

Changeling Press

Kate  
Steele

*Soul Familiar 2:*  
**Unpredictable**

# **Soul Familiar 2: Unpredictable**

## **Kate Steele**

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## **Soul Familiar 2: Unpredictable**

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**Life is unpredictable. That sentiment should be tattooed on my forehead -- or better yet on my lover's ass. I'd see it more often.**

**I'm Alex Layton and I'm a soul familiar. Most people know witches and wizards use familiars to enhance their powers. Soul familiars become not only partners with their chosen magic practitioner but mates for life, and we bond with our partners -- heart, body, mind, and soul. I've found my soul mate, a sweet, gorgeous, recently deflowered virgin, fledging wizard by the name of Tyler Montgomery. To keep him, I face a challenge, or more precisely, we face a challenge. Magical combat designed to test our bond and its strength. If we pass, we live happily ever after. If we lose... let's just say I refuse to lose.**

**Everything's going to be fine. I just know it will. Right? All we have to deal with is the powerful and practiced duo consisting of a fellow soul familiar and his mate who are gunning for us and one accident of nature soul familiar whose erratic powers are making our spells produce daffodils instead of dragons.**

**Like I said, life is unpredictable.**

## Chapter One

What was it that guy said in the movie *Independence Day* when he flew his fighter plane up the wazoo of the alien space ship? “I’m *baaack!*”

Yeah, I’m back. Alex Layton, remember? I’m the two-hundred-year-old, tastefully gorgeous soul familiar who just found his soul mate, Tyler Montgomery. I began my story by telling you about myself and how I met Tyler, and temporarily ended it when I discovered Tyler was my soul mate. Now that the shock has worn off, I think it’s time to continue this little tale. After all, I know you’re totally intrigued and probably smitten with me as well, so who am I to deny you a little more of my charm and wit.

As you can tell, I’ve never been accused of being modest.

Picking up where we left off, Tyler and I had just made love, the soul joining took place, and my dad showed up to congratulate us and give us the good news about Tyler facing that inconvenient little test designed to assess his worthiness to be my partner. When Dad returned the way he’d appeared -- in a nimbus of light via the ether corridor -- I was left to explain things to Tyler. I’d like to say we were cuddling in bed, but my ever practical Tyler decided he’d had enough of my attempts to distract him with some more than friendly groping and made us get up and go downstairs to the kitchen. At this point I could but sigh in frustration.

“It’s three o’clock in the morning. Do you really think we should be drinking coffee at this hour?” I asked as he set a steaming cup of black brew in front of me.

I’d taken a seat at the small oak table that resided at one end of the room near windows that overlooked the front lawn. As dark as it was outside, there was little to see other than that which was revealed under the bluish-white glow of the security light

that topped a tall pole beside the garage. The only thing I could see stirring was the plant life that swayed with the gentle, night breeze.

Tyler took the chair opposite me. "Quit complaining. I mojoed the caffeine out of it since we don't have decaf."

"And how did you do that?"

"A touch of that transformation spell I learned the other day. It was easy to remove that one element."

Giving the coffee a leery look, I picked up my cup and took a sniff. It smelled all right. I took a taste. It tasted all right too. "It's good. Seems you're actually learning."

"From the sound of things, I guess I'd better. You want to explain exactly what's going on?"

"Not really, but I suppose I'd better since you've dragged me out of bed at such an indecent hour."

"Yeah, I can feel your outrage. Spill it."

"Would you just listen to that sarcasm? You've gotten awfully bold and bossy for a twenty-two-year-old former virgin with all of a day's experience under your belt."

"I'm a fast learner, and you're rubbing off on me."

"Not yet, but given a little encouragement..." I knew I was smirking. I just couldn't help it.

"Alex."

Tyler was not amused. "All right. You felt something strange after we made love that last time, right?"

"Yeah, I did." Tyler closed his eyes as though savoring the memory. "It was so intense. Everything I felt, the breath in my lungs, the beat of my heart, the feel of your skin against mine, it was like I was experiencing it not only for myself, but through you as well. Why did that happen?"

"If you'll remember back to what my dad said, he congratulated me on finding my true mate. That particular phenomenon occurs when a soul familiar finds his soul mate. That would be you."

"Soul mate?" Tyler asked, with a touch of doubtful sarcasm.

"Yes."

"I hate to say it, but that sounds a little corny. So what exactly does being a soul mate entail? Did we just get married or something?"

I gave him a brittle smile. "Pretty much."

"I was kidding. You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Tyler dropped his gaze from mine, but not before I saw the dismay in his eyes. His earlier comment about soul mates being corny stung and it put me on the defensive. I was wondering if we were in trouble. It seemed I was the only one feeling happy about this situation.

"Is the prospect of being tied to me such an awful one?" I asked, trying very hard to keep my tone neutral.

"No, it's not that and I wouldn't have made light of it if I'd known you were serious." Tyler raised his eyes to mine. "It's just... I don't know. I feel like I should apologize."

Now that surprised me. I just had to ask. "Why?"

"I'm sure this isn't something you bargained for when you volunteered to help me."

"No, it's not. Do you hear me complaining?"

"No, but it seems like you should be. I mean seriously, when it comes to things like experience, talent, and power we're so far apart. There are probably plenty of other guys way better than me you'd prefer to be stuck with. Someone who would suit you much better than I do."

"What bullshit. Tyler, the joining happened because, corny as it sounds, the cosmic forces of the universe decided we should be together. The fact that I agree with them is just icing on the cake." I reached across the table and waited for his hand to meet mine halfway. When our fingers entwined, I couldn't stop the smile that tugged at

my mouth. "You're right. I've been with a lot of guys over the years, which just helps me know now that there's no one I'd rather be with than you. And thank you."

"For what?"

"For recognizing my stellar attributes, the power, the talent, although you could have also mentioned the drop-dead gorgeous looks and the amazing prowess in bed."

Tyler rolled his eyes and gave me a good-natured yet skeptical smile. "You are so full of yourself."

"You may be right, though I prefer it when you're full of me. Let's go back to bed," I answered with a suggestive wiggle of my brows.

"Not a chance. Not until you tell me the rest of it. What's this test your dad mentioned?"

I groaned and dropped my head to the table. Tyler withdrew his hand from mine, took a sip of coffee from the cup in front of him, and patiently waited. Peering up at him, I could see he wasn't going to budge. It seemed my new mate was not only practical but stubborn as well. After what we'd just discussed and in light of his insecurities, I really didn't want to have to say what I was about to say. Sighing with resignation, I lifted my head up and propped my chin in my hands.

"As my soul mate, you're required to pass a test designed to determine if you're worthy of me." At Tyler's raised brow, I quickly continued, "It's not my idea. Like I said before, I'm happy about this. As far as I'm concerned, you're more than worthy, and for me it's really not about who's good enough for who anyway. I'm just me and you're just you, and as weird as it sounds after such a short time, I... I care about you, you know?" And why did that sound strangely apologetic? Jeez. And why didn't I just tell him that I loved him? Seems like Tyler wasn't the only one with insecurities. Wasn't that a kick in the head.

The smile Tyler gave me in response to what I'd just admitted melted my bones. There was such warmth and happiness in those beautiful pansy blue eyes that it felt as though my heart was swelling. And had the air in here suddenly become thin? I was



having trouble catching my breath. As I sat there, lost in that loving gaze for a frozen moment in time, it occurred to me that it was going to be tough getting used to this.

How do you deal with one person's ability to evoke such emotion in you? It hardly seems fair. Tyler mentioned my power and experience, and yet this ability he possesses to make me feel so much trumped and made meager my practiced skills. I could see the pros and cons dancing before my eyes even as I thought about it, and yet... given the chance, I wouldn't change it. In two hundred plus years, I don't believe I've ever felt so alive. Even at three o'clock in the morning.

"So what does this test involve?" Tyler asked, bringing my thoughts back to the subject at hand.

"Basically, we'll face another soul familiar pair in magical combat."

"*Combat?*"

"Yes. It'll be like a game. They'll shoot a spell at us and we have to counter it."

"What happens if we don't successfully counter it?"

"We temporarily suffer whatever the spell is designed to do to us, and in addition, our bond will be permanently broken."

Tyler said nothing for a few moments and his silence began to make me nervous until his eyes met mine. The determination in them was clearly visible. "Tomorrow or rather later today, I want you to up the intensity of our lessons. I don't intend to be turned into a toad or whatever, and I definitely don't intend to lose you."

The sudden sting of tears that blurred my vision came as a total surprise. I nodded, picked up my cup, and took a gulp of the cooling brew hoping to swallow the lump that had formed in my throat. I was right. These emotions were going to be tough to deal with, but it was oh so worth it.

\* \* \*

"The elements -- fire, wind, water, earth -- these are all strong bases from which to launch an attack or form a defense."

Two weeks had passed since our soul joining and Tyler and I were engrossed in his studies. As usual we were ensconced in the loft to practice. The bond between us

was strengthening with every passing moment and Tyler was more readily able to draw on my power to enhance the spells he performed. At the moment he had a small fire elemental wrapped around his wrist while it purred with pleasure. My boy seems to have an affinity for the little critters. His next words proved me right.

"I love these guys. They're so warm and affectionate."

"With you maybe. You have a way with them and they like you. Fire elementals are usually snippy, hard to handle, and potentially lethal. There are a lot of magic practitioners who won't touch them for that reason, and because of their resemblance to snakes. Reptiles aren't exactly cuddly kittens, which is actually a very good thing... for us."

"Why?"

"If we catch the right soul familiar pair to engage in our little test with, the fire elementals could be our ace in the hole."

"Hmm." Tyler wiggled his fingers and the elemental moved. Its scaled body, shimmering with reddish orange flames, twisted and curled around Tyler's arm as it moved upward to his shoulder. Once there it raised its snake-like head and rubbed it against Tyler's chin. Tyler chuckled when the elemental's forked, darting tongue fluttered against his skin. I couldn't help but smile at the delight Tyler was taking with his little pet.

I suppose I should have been worried. A fire elemental can burn flesh to a crisp in seconds flat if so inclined. As I said though, they really do like Tyler. "As much as you love them, we need to work on other things as well. Send your pet home for the moment."

With a whispered word Tyler did as I asked. When the little guy disappeared, I handed Tyler a plain crystal marble. "What's this for?" he asked, clearly puzzled.

"Think of it as a shield."

"How so?"

"Like this." I took the marble, backed away a few paces, and recited the correct words. A surge of power surrounded me as the marble rapidly expanded. Like a flaccid balloon being filled with air, it increased in size until it engulfed me. "Try to touch me."

Moving from the chair in which he sat, Tyler cautiously approached with his arm extended, his hand reaching out. With three feet still between us, he stopped when his fingers came in contact with the invisible barrier I'd erected using the marble as my focus. Tyler ran his hands over the smooth surface which curved to follow the round shape of the marble.

"This is so cool. Why couldn't we just put one of these up around us and wait out the test? They could throw spells at us all day, but they couldn't touch us, right?"

"Not necessarily. This shield *can* be broken, but it's very good as a temporary defense. Besides, we have to prove we're capable of handling what's thrown at us. Just sitting comfortably behind an impenetrable barrier would prove nothing."

"I suppose," Tyler conceded.

Seeing the worry in his eyes, I dropped the shield and reached out for him. Tyler readily stepped into my embrace and I breathed him in. The faint herbal scent of the shampoo he'd used this morning complemented the clean and subtle musk of his natural essence. "You're doing fine. Winning this contest isn't going to be a matter of memorizing a couple of spells. I wish it could be that simple, but it's not. It's about thinking, acting, and reacting on the fly. You'll have to take bits and pieces of all you've learned, mix them together and put them into action. You've got a quick mind and a good imagination. You're a strong and steady focus for our power and I'll be there with you every step of the way to back up your every move."

"That's just it. I have to make the moves, I have to make the decisions, and if I choose the wrong way to counter an attack, you'll suffer the consequences too. It's not fair. As the more experienced one here, shouldn't it be you who calls the shots?"

"That's not the way it works, baby. I'm powerful, yes, and if it were just me, I *could* call the shots. However, the one thing you can't lose sight of is that no matter how much power I have, I'm essentially first and foremost a familiar. Now that I'm linked

with you, my wizard, my partner, my first priority is to give my strength and energy to you. When we work together, you are the focus, the core of us, the heart of our team. I'm here to enhance whatever magic you command."

"Alex, I'm not a commanding type person."

"I think you are. More than you know. Why do you think the fire elementals come to you so readily? They sense your inner strength." I pushed his hair aside and whispered in his ear, "And so do I. That's why I want you to fuck me."

"What?" Tyler stiffened in my arms and tried to step away.

I held on, refusing to let him escape. "You heard me."

"But you're always the one who tops. I can't... can I?"

Ah ha. Was that a hint of interest I heard? "There's no reason you can't." I let Tyler go and turned away from him. What I was offering him was not only something I thought would boost his confidence, but something I'd been curious about and wanting for a very long time.

I might be a natural top, but there's been many a time over the years that I've wondered what it would feel like to have a slick, hard cock up my ass. The bottoms sure seemed to love it and there was just something about the thought of putting myself into someone else's hands, of not having to be the leader, that I found strangely appealing. I wasn't about to give up on something I thought would be good for both of us. And I also wasn't above using a little judicious wheedling just because Tyler was a bit unsure.

"I'm counting on you too. As my true mate, you're the only one I can give myself to. You know you might think it's great to always be the person in charge, the one who directs everything, but it's tiring, Tyler, even in the face of an ego like mine that pretty much insists on directing everything. I've been waiting for you all this time, waiting for someone I could truly feel safe with and give up my control to once in a while." I walked over to stand in front of the loft windows and looked out over the cornfield and a distant stand of trees. "If you really don't want me... I understand."

Okay, maybe I was laying it on a little thick, but when the words came out I started to realize just how true they were. I did want to give up control, if only for a

short time, and I wanted to give it to my soul mate. Can we at least call that being selfish for a good reason?

I didn't hear Tyler as he closed the distance between us, didn't realize he was so close until I felt warm, sure hands land on my shoulders and a solid body press against mine. A solid body with a growing hard-on. And wasn't that a good sign.

"Don't want you? How could you even think such a thing, let alone say it out loud? I want you so badly. I never told you this but I've been thinking about it, wanting to know how it would feel to be inside you. I just don't want to hurt or disappoint you."

"You could never do either of those things. All you have to do is do to me the things I do to you. Touch me the way I touch you. Anything that feels good to you feels good to me and if there's something you think I'll like, something that would please us both then do it. There're no judgments here and no way to make a mistake. Just bring our bodies together and let me feel you. Once it kicks in, passion will take us both for a ride."

Tyler pushed my hair aside and kissed the nape of my neck. His warm breath against my skin made me shiver in anticipation. "You make it sound so easy and so sexy. Just let me know if anything I do hurts you. Promise?"

His lips pressed against my neck and his teeth scraped lightly over my flesh. I couldn't help the moan that rumbled up from my throat. "I promise."

"Let's go to the bedroom."

I shook my head. "No. I want to do it here."

"Standing up? In front of the windows?"

"Yeah. Besides, who's to see us? Raccoon and deer? I don't think they'll be impressed -- if they pay any attention to us at all."

"While it sounds damned tempting, what if things get too... you know, vigorous? I don't want to accidentally shove you through the glass."

"Not going to happen, lover." I whispered a few words and a pale rainbow of colored lights shimmered over the window then disappeared. "A charging elephant couldn't break through this glass. Now make me feel good."

"Bossy as always. Just remember, as of right now, I'm in charge. Lift your arms." I did as I was told and Tyler skimmed my tee shirt up my torso, over my head and off, letting it drop to the floor. His hands swept lightly over my shoulders and down my back. "Beautiful. Your back and shoulders are so strong and sleek. I love how your muscles are heavy and firm, not lumpy. Bulgy bodybuilder types never did turn me on."

"I'm glad you're pleased."

"Oh, I am."

Tyler proceeded to show me just how pleased he was by caressing and kissing my back and shoulders. When his tongue took a slow, warm, and wet path down the middle of my back, a wave of arousal followed in its wake and washed against the base of my spine like the ocean splashing against a rocky shore. It left a shivery tingle behind that made my stomach clench and my cock twitch.

Straightening up, Tyler nuzzled my neck and laved his tongue over the sensitive hollow beneath my ear. His actions had me drawing deeper breaths and biting my lower lip to keep from moaning out loud.

"You know, I've been thinking. Since you've never had a cock sliding between these tempting cheeks" -- his hands slid down my hips to cup my ass through the fabric of my jeans -- "that makes you at least a semi-virgin, doesn't it?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, tensing as his arms glided around me. He rocked his hips, letting me feel the hard length of his erection pressed against my ass.

"I'm talking about the fact that, according to what you've told me, your tight little hole is cherry."

A flood of realization swept over me and damned if his observation didn't make me tense up for a moment. Me? Virginal? Technically, I suppose he was right. Instead of being embarrassing, it suddenly seemed quite funny. I relaxed against him and chuckled. "Well damn, that's just wrong. A two-hundred-year-old semi-virgin? I'm glad you're going to fix this. It could ruin my reputation. And since you've brought it up, that makes you a semi-virgin as well, doesn't it?"

"How so?"

"You've never fucked anyone."

"Well, crap. And here I thought I was being so clever to point that out. Of course as soon as I fuck you, that problem is solved. For both of us. Too bad I won't acquire a reputation. No one's going to be impressed that I fucked one guy."

"Are you kidding? You're going to be the guy who fucked Alex Layton. Men worldwide will be tearing their hair out. Angels will weep."

Tyler's soft laugh tickled my ear. "I couldn't ask for more than that, could I?"

"I hope not." Suddenly I felt very serious and, weird as it might seem, very unsure. "I hope it'll be enough for you, Tyler."

Tyler hugged me tightly. "To fuck... no, to make love -- to my soul mate? How could that not be enough? Don't get serious on me. It seems an alien concept where you're concerned."

My sarcastic "ha ha" turned into an "Ahhh."

Tyler had moved his hands to cover my nipples and was rolling the sensitive nubs between his thumb and fingertips. Like good little puppies they sat up and begged for more, growing stiff under his tormenting touch.

"Mmm, so good," I moaned, leaning back against him while my hands gripped the window frame.

Straightening his fingers, he flattened his hands on my chest. His palms continued to gently abrade my nipples with a circular motion until he moved them to explore my torso. His fingertips glided through the spare patch of hair between my pecs, ruffling it lightly. I've always been glad not to be particularly hirsute, but the slight, ethereal tickle that accompanied the disturbance of that hair merely enhanced Tyler's touch and made me glad it was there. His explorations took him from collarbone to navel until they were interrupted by the waistband of my jeans. But Tyler didn't let that stop him.

I was wearing button-fly jeans and he eased them open one button at a time until my unrestrained erection practically jumped into his hand. "Going commando? How bohemian of you," he teased while gently stroking me.

"I just like the way it feels. *Unnn, Tyler*. I like the way that feels, too."

"That's good, baby. I want you to feel good. Let's get these jeans off." With Tyler's help, the fabric of my jeans slid down my thighs. He knelt behind me to ease them over my feet and I kicked them away. "I seem to have hit the jackpot," he commented in a voice it seemed to me was tinged with near reverence. "You have the most delectable looking ass."

I smiled at his unexpected compliment. "You know, I thought you'd be tongue-tied and nervous, but you're being awfully smooth."

"I might not have practical experience, but I wasn't living in a cave until I met you, either. I watched movies -- porn and romances -- and I read and I used my imagination. You were right when you said I have a good imagination. Would you rather I stuttered and stumbled and asked for blow by blow instructions?"

"Hell, no. And speaking of blow or rather blowjob..." A solid smack landed on one cheek of my ass and despite my startled "Hey!" the sting felt rather erotic and made my cock pulse in reaction.

"That'll be enough out of you. This is my show, remember? You just stand there, look pretty, and let me do you."

I laughed. "You're really getting into this. Very well, Master. I shall behave."

"Master? Hmm. I like the sound of that. Is that how the well-behaved soul familiar refers to his true mate?"

"Only if he wants to, so don't get excited... boy." A resounding smack landed on the other cheek of my ass.

"I'm no boy."

"Damn, Tyler. Don't tell me you're a closet Dom," I asked, flexing the muscles in my ass to help ride the sting his playful whack left behind.



"Beats me. I never really thought about it before, but now that you mention it... your ass looks sexy with a little blush to it."

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not suddenly turning into Bottom-Boy but, well, I have to admit this feeling of being dominated was rather, um, interesting shall we say? "Maybe somewhere down the line we could try a little role-play. God willing, we're going to have years and years to experiment." I wiggled my butt. "But for right now can we get back to the subject at hand? Namely my ass."

"And a lovely ass it is." Tyler kissed both cheeks and gently cupped the curves, petting and smoothing his hands over my skin. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No, baby, you didn't hurt me. You could make it up to me anyway."

"How?"

"Rim me. If the thought of doing it doesn't gross you out."

"Gross me out? Alex, why do you think I'm down here?"

Before I had time to say anything, Tyler pulled me back until I had to bend slightly at the waist. His hands parted my cheeks and without preliminaries of any kind his tongue settled against my hole to lick and tease.

"Oh God." My hands tightened on the window frame and I held on for dear life. Tyler didn't hesitate or hold back, he simply proceeded to make me his slave for life. He explored me so thoroughly that I swear I could feel every topographical nuance of my flesh as it was thoroughly laved and plundered. My sphincter, unused to such treatment, compulsively contracted and jumped. There was nothing I could do to stop it until the wet massaging heat of his tongue finally made me relax.

Tyler's hands directed my hips in slow, shallow undulations that mesmerized and set a counter rhythm to the insistent nudge of his tongue as it began to penetrate me. That talented organ ravished and made me shudder with pleasure. When a thread of saliva glided down from my entrance to follow the curve of my perineum, the wet tickle made me shiver and squirm even more.

"Oh fuck. Tyler. Baby. Unnn. Oh God. So good. So good."

I was babbling. I knew I was babbling but what else could I do? My brain had drained out of my head and spread itself down the length of my spine. I swear I could feel those normally undetectable intra-cranial electrical synapses firing from vertebra to vertebra. Anyone seeing the gentle rocking motion of my body could have no idea of the totally erotic and explosive devastation taking place inside me.

When a spit-slick finger slid inside me and glided across my prostate on its very first pass, my world tilted and it was all I could do to keep my knees from buckling. *"Tyler!"*

*"Good, baby?"*

*"Oh God, yes."*

*"Want more?"*

*"Yesss."*

*"Soon, love. I need lube."*

Tyler kept going, the in and out movement of his finger in my ass. A moment later, from the corner of my eye, I saw something floating toward us. He'd summoned the bottle of lube from the bedroom and it smoothly wafted through the air toward us as though such things were an everyday occurrence. My lover had learned so many things and never was I so glad that levitation was one of the skills he'd mastered.

With the lube now securely in hand, one wet finger soon turned into two very warm and slippery ones. At this point I was more than grateful that I'd charmed the lube. The spell I'd used to adjust it was noticeably working. I'd purchased the warming kind of lube, but the trouble with those is the heated sensation normally wears off all too soon. Not so with our magicked lube. Not only did it stay markedly warm, it stimulated highly sensitized nerve endings by adding a slight tingling buzz to them. Sort of like an invisible vibrator set on low, it was just enough to add to the tantalization of the flesh, but not enough to make you howl. We'd decided to leave that pleasurable chore to each other and Tyler was doing an excellent job of getting me to that point.

His fingers slowly pumped my hole, relaxing and stretching the muscle while stimulating the soft, inner flesh. The sensations were new and strange but definitely not

unpleasant, even when a third finger joined the first two and I felt a frisson of pain that had previously been missing. The tensing of my body apparently alerted him because Tyler slowed the movement of his thrusting fingers and rose from where he knelt behind me.

His arm encircled my hip and lube slicked fingers wrapped around the hard shaft of my jutting erection. "Easy, baby," Tyler crooned in my ear. "Just relax for me."

"How the fuck... oh God... can I relax... mmm... with you doing that?" I panted, moving with the stroke of his hand on my cock.

"You already have. Now that you're paying so much attention to your cock, your ass has relaxed."

It was then I realized that I had indeed not only accepted that third finger, I was fucking myself on all three of them in counterpoint to the strokes on my cock. "You're diabolical and so damned talented. I can't... Tyler... I can't tell you how good this feels."

"I already know. Firsthand experience. Remember?"

I nodded, but that was all I could manage. The sensations shooting through me were indescribable. Waves of heat and tight, trembling ripples chased themselves over my body. Sweat broke out, a fine sheen of gossamer-like moisture that enhanced the scent of carnal pheromones that saturated the humid air which swirled around us. I could smell my own need and it only served to drive my desire higher and hotter.

Tyler removed his hand from my cock and I groaned at the loss. His fingers grabbed my chin and he took my mouth with a sure and dominating power that made my insides quake.

If the taste hadn't been the same, I'd have wondered who this person was, but it *was* the same, merely blended with the flavor of me. It was a sweet, musky, erotic essence that no one could duplicate. He was definitely my Tyler and he was kissing me as though we'd been parted for weeks. His tongue charged into my mouth like he owned it, subduing my tongue and sucking on it. Completely stunned, I gave him

everything he wanted and reached for more to give. I wanted him to have it all. All of me. All of us.

Tearing his mouth from mine, Tyler growled. "Fucking damn, you are so hot."

Using his free hand he ripped his tee shirt up and over his head then opened the zipper on his jeans to free his cock. I wanted to see so badly, to see him, to see us together like this, that I whispered a word. The glass in front of me morphed into a mirror and looking down, I could see Tyler clearly where he stood slightly behind and beside me. His cock was so engorged it looked as though it might burst at any moment. Precum wet the deep reddish hue of the swollen crown, making it glow like some supremely erotic and slightly obscene plum.

I wanted that plum and the fat branch on which it rested. "Give it. I'm ready. Fuck me, Tyler."

His eyes met mine in the mirror. They'd grown dark, midnight blue with purple blending in from the outer reaches of the iris to rim and enhance it. With a sharp nod he moved into position behind me. His fingers slid free and his cock took their place with an alacrity that left me breathless until the increasing pressure at my hole caused me to tense. A sharp, harsh ache accompanied the sudden penetration of the muscles that guarded my entrance and I gasped in shock. "Stop! Damn. Oh fuck, wait a minute. Wait."

Tyler held perfectly still. "Try to relax, Alex. I know it's not easy the first time. Just hold on, baby. Hold on. It'll be better in a few seconds."

With my head down and my eyes screwed shut I took shallow breaths. Did I say bottoms seemed to like this? They must have been lying. In those few passing seconds Tyler mentioned, I'd decided that bottoms of the world had conspired to pull the wool over my eyes. Until Tyler moved again. It was just a slight nudge, but suddenly my body seemed to decide that it liked what he was doing, because just like that my clenching muscles relaxed, the pleasure was back, and I was moaning to accompany it while pushing back to try and get more of him.

My body's acceptance of him, it allowed Tyler free access. Both of us wanted his cock deep inside me and it was accomplished with one long, smooth glide that took my breath away and made me shudder.

"Oh, Alex. Baby, you feel so good. It's so hot inside. Like silk wrapping around me so tight. Oh fuck." Tyler rested his cheek against my back as the two of us stood still for a moment.

He was right about it feeling good. I knew exactly what he was experiencing. The tight grasp of velvety soft flesh around your cock. The gripping massage of muscle spasms as they surround and hold you. And then the movement. Sweeping caresses against the highly sensitized nerves of your shaft as you pump in and out of a deliciously warm and wet passage. All these wondrous things send tingles of erotic sensation up and down your spine while tying delicious knots within your groin. That's how it felt to be the top and those were merely the physical sensations. Add to that the satisfaction of dominating your partner. To direct not only his pleasure or pain, but your own all the while knowing that it's your actions that control the outcome of every encounter. It's a heady cocktail of physical, mental, and emotional states to be mixed and served at your whim.

Even so, what I was feeling now was something equally exquisite. There was the hot, sweaty chest, belly, and thighs of my mate pressed to my back. His hands planted firmly on my hips while his fingers gripped me. The thick, hard length of his cock stretching me open and filling me so full. The stimulation of ultra-sensitive nerve endings around my anus and the screaming pleasure to be had when his cock rubbed against my prostate. All this pleasure and I had to do nothing but take it. It was Tyler's decision when to stay still and when to move. It would be Tyler's will that brought me to orgasm.

There was no denying it. Top or bottom, sex provides the ultimate, the pinnacle of physical pleasure, and I was one lucky bastard to be experiencing it from both sides.

Behind me, Tyler shifted his stance a bit, ground his hips against me then drew back, pulling his cock partially free of my body only to plunge it deeply inside again

and again. The long, slow glides of that thick column gradually transformed into hard, fast thrusts accented by the slap of our bodies coming together. We engaged in an intimate dance accomplished in tandem like a carnal conga for two. Eventually I merely braced myself and let Tyler slam into me while I rode the wild swells of pleasure that rose higher and higher until they crashed over me.

"Alex," Tyler growled, his breath hot against the curve of my neck and shoulder. "So. Fucking. Good." Every word was punctuated by another thrust, another heavenly invasion of his body into mine. "I'm gonna come. Come with me, Alex. Come with me."

Tyler's hand found my cock and pumped. At the same moment his teeth clamped down on my shoulder. Those two things together sent a shock wave cascading over my already overburdened senses. I know I cried out. The aching wrench of untamed bliss that shattered the last remnants of my control could be denied neither vocally or physically. My cock throbbed with the roiling spurts of semen that spewed forth to spatter against the silvery glass of the mirror before me.

Tyler froze then jerked against me again and again and I could feel the pulse of his cock that announced the spilling of his seed within me. I've felt mildly possessive of lovers in the past, but nothing prepared me for the soul deep, bottomless satisfaction of knowing that no one would ever experience a joining with my Tyler. My lover. My soul mate.

Taking deep, shuddery breaths, I sought to still the shaking of my body and command some starch to my knees, but it was a useless effort. "Tyler, I'm going to sit down now," I announced and slithered to the floor, taking Tyler with me as he did his best to control our descent. We ended up on our sides, with me still cradled in his arms. I could feel the fabric of his jeans against my calves. "Are your jeans still on?"

Tyler managed a lethargic chuckle. "They barely made it past my knees. And my tee shirt's wrapped around my elbow."

I laughed. "Guess we were in a bit of a hurry."

"You're not kidding. Next time I top, I want you in bed."

"Deal. I'd move there now but my legs say no." I yawned. "And I need a nap."

“We can do that,” he answered then murmured a short incantation. I felt my body rise as a soft pad formed beneath me. Tyler kicked off his jeans and pulled a sheet over us. “Sleep.”

With a bleary blink and a muttered thanks, I drifted off to the sound of Tyler’s “I love you” reverberating softly in my head.

## Chapter Two

"Come on, Alex. Get a move on."

"I'll be right there." I grabbed my keys from the top of the refrigerator and met Tyler by the front door. I flourished our grocery list under his nose. "You forgot this."

"Oops," he said with a grin.

"I'll give you oops," I answered, leaning in to take a quick kiss.

Tyler and I were headed for town. We decided to take a break from studies in exchange for a little fun. First on our agenda was shopping for a birthday present for Tyler's uncle, followed by dinner, then grocery shopping to top off the evening. While I admit it all sounds rather plebian, it's amazing the enjoyment you can get out of such simple things when you do them with someone you love.

I locked the front door and we walked to the black SUV parked in the driveway. Tyler squinted up at the sky. "I wish we'd get some rain. Looks like I'll have to do some watering tomorrow. Some of the flower beds are drying out."

"Weatherman's predicting clear skies until Monday. Seeing as today's Friday, watering sounds like a good idea."

Tyler crossed the drive to the passenger side of the vehicle and I'd just keyed the locks when a man appeared behind him. Only the fact that I knew him saved him from the energy blast that tingled on the tips of my fingers. Before I had time to utter a word of warning, the newcomer slid one arm around Tyler's throat, the other around his torso and forcibly yanked him back against his body. I could see a nimbus of energy playing over the two of them. Do you know that expression "to see red"? My vision became more than distinctly rosy.

And I wasn't the only one pissed. Trip, Tyler's cerbretta guardian, appeared amidst angry barks, growls, snarls, and snapping teeth. I'd never seen Trip so incensed.



A small cousin to the not-so-mythical Greek three-headed dog Cerberus, he was a sight to behold. A sight that eloquently spoke of imminent attack. To make matters worse, Kohe, my pet/companion gargoyle, had appeared on the roof of the SUV brandishing a club and chittering at a speed and decibel level that clearly relayed his agitation. Wasting no time, I dashed around to the other side of the vehicle, determined to rescue my lover.

My rescue attempt was unnecessary. With a swift move that made me proud, Tyler outdid all of us and came to his own defense. The distinctive sound of electricity snapping accompanied several blue arcs that shot between him and the man that held him. The assailant's body jerked and he instantly released Tyler, taking a few stumbling steps back and away from him. "Son of a bitch! That hurt!"

At that moment Kohe launched himself into the air, his club raised and ready to strike. With a word I stopped his forward momentum in midair, earning a stinging string of gargoyle-speak and a wrathful glare. "Hold him!" I yelled to Tyler while gesturing toward Trip. "Kohe, cool it!"

Before Trip could charge forward, Tyler manifested a harness around his torso and grabbed the attached leash. "Trip, sit!" he ordered and knelt at Trip's side to soothe him with pets and crooning words of praise while I sent mental reassurances and apologies to Kohe as well as requesting he get rid of the club.

His obvious ire was apparently softened, as Kohe complied and I floated him back to his launch pad -- the roof of my SUV. With the furor dying down, I turned my attention to the man who'd caused it. "That was incredibly stupid. Considering what could have happened, I'd say you got off lucky. Blake, what the fuck are you doing here and why are you attempting to assault my soul mate?" Tyler rose to stand by my side and together with Trip and Kohe we four presented a stern and united front to the man who'd stupidly started this entire ruckus.

Blake Whitten was a practicing wizard with at least eighty years' experience under his belt. For as old as he was, he appeared to be only in his early thirties, a trim man of medium height and build, with chocolate brown eyes and glossy brunet hair to

match. He was actually good-looking in a sort of polished car-salesman-like way. As people go, he was an okay guy, though I found his sense of humor a bit hard to take. He's one of those bluff and hardy types who make broad gestures and tell risqué jokes. Most of the time he was harmless, although he did have a tendency to dip toward boorish now and then. Apparently his knowledge on the etiquette of how to greet someone wasn't all that sound either.

"I wasn't trying to assault him. It was meant to be a joke. As for what we're doing here, we just dropped in to get a look at the competition."

"Competition?"

"Lucas and I will be your opponents in the upcoming duel."

"Wonderful. And speaking of Lucas, where is your dour half?"

"Here, Alex. So nice of you to think of me."

That disembodied voice was followed by the appearance of a second man as he stepped out of the ether corridor. Lucas Tarrasen -- soul familiar, partner to Blake and my former lover in the distant yet not-so-dim past. He hadn't changed a bit. Same ash-blond hair, impeccably styled. Those patrician features schooled in a look of aloof disdain. Cool blue eyes, calm and assessing and that long, lean length of flawless body dressed to kill in designer casual. The total package used to rev my engine something fierce. I always took such great pleasure in shattering the controlled façade he always wore like armor while replacing it with out of control passion. Now there was nothing but the knowledge that caution was definitely called for. Lucas was not as old as me, but his power was a force to be reckoned with. Blake too was no lightweight when it came to magical skills.

"Where he goes, you go," I said, giving him an ambiguous reason for my inquiry. "How are you, Lucas?"

"Well, thanks. And yourself?"

"Fine. Actually, more than fine." I lifted my hand and settled it on Tyler's shoulder. "Tyler, meet Lucas Tarrasen, soul familiar, and his partner, Blake Whitten. Gentlemen, my mate, Tyler Montgomery."

Lucas regally inclined his head, his gaze sharpening as he gave Tyler the once over.

"Pleased to meet you, Tyler. Sorry if I startled you," Blake said.

"Of course. Sorry about that zap," Tyler replied.

I could hear the guarded restraint in Tyler's voice. Good. I wanted him on his toes. Not that Blake and Lucas would start anything before it was officially sanctioned, but it didn't hurt to be wary.

"This is quite a menagerie you have here," Blake commented. "I've never seen a cerbretta in the flesh. Is he your pet?"

"Yes. A gift from my mother," Tyler answered.

"So this neophyte child is your mate?" Lucas drawled. "I'd heard he was young but I had no idea he was so... unfinished. He's not many steps above an ordinary human, is he? Practically a null."

Keeping a tight rein on my temper, I calmly answered his insult. "And yet he broke your Master's hold in a split second with a simple electrical charge."

"Blake was merely playing. You remember playing, don't you, Alex? You always played so well."

Lucas' voice had dropped an octave until he was practically purring. It was quite a performance. Our parting had not been amicable and he knew perfectly well I felt nothing for him now. "I do remember, and I played plenty after we broke up, Lucas, especially after I learned to choose my partners with more discrimination. Fortunately, I don't have to worry about such things anymore. My playing days are in the past." I settled my arm around Tyler's waist. "I'm content to be off the market."

"What a bore you've become, but then you always were rather stodgy."

"Better a stodgy bore than an unfaithful slut who was unable to keep it zipped for the duration of what he claimed was such an important and meaningful relationship."

"Sanctimonious bastard. Just because I hurt your pride."

"The only pride hurt was your own when you could no longer lay claim to me."

"You flatter yourself but then you always were your biggest fan, Alex."

"I suppose it was someone else who begged me not to leave. Or was that just my imagination?"

"And you were so compassionate, weren't you?"

"After the first two times you cheated on me, yes. By the third time, my compassion dried up along with any foolish hope I'd had of you standing behind your word."

"Judgmental cretin."

"Lying whore."

"Whoa, whoa, *whoa!*" Blake stepped between us before Lucas and I ended up toe-to-toe and trading blows. "I knew you two had a history but really, Alex, there's no need to attack Lucas just because he said a few disparaging words about your little wizardling. You go too far."

"I go too far? He deliberately provoked me and you know it."

"You misunderstood."

"Did I?" I asked with a sarcastic growl. "Well, there's one thing I'm not mistaken about, and that is that I'm not the one who showed up here unannounced and uninvited. Nor am I the one who attempted to assault and insult my soul mate. I would suggest the two of you leave before I take this transgression up with the Council of Elders."

"Very well, we're leaving. I think we've seen all we needed to see anyway," Blake responded with a sneer. "Enjoy your mating while you can. In two weeks' time you'll be alone again and this upstart whelp will be stripped of his meager power and all memory of you."

Without another word, Blake and Lucas vanished. In the wake of their leaving an ominous silence ruled for all of thirty seconds.

"So, that's the opposition. It's good to know there'll be nothing personal about their attempts to blast us out of existence."

"Tyler."

“Alex.”

“What?”

“I think it’s too late for birthday present shopping. Let’s go straight to dinner. I’m starving.”

I sent a cautious yet searching look his way, but I could see no sign of agitation in Tyler. He seemed perfectly relaxed. And what was up with that? I thought for sure he’d be all over me with demanding questions and scathing comments. Just goes to show you can never tell how someone will react to something at any given moment.

Once Trip was released from his harness he disappeared. With a grimacing grin, Kohe followed his example and without further incident, Tyler and I drove to town and ended up at Genoa’s, a local Italian restaurant. We got a nice corner booth among a group of other such seating arrangements that occupied a raised dais at the back. The waitress took our drink orders and left to fill them while we considered the menu.

I’ve always liked Genoa’s. The lighting is subdued and on every table is an ornate glass container with a lit candle. From the slightly higher elevation on which our booth was situated we had a clear view of the entire room and it was like seeing numerous small and warm oases of light spreading out across the restaurant.

Back with the drinks and warm rolls drenched in butter, herbs, and garlic, the waitress took our dinner orders -- fresh garden salads and manicotti for both of us. When she left, the silence between us was filled with soft music and the murmur of other diners. I sat quietly waiting for the first question. It wasn’t long in coming.

“So... you and Lucas,” Tyler began.

I looked up from the table and met his eyes. “We were lovers for several years. As you heard, things didn’t end well between us.”

“That was pretty obvious. It also must have been pretty serious, at least on your part, to cause such animosity between you. I thought soul familiars didn’t get or weren’t supposed to get serious about another soul familiar.”

“We’re not.” I heaved a deep sigh. “I met Lucas not too long after my mother killed herself. I was very... confused, I guess you could say. I was having a hard time

coping. I latched onto Lucas and convinced myself I was in love with him. He was more than willing to play along with my delusions. I think that's one of the reasons I resent him so much to this day. Even though it was through my insistence that our relationship resembled some ideal monogamous love affair, he knew better. He knew the truth of it and instead of making me see that truth, he turned it into some sort of twisted game."

"The affairs?"

"Yes. I became this caricature of a jealous, cuckolded husband. It was humiliating, but then he suffered his own share of humiliation."

"How so?"

"I made him bottom for me."

"What's so humiliating about that?" Tyler indignantly asked.

"Between normal couples nothing," I assured him, wanting nothing more at that moment than to kiss that offended look off his face. Instead I settled for explaining. "At the time Lucas and I met, even though I was young I was touted as one of the most powerful of our kind. In human terms it amounted to being a rock star. I was a prodigy, and there were a lot of beings who wanted to be on the Alex Layton bandwagon -- or more specifically in my bed. Lucas was normally a top, but he gave his ass up to me just for the prestige of being known as my lover."

"Then he got what he deserved."

"I suppose. I think, too, that's why he had the affairs. With those other guys he regained the self-esteem he felt he'd lost to me. He was the top again. He hated being the bottom, and I knew it."

"But you took him anyway."

I nodded. "It was wrong. I know that. My only excuse is that my mom's death fucked me up, and that, in combination with all the sycophants telling me how wonderful I was, made me forget for a time how to be a decent person. I got off on doing Lucas, on making him submit to me. Jeez, I think we were both sick. Here I was

telling myself I loved him and all the while I was really abusing him, and he was letting me do it just for the shallow glamour of being the guy in my bed.”

“So what finally made you break up? You said something about a third affair?”

“That was part of it, but it was Lydia who was ultimately the catalyst that made it happen.”

“Really? Your dad’s true mate?”

“Yeah. I’d gone to have a talk with my dad about something. To this day I don’t remember what after the shock I received from talking to Lydia. I just remember he wasn’t home, but was expected soon so I stayed and visited with Lydia. During the course of the conversation the subject of Lucas came up, which was perfectly natural considering our relationship at the time. Lydia point blank asked me if I was trying to follow in my mother’s footsteps by allowing myself to get so deeply involved with another soul familiar.”

“What did you say?”

“At first I was so shocked I didn’t know what to say. Lydia had never had an unkind word to say to me and here she was suddenly asking me if I wanted to kill myself. When I recovered enough to say something my first impulse was to deny it, but then it suddenly hit me that maybe that’s exactly what I’d been looking for, an excuse to duck out on my pain and confusion. I mean seriously. I was doing a credible job of convincing myself I loved him. His true mate could have shown up at any time and if we were together, I’d have had the perfect reason to commit suicide.”

“Yeah, but it could have been years before Lucas’ mate showed up. And there was no guarantee you’d have still been together. The affairs were seeing to that.”

“But don’t you see, I didn’t think about that to begin with. Regardless of how it turned out, I *was* trying to set myself up to follow in my mother’s footsteps. When Lydia had the guts to ask me that question, the truth presented itself to me in all its sordid and idiotic glory.”

“Oh, Alex.” Tyler’s eyes were filled with sympathy.

"Now don't get maudlin. After all, it wasn't a very good attempt to do myself in. I couldn't have been that serious about it or I'd have been more creative."

"I'm glad you weren't."

"Me too," I sincerely replied. "I'd have missed out on being with you." At that moment the waitress approached. I waited until she'd delivered our salads to continue. "At any rate, with my biggest folly being pointed out to me, the rest of them just sort of lined up one after another. I couldn't deny the fact that my relationship with Lucas, not to mention my life at this point, was one big mess. That's when we broke up and I withdrew from my crowd of admirers."

"How long did the withdrawal last?"

"Mmm, about six months. I cautiously dipped my toe back in with a one-night stand, decided I liked it and proceeded to become the carefree bachelor I was until we met."

"Should I ask how many came before me?"

"I wish you wouldn't. I never kept count and I don't really want to remember. I can honestly say that after Lucas I never deceived myself or anyone or made false promises. My relationships were about fun and sex, nothing more serious. Until you." I brought my gaze to his. I know I had no reason to feel this way, but just looking into my mate's loving eyes made me feel, well, guilty, which is I guess one of the cons of being in love. "Tyler, I'm sorry. I wish I hadn't been so... footloose."

"Alex, don't. I'm not going to sit here and pass judgment on the number of guys you slept with before we met. There's nothing for you to be sorry about. Did you regret being with any of them at the time?"

"Honestly? No."

"Then there's no reason to regret it now. I'll be honest and say I'm a little jealous that others got to be with you, but then I got something they didn't. I have the privilege of knowing that it ends with me, that you never belonged to anyone else. You're mine."

"And you're mine," I answered with a smile, relieved and grateful for Tyler's healthy attitude toward my less than pristine past.



"I am," Tyler agreed. "Let's eat."

We took our time over dinner, enjoying the atmosphere and each other's company before tackling our grocery shopping chores. Actually I enjoy grocery shopping. It's fun to weigh the merits of this brand over that or debate which cut of meat is best. It was also fun to slip things into the cart behind Tyler's back like chocolate-covered marshmallow pinwheel cookies and chocolate decadence biscotti. On discovering them he told me I was going to get fat. Ha, like that could ever happen. I told him they were for Kohe. I don't think he bought it, but he let me keep them anyway.

After the shopping was done we headed for the checkout, one of my favorite things about grocery shopping. They have these do-it-yourself checkout lanes and I have fun playing grocery clerk. Simple minds like simple things, right? Humph! Says you. I'll bet there's more than a few of you who are just like me in this respect. At any rate, we got out of the store, loaded up our groceries, and headed home. By this time it was dark out and I flipped on the headlights before we started out.

I was hoping for a quick, uneventful trip so I could get Tyler into bed as soon as possible. What I got was an unexpected surprise.

We drove back through town as Genoa's and the grocery store were out on the southeast end and we lived out in the country, north of town. As I backtracked we of course seemed to hit every blasted stop light along the way. Waiting at yet another one, it had just turned green and I stepped on the gas when something seemed to hurtle itself right out in front of the vehicle. I slammed on the brakes and car horns immediately started sounding out behind us. Traffic in the two southbound lanes as well as the left northbound lane continued as Tyler and I both got out of the SUV to see what the hell had landed in front of us.

When I saw a young man lying there on the road, to say I was shocked was an understatement. Tyler reached him first. "Oh my God, where did he come from?"

"Hell if I know. You saw as much as I did."

"Alex, call nine-one-one."

I reached for my cell phone but stopped when a slightly husky voice said, "No."

The young man opened his eyes and looked at me. "I'm okay. I came to see you."

"Me?" I asked, completely astonished.

"You're Alex Layton, aren't you?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Please, I need your help."

"Guys, we've got to get out of the road. Traffic's snarling up and I see a cop car headed this way." Sure enough, a few blocks away I could see the lights whirling atop a police vehicle. Tyler knelt down and touched the kid's arm. "Can you stand? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I think I'm okay, if you could just give me a hand."

Tyler stood, reached down, and took the kid's hand. There was a surge of power and suddenly the air was filled with confetti. Thousands, millions of colorful bits rained over us and from what I could tell, over everyone else in the immediate vicinity.

"What the fuck! Who did that?" I shouted.

"Don't look at me," Tyler denied.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." In the glare of the SUV's headlights, our accident victim's expression was so horrified it was almost comical. "When he helped me up I was thinking that he smelled like spaghetti."

"You thought spaghetti and we got confetti?" I couldn't tell if I was more incredulous, appalled or relieved. "Hallelujah we didn't get the spaghetti. Get in the car."

The three of us piled in and I got us underway and fortunately out of there before the police car headed in our direction could make it through the traffic. Just to make sure we got out of town scot-free, I threw a disguise charm over us. Anyone looking at our black SUV was going to see a silver four-door sedan, and so we made it safely out of town.

Repeated glances in the rearview mirror revealed nothing more than a clear road behind us and our guest, sitting quietly while presumably behaving himself. "I can tell

you're a soul familiar but we've never met. What's your name?" I asked. My curiosity was getting the better of me and I didn't see the need to hold my questions at bay any longer.

"Robert Cauley, but you can call me Bobby."

"All right, Bobby. You said you came looking for me. May I ask why?"

"I was hoping maybe you could help me."

"With what?"

"My powers."

"Considering the spaghetti-confetti mix-up, I'm gonna go out on a limb here and assume you're having some kind of a problem?"

"They're totally fucked up!"

Tyler snickered. "You don't believe in beating around the bush, do you?"

"I'm sorry, it's just that I'm desperate."

"Why don't you go to the Elders' Council?" I asked.

"I'm afraid to."

"Why?"

"Elder Thomas wants my head on a platter."

"Again, why?"

"'Cause when we accidentally got linked, I made all his spells go wacky. His clothes disappeared at a meeting of the Familiar Society."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Old Thomas in the buff? What a hoot." And then it struck me. "Oh no. Bobby, are you an *adherah*?"

"Yes."

"Oh shit, oh damn." We so did not need this right now. "*Oh fuck*. The duel."

"What? What is it?" Tyler asked. "What's an *adherah*?"

He was clearly mystified and I could almost wish I were as well. "An *adherah* is an extremely rare type of soul familiar. There's one born maybe every thousand years or so. What sets them apart is unlike the soul familiar who forms no magical bond to

anyone except his or her true mate, the *adherah* can form a link with anyone, at will. The only requirement is that they be touching during the working of magic."

"You mean like Bobby and I were touching when the confetti appeared out of nowhere?"

"That's right."

"Are you saying we're *bonded*?" Tyler was clearly not happy. "I'm not participating in a ménage à trois, Alex Layton. I'm not welcoming a complete stranger into our bed."

"No, no, no, hold on now. You're not bonded in the sense that you and I are as true mates. Rather your powers are linked." There was a moment's silence while that revelation was digested.

"But... if his powers are fucked up then... Oh shit. Oh damn," Tyler breathed.

"Yeah," I agreed. "We're fucked."

With the implications of what had befallen us sinking in, we arrived home. I parked the SUV and after determining that Bobby had indeed suffered no serious injury from his fall, I drafted him to help us carry the groceries inside. Under the kitchen lights I finally got a look at our walking disaster.

He looked to be in his late teens or early twenties and stood about five feet seven with a slim build. And talk about seriously cute. His oval face was dominated by almost delicate features and a pair of wide, up-tilted, moss green eyes. His hair was dark, not black like mine but dark, dark brown with rich mahogany highlights that shimmered when the light caught them just right. His hair was cut in a kind of medium-short spiky style with long bangs that fell over his brows to frame those beautiful eyes. If I had to describe his looks in one word, I'd say elfin. The *Sidhe* have an unmistakable elegance and grace about them. Bobby had it, although in him the aura was young and unfinished.

I was contemplating what to do with our little bundle of trouble when Kohe appeared on the countertop against which I was leaning. Small wonder. The bag I'd just unpacked contained those contraband chocolate-covered marshmallow pinwheel

cookies. He gave me a solemn look, blinked a couple of times and patted the box. I couldn't help but smile. Kohe can be very cute when he wants to be and most especially when he wants something. "Brat. You're going to make me share, aren't you?"

He nodded enthusiastically.

From further down the counter came a chuckle and a disparaging snort. Tyler and Bobby were watching us.

Tyler raised a brow. "Excuse me, but didn't you say you bought those for Kohe? I'd think it would be more accurate to say he's going to share with you. If he will."

Giving my traitorous mate the evil eye, I turned back to Kohe. "So, are you going to share with me?" With his forehead wrinkling in thought, he put one hand beneath his chin and tapped a finger against his cheek. "Kohe." The little pipsqueak was obviously enjoying this opportunity to tease me. "You know I'm the one who goes to the store and buys these things. Who are you gonna get your fix from if you piss me off? You know Tyler won't buy them. He makes us eat healthy stuff."

Kohe's grimace was adorably ghastly. He pushed the box of cookies toward me while vigorously nodding his head.

"Good decision."

Rolling his eyes, Tyler continued to put away the things Bobby unpacked and set on the counter. "Yeah right. I make you eat healthy? Like there's no ice cream sitting in the freezer this very minute."

"But I bought that too," I pointed out.

He shook his head and said to Bobby, "It's like dealing with children."

"Yeah, but you sure are lucky to have them."

The wistful intonation accompanying that remark brought my gaze to Bobby. It suddenly struck me just how vulnerable he looked. Considering his difficulties, I'd imagine it would be hard for him to be accepted by those around him, especially fellow practitioners of the magical arts. No one wants their spells going haywire, no matter how accidental the reason behind it.

"Yes, I am lucky," Tyler agreed, meeting my gaze.

I gave him my most disarming grin and winked at him before taking a bowl out of the cupboard next to me. Opening the box of cookies, I placed four of them in the bowl and gave it to Kohe. He gave me a searching look. "There's only twelve in the box. I thought it would be nice if we share with Tyler and Bobby." He nodded his agreement, took up his prize, and vanished.

"He's adorable. I've never seen a gargoyle in the flesh before," Bobby said.

"He's a little bandit," I growled, "but he's family."

"Aw, Alex, that's so sweet," Tyler cooed. He came to me, wrapped his arms around my neck, and smooched me repeatedly on the cheek.

"Gah, get away from me. You're just trying to embarrass me 'cause I lost my head and got mushy."

"I love it when you're mushy."

I gave up and pulled him to me. "I thought you liked it when I'm hard," I murmured in his ear.

"That too."

Not that I'm one for public displays of affection, but when Tyler's in my arms I sort of lose track of everything else. I found his lips with mine and soundly kissed him until he pulled away -- gently reminding me we had a guest. Glancing at Bobby, even though his head was down, I could see his cheeks were flushed. "Sorry about that," I apologized.

He quickly looked up and met my eyes. "It's okay. If you guys want some privacy, I can go."

"No!" Tyler and I both emphatically stated.

"We need you to stay right here until we figure out what to do about this link. Okay?" I clarified.

"Okay," Bobby agreed.

"Good. You like milk and cookies?" Bobby nodded. "Great! Milk and cookies all around."

Tyler and Bobby finished putting the groceries away while I rustled up glasses, milk, and the cookies and carried them to the kitchen table. The two of them joined me and we dug in.

"So, what made you think I could help you with this problem and how did this happen anyway?" I asked Bobby after washing my latest bite of cookie down with a swig of milk.

"Everybody knows about you. They say when it comes to an innate ability and understanding of how magic works there's nobody who knows more than you. That's why I thought you might be able to help me. As for why my powers are messed up, well, I've been this way since I was born."

Rather than preen, I manfully ignored that accolade to my abilities and got straight to the point. "How can that be? Your mother's life force guarded and nurtured the powers granted to you by her and your father as you formed in her womb. They should have mimicked your parents' abilities including their stability. Did either of your parents have a problem?"

"No, it wasn't their fault. It was an accident caused by an electrical storm."

"Huh?"

"At the exact moment I was born, a lightning bolt made a direct strike at the birthing clinic. It ionized the atmosphere to such a drastic degree that it weakened the stability of my magic. When it was discovered, my parents were able to contain the worst of it, but when I hit puberty even they couldn't keep a lid on it anymore. I try not to do things. I deliberately stay away from casting spells but, well, you saw what happened just a little while ago. Sometimes all I have to do is have a thought, and poof... something happens, and not even something relative to what I was thinking about."

"Oh man, that has to suck, as in big hairy donkey balls suck."

Bobby grinned, and the effect was utterly charming. He was one sweet, luscious little morsel. I looked at Tyler who was sitting to my left. He too seemed mesmerized by Bobby's pure and natural allure. Turning his gaze toward me, our eyes met and

complete understanding passed between us. "It almost makes me wish we *were* all bonded," Tyler admitted.

"I had the same thought, but then you know that. We're both utterly shameless." Tyler grinned and I laughed at the wicked twinkle in his eyes before turning back to Bobby. "You're lucky Tyler and I are mated or you'd find yourself the object of a very determined seduction attempt."

"I wouldn't mind," he answered with a shy smile. "You guys are nice. I thought you'd be all stuffy and stuck up like... um... Elder Thomas."

Bobby's hesitation raised a frisson of unease within me. I was just about certain the stuck up person he was referring to wasn't Elder Thomas. Though it was something that required some thought, I put it away for now. "There's a question that just begs to be asked at this point and that is how is the power link broken between you and whoever you become attached to?"

"Mostly by accident, although it can be deliberately transferred from one person to another if the other person will agree to accept it."

"I take it that doesn't happen very often?"

"No."

"And do you have to be attached to someone?"

"No. It's supposed to be a deliberate and voluntary thing but with my powers messed up the way they are, sometimes a link just happens."

"Were you attached to someone before you came to us?"

"Um... no."

As soon as the word left his mouth I knew he was lying. Bobby is not the kind of person who can get away with blithely spouting falsehoods. He gives off "I'm lying" vibes. I can say for certain he'd be a terrible poker player.

"Bobby, what aren't you telling us?" I gently prodded. I had a feeling that whatever the reason was that brought him to us, it wasn't his idea.

Biting his lip, Bobby looked up at me. The smiling young man of a few moments ago was gone. This one was filled with fear. "He made me. I didn't want to, but he said



he'd put a proposal to the Elders' Council to have me put in stasis 'cause I'm a danger to every magic practitioner worldwide. He said my incompetence could expose us all. He ordered me to come here and attach myself to either you or Tyler. I'm so sorry. I was scared. I didn't know what to do."

The root of suspicion that had earlier been planted in my mind produced a bloom fully formed. "Lucas Tarrasen."

With his eyes going wide, Bobby whispered, "How did you know?"

"It's just the sort of underhanded trick he would pull. And you're right, he is stuffy and stuck up. I'm sad to see he's also become cruel. I'm sorry, Bobby, you shouldn't have been pulled into this."

"You're not mad at me?" Bobby looked so subdued and hopeful my heart went out to him.

I'm an only child, but I was beginning to think that what I was feeling now was something an older brother might feel for a younger one. I wanted to protect the little squirt. "No, we're not mad at you. It wasn't your fault. None of this is. Lucas has decided to try and disable us before we have to face him and his partner in magical combat." I went on to explain our circumstances to Bobby and the upcoming trial we faced.

"You'll never be able to win with me attached to you. What are we going to do?"

I smiled at the way Bobby selflessly took on Tyler's and my problem as his own. "I'm going to try to do what you were hoping I could. I'm going to fix your powers."

## Chapter Three

Have you ever heard the untamed cry of an overconfident idiot? It sounds something like, "I'm going to fix your powers!" That's right, the overconfident idiot was me. A couple of days after making that lofty pronouncement I still had made no progress. We'd managed to keep the Bobby-induced disasters to a minimum.

Bobby had been outside on several occasions helping Tyler with his watering chores and I suppose his imagination was overloaded by images of flower beds and sprinklers. The second night he was here, when Tyler and I attempted to go to bed for the night we discovered our bed was filled with flowers. Roses, daisies, iris, daffodils, tulips... you name it, we had it. Fortunately they were cut flowers, no dirt to get rid of.

The second incident happened the next day. I just happened to be in the kitchen when the rain started... indoors. Lucky me. At first I was startled as hell but it didn't take long to realize who was responsible. Calmly I summoned an umbrella and yelled out the window for Tyler and Bobby to come in. Bobby looked suitably guilty and chagrined, but can you believe Tyler laughed at me?

"What is so funny?" I growled.

"I just had this image of you suddenly breaking into song. *Singin' in the Rain* would be appropriate, don't you think?"

I tried to remain serious, but I couldn't stop the twitch of my lips. "You guys are just lucky my powers are unaffected by this or you'd both be in here with mops cleaning up this mess."

At that point the rain stopped. Bobby's magical hiccups never lasted long. Considering my options, I spoke a few words and the water disappeared from the kitchen. It then manifested over one of the flower beds where it rained down exactly where it was most needed.

"What did you do with it?" Bobby asked.

"Look out the window."

He did, then looked back at me with frank admiration in his eyes. "I wish I could do that."

I wanted to say, "So do I," but knowing it would hurt his feelings I restrained myself. Instead it came out, "You will." Honestly? I had to wonder about that. My two days of researching his problem hadn't been totally unproductive. Bobby's magical dysfunctions were deeply ingrained on the subatomic level. It wasn't like he had a thorn in his finger and we could pull it out and put a bandage on the wound. Just being near him, I could sense the imbalance and instability of his powers as they sought to burst free of the natural safeguards that all potential magic users possess.

We could approach the problem two ways. We could attempt to reinforce and strengthen his natural shields in an effort to contain the unrestrained magic. Or we could try to dampen and tame the magic itself. Both of these were daunting tasks. Under the circumstances and considering the unstable nature of Bobby's powers, tampering with either the shield or the powers themselves could bring about some very nasty results should things go wrong.

Theoretically there was a third option, but quite frankly I was loath to suggest it for the simple reason of what Bobby represented. Even among soul familiars, who are themselves rare, Bobby was an *adherah*, rarest of the rare. To even think about draining his powers seemed something akin to sacrilege.

Over the last few days we'd learned more about Bobby and the life he'd been leading thus far. From what I could tell it was a lonely existence. Being closer in age and less intimidated by him, Bobby spoke freely with Tyler when they worked together. I was upstairs in the loft losing myself in some sculpting, hoping the distraction would give my brain some downtime to subconsciously consider Bobby's problem, when I overheard a conversation between them.

It was a beautiful day and the windows were all opened wide to catch the warm, early summer breezes. "Man, this coleus is wilting fast. Drag the hose over this way, Bobby."

"Okay. Wow, they really do need some water, but they're still pretty. What did you call them?"

"Coleus. I like them too. With those colorful leaves they make nice accent plants against the green of the boxwood shrubs."

"You know a lot about plants, don't you?"

"Some. I learned quite a bit over the last few years because of the part-time job I used to have with a landscaping company."

"I envy you. I've never been able to have a job."

"Did you really want one?" Bobby must have nodded because I didn't hear his reply to Tyler's question. "Doing what? Anything in particular?"

"Promise not to laugh?"

"Not really," Tyler replied and laughed.

I grinned at his response and I could hear the amusement in Bobby's voice when he answered. "I want to learn to be a pastry chef."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. It looks interesting. I've tried to learn some stuff on my own, but I'd really like to take classes and learn from somebody with talent. Maybe even be an apprentice."

"Well, that sounds like a nice ambition."

"It would be. But I'll never get to do it."

"Because of your powers," Tyler flatly stated.

"Yeah."

"It must be tough."

"You have no idea. Most people don't want to be around me. I even make my parents nervous. I spend a lot of time by myself 'cause when I'm around other magic users something weird usually happens. Most of them get mad; some of them make fun

of me. I wish I could spend more time around humans, but that would be even worse. I'm always afraid I'll accidentally hurt someone. At least other magic users can protect themselves from me."

"Oh man. Listen, Bobby, you know Alex is really good at this stuff. Don't give up hope. He just might come up with a solution."

"Thanks. You know, I'm not counting on anything, but it's really nice of him to try. You guys are both being really great about this. Nobody's ever been this understanding. I really appreciate it."

"Hey. No biggie. Let's finish up here and you can help me fix lunch, Mr. Chef."

The two of them laughed and their voices faded as they moved away from under the windows. An hour or so later, Tyler called me down for lunch and I joined the two of them in the kitchen.

After hearing that conversation, I'd spent some time contemplating how Lucas and so many others had treated Bobby. It had made me furious. I kept wondering how they could have been so cruel to such a sweet kid because of something over which he had no control, especially as he was an *adherah*. But now, as I shared a meal with him, looking into Bobby's eyes it suddenly struck me. It didn't really matter that he was an *adherah*. Even if he'd been a normal human, he should never have been subjected to any kind of abuse. No one should.

Having this kid around was making me think about things I'd never really considered before. It made me realize just how much of my time had been wasted in shallow pursuits. Finding Tyler and becoming his mate had started the process of making me grow up. It seemed meeting Bobby was going to push that process to greater depths. Maybe it was time I started looking at things, the serious things in life that I'd always avoided. There was a lot of injustice in the world. Surely in some manner I could make a difference?

These thoughts racing through my head made me forget for a moment that Tyler and Bobby were right here with me. I must have been unusually quiet during lunch

because afterward, when I pushed back from the table, the next thing I knew Tyler was in front of me, his hand reaching up to brush lightly over my cheek.

"Hey, what are you looking so solemn about?" The concern in my lover's eyes warmed me to the depths of my soul.

I took his hand. Closing my eyes, I held it to me and brushed my lips over it. "I've been contemplating my past."

"And is it that bad?"

"It's not been... considerate."

"Have you deliberately harmed anyone?"

I opened my eyes, letting my gaze meet Tyler's. How could he be so perceptive? That simple question seemed to exactly sum up my current thoughts. "No. At least not since Lucas and even that wasn't calculatedly deliberate. But I haven't helped anyone either."

"You helped me, and now you're helping Bobby. If you want to do more, that's easily fixed."

"Will you help me fix it?"

"Of course I will. I'm here to support you in whatever you choose to do... as long as it's nothing that would damage you or anyone else. For instance if you decided you wanted to try world domination, I couldn't in good conscience blindly support you."

Tyler's gentle teasing made me smile. "I wouldn't know what to do with the world anyway. All I need is you."

"Now that I can support," he said and kissed me.

Tyler's lips were so soft and sweet as they settled against mine. I opened for the tongue that gently swept over the seam of my lips and my tongue met his and shared in the warm and tender caresses he bestowed upon me. It was one of those magical kisses in which it feels like you exchange pieces of your soul with every passing heartbeat. He rested against me and my arms encircled his waist to hold him there as we each lost ourselves in the other.

Tyler was the first to break away. He turned his face toward Bobby. Eyes still closed, I rested my forehead against his temple, content to share the warmth of his body and to breathe his oh-so-sweet-and-familiar essence into myself with every breath.

"Bobby? Would you excuse Alex and me for the next hour or so?"

Tyler's question brought a smile to my face while stirring embers of arousal in my belly. "Sure. No problem. If it's okay, I'm going to go back outside. Shall I turn the sprinklers on?"

"Yes, thanks. If you have any problems let me know, okay?"

"Okay."

I opened my eyes, lifted my head, and looked at Bobby. He was grinning. "Stay out of trouble, imp," I growled.

"I'd tell you to do the same, but I think it's too late," he boldly taunted.

"Scamp."

Bobby laughed and I could hear the pure delight in it. Once again it made me wonder just how much unkindness he'd endured. At the moment though, his eyes glowed with happiness and with a naughty wink, he left the kitchen and went outside.

"Come on, you," Tyler purred, instantly drawing my attention back to him. "Upstairs."

He took my hand and I willingly followed him. Once upstairs he told me what he wanted in no uncertain terms. "Strip," he ordered. He'd already gone to work on his own clothes. "I want you in me, Alex. No preliminaries, no foreplay, I just want you inside me. Now."

The tight, urgent tone in Tyler's voice made my breath come faster and my cock throb. It filled as though following his unspoken command. "Whatever you want, baby. You know that."

"Show me. I want to ride you."

"Oh fuck, yes." Tyler smiled at my heartfelt agreement. I scrambled out of my clothes and lay down on the bed. Following me down, Tyler straddled me then reached for the lube. He took just long enough to work some lube into himself and to slick my

cock before lowering himself onto me. I barely had time to stop groaning from the touch of his hand stroking me before his tight anal bud swallowed me whole.

"Tyler! Oh fuck, baby. Are you all right? You didn't hurt yourself, did you?" As good as it felt to be buried in the wet warmth of his snug passage I still couldn't help but worry. We'd never attained full penetration this quickly before.

Above me, Tyler sat straight, with his eyes closed and his head thrown slightly back. His breathing was fast but steady and as I watched, muscle by muscle, his entire body flowed into a visible state of relaxation. Tipping his head forward, he opened his eyes and met my worried gaze. "I'm fine. There was a definite burn but I had to have you right now. You've been so unbelievably sweet and thoughtful and kind the last few days. The patience and care you've shown toward Bobby is just... well, it's just too damned adorable. Not to mention very, very sexy."

"You think so?" I grumbled. Believe it or not I was actually a little embarrassed. I compensated by planting my feet on the mattress and using the leverage to thrust up into Tyler's tight, encompassing heat.

"Mmm, so good, but stop that. I'm doing this my way and I want it slow. Excruciatingly slow. Just lie there. Please?"

How could I possibly say no? I nodded and tried to follow Tyler's example by relaxing my entire body as much as possible, at least everything but my cock. There was no way that particular part of me was going to relax any time soon. True to his desires, Tyler began a slow, easy movement. He rocked forward and up then back and down. The deliberate rise and fall of his hips slid his silky inner flesh up and down the length of my cock at a teasing yet arousing pace that soon became sheer agony. The pure sexual urgency, and the methodical way in which Tyler was building it, was driving me insane.

As the minutes passed my insides began trembling and knotting with the growing need to thrust and drive toward orgasm. Every time he lowered himself to me I had to fight not to move, not to buck under him like some untamed mustang being broken to saddle.



It wasn't long before the tension alone had me sweating. For all intents and purposes I was just lying there and wasn't doing anything to cause it, but I'd swear this was the most labor intensive sweat I'd ever produced. With the heat that rose off my skin I could smell not only my own male musk but Tyler's as well. It was heady and alluring and succeeded in ratcheting the insanity just that much higher. Add to that the bed producing a barely audible yet rhythmic creak, the soft wet sounds made by my cock sliding within Tyler's body along with his frequent, lust-filled moans and my blissful torture was complete.

Truth be told, Tyler seemed to be in much the same condition I was. Not being able to see him helped hold back the almost overwhelming inclination I was struggling against to put a stop to this exquisite torment by letting go and fucking the living daylights out of him. Trouble was, I simply couldn't resist watching him any longer. I managed to open the eyes I'd squeezed tightly shut, and the sight that greeted me caused a surge in my groin that almost had me shooting my load.

Tyler's beautiful face wore an expression of supreme effort. His eyes were closed, his brow deeply furrowed. Those sweet, plump lips of his were parted and rosy from the way he even now licked them both then bit the lower one. His golden blond hair was tousled, the silky strands begging to be touched. His skin, lightly bronzed from the sun, glowed with the fine sheen of moisture that covered it while his muscles bunched and flexed with his every move.

And move he did. Hands, arms, shoulders, torso, his rippled abs, flat stomach, strong thighs, and calves flexed like an ode to physical symmetry and beauty in the flesh. Even his cock, long, thick and leaking precum, swayed in a way that drew the eye and mesmerized the watcher. I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Tyler. Baby, please. No more. Need to come so bad," I pleaded. "You're killing me."

His eyes opened and those lush, pansy blue orbs bored into mine. "No. You're strong. You can stand it. Just a little longer. I don't want to let go. Not yet. Not yet, Alex."

"Oh fuck." I couldn't keep the near anguished disappointment out of my voice. "All right. But soon. Mercy, babe, soon."

"Soon," Tyler agreed all the while keeping that slow pace designed to drive me completely senseless.

I balled my fists into the sheet beneath me and held on. There was no other option. Tyler wanted this and I would give him what he wanted if it took my last breath to make it so. Fortunately that didn't happen. I'd gotten to the point where I was engaged in uttering a constant litany of curses in an effort to hold on. I was so focused on this that I nearly missed my reprieve. Nearly.

Tyler's voice penetrated the fog of my delicious suffering and his insistent, beseeching order galvanized me. "Alex. Now, Alex. I want you on top. Hold me. Crush me. Fuck me. Now, now, now."

All rational thought flew out the window. I reached for him, wrapped my arms around him, and rolled him beneath me. Coming up on my forearms, I pumped my hips in a hard, rapid rhythm that had us both grunting. After all that restraint, being released to act as I pleased felt so fucking good, but it wasn't nearly enough. Rising up and getting my knees under me, I lifted Tyler's legs, pushing them back. With this change in position and the added leverage, I was able to withdraw further and slam back inside harder which is just what I did. Again and again and again until we both exploded with agonized cries of pleasure and thick, warm streams of come. Tyler's jetted between us while mine soaked his already wet passage until it leaked out to mingle with my pubic hair.

My body shuddered with ecstasy and relief, while my muscles loosened until it seemed the only thing keeping me from total collapse was the fact that my bones seemed to have locked themselves in place. I finally managed a few shaky moves and melted into the mattress at Tyler's side. He, apparently, was just barely above liquefied-puddle stage himself for he moved not one whit but lay there panting for air just as I was.

My relief must have been greater than I thought; either that or I'd really gone a little nuts because suddenly I was laughing. Low, breathless chuckles that liberated every last vestige of pleasure and sent it coursing through my veins until I floated in a haze of pure well-being. At that moment, had I command of my muscles, I could have conquered the world. Or at the very least the state of New York. As it was, I settled for being king of my bed with my equally exhausted consort at my side.

I remember Tyler moving just enough to press a kiss to my shoulder and then I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up and glanced at the clock, approximately an hour and a half had passed since we took our leave of Bobby. Tyler was still soundly sleeping and, deciding not to wake him, I eased out of bed, pulled a sheet over him and headed for the shower.

I'd just finished rinsing the shampoo out of my hair when the shower door slid open. Staying where I was, with my back to the door, it was only seconds later when Tyler plastered himself against me, his arms encircling my waist. Have I made it clear how much I love this man? Just the touch of his body against mine had me smiling while a happiness only he could stir within me went winging through my entire being.

"Mmm, wash me." His childish demand was couched in a husky, sleep-laden voice.

Turning in his loose grip, I brought us face to face. "Poor, baby. Tired?"

He nodded and blinked those hypnotic eyes of his. They were filled with a sleepy innocence that made my chest tight. Twisting us around, I got Tyler under the shower spray, wet his hair, and reached for the shampoo. He tilted his head back, letting me massage his scalp and work the shampoo in before dipping under the spray again to rinse.

Chest to chest and hip to hip, I could feel his growing erection. It matched the one I was already sporting. Ignoring both of them for the moment, I grabbed the soap, lathered my hands, and washed us both. Not an easy task with Tyler resting against me all loose-limbed and clingy. But while it wasn't easy, it was extremely pleasurable,

especially the part where my hand dipped into the crease between his cheeks and glided up and down while teasing his twitching little pucker.

“Unnn, Alex. Making me horny.”

I stopped what I was doing. “We can’t have that, can we?”

“We can’t?”

“Well... maybe. Stand up like a big boy so I can wash the rest of us.”

“No. Don’t want to.” Tyler tightened the arms that were looped around my waist.

“If you do, I’ll give you a treat.”

He lifted his head from my shoulder and looked up at me with one eye opened and one squinted shut. “Will I like it?”

Talk about adorable. Who knew I’d become such a sentimental sap? “I can just about guarantee it.”

With a sigh he straightened up and let go. “All right.”

I quickly washed myself so I could concentrate on Tyler. With him, the washing became an exercise in sensuality. I soaped his torso, following the hills, valleys, and curves of his muscles. His slick nipples became hard little foam-topped nubs as I gently twisted and teased them.

“My knees are getting weak,” he moaned.

I guided him backward to the shower wall and breathed an order in his ear. “Lean back.”

Tyler tipped his chin up, obviously wanting a kiss, and it was no hardship to indulge him. While our tongues greeted each other, I let my soap-covered hands slide over his shoulders and down the length of his arms. Reaching his hands, I entwined our fingers and guided our arms up over his head, resting them against the shower wall. Releasing his fingers, I let my hands slip back down his arms until they reached the light patches of springy gold hair that grew in his pits.

When my fingers feathered through it, Tyler broke our kiss and chuckled. “Tickles.”

"I'll have to remember that," I gruffly told him and trailed my hands down his sides.

Reaching his hips I let my fingers glide inward, following the creases where torso met thighs to below his belly where I captured his cock in one hand and his balls in the other.

"Ummm. Is this my treat?" he asked, undulating his hips forward and back.

"Mmm hmm. You like it?"

"Uh huh."

"There's more."

"More?"

"Yeah." I got us under the shower spray to rinse the soap off, then guided Tyler to the marble seat that fanned out in one corner of the shower stall. "Sit down."

He sat and squirmed a bit. "It's cold."

"Not for long. Your ass will warm it. You have a very hot ass, you know."

"If I didn't know before, I know now. Thanks."

"You're welcome," I told him, giving him a wink that made him smile.

Kneeling between his spread thighs, I wasted little time in taking my first taste of him. Laving my tongue over the plump, rounded cap that topped his cock, I tasted fresh water and a hint of sweet precum. Tyler moaned and leaned back, one hand holding on to the edge of his seat, the other resting on my damp hair. The sound he made tightened my belly and warmed my blood.

If I haven't said so before, let me take a moment to say it now. Tyler makes the most sensual, decadently sublime sounds when he feels good. And not just during sex. Even a simple shoulder massage can elicit a rumbling purr that sends my testosterone levels up while my dick grows rock hard. I honestly think it's addictive. The more I hear, the more I want to please him just so he'll keep those erotic sounds coming.

At the moment my thoughts, what few I had, were all aimed at how I wanted to kiss, caress, lick, suck, and just plain devour the beautiful cock before me. With my mouth watering, I took the crown inside, closing my lips over the stalk beneath the

prominent rim. For a while it was enough to slide my tongue over the satiny skin, tracing the curves and probing the tiny slit at the top while sweet juice trickled forth to feed my desire. But there was so much more to enjoy.

I slowly took him in deeper, letting the ring of my lips slide down until the head tickled my tonsils. Changing the angle a bit, I took Tyler deeper and swallowed. The sound that came pouring from his mouth made my cock jump in reaction. Easing back I repeated my performance several times before lifting away to lick at his saliva-soaked length.

Following the solid length of him to the root, I buried my nose in his pubes to catch a heady breath of pure Tyler musk before snaking my tongue over his balls. One at a time, those tight, round orbs fit into my mouth where I bathed them in spit and rolled my tongue over them while lightly sucking.

Tyler was voicing a sort of *uh, uh, uh* chant, his thighs spread wide, the muscles rigid beneath my hands. I slipped a hand from his thigh and took hold of my cock, jacking myself in time to those hot whimpers. Freeing his balls, I wasted no time in swallowing him down again, this time sucking hard while bobbing up and down the shaft. With my tongue I kept smoothing over the silky skin of his cock, laving over the head with each upward stroke.

In short order I had Tyler thrusting into my mouth and moaning nonstop. I could tell he was close and thanked my lucky stars because my own cock was ready to burst. He was seated forward enough on the seat that I was able to burrow between his cheeks with a wet finger. Finding that twitching little bud, I centered my finger and pushed inside, a long perfect slide that glided precisely over his gland.

Tyler arched, shouted, and shot. I took every burst of semen as a tribute and reward for a job well done, and swallowed it down with pleasure. His rich essence coated my tongue, the taste faintly sweet and bitter all at once. They say semen's flavor reflects what a man eats. Tyler's fondness for fruits and vegetables was deliciously apparent. Not that I was thinking any such thing at the time. Mostly I was savoring his seed and preparing to disburse my own.

Rising from where I knelt, I delivered a few more frantic strokes to my cock and unloaded on Tyler's heaving chest. My seed spattered against the damp bronze hue of his skin, leaving several tangled ropes of cream to melt and run down the rippled curves of his abs. Seeing it only enhanced the hot rush of pure and delicious fire that pierced my belly and raced through my veins. Knees weak, I shuddered with the aftershocks of my climax and watched as Tyler's hand came up to spread my offering over his skin.

"Mmm, warm," he purred.

Contentment, complete and profound, enfolded me. I pulled Tyler to his feet and held him to me, rocking us slowly side to side. Easing back a bit, I reached up and brushed his damp hair back from his face. "I love you. I really do. So, so much."

Tyler's answering smile was so heartbreakingly beautiful it brought tears to my eyes. "That's the first time you've said it. I knew you did but... it's good to finally hear it."

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"I'm not. I knew it would be wonderful when you finally said it, and I was right. I don't care about anything else."

"How can you be so patient?"

"I've had practice. I waited years for a loving touch I could savor without having Trip appear to put a stop to it. Realizing that the first 'I love you' I received from a lover was going to come from the same man who gave me that touch and set me free was all I needed to know to keep me patient again."

I felt a pang of guilt. "Tyler, I don't deserve you. I still haven't set you completely free of the cerbretta spell."

"You think I care about that?" Tyler gazed at me, his eyes filled with earnest conviction. "You're the only one I need to touch, to hold, to kiss."

His lips slanted against mine, suiting actions to words. It was distracting as hell, but I managed to hold on to one thought. I *would* set Tyler completely free. It wasn't fair

of me to hold him to me this way and despite my stupid insecurities and selfishness, I knew it was the right thing to do.

We got through the rest of our shower without further incident, dressed, and headed downstairs. With my arm around his waist as we walked down the steps I'll admit I was floating. All these tender emotions have a way of making a man mellow, you know?

Both of us were hungry so Tyler peeled himself away from me and went on into the kitchen to get dinner started. We'd decided on homemade steak, cheese, and onion hoagies and I went outside to find Bobby. Imagine my surprise when I saw Kent's car in the driveway.

There was no sign of either him or Bobby, and I'll admit I started to panic a bit. Damn, what if something had happened? How would we ever explain it to Kent? Lengthening my stride, I rounded the house and headed for the backyard when I spotted them. They were peacefully tucked into the glider I had set up under a big maple tree. Dappled patterns of sunshine shone against the canopy that sheltered the swing and the swing itself swayed gently back and forth.

Bobby had folded his legs up on the seat and it was Kent, by virtue of his long legs spread out before him, who kept that slow rocking motion going. As I approached I could hear the murmur of their voices.

"So how do you like staying with your cousin?" Kent asked.

Cousin?

Before he could answer, Bobby saw me advancing toward them and grinned. "Here he is now and I love staying with Cousin Alex. He and Tyler have both been great. I'm really enjoying myself."

"I'm glad to hear that," I told him, lifting an ironic brow. The little brat was obviously enjoying himself. "Hey, Kent. Good to see you. What brings you out this way?"

"I've got tickets for the firemen's annual picnic next weekend."

"Firemen?"



"Yep," Kent said with a grin. "In the spirit of brotherly cooperation between county services, the sheriff's department volunteered to help sell tickets. I figured I could unload a couple of them on you and Tyler."

I laughed. "I guess we can help you out. Better make that three tickets since we've got company," I said, including Bobby.

"Really? I get to go?" Bobby was practically bouncing in his seat.

"Sure."

"Wow. Thanks, Alex."

"You're welcome. Kent, you want to stay for supper? Tyler's cooking steak and onions for hoagies. We have plenty." I saw Kent glance at Bobby a moment before he answered.

"Yeah, sounds good. Thanks."

Oh boy. I don't think it was my imagination that conjured up that gleam of interest in Kent's eyes when he looked at Bobby, but oh well. After that conversation we'd had a couple of Wednesdays ago I wasn't too surprised. Bobby was definitely worth looking at and his boyish charm was compelling. I guess it's not above the realm of possibility that Kent should be attracted to him.

Dinner went well and was accident free. It was actually then that I noticed something. Kent was having an effect on Bobby, and I don't mean just his libido. Once he'd realized that Tyler and I weren't going to mistreat him for his magical faux pas, Bobby's natural personality came to the fore. He was lively and impish rather than subdued. During the meal, the growing interest between him and Kent became more and more apparent, and while Bobby's naturally bouncy personality surfaced, his erratic powers became passive. I could actually feel them settle. It was like seeing the ruff of an agitated dog smooth out and flatten as it calmed.

By the time dinner was over I wasn't sure who was smitten more, Kent or Bobby. Tyler and I exchanged a few knowing looks. Even if those two didn't know what was going on, we certainly did. It wasn't long though before I discovered that Kent, at least, was well aware of the attraction. We'd all undertaken some after-dinner chores. Tyler

and Bobby were cleaning up the kitchen while Kent and I were taking the garbage out to bury in one of the garden plots and the trash out to burn.

While Kent did the honors with the trash, shoving it into the cinder-block surrounded trash pit before lighting a match to it, I retrieved a shovel from the garden shed. We met back at one of the flower beds and while I dug a hole, Kent started throwing some questions my way. "How long is Bobby staying with you?"

"I'm not really sure," I answered, bending to lift a spade full of dirt and toss it aside. "It was sort of a spur of the moment visit with no set plans."

"Um. He seems like a really sweet kid. How old is he?"

I was glad the sun was setting. The dimmer light might have helped hide the smile I was fighting. "Believe it or not, he's actually almost Tyler's age, though he doesn't look it. He's twenty-one." I knew this because I'd already asked. For a soul familiar he was practically an infant.

"You're right, he doesn't look it. I'd have said more like eighteen."

"People in our family age extremely well."

"That a fact? Hmm, well. Alex?"

"Yes?" I dumped the garbage in the hole I'd dug and shoveled the dirt over it.

"I'd like to... shit... I'd like to ask Bobby out. You have any objections?"

Okay, I couldn't help myself. I snickered.

"You fucker," Kent cursed. "I'm trying to be considerate here."

"Man, you don't have to ask for my permission. It's not like he's my daughter or anything. Besides, this *is* the twenty-first century you know. Asking the parent's permission went out of vogue a long, long time ago."

"I realize that." The thick sarcasm in Kent's voice leached away with his next words. "It's just... he seems to look up to you and you've got this sort of big brother vibe going when you interact with him. You know what we talked about a couple of weeks ago. You know I've never been with another guy, not that I'm asking him out for sex. It's just that I don't want you to think..."

"You're going to use him to experiment with."

"Yeah."

"I know you're not." Kent followed me to the garden shed where I put away the shovel. "It would take a pretty callous guy to do that to Bobby and you're not that kind of person."

"Thanks. So it's all right?"

"If it's okay with him, it's fine with me." And that's how Bobby ended up dating my friend Kent.

## Chapter Four

During the course of the next week, because of the link between Tyler and Bobby, Tyler's ability to practice was severely limited. I spent a lot of time doing some very small, very cautious probing at Bobby's powers and his shield with the result that my initial fears were confirmed. When I touched his shield in an attempt to infuse it with a boost of my own power, instead of absorbing what I offered, his shield shrank, as though cringing. Bobby's power took the opportunity to leap out and slap us down by grabbing up any and all loose objects in the loft and flinging them around as though a tornado had suddenly appeared in the room with us.

Fortunately, I was able to protect us with the marble shield I'd taught Tyler earlier in the week. It prevented any serious injury, but all three of us carried a few bruises from being hit before my shield formed. Frankly, I was afraid to go any further. Garnering this kind of result just from working with Bobby's shield, I didn't want to think about what might happen if I actually attempted to tamper with his power. To do so would endanger all of us and I wasn't willing to take that chance with either Tyler or Bobby.

Another weekend was slipping up on us and late evening was approaching. Bobby was out on his third date with Kent. The two of them had really hit it off. That strange calming effect Kent had on Bobby's powers was still in force so we had no reason to worry that anything strange would happen while they were together. It was really nice being able to relax at home without wondering what might appear, disappear, transform or just plain blow up. Don't make me go into details about the Sunday morning jelly doughnuts that exploded. Do you have any idea how shitty it feels to have raspberry jelly and powdered sugar in your hair? Yuck.

Tyler and I were taking advantage of Bobby's absence by curling up together on the sofa in the living room. We were discussing our options for the upcoming contest as our time was quickly running out.

"I don't suppose there's any way we could integrate Bobby into the contest?" Tyler was saying. "Not that it would do us any good anyway."

"No. That wouldn't work. It's you and me only. We're not allowed help."

"Help? Much as I hate to say it because you know I've come to really care about him, but Bobby's not help. He's pure hindrance at this point. Couldn't we explain things to the Elders' Council? Maybe get a delay?"

"I suppose we could try, but I sincerely doubt they'll listen. They can be very hard-assed about certain things." I sighed in frustration. "Shit. If only there was some pattern to the way Bobby's powers misfire. If there was, we could maybe adjust for it, but there's nothing. It's all completely random."

"I know. You just never know when... unnn," Tyler suddenly moaned, his body tensing against mine.

"Tyler? You all right?" He'd pushed away from me and was sitting on the edge of the sofa with his eyes closed tight. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just... damn. Did it suddenly get hot in here?"

"Nooo," I answered, completely puzzled. Watching Tyler closely I could see his skin start to flush. "Are you getting hot?"

"Umm. Yeah. Crap. Oh fuck. Alex," Tyler groaned.

"What, baby? Tell me what's wrong. Are you in pain?"

"Not pain. I'm... oh fuck... I'm..."

"What, Tyler, what?"

"Horny!"

"What?"

"You heard me. Son of a bitch. It feels like somebody's sucking my dick."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Does this feel like I'm kidding?" Tyler grabbed my hand and brought it to his crotch. He was rock hard. I could feel the thrum of his heartbeat in his cock even through the fabric of his jeans.

"What the hell? Not that I object to you having a hard-on but I don't think this is strictly voluntary, is it?"

"No! You know we weren't doing anything but ohhh... shit. Bobby is."

"Bobby? *Bobby and Kent?*" Tyler's nod was nearly frantic. He was rocking back and forth now and breathing hard. "Can you shut him out?"

"I don't know," Tyler gasped. His muscles were tense, his face screwed up in concentration, and his eyes tightly closed. "I thought you said we weren't linked this way."

"It should be impossible, although the way Bobby's powers work I guess we shouldn't be surprised." Tyler groaned again and I took his hands in mine. "Look at me, baby." I pitched my voice so it was smooth and filled with authority. Tyler opened his eyes. Their pansy blue color had darkened to cerulean and aubergine, rich dark hues that surrounded the black of his expanded pupils. "I want you to calm down. I want you to picture a wall between you and Bobby. Build it with me, Tyler. Brick by brick. We can do it." He nodded and for a moment it seemed as though it was working until a ripple of sensation shattered our growing wall. It was so strong I felt it myself.

"I can't! Oh God, Alex. It *hurts*," Tyler whimpered.

Hearing that pained cry tore at me. I knew then there was only one thing to do. I reached for the buttons on Tyler's shirt and starting undoing them.

"What are you doing?" he panted.

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. You're aroused. It hurts 'cause we're trying to shut it down. Since we can't, let's make love. Having Bobby along for the ride isn't the most ideal of situations, but maybe if we concentrate on us it won't be such a big issue."

Nodding eagerly, Tyler wrapped his arms around my neck. His kiss was awkward and flavored with desperation, but just the act of being in my arms seemed to calm him and our usual finesse took over. Kissing this man is one of the greatest

pleasures life offers. It can be anything from hot and dirty to sweet and reverent. Tyler tastes better than the finest wine or the most decadent chocolate. His flavor is pure ambrosia... sensual and nourishing. I'll never get enough of him.

Between kisses we peeled our clothes away. I bent and took his quivering cock in my mouth, sucking the crystal drops of precum leaking from the tip. Tyler fell back moaning, his hips lifting into the rhythm of my mouth as I serviced him. It was good but I wanted more. I pulled off him with a sucking pop, smiling at his groan of disappointment. I rubbed my hands up and down his thighs.

"I've got something else in mind," I told him, weathering his scowl.

"What?"

"I want to bury myself inside you. Get up on your knees and drape that gorgeous bod over the back of the sofa."

Tyler didn't waste any time obeying me. He scrambled around, set his knees on the cushion, and laid himself over the back of the sofa. Gracefully he displayed himself, upper arms spread along the top of the cushioned back with his forearms draped over. At first he seemed relaxed and I took my time perusing his beautiful form.

The wide shoulders and strong back that narrowed to the vee of his trim waist were classically elegant. I loved the slight inward dip that formed the small of his back and the dark, perfectly round and flat beauty mark that accented the upper arch of his left buttock. I knew the feel of it with my fingers and my tongue. It had the slightest upward curve at its center, something barely visible to the eye, but apparent to the sensitive touch of the tongue. And I'd touched my tongue to it many times. It sent shivers down Tyler's spine when I did so. Below that tempting mark, the rounded globes of Tyler's ass were without flaw and met a pair of solid and well-formed legs.

He was truly a work of art in the flesh and I sometimes itched to sculpt him, but I don't believe I could do him justice. Only the maker of us all could have created such perfection.

I thought at first he was relaxed as he knelt there still and silent but as the seconds passed, movement began. At first it was a minute shift of his hips then a more

pronounced one. It wasn't long before those small, random moves took on a rhythm as Tyler rubbed himself against the sofa. The bunch and release of the flexing muscles that moved under the pearly skin of his buttocks was fascinating and oh so erotic. And then the whimpers started. *Son of a bitch*. My cock, which had yet to reach full hardness, went from I'm-taking-an-interest to gotta-fuck-now in seconds flat.

"Unn... unn... unn... Alexxxx. Huuurryyy. They're fucking. I can *feeeel it*."

"*Oh fuck*," I breathed. I couldn't help it. Weird as it was, this was just plain hot.

Grabbing the bottle of lube we kept in the drawer of the end table, I poured some in my hand, wet my fingers, and spread Tyler's cheeks. His blushing little bud was twitching and when I placed the tips of my fingers against it, it nearly sucked them in. Christ! It was like he'd just been fucked. The muscles were elastic and giving as though already stretched. Not stopping to question it, I used the rest of the lube to slick over my cock and sank inside his hot, wet sheath.

We both cried out.

That sudden joining peeled open our soul mate connection. Not a gradual exposure as usual, but a full blown awareness of each other. I could feel myself buried in Tyler's snug passage, could feel the slide of my cock over his gland as I thrust in and out. I could also feel the rub of his cock against the slightly rough upholstery fabric on the sofa and how Tyler's muscles strained to push back into my thrust then forward in an effort to create greater friction against the solid bar of his erection. It was like I was fucking and getting fucked all at once.

I felt awkward and dizzy until our breaths and heartbeats aligned themselves and then it was as though we breathed through and for each other. I plastered myself against him, laid my arms over his, and twined our fingers together. The blood that sang through my veins and the pleasure churning in my gut was his. The heat from our bodies climbed in proportion to the sensations surging through us both. And then through Tyler's connection with him, I began to feel Bobby as well.

Did I say if Tyler and I made love, Bobby's being a peripheral part of it wouldn't matter? Wrong. I'd never been so wrong. Everything Bobby was feeling came flooding



in until we teetered on the edge of it being too much to bear. As I stroked my cock in and out of Tyler's clinging sheath the feelings changed. Out felt like in and in like out all at once and constant. The feedback I was receiving from Tyler amplified and doubled until I felt not only the physical sensations Tyler was experiencing from being fucked but Bobby's as well. It suddenly felt as though I was in possession of two cocks, both buried in tight, wet heat and was taking it up the ass by two more.

With a suddenness that left me seeing stars, Kent's consciousness joined our already overloaded ménage. At that moment each of us became painfully aware of the other. For a split second it seemed as if I stared straight into Kent's eyes before his soul twirled into the maelstrom formed by Tyler, Bobby, and myself.

Though I couldn't see the fire, I swear my skin burst into flames. Molten lava traveled the length of my spine simultaneously searing the back of my skull as well as my balls. Have you ever been in a collision? Everything happens so fast. Even if you see it coming you can't stop, can't react, you just rush headlong into it and that's what we did. Rushed headlong into the most glorious, terrible, ecstatic agony I've ever experienced in my entire life.

Climax ripped through the four of us and scattered our combined consciousness like confetti in a gale force wind. I've never passed out from having sex, but it was a near thing. With the remains of four ear-piercing screams still vibrating in the limbo in which we had met, I wheezed for air, my body feeling shattered, but oddly numb as shudder after shudder rippled over me. Several minutes and many blinks later that total blackness to which my vision had been reduced began to dissipate.

Colors and shapes appeared and my befuddled brain began to put the pieces together. I was alive. I was still at home and Tyler was still with me. But he wasn't moving. Fear twisted my stomach and threatened to make the blackness return, but I shoved it back. Struggling to rip away the remaining fog that enshrouded my senses, I disengaged our bodies and managed to make my quivering muscles obey just enough to ease Tyler to his back on the sofa. Seeing the rise and fall of his chest went a long way toward calming my panic as I cupped his cheek and gently patted his skin.

"Tyler. Baby. Can you hear me? Tyler, wake up. Come on, sweetheart, please wake up." My efforts were rewarded by an incoherent mumble and a modicum of relief began to seep in.

I started rubbing his arms and chafing his hands until he finally mumbled, "Alex?"

"Yeah, baby, it's me. Are you all right? How do you feel?"

Pansy blue eyes blinked open and I could visibly see the effort he put into trying to focus. "M'okay. Tell me my vision will get better."

"It will. It takes a few minutes for it to clear up."

"Good. Alex?"

"Yeah?"

"We can't do that again. It was" -- Tyler swallowed hard -- "too much. I was afraid we weren't coming back."

"I know. Believe me, I know, and it's not happening again." I gathered Tyler to me and held him tightly. He was right. I never thought too much pleasure could be a bad thing, but that turned out to be something else I was wrong about. It had been downright terrifying. "I'm going to make sure it never happens again right now."

I settled Tyler back against the cushions and picked up the portable phone from its place on the end table. I dialed Kent's number and listened to the rings. On the fourth one, he picked up. "Yeah?" He sounded beat.

"Are you all right?" I asked, foregoing the pleasantries.

"Getting there."

"And Bobby?"

"Recovering. He passed out."

"Tyler too. Listen, as soon as you two can get your feet under you, you need to get the hell over here. We need to talk. Like now."

There was a moment's silence before Kent answered. "I fucking realize that, Alex, so can the attitude."

"Do you realize what you did? You just had to fuck him, didn't you?"

"What *I* did? I took the person I'm falling for to bed. I didn't count on you and Tyler joining us. I don't know what the fuck's going on here, but I don't appreciate you trying to blame me for what happened."

Before I could say anything else I felt Tyler's hand on my arm. "Alex, ease up. It's not Kent's fault."

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. Over the phone line I could hear the murmur of voices then Kent was back. "Hey."

"Yeah?"

"It's been suggested to me that we calm down and discuss this rationally."

"Same here. I'm sorry, man. That was all just way too intense and seeing Tyler passed out... well... I... you know."

"I know. So listen, you really want us there tonight? It's after midnight and I don't know about you but my bones are still trying to re-form."

"Yeah. No. I mean... shit. My brain's still wobbly. Um... breakfast. Come for breakfast. Nine a.m. okay?"

"That's good."

"Good. And do me a favor in the meantime?"

"What's that?"

"Keep your hands off the imp. I don't think any of us are up for a replay."

Kent snorted. "Believe me, that's not gonna be a problem. I was almost sure that little performance castrated me. My balls are still in hiding."

I started laughing and suddenly felt for my own which made me laugh even harder. Tyler was giving me a weird look and I shook my head at him. "I'm sure they'll return. Get some sleep. We'll see you both in the morning."

"You bet."

Kent and I both disconnected.

"What was that all about?"

"Kent swears his balls are in hiding."

Tyler grinned. "So you were checking for your own?"

"Yeah. It seemed like a good idea."

"You idiots," he scoffed then yawned. "Bed?"

"Right behind you." Instead of moving, the two of us sat there. "Tell you what," I bargained. "I'll help you if you'll help me."

"Deal," Tyler agreed.

With a few groans and wobbles we got our feet under us and stumbled upstairs. A quick rinse under the shower and we were in bed and that was all she wrote till the alarm went off at seven-thirty.

\* \* \*

When Kent and Bobby arrived, the coffee was on and bacon was frying. Tyler greeted them at the front door and ushered them into the kitchen. When I greeted them from my place in front of the stove, I couldn't help but be intrigued by the expressions on their faces. All in all Kent was rather stoic, but there was a hint of defiance in his eyes and his body language revealed his underlying tension. He was definitely ready for a fight should it occur. Bobby was another matter entirely. He seemed to waver between acute embarrassment and besotted hero worship. He looked at Kent with stars in his eyes, and when those same eyes turned in my direction he blushed so deeply I wondered if his cheeks were hot enough to fry the eggs I had standing by.

After last night's scare I had wanted to be pissed at them both, but I realized that was just stupid. This was no one's fault and we needed to put our heads together and figure out what to do about it. Hoping to put them both at ease I gave them a smile.

"Morning! Help yourselves to coffee. There's juice on the table. I'm making scrambled eggs, bacon, and bagels. Hope that's okay. Or would you rather have pancakes instead of bagels?"

"Bagels are fine with me," Kent rumbled. His voice seemed a little hoarse. Considering those screams last night, I understood why. My own throat was a bit raw this morning. He crossed the kitchen, took up the pot, and poured coffee in one of the cups sitting on the counter. "Bobby, coffee?" My ears perked up at the gentle caress apparent in those two words. Man, did he have it bad.

"Yes, please."

As Kent poured a second cup, I took up the first egg of the half dozen I'd set out on the counter and cracked it over the bowl I had ready. Instead of liquid yolk and white, I got a chick. A real live chick that immediately started emitting little chick peeps. Kent and I looked at each other, back down at the bowl, and then turned our eyes to Bobby.

"What?" he asked, his eyes going round with trepidation.

"Come here," I said, doing my best not to grin.

Bobby and Tyler both joined us at the counter. When they took a look in the bowl, Tyler snickered and Bobby groaned.

"I'm sorry. I'm *nervous*!" Bobby wailed.

"Hey, calm down. It's no big deal," I told him. "Nobody's pissed about last night. Right?"

Tyler and Kent both echoed my sentiments and Kent laid an arm around Bobby's shoulders, giving him a squeeze. Bobby leaned against him and I could immediately feel the erratic pattern of Bobby's powers smooth out. I'd never really paid that much attention to the soul familiar's ability to sense the magic in others. Probably because that magic was always shielded and calm. Because of its unfettered state, Bobby's powers practically demanded attention.

"Kent, Bobby, why don't you two have a seat. The toaster and bagels are on the table. You guys get the bagels started. I'll rustle up the bacon and Alex can finish the eggs. As long as we don't get any more chicks, that is," Tyler chuckled.

"Tyler," Bobby pleaded.

"I'm just kidding, Shorty. Go toast the bagels, okay?"

"Okay, but don't call me Shorty."

"Yes, dear," Tyler agreed.

Bobby giggled. I swear it was an honest to God giggle, and cute as hell. I laughed and so did Kent.

"What?" Bobby asked, giving us a confused smile.

It amazed me how fond I'd grown of him in such a short time. It really was like having a little brother. "Nothing, imp. Hurry up with those bagels, huh? I'll have the eggs done in a few minutes."

"Okay."

Bobby retreated to the table set for four across the room. Three pairs of eyes followed him. "He really is a sweet kid," I mused. I'd gotten another bowl out and was having more success with the eggs this time around.

"He is," Tyler agreed.

"Yeah," Kent added. "Damn, Alex. What am I going to do? This is all just so... crazy."

I poured the eggs I'd scrambled into the hot skillet. "Well, we're going to start with breakfast then we're going to have Alex Layton's version of Magic for Beginners 101. But first you're going to go over there and keep the imp from electrocuting himself." Bobby was poking a fork into the toaster.

"Oh shit."

Kent hurried off. I finished up the eggs and Tyler got the bacon out and drained on a plate layered with paper towels. We brought the food to the table along with the coffee pot to offer refills. Then everyone settled down and dug in.

The fare wasn't fancy, but I was starving. I chose an asiago cheese-topped bagel and slathered it with butter. Along with the bacon and eggs it was pure heaven. I wasn't the only one who was hungry. There was some small talk exchanged but mostly we all concentrated on our food until every morsel was consumed.

I sat back with a satisfied sigh. "Not bad if I do say so myself."

"It was good," Kent said. "Really hit the spot."

"Thanks. So, let's clear the table and get started, shall we?"

Everyone agreed and in short order we had the dishes done and everything put away. Meeting back at the table, we took our seats. Bobby and Kent sat next to each other across the table from Tyler and me. I leaned forward and rested my arms on the tabletop.

"Okay," I said. "I don't see any reason to beat around the bush so I'm going straight for the jugular here. Do you two love each other, because if I'm not mistaken I witnessed a soul joining last night."

Both of them nodded. "We talked it over last night," Kent said. "Bobby explained a few things to me, but we were both so exhausted, I couldn't make much sense out of it. But, crazy as it sounds because we've only just met, I love him."

"I love Kent too," Bobby chimed in.

"Then as far as that subject's concerned, it's a done deal. Kent, you've really stumbled into much more than you bargained for."

"I figured that much out last night. So tell me the rest. I need to hear it."

I nodded and proceeded to rock Kent's perceptions of the world as he knew it. By the time I was through I could see he was reeling with shock but manfully trying to digest and accept it all.

"If I hadn't seen some of these things for myself, I never would have believed it," he admitted. "Magic. That's always been such an obscure and unrealistic concept. Something people only dreamed about. I never would have thought it could be real."

"It's real all right, and right now I could almost wish it wasn't because we've got a couple of very real problems to face up to, folks. First of all there's the soul bond between you and Bobby. As the partner of a soul familiar you're going to be required to face magical combat to determine if you're a worthy partner for him, and let's face it, you're human. You'll never survive."

"No! We can't let that happen. I won't let them hurt Kent!" Bobby shouted.

Kent reached for Bobby's hand and entwined their fingers. "Hush, it'll be all right." He turned back to me. "When you say survive it, are we talking combat to the death?"

"No. I guess my description was a little much. It's a combat with spells, and since you don't have the ability to cast or counter them, the first strike would take you out. Your bond with Bobby would be broken and all memory of him would be erased from your mind." I saw Kent's fingers tighten on Bobby's for a moment then relax.

"So what can we do to prevent that from happening?"

"Under normal circumstances, nothing. However, this is far from normal. First of all the Council of Elders doesn't seem to be aware of your bond as yet. That may be because of the unpredictable nature of Bobby's powers. You've observed that all is not as it should be where he's concerned." Kent nodded. We'd all seen the Bobby-produced chick disappear. "You could possibly duck it for a while but there's that little problem of Bobby and Tyler being linked. As long as that's in force we're all fucked. Or maybe I should say not fucked because there will be no more fucking until that link is broken. Agreed?"

It was no surprise to me that everyone did. "Which brings us to the next problem. Tyler and I are facing the same thing you and Bobby are. Our soul bond is new. In two days we have to stand against another bonded couple and prove ourselves worthy to be together. But we can't do that with Bobby's magic linked to Tyler's. If we don't break this bond, Tyler and I won't stand a chance, and I refuse to let that happen. That being the case there's only one solution I can come up with that will solve all of our problems." I set my gaze on Bobby. He looked so sad I silently cursed myself but then a hard, determined resolve filled those moss green eyes and it matched exactly the one I felt in my heart.

"We have to drain my powers," he quietly announced.

"What? No!" Tyler protested.

"What will that do to you? Surely there's another way?" Kent objected.

Ignoring them, I spoke only to Bobby. "You've thought about this, haven't you?"

He nodded. "For a long time now. I thought maybe it could be fixed but I don't think it's possible, and now there's no longer any time to wait. I'm so tired, Alex. I've been afraid for so long. Afraid I'd hurt someone." Bobby's voice began to hitch. "And now there's Kent and you and Tyler. I'm messing everything up. We have to... have to." His voice broke as he started crying.

"Oh crap. Don't cry, imp." My chest felt so tight, I could barely breathe. I looked at Kent. "Do something," I ordered but I was too late. He already was.



Kent lifted Bobby from the chair he occupied and settled the sobbing young man on his lap. With Bobby's head against his shoulder, Kent gently rocked him and smoothed his hand up and down his back while crooning soft, soothing words to him. "Shh, baby. It's all right. Everything's going to be all right."

I felt like shit. A total heel. Needing to get away and wanting to give them privacy as well, I rose from the table and walked out of the house. I didn't realize Tyler had followed me until his hand touched my back. I slowed my steps, put my arms around him, and pulled him to me. "I feel like I just ran over a puppy," I admitted, breathing the words into his hair.

"You haven't done anything wrong. You heard Bobby. He's been thinking about this for a long time. It's not your fault you couldn't fix this. It'll be strange for him to be without his powers, but he'll get used to it. He has Kent now and at least he won't have the burden of wondering what's going to go wrong next. He's been under a lot of strain, Alex. I think some of those tears may be tears of relief."

"I hope you're right. I never wanted to hurt him but we can't" -- I found myself swallowing against the lump that was forming in my throat -- "we can't defeat Lucas and Blake this way. I won't lose you, Tyler. *I won't.*"

"You're not going to. Even if you wanted to get rid of me, I'd refuse to go."

His words brought a smile to my face. "Why would I ever want to do such a stupid thing?"

"I don't know," Tyler answered. "I don't think you'd ever do anything that dumb... but you never know."

I squeezed him tight then and with a finger under his chin tilted his head up. "Yeah, right," I whispered against his lips. The warm breath we exchanged made me shiver. We shared a kiss that went a long way toward easing the guilt and sorrow I was feeling over what I had to do to Bobby. Taking his hand, I turned and led us back toward the house. "If he's ready, let's get this done."

We returned to find Bobby dry-eyed and still resting comfortably in Kent's lap. I went to where they were seated and ran a hand over Bobby's silky hair. He looked up at me and smiled, the mischievous twinkle back in his eyes.

"Are you all right, imp?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry I lost it."

"Don't be sorry. You had every right to be upset. If I'd had to live with what you have, I'd have gone nuts by now. You've got courage. It's not many people who'd make the sacrifice you're going to make for someone else's benefit."

"It's not that big a sacrifice. Besides, I get something really great in return." He turned those big green eyes on Kent. "And the best thing is, he functions perfectly." Bobby's grin was brilliant but the look on Kent's face was absolutely priceless. The man actually blushed. Bobby's comment had Tyler and I both laughing.

Kent's lips twitched and he finally smiled. "Brat. Wait till I get you home."

Bobby wiggled out of his grasp and grabbed my hand. "Come on, Alex. You heard the man. He wants to get me home."

With Bobby tugging me out of the kitchen, I looked back at Kent. "You are so screwed."

"Not me. I'm the top."

"For now," I warned him and followed Bobby up the stairs to the loft.

Tyler and Kent followed and I took a few moments to set things up while explaining to them exactly what I was going to do.

"I'm going to set a protective barrier around Bobby, Tyler, and me to contain the magic as it's manipulated," I said, addressing myself specifically to Kent. "If anything looks like it's going wrong, don't try to step in and fix it. You'll only get yourself hurt, understood?"

"You're the boss," he answered.

I could see from the look in his eyes that Kent wouldn't just run off and try to save himself. I suppose I should have been pissed knowing he was going to ignore me,

but instead his friendship for Tyler and myself, not to mention his love for Bobby, warmed me.

"All right. Now that that useless warning is out of the way" -- I gave Kent a mock glare which he answered with a grin -- "let's get started. Kent, make yourself comfortable 'cause we're going to be here a while. Tyler and Bobby, I want you face to face. Sit cross-legged and join hands. Since you two are already connected I'm going to funnel Bobby's power into Tyler."

"What? Is that a good idea?" Tyler asked. I could see the trepidation in his eyes.

"It's a very good idea and I'll tell you why. The reason Bobby's magic malfunctions is because it's unrestrained. His shields are inadequate and so he's unable to direct the power in the proper manner. But there's nothing wrong with your shields, babe. We're going to do this very slowly so you're able to absorb Bobby's power and when it's done your ability is going to be amplified as though you've been a practicing wizard for several years and not just several weeks. We are going to give Lucas and Blake the surprise of their lives." I know my grin had to be positively evil because the ones I got in return were definitely along those same lines.

"This is going to take a few hours so let's get comfortable." Tyler and Bobby began to lower themselves to the floor and I was about to join them when a thought struck me. "You know what? Wait a minute. I've got a better idea. Kent, get over here. I've decided you're going to make yourself useful. You don't know this, but you have a calming effect on Bobby's powers and we can certainly use that right now. And instead of the floor... come on, everybody."

I led the way into the bedroom, crawled onto the bed, and settled myself comfortably against the headboard. Three pairs of eyes were giving me some very confused, skeptical, and suspicious looks. "Come on. I said this was going to take several hours. I don't know about you, but I don't want the grain pattern from the hardwood floor out there impressed on my ass. Kent, you sit next to me. Tyler, you're here." I spread my legs, making room for him, indicating that he should sit and rest his back against my chest. "And Bobby, you sit in front of Kent." Everyone did as I directed

and with some wiggling around, we all got comfortable. "Now Tyler and Bobby join hands."

A few seconds later Trip appeared and all hell broke loose. This was getting to be monotonous.

"Holy fuck!" Kent grabbed Bobby and scrambled off the bed. I could see him reaching for the gun in the holster he wore when he was on duty. Thank goodness he wasn't on duty.

"Oh *shit*. I forgot," I swore. "It's all right. Calm down. Trip is Tyler's pet. He won't hurt you."

Tyler had reached a hand out to Trip and was petting first one head and then another as he calmly spoke to him. I have to say, even I'm sometimes thrown off by the weird sights that are part and parcel with being associated with the world of magic. Seeing those identical doggie grins and lolling tongues attached to three heads and one body is chill-inducing.

"That's a *pet*?" Kent forcefully albeit quietly retorted.

"Well, he functions as a guard dog too."

"God help the idiot who goes up against him."

"You got that right. Come on, get back over here."

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"Yes, yes. Come on." I turned to Trip. "Now listen here, you." Trip's heads did that little tilt of inquiry some dogs do when you've said or done something to puzzle them. "Your master has to hold hands with Bobby. He's perfectly fine. No one is going to hurt him. Lie down and stay."

He at least understood that part because Trip lay down, rested his heads on the carpet, and closed his eyes. Apparently reassured, Kent got back into position with Bobby seated between his legs. Tyler reached out with his left hand and Bobby reciprocated with his right hand. Their palms met, the fingers curling around to complete the joining and we all held our breaths for a moment, but apparently Trip was okay with it so we began again.

Taking some deep breaths to center myself, in the silence of my mind I began to cast a charm. Even as I continued speaking to them I laid a gossamer blanket of peace, tranquility, and security over my lover, my friend and the young man who had so quickly become like a sibling to me. I like to call it my spell of dreaming. "Everyone, relax. You can even sleep if you like. We're all just going to drift, like floating on clouds. There are no worries, no problems, there's only calm and quiet."

With the three of them resting comfortably under my influence, I carefully built a protective barrier around us all then touched Bobby's shield. In the corporeal world, shields really have no physical form and are invisible, but for this purpose I imposed a magical reagent if you will, something that would give them a form I could relate to. Bobby's shield was so delicate when it appeared it was even transparent in places, and I felt it quiver but Kent's influence allowed it to hold as Bobby's power ebbed and flowed against it.

I then turned my attention to Tyler's shield. The difference was startling. Tyler's shield was opaque and elastic. When touched it gave slightly then held firm. To accomplish the transfer would require some imagination, force of will, and a little judicious seduction.

Tyler and Bobby were already linked, their powers drawn toward each other. All I needed to do was give them an opening and start them flowing in the proper direction. Using metaphysical fingers, I caressed Tyler's shield. In my arms Tyler moaned and shifted slightly. Our soul bond made the touch pleasant and made Tyler's shield vulnerable to me. When we performed as a team our shields routinely opened to each other, allowing the transfer of power. By inducing Tyler to relax his defenses I hoped to draw Bobby's power into him.

"Open for me, baby," I whispered.

Tyler moaned again and his shield dissolved. Next to us Bobby uttered a whimper. With Tyler's power exposed Bobby's was striving harder to reach it. Turning my attention to him, I could see his shield outwardly bow until it was breached, the

edges of the break flowing like tattered silk in a strong breeze as the power poured forth.

Have you ever tried to see energy? It's not really possible, but again using my magical reagent it gave power the appearance of shimmering light. Tyler's power was cool and blue while Bobby's was warm and red, the result, I think, of being too long in a state of unrestrained flux. With Kent there to mute the wild rush of Bobby's powers as they were released, instead of colliding, the two met with a sparkling flash and began to mingle.

Sensual strands writhed and twirled together while the color blended and became a muted purple that pulsed with life. Ever so slowly they merged just the way I had intended. With Tyler and Bobby both under my spell, their awareness and will was at rest, leaving the power undirected yet contained within the barrier I had erected around the four of us.

The minutes and hours passed in a blur. I was completely entranced with watching the near carnal nature of two powers intermingling as well as busy monitoring Tyler, Bobby, and Kent. When the color became a uniform purple that was cooling to lavender I decided it was time for Tyler to take possession of his new strength. First I checked Bobby once more. He seemed perfectly fine as did Kent. Neither was aware of what was happening and I wanted to keep it that way.

With infinite care, I caused the barrier that enclosed us all to shrink, drawing it inward until Bobby and Kent were left outside its protective sphere while the mingled powers were still trapped within. Then I rescinded the spell of dreaming that had encompassed my three companions and gently woke Tyler. I nuzzled his neck and kissed the exposed skin above the collar of his tee shirt. Tyler began to stir and with his waking his shield snapped into place, pulling the free-floating power in behind it. I checked his shield and it was as it had been before, strong and steady.

When Tyler opened his eyes and turned his face up to me, I was smiling. "How do you feel?" I asked.

He took a deep breath. "Fine. I take it everything went well."

"Perfectly."

"What time is it?"

I glanced at the bedside clock. Approximately five hours had passed since we began. "Four ten."

"No wonder I have to pee."

I laughed and he reached up to cup my cheek, urging me to meet his lips with my own. Soft and sweet. Our absolutely delicious kiss was interrupted by a husky voice laden with sarcasm.

"Jeez, Layton. Warn a guy would you? Waking up in a bed with you at my side has got to rate as a traumatic experience. Especially when I see you doing *that*."

Tyler sputtered with laughter as I raised my head to glare at Kent. "This should be mild in comparison to what happened last night."

Kent's pained expression was comical. "Don't remind me. So is our little problem fixed?"

"It is. Wake the imp. I want to make sure he's all right."

"I'm awake," Bobby yawned and stretched.

"And how are you feeling?"

"Okay."

"Do me a favor. Try a spell. Something simple."

Bobby's eyes widened in alarm. "Are you sure?"

"I am."

Shaking his head a bit as though to clear the last vestiges of sleep from his brain, Bobby centered his gaze on a painting that graced the wall opposite us. He spoke a word. I recognized the spell. It was a simple levitation charm. And nothing happened.

"It didn't blow up. It didn't even move," Bobby whispered.

"No, it didn't. How do you feel now?" I waited expectantly. This had to be something of a shock for him.

"Sad. Happy. Confused? What am I gonna do?"

I could hear the fear in his voice. "You're going to live a normal life without weird things constantly happening," I answered.

"You're going to go to school and become a chef," Tyler told him.

"And I hope you're going to live with me and be mine," Kent added.

In spite of the tears that shimmered in his eyes, Bobby grinned. "I can do all that. But first, like Tyler said earlier, I really gotta pee." He slipped out of Kent's arms and scampered off to the bathroom.

"You really think he'll be all right?" Kent asked, smiling fondly after him.

"I do. We'll all help him adjust. And by the way, speaking of adjusting, you've handled all this quite well," I commented.

"I had a good reason to."

"That would make a difference, I suppose," I conceded. "Umm, you know you can't talk about this, right?"

"Are you kidding? I have no intention of ending up in a padded cell someplace."

"Just thought I'd check."

Tyler stretched and levered himself out of my arms and off the bed. "I don't know about you guys but after a bathroom break I want some food. I'm hungry."

"Pizza?" I asked.

"Chinese," Tyler countered.

"I want wontons."

"Deal. Kent, will you and Bobby stay?"

"If I can have Kung Pao chicken."

"Ooo, he likes the hot stuff," I teased. "Must be why he got hooked on the imp."

"Watch it, Layton."

"Don't be shy, Kent. You did pretty good your first time up with a guy."

"You bastard."

Laughing my ass off, I took off downstairs and locked myself in the bathroom until Bobby and Tyler made Kent promise to leave me alone with just a good-natured threat that he was going to get me someday. I didn't doubt it for a minute. After I gave



up my haven, we ordered Chinese food, had it delivered, and spent an enjoyable time eating each other's choices. Kent laughed when the Szechuan shrimp set my mouth on fire. The fucker.

When dinner was over we talked about getting Bobby set up for his new life. The kid was going to need clothes and other things and although Kent offered to pay for everything, Bobby insisted that he had clothes and money; it was just a question of retrieving them. Tyler and I volunteered to help with that as well as contact his parents to set up a meeting so Bobby could break the news to them concerning his new status. All of this was going to have to wait for a few days though.

Tyler and I had important business of our own to attend to. In less than two days our bond would be on the line. "As soon as everything's settled, we'll give you guys a call," I told Bobby and Kent as they were leaving.

Bobby hugged Tyler then me. "Good luck. I know you'll win now."

"We have an even better chance than we did before, thanks to you, imp."

"I never thought it would turn out this way. I'm glad that asshole, Lucas, made me come here."

He looked so happy, I knew then for sure we'd done the right thing. "So are we. You better get going. I think your hubby's getting impatient. Or maybe jealous."

"So help me, Alex," Kent started to threaten.

"Now, now, son. Take care of my little boy, won't you?"

Bobby and Tyler laughed while Kent merely shook his head before giving in to the smile that tugged at his mouth. "I'll do that."

With that they were off and Tyler and I were left in blissful peace. "Why do I feel like it's been weeks since we've been alone?" I asked him as we flopped down on the sofa together.

"Probably because so much has happened." He sighed. "I'm antsy. We'd better do some practice to test these new powers for the duel."

He started to rise but I held him back with a hand on his arm. "Tomorrow. Let's go to bed early."

Tyler's pansy blue eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled and leaned in for a kiss. A kiss that was interrupted by a crash, some mile a minute chittering, and a flurry of barks.

"Trip," Tyler groaned.

"And Kohe," I added.

"The leftovers!" we both shouted and made a dash for the kitchen.

With rice, fried noodles, wontons, and Kung Pao chicken all over the kitchen floor, not to mention a sticky cerbretta and gargoyle in the middle of it, our pending challenge seemed very, very far away.

## **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](mailto:katesteele27@yahoo.com) or visit her website at [www.katesteele.com](http://www.katesteele.com).