

Changeling Press

Soul Familiar 1:

Lucky DOG

Kate Steele

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Kate Steele

My name is Alex Layton and I'm a soul familiar. What's that, you ask? Well, as you might already know, having a familiar is the icing on the cake for a magic practitioner. A familiar enhances their power and gives them the ability to work spells they might otherwise find beyond their reach. Having a soul familiar as a partner goes way beyond cake, baby. We work with our partner and bond with them heart, mind, body, and soul. It's a true joining imbued with love and magic.

All that aside, I'm about to tell you a little story of how Tyler Montgomery, an untrained wizard, summons me to help him with a small problem. It seems Tyler's had a spell cast on him. It prevents him from getting close to anyone in any way for any reason -- including sex.

Fortunately for Tyler, I find myself very eager to help him. Of course it doesn't hurt one bit that he's a sweet and sexy virgin. I've had over two hundred years of magical and bedroom experience. I'm the perfect guy to break this spell and if I help myself to a taste of Tyler, well, where's the harm in that? Hmm?

Chapter One

What is it they say? I was minding my own business when... so yeah, trite as it sounds, that's how it began. How what began, you say? Well, maybe I should start at square one. First of all my name is Alex Layton. I'm an even six feet tall with hair that's been described, by a guy who was half in the bag at the time and waxing poetic, or so *he* thought, as raven's wing black. I have green eyes and a great body. As you can tell, I'm not modest. I'm built, I'm sexy as hell, and I'd know it even if it weren't for the multitude of men and women who throw themselves at me. I'm also gay, so the women don't get a tumble... but the men? Let's just say when it comes to sex, I'm no virgin. At this point in time, I look like I'm in my mid-twenties. I'm actually well over two hundred years old -- and no, I'm not nuts. I've savored every year of those two hundred plus and I plan to enjoy many more.

By day, in this incarnation, I'm a sculptor and believe it or not, I actually make a great living at it. I do some portrait busts but mostly ancient warriors and mythological creatures like dragons, unicorns and mermen, all of which I've seen for real. I've had my stuff in galleries and museum exhibits; my name is well known among the artsy crowd. They pay mucho bucks to have a genuine Layton gracing their homes.

By night, or more precisely twenty-four hours a day, I'm an unmastered soul familiar. Yeah, you heard right, a soul familiar. Now I know you've heard the term familiar. Any competent witch will tell you having a familiar is like the icing on the cake for a magic practitioner. The familiar enhances their powers and helps them pull off spells that would normally be beyond their capacity. Soul familiars take that a few steps further. We not only enhance our master's power, we bond with them, soul to soul in a relationship so deep and intimate we might as well share the same skin.

And that's why I have no master. I've never met anyone I'd give that much of myself to. You see, soul familiars have a choice. We can't be coerced, captured or impelled. We have enough power in our own right that no practicing witch or wizard, no matter how powerful, could ever force us into their service. Believe me, a few have tried, and to their own chagrin have learned a hard lesson in the doing. I remember that one guy who I stripped of his power and placed as a shoe salesman at Macy's for five years. Lemme think, now what was his name? Oh well, it doesn't matter. Even now that he's regained his former position, I'm told he gibbers in fear at the mention of *my* name. Heh, heh, nice. And don't sneer just because I'm gloating a little. I could have obliterated that posturing little bug but I was merciful... to a certain extent.

Anyway, at the moment I'm living in Upstate New York in a nice renovated two-story brick place that used to be a school house. The downstairs consists of a living room, kitchen, laundry room, and bathroom. The upstairs is a generously spacious loft and has a bedroom with connecting bath which takes up maybe a third of the floor space. The rest is my studio. It's a great place in a beautifully peaceful setting on fifteen acres of land, with neighbors far enough away not to be a pain in the ass.

It's also convenient in that the big cities aren't too far away, Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse and the biggest, NYC herself. I like living in the country, but I do the city thing too. Where else am I going to get some tail? I don't care what magazines tell you, finding a guy while doing your grocery shopping is one hell of a long shot. You stand a much better chance in a club or bathhouse.

And you can raise your brows in surprise or whatever other emotion you're dealing with but yeah, I've done the bathhouse scene. You never know what treasures you might discover in one of those places -- if you keep in mind that old saw "you can't judge a book by its cover." I remember when I lived in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, for a while. I used to pay a visit to this one particular bathhouse once a week. There was a guy there, about five feet six, early fifties, graying hair, glasses and cute. Yeah, you heard me, cute. Cuddly, charming, adorable, appealing, just insert an adjective of your own along those lines and you've got it.

He was intelligent as hell too. We had some of the most fascinating conversations, usually after sex. And we had a lot of sex. This guy was a total pig when it came to certain things like rimming. Damn, I still get hot thinking about that mouth of his. And talk about a talented cock sucker. You know how when you love to do something, you get really, *really* good at it? Well, this guy loved rimming and giving head and it showed. He put everything he had into it and I paid him back by fucking his ass with everything I had and honey, what I got can't be sneezed at.

We'd play for hours then just kick back and chow down on snacks and soft drinks while talking. I gotta tell ya, for a short-termmer -- that's slang for you human types -- he's led a totally amazing life. I really liked him. A lot. That's why I left.

He wasn't a practitioner of the magical arts and things could've gotten seriously dangerous for him if I'd let myself grow too attached. You see, soul familiars are such a rare commodity that we police those who have the luck and pure guts to attach themselves to one of us. The soul mate faces a test, a challenge of his or her fitness to be with one of our number. Had I chosen to be with him, he'd never have survived. Damn shame. I missed him when I moved. Still do.

Oh well, back to my current situation. As I was saying at the beginning of this little tale, I was in my studio, minding my own business, and just working away. It was late or early as the case may be. Nearly one a.m. I was really in the zone too. I was doing some exceedingly detailed work on the wings of a griffin. You ever try to sculpt feathers? Depending on how you do it, it's painstaking work. My technique involves toothpicks and fingers that cramp in protest after a couple of hours. I was nearing the tip of one wing when I felt this prickly sensation on the back of my neck. It actually made me shiver.

Before I knew it, that prickly feeling had turned into a tingle that started sliding down my spine. Someone was calling me. "Son of a bitch. You have *got* to be kidding me. *Now*? Not a nudge, not a nigger in how many years and you gotta call me now? Now when I'm *working*!"

Okay, I'll admit I was growling at this point but I hate to be interrupted while I'm in the zone. And you try watching yourself grow transparent, see how you like it. It's a little disconcerting. The clay-covered toothpick I was holding dropped from my slowly disappearing fingers and I heard a spate of protesting squeaks come from across the room. Mustering a breath, I managed to answer them. "It's okay, Kohe; I won't be gone long." I took one last, longing look at my griffin before I was unceremoniously yanked off to God knows where.

The trip was over in no time. It's no big deal and there's no scenery on the way. It's like zipping down a long, dark tunnel until light appears at the other end and wham, there you are. It *is* a little hard on the stomach. You, like, go weightless and there's this nifty spinning sensation. When you arrive it's sort of like how you feel after a really rad rollercoaster ride. Barf bags recommended for those of weak constitution.

So where was I? Good question. It looked like a public library. A small, old, and well-established one. There were rows of sturdy, free standing bookcases made of thick, prominently grained and heavy oak with every shelf filled with books. The end of each bookcase bore signs that labeled their content by subject and with what I assumed were card catalogue numbers.

Through the windows across the room, I could see it was dark outside and the clock on the wall proclaimed to the world that it was one oh three a.m. At least I was still in the same time zone, miracle of miracles. It also explained the subdued lighting. Apparently they turned off a good two-thirds of the overhead fluorescents after hours.

I was standing in an area that was obviously meant for in-house study. The carpet was a short-napped utilitarian gray and on it rested a couple of library tables in the same thick, heavy oak as the shelves. The chairs matched the tables and actually had the luxury of padded seats and backs.

I took a deep breath and almost hummed with pleasure. I love the smell of books. Libraries all have this same, basic aroma. It's a combination of paper and leather, ink and humanity. All that knowledge, information, and entertainment bound in millions of neat, tight rectangles. How easily it binds the humans who seek it. For some

people, books emit a siren song more beguiling than one sung by the most enchanting of sea nymphs. I might not be human but I guess I'm one of those people. I've had plenty of time to fill over the years and a good part of that has been whiled away in libraries. After all, I can't spend all my time carousing.

Here in this place, after hours and apparently all alone, I found another person who shared at least one of my interests. Head down and seemingly totally oblivious to my presence, was the person who'd summoned me. From where I stood and from what I could see at first, I wasn't impressed. He looked young. A mop of golden blond hair graced a head that was bent over a book. When he angled his chin slightly to read from one page to the next, I saw a glint of light. He was wearing glasses.

Barefoot, I made no sound as I crossed the carpeted floor. I leaned over him and in my best Lurch from the Addams Family imitation growled, "You rang."

Talk about a wild reaction. He let out this sort of panicked wail and flailed around a bit, knocking books and papers off the table before his chair tipped over backward. The next thing I knew, he was staring up at me from his new position... sprawled on the floor. I couldn't help myself. I started laughing. With those glasses and his mouth silently working in shock, he looked like a bewildered fish that had just been landed. Any residual annoyance I felt was swept away. This guy was no pompous and powerful wizard. Where magical arts were concerned, he was a total rookie, a real babe in the woods. I could feel the power pooled inside him but for the most part it was untapped and undirected. I'd have bet any amount of money he either didn't know he possessed it, or didn't know how to properly use it.

My mirth took a decided downturn at that thought and I silently studied him for a moment. Now that I was getting a better look at him, I'll admit my libido began taking note of some things I'd originally missed. For a guy, he was, no two ways about it, just plain gorgeous. His face was oval shaped, with an angular, sharply defined jaw line. The nose was slim. His upper lip was finely sculpted while the lower was just the right amount of plump to be nibbled on. And those eyes, *damn*. Behind those glasses were a

pair of the prettiest violet-tinged blue eyes I'd ever seen. Lashes and eyebrows a shade darker than the golden blond of his hair framed and accented them perfectly.

A blue plaid flannel shirt and jeans covered but couldn't disguise a body that had some clear-cut muscle definition. The kid either worked out or worked a job that kept him in shape. I let my gaze follow the sleek line of his body. I'd like to say I examined him minutely from top to bottom, but I'm gonna be honest here and say I got snagged partway down. On his groin. What can I say? I checked out his package and from what I could see, he was packing enough to make things more than a little interesting.

At that point, with my mouth starting to water, I figured it was time for the introductions. I sauntered over and held out a hand. "Sorry I scared you. Let me help you up."

Instead of taking the hand I offered, he scrambled away and nimbly got to his feet on his own. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"The name's Alex Layton and I'm here because you called me."

"I didn't call you."

"I beg to differ. You called."

"I didn't."

"Rather than get into a 'yes-you-did-no-I-didn't' endless loop here, let me prove it to you," I said.

Spotting a certain book among the pile of things that had been dragged off the table in my summoner's panicked surprise; I bent and picked it up. Despite the harsh treatment of being thrown to the floor, it had remained turned to the page last looked at. When I touched it, the book began to emit a gentle, luminous glow.

"What... what is that? What are you doing to make it shine like that?" the kid asked, his eyes going wide. He took a step closer.

"I'm not doing anything," I told him. I held the book out toward him. "This book is imbued with magic. When anyone with power touches it, it responds by glowing.

Didn't you notice it when you read from this page? This *is* the page you read from, isn't it?"

He looked at it and nodded.

"Did it gleam for you?"

"Well, a little bit, but I thought maybe it was just because my eyes were tired. I've been here for some time now, reading and stuff."

I pulled the book back and perused the open pages. "You read this out loud, didn't you?"

"Yeah. But I didn't think anything would happen. I don't have any mysterious powers. At least not that I know of."

I raised a brow in disbelief. He was trying to lie, and very badly. "Look, kid, you can try and deny it all you want but I can smell power, and this situation makes your little fib an exercise in futility, wouldn't you say? This spell you read is what brought me here. You might not want to admit it, but you've got the mojo to make things like this work. Unless you want to end up in a lot of trouble, I suggest you stay away from books like these."

"I can't and I'm not a kid. I'm twenty-two," he answered, glowering at me.

Okay, I admit, his expression was totally cute and I did my best not to smile but a few twitches of the lip got the better of me.

"Are you laughing at me?" he growled.

"Me? No. Why would I laugh? This is serious shit. Look... what's your name anyway? If you don't want me calling you kid, you need to give me a substitute and your name would be a good place to start."

"It's Tyler Montgomery."

"Great. Nice to meet you, Tyler. Why don't we both have a seat? I'll explain a few things, then I'll get out of your hair. All right?"

With a slight frown, Tyler grudgingly nodded. Together we picked his stuff up off the floor. He righted his chair and sat down while I took the seat to his left.

"So, here's the deal. You've got power, Tyler. Was someone in your family a magic practitioner?"

"My mother," he said without hesitation.

There was something in his voice when he said it, but I didn't pick up on it until it was too late. "Why hasn't she trained you?"

"She died when I was twelve."

"Oh crap. I'm sorry to hear that. That had to be tough for you," I told him and I really meant it. It's sad, kids without parents or loving parents more accurately. Sometimes not having the parents you were born to is a boon but then that's sad too. I knew, partially from personal experience. "What about your dad?" I asked.

"I never knew him. My mom was a single parent. When she died my aunt and uncle on my dad's side took me in. They didn't have any kids. They were good to me but they didn't know that part of my mother... or me."

That softly voiced confession really got to me. "You missed her."

"A lot."

"Well, damn. This is not good. You need someone to train you. Either that or like I said before, you need to leave these kinds of books strictly alone."

"I can't do that," he insisted.

"Why not?"

"I have... there's something... there's a problem."

I felt my brow furrow with the frown that formed between them. "What kind of a problem?" Tyler's cheeks flushed and he got a very self-conscious and pained expression on his face. All I could think was *this should be interesting*.

"Every time I try to... to be with someone, something happens."

Once more I found a smile trying to take control of my lips. "When you say be with someone. You mean sex?"

"Yes," he admitted tersely.

"Well, you know, something *is* supposed to happen when you're with a girl. Didn't your uncle ever have a talk with you, or surely you had sex-ed in school when you were younger?"

"I'm not talking about *that*. I know how sex works. I mean something shows up. Something that won't let me be with anyone. And by anyone I mean guys. I don't particularly like girls."

I nodded, unsurprised at his unselfconscious admission. It may sound strange to say this, but there's something about being a magic practitioner that lets us be completely honest in our view of sex. Maybe it's being closer to the very core of creation, the elements, and nature that lets us eschew all prejudices against any combination of gender or species. Whatever it was, there were times I wish we could pass this blessing on to you humans.

I answered his easily admitted truth with my own. "Well, in that we agree but what the hell are you talking about? What do you mean something shows up?"

"Here, let me show you."

Before I could say squat, Tyler had risen from his chair, plopped himself in my lap, and sealed his lips over mine. To say I was surprised is putting it mildly. To say I wasn't happy about it is an out and out lie. I slid my arms around him and took over that inexperienced kiss. Teasing those luscious lips with my tongue, I whispered, "Open," and hummed with approval when he obeyed.

I slid my tongue into the warm, wet heat of his mouth and found his tongue waiting there to greet me. We touched them together, then slid them sensuously over and around each other until even I, expert that I am, started feeling light-headed. His taste was exotic, erotic, and arousing. It flowed over my palate and I swear drifted straight up into my brain before arrowing down into my loins, making my cock start to stiffen in reaction.

I'd never had someone feel so instantly right in my arms. The flavor of him was simply and supremely delicious and the scent of him mesmerizing. The weight and warmth of him sank into my bones and imprinted itself into my very cells. He shifted in

my lap, his hip brushing against my cock. It went completely rigid in seconds flat and was doing its best to drill its way out of my jeans. It wanted Tyler and was demanding I get him.

Tyler pulled away a bit, ending our kiss. Breathing hard, his pupils dilated, he managed to gasp, "Man, you... you really know how to kiss."

I gave him my best slow and sexy smile. "Sweetheart, I know how to do a lot more than kiss."

Letting one hand slide down his back, I brought it around over his hip and thigh searching for a sign that he was just as turned on as I was. When I easily found it, I was pleased to note I wasn't the only one with a hard-on. Watching him closely, I started massaging his cock. Tyler's eyes closed and he groaned. The sound of it went straight through me and with my other hand cupping the back of his head, I held him, and guided our lips back together.

Those sweet moans and whimpers he made vibrated against my tongue and I swallowed them down like sparkling champagne. He squirmed and pushed into my hand, his movements touched by what seemed like desperation. I'd just gotten his button open and was going for the zipper on his jeans when I heard it. Growling.

At first I'd mistaken it for Tyler's I'm-turned-on-as-hell noises but it suddenly struck me that these sounds were much deeper, and they weren't tinged with pleasure. They were angry, warning growls and they were getting more hostile with each passing second. Pulling my mouth from Tyler's, I looked over his shoulder and met three sets of eyes filled with a great deal of antagonism.

What I was seeing was a sight even I'd never seen before. A cerbretta. You know the Greek legend of the three-headed dog Cerberus who guards the entrance to Hades? Well, he does exist but Cerberus is like... huge. What I was looking at was a sort of junior version. About the size of a large pit bull, a cerbretta, like Cerberus whom they're named after, has three heads. Three heads with very sharp teeth. And paws with razor sharp claws. And a temperament that doesn't take a lot of urging to react violently.

"Shit," I breathed. Near panic shot down my spine. Not for me but for the man in my arms. I had to protect him. "Tyler, I want you to stand up very slowly and get behind me."

"Okay. I'll stand up, but I really don't need to get behind you."

Tyler was panting lightly but considering the situation, his voice was strangely calm. I gripped his arm. "Don't be stupid. Just do what I say."

"It won't hurt me."

Apparently it was my turn to sit gaping like an open-mouthed fish. "You've seen this thing before?"

"Yeah. This is what I meant when I said something shows up every time I try to be with someone."

Tyler stood up and moved away from me until he was able to drop back into the chair he'd vacated. Seemingly satisfied, the cerbretta vanished.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Well, I'll be damned. A cerbretta shows up to prevent you from having *sex*?"

"Yeah, but not just that. I can't touch anyone for very long either. I can't even hold someone's hand for more than a few minutes," he plaintively confessed. "Now you know why I can't stop looking at the books. I've got to find a way to get rid of this thing. It was bad enough when I was a kid but now, well, I'm so horny I'm gonna *die*! And I'm gonna die a *virgin*!"

As comical as that final declaration was, I felt no urge to smile. All I could think about was how awful it would be to not be able to touch anyone, to not feel loving arms or the warmth and comfort of another's body next to your own. Tyler had to have suffered so much over the last few years. The ability to touch and be touched was one of the most precious things in the world. It brought with it a plethora of benefits. A sense of well-being, stress relief, relaxation, contentment, and solace when the mind or body were not at their peak or suffering some trauma. Not to mention the pleasures to be had when engaged in sexual congress with a lover.

In that moment I made up my mind. "All right. I'll help you, but you have to follow my instructions to the letter. Agreed?"

Tyler frowned and worried his bottom lip for a moment. "Um maybe, the thing is, how do I know you can really help me? After all, I don't know you or what you're capable of."

I heaved an exasperated sigh. "Did you even look at the book you read from?"

"Well, yes."

"The spell you read. What was it for?"

"To enlist the aid of a magic practitioner."

"Not just a magic practitioner. A familiar. A soul familiar. Did you read the entire chapter?"

"Um, no. I was paging through the book and I saw that part and I sort of got excited about it and just kind of, um, jumped in."

I rolled my eyes. "Just as I thought. From now on there will be no more jumping in. Where, by the way, did you get this book?" I picked up the fine leather-bound tome. It was smooth and warm against my fingertips and smelled delightfully rich and seasoned.

"It's part of the library's collection of rare books. It's usually kept locked up."

"And how did it become unlocked up?"

"I, uh, picked the lock on the case. I kind of have a talent for getting into things."

"Hmm. Well, this book is coming with us. This wasn't meant to be in human hands."

"But they'll think it was stolen! My friend who lets me in after hours will get in trouble."

"No, they won't and no one will get in trouble." Holding the book in my left hand, I closed my eyes, formed a simple request in my mind, and clicked the fingers of my right hand. A second book appeared on the table in front of me. I picked it up and handed it to Tyler. "Here. It's an exact duplicate without the magic. The most powerful

wizard in the world could read from it and nothing will happen. Now put it back where it belongs and let's get out of here. You've got a lot to learn."

"Get out of here? Where are we going?"

Feeling a thrill of lasciviousness wash over me, I couldn't stop the smirk that curved my lips. "My place."

Chapter Two

When we rematerialized at my house, a glance in Tyler's direction revealed the fact that his stomach hadn't accepted the ride very well. He was distinctly green around the gills.

"You're not going to throw up, are you?" I asked.

Pursing his lips tightly together, Tyler shook his head.

"Bullshit. Come on." I took his arm and steered him in the direction of the downstairs bathroom. "Just hold it in a few more seconds."

We reached the bathroom just in time. Apparently the sight of the toilet, a thing made to order when you feel like spewing, weakened Tyler's hold on his rebelling stomach. He rushed to that shining porcelain oasis, knelt before it, and lost the fight. Now I sympathized, I truly did. I remember my own first trip through the ether corridor or Satan's Subway as we in the know fondly refer to it. I didn't barf but it was a near thing. So I didn't, like, hold Tyler's hair back or anything. In fact I'll admit I kept as much distance between him and me as possible without leaving the room. Hey, I never claimed to be one of those competent caregiver types with the iron stomachs. Puke is a little beyond my comfort zone.

When he was finished, I did guide him to the sink so he could rinse his mouth out. The kid looked bad. His face had gone bone white, his eyes were watering, and his nose was running. Not pretty. I nudged a box of tissues in his direction and gave him a little privacy by crossing to the built-in cabinet across the room to grab a washcloth. Behind me I heard the sounds of nose blowing and turned to see him chucking the used tissue into the waste basket. Taking the washcloth, I dampened it with warm water and handed it over. Tyler removed his glasses, silently accepted it and wiped his face. While

he did that, I rummaged in a drawer of the vanity for a spare toothbrush and tore open the package.

“Here.”

Meeting his eyes, I paused a moment. Without the glasses shielding them, his eye color really popped. Maybe it was the fact that they’d been dampened by tears too, but the blue had intensified and the violet that blended in a soft ring at the outer reaches of his irises had darkened to a purple that was nearly black. The effect was truly beautiful, and I was captured by it for a moment before breaking free to grab the toothpaste from its place in the medicine cabinet.

“Um, why don’t you freshen up a bit then join me in the kitchen. I’ve got something there that’ll settle your stomach.”

Tyler nodded. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I left him and the sounds of teeth being brushed behind, to make my way to the kitchen. My kitchen wasn’t ultra modern but it suited me. The cabinets were all wood, painted a light cream color with simple stainless hardware. The refrigerator was white and the stove matched it. A white, double porcelain sink with a silver faucet was installed in the silver-speckled Formica covered counter below one window and I could look out over acres of fields and stands of trees while I did my dishes. The floor was topped by linoleum, easy to mop when I tracked mud in via the back porch. There was a mud room but sometimes I forget to take my shoes off and Kohe isn’t that fastidious either.

Who’s Kohe? My gargoyle. I can’t say he’s a pet, more of a companion really. He doesn’t speak but he’s definitely intelligent, way more than the average dog, more than the average human, I think. Apparently sensing my return, he materialized on the counter in front of me.

“I hope your feet are clean,” I commented while reaching for the plastic two liter bottle behind him.

Kohe tilted his head, gave me a quirky little smile and an innocent blink of big brown eyes before scampering over to the basket I kept filled with fruit. Selecting an apple, he took a huge bite and thoughtfully chewed. Settling into his usual squat/sit resting position, his eyes remained steady on my face.

I don't know how I knew what he was thinking; we have some sort of silent communication thing going on, but I felt the question behind those eyes. "You want to know who came with me."

Kohe nodded, finished his apple and started on a pear.

"His name is Tyler Montgomery." Scrounging in the cupboard for a glass, I filled it with ice from the freezer then returned to the counter to fill it full with lightly golden sparkling liquid from the bottle. "He's the one who called me. Junior wizard extraordinaire. He's just become my student."

One of Kohe's brows rose. It crinkled his forehead which wiggled one of the boney little nubbins serving as horns that rested between his tall, pointed ears. It was a strange sight, one that never failed to amuse me, but then gargoyles all have some claim to visual fame like that. They can be cute, frightening, rather angelic or downright demonic looking.

Kohe is sort of other-worldly scary adorable. He reminds me of a hairless marmoset with a perpetually pensive expression. He'd stand maybe a foot tall if he ever straightened up. He mostly adopts a sort of crouching posture, a leftover no doubt from his days of guarding churches in Europe. Most of the time he's gray in color, but he can do this cool chameleon thing where he blends with the background. It's totally weird to see him with multi-colored stripes or some other off the wall color scheme. His skin is surprisingly soft despite its rather craggy appearance and he sports a nice overall muscle definition, something I'm sure the ladies of his kind appreciate. His well-formed, nearly elegant and human looking hands and feet have slim fingers and toes that narrow toward the ends and are tipped with short, sturdy, and sharp retractable claws. He also has a tail. It's a sort of sinuous, rat-like prehensile deal which, as I

watched, plucked a banana from the fruit basket and swept it around Kohe's body to lay it in his waiting hand.

"Going heavy on the fruit, aren't we?" I commented and was given a grin that would make a lesser man cringe. Kohe's teeth were pearly white, the canines distinctly pointed. He was definitely an omnivore. His fondness for meat worked out nicely for me. I didn't have a rodent problem around the house.

He had peeled his banana and taken a bite when I heard a quick intake of breath behind me. I turned to see Tyler standing in the open doorway. Behind his glasses those beautiful eyes of his were opened wide in astonishment.

"Wh... what's that?" he stuttered.

"That's Kohe. Don't be afraid. He won't hurt you, but you two should get acquainted." I motioned for Tyler to come to me and it pleased me to no end when he did without question, though I suppose his trepidation over Kohe's presence had something to do with his prompt cooperation.

He stood by my side, and never one to miss an opportunity, I took advantage of his distraction and slid an arm around his waist. I really loved the way he felt next to me. Like he was meant to be there. Taking his hand, I offered it to Kohe who stopped eating his banana long enough to give it an obliging sniff. "Kohe, this is Tyler. He's going to be staying with us."

"I am?" Tyler asked, looking up at me in surprise.

"You are." Knowing the cerbretta would show any second now, I released my hold on him. "Pet him."

"Huh?"

"Pet Kohe. He likes to have his head rubbed, especially around the horns." I demonstrated and Kohe closed his eyes in ecstasy. His face crinkled up in a sort of grimace, a vaguely horrifying demonstration of bliss.

Tyler tentatively reached out to do as I asked. I withdrew my hand and watched the two of them bond. Tyler looked over at me, a bemused smile pulling at his lips. He yelped in surprise when Kohe disappeared. "Where'd he go?"

I shrugged. "He does that. You never know when or where he'll pop up."

At that moment Kohe returned. Tyler had dropped his hand to the counter and it still rested there. Kohe, the little pipsqueak, did his own petting, running his small hand over Tyler's fingers. To his credit, Tyler stayed perfectly still and let himself be caressed. Kohe made a humming little croon and held something out in his other hand.

"What?" Tyler asked.

"He wants to give you something."

"What are they?"

I peered into Kohe's open palm and smiled. "Before I tell you, you have to promise not to drop them. He's giving you a treasure."

"Okaaaay. What is it?"

"Dried mouse ears."

"Dried... are you kidding me?"

"Nope. He likes you. I've got quite a collection of them myself." I took another glass from the cupboard and spoke a couple of words over it. The glass changed, its shape doing a kind of melt and reform into a bottle with an etched stopper. "Lesson number one. It's easier to transform one object into another rather than try to conjure something from thin air. This process merely involves making a change to its molecular structure. You can keep your ears in the bottle."

Tyler gave me a silent owl-eyed look and nodded. Kohe chattered for attention and the mouse ears were handed over. Tyler solemnly thanked the little gargoyle and the tiny brown chips were installed in their bottle. The two of them exchanged smiles and I snorted. What a sight. It was actually kind of cute and it gave me a good feeling. Lord, I'm turning into a soft-hearted granny.

"So what exactly is Kohe?" Tyler asked. He'd reached out and was again rubbing short stuff's head.

"A gargoyle."

"I thought gargoyles were bigger."

"They come in all shapes and sizes."

"And he's a he?"

"Oh yeah. See the loincloth? I asked him to wear it. I may like men, but it was a little too much watching his naked pixie privates constantly dangling in the wind."

Tyler laughed then blinked and frowned a bit. "Jealous."

"What?"

"He says you're just jealous."

"You picked up on that?"

"Yeah. How did I know that and what does that mean?"

"Not sure. I've never known him to communicate with anyone else." I turned a speculative gaze from Tyler to Kohe and back again. "Hmm, interesting." Kohe smirked and disappeared before I could ask the question that popped into my head. "Deserter," I muttered, then realized I'd forgotten to offer the drink I'd poured Tyler. I reached out and scooted the glass in front of him. "Here you go. For your stomach."

Tyler picked it up, frowning thoughtfully. "What is it?"

"Take a sniff."

He did and smiled. "Ginger ale?"

"You were expecting a potion?"

"Well, kinda."

"Lesson two. Never complicate things when the mundane will work just as well."

He nodded and sipped. "So what did you mean when you said I'd be staying here?"

"Just that. You can't just pop in for an hour's lesson every day. You need to be here to study. At least five or six hours' worth of formal daily sessions and impromptu instruction as the opportunity or need arises. Is that a problem?"

"No. My classes are over for the semester, but I was supposed to go back to work for the lawn service that hired me last summer. I earn some extra cash that way to take some of the financial pressure off my aunt and uncle since they pay my tuition."

"What is it you do for the lawn service besides mow grass?"

"Trim hedges or tree limbs, landscaping, that kind of thing."

"So that's how you keep in shape."

My comment had Tyler dropping his head, a bashful gesture I found rather endearing. Jeez, this kid was getting under my skin fast, but somehow I was finding it hard to mind.

"I work out some too."

"It shows," I purred and grinned at the blush that stained his cheeks. "Tell you what. You mow my lawn, trim the hedges, and attend the gardens and I'll pay you so you don't miss out on the money you'd earn from your summer job."

"Really? But do you have enough lawn and all that to make it worthwhile?"

"I've got fifteen acres' worth of lawn and gardens. There'll be plenty for you to do in between your studies. Deal?"

"You bet. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now how about we go to bed?"

Tyler turned wide eyes in my direction. "But... the cerbretta."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Much as I'd like it to be different, you're sleeping on the sofa tonight."

"Oh."

I sidled up to him, cupped his chin in my hand, and gave him as long a kiss as I dared. "Was that disappointment I heard in your voice?"

Tyler bravely met my gaze. I wanted him and I wasn't afraid to let it show. He was an inexperienced virgin but an honest one. There was uncertainty but clear longing mirrored in his eyes.

"Maybe. Not that I like you or anything."

"Of course not. I'm sure you're no more attracted to me than I am to you."

"Probably not."

I smiled at his willingness to banter with me. "I'm glad we understand each other." I kissed him again, savoring the sweet taste and heat of it before ending it and breathing against his lips. "I am so going to ream your ass when we tame that beast."

"What makes you think I'll let you?" he answered, and the warmth of his breath feathering over my lips sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

Hot, Tyler was totally, totally hot, and he was stirring things in me in a way I wasn't sure I'd ever felt before. You'd think to someone with my experience that might have set some alarm bells ringing but no. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

"You'll let me have you because you want to know what it's like to have sex," I countered.

"After the spell's broken, I could do that with anybody."

"But you want me."

"You're awfully full of yourself."

With a grin I stepped away from him. "Lesson three. Honesty is the best policy. I'm getting sheets for your bed."

I left Tyler and his snort of amusement behind and went into the laundry room off the kitchen. I knew I had clean sheets in there as I'd just done laundry the day before. Grabbing a couple, I went back through the kitchen, collected Tyler, and had him follow me into the living room. Together we tucked a sheet over the sofa cushions then I ran upstairs and returned with a couple of pillows and a blanket while he added a second sheet.

"So where do you live, Tyler? What city and state?" I asked as I spread the blanket out over the top sheet.

"Lawrenceville, New York."

"I know where that's at. About one hundred miles east of here."

"One hundred miles? We traveled one hundred miles that fast?"

"That's the way the ether corridor works. We could go to China in about the same amount of time."

"Ether corridor?"

"The dark tunnel, that's what it's called. Officially."

"So where exactly am I?"

"About fifteen miles outside of Madison, New York."

"Still in the same state at least. So how are we going to do this? I have to tell my aunt and uncle something. I can't just disappear."

"I'll take you back in the morning; we'll go to your house. You can collect some clothes and things and tell your aunt and uncle you're staying with a friend for the summer. Do you think they'll object?"

"I don't think so, especially when I tell them I'll be working. Besides, I am twenty-two, you know. It's not like I'm a little kid. But... does that mean we have to go back the way we came?"

I gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder. "Yeah, but don't worry. The first trip's always the worst. You'll get used to it."

"I hope so. I'd hate to have to puke every time we did that."

Placing the pillows on the sofa, I gave the makeshift bed a quick once over. Satisfied, I turned to Tyler. "Well, you're all set. Feel free to take off as much clothing as you want. Get naked even. That's how I sleep." Under the speculative look he gave me, I admit I straightened a bit and preened. "Bet you can't wait to see that, huh?"

Tyler smiled and shook his head, his expression resigned. "You are such a narcissist."

"Lesson four. Know your own worth. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen and you know where the bathroom is. The nightlight comes on automatically so you'll be able to find your way with the lights out. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I made my way upstairs and at the landing turned to take a final look back. Tyler had removed his shoes and was unbuttoning his shirt. The sleek, cut chest that was revealed had me silently cursing a certain mythological beast. Tyler looked up and his eyes met mine. We stood and silently stared at each other for a moment and it was all I could do not to head back down those steps. Finally, with a sigh of regret, I left Tyler and went to my room.

While I undressed I ran through possible spells that might get rid of the cerbretta until a rather interesting idea popped into my head. Have I mentioned yet that I have a tendency to be selfish? Once I consider something mine, I don't like to share. It wasn't hard to guess that Tyler's mother was responsible for the cerbretta that guarded him. It was obviously meant to be a protection spell, but she'd gotten just one small part wrong. The part that was able to distinguish friend from foe. Now, that I could work with and work in my favor. Tyler would be mine and no one else could touch him.

Exceedingly pleased with myself, I climbed into bed. By this time it was going on three in the morning, according to the bright green numbers glowing at me from the bedside clock. I should have had no trouble falling asleep but a certain fledgling wizard kept insinuating his presence in my mind. Halfway between wakefulness and sleep, my mind kept pushing tempting visions, impressions, and memories on me. Shining golden hair, beautiful violet-tinged blue eyes, tender lips, a sweet, erotic flavor, the urgent sounds of another male craving sexual gratification, all these and more combined to make it impossible for me to relax.

Eyes closed, I rolled to my back, dislodging the covers. My cock was already stiff and I reached down, wrapping my fingers around it. Humming with pleasure, I slowly jacked myself. Up and down, up and down. The smooth, satiny skin glided against the slightly rough texture of my palm. Working with clay tends to dry your skin and I hadn't applied any lotion to my hands since my last session of sculpting.

The thought of lotion had me reaching for the bottle of lube that resided in the top drawer of the nightstand next to the bed. When you do something often enough, you don't necessarily need to see to perform the task again. Even with my eyes still closed, the lube came easily to hand and I poured a measure of it into my palm. Setting the bottle aside, I returned my newly anointed hand to my cock and groaned at the slick warmth that coated my sensitized skin. God, that felt good.

I settled in, my body comfortably positioned, the strokes to my cock firm and measured. The tension in my belly wound tighter. The longer I played, the more intense the feelings became. I was riding the high, unconsciously searching for something to

drive it to the peak when another vision formed in my mind. Tyler on the sofa. He'd pushed the covers back and was totally nude. On the coffee table was one of the bottles of hand lotion I kept handy in different places around the house. He'd obviously used it but not for its moisturizing properties. In the gleam of the nightlight from the bathroom I could see the glisten of white cream on his hand and on the full, hard erection he was attending to.

Subtle sounds, the kind you hear from the rubbing of sticky, slippery wet flesh, teased my ears as well as the rough, souging pants of Tyler's breath. He shifted his hips, pushing up into the rhythmic movement of his hand, and I found myself matching his speed and breathing with him, groaning with him.

"Tyler," I whispered and heard "Alex" in return.

The sound of my name on his lips electrified me. "*Christ. Faster,*" I whispered and was rewarded with a desperate "yes."

Our two hands moved in tandem, our hips rising into each stroke, our panting breaths in sync. The pleasure built higher and hotter and so suddenly fast, my head swam as all the blood in my body seemed to rush downward to pool and pulse below my belly and into my swollen cock. The tension I had purposefully raised from the moment I touched myself retaliated by punching me right in the gut, but there was no pain. Only blissful beats of pounding pleasure.

A curse was torn from my lips and my back bowed with the first hard spurt of semen that striped my torso. I could swear I heard a cry that echoed my own as unadulterated bliss burst free from the base of my spine, shot into my balls, and erupted again and again, manifesting as more and more of the pearly white cream that joined the initial thick ribbon that lay cooling against my skin.

Rocked to my very core, I lay there gasping for air while blindly chasing every tiny iota of pleasure that rippled through me. My heart was pounding and my fist, the one not massaging my cock, was convulsively clenching and releasing a fistful of sheet. I couldn't remember the last time I'd come so hard. Had I ever come so hard?

My heartbeat eventually calmed, enough so I was able to hear more than just that and the harsh sounds of my racing breath. Enough so that I heard a low, soothing, and musical humming. An inkling of a suspicion took root and I dragged myself up and out of my bed. From the doorway I could see across the studio to the stair rail. Kohe, contentedly perched there, was practically singing. I walked quietly across the floor and looked down into the living room in time to see the pale rounds of Tyler's tight ass disappear into the bathroom before the door closed.

"I wish you'd warned me," I whispered to Kohe. "Something unexpected like that's enough to give a man a heart attack."

Kohe blew out a soft, derisive snort.

"I take it Tyler got to see my performance in this two-way audio-video feed you set up between us?" Kohe nodded and I scratched behind his ears. "Fried chicken for you later, sonny boy, a whole bucket full."

With a pleased smile, Kohe went back to humming and I returned to my room. After a quick side trip to the bathroom to clean up, I fell into bed and was asleep in seconds flat.

* * *

I was up, showered, and dressed by nine the next morning. Tyler was still horizontal. The sleep-rumpled look totally agreed with him. He was not only sexy but completely adorable. He was hugging one of the pillows I'd given him like a little boy with his teddy. It was too cute and too bad he wouldn't be doing that much longer, but I was determined that I was going to be the one he woke up hugging before another day passed.

Chapter Three

Four days later, Tyler was still sleeping on the sofa and okay, I admit it, I was disgruntled and grumpy. Maybe that's why I got so shitty with him.

After his first night and that spectacular mutual masturbation episode, I was determined to rework the protection spell Tyler's mother had set on him. And I did. It should have worked perfectly. But it didn't, much to my chagrin. Deciding I needed to give it more thought, I took Tyler home through the ether corridor.

When we arrived on the sidewalk outside his house it occurred to me that I was supposedly there to take Tyler to my place for the summer but we had no visible means of transportation. His aunt and uncle were going to wonder how the hell we'd gotten there and how the hell we were getting to our destination, right? So I did a little finessing. I did a mental quest throughout the neighborhood until I found what I needed. An unoccupied house with a currently unused vehicle parked in the garage. Doing what I considered was extremely logical, I summoned it to me.

I was quite proud of myself, but Tyler got a little excited when a driverless vehicle arrived and parked itself on the street in front of us.

"Are you nuts? What if someone had seen that?" he hissed at me.

"Yeah right, it's eleven a.m. on a weekday morning. Everyone who works has gone to their jobs. Mothers are occupied with their little children and the old folks, who've been up since four this morning, are all down for their naps. We need a vehicle. We can't just walk in and walk out. Your aunt and uncle will think it's weird."

"Where did it come from?"

"I borrowed it."

"From where?"

"From the Standishes over on Fifth Street."

"You stole it!"

"No, I borrowed it. When we leave we'll get in the car and drive away. As soon as we're out of sight we get out of the car, I send it back, and we leave the way we came. Simple."

Tyler rubbed his forehead. "If it's so simple why am I getting a headache?"

"Because up to now you've been an uptight, law-abiding, narrow-minded short-termer. Now you're a bohemian practitioner of the magical arts and you get to see a whole new set of possibilities."

"And that includes grand theft auto?"

"What part of borrowing do you *not* understand?"

"The part where you do it without permission!" Tyler snarled.

I grinned and chuckled. "You are so conventional. It's cute but you're really going to have to get over it. Come on, introduce me to auntie and uncle and let's get this show on the road before the Standishes come home and notice they're missing something."

The meeting with Tyler's folks went off without a hitch. Nice people, both of them, and obviously very caring of their nephew. We talked over coffee while Tyler packed a couple of bags. I was able to reassure them that I wasn't a serial killer; I provided them with some very convincing contacts including a buddy of mine, the sheriff of nearby Winton County. No, not a fuck buddy, a pool buddy. He and several other friends come to my house once a week for a few beers, ESPN on the high def big screen, and nine ball in the basement. Believe it or not I *can* actually enjoy masculine bonding that doesn't include swapping spit and semen.

After promising to keep in touch, Tyler and I were out the door, in and out of the Standishes' car and home by one. After that we went into Madison via a very conventional method. My SUV, which I assured Tyler was duly paid for and not borrowed. We stopped in at a popular fast food place where we bought a twenty-four piece bucket of extra crispy fried chicken, biscuits, and all the sides.

While we waited at the window for our order to be assembled, Tyler looked over at me. "You must really love chicken."

"Why do you say that?"

" 'Cause you ordered so much."

"Most of it's for Kohe."

"Kohe? I thought he ate mice."

"He eats everything, including all kinds of meat. I promised him the chicken last night. It's his reward."

"Reward for what?"

I leveled a cynical stare at my companion. "Do you really need me to explain?"

Tyler frowned, his confusion obvious. "Well, yeah, I guess so. I don't get it."

"Would you say you have a good imagination?"

"I guess."

"When you went to bed last night were you imagining anything in particular?"

Tyler got a decidedly uncomfortable look on his face. "Uh, well, yeah."

"And in your imagination did you happen to see a lamp with two sculpted peacocks on a bedside table?"

"Yeah, but how would you know that?"

"That lamp's in my bedroom. Get it?"

Stunned comprehension flowed over Tyler's features. "You mean, that was *real*? But how? Did you?"

"Not me. Kohe. Apparently he decided we needed to share. Not that I'm complaining. You were hot, babe. I can't wait to see that in person."

Tyler shook his head and rolled his eyes. There was embarrassment there too, but he was trying exceedingly hard to act nonchalant. "Jeez, I'm living with a thief whose pet is a pervert. What's next?"

I sent him a wink. "Let's go home and find out."

* * *

After our chicken dinner, during which Tyler got to watch Kohe devour piece after piece like a runaway garbage disposal, we went out for a walk around the property. The weather was beautiful. We had sunshine and blue skies with temperatures in the high seventies. It was perfect for late spring. We stopped in front of one of the garden plots. It was bright and colorful with various varieties of iris and other bulb plants blooming.

"Where does he put it all?" Tyler asked.

"Who put what?"

"Kohe. All that chicken he ate. If you put it in a pile it was almost as big as he is. How could he possibly eat that much without exploding?"

I shrugged. "I've never explored the wonders of gargoyle digestion. I have a feeling he could eat an entire cow in one sitting if he really wanted to. Fortunately I've never heard any reports of the neighbors missing livestock. Although I still occasionally wonder about the Jacobsens' cat. It was fond of wandering over and hanging around here until the day it disappeared."

"You really think he ate it?"

"It's a possibility though he gave me the innocent doe-eyed look when I asked him about it. Maybe the coyotes got him."

"There are coyotes around here?"

"Oh yeah. You'll hear them at night sometimes. They have this sort of high, yippy cry. Not as cool as wolves howling but interesting."

"Hmm." Tyler bent to take a closer look at a particularly large and lovely iris bloom. It was rich golden yellow. At the center of each bottom petal was a streak of deep lavender. The color radiated outward and became more subdued until it changed to a lovely pink that faded to cream as it met the outer ring of golden yellow that completed the coloring at the edge of the petal. "My mother loved irises."

My heart went out to him at the wistful note in his voice. "Did she? That one's called Strange Brew. Appropriate for people like you and me, huh? Tell me more about your mother."

Tyler straightened and smiled. "She was nice." He laughed at the raised brow I gave him at that lackluster description. "I mean nice to other people. She always had a smile for everyone. People liked talking to her." His expression grew pensive. "She was always there for me. Always kind, always loving. She explained things when I had questions, she taught me to read before I ever went to school. She was always so patient and calm. I never saw her get angry although I did see her cry a couple of times."

"Over what?"

"My dad. She kept a picture of him in her dresser drawer. Once late at night, I got up to go to the bathroom. When I passed her bedroom door, I saw her sitting on the bed. She had the picture in front of her and she was crying. I never asked her about it. I'm not really sure why, because I wanted to. It's like something inside of me knew that asking about him would make her sad so I didn't."

"Did your aunt and uncle ever speak of him? He was a brother to one of them, right?"

"Yes. My aunt. I did ask her about him after Mom died. She was very nice about it, even apologetic." Tyler met my eyes and his had gone hard despite the pain that was buried deep within them. "He abandoned us. Apparently he didn't want the responsibility of having a wife and a kid. He packed up and disappeared. They didn't hear from him for a couple of years and by then he was living somewhere in California. As far as I know he's still there and he can stay there too, the fucking bastard."

I put an arm around him and gave him a squeeze before releasing him. "I'm sorry things worked out that way. But you know, maybe it was for the best. People trapped by circumstance or obligation are unhappy. They can turn violent or vindictive or sometimes completely the opposite. They can become despondent or even suicidal. You and your mother may have been spared some very ugly or heartbreaking things."

I turned away and started walking back toward the house. A moment later, Tyler caught up to me and his hand on my arm compelled me to stop. I looked at him, rather taken aback by the concern in his eyes.

"You say that like you know from experience. Do you?"

I debated, torn between making one of my usual smart cracks or telling the truth. I opted for the truth. "My mother. She fell in love with my dad."

Tyler turned his head slightly, his expression showing his confusion.

"I know it sounds strange. My mother loving my dad shouldn't be wrong and it wouldn't have been but it went too far. You have to understand, things are different for us. Soul familiars, we don't form permanent relationships between those of our kind. That kind of commitment is reserved for the magic practitioner we attach ourselves to. After I was born my dad found his life's partner, but my mother hadn't yet found someone. She didn't have a true mate to buffer her from the reality of the situation and she couldn't accept the fact that he'd never be hers. She solved the problem by killing herself."

"Oh, Alex. I'm so sorry." His grip on me tightened and I suddenly found myself being hugged.

I was stunned to the point where it took me a moment to relax into his embrace and return it. It seemed extraordinary to me that Tyler, even though he was unused to physical demonstrations, would so spontaneously offer such solace to me. It actually brought tears to my eyes, something that hadn't happened in a very long time. I tried to think and couldn't remember the last time someone had comforted me this way. None of the relationships I'd formed over the years had included the exchange of anything that remotely resembled what I'd just shared with Tyler. The warmth and caring evident in his gesture made me realize just how shallow those numerous encounters had been. It didn't make me regret them but it did make me wonder just how much I'd been missing.

Tyler released me and I gave him a grateful smile while rubbing my hand over his shoulder in silent thanks. I'll admit I was reluctant to let go of the contentment his touch had brought me. "Thanks but it's okay. It was a long time ago. I've tried to understand what happened, why she cared for him so much, why she became so obsessed over him. Don't get me wrong, he's a good guy and I can see why she loved him, but she knew, we all do, that someday we'll find the one we're meant to be with.

She just couldn't wait, couldn't accept the way things are, especially after he found his soul mate. I hate to say it but she was flawed. I remember her being rather emotional and prone to outbursts. I think she was unbalanced." I confessed this before realizing how stupid it sounded. "Which obviously was borne out by what she did. I just feel bad for everyone involved, her, her family, my dad."

"And what about you?"

"Me? I dealt with it. Just like everyone else had to."

"It couldn't have been easy."

"No, not easy." I deliberately thought back, remembering the shock, the fear, the anger, and the feeling of being hopelessly lost. I especially remember my dad's ragged sobs as he cried out his misplaced guilt and how Lydia, his true mate and my stepmother, comforted him and me. Lydia was more of a mother to me than my own had been, but still. "My mother, she wasn't like your mother, Tyler. She wasn't always there for me. There were too many things that stood between us, but I loved her and I think in her way she loved me. At least as much as she could. I've made my peace with that and with her and what happened."

"But it still makes you sad sometimes."

"Of course. Time may heal all wounds, but it can never take away all the pain. There's always going to be a twinge now and then."

Tyler smiled at me, a mischievous curve of his lips that banished the melancholy I'd been feeling. "You're a philosopher too?"

"Only when I need to be. I'd rather be a lech." I grabbed him around the waist and brought our lips together.

Tyler opened and accepted my tongue, sucking lightly on it while moaning softly. Lord, he made my head spin. It was a feeling I was beginning to count on.

* * *

I spent the next couple of days teaching Tyler. For a beginner he did very, very well. He easily mastered the basics of levitation and transmutation and even managed to summon a small fire elemental, not usually an easy thing. Lessons were conducted in

the loft. After instructing him in the workings of a spell and seeing that he was able to handle it, I'd retreat to my own work, keeping part of my attention on him while he practiced. It was nice having company and we worked well together, both of us concentrating on our tasks. The quiet was broken only by the soft murmur of Tyler's voice as he recited, the rustle of turning pages as he read, or by the quiet noises I made trading tools or turning my work in progress on the carousel base it rested on.

As the time passed I found myself becoming more and more aware of him. Even when my gaze wasn't resting on him, part of me became attuned to every move, every breath, every little sound he made. The griffin I'd been working on when Tyler called me had acquired a rider and it was really no surprise to me when his features began to take on a familiar cast as I worked on him. The thought made me smile and I looked up to find Tyler's eyes on me.

He smiled shyly in return. "You look pleased with yourself. Can I see what you're working on?"

"Sure. I'm not shy about showing off," I answered with a grin.

"I've already learned that about you," he replied, his grin every bit as playful as my own.

He pushed his book aside and shoved his chair back from the table he'd been working at. I watched him rise and walk toward me, silently appreciating the view. He wore jeans and a dove gray tee shirt. Though not tight, both hugged his body nicely. His hair was tousled, his feet were bare, and everything in between was graceful and lean. I swear I could almost get off just watching him walk.

I was sitting on a high stool with rollers. It made it easy for me to maneuver around while I was working and I eased over to the side to make room for Tyler so he could have a front and center view of my latest creation. He studied it for a few moments and I waited, interested to hear what he'd have to say. Even after all these years, I still experience that knot of tension that comes with putting something you've invested a part of yourself in on display. Any artist, writer, chef, anyone who puts their

all into their creations can tell you how it feels. It's anticipation and apprehension mixed together and rolling around in the pit of your stomach, not a pleasant feeling.

"This is really beautiful," Tyler said, and I could feel my tension ease.

"You think so?"

"Oh yeah. I mean, I don't know that much about art but this just sort of demands you look at it and see the joy it conveys. You can see the confidence in the griffin, the eagerness expressed in the way he's poised and ready to launch himself into the air. And the guy on his back, the way his thigh muscles are bunched and how he's leaning forward, his body aligned with the griffin. He's ready to go, ready to fly. That smile on his face, it's all anticipation. You can feel his excitement. The whole piece is so fluid you almost expect them to actually move. And the detail is so fine and delicate. Look at the way you can see the individual feathers of his wings with the edges layered one upon the other. That's amazing."

"You see all that?"

"I'm no artist but I'm not an insensitive clod either."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I never said you were insensitive."

"So I'm just a clod?"

"No. I never said that either."

"Well, you sounded surprised by what I said. Like I shouldn't have been able to see all those things."

"I was surprised."

"Why?"

"A lot of people would say it's nice or beautiful and leave it at that. They don't take the time to break it down, to see the details that express what the artist is trying to convey. You were very articulate and precise."

Tyler gave me a pleased smile. "I'm an English major. I better be articulate, especially since I hope to become an author someday."

Now that surprised me. "Really?"

A raised eyebrow was my answer. "You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Making assumptions about me."

"Now there you're wrong. I haven't assumed you're a particular type of person or tried to guess what your interests might be. Point in fact, I know very little about you but learning that you like to write is noteworthy, thus my surprise. It's not a common occupation."

"Hmm, I guess I can accept that. If I'd met you under different circumstances I guess I'd be surprised to learn you were an artist, not to mention that other thing you do."

There was a teasing glint in his eyes and a smile on his face. I was pleased to see it. I didn't want him to be nervous around me. I got that a lot from other witches and wizards, but then I suppose that's because they were aware of the power I can wield. Just goes to show that sometimes not knowing can be a good thing. By the time he learned, Tyler would be too comfortable with me to be impressed.

"So what would you have guessed my occupation would be?"

He turned those luscious pansy blue eyes on me. I could almost see the smartass answer forming. "Um, I don't know. Gigolo?"

I was delighted with his answer and grinned. "Now there's a good idea. I should get paid for something I do so well."

Tyler snorted. "Your modesty is truly underwhelming."

"Why, thank you."

"You're welcome. Turn this way a minute."

I complied and scooted closer, which brought Tyler between my spread thighs. He reached out, his fingers taking hold of a strand of my hair. I wear it fairly long and usually have it pulled back and tied with an elastic band while I work but I'd neglected to do that today. From the corner of my eye I could see him rolling my hair between his fingertips.

"You've got some dried clay in your hair," he said, confirming my suspicion.

Glancing up at him, I watched in utter fascination as his lips parted slightly and his eyes lost some of their focus. "Something wrong?"

"No," he answered. "I was just thinking."

"Thinking what?"

"How nice and soft your hair is."

"Thank you. It contrasts nicely with how hard I am in other places," I replied.

I couldn't help teasing him because quite honestly his innocent compliment left me feeling a little unbalanced. Tyler didn't say things in a calculating manner in hopes of getting something in return. He wasn't a seasoned player saying all the right things in order to get laid. He was just plain sweet and honest and open and... oh man, am I really saying all of this? Next thing you know I'll be reciting poetry. Sheesh.

In response to my quip, he glanced down at my lap. More than glanced, his eyes were locked on my groin. I could hear the sound of his breathing as it grew labored and saw the increasing rhythm of the rise and fall of his chest. Under his gaze I grew rock hard and the soft lounging pants I wore did nothing to hide my erection.

Tentatively, Tyler reached out and touched me. It was all I could do not to throw my head back and groan out loud. As it was, my own breath hitched in my lungs and they suddenly took on a very real resemblance to a pair of bellows. Slowly I reached out to him and rested my hands on his hips, ready to pray to any deity listening that he continue what he was doing. His fingers gently traced the length of me, and though impeded by the fabric of my pants, they managed to partially encircle my cock.

"So thick. I remember from last night. I've never touched anyone else's, um..."

"Cock," I supplied.

"Yeah," he breathed. He hesitantly began to move his hand up and down on me. God, I wanted to yell; it felt so good. I settled for a heartfelt groan and he raised startled eyes to mine. "Does it feel good?"

"Fuck yes, it feels good. But I think we've got a problem."

From a few feet away a rumbling growl had started. It was a sound like doom that sucked away all the pleasure and heat that had built between us.

“Fuck,” Tyler whispered. He released me and stepped back.

I could hear the frustration and disappointment in his voice. As he looked at me, I could actually see the arousal drain from his eyes to be replaced with something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. His posture went from pliant to taut, and he turned away, not stopping at his study table but instead taking the stairs down to the living room and out the front door.

I let him go. He obviously needed time to deal with what just happened and I saw no reason to chase him down. He wasn’t the only one who was frustrated. If that’s all it was, and frankly, I wasn’t quite sure.

Chapter Four

It was after that incident that I realized why the cerbretta spell wasn't working. It really didn't make sense to me that Tyler would have so much success with other incantations and not that one. I kept trying to puzzle through it when I wasn't distracted by the memory of his hand on my cock. Thinking about that made it really hard to concentrate but every time I tried to put it out of my mind it kept sneaking back. It wasn't surprising when the two thoughts became tangled in my consciousness and the realization of what was wrong finally hit me. Tyler wasn't sincerely trying to make it work, and that's when I got a little testy with him.

We were working in the loft on that fourth day. After Tyler released the fire elemental he'd been working with, I slapped the paper down in front of him that bore the cerbretta spell. I'd made a few minor adjustments to it before it had finally dawned on me just why it wasn't working. That too sort of pissed me off. I'd been honing a spell that didn't need it and I hate wasting my time.

"This again?" Tyler asked, looking up at me. "It doesn't work."

"I changed it a little," I said tersely. "Try it."

He heaved a resigned sigh. "Don't we need to get the cerbretta here first?"

"Ah yes, how could I have forgotten? Let's use the most reliable method, shall we?" I yanked Tyler up and out of the chair, slamming his body against mine. Ignoring the astonishment in his eyes, I took his mouth in a punishing kiss. I smashed our lips together and thrust my tongue into his mouth, taking him with a harsh roughness that instead of bringing satisfaction succeeded only in fueling my frustration. The copper tang of blood joined the sweet essence of the man I was kissing, and guilt flared in my consciousness, making me want to cringe. I didn't know if it came from him or me but it

was blood spilled in anger and it had no place in what should have been a pleasurable act.

Okay, I'll admit it, I was angry and I was hurt and I was most definitely out of line. What I saw as Tyler's rejection of me wounded something deep inside. I never would have believed I had such a vulnerable spot or that anyone could reach it until it lay raw and exposed but I had no right behaving the way I did. I released Tyler, forcing myself to be gentle with him. Calmly I urged him to sit and stepped around behind his chair, keeping my hands on his shoulders. As I massaged the taut muscles under my hands, they slowly relaxed.

"Are you mad at me?" Tyler softly asked.

"At this point I'm mostly mad at myself," I confessed. I wanted to say more, but a reverberating growl sounded to my right. The cerbretta had appeared just as inconveniently as ever. "Read the spell, Tyler."

Tyler trained his eyes on the paper and recited aloud the spell I'd written out for him. When the last word was spoken he looked up, turning his gaze in the direction of the cerbretta. "It didn't work." Disappointment was heavy in his voice and he pinned me with an accusing glare. By all appearances he didn't consciously know he was blocking the spell. I took some comfort from that... but not much.

Holding our eye contact, I moved around to take the chair opposite his at the table. It was time to shake things up. "Of course it didn't work. You didn't really try, did you? You're afraid, afraid to truly face what you want and to let go of your safe little world. You talk a good game but you're nothing but a cock-tease. Tell me, is your virginity so precious to you, you can't bear to give it up or is it just the thought of giving it up to me that's holding you back."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?"

"No! I am trying. I want you. I do!"

"Then listen to me. You are a struggling sapling. A dried up little twig that's wasting away for want of one cool sip of water. That water's locked up inside of you, a

huge deep pool of it just waiting for you to tap it. You know how to do it. You've already proven that. Reach out, send those parched roots deep and take what you want. Drink your fill. Close your eyes and speak the spell like you mean it."

"If I close my eyes, I can't read the spell," Tyler whispered. His expression was troubled, his eyes filled with uncertainty.

I didn't mean to be so harsh with him, but I was afraid to back off, afraid if I went soft now we'd be stuck in limbo and never be able to claw our way out. Once a block is in place it could take months or more to break through it. Yes, I wanted Tyler now, but there was more to it than just sex. It never occurred to me to question just what that was or why I was suddenly so desperate.

I smacked the table with my hand, making Tyler jump. "You don't need to read it! You've seen it, you've recited it. It's in you now; it's alive; all it needs is your belief to make it so. *Do it*. Or do you want to remain a dried up little virgin sapling?"

"Fuck you," Tyler growled. He took his glasses off and set them aside. Closing his eyes which were flashing with anger, he opened his mouth and with only a slight hesitation, spoke the words again. The written figures on the paper before him began to glow. I could feel the power stir like the beginnings of a storm. The air around us took on a near physical weight with the effort he was putting into it and with the last word from his lips a flash like lightning filled the room.

Tyler gasped and opened his eyes. Again he turned toward his guardian, his gaze confident and expectant. Shock filled his eyes to see the cerbretta still standing there. "You lied. I did it. I know I did it but you lied. He's still there. The spell didn't work."

"I didn't lie and oh yes, you did do it. The spell worked perfectly but the only thing that's changed is this." I wiggled my fingers at the cerbretta and he obediently trotted forward. Sniffing my fingers, he wagged his tail and sat, identical mouths parting in a trio of doggie grins. "He's my buddy now."

"But. But that means..."

"That's right. I can touch you now, but I'm the only one who can. You're mine, little wizard. Come here." There are no words to describe the feeling of smug satisfaction those words brought me. What a rush. My cock was already starting to firm up. I wanted nothing more than to drag him off to bed, and put into practice all those fantasies I'd been living on the last couple of days. Trouble was, I had fences to mend before we could continue. Tyler stared at me for a moment then hesitantly rose from his chair and came to me. I pulled him down onto my lap and pressed a gentle kiss against his lips. "I'm sorry I was so rough with you."

He looked at me, his eyes searching mine. Apparently satisfied by what he found in them, he nodded. "I guess I'm partially to blame. You were right," he confessed, bashfully ducking his head to lay his forehead against my shoulder. "I might have been a little scared. I don't know why. I want this. I want you."

"You had too much time to think about it," I reassured him while rubbing his back in a way I hoped would soothe him. "If you could have just acted on your instincts, you'd have been fine. I think everyone deals with a little uncertainty, a little fear of their first sexual encounter, but the rush of hormones push us past it. All that physical heat melts your brain and your inhibitions. In your case you had time to cool down and deliberately face the fear and uncertainty. That's not an easy thing to do."

"I wouldn't have done it if you hadn't pushed me."

"Yes, you would, but I was just too horny to wait any longer."

Tyler laughed, raised his head, and looped his arms around my neck. "I'm glad. Although this isn't fair. You can have anyone you want. I've been limited to you."

"Do you want someone else? Is there someone you've been hoping for a chance to be with?"

"Only in a general way. I'm not in love with anyone. At least not for right now."

Oddly enough a sense of relief loosened the tension that had started to fill my belly. "Then what's the problem?"

"What happens when you don't want me anymore?"

The shocked denial that rushed to my lips took me by surprise. I couldn't believe the words I'd almost blurted out. *I'll never want anyone else.* Holy shit! Was that the truth? Did I really mean what I'd almost said out loud? I looked into the eyes of the young man sitting on my lap and was stunned. Could this green, untried, virginal wizard be my soul mate? Surely the cosmic forces that ruled the universe wouldn't play such a cruel joke on him. It was all well and good that I'd be the one to initiate him into the world of sensual pleasures, that I could handle no problem, but what did I know about love and commitment and fidelity? I'd never given those things to anyone, had never felt the slightest urge to. I was a player, not the kind of solid, dependable person Tyler should have in his life.

And yet... the thought of someone else touching him, holding him, kissing him made me distinctly uneasy. The very idea of some stranger hearing Tyler's breath speed with his rising excitement or of them hearing the soft moans and whimpers he made when he became aroused brought harsh denial rising to the surface of my consciousness so fast it took my breath away. Maybe it was just because I hadn't had him yet. Yeah, that's probably it. Right? Maybe? Crap. I was going to have to think about this.

Tyler's hand cupped my cheek, bringing my attention back to him. Once again that warm, caring concern that seemed to come so easily to him filled his eyes. "Are you all right?" As he gently stroked his fingers over my skin a calm and peaceful kind of serenity filled my soul.

There was no way I was going to voice my concerns to him. I was probably imagining things anyway. I reached for his hand and held it while I turned my face into his palm and kissed the soft skin at its center. "I'm fine."

Leaning in, Tyler kissed my cheek. "Good. Are you going to answer my question?"

"Let's table that for now. I've got better things to do." Twisting my head just slightly, I brought our lips together.

Trying to keep in mind that the man in my arms was a virgin wasn't easy. There's a dominating, bullish side of me that wanted to ravage him like a rutting stag

with no thought other than to get off, but I held back and went slow. A pat on the back for me.

The kiss I gave him started out slow and gentle. He opened for me, moaning around my tongue, which swept over his teeth and the soft inner recesses of his mouth. I sought out his taste, savored it, and swallowed it somehow knowing the craving I felt for it would never be satisfied. I should have been dismayed at the thought, but instead I found myself taking a perverse kind of joy from it.

With our mouths joined and occupied, I put my hands to work on more urgent matters. One held steady against Tyler's lower back, petting him, holding him while the other went to work on the buttons of the dark brown shirt he was wearing. I slipped the buttons from the holes and my arousal jumped higher with each bit of fabric that parted, baring his chest to me. When the shirt was undone to the point where it tucked into the soft, cream colored corduroy pants he wore, I slid my hand inside it and over the smooth skin of his torso. Warm, so very warm. His body radiated so much heat against my palm, I swear I actually shivered.

Tyler moaned and pushed into my touch. It was all the encouragement I needed, not that I needed any at that point. My hand skimmed over his flat stomach and the small indentation of his belly button. His muscles flexed under my fingers. I could feel fine hairs below his navel but none above and I followed the slight depression upward that marked the center of his body. It was sleek and smooth all the way up to the hard unyielding strength of his collarbones.

I swept my hand over one of them and followed the muscular slope of his pectoral muscle until my fingertips passed over the prominent nub of one tiny nipple. Tyler gasped and pulled his lips from mine. *"Oh God."*

Smiling, I petted it and circled my finger around the little mound. "You like that?" Speechless, he nodded. "You'll love this." Leaning in, I laved my tongue over him. He jumped and moaned; I held him steady while I brought my mouth to him and let my tongue take over for my fingers.

Tyler whimpered and bent his head over mine, his hands tightening on my shoulders. He squirmed in my lap and rocked against me, his soft keen sounding in my ear when my teeth closed around his nipple and I began to suck. "Alex, oh God, Alex, please."

I pulled my mouth from him and breathed against his wet skin. "What, baby?" I purred, licking his nipple. It was red and swollen. Looking to the one as yet untouched, I knew I had to make them match.

"I don't know; I don't know. I just... I need."

"I know what you need. Just hold on for me, Tyler. Let me play a little."

I didn't wait for a reply but went to work on the poor neglected nipple that cried out to me. Tyler swayed against me, his body never still, always moving even as I tried to still him. I knew the sensations bombarding him, the sweet agony building inside. I was feeling it myself but I'd been there before and I knew how to ride it, how to let it crawl under my skin and quietly fill me. With my mouth on him, I brought my hand to the button of his pants and released it. I don't think he even noticed the zipper had parted until my fingers found the thick column of his erection where it strained beneath the white fabric of his cotton briefs.

"*Oh fuck!*" Tyler yelled and arched into my hand.

The warm musky scent of him drifted into my nostrils with the parting of his zipper. It cried out to me to come closer. I don't remember moving, but the next thing I knew, Tyler was seated on the table, I was standing over him and his pants and briefs were halfway down his thighs. His cock was full and hard and resting against his belly, swaying with every deep breath he took. His eyes were warm and wide and desperate and tinged with just a hint of fear. I could feel a growl building in my chest at the sight of him so disheveled and wanting, but unsure in spite of the arousal that clearly had him in its grasp.

"Lie back," I breathed and pulled his pants and briefs free of his legs to toss them aside.

"Alex?" His voice was husky and unsteady.

“Shh. I’m not going to fuck you. Not yet. Just trust me.”

Moving between his thighs, I helped him lie back and slid my left arm under his knee, letting it rest in the crook of my elbow. The other went over my shoulder and leaning forward, I took my first taste of him. Tyler’s warbling cry accompanied the convulsive thrust of his hips and I let the momentum of that movement push him deep into my mouth. *Oh God*. So sweet, so satisfying. So undeniably sensual to have him vibrating against my tongue and filling me.

I tightened my lips and drew them up his length, playing my tongue over the wet, satiny skin as I went. Reaching the plump head, I laved its perfect curves and played at the tiny slit, sucking the sweet pre-come that began to trickle forth. Not wanting to end things too swiftly, I released him and straightened enough so that I could see his face.

Tyler’s eyes were scrunched closed, his expression a mask of concentration. His hands were fisted at his sides, his body restlessly shifting. Not wanting him to lose the building urgency, I went back to my oh-so-pleasant work. I licked down his quivering shaft until I reached his balls and rolled them against my tongue. Tyler’s moans, soft and constant, ratcheted higher when I took first one then the other of his balls into my mouth. I sucked them lightly, pressing them against the roof of my mouth to build the pressure before releasing them. I left them with a few gentle laps and once again let my tongue slide the length of his cock from base to tip.

He really was impressive. Not quite as long as me but just as thick and nicely formed. At this point the veins that showed beneath the surface of his skin were engorged, his cock a solid bar of ivory that became rosy and flushed at the head. That beautiful sight drew me. So perfectly shaped, so succulent and ripe with more pre-come flowing forth to entice me. At that moment I desired that taste, needed the feel of him in my mouth more than anything I could ever remember wanting. And so I took it.

A quick lick across the head gave me the flavor I craved. I savored it for a moment before dropping my mouth over him and taking him deep. I wasn’t letting go this time, not until I had everything he had to give me. I bobbed my head up and down,

my cheeks hollowing with the suction I applied. My tongue twirled over the sleek column, teasing, tormenting, petting, demanding it surrender to me. Opening my throat, I swallowed him down. Tyler's hips were bouncing, his voice hoarse and frantic.

"Alex, oh God, Alex. I'm gonna come. Gonna come!"

I growled and the vibrations had quite an effect. Tyler cried out, his back arched, and he froze as the first hot spurt of his seed hit the back of my throat. Spasm after spasm rocked his body, each shudder bringing another rush of semen. I drew back and let it fill my mouth before swallowing his mildly salty and bittersweet offering. Oh, man. So freaking good. I sucked him lightly, licked him clean, then released his slowly softening cock.

Tyler was breathing hard, an occasional whimper escaping his parted lips. His body had gone limp except for his hands. The fingers straightened then curled as though unsure of what to do. Smiling, I gently lowered his legs, leaned over, and took his hands in mine. They gripped mine hard and before I knew it Tyler had pulled himself up, untangled our fingers, and wound his arms around my neck. I slid my arms around his torso and held him to me.

"Everything okay?"

He nodded against my shoulder and took a deep shuddery breath. "Incredible. So damn good. I didn't know. I just didn't know," he repeated and there was such a tone of wonder in his voice that it made me grin.

"I know, baby, but you know that's not all, don't you?"

He nodded again and eased back until our eyes met. His smile was endearingly shy, his eyes soft but filled with an eagerness that made my cock throb. "I know. I can't wait for the rest."

Chapter Five

I couldn't help it. I groaned. A mutual move brought our lips together and we opened to each other. Tyler's sweet moans vibrated against my tongue as he wiggled deeper into our embrace. I could feel his cock making a comeback against my belly and I wanted to shout with the rush of delirium that swept through me. I slid my hands down and under the cheeks of his ass and lifted him. Tyler automatically wound his legs around my waist, a good thing too as I was through wasting time. With him securely wrapped around me, I headed for the bedroom.

Just as we came even with the top of the stairs there was a knock at the front door. We both froze. Our lips parted and as though by some mutual agreement our heads turned in the direction of the sound.

"Are you gonna see who it is?" he breathlessly asked.

"Fuck, no."

"But..."

"I don't care who the fuck it is."

Tyler's arms tightened around me. "Fine by me."

Another knock sounded and this time a muffled voice called out, "Hey, Alex! Man, open up, the beer's gettin' warm."

A biting shock of dismay crashed over me. "Oh *fuck*. It's Wednesday."

"Yeah?"

"I've got friends who come over on Wednesday night for pool and ESPN."

"Oh, shit."

"No kidding."

Reluctantly I eased my hold on Tyler and muttered dire curses when his legs caressed mine on their way down and away from me. He got his feet under him and I

grimaced and took stock of us. Here he was well on the way to looking totally debauched with a bare butt and a half hard cock peeking out from beneath his tee shirt and I wasn't in much better shape. The only real difference was my cock was at full mast and covered, although the tent in my lounging pants did little enough to hide it.

"Shit. Grab your pants and go get cleaned up. I'll go down and let them in."

"You gonna let them see you like that?" Tyler asked, dubiously eyeing my cock.

"Hell, no." With a snap of my fingers my soft pants were traded for jeans. I winced at having my cock crammed against my body and contained by the stiffer fabric but it was better than putting on a display for my buddies, especially as I'd never hear the end of it. Pulling my own tee shirt from the waistband to complete the job of hiding the fact that I had a raging hard-on, I gingerly started downstairs. "Hurry up."

At the front door I paused long enough to make sure Tyler was out of sight then opened it. Standing on the front steps were Kent Paradiso and Jerry Kellen. Kent's black Mustang was parked in the driveway. Ross Tyner was just driving in and he parked behind it.

"Hey, guys," I greeted, doing my best not to snap at them because of the utter frustration I was feeling. I stood aside to let them pass. "Is it my imagination or are you early?"

"We're not early. It's seven. I hope Ross remembered to get extra cheese on the pizza. I'm starving," Jerry replied, his blue eyes sparkling with good humor. "We're eating downstairs, right?"

"Yeah, like usual," I answered and watched Ross maneuver two large pizza boxes out of the passenger side of his royal blue pickup truck. He made his way to the front door and I waved him in.

"Hey, Alex. How's it goin'?" Ross asked with a grin. His bangs had been blown into his eyes and he blew the chestnut colored strands away. "You ready to lose a few bucks?"

"Only if you've got the skill to take it from me," I answered with a smile. "Looks like you need a haircut."

"Nah, the wife likes it this way."

"Not too much chance of him taking your money tonight," Jerry informed me, joining our conversation. "I heard he nailed his thumb on the job today. Yep. Look at that bandage."

"Never marry your friend's sister," Ross said with a mournful shake of his head. "What she knows he knows."

"Not everything, thank God," Jerry teased. "Sherry passes the bedroom stuff on to Liz."

"Thanks a lot. Now I'll never be able to look my sister-in-law in the face again."

There was good-natured laughter at Ross's expense that ended with Tyler's appearance at the top of the stairs. The flushed and semi-debauched man from a few moments ago was gone; his hair was combed, his glasses in place, and his clothing all put to rights. His appearance made me wonder if the same arousal that was keeping me semi-hard was still stirring under that almost prim-looking exterior.

He hesitated and I motioned for him to join us. "Guys, I'd like you to meet Tyler Montgomery. He's staying with me for the next few weeks."

When Tyler joined us I made the introductions. No one asked any leading questions but I was getting some speculative looks, especially from Kent, my county sheriff friend. He was the first of this group I'd met. We'd both attended a local fundraiser and struck up a conversation at the bar in the banquet room. Though he was a good-looking guy, there'd been no spark of attraction between us. It was an incidental meeting and just one of those cases where you're instantly comfortable with someone.

I was new to the area at the time and Kent entertained me by pointing out the local dignitaries. When the owner of a very lucrative RV and modular home dealership walked by with his trophy wife on his arm, Kent made a remark about May/December relationships and how he wouldn't mind a shot at May. I retorted that December might look good bent over his desk. Hey, what can I say? He was good looking for an older guy.

I've never made a secret of the fact that I liked guys and my remark caused Kent's brows to rise but his grin was instantaneous along with his laughter. A couple of drinks later we were fast friends and it was he who introduced me to Jerry and Ross. They're good guys, all of them, and have no issue with my sexual orientation. I wouldn't call them friends otherwise but it was a little weird to see those slight smiles and sidelong glances that told me they didn't think Tyler and I were platonic friends. Even though they were right, it was still kind of embarrassing and I have to say that's a new feeling for me. I don't embarrass easy but it seems for whatever reason, any feelings I have that involve Tyler are heightened to the point where it can be just plain uncomfortable.

Ignoring them as best I could, along with the ache in my protesting cock, being a good host I ushered everyone together and we trooped downstairs like a dedicated pack of male animals intent on feeding our hedonistic need for pizza and pool. The wide-screen television was turned on and tuned to a basketball game which I personally loathe but again, as a good host I couldn't object. I'd take baseball or football over basketball any day. I'm not sure why. Maybe it has something to do with the uniforms. Even if the game sucks at least with baseball or football you've got all those buff bods in tight uniforms to ogle. What the hell could anyone get out of those baggy ass basketball shorts?

The guys made themselves at home and dug into the pizza. I settled on a bar stool with Kent to my left. I watched Tyler carefully in case he was uncomfortable but he seemed to be fitting in nicely. Turns out my studious little wizard was a basketball fan too. Seated between Ross and Jerry on the sofa, he was scarfing down pizza, drinking a beer and grousing right along with them when a player from the team they were rooting for missed an easy shot.

One of the pizza boxes sat open on the end of the bar and I watched with amusement as Kohe popped in for a moment, helped himself to several pieces and popped out. The first few times he did this, I admit I was ready to have a cow. How the hell could I possibly explain him to the guys? Eventually I learned I needn't have

worried. Kohe had this amazing talent for knowing when no one was looking. No one but me that is.

"I hate to ask but is he even legal?" Kent asked, unaware of his close encounter with a gargoyle. A teasing twinkle lit his eyes as he nodded in Tyler's direction. "After all, I am the law."

"He's twenty-two, asshole. I'm no chicken hawk and I definitely don't do minors."

"Chicken hawk?"

"Older guys who go after younger ones."

"Jeez, Alex, you're not that old."

If you only knew, I thought to myself. "Very true," I said out loud.

"So is he your boyfriend?"

"No. He's here to uh..." My mind suddenly went blank. "To mow my lawn."

Kent's laughter nearly made him spit out the mouthful of beer he'd just taken. Wiping a dribble from his chin and coughing a bit, he looked me straight in the eye. "Is that what they're calling it nowadays?"

Feeling like an ass, I returned his grin. "Fucker. Truth? I'm helping him with some special studies and he's doing yard work for me as payment. Anything further going on between us I'm not discussing."

"Fair enough," Kent answered with a nod.

The evening went well but it was far too long. I was still horny as hell. Having gotten off, Tyler seemed to be handling the delay in our playtime quite well. I was the one having trouble. Seeing him bent over the pool table, that tight little ass so round and tempting, had me ready to bite through a steel rod. Some of my frustration must have shown on my face because Kent was giving me these knowing smirks that for a split second pissed me off until I found the humor in the situation.

"I feel bad for you, man, but for some reason I don't feel inclined to call it an early night," Kent teased me at one point. I'd retreated to the bar again to put some

distance between me and Tyler. I swear every time I got close to him my cock throbbed and tried to point like he was north and it was a grossly oversized compass needle.

"You're enjoying my suffering."

"Considering the fact that I'll be going home to my own hand, I find it hard to feel sorry for you."

I snorted. "You need to get yourself a woman."

"Or something," Kent agreed.

Surprised, I snagged Kent's gaze with my own. "Did I just hear a confession?"

Kent shrugged. "For some reason, ever since I met you, I've been thinking about things."

"What things?"

"My tolerance, no, that sounds arrogant. My acceptance of gay relationships would be a better way to phrase it. The way I was raised, well, my parents are both solid rightwing fundamentalists. You'd think I'd be blindly prejudiced after that kind of upbringing but I could never see the sense in denouncing someone just because they're attracted to members of the same sex. If that's the way it is, that's the way it is, right?"

"You'll get no argument from me on that," I answered. I could see Kent had more to say and I'll admit I was very curious to see where this was leading.

"I wouldn't think so. If people would just be rational about things, homosexuality wouldn't be such a big deal. I mean in nature it's a proven fact that males of many different species get it on with each other. So what's wrong with humans doing the same? We may have higher brain functions but we're just as much inclined to follow our instincts as they are. And if we have those instincts they must be there for a reason, right? As long as it's between consenting adults, what's the problem?"

"Very true. So what exactly are you saying?"

Kent sighed and smiled. "Sorry about the long-winded speech, I think it was mostly for my own benefit. The thing is, lately I've noticed a distinct tendency in myself to admit that a man can be just as attractive to me as a woman and in some cases, I'm beginning to wonder what it would be like to... you know."

"Fuck a guy?"

"Exactly."

I had to laugh and I'll admit I was amazed by Kent's unguarded and earnest admission. I was also warmed by the knowledge that our friendship was such that he'd trust me with such a confession. "Did you ever consider the fact that you might be bisexual?"

He slowly nodded. "That thought had occurred to me."

"Maybe you should give it some in-depth exploration," I teased, which made Kent laugh.

"I've given that some thought too. Not sure I want to risk it. I could fuck up my job."

"County sheriff is an elected position, right?"

"Yeah, but it's not just the thought that I could lose the election next time around. Even if I did, I'd still be part of the sheriff's department, I'd still have a job, but it's the thought of what it would be like to work with my fellow officers if they knew I'd been with or was currently with another man."

"Yeah, I can see your point. Not everyone's as tolerant as the guys in this room."

"What are we tolerant of?" Jerry asked.

He was coming back from the bathroom and had passed within earshot during my last remark. I had to think fast. "The SBD fart Kent just let," I answered, winking at him while backing away.

"You lying fucker," Kent snarled.

"Ooo, stay away from me," Jerry snorted, giving Kent a wide berth.

"What's SBD?" Tyler innocently asked, looking over from his place at the pool table.

"Silent But Deadly," Ross answered with a grin. "Better keep your distance, kid. One whiff could be fatal."

Tyler started laughing and that infectious sound carried the rest of us right along with him. By the time I regained control I was wiping tears from my eyes and Kent was managing to grin and glare at me at the same time.

Jerry took Ross's place at the pool table. "You gonna shoot the shit or shoot pool?" he asked, looking at me.

"Since you asked so nicely, I guess I'll shoot pool."

Ross plopped himself down on the sofa and went back to watching the game and Jerry racked the balls. Tyler relinquished his place at the table to me and I managed to grope his ass when I walked around him. A quick intake of breath accompanied his start of surprise and Kent's soft snort of laughter from across the room let me know he'd seen what I did.

Tyler gave me one of those quick glares that include a flash of widened eyes, the ever popular don't-do-that look to let me know I was misbehaving. I grinned and shrugged. He went to sit by Kent and the two of them struck up a conversation.

Every time Jerry took a shot, I found my eyes wandering back to Tyler. At one point I stood with the butt end of my cue planted on the floor while I chalked the tip. Kent went off to the bathroom and Tyler turned his gaze in my direction. He seemed almost mesmerized by what I was doing. I kept my eyes locked with his, pulled the chalk away, pursed my lips and blew the excess chalk from the tip.

Tyler's lips parted as he followed my movements. Slowly building tension took hold of his body and seemed to flow over him. I could feel my own muscles going taut. My fingers wrapped around the cue and with subtle movements I stroked up and down the polished wood. Tyler's lips came together a split second before his tongue appeared to take a slow swipe of them, leaving them wet. I could see the glisten from across the room and the sight of his tongue made me wonder how it would feel to have it sweep over the head of my cock. Before I realized I was even going to do it, I growled out loud.

Fortunately for me, Ross's sudden yell at the television screen covered the sound and made me jump at the same time. Across the room I saw Tyler jump as well and

Jerry turned to yell at his brother-in-law. "Will you cut that out?! You made me miss my shot."

Once more I found myself laughing. This waiting was torture but it was a pleasant kind of hell so I resigned myself to it and went with the flow. That resolve eased my tension and before I knew it, eleven p.m. was rolling around and the guys were preparing to leave.

"So, Tyler, you're gonna be here next week, right?" Ross asked.

Sending a quick glance my way, Tyler smiled at my nod. "Yeah, I'll be here."

"Good. I want a rematch. You didn't tell me the kid was a pool shark," Ross said, aiming his complaint at me.

"Well, that would hardly have been fair," I told him, not bothering to let him know that I hadn't known myself. "And thanks, by the way. Your money will be buying next week's beer."

"I did not need to know that, but now that I do I'll be sure to drink my share," he responded with a grin. "Goodnight, guys. Jerry, I'll drop you off. Save Kent from going out of his way."

"Sure," Jerry answered. "Alex, thanks as usual. Tyler, it was nice to meet you and I'll see you both next week."

I watched the two of them walk out the front door and turned in time to hear Kent say, "Tyler, don't let this guy work you too hard. I hear he's going to have you mowing the lawn."

The look he turned on me was pure devilry in action and I shook my head, hoping my expression would let him know that I knew exactly what he was doing.

"That won't be a problem. I actually enjoy mowing," Tyler innocently answered.

Kent's smile got bigger and I narrowed my eyes at him, daring him to say more. He dared.

"I know what you mean. I especially like it when I get to use the riding mower. You just climb on and let go. It can definitely be fun. Of course it can be messy too what with the trimmings flying everywhere."

"If you use a bagger you won't have that problem," Tyler advised, and I had to pinch my lips together to keep from smiling.

"That's true," Kent answered with a grin. "A good bagger contains the mess and makes the cleanup easier. And you know, when I'm done mowing it's always such a relief. I feel very relaxed afterward."

"Yeah," Tyler agreed. "It's worth all the effort you put into it."

"It certainly is," Kent said with a serious and sage nod.

I wanted to laugh and kick his ass at the same time and decided it was time for some payback. "I heard your riding mower is out of commission, Kent. Looks like you'll have to do more of a hands-on job with the push mower."

"True. Of course there's a lot to be said for a good hand job."

That was it, I started laughing. "You asshole, get the fuck out."

Kent was laughing too and Tyler was looking at both of us like we were nuts.

"Don't worry about it, Tyler; Alex and I are just razzing each other," Kent explained with a final chuckle. "If he explains, keep in mind I was just kidding around. Consider it your initiation into the group. I'll see you both next week."

With that he was out the door. I stayed in the doorway long enough to see him get in his car and start down the driveway before I closed the door and turned to Tyler. He was standing there with a frown and an expectant look on his face. "What was that all about?"

"Just a little joke."

I explained to Tyler about Kent's and my conversation in the basement. He was a good sport about it and laughed it off but I could tell he wasn't going to completely let it go. His next words proved that.

"So, you got flustered when Kent asked if I was your boyfriend, huh?" Tyler asked with a smile.

"I suppose you could look at it that way," I conceded.

"Imagine that. You losing your super cool composure over me."

"Yeah, how about that. I didn't plan on losing it until I was buried balls deep in your ass."

Tyler's eyes widened and his cheeks took on a faint flush. "I guess things don't always go the way you plan them."

"Guess not," I purred. Deciding a little stalking was in order, I started slowly toward him. The look on my face must have alerted him to my mood because Tyler started backing up. "What's the matter? You're starting to look a little flustered yourself."

"I don't like the way you're looking at me."

"How's that?"

"Like I'm a steak and you're a starving dieter who's just been told that steak is calorie free."

"Oh, I like that description. It goes nicely with my plan."

"What plan?"

"The one where I nibble on various parts of your anatomy."

"Uh huh, I knew it. You look like you want to eat me."

"Oh I do, baby, I do. I'm going to devour you."

Chapter Six

Tyler backed up until his heels unexpectedly hit the first step on the stairs. Off balance, he flailed a little and ended up sitting hard on the third step. I closed the distance between us and loomed over him.

"You're so adorable when you're clumsy. Are you all right?" I asked with a grin.

His answering grin was a little embarrassed. "Fine. What is it about you that has me falling on my ass so often?"

"My irresistible charm? It just sweeps you off your feet."

He snickered. "That must be it."

"Come on." I gave him a hand up and got us moving up the stairs. I slid my arm around his waist and let my hand brush over his corduroy covered butt. "I think I should thoroughly examine your ass. Just to make sure there are no bruises."

"Uh huh. Just how thorough is thorough?" Tyler's voice was a little uneven. It triggered my need for him, intensifying it all the more.

"Well, I want to make sure you're all right so..." At the top of the stairs I pulled him to me, nuzzled his cheek, and whispered in his ear, "Minutely, intimately, *deeply* thorough."

"Oh God, Alex. I... I really..." Tyler's breathing had gone rough.

"Really what?"

"Really need you to start the examination."

Chuckling softly, I stepped back, took his hand, and led him into the bedroom.

I paused for a moment, looking around, and Tyler gave me a puzzled look. "Kohe," I said sternly and waited. Sure enough the little snoop appeared, seeming to morph out of the wall above the dresser. His color changed from cream that matched the wall to his usual gray. "I don't want an audience, thank you."

Kohe's face wrinkled with a frown and something that resembled a pout. "There's chocolate ice cream in the freezer and I bought a copy of *Torch Song Trilogy*. He loves that movie," I said in an aside to Tyler. With an excited squeak, Kohe disappeared. "Now, where were we?"

Stopping in front of the bed, I took short teasing kisses from him while unbuttoning his shirt and pushing it off his shoulders. With a soft sighing rustle it slid to the floor. The fabric sliding from his body brought goose bumps to Tyler's forearms. I rubbed my hands over them until they settled, then reached for the button on his pants. At that point I stopped the kisses in favor of gazing into those amazing pansy blue eyes of his.

They were warm and soft and filled with desire and widened a bit when the button came free and the tab on his zipper slid south. I teased him a little, brushing my fingers over the obvious bulge beneath the fabric of his briefs. Tyler's chin lifted, his lips parting a bit with the increasingly rapid soughing of his breath. Dipping my fingers in the waistbands of both his pants and briefs, I let my fingers glide over his skin. Being careful of his erection, I pushed at both items of clothing, guiding them down his thighs until gravity took over and they pooled at his feet.

"Step out of them," I ordered him softly. I stood close enough that his body, his swollen cock in particular, would brush against me. Tyler moaned at the contact, and kicked his clothes away, and swayed against me, teasing himself and me by rubbing his hard length against my thigh. "That'll be enough of that," I warned him. "I don't want you going off too soon. Get on the bed. Pull the covers back first."

He did as I told him and I watched him, regretting my momentary blindness as I pulled my tee shirt off over my head. I really didn't want to miss a thing, especially when he bent over and that luscious ass was presented to me in all its bare glory. My own breathing had grown a bit labored, my heart beating faster. The need I'd been suppressing all evening was being given free rein, and anticipation was racing through my veins, heightening my growing excitement.

Tyler lay down on the bed, and his lightly tanned skin contrasted nicely with the white sheets. I unfastened my jeans, made short work of getting them off, then stood so Tyler could look his fill. The weight of his gaze wandered over me from top to bottom like warm honey being poured over my skin. A blanket of heat started at the top and crawled slowly down, flowing over my body in a long, lingering caress.

I didn't think my cock could get any harder, but when his gaze remained on it, it throbbed and twitched. Tyler took a harsh audible gasp. "Seen enough?" I growled. He shook his head and I smiled. "Take your glasses off anyway. I promise touching will be even better than seeing."

He took his glasses off, setting them on the nightstand. Unwilling to waste any more time, I joined him in bed. Tyler lay on his back. On my side, I rolled forward and lowered most of my body over him, being careful not to pin him down too heavily. We melded together from shoulder to ankle, our legs tangling, arms embracing, torsos and hips aligning while our cocks rubbed against each other.

I took his mouth in a heated kiss and he eagerly reciprocated by opening for me and inviting me in. The journey of my tongue into his mouth was a smooth glide and like coming home except for the flavors that awaited me there. Tyler's taste was a sweet, ethereal feast and I ate it, drank it, and swallowed it like a starving man. Perhaps he was right; perhaps I was a crazed dieter who'd just found the perfect guilt-free food. If that was the case I was going to eat my fill.

I devoured his mouth and began moving against him. Our cocks slid together and I reached down, enfolding them in my eager grasp. Tyler's hips rose, pushing him deeper into my hand. I stroked us, fostering the rising heat, nurturing it, encouraging it to grow until his nonstop moans vibrated against my tongue. Eyes closed, I saw nothing, but the darkness was filled with Tyler. His scent, his taste, the feel of his skin, the warm liquid dripping from his cock that joined mine to anoint the two thick columns that throbbed in my hand.

I thrust myself against him and was answered in kind. Our bodies writhed together, straining, taut and needy, searching for the culmination of a pleasure that was

becoming too much to bear. I was close, so damned close. Desperately I pulled my mouth from his.

"Come on, baby. Come on, Tyler. Let it go. Give it to me. Come... come. Come *now*," I growled, pulling firmly on us both.

Tyler froze and cried out. His body shook and liquid heat bathed my fist, my belly, my chest. He trembled against me, harsh pants and desperate whimpers ringing in my ears. His climax brought my own and it was all I could do to keep from howling. Instead I buried my face against his neck and groaned, jerking against him with each spurt of seed that spewed from my cock, each spurt that brought a hot rush of blinding bliss searing its way through my gut.

With a final shudder, my muscles turned to jelly. I relaxed against him, content to pursue the oxygen that seemed to have eluded my lungs. Small inner ripples of sensation chased themselves in playful circles below my belly. I momentarily tightened my muscles, pushing into them to reap the full benefits of that lingering pleasure before once more going boneless. It wasn't long before my heartbeat leveled out. I couldn't help the smile that curved my lips. Damn, that was good.

My satisfaction lasted all of maybe two minutes. I wanted more. We were both a little sweaty, a little sticky and a little smelly but it was all good, and I wasn't about to stop now. My cock was already firming up again. It knew exactly where it wanted to be and I was damn well going to make sure it got there.

Leaning up and away, I looked at Tyler. His eyes were closed and his kiss swollen lips were parted. His body was sprawled in the sheets, one arm thrown over his head. He looked content. Too bad. I was going to stir him up all over again but in the long run I was sure he wouldn't mind too much.

"Hey. Turn over."

"Hmm?"

"Turn over."

Pansy blue eyes opened and blinked at me. "Over?"

I nodded.

He hesitated for just a second then with a small groan did as I asked.

"Good boy," I praised and reached across his body for the lube I kept stashed in the top drawer of the bedside table.

"Not a boy," he grouched.

"No? Could have sworn I had two cocks in my hand a minute ago. I know for a fact I've only got one."

Tyler snorted. "Smartass."

"How true. While yours is merely gorgeous." I bent down and licked the cheek nearest me. Tyler squirmed and I moved, sitting cross-legged facing that perfect ass. My hands smoothed over his warm skin. "Each cheek is flawless. A perfect, rounded curve of muscle and flesh. So beautifully shaped, so firm and full. Two lovely ivory cabochons to be admired and fondled."

"Cut it out."

"How sad you can't appreciate what I thought was quite poetic." I smiled at Tyler's near growl and really couldn't blame him. I *was* acting rather corny but being with him had me feeling many things and playful was just one of them. My only other excuses were that maybe I was giddy from the orgasm. Either that or my brain had been deprived of too much oxygen. I took a deep breath and decided to get on with it.

"No poetry? Let's do something physical then. How about something really raunchy?" I smacked one of the cheeks under my hands. "Shoulders down, up on your knees and spread 'em."

I expected some hesitancy but maybe Tyler was learning that following my directions meant more pleasure. He did as asked, and I scooted in behind him, making a place for myself between his legs. I have to say it. I love doggie-style. Everything is just right there and so completely accessible. And the view. Oh man. Slim hips, a gorgeous ass, and slightly below that a pair of matching balls and a cock that was growing as I watched. My eyes could also follow the slope of his back which was well defined, trim at the waist, and broadening nicely at the shoulders. Pure yum.

I closed what little distance there was between us and draped myself over his back, planting my hands at either side of his chest. "You know what rimming is?" I asked Tyler, breathing against his neck before kissing a tempting spot.

He shivered beneath me and nodded.

"I'm going to do that to you. I'm going to lick and suck and nibble my way over and around your tiny little hole until I can stick my tongue in you and tease and taste as much as I want. Then I'm going to put my fingers in. One at a time. I'm going to slide them in and out, over and over and over. First one, then two, then three until you're open and that sweet little hole is relaxed and ready for me. Then you know what's going to happen? Hmm?"

Tyler nodded.

"Tell me. Say it out loud."

"You'll fuck me," Tyler managed though his voice was hoarse and once again he was panting lightly.

"That's right. I'm going to fuck you. My cock is going to go all the way in. So very, very deep. You're gonna love it, baby. I'm gonna fill you up and fuck you so good you'll be screaming."

Tyler took a deep breath, his voice unsteady. "With pleasure, I hope."

"Of course." I brought one hand up and rubbed it over his biceps. "I'd never deliberately hurt you, Tyler. We're gonna use lube. Lots and lots of slippery stuff to make it nice and slick. And just so you don't worry about it, I can't catch or pass anything on, so no condoms. And actually neither can you."

"I can't?"

"Nope. That's one of the perks that comes with wielding magic."

"Cool."

"Yeah, cool. Now let's make it hot."

I eased back on my knees and ran my hands down his spine. I was just about to reach for the beautiful cheeks I'd been rubbing against when something caught my eye. On the small of his back to the left of his spine, and just above where the curve of his

buttock began, Tyler had a beauty mark. A small, flat, dark and perfectly round circle that drew the eye to that one graceful curve of his anatomy. Unable to resist, I slid my tongue over it. Tyler's back arched and he shivered.

"Did you know this was here?" I asked, before licking it again and leaving a wet kiss on it.

"What?" Tyler moaned.

"This beauty mark?"

"No, but God, it feels good when you do that."

"I'll remember that," I answered and was pleased to find such a lovely hot spot on my little wizard.

With a parting lick I drew back and rested my hands on his ass. Tyler moaned softly, mostly in anticipation I think, and it made me smile. The smile disappeared as I ran my hands over his flesh, lightly squeezing and massaging the perfect globes before parting them to reveal his entrance. The skin around it was dusky pink with tiny creases where it narrowed inward. Tyler's muscles convulsively flexed and it twitched as though trying to hide.

Instead of going directly for it, I teased the outer perimeter and did just what I'd told Tyler I was going to do. I licked the surrounding surface of both cheeks and sucked up a mark on one, temporarily branding him as mine. I moved around my primary target, drawing closer and closer until finally I laved my tongue over the soft, wrinkled skin. Tyler groaned, his hips flexing as he pushed back into the contact. It was more than apparent he liked what I was doing, which was good because I wasn't about to stop.

Now I know some of you are thinking, eww, this is nasty. Well, yeah, it can be, with the wrong person. I wouldn't do it for just anyone, but for Tyler I was more than willing. Why? A combination of things I think, most of them based in the primitive. First there was his scent. Earthy, musky and masculine, it made me rock hard and aroused as hell. Then there was his taste, which is next to impossible to describe. Is erotic a flavor? All I know is when it touched my tongue it was far from unpleasant.

There was a piquant tang, a dark yet zesty zing that electrified me and swept completely away any reservations I might have had about rimming him.

This was Tyler. His body, his aroma, his essence. I wanted all of it, everywhere. On my skin, in my nostrils, on my tongue, and it didn't matter from where the touch, scent or taste came as long as it was Tyler. That first laving stroke of my tongue became many more until the tight ring of muscle softened and relaxed under my warm and wet assault. I slid my tongue inside that first little bit and gently fucked him with it while listening to his moans. Unable to help myself, I palmed my own cock and gave it a few long pulls. It was all so good. Pleasure coming from every direction, flooding my senses in preparation of taking me under once again.

Much as I enjoyed what I was doing, I became impatient with my progress and decided it was time for more expedient measures. Fingers and lube. I took up the bottle I'd gotten from the nightstand and poured a generous measure into my palm. Slicking up my index finger, I gently eased it in. Tyler's muscles gripped then relaxed and I slowly slid my finger all the way inside. The contrast was amazing. Once past the taut ring it was all velvet soft and hot clinging flesh.

"Alex," Tyler groaned.

"What, baby?" I kept moving my finger, in and out, in and out until Tyler picked up the rhythm and rocked with it.

"So good. Feels so good."

"I knew you'd like it. You want more?"

"Yes. Yes, more."

"Whatever you need, sweetheart."

Sweetheart. That almost made me pause. I'd never called anyone sweetheart before. Part of my brain wanted to stop and analyze this new development, but Tyler's groan drove the thought out of my head. This was about the physical. Mental exercises could wait. I prepared him for two fingers by coating them both with lube and holding them tightly together while slowly easing them inside him.

"Relax, baby. Just breathe and push out a little."

Tyler did everything I asked, and bit by bit his body accepted the careful invasion of my fingers. The muscle that guarded his entrance softened and allowed the penetration, stretching to finally accommodate three fingers all the way to the knuckle. By this time Tyler was fully into it and practically fucking himself. He rode my fingers panting and moaning, moans that took on an edge of frustration.

"More, I can't... I need... Alex, more," he begged and that's all I needed to hear.

With the rest of the lube in my hand, I slicked my cock, gritting my teeth against the need to come. Tyler was so hot, so gloriously aroused and lost in his need it nearly wrecked my control. As much as I got off on getting him there, I had to hang on. Being the top came with responsibilities and making sure I didn't hurt him was number one. But damn, it was difficult. Getting him to this point, I wanted to join him, wanted to become a part of that mindless physical frenzy of urgent need.

"Hold on, baby, just hold on a little longer," I growled and had to wonder if my words were just for him. God knows I needed the same encouragement.

Wanting to make the exchange as quickly as possible to keep him from tensing up on me, I eased my fingers free of his hungry hole, grasped my cock, aimed, and pushed. The head breached Tyler's outer defenses before his muscles had a chance to lock me out, but we both froze as his channel clamped down... hard.

"*Oh fuck.*" Hands on Tyler's hips, I scrunched my eyes tightly closed and panted short shallow breaths to keep from shooting my load right then and there. Tyler's groan, edged with distress, drew my attention. I was grateful for the distraction. "Easy, sweetheart, easy. Relax. It's all right, baby, you just need to relax. Does it hurt?"

"A little," he gasped. "*So big.*"

"It'll get better. Try to ease up, push out with your muscles."

I centered my hand on the small of his back and slid it down until my fingers found the place of our joining. Once there, I lightly massaged the tight skin and muscle stretched around my cock. Tyler moaned and pushed back a bit. Distracted by my caress, his body relaxed and I slid further inside. Tight, wet heat surrounded me, urging me to slam myself home but I resisted, going slow, pushing in and easing out a

torturous inch at a time until I was fully seated and my balls were resting against Tyler's body.

At this point just the thought of it was enough to make me blow. As much as I wanted to look down, to actually see my cock fully engulfed in Tyler's body, I resisted. "Tyler, baby, are you okay?"

"Yeah. *Oh God*. So full, so much. It's good, so good. Need to move. God, Alex, please." Tyler's pleading had a desperate edge. It was almost as though he was afraid I was going to stop and just leave him wanting.

"Shh, I'm right here. Hold on, sweetheart, here we go."

I eased myself back, drawing my cock free of his body before slowly pushing back in. My strokes were shallow at first, the pace deliberate and careful. I was here to provide pleasure, not pain, and I wanted Tyler's first time to be good, a memory that would make him happy.

As good intentions go I did well, but there comes a time when the physical sensations overwhelm whatever sanity you're clinging to. Fortunately by the time I reached that point Tyler was enthusiastically responding. Once more he was pushing back into every stroke, taking everything I gave him and asking, begging, pleading for more. How could I resist?

There was so much heat; my blood was rushing like liquid fire through my veins, shoved along by the rapid pounding of my heart. Sweat was beading on my skin, a few tiny trickles sliding in chill inducing rivulets over my back. My muscles flexed and bunched; the movement so fluid and natural I felt as though I could fuck Tyler forever. My cock was surrounded by hot, wet velvet that sucked and pulled at me with every hard thrust and by this time the thrusts were many and deep, fully engulfing me again and again inside Tyler's willing body.

The feelings coursing through me had gone beyond pleasure and on to some indefinable agony of need that desperately clutched at every nerve ending I possessed. My belly grew tight, my thigh muscles rock hard as I slammed into him. I needed to come so damn bad I felt a scream building in my lungs, but I wouldn't go without him.

Reaching around his body, I found Tyler's cock. It was rigid. I folded my fingers around him, jacking him in time with my thrusts. When my thumb brushed over the head, wet with pre-come, a keening wail tore from Tyler's throat and he came.

All I remember after that was the unyielding grip of his sheath stretched around my cock like an arm in a too tight sleeve. It rippled and massaged me. I tried desperately to push as deeply within him as possible before I exploded. My orgasm ripped from me in a fiery rush and I shuddered and jerked with each wild gush of seed that raced from my cock to bathe his inner walls. There was nothing like it. Ever. I was blind and dizzy and the pleasure was so incredibly overwhelming it left me breathless, speechless, and blank. Just totally gone. No thoughts, no strength, no nothing.

Chapter Seven

When I finally came to, I was lying on my side with Tyler in my arms. I cleared my throat, noticing that it was a little raw. The thought came that I might actually have screamed. At this point I wouldn't doubt it. This had been without a doubt the most powerful sexual experience I'd ever had. I pulled Tyler closer to me and he snuggled his back against my chest, his ass cradled against my groin.

"Are you all right?" I asked. Pretty ordinary first words after such an earthshaking event but hey, my brain was fried.

"Mmm, I'm fine. More than fine. I can't even tell you how fine I am," Tyler answered, his voice sort of dreamy, floaty even.

I snorted softly and grinned. Seems I'd done all right by my no longer virgin lover. I was glad, happy and content, warm and comfortable and, it suddenly dawned on me, a soggy mess. We were both sweaty and covered with come. Tyler must really have been happy. He was lying in the wet spot without complaint. The thought made me laugh and while I hated to mess with the afterglow, no way was I going to lie here all night and end up glued to Tyler and the sheets.

Stretching like a cat who's just swallowed the canary and followed it with a chaser of cream, I gently prodded Tyler. "Come on, you. We're having a shower."

"We are?"

"Yes. And then we're going to put a new sheet on the bed."

Tyler yawned. "Okay."

He was too sleepy to protest and I took advantage of it. I thought the shower would be accomplished quickly and without incident, but it turned out a wet Tyler was too sexy to ignore. I'd already come twice and was sure my cock was temporarily sated, but it proved me wrong. What can I say? I'm a guy. In the shower with the warm water

flowing over us, I poured shower gel into my hands. When I started smoothing it over Tyler's skin, the tactile sensations went from my palms straight to my ever-ready cock. Never one to hide its enthusiasm, it stood up and announced to the world that it was ready for another round.

Tyler stretched and hummed with pleasure as I washed his back. Pushing back into me, he discovered I was turned on by the simple act of my towering erection pressing into the cleft of his ass. He turned around and looked down. A slow smile curved his lips. Before his gaze met mine, I was treated to the sight of his cock. It too had gone stiff. It seemed our nonexistent immunity to the sensual pleasures of a shared shower was a mutual weakness.

His lips parted and he took up the container of shower gel, squeezing a dollop into his palm. Rubbing his hands together, he made a lather, then keeping his eyes on mine, reached out to smooth it over my shoulders and chest. He hesitated at my nipples and I gave him a small nod. Immediately slick fingertips glided over them, and I drew in a deep breath of steamy air. I may be a top, but I like being touched and caressed as much as the next guy. Tyler's fingers lingered, toying with the tight nubs until I groaned out loud.

"You like it as much as I do," he stated and his voice held the wonder of discovery.

"Of course. I'm just like you. I may not be human but I feel pleasure in the same way you do."

"Would it be an insult to tell you that I think you're every bit as human as I am?"

I couldn't help but smile. He was offering me equality and belonging; it was a sweet and thoughtful gift. "How could I possibly be insulted? Humans have many fine qualities, including the ability to produce delicious, virgin wizards."

"Alex," he solemnly reminded me, "I'm not a virgin anymore."

"I know. I was there," I said with a grin, then groaned when Tyler let his right hand slide down over my belly and below to wrap tentative fingers around my cock.

"Is this all right?" he asked breathlessly. "I've dreamed about doing this, ever since I touched you the other day. I hated it that I had to stop. Please. Please don't make me stop."

"Why would I be so foolish as to do that? But I think it would be even better if we did it together," I answered and reached for him as well.

Tyler moaned and flexed in my hand. My other hand slid around his hip to rest on his buttock and the muscles bunched under my fingers. Together we started the movement, slow, firm strokes up and down the thick shafts in our hands. Tyler sought a kiss and I willingly gave it, opening for the tongue he boldly pushed into my mouth. It seemed my little wizard was learning fast. I always did like the clever ones.

We kissed, our tongues doing a slow, sinuous tango, while the warm water rained over us. It muted our scents but Tyler's taste was as potent as ever and it made me hungry for him, hungry for everything he wanted to give me.

As much as I wanted to keep kissing him, the steam was making it harder to breathe. Our mouths parted and I rested my head against his shoulder. He dropped his to mine and I could hear the harsh, rhythmic sougning of his breath in my ear. The pants soon became moans. Our hands moved faster and I found myself pushing into his touch. My climax was coming and I couldn't find one good reason to delay it. Tyler had drawn away from me and was looking down to where his hand was so efficiently working me. The sight seemed to fascinate him and right then and there I decided to push it up a notch. Just for him.

"Wanna see me come?" I growled. His gaze flew to mine and he nodded almost frantically. "Watch." That was all I had time for. Tyler looked down in time to see me erupt.

I threw my head back and groaned at the wash of ecstasy that flashed through my veins like liquid fire. It exploded in my groin and burned its way through my gut like an out of control inferno. I shuddered as my seed spattered between us, then panting hard, leaned against Tyler in time to become his prop as he came. Through it all

my hand never faltered and I took him to the peak and massaged his orgasm straight out through his straining cock.

His keening cry was like another lick of flame against my skin but the feel of his semen splashing against my cock and belly quenched the last of the fire that burned inside me. It was replaced by a bone-deep sense of pride and satisfaction. I was completely sated and so was my lover. At a time like this a man couldn't ask for more. We stood together, leaning on each other while we did nothing but try to catch our breath. It was Tyler who finally broke the silence.

"Alex?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm still standing."

I snorted a short laugh. "You sound surprised."

"I am," Tyler admitted. "I really need to lie down."

"I'm all for that. Let's finish this."

In my oversized shower stall we washed as quickly as possible then dried off in the bathroom proper. I found a clean sheet in the bottom drawer of one of the two dressers in my room, and it was exchanged for the soiled one.

With Tyler once more in my bed, I pulled the covers over us, spooned him against me, and easily fell asleep. Sometime later I woke to the sound of a few quiet sniffs. Blinking my eyes, I tried to focus. It was still dark; there was only the dim illumination from the nightlight in the bathroom to show me the outlines of furniture and walls. I looked around, searching for the source of the sound that woke me when I heard it again. Right in front of me.

"Tyler?" I asked, my voice husky from sleep.

"What?"

"What's wrong?"

"I just... woke up and you were here."

That statement took me aback for a moment. "Is that bad?" I softly asked.

Tyler turned in my arms. "No! It's good. I thought I was dreaming. I thought I was going to wake up and be alone again. But I'm not. You're here and I'm touching you and you're touching me and I don't have to stop."

His tears were wet against my chest. A wave of protective tenderness swept over me and I tightened my arms around him. "Shh, baby, shh. It's all right. You can be here as long as you want. Touch me any time you want."

I found myself kissing his hair, his forehead, his nose, and his eyes. His tears were salty against my lips and I licked them off, savoring the brackish flavor. I followed the wet trail down his cheek to his lips and our mouths came together softly, delicately, our tongues gently welcoming each other with silky strokes and subtle caresses.

I turned Tyler, easing him to his back, and my hands glided over his skin. Ever so slowly I built his arousal, kissing, licking and sucking his skin, his nipples, his belly, his cock, until he was shifting beneath me, moaning softly. With loving fingers, I opened him, leaving him slick and ready for the careful penetration of my engorged cock. Belly to belly, chest to chest, I made love to him, kissing him as we rocked together until climax washed over us in a breathtaking wave of heat and sensation so deep it left us both shuddering helplessly against each other.

What happened next was so amazing, so unbelievable, I thought for a moment I was hallucinating. It was like a wall coming down between us. I could feel Tyler's heart beating in time with my own; his breath was mine, his pleasure mine, and it heightened everything beyond belief. I could feel the sheet beneath his body and the feel of my skin against his fingers. Everything he felt, heard and saw I experienced as intimately as if my own senses were feeding the information to me. For a brief moment it was all too much and we cried out in unison, bound to each other on a level so incredibly profound it was almost painful.

Eventually the feeling receded but I could sense it, that connection; it was there and it wasn't leaving. When I was finally able to think again I held Tyler close and realized a simple truth. What we'd just done wasn't sex; it was indeed making love. Somehow in the past few days that elusive emotion had begun to grow between us.

Who'd have believed it? Certainly not me but there it was. Undeniable. Tyler was my soul mate, and I was falling in love with him.

"Alex?"

"Mmm?"

"What was that?"

How was I going to explain this? I wasn't sure how Tyler was going to react to the news that he was tied to me for life. It certainly wasn't what he'd been looking for when he'd called for help. I didn't get a chance to even think about how to break it to him. Before I could open my mouth, light appeared at the foot of the bed. It was soft, a gentle gleam that suddenly enshrouded the figure of a man. I was about to jump out of bed when a voice I knew well broke the silence that had gathered in the wake of that unexpected light.

"Hello, son." It was my father who stood before us. He was smiling and his green eyes were twinkling with pleasure and mischief. "Congratulations on finding your true mate. Will you introduce me?"

Cautiously smiling in return, I greeted him. "Hello, Dad. This is Tyler Montgomery. Tyler, this is my father, Anthony Layton."

"Hello, Tyler. I'm very pleased to meet you," my father responded.

"Um, I'm pleased to meet you too, sir," Tyler managed to answer, even though he was looking a lot shell shocked.

"You may call me Anthony or Dad if you like. That would be nice," he offered gently. I'm sure he could see Tyler's confusion. Without waiting for him to say anything more, Dad turned his attention back to me. "I'm here to let you know, in accordance with the rules governing soul familiars, you and your mate have four weeks to prepare for the forthcoming challenge. You know what that means don't you?"

"Of course I do, but Dad, Tyler's just coming into his powers. Couldn't we have more time?"

"I'm sorry, Alex, you know the rules."

"Yeah, yeah. Great."

"You'll do fine and I'm sure Tyler will as well. If I might..." Dad walked around the bed and approached Tyler. He sat on the bed, taking the space Tyler cleared for him by drawing up his knees beneath the covers. Dad held out his hand and waited.

Believe it or not my father has a talent for reading palms. "Give him your right hand," I instructed Tyler.

Throwing a questioning glance in my direction, he did as I said. My father studied Tyler's palm. "Hmm. I see great strength here. Determination and talent but there's something... something erratic coming."

"Erratic?" I questioned.

My father shrugged. "I'm not sure what it means. There's confusion and inconsistency. It's very strange."

Before he could say more a rumbling growl filled the room.

"Oh shit, I forgot. Dad, let go of Tyler's hand. Trip, *sit*," I ordered firmly.

The cerbretta obediently sat but remained alert.

"Well, that's interesting," my father commented. Between Tyler and me, we explained the cerbretta's presence and how he'd brought us together. "And you named him Trip?" Dad asked after hearing us out.

I shrugged, feeling sheepish. "Well, you know, three heads, triple, Trip, it just seemed logical."

Dad laughed. "I've always loved your simplicity, Alex."

"Is that an insult?" I asked with a grin. I was really pleased to see my old man. Even under these circumstances.

"Not at all. That's a genuine compliment. There are times when simplicity equals strength. Keep that in mind as you teach Tyler, son. I think the two of you will find that facing the coming challenge will be easy if you refrain from elaborate spells or counter spells." He turned his gaze once more toward Trip, who had relaxed enough to lie down. "So this curse turned out to be good luck after all. A lucky dog, if you will."

I laughed. "Actually I think I'm the lucky dog."

My father chuckled and winked at Tyler before his eyes met mine. “He is a handsome one. I think you may just be right. I’ll see you two again soon. Lydia will want to meet this potential new son-of-ethos.” He rose from the bed, was again engulfed in that soft light, and disappeared the way he came.

I slid an arm around Tyler’s shoulders, cupped his chin in my hand and boldly kissed him. By the time I let him up for air he was red-faced and speechless, which didn’t stop the questions that were gathering in his beautiful pansy blue eyes. I was about to be hit by an explosion of them and I had a lot of explaining to do. But that’s okay. Despite the fact that a magical challenge awaited us, my soul mate was here in my bed and in my arms. I was definitely a lucky dog.

Kate Steele

What is it they say? Watch out for the quiet ones? Kate Steele has found that writing is the ideal way to release all those wild inner urges and she's just getting started. "I'm aging in reverse. With the help of lots of plastic surgery and vitamins I fully expect to have my own male harem by the time I hit 90." For now she's settling for the quiet life in rural Indiana with family and pets. Guilty pleasure: Singing in the car. "With the volume loud enough I sound just like Celine Dion!" You can contact Kate and sing-a-long at katesteele27@yahoo.com or visit her website at www.katesteele.com.