



The Virtuous Vampire

A Gooden and Knight Mystery: Case File #1

Monette Michaels

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

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Cast Of Characters

Abigail Gooden: A thirty-something lawyer who just happens to be a witch. She doesn't advertise her pagan association, but those in the know in the preternatural world are aware of her abilities and bring their legal business to her.

Lucan (Luc) Knight: A private investigator with a preternatural side. An alpha male, he meets his match in the witchy lawyer.

Ilana Storm Gooden: Abbie's mother and a powerful witch who lords over Austin society when she isn't dating vampires and rearranging her daughter's office and life. She wants her daughter to be like the other witches—and like all mothers everywhere she wants grandchildren!

Vidal Storm: Ilana's younger brother and Abbie's uncle. He is a man-about-town in Austin, and performs the occasional séance.

Austin Homicide Detective Lt. Sam Adams: Sam wants to have more than a professional relationship with Abbie. He is one of the few individuals who know of Abbie's true nature.

Prosecutor Jeffrey Walden III, Esq.: Former law school classmate of Abbie's, and a horse's ass. He has the hots for her and she ignores him as much as possible.

Jurnik Golub: Abbie's vampire client and owner of the gentleman's club Exotica. He's been set up to take the fall for the death of one of his former dancers. He is also Ilana Gooden's current beau—and it looks serious.

Daniel Radford: Abbie's secretary, general factotum. His lover Van is the owner of the largest spa in Austin. Daniel and Van are more than what they seem to be, and their help and friendship prove invaluable to Abbie and Luc.

Jo Beth Tibbs: The victim. A twenty-one-year-old college student and part-time exotic dancer. She was strangled on the center stage at Exotica by someone she knew. Her past holds the key to her murder.

Chapter One

As Abigail Merriweather Gooden reached the end of the sidewalk leading to the front door of her offices, a wave of low-level energy flowed over her skin, rippling the fine hairs on her arms and the nape of her neck. Sniffing the air, she separated out the strong chemical smells of burnt sulfur and magnesium from the ever-present cedar and vehicle smells of the urban neighborhood. Someone had performed powerful magick—and not so long ago. Her narrowed gaze swept the newly gentrified west-end Austin neighborhood. Nothing seemed out of place, unusual, or transmogrified, but appearances could be deceiving.

Highly attuned senses on alert, Abbie approached the entrance of the remodeled cottage that served as offices for her legal practice. As she reached for the door handle, the magick's signature amplified until she had no doubt to whom it belonged.

Mother!

The blessed Goddess only knew what her well-meaning—but meddling—parent had done now. Abbie gritted her teeth, then opened the Art Nouveau glass-paned doors to the reception area and stormed in.

"I tried to stop her." Daniel, her secretary and man-of-all-trades, met her at the doorway. His hand, palm out, was raised in midair as if halting traffic or, in his case, as if auditioning for an all-girl Motown singing group. He and his significant other, Van, had never forgiven Diana Ross for breaking up The Supremes. "But you know your mother—a force of nature."

Daniel, she knew, had meant the last statement literally. Her mother *was* a force of nature, a powerful witch whose earth powers would have terrified most of the Austin society crowd with whom she hobnobbed, had they known. Being a witch was not something you bragged about, even in the twenty-first century, and especially not in the Bible Belt of Texas where there were still fundamentalist Christians, even in hippie-dippy Austin. "Outing" the preternatural denizens of Texas would produce a conflagration that would make the Salem witch burnings look like a wienie roast.

Abbie blew out a disgusted breath. "What has she done now?" More importantly, "Was anyone around to see or hear the energy show?"

Her mother could do subtle, but much preferred the showier, whiz-bang kind of magick. Ilana Storm Gooden was of the generation who lived by the saying "If you've got it, flaunt it."

"She redecorated your office." Daniel tried hard not to smirk, but failed. "She said just because you chose to live like a nun and deny your heritage didn't mean your surroundings couldn't be beautiful."

"Not again," Abbie whined. Her secretary choked back a laugh. If it had been up to him, Van, or her mother, she'd have been married off, ensconced in a mini-mansion overlooking Lake Austin, with a gaggle of little witches at her feet many moons ago. Family and friends could be such a burden at times.

She flung an I'll-deal-with-you-later look at her less-than-chastened assistant and raced down the carpeted hallway to the ominously closed door at the far end. She threw open the door, then shut her eyes at the sight. After she counted to ten, she reopened

them. Just as she feared, her twenty-twenty vision had been accurate the first time. The scene within was as bad as her first glimpse had depicted.

The palace at Versailles had nothing on her newly redone space. Her formerly efficient, businesslike law office now looked as if an overly energetic, newly graduated interior decorator with a Marie Antoinette fetish had been given carte blanche and an unlimited budget. Fourteen-karat gold-veined mirrors, gilt-edged baroque-framed oils, and swags of richly hued satins and silks swathed her walls and windows. The desk looked to be an original Louis-whatever-in-the-Hades-his-number-was vintage. Fainting couches and spindle-legged chairs filled the room. The Aubusson rug under her feet had to be three inches thick. It was like walking on a comforter-covered floor. Her shelves—

“My books!” she gasped. She turned and glared at Daniel. His mouth opened and closed like an asphyxiating guppy’s. “Where are my law books? Where are my files?”

“You’ve got me,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders as he peered into the room, his eyes blinking rapidly as if to deny the scene before him. “I haven’t been in here since she did her mumbo jumbo act.”

Dire threats of retribution filled Abbie’s head as she dug through the underlying foundations of the transformation spell her mother had used. She raised her hands and wiggled her fingers in preparation to reverse the spell.

“Ah-ah-ah!” Daniel remonstrated, shaking a warning finger in her face. “Remember last New Year’s Eve? After the second bottle of champagne? You vowed never to use magick again? Remember?”

She swiped at the wagging finger. “This is an emergency! I need my books, my files ... my space. Anyway, she started it! Now get out of my way, or be prepared to pay the consequences. I can’t promise the reversal spell won’t turn you into a stick of furniture.”

Daniel leapt out of the line of her itching-to-undo-a-spell fingers with a yelp of fear. His actions warmed the hidden depths of her witchy heart. Power was a sinful indulgence, one she hadn’t catered to for quite a while. She’d almost forgotten how gratifying the threat of exercising her talents could feel. She would save the angst for later—after her office was back to normal.

She shook off the momentary lapse into self-conceit and turned once again to uncover the threads of her mother’s magick. As was normal with Ilana’s spells, the threads were complicated and multilayered, but there was always a way to reverse them. It just took patience, something in short supply when her mother was trying to rearrange Abbie’s life.

Ah, there’s the little sucker. A layer of purplish-blue seemed to be the primary enchantment layer. Capturing it, Abbie swiftly reversed the spell.

A loud reverberating clap echoed off the walls. The sound was closely followed by the vacuum-sucking sound of air as it left an enclosed space. The reentering whoosh of new air preceded a light show rivaling the Fourth of July over the Texas State Capital. And, *voila*, it was done.

Well, not quite.

The room no longer reflected the luxury of the French court, but had evolved into something akin to 1930s French *moderne*, encompassing exotic woods with metal accents, sleek geometric lines, and tribal and native art accents.

Daniel edged his way past a mahogany wood table topped with smoked glass and supported by graceful curved legs. Warily, he lowered himself into a mauve-colored club

chair with rosewood accents as if he were afraid it would disappear. “Um, who’s your mother dating?” he asked as he snuggled into the seat. “A French count or something?”

“I’m not sure they still have nobility in France, but you’re probably correct; it has to be somebody French.” Abbie was just glad it wasn’t some cowboy. She shuddered at the thought of cowhide couches, rusty iron Texas stars, and longhorn *objets d’art*. “Or someone into all things French.” She turned to her secretary, whose pale blue eyes gleamed avariciously as he considered a bronze statue of Diana the Huntress. “Call my mother and tell her never to do this again.”

“Me?” Daniel’s voice squeaked and his pale white face turned redder than Texas dirt. “Why me? She likes me, says I have *savoir faire*.” He flicked an imaginary piece of lint from his charcoal gray designer trousers and slicked back a lock of baby-fine blond hair that had dared to escape his carefully groomed head. “Besides, she’s *your* mother—and a witch. You tell her you don’t like her decorating. I like my ears and nose right where they are, thank you very much.” He patted the appendages gingerly as if to make sure they were still there and normal.

“Daniel, she didn’t mean to give you bunny ears at the Annual Return of the Bats Ball,” Abbie chided gently. “She was aiming her spell at a crass good-ole-boy politician. You just zipped when you should’ve zagged.”

“So you say,” Daniel huffed. “But ever since, I’ve made the attempt to stay on your mother’s good side. You tell her you don’t want her to be a buttinski.” He turned to leave, then halted, throwing over his shoulder, “I’ve booked you a seven o’clock appointment this evening. I ordered in for you from Bubba’s BBQ. *Bon appetit!* I’m going home to Van who loves and appreciates me.”

At his last clipped word, he flounced down the hall.

“Goddess save me from overly sensitive secretaries and interfering mothers,” Abbie muttered as she turned to try to revert her office back to where it had been this morning before she’d left for court.

* * * *

Abbie’s seven o’clock was late—fifteen minutes late. She didn’t like tardy clients, especially ones who were given after-hours appointments. She would give Mr. Jurnik Golub ten more minutes and then she was home to her cat Pidge, a cup of cocoa, and her flying teacup jammies.

An unseen power tingled across her skin. She was no longer alone. Then a psychic tsunami smacked her mind like a nuclear flyswatter. Instinctively, she reverted to the lessons she’d learned at her mother’s knee. She raised her protective mental shields just in time, then supplemented them with a warding spell to prevent anyone from entering her office uninvited. With her defenses in place, she sat back and assessed exactly what was happening.

Her conclusion? Some son of a bitch was probing her! And not making an attempt to be subtle about it, either. For now, whoever or whatever was outside of her office door did not want to enter.

As relentless as the barrage of psychic energy was, she easily kept her shields in place. With her one-way firewall secure, nothing could enter, but anything could exit. With a small, satisfied smile, she exercised her own not-too-shabby powers to seek what or who had just entered her office building and attempted to scour her mind like a

pneumatic Brillo pad.

Definitely not human, since most humans had little-to-no telepathic abilities, and those who did usually didn't know how to control them. They had to be preternaturals. One was undead, the other living.

Damn, this was all she needed. Undead could mean one of three types: vampire, zombie, or ghost. The living preternatural could be anything. One thing was certain, he was a strong bastard. At her initial probing, he'd slammed the gateway to his mind shut. The resulting thud still reverberated in her head.

They could be either friends or foes.

But friends didn't hurl potentially deadly energy at friends.

The outsider's power surged to a higher and more punishing level. While her shields still held, a headache hinted at imminent breakdown. And still she had no definitive clue as to what or who was in her hallway. She needed answers and she needed them now. To get them, she would have to let the two into her office.

Abbie ramped all her psi powers to the max and reveled in the familiar feel of mastery, realizing in that instant her vow not to practice magick had been doomed to failure from the second she'd uttered it. Magick was her heritage, her identity; not practicing magick would be like cutting off an arm or going blind. As her uncle always said, the only good witch was a fully functioning witch. The two outside the door were just about to discover it themselves.

"Come in," she called out. "No need to lurk, I know you're out there."

Two men entered the room. One was dark-haired with pale skin, flat black eyes, and a designer wardrobe. He was the dead one and had vampire written all over him. A not-so-gentle probe proved her correct. He shot an amused smile her way, but said nothing.

The vampire's companion was taller, leanly muscled, with inky black hair touching his shoulders and golden eyes the color of honey. He was the source of the psychic energy, which had decreased after he entered the room, but not ceased. She still had no clue what type of preternatural he was. No, that wasn't true; she did know he was dangerous.

She kept her protective wards in place—all of them.

"Have a seat." She mentally shoved two chairs through the protective shield. The dark and dangerous one's eyes narrowed at her action. Good. That should show him she wasn't a pushover.

"Nice little magick trick," said the vampire as he sat in the proffered chair.

She tilted her head in acknowledgment. "What's one of the undead doing in a lawyer's office?"

The vampire's companion bristled at her tone, but kept his silence. Ah, the quiet type. He definitely had strong psi powers, but his blocks made him hard to read. Unlike humans with their cluttered, untidy minds, most preternaturals were an open book. This one was locked tighter than a teenage girl's diary.

While Abbie wasn't sure what he was, her other five senses definitely agreed the man was drop-dead gorgeous. His tall, sculpted body was reminiscent of a Greek god, if Greek deities had dressed in bad-boy black leather. The smell of wild, open spaces had preceded him into the room. A flash of movement in the tall grasses of an unknown land flitted across her mind's eye, then vanished as he practically flowed into the chair.

His golden eyes blinked sleepily, almost sensuously at her perusal. A hint of a smile

prowled in their fiery depths.

The son of a bitch was amused. He knew his blocks kept her from figuring him out, and he thought it was funny. The arrogant so-and-so.

The vampire's dark dead gaze moved warily between her and his companion. But he wisely kept silent. Or, maybe, he just wanted to see, of the two, who was the most powerful. Vampires loved to set the cat among the pigeons, loved to control those around them. Maybe this was what he'd wanted to happen, why he had brought the dark Greek god with him. As a test for her.

Well, she'd show him. Ilana Storm Gooden hadn't raised a weakling.

Abbie ramped her mental abilities up another notch while still maintaining her personal psychic firewall and invisible shield. Then, just because she could, she tripped lightly through the vamp's consciousness. Like most of the undead, it was a cold, dark, cavernous expanse with only the synapses of thought it needed to pretend to be human. Everything else was filed away, dusty memories of past times. As most vamps did, he tried to exist mentally only in the here and now, with only his next meal of blood uppermost in his mind.

"Don't even think of it, Golub," she warned. "My blood is not for you. I suggest you cozy up to some blood bank employees and charm what you need out of them."

Jurnik Golub started in his chair as if he realized he'd sat on a tack. Then he smiled and nodded, but said nothing aloud. *Your mother said you were good. But of course I had to see for myself. Have you figured my associate out yet?*

She bristled at the underlying insult in Golub's query—and at the intimate feelings he had for her parent. She was frustrated at being unable to crack his companion.

Irritated, she zapped him mentally. *I'm working on it.*

Mental laughter tickled her psyche.

Blood-sucking bastard.

She swung her full and focused attention toward the darkly handsome man lounging in the uncomfortable chair as if it were a cushioned settee, and he, a pasha being serviced by his harem.

A small leakage of the dark man's psi energy escaped. Atavistic fear swept over her. His lounging attitude was a lure, a false front for the unwary.

For what seemed like hours, but could only have been mere seconds, her mental abilities probed, then bounced off the invisible wall surrounding his mind. But she persisted. Patiently, she scanned the mental blocks until she found a crack. Fine-tuning her psi powers, she widened the fissure. It was like ripping open plastic shrink-wrap; the small crack stretched and stretched until finally the tensile strength tore under the pressure.

She was in!

She sifted through his mind until she found a layer she could access. It was a tangle of thoughts and fleeting memories. His consciousness, like that of humans, was hard to maneuver. Harder than any preternatural she'd ever encountered. His rapidly winging thoughts and recovered memories flew too swiftly for her to capture, but within a few seconds, a half-minute at the most, she eventually garnered enough illusory impressions to give her an idea of what he was.

Then he forced her out with a surge of psi energy, slamming the door against her.

He was a shape-shifter—and not just one form, either. A hawk. A panther. And a

crocodile. At least, those were the three *animé* she'd managed to cull from his labyrinthine brain; spirit images of all three creatures swam through the electrical synapses of his conscious.

He was a predator by nature. That, along with the difficulty she had in dealing with his extremely strong psi powers, meant he was someone to keep at a distance.

She turned to Jurnik Golub. "Why are you here? And why did you feel the need to bring a shifter, and a predatory one at that?"

The shifter sat up in his chair and frowned, his relaxed expression vanishing as if it had never existed. His false repose had been exposed for what it really was—the stalking posture of a patient hunter. Predatory amber eyes were now slitted, establishing a resemblance to the creatures he could become in the flash of an eye.

Then, as if the momentary alertness had never happened, he slouched back into the chair and blinked lazily. A wisp of a smile passed across his lips. "Congratulations, Ms. Gooden. You got more information than I'd realized. I won't underestimate you in the future."

Despite her wariness, his voice warmed her like twenty-five-year-old scotch all the way to the pit of her stomach. And his smile contained an element of something she knew she needed to avoid. Her very existence seemed threatened in a way it never had before. Had she awakened a sleeping beast?

Yes, he was definitely dangerous. More dangerous than the vamp. Especially so, because she wasn't sure she could ever get more than what she already had out of his mind. If she were smart, she'd kick them both out of her office and go home.

But she didn't.

Abbie had to face it; the life of a lawyer to humans sucked. Day in and day out, she handled the petty problems of an increasingly litigious human population. Most of the cases were non-issues, but the clients pursued them as if the courtroom was *The Price is Right* and they had a chance at the grand showcase. It was all about the hunger for money and power.

She wanted a challenge. She wanted a case that was about more than greed.

As Abbie had riffled through Jurnik's file-drawer of a mind, she'd sensed he had that kind of case. She sought the excitement the unknown would bring into her life as a lodestone seeks the North Pole.

Hopefully, she wouldn't live to regret it.

"My mother sent you, didn't she?" She resolutely pushed all thoughts of what this vampire was to her mother to the back of her mind. His thoughts of her parent had been more than friendly—they'd been intimate.

Jurnik inclined his head slightly. "Yes. She finds me *très amusant*." A flicker of some strong emotion sparked his dark eyes. "You didn't like your new office, I see."

Abbie slapped the desk with the flat of her hand. "So, you're the one who put the idea in her head. I ought to consign you to the furthest perimeters of Hades for that trick. It took me all afternoon and quite a lot of Mickey-Mousing around to get my office, files, and books all back where they belonged."

"I've been in Hell for more centuries than I want to admit to, my dear," he replied with a dour look on his face and an accent which wasn't entirely French. "I am sorry you didn't like our surprise. It was in the utmost taste, you know. All originals from my own collection smuggled from St. Petersburg before the Romanovs' demise. I do hope you

managed to send them back properly.”

Abbie recalled the draining and involved process of restoring her office to twenty-first century efficiency. She winced at the memory of one or two less-than-successful reversal attempts and felt a slight twinge of remorse at the heavy-handed magick she’d used.

“I think so. If not, mother will find them for you. And I apologize for the Hades reference. I realize you didn’t choose your state of existence. But if I’m to take your case, whatever it is, please promise me one thing.”

Why had she apologized? Could it have been the sense of hurt she’d read in him? For some reason, this aloof undead wanted to please her.

“And that one thing is?” Jurnik said, one dark eyebrow lifted in question.

“Don’t indulge my mother in trying to rearrange my life, okay?”

The eyebrow lowered and his thin lips quirked with amusement. “Quite, my dear.” He waved his hand to encompass the room. “If you wish to work in such utilitarian surroundings, far be it from me to attempt to bring a bit of charm into your life.”

Now he sounded just like her mother. Just how serious were they?

Abbie ignored the insult to her office, shirked the thorny question of just what her mother’s relationship was to Jurnik and got down to the safer topic of business. “Now, explain to me what has brought you here. I only caught glimpses of it in your current thoughts, and I didn’t catch your friend’s name.” She swung her gaze to the predatory male who eyed her as if she were a puzzle he wished to solve—or prey he wished to eat.

An uncomfortable silence ensued as the darkly handsome shifter swept her with lazy, thorough glances. Occasional nudges at her psychic shields told her he was still trying to find a weakness. Well, she could outlast the handsome bastard; unlike him, her walls had no cracks.

Suddenly, he nodded as if he’d found what he wanted. A satisfied smile crossed his lips and warmed his golden eyes to deep amber. Somewhere in her head a warning klaxon blared *danger*. She smacked it off. She could handle anything the shifter or the vamp dished out. She’d proven that.

So why was she shivering with instinctive fear? What had he found?

She reexamined her shields. Not a hairline fracture to be found. What in Hades had made him smile like that?

“It’s Lucan Knight. Call me Luc,” he said, interrupting her mental inventory.

Luc. A strong name for a hard man.

She turned back to Jurnik, away from Luc’s burning golden gaze. “What has brought you and Luc here to see me?”

Suddenly the room’s temperature soared. Or maybe she was overly warm because of all the energy she’d expended?

She mentally adjusted the office’s thermostat downward. The click-click-click of the thermostat sending a signal to the air conditioner sounded loudly in the silence of the room. Luc chuckled at her actions. His amusement heated her even more. Angrily, she socked the temperature control down another notch.

The vampire’s eyes glinted at the interaction between her and Luc. *Glad someone was having fun.*

Finally, Jurnik replied to her question, calmly, as if discussing the current high price of gas. “A human was murdered in my nightclub, Exotica. I want you to represent my

club in any legal issues that might arise, civilly or criminally.”

Exotica. She’d heard of it, but had never been inside. It was a gentlemen’s club located one street short of being on the wrong end of East Sixth Street. Sixth was the main drag for clubs and restaurants in Austin. Just beyond Jurnik’s, the quality of establishments took a rapid nosedive to honky-tonk beer joints, mom-and-pop *taquerias*, and faded, decrepit houses with iron bars on the windows and doors and junk cars parked in the side yards. Her own offices were located on Sixth Street, but a light year away on the western end where chic little restaurants and boutiques gave way to older residential neighborhoods as the thoroughfare led to the hills of West Austin.

“Don’t wrinkle your charming *retroussé* nose, my dear. My club is reputable and safe, even though the neighborhood is not quite up to snuff.”

“Reputable? Safe? Didn’t you mention something about a murder on the premises?”

Okay, so she was being petty. But Jurnik hadn’t told her the whole truth. There was more to it than keeping his club from being sued or smeared in the papers.

“What are you really here for? And why the muscle?” She angled her head toward Luc who’d sat silently, an intensely disturbing look still featured on his sculpted face.

“Tell her the whole story, Jurnik,” Luc said. “She’ll find out anyway.” He eyed her, but addressed his comments to Jurnik. “Lieutenant Adams is a bulldog, and he’ll find out about Jo Beth and you eventually.”

“Jo Beth? Lieutenant Adams—as in Austin Homicide?” She glanced from one man to the other, finally settling on Jurnik since Luc’s piercing gaze made her uncomfortable. “Well?”

Jurnik sighed heavily, his shoulders lifting in a deprecatory shrug. “Jo Beth and I had a thing,” he said, but added at Luc’s derisive snort, “All right, we had a flaming sexual affair. But it was over. We parted friends. She wanted more than I could allow myself to give her.”

“Such as?” Abbie took notes, not allowing herself to think about what a ‘flaming sexual affair’ between a mortal female and a vampire would entail. And, she definitely wasn’t going to think how such an arrangement might apply to her mother and this man.

“She wanted me to share blood with her.” He shot her an angry, defensive look. “Just to be crystal clear, I do not suck blood from humans—or witches. As you so correctly pointed out, it is much easier—and safer—to get my blood from the blood bank. I do, and I give them generous monetary donations to cover the blood I appropriate. I also work tirelessly to organize blood drives to keep the supplies up.”

“Okay, I believe you and apologize if I insulted you in any way.”

Bless the Goddess, he was one touchy vampire.

His abrupt nod indicated he’d accepted her apology.

“So, Jo Beth wanted you to turn her,” she said. “You refused. Then what? She tripped off into the night to find a vampire who would?”

“Exactly.” Jurnik smiled grimly.

“And you know this, how?” she asked.

“Because she left my employ and went to work for one of my competitors, Alek. He runs a club called GothCity. She bragged to her former peers that she was the man’s mistress.” Jurnik chuckled. His laughter sounded like a rusty gear. “Of course, while Alek may have indulged her with the exchange of blood, she wasn’t turned.”

“That’s obvious,” Abbie said. “She died.”

Luc made a noise. It sounded a lot like choked-off laughter. She threw him a dirty look. He winked at her.

She returned to Jurnik. "So, you're telling me she left you for a fake vampire?"

"Yes, although at the time of her death Jo Beth was once again dancing at Exotica. The poor girl was very confused. She didn't have much luck with the men in her life. You see, she discovered Alek had lied to her, that he was a vampyre, a pretender. It's all a game for him and the Goth-types who frequent his establishment."

Jurnik waved his hand in the air as if the vampyres were of no importance.

But they could be.

"Does Alek know you're a real vampire?" she asked.

"No. Well, I don't think so. He's never indicated such. The only human who knew was Jo Beth."

"Are you sure?" Abbie asked.

"No. How can I be?" Jurnik said with an elegant shrug. "No one has come to me and said anything, so if any other human knows, they are keeping quiet."

"Lovely." Abbie made more notes. She'd have her relatives keep their ears, eyes, and other assorted senses open to the hint of gossip about Jurnik. For a vampire, the man was just too trusting. He was a case of blackmail waiting to happen.

"Do you have an alibi for the time of death?"

"Yes. The coroner estimated Jo Beth died at the earliest, twelve o'clock noon, and the latest, three o'clock in the afternoon." His lips twisted into a wry grin. "During that time period, I was tucked up in my dark basement bedroom. While I can take some daylight, I can't stand the light from around eleven in the morning until late afternoon."

"Well, that's good," she said. "But I can see why your alibi wouldn't be prudent to mention to the Austin police. Is there any reason why they might suspect you, other than the fact you had a past relationship with the victim?"

"No."

Luc rustled in his chair at Jurnik's too-blunt, too-quick response. "Don't lie to her. Tell her all."

Jurnik tightened his lips and stared at a point beyond Abbie's head. "Ms. Gooden can read my mind. She can figure it out."

"I don't go tromping willy-nilly through people's minds, living or dead." She paused and, in spite of her protestations, made an attempt to read him. "Plus, you know very well your current thoughts are on the pint of O negative coming to room temperature back at your office." And the date he had with her mother later this evening.

She glared at Jurnik. "If you don't trust me, find yourself another lawyer."

Luc grumbled under his breath. "Stupid, stupid." She wasn't sure to whom he referred, but it had better not be her. Then he cleared his throat and captured her gaze with his golden one.

"Jurnik found the body when he went in to do paperwork before the club opened. One of his silk neckties was knotted around Jo Beth's neck. He removed it before he called the cops, and later destroyed it. He called me in—I'm a private investigator—because he wants me to find out who tried to frame him for the crime. We figure that person is the murderer."

"Ya think?" Abbie said.

Luc's shout of laughter startled her, snapping her out of her momentary shock. How

could Jurnik be so stupid to think that by taking the tie he'd thwarted the murderer's plan to implicate him? The killer must have framed Jurnik for a specific reason. It only made sense he or she would continue to lead the cops to him.

"I got the impression from something flitting across Jurnik's mind that Jo Beth's relatives are threatening a lawsuit, right?" At the vampire's nod, she continued, "So, not only do we need to keep the club out of trouble, but I also have to keep him out of jail long enough to find the real killer and point the police in his or her direction. Can't have my client burnt to a crisp at a midday arraignment. That about it?"

"Not quite," Luc said. "The murderer is definitely male—there were indications of rough sexual action and semen at the scene. I'll be the only one seeking the killer and pointing the cops in the right direction. You're being retained to do the legal tango with Jo Beth's greedy relatives, the police, and the prosecutor."

Abbie didn't dignify Luc's assumption that she wouldn't be involved in the investigation with an answer; instead, she zeroed in on the mention of the prosecutor. "Is Jeff Walden already poking his rich aquiline nose into this case?"

"Yes." Jurnik sighed as if the weight of eternity sat on his soul. "Walden is on a crusade against men's clubs within the county. He's the prime political force behind Citizens for a Decent Austin. Within the last six months, Exotica has been raided more than the Barbary Coast."

"Well, frigging frog's toes, that sounds like Jeff," Abbie snapped with disgust. She pinned Jurnik to his chair with a sharp look. "Your club clean?"

"Clean? How do you mean?" Jurnik shrank away from her glare.

"Do you follow the current laws?" she asked, ticking them off on her fingers. "No underage drinking or guests. No naked crotches. No touching on lap dances. No prostitution. No illegal drugs on the premises. No smoking in the dining areas. No overcrowding. Not located within five hundred yards of church or school. Those laws."

"I obey every law they've thrown at clubs like mine. I also meet and pass all the health inspections, have smoke detectors, fire alarms and a sprinkler system, plus security inside and outside the premises. We cut drinks off when we suspect inebriation, and we test people and put those over the legal limit in cabs at our expense."

Abbie reexamined all Jurnik and Knight had told her. It was obvious the police eventually would consider Jurnik as the prime suspect. He'd had opportunity—the victim was killed on his premises. He had motive—he was a spurned lover, or at least Jeff Walden would play that up as the motive. And finally, he had had access to the weapon. The fact he had burned the particular tie used in the murder was negligible. Jo Beth had been strangled. Jeff would argue a smart killer would take his weapon with him, then dispose of it. The cons in the case won by a landslide.

But Jurnik had a very big pro—an alibi. Yet it couldn't be used without subjecting him to a holy inquisition. At the very least, he'd be labeled a freak. At the very worst, he'd be killed by a wooden-spike-toting fundamentalist doing God's work. He deserved good legal counsel, and as far as she knew, she was the only preternatural attorney in the State of Texas. She was his only hope.

Besides, the case sounded like just what she needed to eradicate her boredom.

"I'll take the case. I want to visit the scene and talk to your employees about Jo Beth." Abbie jotted yet more notes.

A large male hand slapped the middle of her notepad with a resounding thud. Abbie

jumped, but managed not to shriek. How in the name of the Goddess had Luc breached her ward? Her momentary fright morphed into anger. Bloody alpha-bastard.

She raised her head, arching an eyebrow in inquiry. “You have an issue, Mr. Knight?”

“Yes, I do, Ms. Gooden,” he replied, using the same frigidly polite tone she’d used, but having much less success with it. The heat of his anger threatened to melt her skin. “You will not meddle in my investigation. You will stay away from the club unless you are accompanied there by either myself or Jurnik—and only when required to be there because of your pursuit of the civil or criminal cases which might be thrown at Jurnik or the club.” He reached forward and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. “Are we clear?”

“As a scrying glass, Mr. Knight,” she said in clipped tones. Mentally chanting a repelling spell, she smiled and wiggled the fingers of her right hand, sending him flying back through the open doorway into the hall. “Don’t ever touch me like that again,” she called out archly, “or, the next time I’ll make sure the door is closed before I send you flying.”

Jurnik’s parting laughter as he joined Luc warmed her heart. It was Luc’s answering roar, like that of a large jungle cat denied his downed prey, which reencased it in ice and reminded her the shifter was not tame and she should remember that in the future.

Chapter Two

Luc leaned against the bar. His gaze methodically roved Exotica's main floor. Unlike the urban cowboys in attendance who searched for hot bootie, he looked for anyone who expressed an extraordinary interest in the scene of the crime.

It appeared to be a typical evening for the trendy men's club. Inebriated blue-collar workers ogled the nubile young ladies dancing on the three runways. Twenty-and thirty-something professionals tossed back two-for-one well drinks and chilled bottles of beer as they flirted with idle dancers and the few female patrons who'd braved the testosterone-laden environment. Women who patronized the club were, in his experience, looking for one thing and one thing only—a man for the night.

No one, but no one, seemed overly interested in or concerned with the center dance runway—the scene of Jo Beth's death.

His gaze shifted to the main stage where Ecstasy Delight had just started her routine. As she'd confided earlier, it would be a tribute to Lacey Slipper, a.k.a. the recently departed Jo Beth Tibbs.

The cleaning crew had done a stellar job once the Austin police had given them the go-ahead. They'd removed all evidence of the grisly murder about two hours earlier. Even so, though the chalk-mark outline of Jo Beth was long gone, a picture was permanently etched in Luc's mind: the twenty-one-year-old college student's body prominently and garishly positioned at the end of the main stage, her legs spread-eagled on either side of the pole she'd so sinuously used in her dance routine; the pole itself at the juncture of her thighs, an obscene, but highly effective way to dehumanize the dead girl. Blood and other bodily excretions had pooled in the area surrounding the body, flowing up the pole like mercury in a thermometer. With everything Luc had seen and done in his life, he hoped Jo Beth had been beyond feeling when her murderer had taken a broken Shiner Bock bottle to her.

He bet the details of the gruesome scene were even now winging their way to the FBI Behavioral Sciences Unit.

Now, the center runway was pristine and as clean as bleach could make it. The club patrons surrounding the stage were blissfully unaware of the earlier horror he couldn't wipe from his memory. Instead, they fixed their glassy-eyed stares on Ecstasy Delight. The dancer's nubile tanned body, covered only in two tasseled purple pasties and a diaphanous G-string, made love to the polished pole.

No doubt about it, Ecstasy was on her game tonight. He didn't know if it was because she was emotionally vested in her personal tribute to Jo Beth, or because of the overly exuberant and generous crowd who sat around her stage. He saw ten-and twenty-dollar bills scattered among the singles littering the platform. Money would boost the energy and efforts of most of the dancers.

Ecstasy slid down the pole and whipped her long black hair from side to side in a parody of orgiastic pleasure. The stage lights cast the dancer's hair with glossy blue tones. Without warning, the image of the ravenlike sheen of Abbie Gooden's hair rose in his mind.

Yesterday evening hers had been cruelly bound, with only a few glossy silk-like

strands managing to free themselves to lie against her elegant neck. Didn't she know men couldn't resist messing with hair like that? She probably didn't. Everything about the lawyer—her clothes, her hair, her attitude—hell, even her office, screamed *look, but don't touch*.

Well, he'd touched, and gotten tossed through the air for his actions.

Hell, she hadn't even broken a sweat.

And Gaia and the Father knew, he wanted to make her sweat. Everything that was dominant male in him, everything predatory, urged him to hunt her down and claim her—then make her sweat.

Luc shifted his position on the bar stool to accommodate his body's uncontrollable reaction to the primal urges sounding in his head. He shook off the feeling and took a long pull from his beer. It had been too long since his last sexual partner. But, no, that wasn't it either. No woman, human or preternatural, had ever affected him this way. He'd even dreamed of her last night; strange and dangerously erotic dreams.

Swearing under his breath, he finished his beer and signaled for another. He'd have to do something about this urge, and soon, or he'd go stark raving mad. Or worse, become an alcoholic. After he had her, everything would return to normal.

There was just one hitch—Abbie didn't like him.

Luc would have to see what he could do about that. He expected it would entail a lot more flying time for him. He rubbed the shoulder that had hit the hallway wall outside of her office and grinned. The woman had a righteous temper, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle.

"Whoa, will you take a look at the class act walking through the door?" Biff Williams, the beefy ex-pugilist and Exotica's head bartender, shoved Luc's beer to him, then slapped a wet cloth on the bar's granite surface and wiped at a nonexistent spot. His gaze was directed toward the main entrance and not on his cleaning. "I'd like to get me a taste of her. Whoowee, that's one fine chassis on a woman."

Luc swiveled toward the hostess stand to see what kind of female impressed Biff. The bartender was surrounded every night by some of the most beautiful girls in Austin and often had to beat the women customers off with a stick. Well, only the ones who didn't know him.

The woman in the entranceway stood with her back to him. She was tall, shapely, and had beautiful long black hair hanging down her back to end just above her butt. A strapless red sheath just barely covered her curvaceous body from below her muscle-defined scapula to just below the firmly rounded ass. Her legs went on forever.

"Man, I wish she'd turn this way again. She had a rack on her just begging for loving," Biff's harsh, sexual tone colored his Texas twang. The bartender didn't even pretend to clean the bar now, he just stood and stared at the woman who'd turned to greet a silver-gray-haired man walking into the club.

Luc swore. The little witch had disregarded a direct order. Anger at her disobedience mixed with his earlier feelings of primal lust and one too many beers. The result was a potent emotional cocktail.

"I'm gonna beat her so-fine butt," Luc growled as he shot up from the stool.

He started toward the focus of his—and Biff's—lustful thoughts. Then he hesitated and turned back to the leering bartender. "You forget about getting any of *that*. She's off limits. If she talks to you, you treat her like your mother," Luc advised in a low, harsh

tone. “No, on second thought, treat her like your grandmother, because I suspect you’d fuck someone your mother’s age. *Comprende?*”

Biff’s leering eyes now glinted with anger. “You can’t tell me she’d give the likes of you the time of day. I won’t believe it. Plus, see the guy next to her?” Bemused by Biff’s challenging tone, Luc nodded. “He’s Vidal Storm. He’s wealthier than the Hunt brothers in their heyday and the most eligible bachelor in town. Every one of the dancers wants him to take her away from all this—and it looks like your piece of ass has him.”

Luc’s anger exploded. He reached across the bar, grabbed Biff’s shirt, and pulled the man to his toes one-handed. “She is not a piece of ass, cretin. And she’s mine.”

The scent of ozone rent the air. The area surrounding him shimmered with the heat his body exuded. Luc swore under his breath at his loss of control.

Forcing down his rage, and the unexpected possessiveness exacerbating it, he managed to stop the change before it happened. That’s all Jurnik—or he—needed: for him to shift in a room comprised of humans. What was wrong with him? Damn, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d lost control like this; it had to have been during his early manhood when his hormones had raged at the drop of a hat.

When Luc was sure he’d regained his composure, he released Biff, who intelligently took three steps away from the bar. “Yeah, sure. Whatever you say, Knight,” smirked the bartender.

The fear in the bartender’s eyes belied his verbal bravado. Biff would be shocked to know Luc was just as frightened by his actions as the bartender had been. Nothing about his feelings for the witchy lawyer was normal.

Taking several deep calming breaths, Luc strode away to read Abbie the riot act for showing up at Exotica, for showing up with another man, and for being the cause of his unbalanced emotions.

As he hurried across the floor, his acute hearing caught Biff’s muttered parting remarks. “I’ll get you, you bastard. And maybe have me a piece of that ass too.”

He fought the urge to wipe the floor with Biff’s face; he’d deal with the man later. The lecherous bartender was high on his very short list of potential murder suspects. Biff had made several overtures to Jo Beth, and she’d shot him down. She’d known what he was really like. Biff had a reputation for playing kinky sex games with his women. The other dancers had told him Biff had threatened the dead girl for spurning him. Yeah, he’d deal with Biff for sure.

“Hello, Luc.” Abbie’s serene tones washed over him like a cool mist on heated skin, lessening his anger.

Damn, the little minx was using magick in an attempt to assuage his temper. She’d seen him, was smart enough to know she was caught red-handed, so she had put her defenses in place before he ever crossed the room.

“Let’s go.” Taking the chance she wouldn’t unleash her full magick among humans, he reached for her arm.

Her defense came from another quarter. The man Biff had identified as Vidal Storm placed a securing arm around Abbie’s naked shoulders and pulled her into his—if Luc wasn’t mistaken—Armani-clad body. Hell, the man was old enough to be her father—well-preserved, but still—

“Who’s this shifter, Abbie-girl?” Vidal Storm asked.

Storm’s possessive tone fired Luc’s simmering anger to a boil. Who—or what—was

this man?

Luc opened his empathic abilities as the older man continued to speak, “And why is he going all territorial?”

Territorial? He wasn’t. He groaned mentally. Yet, he’d claimed Abbie in front of Biff. The sense of possessiveness permeated his current anger toward Abbie and the man at her side.

Then everything clicked. Between his brief attempt to muscle past the man’s shields and the man’s own ability to sense what Luc was, there was only one conclusion. Vidal Storm was a witch.

“I could smell his loss of control, feel the heat, clear across the room,” Storm said. “Have you been dating and not telling your mother?”

“No!” Abbie said at the same time as Luc, without thinking, said, “Yes.”

“I’m not dating him!” Abbie turned first toward the older man, then toward Luc.

“I’m *not* dating you! Tell him.”

Luc caught Vidal’s amused glance, and realized the man was highly entertained by Abbie’s reaction to him. Since the fiction fit in with his plan to capture, then exorcize Abbie from his system, he dutifully parroted, “I’m *not* dating her. Yet.”

Vidal threw back his head and roared with laughter, drawing the attention of the people around them. Red-faced, Abbie shrugged away and threw what appeared to be a look of pure disgust at the older man. It definitely wasn’t the look of a woman mad at her lover.

“Hi, I’m Vidal Storm.” The older man smiled and offered his hand to Luc. “Her maternal uncle. And you are?”

The man was a relative. The anger ruling Luc’s movements since Biff had made his lecherous comments melted away as quickly as snow in Austin.

Shaking the proffered hand, he replied, “I’m Luc Knight, private investigator. I’m working with your niece on a case for the owner of this club.”

He chanced a glance at Abbie. Her thinned lips and narrowed eyes reflected she was pissed at him—and, he sensed—at Vidal too. Too bad. She’d disobeyed a direct order by coming here. She’d just have to take the consequences. “So, do you think her mother would approve of me?”

Abbie’s frosty green stare promised severe retribution.

Luc looked forward to it.

“Not sure,” Vidal answered. “At least you’re a preternatural and not a human. Ilana, that’s her mother, has been beside herself since Abbie renounced her witchy ways.”

“Renounced?” Luc’s eyebrows shot up. Amused, he turned and stared at Abbie. Her glare became icier than Antarctica in June, daring Luc to tattle.

He dared.

“News to me. She sent me flying yesterday evening through an open doorway. Felt like magick to me.”

“My, my, my. An open door,” muttered Vidal, eyeing Luc with even more interest. “She must like you. I’ve seen her shoot one of her previous male acquaintances through walls—cement walls.”

“Well, she did say the next time the door would be closed,” Luc added.

Vidal laughed.

“Are you *men* done bonding yet? Or should I go find someone else to escort me to a

table?” Abbie said, ice frosting each and every syllable.

“No!” Both Vidal and Luc shouted, then grinned at each other.

A true meeting of male minds. Luc would have an ally in his campaign to rein in Abbie’s wayward ways. Her uncle liked him. Now, all he had to do was gain Abbie’s respect—and keep her cute tip-tilted nose out of his investigation. He had a bad feeling these two objectives would prove to be mutually exclusive.

Vidal dropped his proprietary arm from Abbie’s shoulders. Freed, she moved toward the hostess.

Not one to miss taking advantage of any opportunity to assert his dominance over the little witch, Luc swooped in and pulled her close to his body. She stiffened, then struggled to pull away.

“I warned you about touching me, Knight,” she muttered as she continued to battle for her freedom.

“Be still,” he warned in a low growl. “You won’t reveal your powers here. There are too many humans present. So you either accept my protection from the reeking mass of humanity crowding the place, or you leave. Which is it?”

Abbie hissed like an angry kitten, but stopped fighting his embrace and allowed him to steer her, with Vidal closely flanking them, toward Jurnik’s private table. The booth was located well away from the hoi polloi and the more vulgar displays of the mating rituals that took place nightly in the club. This witch was all lady and didn’t need to be exposed to such goings-on.

“I’ve been to a men’s club before, Knight,” Abbie said in sulky tones. Damn, he must have allowed a stray thought through his shields. “I’ve even dated men who ogle women and want to fuck them.”

The little minx was trying to anger him—and succeeding.

Luc growled a few choice epithets and continued to lead her toward his goal, the dark corner where he could lay down the law. He’d deal with her sass once they were seated. Right now, there were too many men stripping her naked with lustful stares for his peace of mind.

About halfway to his goal, Abbie dug in her heels, pulling them to a stop in the middle of the mass of raging male hormones. Instinctively, Luc’s adrenaline revved up, preparing for the potentiality of fighting to protect her from an alcohol-brave cowboy.

“Hey you,” Abbie said as she tugged on his arm. “Let go. I’m sitting up front, near the center stage where they found Jo Beth’s body.”

“No!” Luc shouted. God, that’s all he needed, Abbie crowding the stage and attracting even more male eyes.

Vidal snarled a foul word. It was aimed at a man who’d reached for Abbie’s ass.

That did it. Luc picked Abbie up and carried her under his arm like a loaf of French bread. He used the other arm to ward off any men who tried to get too close as he moved determinedly toward their destination. As far as he was concerned, it still wasn’t far enough away from the mass of male humanity to make him happy. The parking lot would have been his choice, but he wasn’t ready to get hurled through a wall. He had no doubt Abbie would do just that, then come right back into the club.

The woman had no sense of self-preservation. This place was a meat market, and she was a tender little piece of filet mignon dressed in a too-tight, too-short dress. It was damn indecent.

“My dress isn’t indecent,” she hissed. “And you’re causing a scene. Put me down, you Neanderthal.” She kicked out with her legs, almost causing him to drop her.

He set her feet on the ground, but refused to release her, swatting her behind when she tried to pull away again. He didn’t like it when she pulled away.

Then it struck him. “I thought you couldn’t get past my mental blocks,” Luc hissed.

“She can’t read you?” Vidal said as he helped Luc steer Abbie toward the private table.

Vidal’s sharp tone of disbelief attracted Luc’s attention. He caught a fleeting, self-satisfied grin on his little witch’s face. Was she playing with him? Could she read his thoughts? Maybe even manipulate them?

He’d have to shield himself better. He couldn’t afford to lose the upper hand with the little minx. If that happened, he’d play hell getting her to follow orders—orders created for her own safety.

What about all those primal urges? And your plan for getting her out of your system?

Well, yeah, he needed the upper hand for those too.

Abbie remained stubbornly silent at his side. Her seething anger skittered across his skin like little flames. Finally, he answered Vidal’s question. “When she managed to get through my shield, she seemed to struggle with it. She caught some of my superficial thoughts and memories, but I was pretty sure she didn’t get in too deep. Why?”

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just odd. Shields or no shields, Abbie usually reads all preternaturals fairly easily,” Vidal said. “You…”

“Stop talking about me as if I weren’t here,” Abbie muttered through narrowed, angry-looking lips. “And, Uncle Vidal?”

“Yes, Abbie-girl?” he said.

Vidal’s lips twitched as if he struggled not to smile. He must sense, as Luc had, Abbie’s barely constrained rage.

“Luc isn’t interested in my personal life or powers,” she said in short, clipped tones.

Oh yes, he is, little cat. Extremely so.

“He and I are business associates, nothing else.” She waved a hand in the air, as if she were erasing him from a chalkboard.

Luc bristled. She was wrong. There was more than business between them. Well, at least on his side there was. She just hadn’t realized it, yet. Plus, the more she tried to shove him away, the more he wanted her. Hadn’t anyone ever taught her predators liked prey who fled? It was the part of the hunt which made the capture much more satisfying.

Abbie had a lot to learn about him.

Later, he’d take Vidal aside and find out why Abbie’s inability to read him was so interesting. Luc had caught a fleeting sense of excitement, then something akin to pleasure in Vidal’s mind before Abbie had cut him off. Maybe it was something he could use to his advantage. He needed all the ammunition he could get in his war of dominance with Abbie.

Finally! They arrived at the table.

Luc all but shoved Abbie into the booth. As she slid across the leather upholstery, her dress slipped up her thighs, displaying an inordinate amount of skin and revealing an interesting birthmark. Abbie swore at him and pulled her dress down before he could discern the shape. Another puzzle to solve concerning his little witch, one which should

prove to be very enjoyable.

He followed her into the booth.

She hissed at him like a kitten protecting her catnip. “Back off, you.”

Luc disregarded the warning.

She sighed loudly. “Really, Knight,” she said, returning to the earlier conversation. “It’s obvious what you were thinking. You’re not very complicated. Men—all men—are such simple creatures.”

“Don’t push me, little cat,” Luc purred, “or I’ll show you just how...”

He never got to finish his threat. They were interrupted by Biff pretending to be a cocktail waitress.

“Drinks?”

Luc turned and scowled at the burly bartender. He hadn’t forgotten the man’s earlier interest in Abbie. Just as he suspected, Biff all but drooled as he stood by their table. The man’s avid, blue-eyed stare devoured Abbie’s bare shoulders and exposed cleavage.

Yeah, Luc would have to have a serious heart-to-heart talk with the libidinous bastard—after he punched the man’s lights out.

Luc glared at Biff, who ignored him and continued to ogle Abbie’s cleavage.

“Where’s the rest of your dress?” Luc hissed as he scooped closer to Abbie, who backed away until she had nowhere else to go. “You almost started a riot coming into this meat market in that skimpy little nothing.”

“Stop crowding me, Knight.” Abbie placed a warding hand on his chest as if it could hold him back. “It’s a cocktail dress. I’m covered.” In a louder voice, she added, “And where do you get off thinking you can dictate what I wear and where I wear it? Just who in Hades do you think you are?”

Luc opened his mouth to deliver his we’ll-be-doing-things-my-way lecture when Biff laughed and cut him off.

“She told you, Knight.” Biff smirked before he turned to address Abbie, “Hey there, darlin’, you get tired of this boy’s shit you just come on over to ole Biff. There’s not a damn thing wrong with your dress I can see. You look pretty damn choice to me.”

Luc ignored the smell of ozone and shimmering heat presaging his change. He was more concerned about getting out of the booth to wipe the smarmy smile off Biff’s stupid face.

Vidal reached over the table and stopped Luc by grabbing his arm with a particularly bruising grip for an older man. “Careful, my boy. Control yourself.”

Luc nodded and sank back onto the booth’s seat. He took several breaths, then swallowed as he searched for the right words and correct tone to set Abbie straight. He had to be careful. If he said what he really wanted—that he was the primary on this investigation and she could damn well play by his rules—well, hell, she’d shoot him across the room, crowded or not. But if he didn’t establish some semblance of dominance over her, she would be impossible to be around, thinking she had the upper hand. And she didn’t.

But doesn’t she? a little imp of a voice in his head challenged.

Of course she didn’t!

He grasped her hand, pulled her to him, and whispered against her lips, “I warned you about messing in my investigation, little cat. So I have every right to worry about you setting yourself up as a potential victim.”

“What does my dressing like this have to do with being a potential murder victim and the investigation into Jo Beth’s death?” she heatedly whispered back.

Luc eyed Biff, who strained to hear their conversation over the din in the room. “Because one of the prime suspects is leering at you right now,” he growled in her ear, then nipped it sharply like a cat reprimanding a misbehaving kitten. To hell with the consequences. How dare she challenge him and endanger herself this way?

Abbie’s dewy, rose-colored cheeks paled. Good. He’d put the fear of Lucifer into her. Then again, maybe not.

She shoved at his chest. To the others, it probably looked like a wimpy female maneuver. He knew differently. Later tonight, there’d be a bruise the size and shape of her hand.

“That’s why I’m here, Knight,” she whispered, “to talk to the employees like this bartender and find out who might’ve had a reason to kill Jo Beth.”

Biff all but growled a second request for their order.

Luc ignored him in the hope Biff would get the point and go away. He couldn’t take a strip off Abbie’s hide with the bartender standing there listening.

Biff didn’t leave. Abbie simmered in silence. And Luc gritted his teeth, wondering when he had lost control of the whole situation.

Try yesterday evening when you hit the wall.

Vidal broke the tense silence. “Chivas on the rocks with a twist for me and a vodka martini, two olives, for the lady. What will you have, my boy?” he asked, turning toward Luc with a companionable smile on his aquiline face.

Biff glowered at Vidal’s familiarity with Luc. The bartender’s displeasure only slightly improved Luc’s disposition. “The Chivas sounds good to me. Put this on Jurnik’s tab, Biff. This is his attorney, Ms. Gooden, and her uncle. They are his—and my—guests this evening.”

Biff snorted, then turned and stalked away.

“What a singularly unpleasant young man,” remarked Vidal. “I’m not sure why you’re insistent on dating humans, Abbie-girl. They are so obtuse and difficult.”

“Uncle, let’s abandon that topic for now. We’re here to find out more about Jo Beth’s death. I want Luc’s reasons for considering the bartender a suspect in her murder.” Then she muttered under her breath, “Since it’s obvious it’s the only way I’m going to get any information this evening.”

Luc groaned. She still thought she should be involved in the investigation. The woman hadn’t listened to a single word he’d said. He was about to set her straight on where her priorities should lie, when Vidal cut him off.

“He thinks what?” Vidal stared after the retreating Biff. “No wonder poor Luc didn’t want you anywhere near this place. In fact, I had my doubts about bringing you here in the first place. But I knew you’d come alone.”

“Uncle, please...”

Vidal cut Abbie off. “Of course, my fears were realized when I saw the number of men staring at you like you were this evening’s drink special.”

Luc sat back, crossed his arms, and smiled. Vidal was his kind of guy.

“Abbie-girl, I get the sense you’ve been holding out on me. Did or didn’t Luc give you orders not to come here?”

“Uncle, I...” Abbie paused and took a breath, then tried again. “Uncle, Luc has no

authority over me. I'm here to do my job. I'm the one who's going to have to deal with Jeff if this goes to trial, not Knight. If Jurnik wants to stay below the human's radar, I need to be involved in every aspect of this investigation. And, I, um, needed you to, you know, get the feel of the scene of the crime. And until we rule them out, all of Jo Beth's fellow employees are suspects."

"A murder investigation is a tricky situation, and I'm not sure your mother would approve," Vidal said. "Now, regardless of your argument, answer my question, did Luc tell you not to come here?"

"Yes, Abbie," Luc said. "Tell your uncle why you just waltzed into the club after I warned you to stay away."

"You didn't tell me to stay away," Abbie huffed. Her eyes flashed with green fire. "Specifically, you told me I needed an escort. Uncle Vidal is my escort."

"No, I said unless Jurnik or I were with you."

"Abigail Merriweather Gooden! Is this true?" Vidal turned a suddenly stern gaze away from his niece and said, "Sorry, my boy, she didn't tell me you'd warned her away from here. She asked me to come and commune with a spirit who had passed. I thought this was an unusual place to conduct a séance, and quite frankly, this isn't the sort of place her mother would want her only child to frequent. Too many," he sniffed the air, "human male hormones running rampant in the room."

"I hate to remind you *men*," she said, her disgust with them coming through loud and clear in her tone, "but we have a dead girl on our hands and Jurnik's innocence to prove. So I'll go where I need to go to get the evidence to protect my client."

Luc shook his head and sighed. Abbie still didn't get it. She might be a whiz in the courtroom, but she was not cut out to be a private investigator.

"The killer was a sadistic pervert," Luc said in harsh, almost cruel tones, hoping to shock her. "If you'd seen Jo Beth's body after the bastard had taken a broken bottle to her intimate parts, you wouldn't be so eager to stick your nose into the investigation." He softened his voice. "Abbie, just stick with the legal mumbo jumbo and leave the grisly stuff to me."

That way they could be a team, each of them doing what they did best.

The concept of teamwork vanished with Abbie's next words.

"I've seen the crime scene photos. The killer was not only sadistic in the manner he killed Jo Beth, but he staged it in a ritualistic way. The presence of semen could mean—"

"Whoa, wait a minute," Luc interrupted. "How did you get the crime scene photos? And the report?" Luc glared at Vidal. "And what's this about a séance?"

"My powers allow me to commune with dead spirits," Vidal said, shrugging his shoulders as if in apology. "I didn't mean to step in where I'm not wanted, but Abbie—"

"I asked him to help out, so leave him alone, Knight," she said. "I got copies of the crime scene photos and the report from a source in the police department. As Jurnik's legal counsel, I need to be prepared—"

Luc literally saw red. She'd already gone and done what he'd feared most. She'd called attention to their client—and to herself. Premonitory chills tap-danced down his spine. Where else had she already exposed her role in Jurnik's life?

"You told the police you needed the files to prepare a criminal defense for Jurnik?" Luc grabbed her arm and shook it. "Are you nuts? Are you trying to get Jurnik arrested? As of now he's not even a suspect."

Abbie pulled away from him. Her eyes all but threw fireballs at him.

"Of course not," she said, acid dripping from each syllable. "What kind of idiot do you think I am? Did you hear me say criminal defense? No, because you interrupted me before I told you I requested the files to defend against a potential civil action by Jo Beth's greedy, low-class relatives. Jurnik called me earlier today. He's already been served with papers. They're pursuing a wrongful death suit, citing a dangerous workplace environment. If I can show it was an outside source who killed her and the scene of the murder was one of convenience, then the civil suit is meaningless."

Abbie's narrowed gaze shifted toward the bar where Biff made their drinks. "But if the bartender, or any of the other employees, killed Jo Beth, then my outside-source defense will go down the tubes. I might as well tell Jurnik to sign a check with a lot of zeroes in it right now."

Luc grabbed on to the most important thing in Abbie's tirade, something he had to clear up before he lost any standing he might have with her. He couldn't afford to lose ground with the woman.

"I don't think you're stupid."

"Yeah, right. It sure sounded like it." Her tone was decidedly huffy.

He blew out a disgusted breath. "Well, I don't. I was concerned, and I leaped to conclusions I shouldn't have. I'm worried you'll make a target of yourself, that's all."

"Why? I'm a witch, Knight. I threw you through a door last night. I think I can take care of myself."

Her words carried more than a hint of frustration in them. And, she was partly correct—she could take care of herself. But why should she have to? She wouldn't if she weren't involved in the actual murder probe.

Luc attempted another approach. "Yes, you are a witch. A strong witch. But who knows who the murderer is? If you're like most preternaturals, you can't read humans for more than superficial emotions. What if you talk to the wrong person and it got back to the killer and he's human? You said you got the police report from a contact in the department, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Besides Biff, one of the suspects on my list is a member of Austin's finest, and one of Jo Beth's regular lap dance customers. Word could get around the police department you're poking your nose into the investigation. This cop could stalk you and shoot you. Witches bleed and die just like any other mortal, Abbie. You could be in danger, and not even know it." He paused and looked into her eyes. She understood now. He saw it in the softening of her facial features. "That's why I don't want you anywhere near this place or the investigation."

The stiffness in Abbie's posture melted away at his final words. Then she sighed. "Knight, uh ... Luc, if we are going to get anywhere, you have to be straight with me. Share information so we don't recreate the wheel. I snagged the file on my own because I didn't think you'd get a copy for me. Was I right?"

"Maybe. I don't know. You didn't give me a chance."

Liar, you'd have used the file in an instant if you thought it would scare her off.

"Okay, I'll admit I didn't ask, but at least admit you wouldn't have," Abbie said, a knowing grin in her eyes. "Just accept I'm in this investigation and deal with it. We've a much better chance of protecting Jurnik and his secret if we work together. Be a team

player.”

She had listened to him, seemed to understand, and still she insisted on being involved. Maybe they should work together. That way, he could keep a closer eye on her—an advantage for his personal campaign as well.

But he had one stipulation.

“Okay, teamwork it is.” He offered his hand to her. When she took it, he pulled her into the circle of his arm just as Biff approached the table with their drinks and whispered, “But I’m the captain.”

Chapter Three

Abbie examined the bartender as he set the drinks on the table. He definitely was good-looking in a rough-around-the-edges sort of way. Dark blond hair, cut short. Lapis-blue eyes. Fit, extremely fit. Wonder how he'd gotten all those muscles? Too many for her. She liked a leanly muscled man, like Luc.

No. Uh-uh. No way. She needed to stop thinking about Luc in *that* way, right now. He was much too alpha for her tastes.

And this idea of teamwork, was just—an idea, a concept. She doubted Luc even understood how a partnership worked. The evidence was in his words and actions. He wanted to be the captain, and he wanted her out of it. The protected little woman, left home to tend the fires and raise the children. Primordial male chauvinism at its best.

Images of girls and boys with dark hair and golden eyes, playing hide-and-seek in the woods, shifting in and out of animal forms as they frolicked flickered through her mind. A warm feeling swept over her body at the thought... No, no, no! Shaking her head, she doused the images with icy restraint.

Goddess, he was already getting to her. If she didn't watch it, she'd be tied to him in more ways than one, trapped under his lord-of-the-manor thumb—and body. She slapped that image right out of her head too! No other man—human or preternatural—had ever affected her this way. One minute she was so mad at him she wanted to spit nails, then the next, she wanted to stroke his abs and see if they were as ripped as they looked. He was far more dangerous than she'd suspected with his solidly closed mind and bad boy looks.

The Goddess knew, she couldn't let him see her attraction. Luc would capitalize on it and have her in his bed quicker than one of her mother's spells.

Pushing all such thoughts out of her head, she returned to Biff and his potential as a killer. Yes, the man was definitely big and strong. He could easily have strangled Jo Beth. And there was a look of meanness about his eyes, cruelty in the curve of his mouth.

But why kill her? Had she refused to go out with him? He was surrounded by women every night of the week—was Jo Beth so special he would kill because she'd said no?

Biff left their table with a long lingering glance at her cleavage.

Eeew! Maybe he'd looked at Jo Beth that way one too many times and she'd complained to Jurnik, who'd threatened to fire him. So he killed her and framed his boss?

She turned to ask Luc why he thought Biff had killed Jo Beth and found him glaring at Biff's retreating form. Definitely issues there. More than just being a suspect in Jo Beth's death.

"Stay away from Biff," Luc growled. "He's dangerous, whether he's a suspect or not."

"I hadn't planned on going out with him," she said. "He's not my type. And even if he were, it's none of your business with whom I go out."

Luc's golden eyes flamed with interest. "Just what is your type?"

You.

Abbie mentally smacked herself. "As I just said, it's none of your business."

Vidal choked back what promised to be a hoot of laughter. She turned toward him.

"Are you having a problem, Uncle?"

"Scotch," he said, holding his glass up for them to see. "Went down the wrong way." He addressed Luc, "Why is the bartender on your suspect list?"

Thank you, Uncle Vidal, exactly what I wanted to know. You poke your nose into Luc's investigation for me.

Luc hesitated as if he weren't sure he'd quite finished with the previous topic of conversation. He would probably attempt to revisit it. Not if she could help it. He didn't need his already inflated male ego bolstered.

"Biff has the reputation of making a play for the dancers," said Luc as he sipped at his scotch. He scanned the area around them as if to make sure no one could overhear. "When Jo Beth first started at Exotica, he didn't make a play for her. Her then-boyfriend, Ben Hereford, had been a high school football teammate of Biff's. As a rule, team members don't poach."

Goddess, not Texas high school football. The sport was a freaking holy rite in the state. There were all sorts of male-bonding rules and rituals associated with the game.

Abbie snorted delicately, then said, "Football players! Women are not a hunk of pigskin and life is not the gridiron."

Luc shrugged his shoulders. "Hey, don't look at me. I'm just reporting what I heard. Anyway, when Jo Beth dumped Bubba, that's Ben's nickname, Biff asked her out. She told him she wasn't ready to date. And, biding his time, he accepted her excuse."

"But she did date. She dated Jurnik, right?" Abbie said, happy to see her reasoning abilities matched the evidence.

"Exactly. And Biff couldn't say much, after all, Jurnik signs his checks," Luc said. "But then she left here and dated another club owner, a vampire-wannabe by the name of Alek, and that's when the fun stuff started."

"Vampire-wannabe? Well, I can see how Biff's nose might get out of joint, but to kill her for dating someone else? Come on, Luc, there are plenty of women in this club tonight who'd jump into bed with the guy. Just look." She angled her head toward the bar where one college coed preened for Biff. "Why would he get so hung up on Jo Beth?"

"Abbie-girl, men will do a lot of things out of jealousy," Vidal said. "You said women aren't footballs to be passed around the team, but to men like Biff, they are. Look at it from his point of view. He'd respected her as long as she was in a one-on-one relationship with his pal Bubba. Then she was free. Who knows? Maybe he'd always lusted after her, but had to abide by the limits set by his team's code of honor. But when she refused him and started to date men who Biff wouldn't recognize as his sort, he lost it."

"I think Vidal's correct," Luc said. "She pushed him too far."

"I still don't buy it. Has anyone asked Biff what happened?"

"Not yet," growled Luc, "and you aren't going to."

You wanna bet?

Changing the subject, she said, "Who are the other suspects on your short list? You mentioned a cop, who else?"

"Why?" Luc's eyes narrowed. Suspicion oozed from his pores so thickly she could almost taste it.

Goddess, she was too, too in tune with this man. She really needed to talk to her mother. No, not a good idea, her mother would want to aid and abet Luc. She squashed

the images of her mother and golden-eyed grandchildren until they were as flat as a pancake. She'd be better off asking Uncle Vidal about just what her father and mother's courtship had been like.

"So I'll know who else is off limits to me," she purred. "And, of course, so I won't inadvertently taint your investigation."

"Nice try, little cat." While Luc's voice stroked her senses like a velvet glove, his smile showed just a hint of teeth.

She shivered. Her cat Pidge looked like that just before she pounced on a bug. The poor bug never had a chance after—Pidge always tortured them to death. She could never forget, not for a moment, that Luc was basically a predator in human form.

"But I don't believe you," Luc continued. "You have every intention of sticking your cute little nose into the criminal aspects of this case no matter what I say."

As she started to protest, he held up his hand, then used his forefinger to stroke the curve of her shoulder where it met her neck. She shivered again—but this time with burgeoning lust. "Never mind, Abbie. I've decided we'll work together on this. Very closely together. So, you'll need to know the players."

She didn't like the sound of the "very closely together," and was about to ask him to spell out exactly what it entailed when yelling and the sounds of breaking glass erupted from the bar area.

As a unit, the three of them left the private booth and hurried toward the center of the ruckus.

Luc yelled over his shoulder, "Get back."

A body came flying her way. Instinctively, she leapt aside, a male body just missing her. The man dropped into a large moaning mass at her feet.

Luc yelled something unintelligible then ran toward her as if he would throw his body between her and whatever happened next. She held out a hand, whether to stop him or reach for him, she couldn't say. He grabbed it and pulled her into his body.

The man at their feet groaned. It was Biff.

The whatever-was-going-to-happen-next turned out to be another man. A very large and angry one. He stormed toward the hapless bartender with fists clenched at his sides. His neck and face gave new meaning to the term "redneck." He looked to be about the size of a four-by-four pickup truck moving along in overdrive.

Abbie would bet her best scrying glass and her grandmother's grimoire this was Bubba.

She would have won.

Biff held up a shaky hand and managed to croak out, "Bubba, please..."

"You slimy, no good, sick son of a bitch," roared Bubba. "You killed my Jo Beth, didn't you?"

Jo Beth's former boyfriend reached down and dragged Biff up by the back of his collar and proceeded to shake him. The bartender's dangling feet kicked uselessly as he punched at the angry man with wild and ineffective fists. Biff's actions were like using a squirt gun against a three-alarm fire. All Bubba had to do was wait until Biff either tired or expired from shaken-bartender syndrome.

Somebody had to do something. And soon.

Bubba switched tactics and encircled Biff's neck with two hands the size of canned hams.

Just as she was about to finagle a little bit of magick to tear the two men apart, Luc shoved her behind him. Then he moved forward, grabbed hold of Bubba and pulled him off Biff. One-handed. A surge of admiration and awe flavored with a healthy dose of involuntary lust hit her. Her resolution to keep Luc at bay was tissue-thin at this point—good thing he was too busy to take advantage of the weak moment.

Finally, one of Jurnik's bouncers did his job and ran in to pull the semi-conscious Biff to safety.

Being deprived of his prey, Bubba only got angrier—and loose. He turned on the only person he could—the man who'd stopped him from taking his revenge.

Fearing for Luc, Abbie watched for her chance.

As Bubba raced toward Luc, his bowling-ball-size fists at the ready, she pulled a small amount of air from the room and held it until Bubba was mere inches from Luc. Then as Luc stepped forward to challenge his attacker—as she knew he would—she threw the mini-zephyr at the bull of a man. The powerful burst tossed him back and to the floor. To the surrounding crowd, it would look like Luc had shoved him away.

White with rage, Luc growled at her over his shoulder. "I could've handled him without your help." He turned back, then stalked toward Bubba.

The downed man just sat where he'd been thrown, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what had happened. As reason seeped back into his eyes, his head turned frantically from side to side, probably searching for Luc—or the cops. Someone had to have called them by now.

Abbie moved to Luc's side and whispered, "I know you could've handled him, but I hate the sight of blood." His snort sounded suspiciously like a choked-off laugh. She smiled at him, and stroked a placating hand down his stiff back. "Besides, we're partners, right? And partners cover each others' asses."

This time she was sure his answering snort was stifled laughter. The muscles of his back released of their tension.

Vidal moved to join the two as they stared down at Bubba, who was now restrained by two burly bouncers. "She's got you there, my boy. Besides, if she hadn't helped, I would have. The man is the size of a tank. Even men such as yourself can be hurt. And it wouldn't do to shed any more blood in this establishment."

Luc's repressed laughter burst forth, probably shocking the crowd which still buzzed with a mixture of excitement and repulsion at the scene which had just played out.

"Thanks. But next time, at least wait to see if I really need help. Okay?"

"Sure, Luc," Vidal said.

No way, Luc.

Abbie forcibly thrust the fear from her body. Her heart had raced ever since Bubba turned his angry attention toward Luc. Even though intellectually she knew Luc was stronger than a human, she had still feared for him, had felt the drive to protect him.

Maybe the territorial imperative ran both ways? Goddess, what a sobering thought. Was she playing alpha-female to his male? Her talk with Uncle Vidal was now a number one priority. A distant memory of a story about how her father had subdued, then finally won over her mother tickled her brain, then drifted out of reach.

Right now, the melodrama had just gone up another notch. The police had arrived. She turned to do her job—protect Jurnik's business.

* * * *

Luc escorted Abbie to her door. He'd sent Vidal home, assuring him he would make sure Abbie was locked up all nice and tight in her home. He'd made a date with the older man to meet him at Exotica the next day, when Vidal would attempt to contact Jo Beth's spirit, if she'd even hung around.

They would've done it tonight, but Vidal had insisted the residual anger and fear in the club's atmosphere would cloud his connection. Better to leave it to the morning, after things had settled.

They never had gotten around to discussing the other suspects, which gave Luc an excuse to stop by Abbie's office around lunchtime and take her out to eat in order to discuss the case. He figured the more she got used to him being around, the easier it would be to lure her into his bed.

Abbie's frustration over the night's ending hung between them like low-lying fog. But you wouldn't know it to look at her. At the club, she'd been calm and collected as she took matters into her small hands. Before the cops reached Bubba, she'd whispered something into his ear. The man had turned white, but had nodded his agreement.

Then she'd gone to Biff. He, too, had agreed to whatever she'd said.

When the police started questioning the two men, they gave the cops the same story—too much alcohol and a disagreement over a woman. There was no mention of Jo Beth.

Since no one in the crowd had heard enough to say otherwise, the cops had to accept the stories.

By the time the police had contacted Jurnik about pressing charges for damages, Abbie had coached him to graciously wave it off. At which point, the law could do nothing else but say goodnight and escort Bubba to his truck and off the premises.

Biff was driven home by one of the bouncers who had orders to keep the bartender in his apartment until Luc could question him the next day.

Luc was proud of Abbie. She thought quickly on her feet. A good attribute to have as a lawyer. Maybe even as a partner. But not one in the line of fire.

Abbie fumbled with her keys, but shrugged off his helping hand. She turned toward him once she had the door open. "Good night, Luc. It's been interesting."

Luc laughed harshly. "I guess you could say that." He placed a hand on the doorjamb and leaned down, moving his face close to hers, just short of touching. "You were magnificent tonight, partner. Why don't you sleep in tomorrow? Vidal or I will come to your office after we try to contact Jo Beth and let you know what happened."

Her face was closed and unreadable. Finally, she said, "How was I so magnificent?"

"The way you handled Bubba, Biff, Jurnik, and the police. You had everyone eating out of your hand, doing as you directed, when it could've just blown up in Jurnik's face. You kept him out of court and the lid on our investigation. You kept two of the principal suspects in Jo Beth's murder free so we can question them without the cops and the prosecutor hanging all over our shoulders."

"Just doing my job." She half-closed her eyes, her lashes fanning out on her pink-tinged cheeks. "You weren't so bad yourself."

Heartened by the reluctantly given compliment, he swooped in to capture her lips. At the last minute, she turned and he caught only the corner of her mouth.

"Good night, Luc," she whispered as she made her escape into the house, closing the door behind her with a definitive thud.

“Damn!” He pounded the doorframe with the flat of his hand.

Luc turned and strode toward his car. He could kick himself for rushing his fences. Now she would be more wary of him than ever.

At the door of his car, he stood and listened. Abbie’s west Austin neighborhood was quiet at this hour of the night with only the slight whirring of early spring cicadas and the occasional cooing of a mourning dove. As he concentrated on the woods and hills surrounding her home, he found the peaceful facade was false. A bobcat hunted for prey in the canyon behind Abbie’s house. Two owls had caught some rodents in her front yard and were enjoying a midnight meal in the large live oak sheltering her driveway. A variety of lizards skittered among the grasses and leapt from bush to bush, slurping up unsuspecting insects.

The night was alive. It called to him.

He slipped out of his clothes and locked them into his trunk, secreting the key in a place he’d made under the wheel well. Then, in a shimmer of energy, he shifted into his earth form, the panther, and took off for a run in the hills. Since he intended on spending a lot of time here, it was as good a time as any to become familiar with the territory and establish his dominance.

Forty minutes later, after a satisfying run, he approached his car parked in Abbie’s driveway.

He stopped and sniffed the air. Something was wrong. There was an essence of something on the night breeze that hadn’t been there when he’d left. He crept silently to the live oak sheltering the driveway and crouched behind the trunk, using his acute senses to figure out what was wrong.

Abbie’s house was in darkness. Her essence floated on the night air. A second-story window was open in the front of the house ... it must be her bedroom. Irritation at her for leaving a window open ruffled his fur. He’d definitely lecture her on that topic—later.

Right now, he needed to know if she was safe, or if whatever was in the area had already entered the house.

Reaching out with the telepathic ability he’d been so careful to shield from her, he confirmed she slept soundly and no one was in her house. But someone *was* close by. A human. The unknown man’s malevolence nauseated him. He meant her harm.

Luc rose to his four legs and stealthily approached the house. He would use the window to leap into her bedroom where he intended to set up guard—whether she wanted him or not.

A movement in the bedroom window drew his attention. He froze.

On the window ledge, a black cat melded into the shadows of the darkened room. Only its movement had called attention to the small feline. Her eyes blinked, staring directly at him.

I’m Pidge. What are you?

I’m Luc. A friend of your mistress.

You’re like me, but not.

I’m a shifter.

There was a slight pause as if Pidge were processing what he’d told her.

There’s someone trying to get into the house. They are right below the window. Can you stop him?

Yes.

Pidge's emerald green eyes blinked twice and small sharp white teeth showed in a cat smile.

Good, so do something already, Luc-shifter.

He snorted. Smart-ass cat. Feisty, sort of like her mistress.

Turning all of his senses toward the shrubbery abutting the side of the house, Luc smelled the person before he saw him. The intruder was definitely a male human. He smelled of sweat and testosterone—and of arousal.

The bastard's body was preparing for sex.

A low growl vibrated in Luc's throat. The intruder was a dead man.

As Luc slunk toward the house, a light clinking noise caught his attention. Widening his eyes, he finally picked out the man's figure in the shadows. The intruder carried something in his hand.

Edging nearer, Luc discerned the object was a grappling hook. The intruder threw it upward, toward the open window. The hook failed to catch, but startled Pidge, who leapt into the darkness of the bedroom as it just missed her haunches.

Shifter-Luc! Stop him!

Luc growled. The muscles in his back and legs rippled as he sprang at the would-be rapist.

The figure screamed—a harsh, angry, and frightened sound.

* * * *

Startled awake by Pidge's paw batting at her nose, Abbie choked back a gasp of fright and sat straight up in bed. Her cat fell off her chest and onto her lap as she flicked on the bedside light. It was one o'clock in the morning. Way too early for her familiar to awaken her. The cat had enough sense to let her sleep in most mornings until seven.

"Pidge! You scared me to death. What's wrong?" she asked. Pidge's fur stood on end and her eyes were large yellow-green marbles.

The cat stared at the open window and growled, a harsh burring sound in the back of her throat.

Before Abbie could rise from bed to investigate, a growl sounding like a thousand buzz saws drifted through her open window, followed closely by a terrifying scream of pain. She shoved Pidge off her lap and leapt from the bed. She'd reached the window in one or two giant steps when an animalistic growl echoed off the walls of her bedroom.

Leaning out, she saw a black panther back away, gather itself, then spring toward the bushes at the base of her house. Another terrifying scream rent the night air. The sounds of fighting—punches and grunts—floated up to her position.

She turned to run downstairs. She had to stop the large cat from killing the person it attacked. A growling Pidge standing in the doorway stopped her. It was as if her familiar knew what was going on, approved of it, and wanted to keep Abbie from interfering.

"Pidge! Move or I'll move you!"

The cat calmly sat, big eyes blinking slowly, and refused to budge.

"Oh, Hades in a handbasket," she muttered as she made her way back to the window.

Sitting on the windowsill, she swung her legs out until they dangled against the house's outside wall. She chanted a levitation spell and stepped off into the night air. Floating slowly to the ground, she landed five feet away from the panther and its unfortunate victim.

“Stop it! Now!” she yelled at the large cat. She followed through with a micro-burst of air hastily gathered on her way to the ground.

The panther flew through the air and landed ten feet from its prey. Momentarily stunned, the large cat lay sprawled on the ground, shaking its head and growling like a rusty motor. As she kept one eye on the animal, she rushed to the downed man and knelt by his side.

“Don’t move, let me check you for...” Her words were cut off by a knife nicking the underside of her chin.

“Thank you for coming out to play, witch,” snarled the man, who although he was bloodied and breathing heavily, managed to reposition the blade against her jugular. He reinforced his control of the situation by flicking a small cut alongside the pulsing vein.

Abbie froze, not wanting to chance the man miscalculating and cutting into the large vein.

Reaching out, she nudged his consciousness. She had to figure out whom—or what—she was dealing. Chaotic, indecipherable thoughts and strong emotions hit her like a windstorm. He was human.

Her lips curved into a slight smile as she gathered a small amount of energy to encase then repel the knife.

It didn’t budge! In fact, the weapon pressed even harder against the life-giving vein.

Her captor might be human, but his knife had been spelled. Unless she could find a way to distract the man, she was in serious trouble.

Her attacker struggled to stand, using her body to pull himself up. The knife moved a micromillimeter from its deadly position, once again nicking her. When he gained his feet, he pulled her more tightly against him. Her back touched his body so closely she could feel his arousal against her rear. She moaned and tried to pull away, but the blade of his knife halted her instinctive move to flee a male in heat.

“Where’s your beast?” he whispered harshly into her ear.

His fetid moist breath sent shudders of disgust through her body. She couldn’t think, couldn’t tell him it wasn’t her beast. She could only smell his excitement, feel his hardened body against hers. Flashbacks to another time and another male holding her hostage threatened to overwhelm her.

Pain added to the debilitating memories. Trickle of warm blood trailed down her neck where they pooled along her clavicle before journeying down onto her breast.

“Her beast is right here,” growled a very male, and human, voice. A remarkably familiar voice.

“Luc?” she whispered. His voice broke through the immobilizing fear threatening to engulf her.

Her captor’s arm tightened across her chest, pulling the gashes on her throat. She inhaled on a stifled shriek of pain.

“Abbie!” Luc’s roar reverberated in the quiet of the night. She sensed rather than saw him move toward her and the man holding her so cruelly.

“Stay back!” shouted her captor.

The knife’s finely honed edge pressed against her skin once more before the man let up on the pressure. Her exhalation rattled from her lungs.

“Hold on, Abbie. I’m coming for you.” His words sounded as if they’d been sifted through gravel. He was mad and, she sensed, getting madder. “Next time, little cat, let me

finish subduing the intruder before you fly me across space, okay?"

Luc moved into her line of vision, a shadowy figure among the darker shadows cast by the trees surrounding her house. Her captor jerked, then swore. He began to move them away from Luc, back toward the house.

"Intruder? No, more like the bitch's demon lover," the man growled in her ear. The knife never wavered from her life's blood as he dragged her along, inch by excruciating inch. "We're going to go inside and finish what I came here to accomplish. Tell whatever in the hell Luc is to stay away. If he doesn't, I'll have to waste you. It wasn't what I was paid to do, but if I have to, I will."

"Paid to do?" said Luc as he mirrored their movement, maintaining a constant distance. His nude body gleamed in the moonlight like fine-grained marble, battle-ready muscles rippling with his tense movements. He was a beautiful fighting machine.

"To do what?" Luc growled.

Abbie, be ready. Watch me.

She struggled not to gasp out loud. His voice in her head was unexpected, but welcome.

"Why, rape her, of course."

The intruder's laugh was ugly and coarse. She couldn't help the tremors of revulsion coursing through her.

"Aw, darling, are you shivering in anticipation?"

His derisive laughter sounded like a hyena. He was a scavenger seeking an easy meal, but she didn't intend to make it easy for him. She'd avoided rape all those years ago—she'd do it again. She'd wait for Luc's move, then act. She'd have to use brute force. Her magick was essentially useless at this point; the dark spell on the knife had assured that. Her captor could slice the jugular, and she would bleed to death before help could arrive.

Luc and his plan were her only chances at evening the odds in her favor. Until then, she'd bide her time.

The would-be rapist licked her neck where the blood oozed, then took a sharp nip of the pulsing vein. "You taste good. We'll have us some fun."

Luc muttered something vile that drifted away on the night air. His body shimmered in the dark night, highlighting the throbbing veins on his neck and arms. His leg muscles twitched as if readying themselves for a race. His deep-throated growl was now constant, like the sound of a thousand killer bees. But it was the look on his face she would never forget. Death was in his eyes—and the lethal gaze was fixed on the man who murmured vile obscenities into her ear.

"But why me?" Abbie asked. She needed to keep the man's attention on her so Luc could make his move. She wanted her captor caught unawares.

"I don't ask questions," snarled the man, shaking her as if to punish her for interrupting his perverted sexual fantasies. "I just do what I get paid to do. And in this case, I'd say it will be my pleasure." He scraped the knife lightly down her neck. More blood followed the knife's movement. Once more he bent to lick the flowing blood. "Nectar of the gods."

Pidge, you ready? Luc asked.

Pidge's answering "mew" sounded from above.

Abbie, when Pidge jumps him, can you protect your neck from the knife?

Yes.

Maybe.

Good. You'll be free soon, little cat.

His words warmed her, strengthened her. She could do this. She waited to make her move—whatever in Lucifer's balls that might be.

"Come on, let's go—into the house." Her captor pushed her the last few steps toward the front porch.

Pidge, now!

Abbie's muscles twitched; her heart pounded in her ears. With a screeching meow, Pidge landed on the man's head. Abbie threw up one arm to dislodge the arm imprisoning her while simultaneously using her other hand to shove the knife-hand away from her body.

It worked. She was free.

As she flung herself away from the man's grasping arms and the wildly swinging blade, Luc, a white blur, tackled the man to the ground, knocking the weapon loose.

Abbie rushed to grab the knife. When she touched it, the blade threw off red-and-yellow sparks then vanished in a cloud of ochre-colored smoke. She back-pedaled from the noxious cloud.

"Stay back, Abbie," Luc shouted as she strayed too closely to the men's wrestling bodies.

Luc threw a hard punch at the man's face from his position straddling the man's downed body. Her former captor wasn't giving up readily. He retaliated by shoving his fist into Luc's exposed genitals.

Luc's anguished howl set Abbie's hair on end.

Damn, she couldn't just stand by and let the bastard emasculate her rescuer.

After gathering as much air energy as she could, she chanted a fire spell and superheated the swirling ball of wind she'd created. Then she threw it at the man who'd struggled to his feet and prepared to follow his low blow with a kick to Luc's ribs. The tornadic wind lifted the man in mid-kick and twirled him into the sky.

Abbie recalled the wind, dissipating it into the atmosphere, and the intruder fell into the top of the live oak at the edge of her drive. His mingled groans of pain and fear floated on the night air. Music to her ears.

Assured her would-be rapist was taken care of for the moment, she rushed to Luc's aid. He lay on the ground in a fetal position, his hands cradling the abused testicles. His teeth ground loudly as he attempted to hold in moans of pain.

"Are you okay?" Abbie whispered.

Hades, Abbie. Of course he isn't. The bastard tried to make a eunuch out of him.

Murmuring nonsense words, she reached out a hand and stroked Luc's sweaty hair and trembling back. Chanting a soothing spell, she absorbed some of his pain. The intensity of it nauseated her and almost drove her to her knees. As she took deep cleansing breaths, she reached for the calm place deep within her and attempted to share it with Luc. Gradually, his pain subsided.

Luc shuddered. His respirations sounded as if he'd just run a marathon. Finally, he managed to whisper, "Thanks for whatever you just did. I think I might live."

Gingerly, he straightened out his body, then struggled to stand. Once he'd gained his feet, he took a step toward her. A look of deep concern formed shadows in his golden

eyes.

She reached for him at the same time he reached for her. As they stood, holding onto each other's arms, it was even money as to who comforted whom.

Luc examined her neck with a narrowed gaze. His amber eyes now blazed with angry flames.

"I'll kill the son of a bitch," he rasped. His hand shook as it traced the path of the blood flow down her neck and onto her chest.

Snarling, he let go of her arms and turned toward the tree where rustling sounds betrayed the intruder's attempt at escape.

"Luc!" she cried.

He turned back to her. His eyes glazed over with blood lust.

"You're not really dressed to subdue him," she pointed out. With the danger gone, she'd become uncomfortably aware of his nudity.

She blushed with embarrassment. Or was it arousal?

His musky male scent sang to her, calling her as effectively as the Sirens had called to unwary sailors. Goddess help her, she was tempted to wallow in the strength and protection of Luc's all-too-male body. Instincts as old as mankind urged her to reward the conquering male with her body while her twenty-first century logic and intellect battled against it.

"Then I'll shift," he replied in growling tones. "Take Pidge and get back in the house. Give me twenty minutes with this piece of filth, then call the cops. I'll have him ready for them by the time they get here."

"I think..." she started to say when he lifted a warning finger.

"Don't think," he said, his voice strained. "Just do as I say. I can't go after him until I know you're safely inside."

Abbie recognized the stress in his voice. In fact, she could feel his pain, his tiredness, his concern. And his hunger—for her. He was near the end of his control.

"Okay, I'll go inside," she whispered. "But you have to bring him inside so we can question him. You can't beat him up anymore—you're better than that."

"Thor's hammer, Abbie! He was going to rape you! He cut you!" he snarled. His patience had evaporated in his fiery response. "Get inside the house. Now!"

Abbie picked up Pidge and scurried toward the house. As she reached the door, she turned and watched Luc's naked back as he ran toward the tree. In a shimmer of golden-white light, he changed from a picture of male nude perfection into a sleek and powerful black predator.

"For Goddess's sake, at least have the decency to put some clothes on before the cops arrive," she called after him.

A snarling roar was her only answer.

Chapter Four

Abbie used the intruder's rope and grappling hook to climb to her bedroom window. The doors were all locked, and she had no key secreted outside. She could have witched the door open, but she wasn't sure she wouldn't destroy something in the process—like the house.

And the levitation spell was totally out of the question. She was shaking so hard—a combination of a post-fright adrenaline letdown and the intense hormonal reaction to Luc's pheromones—that any spell requiring her to think too much would be doomed to an abysmal failure.

Once inside, she ran downstairs and unlocked the front door for Luc. Then she headed back up to her bedroom.

Pidge lay sprawled on the disheveled bed. As Abbie entered the room, her familiar jumped off the bed.

"Meow?" said Pidge as she rubbed up against Abbie's bare legs, purring a hundred miles an hour.

"You're a heroine, my girl," Abbie said as she stooped to pick up the little cat. She rubbed a cheek across Pidge's fur. The cat rumbled with contentment. "Tuna fish every night for the rest of your life for you."

"Meow!"

Pidge licked at the blood on her neck, reminding Abbie she'd better clean the wounds and put on clothes before Luc got back. She looked down at the sheer nightie she'd donned earlier in the evening. Austin nights were often hot even in spring—and tonight had been no exception. The see-through fabric was great for cool sleeping, but not for entertaining male visitors, even ones who'd already seen more than they had a right to see.

She entered the bathroom and gasped at the bloodied, pale-as-chalk woman staring back at her from the mirror over the vanity.

"My God, Pidge. No wonder Luc looked as if he wanted to commit bold-faced murder," she said. "I look like Frankenstein's bride."

A quick wash with a wet rag wasn't going to hack it. She needed a shower. And after that, herbal ointment for the cuts.

She turned on the water, pulled the ruined nightgown over her head and threw it into the wastebasket. She probably could wash the blood out, but knew she'd never wear it again. It held horrifying memories now.

"Guard, Pidge. Don't let anybody inside this room. Okay?"

Pidge lowered her head once in acknowledgment, then stretched out in the doorway to the bathroom and began to groom.

As the water washed over Abbie, her tense muscles started to relax. She soaped her body, gasping slightly when the cuts on her neck protested. She ignored the stinging of the suds and lathered her neck and chest thoroughly. Mentally, she paraphrased Lady Macbeth, "Out, out damned spot."

"Don't use all the hot water, little cat."

Abbie shrieked and whirled around. She covered her breasts with one arm and her

mons pubis with the hand of her other. So much for Pidge guarding the doorway. The little traitor.

“Luc! Get out of here.”

“No.” He dropped the already partially opened pants and shrugged off his shirt. He wore no underwear. “I’m hot, achy, and dirty. And I need to be near you. I—I won’t touch you. I just need to see and know you’re all right.”

Abbie searched his face, his mind. Even though his psyche was once again closed to her after the few moments of complete interaction in the heat of the tense standoff, she sensed he spoke the truth.

She sighed. “You promise? No hanky-panky?”

He smiled. “Not tonight. I don’t take advantage of people when they’re not at their optimum. I like a challenge.”

“I guess you’ve already seen everything anyway,” she said. “And I’ve seen you.” She tossed him the soaped-up sponge. “Here, make yourself useful and wash the bastard’s scent off my back.”

He stepped into the shower. “My pleasure.”

Luc took the sponge, and after she presented her back to him, he washed it in firm, circular strokes. She almost groaned in ecstasy; all the tension seeped from her as he stroked and soothed.

Just as she thought her knees would turn into pudding, Luc’s warm, sweet breath rushed past her ear. “My turn. Do me.”

“Do you?” she squeaked.

“My back, little cat,” he whispered against her wet hair. “Wash my back, please.”

Had she imagined a kiss there at the end? Yes, he’d definitely pressed a kiss to her wet hair.

“Okay, it’s only fair,” she agreed. The memory of his strained muscles as he fought the man who would’ve raped her flitted across her mind’s eye. He had to be sore—and dirty. “Turn around, so I can scrub your back.”

Luc presented the muscled expanse. He leaned against the shower’s tiled wall, his hands supporting him. The water pummeled his back, and it was all she could do not to lick the water droplets rolling from his shoulder blades. He looked especially yummy. Lucifer’s balls, she had to get a grip.

Since Luc’s hands were not on her, distracting her, a thought struck her. She tensed and halted the scrubbing of his back. “You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“No. I wanted to—he would’ve hurt you bad. But I knew you wouldn’t approve, so I refrained from ending his worthless life—barely.” She sighed and resumed her soapy massage. He groaned, the sound echoing all the way to her core. “That’s so frigging good.”

Refusing to be distracted by the earthy sounds Luc made, she asked, “So, what did you do with him?”

“I tied him to one of your kitchen chairs. We can question him, then call the cops.”

“Shouldn’t the police question him?”

“We need to know who hired this guy. If the attack on you has to do with Jurnik and the murder at the club...”

“Okay, I see your point. But if he tells us it is, what’s to say he won’t let something slip to the cops when they question him later?” Her hands moved to his buttocks, swiping

the sponge over the perfectly toned muscles. The man had a Class A ass.

“Uh, Abbie, don’t do that unless you want me to turn around, pin you to the wall, and do you right now.”

“Sorry,” she gasped. “Here,” she shoved the sponge over his shoulder, “maybe you’d better handle the rest. I’ll get out and let you finish.”

“Smart idea. We can talk about how to handle old Dub when I calm down.”

“Dub?” she asked as she stepped around him.

She kept her eyes above waist level. His golden gaze warmed to the color of honey. Damn the man. He was amused again at her expense.

She frowned at him. He smiled at her, a smile so full of promises, lustful promises, that she grabbed the edge of the shower to steady herself.

“His name. It’s Dub Brown.” He swept her nudity with a glance hotter than blacktop on a summer’s day. “Abbie, if you don’t move your so-fine tush in the next few seconds, I swear we’ll be making love on the bathroom floor.”

Abbie’s glance unconsciously lowered. The top of Luc’s erection touched just below his navel. She gulped. “Um—yes—I see. Bye.”

She fled the bathroom as if the all the hounds of Hell pursued her.

* * * *

Luc entered Abbie’s large eat-in kitchen and smiled as Dub glowered at him from his trussed-up position. If the man could’ve spoken, Luc was sure his venerable ancestors would be called into question.

Abbie sat at the kitchen counter, nursing a cup of something steaming hot. He sniffed the air. Hot chocolate. Well, if he couldn’t have his fill of her, hot chocolate was the next best thing to feed the cramping sexual hunger in his belly. A quick hand-job in the shower had taken off the edge, but already his penis searched for the waist of his pants. Even though he shifted into animal forms, he wasn’t one. He was a civilized man and would act like one—even if it killed him.

Besides, Abbie had just been through a horrible experience and wasn’t thinking like herself. The fact she’d allowed him into her shower without a hissing, spitting fight proved his point. She wasn’t working on all cylinders—yet. He could wait. The hunt was all a part of the fun, but not if the prey wasn’t up to speed.

“Can I have some of what you’re drinking?” Luc said, as he leaned against the counter next to her.

“Sure.” She got up and walked around to the stove. She poured him a mug and shoved it across the countertop. “So, how are we going to get the information out of him?” She angled her head in the direction of Dub.

“Well, I guess you could leave the room and I could beat it out of him like I wanted to do in the first place.”

The suggestion got him the drop-dead glare he’d hoped for. His little cat was finding her feistiness again. He never wanted to see her as pale and frightened as she’d been when the bastard had held a knife to her throat.

Dub wrestled in his seat. He mumbled around his gag. His eyes were wide with fright.

“What did you do to him out there? He looks scared to death,” Abbie said.

“Nothing much. I made sure his nuts were as sore as mine.” Luc shrugged. “It was

only fair. Plus, maybe he'll think twice before taking on another job to terrorize and rape a woman."

"Terrorize and rape a woman?" she repeated. Her green eyes turned the color of stormy seas. What little color she'd managed to regain washed away as she reached out and steadied herself on the counter.

"What's wrong, little cat?" Luc asked as he reached to grab her and pull her into the shelter of his thighs. "You look as if you'd just seen a ghost."

"Maybe I have," she murmured. She shook her head as if dislodging a memory. "Do you think he killed Jo Beth? She was terrorized and raped—before she was killed."

Luc swore under his breath. He pulled her closer, then nuzzled her hair as he rubbed her chilled arms to warm them. "I hadn't thought much farther than subduing him and making sure you were safe. But, yeah, sure, anyone who could take a job like he did could go one step further and kill."

"So maybe the person who hired him is going after any woman in Jurnik's vicinity?" Abbie said. "Dub called me a witch when he first captured me. Not many outside the preternatural community know what I am. And Dub is human; all I got from him was white noise and some emotions, mostly fear and anger. But his knife held a dark spell. Dub's boss has to be a dark wizard or witch."

"So that's how he managed to cut you? Since I didn't sense any latent psi powers of any kind in him, I'd wondered why you hadn't repulsed him as soon as he touched you."

Luc caught a questioning glance from Abbie at his mention of his extrasensory perception. She'd nail him on his slip later, he was sure. That and the fact he had his shields back in place. He couldn't risk letting her in—not if he didn't want to reveal his ultimate goal to her.

She shivered within his arms.

"What is it, Abbie?" He pulled her even closer to absorb her shudders. "Are you cold? Maybe you're experiencing delayed shock?"

"No, I'm fine—it's just I remembered he licked, then bit my neck." She trembled again and leaned further into his embrace. "We know he isn't a vampire. Could he be a wannabe? A vampyre? Could Jurnik's rival—and Jo Beth's former lover—Alek, be a secret preternatural and the one who hired Dub?"

"Easy enough to find out," Luc said. He gently lifted and placed Abbie on a counter stool. "Let's ask the bastard."

"Luc, you can't beat him up," Abbie chided gently. "The cops would arrest you. He has rights."

"Well, then do you have some way of making him talk that doesn't involve physical coercion?"

"You know I do, or you wouldn't have asked me," she snapped.

Anger blossomed on her pale cheeks. Good. The scared, weak Abbie wasn't one he liked to see.

"But it's forcing him to speak against his will," she said. "It's unethical."

"Abbie, it's either your ethics or me beating the crap out of him."

"Damn and shit," she swore. "Fine. But if you tell anyone, I swear, I'll—I'll..."

"You'll what? Turn me into a toad?" Luc grinned.

"No, I'll make you impotent!" She smiled, a nasty look gleaming in her eyes.

She was messing with him—because of the shower. Wasn't she? Well, he wasn't

going to tattletale on her, so the threat was negligible. But then why did his balls feel as if they were trying to shrink up into his body?

“I swear on everything I hold holy—and my future children—I won’t tell anyone you used a coercive spell on this man.” Luc kissed his little finger and reached over to touch hers with it. “Pinky swear. Oh, by the way, can this deal include you suppressing his memory of this talk—and my shifting—before the cops get here?”

Abbie frowned and was quiet for so long Luc was afraid he’d pushed her ethical envelope too far. Then she shrugged her shoulders and smiled through thinned lips.

“Might as well. I mean if karma bites me in the butt because of this—I know who to take it out on, right?”

“Uh, yeah, right.” Before that happened, he would have captured her for his own. He didn’t think she would hurt the golden goose—or balls—at that juncture. He should be safe. Maybe.

Chapter Five

“What?” Abbie glared at Daniel.

Normally, she wasn’t so surly in the morning, but a lack of sleep had a way of bringing out the latent bitch in her—that and the fact only seven hours earlier someone had held her at knifepoint and threatened to rape and beat her.

“You have a visitor,” Daniel whispered.

“Is it a secret,” she asked *sotto voce*, “or am I allowed to know who it is before I agree to see him or her?”

“It’s your mother.” Then Daniel added dramatically, with the lifting of one sandy-colored brow, “and she’s wearing Chanel. Pink Chanel.”

The power that always preceded her mother was there—she just hadn’t sensed it. Goddess, she was out of it!

“Shit! Does she have the black pearls on too?”

He nodded. “As big as malted milk balls.”

Damn, she was in Endora-mode today. Just what she needed—her mother in her uptight, conservative-witch, upper-echelon-of-Austin-society mode. She’d much rather have her mother in her Glinda-the-Good-Witch mode, the one who dated the undead and redecorated her daughter’s office without permission.

“Ahem,” Daniel cleared his throat. “Are we in for Mumsie or not?”

“Don’t let her hear you call her that, or bunny ears will be the least of your problems,” she said. “And bring me a cold soft drink and a bottle of aspirin. I have a pounding headache and I suspect it’s going to get worse.”

Daniel eyed her closely. “What the hell happened last night? You look, if you’ll pardon me for being truthful, like doggie-doo. We’ll definitely be having a dishing session once mother is gone. You’re holding out on me.”

Her secretary turned and stalked from the room. His stiff posture and heavy-footed tread spelled hurt feelings with every resounding thud.

Okay, so she hadn’t told him about last night. Who did he think he was ... her mother? No, more like her best girlfriend. Plus, how did you tell someone an unknown person had hired a hit-rapist to attack her as she slept? And how did she explain Luc had spent the night even after she’d pushed him out the door and cloaked her house in an all-inclusive protection spell? She must be losing her spell-casting wits.

She’d almost had a heart attack this morning when she’d gone downstairs to unlock and de-cloak the place. Luc in panther form and Pidge had been curled up as cozy as kittens on the couch.

How in Beelzebub’s name had he gotten through her protection wards?

She managed to sneak out of the house before he’d awakened. She wasn’t sure she could’ve faced him shifting. She’d spent most of the night tossing and turning. Her dreams alternated between her capture and rescue and post-rescue hot monkey sex with Luc. There wasn’t a spot on his body she didn’t know intimately—in her dreams. Damn him.

If her mental shields hadn’t been up, she might have suspected he’d planted those lusty dreams.

No, she couldn't share any of the previous evening with Daniel. Both he and Van would check Luc out from top to bottom and from A to Z faster than a person could say marriage material. His hair, clothes, and, yes, even the size of his penis would be critiqued and judged.

Lucifer's balls! They'd probably check his sperm for motility.

If everything checked out, they would pester her to death and beyond to reserve the church and start bridal shopping. The only thing saving her from their single-minded matchmaking to this point was the dearth of suitable and worthy men. Goddess knew, Daniel and Van wanted her to get married and procreate even more than her mother. They had hopes of being honorary uncles just as her mother had visions of being a grandmother.

Her mother! She was outside, early in the morning, in chic mother-mode. This was the woman who forbade Abbie from getting her up before noon. She must have heard—or sensed—something.

Abbie shuddered. Goddess help her, she might as well plan the wedding if Van, Daniel, and her mother got together and pressured her all at once.

The door to her office flew open and just avoided crashing into the wall, stopped by her mother catching it with the heel of one of her bright pink five-hundred-dollar four-inch heels.

"Abigail!" Her mother swept into the room and sat in a chair opposite her desk. "Who is this man Vidal told me about?"

Abbie groaned. She would be sure to give her uncle a piece of whatever mind she had left ... later.

"What man would that be, Mother?" Maybe the vague and confused bit would work. It had worked a lot when she'd been a teenager.

"The shifter. Or do you have so many men in your life you can't keep them straight?"

Nope, vague wasn't going to hack it today.

Reinforcing her mental shields against her mother's hammering assault, she said as calmly as possible, "Luc is a private detective, and we are working on a case together. That's all."

"Don't lie to me, Abigail Merriweather Gooden! I can smell a lie a mile away." Her mother smiled the I-know-something smile all mothers seem to cultivate when they want you to fess up to spilling the perfume all over their lingerie or turning the pet goldfish into a piranha. The perfume had been an accident. The goldfish, not. "I went to your house to talk to you. A man was there—naked as the day he was born—answering your door and yelling your name. Explain that!"

She couldn't. She was busted. Nothing she could say would convince her mother nothing had happened ... in the flesh. Luc would pay for this.

The sounds of scuffling and Daniel's voice screaming, "You can't go in there. She's in conference," traveled down the hallway to her office.

The cause of the ruckus appeared in her doorway. And from the looks of him, he was pissed as hell, but at least he was clothed.

* * * *

Luc stood in the doorway to Abbie's office. She was there. Safe and in one piece.

Well, she was until he got through tearing a few strips off her perfect little hide.

He took several deep breaths in an attempt to slow the pounding of his heart—and to cool off. Shit. Hell. Damn, he was mad. So mad he was almost incandescent.

“What the fuck is going on here, Abbie?” he growled as he took several large steps forward past her desk. Ignoring the chicly dressed woman seated in the client’s chair he’d sat in not so long ago, he grabbed Abbie’s arms, lifted her up, then gave her a little shake. “You left this morning without me.” Another shake. “Any Tom, Dick, or Dub could’ve taken you out.”

He shook her once more for emphasis; it was either that or put her over his knee and spank her.

“Luc, let go.” She struggled against his grasp.

“Stop it, little cat,” he said. He swept her into his arms, carried her to the couch against the wall and sat down, holding her on his lap. “Now, explain to me why you left the house without me. What were you thinking?”

Abbie stared into space, ignoring him. The stubborn set of her chin indicated he was in trouble ... again. But he really didn’t give a flying fuck at the moment. She could’ve been captured—killed.

Still not looking at him, she said, the words forced through clenched teeth, “You forget what I am. I’m the one who threw old Dub into the tree to save your naked butt.”

He shook her. “Being a witch didn’t help you totally, now did it? The man cut you and would’ve raped you at knifepoint—and all the spells in the world wouldn’t have helped. It took my intervention to give you the opening to escape. Admit it.” He shook her again for good measure.

“Young man. If you don’t unhand my daughter this instant, you’ll see just what a witch can do...” the older red-haired woman lowered her gaze to his lap, “to your balls.”

Abbie laughed, a tinge of hysteria colored the sound. “I don’t think you want to do that, Mother.”

“Why in the Goddess’s name not?” Abbie’s mother snapped.

Abbie waved a hand in her mother’s direction, but she didn’t reply. She couldn’t. She was laughing too hard. Her shields dropped just a bit during her hysteria. Enough for Luc to get a mental picture of what had caused the loss of control.

He smiled at the image of the two of them in bed, naked, lying on rumpled, very rumpled, sheets. He pushed Abbie’s head onto his shoulder and began a soothing back rub on his hiccupping little cat.

He grinned at the older woman’s shocked expression. “I’m Luc. You must be Ilana, Abbie’s mother. Sorry about my state of undress earlier. I’d just shifted and hadn’t had a chance to retrieve my clothes.”

“Why were you in my daughter’s house?” Ilana sat down as if she weren’t sure her legs would hold her.

Her gaze was stern and guarded. She wasn’t easy for him to read, but something in him sensed he might have an ally in his quest for Abbie ... but only if his plans were honorable.

After last night, Luc had reexamined his feelings for Abbie and found they were more than mere lust. What he felt was primitive, completely territorial, and forever. Thor’s hammer! Abbie was his—and no man, witch, or *mother* could stop him from claiming her as his mate.

Which was about as honorable as he could be, so Ilana and he should get along just fine.

“Yeah, Luc.” Abbie choked back a laugh, then gasped. “What were you doing in my house?” She hiccupped, then added in a slightly strangled voice, “And how in Lucifer’s name did you slide through my wards? Again!”

“Abigail!” her mother’s voice sounded shrill. “This mere shifter has gotten through your wards more than once?”

Abbie seemed to sober up at the martial note in her mother’s voice. “Yes, once in this office and again last night. I can’t explain it. He’s also telepathic, but his shields are damn strong. And even when I get in, I can barely read him.”

Abbie’s mother paled.

Uh oh, he thought, she knows.

“What are you, young man? Who are your antecedents?” The older witch pinned him with a piercing green gaze.

“My full name is Lucan Math ap Mathonwy Knight.” Let her figure it out.

Abbie gasped. He stroked her back. “It’s okay, little cat.”

Ilana’s face glowed with understanding. Her mind opened to him.

I have no problem with you pursuing my daughter, as you’re the heir of a great Welsh wizard—and of course, royalty.

Thank you, Ilana. But I wasn’t asking for your permission. Only hers.

Ilana frowned, then laughed. He wasn’t sure he liked the sound of it.

Watch it, young wizard. I learned from a master wizard. Her father. Your intentions better be honorable.

And that, too, will be for Abbie to say.

“Touché, Lucan Math ap Mathonwy Knight.” Ilana said out loud. She bowed her head, but not before he glimpsed the steeliness in her eyes. He’d have to watch his back with this woman. She could be a good ally, but a worse enemy.

“Now, just what have you and Jurnik gotten my daughter into?” Ilana asked, the picture of concerned motherhood. “And you can put my daughter down, young man. You’ve fondled her quite enough.”

* * * *

Luc was the heir of the man most in the world of magick considered the quintessential wizard. Math ap Mathonwy had been a Welsh wizard, the King of Gwynedd, and brother to the mother Goddess Don. The legends said he could only rule if his feet were placed in the lap of a maiden, a reference to the fact the Celts believed their kings had to have the approval of their queens in order to be the recognized ruler.

Abbie shoved and pushed until Luc released her. Standing, she glared at him. “Bastard! You could have told me. I thought I was losing my touch.”

He shrugged. “My lineage is not important, although I can assure you my parents were very much married. Anyway, all you had to know was I could hold my own in the investigation,” he paused, then added with a grin, “partner.”

Abbie snorted, then stalked to her chair behind the desk and plopped into it.

“Abigail, what a rude noise,” her mother scolded. “Where are your manners?”

“It’s okay, Ilana. I can handle it,” Luc said. “I survived being flown through a doorway by your daughter, snorting is the least of my worries.”

“Was it open or closed?” One of her mother’s elegantly groomed eyebrows rose in interest.

“Vidal asked me the same question. It was open.”

A look of immense satisfaction covered her mother’s face. So much so Abbie could feel the resulting emotional waves across the few feet dividing them. Shit. Just as she was about to warn her mother not to put too much emphasis on the fact she had opened the door before flinging Luc through it, her mother said, “Her last boyfriend, Mark Madoc, a young man I at one time had high hopes of calling son and the father of my grandchildren, was put through a wall.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Luc said, his voice intense with his interest. “Little cat put a guy through a cement wall. Why? Vidal didn’t say.”

“Mother...” Abbie attempted to stop her mother’s explanation, but failed. As if she’d thought her mother would spare her feelings and halt the horrific revelation.

“Madoc was ... how should I put this? A very sexual creature.” Her mother paused delicately to make sure the arrow had gone home. It had. Luc’s frown would’ve stopped a clock, but it couldn’t stop her mother. “He’d assumed my daughter was a loose young woman—and she isn’t.” Her mother out-and-out glared at Luc. “Her father and I raised her to be a moral and ethical witch. No coed naked dancing at the Summer Solstice and the like. The young people today have no sense of morality.”

“Mother!” Abbie said.

“Well, yes, that’s neither here nor there.” Ilana moved to sit next to Luc on the couch and captured his gaze with hers, shutting Abbie out as if she weren’t even there. “My Abigail is a good girl. She was participating in an *all-female* celebration at Litha near Lake Travis. Sky-clad, of course. After the final consecration of the circle and offerings were made to the creatures of the forest, Abigail went back to her car to retrieve her clothes. Madoc was there, waiting for her. He, um...”

“Took advantage of the fact I could barely read him—he’s half-mortal—and placed a dark holding spell on me, then tried to rape me,” Abbie interjected before her mother could embroider details of the encounter. “Since he was always shoddy at doing spells, I managed to fly him through a cement retaining wall.”

Waves of energy crossed her skin, raising gooseflesh, and were followed by Luc’s low, rumbling snarl. His face was set and sharply etched with the strong emotions coursing through him and escaping into the room.

Her mother beamed at Luc’s reaction and added, “It took two master witches from Madoc’s family two full days to dig him out of the limestone hillside behind the retaining wall.”

“Good,” Luc said through clenched teeth. “Where is this Madoc now?”

“He’s...”

“Mother, no!” Abbie cut her off. “I’ve told both you and Uncle Vidal it’s over and in the past. And, if you recall, it was your matchmaking that hooked me up with Madoc in the first place. So leave it.”

“What harm would it cause?” Ilana asked. “Madoc’s no longer in the area. Your Uncle Vidal made it clear to his family Madoc had crossed a line and was no longer welcome in the Texan covens. The whole family moved to Britain.” She turned to eye Luc who looked at her with intense interest. “Near Wales, I believe. Isn’t that coincidental?” She smiled a cat-who-had-a-mouse-in-its-paw smile.

Abbie shook her head. Her mother had stirred up trouble on purpose. She was testing Luc. And from the set look on his face, her mother had succeeded.

"Luc, you are not to do anything about this," Abbie warned. "I mean it. This is none of your business. I handled it. It's done. Over. We have a job to do. We're business partners. There is no need for you to avenge your *partner*."

Luc just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, partner, whatever you say."

Abbie would have followed up Luc's so patently insincere agreement, but was interrupted.

"Ahem!" Daniel stood in the doorway, a can of soda and a bottle of aspirin balanced on a thick file. "We do have clients to see, court to attend. Plus, if you want to drink this soda and gulp the aspirin, you need to be doing it in the next few minutes."

Shit. She had a motion hearing in front of the magistrate in less than twenty minutes and it would take her ten to walk to the courthouse.

"Mother, I'll talk to you later."

Her mother stood and smoothed imaginary wrinkles from the perfection of her Chanel skirt. "Tonight, dinner at the Lake Austin house." She turned to Luc. "Be there, young man. Get the directions from Vidal when you see him later this morning. And we dress for dinner."

She swept from the room like a queen. Abbie had to grin. Her mother had the regal act down well.

Abbie turned to Luc who stared after her mother with a small smile on his face. "Little cat, your mother sure has the *noblesse oblige*-style down pat."

"She should ... she was the consort of a king until my father died."

"So you're a princess?" Luc walked over to her and looked into her eyes. His golden eyes gleamed like citrines today. "Shall I worship at your feet?"

"If you do, I'll step on you," Abbie said sharply to cover the image of Luc on his knees, in front of her. It recalled the dreams she'd had last night. "So-o-o, you're seeing Uncle Vidal later?"

Thank the Goddess, Luc took the hint and accepted the change of topic. "Yes, remember I told you last night? We're going to interview Jo Beth's spirit, if it lingers."

"So that's what you two arranged while I was in the ladies' room after the Biff-Bubba bout?"

"Yes. He thought he felt Jo Beth, but the atmosphere was so chaotic after all the crowd's emotions commingled with the latent emotions left at the scene of the murder. Vidal felt he should wait."

"Good. Let's hope Jo Beth can identify her murderer," said Abbie. "The sooner we solve this case the sooner Jurnik can get back to his normal life."

"Tsk, ts, ts, little cat," chided Luc. He reached out and tapped a gentle finger on the tip of her nose. "You aren't going to be rid of me so easily."

Daniel cleared his throat in the background. "Uh, people, time's a wasting. Court waits for no man or woman ... or lovemaking."

Abbie shot an I'll-get-you-later look at her watchful secretary.

Luc let out a gusty sigh. "Go do your lawyer thing. I'll be back to take you to lunch and tell you what we found out from Jo Beth."

Abbie wanted to know what her uncle's séance revealed, but she didn't want Luc to get the idea he could dictate to her. "What if I'm not here? I do have better things to do

than sit around and wait on you, Luc Knight.”

“Just be here, little cat,” Luc said. “If I have to come and find you, I can’t promise I’ll be a gentleman about it.” He left the room in a shimmer of energy and a bang of thunder.

“The man does know how to leave a room,” said Daniel.

A very much impressed Daniel by the look on his face. Abbie groaned. Yep, Van would hear about this and she would have to answer all sorts of questions about Luc.

“So, dish. He spent the night at your place?” Daniel handed her the drink and two aspirins he’d shaken out of the bottle. “Is he hung? And how was it? The moon, the stars, and the universe? Or what?”

Questions just like those. Abbie glared at him as she tossed back the aspirin. The choking fit as she tried to swallow the pills should have warned her the day would only get worse.

Chapter Six

Luc had fumed all the way to Exotica over the revelations about the unknown Madoc. He hadn't thought Abbie was a virgin like those in whose lap his esteemed ancestors had placed their feet to secure their rule, but he hadn't given a thought about what men might have gone before him. Not until it was brought home that Abbie had barely managed to avoid rape. No wonder she didn't want a man in her life. She'd had, he now knew, at the very least, two bad experiences with the male of the species.

All the more reason to woo her slowly. He could wait. He wanted her trust just as much as he wanted her.

You had a showing of trust last night, Lucan. She allowed you into her shower, after all.

Yeah, she had—but she had still been suffering from the aftermath of the attack.

Heck, when he'd stormed into her office, a small part of his mind recognized even this morning she hadn't fully recovered. She was pale and drawn, almost listless. But it hadn't taken long for her innate fighting spirit to take him on—him and her mother.

Yes, he might have an ally in her mother. Good old Math ap Mathonwy's blood in his veins had assured it. Most of the time his wizard ancestors had embarrassed him. Growing up in a shifter family and being teased about the power that had avoided your siblings for some unknown reason of genetics was a trial. With his wizard mother dead, his father had sent him away during the summers to one of his mother's relatives to teach him how to control his powers. He'd resented it at first, but later, as he'd matured, he'd realized it made him special, gave him abilities to do more for his kind.

If his heritage now allowed him to inveigle himself into Abbie's life, well, he would use it. He'd never make it to first base if Ilana Gooden didn't approve. For all her posturing, Abbie would never go against her mother's desires. Just look at what had happened when she'd tried to please her mother and had dated the bastard Madoc.

When he arrived at the club, Vidal sat on a bar stool nursing a late-morning Bloody Mary.

"There you are, my boy." Vidal saluted him with the glass. "Want one? I took the liberty of helping myself. I make a damn mean Bloody Mary."

Luc shook his head. "I don't drink anything red. But I will take a scotch. I need it."

"Coming right up." Vidal hopped off the stool and circled the bar in an almost elegant move putting Luc in mind of a dancer. "What's necessitated this need for alcoholic sustenance, might I ask?"

"Some bastard named Madoc. Your niece not having a care for her so-fine hide. And your sister."

"Ahhh," Vidal said, a knowing look in the glance he shot Luc. "I take it from the order presented that Madoc is the biggest issue stuck in your craw?"

"Yeah. Where is the bastard?"

Vidal shook his head. "Luc, the bastard Madoc and his equally regrettable family are water under the bridge to borrow a human cliché. As the man of the family, I approached the Greater Covens of Texas Council and they excommunicated the whole filthy bunch and banished them from the continental United States. There is not a coven in this

country which would harbor them. Madoc—and his relations—have been punished. It's over."

"Not for Abbie it isn't." Luc took the glass of scotch Vidal slid over the bar and gulped half of it in one swallow. "She's afraid to let any man close. Afraid to open herself. And after last night, she is even more closed."

"What happened last night?" Vidal stiffened his posture. "Am I going to have to go to the Council and get rid of you also?"

Luc stared at Vidal, whose veneer of polish and culture had fallen away to expose a powerful, high-level, and very dangerous witch. "No, not me." He quickly explained about Dub and the attack and its aftermath.

"So, this Dub person is in jail and will undoubtedly go to prison. Texas justice is just as strict as Coven justice. But who ordered this attack? You have any ideas?"

"Dub didn't know—he'd received a phone call—but Abbie thinks it has to do with Jurnik's case," Luc said, shaking his head.

"And you don't agree?" Vidal stared at him as if he could read Luc's mind. And maybe he could, but Luc didn't think so. Wizards had more tricks up their sleeves than witches who rely on the earth for their powers. His shields were firmly in place.

"I did until this morning. The presence of the spelled knife bothers me," Luc said. "While I'm not going to ignore Alek and the wannabe blood suckers hanging out at his place, I don't think they have the power to wield the kind of magick on that knife."

"So, now you suspect Madoc or his family might have ordered the attack," Vidal concluded.

"Yes, or another preternatural who sympathizes with them." Luc set his drink down. "Dub knew she was a witch. Madoc or someone helping him would know that. I'm not sure Alek and his followers, even if they have magick powers, know anything. I'll be seeking that information when I go to Alek's place to question him."

"I'll go with you. Two heads are better than one." Vidal walked around the bar to join Luc as he stood. "Just what are your telepathic powers, my boy? I get the sense of more power than a shifter should bear."

Luc grinned. "You might as well hear it from me. Your sister and Abbie know," he admitted. "My mother's ancestors were in the line of Math ap Mathonwy."

Shock, then pleased surprise passed over Vidal's face just as clouds pass over the sun. "Must I bow to your royal blood, my liege?"

"If you do, I'll push you on your ass."

Vidal threw back his head and roared with laughter. Luc had to smile. When Vidal let go, the elder witch reminded him of Abbie. Must be the side of the family from which she got her spunk. Ilana had the same spark of life in her when she'd ordered Luc to put her daughter down.

"You'll do just fine in winning my Abbie-girl." Vidal threw a companionable arm around Luc's shoulders. "Just remember, don't hurt her. We Storms take care of our womenfolk." He squeezed hard, causing Luc to wince at the strength he'd felt only briefly the night before.

"I won't. It's more than likely she'll hand me my butt on a platter."

Vidal released his stranglehold on Luc and slapped him on the back. "That she might, my boy. Storm women are known to be spirited. Some day, I'll have to tell you the story of Ilana and Merlin's courtship. The way you two argued the other night at

Exotica reminded me of them.” He chuckled. “Austin is lucky to still be standing. But right now, we need to contact a spirit.”

The older man strode toward center stage. “This is where the dastardly act was committed, correct?”

Luc walked over to stand next to him. Once again, in the back of his mind, the image of Jo Beth’s bloodied and battered body appeared to him in Technicolor. He could smell the metallic hint of blood in the air ... taste it. The scotch roiled in his stomach.

“Yes.”

“She’s still here.”

Vidal’s soft, assured tones sent a shiver of fear down Luc’s back. As a wizard-trainee, he’d spoken with the dead, but they’d mostly been his wizard ancestors. Plus, he’d only done those séances with the help of his mother’s brother. Luc had never placed much importance in contacting what was past ... until now. And even now, he’d rather let Vidal make the contact. The older witch’s natural magick proclivity was talking to spirits.

“Is she still in pain?” Luc hoped not.

“Yes, but it is more a phantom pain; like that of an amputee who recalls the sensation of having the limb. It is there, but it’s not.”

“Can you help her?” Luc asked.

“Yes,” Vidal said. “After we find what we need to know, I will help her go on to a more peaceful place where she’ll be without pain. She really is just hanging around for justice. We can assure her that will occur. It should be enough to let her journey on.”

“Good.” Luc glanced over at his companion. “What do I do?”

“Why nothing.” Vidal laughed. “This is not like one of those hokey séances in a mystery novel. I’ll just contact her, but it will be mentally. Can you join your thoughts with mine and share the experience? Or are you afraid to lower those prodigious mental shields you have even for me?”

Luc captured Vidal’s wise gray gaze with his. “What do you mean?”

“When you are around Abbie you reinforce them. I can see you do it.” At Luc’s sharp inhalation, Vidal added, “Don’t worry. It’s not very obvious. Abbie will figure it out eventually ... and I am sure Ilana already has. It’s a protective action I’m sure you only do around beings you perceive as your equals in power. I bet your shields around Jurnik are at their lowest ... and probably vanish around shifters. Am I right?”

“Yeah. But how did you know?” Luc was curious as to what physical manifestation clued the older man into this insight.

“The Storms are known for their mental strengths in regards to preternaturals. We don’t have to work at it to read them—we are totally empathic and telepathic. I’m sure Abbie had conniptions when she couldn’t read you. She probably realizes you are putting up shields, but not the enormous effort you’re putting into it.”

“What about Madoc? Why couldn’t she read him the night he tried to rape her?” Luc was skeptical.

“Mark Madoc was half human. She always had trouble reading him,” Vidal explained in a matter-of-fact flattened tone. “Plus, he timed the attack perfectly. Abbie’s protective instincts were down. After all, at least a dozen of her sister witches were only yards away. They had just celebrated the Sabbath, so thoughts of growth, balance, and life were foremost in her mind. The holding spell silenced her, she couldn’t call out, could

barely move.” Vidal’s breathing had roughened. He paused to regain control. “It was only the strength of her mental abilities which allowed her to find the weakness in his spell. And through that weakness, she managed to pitch the cretin through solid cement and twenty more feet into the side of a limestone and granite hillside.”

“Was she okay?” Luc had to know the worst. Ilana and Abbie had not told him all the details. He could tell.

“She was comatose for a month. The bastard hadn’t raped her, but he beat her because he couldn’t perform.” Luc swore viciously. “I totally agree, my boy. Abbie also burnt out a few neurons in defeating the holding spell and putting together the hyper-burst. The coma was a way for her to heal body and soul.” Vidal reached out and patted Luc’s shoulder. “Don’t look so concerned. She recovered fully and is stronger than ever. The old adage of what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger—is especially true in our family line.”

Luc swore some more and made a mental note to contact his relatives in Wales and have them hunt out Madoc’s direction. “That must be how she managed to find the crack in my shields in her office. Scared me for a second until I’d figured out where she’d gotten in. She still reads my emotions better than any witch I’ve ever met. Well, for that matter, so do you.”

Vidal beamed at him. “I told you, it’s a family trait. Now, let’s see what Jo Beth can tell us, so we can send her to the Father and the Goddess for her eternal rest. Link with me.”

Luc dropped his shield and easily found Vidal’s mental patterns, which even now searched out Jo Beth’s death spirit.

Jo Beth, called Vidal. I am Vidal and this is Luc. Jurnik hired us to find your killer. Come to us, share your story, then pass into the light of eternity where you’ll be in pain no more.

For several seconds, there was nothing. Dust motes set in motion by the ceiling fans and the air-conditioning vents swirled in the light filtering through the club’s barred windows.

“Are you sure she’s here?” Luc asked in a hushed voice.

“Yes. She is standing on the stage, one hand on the pole. Look with my mind’s eye,” Vidal urged. “You’ll see her.”

Luc closed his eyes and saw what Vidal had seen. This must be the last mental image she had of herself as a living person.

Jo Beth stood in a skimpy black leather costume like a BDSM doll. The same costume the crime scene techs had found near the stage. It had been cut away and had lain in shreds under a table where it had been thrown. On her feet were stiletto heels, held on with multiple studded leather straps. Around her neck she had a black leather collar and on her wrists were matching leather restraints. She wore a half-hood, her blonde hair coming out of the top in a ponytail. Her china blue eyes gazed at them through the eye slits. She licked her lips as if she were uncertain.

Who are you? Where am I? Why can’t I go home? It’s because of him, isn’t it?

The torrent of questions breezed through Vidal and Luc’s connected minds.

We’re here to get the name of the one who killed you, Vidal explained. Luc is a private detective Jurnik hired, and I am a friend of Luc’s who can talk to death spirits like yourself.

I'm dead? wailed Jo Beth. *I can't be dead. It was supposed to be just sex. You know, master-slave stuff. He promised to stop at my safe word. But he mustn't have if I'm really dead.*

I'm sorry, Jo Beth, Luc said in the same gentle tone Vidal had adopted in dealing with the girl. *The man killed you, and framed Jurnik. We need to know who did this to you. Vidal assures me once you know we can get you justice, you can go to a better place.*

I don't know who he was, she cried. *Am I stuck here forever?*

No, no, soothed Vidal. *We'll find him whoever he is. You can go—soon—but first tell us how this all came about. Anything you tell us will help us find your killer.*

O-o-kay, she sighed, sniffing audibly. *I met him in a chat room. The Central Texas Alt.Loving site. His user name was Dominator. We chatted for, like, months. After ... after I stopped seeing Alek, I was lonely. And I kind of got used to the, uh ... well, you know...*

Rougher sex? Luc asked.

Yeah. She nodded her head, setting the high ponytail swinging. Grasping the pole, she curled herself around it like a security blanket, then slid up and down. The pole lay at the juncture of her thighs. *He told me he would make me scream with pleasure, but he wanted to do it here at the club. Said he'd seen me dance and I made him hot. He had to punish me for making all the other men hot too. I was to dance only for him. So I agreed. I still had my key from when Jurnik and I were lovers.*

So you let him in, urged Vidal. *And?*

He gave me this costume and told me to put it on and then come out and dance for him. He sat at the head table at the top of the stage.

What did he look like? asked Luc.

He wore a full face mask—sort of like this one I'm wearing, but it covered all of his head. I only saw his eyes. They were a dark color, maybe black, or they could've been brown or dark blue. She shrugged. His mouth was fuller on the bottom than on the top. He was taller than me. Maybe six feet, give or take an inch. He was muscled, big, I like them big. He wore black leather jeans and a white t-shirt ... gloves. I didn't look at his feet once I saw his cock. It was huge. Luscious.

Jo Beth increased her sensual movements on the pole. A grimace of frustration crossed her face.

I can't come! Why can't I come? I can still feel the pain. He hurt me. She stroked her neck where dark bruises had appeared and stood out from the pale transparency of her ghostly skin. *He told me cutting off my oxygen would give me a massive orgasm. He'd already given me two when he put his hands around my throat. And I could feel it coming in the distance ... then poof ... I was hovering over my body as he cut me with a bottle. Why did he do that? I was already dead, right?*

Because he was a sick bastard, Jo Beth, Luc said, his anger seeping through every word he projected. *Where you're going you'll live in oneness with peace and happiness.*

You promise?

Her eyes were wary. And he didn't blame her, after all the last strange man who'd made her a promise had killed her.

I promise, Luc swore.

You know this was one last fling? I was going to go back to my Alek. He'd promised to take me back. Tears seeped from beneath the half-hood. *I made a big mistake. Story of*

my life. Her sigh whistled through the room. *Will the hurt really go away?*

Vidal nodded. *You can trust us. Let go of the pole, Jo Beth. Close your eyes and see the golden-white light.*

Jo Beth obeyed as a small child would her parents.

I see the light. What do I do now?

“Walk toward it. Let go of the earth,” whispered Vidal. “Be at peace.”

Jo Beth’s form diminished, but just before it was completely gone she called out, *He wasn’t a stranger. He was someone I knew. But I couldn’t figure it out before I died and even now I still don’t know.* As her death spirit winked out, she added, *Thank you.*

When Jo Beth’s presence had fully left the room, Luc strode back to the bar and poured himself another scotch and tossed it back in one swallow. Vidal did the same with his Bloody Mary, but did it in two large gulps.

“As many times as I have spoken with the recently dead, I never get over the neediness and helplessness of their spirits. It breaks my heart. At least I know she’s in a better place. I’ll try to séance her after she’s been there for awhile and see how she’s doing.” Vidal poured himself another Bloody Mary, which he now sipped between mouthfuls of bar pretzel mix.

“So, we know it was someone who knew her, but set it up to look like she was meeting a stranger from a chat room. It could fit Biff, Bubba, Alek, or the cop, Randy Sloan,” Luc said. He shook his head in disgust at the young girl’s pathetic attempts to find love. He knew that was why she’d done it—gone from man to man. He’d read it in her eyes and what was left of her life spirit.

“Did all of them have access to Jurnik’s tie?” Vidal asked. “Abbie told me about it when she asked me to help her with her client’s case.”

“They could have. All they needed to do was go into the back office and lift it. Jurnik just takes them off and leaves them lying around. There must be a dozen ties back there. Well, there were before I had him put them away. No use giving the cops ideas.”

Vidal chuckled. “Good thinking. So, what’s the next move?”

Luc straightened up. “I’m going to lunch with your niece to tell her what Jo Beth said. Then I’ll head over to Biff’s to question him.”

“What do you want me to do?” Vidal asked. “I’m willing to help however I can.”

“Why don’t we talk about it tonight?”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, your sister invited me to dinner. She said to get the directions to the Lake Austin house from you.”

“Was this before or after she found out you have royal wizard blood?” Vidal smiled.

“After. I figure the admission elevated me above your average preternatural.”

“You figured correctly.” Vidal drew a map on the back of a napkin and handed it to Luc. “We dress for dinner.”

Luc laughed. “So I leave the panther fur, hawk feathers, and crocodile scales at home and break out the wizard formal wear? Should I bring the family staff?”

Vidal almost choked on his reply. “Sure, my boy. I know Ilana would love to see it.” Then he doubled over in laughter.

Luc reddened as the images of what Vidal thought blasted his mind. Laughing at himself for the double entendre, he added, “Abbie already has.”

Chapter Seven

Of course Abbie wasn't where he had left her.

He glared at her male secretary. He had to give the man credit, he refused to turn away. Daniel, as the small placard named him, examined Luc as if he were memorizing him for some unknown reason.

"Would you like to fetch a camera?" Luc asked.

"That would be great," Daniel said. His smile lit his pale blue eyes and made them sparkle like aquamarines. "Van will not believe this when I tell him. A picture would be super. Hold a sec." The smaller man surged from his chair then ran down the hallway and disappeared into a small room opposite Abbie's office.

From the looks of the secretary, he was like an optical illusion. What most people would see when they looked at him was a slight, pale, rabbitlike male. On the other hand, a discerning observer would note the strength in the man's body as evidenced by his hands and lower arms, uncovered by the shirt sleeves he'd rolled up, and by the lithe, powerful movements of his buttocks and legs as they ran. Couple the physical power with the mental strength Luc had garnered in the stare-down match they'd been having until a few moments ago, and he could only conclude Daniel was not what he seemed to be.

But what was he?

Daniel returned with a digital camera. "Could you stand over there, under the skylight?"

He indicated the interior wall of windows overlooking the atrium of Abbie's building. Skylights framed the four sets of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the central core.

"Sure." Luc walked over and leaned his hips against the railing reinforcing the windows, so people could not easily be thrown or pushed through the glass. The architects must have met Abbie. He smiled at the thought. She did like to fling people through the air.

"Fabulous," Daniel breathed as he happily snapped pictures. "Van will just have a holy cow when he sees what a gorgeous man our Abbie has attracted."

"So, you think Abbie likes me?" Luc asked.

"No, not yet," Daniel replied. "But I can tell you like her, so it will be a contest to see who wins. I told Van over lunch I was placing my bet on you. He reserved his bet until he'd seen you. He knows what Abbie can do."

Curious as to why Daniel would place his "bet" on an unknown quantity over a known such as Abbie, Luc asked, "You think I can wear her down, huh? Why?"

Daniel returned to sit behind his desk and removed the memory stick from the camera. He placed it into a slot on his computer and typed in some commands. "There, we'll know in a moment if Van agrees." He turned to smile at Luc. "Please, sit. I'll answer your question, then let you know where Abbie's eating lunch today. You'll catch her with plenty of time. Her lunch reservation isn't until thirty minutes from now."

Luc sat in the visitor's chair next to Daniel's desk—and waited.

A beeping noise from the computer indicated mail. Daniel hit a key or two, then read something Luc couldn't quite make out.

“Aha, Van agrees. So there really is no bet. We both agree, so we’ll both win.” He beamed at Luc. “Now, I bet you are wondering about Van and I. Everyone does.” He paused. “We met in the Army. We were Delta Force.”

Luc snorted.

Daniel beamed at him as if he shared the joke. “Yes, I know, it’s hard to believe two gay men could make it in the holiest of holy Special Forces unit. I know I don’t look like a macho-muscle killer, although Van sure as hell does. In camouflage, he’s one scary man. But in your world, haven’t you found appearances can be deceiving?”

“I had already determined you weren’t what you wanted people to believe. But Delta Force was definitely not in my realm of possibilities as to your background. I thought maybe triathlete or something.”

“Oh, that’s Van too. He was an Olympic competitor ... that’s how the Army snagged him. I rowed crew and ran cross-country in college. Army was how I paid for my education, just like a lot of straight men. I can blend when I choose ... and obviously I did so. In the Army, I started out as a clerk until a fateful day when I held off a small group of terrorists and lived to tell about it. Delta snagged me and that was all she wrote.” Daniel added behind his hand almost conspiratorially, “Of course, the Army didn’t acknowledge either Van’s or my sexual persuasion, even if they’d guessed. It was don’t ask, don’t tell.”

“I can imagine.” Luc grinned. “So why here? Why a legal secretary? You could have done anything. Gone into law enforcement, for example.”

“I liked being a clerk, and I was tired of dead bodies and violence,” Daniel said. “Plus, Van had this latent artistic talent and the desire to make women beautiful. Oh, and it hadn’t hurt he was raised in a family of six women. He learned all about hair and beauty by watching his mom and sisters. So, when our tours were up, he decided to become a beautician. It was the furthest thing from being a Delta as he could get. We came to Austin, since he was from around here.”

Luc nodded his head, bemused at the artlessness of the dichotomy. “I can’t wait to meet Van.”

“My Van is a lot like you. Tall, dark, handsome ... and dangerous.” Daniel sobered. “This case for Mr. Golub. Is it hazardous?”

“It could be.”

“Then I’m telling you right now, Mr. Knight, you’d better take good care of our Abbie. Van and I are the closest thing she has to big brothers, and we’ll protect her. So don’t cross us.”

“You do know what she is, right?” Luc was curious about the ferocity of this human.

“Yeah, sure. But she bleeds just like the rest of us. She can die. And she’s not infallible. Look at how close the half-witch-bastard Madoc got to her. He almost killed her. Van and I took turns sitting with Ilana and Vidal for the month Abbie was away from us. We swore then we’d never let anyone else hurt her. So be warned. You’d better protect her from others ... and yourself. Or we will.” Daniel nodded once to punctuate his very real threat.

At that moment, Luc could see this slight man killing him with his bare hands.

“Don’t worry, Daniel,” Luc assured him. “I won’t let any harm come to her while she is under my protection. And I don’t intend to harm her, just love her.”

“Well, good.” Daniel wrote something on a notepad, tore the page off and handed it

to him. “Here’s the address of the club she is eating at. Don’t worry, I’ll phone over and have them add a place for you. Just use Abbie’s name to get in. *Bon appetit.*”

As Luc left the building, he realized Daniel had never really answered all his questions.

* * * *

Abbie smiled at the hostess who sat her. “Thanks, Veronica.” She noticed the extra place setting. “You can remove the additional silverware. I’m eating alone today.”

The hostess frowned. “Well, Daniel just called, not two minutes before you arrived and said to set an extra place. Was he mistaken?”

Luc!

Abbie allowed the warm feeling coursing through her body to escape in a light laugh. “Guess I’ve got a lunch date after all. When he arrives, please send him over.”

“Sure thing, Ms. Gooden.” Veronica swept away in a swirl of silk skirts.

So Luc wasn’t easily put off. But Madoc hadn’t been either. No, she wouldn’t think of the bastard. Too much thought and too many words had been wasted on that toad today. Besides, Luc wasn’t anything like him. He was unique—and just Luc.

“Abigail Gooden, I need to have word with you.”

Speaking of toads, one of the slimiest, bug-eating reptiles she knew called to her.

She turned slightly in her chair and spied Assistant District Attorney Jeffrey Walden the Third, Esquire, sitting at the next table. She’d have to let Veronica know there was an extra twenty bucks in it to never seat her next to her old law school nemesis. The man was more than a low-bellied snake ... he was also a lecherous weasel. He’d always wanted her, but didn’t understand the word no. He still tried to hit on her whenever he met up with her ... which was as infrequently as she could make it.

“Jeff, what an unpleasant surprise,” she said. She ignored Jeff’s indignant gasp and angry glare. The man’s hide was so thick, he’d forget the insult by the next time he saw her.

She nodded to the other man at the table. She’d seen his picture in the papers. He was the lead homicide detective on Jo Beth’s case. “And Detective Adams, isn’t it?”

The other man nodded. He was large—no, huge would be a better word. His suit, unlike Jeff’s, was off-the-rack and rumpled. His hair was military short and dirty blond. His startlingly blue eyes were like sapphires, but his gaze was all cop ... narrowed and scrutinizing. No, wait—there was something else there. A fleeting sense of power. She probed. No, his mind was human: cluttered, full of static and noise. She must have imagined the power.

She didn’t, however, imagine the hint of a smile. The detective was amused at Jeff’s expense. Someone else convinced the assistant DA was not as important as Jeff thought he was. She liked the detective already.

“Abigail, what’s this I hear about your taking on Jurnik Golub as a client?”

Jeff’s mouth pursed and twisted as if saying Jurnik’s name left a nasty taste in his mouth. He’d run on a campaign platform to make Austin clean and devoid of the nastier elements in society. Those unsavory elements were defined by his largest campaign contributor, the Right Reverend Jim Bob Briggs, pastor of the largest fundamentalist Christian church in the state of Texas. If Reverend Jim Bob said something was bad, Jeff worked to eliminate it.

So far they had only targeted gentlemen's clubs and adult video stores, but Abbie knew the regular bars and clubs serving the demon liquor would be next. Then they would target homeless people for being unsightly, and homosexuals for just existing.

Jim Bob and his ilk were zealots; anyone not made in their image was unacceptable.

On the other hand, Jeff was just a hypocrite and Jim Bob's stooge. Old Jeff had been one of the filthiest and most libidinous of her law school classmates. There wasn't a female in their class he hadn't tried to bed, including all the married ones. The two-faced bastard. He was also known to tipple a few. And she'd bet he had a collection of adult videos that would make her hair curl.

She suspected the reverend was just as bad. She'd only met the man once—at a charity benefit for a food kitchen—but it had been enough. His handshake had made her feel as if snakes had crawled all over her. Ugh.

"Jurnik is my client, and you know as well as I do, Jeff, I can't discuss my client's private business with you," she lectured. "So if that's all you want to talk about, then this discussion is at an end. Have a nice lunch, gentlemen."

Abbie smiled at the homicide detective, whose eyes glinted. He was trying hard not to smile at her. He seemed nice. Too nice to be stuck with Jeff.

She turned back to her table and took a sip of water to wash the bad taste of speaking with Jeff out of her mouth.

A hand clamped on her shoulder caused her to gasp. "I'm not through with you yet, Abbie." Jeff sat at her table and started messing with Luc's place setting.

Adams had risen and come to the table. He sat at the other empty chair. "Mr. Walden, this is not the time or place, sir." He sent a glance at Abbie full of apology. "We can arrange to meet with Ms. Gooden and her client at her office at a more convenient time."

Abbie glared at Jeff. "What's this about my client and I meeting with you and the police?"

"Your client is filth, Abbie. His 'club' is a magnet for degenerates, and now killers. I'm going to shut it down if it's the last thing I do. In fact, I strongly suspect your client had something to do with the death of one of his dancers. So, as a friend and classmate, I'm warning you to stay away from Jurnik. I wouldn't want you to get hurt." Jeff reached across the table and grabbed her hand before she could stop him.

"Get your hands off her!"

"Luc!" Abbie almost sighed out loud with relief. His arrival saved her from punching an officer of the court in the mouth. Of course, she'd much rather throw the bastard across the room and through the wall, but that would be hard to explain.

"Who is this," Jeff scanned Luc with a sweeping, haughty glance, "uh, person?"

"I'm her luncheon date." Luc gripped Jeff's shoulder, forcing him to release Abbie's hand, then he picked Jeff up one-handed and set him aside. "I'm also the man who's taking her to dinner at her mother's house this evening. Enough information for you, whoever in the hell you are?" Luc sat in the emptied chair and signaled to the waiter who'd stood off to the side, watching the action with eager eyes. "Waiter, I need a new place setting, please. This one has been contaminated."

"Luc!" whispered Abbie. "Behave. Please?"

She reached out to touch Luc's arm with the hand Jeff had been forced to release. Luc took it gently within both of his and brought it to his lips. He kissed the red marks

left by Jeff's cruel handling.

"Listen, Buster." Jeff still stood where Luc had placed him. "I'm Assistant District Attorney Jeff..."

"Can it, Walden. I know who you are. Abbie mentioned you. Get lost and don't let me catch you bothering her again, or I'll report you to the State Bar Disciplinary Commission for inappropriate conduct toward a peer. Got it?" Luc's eyes left the red marks he'd examined and captured Jeff's confused and angry gaze. "And if I ever catch you touching her again..."

"Mr. Walden, let's go, sir." Adams nodded at Abbie. "I'm sorry, Ms. Gooden. I hope your hand isn't bruised too badly." He frowned at Jeff. "I'm sure Mr. Walden is sorry too."

Jeff ignored him and stalked off without a backward glance.

Adams moved to join him, then paused. "Ms. Gooden, I am very sorry, but I am the lead detective on the murder of Jo Beth Tibbs. Is there a time I could meet with you and your client to ask questions?"

Adams's interruption of Luc's threat before it became actionable was a bold move that could get him in hot water with Jeff and the D.A.'s office. That led her to believe he was a straight, by-the-book kind of guy, a true protector of the people he was sworn to protect. Convinced he would give her an honest answer, she asked, "Do you think my client had something to do with Ms. Tibbs's death, Detective?"

"Not at this time," he replied. He sighed and brushed a hand over his crew cut, causing the hair to stand even more on end, like a punk rocker's. "I have an open mind and a lot of questions. I'm hoping as Jo Beth's boss and friend, Mr. Golub can help me find who did it."

Good enough for her. "I'll talk to Mr. Golub about a convenient time. Could you come to his club in the evening if it were necessary? My client sleeps during the day since he has to be at work most of the night."

"Works for me." Adams handed her a card. "Here's my direct line. Call it any time and leave me a message. I'll be there when you say."

Abbie nodded. "Thank you, Detective. I'll be calling you soon."

"Thank you." He smiled at her; the first full-faced smile since she'd met him. She inhaled. Goddess, his smile should be declared a lethal weapon.

She smiled back.

He winked at her, then nodded to Luc before he followed Jeff out of the club.

"What do you think, Luc?" Abbie turned to him.

He was frowning after Adams.

"He likes you."

"Jeff? Yeah, he wants what he can't have. I had to dissuade him in law school. You saved him from a punch in the nose, you know?" She grinned at him, asking him to share the image of her bopping Jeff on his aristocratic nose.

"Has there ever been a man who hasn't hit on you?" Luc's eyes were narrowed with some strong emotion. "And I wasn't referring to Walden. I meant the cop. He likes you. A lot."

"Well, I liked him too. He seems a straight arrow. He won't drag Jurnik to jail on Jeff's say-so. He'll have to have proof. There are not many police in this town who'd dare to nay-say Jeff."

Luc mumbled something under his breath she didn't catch, then turned to business. "Jo Beth didn't see her killer's face. He wore a hood. But she said he wasn't a stranger. Something about him was intimately familiar, narrowing it down to all the men in her life: Bubba, her high school sweetheart; Biff; Alek; and the Austin police officer she'd repudiated, Randy Sloan."

Abbie played with the tassel on the menu. "Are you sure those are all the men in her life?"

"Well, there was Jurnik, and I think we agree he's innocent?"

She nodded. "But she had the opportunity to meet so many men at the club, couldn't it be another one of her lap dance regulars?"

Luc shrugged. "Her fellow dancers told Jurnik those four were the main men in Jo Beth's life. But I guess there could've been another man who imagined himself in love with her, was rejected, then used the chat room to set up the murder scene."

"Chat room?" Abbie looked up from the menu.

"Yeah, Jo Beth said she met him online. He called himself the Dominator..."

Abbie wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Sick bastard."

"Well, paint little Jo Beth as sick too. She eagerly went along. She admitted Alek had turned her on to kinky sex."

Abbie clenched her teeth and stared back at the menu. The words blurred. No, she wouldn't cry, not in front of Luc. She'd already shown him too much of her inner demons.

"Abbie, not all men are like Madoc, Dub, and Jeff. Some are like me and the detective. Honorable men who treat women well." He pushed the menu down to the table. "Look at me, Abigail Merriweather Gooden."

Abbie considered him and sniffed, holding her head up high. "Yes?"

"Please trust me. I am not going to hurt you, and if I do..."

"Yes?"

"You can throw me through a steel wall, and I promise not to get mad, okay?" He winked at her. "Besides, I'm kind of getting used to you flinging me around like a javelin. I figure it's your way of testing a guy."

Abbie raised an eyebrow and tried hard not to smile. "How so?"

"Well, if the guy keeps coming back for more, you know he likes you despite your bad habits."

"Shut up, Lucan Math ap Mathonwy Knight and order. The waiter has better things to do than wait on us all day." Abbie hid her face in the menu and allowed the tears in her eyes to slide down her face. Smiling through the tears, she sighed. The man may have figured her out after all.

Chapter Eight

Biff Williams's apartment was on the east side of Austin right off old Airport Boulevard. When the new airport had been built on the southeast side, the areas around the old one had deteriorated. Abandoned buildings, crumbling streets, and rundown neighborhoods prevailed along both sides of the busy road many Austinites used to go from north to south and back, avoiding the more heavily trafficked I-35 and Mopac.

Luc parked in front of the section of two-story buildings where Biff's apartment was located. The parking lot was strewn with broken glass, litter, and weeds growing through the cracks in the asphalt. A smell of garbage commingled with the smell of the flowering trees lining the driveway and buildings. No doubt the complex used to be a bustling habitat. Now it looked just one step away from condemnation and the wrecking ball.

Climbing the rusty outer stairway to the landing servicing Biff's unit, Luc opened his senses to the surroundings. A couple in the apartment below Biff's argued about bills and moving out of the "dump" as the female called it. Someone in the four-unit building was cooking a dish with lemongrass and cumin, creating an urge in Luc to order Thai carryout. In the apartment that shared Biff's landing, a woman moaned and a man grunted.

Luc knocked on Biff's door. A television was on, and the odor of fast food French fries and hamburgers drifted through the cracks around the door.

Jake, the bouncer Jurnik and Luc had assigned to watch Biff, opened the door a crack, then wider. "About time someone came to relieve me. Old Biff and I ran out of conversation about three hours ago, and there is just so much daytime television a guy can handle."

Luc laughed. "You can go." He slipped the guy a fifty-dollar bill. "Here, I'm sure Jurnik will pay you overtime, but here's something extra."

"Thanks. Let me grab my jacket." The bouncer stepped back and let Luc enter. "Bye, Biff. Keep your nose clean, ya hear?"

"Sure, whatever, Jake. See you tomorrow night?" Biff reclined in a decrepit avocado green plush lounge that had seen far better days.

"Yep. I'm on the rest of the week." Jake waved his hand then left.

Luc sat gingerly on the edge of a leather sofa cracked and strewn with clothes, both clean and dirty. "So, Biff. Tell me about the ruckus with Bubba. Why does he think you killed Jo Beth?"

"Man, you just come right out and ask the hard questions, don't ya, Knight?" Biff sneered, but underlying the bravado was fear. But of what or whom?

"You afraid of me, Biff?" Luc asked.

Surprise flitted across the bartender's face. "No, should I be? Did Jurnik tell you to rough me up or something?" Biff sat forward and gripped the arms of the chair as if it were a security blanket—or as if he readied himself to run.

"No. Jurnik isn't like that, because if he were, you would be roughed up already."

Biff sat back, the stiffness in his posture gone. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Jurnik never even punched me when he told me to lay off Jo Beth when she was his girl."

"I heard Jurnik threatened to fire you if you didn't leave her alone."

"It was after she dumped the weirdo, Alek. I figured she was free." A frown wrinkled Biff's forehead. "She just plain wasn't interested in me, she said. One of the other girls told her I was rough." He slapped the arm of the chair, dust rising from the violence of his action. "Damn it, Knight, the woman had just come from dating Alek-the-freak with his kinky sexual acts and blood-drinking, why would she be afraid of me? Tell me."

Luc shrugged, attempting to keep his distaste off his face. "Don't know, Biff. Doesn't seem to make sense. Did you ask her?"

"Yeah." He closed his eyes in remembrance. "She said she wasn't that kind of girl anymore. But she must have been, 'cause I heard the cops found a leather outfit and stuff at the scene."

"Stuff?" Luc knew about the leather outfit—it had been in the report and Jo Beth's spirit had worn it. "What kind of stuff?"

"Oh, you know. Bondage stuff: restraints, a hood, clamps, and, I heard, devices for, you know, insertion." Biff winked at him, a cruel twist to his lips. "One of the dildos was a ten-incher and at least three inches around."

"How do you know that?" The police report hadn't mentioned any insertion devices, and Jurnik had made no mention of clamps or dildos being present when he'd removed the tie.

"Well, um, one of the crime scene techs is a regular. He likes to tipple." Biff avoided Luc's eyes. "He told me it was one of the sickest crime scenes he'd ever seen in Austin. All the blood and stuff. Said Jo Beth must have been ripped from stem to stern, um, down there."

Biff was lying. Why? The man couldn't be so stupid to think Luc wouldn't check on his story. Or maybe he was?

"The crime scene report said nothing about clamps and dildos. When Jurnik found her body and called the cops, he didn't see them either."

Luc rose. He walked to Biff and pulled him from his chair, holding him two inches off the ground so they were eye-to-eye. "Did you happen on the scene before Jurnik got there? Or do you know about those things because you killed her? Did Jo Beth tell Bubba she was afraid of you? Is that why he came to beat the shit out of you?"

Biff coughed and struggled to get down. His eyes were wild with fear—or maybe guilt? "No. I didn't kill her. And who in the hell knows what Bubba thinks? The guy is fucking brain-dead from getting hit one too many times on the field."

Unconvinced, Luc tightened his grip and held Biff even higher. "You're not answering my question. How did you know about the bondage equipment which seems not to have made it to the official crime scene?" He shook Biff.

Spittle dripped from Biff's lips as he sputtered. "I ... I told you, a tech guy told me. For Chrissakes, put me down. I can't breathe."

Luc threw Biff back into his chair and stood over him. "You're lying. There is no tech guy." He snorted in disgust. "I'll give you twenty-four hours to come to me with the truth before I go to the cops and tell them to take you in for questioning." He turned to go, then paused. "Don't even think about leaving town. I'll find you."

He stalked from the room. After he slammed the door, he stood outside. Biff's muttered words came through the door. "God, am I fucked."

Luc agreed. Biff was. Whatever the truth was, Luc would find out.

Chapter Nine

After Luc had dropped her off at her office, Abbie tried to finish the piles of work on her desk, but found it a lost cause.

She pushed away from her desk. "This is not gonna happen today."

"Talking to yourself now?" Daniel stood in the open doorway. His eyes were filled with concern. "Take off. I can fudge most of the stuff on your desk. You can sign off on it tomorrow."

"What would I do without you, Daniel?" She smiled at him.

"Heaven only knows." He looked up at the ceiling; a naughty grin shaped his mouth. "I have an idea. Let me call Van. Schedule you for a nice relaxing massage, a hair wash and comb-out, and makeup. Van can have the little boutique that shares his building bring over some delicious little outfits. Impress your mother all to hell. You know, she thinks you are a lost cause when it comes to fashion."

Abbie suspected Daniel had already cooked this scenario up with Van. And she also knew he wanted her to gussy herself up for Luc and not her mother. Not that her mother wouldn't be in shock if Abbie turned up in something other than a lawyer-black suit and sensible pumps.

Well, why in the heck not? Why shouldn't she dress up? It had been a long time since she'd done the day of beauty thing.

"Do it."

"Already done it." Daniel laughed and winked.

"Figured you had. Van just doesn't have holes in his schedule without a bit of conniving." She winked back.

"I never can get anything by you, can I?" Daniel walked to the desk and sorted through the piles, taking what he could do.

"Nope," she agreed. "And you'd better remember it. Don't push. Luc and I are adults. If something happens between us, it will be because we've chosen to do so, not because we've been guilted into it."

"Gotcha, boss." Daniel saluted and left.

She could see the former soldier in his bearing. Well, with a little swish added now and then. She giggled.

* * * *

Van's Salon was in a building that took up a whole square block between Fifth and Sixth Streets and bordered by Rio Grande and Nueces. She passed by it every day when she drove to and from work. It was a super location, but the salon would have done well even if wasn't located on a prime piece of real estate. Van was a genius. His line of beauty products was always on the cutting edge, and the man himself just loved to pamper women—all women. Large and small, old and young, plain and drop-dead gorgeous. If he hadn't been gay and totally committed to Daniel, women would have lined up outside his door to snag him.

Abbie blessed the day Daniel walked into her office and told her she would be a fool

not to hire him. And he'd been right, she would have. Lucky for her a gut instinct had told her this human was special. The fact he brought along Van was just icing. They'd proven to be true and trustworthy friends. They would die for her, and she them. They were her brothers in everything but blood.

"Abbie, darling girl!" Van enveloped her in a hug.

Van looked as if he'd stepped off the cover of *GQ*, if *GQ* used rugged, athletic gods for cover models. He smelled of musk, amber, and lemongrass and was so yummy she almost licked his neck. He put her from him, his hands still on her upper arms.

"You are so pale and drawn. Daniel told me all about the..." he leaned closer to her ear and whispered, "happenings. Murder. Breaking and entering. A luscious new man in your life. No wonder my girl is so washed-out-looking." He released her and spoke louder for the benefit of the people straining to hear their conversation. "Don't worry, my precious, we'll make a new woman of you before you go to your momma's for dinner."

"Van." She shook her head at his outrageousness, most of which was staged. She'd seen him in action—he could be as scary as—well, Luc. "Thanks for working me in."

"Always, dear heart. Always. Marie will do your massage and a little something extra as a surprise." He waved to a young girl standing to the side. "Marie, darling. Come get our Abbie."

Van stroked a soothing hand down her back as he gently pushed her toward the massage therapist. In a whisper he added, "We'll do your hair in my private room. I want to hear about everything—in detail. Daniel and I will help however we can."

Marie held out her hand in welcome. As Abbie took the hand, squeezing it in acknowledgment of the girl's welcoming smile, she wondered what help the boys wanted to cook up. Helping with the murder case? Or helping Luc talk her into his bed?

She knew that's what Luc wanted, but she wasn't ready to cede to the shifter-slash-wizard. Unlike Madoc and the other men who'd flitted through her life, Luc was different ... and far more dangerous.

* * * *

Abbie rested in the body treatment lounge, sipping a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice while she waited for Van to do her hair. The special surprise had been a sea salt scrub and a full body masque prior to her massage. Two bottles of water and this glass of juice should go a long way in replenishing the fluids she'd sweated off during the body masque. Marie had covered her in green slime, then wrapped her like a mummy in plastic wrap. She'd felt, and probably looked, like a giant salsa verde burrito.

A woman entered the lounge, dressed, like her, in Van's trademark raspberry terry cloth robe and turban. The face looked familiar, but Abbie wasn't sure where she'd seen the woman before. Although she knew it had been recently.

The woman settled on a chaise and took a gulp of a Van's house specialty, a wine spritzer Abbie had been offered but passed up. She'd felt severely dehydrated after her treatment and feared the wine would go straight to her head. Obviously, this woman wasn't concerned about getting tipsy.

"Ahhh, so good," the wine-drinker said. She glanced at Abbie. "You should try one of these, they are so-o-o yummy."

"I'm afraid I'd fall on my face on the way to Van's room if I did." Abbie smiled. "I'm Abbie Gooden. Did you get the full body treatment?"

“Mary Jane Campbell. Yeah, the sea salt scrub makes my whole body feel as smooth as a baby’s butt.” She saluted Abbie with her glass and took another sip. “In my line of work, my skin has to be smooth and polished. I come here once a month. Wish I could afford it every week.”

“Line of work? Are you a model?”

Mary Jane laughed, a full-throated sound that made Abbie smile. “Well, sort of. I’m a dancer. You know, exotic?”

“That’s why you look familiar. You dance at Exotica, right?”

“Yeah.” Mary Jane nodded. “Ecstasy Delight, that’s me. You’ve seen me dance?”

“The other night,” Abbie said. “Did you know Jo Beth Tibbs?”

Mary Jane’s forehead creased in a frown. “She and I shared a dressing room. Loved the little gal. Hope they nail the fucking bastard who did her that-a-ways.” She took an angry sip of her drink. “Why? Did you know Jo Beth?”

“No, I’m helping investigate her death. Jurnik is my client. Jo Beth’s family is suing Exotica for creating a dangerous work environment and lack of security.”

“What a bunch of bull crap. Exotica is one of the safest and cleanest places I’ve ever danced.” Mary Jane set the delicate glass down with an audible thunk. “Jurnik is a decent guy. Weird, but decent. He doesn’t let anyone hassle us. You need me to testify, I will.”

“Thanks, we just may need to get a deposition from you and the other girls.”

Mary Jane waved a hand in the air. “Any time, you name it. The other gals will feel the same way. We got us decent working conditions, escorts to and from our cars after work, benefits, and damn good wages on top of the tips. Much better than some of the other skanky clubs in town. You can quote me on that one, sister.”

The last few words came out slurred. Obviously, Mary Jane hadn’t realized the effect alcohol had on a dehydrated body.

Abbie got up, went over to the small wet bar and grabbed a cold bottle of water for the dancer. Opening it, she handed it to the woman.

“Thanks. Not sure why I’m so damn thirsty. Don’t usually get this way after the body wrap.” She gulped down about half the bottle. “As I was saying, anything you need help with, you just come to old Mary Jane. Jo Beth and I were with Jurnik from day one, so I know all.” She winked.

What a coup. Van had always told her his salon was the place to find out almost anything about anybody in Austin. He was right.

Abbie sat next to Mary Jane. “Can you tell me who Jo Beth was seeing around the time she died?”

Mary Jane closed her eyes as if it would help her think—or maybe the room was swirling?

“I can tell you who she wasn’t seeing. Will that help?” Mary Jane opened one eye and glanced at her.

“Yes. Every bit of information helps.”

“Okie-dokie,” Mary Jane said. “She wasn’t seeing Bubba. I don’t know why he came into the club the other night and accused Biff of killing Jo Beth. Biff never dated her. And Bubba was out of the picture. She told me the son of a bitch had ordered her not to work at Exotica.” Mary Jane opened both eyes and glared at Abbie. “Just how in the hell was the girl supposed to pay for college, those books, and her apartment if she didn’t have a decent-paying job? Old Bubba-boy wasn’t going to pay for it, I can tell you that

much.”

This was just the kind of information she needed. “Why? Didn’t Bubba approve of her going to school?”

“Now that, girlfriend, is the understatement of the century. Old Bubba wanted Jo Beth home on the ranch, barefoot and pregnant—and on her knees sucking his nasty old cock every damn night of the week. The man was a selfish pig.”

“Did Bubba abuse her?”

“Does calling her a lamebrain and stupid cunt count as abuse?” Mary Jane said with a sneer curving her mouth.

“Yes, I’d call it verbal abuse. Did he ever hit her? I was there when he attacked Biff, and Bubba looked pretty violent.”

Mary Jane considered the question for a few seconds. “Nope, none of that. In fact, she said he was a fairly boring lover. You know, suck his dick, minimum amount of foreplay, then slam, bam, thank you ma’am and falls asleep. No wonder she took a walk on the wild side with Jurnik after dumping the selfish oaf.”

Abbie settled back into her lounge and stared at the ceiling. “You said earlier Jurnik never bothered the girls. Then how did he and Jo Beth get started?”

“No, I said, if I remember correctly, he didn’t let anyone hassle us.” Mary Jane gestured with her bottle for emphasis. “He never bothered us, just let us know he admired us and such. I’ve never done him, but Jo Beth and the gals that have said he’s a superb lover.”

Abbie bet. After hundreds of years of practice and maybe just as many women, Jurnik probably had all the moves down. Plus, he seemed a gentleman. Abbie blushed pinker than the body treatments had made her.

Goddess, was her mother getting some of his vast experience in the sack? No, she wasn’t going to go there.

“Superb lover, like how?” Abbie mentally smacked herself. It had just slipped out. She really didn’t need to know anything. She’d never be able to look him in the face. “Forget I asked.”

“Sure, sweetie. Anyway, I remember seeing you with Jurnik’s friend, Knight. If I were you I’d stick with a guy like him. Yummy.”

Goddess, now Mary Jane was pushing her in Luc’s direction. Was everyone on his side?

“Thanks. I’ll keep it in mind.” Abbie took a deep breath. “So who else wasn’t Jo Beth dating at the time of her death?”

“How is this going to help in the lawsuit Jo Beth’s thieving relatives are pursuing?” Mary Jane asked.

An astute question. Mary Jane wasn’t as drunk as she seemed.

“If we can show the killer was someone who wasn’t an employee of Jurnik’s,” Abbie explained, “then her death had nothing to do with the club, other than it was the place it happened.”

“Gotcha! Did Jo Beth let the bastard in, ya think?”

“Yes. We know she had to have.”

“Sounds like something she’d do.” Mary Jane shook her head and let out a disgusted-sounding breath. “For all the college classes and such, the girl had no sense when it came to men. Take Alek.”

“We heard she dated him after calling it quits with Jurnik.”

“Well, you heard right. She dated Alek, but then left him, then came back to dance at Exotica. I think she started to date old Bubba again. Silly fool. I told her it was a slap in Jurnik’s face, not that he complained, but she didn’t see it.” Mary Jane pulled the turban off her head and shook out a massive amount of black hair, combing it with her fingers to detangle the waist-length mane. “Give Jurnik extra credit. He hired her back and told her he’d be there if she needed help.”

Abbie wasn’t sure how to broach the next subject delicately, so she just went for it. “You said the girls who’d made love with Jurnik said he was a good lover. So why did Jo Beth go to this Alek who, from what I’ve heard, is into kink?”

Mary Jane swung her legs over the side of the chaise and leaned toward Abbie. “You got me, girl. I asked Jo Beth if she was nuts or something. You know what she said to me?”

Abbie shook her head.

“She said Alek promised to give her eternal life and beauty.” Mary Jane snorted. “Now what in the hell does that mean? From what I’ve heard of him, he’s a freak. Heard tell he drinks animal blood. What kind of sick shit is that?”

“I agree with you, Mary Jane. It sounds sick,” Abbie said.

Unless of course you are a real vampire like Jurnik, but he didn’t share blood with humans. And Mary Jane’s hearsay from Jurnik’s former lovers seemed to bear that out. The dancer’s information jibed with why Jo Beth left Jurnik also—she wanted to be immortal.

“Did Jo Beth say why she broke it off with Alek?”

“Yeah, something about him being a liar.” Mary Jane laughed. “Funny, the man abused her, left marks on her with his sicko games, and she left him because he lied to her. I told her she needed counseling. She said she agreed and had already started seeing someone.”

A counselor? That would be another source of information. With Jo Beth dead, there would be no privilege. “Did she say who this counselor was?”

“No, but I got the impression he was a religious type. Maybe her pastor or something.” Mary Jane frowned and concentrated. “She told me the name, but I can’t recall. I’ll ask the other gals and see if any of them know. Jo Beth talked about everything in her life to anyone who would listen. The girl was an open book. I’ll call you if any of them remember anything. You’re in the book, right?”

“Yes, Gooden Law Firm. Thanks.” Taking a chance Jo Beth’s open-book policy included talking about her online activity, Abbie asked, “Did she talk about a man she’d met on the internet?”

“No one in particular.” Mary Jane stood up and stretched, her robe opening with the movement. Her lithe nudity caused Abbie’s mouth to drop open. “But she was stupid enough to meet them, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Abbie nodded. “Thanks.” As Mary Jane turned to leave, she remembered Luc had mentioned he suspected a cop. “Mary Jane, just one more question. Had Jo Beth ever dated a police officer?”

Mary Jane emitted a strangled laugh. “A cop? You must mean randy Randy Sloan.”

“Randy Randy?” Abbie asked.

“Yeah, you know, he was a horn-dog—lusty, randy. Get it?”

“Oh.” Abbie smiled. “I see ... a play on his name, right?”

“Yeah. She never dated him. Just did lap dances for him and took his money.” Mary Jane sent a sharp-eyed glance her way. “Now, he wanted to *do* her. Hell, he wanted to do any of us. Randy’s kind of slimy and not so good-looking. Not too bright, either.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you would’ve thought he understood the meaning of the word no, wouldn’t you? I mean, he’s a cop. They’re supposed to protect women from grabby men, but Randy was one of the grabbiest. And he didn’t take no for an answer. Jake, one of the bouncers, had to toss old Randy out one night when he’d tried to drag Jo Beth outside with him.”

Abbie eyed Mary Jane sharply. “When was this?”

The dancer closed her eyes. “About two or three days before Jo Beth was killed. God, it gives me the creeps. Do ya think he could’ve done it?”

“I don’t know, but it does make you think.”

“Sure does. I’ll stay away from him until y’all figure this out. You ask Jake about it. I think he overheard what they said to each other.”

“Thanks, Mary Jane. You’ve been a lot of help.”

Mary Jane waved good-bye. “No problem. See ya around. You come to the club, you sit in front of my stage. I’ll dance for you. Make sure you bring the hunk with ya. I’ll do a lap dance for him for nothing.” Her eyes crinkled with suppressed laughter. She wiggled her fingers good-bye as she left through the door to the showers.

Lap dance for Luc. Yeah, he’d probably like it. Heck, if she were a man, she’d lust after Mary Jane herself.

Van entered the room. “There you are, darling. How’d you like the surprise treatments?”

“Loved them. Like the woman who just left said, my skin will be as smooth as a baby’s bottom.”

“Mary Jane said that?”

Abbie nodded.

“The girl is a regular. Sends all the dancers at Exotica over here.” He offered her a hand up. “Let’s go do something with all this luscious hair.”

* * * *

Abbie parked her car in the garage space her mother always kept available just for her.

Swinging her legs out of the car, they almost glowed under the halogen lights of the garage. Underneath her clothes, every square inch of her body radiated the same sense of dewiness. Maybe she would go at least once a month and keep the body work up. She felt healthy and sexy all at the same time. A nice feeling.

Van had done a great job with her hair. He had worked on it until it was a mass of loose-hanging waves and curls. Her makeup was subtle but deepened the color of her eyes, making them look like smoky tourmalines. Her lips were juicy; there was no other word for it. Van had mixed a custom-color matching her lips’ natural hue, but just a tad darker, then covered it all with a super-moist gloss. She looked as if she had just bitten into some berries.

The outfit was something she never would have chosen. It was sheer black, making

her skin, by contrast, look the color of an ivory cultured pearl. While the over-dress was made like a shirtwaist dress, the under-dress was a strapless, body-conscious slip made of black lace. Anyone who cared to look closely enough would have been able to discern her nipples and the black thong panty Van had said was part of the package. On her feet were three-inch strappy sandals. Her only jewelry was a pair of chandelier earrings in jet and clear crystal beads.

She felt very feminine, yet dangerous at the same time. A femme fatale, Van had named her. She smiled. He had all the technicians in the studio come in to see his masterpiece. She didn't have the heart not to wear the outfit. He had looked so happy.

Abbie let herself in through the mudroom connecting the garage to the Lake Austin mansion. Her own house was only a mile or so away from her mother's, but not on the lake. Abbie preferred to look out over the wild canyons and hills; it made her feel as if she were in her own isolated little corner of the world.

Ilana's home was located smack dab in the middle of the most developed part of the lake. There was a small marina for sailboats just down the way where the sailing club was located. Her mother's neighbors liked to see and be seen—so did Ilana, for that matter.

"Mother?" Abbie called out as she walked into the professionally equipped kitchen.

People would be shocked to know her mother did all the cooking for her dinner parties. But then she was a witch, and she had shortcuts most humans would not believe.

Abbie chuckled. It was a sight to see when her mother had things all going on at once. Food often flew around the room, as did utensils. It was never safe to stand in the middle of the kitchen when her mother was rushing to get last minute things done. A person could end up wearing one of the courses.

Things looked calm, which meant dinner was in the warmer, waiting to be served.

"Mother!"

"In here, dear."

Abbie followed her mother's voice to the dining room.

"Just setting the table." Dishes flew around the room and floated gently to the table at seven places.

"Seven guests?"

"Yes: Jurnik, Vidal, Luc, you, me, and my boys."

Good thing she hadn't gone home and changed as her inclination had been. Her mother had invited Van and Daniel, or "her boys" as she called them. Van would have been hurt if Abbie had changed clothes at the last minute.

The extra guests would be a great buffer for Luc's presence. Not that she needed one. She didn't. It would just keep the topics away from personal things.

Once the dishes had all settled, her mother looked at her. "Abigail! You look fabulous. Where did Van find the dress? Too bad you and I aren't the same size, or I'd borrow it for my weekend away with Jurnik."

"Mother!" Abbie didn't want to think of her mother's far more voluptuous figure wearing the body-conscious lace slip. Or about Jurnik removing it.

"None of that tone with me. I could wear that dress just as easily as you. Plus, a man like Jurnik would take one look at me in it, and we'd be dining in." An impish look crossed her mother's face. "I do so like a masterful man."

"Mother!" Way too much information. Abbie knew her face reflected shock at her

parent's admission.

"Knock off the display of scandalized modesty, Abigail. I was married for many years to one of the lustiest men in the world—your father. I miss him. And Jurnik is the closest I've ever come to finding a man who knows how to love a woman. I'm not a nun, and I refuse to pretend to be one, even in front of my own daughter."

"Okay. Sorry." Abbie walked to her mother and gave her a hug. "I know you miss Daddy. And I know you're not a nun. It's just more than I need to know, okay? And Jurnik, well, he's a client, and there's this dead girl ... and all."

Her mother held her away. Her concerned gaze skimmed over Abbie's face. "You're worried about me? Are you afraid Jurnik killed the girl and is lying about it?"

"No. I know he's innocent. And I know you know it too, or you wouldn't have sent him to me. It's just..."

"Ah, then it's because he's a vampire. He doesn't drink blood from me, baby. He's a wonderful and experienced man who makes me feel loved and cherished. Okay?"

"I heard that about him. I just worry anyway. You're my mom. Girls don't like to think about their mothers having sex."

Ilana kissed her on the nose. "Well, stop worrying. And just who was talking about Jurnik's lovemaking?" Her peridot green eyes darkened to yellow-green jade.

"No need to be jealous. One of the dancers told me about Jurnik and Jo Beth, that's all."

"Well, the youngster was before he met me. In fact, I think I met him about a week after they ended the relationship." Her mother winked. "I caught him on the rebound. He told me it was the best thing that ever happened to him." Abbie's mother patted her cheek. "Trust me, he never thought about the little girl sexually again once he had me. I'm good." Her mother laughed throatily. "No, I'm excellent."

"All Storms are excellent lovers." Vidal walked into the room, followed by Luc. "It runs in the genes. Merlin told me your mother enticed and enthralled until he was begging her to take pity on him and be his wife."

Her mother beamed at her brother. "The man never knew what hit him. One day I was just another girl following around the big hunk on campus, hoping for a crumb of attention. The next he was at my feet." She pointed to the tiny appendages. "Must be something in the pheromones we give off. I didn't do anything to attract his attention that the other girls hadn't."

"Once she had his attention, she played hard to get." Vidal winked at Abbie. "That's when the battle ensued. Your mother had the instincts to know Merlin wouldn't appreciate a mealy-mouthed, easily won woman. She'd studied the man from afar for months."

"Oh, I wasn't so far-thinking, brother," she said as she walked around the room, lighting the candles with the snap of her fingers. "I had, however, noticed the easy girls never lasted more than a week in his bed. He'd practically slept his way through one female dorm. Of course the girls were mostly humans. I, as a witch, had the inside track."

"Mother, of course you had the inside track, you could read him," Abbie said.

"No, she couldn't read him," Vidal said. "I can remember her calling me and telling me about this luscious wizard in her chemistry class. She knew he was a preternatural, but she couldn't read him. It frustrated her. But as far as she could tell, he couldn't read her, either."

“Really?” Abbie chanced a glance at Luc, who had an intense look of interest on his face. “But I know you could read him, because you both used to send messages to each other so I wouldn’t know what you were planning.”

“The reading of each other came later in our relationship,” her mother replied.

“Much, much later. Be truthful, Ilana,” scolded Vidal. “They had battles royal while they dated. Your mother held out for marriage before she slept with Merlin. And she won. After they were wed and consummated the marriage, then they read each other like a book.”

“Why do you think that was, Vidal?” Luc asked.

Abbie could tell this was important to him. For that matter, she wanted to know too. Maybe it was why all her other male acquaintances hadn’t interested her. They were too easy to read—well, except for Madoc. And once she knew him, he wasn’t someone she wanted to read.

Vidal smiled and glanced between Abbie and Luc. “I think, at least on my sister’s side, the marriage commitment proved Merlin loved her above all others. She could safely entrust him with her body—and her mind. And I suspect for Merlin it was because now he could relax. He had a beautiful woman who both loved and trusted him enough to give him total and free access to all of her, so his mind opened up in return.”

“So, you think trust is the key element?” Luc asked, his gaze fixed on Abbie, who couldn’t look away from the fire in his eyes.

“Yes, definitely,” Abbie’s mother said. “Trust goes hand in hand with love when a man and a woman are committing themselves to one another.”

Abbie tore her gaze away from Luc’s. She swore she could almost feel his disappointment when she looked away. But no, his shields were still blocking her. Yet, something, some emotion of his had swept over her.

“Hello-o-o, anybody home?” Daniel’s voice hailed them from the front of the house.

Abbie rushed to greet Daniel and Van. Anything to escape Luc’s continued scrutiny.

As she brushed past him to leave the room, he whispered, “You will trust me, Abbie. I won’t accept anything less.”

* * * *

Over dessert and coffee, Abbie finished telling them about her talk with Mary Jane.

Luc smiled at her obvious pride in filling in crucial aspects of the case. Randy Sloan, Alek, and Bubba were all viable suspects, as was Biff. And he agreed the counselor would be a great source of information. Hopefully, Mary Jane could get them a name.

“Mary Jane would know.” Jurnik broke the silence around the table at Abbie’s revelations. “She and Jo Beth were as thick as thieves.”

“Do you think all she told Abbie was true?” Luc asked.

“Yes, I do.” Jurnik sipped the warmed blood Ilana had provided for the vampire in lieu of coffee. “Mary Jane is an honest-to-the-point-of-bluntness type of person.”

“Did Jake ever tell you about the cop bothering Jo Beth?” Luc said.

“No, but I don’t always hear about every incident with the girls if it’s a minor problem.”

“So, Randy could’ve stalked Jo Beth outside the club, and you wouldn’t have known it?” Abbie asked.

Jurnik looked at her for a moment, his black eyes swirling with ancient depths Luc

wouldn't want to explore. He looked lethal. "Before, when we dated, she would tell me if someone bothered her. But later—no, she probably wouldn't have revealed it to me. And if Mary Jane is correct and Jo Beth had started to see a counselor, she had someone else in whom to confide."

"Sounds to me," Van interjected, "like this counselor might be an important person to find. Why don't I invite all the dancers to my salon on a Sunday for a private day of beauty? Abbie, dearest one, you could question them in a relaxed and sharing-confidences type of atmosphere. How does that sound?"

"Van! What a super idea!" Abbie smiled at him. "But it would be so expensive for you."

"I'll pay for it," Jurnik offered, then smiled. "After all, I can afford it, and as a good businessman, I can chalk it up to an employee gift or benefit."

Luc laughed along with everyone else. It was a good idea, plus it would keep Abbie busy, following a line of questioning he couldn't. The cops had already questioned the dancers, but Luc bet the women would open up to Abbie much more easily than they had to the police.

"So this Sunday, then?" Van said. "Is it too short notice, Jurnik? After all, this is Friday evening, and I know you're going away for the weekend."

"No, no problem at all. I'll call Mary Jane and have her tell the girls this evening. Since we aren't open on Sunday evening, it would work out perfectly. Besides, I saw Mary Jane when she came in for work tonight. She absolutely glowed—just like Abbie. My girls will look even more beautiful after the treatments. Do you use pearl shells in your products?"

Van smiled and shook his head. "Thank you for the compliment, but the ingredients in all my products are top secret. If I told y'all, I'd have to kill you."

Laughter rippled throughout the room.

"I questioned Biff this afternoon, Jurnik, and he told me something that has me wondering," Luc said after the laughter had subsided.

"What?" Jurnik raised an eyebrow.

"Biff said a crime scene tech told him there had been other bondage items at the scene of the crime."

"What sort of bondage items?" Jurnik asked, a puzzled expression on his face.

Luc swept the table with a comprehensive glance, testing for strong feelings of repulsion. He didn't want to discuss this topic if Abbie or Ilana would be upset. Yet every single eye was on him and Jurnik. The emotions predominating were eager curiosity and helpfulness.

Satisfied, he continued, "He mentioned clamps and assorted dildos and plugs. One in particular was a dildo ten inches in length and three inches in circumference."

Daniel and Van whistled in unison. Vidal grimaced. Ilana looked, well, Luc didn't want to place a feeling on her expression, but he knew it wasn't repulsion. Abbie had no expression at all, and her shields were impenetrable.

"There were no such things there when I found her. I swear. And I know the crime scene people didn't find anything like that, because after I took off the tie I never left Jo Beth's body," Jurnik said.

"You had the tie in your pocket when the police arrived?" Abbie asked. "Weren't you afraid they would search you and find it? It had to be bloody. I saw the photos. There

was blood everywhere.”

“They would never have searched me. I glamourised them.” Jurnik looked smug. “They ignored me and went about their work. While they did, I hid the tie in my office. I burnt it later in the basement incinerator along with other old clothes of mine. That way, if they ever do decide to check out my building, I can tell them truthfully I had burnt some old clothing.”

“Smart, my dear.” Ilana stroked his arm. “So, this Biff person lied. He was there before Jurnik. He could be the killer.”

“Or he could have found her,” Abbie said, “and decided to frame Jurnik because...”

“Because I had told him to leave her the hell alone or he would be fired,” Jurnik finished Abbie’s sentence.

Luc nodded. “Those are two ways of looking at it for sure. But why take the dildos and clamps and whatever from the scene? Why not leave them for the cops to find?”

Daniel cleared his throat. Everyone turned to look at him. “This Biff, he had a thing for Jo Beth, right?”

“Yeah, I think it’s fair to say,” Luc said.

Jurnik nodded. “I agree.”

“Then he wanted the objects because they had touched her, um, intimately. He didn’t take the clothes, because maybe he didn’t see them. What of the other items left at the scene? Were they in places that might show evidence of him being there?”

Daniel looked at Luc, but Abbie answered, “I think Daniel’s correct. The clothing was found under a table. It was either kicked or tossed there. Since the clothes were in the shadows, Biff might not have seen them.”

“Yes, it was dark in the club when I got there. I turned on the lights. I didn’t even see the clothing until the crime scene techs found it,” Jurnik said.

Abbie nodded and continued, “The bondage hood was still on her head when the police got there. It would have taken time to remove it. It was bloody and would not clean easily—and it was not on an, um, intimate part of her body. Since there was so much blood around her lower body and the surrounding areas, anyone approaching her that way would have left bloody shoe prints. Plus the photos show only the bottle in her vagina. So the other implements were someplace where Biff could take them without leaving evidence of himself.”

“I think the scenario fits the facts,” Luc agreed. “While avoiding the blood pools around her lower body, Biff took anything he could that had touched Jo Beth intimately.”

“Like he never had or would,” supplied Daniel.

Luc nodded. “Exactly. He probably still has the items somewhere. I’m tempted to renege on my twenty-four-hour deadline and tell the police this. See if they can obtain a warrant to search his apartment for them.”

“Better yet, Luc,” Jurnik said, “maybe we should visit his apartment tonight while he’s at work. He came on duty just as I left to come here.”

“Yeah, we’ll do that.”

Luc pushed away from the table, but stopped at Van’s voice.

“The blood all over the floor and tables was from what, then?” he asked. “She wouldn’t—excuse me, ladies—spurt after she was dead. The blood would follow gravity to the lowest point and just pool. I am assuming her upper body was propped on something higher than her lower half?”

“Yes,” Jurnik said, anger and grief coloring his tone of voice. “The killer propped her upper body on a cloth-covered ramp the girls use when they mimic sexual intercourse. Her lower body was positioned around the dancer’s pole, the bottle inserted into her orifice with the pole holding it in place.”

Ilana gasped and paled. Jurnik took her hand and kissed the back of it gently. “Sorry, my dear, that was indelicate of me.”

“No, no, I was just thinking of the poor, poor girl. We need to know these details if we are going to find the killer. These things give us a clue to his nature. We know he is a sadistic beast and thinks nothing of taking a life. Who knows? He might kill again. We must find him before he does this to another poor girl.”

“I agree, Ilana,” Luc said. “Your observations are valid, Van. The tests on the blood weren’t on the preliminary reports. I guess I had assumed all the blood was hers. I need to check into it further. The blood could be the killer’s. He might have cut himself on the bottle when he broke it.”

“Or the blood could be from the private stash in my office,” Jurnik added. “It didn’t register until now, but I am missing a bottle. I thought I had just miscounted, but now I’m not so sure.” He looked at Luc. “Do you think the killer knows I’m a vampire, and used my stock to implicate me even further?”

“Yes, exactly,” Abbie said. “He used your tie, hoping someone other than you would find the body and call the police. Once the law suspected you they would dig until they discovered your true nature. Connect the strange blood with you. If you found the body, he was smart enough to know you would remove the tie, but you wouldn’t realize the blood wasn’t Jo Beth’s until later when the cops confronted you. The blood would point to the blood bank.”

“How would they know the blood was from the blood bank?” Ilana asked.

“Because, my dear, the blood bank treats the blood,” Jurnik said. “They would know. Excellent reasoning, Abbie. I think you’re correct. The killer knows what I am. He’s telling me he will expose me—and he’ll do it through dead bodies like Jo Beth.” Jurnik stood and swept the company with a sorrowful glance. “I am sorry, my friends, I may have endangered you all.”

Ilana tugged at Jurnik’s arm and pulled him down into his chair.

Luc chuckled, remembering what Vidal had said earlier about the Storm women being spunky.

“This murderous cretin does not know what he has taken on,” Ilana said. “We’ll find him and that will be the end of it.”

“Mother, we must do it within the law,” Abbie warned.

Ilana looked down her tip-tilted nose. “My dear daughter, of course, we’ll follow the law as much as possible, but we may have to use magick to trip up the foul devil.”

One abrupt nod of Abbie’s head told Luc she was on board.

Van coughed. “Luc, you and Jurnik will need backup and recon on your little sortie into Biff’s apartment. Daniel and I will be more than happy to supply it.”

Jurnik looked aghast. “Gentlemen, please...”

Luc cut him off before the vampire could insult the two men. “We’ll be happy to have two ex-Delta Force members on our mission.”

Jurnik mouthed “Delta Force” at Ilana, who smiled and nodded her head. “My boys are heroes. You should see their medals. Both of them have Purple Hearts, and my Daniel

has a Congressional Medal of Honor for saving over fifty embassy personnel and civilians.”

If Jurnik could have blushed with embarrassment, Luc was sure he would have. The vampire bowed his head. “Gentlemen, I am deeply honored you wish to help with my cause. Thank you.”

“Before you go, I just want to ask one thing,” Abbie said.

“What is it, little cat?” Luc smiled at her.

“Why kill Jo Beth, if the killer wanted to *out* Jurnik? Why not just reveal his nature?”

“Because it was personal?” Daniel suggested. He blushed when everyone turned to stare at him. “Maybe the person was jealous of Jo Beth’s relationship with Jurnik.”

“The relationship was over,” Ilana said in no uncertain terms. “He was with me.”

“They had no way of knowing that, Mother.” Abbie glanced at everyone. “I just found out about it when Jurnik came to my office two days ago.” She got up and started to pace. “Maybe Jo Beth told this man she really missed Jurnik and wanted to get back together with him.”

“But would she have told the guy Jurnik was a vampire?” Luc asked, his eyes following Abbie’s frenetic pacing. “And if she had told someone, that kind of secret gets out.”

“I agree, she couldn’t have told any of them,” said Abbie. “For some reason, Jo Beth kept your secret. But I’m betting she let something slip, however innocuous, to her killer. He added two and two, then went ballistic. She loved an undead person more than she loved him. So he set up the elaborate ruse through the internet bulletin board, knowing she visited it.”

“Yes, it works for me,” Daniel said. “The psychology is right.”

“So we will still pursue the most obvious men in Jo Beth’s life: Biff, Bubba, Alek, and Randy Sloan,” Luc said. “We’ll ask questions; prod and poke. Abbie will find out as many details as the dancers remember, including the name of the counselor Jo Beth was seeing. Jurnik and I will get the items from Biff’s apartment, if they are still there to be found, and use them to make Biff confess his role. Although I’m beginning to think he is in the clear and just a ghoul.”

“I agree,” Abbie said. “If Biff had been the killer, he would have taken away all the items, blood or no blood. After all, Jo Beth told you the killer brought the items with him. Eventually, the bondage equipment could be traced to him. Once we know what all the items are, maybe we can find out if they were bought locally ... and by whom.”

“Once we have a list, I can trace them,” Daniel said. “Van and I can make the rounds.”

Van nodded, a slight smile on his face. “Might be fun.” Daniel blushed beet red and jabbed him in the ribs.

“What about questioning Alek, Randy, and Bubba?” Abbie asked.

“I’ll tackle them,” Luc said.

He didn’t like the responding frown on Abbie’s face. He figured he’d eventually hear about how partners were supposed to share duties and trust each other. He looked forward to the lecture, but he refused to allow Abbie near any man who might be a crazed, sadistic killer. He would not budge on that point—ever.

Chapter Ten

Jurnik's presence was unnecessary to the expedition.

Instead, he volunteered to go back to Exotica and give the breaking-and-entering team a call on Van's cell if Biff left work early for some reason.

Vidal joined the foursome to lend his witch abilities in opening the locked doors. Luc was sure he could have done it, as opening locked items was something Luc had learned his first summer as an apprentice wizard to his maternal uncle, but the older man wanted to help.

As they made the lengthy drive from the west side of Austin to the east, Vidal handed Luc a necklace. "Here, my boy, wear this."

Luc took the leather-corded necklace; hanging from it was an amulet. It was an engraved metal locket studded with cabochon amethysts. The engravings were in ancient Celtic, the metal hand-worked bronze. Inside the locket was a raven-colored lock of hair. He inhaled sharply when he realized what it was.

He looked up. Vidal and Daniel stared solemnly at him. Van's hard gaze caught his in the rearview mirror.

"Is this what I think it is?"

"If you think it is a talisman that will connect you to Abbie," Vidal said with a sober smile, "then yes."

"But why?" The three men in Abbie's life had just handed him an open line to her emotions and well-being. While he might not be able to get past the mental shields into her thoughts and memories, he would effectively know what she felt just by touching this talisman. And, if needed, he could use it to find her wherever she was in the world.

"We're trusting you to take care of her," Vidal said. The other two men nodded. "My Abbie-girl is courageous and strong, but she is a woman—and mortal. Her magick owes more to her white-witch ancestry than to her father's wizardry. So she is less likely to use deadly force when threatened. Her hesitancy could kill her. This will allow you to recognize when she needs the more deadly kind of help. You can transport, I assume?"

"Yes, I learned during the second summer with my wizard-uncle." Luc shook his head in stunned disbelief. "I'm humbled and honored. Know this, on my oath, I will protect her with my life. And I vow I will not knowingly ever give her cause to fear or distrust me."

"So mote it be," Vidal said.

Luc placed the precious gift around his neck. The power was strong and true, amplified by the crystalline energy of the amethysts. Touching it, a frisson of energy tingled against his fingers. He closed his eyes and savored the clarity of the connection.

He smiled.

"What?" Daniel asked, his voice filled with eager curiosity.

"She's happy. I sense Pidge, her familiar, is on her lap. I even feel the cat's contented purring. She's safe and at home." He released the charm. "I was worried earlier when she asked about questioning the other suspects. I feared she would hop off to Alek's club while our backs were turned."

"I told her I'd beat her behind if she did," Vidal said, laughing. "I got the same

message from her body language. I know my niece very well. And, so it seems, do you. The amulet will be a good backup in reading her emotions. Later, when she decides to trust you, you won't need it." Vidal paused, then added, "Like Merlin and Ilana, after consummation, you and Abbie will communicate on all levels."

Luc wondered at the faith Vidal had in him and Abbie to find their way to complete trust and a loving relationship.

"Yo, men. Listen up. We're here." Van turned off the SUV headlights and pulled into the apartment complex. "We'll park here and hike in."

He parked near a building in the front of the complex containing the laundry rooms. Because of the lateness of the hour, no one was in the building. There were enough other vehicles, probably overflow from one of the neighboring units, so Van's SUV wouldn't look too obvious.

"What's the plan, Luc?" Daniel asked.

The men smeared blacking on their faces to cut down on any glare. The Goddess had given them a moonless night, and the landlords had given them a break by not replacing the burnt-out bulbs in the security lights, but it never hurt to be extra-conscientious.

"Van and Daniel, I want one of you on the front of Biff's building at the bottom of the stairs, and the other man at the turn into the building's parking area. If you see anything, signal me."

Both men nodded.

"We'll yip like a coyote," Van suggested.

Luc smiled. "Works for me." He turned to Vidal. "You're with me. You open the door, then stand guard just inside. I'll search."

"Let's do it. I'll take the entrance to the parking area," Van said.

The four men ran toward Biff's apartment. Luc was pleased to note not one of his companions made a sound.

When they reached the entry to the parking lot for Biff's unit, Van stopped and took up a position under one of the flowering trees lining the entry. When the others reached the unit's stairs, Daniel melded into the shadows underneath them. Vidal and Luc soundlessly climbed the stairs.

No life signs were present in the apartment. Luc stepped aside and allowed Vidal to work his magick on the lock. In less time than it took to think about it, the door was open.

The two men entered. Vidal closed the door, then leaned against it.

Luc stood motionless in the center of the apartment, allowing his senses to attenuate with the various feedback they received. He closed his eyes, cutting off his night vision, then filtered out all ambient noise. He wanted to narrow his sensory input to his sense of smell. Inch by inch he swept the apartment, scanning for the smell of blood and sex he recalled from the scene of the crime. He quickly eliminated the kitchen and the main room. Opening his eyes, he moved toward the bedroom and entered it.

As soon as Luc entered he knew the items were located in this room. The smell was overwhelming—a mixture of metallic and musk, blood and sexual fluids. His nose led him to the closet and a secret place under the floor.

In the space, there was a locked box. The lock on the box was easily handled. Inside he found two dildos, the one Biff had described and another, one anal plug, and several sets of clamps. The items had touched Jo Beth—her scent all but screamed at him. The other items in the box indicated Biff had serious issues Luc didn't even want to think

about.

Luc pulled on the latex gloves Ilana had pressed upon him before he left her house. She admitted to watching a lot of cable forensic shows. He chuckled. She'd even given him a large plastic bag to hold "the evidence" as she called the sexual devices; she'd marked it with date and case name. There was something to be said for cable television.

He pulled out the objects that had been used on Jo Beth and left the others. He relocked the box, put it back into the hole, and replaced the flooring. If, as he suspected, Biff visited his stash each night when he got home, the man would go nuts trying to figure out who had taken the items.

Luc smiled evilly. The bartender would know soon enough. Luc intended to question him later today.

Retracing his steps, he entered the living area.

"Did you find them?" Vidal whispered.

"Yes. Let's go."

Luc followed Vidal out and down the stairs. As they reached the bottom, Daniel silently joined them. His eyes lit with pale blue fire at the sight of the loaded baggie. A Cheshire cat grin showed on the secretary's face in the darkness. With no words spoken, the three headed for the car. Van had anticipated them and reached the vehicle first. The doors were unlocked and the motor idling when they reached it.

After the last man was in, Van drove out of the complex with lights off until they hit Airport Boulevard.

"So, where did he hide them?" Daniel asked as he examined the items through the clear plastic. "That is one nasty dildo."

"In the bedroom closet under the floor."

Van snorted in laughter. "Figures. The first place a cop would look."

Luc chuckled in agreement. "I should have gone straight into the bedroom, but had given Biff the benefit of a doubt for having more brains."

"He hid the devices with his porno stash, right?" Daniel asked. "Bet he masturbated on them. Could you tell?"

"Yeah. He did, the sick bastard. But Jo Beth's essence and blood is still there. DNA will prove it," Luc said. "Because of Ilana's foresight in giving me gloves and a bag, I haven't contaminated them any further. It's not a legal chain of evidence, but it's better than nothing. Hopefully we won't need to go to the cops with these things. My gut is telling me Biff's just a sick voyeur who saw an opportunity to feed his perversions and wanted to avoid the cops."

"And if he's the killer?" Vidal asked.

"Then I'll take him and the bag in and give it to the police," Luc said. "I'll figure a way to tell them how I found the items."

"Should be a good story," Daniel said, laughing. "Van and I'll work on something. We were always good at cover stories in our wet work."

A feeling of contentment, for lack of a better word, filled Luc. These men were good friends to Abbie—and now to him. He fingered the amulet. The warmth he felt from the male camaraderie turned to bone-chilling fear.

"Abbie!" Luc shouted. "Vidal, we need to get to Abbie's house. Something's wrong."

"What is it?" Van asked. His voice was cold and lethally calm.

“Not sure. Meet us there.”

Luc didn't wait for Vidal, but clutched the amulet and visualized Abbie's bedroom. Muttering a few Celtic words, he was gone.

* * * *

Pidge yowled. It was a sound that could raise the dead and more than enough to startle Abbie from a deep slumber to shaking awareness. She blinked the sleep from her eyes and glanced around the room. Nothing looked disturbed. She reached out with her senses and checked the wards she'd placed on the house before turning in. They were active and, also, undisturbed. She'd learned her lesson the night before ... her bedroom window was closed and shielded as well.

But Pidge's fur stood on end, and the cat's low-pitched whine vibrated loudly through the room, causing her to reach out further with her extra-senses.

Something was out there in the darkness.

She shuddered with revulsion at the thick wall of malevolence blocking her. The only thing standing between her and the strength of the evil lurking in her yard was her protective ward. And even it had begun to weaken under the onslaught of pure malice beating against it.

Several simultaneous explosions rocked her house, and fire erupted everywhere at once.

Fire! The element traditionally used to rid the world of witches, and a witch's greatest fear.

Her heart pounding with a surge of adrenaline, Abbie leapt from her bed. As she gathered Pidge into her arms, a green-tinged smoke filled the room. Its foul toxic odor weakened her, wracked her body with violent coughing. She ran to her bathroom and wet two hand towels, wrapping one around Pidge and holding one to her own face.

She returned to the bedroom. Fire and smoke had trapped them in the room. The only way out was through the window, and she knew the perpetrator waited for her to do just that.

Abbie had to find a way to lessen the severity of the fire and smoke, giving her time to find another way out of the house. She chanted a rain spell. But nothing happened. She tried again. Still nothing. Whoever had set fire to her house had also blocked her spell. The person watching and waiting for her to fall into his clutches had to be a witch practicing from the dark side of the craft.

She had two choices: stay here and burn or transport out. She hadn't transported in a long time. Even if she managed it, could she transport far enough away from the house to avoid the malevolent being lying in wait for her?

Another bout of coughing wracked her body, even with the protection of the moistened towel. The poison in the smoke was already in her system. A wave of nausea overcame her and she vomited. The longer she stayed, the weaker she would grow.

There was no choice. She had to get out now. Take her chances with the being on the outside. Inside held only death.

“Hold on Pidge. This could get bumpy.” She coughed, a weak sickly sound. Her throat and lungs burned. Her vision blurred. The poison was winning. They had to escape—and now.

As she began to chant the long-unused words for transporting, a gust of wind cleared

the smoke from around her. A large dark form reached for her. She backed away, too weak to fight or run. She fell to the bed. Strong, masculine arms scooped her up and held her against a body that smelled like a breath of fresh night air underlaid with a familiar masculine musk.

“Luc?” she croaked out in a feeble voice. She coughed weakly and rested her aching head against his chest.

“Hold on, little cat. Vidal, take Pidge.”

Her uncle emerged from the smoke that had, like a vaporous kudzu, taken over the room once more. He took Pidge from her arms, allowing her to loop her arms around Luc’s neck.

Then Luc and her uncle chanted the words to the transport spell.

The room began to swirl around them like a hurricane of atoms. Just as the room began to dematerialize into a blur of colored light, she cried a warning, “There’s someone out there.”

Time stood still for a millisecond. Or for eternity? Abbie could not say. She only knew she was alive and safe in the shelter of Luc’s arms when the cool night air touched her burning cheeks. She inhaled deeply; the scent of cedar trees and Luc filled her nose and lungs. She coughed weakly and fought a wave of nausea. The poison was still in her system, and for all intents and purposes, she was weak as a baby.

Luc murmured soothing nonsense words against her hair as he rocked her in his arms.

Then she recalled the evil presence her senses had hit earlier, and she jerked in his arms and gasped. “Where are we? Can you see him?”

“You’re safe, darling. We materialized on the ridge just behind and below your house,” Luc whispered. “Are you okay? Do I need to get you to a doctor?”

“I’m fine, just weak and shaky. There was something extra in the smoke.”

“It was hemp,” Vidal said. “Whoever set your house on fire wanted you too weak to escape. It’s a strong anesthetic.”

“That’s why I feel so sick to my stomach and lightheaded, then,” she said. “I’ll be fine. I feel better already, just tired.”

“Vidal, stay here with them,” Luc said, conjuring up a fluffy blanket upon which to lay her. “I want to go after the bastard. He’s still waiting to see if she manages to escape.”

Vidal nodded, looking back toward the house. “You’re right. I sense him. He is a dark witch. Be careful.”

Luc placed another blanket over Abbie and Pidge, who’d crawled into her arms. “I’ll be fine. In fact, I’m looking forward to the encounter.” He leaned over and pressed a firm, hard kiss to Abbie’s lips.

Her body tingled from the warmth and caring he’d imparted into the brief touch. Then he was gone, and she shivered at the loss of his heat.

Luc muttered a few words and his clothes vanished, then he shimmered and changed into his panther form. He leapt up the escarpment toward the glowing light indicating her house was fully engulfed in raging flames.

“Uncle Vidal, whoever is up there is evil. He blocked my water spell.” Cursing the weakness in her voice, she took several cleansing breaths. “Luc’ll need backup.”

Vidal nodded, the grim look on his face mixed with concern for her. “Abbie-girl, are you sure you’ll be okay by yourself?”

“Go. I’ll follow when I catch my breath.”

Vidal frowned. “Luc’s right. You just stay here. We’ll be back to get you. Van and Daniel will be here soon, I’ll send them to you. They’re armed. Let them take care of you. Consider this an order.”

Abbie closed her eyes. “I’ll be fine. Just go help Luc.”

Vidal’s exit caused a mini-whirlwind. Abbie opened her eyes and had to smile. She could have sworn her uncle had let loose with a Gaelic battle cry as he levitated to the top of the ridge.

Pidge cuddled into Abbie’s body. The cat trembled and made several coughlike purrs.

“The smoke was nasty stuff, wasn’t it, Pidge? Cough it out.”

She sought the area around her for something to counteract the effect of the hemp. When she found a suitable herb, it only took a few words and the snap of her fingers and the leaves of the cayenne plant appeared in her hand. Calling water from the air around her, she filled a depression in the rocky surface near her. She crumbled the cayenne leaves and stems into the water and stirred it with her finger. Then she cupped her hands, scooped the concoction into them and drank it. The stimulant qualities of the cayenne plant had been well-documented for hundreds of years.

Her mouth burned from the strong concoction, but already her immune system used the stimulating effects of the pepper plant to counteract the sedative properties of the hemp.

“Drink it, Pidge. It will help.” She lifted a finger moistened with the mixture to Pidge’s mouth, moistening it. The cat licked her lips, meowed pitifully, but dutifully lapped until the burning liquid was off her lips.

Seeking and finding wild mint, Abbie called it to her, then chewed the tender leaves to calm her upset stomach and the burning sensation of the stimulant. She crumbled the rest of the leaves for Pidge, who nudged them with her nose, then delicately chose some to eat.

The effects of the concoctions had already helped Abbie feel more like herself. She took several more deep breaths and was happy to see she didn’t cough. She was as good to go as she was going to get. She couldn’t just sit there and wait for Luc and Vidal. She had to see what was happening, and help if she could. But what she really wanted was to see who had done this to her. And why.

She stood and addressed Pidge, who nipped at grass growing from a crevice in the hillside. “Stay here until the coast is clear. This fight is for witches and wizards.”

Pidge blinked at her, then curled up under a mesquite bush and began grooming herself.

Abbie stretched, testing her muscles. She was ready to fight. She chanted a levitation spell and rose slowly, keeping her eyes open for anything or anyone out of place. At the top, she saw no one, so she landed. As she headed for the conflagration that used to be her house, she kept to the shadows.

One of her neighbors must have called the Austin Fire Department. The activity around her house was chaotic, but yet managed to have a choreographed rhythm to it.

Abbie halted and hid behind a live oak about a hundred yards from her house. From what she could see, the AFD had made the decision to contain the fire, to keep it from spreading to the brush around her house. They were losing the battle. Leaping flames

licked at the trees to the north of her house. If they caught on fire, the whole mesquite-covered ridge between her and her closest neighbors would burn in a wildfire. She couldn't allow it to happen.

Abbie called up the water spell that had failed earlier. This time it worked. A clap of thunder sounded, vibrating the very earth upon which she stood. The formerly cloudless sky filled with rain clouds and a steady, heavy rain began to fall. To forestall the possibility of lightning from the storm striking the tinder-dry mesquite, she dissipated the electricity in the clouds.

Satisfied she had done all she could do to help the firemen in their work, she dropped her mental shields and sought Luc and Vidal. She found them. They were tracking about five hundred yards south of her house in the thickest part of the woods. She headed their way.

As Abbie ran, she stayed alert to her surroundings. From what she could tell, Luc and Vidal were attempting to herd the dark witch back toward the road leading to her cul-de-sac. She decided to parallel their flanking maneuver, containing the witch between them.

Just as she entered a thicket of live oak and mesquite undergrowth a warning sounded in her head.

Someone was behind her. Somehow the hunted had become the hunter.

Luc! Uncle Vidal! To me!

Whirling around, a dark image rose up out of the shadows. It ran toward her at a high rate of speed.

It was a puma.

Just as the puma leapt for her, she threw up an invisible wall of protective energy. The animal sensed the obstruction and managed to turn in midair to avoid crashing into it, then quickly recovered and circled back at her. She shifted the shield while she regathered the dissipated electrical energy from the storm she'd created. She formed a ball of pure electricity and flung it at the creature.

The puma shrieked, an almost human sound, as the pulsing ball of energy hit him on his wet flank. The animal shimmered and started to change into something more human. But before it could fully form as human, it shimmered and shifted into a small hunting bird.

The shifter's new *animé*, a falcon, flew at her with its claws extended, reaching for her.

Abbie whirled away just as the bird swooped to grab her. Through a rent in her protective shield, the bird's claws left scratches on her thinly clad shoulders.

As the falcon circled above her to begin another approach, a golden hawk flew from the woods and attacked the smaller bird in mid-swoop, knocking it to the ground. The smaller bird lay in the deep grasses, its breast heaving.

The golden hawk landed, then shimmered. Luc's tensed naked body glistened in the rain.

His narrowed glance never left the other shifter as he called to her. "Are you all right, little cat?"

"Yes. He's a shifter. A puma, and it looks like a small falcon."

"I saw. Stay back. I'm going to perform a binding spell, to keep him from shifting again."

Luc's wizard training must be more advanced than he'd let on. Not too many wizards, or witches for that matter, could prevent an adult shifter from transmutation.

He stood over the stunned bird and chanted: "Goddess, mother of us all, lock this creature of the earth in his chosen form." He waved his arm over the bird in an overlapping pattern of three circles—the triskele, the Druids' representation of the sacred number three, the most powerful number in nature. A small green flash of light encased the downed shifter.

A sound of running feet and a flash of something caught Abbie's eye. She whirled to meet it head on, her hands upraised to repel when she recognized her uncle.

He halted next to her and addressed Luc. "The other one got away. Sorry, my boy. I didn't see him, but he was definitely a dark witch. His magick was unfamiliar to me."

Luc swore. "At least we have this one. Maybe he can tell us who the other one was."

Abbie's senses signaled the approach of two more persons. Her senses could not read them. They were human.

"Someone's coming, Luc," Abbie warned.

The three of them turned to meet the new threat.

Van and Daniel ran into the small copse. They stopped and stared at the scene in front of them. Pidge leapt from her perch in Daniel's arms and strolled to the downed bird. She reached a tentative paw and slapped at the green field of binding energy around the bird. She pulled her paw back as if she'd been shocked. Then she sat on her haunches and cleaned the paw as if Luc's spell had dirtied it.

Luc chuckled and bent to pick the offended cat up. "Sorry, Pidge, you can't play with the bird—yet. Maybe we'll let you later if we don't find out what we need to know."

"What happened?" Van asked as calmly as if he walked upon scenes of high-level magick and naked shifters every day of the week.

"Someone tried to burn my house down with me in it. A witch who got away and this shifter waited outside in case I escaped."

Abbie shivered. The combination of the hemp smoke, cool night air, her rainstorm, and inadequate clothing were taking their toll. Even the stimulant she'd taken could not fight the effects of all those debilitating elements.

Luc gathered her into his arms just as her knees gave way. She moaned. Blessed heat. The man was like a furnace. She cuddled into his body as if she could absorb his heat for her own.

His arms tightened, and he seemed to grow even warmer, if it were possible. She struggled to keep her eyes open and stay alert. They were not out of danger yet.

"He's still out there watching us," she whispered.

"Hell and damnation!" Luc swore. "Abbie, stay with me, little one. What's wrong with her?" Abbie sensed he asked her uncle.

Cool fingers touched her forehead. "She's got a fever." Her uncle cupped her face within his hands. After a few moments of silence, he added, "The hemp may have had another herb mixed with it. I can't tell."

Abbie spoke, her voice echoing in her head like it came from the bottom of a well, "I found some cayenne. Pidge and I drank a decoction of it. And mint."

"Will it hurt her?" Luc's voice was concerned and farther away than before. But how could that be? He held her. She could feel his heat, smell his musky scent. Both soothed

her. She was so sleepy.

“Vidal! She’s slipping away. I can feel it.” Did she hear panic in Luc’s voice? No, it couldn’t be. He wasn’t afraid of anything.

“She’s okay, my boy. Her body just needs a healing sleep.”

Movement rocked her as she sensed Luc walking.

She needed to tell him something. “Mother’s house...”

“No, you’re coming home with me.” Luc’s voice brooked no dissent.

“No, not that ... mother ... safe ... house...”

“I think she wants to make sure her mother is safe,” Daniel’s voice floated across her rapidly dwindling consciousness.

“Yes-s-s,” she managed to whisper.

Luc whispered to her, “Remember, your mother is with Jurnik at his club. Then they’ll leave for San Antonio.”

Okay, her fuzzy mind remembered now. Her mother and Jurnik were safe. The evil that had come for her this night had wanted her mother also. Abbie, first. Her mother next. Then Vidal. But why? Her mind was wrapped in cotton wool, she couldn’t think. She was so tired.

The males around her argued. She couldn’t tell about what.

“We can drive her there and stay with her until you return, Luc,” Daniel offered. Van agreed. “We’re armed.”

Where was Luc going? He was the only anchor she had to reality. Why was he abandoning her? She would be cold again. She shivered at the thought.

“She’s cold,” Van’s voice said closely to her ear. “Here, darling, let’s cover you up with this. Old Van will carry you to the car. My God, your feet are all cut up, princess.”

“S-okay. Don’t ... hurt...” The effort to talk exhausted her further.

“I’ve got her, Luc.”

The world within Luc’s arms fell away and a falling sensation was halted when Van’s scent surrounded her. He was warm, too, but not as warm as Luc.

“Bye, little cat. Dream of me. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Firm hot lips brushed a kiss over her forehead. He muttered several words in Celtic that had the rhythm of a spell. A feeling like pure sunshine and fresh air suffused her body. “Don’t fight the sleep, darling.”

A warm sensation flowed over her like a healing wave, then she knew no more.

Chapter Eleven

Vidal and Luc had responded to Abbie's concern for her mother and her mother's house by sealing the property up tighter than a sarcophagus. Vidal left a magickal warning for his sister on the gate: upon their return from their weekend away, she and Jurnik were to go to her Hill Country home near Dripping Springs and stay there until Vidal gave her the all-clear.

Vidal had sensed a magickal signature in the woods near Abbie's house. Like Abbie, he feared whoever had targeted Abbie would go after the rest of her family next. He put out a general warning to the Storms and Goodens to be on the alert. Both men had concluded the attacks against Abbie were personal, and had nothing to do with Jurnik's case. None of the human suspects had the contacts in the preternatural world to hire magickal hit men. Or, at least, they didn't think they did.

The shifter who'd attacked as a puma and then a falcon, like the human Dub before him, had been hired anonymously. He denied all knowledge of the other preternatural present in the woods that night. Luc and Vidal believed him.

They took the young shifter to his parents' house. They were shocked and dismayed their son had almost caused the death of a witch. The boy's parents promised to punish him and planned to send him to his uncle in a remote part of Manitoba for the rest of the year. They promised the boy would never trouble Abbie or anyone in the Gooden and Storm family again.

Luc was happy with the assurances. He vaguely knew the young man's father, a city judge in a small town near the Travis-Williamson County border. Even good families had problems with adolescents who'd fallen in with a bad crowd. Luc and Vidal did learn the young shifter had been known to hang out at Alek's Goth club. Another reason to visit the man soon.

Luc drove back to his house. Vidal had left him to go to his own home and ward it against attack.

The driveway to Luc's hillside home followed the top of a ridge between the lake and a valley. No one could approach without being seen, except by air. Abbie would be far safer here than with any of her relatives.

Besides, he wanted her here. Two attempts in as many nights was two too many.

He let himself into his house overlooking Lake Travis. Van met him in the front hallway. The hairdresser looked extremely comfortable holding a Glock in his right hand. Luc smiled at the knife strapped to the man's leg.

He caught a glimpse of Daniel, standing slightly behind and to the left of Van, in a traditional buddy-flanking position, his gun was pointed at Luc's head. The laser sight, he bet, was aimed right between his eyes. If he'd been a stranger, he'd have been dead, twice over.

"Glad you guys are on our side." Luc walked past Van into the great room. The doors to the master bedroom suite were closed. He smelled Abbie's essence in the air. He touched the amulet at his neck. She was resting peacefully.

In his bed.

Twin feelings of satisfaction and lust filled him until he thought he would burst.

“She never woke up. What did you do to her?” Daniel asked.

Luc didn’t sense any resentment from the man, just curiosity.

“I laid a healing sleep spell on her. She inhaled a lot of toxic smoke. The healing sleep will allow her immune system to repair and stave off any side effects from the smoke and exposure.”

Van smiled. “Good, we don’t want her sick. She is one horrible patient, trust us. We put her in a T-shirt of yours; her nightshirt was all ripped. Found some salve in your medicine cabinet and treated the claw marks and her torn feet. Then we tucked her in your bed. We figured we’d save you the job of moving her from the guest bedroom to yours.”

Daniel snorted back a laugh. “I’d love to be a little bird in the room when she wakes up in your bed. I hope you have a thick hide. She likes to keep men at arm’s length.”

“She like that before Madoc attacked her?” Luc asked, curious for any information about Abbie and previous relationships with men.

Daniel shrugged. “She didn’t date much before Madoc. Too busy establishing her practice, fighting her mother and the family’s attempts to bring her back within their idea of what was best for her.”

“No men?” Luc was surprised. He’d figured she would have had them lining up outside her door.

“Oh, yeah, she dated humans,” Van chimed in. “Daniel and I found out about the witch stuff when one of the guys her mother tried to foist on her got a bug up his nose about us. He thought we were her boy toys à la *ménage à trois*.”

“He sent someone to change us into snakes. Abbie reversed the spell then tracked the bastard down and turned him into a jackass.”

Van smiled at the memory. “As far as we know, we’re the only humans who know about y’all.”

“Would the jackass have been Mark Madoc?” Luc asked.

“Yeah, the bastard,” spat Daniel. “His family made a real big stink. It took them a month to reverse the spell. Abbie was really pissed off when she spelled him. But she wouldn’t let us hunt him down and shoot him. We could’ve saved her and everyone a lot of grief if we had.”

Van nodded his head in a short abrupt movement. “Yeah.” His hand unconsciously reached for his knife, then stopped. “Both Daniel and I wanted to gut him for what he did to Abbie. There wasn’t a spot on her that wasn’t bruised or cut. The man was an animal and should have been hunted down like one. Banishment was too easy on him.”

“He’ll be as good as dead when I find him,” Luc muttered matter-of-factly. “I’ve got my Welsh relatives looking for him.”

Van and Daniel both smiled with satisfaction at his words.

“When you go hunting,” Van stroked the handle of his Glock, now seated in its shoulder holster, “invite us along, okay? We’ll catch your six. Neither of us would mind coming out of retirement to put him down.”

Daniel nodded, a wicked gleam in his pale eyes.

“I’ll do that. But first we need to deal with the current situations. I don’t know if the person behind the attacks on Abbie is Jo Beth’s killer, or if we’re looking for two separate parties. So we’ll need to be ever-vigilant until we solve the dilemma. You guys on board for the duration?”

Both men nodded. Luc offered his hand. Van grasped it, then Daniel laid his on top of it, sealing the deal.

After Daniel and Van left to go home to grab a few hours rest, Luc locked up the house and set his wards. He didn't usually bother with the protection shields, but he didn't normally have such a precious treasure in his house.

He turned out the lights in the front of the house, then entered his bedroom. The room was in varying shades of darkness. He snapped his fingers, and the candelabra on the fireplace mantel burst into flames, casting warm yellow light across the figure curled under the duvet on his bed.

Pidge's green eyes found him and blinked in greeting. She lay curled up on the pillow next to Abbie's head.

Luc-shifter, my Abbie won't wake up. Is she okay?

She's in a healing sleep.

Okay. Good. Food?

Luc chuckled. The cat had its priorities straight at least. Abbie, then food.

I left tuna on the counter. Water next to it.

Thank you, Luc-shifter. Are we going to live with you now our home is no longer?

Yes.

The familiar jumped from the bed and rubbed along Luc's legs, stopping long enough to allow him to scratch her ears, then bounded for the kitchen and food.

Luc left the bedroom door open a crack in case the cat wanted back in.

He strode toward the bed, shedding clothes along the way.

Throwing back the duvet, he slipped in alongside Abbie. He lay on his side and pulled her curvy rear against his core. He curled around her, anchored her to him with an arm, then fell asleep with his nose nestled in her silky black hair.

* * * *

Pale light tickled Abbie's eyelids. Blinking sleepily, she opened her eyes. The view from where she lay was of a large lake, lined with trees and the occasional house clinging to the rocky hillsides leading down to the body of water. It had to be Lake Travis; it was the largest lake in the area with such rugged terrain.

She snuggled into the warmth surrounding her. Her rear end touched a long hard object. An object which twitched when she moved against it.

"Have mercy, little cat," a husky, sleep-warmed voice whispered against her ear. "If you keep wiggling your cute little butt, I can't be held responsible for what happens next. I'm a mere man, you know, and you are temptation defined."

"Luc?" Abbie turned within the circle of his arms. What was she doing in Luc's bed? What was he doing in it with her?

She vaguely recalled being handed over to Van, and Luc kissing her. Then nothing, until now. She hated being out of control for even a second, let alone hours.

His golden eyes glowed at her like twin suns, warming her and coaxing an answering smile. "How are you feeling?" He kissed the tip of her nose. "You're peeling a little right there. Looks like the visit to Van's tomorrow will be needed." He swept a hand down her back and pulled her toward him.

She winced. A small pain-filled moan escaped her lips before she could control it.

Luc frowned as he pulled the covers down to their waists. Before she knew what he

was doing, he had stripped whatever she wore off. His hands slid over her shoulders, cursing at the claw marks. His hands continued on down her arms, then over to her chest, breasts, and on down below.

“Luc! Don’t...” Her protest was cut off by a full-body shiver as his touch sent a frisson of lust to her loins. It was as if he were claiming her, inch-by-inch.

“You’ve got some burns, not serious. Probably from the heat of the fire.” He swore under his breath. She couldn’t catch the words but knew they were vile by the tone in his voice.

Now, he retraced the path his fingers had taken with his lips. She moaned at the sensations he created. She swore her toes curled with desire. No one had ever made her feel this way before. Every other man’s touch was one of a clumsy boy compared to Luc’s mastery.

“Luc, please.”

“Please what, little cat? Please stroke and pet you until you beg me to make you mine?” he whispered right before he took her left nipple into his mouth. Releasing it, he said, “Or, please stop? Which is it, Abbie?” He nipped at the nipple, then kissed it before licking his way down her ribs to her navel.

With a surge of strength she didn’t know she possessed, she shoved him onto his back and straddled him. She braced herself on his shoulders with her hands and proceeded to kiss the tip of his nose, then mimicked on his body the route he’d taken on hers.

“Have mercy, little cat,” he groaned. His sharp inhalation when she licked his flat nipples told her he, too, felt the sensations to his very toes and back again.

“Does this answer...” she licked his six-pack abs, “...your question?” She punctuated her query with a stab of her tongue in his navel, then took a path further south to the long hard rod which had poked her awake and started it all.

A growl reminiscent of a hungry beast warned her she had her answer. Let the petting and stroking begin in earnest.

Abbie felt herself fly, then settle under Luc’s aroused body. His assault to her senses went to the next level: lips, teeth, fingers, and cock all worked like a finely tuned machine to bring her to the peak, only to hold off, then start the path of her arousal once more.

“Luc, Luc, please ... please.” She twisted from side to side, then arched her back, trying to tempt him into her body where she needed him.

“Open your mind to me, Abbie. My shields are down. Everything I am is here for you to see, to share, to feel. Do you trust me enough to do the same?”

Goddess, why did he have to make me think? A montage of scenes whirled through Abbie’s mind’s eye. Madoc, large and vicious. Her, naked and helpless. Pain. Fear. Then, finally, a dark part of her casting her attacker into the side of a solid limestone cliff.

She stared pleadingly into his honey-gold eyes. In them, she saw reflections of his recent fear for her, as well as relief, love, trust and respect. Mirrored in their depths, she found her chance to be complete for once in her life.

She’d be a fool to turn it away, wouldn’t she? So why was she hesitating? What was she still afraid of? Memories couldn’t hurt her.

“Abbie, it’s okay,” he soothed with his voice and hands. “It’s okay, darling. I shouldn’t push you like this. You’re not ready. But please, please don’t be afraid of me. I

would never hurt you.” He kissed her eyebrows, her nose, her cheeks, her lips, then nuzzled her neck. “Please don’t look so frightened.”

“I’m sorry, Luc. I’m not a tease, really...”

His finger stroked her lips as he shushed her. “No, it’s okay. Don’t worry. You’ve been through a lot. I never meant to pressure you, little cat. Chalk it up to waking up next to a goddess in my bed and getting carried away. Just let me hold you, okay?”

He turned to his side and pulled her back against him, spoon fashion. Somehow he’d controlled his arousal. It no longer prodded her, but lay warm and comforting against her buttocks.

She sighed. He wasn’t like Madoc. He could never be like Madoc. The memories replayed once more, causing her to stiffen.

“What’s wrong, darling? Are you still scared? Do you hurt?” The concerned tone of his voice calmed and reminded her Luc had not pressed her with his superior strength as he so easily could have.

He was not Madoc. He was like no other man she’d ever met.

“No, it’s nothing you’re doing. I like being held like this—it’s something I remembered...”

Luc swore vilely at himself. “Aw, sweetheart, I’m sorry—I’d never force you, you know that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said, stroking his arm. “I could never confuse you with him. It’s just sometimes at the oddest times, I remember.”

“When you’re ready, we’ll bury those bad memories with good ones, I promise.” He kissed her ear, then nuzzled her hair.

She sighed and enjoyed the comfort he so easily gave.

“What happened after you left me with Van and Daniel? Where did you and Uncle Vidal go?”

“We took the shifter—Thor’s hammer, Abbie, he was only sixteen years old—to his parent’s house. They’re sending him away to northern Canada as punishment. They’ve vowed he’ll never harm you or yours. They took a blood oath,” Luc finished.

“Do you trust them?” Abbie asked, her body stiffening with a transitory fear.

“Yes, I know the family line. The father is a judge, for Goddess’s sake. You are safe from them.”

She let out a gusty sigh and relaxed into Luc’s strength.

“Vidal and I warded your mother’s house and left her a message to take Jurnik and go to Dripping Springs until we give the all-clear. Van, Daniel, Vidal, and I will make sure no one gets close to you. Do you trust us to protect you?”

Abbie shivered at the memory of what had happened last night. The malevolence the intruder had exuded, the strength of his dark magick. Yet she wasn’t really afraid, just apprehensive. She wasn’t the same girl who had nearly been raped three years ago. She was stronger in her person and her magick. Besides, in this new game, she held the trump card ... she had Luc. With Luc by her side, she could face down a whole coven of dark witches and come out on top unscathed.

She answered Luc the only way she could. “I trust you, Luc. You’ll protect me. And you’ll help me to protect myself.”

His resulting “thank you” sounded almost like a benediction.

Chapter Twelve

“We’re so in trouble,” whined Daniel for the hundredth time since they’d left Luc’s house.

After Luc left Abbie with only Daniel as company, she’d insisted on a shopping trip to the clothing boutiques in the building that housed Van’s salon and spa. After all, she couldn’t wear Luc’s T-shirts forever.

“We are not in trouble,” Abbie replied for at least the fiftieth time. The other forty-nine times she’d just ignored him; after all, she was driving. Traffic in the west hills was murder, made so by the combination of the twisting, turning narrow roads and lunatic drivers in the Texas State Vehicle—the pickup truck. In Abbie’s opinion, pickup trucks were glorified tanks, took up too much of the road, guzzled gas, and seemed to strip the drivers of said vehicle of all their common sense.

Abbie whipped Daniel’s VW Beetle into his allotted space in the underground parking garage of Van’s building and shut off the engine. She didn’t need to give back his keys, since he’d refused to give them to her. Of course, she hadn’t let it stop her in appropriating his vehicle. A little electrical spark to the ignition and the engine had started right up and off she’d gone. She smiled at the image of Daniel running to catch her and jumping into the passenger side as she coasted down Luc’s driveway.

“We’re so in trouble.” Daniel hopped out of the car and shut the door with a firm thud. “Van will agree with me. You’ll see.”

He turned toward the elevator, then stopped when he realized she wasn’t following him. He tapped his foot with his hands on his hips. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I’m here to shop for a new wardrobe, remember?” She forced herself not to smile at his parental I’m-so-pissed-at-you body language. “I’ll be at Bitsy’s, buying clothes.”

“Arrgh!” Daniel threw up his hands and stalked to the elevator. As he jabbed at the “up” button, he muttered for the fifty-second time, “We’re so in trouble.”

“I heard you,” she yelled at him, then broke out giggling.

Her last image of Daniel was his scowling face as the elevator doors closed.

Half an hour later, she came out of a dressing room, wearing a pair of low-ride skin-tight studded jeans, a black bustier, and a leather jacket. She turned to examine the back view in the three-way mirror.

Van and Daniel, looking exactly like a dad-and-mom team, were reflected in the mirrors. “So, is it me?” She twirled to give them the full effect of the low-cut cleavage of the bustier.

“You’re not thinking of wearing that anywhere, are you?” Daniel admonished. His gaze swept over her, stopping at all the skin showing along the way. The revealing top didn’t quite meet the top of the jeans ... by about five inches.

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact,” she replied, turning to check the rear view didn’t show anything it wasn’t supposed to—the thong with the rhinestone band spelling “SEXY” was supposed to show, “I’m wearing it out tonight.”

“With Luc?” Van asked.

“Well, and you two.” She smiled over her shoulder. “My Delta Force bodyguards.”

Van held a quickly whispered conversation with Daniel, who visibly disagreed by

gesticulating wildly with his hands in the general direction of where Luc's house was. Van grabbed one of Daniel's arms and stroked it in a placating and persuasive manner. Finally, with a hunch of his shoulders, Daniel caved to whatever plan his partner had put forth.

"Abbie, once you're done shopping for clothes, come to the salon and we'll do your hair, nails, and makeup. How does that sound?" Van asked. The "or you'll go back to Luc's house" was unspoken, but it was there in the narrowing of his eyes and Daniel's crossed arms.

"It sounds like you want to keep an eye on me." She laughed at the consternation on their faces. "It's okay, guys. We're not in trouble, as long as I stay with you, right?"

"The jury is out on that one, counselor," Daniel snarled. "Luc might have another thought or two about you leaving the safety of his house."

Van rubbed a conciliating hand down Daniel's very stiff back. "It's okay, D. She'll be safe under our watchful eyes until closing. Then we can go back to Luc's and explain the dire need for clothes and beauty. What can he do?"

Daniel turned and glared at his partner. "He can turn us into slimy little creatures, that's what he can do. Vidal told me Luc is a wizard. A macho-bad-ass one, to boot."

"D, it's only shopping and hair and stuff, it's not like she's out and about tracking down suspects or anything."

"Yeah right."

Four hours later, Abbie was buffed, polished, and combed out to perfection. The dark red lipstick the makeup artist used matched the color the manicurist had lacquered on her fingernails and toes. She wiggled the lower appendages and the toe ring she had added to her second toe twinkled at her. The four-inch heels of the black strappy sandals made her feel all-powerful.

"Time to go home," Daniel all but chirped with his pleasure. The massage Van had offered his partner had gone a long way to relaxing her uptight secretary.

"Don't think so, Mom," she chirped right back.

"What do you mean?" Daniel turned to Van who'd entered the room at her pronouncement. "What does she mean?"

"I'm going clubbing. Wanna come?"

Van choked; she wasn't sure if he choked back laughter at Daniel's answering shriek or if it was fear.

"Luc will kill us. Your uncle will turn us into turnips. Please, let's go back to Luc's," pleaded Daniel.

Abbie frowned. "My uncle will not turn you into turnips; weasels maybe, or some other living creature, but no Storm witch has ever turned a human into a vegetable, especially a root vegetable."

Van laughed. "You little devil."

Daniel snorted, then pursed his lips as if he'd just eaten turnips. Then he snapped, "Stop laughing! Van, you're just encouraging her. She's teasing." He glared at her. "You are teasing, aren't you?"

At her nod, he added, a sly look entering his eyes, "So not funny, Abbie. You're beginning to sound a lot like your mother when you say such things."

"Not!" Abbie fumed. "I'm not my mother. She's ... she's..."

"A Storm witch?" Daniel suggested, a sly grin on his face.

“Yes, and I’m only half-Storm,” she said.

Daniel leaned over to Van and said, “The other half is related to all the wizards in England that Luc isn’t. Which makes her worse than her mother.”

“Fink!” Abbie threw at him.

She had to give him credit; Daniel knew her buttons too well. She was not like her mother. And never would be if she could help it. Whiz-bang magick was not her thing at all.

Daniel’s attempt to distract her from her plans wasn’t going to work. She was a part of the investigation, more so now than before. Jo Beth’s killer could be the man who’d ordered the attacks on her.

“Stop it,” she said. “You’re just trying to change the subject. I’m going to Alek’s club with or without you ... and you know there is nothing you can do to stop me. So, are you two coming or not?”

“Coming,” they said in unison.

* * * *

After leaving Abbie safely ensconced in his house, he’d driven to Biff’s apartment, reaching it around noon. No one was home. Biff should have left the club at around three or three thirty in the morning. He should have been asleep in his bed, but he wasn’t.

So Luc waited, parked right outside Biff’s unit.

This gave him a lot of time to think about what Abbie had unconsciously revealed to him this morning. He wasn’t sure she realized her shields had been down since the falcon-shifter’s attack. But they had.

Luc had stayed out of her mind most of the night, respecting her privacy. But when they’d started to make love this morning and she’d hesitated, he hadn’t been able to resist. He’d had to know why one minute she’d been hot and pleading, and the next, stone cold.

In her mind, she’d flashed back to the night Madoc had beat her. Luc’s libido had waned instantly, and if he could have kicked himself in the balls for causing those memories, he would have.

He never wanted her to associate what the two of them did in bed with what the bastard had done to her. He could wait until she trusted him not to hurt her.

The relief that had coursed through her when he’d immediately backed off swept through him also. He’d done the right thing, and had made an important inroad to gaining Abbie’s trust. It was a baby step, but he would work with it.

Of course, he planned to take several more steps later tonight. As she’d withdrawn from him physically, her mental shields had snapped back into place. But the brief glimpse he’d gotten told him she was definitely attracted to him. He made plans to woo her at every instance until she was totally his. In and out of bed.

Luc closed his eyes for a short nap until Biff wandered home.

The sound of a car pulling into the lot in front of Biff’s unit awakened him. Biff stepped out of a police car. He flipped the cop the bird after the black-and-white unit had pulled away.

It was almost six o’clock. Luc had been asleep for almost six hours, sitting in a sun-baked truck. He was sweaty and could use a drink of water.

Well, old Biff could just offer him a drink ... and some answers.

Luc stepped out of his truck and slammed the door. The noise caught Biff's attention. The man stood at the bottom of the stairs leading to his apartment and squinted at Luc's approach.

"What do you want, Knight?" Biff asked. His attitude was what an objective observer might classify as cross, and if the person were being generous, tired. Since Luc wasn't at all objective or generous, he'd call it being fucking disagreeable and a smart ass.

The man did look like hell, though. He had bruises on his face, a split lip, and a shiner just now turning the color of red and black raspberries.

"What happened to you? Or should I say who?"

"Bubba, that's who. Crazy bastard."

Biff turned his back on Luc and climbed the stairs, exhaustion dogging his every step.

Luc followed. The way Biff moved, he was afraid the man might fall backward. It's not as if he cared one way or another if Biff might hurt himself, but he'd never get answers to his questions if the bartender fell and broke his thick red neck.

Biff reached his door and attempted to unlock it, but his hands were so bruised he couldn't manage. "Hell, just what I fucking needed." He turned and found Luc right behind him.

"Need some help there, Biff?"

"What the fuck. Here," Biff thrust the key into Luc's hands, "you're here, you might as well be useful."

Luc took the key and let them into the apartment. The air conditioning had kept up admirably with the day's heat, and the cool air felt like heaven on his sweaty body.

Biff headed for the small kitchen off his living room. He jerked open the refrigerator, pulled out a beer, twisted off the cap, and took a long draw from the bottle. He sighed, smacked his lips, then winced at the too-abrupt movement. "I needed that. Want one?" He held up the bottle.

"Nah, water would be fine." Luc approached the counter separating the main room from the small kitchen and slid onto a bar stool obviously appropriated from Exotica. The "E" embroidered into the leather back was a dead giveaway. "So what happened? And why did the cops bring you home?"

Biff shoved a bottle of water at Luc, then leaned against the counter. He took another sip of his beer, then held the ice-cold bottle to his damaged eye. "Bubba was waiting for me after I got off work. When I got into my car, he followed me out of the lot, then rammed me with his truck. Tried to shove me over a highway guardrail into a gully. The bastard was trying to kill me!"

"Why would he do that?" Luc took a drink of water and almost groaned, the water felt so good going down.

"He's got a bee up his butt. Thinks I killed Jo Beth 'cause she refused to go out with me." Biff finished off the bottle and tossed it in the recycling bin, then grabbed another out of the refrigerator. "I didn't. Never woulda hurt a hair on her head. I loved her, dammit!"

This was news. Luc had always thought Biff just wanted a woman for the bedsheet tango and another new notch on his headboard.

"More like you just wanted to fuck her," Luc tested his theory aloud.

Biff took an angry swig of the beer, then glared at Luc. "I loved her, man! Ever since high school. But all she could see was ole' shithead Bubba. When she left him, I thought I had a chance, but she wouldn't give me the time of day."

Okay, so Biff loved her, but the concept still didn't mean he couldn't have killed her. There were a lot of men in prison who'd killed in the name of love.

"Why not?" he asked, then thought, *Other than the fact you're a big lout just like Bubba and maybe Jo Beth had gotten tired of the sexist pig approach to male-female relationships.*

"She was going to college. Wanted to make something of herself, she said. I was just a piece of her past that would hold her back," spat Biff. "Hell, man, I could respect it if she thought she was too good for me. But then she went and dated Jurnik. The man's old, for Chrissakes, but at least he was a gentleman. I knew Jurnik would tire of her, so I waited. Then she went to Alek and I saw red. The man's a fucking freak."

"So is that why you killed her?"

Biff slammed the bottle on the counter and said, "I. Did. Not. Kill her! Why would I? I loved her, man. I fucking loved her."

Biff started to cry. Luc was almost convinced Biff was telling the truth. Or, better yet, the cynical part of him suggested, Biff had convinced himself it was the truth. "So why didn't you call the cops when you found her body?" Luc asked. "Why did you mess with the crime scene?"

Biff stiffened as if he were a small rodent and Luc a cat lying in wait for him. Any movement might draw Luc in for the kill. "How did you know?"

"You slipped up yesterday, Biff. You described things at the crime scene that weren't even there. Things I found."

"No!" Biff cast a scared look at Luc as he shoved past the bar and ran for his bedroom.

Luc followed at a slower pace to give the man the time to open his secret hidey-hole.

"They're gone!" Biff wailed. "All I have left of her is gone." He turned and looked at Luc from his kneeling position in the closet. "What did you do with them?"

"They're safe."

"You gonna take them to the cops?" A resigned look swept over Biff's damaged face. "I didn't kill her, you know. I just wanted something that'd touched her."

Luc's distaste must have shown on his face, because Biff added, "Yeah, I know it sounds sick, but I had nothing of hers. Then I found her like ... like... She was so bloody..." Biff stopped to swallow and the tears welling in his eyes started to slide down his face once more. "I was afraid to touch her. She was dead. I could tell. No one could be alive after losing so much blood. So what in the hell difference did it make if I called the cops then, or someone else did it later?"

Belligerence had chased away the grief in Biff's eyes.

Luc shook his head in disbelief at the other man's sheer stupidity. Hell, eight-year-olds knew better. "Preservation of the crime scene, Biff. You destroyed evidence which might have helped the cops get the guy who did do it. I do believe you committed a felony."

Biff shifted to sit on his butt, then leaned wearily against the closet door. "I just wanted something that had touched her, with her smell on it. Is that so bad?" He closed his eyes, a slight smile twisted his swollen lips. "She used to come up to the bar after a

dance set for a drink, and I could smell, ya know, her sex. Dancing for men turned her on.” He opened his bleary eyes and lifted his hands, pleading with Luc for understanding. “I never had a chance with her. But at least, this way, I had a little something of her, even if it was just fluid on some sex toys.”

What people did to themselves sometimes amazed Luc. He believed Biff’s story. Every sick piece of it.

“Were the sexual devices covered in blood?”

“No.” Biff shook his head. “They were back up the stage aways as if someone had tossed them there.” He stared up at Luc with disbelief and pain in his eyes. “Why would someone kill her that way? Was it rough sex gone bad?”

“Why would you think that?” Luc asked.

“One evening...” Biff paused and stared down at his hands, picking nervously at the loose skin on his bruised knuckles. “One evening I caught her in the back hallway, and she let me kiss her. I was getting into it, ya know, but she shoved me away. Called me a wimp. Said she liked her men and her sex rough. Told me I should go find me some little sweet thing, get married, and have a passel of kids.”

“Was this before or after she dated Jurnik?” Luc asked.

“I know what you’re getting at, Knight,” Biff said. “It was after. Jurnik isn’t a freak, but Alek is. I hear old Alek is into all sorts of kink. In fact, Jo Beth told me some of what went on while she dated him. I think she liked to gross me out.”

“Did Bubba ever treat her rough?”

“Not so I heard. He was more into mental abuse, you know?”

“Yeah. But he beat you up. Couldn’t he have lost it and beat Jo Beth because she left him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Last night he yelled all sorts of crazy shit at me. Accused me of corrupting his sweet Jo Beth.” Biff sat for a second or two, his brow wrinkled in thought. “Shit! He must not have known about Alek. He thought I was the one doing all those kinky things to her. Hell, I’d have beat the shit out of me, too, if it were true.” He stared up at Luc, his gaze pleading. “Will you tell Bubba I wasn’t the one? He’d never believe me.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell him, Biff.”

Luc needed to talk to the ex-boyfriend and soon. He could have killed Jo Beth in a rage, then in remorse and guilt shifted the blame in his mind to his old pal Biff. But Alek had just moved up to number one on his most-favored-to-be-the-killer list. Yeah, he’d talk to Alek tonight.

“Will I have to go to the cops and tell them what I did? What I took?” Fear lurked in Biff’s gaze.

Luc thought about it for a moment. If Biff came forward now, he might remember the tie and tell the cops. That would indicate Jurnik had tampered with evidence. No, it would be better to hold off until the real murderer was in hand, then if needed, Biff could come forward with the items he’d taken from the scene. Right now, the items were tucked away in the marked baggie in a warded and locked safe in Luc’s basement.

“No. If the cops come and ask you point-blank about tampering with the scene, call me. Ms. Gooden, as the club’s attorney, and I will come forward with the items.”

Biff didn’t even question the legality of it, just nodded his head in understanding, probably relieved he didn’t have to deal with the cops again for the moment.

When Luc left, Biff sat on the floor and stared into space as if he had no reason left to live. And with Jo Beth dead, maybe he didn't.

* * * *

After leaving Biff's at half-past six, Luc called to check on Abbie. When he got no answer, he almost went out of his mind until he remembered the talisman. One touch told him she was safe and relaxed. He caught a niggling of a thought. She was at the spa.

He phoned Van and confirmed Abbie was having spa treatments and had been under Daniel's and his protective eyes since he'd left her at ten this morning. Van promised him Daniel and he would not leave Abbie alone.

Assured Abbie was still out of harm's way, he grabbed a bite to eat and made plans to visit GothCity later that evening.

Chapter Thirteen

Alek's club, GothCity, was housed in an old auto parts superstore right off Highway 183 on the way to Bergstrom, the new airport serving Austin. The sign at the entrance to the large potholed parking lot flashed in neon colors and touted: "Sex, Girls, and Kink." In smaller letters it listed XXX-rated video booths, adult novelties, and a bookstore. One-stop shopping for the sexually addicted.

Since the club was just outside Austin city limits, the zoning ordinances as to politically correct signage did not apply. Or, if they did, Alek had ignored the laws—or had paid off someone on the zoning commission. Abbie would put her money on the latter.

Van and Daniel had changed clothing to blend into the presumed dress code at an adult nightclub advertising itself to the college-age crowd as a decadent Goth/metal venue. Van looked hunky and definitely dangerous in skin-tight black leather pants and a white cotton muscle shirt which allowed his special forces tattoos to show. Only Abbie and Daniel knew Van had strapped a knife to his calf and a small gun in a holster stuffed in the top of his shit-kicker black boots. Daniel looked more dangerous than she ever thought he could. He was dressed head-to-toe in black jeans, black tank top, and black leather jacket. His jacket hid the vicious-looking dragon tattoo which covered most of his right shoulder. This wasn't your Puff kind of dragon, but more the flaming kind. She hadn't gotten too close a look at it, but thought the creature might have a body of some sort in its mouth. Daniel's jacket also hid the shoulder harness holding a very lethal-looking flat black metal gun. Her normally mild-mannered secretary had caressed and lovingly called it Bert before shoving it into the well-worn holster. To finish the look of what the well-dressed urban commando wore for a night on the town, he also wore a knife, black of course, strapped to his leg.

The guys were loaded for bear. Abbie felt they were overreacting until she got a look at the crowd hanging around the entrance to the club. A crowd which materialized as soon as they parked Van's Hummer.

"They have a line for this place?" Abbie turned to look at her escorts, who hovered close to her body, one on each hip. Both men had identical fierce scowls on their faces. The glowering was directed at the two men who'd broken from the gathering at the door and now walked to intercept the trio.

"Abbie! Get behind Daniel—now!" ordered Van with a snarl in his voice that sent chills down her spine. Not only did he look dangerous, he sounded like it.

"What..." she faltered, but shut up at the look on Van's face. It could have cut steel. His eyes narrowed to fierce slits; an unholy smile twisted his lips. The muscles in his arms flexed, causing the snake tattoo to undulate. Yet she sensed his body was relaxed and ready to attack if needed. This must have been what he'd looked like when confronting the enemy.

The enemy probably had shit their pants at the sight of him.

Obviously, Daniel felt she wasn't moving fast enough, because he grabbed and shoved her behind him. His lithely muscled body stood on alert like that of a dog sniffing prey. A low growl sounded at the back of his throat. She could practically smell the

testosterone coursing through him. His body shook with the adrenaline surge to the perceived danger. He was ready for action, deadly action. It was a side of Daniel she'd never seen, and would never forget.

"Hey, watcha go and hide the sweet piece of ass for?" the shorter of the two approaching men said.

Unlike Daniel and Van, this guy did not look good in his all-black outfit. He was built like a fireplug and his personal hygiene was about two steps lower than a bottom-feeder. His body odor announced itself to Abbie almost seven feet away, overwhelming Daniel's clean-smelling aroma. Greasy, stringy black hair lay loosely around a face displaying a penchant for self-mutilation. His eyebrows, nose, and lips all sported steel rings and studs.

The guy probably thought he was God's gift to Goth-womankind. Yeah, only if the woman was a Neanderthal and didn't know any better. And even then, Abbie wasn't sure the guy would end up with the girl at the end of a caveman's day.

The taller man had a Cassius-lean-and-hungry-look about him. His face was pale and pockmarked, his overbite accented with fake fangs. Yet he wasn't a real vampire ... his mind was human and unreadable to Abbie. But the look in his pale eyes told her he was hungry—for whatever prey was weak and stupid enough to let him close.

Abbie was neither, but the point was moot. Van and Daniel weren't going to let either of the Goth-Lotharios near her.

"No magick, Abbie," whispered Daniel. "Let us handle these two. This is a pissing contest."

Pissing contest?

Abbie glanced beyond her bodyguards' shoulders and concluded Daniel had read the situation correctly. The people massed around the door had formed a cordon made up of dominant-looking men and women with what had to be their submissives. Abbie hadn't seen so much leather and metal since a law enforcement convention she'd attended as a guest speaker.

To enter the club, it seemed, a newcomer had to pass a test. Abbie didn't like the feel of the whole situation, but she wanted inside. In there was a piece of the puzzle as to who Jo Beth Tibbs was, a key to her mind in the last days before her death.

Instinctively, Abbie knew acting weak in front of these people was not an option she would choose. Tugging on Daniel's jacket, she hissed, "I can handle the skinny one without magick. Toss him to me. I'm not going in there as a powerless little woman."

"Abbie," Daniel snarled in a tone he would never think of using in the office, "just do as you're told."

The point became moot when the two men approaching from the front attacked Van and Daniel while a third man grabbed Abbie from behind.

All the martial arts classes Abbie had taken after Madoc's attempted rape came into play. Leaning into her attacker, she shifted the leverage and used his weight to her advantage. He flew across her hip and crumpled to the ground in an ungainly heap. Her heel followed him to the ground and rammed his testicles into the crumbled asphalt and stones of the parking lot. His howl of pain echoed around the vast lot like an air-raid siren.

A chorus of empathetic moans came from the assembled male dominants.

Abbie quickly stepped away from the downed man, not wanting to give him a chance

to grab her ankle and pull her down. Sweeping the immediate area for potential attackers, she found none. Only then did she glance over to see how Van and Daniel were doing.

Both men had their attackers on the ground. Van had his knife positioned at the jugular of the short squat man, his knee planted on the man's diaphragm. Daniel had the heel of one custom-made designer boot on the skinny man's privates. The man didn't move, probably well aware his future ability to procreate—perish the thought—was endangered.

"Enough," a smooth rumbling baritone voice called from the doorway of the club.

The owner of the deep voice was a tall, leanly muscled man with long dark hair (clean unlike Mr. Squat's), and fangs (fake, like Mr. Skinny's). He strolled toward them as if he were taking a Sunday morning constitutional.

"Let them up, please," he said. "We apologize for the reception, but newcomers must declare their roles at the door." Chalk one up to her instincts. "We name you three as dominants and welcome you to GothCity." He bowed slightly from the waist, then straightened and waved a hand toward the door. "Please enter, check your inhibitions at the door, and enjoy."

Abbie walked a wide path around her victim, who still gasped, groaned, and moaned while clasp protectively his balls. She joined Van, who put his arm around her bare waist underneath her jacket and pulled her to him. Daniel hugged her other side, his hand on her arm. She smiled at them. Their faces remained impassive and, for lack of a better description, mean.

Composing her features along sterner lines, she asked, "Who offers this invitation?"

"I'm Alek. This is my domain."

So, this was the leader of the Austin Goth underground and the wannabe-vampires, or vampyres, as they called themselves. His grin looked wolfish, probably the effect of the lengthened canines. She searched his mind and found it human. No indications at all he was a real vampire or had were-blood.

"Do you always send masochists out to test the unwary?" Van asked in a sneering tone.

Even though they had passed the entrance test and roundly defeated their would-be assailants, both Van's and Daniel's body language and gazes remained on high alert. Van's hand clutched at her tightly, and Daniel's grip on her arm would leave bruises. Abbie scanned the crowd to see what threat she might have missed. She found nothing but the mass chaos of human minds and a few preternaturals who clearly emitted non-interference vibes.

Yet a tension was in the air. Some indefinable danger lurked out there. But what? Her estimation of her two companions' survival instincts and skills rose yet another notch.

Alek bowed his head, drawing her attention back to the vampyre. His smile was tensely thinned, exposing only the tips of his fangs. The end of one sported a diamond-looking stone. It winked under the lights of the parking lot as he spoke. "We can't be too careful. So we test newcomers to weed out the mere curiosity-seekers and the uninformed. We don't want anyone suing us for their own lack of preparedness." He paused, his eyes holding a wicked gleam. "What happens inside, stays inside."

Alek swept the three of them with a curious gaze. "True dominants are rare. We see many more submissives." His lips twisted into a sick imitation of a smile.

Abbie shuddered. Had Jo Beth reveled in being a submissive? She must have. She'd become Alek's lover. Had the association led to her death?

Van tugged on Abbie's waist and propelled her forward.

The assemblage widened the corridor of human flesh like opening a zipper, then immediately closed in behind them, pushing the three into the lobby. It was like the crowd had decided the show was over and it was time to get back inside to do whatever they'd been doing when Abbie and the guys had arrived.

A sign just inside the entrance reminded the club's guests to always call ahead and advise security of the make, color, and license number of their car before parking in the lot, or they could expect the welcoming committee. Alek must have cameras in the parking lot in order to identify newcomers. Abbie spied several surveillance cameras around the lobby. What were on those tapes? Would they show Jo Beth? Had she been here the night of her death? Would they show she had left with Alek or someone else? How could she get a hold of the tapes?

"They operate like a private club," Daniel whispered so only she and Van could hear. "No wonder we got the full treatment. They didn't know or expect us. Wish someone had told us."

Van chuckled. "You enjoyed it, so stop bitching, D. Reminded me of boot camp."

Daniel snapped back, "Yeah, well, boot camp was a while ago and I like my quieter, more sedate life, thank you very much."

Abbie leaned her head against Daniel's arm and rubbed. "Sorry, Daniel. I'll make it up to you, I promise. But I think after our showing, Alek will talk to us."

"So what's the ploy?" Van asked, steering the three of them to a corner booth. His narrowed gaze swept side to side, alert for any potential danger.

"Right now, let's get the lay of the land," she said, finding herself assessing the threat level of those around them right along with Van.

"Sounds like a plan to me," muttered Daniel. "Watch it, buddy, unless you want a few less fingers."

Abbie turned to see what the problem was. Daniel scowled at a man whose hand was reaching for her hips. Daniel's lean fingers moved to cover the thong exposed by the low cut of her pants. The blue crystals spelling "SEXY" across the exposed part of Abbie's lower back blinked in the lights of the club. It had seemed like a fun idea at the boutique. Maybe it wasn't.

The grabby man withdrew his hand and shrugged.

Daniel muttered, "Lech." He shoved her forward and whispered next to her ear, "You are so gonna get in trouble, Miss Priss, if Luc ever hears about this."

"Then you'd better make sure he never hears about it," she said. "Or rabbit ears will be the least of your problems."

Van choked back a laugh as they reached the table. "Behave you two, we're in the danger zone. Stay alert." He eyed Abbie's back as she slid into the booth. "Maybe the sexy thong was a bad idea, Abbie. Better go to the ladies' room and take it off."

"Yeah, like no panties are better. The thong stays," she muttered.

The table Van had picked was a gunfighter's dream: back against a wall and clear view on all other sides. No one could approach them without their knowledge.

GothCity's first floor was comprised of three performance stages with dancers' poles and other equipment Abbie hoped wouldn't be used while she was on the premises. She

didn't even want to guess how some of the items were employed.

A massive stainless steel bar curved sinuously in, out, and around behind the stages like a giant silver snake. There had to be at least ten bartenders filling orders. The video booths and adult books and novelties stores flanked the main floor on either end of the building, with entrances off the main lobby and bar area.

A circular staircase led to a second level. A sign indicated private rooms for the guests' use were located there and to check with the receptionist to book one.

While Abbie wanted to know what went on upstairs, she was pretty sure Van and Daniel would literally carry her out of the place before she hit the first step. She'd have to come back sometime with Uncle Vidal. She smiled and wondered what the welcoming committee would make of her oh-so-elegant relative.

All three raised stages showcased nude dancers—if you didn't count the body art and piercings—bumping, grinding, and faking sexual acts to the sound of bass-driven, pseudo-metal punk rock. The sound levels had to be in the stratospheric levels since Abbie could feel the pounding rhythms in her teeth and crawling along her skin.

"We should have brought earplugs," Van shouted above the din.

Abbie nodded.

"Want a drink?" Daniel shouted.

"Something in bottles only, D," Van yelled. "I wouldn't trust these guys not to doctor the mixed drinks."

Daniel nodded and slid out of the booth, then walked as gracefully as a cat to the nearest bar.

Abbie leaned back. Van's arm was around her shoulder as soon as she touched the fabric of the banquette. She looked up at him, curious as to why he claimed her in front of the room at large. Because it's what he'd just done ... marked her as his.

"Do you know the guy staring holes into us?" he asked.

Abbie followed his glance to head of the farthest stage. She gasped and shrunk into his embrace. Well, at least that explained why Van had gone all macho on her. He'd sensed the predatory nature of the man leering at her. She'd be sure to thank him later. Right now, she had to deal with remembered fear and helplessness.

"Abbie, what is it? You're shivering." Van spoke into her ear while rubbing her arm with a strong and comforting hand. "Damn, honey, you're turning greener than the clay masks we use at the salon."

But she couldn't answer him, she tried, but nothing came out. Her vocal cords were frozen. Goddess, she couldn't even scream. It was just like the last time the man had stared at her with his icy gray eyes. He shouldn't be here! He couldn't be here. So why was he?

"What's wrong with Abbie?" Daniel asked as he placed two bottles of beer and a can of soda on the table. "What did you say to her, Van?"

"Nothing, I pointed out a guy over there. He's staring. And she went all catatonic on me."

Daniel turned his head. "What man? The one headed this way?"

"No-o-o, it can't be him." Her voice, although weak, had returned. "He was banished. How did he get back in the country?" Abbie stuttered.

Goddess, she had to get a hold of herself. She had gotten over this a long time ago. She had! So why was she a gibbering idiot at just the sight of the son of a dark witch?

“Madoc?” Van hissed. His arm tightened around her shoulder. “The bastard who beat you?”

“Don’t provoke him,” she said. She turned into Van’s comforting embrace and stroked the tense muscles outlined by his shirt. “Remember, he’s part-witch and every bit of it is bad. He’s also immoral and could care less about displaying his powers in public. He could fry you with a small flick of his wrists.”

Abbie knew firsthand just how unethical Mark Madoc was. He’d used her inability to read him and sneaked up on her while cloaked under an invisibility spell, then sprang the holding spell on her before she could defend herself. Then he’d viciously punished her for rejecting his marriage proposal, and for turning him into a jackass when he’d attacked Daniel and Van through a proxy.

“Why didn’t you sense him when we arrived?” Daniel said as he scooted close to her so she was all but surrounded by fierce, highly trained males. His extra warmth helped to stop the shivers that had begun with her first glimpse of Madoc.

“He’s got enough human blood to dilute the preternatural brain waves I’d usually feel. His true nature was masked by all the humans in the club. I only sensed, just as you two did, something was still wrong. I couldn’t put my finger on it.” She cursed under her breath. “I can only read enough to tell the bastard is gloating. He feels he has me where he wants me. Whatever he’s planning, just stay out of the way. I may have to use some firepower.”

Abbie girded herself for a confrontation. Her momentary shock and fear at the sight of him was ruthlessly pushed to the deepest corners of her mind. She refused to be a victim of this man again.

She wasn’t the Abbie he’d known. Yes, he’d dragged her through hell and back, but she was stronger now. And she wasn’t going to let the son of a bitch mess with her. If she had to out herself in a room of humans, so be it.

“My sweet Abbie,” Madoc said. He’d stopped about two feet away from their booth. “You’re looking as beautiful as ever.”

“No thanks to you,” she replied sweetly. “Did you take a wrong turn when transporting? This isn’t Wales.”

Madoc threw back his head and laughed, drawing the attention of the people closest to their table.

“The same old Abbie. Sarcasm overlaid with perfect manners.” His eyes glared daggers at her. His smile twisted into a snarl. “Just like your bitch of a mother and her bastard brother. How are Ilana and Vidal? Aging and decrepit, I hope.”

“No, I’m happy to say either one of them could pound you into the ground with one hand tied behind their backs.” She paused and took a calming breath. “So, why are you here, Madoc?”

“Madoc? But I’ve always been Mark, darling,” he uttered in loverlike tones belied by the angry fires in his pewter-colored eyes.

She refused to rise to the bait. He wanted her to lose control, but she wasn’t the naive white witch he’d tricked years earlier. She’d been honed and strengthened by the fires of the hell he’d put her through.

“Abbie, can’t we let bygones be bygones?” Madoc pulled up a chair and sat across from the three of them. “I came back to ask you to intercede with the Council on my family’s behalf. Is it really fair to punish them for my misdeeds?”

Abbie stiffened. So much potent anger flowed through her body she was surprised she didn't go nuclear.

"How dare you ask me to help you?" she spat. "Your family was just as guilty. They aided and abetted by distracting and restraining the other girls at the Litha ceremony from coming to my assistance. The only reason I escaped was because you always were lax in your spell-casting and left me an out."

Madoc's voice bristled with anger. "Lax spell-casting? I'll show you who's lax, bitch."

He surged to his feet and raised an arm toward her.

Chapter Fourteen

Luc pulled into the GothCity parking lot around seven-thirty. By the time he'd gotten out of his truck, a crowd had formed at the doorway. He tasted sulfur and sweat. Danger. The potential for violence hung heavy in the air like yellow-green smog.

Two men split away from the human mass impeding his entrance to the club. They'd intercept him before he reached the door. Their appearances reminded him of a movie makeup man's idea of post-apocalyptic humans. One was tall and cadaverously thin, his eyes rimmed in dark circles accentuating his unhealthy paleness. The other man was short and square, an evolutionary throwback. Both men walked slightly bowlegged, as if they'd ridden one too many horses, or maybe their balls simply hurt.

One thing for certain, they spelled trouble.

"Hey, guys. What's up?"

Luc held his arms out, away from his side, so they could see he wasn't armed. Yet. He figured they had to be Alek's idea of security. They were ugly and mean-looking enough to scare away the faint of heart. He wasn't scared, or impressed.

Neither man answered his greeting. Instead, the smaller man dove for Luc's legs at the same time the taller man threw a punch.

Luc twisted away, sweeping the smaller man's legs out from under him with one well-placed kick. Then he twirled into a smooth high round-kick and took the other man on the chin.

He smelled the third attacker before he heard him. He whirled to meet the danger, barely managing to avoid the board aimed at his head. Luc tore the board from the third man's hand and used it to hit the would-be aggressor in the gut.

The three assailants lay in various positions on the ground, moaning, groaning, and throwing up. From the front entranceway, a fourth man approached the tableaux, his hands held in front of him in a gesture of peace. He was tall, pale, and not as much of a mutant as the three who'd attacked him.

Still, Luc wouldn't turn his back on the man.

"Welcome to GothCity. I am Alek, the owner of this establishment. You have passed the test and shall be called a dominant." The man bowed slightly from the waist. "Please enter and enjoy. Leave your inhibitions at the door."

So this was Alek. What a load of crap.

"Is there a place we can speak in private?" Luc asked as Alek matched his pace into the building.

"Maybe. Why?"

The two men stopped in the lobby.

Luc spied three entrances—one for the XXX-video booths, one for an adult toy store, and the other for the main lounge and bar. The place was busy and loud. The rhythmic booming of heavy bass pounded through his senses. He smelled sweat and sex underlaid with the metallic smell of blood. There was evidence of other preternaturals in the building, but the overwhelming noise and other assaults on his senses didn't allow him to narrow down and identify just what types were present.

"I need to ask you a few questions about a former girlfriend of yours," Luc said as he

whipped out his private investigator's license and flashed it in front of Alek's eyes.

Alek glanced at it, then raised an eyebrow marked by a single golden piercing. "We'd better go to my office. It's quiet there. Follow me."

Luc started to follow Alek, but something about the preternatural vibes in the building bothered him. A warning sign flashed across his consciousness, urging him to check on Abbie's safety. He touched the talisman as the lobby crowd ebbed and flowed around him as if he were a rock in the stream of humanity.

Black revulsion. Red anger. Maize-colored fear. Each feeling pulsed through Abbie's mind in time with her pounding heartbeat.

On the heels of the emotional impressions were images of what she felt and saw. Shock soared through him. Her shields were down! He savored the unfamiliarity of her touch in his mind, getting a glimpse of the flavor and texture of her essence.

Luc examined each image to see if he could find what scared her. A man, his tones blacker than black and so foul even Luc shuddered. The dark one threatened her. Tussled images of pain, frigid cold, frustration, red-hot anger, and then survival whirled through Abbie's and then Luc's mind.

Luc must have gasped aloud, because Alek tugged on his sleeve, mouthing words Luc could not hear for the roaring of anger echoing in his head. The man threatening Abbie was the same man who'd beaten and attempted to rape her years before.

"Madoc!" he growled. His hand tightened on the talisman, and it glowed with the heat of his anger.

"What about Mark?" Alek asked, his voice tight with what? Curiosity? Fear? Or some sick sort of anticipation? "Do you know my business partner?"

Business partner? He'd come back to that interesting piece of information later. Right now, he needed to find Abbie. He concentrated on the images of their newly conjoined minds and found she was here! In GothCity.

Shrugging Alek's hand off his sleeve, he ran toward the bar. He had some garbage disposal to take care of. He shoved through the crowd around the entrance. He only half-heard Alek telling the guard at the door to stand down and to keep anyone new from entering the bar.

Once inside, it took only a split second to find his quarry. The luminescent golden-white glow around the corner booth was as familiar to him as his own body—it was Abbie's defense ward. The fucker was attacking her—and Van and Daniel.

Barely in control of the urge to shift to defend what was his, he stormed across the room on two feet instead of four. The stupefied crowd surrounding the scene in the corner had enough sense to part and let him through. The mass of people closed in behind him as if they were eager to see the ensuing show.

In a small corner of his mind, he wondered what type of performances Alek had in his club. The humans in the crowd seemed to be treating the displays of magick and raw forces of nature as routine. When in fact the light show from Madoc's attack on Abbie's shields looked as if a fireworks factory had exploded. The pyrotechnics had produced so much electricity that several small fires had started. The overhead sprinkler system had activated to extinguish the flames.

Putrid smoke began to fill the room from both the fires and Madoc's volleys of ever-increasing energy at Abbie's strong shields.

"Clear out the place," Luc yelled to a stunned security guard. He reached out and

grabbed the man, shaking him. "Clear these people out of here! Now!"

The man stumbled to comply, assisted by Alek and other men in the crowd.

Alek grabbed his sleeve. "What's going on? What are you people?"

Luc pried the man's hand from his sleeve. "You don't want to know. Now get these people out of here. And don't call the cops, if you know what's good for you."

"But my club!" Alek swept his arm, indicating the water, fires, and smoke. "What about the fire department?"

"We'll handle it. Just get these people out of here." Luc turned away from the frazzled club owner.

Abbie's shields continued to hold despite her internal battles to conquer her fear and revulsion. Like her innate goodness and courage, the shields were strong and pure.

And Madoc's energy, while initially potent, looked to be weakening. The fool had underestimated Abbie once again. His little cat wasn't an easy mark.

Abbie's gaze met his through the haze hanging in the room from the magick and the fires.

End this now. Please.

You're doing fine, little cat. I'm proud of you.

Ephemeral laughter danced down his spine into his gut. It was like sunlight on water.

Luc! I can hold him, but I can't risk letting go of the shields to end it. Daniel and Van might be hurt in the overflow of energy.

I understand. Just hold on a few more seconds, love.

I'm not your love!

Yes, you are.

The shields on her mind went up like metal shutters. The clanging of their closing off the conjunction of their minds made his teeth hurt. The loss of her mental touch left him bereft and angry.

Luc cursed under his breath. Abbie glared at him, mouthing the words: "I'm waiting." He chuckled despite his pique that she'd cut him off.

Muttering a few words, he conjured chains from the space above the dark witch. At Luc's direction, the chains twined themselves about Madoc, effectively ending his puny fireworks display. Abbie's shield, which had begun to glow fiery orange under the dark witch's attack now glowed pure golden-white.

"Little cat, what do you want me to do with this loser?" Luc grabbed the man and spun him around. "You are a sad excuse for all male witches and wizardom, Madoc."

"Who in Beelzebub's name are you? And what are you to Abbie?" Madoc asked, his forcefully worded questions belying his status as a prisoner.

Luc growled and began to shimmer. "I'm the man who's going to teach you a lesson about attacking women who don't want you, worm."

"Luc." Abbie approached them, a goddess in black leather and bare skin. "Let the Council handle him."

Like hell, no man attacks my little cat and gets away with it.

Abbie opened a small space into her mind. *I heard that.* She smiled and touched his arm in a gentling manner. *I'm asking you to let our justice system handle him.*

Why? he growled. *They did a piss-poor job of it before. He shouldn't have been able to slip into the country, or get anywhere near you, if the damn banishment wards had worked. My take is someone aided him. Someone on the Council. What kind of protection*

is that?

Luc. She touched his face, stroking a finger along his tensed jaw. *For me? Please?*

“She’s mind-talking with you? Who the fuck are you?” Madoc struggled against the chains and Luc. He glared at Abbie. “You bitch. What are you? His whore?”

“Shut up, worm.” Luc tightened the chains on Madoc with a mere thought. The man moaned. Luc conjured duct tape out of the air and slapped it across Madoc’s foul mouth, silencing him.

“Luc,” she said aloud. “Please?” She rubbed her head against his arm as if she were a kitten asking for attention. “For me?”

He looked down at her and frowned. “Abbie, you don’t know what you’re asking. What kind of a man would I be if I let him...”

“You’d be the right kind of man,” she said softly.

What did she mean? Did she mean the right kind of man in a generic word sense? Or for her?

Luc exhaled in disgust. “Okay, just this once, little cat. But the next time...”

“The next time, I’ll help you myself in sending him to the Otherworld.” Her eyes briefly glittered with all the anger and retribution she struggled so hard to hide.

“Okay, but promise me one thing?” he said.

She nodded.

“Don’t close yourself off from me. I find I like knowing you trust me to do the right thing.”

She frowned and was silent for so many seconds Luc wondered if he’d pushed her farther than she was ready to go.

Finally she nodded. “Okay, *but* I trust you not to take advantage. No impromptu astral plane meetings. No tripping through my conscious willy-nilly unless invited in. Respect my privacy.”

Well, damn. He’d planned to use the astral plane to woo her in her dreams. The little minx was up to snuff on all levels. But it was a small price to pay. And if an emergency arose, he would need instant access. He hadn’t let her know he could’ve defeated her mental shields if he’d really wanted, for it would’ve caused her pain and lost him any chance of gaining her willing trust.

“Deal. My shields will go down on the same privacy rules, except you have an open invitation to visit me on any plane you so wish. The first move will be all yours.”

The essence of her touched his mind fully once more. Only a slight blush across her cheeks indicated she acknowledged he’d given her carte blanche to initiate their lovemaking at any and all levels.

“Guys, this has been really fun and all,” Van said, “but we have a situation here.” He indicated the small fires, heavy smoke, and water damage. “And I hear sirens.”

“Thanks, Van.” Luc gathered Madoc and threw him over his shoulder. “I’ll take the garbage to the Council.”

He glanced down at Abbie, whose face still held some concern. “Don’t worry, he’ll arrive in the same condition he’s in now. Can you handle the cleanup before the firemen and the cops get here?”

“Piece of cake,” she said huffily. “You coming back here?” Another kind of concern colored her face and voice now. Maybe she’d just realized she was in danger of getting her so-fine ass beat for placing herself in danger. And if she didn’t realize it, he would be

more than happy to enlighten her.

"I'll be back in a few." He muttered a transport spell and was gone, only a shimmering outline, soon dissipated, indicated he'd stood there.

* * * *

Abbie turned to Van and Daniel. "You might want to take shelter. I can't guarantee your safety if you stand in the open."

Daniel hurried to rush off, only stopping long enough to grab Van. "Come on, big guy. She means it." He hurried them both toward the back hallway. "Will the restrooms be good enough?" he yelled en route.

"Yes, that should be safe." Abbie smiled at Daniel's muttered, "It had better be."

When she was sure her friends were out of harm's way, she closed her eyes and visualized the club as it had been before Madoc's attack. Then, muttering a counter-transformation spell, she reversed the damages the fire and water had caused. As the outer doors crashed open, a flash of green and blue energy flickered across the club's main room.

When a mass of uniformed men rushed into the room, followed by Alek, Abbie was sitting in the corner booth sipping her drink as if nothing had happened.

One of the firemen turned toward Alek and frowned. "Where's the fire?"

Alek turned in place, his astonished gaze sweeping every square inch of the room. When his glance landed on her, he paled to the point of translucence. For a moment, she thought the firemen might have themselves a heart attack victim, but Alek recovered.

"It seems to be under control," Luc said as he stepped from the kitchen area into the main room, dusting off his clothes. He held a fire extinguisher in his hand. "Just a small grease fire. No serious damage, Alek." Luc walked to the lead fireman and offered a hand. "Glad you guys came so quickly. If I hadn't gotten it under control, it could've been a disaster."

"Uh, well ... we'll just check to make sure it's all out," the fireman said. "Grease fires can be tricky. Good thing you used a fire extinguisher. Water would have made it worse."

"Yeah, exactly what I told Alek's cook. He's sitting down and resting right now. The poor man seems to be in shock. Maybe one of your medical guys can take a look at him. I think he caught too much smoke or something."

"Yeah, sure, we'll take care of it." The fireman directed two men carrying large cases toward the kitchen. He looked at Alek. "You want to walk through the damage with me, sir? We can make out a report for your insurance carrier."

"Yes, thank you." Alek walked past Luc, giving him a wide berth, his eyes glazed with what Abbie would call fascinated fear.

Luc walked to the booth and slid in next to her. "Where's Daniel and Van?" He took her hand and held it to his lips, kissing the fingers one by one.

The nibbling of her fingers sent shockwaves to parts of her she didn't want to think about right now. She snatched her hand away.

Luc's cheeky grin told her he knew he'd gotten to her.

"In the restroom. I didn't want to transform them into tables or something."

"Or something?" Luc's eyebrow rose.

"Yeah." Her response had come out a tad bit on the defensive side. Whether over the

tone of his voice or his assumption she belonged to him, she wasn't sure which.

She decided to attribute her touchiness to his questioning her magick abilities. "I always have this habit of overtransforming. Mother has never been able to figure it out. So I'm careful. Got a problem with that?"

Luc grinned at her. Then he reached out and touched the tip of her nose with a gentle finger. The spark of electricity arcing from him to her and back sent shivers down her spine. Goddess, she was in trouble.

"Nope, no problem," he said in an intimate tone. "Ever think it might be because you have more ability than your mother? Maybe something from your father's wizard side of the family?" He cupped her chin with his hand and rubbed her lower lip with a thumb. "You're pulling from more than the earth, my white witch."

"I am?" She'd never thought of it that way. Lucifer's balls, how could she think when he touched her? She struggled to carry on an intelligent conversation. "Um ... like where you pulled the chains and duct tape from?"

Van silently slid into the booth, followed by Daniel. She turned toward them, a pleading look on her face, praying for them to say something to interrupt the intimacy Luc had created. But the two men, her supposed protectors, just stared at her and Luc with almost paternal looks on their faces.

Great. They were on Luc's side.

"I didn't pull the chains from anywhere," Luc explained in a low voice so only the four of them could hear. "I created them."

Daniel leaned over and interrupted the cozy circle Luc had created for the two of them. Finally! She'd have to think about giving him a raise sooner than the next annual evaluation.

"Created?" Daniel asked. "As in from atoms and molecules?"

"Yes, exactly. When a wizard transforms the environment, he can actually use what matter is available, visible or invisible, and create something new."

Daniel looked puzzled. "Okay, I think I understand." His brow furrowed, then smoothed. "Maybe I just don't need to know any of this, right?"

"Right," Abbie and Luc said in unison. They looked at one another and laughed.

"Glad someone is finding this evening amusing."

Alek stood by their booth and glared at them.

"Can you tell me what just happened?" He waved his arm around. "Not ten minutes ago this place was a disaster area and now it's like ... like nothing happened."

Abbie looked to Luc to see if he wanted to take the lead. He shook his head. "Your magick. Your explanation."

Abbie smiled at him. "Have a seat, Alek. I'll try to explain."

Alek plopped into the chair Madoc had recently occupied. "Where's Mark?"

"Madoc's gone," Abbie said flatly.

"Abbie, sorry to interrupt," Luc said, "but Alek told me earlier Madoc was a partner in the club."

Abbie looked at Luc. "Really?"

He nodded.

She turned to Alek. "Why was a man who is no better than a criminal allowed to buy into your business?"

"A criminal?" stammered Alek. His face turned a horrible shade of green, not a good

color for him at all. "I didn't know. My God, I could lose my liquor license."

He hadn't known, which wasn't too surprising. Madoc had always been a convincing liar. Just look at all the preternaturals he'd fooled for years prior to attacking her.

"I'd strike him off any business documents if I were you," advised Abbie. "Don't worry, Madoc won't be coming back."

A hint of color returned to the club owner's face. "Who are you people, anyway?"

"I don't think you really want to know," Van suggested. "Just accept the fact your club is back to its original shape, and you are minus one pesky business problem."

Alek sat silently for about a minute. Abbie sipped her soda, almost enjoying the loud music and the noise of the returning patrons. At least they were normal, and this evening had been anything but.

Van got up and went to the bar to return with three bottles of beer, one of which he shoved at Luc. Luc smiled his thanks and took a long draw from the bottle. He moved closer to Abbie, placed his arm around her shoulders, then squeezed.

"Can you read anything on the human?" Luc whispered into her ear.

"No." She leaned into his strength and inhaled his clean male scent, something citrus and musk.

Around them, the club's action had resumed. The three stages were occupied with single dancers baring more than the legal amount of skin and body parts.

One man in the audience at the end of stage three caught Abbie's attention. He was out of place in his navy suit and clean-cut good looks. Then she noted his lust-filled gaze, and concluded maybe he wasn't so out of place after all. Something about him was familiar, but she couldn't quite place him. He looked like a hundred other businessmen in Austin.

Her stare must have drawn his attention, because his fixed gaze now concentrated on her as intensely as it had on the buxom dancer shaking her breasts in his face. In fact, his stare sharpened then swept over her as if he were thinking of buying her. He smiled and lifted his glass of beer in salute, then eyed her male companions and frowned. After a shrug of his shoulders and one more intensely heated stare, he turned back to the woman who shimmied and shook fiercely, trying to garner his attention. He reached out and tucked a bill between her breasts as she held them together.

"Who's that?" Luc asked, his lips against her hair. It wasn't an idle question. Luc's possessive nature shone through in the tone of his voice, the tightening of his arm around her shoulders.

"Don't know. But something about him is out of place. Or maybe I've seen him somewhere. Could be a lawyer and I've seen him at the courthouse or something." She shrugged, causing Luc's lips to press more firmly against her hair. She shivered. He was so hard to resist at times, she wondered why she even bothered to fight him. But she refused to be easy. She wanted to be sure he was the one. She'd been mistaken before and it had almost destroyed her.

A loud commotion at the entrance to the main room shook her out of her bad memories.

"Uh oh, trouble," she said.

"Trouble?" Alek finally came out of whatever stupor he'd been in. "Where?"

"Jeff Walden at two o'clock," Abbie said.

Jeff and two aides had walked into the main room and stood inside the entranceway.

He scanned the room, his glance stopping on the booth in which Abbie sat. A look she could only describe as anger colored his face.

She smiled and waved at him. He ignored her and continued his perusal of the crowd. Then he smiled and waved to someone. It was the man at the end of stage three.

Jeff walked to the man, who rose and shook his hand. Then the man and Jeff walked toward her booth, the aides following in a good imitation of baby ducks following mama.

"Abbie, I'm shocked to see you here." Jeff ignored Van, Daniel, and Luc, but he did single out Alek for his next remarks. "You the owner? The guy they call Alek?"

"Yes, and who the hell are you?" Alek's dominant nature had returned.

"I'm Prosecutor Jeffrey Walden, and this man is Reverend Jim Bob Briggs. We're here on behalf of the Citizens for a Decent Austin. I have a warrant," he indicated the two stooges behind him, "and these men are from vice and will be conducting the search."

"Vice?" Alek stood up and got into Jeff's face. "What's vice doing here? My club is within the letter of the law."

Alek's action seemed to draw the churchman's attention. The Right Reverend Briggs, who had only moments before been tucking bucks with the best of them, with lust in his eyes if not his heart, glared at Alek as if he hated him more than anything in the universe. Where had that come from? Was it just the hypocritical righteousness of an extremely fundamental churchman? Or was it more personal?

"We'll see." Jeff handed Alek the warrant, then turned to the officers and said, "You know what to look for. Get to it."

"Wait, officers," Abbie called out.

The two men stopped and looked at her. "May I see the warrant, please?" Abbie asked, extending her hand.

"Are you Alek's lawyer, Abbie?" Jeff asked, a strained look on his face. The look he used to get in Moot Court when he tried to pull a fast one on the mock-defense counsel. It hadn't worked then, and it didn't work now.

Jeff looked toward the Reverend Jim Bob as if for help. The man frowned at him, then glared at Abbie, before pasting a holier-than-thou narrowed smile on his lips. He kept silent.

"No, but since I know you, Jeff, and I'm here, I'll do this one pro bono if Alek will hand me the warrant."

Jeff snatched it back. "Never mind. Come on," he said to his companions. "Let's get out of here." To Alek he said, "We'll be back. We'll shut this den of vice and abnormal behavior down. Austin doesn't want people like you in it."

The foursome left in a hurry as if the hounds of Hell were on their tails. Only the reverend stopped in the doorway. His gaze overflowed with the hatred she'd glimpsed earlier, but this time it was aimed at both her and Alek.

"Well, that was strange," Luc said. "Alek, have you had a run-in with the reverend and the Citizens for a Decent Austin before?"

"They've picketed, but the sheriff made them leave," Alek said as he sat back down. "This is county, not city, so I don't have to meet the city codes. But Walden, old Jim Bob, and a few others have tried to shut me down. They're even trying to annex this area into the city to do it, but it's too close to the next county. They won't succeed."

He glanced at the four of them and sighed. "Thanks. For fixing my place back up. It would have been hard to explain to Walden and Briggs about Madoc—and everything."

He fixed his eyes on Abbie. "Thanks for making Walden back down. Now, who are you, and how did you know the warrant was worthless?"

"I'm Abigail Gooden, and I represent Jurnik Golub in a civil action against his club by the parents of Jo Beth Tibbs. And I knew the warrant was worthless because I've known Jeff a long time; he's a horrible lawyer, but a cunning politician."

"Ahh, Jo Beth," Alek said, singling out the most important part of her answer. "But why are her parents suing Jurnik and his club? I thought Jo Beth was murdered. They can't hold Jurnik responsible for it, can they?" Alek paused a moment. "Unless he killed her?"

"He didn't," Abbie assured him. "They're alleging unsafe working environment."

"Well, shit," Alek spat. "Then every club in town could be held responsible for murders on their property. Not a good precedent to set. How can I help?"

"Was Jo Beth here the night before she was killed?" Abbie asked, hoping Alek wouldn't catch on she thought he was a suspect.

"Yeah, she was. For about an hour," he said. He swept them with a knowing look. "I used to date her, but you knew that. I didn't kill her. I don't expect you to believe me."

"Do you have an alibi for the time frame?" Luc interjected.

"What time frame?" Alek asked.

"Between noon and three," replied Abbie.

"I was here, doing the liquor inventory. Also had a beer delivery at about two that afternoon," Alek said. "I get a beer delivery every day at like clockwork. Ask Jack over there. He does the inventory with me and was with me. He can give you the name of the guy who makes the deliveries too. I sign for the beer. No one else."

Luc got out of the booth to ask the indicated bartender.

"Why did Jo Beth come in that night? We heard she'd stopped seeing you," Abbie asked.

Luc loped back to the booth and sat down. She eyed him. He gave her a short nod. Apparently Alek had an alibi. But then people often lied for others ... especially when the other was the boss. Besides, even if he were here for the delivery, he still could have murdered Jo Beth and made it back in time to establish his alibi. Exotica was only fifteen minutes away, even during rush hour.

"She wanted to know if she could come back to me," Alek said. "I know what you're thinking, and it does sound awfully convenient. But it's the truth. Jurnik had just turned her down. She wanted him bad. I know she only came to me to find a substitute. Jurnik and I are nothing alike, yet she wanted us both. I couldn't figure it out. But who can figure women?"

Alek shared a collegial male glance among the men at the table and received glares for an answer. He shrugged.

"What was her mood?" Abbie asked.

"Mood?" Alek thought a bit. "She seemed scared of something. Kept looking around as if she were afraid someone was following her."

"Did you see anyone lingering near her or follow her out?" Luc asked.

"No, but she was scared. And trust me, nothing scared her much. She was a true submissive, a steel core of courage covered by a subservient demeanor. She could take a lot and never utter the safe word," Alek said with a smile. "Man, I'll miss her."

"Then you took her back?" Abbie asked, somewhat shocked at the sexual fluttering

in her core at Alek's graphic description of Jo Beth's true sexual nature.

"Yeah, I did." He smiled, a cruel twist to his lips. "I ordered her to go to her place and pack. She was to move in with me the next evening. I had some things to square away before she could present herself. She'd committed to a twenty-four/seven relationship, so I had to dismiss my current slave."

Luc gripped Abbie's hand and squeezed gently, sensing her discomfort with the topic. "You never saw her again?" he asked.

"Never." Alek turned sad eyes on them. "I think she could've been the one. My soul mate, you know? But now I'll never know."

"Who do you think she was afraid of?" Abbie asked.

"Dunno." Alek paused. His forehead scrunched in thought.

He was lying. He knew exactly whom she had been afraid of. But would he tell them? Or was he planning his own retribution?

Finally, he answered, "Maybe her boyfriend, uh, Bubba, was his nickname, I think. Or, maybe Biff, one of Jurnik's bartenders. Jo Beth told me he'd made a nuisance of himself. Always brushing up against her in the halls and such. Oh, and there was this cop, Randy Sloan. He used to bother her too. Called her and such. Came in here once looking for her. I told him to get lost or I'd call the sheriff on him. No love lost between the county mounties and the city cops, ya know?" He eyed them narrowly as if testing to see if they believed him. "Other than those guys, I don't know."

"Any of the others besides Sloan come here and say anything to you about Jo Beth while she was dating you?" Luc asked.

"Bubba came here once, but he didn't make it past the reception committee." Alek laughed, an ugly sound. "He tested submissive. Refused to act the role, so I didn't let him in. Private club, I didn't have to, right?"

"Uh, right." Luc turned to Abbie, a questioning look in his eyes. "Anything else?"

"No, that's about it." She turned toward Alek. "Thanks for being so open," she said, hoping the sarcasm wasn't evident in her voice. "If you think of anything else, will you call me?" She handed him a card.

Alek took it and looked at it. "Sure. I hope you find the son of a bitch who killed her. I don't know if I loved her or not, but I cared for her. She was mine." He eyed them with a sly smile on his lips. "I never hurt her. You straight types don't understand the BDSM lifestyle. It's not about violence and how much you can hurt someone; it's about trust and limits. She trusted me, and I never exceeded her limits. Never."

Strangely enough, Abbie believed he told the truth about that, but he was still keeping something from them. He knew whom Jo Beth had been afraid of before her death. And Abbie was fairly sure the dancer had gone first to Jurnik, then to Alek for protection.

Chapter Fifteen

Luc unlocked the door to his house and disarmed the alarm system. Pidge came to greet them, twining about first Luc's, then Abbie's legs, meowing a plaintive cry for food.

"Like I've ever starved you," Abbie reached down and picked Pidge up for a good ear scratching.

"Don't use the cat as an avoidance mechanism, Abbie," Luc said. "We *will* talk about your bone-headed move in going to GothCity when I expressly forbade you to do so."

"Didn't," said Abbie as she strolled away from him.

"What the fuck do you mean?" snarled Luc.

"You didn't specifically forbid me," Abbie tossed over her shoulder. "You just assumed it because you decided you would question the men, while I tried to get more information from Abbie's dancer peers, I had agreed not to question the prime suspects. I can't help it if you misunderstood."

Luc slammed the door, the first evidence he was close to losing his temper.

Well, not the first evidence. During the drive from the club to his house, his anger had pounded against her mind like a tsunami. True to his promise, he didn't muscle his way into her thoughts.

It was a good thing too, because more and more her reflections were of him and his newfound role in her life. She was lucky he hadn't already figured out she was hot for his bod and his mind and his values—well, she was just plain hot for him. He was unlike any other man she'd ever met, except for the overprotective, bossy, and territorial parts. Those were typical macho male traits, and she'd decided not to hold something so evolutionarily ingrained against him. Even Van and Daniel resorted to it, when they went into commando mode, and they were not your typical males.

"Abbie!" Luc's voice startled her. "You're splitting hairs. You knew what I meant. You're just being contrary."

"Meow-w-wr!" Pidge had sided with Luc—again. Or maybe she just wanted the talking to stop and the food to start.

"Turncoat," Abbie whispered against Pidge's thick fur. All she got in response was loud purring as they made their way into Luc's kitchen and the promised tuna.

"She's not a turncoat," Luc said as he followed them. "She just knows what's smart and what's not. Going to GothCity was not a smart thing to do. Evidence the fact Madoc was there."

"Madoc was supposed to be thousands of miles away in Wales," she huffed as she scooped tuna into a bowl for Pidge, who, as usual, began to eat as soon as the first forkful hit the dish. "Not even in my wildest dreams could I have anticipated he would get through the universal shields put in place by the International Council."

"Well, he did." Luc sat at the counter and stroked Pidge's back as she ate. "The local Council was aghast and promised to look into just how he managed to escape Wales and end up in Austin."

Abbie worried her lower lip with her teeth, hesitating over her next question. "What

sort of shape was he in when you delivered him?"

The look on Luc's face was blander than vanilla pudding. If he felt any insult or anger at the question, he wasn't showing it on his face. And since they had both promised not to invade the other's mental privacy, she didn't even attempt to slip into his mental-emotional musings.

"He was alive and complaining," Luc finally said. He caught her chin with gentle fingers, stroking the lower lip now reddened from biting. "I wanted to kill him, you know." She nodded. "But I didn't even pound the shit out of him."

"Thank you," she whispered. She grasped the hand cupping her face and kissed the palm, then followed with her tongue—her way of apologizing for doubting him for even a second.

His golden eyes darkened to burnt umber at her gesture. He growled, "Abbie."

The sensuality of his tone shot through her like heat lightning, and reached all the way to her core. Her pulse sounded loudly in her ears. The beating of her heart thrummed through her veins and set up an echoing pulse in her clitoris and into her womb. The timbre of his voice was a call to mate, as old as time and nigh impossible to ignore. He wanted her—but playing fair, he gave her the chance to withdraw and end the primordial ritual.

Could she trust this man with her body? Yes, no doubt there. He was honest, strong, and protectively gentle.

Could she trust this man with her essence? The reality was she already had when she'd lowered her shields and let him in. Other men with his abilities would have run roughshod over her by now, but he hadn't. She suspected he could have defeated her shields easily if he'd wanted. But he hadn't. He'd respected her limits. He valued her person, both mentally and physically. Yes, he was overprotective and possessive, but he couldn't help it. It was a part of him, just as his eye color and preternatural abilities were.

What he felt for her might not be love, but it was a good and solid foundation upon which to build a relationship.

And a relationship was where their coupling would end. Luc wouldn't have gone this far with her if he hadn't wanted some sort of permanent partnership. Even if he didn't recognize it at this point, she did. She had faith in him. She loved him for what he was.

"Yes, Luc?" She looked at him from beneath her lashes. Her tongue traced each of the fingers of his hand. When she reached the thumb, she took it into her mouth and sucked on it, mimicking fellatio.

He inhaled sharply. His eyes darkened with the smoke from the fires burning within them. "If you don't want to end up beneath me in bed in the next few seconds," he rumbled, "you'd better stop. My control is hanging by an unraveling thread and has been ever since I saw Madoc throwing killing energy at your shields."

"I don't want to stop," she said on a sighing exhale. "I want you."

One second she was on the opposite side of the counter, the next she was in Luc's arms, being carried into the bedroom.

"What changed your mind?" he asked huskily between nibbling kisses of her neck and face.

"You changed my mind. You are one of a kind, Lucan Knight ... and you're all mine." She reached for his face and pulled his lips to hers for a deep, moist kiss.

Laying her on the bed, Luc followed her down, his lips locked on hers, while his

hands touched her everywhere, stripping off clothes. His. Hers. Until she was down to her bustier and the jeweled thong, and he down to his briefs. And all the while he kissed her like a thirsty man who'd just come in from weeks in the desert and she was his oasis lagoon.

Finally, Luc broke the kiss and sat back on his legs as he straddled her. One hand gently kneaded and fondled her skin, while the other stroked her hair from her face. "Are you all mine, too?"

Abbie smiled at the tinge of uncertainty in his voice. "Yes. All yours." She swept a hand over his chest, then traced the six-pack abs with firm strokes. "Now, that doesn't mean I won't try to get my own way and do what I think is right." Her hand covered his mouth when he would speak. "But I will always take what you say into consideration before I act."

Grasping the hand on his lips, he nibbled the tips of the fingers, then licked away the sting. "So my little cat intends to remain independent, huh?"

"Let's just say I intend to be the woman who attracted you in the first place," she said, massaging the engorged penis outlined by his white briefs. His sharp inhalation, then low "have mercy" caused her to smile. "You wouldn't want me to become a doormat just because I love you, would you?"

"Never." He forced both her hands over her head, holding them there with one hand, then leaned over to free her breasts from the tight leather bustier. Now it was her turn to moan as he licked and suckled her nipples, first one then the other. "I want you just the way you are. We'll talk about this habit you have of putting yourself in danger later."

As his lips moved from her breasts to her neck then to her lips, for the few seconds she could think, Abbie was vaguely disappointed he hadn't commented on her declaration of love. She hadn't expected him to declare his love in return, for she was sure he didn't know he loved her yet. But he could have said *something*.

Lucifer's balls, a thank you would have been a nice gesture.

* * * *

She loved him!

A mixture of love, lust, and pure possessiveness permeated Luc ... he couldn't speak, only do. He would show her with the passionate possession of her body he treasured the gift she'd given him.

He took her lips with his. At first he nibbled them, then licked, tasting her, inhaling her sighs. His tongue took advantage of one such murmur to invade and capture the heated moisture of her mouth. Her tongue met his and the kiss deepened until he felt the repercussions of it in his cock as it poked against its cotton prison.

He shifted his hips so he fit at the juncture of her thighs. Even through two thicknesses of fabric, he felt her readiness to accept him into her well-lubed depths.

Sometime during the kiss, he'd let go of Abbie's arms, and they now twined around his neck. Her fingers alternated between massaging his head and scoring his upper back with her nails. Her muted moans of passion excited him to the point of exploding.

No. He shoved away from her. Her whimper of loss made itself felt in his groin and his soul. He hurried to soothe her.

"Patience, little cat, we need to slow down," he whispered against her hair as he tried to wiggle out of his briefs. "I'll be hitting my peak long before you at the rate we're

going. You've got me hotter than the core of the sun."

"So?" she whispered against his throat as she tugged at his bared buttocks, pulling him against her moist cleft. "I need you in me—now!" She grabbed with both hands and practically pulled him through the sheer silk thong into her core.

"Sweet-frigging-Hell," he groaned, and almost came from the friction she'd created between their bodies. "Let me get the thong off, little cat."

"Go 'round it," she husked as she wiggled her lower body against his. "Now, Luc. Now!"

Her long, low moan would've convinced him she meant it, even if her action of pulling his ass with one strong hand, while guiding his cock around the elastic into her vaginal opening with the other hadn't.

"Ahhhh," he uttered in a low throaty groan.

Home. He'd come home. Nothing before had ever felt this good. This right.

Luc took a few moments to savor the feel of Abbie. The heat. The rhythmic contractions of her inner muscles squeezing his cock. Abbie's sexy moans and whimpers. Her hands as they grasped and stroked him. Her sucking kisses and love bites on any area of his body she could reach.

She was his. Only his. And God and Goddess help any man who tried to take her from him.

Abbie's tongue found a nipple. A frisson of electricity shot to Luc's groin, prompting his hips to thrust in deep, slow strokes. In. Out. Pause. Then they started over again. With each set of strokes, the speed increased until his hips pumped steadily in time with the matched beating of their hearts.

The rhythm of life.

All the while he touched her: her breasts, her face, her hips.

He kissed her mouth, then swept to her ears where he nibbled and tongued, then back to her mouth where he mimicked the rhythmic pacing of their hips.

His little cat was no idle participant in the endeavor. Her hands learned his body as his did hers. She dueled his tongue and accepted the rhythm he set. Her hips met his in perfect syncopation.

As the heat built between them, their minds entered into the mix.

Luc! I'm dying. I can't breathe.

I'll breathe for us both. Trust me?

Yes. Yes. Please—help me.

Let go, little cat. Just let go.

I can't.

Yes, you can. Let your soul fly.

I don't know how.

Hold on to me. I'll take you. I'll keep you safe.

As the mental exchange ended, he sent the image of his *animé* the hawk onto the astral plane. Abbie's astral form climbed onto the animal spirit's back, her arms anchored firmly around his neck. His *animé* soared toward the sun. When he neared the first gold-orange aura, the earthbound Abbie's scream of completion set the astral plane to shimmering with its potency. His own roaring orgasm followed closely. The hawk spirit and the woman on its back circled the sun for what seemed an eternity.

As Luc held Abbie in his arms, their bodies trembling with smaller orgasms and

post-climax shudders, the hawk with his precious rider rode the solars from the sky in a long, slow, swirling and swooping glide until both planes merged into one ... and they slept.

Chapter Sixteen

Men as a species were overbearing, chauvinistic pigs! And Luc was their king.

After a night of fabulous lovemaking, Luc devoted early Sunday morning to a lecture about women, but specifically about Abbie, staying safely at home—or in the spa under Van’s watchful eye—while the menfolk, specifically he and Vidal, hit the bricks to question the remaining two suspects.

As a sop to her temperamental outburst in which she’d called him the aforementioned King of Swine, he promised to tell her all the details later over dinner at a restaurant of her choosing.

At least he’d managed to stop just short of asking her to tend the home fires and cook dinner.

Well, he’d pay for his porcine tendencies. She’d made reservations at the most expensive restaurant in Austin. And, tonight, he’d sleep alone—on the couch. The man might trust her with his life and his *cojones*, but he didn’t know the true meaning of the word partner.

He’d learn soon, or suffer blue balls until he did.

She wagered he’d be a quick study once she explained the no-sex-until-equal-partner-in-investigation rule. The sex had been extremely exceptional.

Abbie sat in the after-spa area of Van’s salon with several of Exotica’s dancers. The well-endowed and very supple ladies were in various stages of undress and all at different stages of their day of beauty. Van had called a halt for the information-pumping part of the planned activities ... and to arrange a light lunch. Getting buffed, massaged, and polished was hard work.

Mary Jane, better known as Ecstasy Delight, outlined the short and sweet version of what was known about Jo Beth’s death and why Abbie had called them all together—and why Jurnik was paying for it. As Mary Jane had predicted, the girls were indignant about anyone suspecting Jurnik or suing him over the whole situation.

“Jo Beth’s parents are dirt-poor white trash,” huffed a statuesque blonde named Cassie, whose legs were long, muscled, and ended at one of the tightest heart-shaped asses Abbie had ever seen. She thought maybe she should take up pole dancing and stripping for a living as she surreptitiously felt her own butt for firmness. It couldn’t hurt. “They’re just trying to take advantage of poor Jurnik. The man is the best club owner I’ve ever worked for.”

The other two dancers nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, and he’s generous too,” added a small redhead named Jackie. The petite woman had humongous breasts for someone so small. “When I needed a down payment for a better apartment so I could get my kid into a suburban school, he loaned the cash to me, interest-free. Told me to pay it off when I could afford it.” She smoothed a hand over her newly buffed body. “I just paid him back, in full, a month ago. He sent me roses, ‘cause I paid it back so fast. Now does he sound like the kind of man who doesn’t care about his employees?”

“This kind of information is what I’ll need for his civil case,” said Abbie. “But what I really need to know is what you know about the men in Jo Beth’s life near the time of

her death.”

“I already told Abbie what I knew about Bubba, Biff, Alek and the cop Sloan,” said Mary Jane. “But I’m sure one of y’all might have something to add to the mix. Wasn’t she seeing a counselor or something?”

“It wasn’t a counselor,” Cassie said. “It was the pastor at the church Asshole Bubba attends. Bubba was making an attempt at a ‘reconciliation’, as he called it.” She snorted in disgust. “More than likely Bubba was trying to fool her into thinking he would shape up. Old Bubba is a cokehead and a mean drunk. Jo Beth would come to work with bruises all the time from where he’d pinched or slapped her. She used to borrow my body makeup to cover them.”

“I never knew he beat her. Bastard,” spat Mary Jane. “I’d’ve kicked his ass from here to Lubbock and back. I just thought he was doing, you know, mental abuse.”

“It’s why Jo Beth never told ya, honey,” Cassie nodded solemnly. “She knew you’d go and confront the ape, and she was afraid he’d hurt you, then just go home and beat on her some more.”

Jackie leaned forward, her robe opening to show her breasts, the pierced nipples as large as silver dollars. “Ya know, I heard Jo Beth asking Sloan about domestic abuse and all. He told her to go to the prosecutor and get a what-ya-call-it.”

“A restraining order?” Abbie said, trying hard not to stare with fascination at the woman’s studded nipples.

“Yeah, a restraining order.” Jackie smiled and seemingly filed the phrase away for potential future use. “Then the horn-dog asked her out. She told Sloan she was seeing someone else at the time, but thanked him nicely and let him feel her up, uh, down there,” the little redhead blushed as she cast a quick glance to see if Abbie was shocked, “during her lap dances for him.”

“Yeah, Sloan had it bad for Jo Beth,” Cassie said. “He asked me if I knew who she was dating at the time, and I told him another club owner. I didn’t name Alek or the club, because I didn’t like the expression on his face when he asked the question.”

“Why? What would you say his expression was?” Maybe Abbie would find the key to the case here among these women rather than out on the streets with Luc, questioning the suspects.

Concentrating hard, Cassie teathed her tongue for several seconds before answering, “He looked pissed as all get out. Like I said, he wanted Jo Beth any way he could get her. Never sat in any of our stations if she was on the premises. Always gave her twenty-dollar tips and such.”

Jackie laughed and leaned forward. “Yeah, he got really sloppy drunk one night when she was off sick or something.”

Cassie muttered “or something” under her breath and snorted.

Jackie shot her an impatient look, then continued, “Told me he wanted to take Jo Beth away from the club and set her up in the suburbs. She would’ve hated it, but the poor sap didn’t know any better.”

“Why would she have hated it?” Abbie knew the victim’s character in such cases was often important to finding the killer. The more these gals could tell her, the easier it would be to recognize the correct motive when she stumbled across it.

“She was a wild child,” Cassie answered for Jackie. “Nice and all, but she had, ya know, a dark side. Once she got shed of Bubba, she found what she was looking for with

Alek.” The tall blonde scrunched her nose as if she’d smelled something rotten. “Jurnik didn’t do it for her, because although he looks dangerous, he’s a gentleman. But Alek is the real bad-ass deal.” She looked around to see who other than the women might be listening, then lowered her voice. “I know someone who used to dance at GothCity. Girl, what goes on in those upstairs rooms is just goddamn immoral, and I ain’t no saint.” She leaned back, her toweling robe coming loose and exposing her lower body.

Abbie believed her. Jackie’s pierced nipples were the height of conservatism compared to Cassie’s tattoos and genital piercings.

Abbie took a large drink of water, wetting a suddenly dry mouth, then said, “Alek told us last night Jo Beth liked BDSM, but he respected her limits such as they were. So, why did Jo Beth ask about getting a restraining order against Bubba?”

Abbie wanted to see what these women who knew Jo Beth best would say about the dead woman’s inconsistency.

“I asked her about it, I told you,” Mary Jane said. “She knew it was sick and all, but said Alek made her feel special and listened to her about her sexual needs. Whatever he may have lied to her about, she liked what the guy did for her in bed.”

“Would it surprise you to learn on the night before she died she asked Alek to take her back?” Abbie said.

“Nope, doesn’t surprise me at all,” Jackie said. “She came into Exotica on her way to see Alek. Said she’d just made a big decision that would change her life. She asked me not to say anything to anyone.”

“And did you?” Abbie asked.

Jackie’s brow creased in a fierce frown. “I know how to keep a secret, lady.”

“I apologize.” Abbie thought a second, then said, “Could someone have overheard you?”

“Maybe.” Jackie smoothed her brow, rubbing at imaginary wrinkles with her forefinger. “Don’t know. She talked to me in the back hall, near the restrooms. Any Joe Blow could have overheard us. It wasn’t like we were whispering or anything.”

So Biff or any patron could have heard Jo Beth declare her commitment to Alek. Any patron such as Bubba or Randy Sloan. Damn, there were still too many potential suspects. And too many motives to go along with them.

“What about the counselor—the pastor you mentioned?” Abbie asked. “Did Jo Beth ever talk about her sessions with him?”

“Once,” Cassie said, blowing on her nails to speed the drying process. “She didn’t like the guy. Said he was always asking her about her sex life and then having her get on her knees to ask Jesus Christ’s forgiveness for her wicked ways. Said it gave her the creeps.”

“Well, sounds about what I would expect a pastor to do, considering who she dated and where she worked,” Abbie said. “Did she say why he gave her the creeps?”

“The pastor was always touching her,” Cassie said. “Jo Beth told me she thought she’d seen the pastor hanging around GothCity.”

“Did you get the impression Jo Beth was scared of the pastor?” Abbie asked, remembering Alek’s suggestion Jo Beth was afraid of someone.

“Thinking back on it now, yeah.” Cassie nodded so hard the blonde hair gathered on the top of her head fell into her face. She had to brush it from her eyes and mouth.

“Why?”

“Alek thought she was afraid of someone. He suggested Bubba or Biff, or even Sloan.”

The three dancers sat silently for a moment or two in thought. As if by agreement, Mary Jane spoke for the three of them: “Not Biff. He’s a jerk, and kind of grabby, but he understands the word no. Jo Beth was a challenge. He wouldn’t have done anything to scare her off before he had her.”

The other girls nodded.

“Bubba? Maybe,” Mary Jane said.

The girls again agreed, like a nearly naked bobble-headed chorus.

“As for the cop, Sloan?” Mary Jane continued. “Yeah, I could see him losing it if he knew she was going back to Alek.” Jackie and Cassie mumbled their agreement this time. “Plus, he’s used to violence. I’d bet on him more than Bubba. Don’t think old Bubba would’ve had the gall to carve a former lover up in such a way. Seemed to me, marking Jo Beth was something a guy who hadn’t gotten to third base would do. Y’all know what I mean?”

Mary Jane’s reasoning made sense. The killer had acted out of an extreme sense of rage. Maybe frustration over the dancer choosing less-than-stellar examples of humanity over him could have been the spark to the killer’s rage.

“Ladies!” Van entered the room and clapped his hands to get their full attention. “Luncheon is served on the poolside patio, compliments of Mr. Golub. The champagne cocktails are my treat. Now, hustle those sweet little asses, girls. Don’t want the food to go to waste. Then we’ll finish up your day of beauty.”

Abbie followed the three dancers out of the room.

She overheard Cassie whisper to Jackie, “Damn the man’s ass is fine. Too bad he don’t like girls.”

Jackie whispered back, “Wonder if he swings both ways? I’d overlook the other bit just to lick those abs.”

Abbie stifled her laughter, then said, “He doesn’t swing both ways. And don’t let the blond guy over by the pool bar hear you or he’ll snatch you bald.”

Both women looked over at Daniel, whose hand was on Van’s arm as he whispered something into his partner’s ear.

Jackie gave Daniel a full-body once over. “Hell, I’d do him too. Look at that body. Where did these two guys get so ripped? A gym?”

“No, in the Army—Delta Force.” Abbie laughed at the stunned expressions on the two dancers’ faces. “Don’t ask, don’t tell, you know.”

“Never, ‘cause no one in their frigging right minds would believe me if I told them,” swore Jackie.

Chapter Seventeen

Luc picked Vidal up at his place located on Towne Lake. They drove Highway 71 west, deep into the Hill Country. Their destination was the little Llano County town where Jo Beth had gone to high school, and the current home of Bubba Hereford.

"Looks like old Bubba has company," Vidal said as Luc pulled into the gravel and dirt—mostly dirt—driveway.

"And now he has two more," Luc said. He parked in front of the rusting double-wide Bubba called home. "Wonder what's for Sunday dinner?"

"If his cooking is anything like his homeowner skills," Vidal replied, "I don't want to know."

Luc couldn't have agreed more. The yard around the mobile home was overgrown with mesquite, prickly pine cactus, and every weed indigenous to Texas. The wooden front step to the double-wide sagged, and the plastic lattice skirting had more holes than slats. He'd bet many a critter found shade under Bubba's abode. No wonder Jo Beth had turned her back on the man and the lifestyle he represented.

"Should we come back when he doesn't have company?" Vidal asked. "I saw a small tavern in the last town we drove through. We could go back there and wait for an hour or so, then give him a call."

"No, I don't want to warn him we're coming," Luc said. "He might run. After all, he's attacked Biff twice. He'd probably jump to the conclusion we're the law or something."

Vidal nodded. "I see what you mean. Cornered creatures run whether they're guilty or not."

"In my experience, they do, especially the not-so-bright ones. And old Bubba falls into that category as easily as pigs slide into mud."

Luc led the way over uneven ground, then gingerly climbed the rickety stairs. He beat on the door with the flat of his hand. Answering footsteps pounded toward the entrance, vibrating the trailer and shaking the stairs.

Bubba jerked the door open. His face didn't convey a welcome-to-my-happy-home kind of warmth. More of a what-the-fuck-you-doin'-here chill and a hint of something else ... fear. Something wasn't quite right in Bubba's little abode.

Then Luc caught the smell of another body inside. His body stiffened, preparing itself for whatever had scared Bubba.

"What y'all want?" Bubba peered at them more closely, keeping his body between them and the view of the interior. Recognition reflected in his eyes ... prey acknowledging a predator. "You two were at the club the other night." His narrowed gaze concentrated on Luc. "You hit me!"

Luc didn't take the time to correct the man. It still rankled Abbie had felt the need to use her magick to shove Bubba away. The woman couldn't keep her nose out of his business. "Yeah. You started it, so I stopped it. You have a problem with that?"

"No, Mr. Knight, Ben is very sorry he made a spectacle of himself," a low male voice spoke from the shadows in the room. "He will apologize to Mr. Golub, won't you, Ben?"

“Aww, Reverend...”

The speaker moved into the light from the doorway and cut off Bubba’s protest by gripping Bubba’s shoulder. Hard.

Bubba winced, the vacancy in his eyes momentarily disturbed by pain. He shut up immediately.

Luc wondered just what kind of power the Reverend Briggs had over his parishioners. Or was it peculiar to Bubba and this situation?

“Reverend Briggs, isn’t it?” Luc said.

“Yes, it is,” the man answered. “I believe we met at GothCity. You were with Ms. Gooden and the owner, Alek.” His lips pursed as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting this other gentleman?” He turned his sharp-eyed gaze toward Vidal.

“Vidal Storm. Ms. Gooden’s uncle,” Luc said.

“What can we do for you, gentlemen?” the reverend asked.

“Our business is with Bubba,” Luc said.

“Oh, Bubba has nothing to hide from me,” the reverend replied. His lips thinned into a smirk. “I’m his pastoral counselor.”

Pastoral counselor? Where had Luc heard the phrase before?

Then it hit him. Jo Beth had a counselor. In fact, Abbie was probably at this moment asking the other Exotica dancers about the person. Could the Reverend Jim Bob Briggs be the one? Wouldn’t hurt to throw a line out and see what he might catch.

“Just as you were Jo Beth’s counselor?”

The reverend’s smirk turned into a frown; his gaze turned dark—furious—before he managed to control the expression. “Yes, I was the counselor for Jo Beth and Ben.”

Bingo!

“Reverend Jim Bob tried to help me and Jo Beth get back together,” Bubba volunteered. “And she would’ve come back to me if it weren’t for Alek.”

“What did Alek do?”

Bubba spat on the floor. “As if you didn’t know. Reverend Jim Bob told me you were right friendly with Alek. The Goth bastard corrupted my sweet Jo Beth. Promised her all sorts of things. Turned her into a Goth slut.”

Bubba foamed at the mouth, his eyes wild, like a rabid animal. At this moment, Luc suspected Bubba could kill and not even know he did it. The man wasn’t all there. Was he on drugs? Or was he just crazy with anger?

“What sort of things did he promise?” Luc asked. Had Jo Beth revealed her expectations of immortal life to her old boyfriend?

“Well, like, uh...” Bubba turned to the reverend, a question in his confused gaze.

“You tell them, Reverend Jim Bob. Just like you explained it to Jo Beth and me.”

The reverend frowned at Bubba, but the look he turned on Luc and Vidal was composed. Too composed, as if he practiced it in the mirror. “You’ll have to excuse Ben. He is grieving and much confused.”

Bubba paled, then blurted out, “But you told Jo Beth she would be damned. The sins of the flesh would send her to Hell. That she was a fornicator, a whore to the false gods of Mammon and Pride. That she was a rib from Adam and should be grateful a good man like me wanted her after she’d dirtied herself with heathens like Jurnik and Alek.” Wild-eyed, Bubba turned and grabbed the reverend by his shirt and shook him. “You did! It’s

what you told me.”

The reverend removed Bubba’s hands from his tight-fisted grip on the shirt, then pulled Bubba from the doorway. Thrusting the blubbing man behind him, he blocked the man’s huge quivering bulk with his slighter frame. Was he protecting Bubba, or hiding him?

“Please leave,” the reverend said. “You’ve upset Ben, reminding him of what he’s lost. You want to know who killed Jo Beth? Look to those two ungodly men who corrupted her with money and sins of the flesh. They’re the guilty ones.”

The righteous words and stand were expected, but something in the reverend’s tone belied them. Luc’s gut screamed old Jim Bob wasn’t the holy man he purported to be.

The door slammed shut, once again vibrating the trailer.

“That went well,” Vidal remarked mildly as he preceded Luc down the steps.

“Yes, it did.”

“I was joking,” Vidal said over his shoulder as he led the way to Luc’s truck.

“I wasn’t,” Luc replied, stopping to look back at the trailer. As he suspected, the reverend stood at a window with a look on his face Luc could only classify as deadly.

A shadow passed over Luc’s soul, a harbinger of something dark and evil. The reverend’s current influence over Bubba was suspect. His past influence over Jo Beth was worth looking into. Maybe Abbie had found out something more from the dead girl’s peers. If not, Luc would have to take a deeper look into the Reverend Jim Bob Briggs’s background.

* * * *

Abbie placed a plate of chicken piccata and pasta in front of Luc, then took a seat next to him at the dining room table. She’d come home from the salon and with time on her hands had decided to cook him a meal rather than make him take her out. Not that she wanted to be little Suzy Homemaker, but they did have to eat.

“So, Jim Bob Briggs was both Jo Beth and Bubba’s counselor,” she said, twirling pasta on her fork. “Not a very good one, if the results are anything to go by.”

“Yeah, and he’s into big-time manipulation,” Luc said between bites of chicken and capers. “Maybe even more than manipulation. Reminded me of Jim Jones, the guy who killed all his followers with poisoned Kool-Aid down in Guiana.”

“Ugh.” Abbie stared at her plate, laying her fork down. Suddenly she wasn’t hungry. “You know, before Walden got to GothCity the other night, Jim Bob was sitting at the head of one of the dance stages tucking bucks into G-strings with the best of them. Methinks the reverend does not practice what he preaches.”

“Doesn’t surprise me one bit. Something about the man is warped.” Luc reached over and took her hand in his and gently rubbed her palm with his thumb. “Promise me something.”

“What?” She glanced at his face. The motion of his thumb gave her gooseflesh. She tingled all the way to her core. The man was just too potent.

“Don’t go and confront this guy without someone along as backup.”

Chalk up too overprotective and bossy. She stiffened and tried to remove her hand from his, but he gently grasped her and refused to let go.

“No, listen to me, Abbie. The guy is shifty and hiding something. He has a lot of influence and control over Bubba, whose contact with reality seems slippery and getting

slipperier by the moment.”

“Why would you say that?”

“The two attacks on Biff were just plain crazy. Now Bubba’s blaming Jurnik and Alek.” Luc shook his head. “I’m betting Bubba didn’t leap to the conclusion those men had corrupted Jo Beth without a helpful shove from old Jim Bob.”

Luc was really worried—and fearful for her. She recalled what the dancers had told her. Maybe he had a right to be. She stopped pulling away. His grasp softened and his thumb resumed its stroking.

“The girls said Jo Beth was afraid of her counselor. They thought she sought protection from Jurnik, then Alek. Maybe we should warn them. Alek, in particular,” she said, remembering the look of hatred she’d seen on Jim Bob’s face at GothCity. “We should also report our suspicions to the police.”

“What would we tell the cops? Excuse me, Detective Adams, but we think the Reverend Jim Bob Briggs, honest citizen, supporter of one of the mayor’s pet projects and friend to D.A. Walden is a Machiavellian mastermind, putting neuron-deficient, lovesick Bubba Hereford up to assault and battery and maybe even murder.”

“Put like that,” she said, “you’re right. The police wouldn’t believe us. But Jurnik and Alek would.”

“Yeah, I’ll call them. In any case, I need to ask Jurnik if he knew Jo Beth was going back to Alek.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Jurnik didn’t mention it. He knew about the counselor, but he didn’t tell us Jo Beth had come to Exotica that night,” he said. “It’s probably nothing, but maybe mentioning it to him will bring up more memories and impressions of what Jo Beth said.”

They finished their meal in silence.

As she cleared the dishes away, Luc made his phone calls.

* * * *

“Jurnik, this is Luc.”

“Luc, what’s happening? If you hadn’t called, Ilana was going to whisk us to your place to find out what in the hell is going on.”

“Tell Ilana Abbie is safe.” Luc glanced at her. She made no pretense of not listening to his side of the conversation. “She’s staying with me until this is over—maybe longer.”

Abbie sniffed audibly and mumbled, “The jury is out on that one.”

Luc stifled the bark of laughter her stubbornness elicited. His little cat had not totally sheathed her claws. Hopefully, the issue of her future with him would be much closer to being resolved after his plans for the night ahead.

“Luc, Luc, are you still there?” Jurnik’s impatience carried clearly over the phone.

“Yes, sorry. I called to warn you to stay hidden.”

“Why? What’s happened?”

“Nothing yet, but Abbie and I suspect the Reverend Jim Bob Briggs may be influencing Bubba Hereford to commit mayhem against you and Alek.”

“The bastard has threatened me before,” growled Jurnik.

“Bubba threatened you?” Luc’s eyebrows rose.

Abbie came over to him and leaned in to listen to both sides of the conversation. His nostrils flared and his body responded to her female scent, musk overlaid with vanilla and

jasmine.

“Not Bubba. The bastard Jim Bob Briggs,” hissed the vampire. “He came to the club several months before Jo Beth’s death, before she dated Alek, and tried to pull her from the stage. The pervert. Most of the evening he’d sat in the audience with his tongue hanging to the ground, ogling all the dancers. He even had a lap dance from Ecstasy. When Jo Beth came on the stage, he went wild. He leapt up and pulled her off the stage, slapped her, called her a harlot. Biff jumped the bar and tore the man off her. We threw him out. The man said we would pay. He’d see us shut down and in hell for corrupting innocent Texan girls.”

Luc whistled. “Well, shit.” He eyed Abbie, who looked as shocked as he felt. “Maybe the reverend has more neurons missing than old Bubba.”

“Just watch out for him, Luc. Something is not right with him,” warned Jurnik. “I heard from the dancers Jim Bob would linger outside of the club and offer to counsel the poor lost lambs. Ecstasy got so mad she called the cops. But when the cops came and saw who it was, they let Jim Bob go with a warning not to bother the ladies.”

“Ask him if he knows which cops came,” Abbie hissed into Luc’s ear.

“Abbie wants to know if the cops who responded were any you knew.”

“I only knew one of them—Randy Sloan. Our club’s in his patrol district. He’d come in after he went off duty to watch Jo Beth,” Jurnik said.

Abbie’s eyes closed and her lips formed a satisfied smile. Luc brushed her mouth with his. Smart little cat. Her eyes flew open as she licked her lips where he’d kissed her.

“One more thing, Jurnik,” said Luc, who wanted to end this call and warn Alek before his self-control flew out the window and he attacked Abbie on the living room floor. “Did Jo Beth tell you she was going back to Alek before she was killed?”

“Yeah, now you mention it, she did. Why?” Jurnik replied.

“We heard from the girls she was going back to Alek,” Luc said. “Just wanted corroboration since you hadn’t told us before.”

“I forgot. She told me a couple of days before she was killed. In fact, she asked if I would reconsider taking her back. It’s funny, but she seemed afraid of something. Of course, by then I was so involved with Ilana I couldn’t help her the way she wanted. But I did offer her any other assistance she might need.” Jurnik paused. “She said it was okay, that she was glad I’d found someone to love. Then she told me she had another option ... Alek had offered to take her back.”

“Okay, that fits. Thanks.” Luc brushed a hand over Abbie’s back. She shivered in response. “Keep your head down. We’ll let you know when it’s safe to go back to Ilana’s house.”

Jurnik chuckled. “No rush. Ilana and I are enjoying the countryside. The woods and hills at night are lots of fun.”

Ilana’s voice came clearly over the phone. “Shut up, you naughty man. My daughter and her boyfriend don’t need their ears sullied with such innuendo.”

Luc laughed at Abbie’s red face and her shocked, “Mother, really!”

“Enjoy then, Jurnik. Watch out for the prickly pears.”

* * * *

Abbie stormed into the bedroom and slammed the door shut with a wave of her hand. Making a twisting motion she locked, then warded the door.

“Men are obnoxious pigs with their minds on only one thing,” she said to Pidge.

“And just what would that be?” Luc whispered in her ear.

She whirled. “How did you get in here?”

“My house. My secret.” He stalked her as she retreated toward the door she’d just spell-protected. “Now what was all the slamming and banging about?”

“You ... you know,” she stammered, bringing her hands up to forestall his steady pursuit. “You and Jurnik toss around sexual innuendos about my mother and him like they were a proper topic of conversation. It’s not decent,” she wailed. “Plus, it’s just downright embarrassing.”

Her face burned at the thought of her mother and a vampire cavorting the hills, nude, and playing whatever sexual games they played. The fact she could imagine her and Luc doing the very same thing rankled.

“Abbie, Abbie,” he soothed as he reached for and pulled her into his arms. “There is nothing wrong with your mother and Jurnik enjoying themselves sexually. They’re adults, and in Jurnik’s case, have had years of experience in the matter.”

“She’s my mother!” cried Abbie into Luc’s warm chest. His hand rubbed her back in a non-threatening, comforting manner.

“Yeah, and don’t you trust your mother to know what’s right for her?”

“Well, uh, sure, I guess,” she said with a gusty and somewhat watery sigh. “Hell, I don’t know. She has these moods. And rampant sexuality is part of the Glinda-the-Good-Witch mood. She does crazy things when she’s in that mood.”

“But has she ever hurt herself?”

“No. But I still worry,” Abbie said. She shoved away from Luc’s chest and looked into his eyes. They were warm with concern for her, which calmed her a lot. “She’s dating a very old vampire. It scares me that he’ll try to turn her, so he’ll have her forever.”

Luc’s brow creased. “Can a witch be turned? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Why not? She has blood, doesn’t she? And she’s mortal.”

“But her blood is not human,” he said. “Abbie, I think you’re worrying too much. But I seem to recall my uncle telling me wizards and witches were not susceptible to sharing vampire blood. I can call him and find out if it worries you so much.”

“You’d do that for me?” she said.

“I’d do anything for you,” he replied, kissing her nose, then lightly brushing her eyelids with his lips.

“Anything?” she said, her eyebrow arched.

“Anything.”

“Then you’ll sleep somewhere else tonight, won’t you?”

“Sure. But only after we make love again.”

“No!” she said and pushed out of his arms. “You know what I meant by sleeping elsewhere. I meant no sex.”

“You didn’t say that.”

He reached for her, but she twisted out of his way.

“I need space. Last night, was ... well it was special for me, but...”

“But what, Abbie?” he asked. His face was couched in serious lines.

“But I think for you it was only sex.”

There—she’d said it. Because he hadn’t shared his feelings when she’d told him she

loved him, she wasn't going to risk another earth-shattering encounter until she knew what he felt. Great sex, was, well, great, but it wasn't what she needed. She was holding out for love.

For several seconds, Luc stood, just staring at her as if he were trying to piece together a puzzle. He didn't attempt to breach her mind, and she was grateful. He followed the rules she'd set out—no invasion of privacy.

But darn, she'd love to know what he was thinking.

"Go ahead. Breach my mind. I have nothing to hide." He smiled at her. "No, I didn't read your thoughts. I could just tell by your face. It's very expressive, little cat."

"Really?"

"Yes. If it will reassure you last night was more than just great sex to me and that I love you," he said, "you can scour my mind with your little cat claws."

"You love me?"

"Yes. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

She leapt into his arms. "Then I don't need to read your mind, just your willingness to let me proves you love me."

"So," he whispered against her hair, holding her closely to his aroused body, "does this mean I can have sex *and* sleep with you tonight?"

"Yes."

"Good." He swung her into his arms and strode toward the bathroom.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "The bed is the other way."

"Remember the night in your shower?"

"Yes?"

"I had some things I wanted to do to you then, but hadn't wanted to press my luck."

"Good thinking, Knight," she said, laughing. "What sort of things?" She flicked a finger across one male nipple.

"Sexual things, little cat," he replied huskily. "Involving slippery hands and warm mouths."

Abbie hid her face against his throat and nibbled a throbbing vein. "Well, hurry up. You promised me sex in bed plus a good night's sleep too. Time's awasting."

Luc raised his eyes to the sky. "I fell in love with a slave driver."

Chapter Eighteen

“My, aren’t we the chipper one today!” Daniel said.

“What do you mean?” Abbie asked. She paused by Daniel’s desk and eyed the Cheshire-cat grin on his face.

“Well, it’s early Monday morning. You’re humming. You’re smiling,” he said, ticking the items off on his fingers, “and you’re dressed in what I can only call a sexy little French number.”

“So, what’s your point?” She stood with one hand on her hip.

“So, you are never early on Mondays. You hate Mondays. I’ve never heard you hum in all the years I’ve worked for you. You smile, but never like this.” He widened his smile to show lots of teeth; the skin around his eyes crinkled with the exaggerated gesture. “And you never, ever, wear sexy clothes to court.”

“Ohmygoodness! Court! I forgot all about it,” she said as she scurried down the hall to her office. “When’s my hearing!”

“Don’t rush. You have time. It’s not until ten,” Daniel said, following at a more leisurely pace. “Remember? It’s Monday morning. We never schedule anything before ten on a Monday.”

She rummaged through the closet in her office. Pulling out a plain navy blue suit, she turned and found Daniel leaning against the doorjamb, staring at her. The slight smile twisted his lips once more. His gaze shouted curiosity. The kind that killed the cat. “What?”

“So, how was he?” Daniel sauntered into the room and settled on the sofa. “Don’t change into the boring blue rag. Give the judge a thrill. You never know, your outfit might distract the opposing counsel. I suggest dropping something then bending over to pick it up.” He eyed the length of her legs exposed by the short skirt, then waved a hand in front of his face and panted. “Even I’m impressed ... and I don’t swing that way.”

“You’re so evil. Watch it, or I’ll tell Van you’ve gone native on him,” she snapped, shoving the boring suit back into the closet and slamming the door. “And as to your other question, it’s none of your business.”

“He called.”

“He who?”

Okay, so she knew. It was hard enough to concentrate on business with her body still humming from early morning wake-up sex. Dishing to Daniel about the hot night of lovemaking would only make it worse.

Daniel’s exasperated sigh told her he wasn’t playing this game today.

“Why did he call?” she asked, humoring him.

As if she couldn’t guess. Luc had wanted to drive her to work, then pick her up afterward. She’d told him no. She didn’t need a babysitter or a bodyguard. She refused to live in fear. She had a life and clients. Besides, she could take care of herself.

“He called to tell me when you’d left the house. If you hadn’t arrived by half-past eight, I was to call him so he could locate you.”

“Luc worries too much,” Abbie said. She sat behind the desk, then picked up the file Daniel had left for the morning case. “Now, if gossip time is done, I have to review this

before the hearing. We do have other cases besides Jurnik's."

"Fine, don't tell me about last night. I have a vivid imagination. I'll just embroider the details myself." Daniel rose from the sofa. "Your mother will be so-o-o interested." He strolled toward the door.

"Wait!" Abbie rubbed the tension forming behind her temples. A three-aspirin headache blossomed rapidly behind her eyes. The mention of her mother's potential interference into Abbie's social life had a way of doing it to her. "My mother called?"

Daniel stopped and turned. "Oh yeah. Called me at home *very early* this morning and interrupted Van and I at a particularly inopportune moment."

Abbie swore under her breath. "I'm so sorry."

Daniel waved it off. "No biggie. Post-conversation, we picked up where we left off." He shot her a naughty grin. "Boy, did we!" He fanned himself with a hand, paused, then frowned. "I wasn't aware your mother had my cell phone number." His left eyebrow arched as his accusatory stare bored into her.

"Don't look at me, I sure didn't give it to her."

"Knowing your mother, she probably bewitched someone at the cell phone company." Daniel massaged his forehead.

Obviously, her mother's affect on people was universal. Either that, or tension headaches were contagious.

Daniel sighed. "Oh well, now where was I? Oh yeah, I'm to report back to Mumsie on your *big* night." His fingers marked quotation marks in the air. "For some reason, she thinks you'll tell me," he gestured, his arm flinging to include the room, "all. So give me something to tell her so she'll get off my case—and stop torpedoing my sex life."

Lucifer's balls! What could she share that wouldn't have her mother arranging a civil ceremony and a witch's binding rite? She glanced at Daniel. His expression was sympathetic, but expectant.

"Help me here," she said. "You know Mother. Sex with Luc will equate to marriage plans."

"So, is forever after in the cards?" Daniel's eyes widened. She could almost see the wheels turning in his head, planning a bachelorette party for her with male strippers and bawdy gifts. "And I do mean holy matrimony. I'm assuming the sex part has taken care of itself. Right?"

"Right. And yes, it was fabulous beyond description," she said before he could ask again. "He said he loved me, but that doesn't mean he wants to marry me."

"He means to marry you." Daniel nodded. "Trust me. Alpha types do not throw the L-word around if they don't mean it. Van is as alpha as they come. It was months after we moved in together before he finally said the word. The civil partnership came soon thereafter."

Abbie had performed the private personal-partnership ceremony for Daniel and Van. While it probably wouldn't be recognized as a civil union in the State of Texas or most of the other states, it was a binding contractual partnership with all the i's dotted and t's crossed.

"So what do I tell Mumsie when she calls back?"

"Tell her Luc and I have agreed to live together for awhile," Abbie said. "And she is not, I repeat, *not*, to plan bridal showers or anything smacking of a wedding. You can quote me."

Daniel saluted. “Yes sir, ma’am sir.” He turned on his heel and marched out the door with perfect military precision.

Abbie leaned back in her chair and kneaded the tension making its way to her neck. Relationships were hard enough without her mother sticking her witchy aquiline nose into the mix.

Daniel’s head popped around the corner. “By the way, I forgot to tell you how beautiful you look this morning. All glowing and happy. Luc is good for you. Keep him.”

He disappeared before she could reply. Laughing to herself, she picked up the case file and began to read, her headache gone as rapidly as it had appeared. Just the mention of Luc’s name and the reminder of their intimacy had whisked the tension away. Yeah, he was good for her.

* * * *

After a successful morning in court—hopefully based upon her brilliant legal argument and not the length of her skirt—Abbie decided to hit Dick’s BandG. Dick’s was the local watering hole courthouse personnel frequented. It was a noisy, happening place where much of Austin and Travis County’s real business was handled.

She hadn’t been in awhile, so she was behind on the current gossip. Someone was sure to clue her in on the city and county legal scuttlebutt and political machinations. Plus, she wanted to listen and learn if Jurnik’s name played a role in any of the local tittle-tattle. Lots of Walden’s legal gophers grabbed a quick sandwich at the bar and grill. A few beers and the criminal prosecution’s strategy often leaked from loosened lips.

Abbie walked into Dick’s BandG and located a prime corner table from where she could see the comings and goings. After ordering the special of the day—barbeque brisket and fries—and a beer, she settled back to participate in the ritual of nodding to familiar faces and shouting greetings to her particular peers.

A deep voice startled her as she was about to take a second bite of her ‘que.

“May I sit with you, Ms. Gooden?”

She looked up from her sandwich, the sauce dripping down her fingers, to find Detective Sam Adams looming over her table. As she had the last time she’d encountered him, when he and Walden had interrupted her lunch, she registered a fleeting trace of some sort of energy coming from him, then it was lost into the white noise background of his human consciousness. The first time she thought she’d imagined it, but maybe she hadn’t. Whatever it was, it was gone now.

Damn, she’d forgotten to call him, but then, he hadn’t called her either. Maybe no news was good news, and Jurnik wasn’t high on the suspect list.

She gestured with the sandwich and mumbled around the food in her mouth, “Sure. Please call me Abbie.”

The detective’s sharply boned face broke into a grin, lighting his blue eyes to the color of a sunny sky over a Texas plain. After he’d sat in the seat next to her, he swept a hand over his short dirty blond hair, causing it to stand up. He repeated the motion as he sat silently examining her from top to bottom and back.

A nervous gesture? But why should he be nervous? And why did he eye her as if he were committing her to memory?

Puzzled, she turned her head to look him more directly in his eyes. But his gaze was occupied, studying her legs. Was the man attracted to her? Goddess and the Father

forbid! Luc would kill him!

She rejected the urge to pull the short Chanel skirt down a fraction of an inch, if it would even move that much. The detective's overly warm gaze slowly traveled up her body, stopping only to linger at the hint of cleavage revealed by the silk shell under her unbuttoned jacket, then finished at her mouth.

Sweet Gaia's ghost, the man knew how to ogle. Too bad she wasn't interested in any man but Luc. Yet Sam Adams *was* attractive in a bad-boy cowboy sort of way.

One large callused finger gently wiped something from the corner of her mouth. A spark of electricity jolted her. She moved away from his touch.

"Sauce," he said. He licked the finger clean. "Umm, good. The special?" He eyed her lips and not her brisket blue plate special.

"Uh..." She coughed, dislodging the lump blocking her throat. She took one of the extra napkins the waitress had brought, dipped it in her water glass, then wiped her mouth where his finger had touched.

"Why did you do...?" she whispered in a voice she didn't recognize as her own.

"Do what?" he asked, looking up from the menu he studied. His face revealed nothing but benign innocence, but she sensed he laughed at her beneath the composed exterior. He was probably very good at interrogation—and poker.

"Wipe my mouth, then lick your finger." Her blunt reply dared him to be honest.

"I wanted to." He shrugged. "Sorry if I crossed a line."

He wasn't sorry at all. A hint of a grin lurked in his eyes.

"Umm, by the way, do you have something going on with Knight?" His voice was too casual. Her answer, she sensed, was somehow important to him.

"Yes," she said, her voice lowering to a husky level, "I do."

The detective's sunny blue eyes clouded to the blue-gray-purple of thunderclouds. His lips thinned and a muscle jerked along the jawline he presented to her.

"Damn," he muttered, adding a few particularly foul swear words. "So, I guess touching you is out, huh?" He held up a hand, then dropped it to the table to join his other. "No, don't answer."

He looked down at his hands, now fisted. His tanned face burned with repressed emotion. Anger? Embarrassment? She couldn't tell.

He groaned, then swore under his breath once more. Succinct, harsh words. "I'm sorry. Late again, it seems."

Sam rubbed his head with sharp, jerky motions. His hair looked as if it had been styled with a blender, strands of dark blond hair twisted and turned, sticking up every which way. When he stopped torturing his hair, a look of grim resignation had replaced the earlier hotter emotions on his countenance.

"Knight's a lucky man. I hope he realizes it."

"I think he does," Abbie replied, relieved Sam had, unasked, given up his pursuit. Like Biff, the lawman subscribed to the unwritten code of the Texas male: No poaching on another man's woman.

Sam turned to signal the waitress to give his order. After the waitress left, Sam turned and smiled at her as he snatched one of her French fries.

"Can I ask you a police-type question?" she asked to fill the awkward silence.

Sam lifted a sandy-colored eyebrow at the change of subject. "I guess it depends on what the question is."

“Do you know of a uniform by the name of Randy Sloan?”

Sam’s smiling countenance closed down like a castle gate shutting off the courtyard. This had to be how he looked when questioning suspects and apprehending bad guys. She wasn’t sure she liked this Sam.

“Why?” he snapped. He lifted a hand, halting her answer, then blew out a disgusted breath. “Sorry, didn’t mean to bark at you. Sloan’s bad news, Abbie. Stay away from him. He’s an internal affairs nightmare, and the only things keeping him on the force are the union and some political bigwigs.”

“What kind of trouble is he in?”

Sam’s face darkened. “Why do you want to know?” he growled. “You interested in the slick son of a bitch? Was all the talk of Knight just camouflage?”

Sweet Gaia, the man acted jealous! Maybe the grim resignation she’d spied on his face was more like unrelenting determination.

“Abbie, answer me! What the hell do you want with a cretin like Sloan?” Sam reached over and grasped her hand in his and squeezed. Hard.

She winced. He released her hand.

“It’s for a case. Sorry, I can’t go into details. I just needed to know what you thought of him, which I now know,” she said, rubbing her hand where he’d gripped it. “But how do I contact him?”

Sam stared at her hand, then slid his across the table palm up. “Sorry. Friends?”

She placed her hand on his, and he rubbed it gently, almost apologetically, with his thumb. “Friends.” She hurriedly added, “But that’s all it can ever be.”

“Yeah, so you told me,” he said. He laid her hand back down. Clearing his throat, he asked, “Why do you want to find Sloan? Like I told you, he’s bad news ... and he’s not particularly nice to women.”

“I need to ask him a few questions.” She avoided his searching gaze by addressing her cooling French fries.

“Here, have some of mine. They’re still hot.” He shoved his plate toward her. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with Jo Beth Tibbs’s murder, would it?”

“Maybe.”

“You know Walden has your client pegged for the killer, don’t you?” Now it was Sam who avoided looking at her while he concentrated on his food.

“I figured he might leap to such an erroneous conclusion,” she said. “Jeff always did grab at the easy solution to most situations.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty dumb that way,” Sam agreed with a grin. “But I think Reverend Briggs is pressuring him to arrest Jurnik for the crime. The story I heard was because Jo Beth was killed there, Jurnik must’ve done it.”

“What do you think?” Abbie captured his gaze with hers.

“I think the Reverend Briggs is pushing too hard.” Sam let out a disgusted breath and tortured his hair again. “I shouldn’t be talking to you about this, but I don’t believe your client is guilty. Other than the fact Ms. Tibbs was killed at his club, there is nothing connecting Golub to the murder. Everyone I’ve talked to says the breakup of their relationship was amicable and Jo Beth had no issues with her boss. She’d moved on to another man.”

“Everyone? I’m surprised,” she said. “I figured Bubba Hereford would have pointed the finger at Jurnik.”

“No, he’s zeroed in on the owner of GothCity. Not sure why Jurnik wasn’t on Bubba’s radar screen.” Sam shrugged and took a drink of his beer. “Maybe Bubba thought Jurnik was too old and Jo Beth would come back to him eventually. But then she didn’t. She moved on to Alek, and he was their age. That threatened Bubba more.”

“Probably right.” She ate some fries off his plate, chewing slowly, before she asked her next question. “Do you think Randy Sloan could’ve killed Jo Beth out of jealousy?”

Sam leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowed in thought. “Yeah, he could. And I did check on his whereabouts the night of the murder after I heard from the Exotica dancers he’d been harassing Jo Beth. He was on patrol—alone—on the night in question. He had a shoulder mike and could answer calls anywhere, not just in his car. And, yes, I checked. He had no runs during the time in question, so he wouldn’t have been missed.”

“So in effect, he has no alibi. Sam, I really do need to talk to him.”

“Damn it, Abbie.” Sam’s hair took more abuse from his fingers. “He’s a friggin’ time bomb.” He looked around and leaned closer to her. In a lowered voice, he continued, “You didn’t hear this from me, but internal affairs has him pegged as the guy most likely to go ballistic and take out innocent civilians. We’re trying to get the bastard off the streets. For the last month or so the review board has dragged him through internal peer review panels and citizen’s hearings to make sure when we kick his ass off the force the union and a lawyer can’t get him reinstated.” He exhaled and swore under his breath. “If you ask him questions about Jo Beth, he’d probably shoot you.”

“Then go with me.”

“Why not Knight? Let Knight question him.”

“Then Sloan might shoot before Luc ever had a chance to ask a question. I’m a lot less threatening than Luc.”

“Well, you’re right about that,” Sam conceded. “With me there, he’d be less likely to do anything. But then you’ll have to watch your ass from then on. Sloan would knife you in the back if he felt you were a danger to him.”

“Luc has my back,” she assured him.

Sam muttered something foul ... and snide. “Sorry.”

But he wasn’t.

“Okay, when do you want to do this?” Sam asked, resigned.

“Today?” She looked at her day-timer. “I have nothing this afternoon. Does he still work second shift?”

“Yeah. Meet me at the entrance to the police station at two-thirty this afternoon. I’ll drive us to his district call station.”

* * * *

Abbie sat on a bench just inside the entrance to the Austin Police Department’s main headquarters. The activity in the lobby was hectic. She felt sorry for the desk sergeant who patiently tried to follow a hysterical Mexican woman’s mixture of English and Spanish. She was ready to offer her assistance to the beleaguered man when Sam appeared.

“So, you’re really gonna do this?” He groaned.

“Yes. I need to ask Sloan about Jo Beth,” she explained. “We’ve questioned everyone else. He might have something that will help, or...”

“He might reveal something linking him to the murder,” Sam finished for her. “I

know how to investigate, Abbie; I could do this without you. Just give me the questions you want to ask.”

“No, I need to do this,” Abbie insisted. “Luc and I have questioned everyone. We both have a sense of what’s going on in this case, and we’ll know when someone lies.”

“And you think I don’t have a feel for the case?” Sam asked, anger tinged with hurt coloring his voice. He pulled her from the bench with a tad bit more force than needed, then kept her close to him by tucking her arm into his and walking toward the door.

“No, I didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” she said in a soothing tone. “It’s just Luc and I are somewhat tuned into people’s body language and emotions.”

“Are you saying you’re empathic?” Sam asked as he held the passenger door of his unmarked car open for her.

“Sort of.”

He shut the door on her answer, then strolled to the driver’s side and got into the car. He put the key into the ignition, but didn’t turn it over. “Put on your seat belt.” He buckled his, then angled his body toward her. “I understand empathic abilities, Abbie. I don’t tell many people this, but I get the feeling you’ll understand. My grandmother was almost full-blooded Cherokee and from a long line of shamans. I have a little insight or intuition myself from time to time. If Sloan killed Jo Beth, we’ll figure it out.”

So that was the energy Abbie had sensed in him. Sam had placed a lot of trust in her by revealing something so intimate about himself. Being part Native American was an open invitation for small-minded people to ridicule and belittle. She imagined Sam had borne the brunt of being called a half-breed many times in his life.

“Thank you for telling me, Sam. I won’t tell anyone. Not even Luc.”

Although Luc may have already sensed the power in Sam. If Luc asked, she would confirm it. She would never lie to her lover. It would be a betrayal of Luc’s trust in her.

With an abrupt nod, Sam said, “Fine. Let’s get going then.”

* * * *

Sloan’s patrol area was the near east side of downtown Austin, from Towne Lake north to the University of Texas campus. The area was a mixture of businesses, warehouses, and rundown residential neighborhoods. Crime was no stranger here.

They had to track Sloan down. He’d already gone out on patrol when they reached the district call station where the patrol officers changed shifts. The shift supervisor radioed Sloan and told him to meet an officer at Taco Cabana on East Tenth Street.

When she and Sam drove into the lot, Sloan’s patrol car was parked and empty. A quick glimpse inside the small chain restaurant showed no uniform inside.

“Where the hell is he?” Sam asked as he turned the car off.

“Maybe he’s in the restroom?” Abbie replied.

Loud noises like metal on metal and shouts emanated from behind the restaurant.

“Maybe he’s up to his usual tricks,” growled Sam, as he opened his door, his other hand going to unsnap his holster at the same time. “Stay here. Stay down. If you hear any shots, call in officer needs assistance and shots fired.”

Sam didn’t give Abbie any time to agree or disagree, so she didn’t feel guilty about following him at a safe distance. If shots were fired, she’d do something about it, covering Sam and any innocents who might be involved. Now all she had to do was figure out who was innocent and who wasn’t.

As she peeked around the corner of the building, she gasped.

Sam swung round and glared at her. "I thought I told you to stay in the car."

"I didn't agree," she snapped back, shoving past him to watch as Luc pummeled the man she assumed was Randy Sloan into the cement.

She pulled on Sam's sleeve. "Stop him."

"Why? I figure whatever Sloan did to get Knight so all-fired pissed means he probably deserves the beating he's getting." He looked down at her. "Please tell me you didn't call for assistance."

"No, you said only if shots were fired. Why?"

He muttered something that sounded like "at least you followed one order right." Then he said, "Because you don't want Knight to go to jail for assaulting an officer, do you?"

"No! So stop him!" She shoved him in the direction of the men rolling on the ground among broken bottles, Taco Cabana garbage, and other filth she didn't care to guess at.

"I'm not getting between Knight's fists and Sloan. Your man looks like he knows how to hit."

"Grrr." Abbie stepped forward, shrugging off Sam's restraining hand.

"Luc! Stop it!" Abbie yelled as she simultaneously reached out with a gentle mental nudge.

Luc's mind opened to her instantly, but he continued to punch Sloan.

Luc, stop it. Please. He can't talk if his mouth is too swollen.

Luc stopped, holding Sloan's slumped body up with one tensed arm. He turned his head just enough to keep his victim within his peripheral vision.

What are you doing here? And with him?

We came to question Sloan. I wouldn't have bothered if my partner had shared his plans with me.

Well, you didn't share with me, either.

But I hadn't planned on this. Sam sat with me at lunch. I asked a few questions, then one thing led to another.

Sam? One thing led to another?

Luc let go of Sloan, who fell to the ground and lay in a fetal position, groaning and spitting blood.

"Adams! What's the meaning of having lunch with my woman?" Luc ignored the downed cop and strolled toward Sam.

"Luc, it wasn't like..." Abbie said as she placed herself between the two men.

Luc paused by Abbie and lifted her chin with one dirty, bloody finger. He placed a punishing hot kiss on her mouth, then whispered, "Shut up. I can tell when a man is sniffing around my girl. He reeks of it. Keep an eye on Sloan, would you? But keep your distance." He kissed her again, then picked her up and gently set her out of his way.

"Luc," she groaned, then lowered her voice to grumble, "Stupid macho men."

Both Sam and Luc yelled almost in unison, "I heard that."

Abbie turned her back on them and kept a sharp eye on the downed man.

Sloan had managed to push himself up on one arm. His gun was still buckled into his hip holster. Why in Lucifer's name hadn't Luc disarmed the man?

Because he wasn't afraid of the gun.

But she was. She sent a small burst of heat at it, which she hoped would gum up the

works enough so it wouldn't fire.

"Hey bitch," Sloan said. His words sounded as if he gargled them. "Seen you around the courthouse. You sure are one nice piece of ass. Said as much to Knight over there, and he dragged my ass out here to teach me a lesson. But hey, it's a free world and I can say what I like when I like it."

"You are a horse's ass, aren't you?" she said. *And stupid.* "Sam was right. You're a disgrace to the uniform."

Sloan sat up and leaned back against the trash container. "Fuck you, lady. And who cares what Detective Big Shot thinks. No way I'm gonna get canned. I got the union—and the prosecutor—on my side." He swiped a hand across his mouth, smearing blood and spittle across his face. He wiped the hand on his uniform trousers.

"Walden is on your side?" she scoffed. "I don't believe it."

"Believe it," sneered Sloan. "I work undercover for Citizens for a Decent Austin."

Here was something she hadn't known. An undercover operation.

"Is that why you hung around Exotica?" she asked.

"Yeah, why else?" he eyed her from beneath lowered lashes.

He lied. The lies practically wrote themselves in the air above his head like little cartoon balloons.

"The way I hear it is you had the hots for Jo Beth Tibbs." His expression remained unchanged, but his emotions winced at the direct hit. "I even heard you tried to get into GothCity when she dated the owner, but you wussed out when they labeled you a submissive. Bet it hurt, didn't it, Randy?"

His eyes flared open. He surged from the ground while he simultaneously reached for his gun. "You fucking bitch! I'll show you submissive."

Abbie gathered enough energy from the air to hold Sloan in place, his feet moving uselessly against the pavement. His finger clicked the trigger, but the gun didn't fire. She'd successfully melted the mechanism.

"Little cat." Luc's soothing tones reached her before his arms came around her from behind. "Put the bad man down. You aren't playing fair, darling."

"He's working with Walden and Briggs," she whispered.

"I know, sweetheart. Sam and I heard. You're revealing too much to the humans, sweetheart. Put him down now."

Luc stroked her arms and nuzzled her neck. The tension and fear at Sloan's sudden attack melted away. Luc had her back; she could let go now.

Sam? she asked. *When did you guys get so friendly?*

Just now, when Sam agreed Sloan was dead meat for threatening you.

Threatening me? When? Now? I wasn't in any danger. I'd already handled the gun and knew I could hold him until you were ready for him.

No, before you got here. Sloan threatened both of us if we didn't leave the Jo Beth Tibbs investigation alone.

Oh. I'm glad you pounded on him then.

Luc chuckled against her neck. Then he kissed the spot where his lips rested.

Let him go, sweetheart. The fight's gone out of him.

"Okay." She pushed forward with her arms, just as she released the energy she'd gathered. Sloan flew back, his feet a half-foot off the ground, and hit the trash bin with a loud thunk.

Sam hurried past them, casting a look of awe mingled with fear at Abbie. He bent over and removed Sloan's gun from the man's slack fingers.

Sloan sat, slumped against the container.

Sam returned to stand next to them. "What did you just do?"

"Mind control?" she said, seeing if he would accept the answer.

"I've heard of shamans doing that in certain rituals, but you aren't Native American." He looked at her askance. "Are you?"

"Not exactly, but close."

Sam shrugged, but she sensed the topic would be returned to at a later time. Right now they had a situation.

"What are we gonna do with him?" Sam asked as he angled his head toward the downed man.

"We're gonna buy him a cup of coffee," Luc said. "And he's going to explain his relationship to Jo Beth and Citizens for a Decent Austin."

Sam grabbed one of Sloan's arms, Luc, the other. They followed Abbie into the fast-food restaurant. Luckily not too many people were inside. Abbie got drinks and food while the two men escorted Sloan to the restroom to clean him up a bit.

When the three came out, they joined Abbie. Sam and Luc sat on either side of Abbie, across from Sloan who sat as docile as a lamb.

"What did you do to him?" she whispered to Luc. "He looks drugged."

"Wasn't me," he said. "It was Sam. He blew some powder at Sloan, and the man calmed down almost instantly."

She looked over at Sam. "What powder?"

"An old family recipe," he said. "I'll share the ingredients later. Right now, ask your questions, because the powder will only last so long. Sloan will answer."

"Truthfully?" she asked. She knew of herbs grown locally which had sedative effects. But a truth serum? Well, it was better than her performing a relaxation spell in a public restaurant.

"No, the herbs have a calming effect. He might let something slip. Plus, you said you two would know if he lied." Sam leaned forward and caught Sloan's attention, removing the caffeinated drink. "He doesn't need a stimulant right now. Is that water?" He pointed to the paper cup in front of her.

"Yes."

"Here Randy, have a drink. It'll make your mouth feel better." Sam shoved the glass toward him.

Sloan picked it up and gulped it like a man who hadn't had a drink in ages. A slight grimace on his bruised face was the only sign of emotion he displayed.

"Randy, did you have feelings for Jo Beth Tibbs?" Abbie asked in a low, calm voice.

"Yeah." He wiped a hand across his eyes and let out a sob. "I wanted her, dammit. But she wouldn't give me the time of day."

"Did you go to Exotica to see her, or was there another reason?"

"At first it was a job, ya know, for Walden and Jim Bob and the fucking decency committee." He paused and sipped more water. "Then I saw her. She was an angel. Too good for the place, but she wouldn't listen to me. Just seduced me with her sweet-smelling body and teasing smiles." He closed his eyes as if he could see her even now. "I followed her. Jim Bob wanted to know who she saw and what she did."

“Why?” asked Luc, his voice harsh with an unnamed emotion.

Sloan shook his head. “Not sure. I think at first it was for Bubba. The reverend was counseling them. But Jo Beth dumped the hick. Understood that. The guy got hit one too many times on the football field. She deserved better than him.” He accented his statement with one sharp nod.

“So, Jim Bob wanted you to keep track of Jo Beth?” Abbie asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I just said.”

“But what did your surveillance of Jo Beth have to do with the Citizens for a Decent Austin?”

“Nothing I could see.” Sloan slurred the words, his head wobbling on his neck as if he had a hard time holding it up. “Looked personal to me—but not for Bubba—for Jim Bob.”

“You think Jim Bob wanted Jo Beth for himself?” Abbie asked.

“Yeah. Bastard,” spat Sloan. “Acts all holier-than-thou, but I know better. Saw him one night. He walked right into GothCity like he owned the goddamn place. I sneaked in the back, through the kitchen. Watched him. He went upstairs with one of those submissives,” he hissed the word. “Me, I’m not into such shit, but old Jim Bob is. He is into it big-time. Alek knows. Just ask him. They are thick as thieves.”

Sloan’s head drifted to the table and landed with a thud. He snored gently. His body seemed almost boneless in sleep.

“Holy shit,” swore Sam. “Did you suspect this?”

“About Jim Bob lusting after Jo Beth?” Luc said. “I had an inkling. But the rest, no.”

“Me neither. Jim Bob gave me the creeps. After seeing him at GothCity, I thought he might have less-than-lofty motives,” Abbie said. “But Alek seemed afraid of him. I thought it was because of what Jim Bob and Walden threatened to do to his business. But now it seems more insidious.”

“Looks like we need to make another trip to GothCity,” Luc said.

“I think I’ll invite myself along,” Sam said. “They open at seven, right?”

“Yeah,” Luc said. “But I imagine Alek gets there earlier to set up.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you there at six,” Sam said. “I need to get Sloan home and someone called in to cover his patrol.”

“Six it is then,” Abbie said.

Both men stared at her, equivalent narrowed glances and tensed jaws. They could’ve been brothers, one dark, one light. “No, guys, I’m going. If you try to stop me, I’ll just follow on my own.”

Luc swore.

Sam smiled. “Sure you don’t want to hand her over to me?”

So, Sam had been up front with Luc about his desire for her. Must have something to do with the frigging Texas male code of honor.

Luc glared at him. His anger rolled over her in waves. She was surprised Sam didn’t melt into a puddle. “Over my dead body, Adams.”

Sam shrugged. “No need to be so damn dramatic, Knight. A simple *no* would have sufficed.”

Luc grunted and pulled Abbie out of the booth. “Six at GothCity. *We’ll* see you then.”

Sam smiled and mouthed the words “pussy-whipped.” His laughter followed them

out the door.

Chapter Nineteen

In the late afternoon sun, GothCity looked more like the auto parts store it once was than the Goth nightclub it purported to be. The stocky cinderblock construction's once white exterior showed through a bad black paint job. The place appeared cheap, tacky, and abandoned in the harsh glow of the setting sun. The parking lot was empty, except for Adams's car and one other, adding to the desolate feeling of the site. The only thing colorful was the neon sign and several scraggly black-eyed Susans that had managed to grow from between the cracks in the asphalt lot.

Luc pulled his truck next to Adams's vehicle. Adams had parked next to an old Volkswagen Bug, painted black with a skull painted in silver metallic on the hood and featuring a bumper sticker reading "Goths Do It Kinkier."

Abbie had refused to talk about her lunch with the detective, and the omission worried Luc. He respected her mental privacy, but damn, he'd give anything to know how she'd responded to Adams's overtures. Sam had as much as admitted he'd told Abbie how he felt. And even if the cop hadn't been honest, like he'd told Abbie earlier, he could smell the pheromones of a male animal attempting to lure a female to his side. Adams had reeked of them at Taco Cabana.

Probably still did. Luc didn't figure Adams for a quitter.

"Stay close to me," he said more harshly than he'd wanted, but the anger at Adams's effrontery in approaching his woman still rankled. The feelings wouldn't go away soon. Maybe never.

"Stop worrying," Abbie said. "I love you. And Sam knows it."

"Stop calling him Sam. He's Adams or Detective Adams."

"Luc, now you're just being silly." She rubbed his arm, then patted one of his hands clenched around the steering wheel. "Come on, let go. We need to talk to Alek about his relationship with Jim Bob."

Luc released the steering wheel only to grasp her face gently between hands which trembled more than he liked. "I love you. You're mine. I'll kill any man who tries to take you away from me. Even a cop. Understand?"

She said nothing, just stared wide-eyed. Had he scared her? No, he didn't get those vibes from her. Maybe he repulsed her with his jealous possessiveness ... and he just couldn't read the emotion. He mentally groaned. Please Gaia, don't let him lose the ground he'd already gained.

"Luc. Luc." She whispered his name between little biting kisses to his jaw, his lips and the end of his nose. "No one will take me from you. I wouldn't go."

She placed one hot, moist kiss on his lips. "Now, can we go to work? I'm sure Jurnik and my mother would like to come home from Hill Country exile. There's only so much flitting about naked in the hills and the woods my mother can take. Then she gets mean. Trust me, you wouldn't like my mother when she's mean."

"Abbie, little cat," he breathed against her lips, "thank you." Then he kissed her with all the love and trust he could muster.

"Wow," she said when he released her lips. "Hold that thought. Later at your place we can pick up right there."

“Deal.” He laughed and tapped her chin with a gentle finger.

“You two gonna sit and canoodle all day? Or are we gonna get some investigating done?” Adams stood at the passenger side window, glaring at them.

Luc realized he could afford to be generous, after all Abbie was his and Adams was shit out of luck.

He smiled at the detective. “Coming, Sam. Sorry to keep you waiting, just making sure Abbie knew to stay close.”

Sam cast a wary glance at him. “Sounds like a good idea. If Alek is a partner of Jim Bob’s and forgot to mention the fact when you spoke to him, he’s got something to hide.”

“He definitely held something back the other night,” Abbie said, as Sam held the door for her. “This could have been it. Wonder how Madoc figures into all this?”

“Madoc? Who’s he?” Sam closed the door behind her.

“A bastard you don’t need to worry about,” Luc said. “He’s out of it. I took care of him.”

“Took care of him how?” Sam asked, suspicion oozing from each word.

“Stop teasing Sam, Luc.” Abbie turned to the cop. “Mark Madoc attacked me several years ago. He tried again the other night, here at GothCity. Luc stopped him and turned him over to the family to handle his punishment. Alek admitted Madoc was a partner in the club.”

“Attacked how? What family? We don’t like vigilante justice in Austin.”

“It’s not like that, Sam. Trust me, Madoc is alive and well,” Abbie said. “What’s important is if Alek and Madoc are partners and Alek and Jim Bob were as close as Sloan said, then...”

“Maybe Jim Bob and Madoc know each other too,” concluded Sam. “Or maybe Alek strung Jim Bob along, made him a partner to keep the reverend and his decency gang off his case. Madoc might not ever have met Jim Bob. Hell, Alek had one silent partner, why not two, neither of whom knew the other?”

“It’s a possibility. Why don’t we ask Alek?” Luc suggested. “Instead of playing guessing games in the parking lot.”

“Good idea,” Sam said.

Luc led the way to the employee entrance at the back of the building. The door was unlocked. More ominously, it stood wide open, letting the heat of the day into the air-conditioned coolness of the building. The disparity between the inside and outside temperatures was so great a fine white mist hung in the opening of the door.

Luc shoved Abbie behind him and pulled his gun from his shoulder holster. Sam already had his weapon in hand.

“Let me go first, Luc,” Sam said. “I’m the law here, not you. By the way, you do have a license to carry concealed, don’t you?”

“I’ve got a permit,” replied Luc somewhat acerbically, “but I’m more than happy to let you be the primary target. I’ll cover your ass.”

Sam snorted, then went in low. Luc followed high. He sensed Abbie shadowing his back, felt the ward she placed behind them to keep someone from surprising them. His little witch was a good partner, but he still wished she were anywhere but here. Something felt—no, smelled—wrong with this whole situation.

“Do you smell it?” Abbie whispered.

“What?” Sam sniffed the air. “I smell spilled beer and day-old smoke. Wonder if the

Travis County restaurant inspectors know Alek is violating the county's no-smoking ordinance?"

"I think that's the least of our worries," Luc said. "Abbie and I smell death. I can taste it."

"I don't sense any other life forms inside," Abbie said. "You can put your guns away."

Luc holstered his, but Sam didn't. As the detective eyed the two of them in askance, they entered the main room of the club.

Lying on the stage, lit by the spotlight, was Alek.

His position was reminiscent of Jo Beth's, his legs splayed around the dance pole. Unlike the dead girl, Alek's arms were outstretched, cuffed to a spreader bar. His head was encased in a bondage hood; eyes covered and mouth stuffed with a ball gag. The rest of his body was naked, bruised, and bloody. Even from their position near the bar, Luc could see Alek's genitals had been cut off and stuffed into a half-broken bottle. The bottle stood between his legs at the juncture of his thighs and the pole.

Sam winced and muttered several vile epithets. "Whoever did this knew about Jo Beth's crime scene. But was it the same killer?"

"Maybe. Jo Beth was strangled. We don't know how Alek was killed yet." Luc couldn't divulge the fact about Jurnik's tie without incriminating his client. He didn't see any evidence of strangulation, but the killer could have used his hands or taken away whatever weapon he might have used. "Maybe he died of shock from loss of blood? We'll need to see if the blood is mostly ante-mortem or post."

"That's the coroner's job. Just stay back and don't touch anything. I'll get the crime scene tape and radio this in," Sam said as he turned to go out to his car.

"Wait a minute, Sam. Before you call in the troops, let Abbie and I do some more investigation first. What difference does a few minutes make one way or another?" Luc said.

"What can you do the crime scene team can't?" Sam asked.

"You'd be surprised," Luc replied. "Abbie? What do you sense? Do you feel it?"

"Yes, evil. But it—no, it can't be." Abbie grabbed Luc's belt as if she needed support. Sam started forward as if to catch her. "There are remnants of dark magick performed. The magick's signature seems familiar—It's Madoc. He's been here ... and not so long ago. But he wasn't at Jo Beth's scene, was he? Vidal should've been able to sense his presence."

"I agree." Luc pulled her into his arms, waving off Sam. She laid her head on his chest as if she wanted to burrow into him. "We need Vidal. Can you contact him telepathically?"

She nodded, touching an amulet at her neck and closing her eyes. The charm helped with the longer distances for the telepathic waves to travel. When she opened her eyes again, she made an attempt to smile. "He'll be here soon."

"Who'll be here soon? What the hell is going on?" Sam asked. "Why shouldn't I call this in right now? And how in the blue blazes can you smell evil?"

"Do you believe in magick, Sam?" Luc asked, contemplating the bewildered cop over Abbie's head.

Sam didn't answer immediately and when he did, inexplicable anger accented each word. "Abbie told you, didn't she?" Hurt feelings compounded the searing look the cop

shot at Abbie's back.

"Told me what?" Luc asked. He didn't want Sam getting chummy with Abbie, but he also didn't want the man doubting her integrity. "She told me nothing. Said what you guys talked about was private and had nothing to do with this case. I'm not happy about that, but I respect her privacy."

Sam's face lightened somewhat. "I told her about my Native American heritage. My grandmother was a shaman. I used to spend the summers on the reservation with her." His blue eyes revealed hidden spiritual depths the cop had chosen to hide from the world at large. "I've seen things that defeated all rational explanations. When I reached the age of thirteen, I did my spiritual retreat to discover my animal totem. So, trust me, I believe in magick, things that go bump in the night, and other supernatural phenomena. I've even experienced dream state in my animal form."

Luc knew whatever he felt about Sam as a potential rival for Abbie's affections, the man could be entrusted with Abbie's and his secrets.

"I trust him, Luc," Abbie said into his chest. "He's not a threat to us ... in any way."

Luc kissed the top of her head. Sam flinched at the gesture as if a stake had been driven in his heart. No, the man would never do anything to hurt Abbie.

"Madoc is a witch," Luc said. "He took a turn to the dark side when he attacked Abbie after she repudiated his marriage proposal. He was banished by our local Council of Elders. Somehow, he managed to return to Austin. He was here the night we questioned Alek." Luc rubbed Abbie's back more to calm himself than her. "I escorted him back to the Council, which was to decide his punishment for violating his sentence of exile. Someone on the Council must have helped him escape ... again."

"You're saying you're witches?" Sam looked from one to the other of them. "The flying thing with Sloan earlier? I didn't imagine it then. That was magick?"

"Yes, I used concentrated wind energy to move him." Abbie turned within Luc's arms to face Sam. "Actually, I'm part witch and part wizard. Luc is part wizard and part shape-shifter."

"Shaman-type shape-shifting?" Sam eyed Luc with a thoughtful gaze.

"A little more complicated than that, but basically, yes."

"What *animé*?" Sam asked.

"It depends. My earth *animé* is a panther. My air is a hawk. And my water is the crocodile."

Sam's lips twisted into a semblance of humor. "My animal spirit is the cougar. Guess we cats have to stick together, huh?"

"Sure, as long as you don't expect to share my woman, we can be feline pals."

Luc held out his hand. Sam took it. The two men shook.

"Did you feel it?" Abbie asked them.

"The energy?" Sam asked. "Yeah. What was it?"

"It was magick recognizing magick," Luc explained. "You've got power in your blood. You just need to hone it."

Sam snorted. "You sound like my Cherokee relatives. They keep telling me I'm getting too citified."

"Maybe they're right," Luc said. "Magick is not something to be ignored. There's so few who have it."

Sam shrugged. "So, how does this bad-ass witch Madoc figure into all this?" The

topic of wasted magick was closed.

“And why was he consorting with humans like Alek and Jim Bob?” Abbie added, zeroing in on the crux of the matter. “And did he kill Alek, or did Jim Bob? I would’ve sworn Alek was deathly afraid of Jim Bob.”

“Children, I’m here.” Vidal appeared in the corner of the room near the main entrance. “Sorry it took so long, but I was at a late afternoon soiree for the Austin symphony. Couldn’t just pop out in a flash of smoke in front of the Ladies’ Symphonic Society, now could I?” He walked toward them, noticing Sam for the first time. “Lucifer’s balls, a human. Children, why didn’t you tell me? Now, what is the amnesia spell? I always confuse it with the temporary memory loss one.”

“Uncle, don’t worry. He knows.” Abbie hurried to her uncle and gave him a hug. “He’s almost one of us. He’s got Cherokee shaman blood.”

Vidal peered at Sam for a few seconds, then smiled. “Yes, you do, my boy. You need to cultivate those skills. I dated a shaman once. She had very powerful magick.”

Sam snorted again.

Vidal lifted one shoulder in an artless manner. “Don’t mean to tell you your business, my boy. By the way, I’m Vidal Storm, Abbie’s uncle. And you are?”

“Detective Sam Adams, Austin Police Department.” Sam shook the hand Vidal offered, then dropped it. His eyes flared open. “There was that energy again.”

Vidal patted him on the arm. “Not to worry, my boy, just magick—”

“Recognizing magick,” Sam finished. “I know. I’ve heard it before.”

Vidal noticed the body on the stage. “My, my. Alek came to a bad end.”

“You knew Alek?” Luc asked.

“Oh, I visited the club now and then. Dated a young lady who wanted to visit the scene. And you know, it never hurts to know what the wannabes are doing. I made unofficial reports to the Council.” He turned and addressed Sam. “All harmless fun for the most part, Officer. Well, except for the blood drinking. AIDS and HIV, you know. The Council put out several warnings to our young people about the health risks. But youngsters are sometimes not very mindful of their elders.”

There was more to it than what Vidal had said. For some reason, the older witch had omitted the whole truth. Luc would corner him later and find out why the Council had been interested in a human hangout like GothCity.

“That’s nice, Uncle,” Abbie said, “but we need to know what Alek can tell us.”

“No problem, Abbie-girl.”

Vidal concentrated on the space around the crime scene. He smiled and nodded. “Yes, his spirit is very strong and very recently created. I’d say he’s only been dead for two hours at the most. Let’s see if we can get him to appear. He’s being somewhat shy. He’s embarrassed a lady is present and seeing him at less than his best.”

“Jesus,” muttered Sam. “The man is frigging dead. How can he be here, let alone be embarrassed?”

“This must be your first séance, Sam. Don’t worry, this is my specialty. Never lost a spirit yet. Or a participant.” Vidal chuckled at his little joke. “When we’re done, we’ll help Alek pass on to the next plane of existence. Alek was not truly a bad person, just mixed up with the wrong crowd.”

Yes, Vidal knew more than he was telling about Alek and GothCity. Definitely, they would be talking later.

Not to worry, my boy, and excuse me for barging into your head. The Council didn't know about Madoc and Alek's association until just recently. The young shifter you captured at the fire the other night just told them all he knew. I really did frequent this establishment to impress the lady I dated. I reported to the Council that some of our young people were commingling with humans, participating in risky acts. I did not know of Madoc's association then. He was never present those times I visited, or trust me, I would have hunted him down like the slug he is.

Luc's tension level lowered. Vidal couldn't have stopped the violence that had begun with Jo Beth's death.

Exactly. I would never have endangered my niece or other innocents.

"Jesus, are you guys communicating telepathically?" Sam's exclamation broke into Luc's mental conversation. The detective eyed them as if they were aliens come to Earth.

"Yes, we were," Luc verified. "Bet you could do it too—maybe in a dream state. Ask your shaman grandmother."

The detective snarled, then plopped into a chair far enough from the crime scene so as not to contaminate any evidence.

Luc chuckled. This had to be hard for the cynical cop who'd sublimated his heritage to logic and investigatory procedures.

Luc chose a chair near Sam's and sat, pulling Abbie onto his lap.

"Now, let's see. Children, I'll need your help on the mental level. Luc, we'll do this just like we did with Jo Beth. Abbie is an old hand at this, she'll just blend in. Let's do it."

Luc cleared his mind of all external sensations and opened up to the possibilities. Abbie easily joined him on the plane paralleling reality.

Vidal's mental touch added to theirs, clarified and attenuated the mental image of a world that was theirs, but then again, wasn't. At the last minute, Vidal's mental energy reached out and pulled Sam into the mix.

Sam's real-plane gasp vibrated through the alternate plane, rippling their perception of the alternate GothCity. The detective's corporeal body was tense, his hand gripping the table next to him as if to anchor him to the ground. Luc would've reassured Sam except Vidal had made the mental contact.

Alek, my name is Vidal Storm. We come to you today to seek information as to who has done this to you, and to help you pass to the next plane of existence. Appear and tell your story. There is no shame in death.

The four of them shared a view of an area about four feet above the body.

A distortion in the plane's atmosphere formed. It looked like heat waves rising off hot tarmac. Soon thereafter, a human shape evolved. It was Alek, clothed as he'd been just prior to his death.

Luc concluded his body had been stripped naked and the bondage gear put on him post-mortem.

It was the same killer. Abbie's thoughts were a mere whisper in the connection the foursome shared. Jo Beth was clothed until after her death too. Do you think all the damage was done post-mortem?

How did you know that? Sam's thoughts were shaky, but readable. Luc sensed the man's trepidation and curiosity at the situation in which he found himself. *We kept it secret—about the body being manipulated after her death.*

Jo Beth's spirit told us, Luc commented. Just as Alek's will tell us. His spiritual image is clothed, so he wasn't stripped naked until after he was dead.

Alek remembers himself as he was when he was alive, Abbie explained. He was embarrassed because he can see his naked corporeal body from the alternate plane.

"Jesus H. Christ," Sam muttered on both planes. He hadn't gotten used to the idea he need only think, not speak.

Children, time is flying. This establishment is due to open soon. Even now the employees are standing at the back door, trying to figure out how to get through an open door that won't let them.

Sam's mind issued a questioning vibration across the link holding them together. Ah, the cop was getting the idea now.

Abbie put a shield on the door so no one could sneak in behind us, Luc clarified.

Yeah, sure. I should've figured that. Invisible force field. Sam's physical body slumped against the back of his chair. Who's asking the questions? I can keep the public out, because this is a crime scene, but we can't delay much longer.

Alek, what happened here? Abbie took the lead as the least threatening of the four of them.

My partners cut me out of the loop, that's what fucking happened. Bastards! spat Alek.

Which partners? Abbie asked.

Madoc and the fucking Reverend Jim Bob Briggs. Alek's spirit wailed and bemoaned his fate.

So, Madoc did know Jim Bob. Both men were partners in the club. Was this all about a falling out of business partners? Or was there more?

Who killed you? Sam asked, getting to the point.

Alek's image started and wavered at the sound of Sam's deep, harshly voiced question.

Alek, soothed Abbie. We're here to help ... all of us. Sam is a police officer. He'll make sure the person who killed you is caught and punished.

A sobbing sigh escaped Alek. One of them. They were both here. Not sure. Someone hit me on the head. Then I was floating above my body. The two of them stripped me naked and did that, he pointed to his corporeal body with a transparent finger, *to me.*

Did they kill Jo Beth? asked Abbie.

Don't know. Maybe. Maybe they tricked Bubba into doing it. He wasn't here today. I think they might go after him next. He isn't too bright, but even dumb animals can sense evil, right?

Why did they kill her? Sam asked.

Stupid little fool threatened to tell the world about the reverend's deviant sexual proclivities. She caught him coming out of one of the playrooms one night. He was her pastoral counselor, the man who preached family values and called her a sinner for loving me. She came to me, crying. She was so angry, felt so betrayed. She vowed he would pay. He's my partner, so I warned him. God help me, I wish I hadn't. Alek sobbed and pulled at his hair and clothing. *I as good as killed her. I deserve to rot in the deepest pits of Hell.*

So, what's Madoc got to do with all this? Luc asked. *I can understand the reverend being a tarnished saint and his concern about losing his reputation, but where does*

Madoc fit in?

He owns the club. I'm just the front man. Jim Bob was a silent partner. I gathered they knew each other for quite a while.

The revelation surprised Luc. Abbie grasped his hand and squeezed.

Alek's image faded in and out a couple of times, then held. Madoc told me some bitch had him run out of town. So he sneaked back here and started this club, hired me to run it. He wanted to punish the people who'd banished him. Said something about ruining the next generation, turning them to the dark side. A bunch of crap in my opinion, but the club concept went over big with the college-age and twenty-something crowd.

"Great Lucifer's balls!" Vidal exclaimed. "The Council never suspected anything more than some young people acting out."

"Madoc did manage to corrupt a few young men," Luc said, thinking of the human Dub Brown and the young shifter he'd captured.

What am I going to do now? Alek sighed. Where will I go?

Wherever your destiny lies, Vidal intoned. Gaia and the Father take this soul for your own.

Alek vanished, leaving only a silver shimmer in the air above the stage.

Abbie had her cell phone out as soon as the connection to Alek was broken.

"Daniel, sorry to bother you at home. Call Bubba Hereford, his number is in my address book on the computer. Warn him Reverend Briggs and Mark Madoc are not to be trusted and he should get to the closest law enforcement office and ask for protection."

Abbie listened for a few seconds. "That's right. Thanks."

"Good thinking, little cat." Luc stroked her back.

Sam jumped out of his chair, then strode to the back of the bar. "Let me out, Abbie."

"The shields are down, Sam."

Sam's loud voice ordered everyone away from the door, declaring the club a crime scene. Luc expected cops and crime scene techs would be swarming this place within minutes.

"You'd better go, Vidal. Meet us at my place later," Luc said.

"You got it, Luc. I haven't had this much fun in ages," Vidal said with a smile. "I'll just pop to the Council and tell them what we've learned today. We need to find the traitor in our midst soon. Can't have witches like Madoc going around aiding and abetting in human murders."

"You do that," Luc muttered. "Because the next time I see the bastard, he's a dead witch."

"Be careful, Uncle," Abbie called out as Vidal vanished in a blue cloud of smoke.

"Blue smoke?" He eyed Abbie.

"He's like mother. Likes the old ways best. None of the new-age benign earth worship. He's of the whiz-bang-boom days of witches and wizards." Abbie added, "Of course, he and mother marshal their power only for good."

"Never doubted it for a moment." Luc hugged her to him. "How are you holding up?"

"A little shaky, but I'll be okay now we've narrowed it down. I just want the killer or killers brought to justice."

"Me too, little cat, me too."

Chapter Twenty

Evicted by the crime scene crew, Luc and Abbie hung around the parking lot of GothCity until Sam came out to find them.

"You two can go home," Sam said. "You might need to come to the station and give a statement, edited for believability, of course."

Abbie smiled at the sarcasm in Sam's voice. The three of them had agreed to stick to the story that they'd gone to ask Alek a few questions about Jo Beth after talking to Randy Sloan, found his body and immediately called the police. No need confusing the issue with facts no one would believe anyway.

"Sam," Abbie said, "my secretary called. Bubba is in protective custody in the Llano County sheriff's office. Did you want to go with us when we question him about his relationship with Jim Bob and Madoc?"

"Not necessary," Sam said, looking over his shoulder at the club and the people swarming around it like a hive of bees. "I'll stay here and make sure nothing concrete is overlooked and underline the similarities between this death and Jo Beth's. Call me if Bubba has anything to say that might shed light on which one of the two did the actual killing, okay?"

"Damn, this is a holy mess!" The detective shook his head and rubbed his hair into sweaty spikes. "I can't put an APB out on Jim Bob since I can't tie him to the scene with physical evidence. Don't think my superiors would take the word of a dead man."

"We'll let you know if Bubba can tie Jim Bob directly into murder. If he can, we'll ask the Llano County sheriff to take his sworn statement," Abbie said.

Sam nodded, then turned and strolled away, back into the swarm of men and women combing the area around the building for clues.

"So should we drive to Llano and waste two hours? Or should we fly?" Luc asked.

Abbie rubbed her neck. She was tired and only wanted to go to Luc's house, climb into his Jacuzzi bathtub, and soak all the aches, pains, dirt, and sweat off her body. But Bubba's statement was crucial to bringing a killer to justice.

"Little cat," Luc whispered against her damp forehead. "Go home. I'll zip to Llano and talk to Bubba, then come right home."

"But we're partners. I feel like I'm letting you down." She looked up at him, gauging his feelings, his thoughts.

"You could never let me down." Luc took over massaging her neck. "You look like someone just rode you hard and put you away wet. Go home, darling. Rest. Let me handle things this time."

She leaned against Luc's indomitable strength. For the first time in a long time, she didn't feel as if it was a cop-out to rely on someone else. The toll Alek's revelations had taken on her was overwhelmingly exhausting, both physically and emotionally. If what Alek had said was true, Madoc had set up GothCity as a platform to ruin young witches and other preternaturals to get back at the Council for exiling him. The fact humans had also been corrupted was just a side benefit and probably amused the bastard.

She also couldn't disregard the fact Madoc was out to get her. The attempted break-in and the successful fire were proof of it. Tears filled her eyes as the grim reality of what

she had lost finally hit her. Her home, her sanctuary, were gone because of Madoc's pathological need to destroy what he could not have.

Jim Bob, Alek, Jo Beth, and all the others were just tools Madoc had used to achieve his dastardly goals. When the dupes became useless or impeded his plans, he'd ruthlessly discarded them. In her soul, she knew Madoc had killed both Jo Beth and Alek. But the justice system needed physical proof.

She didn't. Jo Beth and Alek were dead because of Madoc's vendetta against her and her family. The man had to pay. She would see to it.

"You aren't responsible," Luc soothed, smoothing hair from her face. He wiped away the tears on her cheeks, then pressed a kiss on her forehead.

"Are you reading my thoughts?" she asked.

"No, I promised I wouldn't unless you invited me." He tipped her head up and kissed her nose. "I just know how your mind works. Plus, this little frown-line," he traced a path across her forehead, "told me you're thinking and worrying too much."

"Luc, they're dead because of what happened all those years ago!"

"No, they're dead because Madoc is evil. You aren't responsible." He kissed her lips, a gentle touch imbued with love and trust. "Now, go home, sweetheart. This shouldn't take me long. I can't transport, since I've never been to the Llano Sheriff's Department before, so I'm going to shift to my air spirit and fly."

Abbie crinkled her nose. "What about clothes? You can't walk into the sheriff's office in the buff."

"You can help me with that," he whispered. "I'm gonna strip down in those bushes over there, then shift. You can fashion a bundle out of them and fasten them to me with my belt. You'll need to take my gun with you when you drive home."

"Sounds like you've done this before."

"Lots of times," he said as he walked to the shrubbery. "The only bad thing about shifting is my clothes get destroyed."

"Oh, not all bad thing. I sort of liked it the other night when you came to my rescue." She winked at him, and got a kiss for her effrontery.

* * * *

The sheriff's department was in a new building also housing the county courts and the jail. Located just outside of the small Hill Country town of Llano, it was evidence of the money tourism brought into the rural county.

Luc landed across the street from the building and used a small shack to shift and change into his clothes. Then he walked across the street and entered the building. Pressing the buzzer, he waited in a miniscule lobby servicing both the sheriff's department and the Llano County courts. Video cameras and state-of-the-art electronic security made the tiny complex as secure as it could get, outside of a small artillery barrage.

"May I help you?" a tinny-sounding voice came over the intercom.

"I'm Private Investigator Lucan Knight, here to speak to Ben Hereford. The sheriff is expecting me." He held his license up to the camera by the door.

"Yes, Mr. Knight. You heeled?"

"No." He turned in a full circle to show he was unarmed.

"Step through the door please. You'll be going through an x-ray machine, so please

put any metal objects in the tray by the door and hand it to the officer.”

Luc pulled what little change he had out of his pocket and entered a large circular room. It was the main communications room of the department and through a glass window he could see men in orange jumpsuits mopping the jail floors. Nice setup.

“Mr. Knight?”

A portly man in a tan uniform addressed him from a doorway leading to a hall off which Luc could count at least four doorways.

“Yes, sir. You Sheriff Black?” Luc walked forward and held out his hand.

The man shook it. “Yes. Bubba came to me with some cockamammy story about being in danger. Asked me to call some Daniel fellow, who in turn told me to expect you and an attorney by the name of Gooden.”

“Ms. Gooden couldn’t come. She asked me to act in her place.”

“No skin off my nose. Old Bubba isn’t too bright, but I can tell he ain’t lying to me. He’s scared shitless, pardon the plain language.”

“He has a right to be. Two people are dead, and Bubba may have the key to who the murderer is.” Luc followed the sheriff down the short hallway to the last door on the right.

Inside Bubba sat at a small conference table, staring into space.

“Bubba, here’s Mr. Knight.” The sheriff turned to Luc. “You need me to record this conversation?”

“Yes, that would be good. I promised Detective Sam Adams of Austin Homicide I would get a sworn statement. Is that possible?”

“Yeah, we got all the buzzers and bells when they built this new building. My dispatcher doubles as a court reporter. I’ll just spell her on the radio, and she can take the whole interrogation down word for word. We can print it out for you before you go.”

“Great. Thank you.”

After the court reporter had set up her computer stenographic equipment, Luc began.

“Bubba, can you tell me about how you hooked up with Reverend Jim Bob Briggs?”

Bubba turned vacant eyes toward Luc. “He’s the pastor at the church my family goes to.”

“Was that Jo Beth Tibbs’s church too?”

“Yes, until she moved to the city.” His brow creased in thought. “She came back to the church when I begged her to go to counseling.”

“When was this?”

“Right after she quit dating fucking Alek.” Bubba choked back a sob and swiped the tears running down his face with the back of his arm. “She only went to counseling for awhile. Said she couldn’t find it in her heart to love me no more and no preacher was gonna change her mind.”

“So what happened next?”

“Reverend Jim Bob had always urged me to keep an eye on her, ever since she’d left home the first time. So, I just continued on doing what the Reverend said ... and I kept my eye on her. The Reverend always said the city was wicked and she might fall into bad company ... which she did. She stripped at Exotica, then went to GothCity and that blood-drinking fucker, Alek.”

“Did you know the reverend owned a part of GothCity?”

“Not at the beginning.” Bubba’s eyes weren’t so vacant now. They flamed with

hatred.

“Tell me about the counseling with the reverend.”

“We went maybe three or four times. Things were good again, ya know? Then...”

Bubba shook his head. “Don’t know what happened. One day she said what I told you ... she didn’t love me and she couldn’t go on seeing the reverend. Said she was going to go back to stripping.”

“When was this?”

“Couple of weeks or so before she died. The reverend, the lying son of a bitch, had me following Jo Beth to protect her, he said. But what he really wanted was to get her for himself.” Bubba spat on the floor. “Jo Beth caught me one day after she got off work—I’d followed her. She yelled at me. Told me she stopped seeing me and the reverend because the son of a bitch made a pass at her. Then she told me the bastard was a what-ya-call-it, a hippo...”

“Hypocrite?” Luc suggested.

“Yeah. Told me she saw him at GothCity doing all sorts of kinky-ass shit, and she was going to tell the world. She said if I believed in him I was a stupid sorry-ass son-of-a-bitch.” Bubba’s whole posture sagged. “And she was right. I am.”

“Why did you accuse Biff of killing her?”

“I got a call. Didn’t recognize the voice, but he told me to go to Exotica and pick up Jo Beth ... said she needed help.” He closed his eyes, the tears rolling down his face like a small waterfall. “When I got there, the door was unlocked. I went in, then wham, something hit me on the head. When I woke up, I was under one of the other stages. It was dark in the place, ‘cept for the one stage was all lit up. I saw Biff leaning over Jo Beth ... aww, God, she was all bloody and cut. She was dead, and Biff was holding something in his hands. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t call out. I was afraid he’d kill me too. So I stayed where I was until he left. Then I ran away.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“Cause I wasn’t sure what’d happened. I started to think about it. Maybe old Biff didn’t do it. Maybe someone killed Jo Beth and called me there so the cops would think I did it. So I kept my mouth shut. My fingerprints had to be there, right?”

Luc shrugged. A million fingerprints were in the club ... totally useless as evidence.

“The night you saw me...” Bubba paused.

“The night you fought Biff?”

“Yeah. I was drunk and, uh, a little high. I thought I’d beat out of Biff what he’d been doing there. But you stopped me.”

“You finally did beat him up later.”

“Yeah. And he admitted he took something from the scene. He said he wanted something of Jo Beth’s, but he didn’t kill her. Said he loved her more than I did. That’s why I beat him up. No one loved her more than me. No one.” Bubba pounded the table.

“I believe you.” Bubba acknowledged Luc’s statement with a wave of his hand. “So, did you go to Jim Bob and tell him you knew about GothCity and what Jo Beth told you?”

“I had him come to my place. The Sunday you and the old guy came by. Jim Bob told me he was working undercover along with some cop and others who were going to close down places like GothCity and Exotica.”

“Did you believe him?”

“Yes and no. I followed him after he left. He went straight to GothCity, met with a big dark-haired guy. I called a buddy who, well, belonged to the club. He came and looked around for me. He told me Reverend Jim Bob and the other guy were partying upstairs, doing all sorts of kinky shit. I decided I wasn’t gonna have anything to do with the reverend anymore. Jo Beth had been right about him.”

“Why did you come here tonight?”

“I’ve been getting messages telling me to forget what I know about Reverend Jim Bob. To forget about Jo Beth—or I’d be next. When Daniel called with Ms. Gooden’s warning, I knew I was in more trouble than I could handle.”

“Do you think the reverend is behind all this? Do you think he killed Jo Beth to keep her quiet and tried to frame you for the murder?”

“Yeah. I know people think I’m stupid and all, but no bad things happened until after Jo Beth refused to see the reverend no more and then I saw him at GothCity. Bastard.”

“Does the name Madoc mean anything to you?”

Bubba frowned in concentration. “No. Is it important?”

Bubba couldn’t connect Madoc to Jim Bob and only had speculations about Jim Bob’s role in the death of Jo Beth. This was still not enough to request a warrant.

“Alek, the owner of GothCity was found dead today. The murder looks connected to Jo Beth’s. Can you think of any reason why someone would want to murder Alek?”

“He must have known too much, just like Jo Beth. The snake preacher has a lot to lose if his parishioners find out he’s a fornicator and a liar. The church tithes, and Jim Bob takes his share.”

Yeah, Alek had known too much, but unfortunately dead men couldn’t testify in court. They’d have to find another way to nail Jim Bob and Madoc. And it had better be soon—Luc’s gut told him time was running out. The killer had already taken two lives—a third would cost them nothing but the time it took to do it.

Chapter Twenty-One

The bubbling waters of the Jacuzzi had just begun to soothe Abbie's aches and pains when the phone rang. She'd let the machine get it.

A mental image of her mother and Jurnik in the hands of Madoc had Abbie arising from the tub like Venus emerging from a marble clamshell. She slipped across the bathroom floor and into Luc's bedroom. Diving across the bed, she grabbed the phone's receiver right before the machine's recorded message kicked in.

"Hello?" Her breathing was erratic, making her voice low and thready.

"Did I catch you at a bad time, Abbie?" hissed Madoc in a tone evoking images of snakes, slime, and putrid swamps. "*Coitus interruptus*, perhaps?"

"What do you want?" she demanded, pretending ignorance of the real situation. Madoc had kidnapped Jurnik and her mother. Her mother's mental communication had been crystal clear on the point.

Abbie had no worries Madoc would suspect her mother's warning. Not all witches had the ability to communicate by telepathy, and even the witch families who displayed the ability usually didn't practice it in this age of instant communication. Madoc and his family fell into the former class, much to his disappointment.

"I want revenge, you perfidious bitch," he snarled. "You ruined my life. So you have to pay."

Delusional psychopathic bastard.

"Why should I pay?" Abbie said. "You tried to rape me. You beat me until I was comatose. And I suspect you had something to do with at least two recent humans' deaths."

The last statement was a leap of faith.

Although Jim Bob was a sleazy, hypocritical dirt bag, he seemed more like a stooge than the prime villain of the piece ... just another tool as Alek had been.

Whereas Madoc was bone-deep immoral, and a much likelier candidate as a murderer.

Maybe he would save them all a lot of time and trouble and just confess.

She could worry about how to prove it to the Council later—after her mother and Jurnik were safe.

By murdering innocents, Madoc had sentenced himself to being stripped of his magickal abilities and thrown into the human justice system. In Texas that meant the death penalty.

"Yes, I killed the slut and the vampire-pretender," Madoc admitted readily. "They were going to upset my little game to punish you and the Council. I can always find another stupid human to front my haven of decadence and corruption. But now I've found a better way to punish you."

"What? You going to try the lame binding spell again? Didn't work too well the last time as I recall," she taunted.

"Shut up, bitch, and listen, or you'll lose your chance to save your mother and her undead boyfriend," he shouted. "I've got them, and unless you come to me within the next hour, they're gonna burn."

Maniacal laughter accented his threat. Madoc was ten times crazier than he'd been several years ago. And crazy made for a dangerous and volatile situation.

In a voice exuding vitriol, he upped his previous threat. "After I'm through with them, your uncle and beast-lover will be next. Then I'll come for you."

"Let me speak to my mother." Abbie hoped her voice conveyed a convincing amount of weakness and fear. It wouldn't do to tip off Madoc that she was madder than hell and had just decided to rid the world of his foul presence herself. Do no harm be damned. His brand of evil could only do harm; balance must be sought.

"No." He laughed again; the sound slithered down her spine into her gut, nauseating her.

"Then how do I know she's still alive and unhurt?" she forced a whine into her words, when she really wanted to scream with the rage roiling inside her. "Maybe this is just a set-up—a trap—and you've already killed her."

"You won't know for sure unless you come to me." He paused, then said, "Tick-tock, tick-tock goes the clock. You now have fifty-nine minutes. Don't waste my time—or theirs—talking. Just get your ass to Lake Travis. You'll remember the place. It's where I last made love to you."

Love? He called the brutal attack on her making love? Her plan to play the cringing weakling flew out the door.

"You attacked me, you son of a bitch!" she snarled. "You don't know the meaning of the word love. Just how long did it take your family to dig you out of the hillside? Two days? I hope it hurt like Hades."

"Listen, you ball-breaking bitch," he screeched, "be here in fifty-eight minutes, or I'll start roasting marshmallows over some blazing bodies."

Madoc cut the connection.

If she hadn't been already sprawled across the bed, she would've been weak in the knees between the two predominant emotions coursing through her body ... anger and fear. His last words had created an appallingly clear mental image. She shuddered.

What if they were already dead? What if Madoc was playing her? Honesty and fairness had never figured in his repertoire in the past. Why should they now?

More frightened than she'd ever been in her life, she frantically attempted to reestablish the mental link to her mother. The image she'd received in the tub had been weak and shaky, but at least she had been alive at the time.

Mother? Are you two okay?

The response was feeble, tremulous, as if her mother struggled against some force.

For now, baby. He has me in some sort of binding spell. I can't see or hear or even feel, but I managed to find a small crack to communicate with you. I can't seem to gather any energy, though, to break the spell.

Abbie knew the particular spell intimately. She'd been lucky Madoc had thrown it together so sloppily. He must have learned something since then.

Be careful. It's a trap. He has help, her mother warned.

Who?

One human and three of his cousins.

Hang on, Mama.

It was a testimony to her mother's fear that she'd called Abbie "baby," and let Abbie call her "mama" in return. Ilana Storm Gooden had always insisted on formality in the

mother-child relationship, saying it instilled manners. Life-and-death situations obviously didn't require proper decorum.

As Abbie hurriedly pulled on clothes she recalled the terrain of the area of her attack. It was heavily wooded and adjacent to a small private beach located on the far southwestern end of the long, meandering lake. The site was only accessible by a narrow dirt road, if you could call the rutted rocky path a road, which veered off the landowner's private gravel driveway. The path then traversed a hilly, rough piece of scrubland before it ended at a large expanse of cedar and live oak. A stand of trees abutted the edge of the beach and the water's edge.

The area was rough, remote, and inhabited by every poisonous snake indigenous to North America, not to mention killer bees, scorpions, coyotes, and bobcats. The perfect spot for insuring privacy for sky-clad earth ceremonies. Perfect for Madoc's nefarious acts.

Getting there wouldn't be a problem for her, because she could transport and drop in, avoiding the harsh topography. Human law enforcement would have a hard time finding the place and even more difficulty getting there quickly by land. A helicopter would be the best method of reaching the area, but she feared Madoc would kill her mother and Jurnik at the first sound of an air approach. The approach by water, though easy since the beach had a dock, would also endanger the hostages.

Even if Sam Adams could not get there in time for the rescue, she still planned to call him, the only law officer she could trust with the information. Sam would have to figure a way to arrest the human participants.

The Council would deal with the preternaturals involved. Yet she couldn't risk calling in the Council now since she wasn't sure who the traitor in their midst might be. Once the situation was under control, the Council could sort out the culprits.

Of course, first she had to bring the situation under control.

Fully dressed, she called Sam, but got his voice mail. She left him a message and instructions on how to find the remote location. She told Sam not to call local law enforcement until after the witches were sorted out.

Then she left Luc a note, telling him what had happened. In it, she asked him to contact Vidal for help and directions, then for both of them to follow her to the lake.

Yes, she could contact Luc now, and he'd come to her immediately. But then he'd ask her to stay behind ... and she would have to waste precious minutes arguing with him about whether her presence was needed.

Abbie knew her enemy, and her presence was essential to the safety of Ilana and Jurnik. If anyone but she confronted Madoc on the remote beach, he would, without hesitation, kill his captives. Abbie counted on Madoc's wish to taunt and torment her as the perfect stalling technique to allow Luc and Vidal to move into position to rescue the hostages and take out Madoc.

Besides, the Storm women weren't cowards or weaklings to hide behind a man's strong back. This was as good a time as any for Luc to learn that valuable lesson.

Was she afraid? Hell yes, but she refused to let it rule her. A little healthy fear would ensure she was cautious. Plus, the adrenaline would give her the strength she needed to carry through.

She had a battle to plan, and one badass witch to take out. Taking a deep breath, she began her transportation chant.

Abbie hadn't transported in well over a year. Hopefully, she'd rematerialize close to the scene and not on it—or worse, in the lake. It was pretty damn deep at that part of Lake Travis.

* * * *

The atmosphere surrounding his darkened house was heavy, ominous, like the air just before a tornado blew through your property and sucked your home into the clouds.

From the driveway, Luc sensed one life form in the house. Pidge. Where in Hades was Abbie?

He tore out of his car, leaving the engine running and door open.

Luc blew through the front door, then ran through the dark great room and into the master suite. He let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when he found no body. She wasn't here. She wasn't dead.

He touched the amulet to seek her, but found nothing. No emotions came across the psychic connection. Just a blur of atoms and molecules whirled and tossed across his mind's eye.

Cursing the heretofore unknown sensation, he closed his eyes and forced himself to see with his inner eye.

She'd been here. And recently. But something had gone terribly wrong. Fear and anger muddled the air, so thickly he could taste the remnants of the strong emotions, smell the sweat, and feel the fight-or-flight surge of adrenaline. The evidence was so tangible that if his initial fear of finding her dead hadn't mastered him, he'd have perceived the leftover sensory evidence the instant he'd crossed the threshold.

But what had happened to cause such strong feelings in Abbie?

Opening his eyes, he found no outward signs of a struggle, smelled no other's scent.

Yet there were indications she'd left in a hurry. The tub was still full, its bubbling water scenting the room with jasmine and relaxed Abbie-smells. A wet towel lay on the floor halfway between the bed and the closet. A depression on the bed indicated where Abbie had stretched out. The phone was on the bed, a message light blinking. A piece of paper lay next to it.

Picking up the paper, he read it. Stark cold fear flash-froze his veins. Abbie had gone to meet Madoc alone.

Anger like liquid fire burned away his fear. His ire was made up of equal parts of rage at Madoc for daring to lure Abbie into danger and seething male pique Abbie hadn't contacted him before she took it upon herself to confront the bastard.

The unusual sensations he'd gotten when he'd touched the amulet indicated she'd transported to the spot.

Since he couldn't get a fix on her yet, and he'd never been to that part of the lake before, he would have to follow the instructions she'd left him, wasting a great amount of time. Time in which Madoc could harm Abbie—or worse.

Figuring he would need the backup of another master witch, Luc began the process of tracking down Vidal. He swore if Abbie made it through this alive, he'd tan her bottom for scaring him like this, and he'd make her swear on her family's honor never, ever to place herself in danger again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Abbie landed very near the spot where Madoc had indicated he held Jurnik and her mother. She checked her watch. She had a half hour to spare, time enough to scout around and begin to plan the attack. Hopefully, Luc and Vidal would arrive soon so they could help in planning the offensive on the enemy positions. The bad guys were spread out all over the rugged terrain. It would take a concerted effort to neutralize the enemy without alerting Madoc.

Since her legal training—and her witch upbringing—had not encompassed Commandos 101, she wasn't quite sure how to approach the problems at hand. So, if Luc and Vidal were delayed too much longer, she just might have to make it up as she went along.

She crossed through the sacred grove used for the Austin area Sabbat rituals. Rituals she'd ignored since her attack. Instead, she'd fallen back into older pagan ways, the customs of the earliest wizards of her father's line and the practices of original witchcraft before New Age practitioners had sanitized the rituals into almost pseudo-Christian liturgies. Gradually, as time had passed, she'd distanced herself from even that heritage, much to the dismay of her mother and uncle. Her excuse? Her law practice had gotten busier.

The truth? She now realized she'd blamed what Madoc had done to her on the practice of magick. In reality, the blame was solely Madoc's. He'd poisoned the good in her heritage with his evil-doing. He'd unbalanced not only the preternatural world with his crimes, but also the human world.

It seemed only fitting she should now draw deeply from both her parents' ancient lineages to bring balance back into the world. And if what she had to do screwed her karma up big time, well, she'd accept the consequences.

Madoc had drawn a line in the sand. Abbie was going to cross it. What else could she do?

Abbie reached the edge of the small grove. Only a small outcropping of rocks and a thicket of live oak, evergreens, and mesquite stood between her and the beach—and Madoc.

She closed her eyes and reconnoitered with all her senses.

The night was alive: the cry of a small animal taken by a night-time predator; the hissing of a snake as it slithered through the underbrush toward the rocks which still retained the heat of the day; the cawing of a crow and the cooing of a mourning dove; the squawking of gulls carried on the night breeze from the nearby lake.

Then, ominously, the cool night air carried the sound of human breathing ... rapid, shallow breaths of someone in the throes of a heightened emotion. The person was not too far from Abbie's position. She sniffed. It wasn't Madoc. His scent was something she'd never forget if she lived for an eternity. Must be one of his thugs on the lookout for her. She marked his approximate position.

She continued to separate out the night sounds, seeking her mother. Finally, she found her parent through the delicate scent of her perfume: Parma violets and lily of the valley.

Mama, I'm here.

A faint sigh on the air reached her and a very weak mental touch tickled her brain.
Careful. He ... knows you're here.

Abbie's arrival would've made an impact upon the surroundings, like a silent sonic boom disturbing the plane of existence. It couldn't be helped. The old Madoc wouldn't have noticed. He must've used his exile to improve his skills; either that, or the preternaturals with him were more talented and were acting as his eyes, ears, and psychic senses.

Abbie, there are four of them besides Madoc. Three other witches from Wales and the reverend, Jurnik warned.

Jurnik's mental touch was far stronger than her mother's. That was to be expected. It was night—the time when his vampiric powers were the strongest. Her mother's psi abilities were constrained by Madoc's vile spell. Jurnik's mental abilities must not be susceptible to the binding spell. Or Madoc had him imprisoned in another way. His vampiric strength could defeat most earthly bonds and most unearthly ones too.

Jurnik, attuned to her thoughts, answered her unspoken question: *He has me bound in silver chains. Must've cost the bastard a lot of money. But very effective. Get them off me and these witches are toast.*

Abbie chuckled silently. *Note to self—free Jurnik first.*

Then maybe she wouldn't have to mortgage her immortal soul in order to kill Madoc. Jurnik, although civilized for the last century or so, must have a fairly bloody history.

Exactly, my dear. Your mother's utmost concern in all of this was her fear you might have to use magick to eliminate Madoc. She'd much rather I—or Luc—do it.

Luc's coming, but I'm afraid he isn't here yet. You or I might have to deal with Madoc.

The triumphant sound of a predatory bird swooping in for the kill disturbed her concentration. A glow lit up the darkened woods around her, then a short burst of warmth agitated the night-chilled air, ruffling the trees' leaves.

Then a rumbling voice cut across her conscious mind. *Ahh, but you're wrong, little cat. Luc is here.*

Strong, familiar arms surrounded and pulled her against a warm, hard naked body. Luc's scent enveloped her, calming and strengthening at the same time. His lips on her neck kissed and bit hungrily, both loving and punishing with their touch.

"You are in big trouble," he whispered harshly as he took a nip of her earlobe, then nuzzled a spot behind her ear. "Remind me to spank you, tie you to the bed, and never let you out of my sight again." He shuddered against her back. His arms tightened convulsively. "Never go into danger without me at your side. I died several times before I got here, wondering if Madoc had you in his clutches."

She turned within the circle of his arms, fitting her body to his, reveling in his love for her. "I was reconnoitering," she whispered against his chest. "I knew you'd come as soon as you could."

"Abbie, don't avoid the issue. You didn't wait for me. Why?"

"Because," she sighed, "I didn't want to do what I'm doing now—waste precious time arguing with you about my being here."

Luc touched her forehead with his and groaned softly. "Abbie, Abbie, what am I

going to do with you? I never would've kept you from coming here. You have the right to see this ended. I would only have asked, as I am asking now, please let me handle Madoc. We shifters have a lot less scruples about using deadly force than you witches."

Uh-huh, sure he would have been Mr. Reasonable. Nope, not her alpha male. She was here. *Fait accompli*. What else could he say or do?

He could send your ass back to his house. He could work a little wizardry and secure you to a tree. He could...

Okay, so he could take care of the matter. But he wouldn't. He was on the scene now and had quickly assumed the leadership role, which she'd planned for him to do all along. Now she could do what witches have always done best ... manipulate the situation until balance was achieved.

"Okay, what do you want me to do?" she asked in a low non-carrying tone, mindful one bad guy was only beyond the rocks.

"I want you to work with your uncle to create a distraction."

"Where is Uncle Vidal?" She hadn't sensed his arrival. But then, he'd had more practice than she at transporting, so he might not have created quite the disturbance to the atmosphere.

"He's scouting the situation," Luc whispered. "I expect him back here any time."

"Madoc knows I'm here. Mother told me his magick has improved. He sensed my arrival."

"Damn, then he knows Vidal is here. He transported here, and materialized on the other side of the escarpment." Luc pointed out a ridge about two hundred yards behind their current position, beyond the sacred grove.

"No. I didn't sense my uncle, so I'm fairly sure Madoc hasn't. Plus, the granite in the ridge might have interfered with the atmospheric disturbance traveling this far," suggested Abbie. "To be practical, Madoc probably suspected I wouldn't come without arranging backup. In fact, I'm sure he expects you and uncle to be here—but he demanded I be here." She paused and swallowed past the lump in her throat. "He threatened to harm you two next if I didn't come to him."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I'm a force to be reckoned with," Luc murmured in grim tones. "Madoc thinks I'm a mere shifter with only transformation abilities. My wizard side will be the secret weapon."

"He still doesn't seem to have mastered telepathy. We need to use his weakness against him." She shivered, a combination of cold and chilling anticipation of what was to come.

Luc stroked her arms as if he could give her some of his strength. She wasn't sure it worked that way, but his touch did make her feel better. "Did your mother tell you anything else, little cat?"

"Oh Luc, I'm so afraid for her. She's very weak," she cried out softly. Luc pulled her into his strength and kissed the top of her head.

Shoving the momentary weakness back into a corner of her mind, she continued, "Jurnik told me there were three other witches and Jim Bob with Madoc. I assume one of the witches is just beyond the ridge over there." She freed an arm and pointed. "We need to free Jurnik as soon as we can so he can use his strength."

"You and Vidal can decide who creates the disturbance. The other one can release Jurnik and your mother." Luc grip on her arms tightened. "Madoc is mine. Leave him to

me.”

“Luc, be careful.” Fear chilled her at the thought of something happening to Luc now that she’d found him. She angled her head back to look into his face. “His magick is dark. He follows no rules but his own. He’ll be out to kill you.”

“I expected as much.” Luc’s smile flashed white in the darkness of the woods. “After all, I intend to kill him.”

Before Abbie could respond, Vidal joined them to make his report on the whereabouts of the other two witches. “I spotted two of them, my boy. One is just out of the reach of the light at the northern end of the beach behind a large outcropping of limestone. The second is at the southernmost end of the beach, hiding in a thicket of mesquite.”

“With the one Abbie sensed just beyond this copse, all three henchmen are accounted for.” Luc smiled grimly. “Good. I’ll take them out one by one. When you hear my roar, one of you needs to create a disturbance so I can sneak onto the beach and confront Madoc. The other can then let Jurnik and Ilana loose.”

“I’ll create the disturbance,” Vidal said. “Abbie has more experience with the binding spell and might be able to weaken it more quickly.”

“I agree,” Abbie said.

Luc detected the shudder that went through her at the thought of confronting the spell again. But he knew she could do it. His little witch was strong.

“The silver chains on Jurnik should be no problem,” Abbie added. “I’ll let him loose first in case either of you need him. From what he told me, he wants a piece of Madoc too.”

“No,” growled Luc. “Madoc is mine. Jurnik can have the leftovers.”

Abbie reached out and touched his arm. “Please be careful. Don’t take any unnecessary risks. You don’t need to kill, just contain him. Let the Council mete out his ultimate punishment.”

Luc whirled and pulled her into his arms. Mumbling against her hair, he said, “Abbie, I can’t promise I won’t kill him.”

“I know,” she whispered against his chest. She stroked his back. “I’m not asking you to promise. I just wanted you to know I don’t expect it. I trust you to do what you have to do to stay alive. That’s the most important thing.” She kissed his bare chest. “Just stay alive.”

“The same goes for you too.” He raised her chin and took her lips in a deeply hungry kiss filled with all the love in his soul.

* * * *

After leaving Abbie with Vidal, Luc shifted into his panther form. His dark fur blended into the night, giving him the advantage over the bad guys lurking in the dark. His plan was to divide and conquer, eventually leaving only Madoc with which to deal. Whatever he had to do to remove the nightmare named Madoc out of Abbie’s life, he would.

He could still taste the kiss, smell her scent on him. He couldn’t live and call himself a man if he didn’t do all to protect his mate and her family.

His paws silently padded along the grassy plateau as he approached the witch guarding the northern access point to the secluded beach. He stopped and raised his nose,

then sniffed the night air. Cedar, mesquite, lake water, and testosterone crossed his nostrils, making them flare. His mouth opened and a low growl rumbled at the back of his throat.

Crouching down, he slunk along the rocky escarpment until he reached the edge. Ten feet below him, he spied the witch hiding behind the limestone boulders at the beach's edge. The man's dark clothing blended into the shadows, but his light skin glowed like a beacon in the night.

Luc chuffed through his nostrils. A citified witch. The man was out of place as a pair of Birkenstocks on Wall Street.

Luc reached out with one forepaw and found purchase on the rocky face of the small cliff. He crawled down the rock face easily and landed lightly on the sandy ground, a mere six feet behind the witch who quite stupidly peered around the rocks, looking to the lake for the potential attack. The fool thought a mere ten-foot ledge would keep his back safe. It would be his first—and last—mistake for the night.

Surging forward, Luc knocked the man down, forcing his head sharply against the limestone rocks. The man groaned, but made no other sound. He was still breathing, but unconscious, possibly with a skull fracture. Luc hadn't bothered to hold back on the amount of force he'd used.

Shifting into human form, Luc used the witch's own clothing to tie him. Then digging down deeply into his well of spells, he conjured an old binding spell his wizard uncle had taught him. Luc was fairly certain the witch would not figure out how to unbind himself until well after he was in Council hands.

Shifting back, the second and the third witches were handled just as easily. Almost too easily.

As he was about to let out the roar to signal Vidal and Abbie, the sound of a gun shot, then a scream, came from the vicinity of the beach.

Abbie!

Chapter Twenty-Three

Abbie and Vidal silently approached the beach and hid among a bunch of rocks. Glancing at her watch, Abbie found they only had ten minutes before Madoc would make good on his threat of burning his captives alive.

Uncle?

Yes, Abbie-girl?

Time is running out. If Luc does not signal us in less than ten minutes, we have to move.

He'll signal us. I've seen him move. He's fast and deadly. Those three traitorous witches won't know what hit them.

I know ... but I'm not going to take the chance on Madoc burning Mother and Jurnik. I plan to distract him before the ten-minute mark is reached.

Abigail Merriweather Gooden. You'll wait for Luc's signal, or I'll bind you myself.

Her uncle's very real threat hung in the air between them for the next six silent minutes.

Smell it? Abbie asked.

Yes. It's smoke. Her uncle sighed. *Let me confront Madoc. You have a better chance of releasing the others.*

No, he expects to see me. Who knows—if you appear he could burn them—or use a deadly spell against you. If he sees me, he'll want to taunt me. It'll buy us time.

Your point is valid. Remind me to back you up when Luc tears a strip off your backside for jumping his signal.

I'll do that. Uncle?

Yes, Abbie-girl?

Do you think you could fashion a spell to get Mother and Jurnik away from the beach? I don't trust Madoc. He may have them booby-trapped. But I'm fairly sure his magick is sloppy enough he can't trigger it long distance. The man was always lazy.

I can do that. Ready?

As I'll ever be.

Abbie stood up and ran toward the glowing light on the beach. The bastard had already lit a huge bonfire. Frantically, she looked for her mother and Jurnik's bodies. A shivery sigh of relief escaped her when she located them near the rocks at the base of a steep path leading to the beach from the copse above.

"Nice of you to make an appearance, Abbie," Madoc said, ostentatiously looking at his watch. "You cut it closely, my darling. Three minutes to spare." He waved an arm toward his captives. "As you can see, they are still alive and untoasted."

"But you didn't wait to build the fire, I see." She moved slowly to a point halfway between Madoc and the captives.

Uncle? Mom and Jurnik are behind me and to the left, at the base of the path to the beach.

I see them, my child. Good luck.

Madoc looked around. "So where are your confederates?"

"What confederates would those be?" she asked, taking small steps to cut off his

angle to her mother and Jurnik. She conjured up a shield to dissipate any spell casting Madoc might aim at his captives.

“Oh, your uncle and the beast-man you’re screwing.” Madoc threw another piece of driftwood onto the large fire he’d built. The flaring up of the flames highlighted his features, making him look like a demon fire god.

Abbie fought the memories of his leering face, backlit by the remnants of just such a fire, as he’d leaned over her. She could almost smell the acrid sweat of his excitement as he’d unbuckled his belt and stripped off his pants. Her skin tingled as she recalled the same belt lashing out at her nakedness. The welts had taken weeks to go down; the scars months to heal and fade with the aid of one of her coven’s healing creams.

No, she wouldn’t let the memories of her past confrontation with this man weaken her. She’d survived; she was stronger than him.

“They’re not here. You told me to come alone.” She closed the distance between them. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be,” he hissed. His tongue licked his lips as his gaze swept her hungrily. “Take off your clothes. I dreamt of your nakedness beneath me. Do you still carry my marks?”

“No. Why should I strip for you?” She glared at him.

“Because I said so.” Madoc flung up a hand, and a stream of glittery powder flew toward her. When the particles hit her shield, they burst into hundreds of little flames, then dissipated down the invisible wall like liquid fire.

“Drop the shields, bitch. Or I’ll barbeque your mother right in front of you.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “You’ll have to find her first.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” he shouted. “She’s right over there.”

She blocked his view.

“Get out of my way. I’ve got a witch to burn.”

He stalked toward her, but she increased the shield to repulse him. He swore as he bumped into the invisible wall.

“Stronger now, are you?” he sneered.

“I was always stronger than you,” she said. “The only reason you got the drop on me back then was because you cheated.”

She moved to cut off his angle. Watching his eyes, she waited for him to make his next offensive move. “I think you must have always known you couldn’t take me in a fair fight,” she taunted. “Take now, for instance ... you had to capture my mother and her boyfriend to lure me here. Be a man, admit you need them to force me to forego my defensive magick.”

She increased her wards to shove him back. Madoc stumbled, but managed to stay on his feet as he tried to see past her to where he’d placed his captives. He muttered foul curses at her, casting spells as fast as he could conjure, but all slid off her shields. If he wasn’t careful, his anger might just be his undoing.

I’ve got them, Abbie-girl. We’re in the sacred grove. Get out of there.

Her plan to taunt Madoc and provide cover for her uncle had worked. Now she could get the heck out of Dodge. She’d let Luc handle Madoc like he wanted.

“But what will you do when you face the facts you no longer have any leverage?” she scorned. “Will you face me—or run?” She stepped aside.

Madoc’s face reflected at first shock and disbelief at the discovery his leverage had

flown the coop, then a sly smile crossed his face. “About time you showed your ugly face,” he barked, looking over her shoulder into the darkness at the base of the lakeside cliff.

Jim Bob! It had to be.

Abbie mentally chanted her transport spell. The only problem was she had to drop her protective wards momentarily in order to complete the spell.

Hopefully, Madoc wouldn’t anticipate her move. In her experience, men as a species tended to negate the things they themselves could not do. Madoc had always been leery of transporting—called it molecular Russian roulette. At the time, she’d been enamored with him and had told him he didn’t need to be afraid, she would help him learn. He’d only gotten mad, called her a fool for listening to her wizard-father about some low-life-charlatan-conjuring. If she were lucky, the same-said low-life-conjuring would save her bacon.

The bullet hit her just as she’d reached the final words of the spell. The impact of the bullet broke her concentration. She fell to the ground, momentarily disoriented from the pain of her wound and the cutting off of the powerful spell.

“Got you, bitch!” Madoc threw his body on hers.

Abbie struggled to raise her wards, but the combination of pain and shock threw her timing off. Madoc countered her weak defensive motions with an offensive spell, negating her ability to shield herself.

She screamed with anger, rage, and pain, then balled up her right fist and drove it into his groin as hard as she could from her semi-prone position. Excruciating agony roared down her back. The bullet had hit her in the right shoulder. Hitting Madoc hadn’t done her injury much good. Gritting her teeth, she hit him again. She had to get him off of her.

His gasp of pain and the string of curses he shouted gave her quite a bit of satisfaction. She wasn’t the only one hurting.

Abbie!

Luc!

You screamed!

I’m a tad bit busy right now. Can we talk later?

Abbie!

Luc’s inhuman growl reverberated through her body. She smiled at Madoc, who lay half-on, half-off her body. His hands cupped his testicles. His face was the color of day-old guacamole—sort of a greenish-yellow.

Abbie made an attempt to roll out from under him before he vomited all over her, before Luc got there and beat him to a bloody pulp.

“Oh, no, you...” Madoc gasped, then groaned, “...don’t.” He grabbed her left arm, and using pure brute strength, held her in place. “Punching me in the balls isn’t going to save you. I’ll let old Jim Bob rape you first. Then I’ll finally get mine. I’ve been waiting to fuck you all these years. It’ll take a long, long time ... and you’ll beg me for death before I’m through with you.”

A flash of black fur, burning yellow eyes, and sharp white teeth flitted across her mind’s eye, and Abbie started to laugh. Her ears picked up the sound of four legs breezing through the grass on the cliff above them. She continued to laugh to cover up her lover’s approach. She laughed so hard tears streamed down her face. So hard she

jarred her wound, sending shooting pains down her shoulder into her back. But she didn't stop. She wanted Luc to have the advantage of surprise when he leapt to the beach for the kill.

Madoc stared at her as if she were the crazy one and not he. Jim Bob stepped into her peripheral vision. A scowl was on his face.

"What's going on with her?" the reverend asked Madoc. "Why is she laughing?"

The look on Madoc's face was reminiscent of a startled deer in a vehicle's headlights. Then he frowned, anger rapidly replacing the stupefaction on his face. He slapped her hard across the face.

"Stop laughing, bitch!" he snarled.

Her eyes caught a dark shadow moving along the base of the cliff. She could stop now. She sobered up enough to catch Madoc's gaze with her own. "You're a dead man."

She turned and looked up at Jim Bob and mouthed the word, "Run."

After all, when a witch turned loose an angry half-shape-shifter, half-wizard and all macho, alpha male on her enemy, she should at least have the decency to warn the poor saps.

"What's she talking about, Madoc?" Jim Bob huffed. "I thought you told me these people were weaker than you. That you had it all planned out. Just what the fuck kind of shit have you been shoveling, man?"

"Madoc, you lied to the poor man?" Abbie said. "Tsk, ts, ts. You didn't learn anything at all those years ago when I sent you flying into the cliff over there." She caught Jim Bob's wary gaze with hers. "See those rocks over there, Jim Bob? The ones where my mother and Jurnik used to be? Those rocks are what his family had to dig out of the cliff to get his body out of the side of the hill. I put him there. He's a weakling and a poor excuse for a witch. You hitched your wagon to the wrong horse ... and now you'll pay the price. If you run now, maybe my friend Detective Adams will get you before my lover does."

A low angry roar shattered the air.

Jim Bob turned as a black flash of fur and teeth leapt at him. He screamed, dropped his gun, and ran.

* * * *

Luc ignored the reverend. Vidal or Sam, whose scent he'd caught on the night air as he raced to reach Abbie, would catch him.

Madoc was his primary target.

Luc had heard all the rogue witch had threatened. There was no way Madoc would live to threaten his mate again. It would end here.

"Jim Bob, get back here!" yelled Madoc. "They are mortal. They can be killed."

"I wouldn't count on it," Abbie said.

Luc conjured a whirlwind and used it to pull Madoc off Abbie, tossing the dark witch to the beach about ten feet away.

Luc padded over to Abbie where she lay on the sand. He gently nudged her with his nose; his tongue licked the blood streaming down her right arm. He growled, then turned to face the man responsible for her being here, for her risking this injury.

His love had no energy left; she struggled to raise her wards, but the loss of blood, he sensed, had debilitated her. He chuffed at her until she stood, then nudged her toward the

path to the cliff.

Madoc moved toward the lake.

Luc, he's getting away.

He's not going anywhere. Go to your uncle.

No. I'm staying here. I can help.

Abbie. He growled long and loudly. Get out of here.

No. I can sense Vidal, my mother, and Jurnik are coming. We'll all be here. I won't interfere unless he plays a dirty trick, I promise.

Interfere? You can barely stand, love. Just stay out of the way. Use whatever power you can manage to protect yourself. I don't trust Jim Bob not to circle back.

Yes, Luc. I love you.

I love you. Now scoot.

He nudged her, harder this time. She walked backward, keeping him and Madoc in her sight. He watched her until he saw Vidal pull her into his arms and her mother start fussing over her. He sensed the flare of healing magick Ilana emitted.

Abbie!

She looked directly at him. Yes, Luc?

Stay put! Let your mother care for you.

She smiled and blew him a kiss.

Jurnik moved forward, placing the women at his back. *Fight the rogue, Luc. He won't get past me.* The vampire bared his fangs.

Luc nodded, satisfied Abbie was in good hands. He turned to follow Madoc, who still backed toward the water, his wary gaze fixed on Luc's approach.

Luc shimmered and shifted into his human form. "I wouldn't try the lake if I were you, Madoc. I hear it's deep, and all sorts of dangers lie beneath the waters."

"Oh, and I suppose I should stay here and fight you, *mano a mano*?" Madoc said, disdain dripping from every word. "I don't think so. I'm not so dumb. It's obvious you've done something to my kinsmen. So I think the better part of valor for me is to live to fight another day."

Luc stalked the witch. With each measured step, his anger grew at the thought of this bastard escaping to try again. It wasn't going to happen on his watch.

"Years ago, you took advantage of Abbie as she was spellbound. Then you hid behind humans to exact your revenge and used hostages to lure Abbie here. What kind of man are you?"

"A cautious one?" Madoc suggested, a slight smile twisting his lips. "I know you think I'm a coward. But what is that? It's only a word." He shrugged his shoulders. "Big fucking deal, call me a coward. I'm not going to fight you, shifter. She isn't worth dying over."

Rage swept over Luc so strongly he shook with it. As he leapt the short distance between him and Madoc, he shouted, "Yes, she is."

Then he reached for Madoc, who turned and dove into the water.

* * * *

Abbie screamed, "Luc, no!"

Shrugging off her uncle's hands, she stumbled toward the lake. The others followed.

She stopped at the point where Luc and Madoc went into the water. Her hands on her

hips, she swore. "Damn the man! How can we help him if we can't see?"

Jurnik laughed. "Don't worry about Luc. I have a feeling he wanted Madoc in the water."

Abbie turned to glare at the vampire. "I know. That's what bothers me. Luc is going to kill him, I just know it. He thinks he has to end it here and now to protect me from Madoc once and for all."

"Well, Abbie-girl, you have to admit the Council didn't do a good job of protecting you or the Austin area preternaturals by banishing Madoc and his family. Maybe a death is just what is needed."

"No, I don't want that." She stood, staring at the water, attempting to find air bubbles, anything to show her where they were. "I don't want him to kill for me," she whispered. "Killing marks a soul. I like his soul the way it is."

Her mother stepped to Abbie's uninjured side and placed her arms around her. "Luc doesn't look at things the way we do, baby." Abbie laid her head on her mother's shoulder. "He has a dual alpha mentality. Killing to protect his alpha-mate is second nature. Can you learn to accept it?"

"I have no choice, Mom," Abbie whispered. "I love him. So, yes, I can."

"Glad to hear that, little cat," Luc said.

"Luc?" Abbie looked around and found him, in all his naked human glory, walking from the southern end of the beach, dragging something behind him.

Abbie ran to him. He dropped his hold on Madoc's waterlogged body and opened his arms to her. She flew into them. He held her tightly against him as he rocked her back and forth in his arms.

"I thought you'd drowned, trying to kill Madoc for me," she cried into his water-cooled chest.

"Abbie, Abbie." He chuckled against her hair. "I am almost as much at home in water as I am on the ground and in the air." He kissed her forehead, her eyelids, and her nose, before he breathed against her lips, "I shifted to my water form. He never had a chance, sweetheart. We crocs have a way of hanging on and rolling our prey until they slip into unconsciousness."

He took her lips in a hot wet kiss before she could say a word.

A low moan from behind Luc had her shoving against his chest, breaking the kiss. "You didn't kill him?"

"Nope. You told me no." He shrugged. "I figure this time the Council will have to strip him of his powers. And with a kidnapping charge and two deaths to his credit, the Texas justice system will get a good chance to fry him their way. Plus, he's such a wussy-assed coward, I figured he was the prisoner most likely to be a con's girlfriend. Killing him would've let him off too easily."

Abbie laughed and threw her arms around his neck. "I like your style, Lucan Knight. No, I *love* your style. I love you!"

"And I love you, Abigail Merriweather Gooden. Ready to get this piece of garbage taken care of and go see if Sam caught the Reverend Jim Bob?"

"I'm with you, partner."

They turned to join her mother, and Jurnik and Vidal, who held Madoc between them. At the top of the cliff, Sam stood with a handcuffed Reverend Jim Bob at his side. The detective waved and yelled, "Y'all need any help down there?"

Luc looked at Abbie and grinned, then shouted up to Sam, “Nope, my partners and I seem to have this end under control. We’ll be up there in a few minutes.”

Sam ran his fingers through his hair and shouted back down, “How in the hell am I going to write this up, Luc?”

“Luc and I will figure something out Sam, don’t worry about it,” Abbie replied.

Luc hugged her. “I like the sound of that. I think we have the beginnings of a beautiful partnership. I catch them; you figure out how to bring them to justice.” He helped her up the stony path. “You think you have space for me in your law offices?”

“You want to work with me?” she asked.

“Work with you. Live with you,” his last words were whispered against her hair, “and love you for the rest of my life.”

Abbie turned into his arms and reached for his face. “You’ve got yourself a deal, partner.” Then she sealed it with a kiss.

The End

To be continued in the next Gooden and Knight mystery:

The Case of the Deadly Seance

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Monette Michaels is the pen name for a multi-published author of suspense/thrillers. She's been married to the love of her life for far longer than she cares to remember. Her home is in Central Indiana.

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