

EXOTIKA

ELLORA'S CAVE

SHERRI L. KING



VENEREUS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Venereus

ISBN 97814199

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Venereus Copyright© 2007 Sherri L. King

Edited by Kelli Kwiatkowski.

Cover art by Darrell King.

Electronic book Publication: July 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

VENEREUS

Sherri L. King

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Calvin Klein: Calvin Klein Trademark Trust

Lexus: Toyota Jidosha Kabushiki Kaisha TA Toyota Motor Corporation

Tiffany: Tiffany & Company

Succubus

A female demon, a myth, traditionally one who engages in sexual intercourse with sleeping men or women. *See also Incubus. See also venereal disease.*

Venerous (*Latin*)

Venereal; exciting lust; aphrodisiac

Lustful; lascivious; libidinous

Prologue

If only they knew, the poor, innocent creatures.

Well. Perhaps not so innocent after all.

The three women, naked and insensate in the rented California king-size bed, were in no way innocent, save one.

They'd done nothing to deserve his disdain.

And yet he did. Disdain them.

They were food. They were a means to an end, fuel for his survival. He should at least feel grateful that they were so willing, so eager to fill him up with their pleasure and their lust for life. But he felt nothing for them, less than nothing, now that the need in him had been well fed.

It wasn't their fault. It was his.

He'd been doing this for more years than he wished to count. Taking. Sure to give, but always taking. It wasn't any different from using a battery and tossing it aside, the way he took these women, fucked them and left them without even giving them his real name. And when he left them, they could barely lift their heads to murmur a request for him to stay. Inviting him to take more—so dangerous a request, so tempting an offer. His *batteries* would be weak and disoriented for days but they would never forget the pleasure—that was all he could give them.

What would it be like to hear one speak his real name?

What would it be like to have one stay for more than one night? For a lifetime?

Folly. Impossible folly to dream such unattainable fantasies.

This world he lived in was not made for fairy-tale endings. For him, for his prey, there could be only one ending. A goodbye.

It wasn't that he could not love. He believed that, somewhere beneath the monster that lived within him, there was a part of him that could easily love, and love forever. That wasn't the problem.

The problem was in his blood.

It was in the fluids that made him.

There was no cure for the heartlessness inside. No matter how hard he wished, no matter how many stars he wished upon in the night sky to help him find a way, there was no woman, anywhere, who could connect with him and forgive him what he was. What he had to do to stay alive.

In a world full of people, he was completely alone.

And every night he would do again the very thing that kept him from those things which he wanted most. A normal life. A future. A hope.

Despite it all—his despair, his doubt and regret—he wasn't entirely unhappy. He had a good life. Better than most, really. He was well educated, monetarily wealthy, and because of these two factors he was free in ways so many others were not. And yet, he could not help but wish that there could be more.

There could never be more than this. Not for him, not now, not ever.

The blanket of living flesh asleep around him on the bed was proof enough of that. The hundreds of others he'd known were further testament of the truth he so hated. Anger, self-pity and depression could not change his reality. But they could make him grow hungry, faster than he should have after such a heady feast.

He was very hungry now.

He was a hunter. So it always had been. So it always would be.

He gathered his clothing, left the remains of his meal behind and went in search of another. If necessary, many others. It was his nature to hunt and to eat, as it was for any other human. But he was more than human—and would do anything to take down his prey, his food.

Anything to ease the pain.

PART ONE

Chapter One

It was supposed to be a simple one-night stand.

No strings.

No repercussions.

He said his name was Bram. She said her name was Lilith. Both names were false. This was understood between them, and it was the way such games were played. It added so much to the mystery of the mating ritual and lent a dangerous spice to the act that would inevitably follow.

Sex with a stranger, a heady sport.

The after-hours culture of a generation.

The stranger could be a sinner or a saint or some strange mixture of both—any fantasy was possible without names or histories attached at the offset. This was the thrill. This was the ultimate high.

The bar where they met catered to the alternative fantasy lifestyles so popular in this dichotomous new millennium of extreme decadence and rigid conservatism. Goths and trash-punks in white face and black dress—always black dress, for even alternative groups had their social etiquettes—roamed the concrete floors, dancing and drinking—spirits not blood...or maybe even blood. Here, in places like this, anything was possible and even encouraged. If there were drops of crimson spilled, then licked away with darted tongues from between porcelain fangs, it lent a certain air of authenticity to the *rebelliousness* of the establishment.

The low lighting added some mystery that bordered on the ridiculous, but Lilith—as she called herself this night—could see her stranger well enough, despite the lack of illumination. Well enough to note his more than handsome features, his heavily muscled, almost thick body and the ample, carnal appreciation in his light-colored eyes.

It wasn't just his appearance that appealed.

Though that would have been more than enough.

It was the way he smelled that decided everything.

His scent was the first thing she'd noticed about him. It had reached her across the expanse of the nightclub, even through the odor of two hundred other bodies sweating and reeking of cheap colognes, soaps, lotions and styling products. At first, of course, the scent had been disembodied. It had entered her nose, her brain, like *Qi*, and instantly turned her insides to warm molasses. For a while, long minutes at least, she'd simply breathed in that fragrance over and over, that strange spirit scent, until her head spun deliciously and her nipples hardened to the point of pain. Other than breathing in deeply again and again, she didn't move an inch, didn't speak or even look at her companions at all.

An eternity passed.

She was in between time.

Outside of real time, inside of her, her biological clock ticking like an antique bomb awakened with deadly function.

"Have you been listening to a word I've said?"

Jerking free from the scented fugue with no small effort, Khira—no, tonight she was *Lilith*—laughed faintly. "I'm sorry, Geoff. I was miles away..."

"Hey, it's Louis tonight," Geoff reminded her with a grin and a quick squeeze with one arm. "Let's stay in character."

"Yeah." The reminder, echoing the one in her own mind aimed at her own self, added to the surrealism. She nodded, squeezing him back, swallowing with a dry mouth. "Louis."

"You want another vodka martini?" Annalise—real name Anna—ordered another round for the three of them before Lilith had a chance to respond.

"I think I've had too much to drink already," Lilith remarked jokingly, wiping a moist hand over her strangely blurred vision, oblivious to the weight of the crowd pressing around them.

"You've only had two," Annalise chuckled. "Lightweight."

"*Lightweight?*" Louis gave a theatrical gasp. "You're saying this about the woman who can chug straight vodka like it was soda water and still recite the alphabet backward without a hiccup?"

Lilith shoved him playfully. "I'm not that big a lush."

"You're halfway there. Just wait, we'll corrupt you the rest of the way eventually." He winked, reaching for his fresh drink. "Well," he backed away from the bar with a lazy, handsome grin, "I don't know about you ladies, but I'm ready to find a strapping young stud to while away the lonely night hours. See you at work Monday, barring catastrophe or death."

The crowd wrapped around him. He was lost in the writhing black-clothed forms.

Lilith reached for her drink and downed it in a flash. That smell—it was back, stronger than before, a sensory halocline, the threshold of which lulled Lilith into losing her sense of self. Of presence and time. Her consciousness was dissolving, disorienting her, pushing her into a transition where limits to thought and self-realization were completely relaxed.

She felt something inside her give, tugged free by the sweet incense, opening her to something new and unknown.

The cloying effusion—a mix of warm suede, soft, dry wood and flame—made every sensitive inch of flesh she possessed either tighten or melt or both. So lost in that perfume was she that Lilith didn't notice when her forgotten Annalise turned and blended into the inky crowd, though to Lilith's credit she did manage to mumble a goodbye to her retreating friend, who tossed a jaunty wave her way as the darkness swallowed her up.

Alone with the scent, Lilith leaned heavily against the edge of the bar. She felt feverish, both warm and chilled at the same time. She pushed her dark red hair back from her damp forehead and noticed with some puzzlement that her fingers were visibly shaking. She scoffed at her own silliness and swallowed another martini in one thirsty gulp. Dizzy, but not from drink for it was an altogether different sensation than inebriation, Lilith set the empty glass down and blinked several times in quick succession, still breathing deeply of that sensual taint in the air.

All this sensation from a simple olfactory stimulus.

But who could own this unique signature? Who was the source of it? Was it even real? Or was it phantosmia—a phantom hallucination?

On the heels of that silent mystery which had become her whole world, Lilith looked into the waiting gaze of a man across the club.

No. Not man. *Male*. All the raw connotations attached to the label were his, owned and exuded like his scent, so that everything that was female in her, primitive and soft, ached for his domination.

The male watched her long enough, intently enough, that no words were needed between them. Their communication went far beyond such mundane pursuits. The scent had her—his scent. The gaze had her—his gaze. Her mind and body were easy conquests on the heels of such victories.

Lilith paid for her drinks and the drinks of her friends, movements automatic in the still-time of her reality. Not one person danced into her path as she made her way to

him, crossing the club entire to where he waited in the shadows against the façade of one cinderblock wall.

Enshrouded in darkness. *Part* of it. Mated with shadow, he waited.

With each step that brought her closer to him, the redolence grew stronger and she was truly overwhelmed.

He was beyond twilight—more so, impossibly, than the black-clad people around him. His hair was deeper than sable—a wash of solid stygian ink over his head. It was artfully styled in gravity-defying chunks that shone in the strobing lights. His sideburns were long and thin against his hollow cheeks, framing his high, angled cheekbones, his jaw square beneath them. He had a little dent in his chin and his throat was a column of sinew and strength. Broad of chest, intimidating, he nevertheless struck an artful, almost fey pose with one hip tilted to the side, booted heels crossed, and one long-fingered hand resting on that jaunty hipbone clad in designer black canvas.

Here was a man who was beautiful, knew he was beautiful and used that trait like a tool to create the perfect allure.

He blinked long, black lashes around pale eyes that might have been green or gray. Or some strange mixture between that shifted in the dim light. Eyes that never left hers as she approached in her slinky, flirty minidress.

The weight of that gaze on hers inspired a response like a pressure on the center of her chest, slowing her breathing beneath the pressure.

“I’m Lilith.” She reached him at last, her usually husky voice even more so now with her breathless anticipation. He was impossibly more attractive close-up. His perfume as magnificent as his form.

The dark stranger straightened, reached out and took her hand with his, resting his callused fingertips against the pulse beating in her wrist. He smiled, revealing even white teeth that dazzled in the darkness. “You can call me Bram.”

The voltage in his voice made her sway, weak-kneed, falling further away from real time in her befuddled mind. She was no simpering virgin. But she might as well have been for all the understanding she had of the alien intensity of her response.

He pulled her close, crowding her with his towering frame, and touched his nose to the sensitive flesh beneath her ear. For several moments he did not move, merely breathed her in.

They could both feel the beat of her pulse beneath his fingers on her wrist. In her throat, not far from where his mouth hovered. The rhythm was thick and hard, her blood a heavy flow of magma behind each contraction of her heart.

Now the music swelled. It sounded epic, as dramatic as the moment she and the stranger shared. Guitars and drums and keyboards vibrated the air around them—Lilith fancied she could practically see the air move. The guitars made the blood in her chest hum, her teeth ache and her breath catch. The drum beats echoed those of her pulse, carrying the keyboard harmony across the casing of her veins like lightning, electrifying her tissues. The music lived in her, became her whole being, her reason and sanity.

She licked her lips and her tongue felt cool against their heat. That smell...she could *taste* it now. Drink it down and let it swim in her stomach. Lilith reached up and placed her free hand on his forearm and marveled at the tight bulge of muscle beneath his form-fitting jacket.

He nuzzled her, the skin of his face so hot. So alive.

She exhaled.

The flavor of her next inhalation made her mouth water.

"Here, now...fast," he breathed in that sovereign voice. "Later, in a hotel, where we can take our time. If you're up to it."

She didn't need any further urging, any further wooing. She was up to it and more. Whatever he wanted became the most important thing to her. Lilith would pliantly see to it that he got anything and everything.

Those long, hard fingers tightened around her wrist and pulled her deeper into shadow. On the heels of his move, she gasped. Before she had enough sense to protest, to at least remind him of decency laws, he had her back against the wall, his lips bathing her throat in burning, hard kisses. His free hand was everywhere at once while the other held her wrist like an anchor, trapping her there as effectively as the firm press of his body. Which grew more and more insistent, heavier and heavier, weighing on her.

He needn't have bothered. His touch, his voice and—God!—his scent, stole away any lingering inclination she might have had to protest or flee.

Lilith was not small, but this man towered over her by a foot at least. He made her feel fragile and suddenly, quite at his mercy. His build cowed her further, his shoulders wide to obscure her from sight but also to blind her to anything that was happening beyond him. Danger exuded from him, a miasma, making her pulse race faster.

The heat of his mouth on her throat scorched, his tongue a licking flame that singed. Lilith's eyes squeezed shut as pressure built at the base of her spine. So soon...

Like an out-of-body experience, she was herself, but outside of herself. Aware to the point of epiphany, but unaware of anything beyond the sensory overload her physical self was bombarded with. Time did not exist. It was a word only...a dream from minds of madmen.

The length of his body bumped hers, a stutter of movement that pressed her hard against the wall—too hard—for one second, no more. She found some clarity but only enough to feel him more clearly. Feel all that he was doing to her, there in the presence of two hundred other people.

She whimpered, a high keen of noise that Bram echoed with a soft, animal growl that made bats flutter beneath her heart. His loins pressed into her belly, his hand cupping the curvature of her hip to bring her tighter against him. He undulated against her, slowly, grinding his hardness into her softness, dancing in rhythm with the music, guiding her to do the same.

Her hand was on his chest, on a hard flex of muscle that promised power in its most elemental form. He bent lower, scooping her up with a thrust of his hips, so that she was forced to rise to the very tips of her toes in her high-heeled shoes. A gasp that he ate, mingled with the moisture of his own breath, returned and filled her open mouth. His erection was bruising, supporting her weight, stabbing against the already soaking-wet heat of her.

Bram lifted her wrist and secured it against the wall over her head. His other hand lifted her left thigh, hooked her knee around his waist and held her tight as he ebbed and flowed between her now-parted legs. A mimicry of sex that felt more raw, naked and open than any actual sex ever could.

The light scrape of his teeth against the shell of her ear made her catch her breath, her head full of his smell, and when he licked the skin beneath it she melted into him like hot wax around an open flame.

Her wrist was free now, but limp as he let it go. His fingers burned a path down her arm, side and over her belly, finding their way beneath the hem of her far-too-short skirt, rising again underneath the veil of cloth. The tips of his nails scraped her skin gently as he nudged aside the whisper of silken panties, reaching for the fruit that lay ripe and weeping its nectar beyond.

His fingers, the pads of them, were so vividly textured. In her dream-state she fancied she could feel the spiral of his fingerprints imprinted on her flesh wherever they touched. If she were dusted in aluminum powder, she'd be a leopard, dotted with the marks where his fingers had lingered.

Those fingers *stroked* the skin between her legs, reinforcing the feline imagery.

When he parted the folds of her slit, when he brushed his fingertips over her creamy clit, she came instantly, moaning and clutching as the eclipse swallowed her.

Too much. Too fast.

This wasn't happening.

This couldn't be real.

When the tremors relented, when she could form any human thought again, Bram had already unbuttoned his jeans and freed his sex. It was broad and heavy as he scooped her up to her tiptoes again with his hips, his hands, and insinuated his cock against the tight, still-trembling walls of her cunt. Her panties had been ripped, a useless scrap of cloth, no bastion or hindrance to his onslaught. The heat of his face nuzzled her throat again, his skin and breath dancing over her like dusted moth wings. The smooth crown of his cock nudged her, solid and real, sinking in the cream, and as he filled her, she wondered how he'd done it. All of it. Made her seek him out by scent, made her mindless with a look, weak with a nuzzle. Made her come with but a simple touch.

"What are you?" she whispered unsteadily, only half in jest, clutching him with fingers that quaked. Needing to hear a voice, even if it was only hers, say words that had some meaning beyond a moan or a gasp or a choke of need.

"I am whatever you want me to be, Khira," his voice smoked into her ear, setting her smoldering coals alight.

Khira? Had he said her name? No. No, of course not, he'd said Lilith—she'd just wished so hard for him to call her by her real name that she imagined she'd heard it in her screwed-up mind.

And then she could hear nothing but the thrum of her own blood in her ears as he forced his thickness past the tight rim of her quim. He didn't just penetrate her, he *invaded* her. His cock a weapon used to infiltrate any remaining defense she possessed. Filled her until there was the very real threat of being torn into agony. It burned. It hurt.

She wanted it more than anything and would have died had he stopped.

A pulse of blood roared in her ear as he slammed home, forcing the last thick inches into her with a quick buck of his powerful hips.

Lilith's arms felt weighted, almost numb, but she managed to gather him close with them, one hooked around his shoulder, the other around his bulging neck. He still held her left leg aloft with one hand while steadying her with a palm cupped around her

right buttock, and she was suspended an inch off the floor, supported only by his strength. By the saddle his loins provided. When he began to pump those lean, tight hips into her, she was mindlessly crying out broken words that made no sense in any language, uncaring that other club-goers might hear, might witness her complete subjugation in the embrace of this carnal sorcerer whose true name she didn't even know.

He was the only real thing in a world that suddenly made absolutely no sense. She had to hold on to him, *tight*, or be lost forever.

Was this like dying?

Her nipples chafed in the lace cups of her bra. He seemed to sense it, pressed his chest tighter against hers as he lifted and lowered her weight so that her nipples received the friction they desired. She laboriously blinked her heavy lids, her eyelashes tangling. When she managed to disentangle them, to open her eyes, his gaze was waiting on hers.

The message in them seemed to say, *I've been waiting here forever.*

Or was that the message in hers, turned around in her gelatinous brain?

His eyes were both green *and* gray, she saw now, and as intense as the storm-tossed waters of some exotic, coral-rich sea.

"Open to me," he murmured. Commanded. *Open to me*, the words seeming important for reasons she couldn't fathom. He lowered his cupid mouth to hers.

It was their first kiss. It was her first taste of...*life*?

Birth. Miraculous and real and agonizing.

Later, for all its magic and its sweetness, she would think it more like the tragic taste of death.

His lips parted hers. His tongue swept in to taste, playing in all the dark corners, flicking over her teeth, sucking on her tongue. And then his tongue was gone and he was breathing her. Breathing *for* her. Stealing her air, but giving his.

The world tilted crazily.

The wide head of his demanding cock rubbed against some secret bundle of nerves inside her sheath, making every thrust and withdrawal a kind of exquisite torture that made her back bow at an impossible angle, her head butting against the concrete behind her as she sought more of him. His mouth followed her. Vanquished her. His arm rose to cradle her bent back, to help bend her sharply so that her hips jutted out farther, so that he could penetrate her even more deeply than before. Her body was tight, but he was strong and hard and determined. The thick cream of her desire eased his way but only just, so he hitched her tighter against him with unbridled strength, keeping her so close, crushingly close, mouth never forsaking hers. She instinctively lifted her other leg, wrapping it around his waist.

So deep at this angle, he was one with her, claiming all of her. More, somehow, than that.

Someone should have seen them. Someone should have, but no one did. In a crowd of people they were the only two alive.

Shoulders bare and vulnerable beneath the thin straps of her dress, her delicate skin scraped painfully against the rough texture of the wall. That discomfort, coupled with the pain at her scalp with each bump of her head and the pain between her legs and in her womb, only added to her pleasure. Indeed, without the pain, the pleasure might have been almost pale in comparison.

The hot, wet undulation of his lips echoed the rhythm of his hips. He breathed her in and breathed into her. When she could, she sucked his tongue, his lower lip, but always he took her exhalations and swallowed them like fruit. Overpowering her kiss with his.

Her fingers tangled in his thick hair, its texture soft beneath the styling products he used. Lilith could *feel* its color, its darkness, as sharply as she could feel him between her clinging thighs, feel him caressing her back and buttocks with his spread palms.

She could taste his scent. The charred wood, the well-worn suede, the floral undertones...*all* flavors. See their pleasure shimmering on the air. Colors and hues she could never describe, a shimmering aurora.

Tears leaked out the corners of her eyes as the pressure built and built. It wasn't a weeping of either sorrow or joy. It was merely a release—her body simply had to vent the pressure somewhere. Moans, too, vented from deep within her diaphragm. He swallowed each sound and breathed new life back into her, more wind with which to create more passionate cries for him to consume. He licked her, suckled her, taking but giving, though the two were one and the same.

Her dizziness increased. Her heart thudded. Her limbs felt weighted down, as if dipped in gold or lead.

Bram thrust into her so hard she screamed, the pain a wicked shock among all the other sensations. And then her second orgasm hit and no amount of physical suffering could have lessened the ecstasy.

His mouth opened wide over hers, covering hers completely. Every cry she made, every breath she expelled, he took into him. Drew into him. Her orgasm swelled and crashed then swelled again. One turned into three and then she lost count. Her body shook, twitched, like someone in the midst of a seizure, sweat pouring from her every pore. She couldn't see. Couldn't hear. Didn't care.

Somehow she lost her hold on him, her fingers clutching like claws for purchase. Her fingertips were numb.

He kissed her, fucked her, took everything she had and gave her the most intense pleasure—wave after wave of it until she drowned, choked, suffocated.

His lips sucked at her mouth.

He's eating me.

I'm his prey.

A fear so primal, so real it stopped her heart, suffused her, turning the heat in her veins to ice as time was reborn.

This was real. But it wasn't any kind of real she knew or understood.

Like a trapped animal she began to struggle, even as the orgasms raped her body and soul, she struggled to be free of him. He would not let her go, would not soften, would not stop *taking* her. He was the male, she his female thrall, and there was no contest in strength or resolve. No chance of escape.

His hips pumped fast now, faster as her struggles increased. Her clit was bruised, her tender flesh raw but still desperate for more of the friction, more of the force, even as she railed against it. Bram gave it, pounding into her savagely, fingers bruising where they dug into her flesh. Lilith—no, *Khira*—dug her nails into his shoulders, fisted her hands and beat at his chest, but he paid her no heed. He sucked her kiss, sucked her soul, made her dizzy and weak and then the rush of oblivion rose up like a storm cloud.

The pleasure devastated.

She cried—a scream, a shriek, a death.

He ate her.

The hot flood of his cum was a shock, filling her with liquid fire. The answering tremors of yet another orgasm shocked as well. The starved ache of her lungs, of her heart, made the tears flow freely now. Khira's head fell back, limp, and still his lips followed. Her body shuddered with each rippling pulsation of ecstasy. Her arms and legs were lifeless, dangling. He held her aloft easily, with unearthly strength. Embracing her boneless form like a demon lover bent over his virginal sacrifice.

She was dying, the pleasure was killing her...

A frigid breath of air inflated her lungs as she gasped, mouth free at last.

"Hey! Hey! The club's closing, lady. Time to leave."

Khira started, lungs filling with a second cold wash of oxygen. Something nudged her leg and she roused enough to lift her head and peer out of the magenta tangle of her hair, barely able to focus her dim vision on the gray-shirted form of the bouncer who was trying to wake her.

Consciousness hit her like a slab of concrete dropped from a rooftop. She gasped and looked around. There were only a handful of people in the now well-lit club, all clearly employees as they busied themselves cleaning up after the night's festivities. Lying in a crumpled heap, hair a mess, clothes rumpled, she blushed—mortified—when she realized her panties were missing.

“What happened?” she murmured, a rhetorical question at best for this stranger, her tongue swollen and lazy in her dry mouth. Putting a weak hand to her head, she accepted the bouncer's helping hand in gaining her feet. She swayed but managed to keep her footing as the world sharpened and righted itself.

Bram was gone.

The club was closing.

Khira glanced at her Tiffany watch, blinked to focus on the tiny hands that reported the human invention of time. It was close to dawn...

She'd been lying unconscious against the cinderblock wall for at least a few hours.

The bouncer eyed her with understandable amusement, no doubt assuming she'd imbibed too much alcohol or other substances or both. Feeling it better not to make a further fool of herself, Khira docilely allowed him to escort her to the nearest exit, still blinking away her confusion and embarrassment. He hailed her a cab and she thanked him absently, numbly crawling into the back of the vehicle, only halfway careful lest her minidress ride up and further expose her shame. She somehow managed to remember her address for the driver, but beyond that...

The dawn light was warm and pink, like the insides of her eyelids.

The next twenty-four hours passed in a fog of listless confusion. She would never gain those hours back.

It wasn't until those twenty-four hours were over that she began to realize, slowly at first as such realizations come, that the one-night stand had been anything but simple and lacking in repercussions.

Chapter Two

"You're so full of shit!"

Feeling herself for the first time since the foggy weekend, Khira basked in the rare sight of Anna's disbelief.

Geoff and Anna's expressions of wide-eyed excitement also did a lot to soothe some lingering, indefinable sense of fear.

"No. I promise you, it really happened." Khira chuckled and took a sip of her soda through the straw, refraining from greedily gulping it—she'd drunk so much today already that her every movement caused liquid to slosh around sickeningly in her belly. Still, she felt *so* thirsty.

"Right there in the club? Didn't anybody see you?" Anna was practically bouncing in her seat.

"No." Khira frowned, thinking for a moment to be certain. "At least, I don't think so. No one said anything if they *did* see us. And it was quite dark where we were. Really, though, it felt like we were the only two people there. It was amazing." And it had been...hadn't it?

"Oh my God. You're such a slut!" Anna laughed and clapped her hands in approval.

"What happened then?" Geoff urged her to continue.

"Nothing. We had sex and that was it. He went home and I went home. The end." Khira didn't dare go into other details—she wasn't sure of them herself and would only muddy them further if she tried to explain.

"Did you get his number?" Anna asked around a mouthful of salad.

Khira shook her head and drank over half her soda before she realized what she was doing. “No.” She set the cup carefully, deliberately down on the table and nudged it out of her immediate vicinity. “I didn’t give him my real name, either.”

Geoff whistled. “Shit, now you’ve gotta go back and look for him.”

“Why?” Khira eyed him under her lashes.

He scoffed, a stunned look on his appealing features. “Well, obviously you had a good time. Why not pursue it?”

“You never do,” she pointed out cheekily, eating a greasy fry. “How many lovers have you had this month? Did you know any of their names? Did you pursue a second encounter with any of them?” Khira grinned as he blushed. “No, I didn’t think so.”

While she teased him, she was careful not to be too hard—he was a sensitive soul. A romantic hiding behind the trendier mask of a cynic. Khira would rather bite off her thumb than hurt his feelings or cause him to lose even a little filament of that thread of romanticism hibernating beneath his façade.

“That is so crazy, though. You, an exhibitionist. I never would have dreamed it,” Anna broke in with a mock whisper. “Pretty soon you’ll be having orgies in your backyard. You know, when we started our Friday-night raving, I never once thought you’d go quite this far. *Now...*” Anna grinned fiendishly. “A real challenge. How much further can we go, hmmm?”

“And I always thought you were a little on the prudish side.” Geoff clicked his tongue and added a saucy wink. “Always serious at work. Always serious in your romances. Your only wild streak showing through at the Christmas parties with a bottle of vodka in your cute little hand. You sure had me fooled.”

Khira laughed but didn’t feel much amusement. She was too thirsty. Too hungry. She waited for their server to pass by and ordered another hamburger with everything and a refill of her drink.

“How you keep your shape with that appetite I’ll never know,” Geoff lamented, looking down at his skinless chicken breast and rice with something close to distaste.

“Good genes.” Khira grinned, patted her flat stomach and ate the last of her greasy, salty fries with gusto.

“Don’t rub it in,” Anna growled, sipping her lemon-flavored water. “You’ll jinx yourself.” She sneered, a lovely twist of her berry-colored lips. “Bitch.”

Geoff glanced at his watch. He swore, fished in his wallet and tossed some crisp bills on the table. “My turn to pay. I gotta get outta here. I have a meeting in twenty minutes and a fifteen-minute ride back to the office.”

When he’d gone Anna leaned over the table and conspiratorially revealed that Geoff was getting back with his ex.

Again.

“No way. I thought Geoff was finally through with Elliott, and good riddance!”

Anna shrugged. “He said they patched things up last night. They’re gonna take it slow, but Elliott’s already moving some of his stuff over to Geoff’s place tonight, so ‘slow’ must be relative.”

“He’s such a frigging jerk,” Khira sneered, anger rising. “He treats Geoff like a dog.”

“I know. You and I both know he’ll cheat again. He’ll wait ‘til he has some excuse – work stress, boredom – and then blam! He’ll break Geoff’s heart.”

“I’ll kill him first,” Khira growled.

“Geoff really wants it to work out. He says this time it’ll be better. That Elliott’s changed and things will settle between them.” Anna added the last in a mocking tone. “I know Geoff’s looking for the happy ending, and that’s sweet, but this will only end badly.”

“I guess love is weird that way.” Khira tossed her hair and jutted her jaw, anger warm like sunlight in her belly. “Makes you stupid.”

“Love’s got nothing to do with it.”

"Eh. Maybe so, maybe not." Someone brushed against the back of Khira's seat and she felt a strange awareness rouse her senses.

Whatever Anna was saying faded away.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw a swarthy, sun-kissed blond in tight jeans saunter to a nearby table. When he caught her staring, he winked and she couldn't hide an answering smile. Anna cleared her throat pointedly and Khira tore her gaze away from the chocolate eyes of the golden hunk with some difficulty.

Anna eyed her affectionately, eyes twinkling. "You horn dog."

Khira blushed guilty, but not for staring. For getting caught.

"You were totally checking him out," Anna whispered too loudly, and Khira's blush deepened. "Oh lordy, I *love* the new man-eater attitude, chick."

Khira's mouth watered and her stomach rolled. She reached desperately for her new plate of food and wolfed the burger down in record time. The fries soon followed, along with the soda. And still, strangely, she wasn't satisfied.

Between bites, Khira stole looks at the blond, who stole his own looks in turn, his dark eyes deliberately lingering on her mouth and breasts.

Khira's nipples were hard beneath her conservative business attire.

"Earth to Khira!"

She started, gaze flying back to Anna. "Sorry."

Her friend chuckled knowingly. "Ready to go? It's about that time."

"Hang on." Khira reached into her purse and grabbed a business card, quickly, before she had a chance to change her mind. On the back of it, she scrawled her cell number. As she and Anna rose from their seats, she approached the blond.

"I'm Khira."

"Chad." He smiled an easy smile, transforming his face from swarthy to boyish in an instant. He shook her hand and something electric passed between them—Khira could see the awareness of it in his dilated eyes.

"Call me sometime?" She handed him the card, flirtatiously hanging on to it a second longer than she should have. "Soon?"

"Yes, ma'am." His grin widened around large, white teeth.

Anna gaped as Khira turned and hooked arms with her, nearly dragging her friend out of the restaurant without a backward glance.

Khira didn't have to look to know that Chad was watching her ass as she sashayed off.

"I can't believe you just did that!"

"What?" Khira asked with mock innocence.

"*That!* Where is my serious little worker bee who would never think of doing that during business hours? What have you done with her and what sort of monster have you put in her place?"

"Maybe she's dead." The words sounded too flat in the bright sunshine of the busy parking lot.

Anna's smile dimmed, but only a little. "Eight months ago you'd only had three lovers in your whole life. Three. Now you've had a handful of encounters with new men, one in *public*, and you're starting to pick up strangers on workdays. I'd think I'd been a very bad influence if not for the rose in your cheeks."

Khira laughed and squeezed her friend's arm before climbing into the driver's seat of her company-owned Lexus. "You're always telling me to let down my hair and relax. I'm simply learning from the master." She caught herself watching as Anna sinuously poured herself into the passenger's seat – as her svelte friend revealed a naked stretch of creamy flesh above her thigh-highs when her skirt rode up.

"Stick with me long enough and I'll teach you every dirty trick I know," Anna chuckled, absently righting her clothing.

Tearing her gaze away, Khira felt the liquid in her stomach slosh as she accelerated onto the roadway.

* * * * *

"So what do you do for a living?" Chad's soft voice blended in with the quiet din of the sushi restaurant.

Khira sipped her wine before answering, wishing the courting ritual were already done and over with. Chad was handsome enough to fuck, but conceited enough and arrogant enough to disabuse her of any real desire to get to know him beyond a physical sense. "I'm in marketing."

"Do you like it?"

"Eh." She shrugged. "It pays the bills." But she *was* good at it, which was nice, but she wasn't willing to go into the boring details.

Chad tilted his head, his dark eyes drinking in her features. "You're so beautiful."

Khira barely refrained from rolling her eyes. She knew with her red hair and green eyes she had fine coloring. Her smile made her passably pretty, when it was genuine. Her body was curved in all the right places, healthy and smooth, so she wasn't ugly. But beautiful? Her? Most definitely not. "You look pretty good yourself," she drawled back, verbally dancing with him willingly enough.

Still, the social mores of the whole dating formula seemed so blasé.

Romance really was dead, she realized. All she wanted anymore was sex. There was no way in hell she'd believe Chad wanted anything beyond that either.

He reached across the table for her hand. That thrum of electrified awareness arced from his touch and she felt wildly invigorated. His fair hair picked up golden highlights from the light fixtures and she was fascinated by the play of colors within its wavy strands. His skin was dark from the sun—he'd revealed he was a carpenter so that made sense—and his hand was warm as if he still held the daylight heat within his tissues. He took a deep breath through his nose. "You smell great too."

"Thanks." Khira drank the last of her third glass of wine and pulled her hand free.

"I love your accent."

That was too much. She had to laugh at that. As she set aside her empty glass, she said, "My accent's no different from any other Savannah native. You must not be used to it yet, Yankee boy."

"I've lived here two years. You still sound exotic to me, even around all these southern belles. Your words drip from your mouth. Like honey."

He swallowed and she heard it. Saw it too, as his Adam's apple worked beneath his tanned throat. "You wanna call for the check and head over to my place?" Frank words after his attempted poetry and, truthfully, more appreciated.

She let her eyes speak volumes through her lashes. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chad signaled to their waiter, never taking his gaze from her face, her bared shoulders. "I live close by."

Was he breathless? She knew *she* was, but not with nerves. With something more akin to need. Real, pressing need that made her want to drag this golden boy from the restaurant and have him in the darkened street corner outside without any foreplay whatsoever.

"Is that why you asked me out to this place?" she teased, wetting her lips with the tip of her tongue.

The way he watched that flick of tongue, the way he stared at her glistening mouth, made things low in her body tighten and throb pleasurably. And despite the impressive meal she'd just eaten, she felt as if she could eat a whole other course.

"Yes," he said excitedly, eyes dilated, dark and hot with carnal expectations.

Expectations she more than wanted to fulfill.

"Are you mad?" he asked, such an all-American golden boy look on his face. A look that playfully said, *you can't possibly be mad at me*.

"Maybe. I'll decide tomorrow," she said with deliberate brass, watching his shoulders move beneath his buttoned shirt when he moved. Eyeing his discomfort,

knowing it had everything to do with the way his eyes kept darting to the points of her nipples beneath her clothes.

They paid for their meal—Khira insisting on covering her ample share as she'd eaten a healthy amount of food—and left swiftly. They didn't hold hands. Oddly, Khira found it too personal and avoided his seeking hand several times. Instead, almost as a concession, she allowed her arm to brush alongside his while they walked the three blocks to his apartment on River Street. With each touch, her heart fluttered and her breath hitched and it was more her fault than his that their last steps were so hurried.

The moment he led her into the darkened living room, the second the front door closed shut, she grabbed him and drew his head down to hers for a kiss.

His mouth was sweet. Like fruit. She sipped the kiss from his lips and his tongue, drinking his taste like so much wine. His hands were rough as they pushed and pulled at her clothing. She didn't mind. Her own hands moved with urgency on his clothes, ripping the buttons on his shirt with a violence she didn't even bother to disguise.

When his chest was bare, his lean muscles naked and hot under her palms, she pressed her face against his heart and listened to it beat. It raced, the rhythm fast and booming, and her heart sped to match its pace. She took a taut nipple in her mouth and bit delicately on the flesh, tugging, licking.

Staggering, Chad groaned and tore at the fastening of her lace bra until her breasts spilled free. "I wanted this the second I saw you," he groaned raggedly.

Me too. But she didn't say the words aloud. They would have been gravelly and unintelligible anyway. Her throat was tight and she was thirsty—had been so thirsty all week. But something about his flesh in her mouth, his hands on her tits, now made her mouth water. She stroked the flat plane of his abdomen and reached into his waistband for the hot, hard ridge of his dick.

It did not disappoint.

The beating of his heart echoed in her ears. She buried her face in the curve of his neck, nibbling him, clutching him, seeking his mouth for another kiss. But he pulled away before she could achieve his lips, seeking out his own destination—her nipple.

His mouth felt cool on the heat of her swollen nub. He sucked her so hard it hurt—but not nearly enough to satisfy. “Harder,” she growled and he immediately obeyed, drawing her nipple between his teeth, biting down, sucking hard so that his lips smacked wetly. His tongue bathed her, he fell to his knees and his hands jerked her panties down around her ankles.

Khira threaded her hands in his golden hair, the coarse waves crisp beneath her fingers, and she smiled wolfishly. Arching into his mouth, she pulled his head tight against her and rolled her hips against his midriff, pressed so firmly into her softness. And then he sank lower, releasing her nipple with a wet pop, lips spreading a wet path down her stomach.

She artfully lifted one leg and draped it over his shoulder, urging him without words to dare all he might. And he dared much. His mouth was on her pussy then, sucking, tongue probing, teeth scraping. Khira bucked rhythmically against his mouth, mashing her well-trimmed quim against his nose and mouth.

He slurped her swollen clit. The sound added to her pleasure.

Khira gripped his hair tightly, roughly so that he gasped into her quivering flesh before lapping again with his wicked tongue. His fingers found her, thrusting inside, slipping in her wetness. But she wanted more.

She heard her teeth snap as she viciously bit on empty air.

With a severity that had Chad grunting, she shoved him off balance, onto his back on the hardwood floor. Her fingers yanked the clasp of his trousers, hands jerking his pants down around his ankles. She looked down at all that naked glory, golden from the waist up, paler down below. His cock was thick and curved, springing up eagerly from a nest of golden brown hair.

His balls were tight, ready to burst. She could see it, smell it, taste it. He was hers.

She stepped over him, a foot on either side of his hips. Trapping his gaze with hers, she watched him watch as she lowered herself onto his throbbing flesh. She kept her knees parted wide to afford him a better view and looked herself as her pussy swallowed the thick staff of flesh like a starving wet mouth. They sighed together as she sank fully onto him.

He filled her, stretched her. His fingers dug into the cushion on her hips as she rode him. The lean, tight muscles of his chest rose and fell with increasing rapidity as she milked his body with hers, deliberately using her internal muscles to squeeze and release him as she rose up and fell back down. Soon he was moaning, gasping, clutching tighter and tighter so that Khira knew she'd wear bruises in the aftermath.

Hunger rose in her. Desperate and vicious. Her mouth watered but her throat was dry. Her cunt ached deliciously, but greater than the need for orgasm was the need to...kiss him. She leaned down over him and caught his mouth with hers—no easy feat as his head was thrashing back and forth with each thrust of her hips.

At this new angle, her clit ground against him, his pubic hairs rasping the sensitive flesh until she was on the cusp of a massive release. But still, she hungered. She delved her tongue into his mouth, tasting him. She sucked, drinking in his saliva, his tongue, his lips.

It was like breathing ambrosia, manna or wine. It sated her hunger. The kiss hardened and she realized she hadn't felt so appeased, so full in days and days. She drew harder, drinking his kiss. Swallowing him. Eating her fill.

Her head swam. He groaned and she took the sound into her throat, physically gulping it as if it were the most delicious food. She wanted more and ground her hips harder against him. He groaned again and she drank.

Then he came. So hard and fast, the splash of his cum stung her. Still, she did not release him, could not release him. She needed all he had to give. Impossibly she deepened the kiss, stabbing her tongue into the back of his wide-open mouth. He was moaning over and over again, each of his breaths filling her lungs, her stomach. A

stream of incandescent light, hot like fire, washed from his crying mouth into hers, burning her insides but swelling her up with strength and with life.

She hit her zenith, her sex clamping down around the semi-soft flesh that still filled her. It was so consuming she saw the stars, heard the pulse of her lover like thunder in her ears. Throwing her head back she felt her body tighten and then explode.

And then the thunder stuttered.

And her orgasm ended, softly, leaving her spent but satiated, brimful with repletion.

And her starlit vision cleared.

And Chad was choking on his tongue.

Khira fell off him. "Chad!" She floundered, reaching to put her hand beneath his neck, to lift his head. White foam erupted from his lips and his face turned an alarming shade of aubergine. "Chad!" His name was a scream on her lips.

Was he epileptic? He hadn't mentioned it, but then they hadn't spoken of much more than his obsession with football and Calvin Klein products. What did one do for a seizure like this?

It took too long to right her raging thoughts.

But finally, she caught a thread of rationality.

Chad needed help. Immediate help that she could not provide.

With his desperate struggle for breath in her ears, she scrambled to find her purse. From within its depths she found her cell phone and dialed an emergency number, wanting—needing—a rational voice to talk her through whatever process she needed to perform to ease Chad's suffering until better-trained professionals could arrive to take over.

The emergency dispatcher's voice was calm, reassuring, but Khira was so far beyond verbal communication that it didn't matter. Later she couldn't even recall what was said to her.

It was seventeen minutes later, after much worry and cursing and panicked weeping on her part, before the ambulance arrived. Seventeen long, agonizing minutes...but the EMT's assured her that Chad would live. That, though he wasn't epileptic, he was going to recover. They assured her of this, right before the van drove away with him inside, body spasming violently as he went into some kind of shock.

Time out of time again as the ambulance drove away. Seconds that existed but did not pass, not in any real sense. Moving through invisible quicksand, Khira felt a separation of self, a split of mundane and empyreal, an invisible cocoon that blunted the severity of the situation.

Fully dressed once more, Khira began to realize that the moment the ambulance doors had closed on Chad's struggling form, she'd lost all panic. All worry. Every anxious twinge of guilt turned off as if some magic switch had been thrown.

With that thought, time resumed its normal course. Minutes fled by in a strange state of calm. Ten minutes then twenty passed. A cab was on its way to collect her...and now she could barely even recall the intensity of her earlier upset. Now all she felt was peace. Ease.

Satiation.

Chapter Three

"How did the date go?"

"Fine," Khira said flatly without looking up from her computer as Geoff and Anna loomed over her cubicle.

"Did you have sex with him?" Anna interrogated with impish delight, smile so brilliant Khira could see its glow out of the corner of her eye.

"No." The lie snapped out of her with more vehemence than she'd intended.

The air pressure in the room seemed to drop. Khira's ears popped.

She looked up in time to catch the comical wince on Geoff's features and the fading of Anna's pretty grin.

"I'm sorry." Khira felt like a total asshole. It wasn't their fault she was feeling so rotten. "I'm just a little tired. It was a really late night."

"A late night, but no sex?" Anna asked with a snort, the grin returning. "What did he do, talk your ear off?"

"Yeah," Khira laughed uneasily, but neither Anna nor Geoff seemed to notice her discomfort. "He was a real bore, too." Words from her mouth. Words that felt as heartless as they sounded.

"Ready for lunch?" Geoff asked, nodding an absent greeting as a coworker passed. "Elliott is meeting us at The Grill and word is he's buying."

Tucking a thick lock of hair behind her ear, mentally reminding herself to condition more thoroughly in her next shower, she forced a light tone. "Nah, I can't make it today. I've got a lot of work." Khira smiled an apology, even as her stomach growled a vicious protest. She was so hungry. And she was working on her fourth bottle of water with no end to her thirst in sight.

Geoff reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "Want us to bring something back for you?"

Khira's eyes fell shut as his touch burned through the flimsy silk of her blouse. Her heart thudded and her mouth watered and it took all her willpower not to lean farther into his innocent touch.

So delicious...

"You okay?" Anna's brown eyes were focused with warm concern when Khira opened hers.

"Y-yeah." She swallowed, striving for control. "I'm just tired, like I said. Um, food." She mentally shook herself. "Yes. Uh, can you grab me a platter of something? Anything greasy and really unhealthy, you know me." She breathed a weak chuckle and occupied her hands by reaching for her purse and digging for some money. All the while, the burn of Geoff's touch ate through her clothing until she felt naked beneath it. "Definitely some fries. But not salted, 'kay? I've been so thirsty lately, salt would only make it worse."

Geoff took her money with a rakish dart of his hand. "Elliott will be disappointed."

"He'll get over it," Khira snapped. She couldn't care less about the man who'd repeatedly hurt her friend over the years. "Give him a wave for me, though," she added, not wanting to hurt Geoff's feelings with her acidic attitude toward the man he loved. He squeezed her shoulder once more and blessedly released her.

"Don't work too hard, chick," Anna warned, and with a wave her friends left her in search of their lunch.

It was several minutes before her heart stopped racing and her hands steadied. By that time, she'd consumed her fourth bottle of water and was well on her way to finishing her fifth.

* * * * *

Her feet carried her without conscious navigation to the bar nearest the quaint, historically restored carriage house she called home. It was a small, dingy affair, and unfamiliar. Though it was only a mile from her house, she'd never visited and didn't know why tonight, a work night—sacrosanct until recently, reserved only for rest and quiet in the confines of her cozy dwelling—she felt the need to visit now. But feel it she did, for when she entered the open door of the beer-scented establishment, Khira was immediately compelled to order a beer and sink into the surprisingly comfortable cushions of a shadowy booth and suddenly the world seemed to clarify.

Odd pains had been plaguing her all afternoon. Hunger pains, or so it seemed to her, despite the large lunch she'd eaten and the gallon of water she'd drunk. Khira's metabolism had always been fast and healthy, but now her system felt completely out of whack, demanding even more calories than normal.

"Well, hey there, Red. Haven't seen your purdy face around here before."

Khira looked up at the hard lines of the man approaching her table. He was tan and lean, not scrawny but by no means as well built as a carpenter like Chad. Still, he had a practiced charm in his features she found appealing.

"I haven't been here before," she said with a faint curve of her lips.

"What brings you to a dump like this?" He grinned and sat opposite her, handing her the beer she'd ordered. "Don't tell me." He eyed her—he had lovely blue eyes, she noticed. "Man trouble. Am I right?"

Khira chuckled and took a healthy swallow of her beer. The man's cerulean gaze watched the workings of her throat as the bitter brew slid down smooth and cold. She liked to watch him watching her. "No man trouble," she said, voice husky from the beer and something else awakening inside her. Something dangerous. "Just bored, I guess."

"Bored? Honey, why didn't you say so? It so happens I'm a very amusing man—guaranteed to distract you from your dull existence. Name's Huck." He offered his hand, a rogue's grin splitting his lips wide to reveal small, white teeth.

Khira shook it with hers, feeling a tingle race from where their skin connected all the way to her loins. Huck felt it too, had to because his blue eyes darkened and his pupils opened wide like a camera lens. “Khira,” she murmured in a stranger’s voice, squeezing his hand gently.

“Pleased to meet you, Khira.” His hand lingered a little longer and she was the one who ultimately released him. “You wander into unfamiliar bars often?”

“No.”

“Talk to strange men often?” he tossed cheekily, the corners of his pretty eyes crinkling. Something swam just beneath his surface, something that resonated with the dangerous thing blinking slowly and alertly inside her.

She bit her lip, just to watch his eyes fall, then raised the bottle in a toast. “Depends on how cute they are.” She took a swig of her beer. So thirsty.

“Ah, well, I’m cute as they come. You finished that already?” Gallantly, he motioned for another beer and the server brought it instantly, a wary look in her eye as she handed the bottle to the tawny-haired Huck. “Careful or it’ll go to your head,” he warned, but they both knew he didn’t really have her wellbeing uppermost in his mind.

Though there was something eager and harried about him, he was charismatic in an unkempt, rakish sort of way. The short stubble on his sharp jaw and deeply dimpled chin added to that effect. His drawl was thick as road tar and his lips as pink and smooth as a baby’s. Khira wanted to bite those lips. She kissed the beer bottle instead and drank deep of the brew.

Again, he watched her throat work as she swallowed.

“You want to cut the foreplay and find someplace private?” she heard herself ask. Words that would have—should have—mortified her...if she weren’t possessed of a lusty appetite that had nothing to do with caloric deprivation.

Huck’s eyes widened and his pupils ate the last of the color. “You don’t waste much time, do you, Red?”

“Would you rather I did?” she asked silkily, knowing the answer before he gave it.

“No,” he chuckled ruefully. He shook his head, the message in his eyes clearly stating he couldn’t believe his good fortune. “Let me pay our tab and I’ll escort you to wherever it is you have in mind, honey.”

Khira waited for him outside the bar door. His long, straight hair reached his collar, swaying as he approached her and took her arm. He was taller than her but not by much, putting him at five-ten, five-eleven at the most. But he was built hard, centered, and when he walked there was a jaunty strut that moved his hips, which Khira much appreciated.

“Where you wanna go?” he asked, a smile toying with the corners of his mouth. A smile that didn’t sit well with her, despite the levity in his tone and the emptiness in her gut.

The last thing she wanted was to lead him back to her house. Why, she wasn’t sure, but the idea of taking him there seemed distasteful. “Somewhere close,” she purred, looking around in the dim twilight for a secluded alcove.

“Hot damn,” he breathed, leading her deeper into the shadows, his hand hard and tight around her wrist. “I’m parked nearby.”

She didn’t want to get into a car with him either. “Closer than that.”

When he started, eyeing her with surprised, excited black eyes, she laughed softly, feeling oddly powerful.

Some part of her, however, knew she wasn’t in control. Hadn’t been since mindlessly walking to the damn bar.

He chuckled then, a sinister sound for all its lighthearted intent. “This way.” He led her a few streets away from the bar and insinuated them between two tall, brick buildings. It was dark here—there were no streetlights—and quiet but for the play of the warm spring breeze through litter on the alleyway floor.

Khira wasn't sure who reached for whom first, but her fingers were fisted in his shirt and his mouth was on hers before any more words were exchanged. He tasted clean and spicy and the rasp of his stubble burned her skin sensually. His lips were soft and smooth, his tongue skillful as it played in the depths of her mouth.

Her back was against the stone and it reminded her a little of her encounter with Bram. The wild swell of her pulse danced high in her chest at the thought of her misnamed, black-haired lover, but the sensation blew away when Huck shoved her harder against the building and reality crashed through her. She was in the arms of a far different man than Bram now.

Huck tore his mouth away. His hands were bruising as they jerked her clothing into disheveled wads. A warning bell sounded in the back of her mind — Huck was being far too discourteous, far too eager, but the caution sound was drowned out by the desperate hunger that gnawed at her belly and her heart.

"Oh yeah, you like it rough, don't you, darlin'?" His fingernails scratched furrows in her belly as he shoved the elastic of her skirt aside to allow room for his seeking touch. The hard tips of his work-worn hands were rough as they charged past the barrier of her lace panties and parted the slick folds of her sex.

The hunger rose. As did her desire. She nibbled on his neck, pulling the skin past her lips. Compelled beyond her self-control, she bit down, hard. Tasted the hint of blood.

He howled, but she found his lips in time to devour the sound. He opened his mouth wide for the invasion of her tongue. Khira sucked his tongue into her mouth, his flavor and his breath. Sucked hard.

Huck moaned into her and fumbled with the button fly of his jeans. Khira clutched him tight, nails digging into his arms through the soft, worn cotton of his shirt. He groaned and she ate the noise, feeling it inflate her stomach like strange, pulpy fruit. Opening her mouth wider, she sucked his mouth whole and raising her hands, fisted them in his soft, fine hair.

He shoved his pants down inelegantly.

Khira wriggled until her skirt was bunched up around her waist.

The breadth of his cock was alarmingly stiff as it probed for her. His rough fingers parted her and she kicked off the confining panties bunched at her ankles so that she could spread her legs wider to accommodate him. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she lifted herself so that she could tangle her legs around him. Awkwardly, rushed, his cock found her, stretched her, and was clumsily shoved into her.

It hurt.

Khira pried her mouth off his and murmured a protest.

"Shh, baby. You'll like it," Huck chuckled darkly, forcing his fat cock deeper, harder.

What was she doing?

"Stop." She pressed against his shoulders and untangled her legs, trying to find purchase. "Stop, wait."

"No," he growled and grabbed her thighs, stilling her, pumping his hips into her relentlessly. "No. You asked for this." He hissed the last, banging her back against the wall.

Though she was wet, his pounding chafed. The naked skin of his phallus almost an evil touch inside her.

"No, Huck. Stop!" The fear had her, but so did the hunger and it was rising, drowning out her instinctive caution. She was thirsty, aching, needing something beyond the sex. Something nameless and vital that screamed at her—*forget the mounting worry, forget the caution, take everything he offers, willing or no*. Still, she beat at his shoulders and shoved with all her might in an effort to put some space between them.

Grunting, Huck slammed his body into hers, bruising her back and her front with his ham-fisted brutality. "Am I too much for you, little girl? Too much of a man?" he panted crassly.

The bottomless appetite raged.

It didn't have to be this way. He was *her* prey – not the other way around!

Desperate for some measure of control over the encounter, she sought out his mouth and kissed him so deep she thought she might swallow him whole. He gasped into her mouth and she breathed it in, taking it as her due. Time slowed. Her pain gradually blended into pleasure and soon she was hot and pliant again, welcoming the swift and brutal thrusts of the barbarian who had her back against the wall.

Taking him, feeling the give of his energy, of his *self*, from deep inside. A fire of life that warmed her insides.

He made some guttural observation and the sound roared down her throat. The flavor of his tongue and his breath sustained her, raising her to a peak that – while still savage and unwanted – was exquisite and pleasurable. His balls slapped against her, so fast and hard did he take her. The broad width of him between her legs stretched her mercilessly, but her pussy welcomed the invasion while relentlessly demanding more with tiny pulsations that racked her to the core.

In her head she could hear the wild beating of his heart.

Taste his rage and his anger, bittersweet like pomegranate.

“Sexy whore.” He grunted the words into her mouth and she could see their muffled sound vibrate through the air. Pretty in their filth, just colors dancing, floating. “You’re so soft. Wet. So –” Something tore from him and it wasn’t words, wasn’t noise at all, but she heard it give. Felt it fill her up.

Khira realized her pain, her hunger, was abating.

Such relief. Khira relaxed further against him, legs dangling freely now, and it was his pumping hips that kept her upright. His mouth that anchored her. His breath that sustained her.

He yanked away from her, ending the kiss so that her craving rose once more and clawed through her savagely. She snarled. Huck slapped her across the face. "Bitch!" he spat, face twisted and vile.

Dazed, Khira felt the burn of his palm print against her cheek. His desire was for violence, *real* violence, and if it weren't for the glaze over his eyes, Khira knew he'd be trying to hurt her permanently. Huck was lost, though, and still thrust himself into the wet heat of her, taking, not giving. But not doing all he meant to do, not hurting her as much as he would have liked.

A wild thing opened its eyes inside her. She felt anger, rage so hot it scarred, eclipsing Huck's.

The crudity of this man who took her like a rag doll was unforgivable. She could have beaten him, slapped him back, bit and scratched him. Tasted his blood with glee. But there was something more powerful, more devastating inside her, screaming to be let loose. And so it must be. Khira set it free, let it take her, take her mind and her rage and even her pleasure, such as it was.

The everyday Khira stepped aside. Her humanity no longer existed.

She fisted her hands in Huck's hair and forced a new kiss on him. Her teeth drew blood from his too-soft mouth. Her nails raked his skin, digging furrows in his scalp that wept claret fluid. Taking him harder, she sucked him, stole all his breath with a great and powerful inhalation that went on and on and on.

The rush was intense. The power that flowed from him to her like nothing she'd ever felt. Her body crossed a threshold, an invisible barrier, and her orgasm was mind-blowing. She yelled, triumphant, and savaged his baby lips to rags. Huck shook in her arms, screaming his life away, but now *Khira* would not let *him* retreat. Now Khira took and Huck was unable to fight her off.

She devoured his cries greedily.

And when he went rigid, she pushed him away. Watched as he fell back on unbending legs. Watched as a pearlescent jettison of semen escaped his swollen dick

and splashed uselessly on his stomach. He groaned and twitched as he came, face ruggedly handsome in his ecstasy, even among the dirt and grime of the alley.

Body aching but beyond that close to full and content, Khira gathered her panties and righted her clothes in silence. The tremors of her own orgasm still rippled through her pussy and her womb, warming her and softening her swollen mouth. Though it hadn't been entirely as she'd hoped, she'd enjoyed herself well enough. So too, it seemed, had the sperm-covered man at her feet.

Huck's groans abruptly turned to gasps.

Khira started, eyeing him in the darkness. Though there was no light, no moon to see by, she could still see him with an eerie clarity that threatened to steal away her contentment. Silently she bore witness, reluctant at first and then with a disassociated numbness, as his body jerked and his eyes rolled up high so that only the whites shone bright beneath the quivering lids.

It was happening again. Whatever *it* was. Huck looked close to death.

And Khira did not care.

"Stop means *stop*," she sneered, pitiless. "You're too fucking eager, Huck."

His body froze in a most disturbing way.

Khira coldly turned her back on him, walking away without a single backward glance. Leaving him there in the filth to die.

Chapter Four

Primitive fear thrust her awake the next morning.

What have I done?

Khira sobbed for breath, biting her knuckle until it bled. The pain helped her find a measure of calm, but the echoing pain between her legs and on her bruised cheek where Huck had struck her brought the terror roaring back.

Khira jumped from bed as dawn stained the sky and took the longest, hottest shower of her life. But no matter how hard she scrubbed, how pink and raw her scalded flesh glowed beneath the spray, she could not feel clean. Could not wash away the past. Whimpering like a wounded animal, she admitted defeat and turned off the water with trembling hands.

Was it possible to kill a man with sex? Had *she* killed a man?

She donned a robe with numb fingers. Her thoughts were tangled. Her memories fuzzy and confused. She'd had sex with Huck—that was not in question—but had she, through copulation, killed Huck for what he'd done to her? What she'd sensed he wanted to do to her?

And as the questions came, so too did the hazy recollection of Chad's attack in the wake of their encounter. One such incident could be discounted as bad luck. But two? And on the heels of each other? It seemed stupid to even pretend they might be coincidental.

Had she killed a man, possibly two—simply by fucking them?

Dear God, she hadn't even called to check on Chad. Hadn't cared enough to pick up the phone and dial a simple series of numbers.

The realization came that she wasn't scared that she may have killed Chad, but that she might get blamed for it. It was the same with Huck...she found herself unconcerned that he was likely dead, but more than a little concerned that the police might come looking for her, asking questions she couldn't answer.

Am I a killer? Her thought echoed like a shout. Was that guilt she felt, rising like bile, burning like acid?

A sudden stab of pain in her stomach had her doubling over. Another cramp made her cry out and fall to the floor, curling into a fetal position, hands over her stomach as the merciless, clawing pain ate through her middle.

Such awful, horrendous agony!

The shards of pain, like glass, radiated outward from her stomach to her heart and arms. Khira panted, too weak to cry, and prayed for the torment to abate. But it did not abate, did not weaken, and after what felt like an eternity of suffering, she began to pray for death.

Death, alas, did not come. Not for her.

Gasping, sweating, trembling, Khira dragged herself from the bathroom to her bedroom. Sliding on the floor like a serpent in its death throes. It took much effort, caused much pain, but at last she managed to reach for the phone that slept on her nightstand. After a great struggle, Khira focused her dim vision on the number pad and dialed 9-1-1. It took two attempts, but at last she punched in the correct digits with her shaking fingers and waited for the voice of the dispatcher on the other end.

It was a miracle that the man heard her croaking voice. A wonder that he caught the fraying ends of Khira's sanity, holding them safe and secure as he and Khira waited together for the ambulance to arrive. And then they were there, her rescuers, having somehow entered her home though she couldn't remember letting them in.

Blessedly, as an EMT fitted an oxygen mask over her face, Khira lost consciousness and escaped the monstrous torture for a time.

When she opened her eyes again, it was to see a doctor's face hovering over hers.

"You're back," the gray-haired woman said by way of greeting, writing something on a clipboard in her hand, smiling absently.

"What happened?" Khira croaked, looking around with eyes that didn't seem to want to move in their sockets.

The doctor pursed her lips and eyed her thoughtfully. "Looks like you had a whopper of a panic attack. Not to worry, though. You'll feel better in a few minutes." The doctor's voice was brisk.

Khira frowned. A panic attack? "What did you give me?" She could taste the bitter drug in her mouth, smell it in her sinuses, sharp and pungent, like rubbing alcohol.

"A shot to help you relax."

"How long was I out?"

"Half an hour." The woman's light-colored brows raised in an expression of clinical evaluation. "Have you been sleeping all right?"

Khira nodded, fisting her fingers in the starched linen of her hospital bed. The world seemed to be moving in slow motion, but her thoughts were racing.

"Been under a lot of stress at work? Home?"

Khira shook her head.

The doctor took out a penlight and shined it in Khira's pupils. "Feeling dizzy? Short of breath?"

"Dizzy, yeah. And hungry a lot. Thirsty too." Her voice sounded like salted gravel but she was gaining strength with each passing second. "I've been having stomach cramps. And..." How to say she'd been horny and engaging in sex with strangers as if she couldn't control herself any better than an animal in rut? Khira fell silent and whatever drug the doctor had given her seemed to cocoon her in a translucent blanket of cotton.

The doctor smiled patronizingly, not really looking at her now. "Yes, well, stress can really max out your system in a hurry. I'm going to prescribe some Diazepam,

which should help you relax. Get some rest over the next few days. Take it easy. You'll be fine."

Khira gritted her teeth and watched the woman leave. Fine? Impossible. It was no panic attack that had crippled her with such pain. She didn't know what it was, but she knew without any doubt that it had little to do with stress and everything to do with whatever was working in her to incapacitate the last two men she'd had sex with.

With some effort she found a well of strength that let her push the worst effects of the drug away. Her mind cleared some.

She was so thirsty.

Sitting up was a chore, one that made her head spin drunkenly. The drug at work still, but weakening with each passing breath she took. At last she was upright and when a nurse came to check on her, Khira asked for some water and received it gratefully in its small paper cup.

"You ready to go?" The woman smiled sweetly.

The alcohol smell of the drug had faded in her sinuses.

The nurse moved closer. Khira heard the beating of her pulse and frowned.

Khira felt her eyes drawn to the Asian woman's almond-shaped eyes, the shine in their brown depths. The nurse blushed, puzzling Khira until she noted the dilation of the black pupils, the rise and fall of the woman's small breasts beneath her brightly colored scrubs.

This woman wanted her, Khira realized, as her stomach dropped and her blood heated, the drug completely gone now.

What was happening to her?

"Yeah, I'm ready." She couldn't rise from the edge of the bed, her knees oddly weak, but not from any tranquilizer.

"You smell so good," the nurse said, voice soft, a mere murmur. She inched closer and Khira heard her breathing, tasted her pulse now as its tempo increased. "What perfume do you wear?"

Khira wasn't wearing any. She smiled and tried to swallow, but didn't have enough spit to accomplish it. "Can I have some more water?"

The nurse—a handsome older woman, blushing beneath her olive skin like a schoolgirl with a crush—immediately got her more from the tap in the sink on the far side of the room. When she handed Khira the paper cup this time, their fingers brushed and Khira's hunger returned with a vengeance. Heat seemed to crackle in the air between them and the nurse was so close, so open...

Khira drank the water in one gulp. Then, as if of their own accord, her hands reached out and cupped the woman's face, drawing her slowly down for a kiss. When their lips met, Khira's head swam but not from the drug. She'd never kissed a woman before, never wanted to, but this embrace felt so good she couldn't have said why she'd waited so long to experiment thusly.

The dark thing inside her took the wheel and drove.

Opening her mouth on the nurse's, the play of their tongues a mere formality, Khira breathed in the flavor and taste of the kiss. The woman's hand cupped her breast and her nipple ached as if it had been electrified.

It was happening again. Whatever *it* was.

"No." Khira snapped out of the embrace, shoving the nurse back.

"Please, *yes*." The dazed woman reached for her, body aquiver. "I'll do anything you want..."

When the woman's hands found her, when they touched her nipple through the hospital gown, when they insinuated between her thighs, Khira almost died. The pleasure filled her head, her heart. It was sweet, but bitter too because it felt so good without good reason.

The nurse's hands tugged at the gown, freeing her hard-crested breast. And then her nipple was in the wet heat of the woman's mouth. The woman suckled her like a babe, tonguing her with soft flickers. Khira cupped the back of her smooth, shining hair and pulled her head closer. The sucking mouth drew on her harder and she gasped, arching into the kiss.

Soft fingers wriggled beneath the hem of her garment, found her wet cunt and caressed the swollen slit with knowing expertise. Khira opened her legs and scooted her hips forward, leaning back a little to accommodate the delicious titillation. She was so wet it surprised her, and the nurse breathed harder in answer to Khira's mounting response, her tongue moving furiously against the long nipple.

And then the woman was pushing her back. And Khira let her, falling onto the uncomfortable mattress, parting her legs wide as the nurse pushed aside the gown. The fingers left her slit and then came the lips, the tongue. The nurse sucked her clit between her lips, licked her from anus to clit and back, wetting her further.

It wasn't the drug that made Khira dizzy. Wasn't the cocktail of medicinal chemicals that made her weak.

She felt as if she hadn't eaten in days.

Her fingers tugged the long, silky hair of the nurse and she bucked her hips against the hot mouth that worshipped at her pussy like a supplicant in a pagan time.

But where was the cock? Khira wanted the cock and there wasn't one.

Still...the pleasure tasted good. Like the scent of food. It made her mouth water. Made her want to bite down on something solid and chew and chew and chew.

With a cry, Khira rose and shoved the nurse away. The woman groaned and fought her, reaching to rub her pussy, to pinch her nipples, but Khira would have none of it. It felt as if she were starving and pushing away a succulent feast, but Khira couldn't feed that hunger, couldn't lose herself to it. Wouldn't.

And then the nurse's mouth was on hers. Her tongue in Khira's mouth. And Khira felt as if a warm wave were crashing over her head, dragging her into the depths of a

great black ocean. Desperate, Khira clutched the woman now, and opened her mouth wide.

Felt the woman's power—her life—flow into the kiss, entering Khira through their joined orifices. Khira breathed it in, swallowed it before sense and reason could stop her.

The hunger eased...its vice-like grip relaxing.

It felt like God, the devil and all the angels, light and dark, danced inside her.

Monster.

"No!" Khira shoved harder and this time the power of the nurse's own life force gave her added strength so that the nurse stumbled backward and fell to the floor. Before the woman could protest further—and Khira knew she would, could see the mindless lust in those lovely almond eyes—Khira jumped from the bed and raced to the door, bare feet slapping loudly against the cold tiles.

On the other side, seconds away from entering the room, the doctor saw her and smiled. "Feeling better?"

Dear heaven...the doctor's eyes roved over her, darkening, glazing over.

"Right as rain," Khira rasped and glanced cautiously over her shoulder at the nurse who had gained her feet, while backing away from the too-intent regard of the doctor. "I'm ready to leave now."

The doctor didn't seem to notice the flushed nurse at all. Brushing against Khira's retreating form—a deliberate slide across her front—the doctor plucked up a familiar terrycloth bathrobe from a chair just inside the door and handed it to over with a heavy lidded smile. "Get dressed, honey. I'll get your prescription and some papers to sign."

Khira put on the robe she'd worn earlier, *her* robe, watching as the doctor strutted away with an exaggerated sway of her hips. Waited, cautious, as the nurse wiped a shaking hand across her glistening brow.

The woman glanced longingly at Khira as she followed in the doctor's wake, and the smell of passion haunted the room long after her absence. Khira's strange hunger mounted.

* * * * *

Food would not satisfy. No amount of water could quench her thirst. And when she looked in the mirror, she barely recognized the thing that stared back at her in the reflection.

"Are you sure you're up for it tonight?" Anna asked in her ear.

Khira bit a torn knuckle. She'd been gnawing them like this for days, the physical pain a much needed distraction from the ache in her middle. But her hands looked ghastly. "Yeah. I'm fine. It's our night out and I wouldn't miss it."

"We could hook up at your place and watch scary movies. Geoff won't be coming—he and Elliott are spending the weekend at the beach."

"Nah. I want to go back to the club."

Anna paused for a beat. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Khira snarled, hating the obvious concern in her friend's voice. "A good fuck will relax me better than anything right now."

Again a stretch of silence. "I don't think I've ever heard you talk like that, Khira. It seems too vulgar coming from you."

"What, I'm not allowed to swear now and then? You say fuck at least half a dozen times a day—that I hear. No telling how many times you say it when I'm not around." Khira knew she sounded rash and hard but couldn't ease her tone or words.

"Yeah, but I'm not a southern belle," Anna chortled, though the sound was empty and mirthless. Uncomfortable.

"Neither am I," Khira insisted behind twisted lips.

"Yes you are, you liar." Blessedly there was a tinge of humor as Anna scoffed. "All right. Okay," she sighed, "we'll go to the club. But if you feel, you know, sick, let me know and we'll go right home. 'Kay?"

"I'm not sick, Anna, I just had a panic attack. I haven't had any problems since then." Lies. Every word.

"Yeah, okay, but just let me know. That's the rule."

Khira felt some of the tension ease out of her — alien tension that had been with her since her encounter with the nympho nurse — and laughed freely for the first time in days. "We'll have fun."

"I know." There was a smile in Anna's voice and Khira was immensely grateful for that. "Want to meet up at the usual rendezvous in an hour?"

"Yeah. That'd be great."

"Later, chick."

"Bye, Anna." Khira turned the phone off and sat in the gathering twilight of her carriage house.

After several minutes, she rose from her perch on the bed and cautiously approached the mirror mounted above her dresser. Though it was near dark, she could clearly see the image that greeted her, and Khira wished for blindness.

What stared back at her through the looking glass was not her. At least not anything that she recognized as herself.

Her eyes were so large in her once elfin face, deeply set in shadows that swallowed her features. Her skin was pale, ghostly. Ghastly. Her red hair was lifeless, limp around her shoulders, hanging listlessly down her back like a tangle of bloodstained seaweed. She seemed gaunt. Diminished. Her breasts looked monstrous on her dwindled frame. Her fingers skeletal as they ran over the unfamiliar angles of her face.

The flesh of her mouth was crimson, but she wore no cosmetic. Her lips were swollen as if she'd spent the whole day sucking on a lollipop. Or a cock.

That word, really just a wisp of a thought in her mind, made her stomach growl like a Minotaur. Cock. What she wouldn't give to have one in her mouth now.

God. Something was wrong with her. Something terrible and vile. And she didn't know what it was.

Was she crazy? Was the panic attack really that—and a precursor of worse things to come? An underlying facet to a much grander malady?

Her face, her body, her whole image resembled that of an alien. A vile creature. And why not? She was a monster—she'd nearly killed one man and, according to the obituaries of the local newspaper, she'd killed another outright. Huck had been found, stiff and cold, in the alley where she'd left him. Though his cause of death was listed as natural, Khira knew better.

Heaven help her, she knew better.

But heaven couldn't help her, not now, not ever, because she was a killer.

A murderer with a mounting appetite for more of the very thing that had taken the life for which she was now damned.

Chapter Five

It had all started with Bram. Khira was sure of that much, at least.

He kept popping into her thoughts, like a bad habit.

She didn't know how or why, but she was certain that her madness had something to do with their explosive encounter. A forbidden tryst shared between her and a black-haired stranger with gray-green eyes. She determined to find him. After that, well...she wasn't a fortuneteller. Could she really walk up to him and say, *you did something to me, something terrible and I want you to fix it?*

How crazy was that?

How crazy was she for thinking she had no other recourse but to do it? If he didn't know what the hell she was talking about then she really *was* crazy and needed to commit herself posthaste. But if he *did* know, if the dawning light of understanding lit his gorgeous olivine eyes on the heels of her words, she vowed to make him help her, if she had to beat him bloody to gain his cooperation. He had to help her put things right.

Somehow.

Some way.

Khira couldn't live like this.

No one could.

"Wow, you look hot!" Anna said by way of greeting in the club's parking lot.

Exiting her cab, pausing midstride, Khira looked at her friend disbelievingly. "Are you making fun of me?"

Anna giggled—an airy sound Khira had never heard from the very sultry and grown-up friend who surely would have gagged at the very suggestion that she could

manage such a thing as a giggle. “What do you mean? Of course I’m not making fun—you look great. Is that a new eye shadow? It makes your eyes really pop.”

Khira knew she looked like shit. Worse than. And here Anna was, from all appearances, serious in her compliment.

Khira didn’t understand anything anymore.

The two entered the club together, Anna instantly scoping out the establishment with a very well-trained and jaded eye. “Lots of tasty man-flesh here tonight.”

Khira chuckled, but she fell far short of feeling any amusement. Her eyes were for one man alone tonight—a tall, dark stranger who had turned her bones to butter. A lover who’d left her in a heap on the floor after the best sex of her life...who wasn’t anywhere to be seen now.

Disappointment shredded her hopes and her heart sank fast.

Anna’s hand stroked Khira’s back, bare beneath the ties of her halter tankini top. Her super-short skirt, black to match the top, let the breeze play with her bare bottom and those sensations—the air and the touch of Anna’s hand—made the gnawing hunger swell alarmingly. Her stomach growled and cramped. Ashes would have moistened her barren mouth.

The world tilted and Khira swayed.

“You okay?” Anna squeezed her, one arm around her shoulders, offering support with her taller, lithe body.

“Fine,” Khira responded brightly, forcing a dazzling smile. To her horror, Anna’s eyes fell to her mouth, pupils flaring wide, and Khira immediately dropped the smile, pulling away from her clinging friend. For both their sakes. “I’m gonna go get a drink.”

Anna shook her head almost imperceptibly, a frown marring her perfect brow, and followed mutely in her wake—an odd occurrence in a mounting flood of the same. Anna was rarely, if ever, mute.

Three shots of Scotch later and Khira was feeling a little better, if not approaching a state of calm. Anna was still hovering, nursing her second cosmopolitan and darting her eyes from Khira to the crowd of men who had gathered around the bar. Several tried to gain their attention but Anna was clearly loath to abandon her charge. This, more than anything else, alarmed Khira. Anna was a lover of men, of attention from anything with a dose of testosterone, and for her to turn away from them did not bode well.

Especially not when Anna kept eyeing her covertly in just such a way.

"You don't have to baby-sit me," Khira pointed out in what she hoped was a helpful tone, reaching for her fourth shot of malt spirits. Holding her breath, she tossed her head back and downed it in one gulp, relishing the burn as it traveled down her throat and into her aching belly.

Anna leaned close but said nothing, watching Khira lick a drop of amber-colored liquid from one corner of her mouth. She instantly regretted licking her lips...but it seemed no matter what she did, her friend was determined to ogle it.

I have to be very careful. Whatever was happening—to her, to her friend, to those around her—it was dangerous and it was unhealthy. Deadly even. Warmed by the liquor but vigilant despite its lull, Khira scanned the crowd tirelessly for a glimpse of an ink-black head. She had to find Bram.

Soon.

"Looking for someone?" Anna asked, breathy voice stirring the hairs at Khira's nape.

"Maybe." She forced a careful smile. "I feel the need to mingle. Don't wait for me—I'll see you later." She pulled away from her friend quickly and entered the swirl of the crowded dance floor. Running away from the glazed look in Anna's eyes.

The music moved the people around her and Khira felt the energy of a hundred bodies undulating, pulsing against her. Enveloping her. It was heady, more so than the Scotch, but dangerous as well and Khira had to hold on to that certainty. Still, her hips

moved naturally with the beat and her exposed nether regions tingled with awareness, as did her nipples and her lips.

She'd never, ever gone out in public without panties before. God, she didn't even remember coming to a conscious decision not to wear them tonight.

The smell of all the hot, sexual beings surrounding her was like the thick aroma of a gourmet kitchen, full of herbs and spices and delicious, sugary confections.

Reality dimmed, smeared, her vision along with it.

Damn, she was so hungry. How long ago had she eaten? *What* had she eaten?

Why had she come here?

The drumbeats exploding from the surrounding speakers made the air visibly jump in tandem to the rhythm.

A strong male form pressed to her back. "Nice moves, baby girl."

It was beyond her power to resist that baritone voice, that heat emanating from the man's body to hers. As much a victim of her curse as those around her, Khira was seduced by her driving hunger and her overwhelming need. She helplessly gave herself to the music and danced, rocking her hips, rolling her shoulders and raising her arms as her faceless partner with the smooth voice reached around and pressed a midnight-black palm to her belly, so that his hips could cuddle hers. Her eyes grew heavy-lidded and each time his decidedly erect cock brushed her back and buttocks, she caught her breath on a rush of excitement. Together they danced the length of a song, the drums and the guitar guiding their movements, and the vocals enchanting their thoughts with poetry only intimate lovers should hear.

Somehow, without overture or invitation, his hand was underneath her skirt, on her freshly waxed cunt, sliding over the soft, smooth skin between her dancing legs.

In the back of her mind the old Khira screamed to run. But the new Khira, the alien Khira, urged her to position her hips so that those wicked fingers could seek with more freedom.

"You're so hot," the stranger said, nuzzling her ear. Breathing hotly against her flesh.

Time slowed to a crawl. Everyone around her seemed set to slow motion.

Her mind bent, her senses warped and then it was someone else nuzzling her ear. Another voice murmuring sweet words. And she was flooded with moisture, aching with desire. The gently callused fingertips that plucked her clit like a berry from the vine made her want to weep with her relief. *He'd* come, oh thank all the gods that ever were, he'd come for her and now this nightmare would end.

He was pressed so tightly against her back, muscles crowding her, arms around her like a cage of sinew so that there could be no escape. No retreat.

She didn't want either.

The music throbbed through her. Her pussy throbbed with it.

They undulated low, her knees bent, spread apart, and his fingers were inside her. They swayed back to their feet, turned and danced through the crowd, but never separated by more than a few inches. His loins, tight and hot, kept brushing against her buttocks, her hip, her wandering hand that constantly sought out his cock. His fingers kept finding her slit, rubbing her clit, spearing her channel like a knife of flesh that did not kill, but maimed.

"You smell incredible."

Khira's eyes shot open at the too-familiar words, the too-familiar drunken slur, and met the teak gaze of her partner, glazed eyes set in the proud ebony face. Not Bram then, not nearly, but the voice was still lovely, still masculine, and that was what she needed to hear. He was lovely to look at and that was what she needed to see.

A pain sliced through her. Demanding hunger. She was starved. But not for food.

"Say more," she commanded, lost, and he obeyed.

"You're beautiful."

Yes, yes, she kept hearing that. "Tell me what you want."

"I want...you."

So fast...he was in thrall to her so fast. What had she done?

What did she care?

"I want to touch your punani. I want to feel it wrapped around my —"

"Shh." Khira placed a finger over his lush mouth. He kissed it. She swayed against him. "Find my clit. Play with it." Her voice was faint but he heard her clearly, even over the music. "Rub it."

And his thick, broad fingers did. So skillfully that she almost came then and there as they danced among the crowd, but he was no Bram and so she did not come, not so easily. Still, the desire was intense. The want an ache. Her wetness dripped beyond her sex, dampening her thighs, and it heightened her arousal as did her partner's touches, his caresses.

Madness.

All of it.

"I want to eat you out," he said, licking his wet fingers before once more placing them beneath her miniskirt to finger her some more. "I want you to suck me off."

"All good things to those who wait," she teased coyly, words she had no business saying, in a voice she should never have heard coming from her own mouth. Dancing away from him, flicking her skirt to flash her ass, she fought a battle in her mind, the winner already in control of her body. There was no need to look back to make sure her male followed, she could hear his heartbeat thudding close on her heels.

She was so thirsty. More than ever before. When would this suffering end?

Soon. That wicked voice, hers, inside her head.

"What's your name?" he asked breathlessly, towering over her in his virile darkness. Hands roving wherever he could reach.

"Lilith." Her voice was so hoarse, her mouth so dry. "Yours?"

"Trenton." It was his real name; she could read it in his pupil-swamped eyes. "Can we go somewhere private?" He slurred the words, lost, hers completely.

Khira felt the feral smile on her mouth before she could stop it. "Did you take a cab here?"

"No," he panted, either from exertion or from whatever strange effect she exuded. Both.

"That's just what I wanted to hear," she purred back. Taking his hand in hers, she felt the beat of his pulse beneath her fingertips and knew she had him.

Had him? She stilled. What was she? A predator?

This wasn't her. This wasn't what she wanted. She was a harmless girl, happy in her job, her quiet life. The most dangerous adventure she welcomed was the occasional wild fling but no more. These past few days...she couldn't do this. Not if she wanted redemption.

If redemption was even possible now.

But the hunger was so strong and all her common sense had been burned away by desire and by woe. A sudden stab of pain stole her breath and tears filled her eyes. She was so hungry. And Trenton was so yummy. She'd hesitated, so now *he* led her from the club, taking her by the hand, and she *let* him. Needing what would come next, wanting the inevitable tryst with him in the parking lot, dreading what would follow, needing an ease to her suffering.

Thank God he had a luxury SUV with plenty of room for his size and hers in the backseat. There was no call for further play—she was as aroused as he, more so perhaps. He was still panting, breath now bellowing from his lungs...so perhaps not. Perhaps he was so far gone that death would be a blessing.

"You're hot as hell, honey," he slurred, pushing her back against the seat, nudging her knees apart with his hands. "Best piece of ass I ever laid eyes on."

Khira watched as he climbed in, hands working furiously on his pants to free his demanding flesh. She bore witness as he dressed his massive cock in a condom, pulled from a foil wrapper nestled in his pocket. The condom was extra large and even then a snug fit. It was true what they said about dark men and Khira wondered deliriously if she'd be any good for other men after a ride with this stallion. Still, she was game to try and giggled with giddy anticipation.

But first, before the feed, she wanted to take his hardness in her mouth. He protested at first, impatient to stick that thick weapon in her juicy cunt—his words—but she insisted. And what she wanted she would have.

He managed to straddle her face. The latex was smooth between her lips, the cock too big for her to do much more than wrap her lips around the crown and tongue him. Still, it was a delicious meal, one that satisfied some of her craving.

She had to refrain from biting him.

After much sucking and smacking, gentle scrapes of her teeth and firm laps of her tongue, he came into the reservoir tip, the spurt of his hot seed tickling her sucking mouth through the rubber. She felt a surge of power that she could so easily bring over such a virile, randy specimen.

He groaned and nearly collapsed upon her. But she caressed his ebony flesh with goading hands and fingers and lips until he was soon ready for more.

A drop of his sweat fell onto her upper lip and she licked it away.

She heard his heart racing, felt it pulsing through him wherever he touched her.

"Hang on." His voice was shaking, as were his hands as he dug in his discarded clothing for another condom. He ripped off the soiled raincoat before donning the fresh one, tossing the limp, dead thing into the front seat negligently despite the expensive, buttery soft leather upholstery.

She should have felt trapped in that small space with such a large stranger looming over her, but instead she felt impatient.

"Hurry." Khira licked her lips with anticipation, her breasts and cunt tingling. Unable to resist, she raised her skirt high to toy with her wet flesh while he watched with black eyes. He was sweating profusely, face glistening in the light from the streetlamp. His breath came in desperate pants and when he leaned in to kiss her...she drank those gasps like nectar.

Trenton brushed her hands away from her pussy as if jealous that they should touch the places he wanted to touch.

"You want some blow?" he asked in between kisses.

His words didn't register at first.

"I've got some coke. In the dash. Just a little but you can have it," he said with a love-drunk smile that softened his face, made him almost pretty.

"No drugs," she whispered. "Just sex."

"God, you smell great." She could hear him breathing her in. Like a drug.

"Stop talking, Trenton, and fuck me."

His hands were big and everywhere at once. He grabbed his dick at the thick base, slapped it against her burning sex a couple times then slid it into her folds. The heat and the weight of him brought tears to her eyes and a curve to her watering mouth.

His cock didn't fit well inside her but they made do. It was so tight a fit it stung, but Khira relished the pleasure-pain. Trenton was too long but didn't seem to suffer any lack of pleasure as he pounded what length he could into her widespread heat, butting against the mouth of her womb, bruising her.

Blindly, as one drunk to the point of poisoning, she reached for his face. "Kiss me." Her words dragged but neither noticed.

Time crawled but she was beyond wondering about it now.

Drinking from his hot, pillowy lips made all her worries disappear into the ether. Khira opened his mouth with her tongue and her teeth. And drew him in.

When he grunted, Khira swallowed the sound and demanded more, stabbing her tongue into the depths of his mouth, her hands playing over his taut back and buttocks. The SUV rocked with the power of their mating, its hardware squeaking gently in protest but cushioning her back with each pound of its owner into her trembling body, superior design and performance at its best.

“Oh...I’m fixing to come,” he gasped into her mouth, the words a garble but full of flavor against her tongue.

He was peaking too soon but still he was so delicious. His pulse beat through her like a pounding drum. Each beat an ache, a stab of starving pain that she wanted to sate so badly she would have done anything in that moment to eat her fill.

“Coming! God, so good...”

Khira devoured his words and bucked up against him, demanding more power from his thrusts while there was time left.

It would be days before she could walk straight again, but the enormity of the pleasure made such an inevitability more than worth it. Their bodies made wet sounds, the latex of his condom bunching and scraping inside her, the friction and the noise adding to her arousal.

She couldn’t see, her vision smeared as if by petroleum jelly. In her ears there was nothing, a void, save for the high-pitched wail of cells dying. The feel of him, solid and real in her arms, was not the feel of a human at all, but of food.

Prey.

“Lilith,” he groaned brokenly into her mouth.

Her thirst was deadly and she had to drink. Her hunger more so and she was forced to feast.

When the invisible flood that sated her flowed from his mouth into hers, a snake of thick fire in her mouth and throat, she nearly screamed with joy. Her body clamped down and a vicious orgasm clawed through her. Attacked her body and her mind. Her

pussy throbbed, her clit swelling so hard and tight, her nipples beneath his big hands embers burning the tips of her breasts. She gorged at a sumptuous banquet.

Until he unloaded, filling the condom with scalding lava. Until he fell off her in a heap on the floor of the SUV. Still as stone and just as silent.

The pain that had been riding her, squeezing her like a vise, abated. Her hunger was appeased. But her sex was still throbbing, still wet. She rubbed her clit and brought herself swiftly to another quivering release, hips bucking in the warm confines of the backseat. Her moans were soft and muffled, her belly warm and full.

Soon, fast, she calmed again, still lazily petting her swollen folds.

Her vision gradually cleared, the rough edges of the world returning, the colors and textures noticeable again. Reality sharpened and she froze.

Oh no.

Moving like a marionette, Khira turned to glance at Trenton and noted the deathly pallor. The bloodless slash of his mouth across his empty face.

It was hard to feel anything – so completely full was she.

Perhaps he'd used the coke earlier and now, with his exertions sending the drug through his system lightning fast, it was killing him. Perhaps all this, the whole week, was just one strange run of bad weather in the storm of her life, she reasoned. It seemed right to believe that now. It seemed to make sense.

"This isn't me." Her voice, her real voice, whispered the words in the still, humid air. To herself. To the dying man on the floor. Neither answered, and dear God, neither cared.

The pain, the hunger was gone.

Khira felt wonderful.

But it wasn't right. None of this was right or good. It was a measure of how far gone she was that Khira *forced* her concern into bloom. She rolled and sat upon her knees, reaching down to feel for Trenton's pulse while her body wanted to rest, to loll.

It took some searching but she founded the throbbing of his vein, thudding against her first two fingers, faint but there. Her relief should have been overwhelming but she could only feel...calm. Lethargy even. Like a cat that had lapped up far too much cream.

Self-disgust made her gag. A broken cry ripped free of her swollen lips and she righted her clothes with guilty haste.

There was no cell phone. Her outfit did not allow for a purse so her credit card and cash were necessarily stashed in a pocket in the lining of her tailored boots. Her cell phone was at home and useless. But in a luxury vehicle, in this day and age, there was sure to be a built-in communications system. Leaning over the still form of her victim, she found and reached for the blue button mounted in the rearview mirror casing and pressed it.

It seemed that the only sane people she spoke to anymore were at the other end of an emergency number. The tinny voice of the operator assured her not to worry, that emergency services were on their way.

Now what to do? Khira wanted to get rid of the drugs in the dash so Trenton would not find himself in further trouble should he survive. But she didn't want to touch the tiny bag of white powder nestled in its hiding place. Too, she wondered if—on the long shot that the episode *was* the fault of the drug and not her vile self—maybe it would be wisest to leave the evidence behind so that the doctors would better know how to treat him.

In the end she left it and scrambled out of the now stuffy confines of her bower. It shamed her, the absence of the dreaded hurt and need that had become her constant burdens. Sickened her, the gluttoned fulfillment that made her think of herself more like a tick well fed on blood—fat and numbed and more parasitic than anything resembling human.

She wanted to die.

Worse still she wanted more. And more. And more.

Khira hailed a cab, hastening to avoid the authorities that would surely come, rushing the driver, heading for home, for sanctuary and relative peace.

Somewhere along the quiet night ride she lost her spurt of desperation. Her hint of worry and her guilt. The world took on a rosy hue, a happy and comforting veneer. She felt warm and safe. Her hands rubbed her flat tummy, which felt swollen from the inside. And the cab driver asked her out on a date. She gracefully declined.

A soft smile played about her lips as she entered her carriage house. A look of such satisfaction that moments later, upon catching it reflected back from her parlor mirror, Khira would once again long for death in a storm of horror at her own inescapable monstrosity.

Chapter Six

For two nights she couldn't sleep.

The rosy glow, the satiation was long gone.

The pain returned and grew. And grew.

It terrified her to think on what she'd done. So she thought of nothing at all. She was afraid to call the hospital to check on poor Trenton, afraid of what she might learn. Of the questions the authorities might like to pose to her should the worst have already happened and Trenton lay not sleeping, but cold and dead and gone. Not once did she pick up the phone. Not once did she dare look at it.

Sunday dawned and she sat in much the same position she'd adopted Friday night after returning home from her dangerous tryst. Now she felt dirty and unkempt, indeed was, but Khira couldn't find the motivation to make her way to the shower to change that state. Her scalp itched. She scratched it.

And ended up with a tangle of hair falling free into her hands.

A chunk of red. Once soft, now brittle, dead.

Mouth agape, breath freezing in her lungs, Khira stared at the wad of hair in her hands as if it were a serpent. With a choked sound, she threw the cloying, magenta strands to the ground. Then, hesitantly, she reached to her scalp again and tugged ever so gently. Another chunk of hair came free at the roots, snarling on her shaking fingertips.

Motivated *now*, she jumped up from the couch, swayed as a sharp pain ravaged her body and ended up lumbering to the nearest mirror like a post-op patient, stitched together haphazardly.

The thing in the mirror...it couldn't be her. *Couldn't* be. That horrible wraith looked half dead—skin gray, eyes deep-set like those of a corpse, mouth too large, too crimson in the colorless face. The hair was matted, coarsely textured and yes, her scalp had sunk loose so that the hair dangled precariously by the roots, barely hanging in there.

It couldn't be her reflection staring back at her—it must be some trick. Some hallucination brought on by her...hunger.

Khira's stomach growled as if to agree with the theory.

Trembling with emotions too terrible to even name, she bared her teeth at the thing in the mirror...and moaned low with despair at what she saw reflected back at her. The once-healthy gums had receded, darkened as if by disease, and her teeth appeared huge. She nudged the back of them with her tongue and felt some give there.

"Oh God. *Oh God!*" she choked, the mantra leaving her lips so fast the words hummed in the air and then fell flat. There was no god to care or hear. No invisible friend to guide her through this waking nightmare. Cold, turgid fear made her heart feel as if it had burst free of her chest and gone galloping away to the arctic.

Breathing faster and faster, unable to find a center, she leaned heavily against the wall that supported the ornate, copper-framed mirror. Had to or she would have fallen. Hyperventilating, her gray face further leached of color and her eyes were so bright they were as gold coins in the sunken pits of her sockets. She wiped at them with shaking hands and was mortified to see the change in their appearance too, her hands. They were thin, the knuckles huge beneath their waxen case of skin. Her nails were long, alarmingly so given her recent manicure, and the cuticle beds were an angry pink. They resembled the hands of a fresh cadaver, dragged bloated and stinking from a river.

No. No! Can't be. Not me. This isn't happening. Stop this! But the tears that blurred her eyes sparkled in the eyes of the monster in the looking glass, and it was her. Is her. Not a hallucination. Not a trick or a mistake.

Now she saw that she was still wearing the clothes she'd sported at the nightclub. Khira ripped them off, whimpering, and threw them into a corner, never wanting to see them again—they bore the remembered touch of a man who might be dead because of her.

Her naked body was as ugly as her face. The skin was elastic, pale to the point of macabre, and her once-firm breasts seemed shrunken and deflated. Her nipples were a shock of rose, her cunt a slash of ravenous mouth curving into the apex of her thighs.

Her belly was round. Swollen, as the rest of her was sunken and skeletal. The belly of a starving creature.

And she could still feel Trenton's imprint between her legs. Still taste his kiss.

Crying, afraid and alone, confused beyond her ability to cope, Khira stumbled her way to the bathroom and shrank beneath the cleansing spray of the shower. Numb to all but the pain that ate her middle, that starved her lungs, that made her mouth dry as silt. There she stayed until the water ran cold, until her teeth chattered and her muscles cramped more from the temperature than her deprived appetite.

Dripping onto the carpet, Khira the ghost, the dead mind, went to her cupboard and passionlessly gorged on all the food she found there. Cereal, cookies, jerky, even raw, hard noodles—she consumed it all. Foods that had always been a comfort, a fun thing to alleviate boredom as much as light hunger, tasted like paper and satisfied even less. Sweet, salty, smooth and rough, none of it sated. None of it eased the pain.

Moving to the refrigerator, she drank orange juice, milk, tea, water, anything cold and wet she found inside. Then there was the cheese, the sandwich meat, the grapes and the carrots. A forgotten can of soda, bitter against her rough tongue, the bubbles burning her throat. But unfulfilling, all of it, her belly still feeling cavernous despite its swell, still racked with sharp agony that threatened to double her over again and again.

Why? What did I do? What horrible sin did I commit to deserve this curse? She sobbed, a wounded thing, crawling back to her couch, the cushions the only things that could

dare hug her now. Naked, damp, cold and hurt, Khira contemplated her plight. And tasted true despair.

The weight of her head was too much to bear. She fell over inelegantly, one arm dangling to drag her knuckles upon the floor, the other painfully trapped beneath the weight of her side.

What now? What was left of her to even care?

Sleep kidnapped her and offered no respite for her mind, though her body stilled and coped. She dreamed.

Nothing made sense at first. The same as her waking world. Images only, strung together like a bad reel of film. And then she was aloft in the night, on the wet streets of Savannah after a rain. The scent of ozone thick in her nose, the shadows long and soft, the sound of the succulent leaves on their tree limb homes whispers in her ears, languages she could not decipher but knew held some arcane meaning.

River Street...she recognized and walked it now, heels clicking against the ballast stones. The shops were closed. It was too late to sell wares that did not involve naked skin.

A blond head entered her view and without pausing, Khira turned to look.

"You killed me," Chad said, accusing with his words and his dead eyes.

Now she did pause and reach out, her hands peaches and cream now, not skeletal in her view. "No. No I didn't. You're alive. I checked to be sure." The supplication in her voice softened it, so that the hard edge she'd adapted of late was almost banished.

"You killed me. And you aren't even sorry," he growled, the sound inhuman, splitting his handsome lips like rotted fruit.

In the damp night, Khira fled him. Chad did not follow but that in no way eased the fear in her heart. Her footfalls were thunderous now in her ears. Resounding like hammer blows against coffin nails. She glanced over her shoulder, looked back with great relief to see that Chad had disappeared, swallowed by the black.

The nightmare loosened, River Street seeming endless before her, beckoning. The scent of the wet moss and stone was so real that she wasn't certain it truly was just a dream.

"Hey there, Red." Hard, cruel hands gripped her, jerking her off balance, back against a cold form. "Where you off to in such a hurry?"

"Let me go!" Khira turned and shoved against Huck's lifeless chest with all her might but he would not budge. It was like fighting rubber-coated wood.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" The words transformed from southern drawl to graveyard ooze and when her eyes flew up to his face she screamed. And screamed forever. Close above her, his flesh dripped like wax, revealing bone. And in his empty eyes, his sunken nose, there crawled the carrion eaters, the ferrymen of soft tissues. Wriggling and happy with their juicy feast.

Khira kicked him, jerking hard with all the weight of her body behind the struggle, and when she slipped free, some of his skin remained, sliding wet and rank from his hands along with her. Soaking her sleeves. Burning like acid through the cloth. He advanced, reaching out, and from his leather lips came his muddy, swollen tongue. It lolled and then fell out with a smacking noise, pulsing like a living heart where it splattered on the ground.

Stumbling around it, around him, she sprinted away, desperate to escape. Her mind was numb. Inside her, the only things that lived were fear and the need to flee.

"Aren't you hungry? Don't you want to stay for dinner and finish what you started?" Huck called out, tongueless, laughing the cackle of a mad thing, a gurgling noise straight from the depths of the river Styx. "I tasted good, didn't I, Red?"

Her heels hindered and without pause she kicked the shoes off, running barefoot. The ballast stones of the street were cold but smooth, and so very real. The wet slap of her feet against them was softer, safer somehow than the thud of her hard shoes. A puddle splashed up her calves, the water clinging thick like blood, and she ran until her muscles burned.

A sharp pain, the stubbing of her toe, was her reward for careening to a sudden halt. But she had no choice. Looming before her was the lovely Asian nurse and at her side was the dark, lusty Trenton. Khira could not stand it; she turned into a darkened path between two storefronts and fled them too, racing away before they could confront her with their damning accusations.

The shadows ate her whole.

Her breath was cold in her lungs and yet it burned.

Aching, tired, out of breath and strength, she collapsed against the hard brick of an apartment building. She tried to control her frantic breaths, breathing through her nose and out her mouth. But there was nothing she could do to slow the wild flight of her heart.

Through her nose.

Out her mouth.

Through her —

And there it was. What she'd been searching for. Yearning for.

The scent.

Well-worn suede. Soft balsa wood. A hint of sweet blossom, honeysuckle or magnolia. Perhaps even a dash of cloying sandalwood. All these facets blended gently, perfectly to form the most sensual fragrance Khira had ever encountered. There when she so desperately needed it. It enraptured her, enthralled her, and she found some of the calm she needed at long last.

Too greedily she breathed it in again and again. Within minutes her heart slowed to its native rhythm and the vise that gripped her lungs eased its stranglehold. Breathe in. Breathe out. In again, through the nose to savor the bouquet. Hold for a beat. Trap it, lock it away, it was hers and hers alone to worship here. Breathe out to make room to suck in some more.

Her head swam but not from lack of oxygen now. Or terror. Quiet peace had found her and she wallowed in it while it let her, the air thick with that soft, masculine fog. Khira sank to her bottom on the hard ground, leaning her head back against the brick, not feeling the cold or the damp. Her nose pointed high into the night, nostrils flaring, taking in the smell, loath to allow one single precious molecule escape on the thieving wind. Closing her tired eyes, she let her senses reel freely.

Khira.

Eyes popped back open, searching the vicinity with desperate haste. There was no one to be seen, the voice disembodied or in her head—imagined. The smell was stronger now. Even more intoxicating. She eased. Dizziness assailed her, but she'd been dizzy so much lately it almost seemed old hat to her now and worried her not one whit.

Using the wall as a prop, she rose to her feet again, slowly. Her fingertips caressed the mortar between the brick, the rough texture keeping her grounded in the now as her head continued to spin. The heady signature on the air called to her and she was compelled to find the source.

Night birds sang. Crickets strummed their legs, the music a natural viola hum. And myriad other bugs danced in the light of the moon and the occasional electric lamp. Everything seemed, despite it all, normal and natural. Ordered. Right and good.

So why don't I feel right?

Because I'm not. I'm sick. With something horrible, some virus or plague I've never heard of. I've no idea.

The perfume was gently coaxing. She followed it as it teased her sense. When it grew faint she turned to catch its trail again. And when it swelled in pungency Khira knew the direction she followed was the correct one. Ebb and flow, turn and follow, it went on and on until she was in a place she didn't recognize. A dream place that was Savannah and at the same time was not.

Khira.

The voice again. But no one present to speak with it. She was alone. It was quiet but for the night creatures and the rustle of the twilight-coated green.

"There you are." An unforgiving voice, hot with triumph, stung the quiet and her nerves. Trenton's hands found her collar, jerking her so hard that Khira choked, flying off her feet and flat onto her back on the moist street.

He loomed above her. Ashes like crematorium dust filled her mouth and she crawled, crablike, away from him. "You're not real." Khira had to believe that. Had to.

"Oh I'm real, baby girl," Trenton mocked her cruelly. "Can't you feel how real this is?" He kicked her calf viciously and yes, the pain that radiated from the blow was very real indeed.

"I'll bet she can feel this too." The nurse behind her grabbed a handful of Khira's hair and jerked it out by the roots. Khira shrieked, hands flying to her scalp as the pain smacked into her. The woman laughed, brandishing the red strands in her fist before her wide, panicked eyes. "You're falling apart." Nympho Nurse threw the hair away and reached for her again.

Strong arms came around Khira's struggling form, black-clad shadows out from the enshrouding darkness suffocating her. They wrapped around her middle and pulled her back—so real, so hard and powerful—away from her tormentors, away from the street and she was flying backward into empty space, held firmly in that embrace.

The scent was overpowering now, soft but suffocating. Khira's heart ached as it raced, breathing deeply through her nose again and again as if starved for oxygen, when oxygen had nothing to do with what she needed.

"Don't let go." The fear in her voice shamed her. But the vision of the fiends of her nightmare was terrifying her still.

But what now? Would this new scene be even more horrible than the last? Could she survive it or would she die, trapped here in her own hell?

Stop hiding from me.

“What?” she cried, hurt and confused. There was only blackness and scent and the whisper of words. Only fear and worry and guilt.

Where are you?

Pain.

“Bram?” His scent, that which had been her whole world for a few brief moments, faded. The promise of paradise along with it.

Her being awash with pain, oh God it hurt so bad...

Gasping for air past the iron cage of her diaphragm, Khira sat up, wide awake. The scent was gone—even the memory too faint to enslave for comfort. The demons were gone, the dream was over. She was alone.

Wait.

Not alone.

Oh no.

PART TWO

Chapter Seven

Two days and nights had passed since his tryst with Lilith, and still he could taste her kiss on his mouth. Still he reeled. Still he longed for more.

No. Not Lilith. Khira. He'd known her name the moment he'd touched her, the moment he'd seen the bright emerald spark in the depths of her eyes.

Who had taken whom? Which one of them had fed upon the other? The very real answer was, he did not know. Couldn't know. All he understood was this—he wanted more of her. He wanted to see her again.

As soon as he had the strength to leave his house he would find her. He would touch her once more. Taste her again. And then he would have all the answers, surely, for no woman before or since his becoming had ever consumed his thoughts so completely as Khira was doing now.

What was it about her?

About him and her together?

She wasn't like him. He'd known that, of course. And she couldn't be like him. But maybe there was a chance, slim at best, that she could accept what he was and come, in time, to understand and forgive what he did in order to survive. If such a miracle could come to pass, perhaps there was a brighter future for him after all.

Stupid thoughts. Errant, futile dreams. He was an idiot.

He would have her again. He would find her and take her, taste her and—as was *necessary*—that would be the end of it.

Opening the tightly clenched hammer of his fist he looked down at the dark scrap of silk in his hand. Torn panties. Hers. Khira's. Closing his eyes, feeling the weight of his need pressing on his lashes, he brought the material to his nose and inhaled deeply.

Colors. Light. The scent of her was the very image of the forces that made up life.

Beyond the alcohol and ambergris base of her perfume, beyond the concentrated essences of hydrangea, peach, plum, violet and Middle Eastern spices, she smelled so completely womanly it made his loins tighten until they hurt. Beyond her curtain of feminine products there dwelt a woman unlike any other he'd ever encountered. The uniqueness was in her scent, her taste, her touch. It was in her breath and her hair. Her skin and, so concentrated, in the fluids between her legs. It was in her soul, which he'd touched more easily than any other including his own.

She'd opened to him freely. Without coercion. Simply because he'd asked that she do so.

Open to me.

Those three words, more potent than any he'd ever spoken to another, had undone them both. Her compliance to his will, his need, had marked her so that he was beyond the capability of denying himself one last taste of her.

It had to be. But only once more. Then never again.

He didn't want to kill her. He only wanted to know her, to love her, to be with her fully for one more night. For longer than the hour they had shared—the hour that had felt like a lifetime on a plane he hadn't known existed—he wanted an entire night. A cluster of lifetimes. That would have to be enough.

He could not let her die.

There was no way, not even after all the black deeds of his sinful existence, he could live with such a scar upon his soul. To see her end, to know her end, to taste it...bliss that would be far worse to him than any torturous death.

One more night.

Just once more and that would be the end of it.

* * * * *

Days and nights without her. Too many. He'd lost count.

He couldn't find her.

Hell. The lowest level of hell. He was Sisyphus. His quest was the boulder that kept him from reaching a summit from which he was sure he could see Khira if only he looked hard enough. Long enough. His quest was one that could never be completed, because it was a punishment that would never end.

He couldn't find her.

Impossible. He was a hunter. He had her scent.

And yet still she eluded him.

How?

Was she a phantom? A specter come to torment him, to punish him for all his evil thoughts and deeds over the years? Her panties—were they really hers? Could he be sure? Perhaps they belonged to another of his conquests, his many, many lovers. Perhaps, somehow, he had convinced himself that they belonged to her, while in reality Khira had never existed and the panties were just rags from the rag dolls he used night after night.

It had been years since he'd seen any woman as more than food. It would be fitting that this obsession with a woman he'd conjured inside his own depraved mind would be his just affliction. Karmic retribution for all the wrong he'd done.

And he had done much wrong.

He knew it. Didn't care. But he knew it.

He could feel no remorse. Not knowing that there might be a sliver of a chance that Khira was real. That she was out there somewhere. Somehow eluding him, true, but still close enough that, given more time, he could find her. While his soul was dark, she was light. His light. With each day that passed, he felt more and more that it was so.

He had to find her.

But first he had to feed. He'd gone too long without the nourishment his system craved. Far too long. It was dangerous and stupid, but he'd waited for her as long as he could. Now was the time to find a substitute for what he wanted, a woman who would taste sweet enough to keep him going long enough to continue his search.

No matter what he wanted, what he needed, he would hope to find her every waking moment.

He only slept an hour for every twenty-four he was awake...because of what was wrong with him he'd had no real need for sleep in over a decade. Now, because of this obsession, he didn't even sleep that much.

Careful with his appearance at all times, tonight and every night since meeting *her* he'd been extra careful. He didn't have to bother—what he was made him irresistible. But he wanted to go through the motions other men did for the women they desired. Now he wanted to feel that he looked his best when he found her again.

He gelled his hair, spiked it in chunks, admiring it from every angle to ensure that its pure black sheen was shiny and stylish. He paid attention to the long, silken hairs that served as his sideburns, using product to sculpt them into points at the sides of his square jaw.

The light growth of black stubble he left. He knew instinctively that Khira would like the scrape of it against her gentle skin.

He filed his nails, buffed them until they were smooth. He groomed his cuticles and carefully selected his jewelry. A ruby ring—the color of Khira's hair—for his right ring finger. A white-gold band with hematite inlay for his left forefinger. A heavy platinum and Baetylus meteorite watch around his wrist, a graphic display of his wealth and taste to even the most untrained eye.

When he touched her, he wanted her to see his decorations bright and complimentary against her perfect, youthful skin.

When he put his fingers inside her mouth, her cunt, he wanted her to feel the smooth ridges of his nails, the scrape of his jewelry, the press of his skin all dressed up for her.

His clothing, hand-tailored to fit him perfectly as current fashion dictated it should, was made of textures designed to entice the eye and the flesh. He chose black because it complimented his skin and made his eyes appear to glow. The canvas trousers he wore were like a second skin, hugging his buns and thighs but allowing for the room of his tall, laced boots. On the back pockets, riding his sculpted ass cheeks, there was a fringe of white stitching to draw the eye whenever he moved. The suede shirt he wore had a stiff collar and he left two buttons undone to better exhibit his muscular neck and the lightest dusting of hair on his chest.

It would be better than many an orgasm to see the look in her glittering eyes when she saw how he looked now.

But would he find her tonight? Or would he find a substitute out of the sheer necessity that he could no longer deny his impulses or risk far more than his own sanity?

He left his estate and drove into the city of Savannah in his sexiest, fastest vehicle. Behind the wheel he felt even more dangerous than he really was, even more deadly. But not because of the power of the machine. Because of the power of his need.

It was early in the evening but he was eager. He continuously scented the air for her, fingering her panties in his pocket though he'd long since memorized the smell of her warm skin. Just feeling the material that he knew had been pressed against her almost as intimately as he had, gave him a measure of self-control that was sorely needed.

Everywhere he went women's heads turned.

Men's heads turned.

He had to dampen the strength of his need before things got out of hand. Had to be careful who he lured to his side. Had to be sure that, once he settled for another, Khira really was nowhere to be found.

After an hour of prowling through the rave, knowing he wouldn't find her here, not tonight, he looked at the woman closest to him and beckoned with a tilt of his jaw.

Seconds later he had her outside, spread atop the hood of his car. It didn't matter that there were dozens of people around. None noticed—he wasn't so far gone that he let himself be seen. The woman had blonde hair but in his eyes it was red—the color of crimson skies just before twilight. Her eyes were brown but he imagined they were the color of a rain forest canopy.

Her cunt was wet but he couldn't for the life of him imagine that it was as tight or soft as Khira's.

The flavor of her life force, when he finally kissed her and took what he needed, wasn't as decadent as Khira's. As unique and sweet. As fulfilling.

When he was through with the stranger whose name he couldn't remember, whose name he would never care to remember, he left her in a daze on the curb as he climbed into his sports car and sped away.

He pulled the scrap of silk out of his pocket and sniffed deeply, wanting to erase the strange woman's smell from his nostrils. But, in doing so, he only reawakened the hunger. And soon he was at another club, looking for Khira, looking for prey.

It would take four more women to sate him. And even they would not take away his feelings of desperation and need.

Khira...why can't I find you? And why the hell do I care?

Considering his condition, his frantic speed on the damp, dark, winding road, it was no wonder that when the connection reached him it slammed him into an almost catatonic state.

He didn't even feel it when the car drove off the road and wrapped around a telephone pole.

Chapter Eight

She was in trouble. He could smell her fear. But he couldn't see her. This wasn't his dream, his vision. It was hers. And so long as she controlled it, he would have to fight it like a mammoth caught in a pit of warm tar.

He was in Savannah—in the dream. River Street, from the smell of the water in the air. The scent of old ballast stones and wet brick were also dead giveaways. But still, his vision was so dim as to be useless. There was a smear around the edges, like fog or mist, obscuring all detail.

He heard her scream echo in the walls of her dreaming mind. Walls that trapped him as easily as a locked steel cage.

This shouldn't be possible.

He could smell her fear, but beneath it...

Dear Christ and all the angels, *no*.

She smelled like heat. Flame. Mimosa and peaches. Powder and warm floral wax. Mint and magnolia. Apples. So many scents blended softly into one intoxicating fragrance that was completely natural. Beyond the ability of even the most experienced perfumer to create, this scent marked her.

No.

"Khira." He whispered her name, a plea, a supplication. The word boomed out of his mouth like the mating call of a thousand nephilim.

The scent of her intensified, intoxicating him. She knew he was here. How could that be? How could any of this be possible?

From the moment he'd met her, from that night to this, the impossible had become routine.

If only he could see to find his way to her. If only he could believe what all his senses told him must be true.

Shit. If this horrible thing could be true then he had committed the worst sin of his dark life.

"Khira." He called her name, cupping his hands around his mouth to make the sound carry better in the damp thickness of the air.

Her pain was his pain. He felt the hunger in her. The suffering.

His fault. All of it.

How had this come to pass?

He heard a shriek and his dream self ran as fast as his booted feet could carry him on the brick-lined street, toward the sound. He heard voices, words that made no sense. But her scent and her cries drew him in the blind world of her dream and when he reached out, when he felt sure he was close enough to touch her, he *did*. At last he'd found her!

He wrapped his arms around her struggling, rigid form. With all his might he pulled her free of her dream and into his own.

Suddenly, he could see her.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered. It was no surprise, especially now, seeing how things were with her, that she captivated his every sense without any effort.

Don't let go.

She sounded so small and afraid. The fear in her glazed eyes turned them the color of seaweed. The fear and hunger that gnawed her in two touched him, telling him more than he needed to know about all she had suffered since meeting him.

The need and the desire he felt for her now mixed with something softer but far more powerful, and he silently promised himself that if there was a way to make things right he would.

"Stop hiding from me," he commanded. He needed her to drop whatever natural defenses she'd erected against detection so that he could track her down and help her.

What? It was naked in her voice, the evidence that she had no idea what was happening to her. No idea at all.

She didn't even know if he was real. If any of it was real. He'd had so much time to get used to it and even he had suffered his doubts that she'd been real.

How fearful she must be. How alone.

Beyond dangerous.

Deadly.

"Where are you?"

She doubled over in his arms. Khira was starving to death and there was nothing he could do to help her, not here, not in dreams. He had to find her.

Bram?

He started. Then remembered. That was the name he'd given her. That incredible, impossible night. He'd said his name was Bram—a joke, a play on the vampire theme of the club, of his life.

"Christoph. My name is—"

She didn't hear him. He woke up with his own name on his lips, the dream broken, lost, his head bleeding from a gash he'd sustained in the wreckage of his car.

He screamed but there was no one to hear his anguish. And even if there had been, they would not have understood it. Could not have. Not in a million lifetimes.

Oh, Khira.

Crawling from the mangled steel of his half-million-dollar sports car, he cared nothing for his wounds, for they would heal so quickly as to be inconsequential. Now he needed to make some anonymous calls to all the city hospitals and clinics, to confirm what he already knew must be true. Then he needed to zero in on her hunting ground,

for in her uninitiated naïveté she would no doubt leave many clues that would lead him straight to her.

Not to mention her wonderful, savory scent.

He pulled her panties from his pocket, knuckles bloody, torn flesh already healing. He smelled them, combined that bouquet with the one he'd been introduced to in their shared dream and put them away safely once more.

Turning his nose into the wind, he hiked back toward the city to find a payphone. He'd discover some of his answers that way...the rest would come when he found her.

Khira, baby, I'm coming.

Please, just don't kill anybody before I get there.

PART THREE

Chapter Nine

Khira counted half a dozen naked bodies strewn about her. All of them still. Quiet. Strangers, people she didn't even faintly recognize, though she racked her brain for some memory. They lay in disarray, like mannequins strewn from a department store truck in the aftermath of a traffic collision. Surrounding her, a blanket of flesh covering the floor in all directions.

The room, too, was one she did not recognize. A small sitting room from the looks of it. There was an old television and a well-worn tweed-upholstered couch. Two brand-new-looking leather recliners. A coffee table had been shoved against a wall, but as Khira looked closely at the carpeted floor she could see the indentation of the table's legs, pressed squares in the material right in front of the couch...

Where a woman with long blonde hair lay strewn, arms and legs akimbo, as if she'd fallen from the sky and frozen in the position in which she had landed on the couch cushions.

Why had Khira noticed the couch before noticing the woman upon it? Khira wanted to run from her cruel self, which was more a stranger to her now than any of these people. These quiet...leftovers.

She shuddered.

Ignoring the massive ache within, Khira leaned toward the nearest body and hesitantly laid her hand upon the skin.

It was still warm.

"Hmmm."

Jerking back, Khira swallowed a shriek as the man moved and murmured, more a sigh than words, and snuggled closer into her. Heart in her throat, she turned to another man sprawled near and watched closely until she saw his bare, black-haired chest move with an inhalation of breath.

Perhaps they weren't all dead. Yet.

The smell of death, sour, pungent, body fluids let loose...it smelled very real in the confines of the room. But there was no proof of death that Khira could see—it was a phantosmia, a phantom scent in a catalogue of recent hallucinations. Surely no one was dead. Just...well used.

That was good enough for her, knowledge enough to give her courage to rise and step gingerly over the strangers, searching for clothes. There were articles of clothing thrown in all directions but Khira didn't see anything that belonged to her. As she searched she learned to be careful not to brush against anyone because every time she did, said person would moan or sigh and seek her out. With each languorous murmur Khira felt the sinister urge to lie back down and take the nearest form in her arms. With each accidental touch, her fault or theirs when they reached out to her—still unconscious—Khira's pain flared and grew worse. Her hunger amplified.

At last she found a familiar sundress. It was an old outfit of hers—she hadn't been slim enough to wear it for a couple years. It had hung dormant in the back of her closet all that while, a reminder that maybe she shouldn't eat so many French fries. Looking down at herself now, seeing the thinned state of her body, she wasn't surprised when it fit perfectly after she pulled it over her disheveled head.

Double take.

Her skin no longer looked so gray. So loose. She looked at her hands. They too looked healthier now. By no means the soft peaches and cream she'd always taken for granted, but not skeletal or frightening. Or even alien. She felt her breasts and they were firmer, fuller.

With much trepidation, she reached up and tugged on a few precious strands of her hair.

Tears filled her eyes when they did not come free in her hand. When they held fast in the roots embedded in her scalp.

"Lilith?"

Khira started and looked toward the sound of the husky voice. The blonde on the couch was looking at her through tiny slits in her bright blue eyes. Her contact-lens-blue eyes.

Khira felt her own eyes holding the woman's gaze and looked away. The woman flopped back onto the couch, asleep again. But now, as Khira watched, she felt her mouth water as she looked at all that butter-cream skin, ripe and exposed. It wouldn't take much urging...the woman would welcome her with open arms and then Khira could ease the pain.

No!

Khira whirled and, blessedly, caught sight of her purse beneath a side table by the door. She grabbed it, checked it for her keys, her wallet, and reached for the exit. A hand grasped her ankle. Warm and strong. It felt so alive. Electric. Khira wouldn't look down, couldn't tempt fate further, and kicked the hand away with more viciousness than it deserved. She stumbled, grabbed the knob, turned it, pulled and raced out the door in her bare feet.

Running, fleeing, she didn't recognize the neighborhood.

Through her tears and her confusion, she almost missed the car that pulled up next to her. The passenger window rolled down and someone called to her from within it.

Just keep walking. Don't look at anyone.

"You sure you don't need a ride, beautiful?"

Khira cringed. "No. I'm fine, thank you."

The car was crawling, keeping up with her jogging steps. The driver obviously did not want to pull away. Khira turned and cut through a yard, leaving the curb and the car behind, running where he could not follow.

She was further disoriented in the unfamiliar yards and side roads. It was a long time before Khira recognized a street name.

She was miles from home. Closer to Tybee Island than Savannah. How had she gotten out here? There was no need to question why she'd come—the army of naked people at the house was testament to what she'd been up to. The sticky feel of semen, the odor of sweat that wasn't hers, the smears of different hues of lipstick on her arms and legs—no doubt in places she couldn't easily see as well—were further evidence of her activities.

But she'd been asleep.

Dreaming.

Hadn't she?

God, no one was safe, least of all her. She couldn't sleep. She couldn't stay awake and feel the growling of her stomach, suffer the hurt. No matter what Khira did, what her real mind chose to do, her body worked on its own, a separate thing beyond her control.

What did she know? She needed sex like food. Ate the life from her lovers, a force, something magical, more powerful than the most potent energy bar. It sounded absurd, but she had done it over and over again and knew there was no way to explain away the things that had been happening.

When she...ate...she felt better. But only for a short while.

People looked at her and saw whatever they wanted to see. When they looked at her and she looked back they wanted her. Any way they could get her.

People were dying because of her. Khira couldn't kiss them, taste them, without hurting them.

How could she stop it? How could she make any of it better when she couldn't even control herself? When she lost hours—maybe more—at a time whenever she closed her eyes.

It took her over twelve hours to walk the long miles home. She should have been exhausted—beyond fatigued by the journey. But her muscles, her tissues felt fine. As if she'd done no more than take a stroll. It was the gnawing pain in her middle, the emptiness inside, swelling and growing into a bottomless void that slowed her down. The dizziness that felt so much like the effects of fasting that made her hurry, made her avoid people, made her run into her house and lock all the doors and windows. Not to keep people out but to keep herself in.

Jesus.

Was it all a dream? Was she sleeping still?

It took effort, sheer force of will, but she began to remember. The memories were faint images at first. Pictures in her mind as she slid onto her couch and tucked her bare, dirty feet under her.

A party. People everywhere.

Men and women. All of them attentive to her every need and desire.

Kisses and caresses that went on forever.

Her leaving in a car full of the people she'd awakened with...

A quick glimpse of him.

Khira gasped and grabbed her throat. She'd seen him. Bram. She was certain of it. Certain, too, that he'd seen her.

Those moss eyes had met hers through the vehicle's window glass. He'd brought a handkerchief to his nose and sniffed it. Watching her. She'd turned away from him... Why had she done that? Hadn't she wanted to find him?

Now she remembered. When she'd seen him, she'd been angry. Angry at him for what he'd done. What she felt sure he had done to her. And to retaliate, she'd turned

away from his stare—so full of wordless communication she'd ignored—and grabbed the man next to her for a deep and satisfying kiss.

When she'd looked back, the car had moved only a little in the traffic outside the unfamiliar club. Bram had been gone.

But Khira knew for certain that she'd seen him. For all the vagueness of her memory, for all the doubt that rode her concerning her strange new world, she was so sure he'd been real.

What she couldn't be sure of was, had he recognized her? Had the look in his eyes been as full of hidden meaning as she wanted to believe, or was it just the way he looked at every woman? And, most importantly, did he really have anything to do with what was wrong with her now?

Khira had never heard of anything like this happening to anyone else.

She knew if she told anyone they'd think she was crazy. It wasn't a certain thing in her own mind that she wasn't simply crazy. That the past week hadn't been a warped and savage trip into madness.

It wasn't until she turned on the television that she realized it had been two days since she'd fallen asleep on her couch. Two days lost in a haze of memories that may or may not be reliable. Two days worth of people dead or dying in her wake.

And she was still hungry.

It was no surprise when she checked her messages that her voicemail was full of concerned questions from her friends and employer. There was a lot of cleaning up for her to do. The least important being a shower, but that was what she chose to take care of first.

Her feet were black with dirt from her walk.

* * * * *

Ding-dong.

Khira frowned. How many hours had she been sitting here, in the dark, listening to her phone ring over and over again?

Had she really only been sitting still all that while? Naked, staring blankly into space, weeping? Or had she been out doing other things before finding herself again?

Ding-dong.

The doorbell rang again, followed by a knocking and she was jolted into full mindfulness. She anxiously wiped away her salty tears. Her cheeks felt raw so she must have been crying for a while, but she didn't remember.

Ding-dong.

"Hang on! I'll just be a second," she barked. The knocking stopped.

Khira went to find something to cover herself with. Her legs were numb from sitting in one position for too long. The pins and needles were a comfort—proof that she'd been in one place for a little while at least while her mind was off somewhere dark and silent. In her bedroom she found her robe on the foot of her bed and as she belted it around her tender middle, the doorbell sounding once more. "I said hang on!"

Biting back a harried curse, she threw open the door to find a rain-soaked Geoff waiting on her stoop. Her agitation evaporated at the sight of her meticulously groomed friend in such disarray. "Geoff, what on earth...?" He looked like hell. Eyes haunted and skin pale in the moonlight.

"I'm sorry, Khira. I tried calling but only got your voicemail." Geoff brushed past her, stumbling into the sitting room without an invitation. He turned, dripping, and regarded her with his wide, tormented eyes. "Elliott and I had a fight. I'm sorry, I couldn't think of anywhere else to go." He snorted—more a choked sound than the derisive laugh he was trying for. "I don't know why I thought of you first—I know you don't feel well, that you've been out sick. I just needed someone I care for to be with me."

"It's okay," she lied. "I'm here for you—you know that."

"I had to leave him, Khira. I needed space." He ran a hand through his dripping hair. "He...he's done it again. Already. So fast. I had to leave." He was regurgitating the same words, speaking rapidly, breathing hard. "I had to leave."

Khira ignored the insistent ache of her empty stomach, the fluttering in her chest. It was hard, appallingly so, to *force* the concern in her words. "Why didn't you kick him out? I thought it was your house?" This was Geoff. Her best bud. She loved him.

Didn't she?

"It is, but I was just so mad, I had to leave before I did something really nasty to him. In the morning I'll go back. I'll feel better then, I'm sure." Geoff smiled ruefully, but his lower lip trembled. It was that more than anything that made Khira feel a real spurt of empathy for his plight. She wasn't totally lost then.

"He cheated again. I left. Didn't even take my car. I had to walk off some steam."

"But you live on Abercorn!" she gawked. Geoff hated walking.

"Seven miles from there to here." He held up his watch. "The pedometer said so. It rained a little on the way."

"Clearly." She eyed his soaked clothing, trying not to linger on all the more interesting parts delineated by the clinging material. It was impossible. God, she was so hungry! Would this never end?

"Sorry," he apologized, looking down at the puddle gathered around his feet and chuckling. For real this time. "I'm glad you answered the door, I didn't want to go back home yet." He looked around, frowning. "Uh. Had you gone to bed?"

"No." Now it was her turn to frown. "Why?"

"None of your lights were on. I was about to give up when I finally heard you call out. And...your robe. You look rumpled." Though it was dark, she could clearly see his gaze sweep over her, from head to toe and back up once more. His eyes darkened with what she thought might be...dear God, was it *interest*? Her sweet, gay friend was ogling her?

Well, some light would take care of that. Once he got a good look at her...she turned on the nearest lamp and waited for the horror that would inevitably follow at the withered, emaciated sight of her.

Geoff saw her but did not shrink back in revulsion or fear as she'd expected him to. Instead his eyes heated, and that was far more horrible than his abhorrence would have been. "Are you sure you weren't in bed? Were you with someone?" He was staring at her mouth, eyes twinkling but dark – too dark – and yes, interested.

Couldn't he see the horrific changes in her? Couldn't he see that she was a woman, curved and feminine – though now a shell, still a woman? He'd been strictly gay since his teens – she knew that. Didn't he know that too?

She busied herself by going to her laundry closet and grabbing a towel for his dripping hair and clothes. "No. No one's here."

When she turned from the closet he was behind her. He'd followed her into the hall, so close on her heels. Her heart stuttered. There was fear, for him *and* for her. But there was also desire.

"Your mouth looks kissed." His words were soft, seductive. And when she nervously licked her dry lips, his lashes flared wide, gaze intent on the flick of her tongue. "If you're busy, I could leave." He whispered the words, clearly telling her without effort that he'd prefer not to leave. To never leave.

Khira couldn't let this continue. Danger loomed. Her stomach growled. She should lie, say that yes, there was a man or maybe two waiting for her in the bedroom. Anything to make him leave. She opened her mouth.

"Dry off. We'll talk in the den, where it's more comfortable."

The words came out all wrong and she felt her lips curve into a predator's smile.

Chapter Ten

"You've always been such a good listener. Thank you for that, Khira. And for your friendship."

God have mercy on my dirty little heart. "I'm sorry I can't do more for you, Geoff."

His eyes flared, pupils swallowing the hazel brown of his irises. He was huddled under the afghan she'd given him, nearly cuddled against her side on the deeply cushioned loveseat. "Should I forgive him?"

Khira started. Surprised, she became more herself and less the need when she eyed him on the heels of that question. And she realized that she wanted to know the answer to a similar question. Should *she* be forgiven? There was no answer she could give to ease his hurt or her own. There was no answer, period.

"You ask yourself what you can forgive. What you can live with," Khira said after some thought before wrapping her brain fully around *his* question. "And *why* you can. Do you need him? Will he hurt you again? Do you need him to hurt you? Is the pain necessary for you to feel that you're in love?"

He frowned, thrown by her philosophical demeanor. "I don't know." His voice was hoarse and full of turmoil. "I love him. I must, to have put up with so much from him. I thought it was over but I hated the months we spent away from each other. I missed him a lot. And I was so glad when we got back together. But here we are, in the same situation as before. He can't stop cheating, so he must not feel the same as I do. Right?"

Geoff was looking at her as if she held the answer, all the answers. And Khira knew she had none. "You have to do what you feel is right." How trite. But what else could she say? What else could she believe, really and truly, in her own heart?

Nervously, she tongued the back of her bottom front teeth...and felt them move.

Panic was the only pure emotion she understood anymore.

How long until she started losing those teeth? One white stone after another, plop, plop, into the bathroom sink after her morning brush.

She didn't dare reach up and tug on a strand of her hair.

Would this happen every day she fasted? Would it get worse and worse the longer she waited between lovers? Was this what her life was going to be like from here on out?

Leaning dangerously close, Geoff tilted his head to her shoulder. She felt the warm press of his mouth...the robe had slipped to bare her skin. "You feel right," he murmured, and the words held the weight of a great secret.

"You're upset." Even knowing that, she couldn't push him away. Indeed she reveled in the heat of his skin as he nuzzled her throat. "Geoff?"

"Yes, Khira?" His whisper was a caress all its own.

"You don't want this." She had to warn him. In all good conscience she should be screaming at him to run, to get away, to save himself because she could not save herself. But her mouth was dry and he would taste oh-so sweet...

His business-length, short-cropped hair was prickly as it danced over her cheek. His mouth was soft as cashmere as it played upon her jaw, kept soft with expensive emollients she herself used on occasion. The scent of his expensive cologne was pleasing, a cloud in the air that fogged her mind as it was meant to do. Her senses were engaged, hungry and demanding. She was caught...and so was he.

"We should stop," she murmured, without really meaning it.

"Yes," he returned, and it was just a word.

"I'm a woman, Geoff."

"A goddess." The tips of his fingers parted the folds of her robe and all was lost. "You smell like stardust."

The whisper of his breath danced on her skin like an infant's kisses. Khira felt her hands pushing away his damp clothing, seeking out the warmth of his flesh. He was lean but firm, the line of his stomach taut when she discovered it.

Geoff needed no instruction. No urging. He skillfully maneuvered himself so that, without cessation of their explorative touches, he removed his shirt and unbuckled his belt. Their naked torsos touched, his cool from the damp but warming from the heat of hers. The chill and the desire made her nipples stand erect, tight and thick.

The heat of his palms soothed them, cupping her breasts fully. There was no awkwardness in his touch, no unfamiliarity. He knew a woman's body as well as a man's...or at least he knew hers.

Khira arched into that expert touch, losing her mind. Her soul already forfeit and not a worry in this broiling storm that could not, would not, be denied them.

He tried to kiss her. She turned away, her fear for him a bubble that barely saved them both. But for how long?

"You've always been so oblivious," he said, kissing her cheek, her ear. Making love to her as devastatingly as if his mouth were between her legs. "You make men ache. And you don't know. Or don't care." The last words were accusatory, but he soothed their sting with a squeeze of both her breasts and a brush of his thumbs across their swollen tips. "Either way it makes us want you even more."

"You've never wanted me before now," she moaned brokenly, legs moving of their own accord to accommodate his weight as their bodies fell back upon the cushions. "You're in love with men. You *should* want men—I'm not safe to you, Geoff. You don't want me. You don't know what I am."

He rocked his hips into her and the robe opened like gift-wrap, exposing all of her. "Don't lie to yourself. Or to me." His cock was an undeniable tribute, pressed tight against the apex of her thighs.

The need rose, her misgivings overpowered by its ferocity. Her nails dug into the jut of his shoulders, her only port in the storm as it roared to full life. Geoff held her

down when she would have arched, demanding haste, so that his mouth could trail wetly down to explore the plump sphere of her left breast. Her heart beat so hard she felt he could taste it and then she realized it was *his* heart, not hers, that thundered so. And it had a taste that she took into herself like a draught of strong spirits.

Her mouth watered amidst the flood of flavor.

The smooth, callus-free flesh of his executive's hands ran over her form. It was like the sliding of the softest satin, his skin against hers, as it discovered the dips and curves of her pliant form. When he smoothed his palms, his fingertips, over her stomach, it growled but he did not pause in his adulation. Perhaps he didn't hear. Khira did, but did not wish to hear it, for it reminded her of how this would end.

"Stop, Geoff." She gathered the strength and will to push away his touch. "Stop this now."

He replaced his hands with his mouth, stealing away her strength. There was to be no turning back for either of them, so when his wicked lips found her lonely cunt, she eagerly wrapped her legs around his shoulders and let him lap at her cream.

The press and knead of his fingers in the plump cushions of her inner thighs as he urged her legs wider made her toes curl. Khira touched all of him that she could reach, marveling that men could feel so different from one to another, and yet the same. They all made love in different ways, some hard, others soft, fast and slow and in between, but in every way they made love with passion and with need. Perhaps their need was for comfort, for the breast of a mother figure or the slap of the hardhearted whore they saw in all women, but for whatever the reasons behind it, the need was as real and voracious as hers.

And now, in the arms of a man she'd known for years but had never even kissed, her need rode her and was answered in the press of his mouth on her pubic bone, on her cunt and along the soft baby skin of her inner thigh.

A tentative probe of his index finger separated her slick folds. It wasn't hard for him to find the pearl of her clit and he didn't have to be a connoisseur of women to

know how to tease and titillate it until she was moaning and thrashing beneath him. His lips nuzzled her there too, sending high voltage shockwaves throughout the nerves beneath her skin.

"Sweeter than I thought," he said, his breath a balmy breeze across her quivering clit. "Bitter and sweet at the same time. Wet and slick." Those naughty fingertips explored her. "Tight too."

His mouth lost its virginity at the portal of her sex and Khira felt that power, that thrill of knowing she was the first he'd tasted this way. The world was set on fire and she was aflame. Burnt in passion, scarred in desire.

As his fingers entered her, two long and firm digits seeking in the wetness, someone entered the room. Soft footfalls and a whisper of breath. A racing heartbeat Khira could hear as the visitor watched.

Fully aware that they were no longer alone, Khira turned her head and smiled. Her hands held Geoff's head still and she made a soft sound.

"I thought I'd find you missing me, but I see you've already forgotten me altogether," Elliott said softly to his lover, who was busy fingering Khira's sopping wet quim.

Geoff stilled but did not pull away. His fingers gently rubbed her deep inside while he turned his head and met the oddly soft gaze of his boyfriend. "Elliott," he breathed, but the name held no meaning or weight. It was just an empty word that spilled out of his glistening lips.

"I knew you'd be here." Elliott seemed not to notice the dazed stupor of his partner. Not to care, or at least not to object, that Geoff was between Khira's splayed legs. "The door was open." Elliott's emerald green eyes met Khira's, but briefly, before roving over her ripe, splayed form with no small bit of carnal appreciation. "Wide open. I thought I heard...moaning."

The tips of Geoff's fingers brushed over her G-spot, deep inside her, as if he'd known exactly where to find it in her secret depths, and she did moan. Loudly.

The way Elliott looked at her, at Geoff, only made Khira's hunger intensify. The way Geoff could barely look away from her. And when he managed, the way his eyes drank down Elliott's thick, stocky body made her want to eat them both alive. To fill herself up with whatever life force they possessed, to digest it and make it her own.

Beseeching with her eyes, begging Elliott without words to see the danger, to save his lover from her clutches, Khira shuddered as Geoff bent back down—as if compelled—to lave her cunt with his tongue. Elliott was oblivious to her pleas—they were empty anyway. The jut of his erection in his loose trousers spoke volumes of how little he cared for any threat of danger. Or perhaps he sensed it all and gloried in the thrill of the risk.

It was too late to feel anything but her own desire. Khira saw her hand beckoning for Elliott to join them. Felt a siren smile stretch her lips wide.

The storm caught Elliott so easily. He fell on them, squeezing onto the loveseat, making its name a true description. Elliott tore at the remainder of Geoff's clothing, shoving his pants and boxers down to expose the white shine of his tight rear. But to his credit, Elliott did not ignore Khira, his hands coming around his lover to touch her, explore her, more aggressive than Geoff but deliciously attentive to her pleasure all the same. When she moaned or thrashed, he repeated the caresses that drew forth those responses, and when she protested he stopped twisting her nipples too hard or stopped stroking her armpits.

Elliott's clothes were gone. Geoff's and Khira's as well. All their coverings discarded, the clothes empty shells like lumps of dead skin on the carpet. Skin on skin now, sweat mingling, kisses meshing together...a medley of eroticism, the three of them rehearsing their instruments. A symphony of sensation.

Somehow she was between them. Beneath them. On top of them. Then sandwiched again, one hard body atop her—Geoff—one softer but no less hot and slick beneath her—Elliott. They touched her, revered her. Worshipped her. And each other.

Still the ghastly appetite in her craved more.

She rolled so that she faced Elliott, looking down at the glazed look in his bright eyes. The too-large pupils that plainly stated he was in a state of dazed arousal. The slack swell of his very pouty lips. The dart of his tongue to moisten them.

This mouth she could kiss, steal from, and feel no lingering guilt.

So she did. Taking his lips with hers, rubbing then nudging them apart so that she could sweep her tongue in like a specter haunting a cave. The slip-slide melt of him against her made her purr. Geoff's mouth gently nibbled the curve of her buttock and she arched like a cat, presenting herself to him, inviting more. More he gave, licking her cleft, spreading her cheeks to find her anus, tongue probing gently at first and then with aggressive fervor, his fingers digging into her ass to hold her still.

Khira wanted a cock to fill her and straddled Elliott with all the demand that rode her. He was wide and fat, hard and smooth, stout like his body. Curved upward, the phallus almost beckoned her to mount it. She could not refuse, wriggling her cunt over him until his crown kissed her portal. Stretched. Slid inside and bound her.

Geoff's mouth had wet her anus, but not enough to ease the pain of his invasion of her only virgin territory. Tearing her mouth away with a snarl, she tried to whirl on him, to chastise him, but an orgasm surprised her as Geoff's cock slid past the tight rim of her sphincter, filling her deep in a most surprising way.

Her refusal became a cry for more as she watched her friend over her shoulder. A plea that made Geoff's savage mouth twist in a too-male way as he pushed inexorably deeper inside of her. His features were hardened, carved ivory, full of the look of sex and torment entwined.

The lids of her eyes slammed shut—she could not look on his face and not want to kiss him. She could not take from him what she needed without guilt. The pulsations of her little death could turn into throes of real death for him if she was not careful.

No matter how heartless she had become. No matter how twisted and evil, she would rather die than hurt her friend.

The release went on but was sexual only. The appetite only barely appeased as she fought it, denied it, the vast and empty void in her soul fed only a teasing morsel. But it was an orgasm, beautiful and mighty and enough to make her body clamp down on her partners so that they all groaned with the mix of pain and pleasure that captivated them whole.

Khira was trapped. Impaled completely in front and back. Doubly filled with heavy flesh that did not belong to her, except that for these moments it did. When her sex pulsed, she felt her muscles squeeze their cocks. Felt their cocks buck and tense inside her. And then they were moving upon the waves. Thrust and withdraw, like the turns of the tide.

Bodies became pistons. In and out, the two men pumping her full then emptying her so that she nearly wept for all the loneliness inside. At first they moved awkwardly, strangers on this dance floor, seeking a fluid rhythm. When they found it, their bodies were one machine of joy and sex. No swaying willow tree could have matched their grace. Khira's voice was hoarse from moaning, Geoff's love words in her ear meaningless, Elliott's grunts adding to her empty hunger. This time Elliott sought her kiss and she breathed him in, wanting that emptiness to fade away forever.

She died inside. Was reborn as his life filled her empty shell.

A hundred orgasms could not have satisfied the way eating Elliott did. The tectonic movement from starvation to appeasement nearly undid her a second time but she fought it, wanting to savor her meal far longer.

The warmth of Elliott's life flowed from deep inside him, up through his esophagus and out his mouth into hers. She swallowed the trickle, pulled harder until it became a torrent. Though there were few thoughts in her mind that could be called human in that moment, there were memories. And these memories—of every time Elliott had hurt Geoff, every time he had made Geoff angry or sad—easily fueled her need to feed.

It was the first time Khira truly realized and understood how dangerous she could be.

She could kill Elliott.

End him completely.

And feel no speck of remorse for it.

Indeed, she'd be...pleased to do it. Delighted even. A vengeance for all the hurts Geoff had suffered because of Elliott's callous disregard.

Realization should have warned her. Stopped her. But she wasn't Khira then, just the craving and the ravenous, starving ache. Khira was gone and in her place there dwelled a fiend.

God, she was so wet. So tightly filled. Yet still so empty that she must *take*. And after, take some more.

Elliott stilled beneath her. She opened her eyes. His flew open as well, fear turning their emerald sheen to mossy darkness. He knew...and then the knowledge left him as he began once more to move, to moan, to kiss her back as if she weren't stealing away his precious life. Sucking him dry.

Geoff pulled her back against him, tearing her mouth free, unknowingly saving his lover from the surety of death's eternal embrace through her merciless lips.

Her friend, now lover, held her upright and pulled out of her, kissing her neck feverishly. His hands were on her breasts, her belly and where she still joined with Elliott.

"Darling," he said drunkenly in her ear. "I love you."

The slurred words were like cold water on her burning skin. With a cry born in the depths of her soul she tore away from them both, rolling in a heap to the floor, shaking as she battled to find some semblance of human thought. Understanding what she'd almost done – willing and knowingly – she wanted to gag. To cry. To die.

To go on eating and not worry about any of it.

The sight of Geoff falling on Elliott enraptured her clamoring senses. Her panic fled as she watched. The passion the two shared was a palpable thing in the air and Khira

breathed it in like much-needed oxygen. Sucking in great lungfuls of the magic that clouded the two men on the loveseat, Khira bore witness to the beauty of their desire for one another because if she didn't, she'd fall on them and feast until they were dead.

Whatever anger Geoff and Elliott had shared earlier was replaced by something wholly beautiful and pure. Perhaps not love, not true and abiding love, but close enough to inspire awe.

Khira knew she'd never deserve anything like that now, not for as long as she lived.

Geoff's mouth found Elliott's. The slide of their tongues was a glimpse between the seams of their fused lips. Their hands treasured each other, fingertips gliding, palms sliding over muscle and bone. Geoff's hand pumped his lover's fat cock, stealing the wet cream that had come from Khira's body. He used the lubricant on himself, his fingers now playing on his own turgid member.

The air shimmered, an aura glowed about them—Khira could see it! A halo of blue and green and brilliant white. A cloud that swirled and eddied about them. And if she tried, she understood that it was possible to pull that aura toward her with a breath. When she did, it was like nibbling on junk food. Not as potent or life-giving as most meals, though it was sustaining and flavorful. Barely worthwhile but enough to ease some of her immediate pain.

Elliott raised his legs, wrapped them around his lover, and Geoff put his moistened cock against Elliott's tight anus. There was no thick lubricant to ease the way. It must have hurt, had to, but neither man cared as Geoff forced his way inside, the root of him disappearing gradually into the receptive strain of Elliott's body. Their kiss ended but their caresses did not. Hands and mouths roamed freely, breaths mingled and their bodies heaved. The look they exchanged was full of heat, of lust and of pleasure. They sighed and Khira echoed their murmur of breath, tasting their flavor in the air that was as real as the revolution of the planet.

Pain, so sharp, like a knife blade heated above a pool of lava, sliced through her middle with merciless vengeance. Her brain froze. She screamed, mindless to all but the

agony, endless and cruel. Screaming again, she lurched toward the lovers who seemed oblivious to her presence, her cries. As they rocked, a groaning beast with two sweating backs, she reached out blindly and found one of them with her hands.

Geoff's mouth held all the salvation she craved. At last! She jerked his head to her, sucked his kiss, drawing hard enough to elicit a cry from him. But instead of pushing her away, he drew her closer. Elliott's hands joined Geoff's, pulling her against them, finding her nipples, her cleft. Geoff's hips bucked wildly now, almost violently taking his partner so that Elliott was crying out as well, mindless in his own realm of pleasure.

The flow of energy from Geoff to her was so great, it was like being lit from within by atomic flames. Khira's hands grasped the sides of Geoff's face, holding him still with a cruel and mindless strength. Bruising him with her mouth and her grip, taking him, eating him, drinking her fill.

It felt so good.

"Khira, let them go!" New hands gripped her now, bizarrely familiar fingers digging into her upper arms, tearing her away from her prey. Bruising her skin with the touch, her ears with the words. A voice of authority, of sanity, in her storm of psychotic hunger.

"No!" she snarled, ignoring the restraints, reaching for Geoff once more.

The hands lifted her bodily and tossed her to the far side of the room. Her shoulder struck a table, knocking it over, and she gasped, full of pain and want and a sudden wash of understanding as a smidgen of her common sense returned. It was the harsh reality of it all that tormented her most.

She took a ragged breath in through her nose.

That scent!

Her body reacted to it immediately. Her lungs burned, full of it. Her nostrils flared as she drew it in again and again. Needing it so badly, wanting it inside her more than life. Sandalwood, balsam, honeysuckle and the unique twist of Bram. A scent like no other in all of creation.

The scent of fire, consuming, purifying.

Vision swimming, mind awash with thoughts that made no sense, she watched as Geoff and Elliott reached a moaning, groaning frenzy of release. Gaped breathlessly as they collapsed in each other's arms. And as a black form swam into her line of sight, Khira felt an orgasm rip through her that had nothing to do with those men, but with the perfume that filled her mind with images of lust, desire, need and love. The entrancing bouquet of *him*.

Chapter Eleven

The orgasm and still-raging appetite left her spent and weak. But the hunger, for the time being, was slaked enough that her pain was bearable. Bram lifted her from the floor, his strength so easy and casual it made her feel downright fragile. He carried her like a babe in his muscled arms to her bedroom, which he found unerringly as if by following his nose.

Khira would soon know how close to the truth that concept really was.

He laid her down none too gently on the bed. Another quiver, a post-coital quake, snaked through her, making her gasp and put her hands against the trembling swell of her cunt as her hips gently rocked against her will. Bram, in all his darkness, gazed down at her with bottomless moss-green eyes and waited with naked patience for her to regain control.

"How did you find me?" The tremulous, hoarse rasp of her voice was all she could muster when she found the wits to speak. "Bram?"

"My name isn't Bram," he said evenly, voice smooth like polished onyx, as he sat on the edge of the mattress eyeing her. "But you knew that from the start. Just as I knew you weren't Lilith. My real name is Christoph and you'll use it from here on out."

The command in his words and in his tone could not be denied and she was too tired, too weak and spent to find fault with it. "You didn't answer my question, Christoph."

"I don't have to. It's enough that I'm here. That I came in time to stop you from killing two more people—one of whom I think you'd sorely regret losing." His worldly, exotically colored eyes dared her to deny the truth of his statements.

Khira felt her lips quiver. "I'm a freak."

He shook his head before she finished the sentence. "No. You're out of control."

"I've...hurt some people."

"I know." The way he looked at her, the empathy she saw in the depths of his gaze, in the chiseled lines of his lovely face, she knew he understood.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" She had to force the question out and it sounded thick with unshed tears, with worry and dread. "With what's wrong with me?"

He blinked slowly, his gaze holding hers captive. The answer was there, though she didn't want to see it. She closed her own eyes and tried to turn away, from him and the truth. He grabbed her face and turned it back, waiting until she looked at him again.

"I have a disease," he told her aloud. "There's no name for what it is. There is no cure for it. It is nearly impossible to spread this thing. Women almost never contract it. But somehow you did. It passed from me to you, that night in the club."

As numb and heartless as she'd become since that fateful meeting, as emotionless and negligent as she was now, Khira's rage was immediate and intense. It erupted from her like an explosion of pyroclastic rocks.

"You did this to me? You *really* did? You *bastard*! You fucking swine!" She sprang from her supine heap on the bed and lashed out at him with her fists. "Devil! Savage! God, how could you let this happen?" She was screaming the words, siren loud, the air moving with the vibration of sound. She slapped him on the face so hard her hand burned as if set aflame.

He caught her and held fast, fingers around her wrists like gentle shackles of flesh and bone. His obsidian hair reflected the moonlight through her window but nothing else; it was like a pool of ink on his head. Though there was no other light in the room she could see him, his handsome features that even through her anger and hurt she adored. See him too clearly.

"You've a right to be angry," he allowed. "But fighting me will gain you nothing. And all you are, all you will be, depends on me now. Do not forget that. Ever." His eyes

were glittering, sharp as volcanic glass but colored like sliced sections of peridot-filled meteorite.

"Fuck you." Words that stung like acid, words she never would have uttered a few weeks ago for shame at their crass sound and feel.

"You have killed, Khira. You will kill again." He was merciless. "But not if you trust me." Without relinquishing her hands he bent his head forward and pressed it against hers, breathing his warm, moist breath across her lips. She parted them to taste him. It was more intimate than a kiss. As invasive as rape. But not unwanted. "I can help you, sweetheart," he whispered, tormenting her with the possibility of redemption.

She rested there, feeling him, his touch, his breath. Her own breathing slowed to match the pace and rhythm of his. Her world calmed. Righted itself. Only when a hot tear splashed on her bottom lip did she realize she'd been crying. Was crying still. "No one can help me."

His thumbs rubbed the skin of her wrists gently. A caress that mimicked the soothing brush of love. "I can."

"No. I'm too far gone." Her breath hitched on a sob then quieted again. His scent filled her head. Her mouth.

"It's not your fault. You didn't know. You couldn't."

"I didn't even care—most of the time," she admitted, confessing her sins to him, her priest, her new religion. "I didn't feel anything for those people. I just...I took them, used them and left them."

"It's the disease. It makes us act beyond what we might like. It's not who we are. But it *is* what we do," he explained. His mouth pressed the tiniest, softest kiss to the tip of her nose.

"Then I want to die."

"You can't." He said it so quietly it sounded like the truth of a god's words. "The disease won't let you. You'll think about it. You'll try to do it. But your body won't

follow the command of your mind. Not for that. Trust me,” he chuckled mirthlessly, “I’ve tried. The infection, the sickness, whatever it is, has a will all its own and it wants to live.”

“I’ll starve to death.”

“You know how impossible it is to deny the ache. I know you’ve tried.” He pressed his cheek to hers, his smell mingling with hers.

“What can I do?” The words, a plea for help, were a faint whisper. Her naked body was hot, more so when he pulled back, looked down and let his eyes dance across her naked form.

“I don’t know. What I do know is that there is no going back to the way things were before.” He murmured the words, though she felt them roaring in her mind. “Your life will never be the same.”

Whimpering, sobbing, she tried to strike him once more, using all her not-inconsiderable strength. In the end, she lay face down across his lap, both her wrists secured in one of his hands. His other hand rested, scorching hot but very still, on the dip of her spine just above the rise of her buttocks.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen, you have to know that. It never occurred to me that it could – there are so few of us, mostly men. There hasn’t been a report among us of an infected woman for over two decades.”

“Us?”

“Those of us with this disease, we keep in touch. Like any other subculture, we have to be among friends with similar...proclivities...every now and again.”

“What about medicine, vaccines? Anything? Is there *any* way to treat this?”

He shook his head slowly, eyes glittering with empathy. “There are no doctors for what we have. No reputable ones. We’re alone in this, Khira. I’m so sorry.”

“How did you know? When you saw me the other night – that was real wasn’t it?” She shook her befuddled head. “When you saw me, did you know I was sick?”

"I knew when I touched you in your dream. I knew then. When I saw you—it was no hallucination—I followed you, but you didn't want to be found and that made it difficult for me."

"You felt me in a dream?" She scoffed then, silently scoffed at *herself* for disbelieving that while believing everything else.

She really was crazy.

"Why not? You feed on the life force of humans, through pleasure and sex. Why not add to that a few other odd so-called paranormal side effects? The mind—our minds—are chock full of untold abilities. I felt you in the dream we shared. I know you did too."

Swallowing that, she sighed. "Will you let me up?"

"Will you hit me again?" he returned, the sound of his voice making her want to spread her legs and beg him to take her.

"Maybe."

He chuckled and the sound was as dark as his black hair, his black voice. Emotionless as the dark. As deadly and empty.

"How *did* you find me?" she asked softly.

Balancing her across his lap he reached in the pocket of his trousers and pulled out a scrap of cloth. It wasn't a handkerchief as she'd thought when glimpsing him that night of her delirium orgy...it was the scrap of her panties, taken from her during their first encounter, that he had been sniffing.

"Androstenone." When she eyed him, perplexed by the unfamiliar word, he shrugged. "It's a pheromone. Only a fraction of humans can even consciously smell it. But you and I and others like us, we reek of it. And it affects everyone in our sphere. I scented you out, using this as a guide." He chuckled again, ruefully. His hand burned against her skin when he breathed deeply of the cloth. "I should have smelled the pheromone's intensity from you the moment you were infected. But, for whatever

reason, I didn't. I guess I just never thought to check before I left you there. I am very sorry for that, Khira. Believe me."

Khira wept silently, his scent, his pheromones swimming through her.

He'd tracked her smell from a bit of cloth. Like a bloodhound.

He sighed. "And so here we are. It's time now for damage control. We'll start with the two men back there..."

His words faded. Khira gasped as cramps marched through her.

Christoph righted her and held her against him. So tormented was she that Khira let him, docilely resting in his shielding embrace. A warm sigh of breath stirred the hair at her temple. "Khira?"

"Hurts." She couldn't manage more than that strained word.

"You're starving." The concern sounded real in his voice. "They can wait, then. You cannot. Lie back, Khira." As he breathed the words, he lowered her back onto the mattress.

Christoph hovered over her, his black clothing scraping her sensitive skin. She tensed, trapped. Suddenly scared. "No." But she knew him, so intimately it seemed, though they'd only had the one encounter. It seemed to her that they were life partners, had been since birth, and it frightened her on a primal level. Because it wasn't true. Wasn't real. "No," she mewled in a strangled attempt to keep him at bay.

"Trust me," he murmured, eyes gentle, and slowly lowered himself upon her, weight balanced on one arm, gathering her up with the other beneath the curve of her spine. "I'll take away your pain if you will let me. Open to me."

The same three words he'd said to her the night they'd met.

This time they made sense.

Khira wanted to hate him. Abhor his touch. But she couldn't.

"There are ways to share. Ways to take without killing. Ways to learn control. Let me show you."

She gave him her kiss. Took his. And let her soul open wide to receive his invasion. Khira felt him reach into her, felt a liquid give deep within, and a flowing river—a torrent—empty from her into him.

Thirst. Oh God the pain and the hunger—too much of it all! She would surely die.

And then Christoph opened to her. Gave her back what she needed and more. It was *his* life force, the energy that sustained him like blood or air, water or food. He gave it freely to sustain her now. As it filled her, all other feedings paled in comparison. This was true power, true fuel. This was the nourishment she'd needed all along.

Her craving eased.

Her pain faded and became bearable.

She was full of light.

Full of him...

Yes! He'd freed his cock, was pushing it inside her, lodging his incredible girth within her wet, slick sex. Pushing deep into the heart of her. Her pussy trembled, wrapped glove-tight around his hard flesh. They fit together perfectly.

This wasn't like the conquests she'd known before or since first joining with him. This was so right, so *meant*. She felt as if she could swallow the world whole and let it live inside her forever.

So long as Christoph stayed inside her along with it.

His perfect hips pulled back, his cock almost leaving her empty and she tried to scream at him not to leave, but he ate the sound before it could bear fruit. Then those hips came back down, punishing as a battering ram, his sex heavy and hot and hard. Bruising. Demanding. Giving.

That scent had her. Caught and held her.

Quivering, she gripped him, hands digging into the broad shoulders flexing above her. But it wasn't enough—she wanted more from him. She tore her mouth away—one of the hardest things she'd ever done. "Take off your clothes," she demanded, voice

rough like sandpaper. "I want you naked. I need to feel you." She sobbed the last words out frantically.

He moved without leaving her, without taking that hot monolith of flesh out of her greedy cunt. He efficiently removed his clothes, keeping her close until he was naked at last. Glorious and mighty, larger without the trendy duds, skin bronze and smooth and rippling with heavy muscles.

The weight of him should have made her feel caged. Instead it made her feel safe. Protected.

The line of his throat hypnotized her. A column of strength, the Adam's apple pronounced amid the tendon and the muscle. His chin, the slight indentation in the flesh, was right at her eye line. She rose up and nipped him with her teeth. He tasted salty. There was the faintest scratch of stubble against her teeth. She bit him again, harder, and licked his skin to steal a fuller taste.

He grunted. She wanted that grunt in her mouth.

Heaving into her, his large body dwarfing hers, Christoph seemed to know exactly what she needed and sought her kiss once more. He parted her mouth and moaned low into it, tongue flicking against her teeth, pushing, testing.

They did not move now. Did not shift in their moorings.

His breath sustained her. His flavor, feral on her tongue, filled her up. The pounding of his heart was hers as well, the pounding of his body echoed in the lurch of her hips to accept the deep thrust of his cock. Her head swam. She fed on him and he let her. Encouraged her. Giving her all she needed and more as she suckled him like a babe.

Their naked skin rasped, a gentle whisper in the dark.

Their breaths echoed from behind fused lips, a faint stirring that none but they could hear.

"I'm open, Khira. Take all of me." He said the words, a benediction, into her kiss.

Life filled her, a tsunami wave of energy, volatile, hot as the sun, drowning her. Her resulting orgasm was more than a release. It was a revelation. Salvation. Birth into a foreign world, bright and new and clean. His gift to her, never ending.

Every muscle and bone in her body screamed with joy. And everything became light, pure energy, pure life.

Her pain was gone.

Her hunger and her thirst more than satiated, now erased, bad memories only. She came and he was there with her, filling her with his seed, with his orgasmic cries, his moans and sighs of carnal relief. Khira touched the sun and it was him, there in her arms, inside her womb.

New life. Theirs.

A shattering of old lives, a fusing together of new. They were one.

She saw in him all the answers she'd been looking for. She was a human woman who had, by chance or by fate, been brought to this strange existence. But above it all, if she fought hard enough she could still be herself. Still was herself. Khira Redgrave. If she were henceforth careful, she would not lose what was left of her human soul.

The orgasm faded and twilight descended—for no matter how dark the night, twilight was what she would see for all her life after the setting of the sun. She was nibbling on his rippling shoulder muscle. Biting it, just to feel the flesh between her teeth.

"I haven't felt like this since that night," Christoph told her gently, his mouth a tickle at her ear. "I didn't understand it then. I don't understand it now." His arms held her, their bodies cooling, still joined but separate now and human. "But I'm glad you're here. Now. With me."

The night deepened.

"How did you get it?" The whisper shattered the peace of their silence. "The disease."

"The same way you did." He didn't elaborate further. It didn't matter.

She lost herself in thought. "Can I pass it to someone else?"

He stirred against her. "Highly unlikely. But not impossible, obviously."

He kissed her neck and rested his weight full upon her.

"I'm a monster." She swallowed hard, but the tears came anyway. "I can't undo what I've already done. I've...killed."

Rising up, he brushed them away before they could stain the pillow. "You'll live with that burden your whole life. And I am to blame. I should have been there from the beginning. To guide you. To watch over you. But I swear to you, I didn't know."

How could his words make her feel so much when all the things she'd done, all the things she'd been through, made her feel so little?

"I know I should have scented you right away. It's in your skin, your blood. The perfume of you is enough to drive a saint to deviant excess. Your house is filled with it—it's no wonder your friends wanted you so badly. Once they entered this place they were powerless."

Poor Geoff.

She started. "Geoff." How could she have forgotten her friend? What she'd almost done to him?

When she tried to rise, Christoph bore her down harder into the mattress. "He's okay. They're both sleeping. If you're careful, in the future that's the most damage you will do to anyone. I'll show you how."

Khira shuddered. "I have to check on them."

"No. The risk is too great. If they want you—and they will when they see you again—you will be just as powerless as they to deny your needs. You should stay here. I'll go wake them and send them home."

His warning struck home and she tried not to show her concern. Her guilt. "Won't they..." She struggled to find words in all the madness of her thoughts and woes. "Smell you? Want you?"

His mouth curved. His lashes veiled bright eyes. "I have control over this. You do not. Stay here." He rose, quickly dressed and left in a cloud of balsam and suede.

Then the blackness came. Rest without nightmares. Real sleep that endangered no one.

* * * * *

"First thing, you have to quit your job."

With bleary eyes, Khira focused on the steaming cup of coffee Christoph offered her. He was dressed again, in a slim-fitting button-up black shirt, tight black pants that were expertly tailored to fit him, secured with a wide black belt with a shiny silver buckle.

"What?" she asked fuzzily, dazzled by his handsomeness.

"You can't work there, so close to so many people. And you absolutely cannot see Geoff again. In fact, you won't be safe in any public setting for some time. You need seclusion. Peace and quiet, a place to learn how to tame your needs."

Gasping, Khira sat erect in the bed, oblivious to her nudity and her bruises from their fierce lovemaking the night before. "I can't do that! I have no money saved, no way to earn more without a job."

"You don't need it. I have more than enough."

What the hell? Was he suddenly to be her keeper? How *dare* he? She hissed, rearing back. "I'm not taking money from you, you bastard!"

"You're welcome for the offer," he drawled, one corner of his lush mouth tilting in a semblance of a dawning grin.

"I'm not your possession. Your pet. I won't do it!"

The softness of his mouth hardened to granite. "You don't have a choice in the matter." His green gaze, smoke-filled but not with desire now, pinned her. "Or do you want more dead bodies in your wake?"

The weapon of his words wounded her deeply and she whimpered. "I didn't mean to hurt anybody."

"But you did it anyway," he said mercilessly. "And you would again. Khira..." He set the coffee aside and reached for her hand. His fingers were long and gentle, resting against the pulse in her wrist. "I know this is hard. But there's no other way. Because you're a female, your lure is much more potent, so much more dangerous than any male's, and anyone near you will desire you. Think of yourself as a black widow in a very strong, very beautiful web."

She put her hand to her throat and swallowed hard.

He continued without mercy. "It will take you far longer than any infected man to control what is a very natural part of you now – the ability to inspire mindless lust and the need in you to exploit that. Your appetite is exponentially more demanding than mine was when I became infected. Heaven knows I had a hell of a time with it. And it will only get worse if you fight it."

"If I can't fight it and I can't indulge it, what am I going to do?" she sneered.

His mouth softened again. "You'll stay with me. I will keep you safe, keep you fed and keep those around you from pushing you too far."

"My friends will never believe I let a man I barely just met live with me."

"I won't live with you. You'll come live with me." He pointed it out as if it were a non-negotiable fact. As if it was already decided between them. "And your friends can no longer know you. You have to leave them behind."

"No!" She yelled the protest. "That is out of the question. God, I'm not an invalid! A leper. I have my own life and I won't give it up."

The sorrow in his eyes enraged her as much as it frightened her. “There is no happily ever after, Khira. Not ever, not for us. You have to give everything up, everything normal and safe. Or destroy everything you touch. Everyone you love.”

She hissed around her tears. “I’ll find a way to control this on my own. I don’t need your goddamned help. Jesus, look what your help has gotten me so far! I’m a freak because of you. What I have is worse than AIDS, and *you gave it to me!*” She lunged for him. So fast. So full of the power, the strength *he* had given her.

He was a beat too slow. Her blow connected with his far-too-handsome chin, the force of her strike whipping his head about.

There was a breath of weighted silence as they both reeled from what she’d just done.

She used to be such a nice, gentle woman.

When he recovered—too quickly for her comfort—Christoph’s eyes were jade and steel behind a forest of black lashes. “Do not hit me again.” He enunciated each word carefully. Danger reeked from him, marking his delicious scent with a bitter tinge.

Without even planning to, she immediately took another swing.

He caught her, pulled her off balance and pulled her atop him. While this position should have given her an advantage, it did not in his imprisoning embrace. Before the battle could truly wage in full fury, he had already conquered her.

Something flowed between them. Electric and terrifying in its intensity—from a simple touch only. Her body moved, undulated against her will, her loins burrowing against his. She came as if they’d been making love for hours. Christoph pulled her head down fast, plastered his lips on hers, and ate her scream.

His hand cupped her cheek, holding her still, a silver band winking on his index finger.

Through their kiss he drained her.

He was merciless. Possessed of supreme control. He was the calm center of a raging universe and she had no protection at all.

When it was over, she fell limp and spent over him. Unable to do more than moan brokenly, faintly, like a dying thing.

Her hunger pains hit, more intense than ever. She wanted to cry but was too weak to summon the sobs, the tears.

"I can leave you like this," he warned, breath hot in her ear. "Forever, if I wish." His fingertips ran down her spine, sending a shockwave of new ecstasy through her, the pleasure mingling with the insane pain. "Do you believe me?"

She couldn't find her voice.

"Do you believe me?" He lifted her with his hips and nudged her toward another instant climax.

"Y-yes!" The word exploded from her swollen mouth.

"Good. Keep it in mind when you feel the need to fight me. Remember it when your arrogance threatens to make you reckless."

Rallying her strength, she spat at him. "I hate you."

"I know." Was that regret in his peat-black voice? Khira didn't believe him capable of it. "But hate me or love me, you're mine." He bit out the last word. She heard his teeth grit. Felt his hold imprint his fingertips and his smell on her. "You need me, Khira."

"No."

"Denying the truth won't change it. You cannot survive without me. You need me."

"How long before I can," she swallowed, "live with this?"

Their noses touched. Their gazes locked. The moist warmth of their breath was so tangled, so mixed, it was a new breed of breath.

"A long time. Years. I don't know." He sounded neither sorry nor glad to say the words. They were flat facts and he clearly accepted them. Clearly expected her to, as well.

Defeated, she lay naked and sprawled across him for a long time. He let her. Let her become accustomed to the rhythm of his heartbeat. Let her swim in his delicious scent. Let her feel him as he owned her body and soul.

He was quiet. He was calm. He was powerful. And she was his.

Her terror had never been so great.

"I can't do this." Had she said the words aloud?

"You have no choice."

"Can't you see what's happening to me? I'm falling apart," she confessed, ashamed. "My hair is falling out in great big chunks. I'm a skeleton—you can see all my ribs. My skin is gray and sagging like melted wax. And I think my teeth might fall out soon. They're loose..." She nudged them with her tongue but they seemed firmly moored. Not twenty-four hours ago they were quite loose...

"No one can see any of that, not past your allure. Your veneer, which dazzles. Not even I can see past it and I am very strong. Very aware of what you are." His words were no boast.

"I'm dying. And worse, I'm going crazy." She feared that less than spending her life tied to this stranger...who wasn't really a stranger. He was too familiar now, too much a comfort. That scared her too, the ease with which she was acclimating to him, to being with him, to belonging to him.

"You won't die. You *were* starving. Your ailments, these are natural side effects of malnourishment. But once you get food, you'll always heal. You'll be surprised at how fast. Just stay away from mirrors for a couple days when it gets bad. Come with me and I promise to keep you fed. I'll keep you well, don't worry. It never has to get that bad again."

How could he be so blasé as to believe she'd just hear those words and follow their imbedded command?

"I'm hurting now. I'm starving *now*." Her plaintive words sounded like a whine to her ears and she wanted to cut out her own tongue.

"I'm keeping you weak for your own good for the time being. But you won't suffer any long-term effects because of it." He sat up, holding her close and tight, as if fully aware that she might well bolt if he wasn't vigilant.

And Khira knew she would have tried, given the chance. But she was so tired. Of everything she'd been through...of all she knew would come.

"Khira, look at me."

She didn't want to. But his gaze beckoned and when she dared meet it, she felt as if she might drown in the deep, crystalline pools of his gaze. He could see into the heart of her – she knew it without question.

What did he see there, hidden, dark and secret?

His hold, everything about him, gentled. "I would never have let you suffer this. I'll tell you a secret. Maybe then you'll trust me."

He kissed her mouth, breathed into her, filled her with starlight.

"You were more than a meal to me – you were so lovely that night. I had to have you, I wouldn't have let you go without a taste, but not because I was hungry. Please believe that. I deliberately ensnared you. I used every trick I have, and I have many you can't even guess at. But then I realized when I was with you, I was more myself than ever I had been in years. I enjoyed you – not as food, as a woman. But if I could take it back I would."

Khira wished she could believe him. But all she felt inside was anger and resentment. And something indefinable that made her want to run away as fast as she could. "I have taken lives because of what you did to me. I will never forgive you." She said it emotionlessly and somehow that made the words seem truer.

"You're not a bad person."

"I felt nothing," she admitted coldly, filled with self-loathing. "Less than nothing, seeing them suffer when I was through using them. They meant nothing to me."

"But you did what was right by them when you could. Yes, you let that would-be rapist rot by that bar—yeah, I read about it—he was a man who deserved much worse than so pleasant a death. The others were collateral damage, but they died in the most pleasant way."

"That doesn't make it right," she growled.

"No. And it never has to happen again. So long as you stay close to me—listen to me when I instruct you and trust me—you will not kill again. I swear it." His vow burned behind his eyes, hardened the edges of his mouth.

Khira hated his beauty.

"How can you think you know so much about me?" she hissed. "About what I've done?"

"I am what you are. I made you what you are. All you are is mine, Khira. All I am is yours. You cannot hide from me now that I've found you. You opened to me willingly, and from that first night to this day and beyond, you will always be open to me."

"You talk so strangely. You act so strangely. Like a barbarian or a poet. I am not your property. I am not a child you can lure away with pretty words, like candy."

"I *am* strange. I *am* a poet and a barbarian. A lover and a sinner. I am not like other men, as you know." He chuckled and tucked a wayward strand of crimson hair behind her ear. She was relieved to see it did not fall out into his fingers. "And you *are* mine."

She rolled off him, pulling hard as she expected him to try and restrain her, hitting the floor hard when he did not. "Will this disease kill me?" she asked hesitantly, righting herself to sit on the floor by the bed.

"No." He petted her hair tenderly. Khira swatted his hand away, even as she found herself leaning back into the caress.

"And no one, outside others like us, knows what this sickness is?"

"No. We really are alone, Khira. We've only each other."

"I'll have to kill myself," she whispered, more to herself than to him.

His hand fisted in her hair and jerked her head back painfully so that her neck craned and she could meet his fierce gaze and bared teeth. "Don't be stupid. I told you already you can't, so stop saying it. You'll learn to cope with this. To control it. You may learn to love it," he bit out savagely.

Love it? Love this? The monster alive and growing inside her? "Never!" She vowed it with all the fervor in her pounding heart.

"Why not? What's so wrong with you, with what you'll become once you accept my help? You're infected with a thirst for life. And life is what you will have. People will line up to give you all you need." He smiled, but it wasn't a particularly pretty expression on his perfectly formed face. "You know, having this disease, it immunizes you to all others. All. Isn't that something to be happy about?"

She curled her lip. "No more runny noses, no cancers or fevers, just loose teeth, bald patches and hunger pains that make me wish I was never born? Just the need to use people like sacks of meat and leave them to rot when I've had my fill?" Khira scoffed. "Sounds peachy. But forgive me if I don't dance for joy."

"I told you, such extremes will not burden you if you are careful to feed yourself properly." He released her hair, nearly shoving her away. "You'll be fine once the shock has worn off." He turned his intense gaze to the sun shining through her window. "At least you're not alone. I'm here, and I am not going anywhere."

She was glad, savagely glad to hear that promise. The intensity of that satisfaction startled her and then she felt revulsion at the collapse of her own independent spirit. She pushed the joy away with hatred for such a personal and emotionally raw response—to desire a man she hardly knew *so much*, to want to be with him, to want him to want it too. It smacked of codependency of the worst kind and a lovesick yearning she feared made her weak. She needed no man, no lover, no *keeper*!

Why, then, did her heart ache for his tenderness and his devotion?

Out of pride Khira couldn't bear to be anywhere near him when she started crying. With a choked sob, she ran to the bathroom and slammed the door, locking it firmly behind her.

Sliding to the cold tile floor, she wept as silently as she could, face buried in her hands, knowing he would be listening but determined that Christoph would see no more weakness in her. Not now. Not ever.

When she was done feeling sorry for herself she finally had a plan. One worth trying, at least. And once she was dressed in the only covering she could find in the bathroom, she set about seeing it put into action.

She'd be damned before she'd be anyone's willing chattel.

Chapter Twelve

Thirty-six hours later

There were worse things than damnation.

She'd felt so good until *they* arrived. So safe and clever. Everything was going to be okay, she knew it.

Until the hunger pains assailed her. Until the crowd of drop-dead gorgeous men arrived in the lobby of her hotel. Until her mouth grew dry and her stomach cramped viciously.

So many men. So close and ripe for the taking. They were a potent lure she was powerless to resist. Khira wasn't even anywhere near the lobby when the busloads of models arrived, and still she felt the pull of all the testosterone-laden bodies from four floors up.

Of all the hotels in all the world, she'd chosen to hide out in the one that hosted some annual bodybuilding competition she'd never heard of. Khira knew she should have left Savannah—but she didn't have the money to flee too far from the only home she'd ever known.

While she scented the tasty prey like a wolf on the hunt, it seemed they scented her too. Three times, three different people had tried to enter her room, mistaking it for theirs. Or so they'd explained. But why, then, had they knocked? Did they usually knock on the doors of their own rooms?

Didn't matter. Khira wanted to eat all of them. So she forced herself to send them away, being as rude and crude as possible, slamming her door in each and every one of their faces before she found herself beckoning them into her lair.

Her black widow's web.

Desperate for a distraction, she dialed Anna's cell number. After being redirected to a full mailbox, she hung up with a curse, gathered her courage and dialed Geoff's number. She had to talk to someone, anyone safe and familiar who might give her the strength she needed to ignore her ravenous appetite and the feast that called to her.

Geoff answered on the third ring. "Khira! I'm so glad to hear your voice." He paused. "I was afraid you might not want to talk to me ever again."

It was hard, but she swallowed down her immediate desire to invite him over. "I'm sorry for what happened."

"Don't be, hon. I'm not," he said gently. "Elliott and I made up, thanks to you. We've never been closer."

"I'm happy for you." She had to force the words past the lump of tears in her throat. It was such a relief to hear him well and happy.

"I'm sorry if I came on too strong," he said quietly.

"No. Of course you didn't," she said, feeling such guilt it was a wonder she didn't die of it. It was she who should be apologizing to him. For everything.

"This won't come between us will it?" He sounded so tentative, obviously treading carefully.

"Of course not."

"You haven't been at work."

"I, uh, I quit."

Geoff was silent for a beat. "Too stressful?"

It took Khira a moment to remember that everyone believed she'd been having anxiety attacks. "Yeah." She latched onto the excuse. "I'm thinking about a new career. Maybe massotherapy." She heard the teasing words, a career choice pulled out of thin air at just that moment, and realized it might not be a bad idea.

Geoff laughed, disbelievingly. "You want to be a masseuse?"

"Eventually, yeah." She reckoned it might be an easy way to feed off the pleasure of others, tactile contact that brought ease, her fingers moving on pliant flesh. Maybe it could work. Maybe not. Only time would tell, but at least now she had one option. Until she had a better plan, Khira would have to use what little funds she had to relocate, to escape Christoph's web, then work fast food or retail to pay the bills until she found a new way to live. A new career. A new life.

"Well...I'll admit you have a magic touch." There was a soft smile in his voice and her mouth watered. "Elliott and I have been going at it nonstop since that night. It's like we've been infected with lust." He chuckled, so lighthearted in his joy.

Khira wanted to crawl under a rock and never come out again.

He sobered. "I hope I didn't hurt you. When I, uh...you know. I didn't use any lube or anything and I should have."

He *had* hurt her a little, entering her in such a raw and masculine way, in a way she'd never been breached before. But the pain hadn't mattered and there was nothing for her to forgive. After all, she would have likely killed him but for Christoph's timely interference. "I'm fine, Geoff."

"Did you like it?" He sounded so unsure, so halting. It was clear he wanted to know that she had, if only a little.

"I did." Her voice was husky. Her nipples hard at the memory of him holding her. Touching her. "But I'm glad you and Elliott have smoothed things over."

"He wants to see you again." Geoff's soft voice touched her like a finger tracing the shell of her ear through the phone. "We both do."

"Not just now," Khira hedged gently, despite the devil in her that screamed, *yes, yes invite them both to your lair!* "I'm busy with my own guy."

Geoff was quiet for a moment. "He is a yummy one. Not too polite though—he ran us out before we could even dress. I was half-asleep, can't remember too clearly what happened but I got the feeling he didn't care for me at all. Seems possessive. I think he was pretty pissed to have caught us all together like that."

Now Khira laughed. "I doubt it."

"So he wouldn't mind us seeing each other again?"

"We'll see." She kept her tone light. "Goodbye, Geoff." Was it her imagination or was the goodbye a final farewell?

"Hugs, Khira. See you around."

Khira knew he wouldn't. Not if she was as careful as she knew she must be from here on out.

The hail of a hundred well-toned and handsome bodies pulled at her from beyond her room. Resisting it was so hard to do. It took every ounce of strength she possessed to keep from bolting for the door, the elevator and the lobby below.

Her mouth was as dry as the Sahara. Her belly as empty as a politician's promises.

This could not continue. Not if she was to retain any shred of her sanity.

There was another knock at her door, a strong heartbeat beyond it. She dared not open the door to see who it was. Her control was hanging by a silken thread. "Go away!"

There was a grumpy mumble and fading footsteps after.

Ever since she'd crawled out her bathroom window, clothed only in a flimsy silk robe, she'd been running from herself. Of the thing she had become.

From Christoph.

And from all the eyes that had lingered on her as she'd fled her home to this hotel. So many people had stopped, watched her, eyes glazed with fascination and unholy desire. The desk clerk had nearly pounced on her when she'd booked her room. The woman hadn't even batted an eyelash when Khira revealed she didn't have her ID or credit card on her. She'd just given Khira a room key and assured her that she could stay as long as she wanted. In addition, she'd ordered some clothes from the boutique for Khira to wear, in place of the shiny silk robe.

Careful to thank the woman without encouraging further conversation, Khira had fled to the room. Running from the invitation plainly writ in the desk clerk's heated gaze, from her own nearly overpowering response to it. She hadn't ventured out since, hadn't risked it.

With the return of her hunger—mostly absent until now thanks to her fulfilling encounter with Christoph, though she was in no way grateful to him seeing as how he owed her so much more than a mere feeding—she realized that her choices were few.

Dwindling with each second that passed. With each new knock upon her door.

She could fight the hunger until the pain was so great she grabbed the first warm body and stole all life from it.

She could find a willing partner and drain them to the point of death, call the paramedics and repeat the scenario each night until some authority figure caught on and charged her with assault. Or murder.

Massotherapy might be a viable outlet, given a few months' training. But did she have to have sex to fully feed the need? Did she need to kiss a mouth to drink its life essence down? Or was it just pleasure that could sustain her?

The public was not safe from her. Nor she from them.

The thought of suicide was becoming...more than intriguing.

Maybe Christoph was wrong. Maybe she was strong enough to go through with suicide, to defeat the thing inside her that would try to keep her from it.

Suicide. Making friends with death. Didn't sound so bad, really. She needed a friend.

She missed her former self. Her lost life. Khira had been the clichéd girl next door. Not pretty enough to be beautiful, not too boring to be friendless, careful with her lovers but in no way prudish or frigid. She'd taken so much of that for granted.

Now...she couldn't bear to look at herself in a mirror. Her ugliness went deeper than her physical defects. When she looked at herself with her wide, dark eyes, she saw

evil. She saw murder. A sexual predator worse than any outside the pages of myth or legend. Her former self was gone and in its place there stood a stranger more frightening than any alien invader.

Her ugliness grew with each passing hour. With each breath that filled her, sustained her. It would worsen until the breath of life she needed from a human host could heal her again.

What was she to do? Build a new life? What was left of her to build a new life *with*?

Sleep. That was what she needed now, Khira decided. She hadn't slept since her night with Christoph. Perhaps rest would ease her suffering.

Why then, when she turned to crawl into the bed, did she find herself leaving her room?

Heading for the elevator.

Hitting the button for the lobby.

I want the sky to fall in. To stop me before I lose what's left of me, she thought, unbuttoning the top two buttons of her blouse, feeling that Cheshire grin scar her face as the doors opened to reveal a swarm of perfectly formed bodies. *I want the moon to come crashing down. I want the world to end. Before I kill again.*

There were men and women—both sexes were competing in the show. All were beautiful, healthy, robust and...delectable. All noticed her, almost at once. But it was the men Khira wanted...though from the smoky-eyed glances from some of the women, she began to care less and less that she was, in her former life, a heterosexual.

The crowd enveloped her as she stepped free of the elevator car.

Dozens of warm bodies brushed against her.

The hotel's doors were open to the balmy night air blowing in from River Street. The competition attendees spilled beyond them. Khira's footsteps brought her through them and the crowd moved with her. It was hard to move among them. With each step she took, it seemed they pressed farther in on her.

A brutal spasm tore through her. She stumbled. A hand caught her, righted her. The man to whom the hand belonged smiled at her, revealing perfect veneers. He looked as sweetly tempting as a wedding cake. She swooned into him and he kissed her.

The taste was beyond description. He smelled of warmed coconut oil.

The crowd undulated against her, against him, pressing their bodies closer together. There was no mistaking his eager consent pressed hard and heavy against her tummy. Without any need for invitation, she reached into his pants and found his cock, wrapping her fingers around it tight and fast.

Her tongue, like poison, swept into his perfect mouth, stealing life in the deepening of the kiss.

He groaned. Food for her, no more than that, no less. He gripped her, a perfect stranger demanding as if he owned her, but it was she who took, she who dominated. He pumped his cock until his hot spill of cum burned wet in her palm, and she sucked him dry through a kiss until he collapsed in a twitching heap at her feet.

No one noticed. Or no one cared. Hands reached for her. Tugging her clothes, her hair, her arms. A feast that begged to be consumed.

Khira grabbed another body, lush with curves and the scent of some floral perfume meant to tease the senses. The woman was taller than she, but eagerly bent down to kiss her as Khira rose up on her toes. And then the woman's hand was rubbing Khira's sex through the material of her trousers, and Khira's hips were pumping into the marvelous seduction of her touch.

Their mouths opened. Their tongues entwined. Khira sucked, the woman moaned, and then the flow of power came. It filled her, like a tick fat with blood, but still the ache was there. The need. The life force flowed out of Khira, somehow escaping her, seeping outward like a stain on wet broadcloth, infecting the people around them in some way Khira didn't immediately understand. Loosing that much energy, she was still hungry.

Drained, the woman fell at Khira's feet, mouth slack and bloodless, only the whites of her eyes showing beneath fluttering lashes.

The crowd became a mob. It surged around Khira, as voracious and hungry as her own unrelenting appetite. People were everywhere and they were all clamoring for her.

The force that was feeding Khira spilled out again, warm like a pulse, like the loosening of a bladder. It felt good, but it also hurt and made her appetite that much more demanding.

The screams began.

Someone jerked Khira's hair so hard she lost her footing and nearly fell. Another stranger grabbed her hand and pulled so hard her socket popped and instant, physical agony ripped a cry from her lips. But that pain was nothing compared to her corrupt hunger.

Long nails raked down her back—her shirt was in tatters—the pain sharpened her hunger. Brought a growl from her lips. Her new bra was undone and hanging uselessly beneath the rags of her bloodstained shirt. Hands found her, twisting her nipples, rubbing her belly, touching any expanse of skin they could reach. Faceless attackers who demanded her attention.

Khira had no fear of them. Only of herself and of what she was doing. What she was going to *keep* doing until she was caught or killed by the voracious mob.

She reached out blindly and found a hand reaching back for her. She took it and pulled her new meal/lover close. The young man used his whole body to rub against her. Someone behind Khira jerked the remnants of her shirt away and she leaned inward, naked from the waist up, to press her aching tits against the hot, sweaty flesh of the man in her arms.

His kiss was so carnal her toes curled. There was little resistance when she sucked the life from him. He died in her arms, one twitch only to protest, still and cold when she was through.

Feeling like the anti-Christ come with death disguised as pleasure, Khira wiped his spittle from her mouth and willingly let the crowd take her deeper.

Two women ganged up on her and grabbed the waistband of her pants, yanking so hard that both of Khira's feet came off the ground and her upper body fell straight down. The side of her face struck the pavement, scraping her skin raw, bruising her cheekbone and jaw.

Her shoes nearly prevented the loss of her pants, but the women were determined. Other hands moved in and tore away her panties, scraps of cloth flying like confetti. Only this was no celebration. Now this was a riot. A violent coup of normal, healthy people driven mad by lust.

Her lust.

Someone shoved her down onto her back. A cock loomed, long and dangerous. The man masturbated, pumping his whole body to the rhythm of his hand around the staff of rigid flesh. Khira immediately scrambled away, even as she strained to press a worshipful kiss to the tip of the glistening wet phallus.

Have mercy! But even Khira knew she didn't deserve it. Would never deserve it now.

Someone's hand clamped down on her mouth. Khira felt the need and gave in to it, biting down as hard as she'd longed to for weeks, feeling her teeth meet through the flesh of the fingers. Tasting the blood and the life that swam in the fluid.

Her captor screamed, poor woman, and jerked the remnants of her fingers away.

A mouth flew into view and fell upon hers. Khira sucked hard, drawing the invisible warmth of life from the kiss, delighting in the taste and in the feel even as she wanted to retch from her unforgivable, heartless wantonness. Her mouth was full of blood, full of tissues that didn't belong to her, and full of this man's tongue as he kissed her deep. Deeper still.

Khira's anger was more at herself than this man. Until he raked his short nails down her arms, seeking to shred her to bits in his mindless lust. Then her anger swelled

to such immense proportions, only a bullet in her brain could have stopped her from biting off the tip of his thrusting tongue.

Oh fuck, she swallowed it!

Then she did retch but nothing came up. Only a spill of warmth. Power. More fuel to feed the inferno's flames.

Khira was pushed and tugged relentlessly. Bruised and sore and bleeding from scratches and bites. There was a vicious slap across her mouth and she tasted the copper of the strike. The bastard who hit her swam into view. "Look at me!" he demanded. "I want to fuck you right now. Right now!"

Too late. Another cock entered her from behind. She was wet enough that it felt good, even if she couldn't see the owner of the hard member raping her. She wanted it, wanted more, wanted everything.

"Fuck me!" the stranger begged, eyes glazed. He slapped her again but she didn't even feel it this time.

She pulled the man into her clinging embrace and pushed her ass out farther for the man at her back. As the cock rammed into her again and again, awkwardly for the most part as she did not fully position her body to receive each thrust properly, Khira met the soft cushion of the stranger's lips. Sucked his kiss hard, with all the fury and indignation she could muster in her mindless frenzy.

Within seconds he fell, just as the others before him had.

She stepped over him and the cock slid free of her as she fled. But the surge of the crowd followed her and soon she was caught again, thrust to the ground, and a mouth was eating out her pussy with a ferocious demand that made her come almost instantly.

Wet. Tight. Slick. Sweaty. Bloody. Painful. Everywhere was sex and violence.

Mouths tugged at her nipples. Hands were everywhere on her body. Khira wanted to scream but a mouth took hers, fed her more power, which overflowed and spilled once more into the crowd.

She was too full. But there was so much more to eat, to devour. How could she stop herself?

Sirens blared. The police had arrived on the edges of the riot, far beyond Khira's ability to see, to beg for their assistance.

The smell of sweat and sex and cum made it difficult for her to breathe through her nose. She pushed away the owner of the lips stuck fast to hers, trying to catch a breath with her mouth instead of her nose.

And she almost missed it...

That clean, redeeming scent. *Christoph*.

Khira tried to call for him. Her voice was barely a whisper.

Her body was flipped over, a cock stabbed at her anus. She cried out, stumbling to her knees, fighting the invasion, desperately crawling away from it.

A plump, wet pussy was pressed to her face. The labia ring clicked against Khira's teeth, so hard did the gyrating hips grind into her face.

Khira shrieked and jerked away.

Everywhere, everyone was naked. Moaning, crying, humping. Fucking. An orgy – a frenzy of fucking. And she was caught in the middle, the epicenter, the source of it all whom everyone sought like raving zombies.

"Christoph." Her voice was barely a whisper.

And then a cock was in her mouth and she was choking.

The scent...was it fading?

Dear God, no. She bit down on the cock, heard an unearthly cry of agony from above her, tasted blood and she was free. Gaining her feet, turning in dizzy circles, she was sobbing, calling out in hoarse gasps.

The colored strobes of lights nearly blinded her behind her sheen of falling tears.

Someone bit her elbow and she struck back with it, feeling the teeth break with her instinctive movement.

Her body wore a dozen bite marks. There was no telling how many of the people sported the imprint of her own teeth. Her jaw felt bruised from hard biting...

A uniformed woman pressed to her. *Halfway* uniformed—the folds of a police officer's standard threads were already in tatters. Her bulletproof vest was hanging loose. "You smell so good," the woman said, reaching with blind lust for Khira.

Anarchy then. And so it was. Not even the law could save them now.

The woman hugged her. Humped her—movements sinuous, graceful, but hurried and frantic.

Instinctively, Khira reached for the woman's gun. The officer didn't even blink when she took it. But the woman bellowed her rage as Khira tore from her embrace and ran beyond her clinging grasp.

There was only one thing Khira could do to end this.

Christoph had underestimated her resolve. Underestimated her strength, even against the sickness inside. Khira knew it was time to stop the rage. The suffering.

She put the barrel of the gun in her mouth.

No. No. No!

Khira ignored the innate urge to stop.

And closing her eyes, she pulled the trigger with a muffled sigh.

"Khira!"

Balsam and suede were warm and welcome accompaniments to her death. But she didn't die. The damned gun didn't fire.

Fuck! She roared her anguish, even as her flooded system rejoiced at the reprieve.

The safety. Stupid. Khira had forgotten about the safety.

Hands shaking, she pulled the barrel out of her mouth, stumbled when someone shoved her down and began humping her leg like a mindless animal, and frantically searched for a way to make the firearm work properly. Khira wasn't a gun buff, indeed

had only fired an air rifle when she was a kid playing with her boy cousins who adored pretend warfare.

There was a tiny lever grooved into the side of the gun, above the trigger. It moved when Khira nudged it. She'd seen enough violent movies to get the idea.

The man fucking her leg grunted, splashing her thigh with the hot, wet gush of his cum.

"Khira!"

The scent was stronger now, overpowering the reek of sex and death. Or was it? Perhaps Christoph's aroma was a figment of her fragmented mind. Khira no longer cared. She put the barrel in her mouth again—her hand didn't want to do it but she made it follow her command. She was shaking so hard the metal might have chipped her teeth.

The man coming on her leg was suddenly gone. She squeezed the trigger...the gun was snatched from her hand, cutting the roof of her mouth cruelly. It exploded in a flash of light as Christoph threw it far into the surging crowd. The odor of gunpowder burned her sensitive nose. *"Khira! For God's sake, get up."*

"Christoph." Her voice was like bloody gravel. *"I want that gun. I need it!"*

Someone tried to force a cock into her. Christoph turned and threw a savage punch. Khira heard the breaking of cartilage and bone, and saw a spray of liquid crimson. Christoph turned back to her, grabbing her arms. *"Get up!"* It was a command that threatened dire consequences should she disobey it.

"I can do it. I can take my life, I know I can. I'm strong enough, in this moment—let me die!" she begged, blindly looking for something nearby that could be used as a weapon.

"I can't." His eyes swam into her view. So beautiful. Soulful. Naked for her to read. *"I can't let you end this way. Don't make me let you go."*

Someone grabbed her, jerking her to her feet, away from Christoph.

Christoph followed, bellowing his rage, and pummeled her captor into the ground with savage ease until she was free.

Full but still wanting, Khira clung to Christoph, limp against his supporting frame. "I can't continue like this," she sobbed, broken, bruised and sore. Dead inside but for the light of him sustaining her.

His arms were around her. "You don't have to," he said, cradling her close, protecting her from her tormentors.

She shook so hard her teeth shredded her lips. All she could taste anymore was blood.

He shook her until her head fell back. "Khira, look at me."

She did. He was *so* beautiful. So set apart from the madness around and inside of her that he was like a cool draught on a hot, dry day. His hair was frazzled but still perfectly styled. His face was writ with worry, but so handsome as to make her loins ache. His body held the forces of chaos at bay, so strong, so solid, he didn't even sway as the mob continually pressed against him. His touch, the imprint of his fingertips on her raw skin, eased her suffering. Made her feel that calm was not impossible if only she could stay awhile with him holding her like this.

Her mind felt splintered but he was there to keep the pieces safe until they could be put back together again.

No. Khira didn't want his help. Did not deserve it.

"You need me. Submit to me. Please." Christoph said the words against her cheek so that she felt them as well as heard them.

There was real emotion in his voice. Real empathy in his face. His touch. The beating of his heart revealed more to her than a thousand conversations with anyone she'd ever known before.

"Please." He had her head in his hands, his mouth on her face.

His voice, begging so prettily, reached her stony heart at last.

There was nothing left within her to deny him. And if there had been, she wouldn't have dared. She *did* need him. But more than that, she wanted him. Beyond sex, beyond food — she wanted him.

Khira said that last aloud before she could stop the words from leaking out.

"I know. Better than you give me credit for," he murmured. "Submit to me."

And it was as if all her pain was taken from her. *He* took it. Willingly, he shouldered the burden, and Khira knew he always would.

"Love me." It was her last bastion of strength, torn from her, her resistance to this need she had for him to feel more for her than mere lust. Once she let it go, she felt freer. Not weaker.

The olive green and smoke gray swallowed her and her tremulous, heartfelt supplication. The color of his eyes became her whole world. "I will."

It was a vow. They both felt the cataclysmic power of it. The finality of it.

"I didn't mean for this..."

"I know." His lips moved, the words spoken against hers. "It's going to be all right."

"Take me away from all of this, Christoph." She wept so hard she gagged.

He did. Christoph swept her up into his arms and ran with her through the mob. The crowd parted. His will made it so.

His scent cocooned her and no one managed to touch her — no one dared. She was held safe in the cage of his protection. The surest thing, the only knowledge that mattered, was that Christoph would always keep her safe. Would always want to. No matter what kind of monster she was, he was her monster too. And they belonged together.

Behind them, the orgy ate up the streets, consuming all who dared venture too close. Self-sustaining now, while the catalyst that started it all was spirited away to safety.

Epilogue

Seven months later

Geoff couldn't find her. She'd been missing for months, ever since the orgiastic riot in the River Street district, during which over two dozen people died, half of whom were crushed or trampled to death. He knew it was time to admit defeat and stop looking. To forget her if he could.

Whatever had happened, whatever was happening to him now, she was okay. He had to believe that. If not...he was alone. Alone with whatever demon was riding him. She hadn't been found by the police, alive or otherwise. She was somewhere safe, at least. Had to be.

He needed her to be.

He wasn't certain—couldn't be certain—but he suspected Khira had everything to do with his demon. Not that he was angry or seeking revenge. He just wanted to understand. If she had the answers, wherever she may be, he wanted to find her, to hear them. To try and make sense of all that had happened since that incredible night he and Elliott had shared with her.

Elliott. Geoff had thought him the love of his life once. Elliott, long gone now, no love lost...and that wounded him the most. That he felt no remorse in losing Elliott said it all.

He wasn't the same person he'd known all his life. Hadn't been since being with Khira.

Since that night he'd...lusted. For pleasure. For life. Like food. From men. But also from women.

The faithless Elliott had found him and three other men engaged *in flagrante delicto*. He'd accused Geoff of being a nympho—quite ironic given all the times Elliott had

cheated on *him*. Geoff had cheated, yes, with many, yes, but not in an emotional sense. Until the end, he'd still felt love for Elliott. While Geoff had often heard the same excuse from Elliott to justify his indiscretions, Geoff suspected in his case it was far truer a claim.

Whatever had infected him, driven his every thought and deed since his encounter with Khira, it hadn't touched Elliott. Only him. And once Elliott had gone, it was so much easier to give in to his new addiction...and it felt almost as good as he'd once thought true love had felt.

Night after night, Geoff fucked. It didn't matter who it was, so long as they screwed, found pleasure, intense release, so that he could feed a need so great it made him *hurt* if he didn't have sex as often as possible. With as many people as possible. In the most pleasurable ways imaginable.

It was the pleasure that made the...food...taste so good. So satisfying. Geoff was a fast learner and that was one of the first of many, many lessons over the past long months. Lessons he'd learned instinctively, like a wild thing, a predator.

Yes. That was how he felt. Like a predator. It felt...good. Mostly.

It wasn't that bad, being a nympho. It really wasn't. Especially knowing, as evidenced by his frantic research into the riot seven months ago and the events leading up to it, that things could be so much worse.

Wherever Khira was—whatever *he* now was—Geoff hoped she was happy. And well fed.

Geoff downed the last shot of bourbon, paid his tab and prowled deeper into the club to lure in his one-night stand. No strings. No repercussions. So long as he was very, very careful.

It would not do at all to fall in love with his prey.

About the Author

Sherri L. King lives in the American Deep South with her husband, artist and illustrator Darrell King. Critically acclaimed author of *The Horde Wars* and *Moon Lust* series, her primary interests lie in the world of action packed paranormals, though she's been known to dabble in several other genres as time permits.

Sherri welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Sherri L. King

Bachelorette

Beyond Illusion

Ellora's Cavemen: Tales From the Temple III *anthology*

Ferocious

Fetish

Full Moon Xmas

Horde Wars: Ravenous

Horde Wars: Wanton Fire

Horde Wars: Razor's Edge

Horde Wars: Lord of the Deep

Manaconda *anthology*

Moon Lust

Moon Lust: Bitten

Moon Lust: Feral Heat

Moon Lust: Mating Season

Rayven's Awakening

Sanctuary

Shikar: Caress of Flame

Shikar: Ride the Lightning

Sin and Salvation

Sterling Files 1: Steele

Sterling Files 2: Vicious

Sterling Files 3: Fyre

Sterling Files 4: Hyde

The Jewel



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com