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*Wicked Witch*  
OF THE  
*West Village*

ANNA J. EVANS

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Wicked Witch of the West Village

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# *WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST VILLAGE*

Anna J. Evans

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## Chapter One

Give me an out and out raving bitch any day. At least then you know what you're up against. With those quietly bitchy women, you're always just the slightest bit unsure, kept from the righteous indignation that is the god-given right of any victim of a full frontal attack.

Of course, that's what they want, the passive-aggressive ones. They want to have their bitchiness and get away with it. They want you to wonder if the slight was all in your head, to feel a little crazy as well as small and outraged.

"Give me a break, Janette. Your proposal was crap and we both know it," I said with a pleasant smile, plucking my name tag from the desk and turning to waltz away toward the line for coffee.

I heard her sputtering behind me and turned to see her soft, fishy mouth opening and closing and her eyes bulging out of her head, but she didn't say a word. She knew she had it coming.

Damn silent bitch.

"Wow, you told her," Kathy said, hiding her amusement behind her own coffee cup and head full of massively curly red hair.

"Yeah, I guess." I sighed, not feeling near the thrill such ballsy effrontery usually inspired. I was low, so low not even giving Janette her just desserts could cheer me up.

"Poor thing," Kathy said, her utter lack of empathy abundantly apparent.

"Shut up, jerk." I gulped at my scalding hot coffee and somehow managed not to wince as it burned a path down my throat. I never liked to admit I'd made a mistake, whether it was hot coffee or throwing away possibly the most eligible bachelor in the city.

"You could always call him, I'm sure he'd still at least listen to the answering machine message. Maybe if you do some excellent groveling, he'll consent to come over and have break-up sex."

"You mean make-up sex." I clomped off toward the conference room. I hated clogs. Why had I bought them? They made me walk like a two-legged mascot for Anheuser Busch.

"Nope, sorry hon. I don't think Richard's retrievable. But he might give you one last roll in the hay with him and the wonder dick."

"How do you know about the wonder dick?"

"Everybody knows about the wonder dick." She grinned. "The dick is legendary. And the dick is wondrous."

"I don't want to talk about this. The last thing I need is a farewell screw."

"Right and maybe you'll eventually buy your own load of crap."

"Whose side are you on anyway?" I asked, actually starting to wonder for the first time. Kathy did like me...right?

"I'm on the side of sweetness and light." She patted my arm in a way that should have been comforting but wasn't.

"I don't feel sweet or light."

"That's because you aren't sweet and, despite the fact that your leg is about as big around as my forearm, you aren't light either. You are heavy, Gail, dark and heavy and hard to handle." She paused, surveying my face as if deciding whether to put the final nail in my coffin, then evidently decided to pound away. "And you really messed up this time."

"Who are you? This is really mean." I sounded whiney, but was starting not to care.

A man can break my heart from time to time, but only a woman can really hurt my feelings. I don't like hurt feelings. That's why I don't have many friends.

Or maybe it's just because I'm so damn hard to get along with.

"It's for your own good, hon. I wouldn't feel like a friend unless I said this at least once. You keep pushing people away. Hell, you would have pushed me away if I couldn't see through to the cuddly little critter inside." Kathy put her arm around me and kept it there even when I tried to pull away.

And I did try, at least for a second, to see if she'd let me. I always have to test things, people, relationships. It's like I try to break them just to see if I can. After all, you can't trust something that can be easily broken...or not so easily broken.

"Critter?" I echoed, feeling sort of critter-like huddled under her arm. Kathy isn't that big, but I've always been a runt. Five three in heels and small enough to wear a girl's size, I'm a huge disappointment to my Cuban mother who spent the majority of my childhood crying over my skinniness and shoving *ropa vieja* down my throat.

She still force-feeds me *tostones*—double fried green plantains—every time I darken her door. If she has her way, my two brothers and I are going to need open-heart surgery by the age of forty. She already killed my WASP father two years ago. The poor man put up enough of a fight to have me named Gail after his Mayflower great-great-great whatever grandmother, but he couldn't resist a greased-up banana if you held a gun to his head.

"Richard was good for you, really good. He made you smile and laugh more and you didn't call anyone a cuntrag when he was around."

"I don't say cunt rag. You're confusing cuntrag with douchebag."

"I'm not confusing anything. Remember Ellen Kale, last September before the book release party?" Kathy smiled as we passed people who knew who we were and gave a shit.

If I had known me, I wouldn't have cared, but then I wasn't a starving romance author craving the eye of a willing editor. And I realized that I was just one person, not the goddess of fame and fortune who could pluck a manuscript out of obscurity, publish it and immediately justify the writer's existence for the rest of her—or rarely his—life.

"Oh...right. Well she *was* a cunt rag. And way too derivative to be so fucking demanding."

"Gail."

"And I'd had like three glasses of wine. Give me a break."

"Is that the point?" she asked, releasing me from under her arm and shooting me a look that said she was beginning to doubt I had a reasonable bone in my body.

"No." I rolled my eyes. Can't a girl even make a joke? Or call a cunt rag a cunt rag if the whatever fits?

"Gail, I'm not trying to be—"

"I get it, I get it. Point taken. Now shut up and leave me be," I grumbled, feeling appropriately chastised. I understood she was trying to help, but the woman needed to learn when to give it a rest before I gave in to the truly evil part of my nature and bit her arm or something equally heinous.

I used to be a biter when I was little. My mother has a scar on her wrist that she swears is the imprint of my baby teeth. My dad, however, told me she had the scar when they met, so I know she's lying to make me feel bad, thusly forcing me to play nice with the Cuban guys she sets me up with. It'd be enough to make me want to bite her for real if I weren't thirty-two years old and a loving daughter beneath my bad attitude. Or if I weren't currently in dire need of a little "setting up" since I'd ruined yet another relationship and probably turned Richard against women for the rest of his life.

"So you want to run the spotlight?" Kathy asked with an innocent smile.

"Shut up *after* you give the spotlight and leave me be starting right now," I corrected, crossing my arms over my nearly nonexistent chest and making a half hearted attempt not to look as grumpy as I felt.

Whether I hated this part of my job or not, there was no need to scare the prospective talent. After all, I do enjoy the company of writers when they're not trying to pitch me their work in progress from the adjoining bathroom stall. I mean, I have enough issues about peeing in public places without someone talking over the sound of my urine stream.

I followed Kathy into the small conference room, feeling like the lowest form of dog shit as I thought back on our conversation and its probable implications. If Kathy said it, it had to be true. Kathy was nice, Kathy was a fantastic friend and Kathy never told a lie. If she said Richard was beyond retrieval she had to be right.

The realization made my stomach twist in an angry knot around my black coffee and two cinnamon rolls.

I'd lost him. I'd really lost him and only now did I understand I probably loved Richard, no matter how many times I'd dismissed him when he pressed me to make some grand declaration. Now he was gone and a part of me wanted to crawl into bed, pull the covers over my head and never come out again.

It was horribly melodramatic and self-loathing inducing, which made me struggle to find someone else to blame. Luckily, a target soon presented itself.

As I sat behind the table and gazed out at the over-eager faces of at least a hundred romance writers, I had to resist the urge to start throwing rotten tomatoes. It was their fault, those damn women who wrote those damn books that I read in spite of myself.

I was an editor of romantic fiction, it was my job to read romance novels, but I didn't have to enjoy them as much as I did. I didn't have to purchase all the newest titles from my favorite authors to take home and savor over the weekend in the name of market research or reread my keeper-shelf novels until the front covers were tattered.

The prolonged exposure had obviously rotted my brain. I should have stuck to my guns in my early twenties until I was transferred to the literary fiction division. But I had stayed in romance, snuggled in like a pig in shit until I was the head editor honcho at the tender age of thirty-two, the top dog on the steaming pink pile of lovey-dovey nonsense that was the romantic fiction department.

So young to be so successful...and so increasingly bitter.

"Welcome and thank you so much for coming to learn more about Handler and Handler." Kathy's bright blue eyes shone warmly out at the audience as if she actually gave a shit that anyone had shown up. She probably did, she was nice. "I'm associate editor Kathy Hewitt and this is Gail Teril, executive editor."

I waved my hand in brief acknowledgement of my name, then pretended great interest in the folder in front of me as Kathy proceeded to outline the new directions Handler and Handler were hoping to take our Visions of Love line.

I, for one, wanted to start by outlawing anything having to do with vampires—what the fuck is romantic about a man who wants to feed off you like a leech while he moans about his tortured immortality? I also wanted to do away with heroines who weren't at least twenty-three or who hadn't slept with a minimum of four men before Mister Right.

What woman these days *hasn't* had at least four lovers before she settles down for the happily ever after? Now I'm sure there are some exceptions, but even my brother's new wife—originally from Georgia, sweet as a peach, inside the Baptist Church every time they open the doors—confessed to me that she had three guys before Rick. I had to get her pretty tipsy on wine coolers before she shared the info, but I proved my point, at least to myself.

I was also more than a little tired of the "sweet as pie" crap. Why could the hero be a big jerk who needed "love's tender caress" to "set him free", but the heroine was always a near virgin who saved whales for a living, ran a soup kitchen in her spare time and took in homeless animals and domestic abuse victims? All while teaching the hero

how her generous and perfect soul could help even a rake like him learn to love, of course.

Not to mention she's also stunningly gorgeous with perfect tits, no cellulite, skin that's smooth and pore-less sans makeup and no body hair in undesirable places in addition to being the next Mother Mary. I have issues with the omission of body hair maintenance in my novels. You never read about a romance heroine having to wax her moustache. As a half-Cuban woman who inherited more from my mom than thick, shiny, luxurious dark brown locks on my head, I would appreciate my heroine having to work a little to be so goddamned perfect.

But everyone else seems to want the heroine to be beyond reproach, other editors and readers included. I was the only one with a problem. I couldn't identify with most heroines because I was a cranky slut jerk who should have been born an alpha male. If I had, then maybe I would have found a sweet Georgia peach like my younger brother or a sassy, incredibly loyal scriptwriter like my older one. If I'd been a boy, maybe I would have already been tamed by love and become contented with venting my crankiness at work like the rest of the penis-owning half of the population.

Too bad I'd been born a gal and a straight gal on top if it. Double too bad most men weren't into putting forth the effort to break through my gruff exterior to find the diamond in the rough underneath. Triple too bad most men didn't find my take-no-prisoners-get-up-in-your-face-and-call-you-a-cock-sucker attitude particularly sexy.

A shame, that. Girls just love an aloof, bossy, unattainable "bad boy". But what about "bad girls"? Was I a bad girl?

*You're the Wicked Witch of the West Village.*

I hated my subconscious sometimes. Especially when it was right, even more especially when I'd just screwed up a relationship with a guy who thought my potty mouth was "cute" and had the guts to tell me to shut up from time to time and really make me listen.

*Especially when his dick was so unbelievably wondrous and you're never going to get to roll around in bed with him EVER AGAIN.*

"I'll take that question," I said with a forced smile, deciding that sharing my opinions on the future trends in romantic fiction was better than sitting there stewing in my own horrible thoughts.

Of course, that's where I made my next stupid mistake. Never open your big mouth unless you're prepared to put your short, fat foot in it.

## **Chapter Two**

Veronica was a serpent-like creature, a relatively pretty, almost white-blond woman in her late thirties with even features and a nose that could be called cute—if you went for the slightly upturned, piggish look. Nevertheless, the first word that jumped into my mind when I’d met her three years ago was “snake”.

It was her eyes. They were a glassy shade of dark blue and once she’d leveled you with that cerulean stare, she never seemed to blink. Creepy. But even creepier was the disturbing sensation that a cold-blooded predator lurked behind her gaze, like she had a snake coiled up in her brain ready to crawl out and do irrevocable damage if you were foolish enough to let down your guard.

I’d requested a full copy of her manuscript after meeting her at the national convention three years ago. I’d been afraid not to, not exactly sure what Veronica might have planned for someone who didn’t see things her way. I’d later rejected the manuscript from the safety of my office in New York. Her book—though not horrible—just didn’t catch my interest. It was sappy sweet and I’m not into sappy or sweet, especially if it’s penned by a woman I’m positive has the potential to be a serial killer. Besides, Veronica lived in Arizona, so I figured I was safe enough from her wrath at that point. Even snakes don’t strike at that great a distance.

I hadn’t anticipated that the damned National Romance Authors Convention might someday be held in Phoenix, Arizona, right on the psycho’s home turf. I suddenly felt like a fool. A very small, edible, snake-foodish fool.

“So you’re saying there is still a place for the traditional romance in today’s market?” Veronica asked, smoothly dovetailing the question before and nailing me with her expectant and disturbing gaze before I could find a way to gracefully hand the proceedings back over to Kathy.

“Of course there’s still a place for it, but we’re not actively looking to acquire it,” I said, trying to remain impassive, though sweat had started to bead on my recently waxed upper lip.

The woman terrified me for some reason. It was completely irrational, but I couldn’t seem to force my heart to slow down or my palms to quit dampening with empathy for my lip. Maybe I had been a small rodent in my last life. That would explain my fear of snake people. Hell, it might explain a lot of things. My father had nicknamed me “mouse” as a kid.

“And why is that?” she asked, perfectly plucked eyebrows arching over her unblinking eyes. The eyebrows were several shades darker than her hair, but I couldn’t see any signs of a dye job. She was most likely a natural blonde, an increasingly rare

creature that my older, geneticist brother swears will be extinct by approximately 2215. Geez, I wanted Veronica extinct. Didn't her eyes get dry and itchy?

*Blink, damn you, blink!*

"Well, for several reasons really," I said, closing my eyes for a bit longer than was necessary, hoping Veronica might take a hint.

"And those are?"

"Relax, Veronica, I was taking a dramatic pause," I said, feeling my fear abate a bit as the room tittered with laughter. I could be funny when so inclined, but I knew the writers were just humoring me.

Damn suck ups.

I love sucking up, actually, as long as it's done really well and I can't tell if someone's sucking up or just realizes how incredibly groovy I truly am.

"Firstly, it's not a market that's expanding. Our core demographic for the Visions of Love line is getting younger. They have less of a taste for a kind of sentimentality that is, honestly, a little old-fashioned. Secondly, I don't like them. Thirdly, I don't like them. And lastly, I have to admit that I don't like them and like any good playground tyrant, I want my way." I finished with what I hoped was a teasing, self-mocking smile as I gazed over Veronica's head, finding it much easier to make eye contact with her white-blond up-do than her face.

"You want your way," she repeated slowly, enunciating each word as if it were a dirty thing she didn't want to touch too intimately with her voice.

"Yeah, you know, it's my ball and I can take it and go home if I want." I laughed again. Some of the writers at the back of the room laughed with me, but the ladies surrounding Veronica had caught on to the creepy vibe that spilled off the woman in waves.

The rather large lady next to her actually looked like she might start to cry. Though I hated to see an innocent bystander freaking out, a part of me was incredibly glad it wasn't just me, that I wasn't the only wimp who wanted to pee myself whenever snake lady was within fifty feet.

"You'll get your way, Ms. Teril. People like you always get what is coming to them," Veronica said, waving one hand in front of her face in a strange swirling motion that made me think of the *Walk Like An Egyptian* video I had loved as a kid. But there was no music and Veronica sure as hell didn't seem like the dancing type...unless she was getting ready to dance on a grave.

"Okay, I'll take the last question," Kathy spoke up from behind the podium, looking down to where I sat with concern. *Are you okay?* she mouthed.

"What?" I tried to ask, but it came out more like, "Gunh?"

My throat was tight, so tight and so dry, and it suddenly became hard to draw a full breath. Trying not to panic, I reached for the pitcher of water next to me and poured a glass, but my hands grew numb as I lifted it to my mouth and pushed the edge of the

cup between my lips. I had to push because my lips were no longer opening or closing. They were frozen, as unfeeling and lifeless as my hands were quickly becoming.

"Gunh?" I asked Kathy again as the glass dropped from my hands, water spattering everywhere before the vessel rolled to the carpet with a solid thunk. Several people in the front row whispered to each other, staring at my face with increasing horror.

"That concludes the session." Kathy cut off the woman she'd selected as the final question in mid-sentence and waved her hand frantically to catch the attention of the moderator at the back of the room.

"We need a doctor, an ambulance, something," Kathy yelled, her voice firm with fear and urgency.

"Shuuh," I gasped, struggling to let loose a string of curses, but finding my rubbery lips weren't up to the task.

I turned to look at Kathy through eyes surrounded by frames of my own swollen flesh. I was puffing up like Violet Beauregard in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, but without any oompa loompas to come roll me out the back door.

"Hold on, Gail." Kathy knelt down beside me and placed a tentative hand on one of my own. That's when I saw them and screamed.

Or tried to scream anyway. My throat wasn't really cooperating with drawing in enough air to let loose a truly impressive shriek.

The hands I held up in front of my face looked like someone had inflated a pair of surgical gloves and I knew my face was in the same sorry shape. Thinking about it, I could actually feel my throat and face breaking out in an increasingly nasty case of hives. It was kind of like what happened when I ate too many strawberries but about a million times worse.

As my eyes gradually swelled shut, I turned to look for Veronica, to ask her to stop this, to save me, to make this all go away and I'd do anything she wanted. Crap, I'd even publish *Logan's Long Lost Lady Lover*, or whatever the hellishly alliterative title of her five-hundred-page masterwork had been.

But she wasn't there. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why, but that made me even more frightened. I'd lost track of the snake and now it could be creeping through the grass, unseen until it was too late to do anything except maybe scream in horror to warn the other mice nearby.

The idea of Veronica oozing up behind me was the last straw. I let myself black out, deciding being conscious while the serpent lady opened her hinged jaws and took me tenderly inside was not at all a desirable state of being.

## Chapter Three

"You're scaring the shit out of me. Shit, Gail. Shit." Kathy hovered over me, blue eyes all swimmy with tears. I had just enough time to realize I'd never seen Kathy cry or cuss, let alone cry *and* cuss, before I blacked out again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"There's no history of anaphylaxis," the bald guy with the caterpillar eyebrows said, peering down at me as if I were a particularly frustrating specimen. "Developing a reaction like this at her advanced age is incredibly rare."

*Advanced age, my ass. I'm still young enough to be your daughter's daughter, grandpa!*

I was thinking about reaching up and plucking some of the hair from his overgrown eyebrows and seeing what kind of reaction *he* had to *that*, but then the world went inky and the sounds of voices faded down a tunnel of darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm alive," I croaked the third time I came to, determined not to sink back into the nothingness again, at least not until I let someone know I was still in here. I hadn't shuffled off my mortal coil just yet.

"Yes, you are, but just barely," came a tired voice beside me, a voice that sounded relieved and weary and loving and terribly sad all at the same time.

"Richard?" I managed to turn my head slightly on my pillow. My hunky man sat beside my hospital bed, looking like he hadn't showered in a few days.

Or maybe he'd skipped shaving on purpose before coming to see me, knowing how a little bit of scruff on his impeccably maintained person always drove me wild. Or maybe he'd been so distraught by the news of my collapse that he'd left New York and flown to Arizona to be by my side without packing so much as a toothbrush or a change of underpants and hadn't left my sickbed long enough to make a trip to the hospital's gift shop.

I liked that idea. I liked it a lot, even though I'd never really had any "dark, tortured, lover by my sickbed" type of fantasies before. I was having plenty of them now, however, and I wondered if I had a private room. I couldn't hear anyone else, but I couldn't be sure. At the moment I wasn't feeling up to trying to make it to a seated position and really check out the lay of the land. Still, I could let Richard know where my thoughts were headed, see if he might be up to nursing me back to health with a little help from the wonder dick.

I was getting ready to say something suggestive when I remembered we weren't an item, that I'd ruined everything and Richard had decided I was the worst thing that had happened to him in his entire life. The realization made the sexy words I'd planned die in my throat and my relieved smile fade away. Suddenly, the masculine beauty of Richard was an almost painful thing to behold.

It was as if he read my thoughts because the second I remembered what I'd done, he closed his gorgeous gray eyes against me. I watched his thick black lashes spread out over his pale skin, skin I'd always teased him was whiter than mere Caucasian, that was flirting with being downright albino-ish. But now I could admit how beautiful I'd always found that skin, how I loved the way his almost-black dark brown hair spilled in waves over his forehead, adored running my hands over the kinky hairs that peppered his chest and tapered to a thin line that disappeared into the top of his boxer briefs.

I fought to keep my thoughts from going any further, from visualizing where that trail led. Down, down to where more tight curls surrounded the part of him I had loved to take in my mouth, to hold in my much browner hand. That part I'd caress until he was begging to be inside me, laughing as he pulled me on top of him and reached down between our bodies to position himself and slide inside where I was always more than ready for him to be.

"Are we in New York?" I asked, my voice still decidedly croaky, though this time I couldn't tell if it was disuse or emotion that made me sound like a frog that smoked a pack of Marlboro Reds a day.

"No. They saw no reason to move you. They have a good hospital here," Richard said in an oddly neutral tone.

He opened his eyes and ran a hand through his hair, which looked longer than when I'd last seen it, almost touching the collar of his rumpled black dress shirt. He looked so fabulous in black, but hardly ever wore it, saying it was too depressing and cliché. The man had been born and raised on the Upper East Side. You wouldn't think he'd mind being cliché. But he did – another thing I really liked about him.

"Where's Kathy?" I asked, remembering her swimmy blue eyes. Poor Kathy, having your boss collapse on you in the middle of a presentation had to suck major ass.

"She had to go home," he said. "But I think she knew I was here to protect you from perverted night nurses and other hazards of the newly comatose."

"I was in a coma? No shit?" No wonder I felt like I'd just been run over by a truck.

"No shit," Richard said with the tiniest trace of a smile, as if to say he'd never heard someone put a near death experience quite so eloquently. "How could you get to thirty-three without realizing you have a deathly allergy?"

"I'm thirty-two, not thirty-three." I sniffed as I smacked my lips, realizing I was terribly thirsty.

"No, you're not."

"I know my own birthday."

Richard always forgot I was only a year older than he was. It was like he wanted to rub in the age difference or something. It wasn't as if we were May-December, for god's sakes, it was more like late May and early June.

Actually, now it was more like nothing at all. We weren't even on the same calendar. He had said it was over and hadn't returned any of my calls. Even though I never left a message, he had to have known I called. The man had caller ID and knew how to use it, unlike my mother or big brother, who can dissect human chromosomes, but not operate his cell phone or tie his kid's shoelace. He says he wishes they still had Velcro like when we were kids.

That said, I had to wonder why Richard was here. If it were really over, if he really didn't care or think he could get past what I'd done, then why had he flown all the way to Arizona to protect my comatose body from assault by the allegedly perverted night nurses? It made me wonder. Worse, it made me a little hopeful. I knew I should have been more worried about nearly dying than the semantics of "me and Richard", but I've always been horrible with priorities and keeping them straight.

"Right." He gave me another little smile, bringing to mind foolish thoughts about taking baby smile steps back into his good graces. "However old you are, they think you almost succumbed to death by cinnamon roll."

"That's just stupid dumb. I eat cinnamon rolls on almost a daily basis." Richard used to love it when I said things like stupid-dumb and crazy-insane. He called them my adorable redundancies.

God, I was pathetic. How had I ever deluded myself into thinking I wasn't in love with him, that it would be a good idea to take some time off and maybe see other people?

"Not with walnuts. Another woman at the conference had to use her epi-pen a few hours before you started to have symptoms. She called the hospital when she heard you'd collapsed and suggested the nut allergy theory. The doctor had already figured it was that or a bee sting, but nobody thought there was much chance of a bee getting that far into the Hyatt."

"But I eat nuts. Peanut butter is one of my major food groups."

"Peanuts aren't nuts."

"Then why are they called pea-*nuts*?"

"They're part of the pea family. Legumes, not nuts."

"You're such a smarty pants."

"That's what you love about me, right?" he said, his light tone fading as he realized what he'd said. His face grew tight again.

Why hadn't I told him that I loved him? Why did I have to hurt people, break things, turn something that should have been easy into something so very fucking hard?

What's worse, why couldn't I tell him...even now?

"Speaking of peanut butter, I am really, really thirsty," I said, forcing the lightness back into my voice.

"That doesn't make sense." He stood and walked around to the other side of my bed.

I hoped he was going to fetch me a glass of water, but I still wasn't feeling up to flipping the old noggin all the way over in that direction. It was sapping all my meager, newly un-comatose strength just to flap my dry and thankfully unswollen lips and refrain from begging Richard to tell me why he'd come.

"It makes sense. When you think of peanut butter, you think about how your mouth gets all sticky and then you get thirsty." When in doubt, ramble inanely and hope something remotely appropriate makes its way into the conversation.

"Right, should have known."

"Have you ever noticed that water kind of tastes like milk when you're eating peanut butter?" I asked as he sat back down in his chair and held a glass of water with a bright pink swirly straw to my lips. I was really glad for the straw, even if it was a little too girly for my taste. I didn't think I could lift my head to take a drink if my life depended on it.

"I should call your doctor before I let you drink this. I'm sure it won't hurt, but he might think I'm stepping on his toes if I don't ask first." He withdrew the beautiful, wet, glorious, succulent looking glass of water before I could latch my lips around the straw.

"Screw caterpillar eyebrows, I know I'm not allergic to water." I actually managed to lift my hand a few inches from the mattress in an attempt to snatch the glass away before I realized I wasn't up to snatching anything. How long had I been out, anyway? I was getting ready to ask when old caterpillar eyebrows himself opened the door to my hospital room.

Or what I'd *thought* was my hospital room.

"She's awake," Eyebrows said, looking oddly eager, like I was a juicy steak instead of a precious patient snapped back from the jaws of death.

"Barely," Richard said, protectively.

"Is she ready for a few questions?"

"I haven't had the chance to tell her anything and she can barely lift her arm an inch off the bed." He looked angry as he jumped to his feet, quickly positioning himself between the doctor and myself, but he wasn't quite fast enough to prevent me from seeing what lay beyond the doorway.

We weren't in a hospital. Hell, I doubted we were still on planet Earth. The sun fading behind those too-green hills with their too-bright red flowers and their too-tall grazing moo-cows was not the right color. It was red, but the wrong red, a weird red, a filtered-through-some-unearthly place's atmosphere red.

I hated it already.

I'd never been a fan of science fiction or fantasy in books or movies and I sure as hell didn't like them in my real life. I turned my eyes back to Richard, wondering if he'd sold me into intergalactic sex slavery or something completely weird to punish me for my wicked ways when I realized the full depth of my in shited-ness.

"What's going on? Who are you?" It wasn't just the hair that was a little too long, it was the tip of the nose that turned down just a little too sharply, the edges of the eyes that narrowed a bit too soon. The man I'd just been talking to, bantering with, treating like my long lost ex boyfriend who used to love me before I pulled out his heart and stomped on it wasn't Richard.

He wasn't Richard. He really, really wasn't and if I'd had the slightest doubt about that fact, it would have been firmly doused by what he said next.

"Gail, I was going to tell you, I really was. It's just that we started talking and then I couldn't figure out —"

"What?!" I screeched, my heart speeding much faster than was probably healthy for a woman just back from death's door.

"I'm sorry. I guess I liked pretending to be a part of your life, to be human. Just for a little while."

Shit. Crap. Shit...and crap.

## Chapter Four

"Help! Somebody help me! Help!" I screamed as loudly as a recently comatose person could, which turned out to be pretty loud since I was hyped up on my own adrenaline and a healthy dose of the creeps.

"Gail, stop it. You're going to hurt yourself," Richard's doppelganger said with a frustrated sigh that was the exact replica of the real Richard's frustrated sigh.

Creepy, creepy and more creepy.

"Shut up. You're not my boss. You're not even my ex-boyfriend, you piece of alien shit." The hysteria in my voice was almost obnoxious enough to make me want to lower my volume, but not quite. One couldn't worry about maintaining their poise when they were getting ready to be turned over to the intergalactic sex trade cartel, or the giant, carnivorous moo-cows, or whatever the hell Eyebrows and Fake Richard had planned.

"That's mature." Fake Richard sighed again.

"Help! Somebody help me! I'm being held hostage by aliens!"

"You told her you were an alien?" Eyebrows yelled over my hysterical screaming, looking at Richard like he was a weirdo.

Wonderful, now the *weirdos* were weirded out by Fake Richard. A bad sign, a very bad sign. I couldn't believe I hadn't realized he wasn't the real enchilada until after I'd lusted after him for a good ten minutes and bantered endlessly about nut allergies. I didn't know what that said about me, but I didn't think it was good.

"Of course not, Dale, could you stop being so literal?" Fake Richard once again eerily reminded me of the real Richard and the way he used "literal" as if it were the worst of all possible insults.

"You're the one who said we wouldn't be able to convince her of the truth." Dale wrinkled his rather bulbous nose and his eyebrows ruffled with irritation. Even knowing his name was Dale, I still wanted to call him Eyebrows. The things were wild, untamed, so alive and full of a personality I suspected them to crawl off his face any second.

"So you thought I'd tell her I was a spaceman and everything would be fine?"

"I have no idea what you tell the patients. I only know what you tell me."

"Are you inferring that I'm lying about Earth reality?"

"I wouldn't know, I can't see a damned thing in that mirror of yours. I'm operating on faith here."

"And your faith in me is touching, as always."

"No need to be sarcastic." Dale sniffed again.

"Surprised you noticed." Richard rolled his piercing gray eyes.

"Ahhhh! Ahhhh! Ahhhh!" I screamed again and again, until I started to see little black dots around the edges of my vision and my chest and throat hurt. But still I kept screaming, an irrational part of me certain that my screams were the only thing keeping the evil Star Wars-like space troopers from coming to cart me off to their ship.

"Gail, shut up!" Fake Richard yelled at me, his eyes wide and this I-can't-stand-your-crazy-screaming-another-second look on his face.

"Ahhh..." My throat was too hoarse to really scream, but I've never been the type to obey gracefully when I could be defiant to my last little toenail.

"You—" His features tried to hold onto frustration for a second before he started laughing. "Lady, you are a handful. I liked you better unconscious."

"I liked you better when you weren't an alien."

"I'm not an alien. I'm just not exactly human, there's a big difference," Richard said with a flirtatious little smile. He was flirting with me? How could he be *flirting* with me?

Big old creep...a sexy creep...but a creep nonetheless.

"I'm going to start screaming again."

"Please, don't. I already have a headache," Eyebrows said as if I were putting him out a great deal. I was glad to see, however, that I was no longer getting the juicy steak look from that direction. Now it was more the dear-god-I-think-there-are-maggots-in-my-garbage look, which was just fine with me. I wanted at least someone in the room to be as uncomfortable as I was.

"Shut up, Eyebrows," I snapped, my anger fading as Richard started laughing again.

"She called you Eyebrows." He sounded like a really lame Beavis and Butt-head impression, something the real Richard wouldn't have been caught dead attempting. Interesting.

"Don't laugh at me," I said, shocked that I kind of wanted to laugh with him.

Richard's laugh had always done that to me, the deep rumbling wonderfulness of it able to pull me out of all but the worst moods. But this wasn't Richard, wasn't even Richard's laugh. It was lighter, bubblier, yet with the same kind of weight and softness, like his laugh was a blanket you could crawl under and snuggle. But it wasn't Richard's laugh, it really wasn't. When I thought about that again, I started to cry—a shocking and rare event in its own right.

"You're not Richard. You're not." Tears rolled down my face and my nose grew snotty.

I immediately regretted the tears and the snot. I didn't think I was strong enough to even wipe my nose on my sleeve. I'd just have to let snot run down into my mouth like some poor neglected child whose mother didn't carry tissues. The thought of neglected children made me even sadder and I started to cry harder. I was never this sentimental,

but apparently being kidnapped by an alien who looked like my ex-boyfriend brought out my sappy side.

"Don't cry," Fake Richard whispered, sitting down beside me and taking my limp hand in his, looking at me all lovey dovey again. "It's not as bad as you think. I'm not a bad guy and I'm going to help you through this. I promise you, I won't leave you, no matter what."

"Ahhh..." I whisper-sobbed.

He grabbed a tissue from the bedside and tenderly wiped away my tears and snot, but that only made me cry harder.

No one had touched me with that much tenderness in years, even Richard, and it hurt me somehow. It made me long for my dad and the way he'd let me snuggle on his lap while he read his tenth paper of the day and I read *Little Women*. I'd loved *Little Women* at eight, though I hadn't understood at the time that it was good that Jo didn't end up with Laurie. Little fool.

"Hey, Killer, don't fall to pieces on me yet." Fake Richard whispered the words so Dr. Dale Eyebrows couldn't hear. My tears slowed as shock took over as my dominant emotion.

How could he have known that? The other coincidences were crazy, but *no one* but Richard and I knew that he called me Killer. It was my favorite nickname ever and I guarded it jealously. Though I wouldn't have minded the people around the office calling me Killer—maybe it would have kept me from being pestered ten times a day for my opinion on things my underlings were perfectly capable of managing on their own—I hadn't shared the name with anyone. I liked that it was Richard's name for me and Richard's alone.

"I don't get it." I was scared, but still unable to draw my eyes away from his. When I looked at the eyes, just the eyes, it *was* Richard I saw. My Richard, with all our history, our memories, our secrets. Looking into those eyes, I would believe this was a man who knew what I looked naked.

"I mean, no matter what. Even if you decide it would be a smart decision to fuck my best friend." The pain in his eyes was a horrible thing to witness.

"What?" I wanted to say I was sorry, that I never meant to hurt him with such a heartless act of drunken stupidity, that I would spend the rest of my life making it up to him. I would be his love slave and worship at the altar of his wondrous dick alone for the rest of my life if he would let me.

But all that came out was. "I didn't mean to. I'm really sor—"

"Don't be. It doesn't matter. You did that to him. But I— I was just trying to say I wouldn't let that destroy something as strong as what you two seemed to have. If you and I had...something."

God, that was right! He wasn't Richard. He wasn't even human for god's sakes. Shifting my gaze, I could still see the giant moo-cows grazing on the too-green grass—

that now looked black because the too-red sun had set while I was having a nervous breakdown.

Thinking of nervous breakdowns made my heart beat faster and my head throb with a pulse that didn't feel healthy. Tough girl, Killer, Romance-writer-devouring-editor-bitch-extraordinaire, Wicked Witch of the West Village—whatever I was, I still wasn't up to this, not by a long shot. It was too much, especially considering I'd been out of commission for at least a few days judging from the achy, horrible feelings in my body.

It crossed my mind that it didn't seem fair not to get a little TLC after just emerging from a coma and then my body took over.

I hated to do it, wanted to fight the pull of the darkness that was at this point annoyingly familiar, but decided I wouldn't be any worse off unconscious. As I once again sank down into that silent well of something deeper than sleep, I harbored the hope that when I next awoke I would discover this had all been just a very strange, hospital-IV-drug-induced hallucination.

It was really the most desirable explanation, no matter how much a part of me wanted to find out the true story behind Fake Richard and his tender gazes and sweet snotty-nose-wiping hands. But then, that was just the crazy insane part of me talking, the part that almost believed you could make up for your past mistakes and second chances were a possibility.

*Second chances are possible, just look at John Travolta. Who would have ever thought he'd make a comeback after that movie with the sweatbands?*

I told my subconscious to quit thinking stupid hopeful thoughts and then both me and it hit the bottom of the well and there was no more thinking to be done.

## Chapter Five

*I'm in that fantasy again, the one I've had since I first started reading romance novels. The one with the really girly white dress...*

*I'm an 18<sup>th</sup> century English miss, escaped from my tutors and governesses and whoever else is in charge of watching after my virtue, intent on an afternoon spent reading in the hammock in my garden. Once there, I settle down to gaze at the timeless hills of the beautiful bit of Great Britain that lies just northwest of London. I'm content to listen to the brook babbling nearby and the wind rustling through the treetops and gradually be lulled to sleep.*

*While I'm napping, however, a summer storm rolls in. The entire staff of the estate begins to search for me, to make sure I don't get caught out in the elements. Of course, who should find me but the stable boy – the large, strapping, incredibly handsome and manly stable boy who I've been lusting after in my naïve, young English nobility kind of way for years.*

*He stands beside me, staring down at my delicate features, the noble servant part of him wanting to wake me and spirit me back to the house. But the other part, the strapping, manly part, wants to lie down beside me and press his lips to mine. He wants to run his strong hands over my body until I'm breathless enough to allow him to bunch my skirt around my hips and allow one of his thick, blunt fingers to slide into the velvet heat found between my virgin thighs.*

*I'm a very sensual young virgin, of course, more than willing to give my maidenhead to my farm boy. I've dreamed of kissing him for years, completely enthralled by his masculinity, tempted by the rough passion I sense in him that is so different from the other young men I've known.*

*So when I open my eyes and see him standing beside me, dark clouds swirling behind him and hunger for me so clear in his eyes, I open my arms without a second thought. He sinks down into the hammock with masculine grace, gently adding his weight to mine. I feel aware of my body as never before as his arms wrap around me, pulling me close to a kind of heat that is more than just the warmth of two bodies side by side. He touches my face, my lips, runs his hands down the curve of my hip, taking his time, drawing out that first moment until I'm practically mad to see if he tastes as I'd dreamed he would, like summer and fall mixed together, like the spice of mulled cider and the cool water from my favorite spring.*

*And he does...only better. From the second his lips touch mine, I know that there is no way to stop what we've started. The world narrows to the sweep of his warm tongue through my mouth, the feel of those strong fingers digging into the flesh of my hip, the soft cries that sound from each of us and the desire for a kind of satisfaction that I'm not entirely sure can exist. Surely there is nothing better than this, than these hands, these lips, this hard male body leveraging on top of my own?*

*Then he's pulling at my dress. I part my thighs and arch toward him. This is what I am aching for, dying for, and nothing can convince me to deny him. Not the feel of the cold air between us or the hot, pulsing length – that part of a man I've never seen – lying hard and ready*

*against my thigh. Even when the storm breaks and a warm summer rain starts to fall hard on our skin, making my white dress transparent and his thin cotton shirt mold to the impressive muscles of his stable-boy chest, we don't stop. We only deepen our kiss, drinking in the rain and the taste of each other with equal abandon.*

*I feel his hands gently urging my legs further apart, feel his hips descend to mine and that hot, steely length press against the entry to my body and slowly push its way inside. I cry out as he pushes deeper, past the tiny hint of resistance, tensing for a moment as pain and pleasure war for the right to claim me. He is gentle, aware and gradually increases his rhythm, waiting until I'm open and ready to receive his deepest thrusts, to feel him filling me completely, welcoming him into my body.*

*I look into his eyes with wonder as he moves, unable to believe the pleasure he is giving me, or the vulnerable expression that has softened his features. He kisses me softly then and stills his thrusts, moving his hands to my bodice, peeling away the damp fabric that clings to my skin so his hands can caress the sensitive flesh. His mouth leaves mine to take one of the tightened buds inside. I moan and arch into his mouth, lifting my hips more firmly into his, thrilling to feel the way his body connects to mine, caressing the place where I've secretly learned I can bring myself pleasure.*

*He starts to slowly circle his hips, as if he knows just where to touch me so that the tension and pleasure growing within me peaks, finally taking me to the culmination, the fulfillment of the promise of our very first kiss. I scream his name as I come, my most intimate muscles clenching around his thickness, triggering a scream from his own full lips. He spills himself inside me, whispering nonsense against my neck, the aftershocks of our coupling making us both tremble.*

*"Lady, you're so beautiful," a voice murmurs against my neck, making the fantasy waver like a reflection in rippling water.*

*The world grows black and I'm scared for a moment. Then I feel soft kisses on my jaw, gentle lips caressing my closed eyelids. My breath speeds a little faster. A large, strong hand is gently massaging the small of my back. I arch my spine, feeling my breasts press erotically against a muscled chest. The hand at my back slowly works its way down to cradle my bottom, to pull me against the firm ridge of what is clearly an aroused male. I sigh, thinking this is by far the most amazingly realistic dream I've ever had when I suddenly realize –*

*I'm not asleep.*

*"Ahhh!" I screamed and pushed at the muscled chest, opening my eyes and screaming again. Not only was I not in my English country garden, I was not in my hospital bed and I was apparently still *not* in my right mind.*

*"Wait, don't start screaming. You don't understand." Fake Richard moved away from me, sitting up in the soft grass. The sun glinted off his slightly too-long hair, which I now realized was not black but a deeply murky green.*

*Wow, green hair. But at least the sun wasn't looking as weirdly red as the last time I'd awoken in la-la land. It was more yellowy orange this morning, almost Earthly. I would have been tempted to believe I was back on my home planet, in fact, if Fake*

Richard weren't there, the grass beneath me wasn't entirely too soft and I couldn't see the giant cows grazing far away on some distant hills.

"Where's the hospital, where's Eyebrows?" I sat up and pulled my legs close to my chest. I felt much stronger than when I last awoke, but still not quite up to fleeing for my life.

I had no clue in which direction to flee, even if I'd had the strength. I was also still wearing my hospital gown and for some reason I didn't want Fake Richard to get a peek at my bare butt as I ran away from him. A ridiculous thing to worry about, of course, since he'd evidently had his hand on said butt mere seconds ago...

"Why were you feeling me up? I thought you were supposed to be protecting me from the coma perverts, not rubbing yourself all over me while I'm dead to the world," I snapped, straightening my legs and trying to tuck my gown underneath me.

It was suddenly worrying me that my bare backside was making intimate contact with the alien grass. Who knew what was living in there? If the cows were the size of elephants, what size might the earthworms be? And what if one of them decided I looked like a tempting little tidbit? I was already severely lacking in the booty department, I couldn't afford to lose a chunk to an earthworm.

"Where am I? And don't say Arizona because I remember everything. I know you're a liar and an emotionally manipulative shit. I'm not taking any more crap from you—"

"Gail—"

"and you can crawl up my ass and die if you think—"

"Gail—"

"I'm going to be sweet talked—"

"Would you—"

"into forgetting you're not who you—"

"If you'd ever shut up, maybe I could answer some of your questions." Fake Richard bolted to his feet, practically growling with frustration before he began pacing around the hilltop on which we were presently perched.

Against my better judgment, my eyes were drawn to the front of his brown trousers. A strange flutter of feminine satisfaction tingled low in my belly when I saw he was frustrated in more ways than one. I couldn't help but notice that he was, um...large. Larger even than the real Richard, who was more than I could comfortably take if I wasn't incredibly aroused. But then, getting aroused had never been a problem for me when Richard was around and apparently Fake Richard had some of the same skills if the embarrassing slickness of my thighs at the moment were any indication.

"Don't tell me to shut up." I pulled my gaze back to his eyes, blushing as it became clear he knew exactly where I'd been looking.

"I didn't tell you to shut up." His gray eyes darkened with that intimate knowledge I'd only ever seen in a man *after* we'd made love. Dear god, what had we done up here? Had it gone further than I thought?

"Well, you inferred it," I said, refusing to show how freaked out I was becoming.

"Lady, you are even worse than she was. Different, but I think worse."

"Don't call me 'lady'. My name is Gail."

"Lady, give me strength!" he yelled, looking to the sky.

Oh, I got it now. Duh.

"It's a —"

"Yeah, I get it," I interrupted. "I'm not a complete idiot."

"Oh my Lady, she's awake!" This came from an excited girly voice behind me.

I spun around, easily coming to my knees in the grass. I was definitely getting stronger by the minute. At this rate, I would be up to running for my life in no time. Maybe the owner of the girly voice would help me figure out where to run to. She sounded friendly and...oddly familiar.

"Kathy?" My mouth dropped open at the familiar blue eyes and red hair.

"No, I'm Kendall, but I guess Rake's told you all about that," Kathy-Kendall said, kneeling down in the grass to give me a big hug. "I know I don't really know you, but you look so much like her I just have to give you a hug."

"Like who?" I asked, sinking into the hug despite myself.

This woman was obviously not my friend, but she even smelled a little bit like Kathy and it was nice to pretend I had a friend in this strange place. Plus, her purple knee-length sweater was so soft it begged to be snuggled. It was even softer than the grass and I made a mental note to ask to take something like that home with me when I left. Not the height of fashion, but a super comfortable rainy Sunday outfit.

"Like Marly, except for you being more brown and her jade."

"Jade?"

"Green." Rake's voice was tight, like he wished Kendall hadn't shown up.

Interesting. Richard had always begged to meet my friends, but I'd kept my friend life and my romantic life separate. A horrible part of me had worried that my friends might like him more than me and when we broke up, they'd decide to keep him instead.

"Not really green, more this shining pearly jade. Her skin is gorgeous, but I'm sure Rake has been talking about her nonstop. They had a serious misunderstanding, but I know he's been worried about her and — Oh dear, I can see your bottom. You don't want to let the cows get a look at that," she said, pulling my gown together in the back.

"The cows eat people?" I let Kendall pull me to my feet while I held my gown bunched together behind me. Standing, I realized she wasn't nearly as tall as Kathy, only topping me by a few inches even in my bare feet.

"No, silly, they eat giant ground slugs, but a bottom can look a little like the tail-end of a slug, especially if you're as nearsighted as those stupid cows are." Kendall giggled, then hugged me again. "Wow, it's crazy. It's like she's here again. Even with the slight differences, the resemblance is uncanny. Right, Rake?"

"Right," Fake Richard – whose name, evidently, was Rake – mumbled.

"She, who? Could I get more than a name?" I asked, my eyes all for Rake. The man had been holding out on me, not to mention he somehow thought it was appropriate to roll around in the grass with me while I was unconscious just because I looked like some chick named Marly who he used to bang.

What a complete creep, loser, pervert, sicko creep.

"I was 'rolling around with you' to help you heal. And I'm not a creep or a sicko. You're the one who gives every act of kindness an ulterior motive." Rake's face flushed red before he brushed past where I stood with Kendall and stormed off down the hill behind us.

The energy in the air seemed to sag slightly as he left and I fought the urge to ask him not to go. He was not Richard and he was not to be trusted. No matter how interesting he might be on several levels, or how much I wanted him to think well of me for some strange reason, I wasn't in the market for a man. Especially an alien man who looked eerily like my ex-boyfriend.

"Don't flatter yourself. I wouldn't pick you up at market if you were on sale. And I'm not an alien." Rake tossed these little gems back over his shoulder, sounding like he'd enjoy watching a giant cow munch on my bottom.

The man in my life was mad at me. At least one aspect of my existence was now approaching something resembling normalcy. Yippee.

## Chapter Six

"I didn't say that out loud. Did I?" I asked, starting to get a little nervous.

What if I'd lost the ability to censor myself as some strange side effect of the coma? I'm sure people who knew me thought I said everything on my mind, but if they knew how many things I wanted to say but didn't, they would thank god for the work my inner censor accomplished.

"No, you didn't. At least I don't think so. Rake has some...special gifts," Kendall said, looking at me as if she'd just realized Rake and I had been doing more than basking in the alien sunshine a few minutes before she showed up on the hill.

"I didn't sleep with him. Don't get mad at me."

"I wouldn't be mad at you. Marly might...hurt you if she were still around, but I wouldn't be mad."

"Well, I don't want to be hurt, so tell her I didn't do it. Because I didn't, no matter what the jerk says," I insisted, willing Kendall to believe me.

"Rake's not a jerk. He's one of the few people who can read what's happening on Earth."

"He's psychic?"

"No, silly, he uses a mirror like everyone else."

"Right." Like anything she said made sense.

"He's also a healer, a sexual healer. That's probably why he was doing...whatever he was doing with you up here. He says it's easier to do his work outdoors, which makes sense to me. I mean, I love having sex outside, it feels so much more natural. Don't you think?"

"Um, right," I said, not feeling up to discussing my outdoor sex life—which had been nonexistent until a few minutes ago—with this woman who was definitely not as Kathy-like as I'd assumed. Kathy never talked about her sex life, but then I guess work kept her too busy for much of a life, period. Besides, most New York City men were self-obsessed assholes not worth the bother of dating long term and Kathy didn't seem like a casual screw type of girl. Not that she talked about it, once again, but that was my impression.

"You don't believe me." Kendall smiled.

Very perceptive, little outdoor-nookie-loving-hippy chick.

"No, I believe you. I mean, it's like, sexual healin' and stuff like that."

Kendall seemed not to get the Marvin Gaye reference. I was going to have to try to remember I was in a different culture and adapt my snarky jokes accordingly.

"Not exactly. The doctors think you suffered a little brain damage, but they couldn't do much for you. Rake, on the other hand, can actually help people regenerate tissue if he gets to them soon enough after the injury. I'm sure he was just trying to help." Kendall took my elbow and pulled me in the direction Rake had gone.

"Oh. Well...okay." I wanted to ask if that meant he had to get frisky with all of his "patients", but decided to let it go. If I started asking questions, then I might actually start believing all of this was real. That didn't seem like a smart thing to do. Whether I was brain damaged or not, I needed to do my best to keep my head on my shoulders.

"One of the side effects of the healing is that he'll be able to sense your thoughts for a few hours. So try to watch what you're thinking if we run into him before this afternoon."

"Riiiggghht. I'll do that." I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Fake Richard was a mind-reading sex healer. It was about as far from the investment banker Richard I knew as you could get. What did *that* say about my subconscious—assuming this was some elaborate fantasy?

"But you can't run from a fantasy," I mumbled to myself, my heart beating a little faster.

"What?"

"Nothing." I pinched myself—hard. "Ouch!"

Yep, I could still feel pain, but then I'd known that from the first time I'd awoken in the hospital. I'd never had a full body ache like that in a dream. I'd also never been able to feel the softness of the grass under my bare feet or the warmth of the sun on my skin.

"Shit." I wasn't dreaming, I really wasn't.

"Wow. You really are just like her," Kendall said as we crested a hill and a grouping of small white cottages with thatched roofs came into view.

"If you say that again, I might freak out and start screaming. It's already happened once or twice."

"I'm sorry. It's just so strange. Usually the people from your dimension look similar to people we know and sometimes even have similar mannerisms, but they always have very different personalities. That's part of what makes the empathy between our worlds so frustrating," Kendall said, warming to her topic. "I mean, if you're going to have your actions influenced by a dominant reality, it doesn't seem fair that your mirror maker isn't even someone you would meet up with for morning juice and a bread basket in your reality. You know what I'm saying?" Kendall laughed, as if there was no doubt I'd get her joke.

I began to suspect I wasn't the only one who needed to adjust my sense of humor.

"I don't get it, Kendall. Rake didn't tell me jack and you're...just talking crazy talk to me right now. Sorry."

"You mean you don't understand, right?" Her unplucked brows drew together. Kathy would die. She spent at least thirty minutes a week having her dark red brows

professionally waxed and tweezed, insisting the eyebrows were the framework of the face and must not be neglected.

"Right."

"Everything, or just the relationship between our worlds?"

"Everything, but that would be a good place to start."

"Actually, a bread basket would be a great place to start." Kendall ushered me toward a large white hut with bright red trim around the windows and door. It looked like something an elf or a Portuguese islander would live in. I really liked it. It reminded me of home, which was strange considering I'd spent most of my life in Northern New Jersey and New York. The closest I'd ever gotten to a hut was the time I made out with my eighth grade boyfriend in his father's tool shed.

"But I can't go out in public in a hospital gown."

"Gail, we don't worry about that kind of stuff. You could be naked if you wanted to be."

"So no one will care if I accidentally flash some bare bum?" I asked, still not liking the idea of being partially nude in front of even more strangers so early in the morning, but willing to go with the flow. I planned on keeping my ass covered, anyway. I just wanted to make sure I wouldn't cause a stir if something did manage to peek out.

"Men are men in any dimension." Kendall shot me a slightly wicked smile as she opened the door.

"But it's not bad manners."

"Not at all."

"Well, I am hungry." I sniffed the delicious smelling air as we entered the interior of the hut. It was lit only by the shafts of light from the open windows, but was far from gloomy. Brightly colored knick-knacks lined the walls and vibrant red table clothes made the place decidedly festive, while the smell of sugary bread made my stomach twist with anticipation.

Some of my anxiety dissolved as I realized most of the tables were empty. The few patrons still finishing their breakfasts only gave Kendall and I small nods of welcome before turning back to their food. It was nice to know not everyone thought I was a very interesting person and that shapeless clothes were the norm.

Rake, with his button down black shirt and brown pants, would be more out of place than I was in my baggy pink hospital gown. Shoes were also entirely optional, I noticed. I was glad not to be the only one barefoot in the restaurant, though I planned on asking Kendall for a pair of boot things like hers after breakfast. I'm not a foot person, never have been, never will be. I prefer to keep my fat little feet modestly covered at all times. Even here, wherever this was.

"What is this place? What do you call it?" I asked.

"Café west. Café east is across the village."

"No, I mean your world or dimension or whatever."

"Here."

"Here?" I asked, more than a little disappointed. I was hoping for something slightly magical and *Wizard of Oz*-ish. Seemed I wasn't going to get it.

"Here's where you are. Savory or sweet? Or a mix of both? What do you think?" Kendall asked as we settled into a booth with a view out to the hills. They were still looking way too green but I could appreciate their beauty now that I wasn't newly un-comatose or entirely freaked out.

"You choose. But nothing with walnuts." I didn't want to risk another near death experience via cinnamon roll.

"We don't have walnuts here, which is another reason the doctors are excited. A mix of savory and sweet and two juices, please," Kendall told the short, pudgy waiter who had magically appeared beside our table.

"I can't stand the suspense anymore, Kendall, spill everything you know. Right now." I gulped the reddish orange juice the waiter brought and reached for Kendall's glass when I finished my own. Man, I was still thirsty, really thirsty, and the juice was an amazing kind of pomegranate tasting thing with an edge of orange and a hint of lemon-lime.

"You could ask before you drink my juice." Kendall frowned.

"You could tell me what I want to know before I lose my mind."

We smiled at each other, clearly on the road to building a friendship.

About thirty minutes and a large basket of yummy carbohydrates later, I had my information. For all the good it did me.

I wished I had paid more attention in physics class, but at the time I'd kind of agreed with Einstein when it came to alternate dimensions. I mean, who cared if something we couldn't perceive was real if we couldn't perceive it in the first place? I had enough trouble perceiving things whose reality wasn't disputed without engaging in theoretical debate.

I love Einstein. I really do. The man was a unique blend of genius and practicality with a great sense of humor thrown in. What more could you ask for in a person? I really wish he'd been my granddad. Him and Willie Nelson. Talk about the best of both worlds.

"So this world is an alternate Earth reality?" I tried not to sound dubious. At least I was getting some sort of explanation.

"One of thousands, though our scientists believe our dimension branched off some time during the Paleolithic age."

"Because the dinosaurs didn't die?"

"No, they died, but much later in our history and the evolutions of most plant and animal species were profoundly affected."

"Giant cows and soft grass."

"Right, among other things. From what I've read, I also think people in our world have enhanced abilities in what people from your reality would call magic, though we don't think of it that way."

"How do you think of it?"

"I don't know. It's just normal, like smelling or hearing or knowing when it's going to rain."

"Like going to the bathroom, everybody does it?"

"Going to the bathroom?"

"Speaking of bathrooms, I could really use one. You know...all that juice." I squirmed slightly on my wooden seat and gave Kendall what I hoped was a universal "I gotta go" kind of look. I needed a potty break to help me grasp a few things. Though it might be considered unfeminine, I had always done some of my best thinking on the toilet.

"Oh, the laboratory. It's outside, just behind the café." Kendall said with a smile.

The laboratory. Right. It was weird how cows were cows, but bathrooms were laboratories. But doctors were still doctors and bread was bread. I'd have to ask Kendall why some of the terms were the same and some different. Though I suppose it didn't really matter. I should be more concerned about the fact that the choices I'd made in my reality had profoundly affected the life of my mirror image in this one. I had enough guilt regarding some of my stupider decisions without thinking I'd screwed up somebody else's life as well.

I didn't want to be a mirror maker, or whatever Kendall had called it. I just wanted to be me, boring old Gail, a person of complete disinterest except to the few motivated romance writers who made it their business to stalk me at the conferences I attended throughout the year.

"Veronica," I muttered to myself as I opened the door to the cleanest bathroom I'd ever seen in my life, even though the floor was made of tightly packed dirt and the toilet and sink rough-hewn granite.

I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of Veronica and her weird swirly hands and ominous proclamations before. It seemed crazy to think she might have managed to send me to an alternate dimension, but not nearly as crazy as the "transport via poisonous walnut" theory. Kendall had said Eyebrows and the rest of them thought the allergic reaction had hurdled me into their dimension, the implications of such an arrival seeming to indicate that ingesting certain foods might allow free travel between the two dimensions.

Though mirror makers, like me, were a relatively normal occurrence in Here, travel the opposite way was fairly rare. But the doctors and scientists and magicians of Here were working really hard to figure it out, having grown tired of being subject to the whims of their doppelgangers on Earth.

Kendall had started to get into the implications of travel between dimensions and the increased likelihood of complete free will for the Here citizen once they and their

mirror maker had occupied the same dimension for at least one Earth year, but I had zoned out. I was still too disturbed by the knowledge that not all mirror makers went back to Earth after they arrived in Here. It was about sixty-forty, with the “staying in Here” group making up the sixty.

She’d been way too casual dropping that bomb, assuming I would be so much happier in Here than I had ever been on Earth. Empathy didn’t seem to be Kendall’s strong suit. Though she was just as sweet as Kathy – or at least seemed to be so far – she just didn’t have that instinctive appreciation for what others were feeling that made Kathy one of my best friends at work. I missed Kathy. I didn’t want to think about never seeing her again, not to mention my other friends or my mom or my brothers or my adorable nieces or the real Richard.

Damn Veronica! It had to be her fault that I was here. Hadn’t she said that people like me always got what they deserved? And I’m sure, in her mind, I deserved to spend the rest of my life alone and creeped out in an alternate dimension without the comfort of friends or family or even normal-sized cows.

I was going to do something horrible to her if I ever got back to Earth and managed to get over being scared shitless of the woman.

“They’re coming! Run!” A woman screamed from somewhere outside the laboratory. More screaming followed and I heard the unmistakable sounds of people throwing open doors and running for their lives – a sound that had become familiar during the anthrax scares around our publishing offices a few years back.

Great, some sort of alternate dimension shit had hit the fan. Nothing like mayhem to freeze my pee in midstream. I just couldn’t catch a break in this world. Being able to use the bathroom in peace should be a basic human right. Being *unable* to do so made me mad enough to banish the terror threatening to overtake me. I clutched my hospital gown behind my back, threw open the door and saw exactly what everyone was running from.

## Chapter Seven

Gail's List of Things to be Included in a "Welcome to Here" kit:

Normal earth clothes, including undergarments, socks and shoes

A toiletry kit with toothbrush, hairbrush and mascara for the ladies.

A barf bag, aerosol inhaler and a Xanax.

An electric blanket, stuffed animal or something else fluffy and warm to cling to.

Copy of "Interdimensional Travel for Dummies".

Copy of "So now you're in Here—The Top Ten Things a Mirror Maker needs to know to make friends, influence people and keep from being eaten alive".

I've always been a big list maker. Even if I don't get around to actually *doing* all of the things on the list, it makes me feel like I've accomplished something just to get numbers and words down on my notepad. It's one of the reasons I love my job. It feels great to take a red pen and mark my way through a manuscript and know that someone else is responsible for assimilating my suggestions.

So it wasn't that unusual that the first thing I wanted to do after seeing a barbarian horde burning and pillaging the village was make a list. Lists are neat, orderly and logical—the opposite of a horde of barbarians. Especially since the barbarians in front of me were at least two feet taller than an average Earth man—seven foot something minimum—and dressed in nothing but fur loincloths and some sort of primitive jewelry that appeared to be made out of...ears.

"Shit!" I squealed as the first barbarian swept past the laboratory and I got a really up close and personal look at his accessories. They didn't look like people ears, which was comforting, but anyone who would run around with rotting body parts on a string around their neck immediately got put on my "people who creep me out" list.

"Marly!" A manly voice boomed from the throng of loinclothed, furry-faced men rushing toward me at an alarming speed.

"I'm not—" I began, but then I was being swept up into the arms of the most amazing looking man I'd ever laid eyes on in my life and lost the ability to form words.

He was *Interview with a Vampire* Brad Pitt's better-looking cousin, a fully bearded man's man with waist-length, dirty blond hair. He looked like he slew dragons for

breakfast, deflowered willing young virgins for lunch and thankfully had the good taste to refrain from wearing body parts around his neck out to dinner.

He was any heterosexual woman's dream and for some reason he wanted to press his full lips to mine as his long, magnificent and slightly grassy-smelling hair swirled around us. My entire body cried out for him to take me here, take me *now*, against the wall of the laboratory. This despite the fact that he was eight feet tall and, from the feel of the equipment growing frisky beneath his loincloth, would probably do my barely five foot self major damage were I to decide to throw caution and Richard reconciliation hopes to the wind and spread my legs in my all-too-easily accessible hospital gown.

"You're not Marly," the hunky barbarian growled against my lips.

I got a big whiff of whatever he'd had for breakfast. Yuck. Horrible raw meat-eater breath! His attractiveness level plummeted nearly as fast as I did as I fell from his bear hug.

"Ouch!" I yipped as my bare feet slipped on the dirt and my bare ass hit the ground with a thud. I had to get some shoes and some underpants, as soon as possible, assuming Brad didn't try to kill me, of course.

"Dear Lady, you're brown as a ground sloth." The man threw back his head for a hearty chortle.

I was getting ready to tell him that was a racist remark, but assuming he was dating my green counterpart, I couldn't very well go down that route. Unless, of course, green people were considered the most desirable race in Here. I made a mental note to ask Kendall, assuming Kendall was still alive and not kidnapped, raped or otherwise brutalized by members of the horde.

"And short. Dear Lady, you're a wee thing."

"Well you're hairy as an ape and twice as stinky." I struggled to my feet, deciding giving Brad shit was probably the best way to throw him off his game. Kendall had said men were men no matter what the dimension and a man as studly as this one probably wasn't used to women acting like he was anything other than god's gift to pussy.

Judging by the glowering response to my comment, followed closely by his most pussy-winning grin, I had guessed correctly.

"Big words for a little girl. Might I be having your name now that I've had my tongue down your throat?"

I finally realized what his accent reminded me of—a bad Hollywood imitation of an Irish brogue. I wondered if he was faking it or if that's just what Irish accents sounded like on this side of the dimensional fence.

That, in turn, made me wonder if Tom Cruise had originally been from Here, judging from his horrible *Far and Away* accent and all. But then I decided I had better things to think about than Tom Cruise, considering he was a psycho cult member who had divorced Nicole. How could you divorce Nicole? I was straight and still thought she was super hot. At least until she started with the minor plastic surgery that wasn't nearly as minor as her publicist or whoever told her it—

"A name, sweet. I'll have one," he urged impatiently.

"Gail. I don't really care who you are as long as you're not trying to rape me." I tried to look as dead sexy and unconcerned with his existence as I could while still wearing a pink hospital gown. Where was my BCBG black slip dress with the sparkly dangly bits when I needed it?

"Wee Gail, I don't think it would be rape, do you?" Brad leaned down and leveled me with a wickedly sexy grin.

That he actually had to put his hands on his knees to be on my level, however, made the grin a little gross. I hadn't had someone have to do that to look me in the eye since I was ten years old. Even though Brad was probably my age or younger—he didn't have the slightest hint of crow's feet around those gorgeous blue eyes, even with the golden tan that looked hard won by hours spent in the sun—it still made me feel weird.

"Don't you guys have any respect for your women here?" I propped my hands on my hips and tried to look appropriately outraged for Marly.

I had the sneaking suspicion I wasn't going to like my mirror image—I could rarely stomach people too much like myself for more than ten minutes—but that didn't mean it was right for her men to keep trying to pounce me even after they knew for a fact I wasn't who they thought I was. Damn manwhores.

"Marly's not my woman. She's no man's woman, but then you ought to know that. You're her mirror maker, after all." There was a suggestive glint in his eye as he took hold of my elbow and pulled me in the opposite direction from whence he'd come.

"Let go of me." I didn't like the slut insinuation one bit. I wasn't an innocent virgin by a long shot, but I didn't sleep around. I could count the men I'd been with in the past five years on one hand...if I had one extra finger.

"Come now, wee Gail, or you're going to get that shapely bottom in a lot of trouble." Brad snuck a peek at my backside as I struggled to free my elbow while holding my gown together in the back. Not an easy feat, not easy at all.

"Don't call me wee, Sasquatch," I said with the due amount of hatred any respectable person with a Napoleon complex would infuse in those words, yelling to make myself heard over the shouts of the rest of the horde.

They were tearing down buildings faster than I would have dreamt possible using only brute strength and a few spiky mallets. And once the structures were leveled, they were just as quickly torched. All the happy, innocent-looking villagers seemed to have fled or been captured or something, because only the scary men remained in the village. I was alone and I suddenly thought to wonder what Brad was going to do with me—whether he was the relatively harmless horny giant he appeared, or someone I should be working a whole lot harder to get away from.

"Argh!" Brad yelled as I sunk my teeth into the meat of his hand. I have very sharp teeth, or so I've been told when getting overenthusiastic with my love nibbling during foreplay.

"Ahh!" I squealed as Brad threw me over his shoulder, revealing my bare backside to the entire world in general and the marauding horde in particular.

I instantly felt tremendously embarrassed and vulnerable. I clenched my legs and bottom together as tightly as possible to try to keep the more intimate bits of myself concealed, but had no idea how good a job I was doing. Even if I was managing to keep my flower of maidenhood out of sight, my nude ass was less than two inches from the face of a man who I didn't know and who looked like he could do some serious damage to any of the very scary men we were passing. As he trudged up a path that led away from the village to the top of a very tall hill that I'd never seen before, I decided that it was time to beg for mercy.

"Please, put me down," I pleaded, more than a little panicked as I watched the village fade in the distance, swiftly becoming a blur of black smoke. That was the thing about being eight feet tall, when Brad decided to haul ass, he moved faster than most quarter horses. If I had been walking, I would have had to take at least three steps for every one of his.

"Too late for please and thank you."

"Come on, Brad, I promise I'll be good."

"The name's Garreck, wee Gail, and I have no doubt you'll be good."

"Can the innuendo, jerk face."

"Shut your mouth, wee Gail. You're giving me a headache."

"If you call me wee one more time, I'm going to bite you again."

"You try it and I'll tan this wee bottom," Garreck growled, delivering a stinging smack to said bottom to prove his point.

It really pissed me off that he'd touched my ass, but it pissed me off even more that this weird part of me kind of *enjoyed* it. I got all tingly imagining him spanking me a few more times and then putting those thick fingers to use stroking all the parts I was working so hard to keep concealed.

I don't like it when weird kinky urges come at me out of nowhere. I'm not into spanking or bondage or sex games and it pissed me off that my mind was trying to convince me differently. A little biting is one thing, being turned over some dude's knee and punished is quite another.

So I bit Garreck again—really hard—just grabbed a big chunk out of the middle of his back and chomped. I knew it wasn't right to take my frustration with my own twisted libido out on someone else, but I'd had a really rough twenty-four hours and couldn't be expected to behave.

"That's it!" Garreck roared as he flipped me right side up, back to my feet with a speed that made me dizzy. "I'm beginning to doubt your ass is worth saving, no matter how pretty."

"Saving? You're kidnapping me!" I tried not to stumble when black spots danced in front of my eyes as the blood flowed away from my head.

"You fool, I'm taking you to the shelter." Garreck scooped me up like a damsel in distress this time and cuddled me close to his manly chest as he ran away from the village, toward what I could now see was the entrance to a cave. "The Destroyer and his men are coming and he'll be looking for you. He takes special pleasure in collecting people from your dimension."

"So you're not the bad guys?" I asked, unable to believe that the barbarian horde was working for the side of sweetness and light.

"Do we look like bad guys?" he asked in a way that inferred I was a few nuts short of a fruitcake.

"Yes. You're big, hairy, scantily clad and you carry spiky mallets and smash things."

"You're small, hairless, scantily clad and bite people. I'm not assuming the worst of you."

"I wax, a lot," I said, momentarily distracted by the thrill of someone calling me hairless. "I'm not burning buildings to the ground and sending an entire village running screaming. I was just trying to get away from you."

"We have to burn everything. If there is a single personal possession left behind, the Destroyer can use it to claim a person for his own. His power is that strong."

"And I take it no one wants to be claimed by the Destroyer."

"Dear Lady, you are dim." Garreck looked down at me as if my attractiveness level had dropped several notches. "Who would fancy being a minion of the damned? An animated corpse with a soul trapped inside, but with no more free will than a poppet in a child's nursery show?"

"I've only been here for a day, excuse me if I don't know the ropes," I snapped, not knowing why it hurt my feelings that this loser thought I was stupid. I didn't want him to try to pounce my bones again anyway, right?

I wasn't enjoying the feel of his strong, muscled arms cradling my body or the way one large palm nearly brushed against the side of my breast. I was not dreaming of how nice those warm lips felt on mine or thinking how Garreck would be completely yummy if I could get a toothbrush and some strong mouthwash after that raw meat breath. I told myself a few other comforting lies while I allowed my arms to twine around his neck, to tangle in that long dirty blonde hair under the guise of helping him support my weight.

Pathetic, I really was pathetic.

Before I could fully explore why I was still so oddly frisky when my life was in mortal danger and I was trapped in an alternate dimension where the barbarians were the good guys and a dude named the Destroyer was turning people into ghouls that sounded like something straight out of *Night of the Living Dead*, we were entering the caves.

And they were dark. Really, really dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Something I make sure all new people in my life know about me is that I'm terrified of the dark—really, honestly terrified. I tell them this so they will know not to invite me to places that are creepy and dark, like haunted houses or Goth clubs or barn dances in the country.

Where I grew up in New Jersey, there were a lot of barns and a lot of teenage opportunities for sneaking beer that I missed out on because of my terror of the dark.

Some people don't realize that there's more to the Jersey than Newark, but the state is just loaded with beautiful farms and pumpkin patches and horse grazing land. It's Naturlicious, definitely worth a visit in autumn when the leaves are changing.

I also tell people about my little phobia so they will understand how very, very dead they will be if they ever fuck with me about it. I do not enjoy practical jokes involving dark rooms and buckets of cold spaghetti that are supposed to be some dead person's guts. I do not appreciate the humor in this or other sophomoric attempts to help me get over myself. I have even been known to consider inflicting head trauma if my guy of the moment makes the mistake of turning off the bathroom light when he gets up for a midnight tinkle. If you're lucky enough to spend the night in my bed, you should know better and act accordingly.

It's a stupid, childish fear. Just as many bad things happen in broad daylight as in the dead of night. I understand all that, but it's just the way I am, a wrinkle in the fabric of my psyche placed there when I was roughly eight years old.

When I was eight and my brothers ten and seven, my dad would watch all three of us every Sunday so my mom could go to mass with the old Cuban ladies down the street and have a day to herself to shop and relax. Very nice, dad, very, very nice considering not a single other dad on my block would ever consider that their wife needed and deserved some time away from the kids so she didn't go absolutely insane.

My dad was a peach. I miss him like a phantom limb.

But in spite of the fact that he was a peach, or probably because he was so nice and hated to spank any of his kids, he started locking us in the bathroom for a five minute time out whenever we were bad. And we were really bad that summer. We finally figured out that we could pool our resources to make triple the mischief for everyone who was not one of our clan. Dad had other ideas, however, and wasn't proud his kids were the bullies of the neighborhood. So he locked us in the bathroom every time we were caught in the act of being little rat turds. Separate bathrooms, of course, isolation from our comrades being part of the punishment.

Not so bad, you might think. We were all old enough to know better than to drink Drano or drown in the toilet bowl, so it was actually a decent punishment. There were no toys in there, not even a magazine because my mother said reading on the toilet was bad for the bowels. There was nothing to do except use the bathroom, wash our hands and think about whatever bad thing we'd done to deserve our alone time.

If he'd just left the lights on, it probably wouldn't have scarred me for life. It still probably wouldn't have scarred me for life—because my mom found out about it after a few months and freaked out—if my imagination hadn't always been totally out of control.

Somehow, in those five-minute time outs in the dark bathroom, I convinced myself Satan hung out in the bathtub when the lights were off. I even imagined that I could hear his dog-like toenails clicking on the plastic as he paced back and forth behind the shower curtain, waiting for me to do something truly horrible so god would turn his back on me and the devil would be free to leap out and tear my throat open and lap up my blood with his long forked tongue. To this day, I swear that I saw the dark red glowing orbs of his eyes and could smell the burnt raisin toast smell of his skin.

I know my fear of him and related fear of all dark places is single-handedly responsible for my continued membership in the Catholic Church. I like believing that things like Holy Water and necklaces with Saint Michael's picture on them make a difference. If I ever do snag a husband who isn't of the Catholic faith—like Richard, perhaps, a Presbyterian from way back—he'll have to convert. I will never leave the church, no matter how many issues I have with creepy priests

Now if I'd had time to tell Garreck about my little issues with the dark, if he had been deemed an important person worth knowing my secret or if he had told me the caves were pitch black when you first went inside, I could have prepared him for my major malfunction. But he didn't.

Hindsight is twenty-two twenty, or whatever kind of vision is better than perfect.

"No! Please no!"

As the blackness closed around me, I thrashed in Garreck's arms with enough strength that he had to use all his considerable muscle mass to maintain his hold and was still having a hard time. My rational mind registered this somewhere while the rest of me was busy kicking and scratching and scrambling and doing just about anything else to get out of Garreck's grip and head back toward the light of the cave's opening, which grew dimmer and smaller with each of his mammoth steps forward.

"Gail, I'll not hurt ye, I swear it." Garreck grunted loudly as my elbow connected with his jaw.

"No, please!" I screamed again, my entire body trembling as the light of the outside world disappeared completely. Then I was surrounded by nothing but darkness and Garreck's arms.

"It's all right, wee Gail, I'll not hurt ye, wouldn't dream of hurtin' ye." Garreck's accent grew thicker as he pulled me closer.

I clung to him like a baby monkey. With no light left to run toward, he seemed solid and safe. I certainly wasn't going to try to stand on my own two feet in the absolute blackness of the cave.

"I'm scared of the dark," I whispered, my voice sounding way too near to tears for my liking. I hadn't full out cried since those first few minutes in the hospital—not even

when I learned I was in an alternate dimension and might not ever find my way back. I couldn't break down and bawl over a little dark tunnel.

Well... I guess I could.

"Don't cry, sweeting." Garreck hugged me close and planted a soft kiss on my forehead. "We'll be in the main cavern in a minute's time. The front entrance has to be kept dark. We wouldn't want the Destroyer knowing where we're hid."

"Kiss me again?" I ran my hands over his face until I found his lips and then guided my mouth to his like a blind woman searching for the mouthpiece of her scuba equipment or something else equally dramatic. I needed something to distract me from the terror and making out with Garreck was the first thing that crossed my mind.

"Any time." His voice rumbled against my lips as his warm mouth caressed mine with a passion born of something more than my tears or his obvious appreciation for my bare bottom. He kissed me like a long lost lover, like a woman he treasured. Despite the fact that I knew all that passion was really for another woman, I let myself kiss him back with the same heat.

Soon I forgot all about the dark as Garreck's tongue swept through my mouth and his lips pressed against mine with a pressure that let me feel his teeth against mine through our skin. I surrendered to his demanding mouth, finding the slightly meaty taste of him wasn't bad once you got used to it. In fact, I soon had to fight the urge to bite that full and yummy bottom lip as it slipped and slid in and out of my mouth. I figured I'd already bitten Garreck enough for one day and I didn't want to do anything to make him stop the magic he was working with his mouth against mine.

"Lady, Gail. Dear Lady," he murmured as the hand that had teased at my breast slipped around the side of my ribs and closed gently over it, his fingers trapping my already pebbled nipple in their grasp and drawing a small cry from my throat. His rough hand on my sensitive flesh through the thin fabric of my hospital gown was by far the most erotic thing I'd felt in ages. I was immediately wetter than was wise for a girl without undies, my body preparing to give this man every part of me regardless of the fact that we were probably about as good a physical match as a Chihuahua and a Great Dane.

"Garreck," I moaned into his mouth, tightening my grip around his neck and squirming in his arms, praying that he'd move his other hand between my legs, would fill that aching part of me with those strong, tender fingers.

"I want ye, Lady, how I want ye." Garreck's sure steps faltered as I clenched my hands into his shoulders and took a gentle nip at his neck, drawing the salty skin into my mouth and dragging my teeth slowly over the surprisingly soft flesh.

"Take me." I was already a little mad from the dark and the crazy making loveliness of his fingers rolling my nipple in circles that brought wave after wave of longing flowing down to knot between my legs. Not to mention I was pretty sure I was in at least a mild state of shock from my brush with death and arrival in another

dimension and the burning of the village and the attack by the Destroyer and what I thought was my kidnapping, but really wasn't.

Fuck it. Whatever it was that had convinced me to throw common sense to the wind, I didn't care. I wanted something to make me feel alive and the pleasure of this beautiful man's mouth and hands and skin seemed a wonderful choice. Not to mention his tongue, oh god, his tongue was a thing of unbelievable skill, communicating things that neither my mind nor my mouth was quite ready to handle.

But my pussy might be ready...yes, it would definitely be ready.

"Wait, wee Gail, wait a few moments more. I have a room of my own. I'll lay you there and love you properly." He moved his hand from my breast and tried to pull his lips away as well.

"No, now, please." I pulled at his neck, raining kisses over any part of his face I could find in the dark. Thank god it was starting to get a little lighter in the tunnel so I could make certain I didn't stick my tongue up his nostril or something equally gross.

*Lighter in the tunnel.* It was getting lighter, no doubt about it. Did that mean I was going to come to my senses and realize I didn't want to screw a man from another dimension on the first date or first whatever this was, no matter how lovely and sexy and heroic he might be?

"Now, Garreck." I moved my hand to his and guided it between my thighs.

Evidently I *wouldn't* be coming to my senses.

"Sweet Jane's down pillows." He cried out as he felt the slick heat of my sex and plunged a finger deep inside. Weird thing to say, but hell if I cared.

"Oh god, yes," I screamed, lifting my hips into him, fucking that finger with all the eagerness flowing through my veins.

It felt so wonderful to be filled with him, to have that large finger stretching me, sliding in and out of my pussy, taking me to the edge of ultimate completion more quickly than I would have dreamed possible. I never had trouble coming—usually did so at least twice with a man who knew what he was doing—but this was unbelievable. He was so good, so horribly wickedly good, and I was so very glad he was strong enough to hold me with one powerful arm and touch me so intimately with the other.

"Lady forgive me," he growled, shifting me so that I was straddling his hips. He pushed my back against the side of the tunnel, a rock wall that was thankfully fairly smooth since my back was completely bare against it.

"Yes," I moaned in encouragement, wiggling against him as he adjusted his loincloth, freeing his truly impressive cock—an at least fifteen-inch, dangerously thick shaft of swollen flesh that I proceeded to slide my wet center up and down with reckless enthusiasm. His skin was so hot, so soft and hot and obviously ready to claim me right there without a care for who might come down the passage and find us about our lusty business.

"Put your mouth on mine," he ordered as his fingers spread my swollen flesh, opening my sex wide and positioning the head of his cock against me. He was going to take me, just like I'd told him to. No matter if it was wise or right, it was too late to change my mind now, I felt that in every tense inch of his perfectly muscled flesh.

"Get away from her, Garreck," an oddly familiar male voice called down the passage from the direction of the light.

"Lady help me, I can't. I can't." Garreck's cock started to press inside me, bringing me back to my senses a bit as a hint of pain broke through my pleasure. He was so large, so terribly large and a part of me knew this wasn't smart, no matter how drenched in my own lust I might be.

And somebody else knew what we were up to, mustn't forget that little detail. I wasn't an exhibitionist, never had been, never would be. I liked my sex nice and private, though I did like the lights on for aforementioned reasons.

"Get off! Now!" the other voice yelled. I heard a weird metallic clicking sound that reminded me of something, though I couldn't quite put my finger on what. Where had I heard that sound before? Did I really care?

Garreck was still pushing the head of his massive length against me and I wanted it so much, despite the hint of pain, despite the fact that we weren't using protection and I had no idea what kind of alternate dimension crotch cooties I might be risking at that very moment. Not to mention pregnancy. I was on the Pill, but had never been very good about remembering to take it every day and who knew if it even worked on this side of the dimensional fence, not that I had it with me anyway. This was stupid, so stupid, and there was some creepy man watching while Garreck tried to push inside me. I knew I should be freaking out and shoving away from him as quickly as possible.

But for some reason, I just didn't give a shit. I just wanted to screw, to fuck, to have someone, something, anything warm and human and alive shoving into my hungry emptiness. I'd never felt so out of control, so completely empty of anything except raw, animal lust. I was a woman who enjoyed sex, craved it, but I wasn't a nympho, for god's sakes. The fact that I was behaving like one should have tipped me off that something wasn't quite right in the state of Denmark.

Too bad I wasn't thinking clearly enough to worry about how odd it was that I was completely out of control. Too bad I couldn't think of anything but scratching my own itch, or I could have prevented what was, without a doubt, the most uncomfortable mixed sex encounter of my adult life...thus far.

## Chapter Eight

"You're going to hurt her and if you do, I'm going to hurt you." Rake stood no more than two feet away. I couldn't believe I hadn't placed his voice immediately. It was my alternate dimension ex-boyfriend and he was mightily pissed.

Even though the light in the tunnel was still fairly dim, I could see the anger burning in his eyes. His skin almost glowed with it. His voice shook with rage and his hands were already fisted at his sides, arms tensed to strike at the slightest provocation. He looked scary, like he was itching to kick somebody's ass. I was glad I was *mostly* sure it wasn't mine.

"I won't hurt her. Get back to the hall and don't threaten me again," Garreck growled, obviously not cowed by Rake's threat. But then he was eight feet tall and all muscle, so I supposed he wouldn't be.

"It's not you she wants, it's a release for the power. My power."

"Don't flatter yourself, wee Rake."

"Don't finish what you've started. It would be little better than rape." Rake stepped even closer, until I could have reached out and touched him with my toe if my entire leg weren't wrapped around Garreck's waist.

"You would know, wouldn't you?"

"Don't you dare, Garreck. I'll kill you where you stand."

"It's your own doing. You left her for any man to find." Garreck's tone was not the least bit remorseful, though he did pull his cock away just the slightest bit, which made me squirm in his arms as I tried to close the distance again. I was a hopeless sex fiend, that was now firmly established.

"I didn't expect it would be a problem. No one in the village would have dared —"

"Well, you expected wrong. Leave us. We'll be there when we're finished. I'll help her release the power as well as you would," Garreck said. "Better, in fact, if Marly's to be believed."

I could tell by the taunting lilt of those last few words that Garreck had overstepped himself. You don't throw pennies at an alligator that isn't in a cage. Hell, you shouldn't throw pennies at an alligator on any occasion. It isn't nice or karmically wise to taunt another life force, especially another life force who is standing two feet away, threatening to kill you. It was a dumb move on Garreck's part, proving that he was far more nuts short of a fruitcake than I would ever be.

My studly barbarian let me slide to the ground none too gently as Rake lunged at him with a wounded cry. It was a sound that hurt my heart and made me wonder if

that's how Richard had screamed when he'd found out I'd banged his best friend. A wave of self-loathing helped dampen my lust for a moment.

What was I doing? There would be no chance Richard would forgive me if I started screwing barbarian Brad Pitt lookalikes my first day in an alternate dimension. Sure, some would say he wouldn't have to know—what happens in Here stays in Here and all that—but I'm not that kind of girl. I can't keep secrets, especially from the man I love. And I did love him...I was fairly sure.

"Don't even think it," Gareth warned as Rake pulled what looked like a miniature pair of handcuffs from the back of his belt.

That must have been the metallic clicking I heard, made familiar from watching too many episodes of *Law and Order*. Before Garreck could move away, Rake flicked one half of the mechanism around Garreck's exposed erection. He hadn't taken time to adjust his loincloth before the scuffling began. Big mistake. Very big.

Garreck screamed as waves of pale green light flowed from Rake's hand, down the length of the metal chain and into Garreck's cock. Soon the larger man was on his knees, back arched in agony as his entire body trembled with what looked like an electric shock.

"Stop it, please," I yelled over Garreck's screams of pain. This was my fault as much as his. Sure, I hadn't taunted Rake, but I had practically forced Garreck to pounce me in the tunnel. A man can only be expected to exercise so much restraint when a woman is wiggling her aroused body all over him. In my humble opinion, Garreck had fared better than most.

Rake didn't seem to hear my plea for mercy, however. He had eyes and ears only for Garreck, his gaze locked on the other man's throat as if his next act of violence would be to tear open the barbarian's jugular and watch his blood spill out over the floor. A closer look near said jugular, however, revealed that Rake was staring at a small set of teeth marks on Garreck's brown skin. My little teeth marks.

Shit. Now I really had to do something to stop this.

"Rake, please!" This time I reached out to gently touch his shoulder.

And immediately wished I hadn't.

"Ahh!" My head swam as I was repelled away from Rake's body like some WWF wrestler had bitch-slapped me across the room. I hit the wall of the tunnel with a solid thud, my shoulder crying out for mercy before I slid down to the cold cave floor once more.

"Gail!" The green light disappeared as abruptly as Garreck's screams.

"Shit," I gasped. My skin tingled, sort like when your foot falls asleep and then starts to regain circulation, but much worse. It was a bad tingle, a god-I-don't-even-want-to-try-to-breathe-because-it-hurts-like-hell tingle.

What a shit Rake was. After all his talk about killing Garreck if he hurt me, *he* was the one who made me feel like I'd taken a bath with a toaster oven—a *plugged in* toaster oven.

"I'm sorry," Rake whispered against my forehead. His lips on my skin and his arms pulling me to sit in his lap both felt entirely wonderful despite the fact that I was pissed at him for hurting me and doing god knows what to Garreck. The poor man wasn't moving, but at least his eyes were open.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine, wee Gail," Garreck grunted from the floor, sounding okay but not moving from where he was curled up in a fetal position.

His hands were cupped protectively around his groin and I really hoped that all his manly bits were still in good working condition. I had come to my senses enough to realize that I definitely didn't want to take on that monster in his pants, but the man didn't deserve to be wounded or maimed for life. There were probably a lot of virgins waiting to be deflowered who would be tremendously disappointed by the loss, not to mention poor Garreck himself.

"Can you make him better?" I asked Rake. I was still angry with the jerk, but my body snuggled closer to his strong chest with a traitorous will of its own. He just felt so...right, so perfectly solid and capable.

"I'll send someone to tend him." Rake sighed as he scooped me up in his arms and stood without the slightest sign of increased effort. I wanted to tell him to put me down, that I could walk on my own two feet, thank you very much, asshole, but I wasn't entirely certain that was true.

The horrible tingling had abated when his skin touched mine, but my shoulder still hurt like a son of a bitch and I felt weak and trembly all over. Not to mention that somewhere beneath all that anger and pain and frustration and worry for my new barbarian almost-would-have-been lover, I was still horny as hell. My pussy throbbed hungrily, in a way that had nothing to do with the throbbing in my shoulder or the dull pounding starting in my head.

Wow, I was getting a *horrible* headache. No wonder really. This day had sucked major ass. I'd had enough adrenaline rushes to exhaust my fight or flight response. I just wanted to melt into a bed somewhere...right after I screwed the brains out of the first available penis-owning member of the population who crossed my path.

Shit! The sicko lust raised its ugly head again. What was wrong with me?

"There's nothing wrong with you. It's normal and Garreck was right. It is my fault," Rake said, creepily responding to my unspoken thoughts. Crap, I'd forgotten about the mind reading stuff. Who knows what I'd thought that I didn't want him to know I'd thought? Might as well start speaking my mind.

"I don't want to leave Garreck there. It's dark and he's helpless," I said as Rake walked away from a motionless Garreck toward the light of what I assumed was where the rest of the village had taken refuge.

"He'll be fine. I'll send one of the other healers as soon as we get to the main cavern," Rake said, not stilling his pace.

"Send Railyn," Garreck called out behind us, starting to sound a little better off than a few seconds ago, not to mention a little frisky. I guess his trouser snake or loincloth snake or whatever wasn't permanently down for the count.

"I'll send whom I choose," Rake yelled over his shoulder, obviously still pissed.

"Send Railyn or you'll have a challenge on your hands, wee Rake." Garreck's voice was dark with a threat I had no doubt he would follow through on with pleasure. He sounded like he was looking for an excuse to get another shot at smashing Rake's face in. I didn't know if I could blame him. What Rake had done didn't seem fair.

"It was more than fair. You don't know what you're thinking," Rake said to me.

"In my dimension, kicking another man in the private parts is not considered fighting fair, let alone electrocuting his penis or whatever the hell you did."

"I didn't electrocute his penis."

"It looked like you electrocuted his penis. How would you like it if somebody electrocuted *your* penis?" I asked, thinking that Rake would probably have screamed like a little girl if he'd had the green whammy put on his private parts. At least Garreck had expressed his agony with nice, manly bellows.

"I've had worse done to my 'private parts' and I didn't utter a sound."

"Quit reading my mind," I snapped.

"I can't."

"You won't."

"I can't. And just so you know, the cufflinks wouldn't have hurt him if he hadn't believed what he was doing was wrong. It's not in their power to do so. You wouldn't have been affected by touching me either if you'd truly thought it was right to mate with him."

"I don't believe you." But I knew he was right. I *had* thought it was wrong in the part of my mind not ruled by animal impulse.

"It's the truth." His arms tightened around me as we walked into the brightly lit main cavern as if he were afraid I'd flee his clutches as soon as another human face came in to view. I might have thought about it, but I didn't know any of the people huddled in small groups throughout the large, airy room and I still wasn't feeling up to standing on my own two feet.

"Whatever," I said, glad that Rake had tucked my hospital gown under my body so I wasn't flashing any of the people we passed as we walked through the room. I'd had more than enough flashing for one day. In fact, if I never bared my ass to another stranger for the rest of my life, it would be just fine with me.

"I know a few women who favor the styles from your dimension. They won't mind loaning you something to wear until we're sure the Destroyer is gone and we can leave the shelter. Then I can buy you whatever you need," Rake said.

"I don't need you to buy me anything."

"I don't mind. I have barter credits to spare."

"I don't want anything you have to spare," I said, just to be surly. I was in the mood to be surly and giving in to that urge was highly preferable to giving into my other urges.

Unless, of course, I wanted to find myself mere seconds from intercourse with a complete stranger again in the near future. Lord, I was so frustrated. My breasts were sore and achy and my nipples beaded painfully against my gown. It didn't help my nympho state that Rake smelled so unbelievably good.

He smelled like sunshine, like a day spent outside drinking wine on a patio in the Finger Lakes region of New York—one of my favorite places to enjoy the pleasures of alcohol and nature at the same time. I could practically taste how good he smelled and my mouth watered for more. I wanted to run my tongue over his skin, to lick every inch of him until I finally got to those rock hard inches hiding out in his sensible brown pants.

I'd rip off those pants and take every inch of him in my mouth, breathing in the musk that surrounded the heat of his cock. I'd suckle him deep inside my mouth until he came, screaming my name, his cock pulsing between my lips. I'd usually hate that—would have to be bribed with an excellent round of oral sex and maybe a small diamond before I willingly took a man's cum down my throat—but right now, I wanted to feel his essence surging into my mouth. The mere thought was enough to make me even wetter, hotter.

I closed my eyes, took a long deep breath and *still* had to fight the urge to beg Rake to let me suck his cock. It just wasn't normal and it made me very, very cranky. And horny.

"Dear Lady, stop," Rake croaked, as if he were in pain.

Asshole mind reader creep! He probably knew all the embarrassing things I'd just thought. I hated him almost as much as I wanted to fuck him.

"I hate you."

"You don't have to be embarrassed."

"You don't have to be a mind-reading creep asshole creep."

"Will you just shut up? No wonder your nickname is Killer."

"You shut up. How did you know about that anyway?"

"I heard it while I was reading the mirror," he said, looking guilty, as if he still felt bad for pretending to be Richard when I first woke up. Good, he should feel bad. He was a jerk, such a jerk that I didn't even want to pick his brain about whatever "reading the mirror" meant and whether he might be able to see if my family was okay back on Earth.

I knew my mother would be devastated that I'd disappeared into an alternate dimension and not just normal, average, everyday mother devastation, but typical

Cuban mother devastation. She probably had the entire Reyes clan up from Miami, spraying her with holy water and cooking enough food to kill an army. Hopefully my brothers were keeping her from doing anything too dramatic or letting Aunt Rosie dose her up with ten cups of Tilo—a natural tea old Cuban ladies swear is a gentle sedative and good for the heart but which I'd distrusted since my Dad's funeral. They'd given me a big old mug of the stuff and I'd slept for eighteen hours straight. It could have just been exhaustion from grief, but I was betting on the Tilo.

"Listen, Gail, I'm sorry but—"

"Whatever. Just don't call me that again."

"I won't call you anything as soon as we're done. Believe me, I'm not enjoying this any more than you are. You're a brat," he said, his eyes getting all stormy and lovely. He looked really sexy when he was mad.

Shit, I shouldn't have thought that.

"When we're done with what, mind rapist?" I wished I could stop thinking completely so that Rake would have nothing to eavesdrop on, but I'd never been good at clearing my mind or meditating or any of that stuff. I took Yoga a few times with my sister in law, but just couldn't get into all the om-ing and centering. I was too cranky to become one with the universe.

"Don't throw that word around like it doesn't mean anything," Rake snapped, suddenly even angrier. I bet he was too cranky to become one with the universe too. Good to know we had something in common.

"Which word?"

"You know which one. It's heartless to victims and insulting to me. Not to mention that it really pisses me off."

"Sorry." I actually felt sorry even though I was still pissed at him. I knew I shouldn't throw the word "rape" around lightly.

It was an ugly word and while I've never pussyfooted around anyone, I certainly hated it when people used certain words in conjunction with one another. Like, oh, say, "femi-nazi". Feminists have never tried to enact genocide on an entire ethnic group or thought it would be cool to make lampshades out of people's skin. The Nazis were a true abomination and it sucks that some people think a few women who are hardcore about wanting equal rights are in any way Nazi-like.

Therefore, I tried to swallow my irritation at being reprimanded like a two year old and continue the conversation like a rational human being capable of controlling her temper.

"Okay, I'll ask again. When we're done with what, Rake?"

"Healing your shoulder. And helping you...regain your focus," Rake said vaguely. Regain my focus. What the hell did that mean?

"I'll show you in a second, let me talk to Railyn."

He nodded toward a beautiful woman about ten feet away with long green hair down to her waist. She was petite and very pale with striking slate eyes and dark black eyebrows that somehow looked perfect on her heart-shaped face. Rilyn was lovely. No wonder Garreck had requested she tend to his wounds.

The big pervert. What kind of sex fiend could still be thinking about boinking after nearly having his penis turned into a charred little lump of fried pig skin? Fried pig skins are called *chicharones* in Cuban cuisine. No matter what their views on animal eating, I've never met a person who didn't love a *chicharone* or two. They're yummy, devilishly yummy.

So now I knew Garreck was a sicko nymphomaniac with a fetish for having green-haired women nurse his electrocuted manhood back to health. What a loser...yet...I was still the tiniest bit jealous. It was totally ridiculous, but I didn't want to think about Garreck's strong hands moving over another woman's body. I didn't want to visualize those full, pouted lips descending onto the bow shaped mouth of that scrap of a girl whose bust was far too generous for her petite stature. It was shallow and stupid and completely unfounded—I barely knew the man for god's sakes—but I could be honest with myself.

"Pretty soon you won't even remember his name," Rake said in a husky voice, interrupting my jealous ponderings by digging his fingers roughly into my skin. The rush of sensation was immediate and overwhelming, sending shockwaves of desire shooting through my already far too aroused body.

Shit. The man sounded like he was going to kill me or ravage me right where we stood. I didn't know which he had in mind, but my body was praying for the ravage option and not just because I didn't think today was a good day to die.

A sex fiend, I really was a sex fiend. I decided I should look into finding a support group as soon as I got back to my home dimension.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What?" The word emerged as a yelp as Rake dropped my legs and spun me in his arms, pulling my full length against his with an intensity that was almost frightening.

"Rake, I—"

"Don't talk." His lips met mine, claiming me with a kiss that was by far, without a doubt, no debate necessary, *the* best thing to happen to my body in years. He was a sensual magician, every movement of his lips pure intoxication, each caress of his tongue in my mouth creating a river of heat I knew I could drown in.

"Oh...god," I moaned against his lips, my eyes rolling closed and my body tingling with awareness.

Unlike the creepy "my foot's asleep" tingling in the tunnel, this was a numbness I would gladly trade my right breast to feel three-hundred and sixty five days a year. It wasn't even numbness so much as the absence of pain, the purity of pleasure, the

exclusion of everything but pure tactile, physical, skin-to-skin joy. I wanted to strip naked and press myself to his bare flesh more than I'd ever wanted anything. Ever.

He was going to ruin me for anyone else, absolutely ruin me. A part of me recognized this and was properly afraid, but the rest of my aching body couldn't care less as long as he kept doing that crazy thing he did with his tongue against my upper lip. I would have never dreamt of trying something like that, but it felt amazingly nice, very, very amazingly nice.

"Gail," he murmured into my mouth. I wanted to tell him I felt the same way, that I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anything, including the red Mustang convertible my parents refused to lease for my seventeenth birthday even if I promised to make the payments myself.

But I only moaned again into his delicious mouth. I was quickly losing the ability to think of anything so complex as the formulation of language, lost to all but the magic of his mouth, the enchantment of his completely unique taste and smell and touch. God, he was wonderful, really, really wonderful.

Every place our bodies touched was aflame, burning with a need for completion that made me cry out and arch my breasts into his chest. I was going to fuck him right there, right in the middle of an entire village of Destroyer refugees and the thought didn't bother me in the slightest. I just shivered as those magnificent hands of his smoothed down over my bottom, praying he'd let the stupid hospital gown gape open so those hands would be touching my bare flesh, inches from where my pussy throbbed like a live thing, an organism all of its own that would no longer be denied what it needed so desperately.

"How does your shoulder feel?" Rake's voice was ripe with sexual overtones. It sounded more like he was asking how my pussy felt, or if my nipples were hard, or if I was ready to be fucked. My ears were so confused, in fact, that it took me a second to remember that a "shoulder" was not necessarily an erogenous zone.

"Yes," I moaned.

"Yes, it feels better?" He laughed, a sexy little rumble that I felt everywhere.

"Yes." I sighed into his mouth, then nibbled his bottom lip and wiggled my hips into even closer contact with his pulsing erection, which was almost even with my own pelvis.

Wow, for the first time I noticed that Rake was short, a good six inches shorter than my Richard and only a few inches taller than myself. I still had to tilt my head back to kiss his lips, but I didn't have to stand on tiptoe and he didn't have to hunch his shoulders. It was nice and I suspected we would actually be able to have a lot of fun in missionary position, an old favorite I hadn't enjoyed in years since I wasn't a big fan of staring at a man's nipples while he banged me—there are definite down sides to being short, though it is nice to be able to buy extra large girl's winter sweaters for half the price of the women's versions.

But Rake would be able to kiss me while we made love with him on top, look me in the eyes as he moved his thick cock in and out of me. I pondered this development and tried not to be entirely weirded out by the fact that I knew Rake and I would make love, not fuck or have sex or bang like bunnies. I distracted myself from this troubling thought by sucking his tongue into my mouth, drawing a groan of need from his throat.

I didn't make love with anyone, even Richard, no matter how much I wanted to. I just couldn't seem to let down that final wall, the one that shielded my eyes, kept the windows to my soul from flying fully open to another person. Despite the fact that I had the most loving family in the world and never had a boyfriend do worse to me than break up a few days before junior prom, I had major intimacy issues.

I was pretty sure that made me less of a person, the kind of closed-off critter who didn't know how to fully love, but I couldn't seem to help myself. It was just the way I'd been for thirty-two years. No matter how tough I played it, there were things that scared me—like the dark and being completely vulnerable to another human being while I was naked. Or clothed, for that matter.

"Look at me." Rake pulled away from me with a suddenness that was jarring, moving both hands to cup my face and stare deep into my eyes. My hospital gown flapped open again, but it didn't bother me nearly as much as the shock I was reading in Rake's stormy eyes.

"What?" I squeaked the word, knowing my own eyes were wide and flirting perilously with vulnerability. What had I thought that freaked him out this time? Was I wrong about him wanting to make love to me or did he just really hate the missionary position?

"You really are thirty-two, aren't you?"

That was the last thing I expected. Did I look old and haggard today or something? Was he worried I might be too old for his handsome, studly young self? I was going to remind him that we weren't a couple—and remind myself while I was at it—when he shook his head and stepped away. Geez, talk about giving a girl a complex.

"This isn't possible."

"Yes, it is. I know how old I am, for the love of Zeus!" I said, not knowing why I picked Zeus, it just felt suitably silly. I needed some silliness today. If I lost my sense of humor in this dimension, I might never get it back. There was so much action, adventure, sexual healing and running from bad guys, a person could quickly start taking life way too seriously.

"You're not her mirror maker. You couldn't be." Rake ran his hand down his face and grew a little paler.

"You're creeping me out again." I started to cross my arms over my chest, but remembered I had to hold my gown together in the back. I cursed as I did it, swearing to Zeus that I was going to kill someone if I didn't get some new clothes ten minutes ago.

"Railyn!" Rake called, visibly pulling himself together.

"Rake, what are you talking about?"

"The woman needs a hearing assist," Rake muttered to himself.

"Rake."

"Damn it."

"So now you're ignoring me?" I asked, resisting the urge to pop him in the mouth with a well-placed fist. If I damaged his lips, he might not be able to tell me what the hell was going on. Maybe I should punch him in the stomach instead.

"Don't even think about it." He grabbed my free wrist with a grin, that small touch enough to send another rush of need shooting through me. I hated him for being able to me even friskier without even trying.

"You don't hate me," he said. Cocky bastard. "For the love of Zeus, Railyn!" he called more loudly, almost making me laugh as he mocked my call to Zeus.

Railyn finally looked up and waved from where she was sitting cross-legged on one of the picnic-table-like rock formations. She spent a few more seconds chatting amicably with two other greenish people and a pair of little girls who looked like twins before heading over to where I stood at Rake's side, trying to look like my knees weren't about to buckle with lust. She stopped a couple times to exchange a smile or a laugh with other people in her path. Suddenly, I felt annoyed with the whole pack of them.

They were all laughing an awful lot for people who had just lost everything they owned. I thought we were all supposed to be quivering in fear of the approaching Destroyer, but no one seemed overly concerned. They were playing card games, letting the kids run around squealing and giggling and even snacking on cakes that I recognized from the breadbasket I'd shared with Kendall.

Kendall. Crap, I hadn't thought about her in awhile, but I assumed she was safe, even though I hadn't seen her in the cavern just yet. Everyone else seemed pretty happy. There was ample room in the football field sized space, plenty of stone picnic tables to go around and what looked like a playground on the opposite end from where Rake and I stood. It was very nice, actually, and wonderfully well lit. It practically looked like daylight, except I couldn't pinpoint the source of illumination. It was just bright, without lights or cords or holes in the ceiling or anything else. It was weird, but what else was new?

"It's a spell. That's why no one is afraid. This cavern has been protected by some of our most powerful magicians for centuries. The Destroyer could never penetrate the wards at the entrance," Rake said. "And Kendall's fine. She's the one who told me Garreck was bringing you up to the shelter."

"Good to know." I was getting tired of fighting with him about reading my mind. If Kendall had been telling the truth, the annoying side effect should wear off pretty soon anyway. I'd just have to deal with it until then.

"Rake!" Railyn said warmly, standing on tiptoe to plant a gentle kiss on Rake's cheek. I didn't like the kissy kissy—my jealousy of all recently pounced males still raging strong—but I took immense pleasure in the fact that she was even shorter than I

was. Shallow, perhaps, but a rare enough occurrence that I enjoyed the sensation of looking down on her quite a bit.

"Railyn, good to greet you, this is Gail."

"Welcome, Gail!" Railyn was way too excited to see me. I was a stranger, for god's sakes, she needed to relax and can the squealing. "And how are you both?"

"Well enough," Rake said. "I have a few things I would share with you and only you, but there is work to be done first."

"Of course." Railyn's eyes revealed her curiosity, but as she flicked her gaze back to me, her face spread in a wide smile. "First off, we have to get you out of that gown. You look lovely in pink, but I bet you'd like some real clothes."

"More than anything." I smiled, liking Railyn a lot more already.

Not only had she complimented me—who doesn't enjoy a compliment—but she was offering me clothing, real clothing if I could judge by her own apparel. Her dark gray turtleneck and faded blue jeans looked the most like Earth clothes of anything I'd seen. I had realized that even Rake's pants and black button up were probably made in Here once I'd gotten a closer look at them, but those jeans were straight out of my dimension. I'd bet my favorite pair of Sevens on it.

"If you wouldn't mind giving her something suitable and showing her to my chamber, I would appreciate it," Rake said.

"No problemo, dude," Railyn said, using what I assumed she thought was Earth slang.

"But what about Garreck?" I asked as Railyn took my hand and Rake started off in the opposite direction.

"I'll find someone to tend to him," Rake said casually over his shoulder.

"He said he'd kick your ass if you didn't send Railyn," I yelled after his retreating back, not wanting him to forget that a barbarian was going to have his head on a platter if he wasn't careful.

"I'm terrified," Rake said dryly, turning to shoot me a look that said he really couldn't give less of a shit. God, he looked sexy when he did that.

A smile twitched at the edges of his lips before he moved away into the crowd of picnic tables. I shivered and let Railyn lead me toward a large tunnel entrance across the room—that was as well lit as the main chamber itself, thank Zeus for small favors.

Rake was getting sexier by the minute. I was starting to seriously doubt I would be able to resist engaging in ultimate nookie with him if I were to be left alone in his "chamber" with nothing but him and any kind of flat surface. It didn't have to be a bed—the floor, a desk, a chair, the smooth part of a rock wall—I knew I wouldn't be picky.

And once I gave in to the unholy urge for massive humping, I would have to give up all fantasies of me and Richard and a happily ever after in a cute apartment in Hoboken with a great view of the city and a relatively short commute. It was a sobering

thought, but I had to be honest with myself. Richard and I were probably over for good, no matter what kind of trouble me and my pussy managed to get into in this alternate dimension.

Then there was the little matter of the sixty-forty rule. I'd never even hit the jackpot at an Atlantic City slot machine, what made me think I'd ever get back home to my reality? I was probably stuck in Here forever. I might as well start encouraging my brain to deal with that fact as soon as possible. Wouldn't a Rake in the bed be better than a Richard not in the anything? Assuming, of course, that Rake wanted me, which I wasn't quite sure of.

I mean, he was obviously very into the idea of getting me in the sack, but did any part of him besides his cock like me at all? Under that exasperation and irritation, did Rake think I was an interesting prospect? Or did he really just want to get me out of his life as quickly as possible? And why did he care so much about my age and what about Marly and me not being her mirror maker, not to mention everything else that I didn't understand yet?

Damn, I just wanted to go home. Screw thoughts of men of all kinds. I'd be happy to die an old maid if I could just get the hell out of here and be back in my room in New Jersey with my mom yelling at me to clean up my pigsty or she'd "never make *arroyo con pollo* for you ever again, Mother Mary help her".

"I want my mom," I muttered to myself as tears started to roll out of my eyes. They were big tears too, big fat tears that slid down into my mouth and tasted salty and sad, like the rim of a margarita glass when all the tequila and limey goodness is gone.

I was a thirty-two year old woman crying for her mommy for the first time in at least twenty years. My Cuban mother would have been thrilled.

## Chapter Nine

I am not a fashionista. I do not own a single pair of Manolo Blahniks or any other shoes that cost more than I make in a week. I have two very nice BCBG dresses, both black, that I wear for cocktail parties and a few Banana Republic wool skirts that I wear during the winter when my boss gets in the mood for us to look professional and festive. For some reason, she never worries what her editors look like until sometime after Halloween. I think she has seasonal depression and it lifts her spirits to see her underlings traipsing about dressed up in red and green sweaters and little holiday pins and sparkly scarves.

I'd be fine with that as long as I didn't have to wear wool tights to stay warm in my flirty skirts. I hate wool tights, have hated them since grammar school. I think I'm mildly allergic to wool, but I'll take itchiness over freezing my ass off any day. I *do not* like to be cold. I think it's the Cuban half of my genes. They long for an island climate where my golden skin could be bared to the elements three hundred and sixty five days a year. It's obviously not my WASP genes that are responsible. The pop was from Massachusetts and couldn't wait to bust out the sweaters from under the bed every year. He thought shoveling snow was an enjoyable form of exercise.

My favorite time of year, without a doubt, is the sweltering, humid New York summer that everyone else in the city bitches endlessly about, when it's acceptable to wear my designer jeans—my one clothing splurge, I just love the way a two hundred dollar pair of jeans make my slightly scrawny butt look plump and bootylicious—and a tank top to work. I love being comfortable and casual and not having to worry about keeping track of my sweater and coat and hat and gloves and blah blah blah. I don't see how women with children manage in cold climates. I barely have enough hands to keep track of my own winter weather accoutrement, let alone anyone else's.

So it wasn't my "fashion diva" sensibilities that were offended by what Railyn had brought for me to wear. I have no such sensibilities and would have been really happy with a pair of sweats or some comfy jeans and a sweatshirt. It felt like early autumn in Here and was cold in the caves, so I would be glad to have something a little more skin-concealing than the hospital gown, but I wasn't picky. Still, I had to draw the line somewhere.

"Do you...have anything else?" I held up the pinstriped bellbottom overalls and tried not to reveal the depths of my disgust. If I wore them, I was going to look like a refugee from the Electric Company, not to mention about twelve years old. Maybe Railyn with her big boobies looked shapely and cute in them, but I was going to look like an adolescent boy. Probably the least of my worries, but once I'd managed to stop

crying for my mommy, I was working really hard to concentrate on anything except stuff that would make me freak out.

"You don't like them?" Railyn looked a little hurt. "But you'll look so cute in them. I swear, with that tight red sweater underneath, it's going to be super cool, dude."

"No, I think it's really cute...dude." I managed not to be a sarcastic brat and make fun of Railyn's attempts to speak my language. She was very nice and not deserving of a snark attack of any kind. And the sweater was cashmere and super soft and the overalls were probably a classic vintage item that would sell for big bucks at one of the trendy shops in the East Village.

"Great!"

I smiled at her obvious enthusiasm. I would just have to suck it up. At least I had underwear and clothes that didn't show my ass. Railyn had offered me a bra as well, but I figured it would be fairly pointless to let my barely B's swim around in her D cup. I should quit my bitching and start looking on the bright side.

"I'm going to go check on Rake and make sure he found someone for Garreck. Will you be okay here?" Railyn asked. I'd updated her on the status of my rescuing barbarian and his request for her attentions, but she hadn't seemed that interested in any sort of hanky panky.

Railyn was married, or "partnered" as they called it, and only did the sexual healing stuff on a purely professional basis. Her husband must be a very open minded kind of guy. I didn't think I'd like the idea of Rake shacking up with other chicks, even professionally, if we were an item. But I am a fairly jealous and possessive kind of person. I wouldn't even let my brothers share my crayons growing up, didn't want them blunting all the points and then being too lazy to sharpen them before putting them back in the box.

"I'll be fine. I might actually take a nap. I'm so tired." I eyed the plush little nest of a cot on the ground with longing. It had a huge poofy mattress stuffed with down and a white quilt on top that looked silky soft and shone nicely in the dim light of the small chamber.

Once again, I couldn't tell where the light was coming from. Earth interior designers would surely be interested in the phenomenon.

"Of course. You'll be tired as long as the energy's working in you. Rake will come and help you with that in a little bit, I'm sure. Then you'll feel much better and be able to regain your focus," Railyn said with another sparkly smile.

"Wait a minute." My words stopped her at the door of the chamber, a tiny little room carved in the rock with nothing inside but the bed and a small chest of drawers on the opposite wall. "What does that mean? Regaining my focus?"

"Oh, well, surely you've noticed your thoughts are a little singularly themed?" Railyn said gently with a knowing smile.

"My thoughts are a little singularly themed." I repeated, still not getting it. I mean, sure, I'd been abnormally frisky, but she didn't know that. Or did she?

"You want to have sex?" she prodded.

"No thank you, I don't like girls, but you're very cute. Great breasts, I'm so jealous."

"No." She giggled. "I mean, thank you, my partner likes them, but I meant to ask if you were wanting to have sex, thinking about it, feeling more in the mood than usual so to speak."

"Yeah...sort of..."

"When a healer sets their energy free inside you to heal, their power will continue to recirculate until someone sets it free. That has certain side effects. Rake left his power in movement within your body. He wouldn't normally do that, but I guess you must have been pretty seriously injured."

"I was in a coma. They thought I had brain damage."

"That would explain it," she said with a nod. "So don't worry. The urges you're having are just a side effect of the healing. Rake will help you release the power and then you'll be fine. In fact, you should feel better than ever. Rake's power is very strong, he'll fix up things you didn't even know weren't functioning up to their potential."

As intriguing as that idea was—I'd always had issues with my stomach, from ulcers to acid reflux and everything in between, and it would rock not to have to carry Tums around in my purse—there was still one part of the equation I hoped I wasn't understanding.

"You mean he's going to try to have sex with me?"

"If you want...maybe. He seemed to like you as more than a patient, but he'll most certainly help you release."

"You mean release like...release?" I asked, getting obscenely nervous about the idea. Mutual abandon was one thing, but him "releasing" me was just too clinical and creepy and embarrassing. "Can't I just, um, you know, take care of that myself?"

"Unfortunately not, you need the polar energy of the opposite sex to manage the release. Though you could do that in the meantime just for fun," Ralyn said perkily.

People in Here were way too laid back about sexuality. I was from the relatively uptight segment of the United State's population and wasn't comfortable talking about things like masturbation in front of people I barely knew. In fact, it grossed me out and helped kill the entire mood.

"Or you could ask another man to help. Now that you know what's involved, it would be fine to ask Garreck. The only reason the cufflinks zapped him before was that he knew why you were behaving the way you were and didn't tell you. That's a little skeezy, if you know what I mean." I did and I was going to compliment her on her proper use of Earth slang, but then decided she might not appreciate it.

"So it was like he knew I was on a roofie and was going to take advantage?" I asked, wanting to have a word or two with Garreck now that I understood. Still, I couldn't get too worked up. He was incredibly attractive. I would have wanted to pounce him even in my right mind, though I surely wouldn't have acted on it.

"I have no idea what you mean." Railyn frowned.

"Don't worry about it."

"Garreck's not a bad man, Gail. A lot of women would be thrilled to have him try to take them against a wall."

"I'm sure. Thanks, Rai, but I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"You're uncomfortable?"

"Obscenely." I confirmed.

"Sorry, dude, but don't worry about it. Here will only seem strange for a little while. Pretty soon you'll fit right in. My partner was originally from your dimension and now he can barely remember why he was so pissed to be here at first." So her partner was from Earth. That explained the slang...I guessed. But there was still something I needed to know, something that seemed vital to my existence at the moment.

"Could I ask you where you got your jeans? I had some barter credits offered to me and I'd love to snag a pair."

"There's a store in the city, *All Earth*. It has the most bitchin' stuff from Earth," Railyn said, getting that shopaholic gleam in her eye that I recognized from my few true fashionista friends, the ones who actually made enough money to pursue the addiction.

"How do they get their merchandise?" I was curious about more than jeans now. If there was a way to get things from Earth into this dimension, surely there must be a way for me to get out.

"The owner has a farm out in east country with a portal right over his roof. He had things from Earth falling through there for years before he finally decided to gather up the stuff and sell it. Now he's so rich, he doesn't even have to raise Gorgenflutten anymore," Railyn said. Gorgenflutten. Did I really care what that was? I decided I didn't.

"So can stuff, people for example, go through this portal? Back to the Earth dimension?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think one person tried and then part of their hand came back through the portal a few days later," Railyn said with a sympathetic look. "Here is really great, Gail. You're not going to want to jump through a portal once you've been here for awhile. We don't have disease like you have on Earth, ninety percent of people are really decent and no one in Here goes hungry. I couldn't believe it when my partner told me about the starving children on Earth, just heartbreaking. You'll find Here is so much better. Today's just a bad day because of the Destroyer coming through the village and everything. You'll see how bitchin' the village is once the all-clear comes and we can go back and rebuild."

"And when might that be?" I asked, shallowly thinking about the clothes I was wearing when I went to the hospital and hoping I might be able to fish them out of the wreckage.

Until I could get someone to take me to the Earth store, I would gladly take the khaki pants and light green sweater I was wearing on my last day in my dimension. It had been July in Arizona and hot as hell, but the hotel conference rooms had been freezing cold, so my clothes would still be good for early autumn Here weather.

"A week at the most. The Destroyer usually clears out pretty quickly if he can't find anything to use to call people to his power."

"You mean make them zombies?"

"Pretty much."

"Call me crazy, Rilyn, but I'd rather get the flu once a year than have to destroy everything I own every time a psychopath zombie making freak rolls through town. I mean the flu sucks, but by the second day, you can at least hang out in your pajamas and watch television all day."

"My partner really misses television."

No television. I thought I might cry again. Despite being a life long book person, I really liked to overdose on T.V. at least once a week. There was nothing as relaxing as a Tivo marathon and a bag of Pirate's Booty. God, they probably didn't have Pirate's Booty either!

"Listen, you'll be fine. You just have a little culture shock. Take a nap and you'll feel much better when you wake up."

"Right." I tried to look on the bright side. Everyone *had* been really nice so far, even Eyebrows was nice, though a little cranky and doctorish. "Hey, why do you need doctors if you have sex healers who can make things all better?"

"Healers don't deliver babies. And doctors usually diagnose and we treat. It's easier for us to heal if we know where to direct the energy. Plus, some people don't like to be healed sensually. They find it too intimate. So they go to doctors for smaller stuff. But listen, I really should go. I'll see you soon. Come by my chamber tomorrow and I can show you where to wash clothes and take a spritzer and we can talk some more."

"Okay," I said with a sigh as I sank down onto the incredibly soft cot.

Spritzer must be a shower. I'd love one of those right now, but I was too tired, too tired to even think about what I was going to do with myself for an entire week trapped underground with nothing to distract me but Rake's irresistible sex vibe. Rilyn and Rake had both said I would "regain my focus" after he and I did whatever we were supposed to do, but what the hell was my focus? I wanted to find a way out of Here, back to my dimension, but how was I to go about doing that when I was stuck hiding out in a cave because some zombie lord was running around outside?

I decided to start by taking a nap...right after I snooped through Rake's drawers.

Right, I shouldn't snoop, snooping is bad, whatever. Rake had taken it upon himself to sex heal me without permission, turning me into a nympho who would pounce anything male that held still long enough so he could just deal with being snooped on. It seemed the least I could do to even the score.

Pretty soon, I wished I'd restrained myself. Her picture was in the top drawer, buried under several pairs of boxer-like underwear. She was at least five-ten, with skin the palest shade of green, my exact long dark brown hair and a face that looked like mine if I'd gone through an *Extreme Makeover "Making you Prettier"* edition. It had to be Marly because she was standing next to Rake, her arm around the slightly shorter man. They were both grinning into the camera like they knew they had a love no one would ever take away.

But something *had* taken it away and it was probably my fault. I was her mirror maker and had probably made a decision that influenced her behavior and drove the two of them apart. Probably the same decision that had ruined my future with Richard. I felt a wave of shame pass over me, mixed with a hearty portion of guilt. That one evening with Gable had been so much more trouble than it was worth. I hadn't even liked him, would never have dreamed we'd end up in bed together even after two or five margaritas. I'd regretted it the second I woke up in a bed I knew wasn't mine or Richard's and remembered what I'd done and that was before I knew I'd ruined the relationship of two completely innocent people.

But then Rake had said I couldn't be Marly's mirror maker, hadn't he? For some reason he hadn't disclosed because he was an asshole who didn't understand what it was like to be trapped in a world where some things are the same, but everything else so terribly different and the combination of the two made you want to tear your hair out and run screaming in circles until you passed out from hysterical exhaustion.

I decided to skip the screaming and running and go straight to exhaustion. I tucked away the beautiful Marly's picture, folded the clothes Railyn had loaned me to put on after my nap and collapsed on the bed, falling asleep faster than I had since I was four years old and would lose consciousness the second my mother pulled the car out of the driveway. Something about the car always knocked me out, apparently so did days like this.

## Chapter Ten

This time I knew I wasn't having a sex fantasy dream, but I still didn't open my eyes. First of all, I was really enjoying myself and didn't want to do anything to make him stop what he was doing with his unbelievably talented tongue. The man was stop-your-heart brilliant, without a doubt the best I'd ever had. And I'd only been conscious for about five seconds.

Secondly, I was embarrassed, *really* embarrassed, and didn't want to wake up and deal with it. I mean, I love having a man kiss me down there but not when I'm unsure if I'm properly trimmed and tidy. I'd been in Here for a whole day without a shower and who knows how well the nurses had bathed me while I was in a coma. I mean, I felt clean, but you never know. I believe you can never be too prepared for this kind of situation.

Thirdly, I was pissed off that he'd pounced me—yet again—without bothering to wake me up first. Didn't he understand from all the dirty names I had called him the first time I woke up and found him touching the goods while I was asleep that I didn't like it? How stupid and-or deliberately annoying was he? It irritated me, but I didn't want to get into a big fight about it because, beneath the waves of pleasure coursing through me, I was still bone tired and just not up to conflict.

"I know you're awake, wee Gail. I heard your breathing change," Garreck said, his voice startling my eyes open and my gaze down between my thighs.

There he was, his long hair blonder and fluffier than I remembered and his beard shaven away to reveal the full glory of his sexy mouth and flashing blue eyes, but him nonetheless. Garreck, of the electrocuted cock, grinned up at me, his hands gently but firmly spreading my slightly paler thighs wide. His lips already glistened with the taste he'd had of my body, a taste he was enjoying judging from the heat burning in those baby blues.

God, I could almost come from making eye contact with that kind of look. The man was sex personified. Now that a shower had evidently wiped the layer of dirt away and he'd made use of a razor, Garreck was even more dangerously handsome, shockingly sensual, with a mouth made for kissing and a tongue...god that tongue.

"What are you doing?" I asked, for some reason more worried that Rake might come in and find him than I was about Garreck being the second man in twenty-four hours to ravage me while I slept. Either I was still firmly under the nympho spell or my mind and body had decided we liked Garreck all right, at least enough to let him pleasure us orally.

"What does it look like? Better question, what does it feel like?" He shot me another devilishly sexy smile as he opened his mouth and slowly, deliberately ran his tongue up me, past my already wet center all the way to my throbbing clit.

I gasped and jerked against him, my hips lifting into his mouth with a will of their own. I wanted this, wanted it so badly that my legs started to tremble and I whimpered softly. I'd never whimpered in my life, had laughed when some of my writers used the word in their love scenes. What kind of self-respecting woman *whimpers* during sex?

I did, apparently, and would probably be whimpering more if he didn't do that with his tongue again and again and again until I shattered into his mouth. But that couldn't happen...for some reason that I was about to forget.

Oh shit, Rake. He was going to kill Garreck if he saw him here, I sensed it deep in my sex gooey bones. Having a man get electrocuted or stabbed multiple times while he had his head between my legs was not my idea of a good time. I had to get him out of here, fast, before I lost the ability to exert anything resembling will power.

"You have to....stop." I moaned, my eyes falling closed and my hands fisting in the mattress as he started to circle my clit with his tongue, using a firm, even pressure. "Please, you can't."

"I can't put myself inside you, that's true," Garreck muttered against my thighs, moving away from my clit to plant soft kisses on the sensitive skin right before leg became something more intimate. "I'm still healing, but I can make you lose yourself in my mouth."

"Rake is coming, he'll –"

"He'll do nothing. He ignored my request and I have the right to challenge him to a death fight. Instead, I'll take his place in your bed. I think it's an even trade," he said with a slightly evil laugh as he took his tongue and tunneled it deep into my core.

"Oh god," I cried out as my body started lifting into that tongue with wild enthusiasm. I wanted to argue with him, wanted to tell him he was a misogynist shit for assuming he could "claim" me just to piss off Rake and act like I had no say in the matter.

But the fact was, I was starting to feel like I *didn't* have very much say in the matter, especially when he moved his hands to my breasts and started to roll my aching nipples with the pads of his roughened fingers. Sometime before I had regained consciousness my hospital gown had vanished, so there was nothing to impede his skin from touching mine, nothing to interrupt the ecstasy of his hands smoothing over my ribs and back to my breasts, that mouth devouring me until I was writhing beneath him, panting and arching and seconds away from a bliss I honestly didn't know if I could handle.

I felt so aroused, so consumed with the need to come that it was painful, my body filled with more awareness than it knew what to do with. It was as if I felt every stimulus ten times over until what should have been pure pleasure turned into something darker, almost frightening. It was nothing I could quite put my finger on, just that the mattress was too soft, the pressure of his hands too wonderful, the vigorous

movements of his tongue too perfect—all of it too much for my nerve endings to assimilate. And because they were having a hard time coping with this overload of pleasure, a part of me started sending up signals to abort the mission, whether I'd achieved satisfaction or not.

"No." I moaned, my head tossing on the mattress as my breath came in swift pants that made black spots dance behind my tightly closed lids. I wanted to stop, didn't want to stop, didn't know what I wanted. I felt lost, scared and I had the horrible feeling that Garreck wasn't going to know how to find me. I'd never felt this way before, never had the horrible sensation of my body fighting its own release. I liked sex, loved releasing. Even a wicked case of guilt had never been able to stop me from claiming my moment of ecstasy. I couldn't understand why this was happening.

"Come for me, wee Gail," Garreck groaned before he closed his mouth over my clit and started to suckle me even as his tongue continued to flick in and out of my entry. Apparently having an extremely large mouth had its advantages.

"I can't," I panted as my hips bucked against him hard enough to bruise my sensitive flesh against his teeth.

Garreck rumbled something that I couldn't understand and then his fingers started to work my nipples even faster, the battle-roughened skin flying over my tightened tips with a swiftness and agility that I wouldn't have believed possible. My nerve endings screamed out in pleasure-pain, as if part of me had been submerged in hot water and the other in cold and my brain was calling out for an end to the madness.

"Garreck!" I cried out, no longer caring who heard me, just needing to call out to someone, anyone, to remind myself that I was human, not simply a writhing mass of tormented flesh.

"Yes, yes, yes," I started to chant softly as the orgasm finally started to build. Even though the wave of pleasure preparing to crest within me was larger, more powerful than anything I'd felt before, I no longer feared it. Anything would have to be better than this wicked limbo, this world consumed with equal parts ecstasy and unimaginable frustration.

"God! Please! Please!" I screamed out finally, my back arching my hips into Garreck's mouth, my hands fisting in his hair and pulling him even closer to my pussy, screaming again as his tongue tunneled even further inside, as if that thick muscled piece of flesh would reach all the way to the entrance to my womb.

He cried out in triumph. I thought I kept screaming too, but I couldn't be sure because my entire focus was suddenly riveted to riding the waves crashing over me again and again. My body bucked and thrashed with the power of my release, completely out of my control. All I could do was focus on breathing, sucking in oxygen during the few seconds when my body allowed it.

I finally had to admit that the pleasure was riding me more than I was riding it. I feared for a moment that it would take me under, roll me like a surfer caught on the wrong side of a wave. I had a sudden vivid memory of my first trip to Hawaii in college

when my boogie board had been ripped from under me and I was dragged under, caught in the undertow, the skin of my face smashed into the sandy bottom as my pathetically weak arms tried to fight the ancient power of the ocean.

But I'd survived those moments of terror. I would survive this too, my logical mind insisted. No one had ever died from coming too hard and I wasn't about to be the first to succumb to death by orgasm.

"Oh god, oh god," I muttered again and again, part prayer of thanks and part a request for a swift recovery. I could finally exert some control over my body again, but I felt as weak as a newborn kangaroo, totally incapable of crawling into my mother's pouch. I felt incapable of doing much of anything except lying sprawled on the mattress with Garreck collapsed heavily between my legs, and doing my best not to lose consciousness.

I thought Rilyn had said I would feel better after the release of the healing energy or whatever the hell had made my orgasm rank a ten on the Richter scale, that I would feel better than I ever had before. But I didn't feel fantastic or rested or even particularly well. I felt trembly and weak and nauseated. My skin had broken out in a cold sweat and I shivered on top of the blankets, the heat of desire and Garreck's warm body pressing down on my legs and hips no longer enough.

"Brrr." I shivered mightily and hoped Garreck would get the hint. But he just lay there on my thigh with that golden hair tangled over his face so I couldn't read his expression.

Great, he was hiding. Good thing I was too exhausted to care what he thought of my crazy, seizure-like orgasm. Otherwise, his silence would probably be making me nervous.

"Garreck, would you mind moving? I'm freezing. I want to get under the covers," I said, forcing myself up on my shaky elbows so that I could get a better look at my barbarian. Geez, he was laying there like *he* was the one who was nearly obliterated by pleasure. Surely it hadn't been so much work making me come that he needed an immediate catnap. If that was the case, I had a feeling I was going to get a reputation for being way too high maintenance.

"Up, Garreck! Get up!" I said, giving his head a gentle push that did nothing to move the large melon. The man had an enormous head. It was bigger than my hips and threatened to cut off the circulation to my lower leg. My toes were already starting to tingle uncomfortably.

"Garreck, I mean it. Move it. If Rake comes in and finds you asleep on my naked body, I don't think it's going to be a good scene." I waited one more second before I reached down to grab a handful of his hair and pull. If we couldn't do this the nice way, we'd do it the pull your hair until you move your ass way.

At least that's what I was thinking until I pulled the blonde mass out of his face and saw his jaw slack and his eyes wide open and empty.

"Ahh!" I screamed and screamed and screamed, the adrenaline of terror giving me the strength to wriggle my body out from underneath Garreck's limp form.

I'd killed him, somehow I'd managed to kill him and I had to get help. Maybe the healers or the doctors or somebody would be able to do something if I got to them in time. I couldn't handle the thought that it might be too late. I couldn't have *killed* a young man during sex. That was something that happened to eighty year old men who married sixteen year old strippers, not massive young barbarians and only moderately sexy half-Cuban-half-WASP Catholic girls who didn't even lose their virginity until they were nearly twenty-one. I only had roughly a decade of nookie under my garter belt, I just wasn't skilled enough to send a man to meet his maker with only my luscious bod as a weapon.

"What have you done?" Rake asked, bursting into the room only seconds after I managed to free my leg from Garreck's dead weight—god, I didn't even want to think the term, he wasn't dead, he *couldn't* be—and scramble off the bed.

"Help him, Rake, help him please." I grabbed his hand and pulled him over to Garreck's nude form.

It was the first time I'd noticed that Garreck was naked. I guess I'd assumed he still had his loincloth on. He had said his manly bits were still healing and he couldn't do the deed, why would he have stripped down before joining me? Maybe he was holding out hope for a fast recovery and wanted to be ready just in case. It sounded like something a man would think. They never want to admit defeat when it comes to their cocks.

But his being naked made it look like we'd been up to a lot more than we actually had been. Not that oral sex isn't still sex and all that, but a part of me felt it wasn't as intimate, that it wasn't "the real deal" and therefore not as likely to make Rake angry enough to withhold his healing abilities.

"What happened? Why is he—"

"I don't know, just help him, Rake. Help him. He can't be dead. I can't have killed him. I've never killed anyone, never wanted to kill anyone, not really, even when I said I wanted to." I was getting a little hysterical. A dead man in your bed will do that to you, I guess.

"Calm down, Gail. You have to tell me what happened. What were you doing right before he went into cardiac arrest?" Rake asked as he flipped Garreck over onto his back with a mighty grunt.

"He had a heart attack?"

"The energy from his heart is all wrong, it smells burnt." Rake ran his hands gently over Garreck's chest, a weak green glow starting to throb around his fingers. "Was there anyone else in the room? Did you see anyone at the door?"

"No, no one. I mean, I was a little distracted, but I didn't see or hear anyone," I said, too scared to blush as I said the words. Who cared if Rake knew what a slut I was, as long as he helped Garreck before it was too late.

"What do you mean, distracted? Tell me, Gail, I can't read your thoughts anymore," Rake said impatiently, bringing his hands down with a solid thump on Garreck's chest.

"I was coming, Garreck made me come with his mouth." I found a way to blush through my fear. I guess I shouldn't have been ashamed of myself, but I was. Now that the nympho haze was gone, I felt like a slut-whore of the worst kind.

"And there was no one with you? No one else touching you or him? No one else in the room, you're positive?"

"I'm a slut, Rake, but I don't do ménage. There was no one else here," I practically yelled.

"Don't make this about you, Gail, there's a man dead and we only have a few minutes to bring him back without damage," Rake yelled back.

"Oh god," I whispered, bringing my hands to my mouth and feeling tears start to sting my eyes. I'd known Garreck was dead, but hearing Rake say it made it horribly real. He was dead, he was really dead and I was a murderess.

"My energy isn't working, he's too empty."

"Should I go get Railyn?" I asked, thinking maybe the healer he'd wanted to help him in the first place might be able to persuade Garreck to give life another chance.

"No, only the person who took his energy can help replace it."

"And that's me, right?" I asked, seeing the answer in Rake's eyes. "Well then, tell me how. I'll replace it. I'll give it all back. I didn't mean to take it anyway."

"You don't have it anymore."

"How do you know? I can try, at least show me how to try." I grabbed Rake's shirt and gave him a little shake, fighting the urge to sink my head to his chest and bawl. Bawling wouldn't help anything right now and I had never been the type to succumb to useless hysterics.

"Gail, there are about twenty people passed out in the hall," Rake said, taking hold of my shoulders and leaning down slightly to look me, his eyes full of a meaning that I still didn't understand.

"Are they dead too?" I asked, my voice a frightened squeak. I'd gone from a woman who refused to eat veal to a mass murderer in less than fifteen minutes.

"No, just unconscious. They're breathing, they should be fine, but that's where the energy went. Apparently you took it from Garreck and then released it. Combined with the energy I'd already placed inside you, it was enough to make those people outside lose consciousness and to stop Garreck's heart," Rake explained.

I wanted to ask how in the hell I'd managed to do something like that when I hadn't meant to, hadn't even known I was capable, but there would be time for explanations after I did my damndest to bring Garreck back from the dead.

"So how do I give it back? Can I suck it back in from the air or something?"

"I have no idea," Rake said, looking more than a little wary as he started unbuttoning his shirt. "I've only known one person who could do this and he doesn't share his secrets."

"What are you doing?" I asked, watching Rake shrug off his shirt and quickly dispose of his pants and boxer brief looking thingies.

"I'm going to give you some of my energy, try to help you take just enough to funnel into Garreck." Rake pulled me against him. When my nude flesh touched his, I felt a renewed rush of need, the last thing I would have thought myself capable of at this critical moment with a dead man in my bed. "Kiss me."

"Rake, I don't think I can do this with him lying there all –"

"Kiss me, Gail," Rake demanded, his hands cupping my bare bottom and pulling me tight to his swelling shaft. "Kiss me and do exactly as I tell you or Garreck's going to stay dead and there will be nothing to do but bury him in the ground to fertilize the grass."

His words were all the urging I needed. I threw myself into the kiss with all the enthusiasm I could muster, finding it surprisingly easy to get aroused as Rake's hands massaged the bare flesh of my ass and urged my clit gently against his length. In fact, I was close to the edge of what felt like a normal, healthy unbelievable orgasm in seconds, so thrilled by what Rake was doing to my body that I didn't flinch as he pushed me down to the mattress beside Garreck and spread my thighs, positioning the thick head of Rake's cock against me and preparing to drive inside.

## **Chapter Eleven**

A ménage a trois with two men has never been one of my fantasies, neither has a ménage with a man and another woman. I don't like women in that way and I don't require more than one penis in my bed at a time. One penis, one pussy and a private room—those are my preferences. Maybe it's fairly white bread and boring, but it works for me. Sex is plenty exciting without adding in all sorts of other variables that might make me wonder if my lover thinks another woman's body is prettier than mine or if he might secretly liked the cock on the other guy more than my pussy.

Keep it simple is my motto. Sexual relationships are complicated enough.

So, needless to say, having Rake take my hand and place it on the rapidly cooling flesh of the dead man next to me at the second he shoved his almost too thick cock deep inside of me was not my idea of fun. The cock was lovely, but touching what was essentially a corpse was mind-blowingly horrid. In fact, I was considering freaking out in a major way when Rake leaned over and pressed a sweet kiss to my lips.

"I didn't want our first time to be like this." He thrust gently inside of me as he coaxed me into a kiss that was the softest brushing of lips, the tenderest sweep of his tongue against mine.

"I didn't want any time to be like this," I said, still disturbed by the feel of Rake's hand massaging mine into Garreck's furry thigh, but unable to keep myself from lifting into the hips that were grinding against me. The man knew how to use that beautiful, thick cock between his legs and it was practically impossible not to respond.

"Lady, you feel amazing." Rake trembled slightly and emitted a shaky breath that feathered over my lips and made me moan.

He wasn't kidding. If I felt half as wonderful to him as he did to me, then this was by far the best love-making of his life. Garreck had given me profound physical satisfaction, but it had been purely sexual. With Rake, there was this other energy, this tangible, emotional aura—for lack of a better word—that pulsed around us. It kind of made me want to tear up again. It was just so beautiful, more layered than I'd dreamed sex could be, so very much more than his cock inside me or his lips on mine—though those were magnificent sensations in their own right.

I wasn't exactly sure why I was feeling the way I did about him. It certainly wasn't love. I barely knew him, for god's sakes. He could be an axe murderer. Or have a foot fetish—which would be almost as bad as the axe murderer because I deeply loathe feet and would never allow anyone to nibble on my toes or anything else so utterly repulsive.

But stranger or not, when I looked into his eyes as he slowly withdrew his cock, inch by torturous inch, I had a hard time not confessing undying affection. I felt

everything within me soften in a way it hadn't before as I fell headlong into the steely beauty of his eyes. I sensed he was falling into mine as well, seeing all those bits of myself I'd managed to hide from every other man in my life until now. But for some reason, I didn't care. In fact, it felt right, like I'd finally exhaled a breath I didn't know I'd been holding and sucked life-giving oxygen into my lungs.

"Rake, I think I'm going to—"

"Wait, just a second, wait for me," he groaned, increasing the tempo of his thrusts, working his body into my slick center with a skill that did nothing to help me "wait".

"Rake, I can't," I gasped. "I'm trying but—"

"Wait, baby, wait," he panted, "and when you feel me go, think about where your skin is touching Garreck as you come."

"I come after you or at the same time?" I asked, my orgasm fading into the distance a bit as I worried about the semantics of the thing. It's not easy to come on command—for me anyway. Add that to the knowledge that I had to do this right or Garreck was worm food and I didn't know if I could perform under the pressure.

"I have no idea. I think either would be fine," he said, his eyes squeezing shut for a second and a look of ecstasy crossing his face. "Lady, Gail, I've wanted to do this since the second I saw you. So much, so, so, so, so, so much."

"Me too," I said, things low in my body starting to tighten at the raw pleasure in his eyes when he opened them again.

"You wanted to fuck me?" he asked, voice dark and just a little wicked.

"Yes."

"Me, not the man who looks like me?"

"Yes, damn it, yes," I gasped, knowing as I said it that the words were true. I'd loved Richard, still loved him, would probably always love him, but I'd never felt this kind of powerful emotion with him. The wonder dick couldn't compare to the wonder of Rake, his mouth, his eyes, his hands, his heart, his dick, all of it.

In that second I knew that it was really over for me and Richard, whether I found my way home or not. No matter what happened with this man who was pumping himself into me with a passion that was almost scary, I wouldn't be begging Richard to take me back. After this, I wouldn't be able to settle for anything less than everything and I knew now that I hadn't been the only one too afraid to risk it all.

Richard had never looked at me with eyes like Rake's, eyes that demanded all of me and offered all of himself, eyes that let me know how much I could hurt him if I were so inclined. Eyes that promised I could let myself go completely and he would be there to help if the "letting go" didn't go exactly as planned.

"Me too," he said. "More than I ever wanted her, Lady help me, so much more."

And those words were enough to make me lose control, put the final uncertain part of me at ease so that the next time he plunged his cock inside of me I cried out and

arched into his thrust, the walls of my pussy clenching around him with a violence that thankfully made his groan of completion echo in the air a second later.

Then, no matter how much I wanted to clasp him to me with arms and legs and anything else I could imagine, I pressed the palm of my hand into Garreck's cold flesh, closing my eyes and imagining all that pleasure traveling down my arm and into his horribly still form. I prayed that when I opened my eyes and I had finally ridden out the last of the blissful waves rocking my own body to the core, Garreck would be among the living.

Not only did I fear I'd lose a part of myself if I were actually responsible for killing someone, I was also incredibly creeped out that I had just had a ménage à trois with a corpse. Call me crazy, but I figured that would be a lot less emotionally scarring if Garreck were to wake up and call me "wee Gail" and complain that he'd missed out on the fun and threaten Rake's life or something else suitably lifelike.

Rake finally collapsed on top of me with a last manly noise of pleasure and I knew there was no more delaying the inevitable. Hugging Rake's warmth to me with one arm, I let my eyes open and trail down the length of my other arm, not all prepared for the sight that met my eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

My father was fond of the phrase "too much of a good thing". The time I ate all my Halloween candy in one night in second grade, he solemnly pronounced "too much of a good thing" while he held back my hair as I vomited. Same story when I was fifteen and two girlfriends and I got drunk on cheap vodka and orange juice in the basement while my parents were out to dinner. "Too much of a good thing", he'd muttered, but that time he'd let me tie my hair back with a hair band while I puked.

The smell of orange juice, especially regurgitated orange juice, made him nauseous and he figured I should have known better by the ripe old age of fifteen. Riigghht. Like fifteen year olds aren't some of the stupidest beings on the planet.

So, seeing as how I never failed to think of my dad every time I uttered those famous words, it disturbed me that they were the first to fly into my mind when I laid eyes on the unbelievably enormous, fully erect cock that lay mere inches from my hand – and therefore Rake's hand which was still right on top of my own.

"What happened?" Garreck sounded like he'd been run over by a truck or a herd of giant cows or something. I couldn't seem to bring myself to answer, no matter how thrilled I was to have him back among the living.

I just couldn't take my eyes off of the monster between his legs. I mean, I'd felt that it was very large, had even seen it at what I thought was its full glory in the tunnel earlier, but nothing could prepare me for an up close and personal inspection.

It was nearly as long as my arm, two feet minimum, no joke, no lie, no exaggeration whatsoever. And not only long, but thick. There was no way I would be able to get one hand around it at the tip, which was now plump and swollen to a nearly purple color –

so fully aroused that a bead of cum graced the top of it like a pearly cherry on top of a...darker and really, large maraschino cherry. It was erotically terrifying and I thanked god Rake had stopped us from consummation. Otherwise, I was certain I would have been in a world of hurt with probably a few bruised and battered internal organs.

"There was an accident," Rake said vaguely, plucking his hand from on top of mine and slowly sliding his cock from inside me.

"You bastard." Garreck turned his head to take Rake in as the shorter man pulled on his clothes.

Unfortunately, he wasn't quick enough with his boxer briefs to keep Garreck from seeing the clearly girly-fluid-coated length of his cock. A second glance at me lying beside him, still spread open for Rake's pleasure, apparently solidified whatever suspicion was taking root in the barbarian's mind.

"I'm hardly a bastard," Rake said, not seeming overly thrilled that Garreck was once again among the living. "Though I can't say the same for you. Isn't there still an issue with your inheritance?"

"You Lady defiler. I'll kill you, I swear —"

"I challenge you to try, you dim witted —"

"Hey! No one's going to be killing anyone," I said, trying to be the voice of reason as I pulled part of the cover out from under Garreck and wrapped it around my body. I wasn't going to waste the nice clean clothes I'd been loaned on my sex-musky body. I needed a spritzer before I wiggled into my Engineer Eddie overalls.

"He attacked me from behind! I'll not let that go unpunished," Garreck roared, sitting up in the middle of the bed, his face outraged and his cock still going strong. The combination of that monstrous arousal and his words almost made me laugh. Maybe it was the fact that we'd all just kind of had a ménage à trois, but the visual that accompanied his claim of being attacked from behind I'm sure would piss him off mightily if he were to know the direction of my thoughts.

"I didn't attack you, you cow mountain." Rake pulled on his shirt but didn't bother doing up the buttons. He looked really sexy like that, his pants rumpled and low on his hips and his sculpted chest peaking out beneath the dress shirt. I kind of wanted to pounce him again already. Good thing I was too tired and Garreck was still in my bed. I needed some time to think about old Rake and the things we'd said while we were having resurrection nookie.

"You're a liar, you woman man. You've always been a liar and the whole village knows it," Garreck said, coming off the bed and standing way too close to Rake for my comfort.

Rake was a strong little guy, but Garreck was huge and I didn't see any cufflinks or whatever they called them in Rake's hands. Without them, Garreck could probably pick the smaller man up and strangle him to death with one hand tied behind his back. If he didn't skewer him with that cock first. Geez, did nothing make this guy unaroused? I

wondered what would happen if I told him to think about dead puppies and his grandmother's underwear.

"Watch your mouth, Garreck," Rake said in a decidedly dangerous tone. This was escalating far too quickly, especially considering there was absolutely no reason for them to fight. Rake had saved the guy's life. I was the one who had nearly sent him to meet his maker or his Lady or whatever.

"I'll watch nothing except my hand fisting into your face, you —"

"Wait! Listen to me." I stepped between Rake and Garreck, effectively stopping attacks from either side, though now *I* was feeling threatened by Garreck's erection. It was only inches away from poking me in the chest just below my ribs. The man was too tall. He made me feel like a member of Munchkinland. "I was the one who killed you."

"What?" Garreck asked, clearly dubious.

"It was an accident, I didn't mean to. I still don't know how I did it, but I knocked you out and you were all passed out on my leg with your eyes open, not blinking or anything. Rake only came to help after I was screaming bloody murder. You were dead before he even entered the room."

"I thought you said it was an accident?" Garreck asked.

"It was."

"Then why were you screaming bloody murder?"

"It's an Earth expression," Rake supplied with a bored look. "You really are very literal, aren't you?"

"I don't need your input right now, thanks anyway, Rake," I said, wishing he would quit trying to pick a fight and never use the word "literal" again. It was one of few the things that seemed way too Richard-ish about him. It was confusing.

"I think you do, unless you know what you did and how not to do it again," Rake said, sounding cocky as hell. How annoying was he?

"Oh shut up, you...turd," I said, warm, fuzzy, post coital feelings fading as Rake reminded me why he got on my nerves the first few times I met him. "Why don't you just read my mind and figure it out for yourself?"

"I can't read minds, just thoughts."

"Whatever. Semantics."

"Not really, there's a real difference between —"

"Oh my god, I don't care. Just read them."

"I can't anymore. Couldn't from the second I walked in the room, which is another very interesting development," Rake said.

"You can't read her thoughts?" Garreck asked, looking more interested than angry for the first time. "And you clearly bedded her just now."

"I did, clearly." Rake stepped closer behind me until I could feel his body heat brushing against my back like a live thing, a thing that touched me in all the right places and once again made my body take notice of his.

"Don't be gross," I warned, though my voice wasn't nearly as threatening as I'd wanted it to be.

"There was nothing gross about it," Rake said softly, leaning down and pressing a gentle kiss to my neck that made my eyes close and a shiver run through me against my will. I didn't want to respond—didn't want to piss Garreck off anymore than we had already—but I couldn't seem to help myself.

"I would imagine not," Garreck said in a deceptively calm voice. "There was nothing gross about her thighs spread for my mouth, either. In fact, wee Gail, I'd say you were the most delicious thing I've tasted in a long time."

Garreck followed this proclamation by going to his knees in front of me, an action which put his face even with my blanket-covered breasts and made me step back until my entire body was making contact with Rake's. One part of me was suddenly noticing how lovely it felt to have my bottom rubbing against Rake's groin, while the other part watched in stunned fascination as the barbarian gently grabbed my hips and nuzzled his face between my covered breasts, ending the caress with a soft kiss on the exposed flesh above the blanket.

"In fact, I'm already hungry for more." Garreck began bunching up the blanket that trailed to the floor around my legs. For a second I wondered what would happen if I let him proceed, what Rake would do. Would he leave the room? Or would he take the hands that were now resting lightly on my shoulders and smooth them down over my breasts? What would it feel like to have Garreck's mouth on me while Rake entered me from behind?

The eroticism of the thought made another shudder run through me and my knees grow decidedly weak. A part of me wanted that, desperately longed to be completely surrounded, consumed, ravished by these two men. It made me seriously consider what either man would think about sharing a woman? They obviously couldn't stand each other, but would they put their differences aside for sex?

I had no idea and the fact that I was even *curious* about that kind of thing was enough to shock me back to my senses. This wasn't me, it just wasn't and I had to keep my out of control libido from urging me to make decisions I would regret.

"Garreck, I almost killed you the last time and I'm not into ménage, so cut it out." I grabbed the blanket and flipped it away from his hands.

"Whatever the lady wishes," he said, not looking overly offended. "There'll be time later. When I show you what I can do now that I'm healed, I'm sure you'll lose interest in this wee lady man."

"Why do men always call each other women as an insult? As a woman, it pisses me off," I said, then rushed on before either man could reply. "And I'm not having sex with you, Garreck. First of all, I've already had way too much sex in this dimension,

considering I've been here twenty-four hours. I'd like to focus on something else, like how in the hell to get out of Here. Secondly, you're just too big. It's not sexy, it's scary, and if you don't cover up pretty soon, I'm probably going to run out of here without bothering to make sure you two idiots don't kill each other."

Apparently that was really funny to Garreck, because he started laughing, really laughing, throw-your-head-back-and-squeeze-your-eyes-shut-and-fill-the-room-with-noise laughing. I didn't really appreciate being laughed at quite so heartily, but at least he looked around the floor for his clothes while he snorted and giggled in a way that would have been funny in itself if I weren't feeling kind of pissy. Or if Rake weren't looking at the other man like he'd like to cut off his scary cock and shove it down this throat.

Finally, Garreck located the clothing he'd come into the room with under one corner of the mattress. I was glad to see that said clothing was a pair of pants that covered more skin than his loincloth. Covered was a good thing. We should all get as covered as possible to keep from having any more accidental sex. As Garreck pulled on some comfy-looking tan leather pants—the kind of thing I would steal from him if he were my boyfriend and not eight feet tall—I couldn't help but admire how incredibly lovely he was.

He was a magnificent looking man, with a body so masculine that not even his almost feminine mouth or long flowing hair could make him look anything less than rampantly male. I knew most women wouldn't give Rake a second glance after earning the interest of Garreck the gorgeous, but I had to admit that Rake was the one who really did it for me. Garreck wasn't a bad guy and there was no denying he had certain...skills, but Rake was the one I wanted to ask out for a juice or a breadbasket or whatever. He was also the one I wanted to take back to my cave and make love to until we both passed out from exhaustion. Which reminded me...

"Rake, I'm going to go check on the passed out people in the hall. I want to make sure I didn't hurt anyone. Then I'm going to take a shower while doing my best not to kill anyone else and then you're going to tell me absolutely everything you know or think you know and answer all my questions to the best of your ability or I'm going to kick your ass."

"And I'll help her," Garreck said. "I've been looking for an excuse to slam your head against a wall."

"Garreck."

"What, wee Gail?"

"Stop helping."

"Don't worry, Gail, I'll tell you everything. Garreck, I'm not afraid of you, you sack of sloth leavings."

"Rake, cut it out, you're better than that. Garreck, if you hurt Rake, I'm going to sex you to death again. Both of you behave." I grabbed my overalls, red sweater and clean undies and turned toward the door.

"Well, at least I'll go out with a smile on my face," Garreck said with a wicked grin I just caught out of the corner of my eye before I emerged into the hallway.

"Not if I have anything to say about it." Rake's voice faded as I walked swiftly down the thankfully empty hall. I supposed the unconscious people had been tended to or woken up and left or whatever.

I thought about going back into the room and kicking the boys in the shins to give them something to worry about besides their beefs with each other, but decided a shower was more important. Whatever was going on between the two men, it was obviously much bigger than me or what had happened in Rake's bedroom. Besides, I needed to wash the smell of both of them from my body so I could concentrate. They had been fighting before I arrived on the scene and would probably keep fighting long after I was gone.

I didn't even want to think about what would happen if I didn't get to leave. No matter how gorgeous and great in the sack they both were, I just didn't know if I could handle the drama of Here. I was trying to do away with drama, not give it a handwritten invitation. My last big mistake back in my dimension had taught me that relationship angst was highly overrated, hadn't it?

"As if you ever learn useful lessons like that," I muttered aloud.

Lying to myself has never been high on my list of stupid things I do on a regular basis. I've always thought that my brutal honesty with myself and others was one of my better traits. Too bad not everyone else agrees and that, at the moment, honesty was only increasing the turbulence of what was proving to be a very bumpy ride.

## Chapter Twelve

I am a shower person, have been since I was old enough to be trusted not to slip and fall and kill myself while trying to wash my hair—about five years old, I was coordinated for my age. I do not like baths. They make me feel like I’m soaking in a puddle of my own filth, sloughed off skin cells and soap. I don’t feel clean until I’ve gotten out and rinsed off in the shower, which kind of eliminates the whole purpose of the bath.

Aside from the sitting-in-your-own-filth factor, a bath just can’t compare to the bliss of a strong shower beating down on your head and shoulders. Not only does it feel fantastic, but my pre-bedtime shower has always been one of my most peaceful times of the day. The closest I’ve come to meditation is zoning out to the sound of the water as it bounces off my skin, hits the shower wall and disappears down the drain.

This being the case, the Here spritzers should have been my idea of a dream come true. They were little cubicles carved out of the rock wall with hot spring warmed water streaming down from all sides. The pressure was perfect, the temperature perfect, the soapiness of the soap perfect, everything was perfect except for the fact that I had just had unprotected sex with a man I hardly knew.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I muttered to myself as I scrubbed every last trace of male fluid from my body. But even when I was as clean as I could possibly get without some major exfoliation, I still didn’t feel any better. The damage was done and I was even stupider than previously imagined.

I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it sooner. Just goes to show how truly routed I had been by the lust demons and the culture shock and the reality shock and all the rest of it. I’d been so busy worrying about Garreck being dead and then about the pair of super idiots killing each other that I hadn’t realized Rake had come inside of me without wearing a damn thing. In fact, I don’t think I would have realized what had happened at all except that, as I began to shower, certain...fluids were abundantly evident as they trailed down my thighs.

“I’m probably pregnant with an alien baby,” I whispered, trying to get a laugh from myself by imaging my *National Enquirer* cover, but failing. It just wasn’t funny.

Rake wasn’t an alien, he was one hundred percent human dude, or as close to it as you could come and still have slightly green hair and sexual healing powers. And if the mess that had dripped slowly from inside of me was anything to judge by, he came like a champ. I didn’t know if quantity meant anything with regards to fertility, but it was enough to make me worry. A lot.

I’ve never been particularly maternal, though I love my nieces to distraction and treasure the days I get to baby sit and play the cool aunt. Five-year-old Heather and

two-year-old Briana are two of my favorite people in the whole world. They amuse me endlessly and make me feel like the world is a better place than I usually assume it to be. They have also convinced me I want kids, but in a vague "someday" kind of way

I guess I am kind of like the *Sex and the City* girls. They always wanted a family, but kept putting it off, somehow managing to convince themselves that their early forties were meant to be the childbearing years. Scientifically, fertility peaks in your late teens and after your twenties you start to scrape the bottom of the egg barrel. By forty, you're lucky to even get one of the suckers fertilized.

I was thirty-two, three years away from mandatory genetic testing with a big scary needle. I shouldn't have been thinking munchkins were a thing of my distant future, but I was. I wasn't ready for a child, especially not with a man I hardly knew, in an alternate dimension where I didn't know the ropes, without my mommy by my side. Cuban grandmothers are one of the major wonders of the world. The idea that my son or daughter would never know their Abuelita made me want to cry again.

"Shit." I started to tear up against my will, a phenomenon that only made me more freaked out that I might be preggers. I hadn't cried this much in the past five years, let alone a mere twenty-four hours, I must be abnormally hormonal.

"Blah. Blah. Blah." I *couldn't* be hormonal that quickly, that was just stupid.

I took a deep breath and willed myself to relax and not give in to worst-case scenario thinking. Rake seemed like a decent guy and he was a sexual healer, for god's sakes. They wouldn't let him work if he was rife with disease, so at least that worry was behind me.

And what were the real chances that I was pregnant? I had just finished having my period two days before being zapped into Here. I remembered that clearly because I had been pissed that I had to carry tampons onto the airplane and might actually have to change one during the flight. I hate airplane bathrooms, so much that I almost wore a pad with my tampon but finally decided I hated pads even more than stinky airplane lavs.

So the timing was way off, the chances I had conceived slim to none. But for some reason, that didn't make me feel better.

"You're a stupid slut whore," I muttered to myself as I rinsed the last of what I assumed was conditioner from my hair.

It didn't have a label, none of the toiletries did, but what I thought was the shampoo had been tan and smelled like rosemary. The soap was almost clear and so powerful with peppermint you could almost taste it. And this, the conditioner, was a milky substance that made my mouth water for a teaspoonful of honey. I love eating honey straight. Not good for maintaining a steady, even blood sugar level, but so tasty.

"Gail?"

"Shit," I yelped. I hate it when people sneak up on me when I'm trying to think. The process is hard enough without interruption.

"Gail, can I come in?"

"No, um, not right now," I said, embarrassed that Rake might stick his head through the strings of beads that covered the tiny opening to the shower and see me naked.

The shower areas were coed and everyone else was wandering around without regard to their nudity, so he probably wouldn't think much of it. Besides, he'd obviously seen it before. But it felt more intimate now that I wasn't filled with sexual healing energy and fear for Garreck's life. Not to mention my fear that we could possibly be co-parenting a little green haired baby in the near future.

"Gail, please. I need to tell you everything. Now. There are things you don't understand and it has become urgent that you grasp them as quickly as possible," Rake said with a frustrated, anxious sigh. Oh, so *now* he was ready to spill the beans, so eager to tell me what he'd been teasing me with he couldn't even wait for me to get out of the shower.

"I'll be out when I'm finished. You can talk to me then," I said, refusing to hurry just because he had ordered me to.

Sure I had rinsed the last of the conditioner out of my hair a few minutes ago and really had nothing left to do in the spritzer if I wasn't in possession of a nice, sharp, triple blade razor, but that wasn't the point. He was not the boss and it wouldn't do for him to start thinking he was this early on in our relationship. If we were even going to have a relationship, which was still entirely up in the air.

"Get out! Now!" he roared, sounding suitably patriarchal and scary.

"What part of 'out when I'm finished' don't you understand, asswipe?"

"What part of urgent don't you understand, pissant?"

"Fine! I'll be out in a second. Go away so I can get dressed." He'd better have some majorly urgent news or I was going show him just how pissanty I could really be.

Ten minutes later I was walking out of the spritzer area, dressed in my red sweater and striped bell-bottom overalls with my hair miraculously dried to an only slightly fluffy straightness by the drying chamber. A woman in the stall next to mine had shown me how to apply this thick lotion to my skin and a lighter tonic on my hair before I stepped into the chamber to protect anything from getting dry or cracked by the heat. As a result, my hair was shiny and my skin flushed and glowing with health. The glimpse I'd gotten of myself in the mirror wasn't half bad. The overalls were tighter fitting than I'd thought and made it clear I was a woman and the red sweater brought out the color in my face. If I'd had a touch of mascara, I would have felt downright pretty. Not that I cared. Who the hell did I have to impress?

"You look beautiful," Rake said, stilling for a moment, his face relaxing into a pleased expression as I emerged into the main tunnel, interrupting the nervous pacing he'd been doing just outside the door. Okay, so *that's* who I had to impress, but I still didn't care. Right?

"Whatever." I averted my eyes and tried to look frustrated even as I felt myself blush with pleasure. Vanity, what a gross thing it is, always ready for a meal.

"Right." The soft look faded as he uncrossed his arms and pulled out a pair of shoes. He was wearing a black sweater now and pants that looked very similar to the pair Garreck had pulled on earlier. Evidently he had showered as well and in roughly half the time it had taken me if he'd had time to yell at me, get clean and then go fetch me a pair of shoes. Oh well, I had more hair and it was my first time in a spritzer. I refused to feel guilty about my pokiness.

"Do I need socks?" I asked, taking the simple gray slip-ons that looked like the marriage of an orthopedic shoe and a Mickey Mouse foot. I loved them.

"No, not unless it gets colder." Rake watched me slide my fat little feet into the shoes. They were wide and comfy and I had no trouble getting them on, a fact I appreciated since I really don't like people watching me put on shoes. With fat feet, sometimes you have to really work to get foot and shoe to agree to be friends and the process is a little embarrassing.

"Thanks, they're great." I jumped up and down to test them out and smiled at how wonderful it felt to be among the shoe-wearing portion of the population once more.

"Whatever," he said with a blank face, so I couldn't tell if he was deliberately mocking me or just returning the favor of being a jerk. "Come on, we have about fifty people waiting for us in the Eatery. The council cancelled group dinner and sent people meat pies so we could have privacy."

"Sorry, I didn't know anyone was waiting," I said as I hurried down the hall after him.

"You knew I was waiting," he reminded me, sounding slightly hurt.

"It was my first time in a spritzer. I did the best I could."

"I know they have showers on Earth."

"It's not the same."

"You *could* just apologize," he said as we rounded a curve in the corridor and headed toward the mammoth entrance of what looked like a school cafeteria. It even smelled like one. Yuck. I had a sudden vivid memory of Frito Pie Wednesdays at Catholic School. Truly disgusting and Sister Catherine had always forced me to eat the entire thing. She was friends with my mom and they were united in the battle to conquer my skinniness.

"I already did apologize," I snapped, my stomach rumbling despite Frito Pie memories. I hadn't eaten anything since the morning and nookie and stress always made me hungry.

"Not to me."

"Don't be a big baby."

"I think we know who's acting childish."

"You're such a loser."

"You're right," Rake said with a sigh as he abruptly stopped in the hall and turned to face me. "We have bigger things to worry about and I want you to know you can trust me. I'm just...confused about a lot of things."

"Yeah, me too. And I was worried about...some stuff and it made me cranky," I said, finding it easy to be mature for once. He was obviously trying to mend our rift and I could meet him half way. Though I still wasn't quite ready to talk about the chance that we had made a munchkin. "I didn't mean to take it out on you. I'm, um, really glad you helped save Garreck's life and brought me shoes and...everything."

"I'm really glad you trusted me to help," he said, stepping closer and running his hand over my fluffy, honey smelling hair with obvious affection.

I closed my eyes for a split second, lost in the heat of him as it pulsed between us, making me want to sigh and lean forward until my breasts were smashed against his chest. Memories of what we'd been doing less than an hour ago flooded my mind and I felt my nipples tighten and a stir of interest inside my modest little cotton undies.

"But now I need you to trust me even more."

"You keep mentioning the 't' word." I opened my eyes and willed all friskiness to fade into the background.

There were fifty people waiting for us and I wasn't about to do any more public displays, not today anyway. Rake wasn't getting anywhere near me in that way until we had a talk about what passed for protection in Here. They had to have something. I'd seen kids running around, but not ten million of them. The people were obviously controlling the birth rate in some way and I wanted in on it.

"Yeah, I do," he said, a muscle in his jaw jumping and his eyes sliding toward the door of the cafeteria and back to me again. "There are some people in there who, though they mean well, are not going to have what's best for you in mind. They're scared, they're worried that what happened might have in some way weakened our defenses and made us vulnerable to the Destroyer. They may want to take aggressive action first and ask questions later. So you need people on your side to help convince them this was an accident and that we can fix it."

"What are you talking about? I thought you said I didn't kill anyone else?"

"You didn't."

"Well, then I thought Railyn said ninety percent of the people in Here were nice? This doesn't sound nice. It sounds like they're going to string me up from the nearest tree or stalagmite or something." I didn't trust a large group of people. The mob mentality could take over far too easily and I'd be up shit creek before Rake could do anything about it.

"Relax, no one's going to string you up from anywhere, it's against our laws. Besides, I wouldn't let them, neither will Garreck. I've asked him to be there with a few friends."

"Wow, this must be bad if you've invited Garreck to the party."

"Garreck is an ass, but he can be helpful at times. Whatever our problems, they have nothing to do with you. Or mostly nothing."

"I kind of figured that out already," I said. "What exactly am I going to be defending myself against?"

"I think it would be better if you didn't know. If everyone can see that you're clearly surprised by what's happened, it will give us a stronger case," he said, gently taking my arm and guiding me toward the bright lights and the smell of Frito Pie.

"A stronger case for what?" I asked, my stomach doing a flip-flop that had nothing to do with hunger.

I didn't even like to speak in front of large groups of people. That's why I'd let Kathy run every workshop we'd given since we had started going to writers' conferences together three years ago. The very idea of holding forth in public makes my old ulcer threaten to reemerge. I didn't want fifty sets of eyes on me, let alone be the focus of rage or frustration or fear or any other hostile emotion.

"I don't think I can do this. Can't I just run and hide somewhere and you come get me when it's over?"

"It's going to be fine, don't worry. I shouldn't have scared you. Just forget I said anything." Rake tried for a comforting smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"You're a really bad liar."

"Yeah, I am."

"I like that about you."

"Thanks," he said with a real smile, one that made him look so incredibly handsome and friendly I felt a wave of pounciness rush over me again.

"But I still want to run and hide."

"That's okay, just trust me."

"Right." I sighed. Trust has never been one of my strong suits, but it didn't seem I had a choice.

I could either trust Rake and Garreck—two men who seemed to like me pretty well and were actual residents of this dimension and therefore privy to the laws and customs and history of the place. Or I could trust my own gut instincts not to lead me astray. I decided to go with the guys via the gut.

My gut told me to trust them. After all, they both wanted to pounce me again. They might work a little harder to keep me alive just so they could continue to fight over who got to join me in bed. It was kind of a base thing to consider, but I had learned not to underestimate the powerful persuasion of a man's cock, especially when it seems to be a little obsessed with you for whatever reason.

Whether it was old rivalry, my resemblance to Marly or just my own hot, raging sex vibe—or a combination of all three—both Rake and Garreck seemed a little obsessed with having me. Having two gorgeous men trying to seduce me wouldn't be a bad thing at any time, but right now it might save my life.

"This really isn't life or death serious right? I'm just scaring myself?" I asked in a whisper as we entered the room and a mix of terrified, angry and stone cold eyes landed on me with a weight I could practically feel.

"Right." But his voice was strained and his jaw clenched. He really was a horrible, horrible liar. Adorable trait in a man, but at the moment it did nothing to calm the anxiety that flooded my system for the tenth time that day. If I didn't stop getting this stressed out this often, I was going to start losing my hair.

Then I'd be really pissed.

## Chapter Thirteen

Power of any kind is a heady thing and I tend to enjoy it. I've never been completely swept away on a power trip or anything, but I relish guiding my five underlings at work and feel a certain satisfaction that I can still make most heterosexual male patrons of a New York bar sit up and take notice. Both professional and raw female power are fantastic things and I'm grateful to have them in my life.

I also guess I feel generally "empowered" as a person. I hate self-help terminology, but I have been supporting myself since the age of twenty-one and have advanced in my company faster than anyone else I know. I'm still not getting rich or famous, but I'm proud of myself, confident and empowered, I suppose you could say.

*This*, however, was not a power I'd ever dreamed of having or thought I would enjoy in the slightest. I hadn't killed the twenty people I'd caught in my power explosion—which I was happy about—but I wasn't sure the state they were in was much better. They were all sitting in their chairs with slack jaws and glazed eyes, breathing, but not much else. It was horribly sad and creepy and I couldn't believe I was responsible. I really just *couldn't* wrap my mind around the fact that I was capable of giving more than a dozen people a lobotomy simply by having a really intense orgasm.

Apparently, no one else was having that problem.

"She did this to him. She made him this way and she should answer for it." A beautiful blonde woman with puffy red eyes and a swollen, drippy nose clung to a drooling man I supposed was her husband.

I shifted nervously in the chair Rake had helped me into, wondering how long it would be before people stormed the small stage where Rake, Railyn, Garreck and friends and Eyebrows were sitting beside me. If they did rush the stage, should I run? Would I even be able to leap down from my perch without twisting my ankle? The chair was more like a stool and my feet didn't come close to touching the floor. It made me feel like a little kid—which was the last thing I needed to boost my confidence—but which I hoped made me appear a little less threatening.

"Now wait, she didn't do anything on purpose. She's only been in our dimension for a day. We had no idea she had this power and neither did she," Rake said, calmly and firmly. "And we don't know that this is permanent. We brought Garreck back when he didn't have a heartbeat. So, hopefully, we'll be able put everyone else back to normal."

"Sloth leavings! No one goes back, we've tried before. The state is irreversible!" a man with a bad green comb-over shouted from the back of the room. He was pissy, but not as upset as the people in the front rows, leading me to believe he wasn't the friend

or relative of a victim, just a shit disturber who wanted to see my head on a platter. Charming.

"Shut your hole, Barber. I came back, I'm standing here before you, everything in working order," Garreck yelled to the back of the room.

"How do we know that? No one but Rake and the girl saw you 'dead' and we all know he's been known to shade the truth," said the paunchy comb over man whose name, evidently, was Barber. Ironical for a man with nearly no hair.

"I'm not a girl. I'm thirty two years old and I'm not a liar. I saw Garreck, up close and personal, and I fully believed he was dead." I sounded more sure of myself than I really felt. What if I'd been wrong? What if Garreck hadn't been dead? He certainly hadn't been in the weird state these people were in, so who knew if I could help them, even if Rake and I repeated exactly what we'd done to help the barbarian?

I mean, I was willing to strip down and get busy however many times it took to undo the damage I had done, but I wasn't positive resurrection nookie would help these people. Not to mention it would probably be worse to have one of them in bed than a full fledged corpse. Their wide, empty eyes and drooly mouths were already profoundly disturbing and none of them was close enough for me to touch.

"Which brings us to my reason for being here." Eyebrows stood, drawing the eyes of the room. "If what Rake and Gail have told me is true and she really is thirty-two, not thirty-three as previously assumed, then we have only the second known case of inter-dimensional reversal."

Inter-dimensional reversal. I really wanted to ask what that was and whether I was going to get my picture in Here's version of the Journal of Medicine, but I wasn't that comfortable speaking in front of the angry mob. I'd corner Eyebrows later and make him spill the beans if he didn't elaborate.

"Which means she was born into the Earth dimension *after* her counterpart in our dimension," Eyebrows explained. I wanted to run over and give him a big kiss. *Finally*, some answers. Weird as they were, I already felt better. "For those of you who knew Marly well, you'll remember that she would be celebrating her thirty-fourth winter in a few months."

"I'll be thirty-three in January," I offered, then fell silent at the hard look from Eyebrows. Evidently he didn't like being interrupted in the middle of his big spiel.

"If that is the truth—"

"Why will no one believe me? If I was going to lie, why lie about one year? I still get carded for alcohol, so why not say I'm twenty-two instead of thirty-two?"

A thick, angry silence met my words. These people still weren't happy with me—inter-dimensional reversal woman or no. I should have kept my irritation to myself since I really didn't enjoy being glared at with enough animosity to melt off a layer or two of skin.

"Are you through?" Eyebrows asked with a wry arch of one of his furry nick-name sakes. I nodded and looked at the floor, determined not to indulge in any more

outbursts until I was safely cleared of all charges or suspicion or whatever. “As I said, if this is true, then Gail is not Marly’s mirror maker and cannot be treated as such. She did not influence Marly’s behavior and could even have been the recipient of energy not from her own world. That energy could have considerable effects now that she’s entered our dimension. She’s an anomaly with the potential for a kind of power that could resemble that of known Here criminals of honor. That said, we should refrain from leaping to the assumption that one inter-dimensional anomaly is just like another. There’s no proof that Gail had malicious intent and we should assume this was an accident until proven otherwise.”

“I don’t care if it was an accident, I just want my mom back,” a teenage boy shouted from the second row. He had his arm around an older woman and was valiantly managing not to cry. For some reason, that got to me more than the teary woman.

“I’m so sorry. I promise that this was a mistake and I will do everything in my power—even if I don’t really know what that is yet—to make your mom and the rest of these people better. I swear it. I’ll do whatever it takes,” I said, my sincerity evidently getting through to a few people who visibly relaxed in their chairs.

“And I’ll do everything I can to help her,” Rake said, further soothing the crowd until an obnoxious whine came from the back of the room.

“I would ask that a different healer be assigned to instruct the girl. I’d be concerned for her welfare if Rake were to continue as her only guide.” Barber’s obviously fake concern reminded me of the more smarmy politicians of my dimension.

“I’m still head healer, Barber.” Rake’s voice held a warning I, for one, would have heeded.

“But for how much longer? Especially now that we know that Marly wasn’t influenced by a mirror maker. Her decisions and her *accusations* were purely her own. How do you explain that away, master Rake?” Barber’s words made the room fall silent and most everyone who wasn’t in a waking coma shift uncomfortably in their seats.

I had no idea what was going on, but most of the crowd looked embarrassed and a few shot nasty looks back in Barber’s direction, which spoke well for Rake. No matter what Barber was talking about, most people didn’t give it much credence. They seemed to think Rake was a good guy.

On the other hand, this wasn’t the first time I’d heard allusions to Rake’s dishonesty. Hadn’t Garreck taunted him about the same thing? Of course Garreck was a jealous psycho who had a thing for Marly and wasn’t averse to pouncing me when I didn’t know why I was so frisky or crawling into my bed while I was asleep with less than pure intentions. Rake had gotten a little sensual with me while I was passed out in order to help me heal. Garreck just wanted to get back at Rake and have a little fun.

Which of the two would I believe was telling the truth?

It was a non-question, especially considering how horrible Rake seemed to be at lying. Unless he was a true sociopath who faked being bad at lying so people would believe him when he really lied, which was way too complicated for me. Still, I was

curious about the exact details of this apparent scandal, as well as itching to know where Marly was.

Was she dead? The way Eyebrows had said “would have been thirty-four” made me think so. But the way everyone else talked about her it was more like she’d gone somewhere and was still alive and well, though probably not likely to return to the village or either of her lovers in the near future.

“I’ll help Rake, I’d be happy to.” Railyn piped up for the first time during the little meeting. She’d seemed pretty freaked out when I’d first entered the room, shooting me a look that made me worry she might not like me quite so much anymore. But here she was, standing up for me—or Rake anyway—and Rake was definitely on my side.

“I’m not sure that would be—”

“Barber, I’ve been healing for fifteen years without a single negative client report. You’re not going to find anyone else with a more impeccable record, yourself included.” Railyn gave Barber a look that was haughty and condescending and mildly accusatory all at the same time. It was a fabulous glare and I wanted to applaud, but didn’t. I was keeping my quiet and my cool. My last words had won me a few friends and I wasn’t going to risk turning the tide by flapping my lips unnecessarily.

“We’ll guard the hall so they’re not disturbed,” Garreck said, fixing the entire room with a threatening glare. The two big, hairy, scary friends he’d brought with him glared too and I got a little warm, fuzzy feeling. I liked having the big bullies on my side.

“Excellent,” Eyebrows said. “Now, why don’t we get these people comfortable while we wait for Gail and Rake and Railyn. Unless you think you’re ready to try to heal them now?”

“No, time would be good,” I said, anxious to interrogate Rake and Railyn, to see if there was another way to help these people. I didn’t want to have that much nookie with strangers present if I could help it.

I was still a little sore from the first time with Rake—his manly bits being the only thing larger than his mirror maker back on Earth—and I didn’t want to imagine the state I’d be in after twenty rounds. Besides, the victims were getting more disturbing by the moment. The way they walked as they left the room was totally the *Thriller* video shuffle. They looked like the walking dead, like...

“Zombies,” I muttered quietly to myself.

Rake shot me a look that said I’d hit the nail right on the head.

I appreciated that he didn’t act like I should have caught on sooner.

“So the other case of inter-dimensional whatever would be you know who?” I understood now why everyone had been acting like I was the anti-Christ. Or the anti-Christ’s sister in inter-dimensional anomalism or what have you.

“Yee-up.” Railyn’s eyes were still glued to our zombie friends as they ever-so-slowly made their way out of the cafeteria, led by friends and family.

“Yee-up?”

"Yip?"

"Yep. Yep is fine." At least she was back to her Earth slang. Maybe she *hadn't* decided I was a very scary person who was better observed from a safe distance. Or maybe she just wanted her electric company overalls and sweater back.

"Speaking of getting your stuff back," I said.

"I don't want my stuff back," Railyn said quickly. "You can keep the overalls, please, I insist. They are no longer mine. I renounce ownership and make of them a gift to you, Gail from the Earth dimension. So be it witnessed by head healer Rake Heller on this tenth day of —"

"So you *are* afraid I'm going to try to make you a zombie." I remembered that the Destroyer used personal possessions to put people under his power, but I'd hoped Railyn would trust me never to do something like that, even if I knew how.

"Not on purpose I don't think you would," Railyn said with a blush. "But it had crossed my mind that there might be an...unfortunate accident."

"That's okay." She was right. "It just crossed my mind too. I'll go take off the clothes before we try any healing or anything."

"I heard you had to take your clothes off to restore Garreck anyway," Railyn said with a slightly suggestive grin. Or maybe it was just gas. I decided to ignore it because talking about nookie with a girlfriend in front of a man I'd just had nookie with embarrassed me.

"We didn't restore Garreck, we restarted his heart. It was something any doctor could have done with the right equipment." Rake ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "We're not going to be able to do the same for those people, so no one needs to get naked just yet. Sex healers have tried to work with Destroyer victims before with little success."

"Yes, but the Destroyer himself was never here to help," Railyn said.

"No, he wasn't, but if he had been, he could just as easily have made the situation worse. We don't know enough about the nature of his or Gail's power. She was able to funnel my energy back into Garreck, but the rest of the victims are in a completely different state. We could just as easily kill them as bring them back."

We all fell quiet, contemplating the shit we were in. Or at least that's what I was contemplating.

"And I don't think it's necessary for Gail to give the clothes back anyway. The Destroyer doesn't put people's personal effects on his body to use his power, there's an incantation and then he applies a mix of herbs."

"That's what we've heard, but what if we're wrong?" Railyn asked.

"You mean he's faking a spell to throw us off?" Rake seemed to seriously consider the idea.

"Right. I mean, the spies can only get so close and Barber was right about one thing—even the people we've managed to rescue from the Destroyer have never been returned to their natural state."

"They're permanent zombies?" I asked.

"Yee-up," Railyn said with such a straight face I couldn't correct her. "They have to have everything done for them by their families or go to a rehabilitation center."

"Where they never get rehabilitated," I finished.

"Right."

"But that's only if a healer or spell dissolver can manage to break the ties to the Destroyer," Rake said. "More than half of the people recovered get up from their beds and go back to him. The hold he has on them is too strong to resist."

We pondered that in silence for a bit, one by one sitting down on the edge of the stage and letting our legs hang over the side. We were all too short to be really comfortable in the chairs.

"Those chairs are really high considering most of you guys are short," I said.

"We're not short, the Protectors are just really tall," Railyn said with a sigh. "This was originally Garreck's peoples' sanctuary, so all the furniture is monster sized."

"Like other things I could mention," I muttered.

"No kidding." Railyn laughed. "But if you kiss them on the mouth just before penetration, it will resize itself."

"Really? You're kidding."

"No, truly. Otherwise they'd do damage with those things. They're just too large for intercourse in their natural state, at least for our women."

"You're telling me. I was shocked. I would have lost a kidney or something if we'd gone ahead and—"

"As enjoyable as this conversation is," Rake said, sounding like he found it anything but enjoyable, "could we get back to the point? We have more pressing issues at hand than whether or not Garreck's cock is fuckable."

"Speaking of fucking, do you think the Destroyer might make zombies the same way I did?" I asked, then hurriedly added. "I mean, not that I really had technical sex with Garreck, but with the um, you know...release of sexual energy or whatever?"

"Technical sex?"

"You know, *sex*, but not technical sex. Not sex without a word before it." I squirmed slightly under Rake's gaze.

"You mean like 'oral' or 'anal' or —"

"Right." I interrupted Railyn before she could finish her list. No need to poke the tiger or throw coins at the alligator or whatever that zoo analogy was I had been thinking of earlier.

"I don't know." Rake still sounded cranky.

"Don't be cranky, I'm just brainstorming."

"It's a good question, but it would be hard to say. No one really knows much about the Destroyer except that he came here from the Earth dimension over twenty years ago. There were no pictures taken and no one who saw his true face is still alive. Now he wears a mask and none of our spies have ever seen him take it off," Railyn said.

"Meaning?"

"We think he might be really, really hideous to behold," she said.

"So? Don't ugly people have sex in Here? I mean Barber is a sexual healer, right?"

That made Railyn giggle and Rake snort in mild amusement. I was glad the tense moment had passed, though neither of them offered further opinions on my theory. I didn't see why the Destroyer couldn't be making zombies the same way I did, no matter how gross he was under his mask.

He was a powerful man and a scary one and those kind always attract a certain type of woman. Ugliness had never stopped a man in my dimension from scoring major booty. Look at Keith Richards and the dude from *The Cars*—ugly as sin and bedding supermodels left and right. Besides, the Destroyer had a crapload of zombies at his beck and call. And, as horrible as it was to imagine, he could probably order a female zombie into his bed if he wanted.

But Rake and Railyn seemed to dismiss the theory without a whole lot of thought. I obviously needed more information.

"What does the Destroyer do with his zombies?" I asked. "He must have some purpose, some reason for wandering around trying to suck people's souls and make them part of his army."

"We don't know," Rake said softly.

"You don't know? He doesn't fight people or take over land or—"

"No, he simply acquires as many converts as he can and moves on."

"He isn't even sneaky about it," Railyn added. "He's never tried to stage an ambush, or come back to a village too soon after he's already been there. Which makes it hard to technically declare him a 'bad guy' by our law."

"You're kidding. This guy has been turning people into his zombie slaves for how long?"

"Almost twenty years," Rake said.

"And you still don't know why and he's not technically considered a bad guy? How much worse do you have to get? I mean, you have to have evidence. You said you had spies. They're doing a pretty crappy job if you still don't even know what the hell he's using the zombies for. Don't you guys have CIA or FBI or some sort of secret task force or something?"

"We don't work that way in Here," Rake said.

"What's a CIA?" Railyn asked.

"It's not important." Rake waved a hand dismissively.

"I think it's important," I said. "How can you say you're doing everything to stop this guy if you don't even have people actively working to figure out why—"

"We have people watching him, trying to learn all we can, but we can't just go in there and start destroying the Destroyer," Rake yelled, getting keyed up, almost as if we'd had this exact argument a million times before.

It reminded me of the ancient feud between my mother and I involving Styrofoam and whether or not it can be microwaved. I say no—and am right. She says yes—and is so very, cancer causingly wrong. But still, the slightest mention of the substance or the purchase of a cup of coffee at the Greek deli near my apartment is enough to spur a major conflict.

"Why the hell not?" I yelled back. I can escalate as well as anyone if I feel like I'm being picked on for no reason. I hadn't asked Rake *that* many questions about the Destroyer or anything else. He could be a bit fucking patient with me, thank you very much. I was just trying to help solve the problem and I couldn't do that without information.

"Because then we'd be no better than he is," Rake said. "Besides, it's not illegal to use any power inherent in your nature. As long as he isn't using anything but herbs and his own Lady-given words, then he isn't breaking our law and we can't ask him to stop."

"What?!"

"That's why he's a criminal of honor and not an enemy of the nation or a violator of the land," Railyn explained—like that made any sense.

"So you don't consider stealing people's souls and making them zombies against their will a crime?" I was totally freaked out. How could they think Here was so fantastic when it wasn't kosher to kick the ass of a psychopath?

"No, we don't, because it isn't their will in question. It is the Lady's will and we have no way of knowing her grand design," Railyn said, parroting the phrase in a way that really irritated me. I hated dogma being spouted to me like a matter of fact. "If the Lady gave the Destroyer his power, there must be a reason. We might wish he wouldn't exercise his power and can make that known by declaring him a criminal of honor, but other than that we defer to the Lady's will. If she wanted him stopped, she would stop him. In the meantime, however, we can use our own Lady-given powers to avoid him or attempt to rescue our loved ones."

"And you believe that too?" I asked Rake.

"I do." But his jaw was tight and he had that bad liar tone in his voice.

"No offense, but I have to disagree. I can't believe god or the Lady or whatever you want to call the higher power wants some inter-dimensional interloper hurting people. In fact, I know he or she doesn't."

"How do you know?" Rake look at me as if this were a real question. A real question he had asked before with less than satisfactory answers.

"I just...know." Maybe it was a weak way to defend my argument, but some things you just *know*, end of story. It's a gut thing. I'd never believed the god of my dimension had a hand in all the horrible things happening on Earth. The higher power was there to help you handle the shit life deals out, but is not the dealer of said shit. That had always felt true to me in a way not many things had.

"This has been our custom in Here for nearly a million years. And, unlike the Earth dimension, we have no famine, no war and relatively little disease or political corruption," Rake said.

"But you have a zombie maker on the loose! And who knows what else? I haven't been here long enough to say that's the only part of Here I don't think is so swell, but I'm betting it isn't. Besides, those people wanted to kick my ass. If they're supposed to believe my turning their family members into zombies is the Lady's will, why were they asking for my neck to be wrung until death?" I asked, warming to the argument.

"They didn't ask for that, they were just hurt and scared and confused," Railyn said. "If it comes down to it, you'll see our law stands. Even if we can't help the zombies you made, you'll be free until you do something to violate the written word of the land."

"Great," I muttered under my breath, burying my head in my hands. Like I had any idea what the written word of the land was on this side of the dimensional fence. I needed someone to give me some answers, some instruction, *something* before I did more damage or got so frustrated I decided to go ask the Destroyer for guidance.

Hmm...that might not be such a bad idea. At least I knew where to find the Destroyer at the moment. When else might I have such intimate knowledge? I didn't suppose a zombie king and almost outlaw left a forwarding address. I had no idea how big Here was, but it was probably sizeable if it was truly an alternate Earth dimension. He might not come back around these parts for years, decades even. If I lost him now, I might never find him again.

I should go straight to the source and demand some answers. It was just a matter of getting up the gumption. Not to face the scary guy so much as walk all by my lonesome through the long dark tunnel Garreck had carried me through. Maybe I could ask Rake and Railyn about a back entrance.

"Okay, I have an idea," I said slowly.

"Splendid," Railyn crowed, though Rake looked the slightest bit green.

I didn't know if I was glimpsing a subtle skin tone I hadn't noticed before or if he was feeling ill. I told myself I didn't care if it was the latter because he was being a close-minded, impatient jerk, but I still found my hand reaching for his in a little caress that wasn't like me. I'll have casual sex before I'll hold hands with someone. Holding hands is an intimate, vulnerable act. But with Rake, it felt right.

I hurried on before I could wonder how someone who made me feel so comfortable could be so very irritating at the same time.

"I think I should go talk to him."

"Him who?" Railyn asked.

"The Destroyer." Rake cursed, jumped off the stage and flung one of the monster sized chairs in the front row to the ground. Railyn and I flinched as it fell to the stone floor with a loud clang. I looked over to see her gray eyes wide and frightened.

"No, Gail, you mustn't. It isn't safe." Railyn shot me a look I understood meant I should shut my mouth immediately.

I probably would have been more inclined to obey if she hadn't just spouted a bunch of crap about it being the Lady's will that the Destroyer stole people's lives and left mass destruction in his wake.

"She doesn't care about being safe, she only cares about being right." Rake's anger made him dangerously sexy. It wasn't right that someone's temper could make my heart flip in my chest, but his did—even though I was getting frustrated enough to strangle the man.

"You don't know me, Rake, don't forget that," I reminded him. I wasn't his long-lost girlfriend any more than he was Richard. We both needed to wake up to that fact and start treating each other as virtual strangers.

"I know you, probably better than you know yourself," he said, all the fight seeming to drain from his body.

For a split second I thought he was going to calm down and have a reasonable conversation—no matter how ridiculous the sentence he'd just uttered. Sure, he'd been inside my head for a few minutes and we'd had amazing sex, but that didn't mean he *knew* me, especially better than I knew myself. I knew myself plenty well. I might not always like the information I gathered, but I was open to understanding my own semi-twisted psyche.

"Lady damn you both!" Rake suddenly yelled, shooting to hell any hopes of being reasonable. He tossed over another chair and stormed from the room like a furious green haired whirlwind. He was nothing but a blur of black sweater and tan pants.

For the first time I gave serious thought to exactly how much of Rake wasn't technically human. I'd never seen anything move that fast that wasn't the result of movie special effects and...it bothered me. But there wasn't time to worry about Rake and his humanness or lack thereof. I had zombies to save.

So he could move really fast when he was mad? Fine, I could move fast too. I'd be down to chat with the Destroyer and back with my information before he had time to finish throwing his hissy fit. I'd find a way to fix the zombies and finally get the answers I deserved. This Destroyer creep was only a man from the Earth dimension. I forced myself to believe I could convince him to talk with me. Maybe I could even gather enough information to get him officially on the "bad guy" list. Somebody had to

help these people before their misguided faith led them to become a dimension full of drooling, mindless zombies.

"Is everything all right, wee Gail?" Garreck asked from the doorway, obviously having seen Rake exit the cafeteria in a huff. The look of childish curiosity on his face would have been funny if I didn't know he was taking great pleasure in the angst of a man I rather liked when he wasn't being difficult and confusing.

"Everything's fine," I said firmly, inviting no further comment.

"Well, it certainly didn't look fine." Garreck smiled. The guy couldn't take a hint, but then I probably should have known better.

"Garreck, stop it. Being a shit is not going to get you anywhere."

"Wee Gail, I'm hurt," he said with a naughty smile, looking anything but hurt.

I could make a fairly educated guess Garreck found back-talking women a turn on. At least he'd been pretty hot for me since we met and all I'd done was sass him and bite him and boss him around. Still, he kept coming back for more, leading me to believe I was his kind of gal. But then, for all I knew, *every* woman was his kind of gal. A testosterone machine like him surely had an eye—and a monster dick—for all kinds of ladies.

"I need you and your guys to come with me to ask the Destroyer a few questions," I said, liking the idea of a bodyguard or two, no matter how confident I might be feeling.

For some reason, I wasn't afraid of the Destroyer. If he was my inter-dimensional twinkie, he couldn't be that bad. At the very worst, he was a jerk from Earth on a power trip. He was probably all bark and no bite. Of course, he did make zombies...but maybe it was an accident or a misunderstanding. I didn't really want to think *too much* about that part or I would lose my gumption and I couldn't let that happen. The Destroyer seemed to be the only one who could help me understand and control whatever power I possessed.

"Don't be mad, wee Gail, he'll enslave the lot of us. Then we'll be no use to anyone."

"He can't do anything without something that belongs to us, right?"

"Aye," he said, looking suspicious of my reasoning.

"So, we'll give away everything we're wearing and your weapons to someone before we go," I said, thinking the idea pretty logical if I did say so myself.

"But then the person we gifted would be enslaved. It won't work."

"Not if we give everything to someone who's already a zombie. You can't make someone a double zombie, can you?"

"I don't think so." Garreck shot Railyn a pleading look.

Big chicken. I thought he was supposed to be one of the *Protectors*? Wasn't it better to protect people by stopping the psycho who was threatening them rather than help them run when danger was on the horizon?

"Not that I know of, but this is lunacy, Gail. You can't do this, you'll ensure your doom, not to mention break my brother's heart a second time," Rilyn said.

So that's why the eyes were the same. They were brother and sister. Duh. How slow on the uptake was I? Of course, that made it even creepier that she talked so casually about me banging him. I'd never talked about banging with my brother's girlfriends until they were at least fiancés and then only to help prove my theories about romance novel heroines needing to have sex with more men before they settle down with Mr. Right. But I guess it was different when you and your brother were both sexual healers.

Richard had also had a sister, but I'd never met her. We hadn't introduced each other to our families. That would have made the relationship too real for us both, I think. Until a few hours ago, I'd thought the fear of intimacy was mostly my problem, but I was realizing Richard wasn't completely blameless.

"I'm going, Rilyn," I said gently, but in a way that left no room for argument.

I was beginning to think I would be wise to depend on my intuition in this dimension, no matter how stupid and clueless I might feel. I liked Rilyn, I really did, but she wasn't someone I'd trust to guide the course of my life on Earth so why should I be her lemming in this dimension?

Still, it hurt to see her eyes grow cold. As I said, I liked her. I liked Rake too—probably a lot more than I should. I would actually enjoy liking him a whole lot more if he would quit treating me like I was another woman half the time. That hurt. Especially after the stuff he'd said when we were in bed together about wanting me more than he'd ever wanted her. I had taken him seriously and that made his behavior even more confusing. Still, it was probably my own fault for taking the coital ramblings of a near stranger to heart.

"You don't understand, Gail." She looked sad and more grown up than I'd seen her thus far. "But I'm sure Garreck will be happy to fill you in."

"You know I'd never hurt your dear brother, Rai." Garreck sounded somewhat sincere, but Rilyn didn't seem to be buying.

"Spare me, Garreck, you made your position known several months past. Don't think I've forgotten it." Rilyn tossed her hair over her shoulder in a movement that was unconsciously sexy. Or maybe it was conscious, maybe she was trying to remind Garreck of what he was never going to have from her.

"I didn't mean to upset you. Or Rake," I said, wishing I understood what the hell was going on.

"I know you didn't. Good luck, Gail. Now I need to make sure my brother's okay."

She sounded pissy and I couldn't blame her. I'd made her brother freak out in a way that obviously wasn't normal or she wouldn't have been so shocked to hear the furniture hitting the floor. A part of me wanted to run after her and say I would help calm Rake down, let him know that I was willing to take his guidance if he'd give me some explanations instead of flying off the handle.

But then, the other part of me wanted to do as I damn well pleased, to follow my gut and screw the popular opinion. That part won out. It usually did. That made me sad sometimes...times like now.

## Chapter Fourteen

"And so also do I give my battle coverings and my leather shoes to Carby of the house of Blythe, the daughter of Phillip and Grace, recently be-zombied by Gail of the Earth dimension," Garreck said with a trace of doom in his voice.

He hadn't grown any more supportive of my plan in the past thirty minutes. In fact, he'd looked like he was at a funeral the entire time I and the two other Protectors—Thomas and Squire, large, hairy men of few words—had given away our clothing, as well as the men's weapons and jewelry, using the formal gift giving speak of Here. I tried to make Thomas leave his ear necklace in his chamber because I found it disturbing, but he was adamant that it made him look more fearsome. Since he seemed to need a little fearsomeness ego boost once he learned where we were headed, I let it go.

"There, are we all done?" I asked in an upbeat, rally-the-troops tone that I made sure wasn't too perky.

Carby, the oldest of the four Blythe daughters, was one of the unfortunate victims of my newly acquired zombie-making skills, and I didn't want her tearful parents to think I wasn't sensitive to their plight. Their sad, hopeless faces were already starting to blow a hole in my newfound confidence.

Carby was a beautiful young girl even in her drooly zombie state. She had wide, almost purple blue eyes and dark black hair that glowed in the dim light of her parents small cavern room. She reminded me of a young Elizabeth Taylor from the *My Friend Flicka* years, except with a different nose. She couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen. Seeing her young life so horribly interrupted and knowing it was my fault made me even more determined to get out of this mess as quickly as I had gotten into it.

I'd undo my zombies, make sure to avoid sex in this dimension—no matter how I lusted after Rake and, to a lesser extent, Garreck—and try to get home as soon as possible, back to a place where the most horrible power I could wield was to hack apart a writer's manuscript and order them to reform it to my liking.

"We're done, Gail. Let's be off, since you're in such a hurry to end all our lives." Garreck bowed to the Blythe family and we all took our leave.

"Don't be so doomsday about it," I whispered with a small comforting look over my shoulder to the Blythes. "We have to think positively, show no fear and all that."

"Hard to think positively when you're going to die," Thomas said with utter seriousness. He was the youngest of the three men. Under his furry face and shoulder-length brown hair, he couldn't be more than eighteen.

"Thomas, you're not going to die," I said firmly, willing him to believe me with a hard look.

"No offense, missus, but I have to disagree," Squire said. He had an accent similar to Garreck's, though it didn't dance out of his mouth with quite the same charm.

He was a serious man with dark black hair and bright blue eyes and a beard nearly down to his waist. Even with the extreme facial hair, however, he was stunning. He had a body crafted for male underwear ads. If he'd been a little less intense, he would have been as attractive as Garreck, but the dark, brooding aura dulled his masculine beauty—for me, anyway.

"It's all right, Squire. It's a good day to die. Better dead than a walking corpse, I always say. Which reminds me, I'll have your wee ass if I'm turned, Gail. No death could strike the fear of the Lady into me like that sorry fate," Garreck said, motioning the way through a dimly lit tunnel.

It allegedly led to one of the rarely used rear entrances of the caverns and was illuminated by centuries old magic the entire way. I cared mostly about the last part. If we had to turn back because the passageway had collapsed or something, so be it, but they'd better not try to drag me through the dark a second time today. It just wasn't right, especially when I was supposed to be preparing myself to deal with major inter-dimensional confrontation.

"We've taken precautions," I said.

"That we don't know will work," Garreck reminded me with a wry grin.

"But which seem like they should. You all just need to relax."

"It's hard to relax when you're going to die," Thomas said.

"Aye, that's true," Squire agreed, "and all hopes of your countryman's redemption from eternal servitude with you."

Before Garreck could pop in with his latest proclamation of most horrible doom, I stopped dead in the middle of the tunnel and turned to confront the pessimistic lot of them.

"If you all are so sure you're going to die, then why are you coming?" It was hard to keep my kick butt and take names attitude with three enormous men practically peeing themselves because they didn't want to go back outside and confront the Destroyer. "I asked you to come, but you could most certainly have said 'no'."

"I have to obey orders," Thomas said, though he looked a little confused, as if he weren't sure that was the real reason. I was beginning to suspect the kid wasn't the brightest light in the deep dark tunnel.

"That's not true, you obey the code. You're obligated to protect the greater interests of the citizens of Here, southern territory east—not to obey my orders or follow a madwoman to her death." Garreck's voice held a teasing note that made the "madwoman" part a little easier to stomach...a little.

"He's compelled," Squire said in a dark, damning tone, his bright blue eyes looking a little mad himself.

"I am not," Thomas argued, furrowing his brow, making me wonder if he even knew what compelled meant.

"You are, we all are. I felt it from the moment she asked for our help. I could not say no to her, no matter how my mind willed it," Squire said.

"I told you she was a bit irresistible." Garreck smiled, but he looked guilty. So, he did have a conscience, after all. He seemed to feel bad for leading his men to their doom with apparently no choice in the matter.

"So you're saying you can't say 'no' to me?"

"No," Squire said.

"Ah-ha, you just did."

"Did what?"

"Said 'no' to me."

"I'm glad you're amusing yourself. Someone should have a light heart, though it makes me fear even more than you have no idea what you are doing." Squire sounded about a hundred years old, but he did smile at me the slightest bit. That made me more depressed than any of his gloom and doom beforehand. Sometimes a smile can be sadder than any other expression.

"I *don't* have any idea what I'm doing," I confessed.

"She doesn't," Garreck confirmed with a sigh.

"You don't have to rub it in, Garreck. I'm doing the best I can. This seemed like the best way to—"

"No, it's partly my fault." Garreck stalked up and down a short portion of the tunnel as he argued something out in his mind.

I assumed that's what he was doing, anyway. His expression was as intense as I'd ever seen it and he mumbled lightly under his breath, then stopped and turned to face his men. "Squire, Thomas, go down the rest of the way. Make sure the tunnel is travel worthy and then come back and fetch us. Perhaps by the time you return, our Gail won't be quite ready to continue in this vein."

"Aye, sire," Squire said.

"Sire, if you're explaining things to her, would it be acceptable for me to stay and learn as well?" Thomas asked.

"No."

"No, sire?"

"He does seem in need of a clue or two," I offered. Thomas could obviously benefit from instruction and I wasn't ready to be alone with Garreck. A part of me was still very drawn to him and I didn't want to take the slightest chance I might give in to

temptation. That was assuming he would be foolish enough to pounce me again after I killed him the first time.

Call me crazy, but something told me he would.

"See sire, even wee Gail thinks so," Thomas said hopefully.

"No." Garreck shot the younger man a look that told him to shut his mouth before he had it shut for him. He didn't seem to like Thomas' casual use of my nickname. I didn't really enjoy it either, but I wasn't going to slit his throat about it.

"Yes, sire." Thomas bowed slightly, visibly deflated.

"Sire?" I asked as the two men disappeared down the long, curving tunnel, Squire hunching slightly to accommodate his massive height. He was even taller than Garreck, nearing nine feet if he was an inch.

"I'm a prince among my people," Garreck said with his familiar grin as he settled down to sit against the wall with a manly grunt. "That's what Squire was speaking of, that he would feel guilt for letting the hopes of our people die."

"You're the hope of your people?"

"Some say so."

"Oh. Well, okay." I didn't want to insist he was teasing in case he wasn't. So he was the hope of his people, I was sure they could do worse even if the man didn't seem to take life too seriously.

"Does that surprise you, wee Gail? Don't I seem princely?"

"Incredibly princely."

"I even have a tattoo of a wee crown on my ass. Do you want to see?"

"Can it, Garreck." I crouched down on my heels across from him, well out of snatching distance. He seemed ready to talk, not pounce, but I didn't want to tempt him.

"I'll gladly can you any day," he said with a genuine laugh. So either he was lousy at making jokes or I'd indeliberately said something lewd in Here slang. Where was my handbook when I needed it?

"Are you going to help me or are you going to sit there and laugh at your own juvenile jokes?"

"I'm not sure if what I'll tell you will help or not," he said, suddenly serious. "I don't want to frighten you."

"I need to know, Garreck. Whatever it is, I'm sure I need to know." But I was already afraid and had to fight the urge to jump into his lap and ask for a hug.

"It's not a pretty story I have to tell."

"Prettiiness is overrated."

He seemed to read my mind, then. He reached out a gentle hand, pulling me over to sit beside him, tucking me under his arm like a child. I wanted to tell him to get on with it, to not touch me and stop acting as if there was any connection between us

except a budding friendship and some magnificent oral sex—but instead I relaxed against him.

I snuggled into his side, inhaling his woodsy scent and wrapping one arm around his leather-covered torso. I was glad he had donned the tight vest or I don't know what I would have done. The temptation of his flesh was still something I had to fight to resist. If my cheek had been lying against that golden skin instead of fabric, I think I would have succumbed to the urge to run my tongue gently across it, to discover if it tasted as sweetly salty as I thought it would.

"I'll tell the short, truthful version."

"Your version of the truth or the majority version?" I asked, cheek still resting against his side as I thought about his obvious hatred of Rake. How much I could really trust anything he said? How much could I trust anyone here, no matter how much I liked them?

"The majority shouldn't always be trusted," Garreck said.

"I guess you're right. Sometimes."

"That's what Marly thought. I agreed with her. I think you would too."

"Maybe," I said, not wanting to agree with *her* of all people. I didn't like her and I hadn't even met her yet. She was too pretty and she'd broken Rake's heart. He might be acting like a psychopath, but that was probably her fault and I resented the fact that I hadn't had the chance to meet him without all the emotional wounds she'd inflicted.

And I was jealous, shallowly, stupidly jealous, which made me shut my mouth and try to open my mind. I couldn't afford to overlook important information because of something as ridiculous as feminine rivalry.

"She wanted to stop him and was willing to do whatever it took to make sure he quit collecting people like they were stones in the road."

"The Destroyer?"

"You agree he needs to be stopped, by whatever means necessary?" he asked, more passionate than I'd ever seen him. I suddenly saw the prince in Garreck, the man who wanted what was best for his people and wasn't afraid to make decisions that weren't popular because he believed they were right. A part of me softened toward him, the part that had assumed Garreck was only a pretty warrior with bedding on his mind.

"I do. If it can be proven he's the zombie maker and he's doing this on purpose, he should be imprisoned for life. Even if his actions are accidental, he has to be stopped, though I guess I'd want it to be more humane than locking him up and throwing away the key."

"It's no accident. He's not like you, Gail, he's a monster."

"Then yes, I agree. Monsters have to be stopped in different ways than normal people," I said cautiously, not wanting to agree to an outright hunt-him-down-and-kill-him mentality. Not yet anyway, not until I was absolutely sure that was the only option.

"We were so close. She'd already given up so much, but she was willing to finish it. And god help me, though I miss her like a piece of my flesh is gone, I wish he'd let her. It wasn't right that she was going to die—I would have died in her place if I'd been able to do what needed to be done—but at least it would have finally been over. We would finally have had some peace." Garreck's voice was full of emotion, though a peek up at his eyes showed him staring blankly at the wall. I was glad. I didn't think I could take seeing him fall apart without doing so myself and neither of us could afford the luxury at the moment.

"I don't understand, Garreck." I smoothed my hand up and down his chest in what I hoped was a comforting gesture. I'd underestimated this man, let the easy smile and abundant flirtation blind me. He obviously felt Marly's loss as deeply as Rake. Once again, I had to wonder if she were dead, if I'd been envious of some poor woman who had lost her life trying to stop her people from being zombified.

"The Destroyer has never turned a healer into one of his people, though we know for a fact he's tried. Whether it's for the sheer evil accomplishment of it or something more serious, I can't say. But there's been word floating around for a very long time he'd reward the person who would deliver a healer into his possession handsomely," Garreck said, the story obviously a hard one to tell.

"So Marly volunteered?"

"She did and I was the one who delivered her to him."

"But you didn't think she was going to be turned or killed."

"She always had special power, even among the other healers. She could tend to the worst wounds, mend damage others couldn't. But she could also do damage if she let her energy go too far."

"She hurt people?"

"By accident and only the very worst cases. No one faulted her for it. She only risked such a healing if the patient was already destined for the Lady. Sometimes there was a miracle and she brought them back, sometimes she made their injury worse and they died immediately. It was a chance the patient or the family knew they were taking."

"I understand." So Marly was like an alternative therapy, the last resort. There were similar things on Earth, chances people took with modern medicine in order to have the chance at a real life.

"She was going to use that power against him. As soon as he laid hands on her with evil intent, she was going to unleash the power and end his life."

"What went wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I didn't see what happened. I was...otherwise engaged, but the observers' reports say there was a bonding between them. He absorbed some of her power and she his. They were both wounded. All the other healers seem to think the power exchange was extreme enough she would have been able to take him with her to the afterworld." Garreck's arm tightened around me as if talking about what he'd lost

made him afraid he was going to start losing all over again. "She was willing. She had managed to escape him and reach my camp. Rake was there. He had been known to travel with us when she did. She asked him to allow her to end her life."

"That's a big request. They were in love, right?"

"In love. I guess you could call it that, though until that day he'd not been in her bed for quite some time."

"He tried to heal her and killed her instead?" I asked, horrified for Rake.

"No. He tried to heal her and succeeded, against her will. She called him a rapist, but the healer's council decided she was out of her mind. They said she was clearly being influenced by her mirror maker to make rash decisions that violated our laws. To seek the end of her own life was against the will of the Lady and made her unfit for her position in the village. She was going to be transferred to a safe house, a pretty word for prison, until it could be determined if she could be rehabilitated."

"Was?"

"She ran away. Some say to join the Destroyer, but most think better of her even if they don't believe what she said about Rake. He's still a hero, healed too many wounded babies for anything harsh to be believed about him," Garreck said bitterly.

"But you believe her." An uncomfortable sensation worked its way down my spine. Rape was not acceptable, even if it was to save someone's life. Right? Could she have been out of her mind? Was that really the only way he could have helped her live? I didn't know, but the story bothered me. A lot.

"I do. I think he raped her and all for nothing. Now she's gone and the Destroyer is stronger than ever. She should have been allowed to die. At least then her suffering would have been worth something."

"Garreck—"

"I know it sounds hard, Gail. But the entire country is terrified of this man and bone tired of it—tired of living in fear, of running for their lives, of having their homes destroyed. My people haven't had the chance to settle down with their families for over twenty years. I was only six years old when my father took me and my brother and every able bodied male between eighteen and twenty-eight summers and dedicated us to protecting the country until the Destroyer could be stopped. Most of my men have wives back in our province they see only once or twice a year, children who barely know them. It's no way to live and I don't believe my father would have pledged our services if he'd known this evil man would be allowed to continue his work for so long unpunished."

"Railyn said people thought it was the will of the Lady."

"Railyn's a beautiful fool. She's always been one of the conservatives and her earth husband encourages it. She says it gives her peace to think the way she does."

We were both quiet then. I don't know what he was thinking, but I was wondering at the difference between peace and complacency. I have an aunt who is very fond of

saying that “everything happens for a reason” to help her through times when life isn’t going her way. I love her desperately, but her frequent use of the phrase always pissed me off.

If I believed that, I’d have to believe millions of starving people, war over oil and the molestation of young girls and boys by family members was intended by god or the Lady or the spirit or whatever—not to mention thousands of other atrocities of my dimension. Therefore, I had to reject that potentially peace-inducing bit of wisdom because I liked to believe that the all-powerful energy of the universe was good and kind. “God is love” and all that.

“So no one knows where she is now?” I broke the silence as I pulled away from his embrace. If I didn’t get up and start moving, I was going to fall asleep right there in the tunnel. No matter how scared and confused I was, I was more exhausted and Garreck was a warm snugly furnace that made me want to give in to the heaviness behind my eyes and sleep for about a century.

“No. As I said, some think she joined the Destroyer, but I can’t believe that. No one who knew her well could believe that. She hated him too much to ever join him willingly.”

“But you said there was some sort of energy exchange. Could she be in his power somehow?” I asked, feeling fairly clever for even coming up with the idea. For a girl who hated science fiction and supernatural mumbo jumbo, I was starting to catch on.

“I’ve wondered, but the exchange went both ways. So he would be as much in her control as she his. If she were able, I know she’d slow him down, but he’s been worse than ever. Fifteen villages this month alone and he’s headed toward the city.”

“And what happens when he gets to a city?” I asked, not wanting to mention that his increased power sounded suspicious. Marly going on the lam and the Destroyer suddenly upping his zombie making pace at the same time sounded like too much of a coincidence to me. But I wasn’t about to bring that up with Garreck. His unwavering faith in Marly was obvious. I had to respect it, even if I didn’t necessarily agree.

“I don’t know. He’s never tried to pass through such a densely populated area before, but I think he’s grown cocksure enough to give it a try.”

“Am I crazy or do you actually sound excited about that?”

“It would be impossible to evacuate such a large group so quickly. We’d finally have no choice but to fight back and put a stop to him,” Garreck said in a voice I would have dubbed the most bloodthirsty I’d ever heard if I’d had anything to compare it to. “It would be against law, but no one would fault me if he dared to invade the capitol. No one.”

“And if you lost?”

I didn’t get to hear how Garreck would have answered because Thomas came running back down the tunnel, breathless and frightened.

"Sire, he's gone ahead. I couldn't stop him." Thomas stopped in front of where we sat and dropped his hands to his knees, drawing in great gulps of air. "He said we couldn't risk you, couldn't leave the people without hope."

"Squire. Damn him," Garreck growled, vaulting to his feet and racing down the corridor without a backward glance. Thomas shot me a look clearly conveying this was all my fault and dashed off after him.

I was now alone, fairly certain I was responsible for sending a man to his death and even more unsure what they hell I should do next. Though I supposed it was too late to have second thoughts about confronting the Destroyer at this point. I'd put the men in danger and was obligated to follow.

"Shit." I scrambled to my feet and trotted after them. I would have sprinted, but knew I'd only last a few seconds at that pace. Besides, I'd never catch up with them, no matter how hard I ran.

They had much longer legs and I wasn't in the best shape. Walking briskly from my subway station to my office everyday hadn't prepared me for this, not that hitting the gym would have. I'm not a runner, never have been. I can't outrun my out-of-shape nerdy older brother, let alone two warriors topping eight feet. Of course, I'd never had to run for my life or anyone else's. I bet that would put a spring in my step.

I thought of Squire's bright blue eyes and ran faster, until my legs itched and I tasted metal at the back of my throat.

## Chapter Fifteen

It was dark outside. I hadn't expected it to be dark, though I guess it made sense. It had been morning when we'd all run to the caves and it had been nothing if not a full day since I'd first met Garreck outside the laboratory. Realizing I'd only known the man for that short amount of time made my head hurt. I couldn't believe I'd come to care so much about someone I barely knew. The thought that he and his men might be out there dying in the dark scared me even more than the darkness itself.

"Okay, it's okay." I forced my feet to move away from the entrance to the cave. It wasn't *that* dark, after all. The two moons in the sky were nearly full and shone brightly down on the rugged cliffs stretching away from where I stood.

*Two moons.* I had never heard anything about Earth ever having had two moons. Of course, maybe that was just one scientific hypothesis I had managed to miss. I was more of a fiction girl than a scientific journal subscriber.

In any event, it wasn't as if I were walking out into complete blackness. I could see well enough to pick my way along the rocks, carefully avoiding the edge of the cliff that dropped steeply about three feet in front of me. The scenery on this side of the mountain hideout was harsher and more dramatic than the verdant green hills, a canyon like landscape devoid of trees or grass. A chill wind whipped along the rocks, easily penetrating my sweater. It would have had me shivering from cold if nerves hadn't already done the job.

I took a deep breath and tried to move faster along the trail. There was nowhere else to go except up the side of the cliff or down into the abyss. Unless Garreck and friends could fly—which I wouldn't have even considered if I hadn't seen Rake move like the Tasmanian devil on crack—they had to have taken this path. Still, it made me nervous that I couldn't see them or hear the slightest sound in front of me.

Hopefully from the peak I would be able to see for quite a distance and catch sight of the men.

"Weird," I panted as I crested the rise and gazed out over the same rolling hills I'd seen when I first arrived in Here. The change in the dynamic of the land was like nothing I'd ever seen on Earth. It was almost as if a line had been drawn on the grass and on one side were rolling hills, the other desert canyons. The strangeness of it threw me, enough to stop me where I stood.

I wasn't the biggest tree hugger ever born, but I did go hiking all over the Northeast with my friends from college. I knew enough about topography to know this sudden shift seemed unnatural, at least as far as my observations of the natural world were concerned.

But then I was in a different place, a different realm. Kendall had said evolution had proceeded differently. Still, this didn't feel simply different, it felt wrong, like something your mind would create during a dream.

My breath caught and I felt a nearly unbearable weight descend on my chest. What if this weren't real after all? I'd quit questioning, gone along with a series of events that grew more and more fantastic simply because I couldn't conceive of such an elaborate hallucination. It felt like I was awake, it really did. I still felt hungry, for god's sakes, and I have never been hungry in a dream.

But what did I know about being in a coma? What did anyone know for sure? Maybe I was still in a hospital somewhere, struggling to recover from my allergic reaction to a walnut. Or maybe, just maybe, I was dead.

I made a weird little sound I didn't recognize and my knees buckled. I landed hard on the soft grass. It hurt and I was fairly sure I'd gotten grass stains on the knees of Ralyn's overalls. One part of me insisted you shouldn't get bruises or grass stains in heaven and I was wasting valuable time, while the other part put forward the hypothesis that maybe we weren't in heaven, maybe we hadn't been quite sweet enough.

"Purgatory wouldn't have people in it who aren't dead," I assured myself in a strange voice that didn't sound like me at all. The tone was flat and emotionless, the tone of a mad person, a person who had surpassed the amount of strangeness she could tolerate and still maintain the full use of her faculties.

"Gail, are you all right?" a hushed voice sounded from behind me. I would have screamed, I think, if I hadn't been in the midst of a spiritual crisis. I didn't expect anyone else to be out roaming the cliffs. But I was sort of getting used to Rake sneaking up on me.

"I guess." I stared straight in front of me without see much. I don't even think I was blinking, which reminded me of Veronica, of the snake woman who had started this mess.

Snakes. Eve had been brought low by a snake, but I wasn't vain enough to think I had anything in common with the first female ever created, was I? Did I even believe Eve and Adam were more than a creative allegory? Did I know what I believed anymore? How could I have faith in anything when the very fabric of my reality had been ripped to bloody shreds?

"Gail, look at me." Rake knelt in front of me and took my cold hands in his.

"I am looking at you."

"No, really look at me." He cupped my chin in his hand and turned my face firmly toward his. "You aren't crazy."

"What?"

"You're not crazy. I know how hard this must be for you, but you have to keep it together."

"I don't know...if I can."

"You can, I know you can. You're a strong person."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You proved that when you lay down next to a dead man."

"That was really disturbing."

"No shit."

"You've never done it with a dead guy either?" I asked, starting to feel a little warmth seep into my skin through his hand.

"First time. Though I don't technically consider I have now. I didn't actually touch him," he said with a smile that warmed me even more. "I'm not into guys, dead or alive."

"So I guess you don't heal them? I was wondering about that."

"I do sometimes, but that's different. The actual healing can be asexual, it's only the release of the energy that requires a sexually polar opposite force. I wouldn't heal men otherwise."

"Right." I smiled. There was no need to be a homophobe, I'd still love him. I mean, *like* him.

The casual thought shocked me. I couldn't love a guy I'd just met, I just couldn't, especially not when I was also liking another guy I'd just met a whole lot too. Seeing Garreck's passionate warrior prince side had stirred something in me. If I were a little more rational I'd call it respect, but at the moment it felt like affection.

"It's not sexual when I heal a kid," Rake said.

"Right, of course." Not that I'd known that, but it made sense. The kids I'd seen had seemed well adjusted, not at all the victims of inappropriate sexual contact, healing oriented or otherwise. "But how do they release the energy or whatever?"

"People under a certain age can release healing energy as they exhale, as easily as carbon dioxide. It's only when we get older we forget how to manipulate our own energy. The more thoroughly we forget, the more quickly we age."

"Thanks," I said, realizing his lecture had been motivated by the need to distract me from my own thoughts. "How did you know what I was thinking? I thought you said you couldn't read my mind."

"I could never read your mind, just your thoughts."

"Rake, please —"

"It's just empathy." He used both hands to cup my cheeks and stare deep into me in a way that made me catch my breath. The man was a genius with the smoldering looks and even more amazingly, he seemed completely sincere. "I'm sorry I haven't been using more of it before now. There's no excuse, but I can promise it won't happen again."

"Thanks," I said, because I believed him. He'd said something similar before and still flown off the handle, but the way he looked at me now, the way he touched me, held a promise, one that I believed. "I'm done freaking out for the moment. We have to find Garreck and the others before they do something stupid. Garreck's mad enough to try to kill the Destroyer. I think Squire realized that and decided to run off and kill him first. Which I don't guess would be such a bad thing if he wouldn't go to prison or a safe house or whatever for the rest of his life or —"

"If the Destroyer doesn't kill or enslave one of them first," Rake said, moving the hands at my face to the small of my back and then sliding them even further down until he cupped my bottom. A flash of excitement shot through my body and knotted between my thighs.

The sex fiend was back in full force. I no longer wondered what was wrong with me. This was obviously who I was in Here, a sex maniac. Might as well start learning to deal with it and quit bitching and moaning. A more active sex life might not be a bad thing. Despite my one night of infidelity, I hadn't been laid in a long time and even then not on a consistent basis. I was always too busy with work and strangely, Richard and the wonder dick hadn't been as interested in spending time in the bedroom as I had.

Come to think of it, maybe that's why I'd thought the wonder dick was so damn wondrous, simply because it was in short supply. Richard had been a sex-withholding bastard. A stereotypically female *modus operandi*, but if the extra large cock ring fit...

Still, this wasn't the time. For nookie or rumination.

"Rake, we can't, we have to help them and —"

"We need to do this first." He flexed his arms, pulling me to him. My knees slid along the grass and my breasts bounced off his chest. The man didn't have an ounce of fat on him. He was five feet seven inches of pure muscle and a good nine inches of pure arousal.

"Rake, please, I'm worried —"

"I'm worried too." He brushed one of those deceptively soft kisses across my lips. It was the kind of kiss that seemed sweet until you realized the pressure was just a little too firm, the tongue a little too demanding and your response way too intense. It was the kind of kiss that could quickly get out of hand, that could lead to rolling around in the soft grass with my overalls torn from my body and nothing but Rake and the moonlight to keep me warm.

"When you made the zombies, you had had my energy inside of you for several hours," he continued, his hands deftly sliding open the clasp on one side of my overalls and flipping the strap over my shoulder. The front of the pinstriped abomination flapped forward as Rake's hand smoothed down the softness of my sweater to my waist, all the way to where the fuzzy red fabric ended and skin began. As his hand slid back up to cup my breast I made that weird whimpering sound again, the one that seemed to accompany this new and powerful desire I wasn't nearly woman enough to control.

"Sweet Lady, you're not wearing coverings." Rake's body shuddered against mine and his hand tightened convulsively around my bare breast.

"Railyn's bra was too big." I moaned and ground my hips forward as he began to flick his thumb over my nipple again and again.

"Good, I hate bras."

"Sorry my breasts aren't as big as Railyn's." I felt stupid the second the words were out of my mouth. What an insecure dork I was. The man was obviously more than interested.

"Don't talk about my sister when I'm touching you," he said. "Your breasts are the perfect size. I can't wait to take them in my mouth."

"Right, sorry," I panted, closing my eyes and arching toward his touch as he began to pluck more forcefully at my nipple, causing my pussy to swell and slicken. I wanted him so badly, was ready for him to push his thick heat inside of me after a mere minute of foreplay. I was still sore from our first time, we hadn't had the birth control talk and it was probably forty degrees outside, but my body didn't care. Good thing my mind did.

"Railyn's got great tits. A great ass too for such a petite girl."

"Gail, sweet Lady," Rake said in a voice laced with disgust, pulling his mouth away from mine and stalling his work at my breast long enough for me to throw myself to the wet grass. Not graceful in the slightest—actually a little painful—but the loss of his body heat and the shock of slamming against the cold earth was enough to bring me back to my senses.

"Get back," I warned Rake as he reached to help me up. "We can't have sex right now."

"I know we can't," he said with a slightly put upon sigh. "I was only giving you some of my energy. Just in case."

"In case of what?"

"In case you need to defend yourself." He refused to meet my eyes as he worked his way to his feet and held out a seemingly benign hand to help me up as well.

"In case I need to make more zombies, you mean?"

"Lower your voice," he whispered, grabbing my upper arm and pulling me down the hill, away from the canyons, toward the distant flare of what looked like a campfire though it could have been the smoldering remains of the village.

"Don't manhandle me," I whispered back, pulling away, but continuing to walk alongside him once I was free. I was the one who had insisted we get going. I couldn't very well justify stopping to argue with him.

"I didn't manhandle you. I barely touched you."

"I could be bruised tomorrow for all you know."

"That's ridiculous."

"You're ridiculous."

"We're arguing again."

"Yeah, but I'm not really mad," I said, realizing I wasn't. I was actually enjoying myself. Yet another aspect of my sick new personality—I enjoyed arguing with people.

Who was I kidding? I'd always enjoyed arguing with people, just not quite this much.

"Arguing actually kind of relaxes me."

"Me too." He grinned as he reached out and took my hand. We were officially holding hands and walking through the moonlight. It would have been romantic if our comrades weren't in serious trouble.

"This is really nice, but shouldn't we hurry?"

"I think it would be better if we arrive after they do and try to sneak in while the Destroyer and his guards are otherwise occupied. Then I'll try to figure out a way to get them out while you hide."

"No way. I'm not hiding. The whole point of coming out here was for me to confront him, to find out if he had any answers."

"You think the Destroyer is just going to tell you his secrets and then let you go? It's stupid Gail, deadly stupid. Why do you think I finally pulled my head out of my ass and came after you?"

"To help, maybe?"

"I am helping. I can't let you risk this. I can't lose someone else I care about." He stopped and grabbed my other hand, giving them both a small shake as if he could rattle a little sense into me.

"I'm not Marly." I hated to bring the subject up now that I knew how fraught her departure had been for him. But if we were going to care about each other, it would be best if we realized exactly who *we* really were.

"I know you're not. She was actually properly afraid of him, went in with a plan and still almost died."

"Shh. Now *you're* yelling."

"We're still a good mile away. I doubt they can hear us. I was just—"

"Being bossy?"

"Being cautious," he corrected with a frown.

"Listen Rake, I understand this is dangerous and I shouldn't have asked anyone to go with me, but Garreck and Squire and Thomas are already risking their lives. Let's not waste their bravery. If the Destroyer is going to talk to anyone, it would be me." I squeezed his hands and willed the doubtful look from his face. "Think about it. Eyebrows said I was the only other person known to have powers like his, to be born after my other half in Here. Don't you think he'll be curious?"

"Perhaps, but what if he decides he'd rather do without the competition and has you killed?"

"I thought he didn't kill people, he only made zombies." A burst of nerves made the taste of bile rise at the back of my throat.

My acid reflux was coming back with a vengeance. I made a mental note to ask Rake if he could help me out with that at a later date, assuming I didn't get everyone killed. I hadn't thought this through nearly enough, had rushed off to chat with the Destroyer in an impulsive way that just wasn't like me. But for some reason, I still felt I was doing the right thing. Like this was my destiny or something.

*Destiny.* I didn't even believe in destiny, did I?

I squeezed my eyes shut and pushed away all thoughts ending in a question mark. I didn't have time for an identity crisis or a faith crisis or any other kind of crisis but the one at hand.

"As far as we can prove."

"Well, there you go. If he tries to make me a zombie, I'll just make him one first."

"How? Ask him to wait while you have sex with someone and probably kill them at the same time?"

"You're the one who said I should be ready just in case! What did you mean by that if— You know what? Never mind, I'll figure it out as I go along. Will you quit blowing holes in my plan?"

"I'm not blowing holes, I'm just pointing out the holes that are already there."

"Arguing isn't relaxing me anymore."

"Me either."

"It would actually be neither."

"What?"

"Please, just let me try, Rake." I was tired of debating something I knew I was going to do whether he supported me or not. "I'm not going to be able to live with myself if those people stay zombies or if I stumble upon any other horrible powers by accident. There's a chance he'll talk to me. It's worth the risk."

"There's a chance we could have helped the others the way we did Garreck, Gail, and then none of this would be necessary. We didn't even try."

"I know." I felt stupid again for a moment before my gut feelings reasserted themselves. "But I don't think it would have worked. You didn't seem like you thought it would work either."

"I didn't," Rake said with a sigh. "Garreck was dead, no vital energy left. The others are still inside there somewhere. I don't think they'd be open to such an...infusion. It could actually do more harm than good."

"I won't pretend to understand that."

"Good, I won't either." He pulled me into his arms and hugged me close.

I snuggled my cheek into his chest, letting myself melt into him for a few seconds. I'd been wanting to do this since the moment we meant, just be held in his arms, to close my eyes and inhale the scent of him, let his energy, his aura, whatever it was, fill me up. It was a moment as intimate as when we'd had sex, more so since there was no dead guy in the bed. In short, it was everything I'd thought it would be and more.

The sexual awareness was still there, but we were taking comfort from each other at the same time, giving something to the other person to help them breathe a little easier. The *something* wasn't anything I'd felt before, but it made my heart hurt in the good way, like when you want to cry because a moment, is so perfect it overwhelms you completely. If I were a crazy woman I might have called it love, but despite the fact that I was getting ready to walk into the clutches of a zombie making criminal without so much as a sharp stick for protection, I was *not* crazy.

"Should I grab a sharp stick or something before we go?"

"Don't think a sharp stick would do much good. Besides, we're nearly a hundred miles from the nearest forest." Rake kissed the top of my head with a gentleness that made that strange *something* wash through my body once more.

"Right. Well I guess we should get going." I sighed, making no move to free myself from his embrace. It was too wonderful not to savor a few more seconds, especially when it might be the last of such snuggles we'd ever share. I wasn't planning on getting anyone killed, but as Rake had so comfortingly pointed out, my plan was completely full of holes.

"Let me carry you."

"I can walk," I said with a dismissive wave as I pulled away. "I was a little tired after running down the tunnel, but I feel better now."

"We've already given them enough of a head start. I think we should hurry."

"Hey, I said we should hurry a long time ago. And I hate to break it to you, but I don't think you can walk that much faster than I can, especially if you're carrying me. You're not an eight-foot barbarian, in case you hadn't noticed." I began trotting toward the fire in the distance. I assumed that's where we were going since it was the only sign of civilization on the dark rolling hills.

"Are you calling me short?" He laughed as he jogged around in front of me.

"Don't get huffy, I like short guys," I said, trying to move around him. This wasn't the time for dealing with height issues, though I understood where he was coming from. I'd always hated being short, had worn platform shoes way before they were fashionable again just to stop talking up to everyone's nostrils.

"I'm actually fairly tall for a man from Here, in case you hadn't noticed." He moved to block my path with a rakish smile on his face. I was began to wonder if Rake was really his name or a nickname he'd earned somewhere along the way. "True, I'm not a Protector, but I can more than make up for my shorter legs."

Thinking he was making some kind of sexual innuendo, I started to come back with a smart remark. But then he threw me over his shoulder and raced across the hills with the supernatural speed I'd glimpsed briefly on his way out of the cafeteria.

"Shit," I gasped, struggling to breathe. It was like being in a vacuum chamber. He was going so fast he seemed to scare away all the oxygen, making me wonder if I would pass out before we arrived at our destination.

But then the ride was over as quickly as it began. Thankfully, it didn't take much time to clear a mile at lightning speed. Rake set me down, then held a finger to his lips as he gestured toward the large campfire about fifty feet away. I felt momentarily warmed by the sight of the blaze, but then noticed the campfire had...campers.

## Chapter Sixteen

Additions to Gail's "Welcome to Here" care package:

1. A coat and/or jacket. It gets very cold at night in Here and feels even colder when your body keeps going in and out of a state of shock.

2. Energy bars to be kept in coat/jacket/overall pocket because obviously the people of Here will not worry about feeding you on a regular basis.

3. Prophylactics. Not that everyone should be encouraged to have crazy sex with the Hereians, but if they happen to fall into bed with one or two people they should be prepared.

4. Zombie instruction manual with answers to the following questions:

Do zombies see well in the dark?

How is their sense of smell, hearing, taste?

Do you need to feed your zombie if charged with one's care?

Do zombies eat people?

Do zombies feel pain the way more traditionally alive people do?

Will zombies attack without provocation? Is there anything you can do to keep them from attacking—crosses, holy water, silver bullets, smearing your clothes with raw sewage? Carnivorous bacteria?

Do zombies die or will they eventually turn into animated rotting corpses?

Do zombies sing campfire songs?

"Do you think zombies sing campfire songs?" I clung to Rake's hand as we squatted behind the charred remains of what had once been some villager's cute little hut.

"Kumbaya maybe?"

"Maybe. I'm really glad you are up on your Earth culture," I whispered back with a little smile.

How could I be smiling while watching a few hundred zombie people sway back and forth like trees in an exceedingly creepy forest? I guess for the same reason soldiers

crack jokes in their tanks. Humor helps ease the tension when you realize you might be about to die in some violent and probably very painful manner.

"I'm pretty good with the mirror. I can show you how to use it when we get back to the shelter if you want."

"To see Earth you mean?"

"Yeah. It's the closest thing Here has to a television. It's not hard to learn and we can even try to find your family," he said with a soft, comforting squeeze of my hand. He was doing much better with his empathy. I felt like hugging him again, but was afraid I'd get too distracted. Every time I touched the man I turned into a raving sex maniac.

"I didn't think everyone could see through the mirror." I let him lead me around the outside of the hut so we could get a better look at the entrance to the tent dominating the zombie camp. It was an enormous, bright red canvas affair that wouldn't have been out of place at the circus. There was warm light shining from inside and soothing flute-like music floated out toward where we hid, accompanied by the faint smell of roast beef. The Destroyer was a meat eater. Why was I not surprised?

"Only a few people can," Rake whispered over the rumbling of my tummy. I was starving and there was little I enjoyed better than a nice semi-bloody slab of meat. Perhaps the Destroyer would offer to discuss our inter-dimensional uniqueness over dinner.

"But you think I'll be one of the few?" I forced aside my foodish thoughts. I would *not* sit down and eat with a psychopath. It just wasn't right...right?

"I do."

"And why's that?"

"I believe in you."

"Aw, that's sweet."

"Am I making you want to puke?"

"Only a little bit." He really did seem to *get* me. I just wanted to kiss him and hug him and maybe get down to something a little more serious here behind the charred hut. I was hopeless. Better go save my barbarian before I totally forgot I was torn between the two of them and asked Rake to be my green haired love slave.

"You ready to go?"

"Shit, no." I suddenly had to pee really badly.

I hadn't gone since right before my shower and my small bladder was protesting. I kind of felt like I should have visited the loo after we gave away our clothes, but I was worried about my chicken shit guards losing their nerve and hadn't want to bother with wrestling my overalls on and off. Overalls are not friendly clothing for those of us who have to urinate frequently.

"I have to pee."

"You don't have to pee."

"Yes I do."

"You're just scared."

"I'm not scared, I have to urinate. It's a biological thing."

"Pee on the zombies, maybe it will scare them off."

"You're an asshole."

"You don't have to go in there. I can go look for Garreck and his men and you can hide here. I won't think any less of you," he said, his face dead serious all of a sudden as his hand played along the back of my neck. A shiver of desire passed through me and took the urge to pee with it.

"Okay, I don't have to pee anymore."

"If you really have to pee, I can turn around. I don't think the Lawlands will mind if you christen what's left of their house."

"I don't have to go anymore."

"Don't be embarrassed."

"Are you insane? We've had sex, I wouldn't be embarrassed to pee in front of you." I blushed for some strange reason. This was the most absurd pre-heroic rescue conversation in the entire history of heroic rescues.

"Good, I don't want you to be shy about your body with me." The look on Rake's face clearly conveyed he was *not* thinking of me peeing in front of him, but of something much more intimate and sexually graphic.

I had a sudden visual of me on my hands and knees with Rake kneeling at my back, ready to thrust his cock inside of what I was presenting to him without an ounce of shyness. I closed my eyes and cleared my throat softly against the vision, willing away the soft throbbing already taking up residence between my legs. Unless we were going to have a quickie right here – another thing made very difficult by the damn overalls – it was time to change the subject.

"Are they going to try to attack me?" I peeked around the corner of hut.

"I have no idea."

"You have no idea?" I asked, stunned. I was counting on him to know more about this situation than I did.

"No one's ever tried to walk into his camp unannounced before. I wasn't there when Garreck tried to ransom his brother with Marly, but evidently they made contact by messenger before the exchange took place," Rake said, his tone chilling several degrees as he mentioned Marly's name.

"Garreck's brother is a prisoner?"

"No, he's one of them," he said, nodding toward the zombies. "The Destroyer said he would change him back if Garreck delivered a healer in exchange."

How horrible, no wonder poor Garreck hated the Destroyer so much. It was a miracle he hadn't gone rogue and tried to kill the man before now. If someone hurt

either one of my brothers I'd kick their ass. Or pay someone to kick their ass if I was too runty to get the job done. I would probably draw the line at using another human being as ransom, but according to Garreck, Marly had been a more than willing bartering chip.

"But Marly agreed to it, right? Wasn't it her idea?"

"He says so." His already fisted hands tightened enough to make the veins of his arms stand out against his pale skin. Yikes.

"Did Garreck get his brother back?" No use talking about Marly with either of my boys. I was going to have to get someone else's version of the story as soon as possible. Garreck and Rake were too close to the issue and way too distrustful of each other to see the situation clearly.

"No."

"The Destroyer didn't keep his word?"

"I don't know."

"Garreck didn't say?"

"No."

"Did anyone ask?"

"I don't know."

"Okay...well, this has been a nice chat," I said with a sour smile.

So that was it. No advice, no guidance and Rake was growing progressively pithy and conversationally useless. I was just going to have to go in there cold turkey.

That's one analogy that's always escaped me. Maybe it's because I don't cook, but I don't understand the comparison between a frozen turkey and doing something without preparation.

"Because you have to defrost the turkey before you cook it!" I whispered aloud as inspiration struck. Geez it was good to finally figure that out. I felt dumb, but it was going to be good to die without that plaguing my mind.

"You're insane," Rake said dryly.

"Yes I am," I agreed and walked out from behind the hut without a backward glance.

"Be careful," I heard him whisper from behind me, followed by something that, to my crazy ears, sounded like "I love you". But it couldn't be.

And even if it was, what the hell could I do about it right now? This wasn't the time to discuss our feelings. I had to go wade through a few dozen zombies to get to get to the Destroyer's front door.

\* \* \* \* \*

The walls had eyes. Or in this case, the zombies had eyes—which wasn't unusual since they were actually people, but was disturbing since the people didn't seem much more animated than walls.

As I walked at a nice medium pace toward the opening in the tent—not too fast, not too slow, doing my best to act casual—the eyes of the zombies fixed on me as if they were all parts of the same organism. But thankfully, they didn't move. Not one of them screamed, or lunged, or moaned, or tried to shuffle forward and grab me in a killer zombie death grip and demand I give up my brains as snack food.

It was unexpectedly easy and a little anti-climactic. Not that I'd wanted to be attacked, but at least it would have helped me understand where I stood. If the Destroyer was defensive and the zombies were violent, it would make it much easier to feel certain he was the bad guy everyone proclaimed him to be. I didn't doubt Rake or Garreck or the people who had fled from the man as if their lives—or at least their souls—depended on it, but I would still appreciate the definitive moment when he made this personal.

"Hi," I mumbled with a weak attempt at a smile, my heart leaping into my throat along with a burst of stomach acid, making me gurgle.

The zombie guarding the entrance to the tent didn't flinch, make eye contact or acknowledge my presence in any way. All eight or nine feet of him simply remained at rigid attention while his glazed eyes looked out into the darkness, focused on nothing at all.

He was obviously one of the Protectors, if the height alone hadn't turned me on to that fact, the full brown beard and tattered loincloth would have. I wondered for a moment if he could be Garreck's brother. He wasn't a particularly handsome man, but was certainly imposing and shared the same golden skin.

The sun-kissed glow looked horribly out of place on a zombie, however, and made my heart hurt for this powerful man who had been stripped of his will. But my pity wasn't enough to make me stupid. The guy was still on the side of the bad guys—at least until we could find a way to free him and the other zombies from their forced servitude—and I wasn't going to let my softer side overwhelm a good healthy zombie fear. They were still creepy monsters to me, no matter that I knew they were once the family and friends of people I might have met.

I held my breath as I walked past him, tensed for one of those large hands to reach out and snatch me by the arm, but I passed unmolested into the warmth of the first segment of the tent.

At the end of the segment hung a thick plastic flap that reminded me of the New York Fashion Week show I'd been invited to last Spring. It was still cold in New York and I'd assumed the flap was to keep the heat inside the big white tent so the models in their skimpy clothes wouldn't get cold. My girlfriend later assured me, however, that it was the rich and fashionable audience members who needed to be coddled like

hothouse flowers, not the models. Evidently no one cared if their anorexic butts froze to death.

High fashion. What a sad fate. Thank god my short stature, lack of haunting beauty and fear of being deprived of my daily carb fix saved me from such a sorry end. I actually liked the small pooch rounding out beneath my belly button, the testament to how much I loved my bagels and cinnamon rolls. I felt it made me more womanly and bakery products certainly made me a more tolerable person to be around at eight in the morning.

“Come in, come in, you must be half starved,” came a voice from behind the plastic, as if it had read my carb lusty thoughts.

I think I would have jumped or made some sound of surprise if the man’s tone wasn’t so very soothing. He had one of those magic voices, a smooth, touchable rumble that would have sounded perfect reading commercial copy back on Earth. It was deep, resonant, the kind of voice that inspired faith in a service or lust for a product. I immediately wanted to go test drive a luxury automobile even though my desire for all things vehicular had faded after my senior year of high school. A car is more of a liability than an asset when you live in a big city. The parking garage fee alone would eat up a third of my weekly salary.

“Come now, don’t be shy. Anything but that,” the voice came again, accompanied by a throaty chuckle that slithered down my back.

I think most people—women anyway—would have found the sensation arousing, but for some reason my body rebelled against it. It was like in junior high when my girlfriends said Michael Bolton’s singing made them hot. I wasn’t exactly sure what they meant by *hot*, being a bit of a late bloomer, but I knew without a doubt Michael Bolton didn’t make me that way. He made me want to hurl.

Suppressing a shiver, I pushed through the flap in the center of the plastic, emerging into a cocoon of luxury and warmth. Not at all what I’d been expecting to find in a zombie camp. The grass was covered with thick, lushly colored rugs in vivid reds and greens and plush furniture was scattered throughout the large space, clustered in groupings arranged to encourage lingering over wine and conversation.

And there were people sitting on the plush furniture, real, live, non zombie people, sipping from crystal wineglasses, though the conversation stopped as they turned to stare at me with a range of expressions. The exotic, dark haired man in the yellow chair to my right looked vastly amused, while the tall, leggy red haired woman next to him kept a smooth half smile on her face that conveyed nothing. Her expression was not one that invited comment, however, so I valiantly kept my eyebrows from rising as I surveyed her outfit, or lack thereof.

She was draped in the sheerest of fabrics, a Greek inspired toga-dress leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination. I could see her large, dusky nipples and thatch of darker red hair through the lavender-tinted material and I wondered what exactly she and the olive skinned man had been up to. Had I walked in on stripper night at Club

Destroyer or was this just typical evil high society fashion? I *supposed* it could be something as innocent as style. Back on Earth it was certainly normal for women to bare a lot more skin than men. But the woman was for all practical purposes nude and her companion had taken his dress to the other extreme.

He looked ready for a midwinter outing, covered practically head to toe in a long sleeved black shirt, pants and a black cape that fanned out over his chair and helped to broaden a pair of already broad shoulders. Dark gray leather gloves stretched over his large hands and a hat of matching gray leather perched atop his silky black hair. The hat was a cross between a cowboy hat and an old fashioned bowler and probably should have looked silly, but didn't. The man was as beautiful as his companion, his hawkish nose sharpening a face that might have been a little too soft without it.

The man was relaxed as I gave him and his lady friend a quick once over, but when my eyes lingered on his face, his smile grew wider and one of his dark brown eyes winked at me. I did my best not to show how the wink surprised me, but a smile twitched nervously on my lips as my eyes darted away from my would-be Casanova. I wasn't here to pick up men and, despite his attractiveness, the guy just didn't do it for me.

I guess he reminded me a little too much of the nice Cuban boys my mother tried to set me up with, who—no matter how sweet and handsome and apparently forward thinking they seem to be—always wanted a woman who is going to take care of them and coddle them like their mommies did. *Always*. No exception. Do *not* be fooled, even if the man professes not to like home cooked meals or neatly folded boxer shorts tucked away in his drawer by a magic laundry fairy.

On the other side of the room sat a similar couple, similar in that the woman—a petite brunette with an abundance of curves and a silly smile on her face—lounged on a couch nearly naked, while the man across from her sat in a chair fully clothed. He wore all brown, dark brown pants and shirt with a lighter brown leather duster coat and hat. His was a full-blown cowboy hat, however, with the brim tipped down over his handsome face. I couldn't see his eyes, but he had one of those classic profiles designed to make women drool, with a strong jaw and lightly tanned skin you could imagine glowing by firelight as he prepared to show you exactly how well this cowboy could ride.

He still didn't spark my interest, however. He obviously wasn't the man I was looking for and I didn't have time to waste appreciating a male who would keep company with a monster, no matter how lovely.

Speaking of monsters, where the hell was he? They said the Destroyer wore a mask. He shouldn't be hard to find, but a sweep of the room revealed no one who fit the bill. The rest of the guests were predominately older men and there was no throne, no raised dais, nothing to indicate a maniacal zombie maker was the host of this little soiree. But then, there was also no sign of any of my barbarians strung up in chains or being beaten within an inch of their lives, so that was a good thing.

"Gail, let me welcome you to our little gathering," came the voice again. It was obviously in the room but I had to search the tent and the dozen other guests several times before my eyes finally found him, lounging on a light blue fainting couch in the shadowed corner of the tent. "Please, do come sit with me. I believe your friends will be joining us in a moment."

"Where are they? What have you done with them?" I asked as I made my way past a large table surrounded by old, toady men playing cards.

Not that they were paying much attention to their game, preferring to stare at me with their puffy, sunken eyes. They were pasty, coddled-looking men who had the doughy hands of those not accustomed to hard labor, or labor of any sort. I wanted to stick my tongue out at them or ask them what the hell they were looking at, but I couldn't afford to take my attention off the main subject of my animosity.

"Dear Lord, you've been indoctrinated already," the Destroyer said with another laugh that rolled over my body with an intimate little caress.

It made me feel dirty and not in the good way. I was suddenly sure this had been a very, very bad idea.

## Chapter Seventeen

"I wouldn't have believed it possible in less than twenty-four hours."

"How do you know how long I've been here? Or my name?" I moved slowly closer, wondering why I couldn't yet see the Destroyer's face.

His legs came into focus—strong legs enclosed in faded blue jeans molded to the large muscles of his thighs. They were nice legs, very nice legs, and not at all what I had imagined. In my mental image of the Destroyer, he'd been a skeletal man, thin and wasted by his own evil. I'd thought he might wear a black cloak, carry a scythe and have one of those creepy theater masks or a paper mache replica of that guy's face from *The Scream*.

Obviously, my imagination had gotten away with me. But just because he didn't look the part didn't mean he wasn't a wasted worm-eaten-corpse of a person on the inside. And I still couldn't see his face. It was as if the shadows clung to him, swirling around his head like thick smoke, a phenomenon scary enough to freeze me in my tracks. No need to get more than four feet away from a man who I wasn't entirely sure had a head.

"I know a lot of things. Please, sit down, Gail, and let's talk about this like reasonable Earth people."

"Promise me my friends are okay."

"Can someone really be your *friend* after such a short time?" he asked, the emphasis on the word "friend" making it sound like a fancy only a fool would believe in.

"That isn't a promise, that's a question."

"Brilliant observation." He chuckled.

"Don't be sarcastic," I said, trying to maintain my tough-girl stance even when the shadows around his head glowed orange when he laughed and then faded back to black when the Destroyer was evidently feeling less mirthful.

"Why should you believe a promise if I gave it? You don't know me. If the rumors are to be believed, I'm hardly the sort of man to keep my promise even if I should be persuaded to give it."

"So you're saying I'm just going to have to take my chances."

"Exactly," he said, infusing the word with a sensual promise all of its own. His tone promised danger and pleasure and multiple orgasms, but I didn't want any part of it. He frightened me. Even if his reputation hadn't preceded him, he would have frightened me.

"Sit down, darling, you're giving me an ache in my neck."

"I'm not tall enough to give you an ache in your neck," I argued, not liking the endearment in the least, but willing my body toward the overstuffed footstool beside his couch.

A few steps forward and I could see his chest, a fairly manly chest covered by a simple burgundy sweater. His arms were casually crossed in a way that wasn't at all defensive, just the posture of a man completely at home in his environment. So far, the Destroyer looked like something out of a J. Crew catalogue, not an evil minion of darkness or a harbinger of death.

"Eduardo, bring Gail a plate," the Destroyer said as I lowered myself to the puffy footstool, trying my best to force down a wave of hysteria as I realized I still couldn't see his face, even less than two feet from his reclining form.

"I'm not hungry," I said quickly.

"Ridiculous, I know you're hungry. I could hear your stomach growling from outside the tent. The people in Here are notorious for forgetting to feed their visitors. They don't need to eat as frequently as we do and can be rather heartless where our stomachs are concerned."

I didn't like the way he gave special attention to the words "heart" and "stomach". It made said body parts tighten with anxiety. No matter how mannerly the man had been thus far, my body was instinctually paranoid that he was going to carve out my insides and serve them up as dessert for the pasty old men. They looked like they would enjoy a nice bloody kidney or heart with their wine.

"Thank you," I mumbled as the dark haired man from the entrance, Eduardo, set a plate piled with steaming roast beef and vegetables—which kind of looked like a cross between a carrot and a green bean—down on my lap.

"Would you like a tray? Eduardo, get her a tray. How many times do I have to tell you it's rude to expect a lady to balance a hot plate on her knees?" he asked in a pleasant way that still had Eduardo's dark brown eyes widening with fear as he dropped to one knee and bowed deeply to his master.

"So sorry, sir, I—"

"Don't worry about it. My knees are fine. This is fine," I said hastily, not wanting to be the reason anyone got in trouble. I didn't even think I could choke down the food, no matter how hungry I was, and the plate wasn't *that* hot. It would be silly to have Eduardo lose a thumb or something over it.

"Never settle for *fine*, darling. If you settle for fine, especially in Here, then fine is all you will get," the Destroyer said. "You're dismissed, Eduardo. Make sure you thank the lady properly later for her kindness."

"I will, sir. Don't worry, I most certainly will." Eduardo eyes to met mine with a look that made promises I didn't want him to keep.

"No thanks necessary, Eduardo," I said in a chilly tone.

"If my master wills it, then it is more than necessary, it is imperative." Eduardo took my hand in his and brushed a quick kiss across my knuckles before retreating back to his position near the entrance to the tent.

"He's lovely, isn't he? I saw you looking at him when you came in."

"I was looking for you. Eduardo doesn't interest me." I picked up the fork balanced on the edge of the plate and prepared to stab the roast beef. It would be rude to refuse to eat and pushing my food around would be a way to keep my eyes from staring at the swirling mist where the Destroyer's head should be.

"How flattering," he said with another intimate chuckle.

"Where are my friends?" I forced a bit of the meat into my mouth, finding it easier to swallow than I'd thought. The roast beef was delicious, perfectly salty with a lingering rush of flavor that reminded me of my favorite red wine.

"That word again. Tell me Gail, why do you think you've become so enmeshed in another planet's politics in less than a day? Have you stopped to consider these people may be using you, doing their best to get what they need before you wake up and smell the coffee as it were?"

"Don't you mean another dimension?" I asked, slipping another bite into my mouth, choosing to pick at the least threatening part of his little commentary.

I refused to believe Rake was using me. Garreck maybe. He was a good man, but he'd been willing to give up my Here counterpart for the good of the cause and the freedom of his brother. He might be willing to sacrifice me as well. I didn't think that was the case, but I couldn't be completely certain.

But Rake I trusted without a doubt. Besides, neither one of my boys had given me shivers of revulsion or inspired fear at first sight. The Destroyer was going to have to do some excellent talking if he wanted to convince me his was the side of sweetness and light.

"That's the first of their lies. It seems a small thing, of course. Another dimension, another planet, both are a bit fantastical for those from our world are they not? Why, in my age on Earth, a carriage that could be powered without horses was still a modern marvel. No one would have dreamed space travel possible. Only lunatics imagined a rocket to the moon, let alone portals to other worlds."

"Right," I said, wondering at the implications of his words.

If what he said were true, then he'd been in Here over a hundred years. I thought Railyn said it had only been twenty. But maybe he'd only been the *Destroyer* for twenty years. I wanted to ask, but held my tongue, shoving some of the vegetable into my mouth to join the beef. If my mouth were full, I couldn't say something stupid and it seemed better to let my host guide our conversation for the moment. I had the horrible feeling anything I said or did would be used as a tool for manipulation. I didn't want to give the man any ammunition.

"But then you begin to see the true differences, potentially dangerous differences, between our two worlds. Have you noticed the two bright moons, for example?" He

chuckled as I nodded and popped another bite of roast into my mouth. I was glad he found my healthy appetite charming, but the affectionate note in his laughter disturbed me. I didn't want this man to like me. I had a feeling his favor was not something that would make my life in Here any easier.

"There is also a darkened moon this part of Here sees for a small portion of their month. Between the three moons, the gravitational pull is substantially more intense than that of Earth...which causes various side effects."

"Like what?" I said around a mouthful of food, unable to quell my curiosity. This was kind of what I came here for. If he was going to start spilling his guts about our powers or juicy Here gossip, I should make it as easy for him as possible.

"Numerous things, but some of the more detrimental are the speeding of the aging process and a decrease in fertility for those of us not originally from the planet. There has never been a child born from a union that included a person formerly of Earth, male or female. Not that I would want to bring a child into this violent place. It is disturbing, however, that the life expectancy of an Earth person in the best of health drops to thirty-five to fifty years of age, depending on how old they were when they arrived on the planet. It's tragic really. After all, time is the most valuable of all commodities, is it not?"

"So I'm already over the hill," I said, the news affecting me in the way he had known it would. Though his little speech relieved me of my concerns about an unplanned pregnancy, it replaced them with a sensation resembling full-blown panic.

Why hadn't they told me about the advanced aging? Why had they lied about this being an entirely different planet than Earth? What was the point? What did they have to gain? Should I be freaking out or was the Destroyer the one who was lying? Sure I'd seen the two moons and had questions about the decidedly unearthly landscape, but that didn't mean this couldn't still be another dimension.

"Well, not exactly," the Destroyer said. "I think you're different, Gail. If what I've heard is true, then you may have powers similar to mine, powers that will sustain you in this often inhospitable world. If, of course, you can avoid being manipulated by people who think nothing of telling lies to further their own cause."

"Like you, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. I know it's difficult to know whom to trust. But I think I have the necessary evidence to help you see things my way. In fact, if what my friends tell me is true, I may be the only person in Here you can depend upon, the only person capable of guiding you as you learn to utilize your new powers."

"What friends? After what you did to Garreck's brother I doubt he'd tell you anything," I said, a little anger making its way into my fear. I didn't like this man and hated the way he was trying to make me feel abandoned and betrayed. I abruptly lost my appetite, setting the plate down on the floor by my feet with a little more force than necessary. I was half hoping to break it, but evidently the Destroyer believed in purchasing durable flatware.

"Surely they told you they have spies watching my every move. I wouldn't be successful in surviving in this world if I didn't have my own set of spies, people willing to tell me what goes on in their magically protected fortresses." He avoided any mention of Garreck or his brother, I noticed, as he shifted into a seated position that brought his upper body out of the shadows.

The mist around him seemed to lighten and thin for a moment and I thought perhaps I might finally see what the Destroyer was sporting above the shoulders, but a sudden wave of nausea made me close my eyes and clap a hand over my mouth. I held my breath and struggled to hold back the gorge surging toward my hand. No matter how distasteful I found the man, I didn't want to vomit on his lap. It would be unproductive, not to mention embarrassing. I needed to find Garreck and Squire and Thomas and make sure they were okay. Yacking all over my host probably wasn't the fastest way to accomplish that goal.

"Eduardo, bring a blanket. I believe our guest is feeling ill," the Destroyer said in his silken voice, the words sliding down my throat like the fifth shot of tequila. Anything more than four shots in not a good idea for a woman my size. I just can't handle that much alcohol. It will inevitably end in upchucking.

"No thank you, I don't need a blanket," I managed to choke out as I simultaneously re-swallowed the recently ingested roast beef rising in my throat.

Must not think about alcohol or puking. Must think cool, soothing thoughts, cold shower thoughts, cold bathroom tile thoughts, ice on my forehead thoughts.

"Eduardo, hurry." His voice was sharp and insistent, hurting my head and making the unsettled state of my stomach worse.

"No," I gasped, "I'm so hot, I don't want a blanket, I—"

I didn't get to say anything else because I was suddenly picked up bodily by Eduardo and thrown to the blanket he had lain over the luxurious rug beneath our feet. I landed on all fours, losing my dinner a few seconds later. I heaved violently onto the rough woolen blanket, spilling the contents of my stomach until only green bile dripped between my lips and tears from my eyes.

God it was horrible! I hated vomiting on any occasion, but being on my knees in front of Here's main bad guy and over a dozen strangers made it positively the worst sickly experience of my life. Finally I finished and sat back on my heels, trembling with weakness, shivering as a cold sweat broke out under my red sweater. There was vomit clinging to my hair and smearing the front of my overalls and I knew I smelled like some sort of putrid death.

Therefore, it was with a great deal of reluctance that I raised my eyes to look at the Destroyer, prepared to apologize and ask for a rain check on this little meeting. I couldn't very well keep talking shop when I was covered in my own barf.

"See there, you did need a blanket," he said cheerfully. "I would never have forgiven you if you'd damaged my rugs."

"I need to go," I said weakly, resisting the urge to tell him and his rugs to fuck themselves.

"I don't think so."

"I don't feel well."

"Of course you don't. I didn't assume you would. Eduardo always tends to go a bit overboard."

"You poisoned me," I said, the truth of the situation suddenly penetrating my vomit-fogged mind.

"Yes, darling, but I never promised to be your friend."

"You bastard, you fucking bastard I—"

Another wave of nausea interrupted the string of insults on the tip of my tongue and I had to squeeze my eyes shut and hang my head as I fought through the urge to dry heave on the blanket. There was nothing left in my stomach and my whole body ached from my first round of sickness or I would have moved my head and ruined his precious carpet. I made a promise to myself to burn the damn things as soon as I stopped feeling like I was going to die.

"Shut your mouth," Eduardo yelled, delivering a stinging slap to the side of my hip. I had a feeling he would rather had attacked my face but didn't want to get his hands dirty. I made further plans to vomit on him and make him sit in it as soon as I stopped feeling like I was going to die.

"Now, now Eduardo. Words can't hurt. This one's all bark in any event. You'll see what a good pet she makes after a few days adjustment." The Destroyer leaned back onto his couch and re-crossed his feet at the ankles. "Take her away."

"Sir, might I stay here with you? I've longed to serve you these many nights past. I'm sure there are others who would be happy —"

"Are you questioning my will again, Eduardo?"

"Never, sir," Eduardo said, collapsing to his knees once more and touching his forehead to the Destroyer's boots. "Your will is my will, without your desire I would have no direction, no soul, no joy."

"I'll take her, sir," came a soft, deep voice from my left.

I looked up to see the cowboy standing only inches from the edge of the blanket, his amber eyes fixed on the place where the Destroyer's head should have been in a blank look that gave nothing away. His expression reminded me of the red headed woman's enigmatic smile. I began to wonder if this was the kind of carefully cultivated control one needed to survive in the Destroyer's court. If so, I was done for. I couldn't carefully control myself if my life depended on it.

I shivered as I realized it just might.

"Very well, Jacob. You know what to do. Find something in red. She looked quite lovely in that sweater before it was covered in bile," the Destroyer said.

"Lie down." Jacob squatted next to me and motioned for me to stretch on the blanket.

"Fuck you, Jacob," I said, flipping him the bird. Considering the blanket was still covered in puke, lying down on it didn't seem like a very enjoyable command to follow. Besides, I was furious with everyone in this tent so he could just go suck his own dick if he thought I was going to make this easy for him.

"Lie. Down."

"Fuck. You."

"She is a feisty one." The Destroyer chuckled, a sound echoed by Eduardo. I turned my head to shoot them both a murderous look, but Jacob took that moment to move swiftly behind me and throw his full weight on top of me, thrusting me from all fours flat down onto my stomach. I gasped as my face landed in my own filth and then struggled to breathe beneath the wall of solid male flesh now pressed firmly down on me from head to toe.

"I think Jacob likes her," Eduardo said, his voice laced with a taunt I didn't understand.

"Maybe she'll be the one to turn his taste," the Destroyer said. "She is rather boyish for a female."

"Hardly any breasts at all," Eduardo seconded, stretching out beside the Destroyer on his couch and starting to run his hand up and down the other man's thigh with the tenderness of a lover. I couldn't help but notice the Destroyer's tight jeans grew just a little tighter and I felt my stomach lurch again. There wouldn't be any seducing my way out of this situation, even if I managed to get all the vomit off my body and survive. The Destroyer's taste obviously ran to things with a penis and—small breasts or not—that was one thing I didn't have.

"I'm going to kill you," I threatened both of the men on the couch as Jacob forced my hands together behind my back and tied my wrists with something that felt like metal wire. It hurt, a lot, and helped make my threat suitably sincere.

"Doubtful, but I appreciate your passion," the Destroyer said with a satisfied sigh as Eduardo started to caress him through his jeans.

The last thing I saw before Jacob wrapped me up in a cocoon of my own vomit was Eduardo stretching up to kiss the mist above the Destroyer's shoulders. I thought for a second the mist subsided and a pair of mangled lips twisted out to caress the other man's mouth. But then my eyes were covered with vomit-smeared wool and I was being lifted into the air and thrown over yet another manly shoulder.

I hadn't been hoisted into a fireman's carry in my entire life, but in Here I'd had the pleasure on three instances with three entirely different men. I made a promise to myself to start a feminist movement as soon as I made sure I wasn't going to die.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I heard them first, deep, male murmurs that were clearly sexual in nature. A sigh, then a laugh, then a groan as man number two did something wicked and wonderful to man number one. I felt the last sound of pleasure ripple over my body, vibrate along my skin, awakening tingles of awareness. Sexual awareness. It suddenly didn't matter that I'd never found the idea of two men making love particularly sexy. My body responded without my conscious approval, my nipples drawing tight against my thin t-shirt as heat pooled between the legs curled tightly to my chest.*

*I was lying on my side on something soft and firm, balled in a fetal position. I'd obviously been upset before I'd fallen asleep – my chest muscles ached as if I'd been weeping and I only ever slept curled on my side when I was miserable – but I couldn't for the life of me remember why I'd been so disturbed*

*There had been something...a bad dream...a horrible misunderstanding...something...but I couldn't muster the energy to force myself to remember whatever it was my mind so clearly wanted to forget.*

*Surely there could be nothing so very wrong if I was warm and safe on some sort of bed and two lovers were going at it not too far away. The men and I were definitely in the same room. I could hear them too well for there to be a wall between us. I could even smell them, I now realized, as the scent of aroused male invaded my nostrils, heightening my own arousal.*

*God, they smelled so good...so fucking good.*

*No matter that these men probably wouldn't be interested in anything female joining them in their play, I wanted nothing more than to run my tongue over their bare skin, to taste the flavor of their passion. I longed to tease my fingertips down their hard, flat stomachs until I found a hard-on with each hand. To slide my fists up and down, up and down, coaxing fluid from the tips of their cocks, then lower my mouth first to one and then the other, taking their arousal between my lips. I'd pull them as deeply inside as I could, suckling and teasing with my tongue while I rolled my eyes up to see the effects of my work on their gorgeous faces.*

*I hadn't seen them yet, but I knew they both were gorgeous. No one who smelled so sweet, spicy and flat-out sexy could be anything but examples of manly perfection. These men were the kind that made heterosexual women weep with despair when we saw them walking down the street arm and arm and realized we would never have a chance of luring them into our beds.*

*But maybe sharing a bed with them wasn't necessary...maybe if I could just watch them while they were in bed together...*

*Just the thought was enough to make my pussy hotter, wetter, to send a rush of heat flowing from my between my legs and out onto the panties I...wasn't wearing.*

*What the hell?*

*A quick scan of my body revealed the thin t-shirt was the only thing covering my nakedness. Below the waist, I was completely naked. There was nothing there to conceal my pussy's response to the men's sighs and moans, which made me wonder...perhaps they had intended to invite me to their party all along? Maybe they were just biding their time until I woke up and smelled the pheromones?*

*My clit perked up considerably and my beaded nipples burned with the need to be touched, tugged, pulled into the hot, wet mouths of the men growing progressively naughty on the bed. If*

*the sounds man number one was making were any indication – deep, guttural groans that brought to mind half a dozen lurid possibilities – things were nearing the critical point. If I hoped to have any chance of getting in on the action, I was going to have to speak up soon.*

*I listened with my eyes closed for a bit longer, a part of me still afraid what would happen if the men were to notice I was no longer asleep. I still had no idea how I had come to be here...wherever here was and...*

*Here. Now why did that word ring a bell somewhere deep in my foggy brain?*

*“Fuck yes, Garreck. Yes!” man number one cried out.*

*Garreck. The name brought back a flood of memories and an equally overwhelming rush of anxiety. I wasn’t on Earth any more. I’d landed my ass in some deep shit and then gone looking for more trouble without thinking things through and god only knew where I was now.*

*I cracked my lids the slightest bit, trying not to gasp at the sight that met my eyes. It was Garreck all right, but he wasn’t being tortured or held prisoner. No, he didn’t look at all worse for wear. In fact, he looked unspeakably gorgeous, his bare skin glowing golden in the candlelight that illuminated the bed. The giant, circular bed where he knelt behind a smaller man, teasing his giant cock between the other man’s cheeks.*

*“Yes!” The other man – whose face I couldn’t see from where I lay, but whose body was every bit as gorgeous as Garreck’s – groaned and shoved back against him, obviously more than eager to have every inch of that enormous arousal buried in his ass.*

*If someone had described the scene to me, I would have probably been horrified at the thought. But as I watched Garreck’s ass muscles clench as he pushed gently forward and saw the head of his cock disappear into the smaller man’s body, it was all I could do not to slide my own hand down between my legs to find my clit.*

*I was so incredibly aroused and it only grew worse when Garreck cried out in ecstasy as the smaller man rammed his hips back, taking Garreck completely inside of him. Garreck’s head flew back, sending his long hair flying over his shoulders, partially obscuring my view of his ass. But that didn’t matter, I knew what he was doing, could see the way the other man’s hips bobbed back and forth as Garreck fucked him, deep and hard, mercilessly pounding between his cheeks.*

*The other man was far from in pain, however, if the sounds he was making were anything to judge by. No, he was enjoying every minute of this, relishing Garreck’s cock working into his hidden places, practically weeping with joy as Garreck reached under his body and found his arousal. Garreck fisted the man’s cock in his hand, jerking the smaller man in time to his own thrusts until they were both groaning, gasping for breath, obviously seconds away from finding release.*

*My hand moved of its own accord, delving into the pool of heat rushing from my body, smoothing it up to my clit and beginning to move. I wasn’t brave enough to interrupt the men, to live out the fantasy I’d had while still half-asleep, but I could at least join them in release. My fingers flew back and forth, applying the perfect pressure, quickly bringing me to the edge. I was close, so close and –*

*“Wait, not yet. Not yet.” The smaller man shoved Garreck’s hand away from him and reared up on knees, interrupting Garreck’s rhythm. My own hand stilled as well as a ribbon of fear threaded through my arousal. Something wasn’t right.*

*"No, let me finish. Let me – "*

*"Not this time, lover," the smaller man laughed, a horrible gut-tickling sound that made me realize his identity even before he flung Garreck from his body and turned around.*

*It was the Destroyer, in all his strange, head-misted glory, who urged Garreck onto his stomach and mounted him from behind, shoving his cock deep into the barbarian's body. Said cock and the rest of the Destroyer's nude form, would probably, objectively, be described as perfect, gorgeously formed and utilized. But the second I knew it was him, my desire vanished, transforming to profound disgust. I was disgusted with myself for finding monster arousing, even for a few moments, and even more disgusted with Garreck who still seemed to be enjoying every second spent in the Destroyer's bed.*

*The look on the barbarian's face certainly wasn't revulsion or pain. No, the man looked...entranced, as if he had never felt anything as wonderful as the Destroyer moving his thick cock in and out of his ass, faster and faster, until the man above him groaned, his hips jerking forward as he spilled himself deep in Garreck's body.*

*"Yes!" Garreck cried out seconds later, his features twisting into an erotic grimace as he came, hips grinding against the sheets twisted beneath his massive body.*

*The Destroyer laughed and collapsed on top of Garreck, his fingers playing up and down the sides of the barbarian's body in an intimate little caress. Garreck smiled as well, but the grin faded as soon as he opened his eyes. Blue eyes that flew directly to meet my own, catching me out before I could even think to pretend to be asleep once more.*

*"I'm sorry, wee Gail. I wish it could be different between us." Garreck spoke as if the Destroyer couldn't hear him.*

*And maybe he couldn't because the light suddenly shifted dramatically, the room becoming pitch black save for the beam illuminating Garreck's sad face. I was still trying to think what to say when that face began to transform, melting into itself as if someone had poured acid over the sensitive flesh.*

*"Run!" Garreck screamed before he began to weep, long wrenching sobs I felt cutting through my heart.*

*"No!" I sobbed, trying to go to him, to help him though I had no idea how. But I found I couldn't move, couldn't even close my eyes to shut out the sight of Garreck's features dissolving into a horrific puddle of –*

*My eyes flew open on a gasp and I immediately began to struggle, beyond grateful to be out of the dream and in control of my body once more. "Stop it! Let me go!" I felt the strange body against my own and instinctively thrashed my legs, confused by the water that splashed around me in response.*

*"Relax, I won't hurt you," a soothing voice said. I stiffened, hands coming to claw at the strong, slightly furry arm looped gently underneath my armpits. My head was cradled on his manly shoulder and warm breath swept over my neck as he spoke, making me shiver despite the heat of the bath and the horror I'd just awakened from. My desire might have been firmly dampened in my dream, but my waking body was still aching in places I didn't want to think about.*

"Let me go," I demanded, not enjoying having the arm of a man I didn't know making contact with my bare breasts or him whispering in my ear. Being naked in the bath with a stranger was bad enough without getting so uncomfortably intimate.

"I will, calm down. I just want to make sure you don't drown," the voice, which I now recognized as Jacob's, said.

"Fuck you, don't tell me to calm down," I snapped, remembering all the reasons I had to be outraged. I hadn't vowed to kill Jacob, but he could very easily make his way onto my shit list if he had the balls to infer I was being unnecessarily hysterical. If I was hysterical, I had plenty of reasons to be.

"Fine. But the tub is deep." He released me so quickly that my head dipped under the water and I came up sputtering and gasping for air. I was still choking as I swam to the side and held on.

"I told you it was deep." I turned to see him sitting casually on the steps a few feet away. His elbows were propped back on the soft, fabric covered platform that surrounded the tub on all sides. He still had that neutral expression on his face and I was possessed of the urge to slap him as hard as I could, just to see if I could get a rise out of him.

"Are you naked?" I asked instead, narrowing my eyes.

"Yes. Our clothes were sent to the laundry. They were covered in vomit."

"You don't have to sound so disgusted."

"It was disgusting. I had to wash your hair three times to get the smell out."

"It's not my fault," I said, blushing at the thought of a strange man washing my hair, especially this strange man. He looked more like he should be out branding cattle than in a tub washing a girl's hair.

As pretty as he was, there was still a hardness about him. The skin that covered that classic profile was slightly weathered and the palms of his hands were roughened by work. I knew that for a fact because I'd felt them against my skin, was pretty certain those calloused fingertips had brushed across my nipples as he'd let me sink into the water.

I blushed even harder at the memory, really starting to hate my new sexual appetite for the first time. It wasn't so bad lusting after Rake and Garreck, but I didn't want to want this man. He was the enemy, had wrapped me in a blanket with my own vomit, tied my hands behind my back with wire, washed my hair while I was unconscious and was probably a sociopath.

"I never said it was," he said.

"Said what was?" I had entirely lost track of the conversation as I fought a rush of desire that made my skin uncomfortably aware of the sensual swirl of the water around my breasts, across my stomach, between my thighs.

"You should eat something. I'll ring Teresa for some fruit and bread."

"I'm not eating jack shit. I've had enough of being poisoned for one day."

"You're going to have to get fuel from somewhere and I'd prefer it not be me."

"I don't eat people, freak."

The guy was definitely a sociopath. He probably kept people's organs in his fridge for a little midnight snack. Only people who eat people would worry about someone trying to eat them. It's the same way with cheaters. I've found a person who has a problem with fidelity is much more likely to stress out about their partner getting some action on the side.

Why was it all my thoughts seemed to curve back around to something sexual?

"I was talking about sex," Jacob said, his face still annoyingly impassive.

It was like he read my mind, which was a little creepy. I wondered if maybe he could read my mind. Rake had been able to do it. This guy wasn't green, but that didn't mean he didn't have mind mojo. I had already learned my lesson about underestimating the special gifts of the citizens of this dimension, so I decided to test my theory.

*You are a creepy organ eating sociopath.*

"Is there a problem?"

*You smell worse than my vomit.*

"I'm going to ring for the food if you're just going to sit there and glare at me."

*I'm going to get up out of this tub and run for my life and you'll never be able to stop me. Here I go right...now!*

"Good, I want you to eat," he said, reaching for a bell sitting on the tub's platform, right next to two fluffy red towels and a massive candle. He hadn't lit the candle. Guess he didn't find this bath a romantic experience either.

"I'm not hungry."

"So now you're talking," Jacob said as he continued to twist around, starting to reveal the sculpted cheek of what was undeniably one of the perkier asses I'd ever seen. For a second, I was torn. Did I let him ring the damn bell just so I could get a better look at that butt or did I put my foot down?

"Don't you dare. I'm not kidding, I'm not eating." I was a little sad to see his hips sink back into the water as he turned around, but satisfied that he wasn't reading my mind. Though I had to admit my experiment was hardly conclusive. He could just be ignoring me. He seemed like the type who would be really good at that. "And I'm not going to have sex with you. I wouldn't let you near me with a ten-foot pole."

I emphasized my statement with another killer glare, but knew I was blushing again. I'm not a good liar. I'm just not and if the man dared to lay a hand on me he was going to be able to call my bluff. My nipples were already hard, my pussy wet and I knew I'd jump him if he made the first move. I was pretty sure I could keep myself from becoming the aggressor, but that was as far as my self-restraint would take me.

"You really are new," he said with a frustrated sigh, the first hint of emotion I'd seen from the man. He ran a hand through his hair, which I couldn't help but notice

was a beautiful dark blond, shot through with natural highlights that accentuated his amber colored eyes. I'd never seen eyes quite that color before. They were like liquid honey, the natural kind that came with the honeycomb you could only get at a farmer's market or a roadside stand.

As I've mentioned before, I love honey, love to eat it straight from the jar with a spoon. I also thought I'd enjoy dribbling some over Jacob's finely sculpted chest and licking it away, following the honey trail with the tip of my tongue as it oozed down his flat belly before dipping down to his hips, which were presently covered by bubbles. I wanted to sweep away those bubbles and see what he had to offer between his legs, maybe take his balls in my hand while I—

"What is wrong with me?" I whispered to myself, closing my eyes and swallowing hard, trying to deny my mouth was watering for reasons that had nothing to do with food.

"You're like them, the people on this planet. They eat other people's energy, usually during sex," he said, sounding mildly disgusted by the phenomenon.

"You're kidding," I said, sinking lower into the bubbles until only my ears and eyes were above the water. I felt like a crocodile and I wondered what Jacob would do if I lunged at him and tried to roll him under the water, if he'd be distracted long enough for me to scamper out of the tub and grab one of those red towels.

I'd been faking my mental notification of my intention to flee, but it really wasn't such a bad idea. A part of me was interested in what he was saying, but the biggest part just wanted out of here as soon as possible. Rake was probably still out there lurking around the edge of the camp and I knew he would be worried. I didn't want him to do something stupid, like try to bust in and rescue me or confront the Destroyer with my capture. I had to let him know I was okay.

Because he *would* try to save me. Those things the Destroyer had said about Garreck and Rake lying and the people of Here trying to use me weren't true, they just couldn't be. I wasn't *that* bad a judge of character. In fact, I usually prided myself on my instincts. Deep down, on a gut level, I generally knew a bad guy from a good guy. Too bad the guy in the tub with me was such a hard read. He might kiss me or kill me, I couldn't say.

All the more reason to get the hell out of Dodge.

"I don't know how to kid anymore," Jacob said with a bitter little laugh that faded away as his eyes met mine. Talk about eye contact. I felt the way he was looking at me like he had physically touched me, run one of those strong, rough hands down my spine and then crept up between my thighs. "But I'll probably end up feeding you. It's been too long since I've had the chance to choose who I fuck."

"I'm not going to fuck you," I said, rising up out of the water and spitting bubbles in his general direction.

I really *didn't like* the way he'd said fuck, made it sound like something base and aggressive. I would have made a run for it right then if there hadn't been a horrible little

part of me that *really liked* the way he'd said fuck, how he made it sound so base and aggressive.

"Yes you will, you won't be able to help yourself." He slid off the steps until he stood in the water. It came nearly to his shoulders and I knew if I let go of the side the water would be over my head. He would be able to drown me without breaking a sweat.

The knowledge scared me. I was not a crocodile, I was a relatively scrawny woman and this man was capable of doing whatever the hell he wanted with me. The element of surprise was no longer on my side and my prey had turned decidedly predatory.

## Chapter Eighteen

"Okay, I'll eat food," I said in my most pacifying tone.

"Too late," Jacob said, moving inexorably forward.

"I thought you said you wanted me to eat fruit and bread?"

"Maybe I've changed my mind."

"You don't look like a guy who changes his mind." If I could just keep him talking, maybe he'd get distracted and forget about his obviously less than honorable intentions.

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know that you don't like girls," I said, hoping I remembered what Eduardo and the Destroyer had said about Jacob correctly.

He certainly looked like he liked girls, but maybe he was faking it to intimidate me. Rape is a powerful intimidation tool. Except, of course, that it wouldn't be rape because I wanted him, could imagine how hard I'd come as he held my arms above my head and fucked me with all the intensity simmering beneath those deceptively calm eyes.

"And my breasts are bigger than they look." Hadn't Eduardo said something about Jacob liking small breasts or was I insane?

"I've seen your breasts. I've washed your breasts," he said in a husky voice that made my nipples tighten and my clit pulse.

"Well, then you know," I said, my tone issuing an invitation my logical mind really didn't want to give. I didn't want to have sex with this guy. I really didn't...except for the part of me that did. "Stop. Don't come any closer."

"The Destroyer enjoys pleasure and he enjoys pain. It depends on which he thinks will be a more powerful tool," Jacob said, continuing to inch closer despite my order. The tub was big, but he was less than three feet away. Even if I had the strength to pull myself out on my side – which I wasn't sure I did – he'd grab me before I could escape. I had wasted my window of opportunity and now I was going to pay for it.

"Jacob, please. Don't come closer. I don't want to do this," I pleaded. Surely the guy had a little mercy left in him.

"He seemed to know from the start I couldn't be won over with pleasure. There are a lot of things that mean more to me than eating well or drinking well or fucking well. So he chose to punish me into obedience instead."

"Don't punish me just because you were punished," I said, not knowing what the hell I was saying, but hoping it would make him stop coming closer. The slow, sensual way he was moving through the water was making me ache with longing, things low in my belly clenching, demanding they be satisfied.

"I'm not punishing you, I'm helping you."

"This doesn't feel like helping."

"I pretended to like men, to prefer nothing more than dominating another man. So he makes me play the submissive to women. Every time I displease him I'm forced to perform for him with a woman of his choosing. It's not so bad, at least I don't have to fuck him. But for once it would be nice to choose, to be the one in charge," Jacob said as he came close enough for me to touch, for *him* to touch.

But he didn't touch me, just braced his arms on either side of my head and gripped the edge of the tub like he was clinging to the edge of a cliff. If he let go, I knew we were both going to fall.

"I don't understand." I closed my eyes as he moved his face inches from my own. I could smell his slightly apple cider smelling breath, could feel the warmth of him reaching out to caress my skin, my lips, feel the strength in his body vibrating all around me. It filled the water with a sensual energy that turned the aching inside of me into something painful, an insistent shouting need.

"Start thinking of what you really, really hate and be prepared to pretend convincingly you love it beyond all reason. If you're a good enough actress, maybe you'll be able to survive more than a few months."

"I'm not staying here," I whispered, keeping my eyes closed, knowing by the sound of his words he was even closer, that I could tilt my head the slightest bit and touch his lips with my own. God, how I wanted to wrap my legs and arms around him and ravage his mouth. Or be ravaged. Right now it didn't seem to matter.

"Unfortunately, you are." His tone allowed no disagreement, as certain and final as the print on an obituary. "And it's going to be worse because you're like him. He doesn't like competition."

"I don't want to compete, I just want to go home," I said, my voice giving way to a sob. I suddenly didn't care about being vulnerable in front of Jacob, didn't care what he did to me or what I did to him. I just had to stop playing tough for a few minutes.

"You can't go home," he said with more tenderness than I expected to hear in his voice. "We can't ever go home, but we can make each other feel good right now, baby."

"Don't call me baby, you don't even know me."

"But we could pretend. We could pretend for a little while." His voice was filled with a need I completely understood. He was from Earth, like me, lost in this world where life seemed to get more miserable and confusing by the hour. I suddenly felt a soft spot for Jacob I hadn't before and it was enough, just barely enough.

I looped my arms around his neck and parted my legs just in time. His mouth pressed down on mine with an intensity that made me dizzy, his arms wrapping around me as his body slammed me into the side of the tub. Suddenly his erection was pressing tightly against pussy, his tongue penetrating my mouth with a ferocity that allowed me to do little more than cling to him and struggle to breathe.

"Not so hard, it—"

"You don't give the orders," he ground out against my mouth as his fingers delivered a sharp, painful squeeze to the flesh of my ass. "I'll tell you when I'm going to fuck you, when you can beg for me to fuck you and when you can come after I've got my cock inside you."

"That hurts," I breathed as his fingers dug into my bottom hard enough to bruise.

It hurt, made me wince in pain but at the same time turned my already liquid center molten. I was burning with the need to abandon control completely to this stranger, to feel him taking me, claiming me hard and fast no matter what I had to say about it.

I'd never played this kind of game before, but my body liked it, probably more than was wise. I didn't know this man and I'd heard you should only explore your kinky side with people you know very, very well. Just to be sure you both know how far to take the game, to make sure you both know it's a game in the first place.

"I wouldn't hurt you," he said, releasing my ass as he brought his hand to my breast and squeezed my nipple with a steadily increasing pressure. I moaned and twisted in his arms, arching my hips toward the thick shaft pulsing between my legs. This time he stopped just before I felt pain and dropped his mouth to my other breast.

"Please," I begged as he lifted me out of the water, bringing my nipple to his mouth and causing my clit to slide up his cock. I squirmed against him, feeling the head of his erection pressing against my clit, so close to where I wanted him to shove himself inside.

"I tell you when to beg," he mumbled against my breast a second before his teeth bit down on my nipple, ringing a cry from my throat that was part pain, part pleasure.

I dug my fingers into the thick muscles of his shoulders, ready to give a little of what I was getting when he slid his hands under my knees and set me on the edge of the tub. The cold air hit my skin with a suddenness that took my breath away, but then Jacob was pulling himself out of the water and pushing me back, down onto the velvety cloth that covered the platform around the tub.

"Do you want my cock in you?" he asked, even as he positioned himself to slide inside of me. He was thick, incredibly thick, though not as long as Rake, the other man I'd had sex with after knowing for less than a few hours.

God, what was wrong with me?

"No, I don't want..." My eyes closed and what could have been tears leaked out the sides. I didn't want to fuck another man I didn't know, didn't want to be consumed with this desire I didn't understand, to be spread wide and vulnerable to whatever this complete stranger wanted to do to me. Most of all, I didn't *want* to want him, didn't want to ache for him to slam that thick cock home with every cell in my body.

"Don't lie to me." He began to work his erection inside of me. A moan of surrender escaped my lips and was muffled against his chest.

He was tall and missionary position left a lot to be desired, especially after having Rake working above me, his eyes nearly level with my own, making me feel more for him than I'd thought possible in such a short time. But I tried not to think too much about Rake. Jacob and I were going to do this. There was no turning back now, no matter how much I already knew I would regret it.

"Beg me for it, baby." Jacob paused when only the head of his cock pulsed inside me, forcing me to ride the edge of desire and satisfaction.

"Please," I said, closing my eyes against the need in my voice.

"Please what? Please fuck you?" Jacob trembled slightly, his body betraying how much he wanted this, wanted me to help him dominate me.

"Please. Fuck me Jacob. Please."

A second later he shoved into me with a hoarse cry I echoed as a bit of pain once again intruded on pleasure. I wanted him, there was no doubt, but the water had washed away my natural slickness and we were a tight fit, accompanied by more friction than was necessarily comfortable. But I didn't care. I thrust my hips, bucking into him until we finally found a way for him to bury his cock inside me, working together to get enough wet heat for him to set up a rhythm with his thrusts.

As soon as I was slick enough for him to move more freely, he began to fuck me. There was no other word for the way he road my body with total possession, tunneled his cock into my pussy with a swiftness that made our bare skin smack together and his balls slap between my butt cheeks with every driving thrust. It was all I could do to not struggle against him, but I knew if I tensed, if I tried to fight, this pleasure would turn to pain, that he might even tear me.

"Please." My voice quavered from the force of his body hammering into mine. I clung to his shoulders as the power of his thrusts forced me along the platform, rubbing the skin at my tailbone until it burned.

"Please," I said again, though I didn't know what I was begging for. I knew it wasn't mercy because it was obvious we were beyond that. He had retreated to that place where sexual creatures go when there is no thought except the mad desire to keep moving, keep fucking, keep thrusting until orgasm, until release, until you spill your seed or feel your womb clench around the man inside of you.

He groaned above me and pulled his upper body away from mine, coming to his knees between my legs. Without missing a beat in his rhythm, he took large handfuls of my hips and thighs and used them as leverage to drive himself even deeper. Watching his magnificent body working into mine, seeing the raw passion on his face suddenly made me even wetter. I tipped my hips, gasping as the new angle made the head of his cock slam against that sweet spot inside me. I felt energy pool low in my belly, tightening between my legs. I was getting close.

Or would have been getting close if a different force hadn't started to fight the release, turning my skin cold.

"You have to stop," I screamed, starting to fight Jacob, kicking my legs and pushing at where his hands gripped my hips.

"No," he yelled back, his voice a plea as he tried to pin my legs on either side of his body. Luckily, the suddenness of my change of heart allowed me to free my left leg and kick him in the face. I winced as I saw blood burst from his lip, but I didn't have time to feel sorry for the man if I was going to save his life.

With a very unsexy grunt, I managed to scramble over to my hands and knees. I had a split second to decide whether to jump back in the water or lunge for the towel only a few feet away. I chose the towel and reached. If I could get something to cover myself, I could make a flying leap off the edge of the tub and try to find my way out of the Destroyer's camp. But I wasn't going naked.

My modesty proved my undoing. I suddenly realized why all those horror movie heroines run through the woods in the nude. Sometimes there just isn't time to grab something to cover your breasts.

"Stop!" I screamed as Jacob landed on top of me from behind, his body weight pinning me to the platform even as one arm locked itself around my waist and lifted my hips. His other hand was busy between my legs and I felt a wave of panic sweep over me as I felt his cock start to press inside me.

"I said stop," I yelled again, struggling and kicking and managing to prevent him from thrusting into me.

It didn't matter that I'd gone into this as a consenting partner, it was now clear I wanted to stop. The guy was basically trying to rape me and all because I didn't want him to end up another victim of death by orgasm. He obviously didn't understand we weren't playing anymore and that he was the one who stood to lose big time if he didn't get off of me.

"If you don't stop I'm going to kill you," I said, bucking against him as he pinned my arms, legs and hips to the ground. I fought until the last second, even though my body was screaming out that it wanted this, that it wanted him, wanted him to fuck me from behind, to pound into me until I arched back into his cock and came with enough power to blow us both apart.

"Really, I'll kill you, right now." Struggling to ignore the shock of erotic sensation as my nipples rubbed against the fabric beneath me, I strained against his weight until I felt him let go of one of my hands and use those fingers to spread me open.

"You're so wet. You want me, you want this."

"I'll kill you when I come, I've done it before."

"But you want me," he said, his entire body trembling as he positioned his cock, but held back, waiting me to say it was okay.

But it wasn't okay.

"I want you, but I'll kill you, don't you understand?" I said, moaning as my hips arched up into him against my will.

"I know you will," he breathed into my hair as he started to push his cock inside me. "It's okay, I want you to."

"No," I moaned as he used the hand he had free to smooth around my hip and slide down between my legs, caressing my clit with a gentle pressure that made desire surge through my body once more.

"I don't want you to feel bad. I want you to feel good. I want you to come for me," he muttered into my hair as he thrust slowly in and out, all the violence gone from his touch.

"Stop it, you sick fuck." Tears rolled from my eyes as I realized this was what had been on the menu for Jacob since the moment he decided to have sex with me. "It's still suicide."

"You might not kill me. You might figure out how to feed without taking it all, but if you made those people yours without trying I doubt it," he said, moaning into my neck and increasing the pressure on my clit as he quickened the thrusts of his thick cock. He was getting close to the edge. Unfortunately, so was I.

"Tell me how. Tell me how to not— to— oh god," I cried out, seconds away from finding the release my body was demanding.

"I can't tell you anything, I'm sorry," Jacob whispered.

"Please, I—"

"I'm going to come, come with me," he demanded, his thrusts growing faster, grinding my clit against the fingers between my legs. "Come with me!"

And I did, screaming, the orgasm smashing down all around my body just as it had with Garreck, a dark ocean I knew I couldn't control. But I had to try, I would never forgive myself if I didn't try, no matter that Jacob was the one truly responsible.

"Please." I prayed for help as I tried to focus on the pleasure, to observe it rather than be swept away. I tried to concentrate on the feel of the velvet beneath my hands, the smell of Jacob's apple cider breath, the feel of his cum shooting inside of me, anything tangible, physical, more solid than the painful bliss of the orgasm that seemed to be wringing my very soul from my body.

And somehow I found it, that small thread holding all of this together, the string that was vibrating between Jacob's body and mine, the wire through which the energy was traveling. But it wasn't real, not in the physical sense. I couldn't touch it with my hands, couldn't tear it apart, so for a moment all I could do was watch, observe as Jacob's energy traveled into me at a speed that was frightening.

I'd never meditated, never practiced visualization of any kind. I hadn't even really played pretend that much as a kid, but I pulled upon every last drop of faith in my body and imagined I had a huge pair of scissors. And I used them to cut the line.

"No." Jacob moaned as his weight collapsed fully on top of me. He was disturbingly limp and shaking and his voice sounded seconds away from tears, but he was still alive.

We had both come and we were still among the living. Not something I'd ever thought be taking as anything but a given, but I was obscenely grateful. I would have breathed a sigh of relief and tried to roll the suicidal freak off my back, but something still didn't feel right. There was something still roiling around inside of me like a jack in the box wound way too tight.

"Why? Why didn't you kill me?"

"Shut up, Jacob," I snapped, never remembering being this disappointed in a man I'd decided to have sex with. Even the Scottish guy who didn't know how to move—just kind of put his cock in me and held it there for a few seconds before he came—hadn't made me this frustrated.

*Frustrated.* I was still frustrated, almost like I hadn't had an orgasm, though I most certainly had. But maybe it was the energy, maybe there was something I needed to do with the energy I had taken from Jacob, to release it somehow. With Garreck I'd apparently used it to accidentally make zombies. I didn't want to go down that road again, but what else could I do with it? Jacob had said people in Here fed off other people's energy and I did too, so should I just imagine the swirling power inside me oozing into my cells? I tried, closing my eyes and visualizing my internal organs sucking up energy like hungry little vacuums.

"Shit," I muttered after a few seconds. I wasn't accomplishing jack shit except learning I had very little idea what my internal organs looked like. I assumed my kidneys looked like kidney shaped pools, them being the inspiration for the name, but what shape was my liver, my pancreas? Was the pancreas the organ we didn't really need? Should I bother trying to feed energy to an unnecessary organ?

"I can help you." Jacob wearily rolled off my body and back into the water with a splash.

"Don't drown yourself, shit head. Now shut up and let me concentrate." I pulled myself into a seated position, crossing my arms over my chest to help hold back the mounting tension inside of me. This energy needed to go somewhere and it wanted to go there *now*. It was no longer a suppressed jack in the box, but a hungry lion who'd been kept caged for days and was getting ready to pounce on a nearby gazelle.

"Feed your people," Jacob said.

"What?" I was getting ridiculously cranky, which I supposed was understandable considering the events of the past day, but if Jacob didn't watch out he was going to lose a limb.

"Feed your people, give them the extra energy."

"I don't have people," I said before I realized who Jacob might be talking about. "You mean my zombies?"

"They're not zombies, more like batteries, but you have to feed them every once and awhile. You've probably been sucking at their energy since you made them," Jacob looked pale as he settled back onto the steps of the tub and wiped at the blood still

leaking from his lip. He sounded bone weary and as repulsed by my energy suckage as he had about people eating energy in the first place. I wondered if he was a vegetarian.

"How do I feed them?"

"I don't know."

"You're so full of shit. Tell me or I'm probably going to make more of them and I bet you'll be the first to zombify. I know you wanted to die, but—"

"People from Earth can't be changed, we're immune. I really don't know how or I would tell you." He looked passably sincere as he closed his eyes and paled even more visibly.

"Get out of there. You're going to pass out and drown," I said, the part of me that gave a shit insisting I not let a man die on my watch, no matter what a suicidal asshole he might be.

"No," he said, eyes still closed.

"Fine, then go ahead and die."

"Maybe I will."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"More than fine." I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on the energy. I'd wasted enough time on the loser.

Why should I bother with a man who had come perilously close to raping me? Sure, it hadn't been a forced situation in the beginning, and I never would have tried to stop if I hadn't been worried about killing him, and he *had* finally gotten around to waiting for permission. But there had still been a few moments when it seemed he wasn't going to take no for an answer. And those moments were enough to kill some of my empathy for the man, no matter how abused he'd been at the Destroyer's hands.

The fact that I was still trying to keep him from death's door told me I was a more decent person than I'd assumed and reinforced how very creeped out I'd been when Garreck had died. If I never saw a dead body again—even the dead body of a man I didn't like very much—it would be fine with me.

"I think I would like you, if I could still like people," he said softly.

"Cry me a river, Jacob, and shut up." What a selfish little shit he was. Couldn't he see I was trying to do something more important than join the Jacob pity party?

"Think, think, think," I chanted out loud, taking a deep breath and focusing my attention on the swirling vortex of craziness inside of me. For a few moments I couldn't sort my way through the energy, even with my eyes closed and Jacob put firmly out of my thoughts. It was too chaotic and unfocused and my need to get rid of it had grown too strong. I was starting to get frantic, my nerve endings screaming out that I was going to get electrocuted if I didn't take my hand out of the bathtub before the hairdryer was thrown in.

The thought made me wonder if I'd electrocute Jacob if I jumped into the water. Was I kind of like a human hairdryer? Did the hairdryer get destroyed when it landed in the bathtub? Would I destroy myself if I released energy in the water or even say, had sex in the rain?

Would I ever stop asking stupid questions long enough to figure out what the fuck to do with myself?

"Shit."

"Just relax. You're trying too hard," Jacob said.

"Keep talking, Jacob, and maybe I will be your hairdryer," I mumbled.

"How did you cut the connection between us?" Jacob prodded, ignoring my threat. "It should be similar. They're connected to you, not sexually but —"

"Shh. Wait." I could see them now, just barely make out the tiny little threads that reached out away from me into the night. There were at least fifteen or twenty of them and they glowed softly, throbbing as power flowed sluggishly down the lines toward me. It wasn't like the major life force theft I'd been performing on Jacob, but he was right, I was sucking energy away from them without even knowing it.

But how to reverse the flow? Did I just think about it?

"Ouch!" I yelped as all the lines came alive at once and my energy sizzled out and away into the night. Apparently I *did* just have to think about it. That left the question — did I do the same to stop the flow? I waited until the tight, anxious feeling inside of me faded, until nearly all of the energy I'd siphoned away from Jacob was released and then thought about the energy stopping. And it did.

Amazing. I was suddenly a thought genie in charge of my own destiny!

"So what happens if I cut them loose, like I cut you loose?" I asked Jacob as I opened my eyes.

"I don't —"

"Don't tell me, you don't know." I toyed with the idea of cutting the lines. I still had my metaphysical scissors out, but did I dare risk hurting those people? What if it didn't work? It seemed I should probably wait until I knew a little more about this supernatural crap before I tried to free my zombies. Then there was also the little matter of needing to focus on getting the hell out of here and saving my own ass before I could save anyone else's.

"No, I don't. But I do know what would happen to you." He sounded like he was getting ready to tell me something horrible.

"Do I want to know this?"

"It's not pleasant, but you probably should."

"Okay, fine." I grabbed one of the giant red towels and fashioned it into a makeshift toga. I knotted the thick fabric and then shoved it up on my shoulder, figuring that having my hands free while I fled for my life was a good idea.

"I brought you something to wear." Jacob gestured to the bottom of the steps leading down from the tub. For the first time I noticed the little sitting area with another fainting couch and a wingchair. There was also a vanity table scattered with a few mysterious looking pots of cream and a mirror with a one of those sheer Greek goddess stripper dresses in red hung over it.

"No way I'm wearing one of those, it's worse than being naked." I used the other towel to wipe away certain fluids that ran down my leg as I made my way to standing. Jacob could dry off with the crusty towel, served him right for trying to use me to fuck himself to death.

"You'll start to age even faster. Phillip uses his people to keep him young."

"Phillip? The Destroyer's name is Phillip?" I asked as I scampered down the steps. I wasn't going to run until Jacob spilled the beans but maybe he'd hurry if I looked like I was leaving. Of course, it would probably help speed things up if I'd stop asking questions.

"The Destroyer," Jacob echoed disdainfully. "He thinks that's really funny, you know. He doesn't destroy anything. They're the ones who tear down their own houses when they see him coming."

"They think it keeps them safe, that he uses personal possessions to zombify them, but he doesn't does he?"

"Of course not, he uses sex. Just like you do."

"Don't compare me to him," I said, wondering why that explanation still felt off somehow. "If he doesn't use their possessions then how does he pick his victims?"

"If one of them wanders too far outside the center of their spell-protected hiding places, they're vulnerable. Nothing more complicated than that. You'd think with all their fucking magical knowledge they would have figured that out by now."

"No matter what they haven't figured out, they don't deserve to have their lives stolen. Have some respect, Jacob." I peeked out the flap of the small tent. It was still very dark outside so I hadn't been unconscious long. I couldn't see the fire from here or the big red tent, which also made me a bit more optimistic about being able to escape into the night.

"Sorry," he said, sounding enough like he meant it for me to turn around. He suddenly looked younger. With his arms folded over the edge of the tub and his chin propped on top and his split lip and sad eyes, he looked...vulnerable. I almost felt sorry for him again. "And I'm sorry about what I did. It was wrong. I guess I've just started to go a little crazy."

"Then why don't you leave? Come with me right now," I said, not knowing what the hell I was going to do with him, but he was just too pathetic to leave behind.

"I can't."

"Why not? Just come with me, walk away. You have legs and I'm sure the people who helped me would help you."

"It's too late. I'm not like you. I need him," Jacob said, his eyes haunted.

"Jacob, I don't understand, but I'm leaving whether you come with me or not."

"I'll die without him. We all would. I've been here ten years. The six I spent away from Phillip I aged so fast I looked like I was thirty when I should have barely been eighteen."

"You were a kid when you came here?"

"I was twelve. I'm only twenty-two now. I look forty don't I?"

"You look older than twenty-two," I admitted, shocked by what he was telling me. Jacob was crazy, but I didn't think he'd lie and he most certainly wouldn't stay with the Destroyer if he didn't think he had to. So it must be true. Rake and Railyn and Garreck hadn't necessarily lied, but they hadn't told me I was at risk of shriveling up and croaking way before my time. It was a pretty serious omission. It made me wonder if there was anyone I could trust.

"But it doesn't have to happen to you, Gail. Keep the zombies or whatever you call them. Make a few more in a few years. You don't have to be like Phillip, you don't have to abuse it. Just take what you need to live a full life."

"And what about those people, Jacob? Do you think they deserve to live the rest of their lives as vegetables just so I can avoid getting crow's feet?" Shit, this was getting horribly complicated and no fun at all.

"They'll use you if you don't use them first. They believe in prophecies here, Gail, and you're part of one of the big ones. These people are going to slaughter you without a second thought. Ask someone you trust if you don't believe me, someone who cares more about you than the future of this planet."

"I don't think I know anyone like that," I said quietly. "But I'm not going to use those people, not even if you're right."

"I didn't think you would," he said with a sad smile. "That's why I have to stay here. If you won't use people, you can't donate to me. And if I don't get regular donations, I'm a dead man."

"Sorry, Jacob." I knew the words were far from adequate, but what the hell was I supposed to say?

"I'm sorry for you too. I wouldn't want to be in your position."

"Well, you know, I'll figure it out, try to do the right thing and all that."

"Gail, you should really know exactly what could happen to you before you do something stupid and noble."

"I'll age faster, you already –"

"That's not the whole story."

"Then tell me the whole story if you're going to tell it." I was starting to wonder if Jacob was stalling for reinforcements or something. I was nervous and more than ready to be on my way, but for some reason I couldn't leave, not until I'd heard him out.

"Theresa's been with him the longest, nearly forty years. She says about twenty years ago he lost over a dozen of his people. One of the younger ones managed to free herself. She went crazy and slaughtered the people in her tent. No one knows why, maybe because she was young enough to manipulate her own energy. It never happened before, but by the time Phillip and the other people from Earth stopped her, she'd killed fifteen or sixteen others. When they finally cornered her, she chewed her own arm off and bled to death."

"Jesus," I said, horrified and...completely captivated. I was truly a product of the sicko twenty-first century.

"That next morning, Phillip didn't have a head," Jacob said.

"So he really doesn't have a head?" I felt sick again. Thank god I hadn't taken Jacob up on his offer for food or I think I would have wretched a second time.

"No one knows for sure. Some people say he doesn't have a head, some people say the smoke's a spell to hide what happened to him, that it's still there but ruined, that he's a monster. Theresa won't say. She's the only one who knows what he looked like before. I think she used to love him, but now she's just afraid. We're all afraid."

"Thanks for sharing, Jacob, now I'm afraid too," I said as I checked outside the tent again. It was still dark and silent with not so much as an armed zombie waiting to bar my way.

"You should be." Water dripped off his body as he stood up and reached for a towel to wrap around his waist. He was still a fine specimen, but his perfect body and perky ass were depressing to me now I knew what kind of life he was too afraid to leave.

"Jacob, I have to ask," I said, knowing I should just shut up and run but curiosity getting the better of me. "If you really wanted to kill yourself with me today, if you hate living with the Destroyer so much, why don't you just come with me? Maybe we can figure something out. I know I'm going to try to find a way to feed, or whatever, without hurting anyone. And if not... Not that I'd want you to even think about really drowning yourself, but I guess you could do that more easily out of the Destroyer's clutches than—"

"It's wrong to take your own life. I've spent enough time in hell while I was alive, I don't want to risk going there after," he said, his lips pressing into a thin line.

Shit, another fanatic. Or was he? I was Catholic, didn't I believe suicide was a mortal sin? At this point, I really couldn't say for sure, but I could point out the major flaw in his reasoning.

"But Jacob, it would still have been suicide if I'd killed you today."

"Not technically. Besides, if I'd died today it would have been in the middle of some of the best sex I've had in my life. That softens the blow, don't you think?" Jacob walked slowly down the steps to the tub and collapsed on the fainting couch.

I would have blushed or said thank you, but if the guy had been with the Destroyer since he was eighteen, he probably didn't have much quality sex to compare me to. And

his idea of great sex obviously wasn't mine. I liked a little more foreplay and a whole hell of a lot more control.

"I don't know." I sighed. "I guess I think I'd rather get old fast than live a life that is obviously completely miserable."

"That's because you don't get it. It's not natural, what happens, not like on Earth. You age, but you don't die right away. You turn into a monster first."

"Kind of twisted and gross and lumpy?" My throat tightened as I remembered that glimpse I thought I'd gotten of the Destroyer's lips through the smoke around his head. How long would I be able to stay the moral high ground if I started to turn into something like that?

"Hit me over the head with the candle before you leave would you?" Jacob asked, not answering my question. He didn't have to, the darkness in his eyes gave me the answer.

"No." I readied myself to dart out of the tent. Jacob was weird and he was scaring me and I had to go before he told me anything else that made me want to wet the pants I wasn't wearing.

"Gail, there are two guards outside, right beside the opening to the tent."

"There are not." I stuck my head out the tent again, making sure I looked to the extreme right and left. Crap, there *were* two zombies there, big ones. I jumped a little in surprise, but managed not to squeal.

"Leave out the back and you'll be fine, but if I scream they'll come in and capture you. They were assigned to me so I control them. If I don't scream and they don't capture you, then I'll be tortured for days for allowing you to escape. I'll still be tortured if you knock me unconscious and escape, but it won't be nearly as bad." Jacob fetched the candle from the side of the tub and held it out in my direction.

"And he's going to believe I overpowered you with this?" I asked, grunting as I took the candle from him. It weighed a ton. There's no way I'd be able to knock him out with it unless he sat down and waited patiently for me to do so. I couldn't move that quickly with anything over thirty pounds in my hands.

"I'll make him believe," Jacob said as he lay back down on the couch. "I'm an excellent liar."

"I'll bet you are," I agreed as I hurled the candle on top of his head.

It hit with a resounding thunk and burst the skin on Jacob's brow, causing a thin trail of blood to run down over his eyebrow before it veered off to trace the line of his cheekbone. His head dropped at an unnatural angle, but he didn't make a sound and I could see the rise of his chest as he continued to breathe. I wondered for a second if I'd really hurt him or if he were only pretending. I was going to ask, but then I ran instead. There wasn't any more time to worry about Jacob.

## Chapter Nineteen

Leaving out the back was not as easy as it sounded. The tent was strapped down to the ground really tightly. I couldn't just lift part of it and slide under. I had to dig into the alien grass with my bare hands, clawing and scraping until I had enough room to wiggle out.

By the time I emerged outside the tent I was sweating – despite the cold night – and filthy and beginning to wonder if I'd ever get clean and stay clean for more than a few minutes in this dimension. At least I had a nice thick towel to wipe my filthy fingers on before I got ready to get myself captured again. I couldn't just run for it, no matter how much I would like to. Garreck and friends were in this situation because I'd thought it would be nice to come chat with the headless zombie-man. I had to at least *try* to find them.

Drawing a shaky breath that did nothing to calm my nerves, I tried to imagine where I would be holding three huge warrior-like men captive if I were the Destroyer. I could see the red pavilion and the bonfire from this side of the bathing tent, but it was at least five hundred feet away. To my left and right were a few other tents of a similar size to the one I'd just left that I assumed were bathing places, as well. Thankfully, they looked deserted, so I felt relatively certain my encounter with Jacob and subsequent escape had gone unobserved.

Everyone else still seemed otherwise occupied. A little closer to the big scary tent were some smaller structures with lights glowing from the inside. Music and laughter sounded from them as well as the main pavilion. The Destroyer and his court were still distracted by their feasting or their fucking or their card games or whatever else had been on the agenda after watching me throw up and be carried off in a sheet.

"Assholes," I muttered as I eased away from the tent and into the darkness surrounding the camp.

There was nothing that looked like a place to hold prisoners on this side, best to circle around and look on the other side of the bonfire. If I remembered correctly, there were smaller, grungier looking tents over there. I was betting they housed the zombies. If I were the Destroyer, I'd keep my prisoners in the same place as my zombies – wouldn't want to disturb your guests with sounds of captives being tortured – so I felt fairly confident I was headed down the right track.

I hoped I would run into Rake somewhere in the dark. His hideout behind the burned cottage had afforded a clear view of the main tent, so he had to have seen me being carried off. Sure, I had been wrapped in a blanket, but it didn't take much imagination to figure out it was probably me in there. He should have been lurking

around the bath tent, ready to bust in for a rescue. Or at the very least been waiting for me when I managed to rescue myself.

But maybe he had heard me fucking Jacob and decided he could care less about rescuing my slutty ass? Maybe he'd trotted off to rescue Garreck instead so they could go back to the caves and drink a beer and bitch about women in general and me in particular.

"Or maybe he's been captured," I whispered to myself, hating that a part of me actually hoped he had been.

It would be easier to rescue my barbarians with some help, but if Rake had been captured then I wouldn't have to worry about why he hadn't bothered to try to save me. I didn't want to be thought of as a damsel in distress who couldn't take care of herself, but I would have tried to save him if the roles had been reversed. I probably would have only succeeded in getting myself in trouble too, but I would have at least tried.

Pushing aside distracting Rake thoughts, I tried to make my steps even quieter as I circled around the big tent. Bare feet on silky grass were pretty quiet even at a dead run, but the Destroyer had said he heard my stomach growling from outside the tent. Just in case he'd been telling the truth and did have some kind of crazy supernatural hearing, I held my breath as I passed, willing my stomach not to gurgle. Thankfully I had filled up on Jacob and wasn't nearly as hungry.

Crap, I didn't want to think about that either. Jacob had been telling the truth. I *did* eat people's energy. I'd seen the energy threads in action and I certainly felt a hell of a lot better than I did before. I felt fabulous actually, strong and swift and not even cold though it was probably about thirty degrees outside and I was wearing a towel. I felt ten times better than I had the first time I'd gobbled up Garreck's life force. Probably because I'd kept some of the energy for myself instead of spraying it out into the air to make zombies.

*Gobble up life force.* That's what I did. Eww. It was gross, but apparently true.

I was like a sexual vampire, sucking the strength from my victims. What do they call those? Succubuses? Succubi? Whatever they were called, I was basically one of them.

The realization shocked me. Shit. Was I going to grow fangs or something? Would I develop a taste for blood and ripping out people's organs? Had I really only suspected Jacob of being a sociopath organ eater because I was about to become one myself?

"Mmmph!!" I screamed against the large, rough hand that smashed down over my mouth. It muffled the sound so I didn't think anyone heard me, but my heart was beating so loudly I was sure the Destroyer could count my beats per minute.

I struggled silently as the hand pulled me back into a solid male body and another arm wrapped around my waist. I had to get away, but I couldn't afford to make too much noise. I would much rather have just one large, zombie warrior to deal with than

the Destroyer, his entire court, his legion of zombies and whatever else he decided to sic on me as punishment for escaping Jacob.

I supposed I could use my new powers of energy suckage to dispose of this zombie. Or could I only suck from my own zombies? Would I have to have sex with the zombie to suck the life out of it? Eww, the thought of more stranger sex—especially with a zombie—was almost more than I could take, prompting me to try more traditional methods of liberation.

“Dear Lady,” a familiar voice hissed into my ear as my captor lifted me off the ground and up to his mouth. “If you bite me again, I’m going to put a muzzle on you.”

“Garreck?” I whispered around my mouthful of hand, though I think it came out more like “Grrgrt”.

“Aye,” he whispered back as he gave me a quick little hug, then set me back on the ground.

When I turned around I could see he was smiling, so I guessed he was glad I wasn’t dead. I was glad he wasn’t dead too, but when I looked up into his eyes I couldn’t help but wonder what other secrets he was keeping. The easy, safe feeling I’d had around him since we met was tainted now, edged with suspicion and a hint of plain old fear.

“Where are —”

Garreck interrupted my question with a finger to his lips, then took hold of my hand and pulled me away from the camp. I’m not the best with directions, but it seemed like we were moving away from the village, in the opposite direction of the caves. Not that I wanted to run for cover before I knew that everyone was okay, but it made sense to at least start walking in the right direction.

“Where are we going?”

“Shh.”

“Where are Squire and Thomas?”

“Shh!”

“Have you seen Rake?”

“Gail, be quiet or I will make you be quiet!” he hissed with enough vehemence that I shut my mouth and followed him. I had to quit talking to keep up in any event. He wasn’t walking slowly. I had to practically run behind him, but I didn’t mind. I was just glad not to be thrown over someone’s shoulder for the umpteenth time. It wasn’t romantic or sexy and made my abdominal muscles cramp something fierce.

Over the next hill, Garreck slowed down and scanned the area around us carefully. The two moons were still bright in the sky, but only the tops of the hills were illuminated. In the darkness between the rises, it was hard to see, making me worry we were going to stumble upon some of the giant cows while they were asleep. I really wished I remembered if it was the cows that might eat my butt or the earthworms. I was getting ready to ask Garreck when a soft whistle sounded from our left.

“Over there,” Garreck whispered, guiding me toward the sound.

"He's got her," I heard someone whisper. It was a man, but I didn't think one I'd met before. Uncertainty suddenly overwhelmed me.

What if Garreck was going to turn me back over to one of the Destroyer's men as ransom for his brother? What if the Marly story had been a lie and Thomas and Squire were in on the plan to lure me to the zombie camp from the start?

"Wait a second." I heard the fear in my voice as I pulled at the hand Garreck still held tightly in his own. His hand was huge, completely consuming mine. A second ago, that had been warm and comforting. Now, I felt trapped.

"Come on, damn you," he insisted, tightening his grip on my hand and giving me a little tug. It wasn't a rough tug, but it wasn't gentle either and the lack of gentleness made me freak out in earnest.

"Let me go," I said more loudly, digging my heels into the dirt with enough force to make me fall back onto my ass when he did indeed let me go.

Ouch. Once again, on my ass in the dirt without any underwear. I was going to have to start carrying an extra pair in my purse...once I started carrying a purse.

"What's wrong with you? I have two of my men here to take you back to our camp. I'm going back to find your precious wee Rake. I thought you'd be glad of that," he said, sounding frustrated.

"Why should I trust you?" I let my own tone grow as chilly as the night wind. Frustrated with me was he? Well I was plenty frustrated with him, as well.

"Dear Lady, he got to you that fast did he? I thought better of you, wee Gail. You don't seem like the type of girl to be swayed by a fast talking, zombie making—"

"He might be lying, but so have you."

"You're mad. Tudor, take her with you, I don't have the time—"

"Why didn't you tell me about your brother?"

"What do you know about that?" he asked, his voice completely devoid of that easy, lilting humor I'd come to take for granted in the short time I'd known him.

"I'm not telling you anything until I get some answers."

"You don't deserve answers."

"Well, fuck you very much too, you assho—"

"Did you see my brother, did you see Gavin? Tell me," he yelled, grabbing me by the arms and wrenching me up until my feet dangled off the ground.

"Did I ever tell you your breath smells like raw meat?" I asked, wanting to hurt him. The look in his eye as he'd asked me about his brother told me everything I needed to know.

He would do anything to get him back, *anything*, even hand over his girlfriend, let alone a woman he'd known less than twenty-four hours. I couldn't trust him, I just couldn't. But what else could I do? Running screaming over the hills—alone, dressed in nothing more than a towel, with no place to go, no one to run to and no clue what kind

of dangers might be lurking in the dark in addition to the big scary cows—was not an option.

So I probably shouldn't have tried to piss Garreck off, but I couldn't seem to help myself. I just felt so...betrayed.

"Tell me." Garreck gave me a rough shake, rattling my teeth and hurting something more intangible inside of me. I hadn't liked him that much, right? It shouldn't hurt that he didn't care about me, that he was willing to use me to get what he wanted. But it did. It hurt a lot.

"Go fuck yourself. I'm not telling you anything." My voice was full of tears I refused to shed.

"You'll be telling me. I'll be making you tell me if—"

"Sire, please," a young male voice broke into the darkness.

Thomas. I could just make out his features in the darkness, though his face was all but hidden behind the broader shoulders of the soldier in front of him. Even in the dark he looked scared, but he'd spoken for me. It wasn't something I was going to forget and it made me think better of the kid. He might be dumb as dishwater, but at least he had the balls to call his superior officer or prince or whatever Garreck was on being an asshole.

Garreck stopped screaming into my face, but his hands actually tightened on my arms, clenching hard enough to wring a small sound of pain from my throat. Evidently, the sound triggered some scrap of decency inside of him because he dropped me. I managed to land on my feet this time and resisted the urge to clutch my bruised upper arms. He'd more than hurt my feelings, he'd nearly broken both of my arms, but I wasn't going to let him know it.

I'd never had the misfortune to spend time with a man who would use his superior strength against me. I had no idea how to act, but I figured playing it tough was my best call. Still, it was hard not to fall apart. I hadn't expected this of him, hadn't read this side of his personality on my people meter at all. It frightened me that I had let myself get intimately involved with someone violent. Add to that the fact that I was already a little worked up about the degree of force used in my encounter with Jacob and I knew there was a chance I would collapse on the grass and sob my heart out.

"Thomas, come here." Garreck voice was strange and hollow sounding, making the hairs on my arms stand on end.

Scary. He was getting *very* scary and setting off major alarm bells. I inched slowly away as Thomas reluctantly obeyed his order. I knew I couldn't run *screaming*, but I could run. And I would—at the first opportunity.

"Yes, Sire?"

"Thank you." Garreck embraced the young soldier in a tight hug. Thomas didn't say anything, but hugged him back with a vehemence that showed how much he admired the older man, even after having to call him out.

It wasn't what I'd expected. There hadn't been any bloodshed and Thomas still had both arms and legs attached. Did I still want to run? I wasn't sure, but it was pretty high on my to do list.

"I'm sorry, Gail," he said as he released Thomas, the lack of the wee before my name making the word sound odd, like it was coming from a stranger. I guess, in a way, it was. He'd never been anything but a stranger. I'd been a fool to think otherwise. The Destroyer was right. Only an idiot would call someone a friend because they gave great head and gave you ridiculous nicknames.

"I don't know if you'll ever forgive me, but you have to believe I'm sorry," Garreck continued, growing eye-of-the-storm still. I was just getting around to wondering why those words sounded like an apology when his arm swung out, lobbing Thomas up side the head with enough force to send the younger man sailing a few feet into the air.

Thomas landed in the grass without so much as a grunt, only the heavy thud I now knew a limp body made when it made contact with the earth.

"Tudor, take him back to the camp. He's not going to be as useful as I thought."

"Leave him, Sire. You and I together can more than manage the deed."

"No, Tudor, I shouldn't have asked this of either of you. I'll do the thing myself and it will be only me they can bl—"

"Sire!" Tudor interrupted as he caught sight of me hauling ass over the hills. I had no idea if he pointed when he said it or how long it took for them to take chase because I was really, really, moving my tail, not even thinking about wasting a second to look back over my shoulder.

I didn't know what "deed" or "thing" they were talking about, but it didn't sound good and for all I knew, I had just watched Garreck kill one of his own men. Thomas wasn't moving. Even if he'd just knocked the boy unconscious, it was still a heartless, violent act. Who knew what he had planned for me? I wasn't dumb enough to stick around and find out.

"Stop it, you'll ruin it all if you run back in there alone," Garreck whispered from behind me, sounding far closer than I would have preferred.

Fuck him. I wasn't running back *in* anywhere. I was running *away* from the Destroyer, *away* from the mountain hideout, *away* from him and his camp of barbarians, out into the green hills. At this point, the unknown had to be better than any of the alternatives. Everyone was lying. Everyone was suspect. All I wanted to do was get far away from the lot of them and hole up somewhere and shiver uncontrollably.

*What about Rake? You don't know for certain –*

"Shut up," I whispered to my thoughts. I didn't have time to worry about Rake, about whether or not he was a conspirator or an innocent victim. Either way, I couldn't cut his dick off or help rescue him until I escaped from Garreck. I needed to develop some excellent track and field skills and I needed them quick.

"Unfph," I grunted as Garreck tackled me to the ground. Thank god the full weight of his body didn't hit me, but even the smack of his large hand was enough to send me flailing. The wind was knocked from my body, I ate a mouth full of dirt and my teeth hurt. If the bastard made me lose a tooth in a dimension-planet I wasn't sure had modern dentistry, I was really going to kill him. For real. With a knife or a very sharp stick or a blunt stick – whatever would hurt more.

"Come here to me," he demanded. He didn't even sound like himself anymore, he sounded completely out of his mind. I wondered if they had multiple personality disorders in Here and kind of prayed they did. Maybe his "sweet barbarian" personality would raise its head long enough for me to wiggle away and flee into the night...but I wasn't going to hold my breath.

"No!" I scratched my nails down the arm latched onto my calf. He was still lying on the ground and so was I, but I'd very quickly be back on my feet if he'd turn loose. I couldn't breathe and I hurt all over, but the adrenaline in my body was making me feel stronger and faster than ever.

Or maybe it wasn't adrenaline. Maybe it was something else, energy derived from a new and unique source. There was only one way to find out.

"You'll not escape this. It is written, I'm only doing what must be – Ahh!" Garreck's voice broke off in a wail as his arm was suddenly ripped to shreds. My mind rebelled against what I saw and I almost stopped fighting. But Garreck was like a man possessed, only releasing me when I snapped something white and fatty-looking deep in his arm with my new claws.

Only they weren't claws, they were just my hands. My hands, but with a weird light shining from the tips, a light that traveled to me down all those little threads and channeled itself into my digging fingers. My zombies had turned me into a killing machine with energy razor blades for nails. Not what I'd been expecting – not at all.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod," I muttered as I ripped my hands away from him and hauled myself to my feet. But I couldn't seem to pull my eyes away from the shredded and bloody flesh of Garreck's arm, even though he was already up and moving toward me, clutching the dripping wound to his chest.

"It is written," he muttered as he approached, a little unsteady on his feet but as relentless as any good Hollywood psychopath. He was terrifying, his eyes glazed over and his arm bleeding profusely enough that I wondered if it might prove fatal. Blood loss killed. Was I going to be responsible for killing Garreck twice in the same day?

Or was he going to kill me first?

"Stop!" I ran backward, fell on my butt, scrambled back to my feet and started running again, tearing through a forest of my own energy. All around me, the night glowed with little neon strands of light. I could see the threads to my zombies so clearly now, could feel the energy surging toward me, wanting to fill me with whatever I needed.

"Gail," Garreck called, a pathetic cry that almost made me turn my head to look back at him. But I couldn't. He was too close. I couldn't stop, couldn't look back. I needed to run. *Fast*. I had to get as far away from Garreck and what I'd done to him—not to mention what he wanted to do to me—as possible.

It was like thinking about running was all I needed to do. In seconds, my feet were flying over the ground at inhuman speed, my bare toes barely touching the ground. I was doing the Rake run, moving so quickly I thought for a second I might take flight, but I didn't. I just ran and ran and ran until the red sun started to peek over the horizon.

I'd never been so glad to see a sun, regardless of the color, in my life. It made me feel safe, warm and finally able to quit running. I'd left Garreck far behind ages ago, had been running well over an hour. Still, I hadn't felt safe. I hadn't wanted to stop moving and come to terms with my new situation, but I had to stop sometime. Running didn't solve any problems, especially when you had nowhere to run to.

I stopped as abruptly as I'd started, standing stock still in the middle of a landscape that seemed strange even after growing accustomed to all those softly rolling hills. It was still grassy, but flat as a pancake, stretching out in all directions, making me feel horribly exposed.

"Umph." I sat down on the ground—hard. It was more like my knees buckled than any conscious decision, but I decided I was okay with it. At least I was hidden this way, my head barely showing above the tall, waving grass.

I fell over onto my side with a sigh. Who would have ever thought I'd be grateful for the chance to lay my body down on the dirt, wearing nothing but a red towel-toga, with my hands still bloody past my wrists from clawing my way through the living flesh of another human being?

I looked down at my hands. The sight of the blood growing black beneath my fingernails was all it took. I let my weary conscious mind fall head first into a hard sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I was lying on my stomach on a hard table, still wearing a towel, but not a red one. It was a little white towel wrapped around my body just above my breasts, like the kind they give you at the spa before you go in for a massage. I could feel the Velcro closure between my shoulder blades.*

*"Just take a deep breath," a rumbling male voice said as two warm, strong hands were laid gently on the skin of my shoulders. "Keep your eyes closed."*

*"Okay." My voice was breathy, as if I knew we were both here for more than a therapeutic treatment.*

*I've never had a male masseuse, never wanted one. I can't divorce the sexual awareness of a male creature enough to totally relax and relaxation is what I'm after when I pay someone to rub me, not stimulation.*

*But I was definitely stimulated now, my entire body breathless, filled with anticipation. Where was he going to touch me next? Would he simply rub my shoulders or would he slide those hands up my calves, past my thighs, up under the towel to where I was already hot and wet and ready? What exactly was he going to do to me on this table?*

*Whatever it was, I couldn't wait. I was already trembling, longing for it.*

*"I'm going to remove the towel."*

*"Okay," I said, trying not to let the words come out as a moan.*

*The cool air made my skin prickle, but my shiver wasn't due to the cold. I could feel his eyes on my body, feel his gaze taking in my bare ass, appreciating the way the fullness of my breasts smashed against the table and rounded outward. I'd never had my hands stretched out above my head during a massage before, but I was glad I did now. I wanted him to look at me, wanted him to maybe slip one of those warm hands beneath my body and tease my nipples the way his fingers were teasing the knotted muscles of my shoulders.*

*"What do you want?" One hand smoothed down to the small of my back until it rested possessively on the upward swell of flesh that marked the place where back becomes bottom.*

*"You know what I want." I gasped when his other hand tangled in my hair and fisted there, claiming me even more thoroughly. I almost opened my eyes then, the temptation to roll my gaze back to look at him nearly overwhelming, but I didn't. For some reason I knew he'd stop if I opened my eyes and I really didn't want him to stop.*

*"Tell me."*

*"I want you."*

*"How do you want me?" he asked as he removed both of his hands from my body. I was about to protest when I felt the warmth of his palms on either sides of my torso even with my breasts. I thought maybe he'd touch me there, as I'd hoped he would. My nipples tightened painfully with eagerness, but then I heard the table groan as he added his weight to my own.*

*"Do you want it like this?" He lowered his body heat down on top of me. He was doing a pushup over my body, bending his arms just enough so that his muscled chest trembled against my shoulder blades and his thick cock nestled into the cleft of my ass. "Do you want me to fuck you from behind, spread you and fuck you, without ever seeing my face?"*

*"I've seen your face," I whispered, arching my ass back against him, rocking my hips so my tailbone slid up and down his cock. I wanted him so badly, wanted to reach back and urge his swollen length lower, down between my legs and then up into my slickness. I wanted to feel him ram himself inside of me, hard and fast and fearless.*

*"Are you sure about that?" His voice caught as he found my rhythm, fucking the valley of my cheeks.*

*At one point he dipped low enough to tease the entry to my anus and I cried out, not because I was afraid, but because I wanted him there too. If I couldn't have him in my pussy, I'd take him in my ass. I'd never even thought of doing something like that before, never thought of anal intercourse as anything but gross. But by the way my flesh puckered and ached I knew I wouldn't think twice if he were to use a finger to spread my juices across that untried place and then ease himself inside.*

*"Rake, please," I moaned, my breath coming faster as I bent my arms and brought my palms on top of his.*

*"Please what, baby?" His fingers tangled with mine, showing me how desperately he wanted this, as much as I did if not more.*

*"Fuck me, however you want to fuck me, just fuck me."*

*He answered with a growl as he pulled his hands and cock away from me, looping his arm around my waist and pulling my hips up so I was presenting my pussy for him. It was just like the image I'd had of us, him kneeling behind me while I arched up toward him, my hips wiggling as I displayed my slick heat for him, showing him I was practically dripping with want.*

*Then his hands were digging into my hips, stilling me long enough for the head of his cock to tease at my entry. Slowly he worked me up and down the tip of his cock, moving my hips, not his, so that my nipples brushed back and forth against the rough fabric of the table, building my desire to an even more feverish pitch.*

*"Oh, god, ohgod."*

*"Do you want me to touch your clit?" he asked as he started to thrust his own hips, gradually coming deeper and deeper until my body came to accept the full length of his sizeable cock.*

*I sighed in response since he was already moving one hand under my body, sliding a warm palm over my belly before he found his way through the nest of springy hairs to my throbbing clit. He applied pressure to the swollen nub that was perfectly, blissfully torturous, just enough to ratchet up the tension in my body to the next level, but not enough to bring release.*

*"Where else do you want me to touch you?" There was a naughty lilt to his voice as his other hand came to tease where our bodies were joined. He stroked the tight skin around my entry and then started to fuck me through his own fingers before his cock disappeared into me, all while stroking my progressively slick and aching clit.*

*"Rake!" I cried out as I realized what he was going to do next, but it was too late to pretend modesty or reluctance. Hadn't I said I would take him like this, that a part of me wanted his cock in my ass? Why should I mind if one of those slick fingers started to press inside?*

*"Relax," he commanded as the blunt tip of his finger penetrated my anus, the slickness he'd taken from our bodies easing the way.*

*And relax I did, relax into the fullness of my body, into the exquisite double penetration of his thick cock and his probing finger, into the fingers that were gently plucking at my clit, quickly taking me over the edge.*

*"Open your eyes, open them when you come," he cried out as I started to spasm, my pussy clenching down hard around his still thrusting cock.*

*My eyes flew open, but before I could try to turn my head, I saw the mirror. A wall-sized reflection of Rake fucking me met my gaze. I saw the clenching of his abdominal muscles as he thrust into me with a sinuous grace, saw my own body spread out on the table, my hips up, but my torso smashed to the table, a look of orgasmic bliss twisting my face into something foreign and primal, yet strangely beautiful.*

Meeting my own eyes was so startlingly intimate I came again. I screamed and twisted as a second, shattering orgasm claimed my body. I couldn't help but close my eyes against the explosion of pleasure. Seconds later, I heard Rake's cry join my own and felt his rhythm falter as his pleasure threatened to overtake him. I thought he would come then, expected to feel his pace increase until he shattered inside of me, but instead he slowed, then stilled inside of me. Suddenly, something in the air seemed different.

I held my breath, strangely anxious about what he would say next. Would he mock me for displaying my desire so openly? I never would have dreamed he would, but the silence was fraught with unspoken things. When he finally did speak, he sounded different somehow, older, harder.

"I want to come inside you."

"Come," I moaned as I arched back into his cock with a sigh of relief, my eyes still closed and my voice hoarse from the pleasure that had turned my body into a ripe, throbbing mass of pure sensation. I wiggled against him, desperate to give him pleasure, to put away the strange anxiety that had filled our intimate little world for a few desperate moments.

"I want to come in your ass." He pulled out of my pussy and the finger withdrawn from my ass was replaced by the head of his cock.

"Oh!" I cried out as he began to push inside. I felt my body stretching to accommodate him, but I was suddenly afraid.

"Relax, let me in," he commanded. I did as he asked, letting my entire body become limp, my hips drop to the table and all the fight vanish from my muscles. And then his cock was pushing slowly, slowly all the way into me.

"I don't know, I don't know," I whispered, feeling entirely overwhelmed by what was happening between us and afraid to open my eyes again. This was not what I had expected from Rake. I didn't know how to handle it or how mind numbingly arousing I found it.

"You do know, you love my cock in your ass."

I only whimpered in response, struggling not to tense up as one of his hands turned my head roughly to one side with his fist in my hair and then slipped under my chest to twist my nipple.

"Tell me," he growled, his voice filled with a trace of violence I didn't understand. "Tell me how you like my cock in your ass."

"Stop, please," I begged, though I didn't really know if that's what I wanted or not. The surety and deep comfort I'd felt whenever Rake touched me had faded, but there was a different kind of excitement in the air. It was almost as if he was a different man, a more dangerous man who turned me on in an entirely different way. His voice still sounded the same, but his energy was completely different, foreign.

For a second the phenomenon reminded me of Garreck, of how he had changed from the gentle giant I had known into a man intent on sacrificing me to whatever cause had made him passionate enough to cling to my leg even when I tore open his skin with my bare hands.

"Wait," I breathed, the thought of Garreck almost enough to scare me out of this strange, yet incredibly erotic, submissive place in which I'd found myself.

*"You don't want me to stop," Rake said, his cock thrusting impossibly deeper with a sharp movement of his hips.*

*I cried out then, half in pain, half in horrible, shameful pleasure and he took that moment to claim my lips, to suck my tongue into his mouth until something deep in my throat started to hurt.*

*"I'm going to come in your ass. Then I'm going to wait until I'm hard again and you're going to clean me with your mouth." He broke off the near painful kiss and started to fuck me with progressively hard thrusts.*

*The painful pleasure of feeling him using my body began to sour as I realized he meant those words he'd just uttered more than any sweet thing he'd ever said to me. I felt tears begin to form behind my closed eyes as I realized this was no game, this wasn't a sexual fantasy for the two of us, it was a way for him to hurt me. Him helping me discover this different side of pleasure wasn't for our mutual benefit. He wanted to make me feel small and dirty and ashamed and suddenly I was.*

*I started to cry silently, feeling like my heart was breaking. It was more than the betrayal of a lover, it was the betrayal of a friend, the last friend I'd thought I could still hope to come to my rescue. But he didn't care for me. I could hear him laughing as I started to tear and I knew I hated him more than I would ever hate any person or thing for the rest of my life.*

*"Gail wake up," came another, distant voice through the misty, humid air of my massage room turned sexual deviants' torture chamber. "Open your eyes."*

*"I can't, I can't," I muttered. I didn't want to see my reflection in the mirror, didn't want to see the face of a man I'd half loved twisted with hate as he brutalized my body.*

*"You have to. It's just a dream. Open your eyes, Gail. Open them! Come back to me!" the voice screamed, breaking through my fear.*

*It was Rake begging me to come back to him, Rake's voice floating from some far away place.*

*Which meant that whoever was on top of me right now, with his cock inside me and words of hate on his lips, wasn't Rake.*

*My eyes flew open and a scream soon followed as I saw him in the reflection. The mist wasn't swirling around him any more and I suddenly knew what the man known as the Destroyer looked like without anything to conceal the horror that had been a human face. The dreadfulness of it was enough to make more than my mind's eye fly open, but my real life eyes as well.*

*"Oh my god, oh my god," I cried out as my eyes flew open. I felt the dirt under my cheek, heard the hum of foreign insects filling the air and saw Rake crouched down in front of me on his hands and knees, face nearly kissing the ground to be on my level.*

*"Are you okay, Gail? Gail, can you hear me?" Rake's voice was tight with fear and his eyes strangely damp around the edges. Why was he crying? What had happened?*

*I wanted to answer, to tell him everything was okay, but for some reason I couldn't make my mouth move, couldn't seem to draw a deep breath. It wasn't like the dream in the bathing tent, waking up didn't banish the horror of immobility. Every inch of me still felt numb and wooden, incapable of softening even that slight amount it would*

take for me to speak again, to blink. I knew if I did then I would remember whatever it was my mind had demanded I forget.

"Oh no," I whispered as memory started to return. My eyes darted around madly, searching for any sign of Him, of the man who was quickly becoming my scariest living nightmare.

But there was no room, no massage table, no humid air, no horrible face. I was lying outside in the tall grass, on my side in the fading sunlight, curled into the tightest fetal position imaginable. My body was sour with the sweat of terror and shame, but I was safe. Wasn't I?

I shivered and felt my breath catch in my throat as I struggled to convince my terror-numbed mind to do a quick scan of the situation. My red towel was still in place and my body, though somewhat battered and bruised from my scuffle with Garreck, was blissfully inviolate. I was okay, my flesh and bones were unhurt, no real damage done to my physical body.

Too bad I couldn't say the same for my mind.

## Chapter Twenty

Night fell. Rake built a fire, found water from somewhere and heated it with herbs from a pouch around his neck. I didn't remember seeing the pouch before, but I didn't remember those robes either. He'd certainly never worn anything like the flowing gray Obi Wan Kanobi thing in my presence before. But I guess I liked it. It made him seem less threatening, almost monk-like.

He didn't look like a man who would hurt me, but I was still tense and nervous. I couldn't seem to help myself. Logically knowing it hadn't been Rake and I on that massage table in the horrifically lifelike dream didn't help. I felt like crying again as I wondered if I would ever be able to relax and take comfort from the man again.

"You should drink this." He held out half of a giant walnut shell filled with sweet, grassy smelling water.

"I'm not thirsty."

"It doesn't matter if you feel thirsty, you're probably dehydrated."

"That looks like a walnut shell. I'm allergic to walnuts."

"It's not a walnut shell. Here doesn't have walnuts. It's a kind of legume. Kind of like a peanut, but sweeter."

"Is that what you're smashing?" I asked, gesturing toward the smooth stone where he'd been grinding something brown and pulpy looking into a bunch of mush. Now that I suspected it might be peanut butter, I was a little bit more interested.

Food still wasn't sounding appealing, but I do love peanut butter. It makes me feel safe. I guess it reminds me of school lunch and long summer bike rides with my brothers.

"We call them Giant Groundbeans," he said with a nod, still holding out the steaming drink. "They don't grow on Earth anymore."

"So now we're admitting this isn't Earth." I took the shell from his hands and huddled around it. I didn't want to drink it, but the warmth felt good. As night had fallen on this prairie, or whatever you would call it, it had turned cold. I could see my breath puff white on the air.

"Gail—"

"Don't lie to me, Rake, please. I don't think I can handle any more lies. I already feel like I'm about to lose my mind." I shivered, not from the cold, but from the effort it took to hold myself together.

"We never should have gone into that camp. I should have forced you to stay in the caves, tied you to a chair and let you hate me. At least then you'd be safe," Rake said with unexpected vehemence before he sprung to his feet to pace in front of the fire.

Since I'd awoken from the horrible dream, he'd been very quiet and controlled. He seemed afraid to speak too loudly for fear I might retreat back into the terrified place in my mind he'd barely coaxed me from the first time. It had taken what seemed like hours for me to discover speech again and then several more hours before I could be persuaded to move my stiff body from my fetal position. It actually encouraged me to see him losing control of his emotions. I must be looking slightly less traumatized.

"That's another lie, Rake. I wouldn't have been safe in those caves, not after what I did. Would I?" I held my breath as he stopped moving and stood absolutely still, his eyes gazing blankly out into the darkness.

If he didn't tell me the truth now, if he didn't start letting me on the secrets everyone had been keeping, then there was no one I could trust. I would have to lose him at the first opportunity and go off on my own. I had been grateful he'd been able to follow the energy trail I'd left behind when I'd fled. But wandering the prairies of Here on my own and gradually starving to death seemed preferable to waiting around for Rake to betray me, to turn me over to the Destroyer or the Protectors or the angry family members of my zombies.

"You're right. You wouldn't have been. I would have tried. I thought there could still be a chance," Rake said softly, his voice growing progressively softer until it was absorbed into the absolute darkness surrounding our little campfire.

There were no moons tonight, no stars, not even a twinkle of light through the clouds. The utter darkness was enough to make me wonder if I was still in a dream, trapped in some corner of my own mind. If I hadn't seen the sun set with my own eyes, I think I would have had a much harder time coming back from the edge. Still, sunrise couldn't come soon enough. I was as close to the light of the fire as I could get without being burned. Darkness had never been a friend of mine and that was true now more than ever.

"A chance of what?" I asked.

"I thought if we could bring them back, then we could prove the prophecy wrong. Or at least prove you weren't the one they'd been waiting for. And I guess I wasn't sure anyone was still waiting. It's been so long and nothing in that stupid book—"

"Rake?"

"Yes?"

"Would you look at me?" I felt something loosen in my chest when he did, when I saw the genuine torment in his eyes.

"Are you okay?"

"I just needed to see your face."

"I'm sorry," he said, moving around the fire and slowly sinking down to sit beside me, close enough I could reach out and take his hand, but not near enough for our crossed legs to touch.

"You don't have to be sorry, just make it better."

"I don't know if I can," he said, his hand twitching where it lay against his thigh, as if he wanted to reach out to me, but thought better of it.

"Yes you can. Ignorance is not bliss, Rake."

"I know, but —"

"But what?"

"I'm one of the only people who can read the mirror, Gail. Do you know what that means?"

"No, Rake, I don't know what anything means, don't you understand! I don't get this place, this world, anything." I wanted to slap some sense into him, which made me feel better than any cup of hot tea. Anger was good, anger was a step in the right direction, away from being traumatized.

"Don't get upset."

"I'm already upset, I don't have to *get* that way."

"Okay, okay. I read the mirror, only five or six people on this side of the planet can do that. That means I was expected to spend all my time watching. Watching Earth, watching people in another dimension or another world, instead of living my own life, trying to figure out what mirror makers are doing and how we could divorce ourselves from them. Before you came, I hadn't had a day off in over one hundred suns. I don't have a life, Gail. I don't have friends, I don't see my family, hardly ever, except for Railyn. I'm either healing people or watching that stupid mirror, spying on people I will probably never meet."

"You met me."

"I know I did and it blew me away. I'd been watching you for so long. At first because you were Marly's mirror maker, but then, just because you were...you."

"You're like a perverted stalker."

"A very nice perverted stalker, who cared about you. Who still cares about you. You've been more real to me than most of the people I see every day, don't you understand?"

"I guess. But Rake, that's like the old Cuban ladies who spend all day watching soap operas and talk about the actors' characters like they're real people. It's weird and...sad."

"Maybe so, I'm not saying it isn't. The only reason I even mentioned it is so you can see where I'm coming from. I spent most of my time at the mirror, I was expected to do so by everyone because I was one of the few people who could. But because of that, I don't feel connected to my own world. Your world is more real to me and so gradually, I guess I started to forget things."

"Things like?"

"My own people, my own culture. I remembered what Railyn and I had been taught as children, but I just couldn't believe anyone still bought those stories. They

were myths to me, hardly believable, let alone something that would convince hundreds of rational people to try to sacrifice an innocent woman they hardly knew."

"Sacrifice me, you mean. Is that what Garreck was going to do?"

"Did he hurt you?" Rake's jaw clenched and his eyes held the threat of murder.

"I think he would have. That was his blood you cleaned from my fingernails."

"Did you kill him?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You should have. I should have done it for you, months ago, but no one else saw, no one believed. But I was there the day Marly came back from the Destroyer's camp and there was something changed in Garreck. He seemed to be the same man he'd always been, but there were times when his mind was not his own."

"You mean he only recently turned into a evil schizophrenic murdering asshole?"

"No, he was always an asshole, but the evil part is new. I think the Destroyer got to him somehow. I think he owns a part of Garreck's mind and uses it when it fits his purpose."

"Do you think the Destroyer owns part of my mind?" I asked quietly, shivering, torn between retreating to my fetal position on the ground and closing the distance between Rake and I and curling into his strong body.

"No, Gail. No, of course not." Rake put his arm gently around my shoulders, as if he knew how much I'd been craving some kind of comfort.

"Then why was the dream so real?"

"I don't know, but you pulled yourself out of it. You woke up and if even a part of you belonged to him, you wouldn't have been able to do that."

"Is that what's it's like for the zombies, for my zombies too? Is it like some horrible nightmare?" I shivered harder, my stomach clenching painfully around the single sip of tea I'd taken.

"I'm not sure." Rake's voice sounded as tormented as I felt.

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

"You don't take pleasure from hurting people."

"No, I don't."

"So, I wouldn't think the people in your control are suffering, but I can't honestly say for certain. I've never been in either position. Everything is guesswork."

"But Earth people need zombies right? Need the energy to feed on or they die?"

"Is that what he told you?" Rake looked shocked.

"Yes, he said we'd age faster and one of his followers told me we turn into monsters first," I said, not wanting to think of Jacob and his hopeless eyes or what we'd done together.

"That happens, Gail, but only to one in five hundred Earth people. It's incredibly rare. That's why the Destroyer has so few Earth followers. If it happened to—"

"But it *does* happen!"

"Yes, but —"

"So, don't act so shocked! It does happen and —"

"It does, but it's...how do I explain? Back on Earth women have a one in seven chance of getting breast cancer right?"

"Um, something like that."

"So, did you spend your life on Earth living in fear of being one of the one in seven?"

"No. Okay, I get it...but I'm only the second person to be able to make zombies, right? So it makes sense I would be like him."

"That we know of, yes, but it's different Gail. You came here like most Earth people, accidentally."

"The Destroyer didn't? His name is Phillip, by the way."

"He doesn't deserve a proper name."

"No, he doesn't," I agreed, though a part of me thought calling him by a nice, ordinary name would take away some of his power, at least in other people's minds.

"He chose to come here, arrived through a portal from a third dimension or a third planet, we're not entirely sure. No one was lying about that. The most popular, widely believed theory is that Here is an alternate Earth reality, one of many. We're aware of other realities, however, as well as other planets, but we don't believe ourselves to be a separate planet from Earth. Does that make sense?"

"No."

"No one has ever landed on Here in a spaceship. They just appear through portals, weak places where it seems the two realities are more closely connected. That's why we don't think we're a different world."

"That makes more sense. Do you guys even have spaceships?"

"No one has ever tried to make one. It's against the law to create machines that feed on anything but renewable resources."

"So no cars?"

"No cars, but in the cities there are several transportation modules, kind of like subway trains, but they run on group energy."

"Hmmm. I would ask what group energy is, but I'm already overwhelmed."

"Me too." Rake laughed and hugged me closer to his side. I felt a smile twitch at the edges of my lips. God, I was almost smiling again. Two hours ago, I wouldn't have thought it possible.

"I like your new outfit," I said as I snuggled closer to Rake and wrapped an arm around him, inhaling his comforting, sensual smell and feeling ridiculously grateful to have him here with me.

"Thanks, but it's not mine. I stole it, but that's the good thing about robes, one size fits all."

"You stole? Isn't that against the law?"

"It is, but it's also against the law to take anyone into Protector custody against their will. As soon as you went into the Destroyer's tent, Squire and Thomas showed up at our little hiding place, encouraging me to go with them. They didn't take it well when I wasn't in the mood to be so encouraged."

"So it was a trap?"

"All I know is that I started to struggle and Squire hit me over the head. When I woke up, I was in their camp, being tended by their resident healer. Garreck, Squire and Thomas were nowhere to be found. I overpowered the healer, stole his robes and ran from the camp."

"Those bastards. How could they have done that? It was my idea to go, they acted like they were scared shitless."

"Garreck's always been very good at manipulating circumstances to his own advantage. But I should have known better, I should never have let you go."

"Rake, you don't have any control over me. You're not my boss or my —"

"Or even your boyfriend, I know, you've mentioned that several times," he sighed, his body stiffening slightly.

"But that doesn't mean I don't care about you or respect your advice," I heard myself saying, amazed at my sudden maturity. I was thirty-two years old and should have matured a long time ago, but I felt like I'd grown up more in the past twenty-four hours than the past ten years. "If you're just honest with me, I'll listen to anything you have to say and think seriously before I do something you don't think is wise."

"Really?" His body softened as he cupped my chin and tipped my face up to his. "Who are you? Is this really Gail Terril?"

"Rake?" I whispered, momentarily lost in the way our breaths mingled together, creating a cloud of white between our faces, a strangely intimate phenomenon.

"Yes," he said, his eyes full of more caring than our brief history could have rationally inspired. But I guess some things aren't rational, like fear and love and probably other things I couldn't think of at the moment.

Did I *love* this man? It didn't seem possible, but I couldn't deny I wanted to tell him everything, cling to him, stand next to him for whatever came next.

"It was you in the dream. He made himself look like you, sound like you. We were —"

"You don't have to talk about it."

"I don't want to talk about it. I want to do something about it," I whispered, closing the distance between us and brushing my lips softly across his, not at all surprised by the tightness in my chest. I had feelings for this man, feelings that went beyond any other person in this dimension or my own. Feelings always made my heart hurt.

That's what happens when you tax a little used muscle, I suppose.

We sat there for what seemed like hours, our lips playing slowly, softly, occasionally reaching out to trace the line of the other's mouth with a tentative tongue or gently suckling a full bottom lip. But his arms didn't tighten around me or mine around him. It was as if we were both holding our breath, unable to believe we were really going to have the chance to share an uninterrupted moment.

"I would never hurt you," Rake finally whispered against my lips, his breath ragged with a need I fully understood. If someone had told me three hours ago I'd be ready to beg Rake to lift up my towel, I would have called them a liar. I guess it just goes to show the power of lust with a little love and trust thrown in.

"I know you wouldn't." I shifted to my knees beside him, never breaking the teasing contact of our lips or tongues as I reached up to my shoulder and untied the knot in the towel, letting it fall to the ground.

"You're so beautiful, Gail. You don't know how many times I dreamed of you like this." His expression was almost pained as he reached out, trailing his fingers down the side of my neck, over my bare shoulder, down my arm to my fingertips. I shivered as he took my hand, but it wasn't from the cold. I didn't seem to feel cold in the same way anymore, but I did feel his eyes on my bare skin.

"Let's not talk about dreams."

"No, let's not," he agreed, coming to his knees beside me and looping his arms loosely under my own. With the slightest feather of a touch his hand played down the hollow of my spine, down to where the flesh started to curve. I closed my eyes and sighed, expecting him to cup my ass in his strong hands and pull me close to the hard, comforting wall of his body.

"Please, touch me," I said, when his hands parted just above my bottom, smoothing around the sides of my hips to tease along my stomach. "I want you to touch me."

"I'm going to touch you, everywhere," Rake said, a slightly evil look in his eye as he moved one hand up to cup my heavy breast and flicked a gentle thumb over where I was already drawn tight. I gasped at the sensation and the shockwave that shot down between my legs and back again in response to the sweep of his calloused hand. "But I don't want to rush it, now that I finally have you safe and all to myself."

"Rake, I—" I started to protest—half thinking to tell him what I'd done with Jacob, to ask his forgiveness or something completely ridiculous. But then he whipped his long robes up and over his head and I lost the ability to form words.

He was even more stunning than I remembered. The firelight traced each one of his perfectly shaped muscles and turned his skin into something almost holy to behold. His pale, chiseled body caressed by the red orange flame, suddenly made me feel as if I were in some ancient temple, a foreign, primal place where the statues came to life to perform the rites of fertility.

"You're so pretty." My voice caught and the sting of unshed tears pricked behind my eyes.

"Nothing compared to you." His eyes were dark with the promise of everything we were going to do together as he spread his robes on the dirt and reached out to take my hand. "But I prefer studly."

"You're crazy," I said with a laugh that was half sob, half snort. "I can't believe I'm crying because you're so studly."

"You're not crying because of that," he said as he softly lay me down and lengthened his body on top of mine. I gasped again as the crisp hairs on his chest brushed ever so lightly across my nipples and the swollen length of his erection made gentle, heavy promises against my thigh. "You're crying because we're finally going to make love, just like you knew we would."

"Rake I—"

"Gail, you knew it would be like this, but you don't have to say the words." He brushed his lips softly, firmly against mine, drawing a low moan from my throat as he demanded I part my lips. I let his tongue claim my mouth, let him suckle and bite and do all those amazing things he could do with just a kiss.

"I'm not a chicken," I said as he kissed down the length of my throat, pausing to drag his teeth softly over my jaw, a subtle bit of foreplay that made me lose my breath and a rush of heat flow between my already slick thighs.

"I know you're not." His lips continued on their path, hovering over my breasts as his hands gently pushed them together. The twin rosy buds of my nipples seemed to strain toward his mouth with a mind of their own.

I cried out, arching into his caress as he let his tongue sweep over the tight, sensitive flesh, back and forth from one aching nub to the other until I was writhing beneath him, sliding my thighs against each other in an effort to calm the burning need, to add some small bit of friction.

Just when I was sure the torture of his tongue couldn't get any more pleasurable, he paused and took one nipple into his mouth, sucking with deep, rhythmic pulls. I screamed out into the darkness, headless of what creature might hear. I let my nails dig into his shoulders, my hips lift demandingly into his and thought about begging for him to fuck me when he quit his sucking long enough to capture my tight, aching, too sensitive flesh in his teeth and bite down.

"Rake!" Every nerve ending in my body cried out in anticipation. I was about to shatter into a million pieces without so much as a single caress between my legs. Amazing, but I didn't want it that way. I wanted him inside me, needed to feel connected to Rake through the shared pleasure of our bodies moving against each other, inside each other.

"God, Gail, I can smell how wet you are," Rake breathed against my breast, his breath as ragged as my own. His hands tightened around my ribs, his muscles trembling as he fought for control.

"Make love to me, please. I want to feel you inside me." I twined my fingers in his soft hair and tugged.

"I wanted to take longer." He planted hurried kisses down my stomach, swirled his tongue in my navel while his hands dug into my thighs. "I wanted to taste you."

"Later, please, I need —"

I lost all ability to protest, however, as he spread my legs with strong hands, groaning as if my drenched pussy were the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. I looked down in time to see the tenderness and hunger mixing on his face before he was kissing me, devouring me, his tongue lapping up my juices, delving into my aching center, swirling up to tease my clit into a state of near complete ecstasy again and again. But still, I refused to let myself succumb. I wanted his cock in me when I came. I wanted to feel him losing himself inside of me.

"Rake, fuck me. Please, now."

"Dear Lady, Gail," he moaned between my legs, the vibration of his drunken words against my clit almost enough to send me spiraling into bliss. "I can't get enough of you."

Then he spread me even wider, lewdly wide, baring every inch of flesh between my legs to his mouth, his fingers. First one finger, then two, shoved deep into my pussy, penetrating me with an insistent rhythm that soon had me panting for breath. I writhed beneath him, but Rake held me with one strong hand, pinning me in place, forcing me to hold still as his tongue returned to my clit, flicking back and forth, teasing until my vision blurred with the effort of fighting my own release.

"Now, please," I pleaded, praying he could hear how much I needed him in my tightly strung words.

"I want you to come. Come for me," he demanded, intensifying his pressure on my clit as his fingers fucked me, harder, deeper, building the tension in my womb. I trembled beneath him, every nerve ending tingling with bliss. I was so close, so near the edge, I knew I wouldn't be able to hold back much longer.

I was cresting the wave, ready to break into a million pieces when Rake did the one thing I would have asked him not to if he had bothered with requesting permission beforehand.

As his thumb pushed into my ass, I tensed, wishing I had dared to share with him the worst part of the dream, that I had warned him not to do this one, intimate thing. But now, it was too late. For a second the feelings of being violated rushed back with a vengeance, making tears spring to my eyes and my breath catch on a sob.

But then, amazingly, my body responded in a way I never would have dreamed. As Rake fucked me with fingers and thumb, the feeling of fullness became pleasurable, then more than merely pleasurable, the ecstasy vibrating through my every cell banishing any fear or shame to the far reaches of my mind.

The orgasm that crashed over me a second later was so fierce it wrung the very soul from my body and then summoned it home again, back to dance beneath the talented hands of the only man who had ever made me feel so wonderfully complete.

"I love you." His mouth came back to mine, mumbling against my lips. I tasted my salty heat on his lips and felt his throbbing length begin to tunnel inside where I was more than prepared to take him. I knew I wasn't going to have a problem forgetting the horrible dream, or the Destroyer masquerading as Rake. There was only one Rake and he would never hurt me, not in a million years, in any dimension or planet.

"I love you too." I half cried, half laughed the words into his mouth, lifting my hips into his quickening thrusts.

"Dear Lady, so much." He pulled back to look at me with a tenderness equal to the ferocity of his movement between my legs.

"I'm going to come." I cried out, threading my fingers through his hands, clinging to him as he clung to me, calling out his name again and again as my body clenched around his thickness, milking him into his own orgasm.

The waves of pleasure rode us both for what seemed like hours, again and again they would build and fade, racking our bodies, leaving us crying, clinging to each other for dear life. It was unlike anything I'd ever known, more powerful than the dark waves of pleasure I had experienced in this world and one hundred times as sweet. It was pure intimacy, pure, heartbreaking joy of the flesh. If there was a heaven, surely you felt like this when you were there — so free, so full, so ecstatically, blissfully at peace.

"I'm going to send it to them," I whispered to Rake's cheek, licking away a salty tear there with a smile. Suddenly the answer seemed so clear. There wasn't a doubt in my mind as I opened up the threads of energy and let all the love flow out of me and into my people.

The lines glowed purple, surging and gaining brightness until purple gave way to blue and blue finally to white. A humming sound filled the air, a high whine of energy filling my head, vibrating deep in my cells. I could feel some deep connection slowly being severed, like the slide of one cell into two just as the membrane pinches and closes, creating two separate creatures where there had once been one. The light continued to glow brighter and brighter and the whine to crescendo. Just when it was nearly too much, when I feared I might go blind if something didn't happen soon, I withdrew those metaphysical scissors and I cut the cords.

## Chapter Twenty-One

"Ouch," Rake breathed into my neck, jumping slightly in my arms. The night was once again dark and peaceful and—except for the ringing in my ears—I might have thought I imagined the entire zombie-freeing experience.

"That was wonderful," I sighed in a slurred, pink-puffy-cloud voice that reminded me of the first time I'd had too many wine coolers in the eighth grade.

"What did you do? It felt strange at the end, like an electric shock."

"I really do love you, even though we've only known each other three days."

"I love you too."

"And it really was so wonderful."

"It was beyond wonderful," Rake said, his cock still throbbing softly within me and the evidence of our pleasure marking a sticky trail down my thigh. The sensation made me want to giggle and then fuck him some more, but I was pretty sure I was a bit too languid for either.

"I love your cock," I said instead and then did giggle, hard enough for my muscles to contract and said organ to be forced gently from my body. "Oh, come back."

"Gail, are you okay?" Rake asked with a little laugh.

"I love the world."

"I wish I could say I'm sure the world loves you," he said with another laugh.

"I love my zombies," I said with another goofy grin.

"How much of that tea did you drink?"

"I set them free because I love them, *soooo* much."

"It should have a mild sedative effect if any effect at all."

"If you love something Rake," I said, trying to make my face as serious as possible as I cupped his cheeks and looked deep into his eyes, "you have to set it free. Like a butterfly."

It was the word butterfly that did it. I don't know why, but it was *really* funny to me and I started laughing again, high, silly titters that had me rolling onto my side on Rake's discarded robes. I clutched my belly while he pulled himself into a seated position, staring down at me with bemusement.

"You set them free?"

"I did, I cut the cord, threw them out of the nest, *hasta la vista*-ed 'em."

"Gail—"

"Rake, did you know I don't speak Spanish? Isn't that horrible? I'm half Cuban and I don't speak Spanish. I'm ashamed of myself."

"Honey –"

"I speak a little French, but who speaks French except French people? And who wants to speak to French people?"

"Gail, look at me."

"That was a horrible thing to say, wasn't it? And, oh my god, I forgot about French Canada. I love Canada, Rake. I want to be Canadian when I grow up."

"How do you feel?" Rake asked, taking hold of my wrist and feeling for a pulse.

"Never better. You want to play doctor?" I gave a naughty growl and shook off his hand. I pulled myself onto all fours, crawling toward where he sat until our lips were almost touching. "Or we could play wild jungle cats. I'll be the girl jungle cat and you can be the boy jungle cat and –"

"Your skin isn't too warm. It should be colder since you're human, but it's normal for Here." Rake ignored my sexy jungle cat growl and felt my forehead with the back of his hand.

"I have had fantasies about submissiveism." I suddenly felt serious, though I was fairly sure that word I had been looking for hadn't come out right.

"You mean being submissive, being dominated?" Rake asked, a wary light in his eye.

"Yeah, but not like the dream."

"I'm going to kill him for that." His tone was casual, but the look in his eyes made me very glad I wasn't on his bad side.

"Now you sound like Garreck, but I think maybe we should kill him. If nothing else because he's a bastard for ruining one of my most private sex fantasies," I said, a tightness in my throat I tried my best to swallow down.

I didn't want to think about Phillip. Rake and I had just made fantastic, trauma-banishing love and I wanted the trauma to stay banished. I tried to think about raindrops on kittens and whiskers on roses.

Was that how the song went? Damn, if I wasn't still feeling very silly.

"Baby, it's not ruined." Rake cupped my cheek softly. "When it's done right, the submissive is in control. You have a safe word and you can tell your lover to stop any time you want them to."

"Oh, good to know. So you've done that before, huh?"

"I've been a sexual healer since I was fifteen," he said with a smile that said he'd done it all and then some. Cocky, super-experienced bastard.

"You're very smug."

"I know what I'm good at." He smiled again and kissed the tip of my nose. I decided to forgive him since I was feeling generally at peace with the world and the nose kissing was nice.

"So, would you be interested in something like that? Maybe someday?" I ran my hands up his bare thighs, digging my fingernails into his skin, quite pleased with myself when he took a sharp breath. I could practically smell him getting aroused all over again.

"I'd be interested in anything having to do with you and me being naked, but I really need to be serious for a second." He moved my hands away from him, placing them gently back on my own knees.

"Sex is serious."

"Dead serious."

"Dead sexy," I said, giggling again because it's fun to play with words.

"I can't sense any energy flowing to or away from you anymore. Did you really release them somehow?"

"Yup. There was light and it was purple and then white and the cells divided and I snipped 'em off, all nice and tidy."

"Shit," he said, looking at me like he was just the slightest bit in awe...and afraid. The in awe part I was cool with, but I didn't like seeing my most resplendent lover afraid of me.

"Listen Rake, you and me...we're cool, okay? So you don't have to be nervous, cause I'm gonna treat you right baby—"

"We have to go. I was going wait until tomorrow, but we should get there as soon as possible. We can send word back to the shelter and if everyone's all right, if they're alive and back to normal then—"

"Do you not love me anymore because I'm kind of drunk for some reason?"

"No, I love you indescribable amounts, even when you're high on energy." Rake smiled, tenderly wrapping my red towel around my shoulder and tying it in a knot. "And when we get to the city, I'm going to buy you a tight little pair of jeans and I want you to wear them for me with nothing underneath."

"God, I would love a pair of jeans, but I kind of miss underwear, just to be honest."

"I'll buy you ten pairs, but first you wear the jeans without, I take them off, we make crazy love. Then you can put them back on with underwear underneath."

"I'm glad you don't call them panties. I hate it when guys called girls' underwear panties. Lingerie is okay, but not— We're going to the city?"

Woah, I'd missed something in the past few minutes. Rake had his robe in one hand, I was dressed—if you could call a red robe-toga dressed—and the fire was having dirt thrown upon it in preparation for what seemed like a departure.

"Hold it! Wait," I said, putting a hand on Rake's arm. "It's not daylight yet."

"It will be soon. By the time we get to the end of the medium grasses it —"

"Rake, I'm afraid of the dark, really, really afraid. Please don't put out the fire!" I said, sobering up more quickly now that terror was threatening to invade.

"Okay, it's okay," he said, turning to me and placing his hands gently on my shoulders. "I'm sorry I didn't know, we'll wait until light. I can't believe this."

"Sorry to slow you down."

"No, not that. You, well, it's just— I mean you're right, I should have thought of that. I guess I still can't believe what's happening. Everything you say and do, the more I find out about you- It's like finding out the character in one of your nursery rhymes is real." He pulled me to him and planted a quick kiss on my forehead. Then he bent down and poked the fire with a stick, urging the fading flames back to life and throwing more grass into the center.

"Would it be irritating if we finally sat down and you spilled everything you know about everything?" I sighed.

"Not at all, I'd be happy to."

"Would you put your robe on first?"

"Why, can't keep your mind off my studly bod?" He ran his hand down his perfectly muscled stomach toward where that part of him I was becoming incredibly infatuated with was slowly throbbing back to its full glory.

"Something like that, but the word studly doesn't really do it for me." I felt the heat rise in my face as I forced myself to look away. Who was I kidding? The guy could call himself spiffy and I'd still get wet looking at him sideways.

"I thought I was pretty current on my Earth slang." He laughed as he threw on the robes and sat down by the fire.

"Better than Railyn, at least." I snuggled next to him, still happier than I could remember being in my life, despite the fact that I was apparently a mythical-type creature people wanted to sacrifice.

At least I was famous. Hadn't I always wanted to be famous?

Actually, no I hadn't. Seemed like a fairly miserable existence when you really looked at the whole picture. Obscenely rich would be okay, but the beautiful people could keep the fame.

"Dear Lady, she's horrible isn't she? It's because her husband is a dork."

"Rake? Could you spill, please?"

"Right." He paused as a worrisome thought seemed to flit through his beautiful brain. "But I want you to know I love you because of who you are, not who I thought you were. Okay? Because I honestly didn't even think it before."

"It's okay, Rake, I don't think you're the groupie type. You're too full of yourself."

"Interesting to hear that from your own sweet lips," he said with a wry grin.

"I'm not vain."

"And my hair's not green."

"I just have a healthy sense of my own worth," I said, leaning over to press a gentle kiss to his irresistible lips. "If I didn't, you'd try to boss me around way too much and if I let you, you'd lose interest."

"I'd never lose interest," he said with a passion that was entirely convincing and a kiss that didn't hurt my faith any either. "I just hope you still feel the same way after you know the truth."

"That doesn't sound good." I pulled back to give him a hard look and wasn't comforted by the absence of humor in his eyes.

"There's a book."

I felt a little better then because books aren't scary. I mean, not everyone can even read, right? You didn't have to worry about a book causing that much trouble unless it was like some holy scripture people could use as an excuse to start blowing each other to bits in disputes over land or oil or the global economy.

"It's ancient, but clearly not of our world. I guess in some ways it's comparable to the Bible in your world, but it's much more heavily prophetic," Rake said.

Well, so much for my "at least it's not like the Bible" theory.

"But the Bible is prophetic."

"But this is thousands and thousands of pages. There are some stories, parables, but mostly it's just endless babbling about the things that will come to pass. I don't even know that any one person has read the entire thing. Some portions have been become pretty well known fables, but even those people who are strict by-the-book believers don't necessarily believe those stories are true. They're more allegorical."

"I understand, kind of like Adam and Eve and the snake."

"Right, I think. I haven't read the Bible. I only know what I've overheard during Earth church services."

"So am I Eve? Is that why everyone hates me? They think I'm going to ruin their paradise? Because, honestly, any world with the Destroyer in it does not seem like heaven on Earth or Here or wherever."

"It's a little more dramatic than that."

"I don't like drama. I know it might seem like I do, but I don't."

"You're awfully antagonistic for someone who doesn't like drama," Rake said with a quirk of his eyebrow.

"I'm not antagonistic, I'm forthright."

"I don't think calling someone a cunt rag is considered forthright."

"Can we please stay on topic?"

"I just really don't think you're going to believe me. I was even worried about telling you that you were just another average, inter-dimensional traveler. You're so stubborn."

"Will you just tell me? Please!"

"You're the embodiment of the Lady of Light, come in flesh form from a different world to banish the soul eater," he said in a perfectly flat tone, as if he were sharing his preferences on pizza toppings.

"Oh, is that all?" I asked.

"No, you're also going to interpret a new law for our world and establish a legacy of inter-dimensional unity and a few other things. The prophecy puts it more eloquently, but that's the basic nuts and bolts of it."

"You mean I'm like...god?"

"No, you're like the vessel of the Lady's will."

"So I'm like god if He were a woman?"

"Not really."

"I hate to break it to you, Rake, but I'm really not god-like or Lady-like or Jesus-like or even Mohammed or Buddha or anything else-like. There has to be some kind of mistake in the prophecy thingie."

"Our Lady isn't like your modern Earth gods, she's more pagan. She's very earthy, most of her power is sexual in nature."

"Like what kind of power?" I asked, wondering if I should have X-ray vision or something.

"Some of the stories have her healing ruined crops by making love to her consort in a newly plowed field, defeating the Lady of the Dark by giving her an orgasm that turned her body inside out and sent her to the underworld —"

"She did it with the Lady of the Dark?"

"There are different versions, one where she sent her consort to seduce the Lady of the Dark and one where she went herself. But most people agree she's a bisexual deity."

"I don't like girls."

"Gail, could you quit being so literal?"

"Could you never say the word literal again?"

"You're a vessel, you're not the actual Lady. And who knows if any of these stories are even true?"

"So what other stories are there?"

"One of the more gruesome ones has her stealing the souls of two thousand village people during a year-long orgy," Rake continued.

"She really doesn't sound very nice."

"I guess it's complicated, but what god really is 'nice'? She's heroic, though. The most well known Lady story is about the time her vagina detached from her body and flew through the sky to slay the last of the winged dinosaurs," he said with a barely suppressed grin.

"I'm the reincarnation of a flying vagina?"

"No, you're the embodiment of Her will. You're still you, but you have been sent to accomplish what the Lady feels is necessary for our world to survive."

"And you believe this crap?"

"Never, didn't even consider it. But Gail, the fact that you can steal souls was huge. If you've managed to return those souls, if you can feed on sexual energy, which no one can do—"

"The Destroyer said everyone on the planet did."

"Well, he's a fucking liar, haven't you caught on to that by now?"

"What about children? Can people from Earth have kids?" I asked, holding my breath as I wondered if I had been completely stupid for a second time with my studly and perhaps "more fertile than I had assumed" Rake. If the Destroyer's lies had made me an unwed mother, I was really going to kill him.

"No, that's true, it's never happened before," he said in a tight voice, but then hurried on before I could wonder if he was sad we wouldn't be making any green haired, brown skinned babies together. "Only high priestesses of the lady can even supplement their nutritional needs with sexual energy and none of them are from Earth. Earth people usually just have to eat a lot more than we native people do."

"And why is that?"

"I think we have slower metabolisms, I don't know. "

"Oh."

"Even the fact that you're afraid of the dark. All the myths say the Lady of Light loses a lot of her power in the dark. That's why she has so many sexual partners, to help supplement the energy she loses when the sun goes down."

"Assuming all this crazy crap is true, then why do people want to kill me? Banishing the soul eater and making new laws doesn't sound so bad to me."

"I have two different theories."

"Only theories?"

"I'm not a mind reader. Whether it was stupid of me or not, I just didn't think any of this was possible."

"Okay, theorize for me," I said with an impatient wave of my hand. Getting information from the man was like squeezing your own grape juice by hand—frustrating and slow as shit.

"Theory one: they think you're not the Lady of Light. There's another prophecy about the Lady of the Dark coming to be the soul eater's consort and plunge the planet into despair and ruin."

"How can there be two such contradictory prophecies? That's stupid dumb."

"That's why I'm not a follower of the book. Theory number two—which is going to be the reigning theory in my mind if we find your zombies are back to normal, but people still want to kill you—"

"You think they will? Still want to kill me?" I asked, feeling strangely hurt. I understood innocent people were killed all the time, but I had never thought I'd be the object of large-scale group hatred.

"Some people, probably." Rake took hold of my hand and gave it a squeeze.

"It's okay, I'm fine." I pulled my hand away, feeling anything but fine. At least I couldn't complain about his honesty. "What's theory number two?"

"If you've freed the people under your control, there won't be much doubt in most people's minds that the prophecy of the Lady of Light is true. Eventually, I think that will lead to a lot of anxiety about what kind of laws an Earth woman is going to make. And that might lead to some people thinking they should just get rid of you before you have the chance to royally screw everything up."

"Assassinate me, you mean?"

"Pretty much."

"But I'm the embodiment of the Lady of Light."

"Right, but your heirs are supposed to rule the dimension for the next hundred thousand years. That's a really long time to put up with unpopular Earth-reality-inspired laws a lot of people are going to assume will turn our dimension into the same shit hole they assume Earth to be."

"I don't think Earth is a shit hole. We have our problems, but who doesn't?"

"I agree. Personally, I like Here better and kind of think Earth is going to self destruct a whole hell of a lot sooner than we will. And I think Here will eventually become a dominant reality of it's own, but there's no reason to argue about it at this point."

"Here is a stupid name for a reality."

"You're stupid."

"Thanks." I giggled and felt the tiniest bit better. Rake made me happy, I couldn't deny it. I liked the adolescent, dorky side of him and the sexy, lover side and the caring friend side and all the other sides I'd seen so far.

"You're so in love with me," he said, watching me with a goofy grin.

"Shut up about it before I decide to change my stupid mind." I kissed him and he did shut up, but started moaning when I pulled up his robe and straddled him in front of the fire. As I lowered myself onto where he was already hard and ready, I had to admit I had no plans to change my mind about this man anytime soon.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Several orgasms later we finally separated, pulling what passed for our clothing back in place. We sat quietly until the darkness turned to a deeply murky gray and then the faintest hint of dawn shone on the horizon.

"I think the sun is coming up," Rake said, almost sounding sorry to leave even though he'd been the one who was in a hurry to get to the city.

"It does seem lighter."

"You ready to go?"

"Yeah. We're going to the city to get a closer look at the book with my prophecy in it?" I asked, knowing there was something else I wanted to question him about, something nagging at my mind, but not quite able to put my finger on it. I was on information overload and had been on my way to a horrible headache before sex therapy with Rake had banished it to the far corner of my mind.

"I also think it will be a safer place to hide out until we can send messengers to see what the situation is back in the village. There are more liberal-minded people in the city."

Rake helped me to my feet and in a few minutes we had put out the fire and rounded up our very few belongings. Other than the empty nut shells and the Here dimension peanut butter—which I was still open to trying in the future even if I could apparently feed on sexual energy—we were traveling extremely light. On Earth, I'd never been the type to even go for a long weekend without a huge suitcase. But I found I kind of liked the feeling of being unencumbered—even though I was never going anywhere without an extra pair of underwear in my purse, and a purse for that matter. Ever. Again.

"Hey, Rake?" He took my hand and we started wading through the tall grass. The simple intimacy of the gesture made me ridiculously happy, turning my insides as mushy as the peanut butter in the shell tucked into Rake's robes.

"Yes?"

"If my zombies aren't okay—"

"I think they will be. I think that—if you felt like you were doing the right thing when you manipulated the energy—the people are going to be fine."

"But you could be wrong."

"Yes, I could be wrong," he admitted with a sigh and a slightly too vigorous smack at a patch of grass in front of him.

"Does that mean people are going to think I'm the other one, the other prophecy, the Lady of the Dark?"

"I don't know." He scowled and tightened his fingers around my hand like he was never going to let me get far enough away from him to use the bathroom by myself, let alone allow anyone to think horrible thoughts about me.

"Then that means I'm supposed to be the Destroyer's consort, right?"

"He's never going to get his hands on you again, don't worry."

"But he showed up in my dream, Rake, and it was like no other dream I've ever had. It was so real. How do you explain that? Maybe I am the bad Lady," I said, this new theory of mine starting to make horrible sense. "I mean, I love myself and all, but I would believe I was the embodiment of the bad girl way before I'd believe I was the good girl."

"That's because you're too hard on yourself and you don't give everyone the chance to see what a wonderful person you are," Rake said, stopping to cup my cheek in his hand, looking at me with more tenderness than I probably deserved.

But then, maybe he was right, maybe I was just being too hard on myself. After all, I didn't enjoy hurting people or spend my spare time drowning kittens or spitting on the homeless people in the subway. I only lashed out if provoked and the provocation usually had to be fairly major...unless I was just in a really, really bad mood on that particular day.

"Thank you." I smiled at him, turning my head to press a soft kiss into his palm before I took his hand in both of mine and held on tight. "But Rake, it is a possibility and I need to know how to deal with it."

"You won't have to deal with it. I'll make sure you're safe," he said, dismissing me as he turned back to our trek through the grass.

"I appreciate that, but I can help make sure I'm safe if you keep me informed. I really don't want to think about the way I did it, but I *did* get away from Garreck by myself. But maybe, if I'd had a clue about the way he was thinking, I would have been able to get away before I had to turn his arm into hamburger meat."

"His arm deserved to be hamburger meat," Rake insisted.

"Maybe, but I'm not excited about having that memory with me for the rest of my life. You're the one who said I'm really a sweet, soft, fluffy kitten type person—"

"I didn't say that exactly."

"So do you understand why I would rather take the preventative route rather than the kick ass and take zombies route?"

"I understand that, but if you were really the Lady of the Dark's embodiment, I think I would know. You just don't have that kind of energy. I've been with people who..."

"Who what?"

"Nothing, I don't really want to talk about other women."

"Good, I don't want to hear you talk about other women."

"If people think you're the Lady of the Dark, then they'll want to take the appropriate measures to be sure you don't bond with the Destroyer. I don't remember this prophecy as clearly, but I know it calls for the Destroyer's potential consort to be sacrificed in a ritualistic way and that it's very important for the sacrifice to be performed at a certain distance from the Destroyer himself so that he can't absorb the soul's energy when the woman dies."

"So that's why he didn't want me going back into the camp to look for you. He was afraid I might bond with the Destroyer."

"Garreck?"

"Yeah," I said, feeling a horrible shiver work its way through my internal organs like some sort of deadly pinball. There had been no doubt in my mind that Garreck meant to hurt me, maybe even kill me, but hearing Rake describe exactly what he'd intended to do made it even more terrifyingly real. And hurtful. It still hurt that a man I'd had feelings for, no matter how new or ridiculous, had fully intended to kill me.

"Gail, I would never, ever try to justify what he did, but if it makes you feel any better he just hasn't been the same man since his brother was taken. It's almost like a part of his soul was lost as well. I hated him for having a sexual relationship with Marly when that wasn't an option for me anymore, but I would never have believed he would hurt her. Until that day she came back from the Destroyer's camp half dead and told me he'd delivered her there."

"But it was her choice?"

"That's what he said. By the time I got to her, she was in so much pain I didn't think she was in her right mind. She just kept screaming for us to let her die, that she couldn't stand to live with him eating away at her," Rake said, his voice tight and his throat muscles working hard to form the words.

I wanted to ask him why he and Marly hadn't been regular lovers, especially since I vividly remembered Kendall saying Marly would have wanted to kick my ass for sleeping with her man. Why should she be so possessive if she was sleeping around and Rake wasn't even one of her multiple partners? I was dying to ask him that and a whole lot more about the Rake-Marly-Garreck love triangle. But he was right—I wasn't heartless and there was no way I could ask someone in such a raw, miserable state to stay there any longer than was necessary.

"I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive Garreck and I would never be stupid enough to trust him again, but I know what you mean. There was something...off about him. He didn't seem to be himself. He was violent and scary in a way I don't think he could have concealed if it were something that was with him all the time. I think he may need help as much as the Destroyer's zombies." We walked around a large muddy patch in the grass and headed down a soft sloping hill that quickly introduced a different kind of terrain. One that was dustier, rockier and had a road winding through it. "A road! A real road!"

"If I'd known you got that excited about roads, I might not have been so flattered when you screamed my name half an hour ago," Rake said with a tight laugh.

"Listen, I've had lots of hot sex since I've been in this dimension, but I have yet to see a road," I said, regretting the words as soon as they'd slipped from my mouth.

I shot Rake a quick look out of the corner of my eye. Would he be pissed? Would he demand to know who I'd been banging or would he simply assume I was talking about the incident with Garreck in his room? If he asked if there had been anyone else, should I tell him about Jacob? A part of me almost wanted to, just to clear my conscience, but the more rational part of me insisted it wasn't necessary to hurt Rake with that information. I never planned to pounce Jacob again. I had no feelings for him and in a way I hadn't even wanted to do what we'd done. I'd just been starved and needed the sexual energy too badly to resist a handsome guy naked in my tub, even if he had been one of the bad guys.

Seconds passed, but Rake didn't say anything. His steps didn't falter, he still held my hand and he even started to hum a bit as our bare feet hit the tightly packed dirt road. He didn't seem to mind. Either he wasn't as possessive of me as I'd thought or he'd assumed I was talking about all the hot sex we'd had. There was no doubt we had enjoyed an inordinate amount of sinfully delicious, emotionally rich and profoundly satisfying nookie for two virtual strangers who had known each other for a short time and spent most of said time running from bad guys or bringing people back from the dead.

We had actually come to an easy place in our new relationship considering we had gotten on each other's last nerve the first several hours of our acquaintance. It felt good not to be mad at him and not to have him mad at me, which made me remember the other thing I'd been wondering before I'd become sidetracked.

"Hey, Rake, why did you think I'd be mad at you?"

"What?" he asked, in a voice that said he was kind of busy thinking about something else and—though he loved me desperately—it might be best not to bother him. He should have known that wouldn't work. He was the one who'd reminded me how stubborn I was, as if I needed any reminding.

"Why did you think I'd be mad at you?"

"When?"

"Before you told me about all the prophecy stuff."

"Oh, right," he said, once again in that semi-checked-out voice I was beginning to think was a ruse to keep from telling me something.

"Rake."

"Gail?"

"Rake!"

"What?" he asked, shooting me a really lame why-are-you-screaming-at-me-I'm-completely-innocent look. The man would have been a horrible actor.

"Just tell me. This lame avoidance crap is making me angrier than whatever you're worried about."

"I doubt that," he muttered under his breath, almost softly enough for me to miss the words entirely.

"Rake, I swear I—"

"If the prophecy is true, you're going to change the law in Here for a very long time. Wouldn't you worry, as a person in a position of power, that I'd try to use my influence over you to manipulate those laws to my liking?" he asked a little too casually, his eyes squinting toward where the sun was beginning to get higher in the sky. He still wasn't looking at me and his voice had that weird lilt in it I'd only heard on one other occasion.

"You're lying, Rake, what are you lying about?" I stopped where I stood and wrenched my hand from his. I might be in love with him, but I could still ditch his ass in a second if he started lying to me. At this point, I at least had a road to follow. Even if I hadn't, I couldn't take any more deception, not when I'd finally started to believe he was the one person I could trust.

"I'm not lying!" he yelled, turning to me, but he kept his gaze on the dirt at his feet. His strong shoulders bunched up around his neck and the way he hung his head made a lock of dark hair hang down into his face. I was struck anew by what a very beautiful man he was. Unlucky for him, I was a firm believer in one of my Aunt Clara's favorite phrases—pretty is as pretty does.

"You are and now you're lying about lying."

"I'm not lying, I'm just...keeping back a few things that might make it more difficult between us," he said carefully, raising his still guarded eyes to meet mine.

"That's still lying. Just tell me the truth. Not telling me the truth is the only thing that's going to make anything difficult between us."

"You promise me that?"

"I'm not really in the mood to make promises."

"Fine. You remember when I said your heirs are going to rule for thousands of years?"

"Yeah," I said, not immediately understanding where this was going.

Earth women couldn't have children, so the "heir" part must mean whomever I chose as my successor. Was I going to choose Rake? Is that what he was stressing out about? I didn't know what the prophecy said, but I supposed I would choose him over anyone else I'd met, kind of appoint him vice president just in case I got sucked back to the Earth dimension. I was going to tell him as much when he opened his big stupid mouth again.

"I'm pretty sure I'm your consort."

"What?"

"Our children and grandchildren are going to rule the planet," he said with a stupid little smile that made me wonder if I should beat him up now or wait until I found out if he was going to be my baby's daddy.

Becoming a new mother in an alternate dimension where you have no family and very few friends sounded like plenty of a challenge for me. Becoming a new mother in an alternate dimension where the father of your baby is an absolute asshole—no matter which of the two sperm donors might be responsible—you are practically a wanted criminal, you have no home, no support system, no money, not even a pair of underwear to your name and most everyone you meet would rather ritualistically kill you first and ask questions later...was not my idea of a good time, to say the very least.

"You knew this?" I asked quietly, my pulse pounding in my ears in a way that made the outside world seem strangely quiet.

"I didn't know it. I still don't know it." Rake kept his gaze locked firmly on mine and actually had the balls to look a little defensive. What the hell did he have to be defensive about?

"But you knew it was a possibility."

"Yes, but what the hell does that mean? There are a hundred different possibilities, including the one where you're just a normal inter-dimensional traveler and go back to Earth the day after tomorrow. It was also a possibility you might be one of the few people who aged prematurely. We both agreed you can't live your life in fear of—"

"But you still had unprotected sex with me, knowing there was a chance I could get pregnant even though you'd told me yourself people from Earth couldn't have children!"

"I never said that, I said it had never happened before. Not that it couldn't happen!"

"Semantical asshole!"

"That's not even an Earth word. For a woman who works with words, you're awfully creative with the language."

"For a man who's supposed to love me, you're awfully creative with the truth!" I screamed, shocked I'd been stupid enough to trust anyone in this horrible place again. "How could you do this? Don't you understand this is not the time to be conceiving a child?"

"Gail, a prophecy is a prophecy."

"What the hell does that mean? I thought you didn't believe in that crap?"

"It doesn't matter if I believe in it. If it's going to happen, it's going to happen."

"But you could help it along by not doing anything to stop it."

"Would it be so horrible to have me as your consort? To have children and grandchildren together? You said you loved me—"

"Just because I love you doesn't mean I'm ready to settle down and make babies. We've known each other less than a week! Are you insane? This is not the time to have a kid!"

"That's not the way we think about life in Here. We don't even have methods in place to prevent conception. There's never a wrong time, never, no matter what the circumstances. Never." His eyes flashed as he made several violent slashing motions through the air with the side of his hand to emphasize just how "never" never really was.

I didn't even have a reply to that. I just stood there with my mouth slightly open, my chest tight and aching and my head shaking slowly from side to side. How could I have thought I knew this man, that we were anywhere close to being on the same page? Birth control was one issue on which not even my Catholic faith and I had ever been in agreement. I had always thought having safe sex—choosing not to have a child until I was capable of being a good parent—was the most respect I could show for the sanctity of life.

"Nearly half our population consists of people from other dimensions. If our native population sinks much lower, most people believe we'll cease to exist as a separate reality of our own, that we'll become a shadow world where—"

"I don't care," I said, darting around him and heading down the road at a brisk walk. I was sick to death of the alternate reality mumbo jumbo.

Maybe the citizens of Here were right to be concerned about what laws I might make for their planet. My very first act as the big boss would be to outlaw all of their superstitious crap. After that, I'd work on instituting methods of birth control. It shouldn't be that hard to rig up something condom-like. If their magicians and scientists could make rooms that glowed without lights, surely they could figure out how to make a rubber.

"Well, you should learn to care," Rake snapped from behind me. "This is your world now, you will probably never go back to Earth. You should start caring what happens to the people of Here."

"The people of Here have lied to me and tried to kill me, sorry if I'm not that interested," I threw back over my shoulder, walking a little faster as I heard his footsteps grow louder behind me.

"I haven't lied and I've risked my reputation, my livelihood, not to mention my life to help you. I might not ever be welcome in the village again after what I've done."

"What do you want, a cookie?" I knew I was being mean, but I didn't care. What he was saying was true, but it was also true he was a careless impregnator. I wasn't so naïve as to believe he honestly had no ideas about "using his influence over me" to make Here the way he wanted it to be. There was more in this for him than he let on.

"You are a—" he began, but before he could get out whatever insult was on the tip of his tongue, the ground under our feet started to tremble and a rumbling sound filled the air.

"What's happening?" Rocks skittered across the hard ground, as if the world were a pool table that had been lifted on one end and now all the balls were rolling into the right corner pocket.

"You can Run can't you? You never would have been able to get as far from the Destroyer's camp if you couldn't. I would carry you, but I'm not sure I have the energy left to get us both as far as we'd need to be to be safe," he said, all animosity toward me fading as he struggled to keep his balance on the rocking ground. He reached out to grab my hand and hold me steady.

"Yeah, I can Run. I think," I said, knowing somehow the run he was talking about had a capital letter. I had definitely Run when I'd escaped from Garreck, but I'd used the energy from my zombies to do so. Would I be able to move that fast under my own power? I had no idea, but I guessed I was going to find out in the very near future.

"Okay, then let's go. Head straight down this road and veer right when it forks the first time and left when it forks the second. I would hold your hand and guide you, but I've never Run that way. I wouldn't want to tear your arm out of your socket."

"Yeah, that would suck," I said, "but what are we running from? Is it an earthquake?"

"No, it's the Protector army. When you have that many three-hundred-pound men jogging in formation, it's enough to make the land move."

"They're coming for me, aren't they?" I asked, knowing that I'd grown as pale as my brown skin would allow. I didn't like the idea of all those hairy men coming at me with the full force of their fury and I was pretty sure they'd be furious. At the very least I had severely wounded their prince, and that was assuming he hadn't died from blood loss.

I hadn't wanted to think about that option. I wasn't equipped to deal with the thought I might have killed someone—even someone who had wanted to kill me. But now I had to admit the possibility that the army behind me might have come seeking retribution for murder. I had a sudden vivid image of hundreds of men fighting to rip my ears from my body to use as trophies for their flesh necklaces. I had to fight back a surge of bile.

"I would imagine so," Rake confirmed, giving my hand a quick squeeze.

"How many three-hundred-pound men are we talking about?"

"You don't want to know. Come on, Gail. You go first, I'll follow."

"No, you go first. That way I can follow your trail."

"I'm not going anywhere until I know you're on your way to safety."

"Rake, I'm fine, just go. I'm terrible with directions, it would be better if I followed. I've already forgotten whether you said left then right or right then left and I'm not even running at light speed." I squeezed his hand and managed to plant a quick kiss on his lips, despite the shakiness of the ground.

I was still pissed with him, but I didn't want him to die simply because he was trying to save my ass. If I could Run, then I would. If I couldn't anymore, if releasing my zombies had somehow taking away my super powers, then I would deal with the

coming danger by myself without risking anyone else. Maybe I could find a rock to hide under.

"Okay, let's go then. Stay close," Rake said, obviously having decided arguing with me was useless. Smart boy. Now if I could get him to quit lying and scheming to impregnate me we'd get along just fine.

We both started trotting along at a normal jog and I actually managed to keep in step with Rake for nearly a minute before I felt a surge of energy fill the air around me. Suddenly he was nothing but a blur, a speeding dervish in gray robes quickly disappearing around a bend in the shaking road. I felt a wave of panic wash through me as he vanished from sight, but I forced it down, fisted my hands and concentrated on moving into warp speed.

I tried to focus in on my breath, to let my awareness of my immediate surroundings grow soft and distant, to see if maybe I'd been wrong, if perhaps the lines to my human power sources still stretched through the air around me. I counted to five and then ten, but there was nothing, not the faintest flare of power. I knew for certain, whether my former zombies were now healthy, whole people or had dropped dead on the floor, the severing had been complete and permanent.

"Shit," I muttered to myself, looking wildly around the increasingly unsettled ground around me.

There was nothing to hide me, nothing but dirt and rocks and even the rocks weren't actually big enough to offer much cover. There were no trees, no shrubs, not even a well-placed cactus that might help conceal a smallish woman. I was in deep, deep trouble. Nowhere to hide, no way to run fast enough or far enough. I was actually considering playing dead as my very last option when a rush of wind blew my tangled hair around my face and a strong arm wrapped around my waist with a familiarity that felt better than I would ever admit.

"Rake, you can't. You said you didn't have the energy to—"

"I'll find the energy. There's no way I'd leave you and save myself. If you thought that for a second, you really don't know me at all," Rake said before he scooped me up in his arms.

Then we were moving too fast for either of us to speak, once again almost too fast for me to breathe. But unfortunately, not too fast for me to think about the danger swiftly approaching, or that the man cradling me in his arms was probably right. I didn't know him at all. Maybe we could make time for a "get to know you" dinner if we ever stopped arguing or running from bad guys long enough to make an actual date.

For some reason, I didn't hold out a lot of hope for that happening anywhere in the near future. But maybe I was just being pessimistic. Even fugitives gotta eat.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

When I was a little girl, I would pester endlessly to be taken into the city. I loved New York from the first trip we made to visit the Macy's Santa Claus when I was five. It was so full of energy and life, there was so much to look at and the uncertainty of what the next minute might hold in a place so jam packed with action excited me beyond description. From the moment me and my Mom and two brothers stepped off the commuter train from New Jersey and I felt the swirl of people in a terrible hurry rushing around me, I was hooked, addicted to the frantic, grouchy, endless, frustrating, overwhelming bustle.

Some people said the relentless pace wore them out, but I fed on it, thrived on it. There was never any other place in the United States I wanted to live—though I did have fantasies about becoming Canadian.

I've only been to Montreal a few times and spent one summer weekend on Prince Edward Island, but something about the country calls to me. I also love Canadians, they're just so nice and friendly, kind of like people from the Southern United States but not quite so over the top. I thought I might like to be one some day if they would have me. And they probably would, being so nice and Canadian-like.

I naively thought maybe the city Rake and I were going to would be a place where I would finally feel at home—or at least more at home than the village or the cave or the land of medium grasses. I have a deep love of nature and definitely feel comfortable out in it, but I need steel and concrete and noise to really feel at home.

I was craving a little bit of comfort like that, but I guess I couldn't complain about being disappointed. At least I was still alive, had both of my ears and was holding on to consciousness. I couldn't say the same for my rescuing hero.

"Rake, can you hear me? Rake?" I crawled along the dirt road toward where he lay in a heap. He was curled on his side. I couldn't see his face, but his chest still rose and fell, so I wasn't quite as worried as I would have been. He was breathing, he was going to be okay. He *had* to be okay.

"Rake?" I asked again, wondering if he'd simply fainted with exhaustion. He'd run like a madman for about twenty minutes, but then stopped so suddenly I'd been thrown from his arms and hurled a good ten feet away. I managed to twist in the air and land in a half squat on the ground, avoiding any injury worse than a few broken fingernails. The miracle of having had that much coordination, however, had me feeling extremely shaky. I felt safer staying close to the ground—thus the crawling.

"Keep running," he whispered when I finally made it to his side. I fought the urge to sob with relief. He was still conscious and able to talk to me. I couldn't really care

about him this much, it was probably just some stress-related phenomenon, like when a hostage falls in love with her kidnapper.

"We're fine, you made it. We're here," I said, motioning to the buildings lining the dirt road.

They weren't skyscrapers by any means, but they were several stories tall. To our left, the three and four level homes and businesses appeared to be made of very old, weathered gray wood. To the right, the people had simply carved caves out of the rock face, reminding me of old postcards from the American southwest. There weren't any cars on the road—which made sense since Rake had said Here didn't have cars—but there was still a city vibe to the place. The people dashing in and out of the shops seemed terribly intent upon their business, to the extent that our unfolding drama didn't even draw their attention. It kind of reminded me of the weird feeling I got in New York City sometimes, that "I could probably drop dead in the middle of the sidewalk and no one would even stop talking on their cell phone" feeling.

"We're not safe."

"It's going to be okay, I can't feel the ground shaking anymore." I smoothed the hair back from his face, wishing I had something cleaner and cooler than my hand to comfort him with.

"They're still close," Rake said again, running his tongue over his dry lips. We could both really use some water. I looked around to see if there might be someone willing to part with something cool and refreshing and for the first time noticed this city was completely lacking in human citizens.

"Rake, the people who live in the city *are* people, right?" I asked, hoping the swift beating of my heart wouldn't attract the creatures' attention. I'd been so worried about Rake I'd assumed the movement I'd seen out of the corner of my eye was the hustle and bustle of people going about their daily business.

Wrong again, but what else was new in this dimension?

"This isn't the city." Rake twisted slightly on the ground, moving his palms to the dirt beneath him.

"Oh good, I was hoping the city would be bigger and, um, not populated by werewolves," I said, my voice not much more than a whisper. I was starting to get truly concerned. If the creatures decided to attack, there wasn't anything I could do to save Rake or myself from their incredibly scary teeth. I didn't even have the sharp heel of a shoe to shove into their muzzle. If they wanted to eat us, they were going to be able to do so without much of a fuss.

I shivered and a cold sweat break out under my towel. I was suddenly hyper aware of the delicate nature of my human flesh.

"They're not werewolves." Rake grunted as he pushed against the ground, the muscles of his arms and shoulders bunching as he struggled to make his way to a seated position.

"Okay, whatever you say. I'd still like to get on the move if we could." I grabbed Rake under one of his arms and helped him stand on his obviously unsteady legs.

Whatever the people of Here called these things, they were werewolves in my mind. Anything that's six or seven feet tall with the head of a wolf and a weird hunched body ending in two canine hind legs with vicious looking claws is a werewolf, no doubt about it.

"I can't Run anymore. I can barely walk." Rake grimaced as he limped along beside me, leaning heavily on my narrow shoulders for support.

"That's okay, just lean on me." I tried to sound tough even though Rake was incredibly heavy for a short person. Must be all that manly muscle. I adored the muscle, but right now I would have been thankful if he were a little less...solid.

"If they choose to recognize us, we can ask them for shelter. I don't know that they'd do battle for our sakes, but the Gorgenflutten have never had much respect for the Protectors. I believe they'd help us hide at the very least."

"These are the Gorgenflutten?" I asked.

Where had I heard that term before? I thought it was something Kendal had mentioned, about some farmer raising them before he moved to the city and started his Earth store. I'd assumed at the time they were a breed of giant cow or some sort of livestock, but hadn't been interested enough to ask. Maybe I would have been more curious if I'd known they were werewolves and I would someday have the misfortune of having my ride pass out in the middle of their town.

"They used to be, but I think they call themselves something else now. I just can't remember." Rake felt even heavier and perspiration beaded on his face.

"But they're not going to eat us, right?" I asked, feeling more on edge as I realized the two humans walking through the middle of town had finally started to attract attention.

A few of the creatures stopped their quick movements in and out of the doorways lining the street, becoming preternaturally still as they stared out to where Rake and I struggled along. They looked even more predatory frozen in place, with their sizeable muzzles in the air and large, knotted muscles tensed. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about how fast they could probably be on our backs tearing our heads off with their massive jaws if they decided it was time to pounce.

"Probably not."

"That's not very comforting, Rake."

"Relax, don't let yourself be afraid. Fear and aggression smell the same to them. We don't want them to think we're aggressive."

"Should have told me that sooner. I'm already afraid and now they're looking at us," I said, my mouth going dry as more and more of the wolf men and women stopped what they were doing and came to stand at the side of the road.

I don't think I would have been able to distinguish separate sexes if they'd been wearing clothes. There wasn't much difference between the two except the obvious equipment hanging between the bowed legs of the men and the softer swell of breasts that barely served to break up the massive chests of the women. Both male and female looked incredibly strong and vicious. There wasn't even much of a difference between the two when it came to height and weight. Strength wise, they seemed equally matched. I wondered if that added up to more equality between the sexes in their society.

Then I decided I probably had other things to worry about.

"Just breathe deeply and keep walking. Try to relax. If they want to recognize us, they will," Rake said.

"I once told this guy I was dating in college I didn't like dogs."

"These aren't dogs."

"So he would lock up his dog every time I went over to his apartment, but then we got in this huge fight and he let the dog out. It went nuts and backed me into a corner before I could make a run for the door—"

"Gail, stop it. This isn't the time to relive memories that make you anxious."

"And the guy just stood there laughing, saying the reason I didn't like dogs was because they could smell evil," I finished with a gulp, a little surprised when my story was met by a chuckle from Rake. "You think that's a funny story?"

"I thought you were making a joke."

"Well, I was, kind of, but that's the only funny thing that guy ever said and the teeth on that dog weren't funny at all."

"It bit you?"

"No, but it wanted to. I could tell."

Just then a low, menacing growl sounded from the right side of the road. With Rake's body blocking my view, I couldn't really tell what the growler looked like, but I knew the sound wasn't a good sign.

"Relax," Rake commanded, his voice not relaxed in the slightest.

"You relax," I snapped back.

"The Gorgenfluten were raised to be soldiers. They were bred for strength and viciousness until the Act of Emancipation freed them about ten years ago. They aren't animals, but they aren't fully civilized and they aren't very pleased with hum—"

"I thought Here didn't have war?"

"We don't. Farmers who raised Gorgenfluten sold them to other dimensions."

"You people are so full of shit. You have these high morals and think Here is so peaceful and perfect, but then you're breeding and selling war monsters to other worlds and—"

"No place is perfect. I never agreed with it. Besides, they aren't monsters, they're intelligent beings and they shouldn't have been—"

"Shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't," I mumbled, then flinched as the growl sounded again.

"We should probably quit talking," Rake whispered.

"Rake, what are we going to do? Even if we get through this town, I'm not strong enough to hold you up much longer."

"That's why I told you to leave me."

"I'm not going to leave you anymore than you were going to leave me."

"Because you loooove me?" he asked in a stupid, teasing tone that was so completely out of place in the life and death moment I had to laugh.

"You're a dork."

"I love you too," he said, but then his laugh turned to a grunt of pain. I felt his entire body stiffen before he collapsed against my side. I was forced to let him slide to the ground or be trapped underneath his weight.

I called out his name in a terrified voice when I saw the arrow stuck in his back. It was a mean looking ten inches of razor-sharp wood I knew had to have hurt if it was enough to make Rake lose consciousness. Or maybe it was poisoned, or maybe it was longer than I thought and had slipped through the spaces in his ribs and penetrated his heart. I didn't know for certain, but I did know I wanted to kill whoever had dared to shoot an already exhausted and harmless man in the back.

"Who did that?" I yelled, my tone filled with enough venom to poison the shooter of the arrow if they dared to come near.

My words were met by the same evil-sounding growl and soon my eyes found the body that went along with it. He was seven feet tall if he was an inch, but that wasn't even the worst part of it. The Protectors were all taller and I'd clawed my way through the arm of a man who was at least eight feet and well over three hundred pounds. I might have considered seeing if I could take this guy if I'd still had my zombies to draw energy from...and if he hadn't been possessed of the biggest head I'd ever seen.

His skull was at least twice the size of the other werewolves. But it wasn't his possibly oversized brain I was worried about, it was the teeth, the massive, sharp teeth. Each was nearly as long as my forearm and overflowed his enormous jaws, seeming to strike terror in everything within a fifty-foot radius, including the other werewolves. The other men and women huddled back and abased themselves in front of the big skull man as he strode through the crowd and straight up to where I stood beside Rake's fallen form.

I tried to draw upon my deep reserves of gumption and sass, struggling to find the nerve to tell this guy where he could shove his next long sharp stick. But when he stopped inches from where I stood and let out another low growl and a small trail of spittle leaked from his mouth, I knew it wasn't going to happen. My gaze locked in on

those saber teeth, which looked even scarier up close and personal, and suddenly I felt terribly light headed.

I would have tried to blame the heat or dehydration or exhaustion, but it was simply a case of terror overload. The last thing I thought before my eyes rolled back in my head was that I would take the snake lady over the wolf man any day. At least she was in my weight and tooth size class.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I think she's starting to wake up.*

*Good, we don't have much time. Where is the sun?*

*Still not quite past rose glow. Everything's going to be fine.*

*I don't need reassurance, female.*

*I don't need you scaring my patient.*

*You will address me as your ruler even in private quarters, Falor.*

*Yes, Long Tooth, Ruler of the Flesh Tearers.*

*I don't like your tone, female.*

*Will you please leave? We don't have time for this. And don't bother coming to my quarters after the battle is over. I'm sure I'll be too busy with the wounded to entertain anyone, even such an grand ruler as Long Tooth, Ruler of the Flesh Tearers.*

*Falor –*

"I'm awake," I said, but kept my eyes closed. I was lying on some sort of pallet. The sun was warm on my face and a nice breeze played across my skin, but I hadn't forgotten those last few seconds before consciousness fled. Even if my mind had managed to convince my unconscious the wolf people were a hallucination, there would have been no denying the muffled grunts and growls filling the air, mingling with the voices in my mind like some strange audio collage.

*Good, don't open your eyes just yet. The softer, more feminine of the two telepathic voices replied. Long Tooth, you should leave.*

*I'll not leave such a large duty in the hands of a female. The future of the –*

*Long Tooth, you've done enough. Get out before you ruin what chance we have of saving our city. If she sees you again, you know she'll be too frightened. She won't be able to hear us anymore.*

"I can hear all this. If she's talking about the guy with the big teeth, then I would be really glad if you were gone when I open my eyes. You're incredibly fearsome. I'm sure I would be too frightened to think straight," I said in my smallest, little-girl-lost voice.

So much for equality between the wolf sexes. Sounded like Long Tooth was a real alpha male jerk, coming in and taking control with a sword when a toothpick would have done the job. Still, I didn't mind playing to his big-strong-wolfman side if it meant

he would leave me alone with the gentle, feminine voice in my head. Falor sounded nice and maybe she would help me find out what happened to Rake.

*I will go check on the war formations, but don't take long, Falor. I will be back.*

After that very Schwarzanegger-like proclamation, there was the sound of a door slamming. The air around me suddenly seemed less fraught. I let myself take a slightly deeper breath and on my exhalation opened my eyes.

"Oh my god." There was a large muzzle not two feet from my face.

The wolfwoman I assumed to be Falor didn't have the massive skull of Long Tooth, but she was every bit as scary. Her nose narrowed to a sharp point and her teeth were long, thin daggers that looked like they could tear through an elephant hide with ease. Her eyes were slanted and framed with thick, dark lashes that added to the intensity of her bright yellow gaze, making me feel she could see right through my skin to all my vulnerable and no doubt juicy and delectable organs.

I sucked in another sharp breath as she lifted her hand. From palm to claw-tips, it was at least ten inches long, strangely skeletal looking and covered by a thin coating of light brown hair. But it wasn't the sharp claws topping her fingers that frightened me so much as the strange mix of human and animal revealed in the construction of that part of her body. I didn't want her to touch me, I really didn't, but I was afraid to flinch as she lightly settled the back of her hand against my forehead. It was a gentle touch, reminding me of how my mother would check our skin for fever when I was a little girl. I guess it was just enough to help me relax and open up my mind.

*Can you hear me now?*

The voice was softer, but it was definitely the same one I'd heard before. I could somehow see the connection between the words and the look in Falor's yellow eyes. She was the one speaking in my mind, but apparently I had to be calm for the connection to be made.

*Can you hear me now?*

"Yes, I can hear you," I said, my voice a little wobbly. "We have a commercial like that back on Earth."

*A commercial?*

"It doesn't matter, it's ridiculous anyway, more than played out. Sorry, I'm babbling. I'm a little nervous. Not to be rude, but you all are a little...scary."

*Only scary? Not fearsome in the utmost extreme?*

"Thank you for making a joke, that really makes me feel better. Honestly." I tried to push myself into a seated position and was halted by Falor's hand on my chest.

*Don't move. You must not use too much energy until we find an alternative energy source. Your mate is very weak and can't take any further drain on his reserves.*

"Rake? Is he okay?" I asked, feeling my heart starting to ache as I remembered the way he'd fallen to the ground. If Long Tooth had killed him, I was going to find a way to make him pay, no matter how big and scary he was. Or how large his head.

*No, he's not. We don't have much time so I'll explain as quickly and simply as I can.*

Quick and simple. Finally someone in this dimension was speaking my language.

*Early this morning your name and description were sent out to the incorporated townships. You're wanted in the city for an emergency meeting with some of our dimension's highest rulers, but it is to be understood by all that you are a welcome guest in Here. You are not to be harmed or taken into Protector custody against your will.*

"I don't understand. Are they going to cut off my head when I meet them in the city? What about Rake? Why did Long Tooth shoot him?"

*Hold your questions until I'm finished if you hope to save your mate.*

Bossy gal, this Falor, but I had to respect her bluntness. I like blunt people and it's true that I ask entirely too many questions and interrupt when I should be shutting-up. I vowed to keep my silence until Falor opened for questions and not waste time debating such petty things as the fact that Rake really wasn't my boyfriend, let alone my "mate".

*Late last night, the people of Softhills Village discovered the people under your control were once again inhabiting their land bodies. They appeared unhurt by their term in your servitude. When asked if they suffered, they said they had no memory of the time, that it was as if they had been in a deep sleep. This naturally led most to assume that you are much more than a mere Earth woman.*

"I know all about the prophecy. I'm the Lady of the Light." I pressed my lips together in a tight line. Falor widened her eyes and raised her furry eyebrows in an expression that I was pretty sure was meant "don't you remember that promise you made about shutting up, so shut up already".

*That will be a subject of much debate, I'm sure. But this isn't the time for religion or prophecy. I assume you intentionally freed the people under your control?*

"Yes," I said, then zipped my lips again. Falor was making more sense than anyone I'd talked to thus far, including my dearest green-haired boy. I wasn't about to waste any more of her time or patience.

*A noble gesture, but not a wise one for your mate. You've been feeding exclusively from his personal energy. It's nearly killed him. I'm sure you didn't intend to hurt him and it's doubtful he knew what was happening. Even if he did, healers are notorious for their hubris. At times it seems they consider themselves immune to the vulnerabilities of other mortals.*

"Of course I didn't mean to hurt him. How do I stop?" I forced away any thoughts of what a repulsive energy vampire I was. There would be time to berate myself later when Rake wasn't getting sucked to death.

*I have a few ideas, but Long Tooth has a plan in place should those ideas fail. Either way, we'll have to hurry. The Protector Army has gone rogue, refusing to obey the laws of our land. From what we've learned, the entire army has run mad. They're moving quickly, killing any who stand in their way, and were last sighted not more than an hour's hard march from here. We were preparing to abandon our settlement until you appeared. Now we will fight, but I fear it*

*will be a losing battle if I can't help you harness your power and lend our much smaller forces some of your strength.*

"Just tell me how to save Rake. I can't promise anything until I see that he's okay," I said, growing wary. I wasn't in a position to know if what Falor was saying was the truth and I'd had enough of running headlong into situations I didn't understand. I wasn't helping anyone do anything—especially battle a rogue Protector army—until I got a second opinion on the situation. I needed Rake, needed to talk to him, consult with him. Lying would-be impregnator or not, he was still the only person I trusted.

*Of course. What is a battle for the world if our mate isn't there at the end to lick our wounds?*

Kind of gross imagery, but I could see where she was coming from. I could also hear a sadness in her voice I suspected had more to do with her and Long Tooth than me and Rake, but there would hopefully be time for girl talk later.

*I had you brought out onto the roof of our home so that you could soak in the sun's rays. Even though you were unconscious and your mate stunned into sleep, I hoped you might be able to start drawing some energy from the light.*

"Like a human solar panel?" I asked.

*I don't understand the comparison. Simply think of how you drew energy from your people and try to do the same with the sun's rays.*

I closed my eyes and tried to do as she asked, imagining the warmth of the sun on my skin connecting me to its energy. I tried to visualize a huge thread linking me to the glowing red orb and life-giving source strength flowing down into me along the thread. I didn't know if I was simply getting better with visualization exercises or what, but I did start to feeling amazingly refreshed.

This was good news, very good news. Now I just needed to give some juice to my drained boyfriend. I tried to focus on the thread connecting me to Rake and—

"There's no thread." My eyes flew open and then squinted half closed again as I tried to see the ephemeral string of connection that had linked me to my zombies and to Jacob when I'd fed on him.

*I don't understand. It seemed you were drawing energy from the sun. Your cheeks are even pinker. Why did you stop?*

"There's no line of connection. With the zombies, I could always see a thin ray of light if I kind of blurred my eyes just so. But with Rake, I don't see anything. I don't even feel anything."

*That's because you aren't separate. With your people, you were linked to them, but not truly one. With your mate the connection is more layered, a deep melding of life force.*

"I don't understand. He's not my mate. I've only known him a week, tops."

*Flesh Tearers were bred to be sensitive to energy connection, mostly because the people who once purchased us for battle wanted us to kill more efficiently.*

She must have seen my confused look because she continued without missing a beat.

*For example, if we had been fighting you and the people under your control, we could have killed one of them without doing undue damage to you. If we had killed you, however, we would have effectively killed all of your people as well. That would have made you a more vital target.*

"And you can see this? See those little threads I was talking about?" I asked, trying not to let myself get freaked out by the way she had so casually discussed killing me.

*We see that and more. We see energy connections of many sorts and can also sense the energy reserves of our enemies. That way we know how long we will have to keep fighting before they become exhausted and succumb. When you and your mate appeared, it was obvious you were mated. Your auras were converged.*

"I'm not sure I have an aura," I said, my natural sci-fi hating nature rearing its ugly head.

*How can I explain it so you will believe? If you saw the threads of connection, as you called them, can you not believe there are other forms of connection?*

"I guess."

*Good, because you are connected to your mate. Your energies are pressed against each other, through each other, as tightly joined as the roots growing through the soil. And though neither soil nor tree will ever be complete without the other, the soil can recover while the tree will eventually die. Rake was near death from energy loss. That's why, when he didn't reply to Long Tooth's offer for help, he shot him with the medicine dart. He had to be immobilized immediately before the last of his life force was lost.*

"Well, do you think he's better now? Can I go see him?" I asked, refusing to think about either soil or trees at the moment. I just wanted to see Rake, wanted to touch him and make certain he was going to make a complete recovery.

*Spend a few more moments concentrating on taking in the sun's energy. Then I will take you to him and we will see if larger measures may be necessary.*

"Okay." I closed my eyes, honing in on my sun link once more. "Hey Falor?"

Yes?

"Thanks for helping me, but I really don't think Long Tooth had to shoot Rake. There had to have been a less drastic way to handle this, especially since it seems all you wanted to do is help."

*I'm sure there was, but my greatest and most powerful Ruler, Long Tooth of the Flesh Tearers, chose what he thought was best.*

"Hey Falor?"

Yes?

"Long Tooth is right, you really do have to work on your tone."

*Long Tooth can lick the bottom of my filth-digging foot, that son of a dirt burrower.*

At least that's what I think she said, it was kind of a mental mumble. Trouble in paradise at the Long Tooth house, it seemed. Good to know I wasn't the only one.

Maybe after all this battling was over, Falor and I could go out for margaritas and dish about controlling men and why we—two such level-headed, wonderful, sexy, funny and clever women—put up with their shit. Obviously we were women who loved too much.

That made me wonder if they had self-help books in Here. If they didn't I could probably write a few and make a killing. I was betting every woman in Here would value a few words of wisdom from the embodiment of the Lady of Light. Not that I would want to exploit my position as a prophecy come to life for barter credits, but a girl did have to eat. I wouldn't want Falor to have to pay for the margaritas.

I really hoped they had margaritas in Here. I had a feeling I was going to need one or three by the end of the day.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

"Gail?" Rake croaked as I slipped through the door to his sickroom. It was a spare space, with only a bed and a large shell-shaped sink wedged in the corner. But the graying floorboards were clean and a window let the last of the sun's rays shine in to caress Rake's slightly green skin.

"How are you feeling?" I crossed to take his hand.

"I'm dying of thirst," He coughed and swallowed with some difficulty.

"I'll have to ask your doctor is it's okay for you to have a drink," I said, suddenly getting a little teary as I remembered a few days past when he and I had been in a very similar position. I couldn't believe it had only been a few days. It felt like years, or at the very least several months.

*I'll have Marcy bring water. I'll be back in a few moments.*

After those words, Falor left, revealing herself, once again, to be a woman of great sensitivity. Once we were alone, I gave Rake's hand a little squeeze and looked him over more thoroughly, scanning him for injuries. Falor and I had stayed on the roof in the sun until a much smaller female wolf, barely more than a pup, came to fetch us, saying that the green man had awoken and was asking for his mate.

His mate. I wondered if he had heard the news and what he thought of his energy vampire other half.

"Rake, I'm so sorry. I didn't know what I was doing." I brushed a limp lock of hair from his forehead. We both needed a shower. My hair was hanging in heavy, dirty clumps around my shoulders and his shining green tresses looked in sorry need of a deep cleansing shampoo. I wasn't even going to think about the state of my unshaven little legs, still barely covered by my stupid red towel.

"I didn't know either. I should have suspected, but I thought you'd just sexed me half to death and that's why I was so tired," he said with a naughty smile.

"What a way to go, huh?"

"I wasn't complaining."

"How do you feel now?" I nailed him with a look I hoped he realized meant I wouldn't tolerate anything less than the truth. If my sun energy therapy hadn't done the trick, Falor had said there was still hope, that Long Tooth had some sort of backup plan. I had a feeling I wasn't going to enjoy any plan cooked up in Long Tooth's hot-headed brain, but I was willing to explore the options if Rake wasn't on the mend.

"I feel better," he said slowly.

"But not one-hundred percent," I said with a sigh.

"No, not one-hundred percent, which is unfortunate considering we're due on the battlefield at any moment." He grimaced slightly as he tried to move into a seated position.

"Lay down. You're not due anywhere until you're better."

"I'd rather die out in the fighting than wait here to have my throat cut on my sickbed."

"Rake, what's going on? Do you think the Protectors have really gone rogue? Is there any reason the werewolf people would have to fight them? Do you think—"

"The Flesh Tearers, that's what they're calling themselves now. I remembered when I woke up," Rake said.

"Is that the most important thing to talk about right now?" I asked, my voice slightly hysterical. I could understand the urge to be politically correct and all, but there was a time and a place.

"Yes, I think the Protectors have gone rogue. They're slaughtering innocent people and there's no reason for them to make war with the Flesh Tearers. Since they were freed ten years ago, the Flesh Tearers have kept themselves as isolated from the rest of our dimension as possible."

"Maybe they've just been biding their time, getting ready to make trouble."

"I doubt it. More likely they knew people would have called for their banishment if they'd seemed inclined to pursue the violent acts they had been bred to perform. But even if Garreck had some reason to attack Long Tooth, war is forbidden here. The Protectors know that. To go against the high council's mandate not to take you into custody against your will would be grounds for the highest punishment, let alone to make war on another group of people," Rake said, swallowing painfully again.

"Does your throat hurt? I'm sure they'll be back with water in any second. The girl wolf people have been really nice to me, so far."

"Is that the most important thing—"

"Okay, fine, I won't feel sorry for you. How do we know the Protectors are really killing people? It's just these people's word. What if they have their own agenda?"

"I read the proclamation papers, Long Tooth showed them to me himself. They're official and bear all the proper seals."

"That was nice of him, considering he shot you with a poison dart."

"I don't think he was being nice. He seemed most concerned with the fact that I read what the proclamation had to say about your former zombies."

"So you heard. That's good news, at least. I mean, I can't believe I've been feeding on you like a parasite, but I'm glad the people are okay."

"Gail, I think that Long Tooth—"

As if summoned by his name, Long Tooth burst into the room. He didn't knock, just slammed open the door as if he were in a terrible hurry and the mere act of having to

turn the handle pissed him off immeasurably. He was looking just as fearsome as before, but for some reason I wasn't as terrified.

*There is no more time. The Protector army has been sited less than three growers' fields to the east. Earth girl, you will come with me.*

Before I could tell him that he wasn't my boss and that I wasn't a girl, I was a full fledged woman, W-O-M-A-N, Falor bustled into the room behind him, trailed closely by the same younger wolf who had come to fetch us from the roof.

*Marcy, give the man a drink, but no more than one third of the glass until we see if his stomach is fitful. Long Tooth, I think you should make your way to the front lines and leave this situation in my care.*

*Falor, you are not ruler here! Remember your place or suffer banish –*

*You would banish the mother of your children? You would banish the mate who has stood by you when others doubted you would have the strength to lead? Do so at your own risk Long Tooth, for I doubt you will find yourself possessed of as many friendships without my influence among the –*

*Do not threaten me!*

*You are the one who threatens, Long Tooth. I am simply telling you the facts as they will stand if you do not come back to yourself.*

*I don't have the time for this mate trial. You should know better than to argue in front of our eldest or our guests.*

*I would have Marcy know the truth of how a female must stand for herself.*

*I leave you to this duty, but if you fail, our entire race will be slaughtered. Remember that and let your foolish concern for female power take second place for once.*

Falor growled low in her throat as her mate left the room. I had to give her credit for her restraint. I would have done a lot more than growl if I'd been wed to a power hungry chauvinistic wolfman.

"Gail, I know what he wants you to do and I think you should do it," Rake said.

I really didn't like the you're-not-going-to-like-this-very-much tone of his voice. I was about to tell him so when Falor spoke again.

*Come Gail, Long Tooth is right. We all stand to lose our lives if we don't act quickly. I hope your mate's words will sway you.*

"Like your mate's words sway you?" I asked.

"Gail, don't argue. Just trust Falor. I know the Flesh Tearers have the best interests of our dimension at heart. If the Protectors aren't put in their place, our world may soon become as wartorn and violent as Earth itself."

Once again, I felt my heart start to ache a little in my chest as I realized where Rake's first thoughts would always be. He was a man who thought of country, or dimension, first and everything else second. I didn't waste my breath telling him how it hurt that he hadn't even thought about if what Long Tooth wanted me to do was in my,

or even *our*, best interest. There wasn't time. Falor was already urging me from the room.

The look in his eyes, the tone in his voice, everything told me Rake knew I wasn't going to like whatever I was going to be asked to do. He knew, but he didn't care, that wasn't his priority. I think in that moment I realized Rake and I were never going to live happily ever after, but I couldn't let myself get too horribly sad about it. After all, we might all be getting ready to die at the hand of a pack of vengeful barbarians and that would put an end to our love story a lot sooner than irreconcilable differences.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You do realize that, *if* I do this, they may not be anything except mindless zombies, right? I never tried to make my people do anything. I just sucked their energy when I needed it to run really fast or claw someone's arm off. But even if I sucked these guys dry – which I'm not willing to do by the way – I don't think I'd be able to take down the whole Protector army. I'm only one fairly small person and –"

*I'll help you the best that I can, Gail. At this point there is nothing to lose for you or for the prisoners. You will get their energy and they will be spared death for at least a few more days. But our warriors are out on the field as we speak, waiting to meet an army at least three times their number.*

"Falor, I didn't ask Long Tooth or anyone else to fight for me."

*It doesn't matter what you asked for, this is the situation as it stands and all that is in our power to control. Please, do what you can to help my people protect your future in this dimension and our own dimension as well.*

"Why did they do this?" I flinched as the Flesh Tearer prisoners growled and lunged toward where Falor and I stood on the far side of their cell. I was very thankful the chains around their necks, manacled to the wall, looked strong. "You said Long Tooth planned to abandon the town. Why stay and fight just because Rake and I showed up on the street? Long Tooth doesn't even like me, it's obvious."

*It's not a matter of liking you or even of believing in the prophecies of the human kind of our dimension. If you had died, undefended, within the limits of our town, the Flesh Tearers would have been blamed for your death by every believer citizen. For standing by and letting a woman some believe to be the embodiment of the Lady of Light be killed, we would have been exiled to an inhospitable planet at the very least, if not eliminated altogether. There are more than a few people who believe the Flesh Tearers should have been destroyed after it became illegal to breed us for battle on other worlds. We have done our best not to give them an excuse to act on that opinion, Gail, but by walking through our town you handed them all the justification they would ever need.*

"I understand." I squeezed my eyes shut. Wrong place, wrong time. It was becoming the new story of my life. Now these people had been forced into putting their life on the line for me and I, in turn, was being forced to turn twenty-seven of their most violent criminals into my own personal attack zombies.

*Gail, if you mean to help us, please act quickly. It's starting to strain my energies to keep the prisoners' thoughts from your mind.*

"Right, sorry." I opened my eyes and gulped mightily as I took another look at my potential converts.

To say they were scary was to say George Dubya wasn't the smartest man in Texas. They were all huge, impressively muscled and built to rip lesser animals limb from limb without breaking a sweat. The looks of pure meanness twisting their faces said they wouldn't feel any remorse during the ripping.

I was appropriately grateful Falor was keeping their thoughts from my mind. From the amount of snarling and snapping going on, I doubted they had anything pleasant to say. Falor said half of them had been sentenced to death for challenging Long Tooth to a death match and losing, the other half for killing their mates or children.

According to Falor, a lot of the male Flesh Tearers had rage issues that often manifested in violence against the very people they were supposed to care for most deeply. She had sounded ashamed of her species as she'd conveyed that little bit of information, but it only made me respect her more. She truly was a brave woman to continue to demand respect from her mate when so many women before her had obviously paid for defiance with their lives.

It didn't even matter that the men who had killed them were sentenced to die, the women and children were still dead. It pissed me off, almost enough to make me feel fine about turning the creeps into zombies. Almost.

"Falor, I would be willing to try, but the first time I did this I almost killed the man having sex with me in the process. Considering Rake is barely conscious as it is, I don't think he could hold up to—"

*There may be another way. In a battle I fought many years ago, one of the captains of the opposing force was an energy manipulator. He enslaved half of our own fighters before we managed to escape. Would you be willing to try another method to take them as your own?*

"I'll try, but I can't guarantee anything will work," I said, feeling a little nervous when Falor held up one hand and her already long nails grew even longer and sharper, like an oversized cat extending its claws.

It was a scary thing to watch, but I knew Falor wouldn't hurt me. I felt close to her, no matter how short a time we'd known each other. Besides, she needed me to help her people. There was no way she planned to use those claws against me.

*Think of reaching out to them.*

I was going to ask her exactly what she meant by "reaching out", but then she swiped at me with her claws. All I saw was a blur of brown fur. I looked down at my midsection, shocked to see my towel shredded and a deep gash ripped in the sensitive skin of my stomach.

"You bitch," I managed to gasp out before the pain overwhelmed me.

I fell to my knees, clutching at something soft and slick trying to squeeze through the hands I pressed to my midsection. I figured it was an internal organ of some type.

The knowledge would have made me throw up if my body were capable. Instead, I simply slid sideways onto the floor, growing progressively lightheaded as a pain unlike anything I'd ever known rapidly consumed my world. I squeezed my eyes shut and begged for it to end, opening my mouth to scream but no sound came out. After all I'd been through in the past few days, this was by far the last way I had expected to die and for that reason it was all the more pointless and depressing.

*Gail, reach out. Reach out to them!*

I would like to reach out to *her*, give Falor a little of the agony slicing through me in sharp, life-stealing waves.

No sooner had the thought passed my mind than Falor's knees hit the floor. She keened like a dog whose tail has just been sliced from its body. My mind was assaulted by a barrage of male voices as the prisoners' thoughts broke through her weakened control, becoming a terrible screaming in my head. I think I would have lost consciousness, except that my own pain lessened as Falor's increased. As the agony began to fade, I realized what she had meant for me to do.

"You should have warned me first," I groaned. Then I let the pain within me reach out to fill the room, let that desperately seeking energy roll from my body like a dark wave, pulling under everything in its path.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun had sunk behind the horizon, but the last bit of deep red light still hung in the air, bathing the waiting Flesh Tearer army with its bloody radiance. I sent my new zombie warriors scampering to the front lines and followed Rake and Falor over the shaking ground. I tried not to think of the crimson light as some horrible omen of things to come.

"Gail, are you okay?"

"No, Rake, I'm not, but thanks for asking." I rearranged my face into an expression hopefully a little less prophetic of our doom. I might be scared to death and not at all confident about my soldiering abilities, but I'd watched enough manly hero movies to know you didn't go into battle without your game face on.

*I'll go ask Long Tooth where he would like us both positioned.*

Falor ran ahead, dropping to all fours and bounding forward with a speed and grace that was inspiring to see. It helped remind me the Flesh Tearers weren't your average, everyday army. They had been bred for battle and moved with an assured physicality that spoke of how well they could fend for themselves. Maybe they could handle being outnumbered three to one.

"We have more than a fighting chance, Gail," Rake said, as if reading my thoughts.

"You can't read my mind again, can you?"

"No, just your facial expressions."

"I thought I had my warrior face on." I tried to stand up a little straighter, grateful Falor had spared a few precious seconds finding me something to wear other than my tattered, bloody towel. I would have had an even harder time pretending I wasn't completely terrified if I was walking onto the battlefield in such a sorry state.

But, amazingly enough, Marcy, Falor's daughter, had some clothing in my size. The simple brown leather tunic was a bit wide in the shoulders, but it hit me at mid thigh and left me covered without impeding my movement. The lightweight armored breastplate that fit over the soft leather also made me feel about a hundred times less vulnerable. Falor said the armor wouldn't stand up to much abuse—having been created for protecting young Flesh Tearers during their combat lessons not real battle—but it helped put me in the proper frame of mind.

Now if I'd just had shoes, I would have been ready to kick ass and take names. But the scraps of leather wound around my feet would at least serve to protect my soles from the rocks on the ground, though my poor toes were still left hanging out in the wind. Still, I would consider myself the luckiest woman in the dimension if, by the end of the night, my worst injury was a stubbed toe.

"I'm sure to everyone else you look completely confident." Rake clenched the sword Falor had provided more tightly in his hand.

I will never understand why men think it is heroic or brave to go out and kill each other, but deep down, they all seem to share the belief. Even Rake, the pacifist who didn't want war on his planet, looked almost excited to be going out to face down the enemy. Oh well, it looked like we had to fight whether we liked it or not, at least Rake seemed like he was feeling up to the task.

When I'd made my second batch of zombies—through a near death experience not nearly as pleasurable as orgasm—not only had I healed my own severe wounds, but I'd refueled Rake's lagging energy reserves as well. I found it fairly easy to manipulate my new "people" simply by thinking about what I'd like them to do and they proved stronger under my control than their own.

The only bump in the road was that I had accidentally zombified Falor at the same time as the rest of the wolves in the dungeon. Since she wasn't really high on my VIP list after slicing my stomach open with her claws, I considered leaving her that way. But I finally came to terms with the fact that I needed her in her own mind, to tell me how to get to the battlefield if nothing else. Plus, I thought a Falor zombie might piss off Long Tooth and that wasn't something I was ready to do. Stand up to him a bit, maybe, but not wave a red flag in his toothy face.

"You seem awfully comfortable with a sword for a man who's lived his life in a dimension without war," I said, reaching down to assure my own small weapon was still attached to the belt at my waist. The adolescent Flesh Tearer-sized battleaxe wasn't something I thought I'd be able to use with any skill, but since Marcy had been forbidden to fight I decided to carry it anyway. At least I'd have something sharp to whack people with if it came to that, which I prayed it wouldn't.

The plan was for Falor and I to be positioned within clear view of the front lines of battle, but still safely protected by a contingency of soldiers. That way, with Falor's advice, I could mentally direct the efforts of my zombies without becoming a vulnerable target myself. Falor had assured me the zombies would continue to fight even if I was drawn into the battle and unable to direct them—that they would follow through with my intentions until I told them otherwise—but I wasn't completely convinced. I would rather keep a firm hand on the whole lot of them, just in case they decided to go crazy and turn on their own people. They were not nice guys in real life and even as zombies they were almost more than I could handle.

Their energy was very different from the villagers I had been linked to before. It was raw and wild and for the first few seconds after they were created, made me feel like I'd been pounding shots of straight whiskey. Where as Rake's energy made me kind of punch drunk, sort of floaty, champagne bubble silly, the Flesh Tearers made me feel wild and ornery.

"Gail?"

"What?" I asked, breaking into a slight trot as Falor beckoned us to hurry to where she stood next to Long Tooth some fifty feet ahead.

"I was telling you about sword practice with my father, but it doesn't matter," Rake said, beginning to jog beside me.

The fighters already in place parted to make way for us. I tried to look as in control of the situation as possible, feeling I had to live up to the confidence I saw in the yellow and amber eyes staring down at me. What I had done to earn their trust, besides making some zombies, I had no idea, but I didn't want to let them down.

I didn't want to fight Garreck and his men, either, but if they gave me no choice I would. My allies were constantly changing in Here and I had to choose to stand with the people who weren't trying to kill me at the given moment. My relatively involved standards for determining friend or foe had been drastically simplified. If you were watching my back, you were my buddy. If you were trying to arrange for my death in some violent fashion, you were not.

*You have done well, Earth girl, your new people are as fierce as I had hoped.*

Rake and I came to stand beside where Long Tooth and Falor were watching my zombies take up their battle positions ahead of the first line of Flesh Tearer warriors. Long Tooth seemed suitably impressed and Falor completely pleased, but I couldn't take credit for what my psychotic charges had gotten up to in the few seconds they had been out of my sight.

Falor told me to direct them to the front and urge them to be ready for battle, but I hadn't intended for them to be doing...whatever it was they were doing. All twenty-something of them were leaping up and down, growling and snarling, putting on quite a show. As the intensity of the ground's quaking intensified—signaling the increasing nearness of the Protector army—my wolves grew equally more manic, practically frothing at the mouth with their eagerness to be tearing into barbarian flesh.

*Falor, take her and her mate to the tower. You should have a clear view from the top.*

*Her mate wishes to fight, Long Tooth.*

*It is better for him to remain safe. Females are easily enough distracted without fearing for the well being of their mates.*

One part of me wanted to tell Long Tooth where to shove his opinions about females, but the other part realized I *would* be distracted if I saw Rake injured or dying. I wanted him safe and knowing he was right beside me would free me from worrying how he was faring out on the battlefield.

"I'll stand with the men protecting Gail and Falor." Rake nodded his head to Long Tooth like a young prince deferring to an older and wiser king. The man was good with people and Flesh Tearers. I wondered if he'd ever thought of taking up politics before he decided he was going to be my consort and father to the future rulers of the dimension.

As if *that* was ever going to happen.

When I'd cut the zombie cord on Falor, freeing her from my control, the first thing I'd asked her is if what she'd done to me would have hurt a child. Assuming Rake and I had managed to conceive during one of our epic love-making sessions. Though I hadn't planned on becoming a mommy anytime soon, I think I would have broken down and sobbed on the cold dungeon floor if Falor had told me my not-two-day-old fetus was dead.

*Possibly, but your energy wasn't pregnant.*

That's all she'd said, but the confusion in her tone had been complete enough that I'd believed her. Of course, I'd wanted to believe her. The alternative was too hard to handle. At least now I knew Rake and I weren't presently mommy and daddy to a new generation of Here rulers. Assuming I had the good sense to keep my legs crossed until I could find something resembling contraception, I could keep it that way.

"Go ahead, I'm right behind you," I said to Rake as he waited for me to crawl up into the wooden tower serving as a lookout post for the Flesh Tearer army.

It was probably two stories high, accessible only by a narrow ladder that could be pulled up onto the top of the platform. It made me wonder what would happen to us if the Protectors overran the first legions of fighters and swarmed. Wouldn't it be better if we had some way to get down quickly? But I decided to keep my mouth shut and follow orders. I wasn't a specialist on battle tactics. I was a romance editor. Good god, did *that* seem like another life.

"No, I want to be underneath in case you fall." Rake leaned down to plant a soft kiss on my forehead before turning me toward the ladder.

"I'm still not wearing underwear," I protested in a loud whisper.

"As I said, I want to be underneath you in case you fall," Rake whispered back as one hand snuck up the back of my tunic to pat my ass. "It's nothing I haven't seen before, or wouldn't love to see again."

"This isn't the time for horseplay," I said, for some reason flashing back to my third-grade teacher's favorite phrase. What the hell was horseplay anyway?

"Good thing I'm not a horse." Rake slid a soft finger between my legs. The simple, intimate touch was enough to draw a sharp breath from my throat and a shiver from the rest of my body. Even now, at this horrible time, after I'd just finished thinking about how glad I was we weren't bound together by our unborn child's needs if nothing else, he could still make me ache for him unlike anything I'd ever known.

"I hate you." I leaned back into his chest for just a second. I did love touching him, holding him. I didn't want to give up on life or each other until I'd spent at least one full night with him in a normal bed, cradled in his arms, just resting my head on his chest and listening to his heart beat.

"I love you, so much." He kissed the top of my head, his voice so full of emotion I had to tell him the truth.

"Rake, we're not pregnant. Falor told me."

"That's okay. Some things take time."

"I'm glad we're not, Rake, and we're going to have to have a long talk when this is over," I said, starting to climb up the ladder.

"Like I said, some things take time."

"Has anyone ever told you what a smug little turd you are?"

"Has anyone ever told you that your pussy is unbelievably gorgeous?"

"Actually...no." I was suddenly a little embarrassed and more than a little turned on, knowing Rake was staring at my evidently beautiful pussy.

"It is."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"And Rake, I do love you."

"I know."

"But you're still a smug little turd."

"I love you too."

Satisfied we understood each other, I scrambled the rest of the way up the ladder and onto the platform, joining Falor and three other wolves with bow and arrows at the ready. Rake followed closely behind and reached out to take my hand as we looked out at the darkening horizon and saw the dust of what looked like a million runaway cows clouding the air.

If it had really been a million cows, I still would have been terrified. Knowing it was probably upward of a thousand armed, angry and enormous men, I suddenly wished I'd spent my youth in target practice instead of dance lessons. After all, I'd never found myself in a situation where knowing how to dance the Samba was going to save my life. I hadn't even been dancing since 2004.

*Are you ready?*

"As I'll ever be," I said to Falor, gripping the wooden railing surrounding the platform with hands that looked frighteningly small. Not that it would have mattered if I were a large person. Big or small, arrows and big spiky mallets still killed and outnumbered was still outnumbered.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

I'd been wishing the stupid Protectors would just hurry up and get there already and spare me the angst of anticipation, when suddenly they were upon us and I changed my mind. This wasn't like a shot at the doctor's office you could hurry up and get finished with. This was more like a marathon I wasn't nearly prepared to run.

If there had been any doubt whether the Protector army intended to fight, it was squelched in the second they slammed into the front lines of the Flesh Tearer army without so much as slowing their pace. The battle was frantic and intense, both sides setting about their work with a passion that made me certain there was more at the heart of this conflict than one Earth woman. But then again, when someone was coming at you with intent to kill, battle probably stopped being about anything except who you had to destroy to see another day.

The dust in the air made it difficult to breathe. The sounds of screaming men filled the air as the two moons rose peacefully over distant hills, giving me the surreal feeling I sometimes got when riding the subway in New York City. There could be some crazy person raving about aliens lasering their eyelids shut while they were sleep, but everyone else on the train just keeps reading their paper. The moons were like that, frustratingly refusing to acknowledge that the land beneath them was covered in blood.

My rabid zombie wolves fought with unearthly vengeance and for the first several minutes of the battle, the front lines of normal Flesh Tearer warriors went untouched. Arrows flew from both sides and I saw a few of our side fall to the ground, heard the whining of wolves in pain, but for the most part it was the Protector army whose blood was used to wet the dry earth.

It was violent and horrifying, but at least it helped kill some of the dust. After awhile I could see the individual bodies of the warriors at the front. We were still too far away to make out actual faces—a fact I was glad of since I didn't think I could stomach seeing Thomas or even Garreck slain by one of my wolves—but I could see more and more hairy barbarians screaming their death cry into the night before they lay down without any sign of getting up again.

*Long Tooth is circling around to the rear of their force. Hold your people to their work.*

I heard Falor's voice in my mind and was aware that Rake had taken up a bow, but it was a dreamy kind of awareness. The majority of my concentration was with my warriors, not looking at them or directing their actions so much as focusing my attention on them and urging them to slaughter anything large and human that came into their path.

Considering I'd never done anything like it before, I was doing a hell of a job, or they were anyway. Either I was more bloodthirsty than I thought, or else the vicious

natures of my ex-con zombies just naturally lent themselves to mass destruction. Whatever it was, I was relieved. I hadn't thought I would feel anything but horror watching men die, let alone being responsible for their deaths, but as I saw yet another pair of hairy men scream as the claws of one of my wolves disemboweled them both with one swipe, I was relieved...and more than a little satisfied.

"Shit." I gasped as a Protector arrow landed with a sharp thud not two feet from where I stood. Maybe god was getting ready to punish me for my gleeful homicide-by-zombie.

*Don't lose focus!*

"Gail, to the north!" Rake screamed.

"Like I know which direction is north!" I screamed back, ducking as another arrow whizzed over our heads and sought some werewolf's death on the other side.

I followed the direction of Falor's frantic pointing and saw at least fifty Protectors armed with the largest bows I'd ever seen. That might not have been so scary except that the soldiers were mounted on terrifying animals whose backs would probably have drawn even with the top of the platform on which we stood. Ridiculously enormous and scary, but what would I have expected a barbarian to ride—a pony?

"What are they?" I felt a sudden flash of pain followed by Falor tugging sharply on the arm of my tunic.

One of my wolves had fallen while I was distracted. I felt my eyes start to tear up and my throat grow tight. I shouldn't waste energy grieving one of my nasty zombie wolves who would have been executed if they weren't being used for battle purposes, but I did. It was my fault that man-wolf thing died and I knew my conscience wouldn't ever let me forget it. But for now, the best I could do was keep my mind on business and make sure we didn't lose anyone else. Otherwise, I might not live to be tortured by anything so gentle as a conscience.

"There's no Earth word for them." Rake grunted as he let loose another arrow in their direction. "The closest comparison would be a rhinoceros, but they're not mammals. They're alien, from a dimension consumed by war. Their teeth, three horns and claws are venomous, even prolonged skin-to-skin contact with them can kill."

"Hence the outfits," I muttered. The men riding the creatures were covered head to toe in something tight and black that reminded me of duct tape. Even their eyes were concealed by a silver shield that covered them from the top of their brow down to the end of their chin. The only recognizable characteristics remaining visible were the various shades of hair flowing from the top of their heads.

One such head sported a wealth of long, blond locks that were horribly familiar.

He'd come to kill me. There was no denying it now, no imagining we'd had a misunderstanding two nights before, that perhaps he'd really wanted to take me back to his camp and feed me a warm bowl of stew and console me about my nasty experience in the Destroyer's custody.

"Garreck's here," I said, deciding this was without a doubt the worst ex encounter of my life.

I'd assumed the time I'd run into my ex-boyfriend on a date with a supermodel two days after we'd broken up while dressed in my rattiest pair of sweats with a bright red upper lip from my recent moustache wax would forever remain at the top of that particular list. But I was wrong. Running into an ex riding a giant venomous rhino lizard alligator while he's leading an army intent on killing you was much, much worse.

"And he's not alone." Rake covered me with his body as another round of arrows thunked into the platform.

*Hold fire and reverse fifty paces.*

As soon as the words left Falor's mind, the platform started to move. The wolves beneath us rolled the structure back into an area beyond the Protectors' arrow zone. For now at least.

I resumed my concentration on my zombies, nearly forgetting I was going to berate Rake for stating the obvious when something large and red caught my attention. Behind the mounted men, the moons' eerie light illuminated an enormous zombie-drawn litter fit for the dimension's most evil socialite.

*I consider myself more an impresario than a social butterfly, sweetest.*

"What?"

*I enjoyed our time together, didn't you? I was pleasantly surprised to find such a filthy, little slut concealed behind your abundance of moxie.*

"No," I whispered, the breath knocked out of me by the violating sensation of Phillip's voice in my head.

I didn't want him anywhere near me, but I especially wanted him kept safely outside the walls of my most personal, private space. I'd never worried for my sanity in my life except for those first few hours after he'd made his way into my dreams. I thought I had managed to block that particular experience from my memory, but as his mind touched mine I wanted to curl into a ball and shiver all over again.

*Gail? Gail, can you hear me? I can block his voice, but you have to regain your focus. We've lost two more of your people and are suffering great losses to the archers.*

"He's speaking in her mind?" Rake asked Falor, taking one look at my face and realizing I was too terrified to answer with anything resembling coherency. "How is that possible?"

*I do not know, but I felt the echo of his energy in the air around her.*

"He entered her dream last night." Rake smoothed my hair out of my face and cupped my cheek in a way that helped bring me back to myself enough to look away from the Destroyer's slowly approaching royal procession. My zombies were suffering, I owed it to them to keep my mind in the right place.

"He's right. He took Rake's place in my dream. It was the most vivid sleeping experience I've ever had and not in a good way," I said, feeling a flush of heat sweep across my skin.

I hated Phillip with every nucleus of every cell in my body and it was as if that hatred suddenly took on a consciousness of its own. I felt my heart beat steady and the efforts of my zombies intensify as a quite assurance took root deep inside my guts. I was going to kill the Destroyer. It was a prophecy if I had ever known one and that deep knowing made me feel a hundred times more sure of myself.

*There must be a common energy source.*

"But that's impossible, you said Rake was my only energy source. That's why I was sucking him dry." I exhaled deeply and imagined my breath fueling my people. Amazingly it seemed to work.

"I've never even seen the Destroyer, let alone established an energy connection," Rake agreed, clapping me heartily on the back. The archers on the platform howled with enthusiasm when my zombies suddenly grew even fiercer, moving with a speed that made them little more than flashing claws and snapping teeth.

*I agree. Rake is not the source. There must be someone else, unless you bonded with the Destroyer himself.*

"No I didn't. I didn't even touch him." A horrible suspicion took root in my mind. "But I did have sex with one of his human followers."

I refused to meet Rake's eye as I said the words, trying to act as if I wasn't worried how my announcement would affect him, but I knew I'd grown pale.

*Is the person still living?*

"I don't know, I guess so. I didn't make him one of my people, I just...fed from him during the act and then kind of cut him loose."

"I don't think that would be a strong enough link for the Destroyer to reach your mind against your will," Rake said, stringing his bow again. He didn't sound pleased, but he didn't look particularly angry either.

The mounted Protector archers were once again getting within arrow range and I could tell he had designs on picking one man in particular off of his rhino-gator. But he didn't seem angry with me for being a sexual-energy-vampire-slut, which made me think maybe I had just dated too many Latino men in my life. On the whole, they were a fairly jealous and possessive lot. Though to be truthful, so were most men when they really cared about you. Maybe Rake didn't really care? Maybe he didn't want to be exclusive, maybe—

Jesus Christ, I had to get a grip. This wasn't the time to be psychoanalyzing mine and Rake's relationship—or lack thereof.

"So there's someone else?" I asked Falor, whose eyes had grown distant.

*He's very powerful. He has spent time in the bodiless realm.*

"Humans can't exist in that realm." Rake darted a concerned look to where Falor stood.

*I don't think he's human. And I don't think I can block his thoughts much longer. We have to get Gail out of his sight. If he can't see her, perhaps he won't be able to reach her mind.*

"But what about my zombies?"

*They will continue their work.*

"But he entered my dream last night and he couldn't see me," I argued, feeling awfully reluctant to leave a party I hadn't been excited to attend in the first place. But I felt my warriors needed me and I wasn't about to abandon them now that I'd finally managed to coax them into full-out killing frenzy mode.

*Your mind is more vulnerable during sleep. Your people will continue to fight as long as you are willing them to do so, but I don't know how much longer I can hold off his thoughts without sustaining damage to my own mind.*

"Let's go," Rake said, gripping me by my upper arm in a way that left little doubt in my mind he'd make me go if I wouldn't do so willingly.

"Rake, I can take it, I don't want to —"

"Falor can withdraw her concentration and be safe from invading thoughts, you can't. Until we figure out how you're connected to the man, you need to remain out of his sight."

"Rake, I —"

"You haven't seen the worst of what he can do. He was playing with you in that dream. In his sick mind, he probably assumed you were both having fun. You don't want to experience what will happen when he stops playing," Rake said, blanching as he helped Falor position the ladder at the opposite side of the platform from the Protector archers.

*I believe you should send half of your warriors to attack the beasts and pull half back toward our present position. We will retreat to the west and won't want to be completely undefended. I'll tell Long Tooth that —*

"But won't the zombies be killed if they touch the Rhino things?" I asked, scrambling down the ladder first. I noticed the normal Flesh Tearer army hadn't been getting too close to the creatures. Bow and arrows and the occasional javelin-like thing were thrown, but no creature-to-claw combat.

"Gail, they were going to be executed anyway. If their sacrifice can save several hundred lives —"

*He's right, send them and then we'll follow the path out to the —*

"No," I said. "I should go. I'll send part of my people to safety like you said, but I'll be the one to go attack the poisonous things."

"Gail! You can be serious, those —"

"If I get hurt, I can heal myself drawing on the zombies' power. I stitched up my own stomach and there's not even so much as a scar," I said.

"It's a completely different situation. You could be mortally injured."

"My innards were spilling out onto the floor an hour ago, Rake, and now I'm fine. That wouldn't be possible for any of them. I have to try."

"And what about the Destroyer? Do you think you'll be able to fight those creatures and heal yourself while he's busy doing his best to distract you?"

"I don't know, but—"

"It doesn't matter, I'm not going to let you go. I shouldn't have let you go into his camp the first time and I'm not about to make the same mistake again," Rake said, moving toward me as if he would carry me bodily from the battlefield kicking and screaming. Falor and the archers advanced behind him, apparently in a similar frame of mind.

There was little doubt they would have succeeded in carrying me off into the night, forcing me to flee for my life once again, but I found I had rediscovered my ability to Run.

And Run I did, faster than I believed possible. So fast, in fact, that by the time I figured out how to stop I'd darted through the massive tree trunk legs of the Protectors' war monsters, past the Destroyer's royal litter, and was nearly at the end of the zombie caravan.

"Crap." I ground to a halt. I'd obviously overestimated how much energy I needed to take from my zombie wolves. I was going to have to remember that a little bit went a long way.

To my right, a few straggling Destroyer followers trudged along the darkening road. The zombies at this end of the battle were smaller men and women and a few children—which made me even more determined to kill the Destroyer and set his followers free. The larger converts had been tapped for the fighting and these left behind to guard what seemed to be the Destroyer holding cell. Inside a ten by ten foot metal cage, set on large wheels that came nearly to my chest, a few crumpled bodies lay on their sides, looking as worn and defeated as I'd ever seen anything still living.

I was beginning to think they weren't living—that maybe the Destroyer enjoyed toting around dead bodies—when one of the shadows shifted and moonlight touched upon a familiar face.

"Thomas?" I asked quietly, advancing slowly toward the cage, relieved the zombies made no move to stop me. I had no doubt I could take them down if I needed to, but I didn't want to hurt any more innocent people if I could help it.

"Gail?" croaked a familiar voice from behind the body I could now clearly see was indeed Thomas. But the young, Protector warrior barely seemed to be breathing, let alone up to making words. Unfortunately, it was another unexpected pair of blue eyes that rose from the pile of bodies to meet my own.

"Garreck?" I asked, my heart in my throat as my mind fought to assimilate two revelations and their accompanying questions.

One—if Garreck was in this cage, then he couldn't be leading the Protector army. So who the hell was the man with the long blond hair riding the war monster? Two—if the weird greenish light that hung in the air between Garreck and I meant what I thought it did, then I just might have found my Destroyer connection. But what the hell was I going to do about that? Should I just whip out my metaphysical scissors and cut him loose?

*Gail, I'm sorry I'm –*

*I wouldn't consider that, Gail, unless you are ready for the young prince to die.*

I shivered as Falor's voice was cut off and the Destroyer invaded with full force, his presence so overbearing I physically staggered. A wave of nausea swept over me as I felt his energy ram through me like a rough hand trying to fill a glove. Not at all interested in being his glove, I gripped the bars in front of me and concentrated on their cool metallic feel, sucking the night air deep into my lungs, struggling to keep from closing my eyes. I somehow knew his power would be even more overwhelming if I retreated into the darkness behind my closed lids.

Besides, I figured it was best to keep watch on Garreck, just in case he decided to go crazy again. He looked beaten and terrified and exhausted, but I was sure he had at least enough energy left to strangle one smallish woman. Especially considering what I was planning to say next might not make him too happy.

*"Maybe I'm ready for him to die."*

*"Gail, please you don't understand,"* Garreck said, his voice a study in despair.

*No, she doesn't understand, but who can blame the poor girl? So many lies, but now it seems their lies may be the death of many. Go ahead and kill him, Gail, it should be interesting to watch the dominos fall.*

*"Don't listen to him, Gail. You can't do it. I have to do it, but he won't—"* Garreck broke off with a scream, falling back to the floor of his prison. He gripped his head with his massive hands and showed me clearly what I had done to him the night before.

*"Oh god."* I pressed a hand over my mouth as if I could hold back the vomit manually. Garreck's arm was already rife with rot, squirming with large, white worms I assumed were maggots. I'd never seen a maggot before and knew I would pay a large sum of money never to see one again, especially one feeding so enthusiastically from human flesh.

*Horrible, isn't it? Look what you've done to him. You should kill him, Gail. Kill him and end his misery.*

*"Get out of my head and let him talk!"* I screamed, jumping as my voice filled the air and made several of the zombies close to me moan in what sounded like pain.

In the distance I could still hear the battle raging. I knew I needed to get back there, needed to do something, needed to focus on someone, but I couldn't remember. The world had narrowed to the horrible raw meat of Garreck's arm and the oily sound of the Destroyer's voice in my head.

"I'll stay out of your head, my sweet, but are you quite sure you want him to talk? All the young men these days are so full of shit," Phillip said, his actual voice meeting my ears and making me jump again. I turned to find him not twenty feet away, but I wasn't surprised he'd managed to sneak up on me. He was the personification of sneaky.

"Crass choice of words, Phillip. I thought you were more poetic than that." I turned my back on Garreck, but stepped away from the bars—just in case. Not that Phillip didn't have me surrounded by zombies, but for some reason I wasn't too worried about them. They were the smallest zombies I'd ever seen and even infused with super strength, they weren't that intimidating. Not when compared to an angry giant or a monster masquerading as a human being.

"Just adjusting for my audience. You are a fairly crass character, Gail. I have to admit I'd hoped for a more elegant spirit in such a beautiful woman, but I think you'll be entertaining in your own way. Despite what some of my follower's might have told you, I do enjoy pleasing my lovers."

"I am never going to be your lover, in your dreams or anywhere else," I spat at him, wishing I could tear out his eyes with my bare hands. I'd like to see some maggots crawling around in that monstrosity he called a face. But tonight he had his mist back in place so there was no clear eye socket to aim for, even if I'd had the nerve to get quite that close.

"But I've already had you, don't you remember how thoroughly I fucked your tight little ass? And you liked it, so much. Didn't you?"

"That was just a dream." I trembled as his voice seemed to move inside of me, touching things I didn't want him to touch, squirming around inside my internal organs until I felt like I would gladly rip open my own stomach again if it would force him out.

"What are we if not the sum total of our most secret wishes? You enjoyed what we did together, Gail, and you're going to enjoy all the things I have planned for the future."

"Gail, give me your weapon," Garreck called from the cage, startling my eyes away from Phillip's. Immediately, the roiling sensation inside of me subsided. I had been allowing him to get to me, been drawn into whatever spell he was trying to weave.

Phillip had moved even closer during his little speech and was now no more than ten feet away. I somehow knew he could close that distance in an instant and that the way he'd been manipulating his energy inside of me was just a small taste of what he was truly capable of. He could have me on the ground feeling like alien babies were trying to burst through my chest cavity if he were so inclined.

But for now he was still trying to take me without a struggle, a fact that baffled me completely. Surely he had to know I hated him, that I'd never go along with whatever he had planned without one hell of a fight? So that left me wondering about his game plan. Was it actually possible he believed his own load of crap? That he thought we'd make a fabulous couple?

"Give me the axe, wee Gail!"

"No way in hell Garreck," I said.

"Gail, please, you don't understand," he pleaded before another wave of pain made him curl into himself and sob in a way no grown man should ever do.

"Stop whatever you're doing to him," I screamed at Phillip, picking up a rock from the ground and hurling it at the mist above his shoulders, an action that was met with laughter as my missile missed by several feet.

God, I hated him and my inability to throw with precision.

"I'm not doing anything the Prince doesn't secretly enjoy. Much like yourself, Gail, Garreck enjoys a little pain, a little degradation. I've found royalty often does. His brother is the same way, relishes being tied, restrained, taken roughly while he pretends it is against his will for me to do so," Phillip said, taking a single step closer.

"Stop right there and shut the fuck up," I said, not believing for a second Garreck or his brother enjoyed being with this monster, despite the dream I'd had in the bathing tent.

I'd be willing to bet my right hand Garreck was one of the most heterosexual men I had ever met. I knew for certain I had only enjoyed the idea of playing the submissive with a man I loved and trusted. I did not enjoy being used and deceived—even in a dream—by someone so cruel and inhuman. I didn't believe anyone could, no matter how twisted their sexual psyche.

"Now Gail, that isn't how a good girl speaks to her Master," he chuckled and stepped even closer, making me almost nervous enough to miss the movement behind him.

"You're not my Master." I kept my gaze glued to his misty head though I watched the man in the long brown duster out of the corner of my eye as he crept up behind the Destroyer with a large, Samurai-looking sword. If Jacob was planning to use that sword on Phillip, I didn't want to do anything to keep him from it. If he were coming to the aid of his ruler and getting ready to gut me, however, I didn't want to miss my chance to run for it either.

"Maybe not, but we'll find out soon enough. One of you has been born to be my consort and I'll not risk claiming the wrong one, not when I'm so very close. The other one hides from me, but she will be found. Then we will decide which one of you will live," Phillip said. I think I would have asked him what he meant by that, the words having been the first semi-interesting thing he'd said all night, but at that moment Jacob took the opportunity to prove his true colors.

I, for one, was very, very glad they were of the turn-on-your-benefactor-and-stab-him-in-the-back variety.

"Ahhh!" Jacob screamed as he swiped the sword through the air at waist level, cleanly severing Phillip's bottom half from his top.

Phillip howled out a high-pitched wail that didn't sound anything close to human as his two halves hit the ground and began to spew unholy amounts of blood.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod," I heard myself mumbling, not realizing I had backed away from the gore until my back hit the bars of the cage and a strong, maggot covered, arm wrapped around my neck.

"Give it to me!" Garreck screamed over my scream.

"Stop, let me go!" I shrieked, clawing at his arm and growing progressively more hysterical as one of the maggots crawled onto my face.

I tried to think of my zombies, of the energy cords, of how I had managed to turn my nails into weapons of destruction the first time around. But though I think I would have gladly cut my own neck off to get away, I just couldn't concentrate. I was out of my mind with terror, a few white, squirming, flesh-eating things succeeding in stealing my sanity more surely than the Destroyer himself.

"Let her go and I'll do it for you!" I heard Jacob yelling from in front of me, but I couldn't seem to see anything except the arm and the puss, feel anything except the tingle of my skin as the maggots crawled over my face, toward my eyes where I was sure they were going to enjoy a juicy feast.

"It's as I told you, no one else can do the job. It has to be by my own hand! Give me her weapon!"

The next few seconds were a complete blur. I know I felt someone pulling my axe from my belt and seconds later I hit the ground, but I was so busy swiping the maggots from my face and neck and struggling to my feet I didn't see exactly what happened to Garreck. By the time I turned, his throat was already sliced cleanly open and the light of awareness starting to fade from his eyes as fast as thick, rich blood ran from his body.

"Oh god, no," I sobbed, the tears flowing fast and furious.

I felt like my heart was breaking, like the world would never again be the same. No matter that he'd tried to kill me, I hadn't wanted this for Garreck. To watch his face grow slack with death was the most profoundly disturbing thing I'd ever seen. His body convulsed slightly and a gurgling sound escaped from his full lips, but soon he lay still on the floor of the cell. The night air suddenly grew colder and my breath caught as the cord of green light faded and disappeared. In a few moments, there was only horrible stillness where the energy that was Garreck used to be. I knew he was gone.

"It had to be, Gail. If you'd—"

"You killed him!" I accused Jacob, lunging at his chest and beating at him with my fists even though I could barely see through the tears running down my face.

"He took his own life. We'd spoken before. He believed if you cut him free or if he died by another's hand, you would have injured yourself and killed all of the people under your power."

"Why?" I asked, still sobbing though I stopped beating on Jacob.

"He was deeply connected to you, they call it mating sometimes, but —"

I think I screamed really loudly then, but I don't remember. I was just so furious, so sick of this stupid world and its rules and zombies and bad guys and men in general, but mostly just so sick that Garreck was dead and I was responsible. I blacked out for a few seconds. When I came back to myself, I was sitting in the dirt and Jacob was holding me, tenderly brushing the hair back from my face and rocking me back and forth.

A dozen feet away, the two halves of the Destroyer were squirming on the ground, still shooting blood, but definitely starting to move.

"Is he...not dead?" I asked, my voice hollow and small.

"No, but he'll be out of commission long enough. I wouldn't know how to kill him and even if I did, I wouldn't. My own death would be one thing, but the rest of these people deserve to be freed before he dies."

"Oh," I said, knowing I had more to say about the Destroyer not being dead than that, but still feeling too empty inside to know what that something more might be.

"Gail, you have to leave. Garreck did what he had to do."

"But we weren't mated. Falor said Rake was my mate, that we were joined with that deep connection." I came to my feet on shaky legs, leaning on Jacob, not even stopping to think if I could trust him. If he wanted to kill me, he would have already. My mind wasn't up to worrying about much more than that at the moment.

"I can't tell you for certain, but you could have several deep energy connections. They call them mates, but all it means is that you can feed more intimately from those people and they draw energy from you as well. It makes you stronger, but it also makes you more vulnerable. If one of your mates is killed by anything but their own hand, it can wound you seriously and take out all the other energy sources," Jacob said, starting to walk away from the cage and the increasingly frisky two halves of Phillip.

"And why is that?" I asked, though my attention was mostly glued to where Phillip's head lay on the ground in clear sight, all his mist melted away.

It was no less horrific than it had been in my dream, the two eyes melted deep into his skull and the surrounding flesh a wax-candle-looking mass of tortured flesh, but I wasn't afraid. The twisted maw of his mouth—not much more than a gaping wound that revealed a row of gray and blackened teeth—was open and flapping uselessly and his arms looked ready to start pulling himself back together, but even then I wasn't worried. Either I was too numb, or I'd finally realized that Phillip wasn't as all-powerful as I'd begun to think. I couldn't hear his voice in my head or feel his energy inside me anymore, however, and I'm sure that helped.

"I'm not sure." Jacob moved us both along more quickly as other Destroyer followers emerged from the litter to see what was going on.

"Helpful as always, Jacob," I said, my tone unnecessarily nasty, but I felt like being nasty. I was so frustrated and angry and I'd more than had my fill of lame explanations.

Feeling stronger, I pulled away from Jacob and started to walk under my own power, brushing past two of the women I remembered from the Destroyer's tent party who had come to stand in the road. The blonde seemed more sober and decidedly less cheery than the first time I saw her, but the tall, elegant, redhead was still possessed of that strange, enigmatic smile. I kind of wanted to hit her and see if that would wipe the grin from her face, but decided I had more important ways to vent my aggression. From the sounds ahead, the battle was still raging strong and it was past time for me to do my part to end it.

"I think it's kind of like the laws of physics back on Earth, but I can't explain the dynamics of it for you. Phillip does his best to keep us ignorant. If I hadn't spoken with Garreck, I—"

"I don't want to talk about Garreck, Jacob."

"Listen, Gail," Jacob said, increasing his pace beside me. "If it makes you feel better, Garreck was also claimed by Phillip. He was the vessel that allowed Phillip into your thoughts and he knew that."

"It doesn't make me feel better. I didn't even mean to 'mate' with Garreck or anyone else."

"But Phillip did and Garreck allowed it. He thought it would convince Phillip to free his brother, but it only made him more of a servant than Gavin will ever be. Gavin could probably be freed, like you did with your people, but the rest of us are trapped."

"What do you mean? You mean you're going back to him?" I asked, shocked as Jacob stopped even with the litter. "After you sliced him in half?"

"He can't kill me without wounding himself and killing the rest of his people and he won't risk that. He values the whole portions of his body too highly and he'll need all his strength to heal," Jacob said with a shrug. "The worst he can do is torture me, refuse to give me energy until I turn as monstrous as his face, but he can't kill me."

"That's worse than dying, Jacob, and you know it. Just come with me. When the battle is over I'll find a way to help you. You probably saved my life. If I have to claim you as one of my mates or whatever to help you survive I'll do it. Even though I have no idea how to do it and didn't mean to do it to Garreck, or Rake," I said, feeling a wave of panic rise in my chest that I quickly forced back down again.

There was no time for panic or grieving or even too much thinking. I had to make sure the people and werewolves risking their lives on the battlefield survived. I meant what I'd said to Jacob. I owed him at least one and I couldn't handle the thought of him suffering through living hell at the Destroyer's hands for my sake.

"Thank you, but then he'd have access to your mind again. Do you really want that?" Jacob asked, reaching out and running a wistful hand through my hair.

"No, but we'll figure something out." I shook off his touch, more because I couldn't handle any emotion except anger than that he repulsed me. Because he didn't, I actually liked Jacob a lot, no matter how strange our brief history.

"If Phillip gets in your mind, you'll go crazy, just like she did. I can't be responsible for that," Jacob said. "I thought I was beyond caring, but I'm not. I thank you for that."

"Don't thank me for anything." I sighed, wishing I could change his mind, but doubting I would have much luck even if I had more time to waste. "Goodbye, Jacob."

I turned and walked away, not even bothering to ask him who "she" was. Somehow I knew he was talking about the other me, Marly, the woman who was still as much a mystery to me as the first time I heard her name. So she'd gone crazy, who could blame her? I had a feeling I might be crazy after a few more days of this place. If I wasn't, maybe I'd try to figure out a way to help her, wherever she was. At the moment, however, it was every girl for herself, doppelganger or no doppelganger.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Back on the battlefield, things were going more smoothly than I'd assumed. My wolves were still fighting, though with decidedly less ferocity than when I'd been there to direct the efforts. Luckily, the Destroyer's need to focus on pulling himself back together had more than evened things out, greatly slowing the progress of the mounted archers. They were still drawing their bows and shooting, but didn't seem to be aiming at much of anything. They were getting picked off at an alarming rate.

Alarming for them, anyway. I couldn't help but be a little glad, despite the fact they were probably all innocent zombies who didn't have any idea they were killing people. I considered this a mad dog situation. It wasn't a dog's fault if it got infected and started spreading rabies, it was the virus. Still, the dog had to be put down so it didn't spread slobber all over everyone and spread the damn disease.

As I walked around the rhino-lizards, the actual men mounted on them didn't even seem to notice me, though the monsters hissed and spat in my direction. It was all I needed to confirm my theory that the mounted men were zombies, not Protectors. I wondered if the elaborate coverings were actually for their protection or to keep the Protector army convinced the man with the long blond hair was actually their beloved prince, leading them into battle.

I took a moment to concentrate on fueling my wolves' efforts on the front lines. Then I drew upon those lines of connection, surprised again at how potent the energy felt as it filled my body, and raced toward the platform with truly unbelievable speed. I figured I could probably beat even Rake in a foot race at this point. Now, if I could only gather up all the Flesh Tearers and my main man in my arms and make a run for it, everything would be fine.

Unfortunately, my arms weren't that big and I still wasn't sure if there was any place safe for us to run. Rake and I had been bound for the city. The people waiting for me there sounded like they were on my side, but the knowledge that I couldn't be sure of anything was the only thing I was really sure of.

*Gail!*

I heard Falor's voice in my head and turned to see her holding one of the deadly javelins with a bloodied tip above her head, a dying Protector at her feet. The fighting was still going strong between the actual Flesh Tearers and Protectors and I had to dodge more than a few flying swords as I made my way to where Falor stood.

"Where's Rake?" I ducked as Falor's claws extended and she swiped at someone over my head. I heard a moan and felt a warm gush of blood against my back, but didn't even turn around to look. I was beyond being horrified at this point, simply

focused on surviving and taking as many of the people on my side as possible along for the ride.

*I lost sight of him, but he fights well. It is lucky that his father had him trained in battle as well as the healing arts.*

"Behind you!" I yelled, imagining my own fingernails as long and vicious as Falor's before I stabbed at the dark haired Protector with an axe raised over Falor's head. The man gasped as my energy nails punctured his stomach. Falor turned to finish the job with her own claws at his throat.

*Long Tooth has closed in at the rear of the Protector army. The battle is won for the Flesh Tearer forces.*

"Then why are we still fighting?" I asked, stabbing at another man who ran toward where we stood, realizing I would be having an easier time if I'd taken the axe from Garreck before I left. But I just couldn't touch it, not with his blood all over it and his hand still gripping the handle.

*A battle's end is never so clear. Some of the Protectors have fled, the rest will fight to their death. But we outnumber them now and the archers have ceased to fight. It's only a matter of making the remaining foot soldiers lay down and sleep in their own blood.*

"The archers aren't Protectors, they're the Destroyer's people. I think —"

*We'll talk when the fighting is done.*

"Right, I guess," I said, knowing I shouldn't distract Falor, but thinking she might need to know that Garreck wasn't Garreck, that it was his Destroyer-controlled zombie brother leading the forces. "But Falor, I—"

"Gail!" I heard Rake's voice and turned toward it, all of the despair I'd felt seeing Garreck die rising to the surface again when I saw his face. He was filthy, covered in blood, but it didn't seem to be his own. I wanted to run over and hug him, hide in his arms and cry for Garreck and ourselves and this crazy place, but then two large blond men rushed at him with swords drawn.

I ran to close the distance between us, stumbling over a dead wolf in the process, but managing to pull myself up and grab hold of a slain Flesh Tearer's sword without losing much time. Still, by the time I reached Rake, he'd killed both of the Protectors, a fact that made me inexplicably sadder. I'd grabbed the heavy sword in my hand with every intent of helping Rake kill one or both of them and had just helped Falor kill a man myself, but seeing their boyish faces twisted in pain as blood gushed from their slit throats brought home what a waste this battle truly was.

"Oh god." I sucked in a breath and tried not to cry. I didn't want to distract Rake from killing people by having an emotional melt down in the middle of the battlefield. We hadn't started this, but we had to keep fighting until we finished it or we'd die and I really didn't want him to die, or feel much in the mood to die myself, no matter how upset I was.

"They're on the run, Gail, just hold on for a few more minutes," Rake said, pulling me to him for the quickest of hugs before he turned his attention back to the field

around us. Thankfully, most of the remaining Protectors seemed to be lying dead on the ground or retreating.

"Rake, Garreck's dead," I said, needing to share the horrible news with someone.

"He may be wounded, but he's not dead. I saw an arrow on his mount, but he was still riding when they turned."

"When they turned?" I repeated dumbly, looking over to where the archers had been to see dust. The monsters and their riders were gone and the Destroyer's festive red litter was nowhere in sight.

"That wasn't Garreck, Rake. I think that was his brother. I saw Garreck die. He killed himself. One of the Destroyer's men said he was mated to both me and the Destroyer and so he killed himself."

"Did you mate with him?" Rake asked, looking vaguely accusing.

"I don't know! I didn't even know I mated with you, had sex with you, yes, but not energy melded or whatever the hell—"

"It's okay. We'll find people in the city who can help us discover more about your powers and how to control them. I'm sorry to hear of Garreck's suicide. But if he really was connected that deeply to you, he could have hurt you very badly if he'd been killed or if you had tried to cut him free like you did—"

"I know, I heard. Though I don't understand it."

"It's an ancient fealty spell on our dimension. If you bond with another's life force, neither can cut the bond without killing them both. In your case, since you have other sources of life force energy other than your mate, you might survive, but all the people currently connected to you would most likely die."

"So you would have died."

"Probably. Life-force bonding is very rare and there hasn't been anyone like you or the Destroyer for thousands of years, not in this dimension anyway. So most of this is theory, but—"

"But assuming our life forces are bonded, I can't cut you loose without killing you?"

"Pretty much, though you might die too. It's theory, but—"

"Don't 'but' me. I understand. It's like we're married except worse because there's no divorce and we're stuck with each other and probably my zombies too."

"You make it sound like torture."

"No, I really love you and I'm really glad you're not dead. I'm just...so tired," I said, then burst into tears. The smell and sight of so many bloody bodies and everything that had happened in the last few days was suddenly too much for me to handle.

"I know you are, baby." Rake wrapped me in one of his hugs that made me feel everything was going to be all right. "But it's over now and I promise you everything's going to be okay."

"But what if they want to kill me when we get to the city?" I sniffed, hugging him so tight it was a wonder he could even draw the breath needed to respond. I just didn't feel I would ever get him close enough.

"They wouldn't dare. My father still holds supreme power on this hemisphere of our dimension. They wouldn't dare threaten my life force mate. We'll be sure our mating is widely known before we set foot in the city's walls and we'll spend as many days in my father's house as we need to recover before we see anyone. I want you to feel safe and relaxed before you have to deal with the council."

"So your father's a big shot, huh?" I asked, wiping my tears on his robes, then realizing I shouldn't have because they were covered in blood. Yuck. I guess it served me right for being gross enough to wipe my bodily fluids on my boyfriend or husband or energy mate or whatever.

"They call him Father of the Motherland, but it's kind of the same thing as a king in the earlier centuries of your dimension, though the council does have the power to advise the citizens and make laws and govern inter-dimensional visitors, as well." He pulled away from me and wiped a bit of the blood from my face with a non-disgusting portion of his sleeve.

"So you're next in line to rule Here?"

"Yes, unless I do something unforgivable by the people," he said, then smiled. "Or some ancient prophecy is fulfilled and I'm out of a job."

"That's not funny, Rake. You should have told me all of this yesterday!"

"It is funny and it doesn't even matter. It's a non-issue in my mind. I'm your consort and —"

"It's not a non-issue. Even if I agree to the consort business, your Dad is the guy I'm going to be displacing if I do end up being the Lady of Light's embodiment, right?"

"Yes, but —"

"I have to tell you Rake, that doesn't sound good. No offense to your old man, but I might not want to stay at his house in case he decides it might be better not to hand over his —"

"My father has only three more years of rule before his seventieth year and his mandatory retirement. I'm his only son and Railyn has already signed papers expressing her unwillingness to rule. I'm the one you'd need to worry about and there's no way I'd ever hurt you." He looked like he was getting geared up for a tirade, which suddenly reminded me how very tired I was. I didn't think I could handle a tirade and wished I hadn't even started talking. I should have just hugged him and been glad the battle was over and we were both still alive.

"Okay, Rake."

"Even before we were mated, I would have stepped down willingly if that's what the people wanted, but now I couldn't hurt you without killing myself. So even if you don't trust my love for you, be assured I value my own life."

"I trust your love for me. I'm sorry, let's not fight. I'm just...worn out." I started to cry again. I was a mess, an absolute mess. "I think I need a nap."

"I'm sorry too, I love you so much." Rake said started to mist over a little.

The Flesh Tearers, now busy dragging Protector bodies into a large pile in the center of the battlefield, shot us strange looks but steered clear, obviously as uncomfortable with human emotions as I once was. Over by the tower, however, Falor and Long Tooth were locked in a similar embrace, so I didn't feel so bad. If you couldn't indulge in a little public display of affection after nearly dying, when could you?

*I'm glad your mate is well.*

"Yours too," I whispered, forgetting Falor probably couldn't hear me since I was at least fifty feet away.

*The battle is over and we have lost very few of our men and women.*

"Thank god." I sighed, wondering if Falor wanted me to come over and talk to her or would be satisfied with her mental update. I wasn't in the mood to chat, needing a few more hours in Rake's arms and some sleep before I did anything.

*So...you can set your people at ease...when you get a moment.*

"Right." I looked over to see my zombies still leaping around like madmen, intent on tearing out the throats of an enemy that was no longer there. I quickly sent out a mental signal for them to relax, unable to believe I'd forgotten about them.

Actually I could believe it. I always forgot to turn off the coffee pot before I left for work and this night had been loads more stressful than any day I'd ever had planned at Handler and Handler. I was surprised I hadn't forgotten something more important.

"Thomas!"

"What?" Rake asked, taking hold of my shoulders as I pulled away from our hug in a panic.

"I forgot Thomas. He was alive, I think, in the cage with Garreck and some other men and —"

"Where? Down the road?"

"Yes, but now the Destroyer's tent thing is gone and I'm sure they took the cage and —"

"Stay with Falor, I'll go look."

"No, Rake, the Destroyer was in two halves on the ground. What if he's still there?"

"Then I'll take care of him."

"But you can't kill him without hurting his zombies."

"I didn't say I'd kill him, I said I'd take care of him," Rake said, kissing me quickly on the forehead.

"I'm coming with you," I insisted, taking hold of his hand before he could dash away.

"Okay," he said and squeezed my hand.

"Oh...good." I was amazed that we'd come to such a relatively easy agreement. Maybe this mated thing was going to work out better than I thought. Maybe.

\* \* \* \* \*

I had been aching for a pair of jeans since the first day I arrived in Here. But by the time Rake actually made it down to the *All Earth* store to get me a pair, I'd become so comfortable in the long, fuzzy white sweaters Rake's Dad, Callen, had given me as a welcome present, I wasn't that eager to put them on.

"Are you sure? I found Earth underwear too," Rake said, holding out a delicate blue lace thong beside the pair of acid washed jeans.

"I think I like Here underwear." I smiled and stretched luxuriously on the chaise lounge, tilting my face up to catch a bit more of the sun. The day was beautiful and the gardens in Rake's childhood home indescribably perfect. I'd just had my moustache and eyebrows and several other things waxed by the really nice lady who had been assigned as my personal attendant. I couldn't imagine my contentment being increased by something so silly as a pair of denim pants or a scrap of lace up my butt.

"Here doesn't have underwear," Rake said with a naughty lilt in his voice.

"Exactly." I held my arms out to him, giggling when he threw the jeans and thong to the grass and joined me on the wide lounge chair, pulling me close so I could feel the firm planes of his body and the increasingly firmer swelling beneath his thin linen pants. Immediately I was slick and aching for him, every nerve ending singing out its pleasure as I snuggled even closer, enjoying the way the soft fabric of my sweater felt as it brushed across my nipples, already beaded in anticipation of being pulled into the heat of my lover's mouth.

I'd spent the last five days dividing my time between napping and eating and making love with Rake in his enormous bed, and napping and eating on the chaise lounge in the garden—since absorbing solar energy was now part of my fueling regimen. I'd tried to convince Rake to make love there too, but he was a little shy about getting naked and doing me in an area where his dad had been known to come for a visit.

I liked Rake's dad a lot and was fairly sure he'd turn and walk the other way if he heard the sounds of hanky panky, but I could understand Rake's reticence. I'd rather walk barefoot over broken glass than have sex in my mother's house, let alone her back yard. Though her yard couldn't compare to the acres of walled gardens surrounding the Father of the Motherland's enormous home.

I'd seen my mother and brothers through the mirror a few days after we arrived in the city. I'd been nervous, at first, equally afraid that I wouldn't be able to see them and that I would be able to see them, but they'd be so upset it would break my heart. I'd stared into the smooth glass table Rake used to see Earth for a good ten minutes without seeing anything but fog, but finally the picture had cleared and I'd been able to locate my family.

The situation on Earth was the best I could have expected under the circumstances. The police investigation into my disappearance from the hospital revealed no sign of foul play. Since I'd only been gone for a little over a week, most people assumed I had just freaked out and abandoned my stressful, New York City lifestyle and would probably turn up tending bar on an island in the Caribbean. That had made me laugh, of course, since Here made New York City on its worst day seem positively low key.

I felt horrible for my mom, however, who wasn't convinced I'd run off. She knew how much I loved my job and couldn't buy that I'd sneak out of the hospital and abandon my old life without at least calling her first. She was convinced I had amnesia and was wandering the streets somewhere lost and out of my mind. She was crying a lot and I cried when I'd watched her cry.

Rake said he would try to figure out some way to get a message to her, to let her know that I was okay. I trusted he was on the case and tried not to think too much about my old life. I'd been a nervous wreck by the time we'd arrived in the city, near the edge of physical and emotional and mental exhaustion. I had my hands full recovering my strength and learning how to control my new powers.

I had released my werewolf zombies not long after the battle, but found that, without them, I had to lay out in the sun for at least three hours every day in order to supply enough energy for my own needs without draining Rake dry. Eating tons of food also helped. Neither the sun bathing or the eating taxed me too terribly, but just knowing I was an energy vampire accident waiting to happen caused me a lot of stress.

But then, I found lots of sex helped me deal with that.

"Are you sure you don't want to make love to me here?" I asked, hitching my leg over Rake's waist and pulling at the hem of my sweater until it rode up around my hips.

"Gail, anyone could come by," Rake admonished, but his hand nevertheless came up to caress my bare bottom, playing down the crease of my body until his fingers teased lightly over the slick, swollen folds of where I liked to feel his cock thrusting at least three times daily.

"Oh, yes." I moaned as he dipped his fingers into my wet center and then used the moisture to glide his fingers across my clit again and again, until I was writhing against his hand.

"I checked on Thomas, he and the others are doing well," Rake said, abruptly stopping his work at my clit and thrusting two fingers deep inside of me.

"Good," I cried, burying my face in his neck and nipping at the slightly salty flesh. I thrust my hips forward and felt his fingers move even deeper inside me, but not nearly so deep as I preferred. I wondered if there was a chance he'd let me free his erection from his pants and put it to proper use.

"Jacob is still unconscious, but his color is better," Rake said, his tone tightening slightly as he said the other man's name. He pulled my hand away from the close of his pants and I thought for a second he might put an end to our heavy-petting session, but

then he grabbed me around the waist and rolled me beneath him, spreading my legs with a rough movement that made my already aching center throb.

When Rake and I had gone to look for Thomas, we'd been relieved to find the prisoner's cart had been left behind. Garreck had been given a proper burial and Thomas and a few other Protectors who had somehow made it into the Destroyer's clutches without being zombified were being nursed back to health. Unfortunately, Jacob, who had been lying in a puddle of his own blood not ten feet from the cart, was not faring so well.

I'd told Rake he was a little suicidal and that he might have tried to kill himself, but I couldn't be sure. Rake had him put on suicide watch, just in case, but so far there hadn't been a need to keep him from offing himself. Jacob had been unconscious since we arrived in the city. Concerned for his survival, I had broached the subject of how I might be able help him, but Rake refused to let me near the other man until I learned how to control my powers completely. He said he didn't want to accidentally end up a mated triangle or square or octagon or any other arrangement, that I was his and he mine and that was it and if I willfully tried to mate with anyone else he'd be royally pissed.

I didn't like being bossed around any more than I ever did, but I did love Rake and in a horrible, possessive-female kind of way I was glad he didn't want to share me. I didn't want to share him either and had asked him to quit the sexual healing business. Considering most everyone in the dimension was terrified they'd get zombified if they so much as held hands with my life force mate, that wasn't too big a request. The man was lucky his pop was wealthy or his ability to eat three squares a day would have been seriously impacted by becoming my steady date since he evidently didn't get paid anything for the hours he spent reading the mirror everyday. Which seemed totally wrong to me and was on my list of things to address once I felt strong enough to meet with the high council.

"Come on, let me," I cooed against his lips, swatting at Rake's swatting hands as I tried to free his cock. I was dying to feel him inside me, filling me, making me feel more complete than I'd thought possible.

"But we don't have any sheaths. What about your new rules?" Rake mocked, teasing me by loosening the drawstring on his pants just enough so that the tip of his erection was visible.

"Maybe I want to take you in my mouth," I said in my sexiest voice, running the tip of my tongue along my lips and brushing my fingers over the pearl of liquid already shining on the plump head of his swollen shaft.

"Dear Lady, you'll be the death of me," Rake breathed as he watched me bring my fingers to my lips and lick the taste of him from the tips.

"Or maybe," I said, reaching over to the picnic basket I toted with me everywhere, just in case I had an energy emergency and needed a ground nut sandwich, "I have something up my sleeve."

"How many of these did Falor provide you with?" Rake sighed as I pulled one of the condom-like sheaths from my bag. Before we'd left the Flesh Tearer's town, I'd shared my concerns about safe sex with Falor, who was happy to provide me with some of her own private stash of puppy birth control. Apparently the Flesh Tearers were fine with prevention and, luckily for me, my green-haired love was sufficiently well hung that the werewolf-sized condoms were a perfect fit.

"Plenty and I can always get more," I whispered in his ear, biting down on the lobe before I slid the condom over his cock and drug my fingernails along the tightened skin of his balls.

"But don't you want to feel me spill myself inside you?" he asked, shoving his pants down around his hips and positioning himself at the entry to my body. "I thought you loved feeling our cum mix together and leak out of you after we make love."

"I never should have told you that," I panted, trying to lift my hips and get him inside of me, but finding he'd pinned me to the chaise with his strong hands.

"No, you never should have told me you love me," he said with a wicked grin. "Now that I've seen your soft, mushy side, I know I'll convince you to do away with these things eventually."

"You think you'll wear me down, do you?" I gasped as he began to move in and out of me with shallow little thrusts, just enough to tease me into an even more extreme state of arousal.

"No, I won't have to." He groaned, thrusting deep and hard into me just once and then resuming the teasing probing of his cock. "You'll eventually feel the same way I do."

"Convinced that we have to make a new generation of rulers for your dimension?" I reached around and dug my fingers into the luscious swells of his ass, pulling him as deep inside of me as he could possibly go. But still I wanted more, ached to be closer and closer, and knew it would never be close enough.

"No. You'll want to know what it feels like to hold a little piece of both of us in your arms, know that our love made something so precious," he said, starting to move inside me in earnest.

"I love you, even if you are a big old sap." I tried to pretend what he'd said hadn't made me a little weepy. I got weepy a lot more than I used to. I suspected it had something with the windows to my soul being so open, must make it easier for the water to leak out.

"You don't think I'm a sap."

"No I don't," I said, wanting to tell him again how much he meant to me, how I would never have been able to keep looking forward to another day without him. Not to say that I would have shriveled up and died, but there was no way living could have been anywhere near this fabulous.

I'd been having horrible nightmares ever since we arrived at his father's house, nothing like when the Destroyer had entered my dreams, but just as scary. In the

dreams I always had light green skin, was dressed in a full on Wicked Witch of the West costume and was running from a terrifying voice I couldn't seem to escape. Rake held me when I woke up screaming in the night, but I hadn't told him all the specifics. There was no need. I could figure out the dreams were a product of my guilt over knowing Marly was out there somewhere, driven mad by the Destroyer, hiding from him and totally terrified he would find her some day. That's what made my conscience dress me up in a witch's costume night after night, not some new manifestation of my powers.

I'd promised myself I would try to find Marly as soon as I was able, but that time hadn't come, no matter what my subconscious mind thought. I was still too raw and exhausted and ignorant about what I could do and how I did it. I would have at least tried to talk to Rake about the dreams, about what Jacob had said, about my own suspicions. But when it came to my inter-dimensional other half, Rake and I were in a strange holding pattern. I didn't ask, he didn't tell. He didn't encourage further query, I didn't press the issue.

It was fine for the moment, since I wasn't ready to dredge up something that was obviously so painful for Rake. I wasn't equipped to comfort him quite yet, but I would be soon and I had to admit I dreaded the conversation a great deal. Not that I doubted his love for me, but I couldn't say with complete certainty I doubted his love for her either. It was a weird situation, no doubt about it, and I was grateful it was a discussion that had been safely stowed away for another day.

"And do you know why?" he asked, bringing me back to the present and the warm sun on my face and his hot length thrusting between my legs.

"No, why?"

"Because I'm so studly," he whispered against my neck, making me laugh and hold him even tighter. The man knew exactly when to lighten the moment, when to back off and let me sort through all the new feelings between us and about my new life in general.

"I told you I hate that word," I said, matching his quickening thrusts with my hips, quickly climbing toward that blissful release I had only ever known with him.

"Well, I hate sheaths," he said, raking his teeth over the sensitive skin at my shoulder and plucking at one of my tightened nipples through the silky fabric of my sweater. "So I guess we're even."

"I guess we are. For now," I gave up on the banter all together as he drove more fiercely into me and I clung to his shoulders. Within seconds I was screaming out his name, arching into his cock as I came with earth-shattering intensity.

His release followed within seconds of my own. I sighed with satisfaction as he collapsed heavily on top of me. I loved feeling his weight on me after we made love, relished the feel of him still pulsing inside me for a few moments before I made him dispose of the sheath properly. I was still pretty bossy about stuff like that, but even I

couldn't believe it had been less than two weeks since I was mourning the loss of Richard and calling people cunt rags.

I just wasn't that woman anymore. I wasn't sure if it was being the Lady of Light's newest "it" girl or love's tender caress or something else entirely, but I felt softer, kinder and happier than I could ever remember. This despite the fear and uncertainty that still hovered around the edges of my mind in those dark hours of the night when my lover was sleeping, when I looked out at those two moons in the sky and wondered how any of this could be real.

"Hey Rake, I'm glad you're real," I said in the new, girlier voice I was starting recognize as my own.

"I'm glad you're real too, baby." He pulling away and kissed me softly. "You want to go take a swim?"

"Can we be naked?" I asked with an evil smile that really wasn't evil at all.

"Of course, my little exhibitionist." He laughed as he pulled out of me and disposed of the used sheath. So he hated them. It didn't seem to injure his sex drive in any way and what man didn't bitch about condoms at some point or another?

"Oh, and I brought you the new proclamation, it has a picture of my father's wife-to-be." Rake reached into the bag from which he'd pulled the Earth goods and handed me a thin sheaf of paper.

"Good! I can't believe he didn't have a picture of her in the house. What kind of fiancé is she if she hasn't placed a few reminders of her loveliness around his..."

"What's wrong?" Rake asked, having just finished stripping off his shirt in preparation for our dip in the heated pool not ten feet away from my lounge chair. I'd picked the best place in the garden, there was no doubt about it. Too bad me and Rake were going to have to move house when his new step mom moved in.

"This is her, Veronica, the woman who sent me here in the first place!" I thrust the paper into Rake's hands and then wiped my palms on my sweater as if I'd touched something dirty.

"Her name is Madeleine, Gail. She and my father have been engaged since I was nineteen. She's irritating as hell, but harmless, I assure you."

"She's a snake lady. Do we have to go to the wedding?" I asked, no longer looking forward to the royal nuptials one bit.

"He's my father."

"So? He doesn't have to come to our wedding if he doesn't want to," I reasoned.

"So you're agreeing to marry me now?"

"No, not right now, but maybe eventually and if and-or when I do he doesn't have to come if he doesn't want to."

"Honey," Rake said, dropping the paper on the lounge chair and looping his arms around my waist, "maybe she is this Veronica woman's mirror image, but that doesn't mean she's anything like her. We should know that better than anyone, right?"

"Hmmpf." I didn't want to admit he was probably right. No matter what similarities I'd seen between him and Richard when I'd first arrived in Here, now he was only Rake to me and always would be. He was completely his own wonderful, unique person and I knew, no matter how much I'd fancied myself in love with Richard, that infatuation could never compare to the profound, emotional satisfaction I'd found with Rake.

"Can we get naked now?" he asked, tugging my sweater up and over my head and pulling me close to his warm, bare chest. My nipples immediately hardened again and not from the cool air in the garden. The man had a gift for inducing wild, unbridled lust, no doubt about it.

"You're just trying to distract me."

"Exactly. I have an evil plan to seduce you so thoroughly in that warm water that you beg me to take you right there against the side of the pool, forgetting about your stupid sheaths and the sanctity of your unfertilized womb," he said, trailing kisses down my neck and brushing the pad of one thumb across my nipple.

"Not likely," I said with a snort and a shiver of pure arousal.

"You're sexy when you snort."

"You're sexy when you talk about my unfertilized womb."

"Last one in is a rotten leg."

"Rotten egg."

"You're a rotten egg," he replied and then picked me up and threw me in the warm, blue water. As I sank slowly down to the bottom and then swam back up again, struggling not to laugh before I broke the surface, I considering letting myself get seduced. Surely a munchkin couldn't be more trouble than a passel of zombies. But then, I had observed that zombies, on the whole, did tend to be potty trained.

"Do you have diapers in Here?" I tossed my wet hair out of my eyes and swam into Rake's waiting arms.

"Does this mean you're considering my offer?"

"The seduction offer? Maybe. Though I think we should wait at least a few weeks on the fertilization, just to make sure we're going to last for the long haul."

"If I can handle you for nine days, I think I can manage a lifetime. Especially now that I've got you all broken in," he teased, starting to touch me in all those places he had discovered were my favorites.

"I'm going to break you in," I threatened.

"Oh please, do," he said and then he kissed me.

And that was enough...for now.

## About the Author

Anna J. Evans came back to her true love of writing fiction after working Off-off-off-Broadway and in a few Hollywood C-movies. She quit the biz to become a stay at home Mom-Writer and she's loving every minute of it!

Anna lives in Arkansas with her Air Force husband, her real-life romantic hero, their three kids and all the stories still making their way from her imagination to the page.

Anna has been awarded multiple Recommended Reads for her paranormal and fantasy erotic adventures, but her favorite feedback always comes from fans. So feel free to drop her a line or join her newsletter, [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/anna\\_j\\_evans\\_newsletter/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/anna_j_evans_newsletter/)

Anna welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

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