedure.”

“Braden,” Maddie muttered with a touch of anger. “He works for the hospital.”

He bit his cheek, rather than frowning. Personally, he’d like the chance to punch him, just once. “I can see that.”

It still bothered Trajan that Braden had disappeared when the police had stormed the mill. He couldn’t have gone far. He didn’t have distance in his displacement ability. But with Shar safe again, there was very little left for him tonight he wanted to deal with.

People left in ones and twos as the evening lengthened. Maddie was one of the last to leave. She paused at the door, looking him in the eye. “You take care of her, Trajan.”

“I will.” He gave her a quick hug. “Thanks for helping out.” He watched until she had pulled away in her car, heading back to her apartment. Casting a look in all directions, he shut and locked the door. As a precaution, he guarded it and the rest of the house, just in case Braden had any not-so-bright ideas about trying to find Shar tonight.

Trajan would look for Braden in the morning. Sick bastard. He deserved to be roasted, but there wasn’t a jail made that could hold him. The elders were already deciding his punishment and the council would see it delivered. They had to find him though. Treason to the Kin of Granier Falls had finally gotten the council involved. He wouldn’t be at all surprised if Braden disappeared for a good long while after trying to hand over one of the Kin to a witch hunter. At least any attempts at creating a new hunt had been stopped cold.

He turned off most of the lights, leaving only one or two to illuminate the house as he walked to his room.

Shar was stretched out, long pale legs peeking out from the t-shirt he’d dressed her in to be more comfortable. The length of her hair fanned to her side, racing down her back like a molten river of silk. He pulled his shirt over his head and stripped out of his own clothes, crawling into bed behind her. He pulled the blankets up and wrapped his arms around her warming her with his body.

He fell asleep knowing he wasn’t going to let her go. Ever. For some reason, the thought didn’t bother him in the least. It appealed to him.

* * * *

Shar came back to reality slowly. She swallowed, working her tongue, feeling like she’d eaten something huge and fluffy, like a pillow. Life pulsed through her body as nerves woke up, and she stretched. She froze in the next instant, finding the heated length of a body all along her spine, down to her toes. Fingers flexed, cupping her breast, and an arm and hand were laying along her stomach, folded over her in possession. Absently, a thumb moved. It stroked the peak of her breast and she arched into the electrifying shock.

A purr rose near her ear. *Trajan*. Relief flooded her and she pressed backward into his body. That purr again.

“God, you feel good,” he murmured, flicking his tongue out to her earlobe. His embrace tightened around her middle. “How are you feeling?”

“Like road kill. What happened?”

“Lawson and Nick are in jail.” He lifted and swirled his tongue inside the edge of her ear. “You’ve been sleeping off the injection.”

That seemed like a very cut and dried answer. She’d ask for more details when she was feeling coherent enough to actually understand them. She knew there had to be more

to what went down at the mill then 'they're in jail'. Back to the injection thing. She did remember that happening. "How long?"

"Not long. An hour, maybe two."

A short groan slipped out. "No wonder I feel like hell."

"Not to me."

She smiled, hearing the sensual tease in his words, wanting her to know she was safe. He must have been asleep too. His voice had a low rumble that made her insides tremble. "What happened after Lawson?"

She felt his hot breath brush over her in a slow sigh. "Braden was behind it. He was the one who taught Lawson the mental guards. They bought him off to start a 'Kin clean-up.' You were supposed to be the first."

Anger made her stiffen. "Are you serious? I thought he was my friend."

His thumb started to stroke her again, a soothing motion that warmed her. "Honey," he started, lowering his voice, nuzzling her. "He is obsessed with you. Maddie told me what happened in the club, in detail. That's not the Braden we know. He never would have put you at risk before. He also knew the club was set to be blown up, but he was so obsessed with beating you, he overstayed and was caught in the explosion."

Her voice was dry, her throat wanting to close up trying to decipher what this meant. She stared at the far wall, but only saw flashes of that night in her mind. "But he saved me. He's the one who pulled me out after the explosion, when the fire started."

Silence met that. Moments passed. "You'll have to ask him, baby. I don't know why he did what he did. He hated losing to you, but I think the payoff Nickolas had given him was the reason he actually pulled you out."

"That's ridiculous."

His fingers moved up, cupped her chin in firm but tender fingers. "Think about it Shar. Braden has always felt the need to one-up you."

"So Lawson..." She didn't want to say. She could only swallow humiliation so many times this week and she was well past her limit.

"Lawson..." He paused.

"Just spit it out."

His fingers caressed her, softening the blow. "Lawson dated you until he was tired of you. He thought he was on the verge of losing his chance to hand over a witch. So he decided asking you to marry him and giving you the ring was the way to keep your interest for just a little longer. Give him time to set up the blackmail and then hand you over."

"Damn him," she bit out. Her eyes closed, burning with tears. "I shouldn't be shocked. After Saturday, it's so obvious." She sucked in air, refusing to let a single pain-filled tear fall. "I should be used to this by now. He's never denied a single thing."

"Shh," he whispered, caressing her with his fingers, running his lips over the skin of her neck and ear. "It's over. All the collateral damage will be covered, including your car. The police are going to run the ballistics on the bullets. If they were fired from Nick's rifle, that's attempted murder. They ran a background check. They know you don't have a gun. He's really sunk his career."

She swallowed, trying to absorb it all. All this time his fingers hadn't stopped once. Heat was licking at her skin as if it were a flame, rather than his fingertips. "You sure did find out a lot." The words flowed from her on a breathless sigh. His caresses felt so good,

she was slowly turning into a quivering ball of desire.

He chuckled. “Turns out Maddie’s got some friends in high places too. She was able to get the Mayor to throw his weight around and get some action. Don’t worry. You’ll be back at your store, doing what you love in no time.” She nodded. Maddie did have connections. She owed her friend. His breath continued to warm her, everywhere from her ear to the nape of her neck where her hair had been swept up. “No one’s ever going to hurt you again, baby.”

It sounded too good to hear. Like he meant it. Like she meant *something* to him. But she fought the feeling, fought the want to let her feelings get wrapped up into his words. She was already tied too tight as it was, caring too much. Loving him. She was doing this with her eyes wide open. She just prayed when it was time to say goodbye, she had the strength to do it.

The drugging sweep of his hand lifted to her hip, finding her thigh and forming his palm over her skin. He tipped her chin, purposely toying with her earlobe between his lips. A shiver sliced down her spine, lighting her insides on fire.

Would it be so wrong to just take tonight, like the nights before? Would it really matter when it was over how much she loved the way he made her feel?

If he gave her any indication that she really meant more than sex to him, she’d fight for him, but she didn’t think that was the case, and she didn’t want to fool herself. It had started out with protecting her, and that’s where it was going to end. Swallowing the disappointment, she accepted it. No one would know the truth, least of all Trajan.

Chapter Eighteen

Darkness lined the windows to his bedroom, ethereal shadows covering the floor, creating a patchwork of light and dark. Her eyes fluttered with each wicked lick and taunt of his tongue, closing them from the world surrounding her. The heat of his hand drifted, following the slope of her hip down to cup her ass, giving her a gentle squeeze. He murmured in appreciation and her heart pounded in answer.

The arm beneath her curved tighter, tilting her more until she turned, her cheek at his lips. Pressure from his fingers delved between her thighs when he dropped his hand and she opened in welcome, inviting his touch. He didn't disappoint.

That murmur of pleasure turned into a deeper growl, a mixture of desire and hunger that thrilled her. Dampness spread, creating a slick playground for him.

"You're so hot," he told her, his lips wisping like fiery brands against her skin, traveling from her cheekbone to the corner of her mouth. A sharp quiver arced up her spine when he scraped his fingers against her heat, teasing her through the small triangle of fabric, the only real barrier he faced. He pushed it aside and slid between the folds of her desire, groaning. His whispered words growled into her ear. "I love how wet you get. So hot." She gasped at his words, at his voice, at his touch, lifting her hips craving the tease of his touch.

She whimpered, wanted, but he refused to hurry. Each stroke was slow, sliding against nerves, forward then back tantalizing slick and heated skin. His thumb brushed against the edge of her anus and she whimpered harder. His mouth suckled at her neck, keeping her pressed up against him, twisting her body to be immobile, completely at his mercy between his mouth and his hands.

He yanked her underwear free and bent one of her legs over his hip, exposing her to his pleasuring touch. The press of his forearm over her stomach kept her at his mercy. She was already sinking into mindless ecstasy, malleable and aching.

"Mmm. Sweet Shar," he told her, pushing her shirt up over her breasts. Her nipples instantly hardened in the cooler night air. He released her chin, dropping his fingers to brush against the turgid peaks. With gentle fingers, he plucked at the tips, each tug pulling a rope of desire that reached to her womb, heating her, making her arch with need.

The hand resting on her thigh kneaded skin, fingertips grazing the center of her heat with feather-light touches. She moaned, craving, silently begging. His laugh was low, and knowing.

"Tell me, baby." He licked the shell of her ear, his fingers methodically winding her tighter with each touch against her breasts.

She covered his hand with hers and tugged him toward the part of her needing relief. He laughed again, resisting. "Tell me. I can do this for a very long time. I love touching you, playing with your body. You're so hot."

Her lips trembled as a twist and a pull had her sucking in air and arching her back like a cat when he proved his point.

"Touch me." She sounded breathless, felt breathless. And on fire.

He swept his fingers along her thigh in blatant misunderstanding. "I am."

She groaned, aggravation and lust becoming friends. His fingers curled around her breast, and the heat of his palm reminded her just how good he felt.

“Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you.” His rich voice weaved over her and she burned. Ached. Hungered. “Knowing what you want and not being scared to ask for it turns me on Shar.” He pressed his erection into her, letting her feel his naked hardness against her back. Feeling his entire length heated her skin, his own pleasure in her desire turning her inside out.

She groaned feeling his weighted thickness. “Touch me. Make me come. I love the way it feels.”

“My pleasure,” he purred, curving his hand to her mound. She gasped at the instant fire beneath his fingers. It raced with delicious heat through her. He moaned into her hair.

All she felt was the stroking fire of his touch, the persistent erotic tug on her nipple matching the pace he had set against her slit.

“You feel like silk. Hot honey and silk,” he told her, breathing in deep breaths as he spread her lips and worked her clit with his thumb, rubbing it in circles. She gasped with each new pressure. With slow, mind-freezing deliberation he slid two fingers into her, twisting them inside before slowly pulling them free again. She moaned with each motion. Each stroke sent blazing fire spreading, sending her closer to the edge that she knew he’d take her to, repeatedly. Liquid heat coated her insides and he purred again, making a sound in his chest that told her he felt her excitement. He continued to caress her, sliding in and out in long strokes, increasing his tempo in measured beats until he was rocking against her, until he was slamming the heel of his hand against her clit with each penetration.

She gasped, moaning and writhing with each thrust, whimpering in pleasure as the pressure built.

His voice was right at her ear. “Come for me Shar. I love to see you come.” He plunged again, flexed his fingers and she shuddered. “Ahhh. Yessss.” His jaw clenched, air hissing through his teeth as she hit her orgasm. “Ride it baby.” Muscles locked, holding him, sucking him deeper as he wrenched every last drop out of her.

He formed his palm over her heat, massaging her, and she throbbed harder, trying to catch her breath. He slid down behind her on the bed, pressing the head of his erection to her opening. With a single movement, he slammed into the drenched flesh of her body, then stilled. He flexed and groaned again. “Damn, Shar.” He moaned, his hard breathing echoing hers in the room. “You feel so good.”

She moaned, barely hearing him, feeling him slide as deep as he could go. He stroked her again, pulling back until he was nearly free of her and she held tight not wanting to lose the wrenching bliss, the feeling of him filling her fully now aching as he waited, only an inch of pleasure holding them together. Anticipation made her quake. She cried out when he shoved into her hard enough to slap against her skin. He did it again and she spiraled, aching, clawing for him to carry her over the edge.

He slipped free, saying, “I’m sorry Shar, I can’t play any more.” He pushed her to her back and gripped her at her knees, hooking them over his arms. Pulling her hips toward him, he impaled her with one motion, filling her, stretching her with his engorged size. His groan poured into the room.

She pushed her head back into the bed, swept away in feeling as he plunged like a piston into her, firing his hips with forceful lunges sinking him to the hilt over and over.

His fingers dug into her hips, holding her steady as he continued his rhythm, pounding into her. His expression was fierce, dominating, claiming and it thrilled her. Nails dug into the bed, into his forearms, anything to find a way to ground herself as he took her closer and closer to sheer delirium.

Muscles fought to hold him with each stroke, caressing him, sucking him deeper with each thrust. Heat rose up in his green gaze like an out of control fire, burning her just to look at him. Her head snapped back. "Oh God," she whimpered.

His cock rammed into her with solid contact, shocks rippling up her body with each impaling. Hard and deep, pushing as far as he could into her with each one. Lightning was singeing her nerves and lights were blistering on her lids, coloring her visions in an array of beautiful fireworks. Energy built up, filled her until she felt her body grow hot. The orgasm sitting on the cusp made her quiver, hunger and moan.

"That's it Shar. Just like that," he gasped. "You're beautiful like that." She shivered at the gruff intensity and he clenched her tighter. Somehow he drove into her harder, deeper, filling her more.

She screamed. Stars exploded around her, her body corkscrewing into ecstasy. He stiffened at the same moment she met her release, her orgasm rocking her from shoulder to knee. Harsh pants reverberated through the room. He pulsed, pulling her as tight as he could until he relaxed, sagging onto his calves.

He sank forward, finding her lips. "Incredible. Nothing but incredible." Her fingers dug into his damp hair, her smile bittersweet even as she held him tighter, not wanting to let it end. The inevitable was too depressing to think about at that moment and she pushed it away.

"You're pretty awesome yourself," she replied. It wasn't nearly enough. It wasn't nearly the full truth either, but the way his lips lifted into a satisfied smile told her it was just what he wanted. The bittersweet ache grew and stabbed her right through the heart.

* * * *

The rest of the week went by in a fairly uneventful fashion. The Chief of Police questioned her about the evening of the mill, the shooting, and the blackmail letters, which she willingly gave over. Braden had lied about receiving one of the letters to throw them off, allowing them to believe he was one of Lawson's victims. He was more the brains behind the scheme. She'd never had a clue he'd had anything to do with her troubles until she met with Lawson at the mill to try to trap him. Nor did she know of his closet obsession with her that apparently he'd had for several years. In hindsight, it was easier to recognize. All the sexual innuendoes, all the taunts. She shook her head. It had gone deeper than his playful teasing. Searching his house, the police had uncovered an entire stock of Shar photos. *That* crept her out.

He'd disappeared off everyone's radar, even the council's. This made it harder for them to deliver their decision. His treason to the clans had ensured retribution, as well as losing his freedom of magic. That was a liberty granted by the council, in each town, held by elder members of the clan. He would forever be banned from using his skills in Granier Falls. Most decided to start over elsewhere when that ruling came down, and most of those were not repeat offenders. Once usually did the job.

For herself and her shop, she'd received flattering commentary as well as a full apology. Nickolas and his nephew Lawson Warton were in custody for their crimes and

attempted murder. For a few short days, she'd been a celebrity, but all of it was finally fading, which she was glad of. She'd never liked being in the public eye that much to begin with. The Kin council didn't like it either, but the residents of Granier Falls who were aware Kin lived there ignored their 'differences.' Most of the people who knew of the Kin's existence knew of it because of marriage into a family, and the same rules that applied to the Kin themselves were expected to be followed by any who knew of their existence. No one knew of every Kin either. It would be like knowing people who attended the local block party in your neighborhood, even if only by face but you wouldn't know them all by name, or where they lived. It was one reason Granier Falls was still home to herself and so many others after so many years. There was a feeling of anonymity in her hometown.

More good news came on Friday when *Sassy's* owner contacted her with a full inventory agreement. Shar's lingerie was going into distribution, even if it was only locally. It was going to a store on the other side of town from *Dressed To Kill*.

By the following Wednesday, most of her life felt normal.

Most. Not all.

Trajan had two orders to complete and ship that he'd delegated to the back burner when she'd needed his help. He'd been holed up in his garage since Friday of the week before getting the work completed. She hadn't called him, and she wasn't expecting him to call her. The urgency of their situation was over. She didn't need his protection any longer.

It didn't make it any easier on her heart though. Her heart still wanted him, still wanted his love. Her body still craved his touch. A lot.

She let out a sigh, flipping through the receipts from the day before. It was eerily quiet in the shop today after all the hustle and bustle of the last few days. Amber was gone for the afternoon and the door hadn't made a sound in two hours. She'd already checked it once to be sure it hadn't accidentally been locked. It hadn't.

There were only a couple hours left and then she could lock up. Seven couldn't come fast enough for her. She dumped the receipts on the desk, unsure why it even mattered. She had no reason to rush out of the store, much less to rush anywhere. Trajan's silence made it clear their time was already a memory. At least to him.

Almost in answer to a prayer for distraction, her front door chimed diverting her from her woeful and pathetic thoughts, but when she walked out to the front floor, no one was there.

That eerie silence thickened, creating a chill on her skin. She looked in both directions but saw no one on the sidewalk, no one who had peeked in and kept going. *Just go home*, she told herself. With a flick of her wrist, the lock turned and she took her own advice.

She dropped the blinds and locked them down, casting a shadow through the store. The lights were bright enough so she could see fine from the front door all the way to the register and the opening of the changing den. They weren't turned down yet and the illumination was fine. She drew a breath, still feeling off kilter and nervous.

The sudden sensation that someone was standing behind her made the hair stand up on her neck. Hot breath blew across her shoulder and she froze.

"Lovely," he whispered just before he wrapped his arms around her waist and they both disappeared out of the store.

Chapter Nineteen

Trajan sat on his bike, staring with a surprised gape at the blanked out windows to Shar's shop. The blinds were drawn but the lights were on. And it wasn't even seven yet. Had she closed early?

Resting his chopper by the curb, he strode up and tried the door only to find it locked. Getting back on his bike, he cruised to the rear delivery alley and tried the door. This one opened easily. Okay, she was still there. He let out a breath, worry in the feeling he'd missed her. He'd meant to catch up with her a couple times during the week, but his orders had needed to be completed. He'd rushed them as much as he could so he could have the coming weekend to spend with her.

It had sunk in slowly over the days without her. He missed her. He missed her sarcastic, funny, vibrant self. A lot. Sissy had called again the day before. He'd had no problem telling her he wouldn't be seeing her anymore. She'd been clipped, not overly surprised at the change in their relationship, but she'd been hurt. He'd never meant to hurt anyone, but Sissy wasn't Shar.

Shar was the only woman for him. He recognized the truth of that now. He walked into the store, expecting to find her but instead found it empty. He double-checked the front door. It was locked, as were the blinds. So she was on her way out for the night. He turned and searched her office then the changing den but saw no sign of her. Returning to her office, he noticed the slips scattered across her desk, her computer was still on, and her purse sat on the cabinet.

He frowned, and called her name, hoping maybe she was just in some nook that he hadn't found yet. Silence. Something told him she wasn't coming back either.

Retracing his steps, he locked the back door, leaving the rest as he'd found it and went to the one person who could help him find her.

* * * *

"Braden. What are you doing?" She was fighting to stay calm, but not being able to see was messing with her equilibrium. It wasn't a blind, it was a spell, and not one she knew how to counter. It also captured her hands, imprisoning them to be frozen. The only thing she could move freely was her head.

"You screwed up my future Shar," he explained calmly. "I had it all set. A fifty thousand-dollar bounty for each Kin I gave them, and you had to screw it up."

The way he said it turned her stomach. So matter of fact, so calmly. As if it was no big deal to turn over personal friends to a bunch of witch hunters. As though there was no issue at all. The Salem witch trials all over again except it would be even worse as she could attest—just being taken and murdered by the hunters. Not even the mockery of a trial. She kept her mouth shut. She needed at least an idea of how to get away before she tried something. Her magic would free her, but he'd catch her again easily with his plane displacement ability.

The sound of his feet on dirt gave her a clue to where they were. She cocked her head to listen and caught the muted tumble of water, the sound of leaves and limbs

moving freely and not a single car. She shook her head. Right back to the mill. How cliché.

“What are you going to do Braden?”

She stiffened when he lowered to bury his nose in her hair. “My lovely fireball, I’m going to show you what a real man is. I know Trajan’s already been there, but I can forgive you for that. You should have been mine long before now. Letting Lawson play with you was wrong.”

She blinked, still not able to see but shocked just the same at the apology in his tone. “What the hell are you saying?”

“I was wrong to let Lawson have you. He didn’t deserve you. I should have given him another when he wanted to know what it was like to screw a witch.” He stopped and lowered her to the ground, discovering a soft pallet of sorts beneath her. She still couldn’t see or move though. It bothered her but she focused to try to hear around her, to determine where she was, how close things were.

“He showed me how wrong I was in not saying anything. If I’d had you, you wouldn’t have been their first choice. I wouldn’t have allowed it, regardless of the money.”

She felt a weight lift from her face and blinked, seeing his hand as it hovered in front of her face. Her vision returned instantly, but the bind on her hands was still intact. Candles were lit nearby, illuminating the immediate area. A huge portion of the building was missing from the previous rescue, still lying in a pile of rubble where the wall and roof had collapsed. Trees and stars gave an out of place backdrop to the side she was staring at.

“I can love you Shar. I always have,” he said.

She shook her head, looking at him. “No, Braden. You haven’t.”

“I know I’m better than you,” he challenged her, his voice hardening. “You can’t deny that.” He knelt on the pallet, brown eyes watching her without a single reservation.

She didn’t blink twice at his lack of conviction to argue his love for her. “Braden, this is juvenile. It doesn’t matter who is better, who is stronger, who is faster. I can’t do the displacement. I never could. That is your strength. Mine is fire and ice.”

His sensuous lips thinned. Trajan was right. At some point Braden had slipped a cog. She kept her breathing even to not let him know what she was thinking. She needed to find a way to put distance between them. She’d never get far enough before he caught her again. And the next time he grabbed her he might do something worse than just bind her.

“I don’t understand this Braden.” She was hoping keeping him talking would give her time to think. “Why hand me over to begin with if you loved me?” She gave him an innocent look, trying to look confused and not worried about her situation.

He touched her cheek and she was proud when she didn’t flinch. “When you broke it off with Lawson, I was going to give you a few days to calm down, but Nick wanted to watch you, see if you did anything to prove you were a witch. It was his idea to throw you in lock-up. Being drunk just gave him cause.” She nodded, encouraging him to continue, giving him a wide-eyed look that said she was enraptured.

“Then Lawson had the bright idea to get money, and…” He blushed, dropping his gaze. “That was my fault. I told him you were loaded.”

“But I’m not, my dad is.”

He shrugged. “Didn’t seem to matter once Lawson knew. Nick knocked you out. The

syringe was only supposed to be if you caused them problems.” Like that made it better.

She shuddered, not wanting to think about what they would have done, or how far it would have gone before Braden would’ve decided they’d all suffered enough. His was one conscience she didn’t want to rely on. She refrained from telling him how stupid he was to put his trust in hunters to begin with.

Sincerity brightened his gaze as he explained. “I was only going to let them humiliate Trajan. I wasn’t going to let them do anything to you.”

“You would let them hurt me to get back at Trajan?” she whispered, bile and shock rising in her throat.

“It sounds so bad when you say it like that,” he admonished her, his brows furrowing in displeasure.

“Because it is bad, Braden!” She scooted away from him. “I can’t believe you would do this Braden. We’ve known each other for years.” She cast another glance toward the opening, wondering how much more damage the building could take. If she knocked out another few sections, another wall would come down fairly easily. As dry and rotted as most of the wood appeared, it didn’t look as though it would take much to make it all come down. She hoped the confusion would be enough to give her time to hide out in the darkness.

She turned a shoulder to hide her hands, feigning disgust at him, which wasn’t all that hard to feel, and keeping her hands clasped before her. She blocked his view of her face so he couldn’t see what she was doing, murmuring the words to the release spell under her breath. The ropes loosened and fell free, hidden from his view.

“Shar,” he said. “I wouldn’t have let them hurt you.”

“You let them chain me up and knock me out. You let them, Braden.” Her voice was stiff, anger suffusing her. She controlled it, but it wasn’t easy. The urge to just char his hide was very strong now that her hands were free. “A person who loved me wouldn’t have even let them touch me.”

He shook his head. “Shar. I’ve loved you for years. You never saw it.” He sliced a hand through his blond hair.

“I don’t think so,” she told him, quietly to not make him suspicious. She inched a little further away.

A fury she’d never suspected raced over his expression. “You wouldn’t know! You jumped from Lawson right to Trajan’s bed like some whore. I was going to give you time to cool off, but Nick wanted you first. I would have saved you from that if you’d once showed me you cared!”

He leaped to his feet, yanking her up by her shirt, tearing the shoulder loose. “You even let Lawson fuck you. I wonder who would have been next?” he sneered.

She pushed him away, shouting at him. “That’s enough!” She stepped back. “I don’t know when you got this sick idea of me Braden.” She lifted her hands and formed a power surge, looking at him, aiming it at him. He hardly acknowledged the threat. “But you have it wrong Braden. We’ve always been friends. Nothing more than friends.”

Heat flowed over her skin as the magic undulated in stasis, just waiting for the command to be released.

“Go ahead,” he taunted. “I know you won’t do it. You can’t hurt anyone.”

“Hurting you wasn’t part of my plan.” She lifted her arms and shot over his head, aiming for beams and supports. They exploded and flared into a blaze instantly. Creaks

and wooden screams cried over the immediate crackle of the hungry flames.

He ducked and turned to view the damage. "What the hell!" Heat waves filled the enclosed space at the end of the mill, smoke quickly filling the air.

She whirled and ran for the opening in the opposite wall. Smoke billowed out behind her, along with a harsh, angry curse. A fireball hit the ground nearly beneath her and it tossed her several feet. She landed, sprawled and shaken, but rose to her knees.

His hand on her collar hefted her up and shook her. "Don't do that again!"

This time she didn't hesitate, letting the heat roam on her skin like a living flame. He shouted, tossing her to the ground then shaking his hand. She just avoided a swung kick for her side, rolling away from him.

"I'm better than you!" His voice rose with an unholy shriek of anger. Another arc of light burrowed into the ground with a burst of grass and dirt where she'd been, barely avoiding the direct hit. A loud crash rose from the mill, followed by a storm of sparks as more of the structure collapsed. She threw a pulse to where he stood, but missed. He'd vanished again.

She stood, watching, waiting. He wouldn't go far. Not this time.

Chapter Twenty

“Come on Braden.” She circled again, the fire illuminating all around her as the mill continued to be engulfed in flames. “You know they were using you.”

A surge slammed into her back, knocking her into the ground. She gulped for air, her lungs burning as she fought to get back up to her feet.

“Only a coward would attack a woman from behind.” She created a wall around her, never believing before tonight she’d have needed one. Silence met her sneered challenge. She searched but there was no movement, no sense of where he was, of where the next attack could be coming from.

Without warning, bright white light infused the area from all over and she was forced to drop her hands, sucking in air. Smoke lay heavily in each breath. She blinked rapidly to shield herself from the brightness.

Several bodies formed in the ring of light and as she spotted them, Braden became visible within the light, shock and anger in his expression.

She trembled, never having experienced the council’s influence en masse like this. They could only be there to finally render their judgment to Braden for his crimes against the Kin of Granier Falls, not to mention against her. She noticed he was looking around, searching for a way out was her guess, but he was as frozen as she was.

“Braden Lewis.” It was the hum of the voices, the unique oneness of the council chilling her nerves. Everyone was taught to revere, respect, and as needed, fear the council. “Come forth.”

He shook his head, trying to take a step back instead. The fear was openly apparent on his face.

Shar watched as glowing blue bands encircled his body, trapping his hands to his sides, each band pulsating with intense control. “No! You can’t do this!”

“Your judgment has been decreed Braden Lewis. You have turned your back on the clan and the Kin of Granier Falls.” The voices spoke in perfect unison. There was no escape from the power of the combined Kin. Shar could see Braden was quaking, fighting against the strength of the council’s power.

“You have been banished from Granier Falls. It will never again be your home. Your magic will be stayed until the council sees fit to return it.”

“No!” He struggled against the bands, their grip not lessening.

“You will be monitored and at the time the council sees fit, your magic will be unbound. If you are not deemed worthy or responsible in your new home, it will never be unlocked. Do you understand?”

He sank to his knees, shaking. “No. Please.”

Shar had never seen them dispense justice and for a split moment felt sorry for Braden’s verdict. It didn’t last long. She felt sorry for him, but not for his punishment.

“Leave Braden Lewis. Find peace in your future.” The words were the final sound, like the crack of a gavel on walnut. Braden’s verdict had been delivered.

The bands faded away, leaving him on the ground, nearly sobbing. “No!” He leaped to his feet, shouting his outrage. “You can’t do this!”

He closed his eyes and in the next instant let out a shriek of pure outrage. “No!” She

stared agape realizing they had done as they'd said. His magic had been locked. His desire to disappear wasn't possible.

His gaze found her. Hatred, anger and pain lit his expression in the nimbus of light just before he charged her. Her heart went into her throat, frozen in place for a split second. She closed her eyes, too shocked to avoid the contact. A shape rushed out of the line of the council, tackling Braden before he hit her, taking him to the ground with a loud grunt.

The struggle was quick, two quick fist-laden attacks, and Braden was quiet.

"Never touch her again," the voice snarled, shaking his shoulders before letting Braden sag to the ground nearly unconscious.

Seeing Trajan turn to her from where he sat on Braden made her gasp.

"Shar? Are you all right?"

He held out his arms as he approached and she sank into his hold. The tightness of his embrace shocked her. Like he didn't want to let her go. "I'm sorry, baby. I tried to find you, but the council had to get involved this time." His voice was low, tender. "I had to wait for them."

She shook, shock riding her as she grasped at what he was saying. "You were looking for me?"

He nodded, brushing his hands down her body, feeling for himself she was unharmed. "For the last few hours." He found the tear of her shirt. His glare returned, looking over a shoulder at the groaning lump on the ground. "He did this? He didn't hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Yes, but he didn't hurt me. How did you find me?"

"Maddie."

She nodded, not surprised.

"I wanted to kick his ass once I knew where to find you, but the council had laid down their ruling for the betrayal. Once they knew where he was..." He let out a harsh breath. She realized he'd wanted to rescue her, but the council superseded his desire to kick Braden's ass. "It doesn't matter. You're okay." He tipped her back to look into her eyes. "Right?"

She attempted to nod. He was holding her very close. "I'm fine Trajan."

Something was different in his gaze, something intense that made her insides turn to jelly. Her hands wound around his waist and he tucked her into his chest. The rampant beating of his heart beneath her ear warmed her.

She realized a few minutes later the darkness of nighttime had returned. "Where did they go?"

"The council doesn't hang out after shop talk. You know that." Long fingers of orange light brightened the ground from the fire eating at the mill. She turned to watch the last of it collapse, and the wail of fire trucks reach them through the snapping and crackle of the consuming heat.

"We better get out of here." A final look around showed Braden had already slunk off. She nodded, sighing tiredly.

He stopped by the store to drop her off, and to finish locking up with a final few words.

"I want you with me tonight." He slid his hand into her hair and tipped her back, finding her lips, gently swiping against them before plundering between claiming her

breath.

She wanted to deny him, but longing made her cave before she could even think about saying no. She nodded, sighing against his mouth.

He lifted, looking down at her with that intensity again. The look stole her breath and her capacity to think. "I missed you," he whispered as he plundered one last kiss. "I'll be waiting for you. Don't be long."

He released her at her back door, waiting until she was inside before ramping up the roar of the motorcycle, disappearing into the night.

Twenty minutes later, she was on the road to Trajan's house, seeing the lit old farmhouse in the distance. She also spotted a second car in the driveway. A car she didn't recognize. Instinctively she slowed, feeling pain slice through her as she watched. The tableau she saw formed a cold fist of agony and pain inside of her chest. Her heart felt ripped in two.

There was no mistaking Trajan in the arms of a tall blonde, kissing. A long drawn out kiss that burned and destroyed the small hopeful part of her heart that thought there was more to what he'd said tonight, that he'd missed her, that he'd looked for her. This was proof she meant nothing to him, that he'd lied to her. Better to find out now than a year from now when her heart was completely vulnerable.

She didn't want to be betrayed twice. Instead of giving Trajan the chance to use her the way Lawson had, she made a quiet u-turn on the road, and drove home. It was a good thing there was no traffic that evening. It was hard to see the road through the tears falling like rain down her cheeks.

* * * *

Trajan watched Sissy drive away, his gaze automatically looking further down the road for the car Shar was driving. With an anxious breath, he turned and walked inside. At first he'd been shocked to find her on his porch. Shar was on her way. Sissy had to go. He'd never been caught in this predicament. Not that he'd done anything wrong, but he wanted a clean conscience, starting tonight.

It was over between himself and Sissy. It had been over for them since the first kiss with Shar, but she wanted to hear it from him. He guessed she deserved that much after all the time they'd spent together. She was more attached than he'd originally thought but that didn't matter. It wouldn't change how he felt, it wouldn't change who he felt for.

Tonight had been the hardest night of his life. Knocking on Maddie's door and seeing her expression when he told her Shar was missing; all of it had his heart in his throat. Fear was something he didn't like to feel when he thought about the danger his Shar might be in.

She dragged him in and used the mirror she kept on her coffee table to search for her.

One look and her words said what was on his mind. "We have to tell the council." Even though he hated hearing them, she was right. The council would have made their decision by now, but finding Braden was the only way they could deliver their judgment. The body of elders was a large governing group of all ages, and any talent or magical gift. It took a large group to make these kinds of decisions as unbiased as possible. But Braden's was one of the severest crimes against the Kin Trajan had seen in his lifetime. He had no choice but to wait for the contact to be made.

He hadn't known how fast he'd traveled getting to the mill, his only thought getting

her away from Braden. And kicking his ass for doing this, pushing this obsession bullshit, hurting Shar.

The fireball had erupted and he'd skid his bike to a stop in the trees, racing toward the blaze on foot before he could think. In seconds, he had been frozen to the ground, still too far away to do any good. A brighter-than-day light had flooded the area and he knew the council had arrived. Seven of the elder circle to mete out Braden's punishment. He hadn't been able move or speak until they were done. Not that he cared what happened to Braden. Shar's fear and torn clothes made him see red.

It had felt good, *too* good to tackle Braden. He wasn't the type to start a fight, but he could finish them. Now he just needed Shar there, in his arms, in his life. Forever.

He opened the door, frowning after another ten minutes had passed and there was still no sign of her.

Chapter Twenty One

Shar wiped her tears with the shredded tissue, pushing her hair behind her. She wanted to scream, but she wouldn't. She lived in an apartment and it was late. She wanted to cry... That she could do. All too easily. She had lit a few candles around her apartment, not bothering with any real lights, not wanting to have that glare of truth shining on her. Trajan was no better than Lawson and was going to use her.

Her heart ached just thinking it. Damn it to Hell! Why did she have to love him? Why did she have to fall for a big jerk of a guy? She sank down on the couch curling into a ball of misery and heartache, unable to answer her question. Life sure wasn't being fair either. First Lawson now Trajan. Was she just racking up lousy boyfriends? Then she snorted. Trajan had never been her boyfriend. A minor technicality but it couldn't be ignored. He'd never once stated what they were, but in a relationship sure hadn't been it.

A tap at her door had her looking at the clock. *Midnight? You have got to be kidding.* Then she looked through the door.

"Go away." She turned, bent on ignoring him.

"I need to talk to you Shar. I have something of yours."

She sniffed. "No you don't. It's late." *Just leave me in my misery already.*

"Shar, open this door," came the low growled command. "Unless you are telling me it's okay to go shopping on your credit card tomorrow. I can always use more supplies for the garage."

She swung her door open before he was done talking, the credit card held aloft in his fingers. He grinned wolfishly at her. She'd forgotten all about it. The night she'd spent hours in jail, she'd asked him to get it in case she needed it. She'd never asked for it back.

She held out a hand. "Fine. Thank you. You can go now."

He whipped it out of range. "Tsk, tsk. Nope." He pushed her back firmly but with no force on her shoulder. "I need to know why you didn't come out." He purposely looked at the clock on the wall. "I've been waiting for well over two hours, and I know it shouldn't take near that long to come from your shop to my house." He leaned in. "Even if you stopped here first."

She shot him a glare. "Stop playing games Trajan. Just give me back my card."

He shut and locked the door, not bothering to turn around to do so. He slid the card back into his hip pocket.

"No."

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "Fine. I'll just cancel it tomorrow."

He rested his palms on her shoulders, kneading her beneath his strong touch. "Why didn't you come out?" That purr was back in his voice. She steeled herself against its pull. It wasn't easy, but she managed, hiding the turmoil behind indifference in her words.

"I didn't feel like it."

"Liar." He breathed the accusation, pushing until she took a step backward. "Try again."

"Because I was tired," she snapped. "What difference does it make?"

He shook his head and pushed again. The solid coolness of the wall covered her

back, from shoulder to shoulder and down to her calves.

“I can see you being tired, but you could have slept in my bed as well as you could here. You know that personally.” He dipped down and bit her earlobe.

She pressed her hands to his chest, enraged when her body responded even when she knew it was doomed to fail between them. The push of her hands did nothing to deter the traveling of his lips.

“Because there wouldn’t have been room for me! Okay, fine. I know you like your women, but damn it. I’m not doing it again. I just won’t. Go back to whoever the hell it was making out with you on your porch and leave me alone. I refuse to be one in a line.”

He froze. “Shit.”

She watched his expression, hurt and shocked when he didn’t deny it. Fresh tears welled up. She couldn’t stop them either the way she was pinned to the wall by his frame. They slid down her lashes, leaving scalding tracks down her cheeks.

“Shar. It’s been over between me and Sissy since the first time I touched you.”

“It didn’t look over to me! She was all over you!”

He nodded. “And what was I doing?”

“Kissing her!”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Was I? Why don’t you look and make sure before you make that accusation.”

“Because it’s against Kin law,” she replied, lowering her gaze, unable to stand the gentle understanding in his expression.

“Not if I give you permission. Not between people who allow it.”

She shivered. Her voice cracked. “I’ve never known you to be cruel, Trajan.”

Caring fingers tilted her up to look up at him, into him. “I’m not being cruel. I give you permission. I want you to know the truth of what happened with Sissy tonight. I don’t want any misunderstanding to ever come between us.”

Her sobs deepened. “Trajan. I can’t be one of your girls. Don’t you understand?”

“I think I do.” His voice was low, seeping into her mind. She felt every brush of his gaze as he searched her. “This just means we’ll have to make it permanent.”

She sucked in air and groaned. “What? Permanent flings?” She thumped her head against his chest. “Trajan, I need someone who loves me, all of me, and not because of my father’s money, temper included.”

“Will I do?” His breath caressed her ear, the words weaving through her mind like a drug.

She blinked, knowing she heard him wrong. “What?”

His hand cupped her face, his fingers holding her steady, tilting her to let his gaze bore into her. “Shar, I love you. I’m asking you to marry me. I don’t want you to think Sissy or anyone will have any bearing on our lives together. If you want to look, I give you full permission. And remember, once it’s given, it can’t be revoked.” His thumb swept away straying tears on her skin. “She was saying goodbye, Shar. Nothing more, and I wasn’t kissing her back. I couldn’t. Someone else already owns all my kisses.”

“Someone else?” she asked, feeling breathless, a liberating elation filling her. Maybe everything would work out.

“If she wants them.” He looked deeply at her, his heart out in the open for her. “Do you?” The depth of those two words sent a shiver down her spine.

There was more than the kisses in those two words, in that question. She relaxed

beneath his touch, feeling the hard form of his body caging hers. But she was going to torture him just a little. He deserved it.

“Do I what?”

A smirk rose on his lips, heat rising in the green of his eyes, fully aware of the game she was playing. “Do you want my kisses? Let me show you what you’ll be getting.”

His lips molded to hers, spicy and strong, like the man, capturing her as he fit against her body, pressing himself into her shape. Firm fingers delved into her hair, holding her as his captured prisoner, plundering her mouth with his tongue. She moaned, her hands wrapping around him tighter, clutching at his shirt in her hands. She pulled his shirt free and found bare skin.

“Mmm. Yes,” he breathed. “I love your hands on me. I love your sweet little ass. I love your temper, your red hair.” He groaned, dropping down her neck to suck and nibble at will. “I love you Shar.” He bent and swept her into his arms, carrying her to her bedroom.

He set her on her feet at the edge. “You haven’t said yes yet,” he pointed out, sweeping her shirt over her head. He rubbed the tips of her breasts with his thumbs and she felt herself go liquid at the touch. She moaned, aches and longing growing in leaps and bounds.

“I haven’t?” she gasped. She sucked in air in a hiss when he twisted a nipple playfully. Somehow the torture tables had been turned on her. She quivered with desire as his palms continued to indulge in the bounty before him.

“No. You haven’t.” He licked one hot peak, dragging his tongue across her like a velvet rasp. “You haven’t said you love me either.”

Her arms clasped around his head, encouraging his hot mouth to continue with his course.

He shook her off. “Tell me, Shar.” He swirled his tongue around a stiff peak again. “Tell me what you want baby. You know what that does to me.”

She groaned. Yes, she did know. She let out a low shriek when he pulled her breasts together and licked them side by side. Her core quivered with aches, dampness filling her.

“I’m not going further until I know the truth. I want to hear it Shar.”

She shuddered, ecstasy coalescing into a huge fiery ache inside of her. Her lips quaked as she drew breath, her fingers clutching at him to stay standing.

“I love you Trajan.”

He groaned and with a quick motion stripped her shorts and tossed her on the bed. She squeaked and tried to scoot back, but he captured her ankles. His fingers stroked her skin, stoking her fires higher.

“I’ve been without you for days baby. I need this.”

He knelt by the bed, bringing her level to his mouth. He licked her like a cone, one long, thorough, mind-shattering swipe of his tongue that had her wet and achy and needy in a heartbeat. She moaned like a winter wind at the hard push, the rasping texture.

His voice grew husky, filled with rich desire. “Yes. Just like that. Let me love you Shar. Let me see those sparks that are yours, only yours.”

Before she could agree or say even a word, he dipped down and gave her all she could have wanted.

The End

About the Author:

Diana DeRicci lives in Central Texas with her husband. She's traveled all over the grand state she calls home and has many stories that carry the flavor of it. Erotic romance is a new adventure in her writing endeavors with the first books hopefully being just the steamy beginning.

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