

# WYNNE HAYWORTH

*Evolution got an astronomical kick in the pants. Now it's kicking back...*

*Afterglow.* Our world is changed. Mutated. Now home to humans who possess DNA belonging to creatures once thought to be only the stuff of legends. So what if the neighbor howls at the moon every month? No big deal as long as he mows his lawn.

A savage killer munching on helpless victims, however, is a big deal to Detective Buck Shand.

Buck is thinking less legend and more nightmare as he surveys the most recent in a series of brutal slayings. It's beyond even his special talents, and he's going to need help with this one. It arrives in the shapely form of Dr. Lian Herrick, a woman with her own form of Afterglow mutation—a demon that will shake Buck's everyday world to its foundations and turn his brain inside out.

Will their combined skills be enough to track and stop a savage killer? Possibly. If they can keep their minds on business and their hands off each other long enough to lure a beast who feeds on sex—then kills for pleasure.

Warning: This book contains blood-spattered scenes of assorted body parts, gruesome murders, and humans who aren't quite what they appear to be. Also included are episodes of mind-blowing sex and a good old-fashioned bit of detective work by a really cool detective. If you've ever dreamed of being a part-time faery, vampire, shapeshifter or paranormal psychic, and like kick-ass heroines with some interestingly unusual talents of their own, then read on.

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# Demons are Forever

*Wynne Hayworth*

## Dedication

To my family...you're the best!

To all the unsung heroes and heroines who play a role in every book on sale today—thank you. The editors, cover artists, formatting staff, publishing staff—so much more goes into the final product than just the writer's words, and I'm very grateful to you all.

Special thanks must go to one guy, my literary soul mate. He's always been there for me, and knows what I need almost before I do. Whether with words of encouragement or a well-placed kick in the pants, he delivers. Without him, you probably wouldn't be reading this book today.

Thanks, babe.

## Prologue

Science knew about them, of course—gamma ray bursts and their consequent afterglow.

So the announcement that something, somewhere in interstellar space, was about to go nova didn't exactly send people shrieking into the streets waiting for the sky to fall. Although in retrospect, it probably should have. Because the planet was about to change in a way that no human brain could possibly have imagined. Not even a mind belonging to the most fervent science fiction novelist or futuristic scientist. For all intents and purposes, it did nothing at all and merited barely a paragraph on an inner page of the newspapers, but for the blissfully ignorant residents of the tiny world they called Earth, nothing would *ever* be the same. It took two generations for the effects to be fully realized. It would take much longer for the new inhabitants of this changed world to come to terms with what it meant. To understand that creatures of fantasies and dreams were no longer simply words on a page or pictures in a book. That human DNA still contained the genetic markers for beings once considered legend. And that a gamma ray burst had unlocked this DNA from its sleeping state, creating a new generation that could become any and all of those fantastical creatures. So the shocked planet Earth stumbled forward into a new knowledge, struggling to accept that its population had changed—mutated—and that the guy next door might well howl at the full moon with teeth bared and tail wagging even though he'd brought in your garbage can for you earlier that same day. Magical abilities were tentatively accepted, paranormal skills were gradually infused into the education system, styles changed to accommodate things like wings and fangs, and psychic talents were no longer considered abnormal but simply part of who we are. It wasn't quite the brave new world Shakespeare envisioned for Miranda, but it did indeed have such creatures in it. For they were more than human, these “afterglow” beings. On the surface they could have merged into any city or town in any time period. But within them were genetic mysteries scientists had yet to solve. Within them lay the secrets of ancient things. And *that* was a mixed blessing.

## Chapter One

“*Shit—*”

Marri Jensen reached behind her for the headboard and hung on as her body surrendered to the best fucking she'd had in quite some time. His cock was huge, slamming again and again deep into her cunt, their bodies slapping together rhythmically as the bed squeaked and moaned in protest. He was big all over, not just between his legs, and Marri had sensed his lust the first moment she'd laid eyes on him. It was her talent, her skill, one she shared with most of the other Pleasure Pets who serviced their clientele with enthusiasm. They all loved sex and it was quite natural for them to put their desires to good use at a Pleasure Pad.

They were happy, their customers left happy—yep, smiles all around.

And this dude—well, he surpassed any of the customers she had satisfied recently. One hand was holding her thigh high against his hips as the other squeezed her butt cheek beneath her. She was open, vulnerable and welcoming his thrusts, loving the slightly rough treatment, excited by the constant pounding of her clit and the tiny slick sounds coming from where they were joined.

She moaned with delight, muscles tensing as her orgasm began building, the first of what she hoped would be many with this man. Her clit ached, her breasts swelled as she released one rung of her headboard and reached for her nipple, pinching it in a frenzy of need.

The tiny pain stung, sending shivers across her nerve endings, tightening her belly and landing up right where he was hammering against her. His face was flushed, eyes wide and staring at his cock as it slipped in and out of her pussy.

Marri whimpered, hips bucking up to meet him, thrust for thrust.

She was coming, trembling, about to fall off the brink into magnificent ecstasy and madness...

And he moved, burying himself to the hilt in her cunt, leaning down to touch her breast with his tongue then lick upward to her throat.

Lost in her release, Marri simply closed her eyes and cried out at the hot touch, fuel to the fire she was traversing at that instant.

She never saw his face lengthen, his skin change or his teeth sharpen. She was blind to the strange glitter of his skin, his dark amber eyes, blind to everything but the cock that was driving her ever higher with each rough penetration. Her orgasm was the last thing she experienced before a massive mouth descended on her throat and tore it into shreds.

Detective Buck Shand stepped adroitly around the vomiting patrolman and walked to the door of the Pleasure Pad.

“Why the hell Con gets these calls, with *his* stomach, I’ll never understand.” He nodded at the older officer barring his way. “Look at him. Greener than ever.”

This was true. Officer Conrad Martin was very green. Of course, he was always slightly green, being part elf and all, but right now he was getting pretty close to the color of the grass he was throwing up all over.

The other man shrugged. “That’s Con. And it’s our shit luck to get these damn calls. Fourth one in—what—six or seven weeks?” He passed Buck a pair of protective plastic boots. “You’ll need these.”

“Bad, huh?” Buck lifted each foot and covered his shoes with the plastic stuff. It molded rapidly to his contours, pinching his pants against his legs.

“Yeah.” The man swallowed. “Bad.”

Buck’s mood sobered rapidly. If Officer Mike Shannon, a bland, with twenty or more years in the force under his belt, said it was bad, then it was *really* bad. With a capital B. Blands were a lot less sensitive to violence than the afterglows.

He squared his shoulders and absently brushed the tiny blue mark on his right earlobe that marked him as an afterglow. An AG. He knew he was different, but it was a difference he shared with half the damn planet these days.

Pushing the stray thoughts aside, he focused on his job. “Upstairs?”

“Yep. Follow the lab boys. They’ve already started leaving a pretty good trail.”

With that in mind, Buck pulled a pair of plastic gloves from his back pocket and slid them over his hands. “Thanks,



Mike. We gonna be able to keep this quiet, you think? We don't need any more troubles than we've got already.”  
“I hear you. We'll do our best, but you know the newshounds are gonna get it sooner or later.” Mike looked somber.  
“And after this one, I'd say sooner.”

Buck nodded in silent agreement, then did the thing that topped his Ten Most Disliked Activities list.

He walked into a homicide knowing he was going to have to open a door in his mind that he *really* preferred to keep shut.

The metallic scent of fresh blood seared his throat before he got to the crime scene and the soft sounds of a forensics team at work led him to the end of the upstairs hallway. There were other doors, all closed at the moment. He assumed they were empty, otherwise there'd be people working inside them, sifting through bits and pieces of stuff, the everyday detritus of a Pleasure Pad.

A very tall man leaned against the last doorjamb, watching Buck approach. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” Buck looked at his partner. “How's it hanging?”

Cheney Fisher's mouth curved down. “In buckets. All over the place.” He nodded inside. “See for yourself.”

Automatically blocking off his nasal passages as best he could, Buck slid past Cheney and did as he was invited—saw for himself.

It was a scene reminiscent of the latest horror movie to hit the theaters.

Blood, beginning to turn viscous and dark in places as it congealed, slashed a path through the room from floor to ceiling. It had splattered on the pale wallpaper, mingling with the pink and white stripes in a post-post-modern pattern of drips and globs, softly muted at the edges and solid in the middle.

“Whoa.” Buck traced the evidence with a practiced eye. “Somebody's artery sure blew a gasket.” He stared at the clear spurted daubs where a heart had pumped strongly, not knowing it was about to close up shop.

“Wanna see the body, Buck?” A tech, clad in absurdly white coveralls gestured at the bed. There were smears of blood on his feet, and nasty stuff on his knees. Buck looked at the plush carpet soaked with the internal fluids belonging to whatever lumped the opaque plastic lab sheet. Yuck.

“Guess so.” Buck carefully avoided the evidence markers and their associated gobbets of something red and nasty-looking, stepping around them as best he could. Since the whole damn carpet looked redder than it should have, he figured they'd already worked it. Otherwise he wouldn't have gotten this close without being yelled at.

Silently the tech drew back the sheet and Buck got his first good look at the—for lack of a better word—body.

There had to be a better word.

This wasn't a body by any stretch of the imagination. It was an autopsy gone terribly wrong. Bits and pieces of what had once been a woman lay strewn haphazardly amidst a mess of blood and tissue, the ribcage standing intact above the carnage like the obscene carcass of an animal or the ribs of a wrecked ship. One breast sat neatly to the left, its nipple still hard.

“Fuck.” He'd seen many things, a lot of them dead. But he knew this was the worst yet.

“You said it.” The tech sighed behind his face shield.

“ME seen this yet?”

“On the way.”

Somebody from the medical examiner's office would have to sign off on the corpse before it could be collected and removed. For now, all Buck could do was observe and make some preliminary determinations.

Female, blonde, probably in her late twenties. Her head was pretty much intact even though it was at an angle nature never intended. Her spine showed white through what was left of her neck and throat. Great ripping gashes had severed both arms, and her thighs were torn into bloody pulp.

Incongruously, a tiny glittering toe ring adorned one perfect, untouched foot. The toenails were painted a shiny pink. Buck swallowed down bile and focused on the scene as a whole, knowing this was why he was doing what he did. It was time. Time to open that door nature had placed in *his* fucking brain. The door to another level of consciousness where things roamed that were best left to the darkness. He had to do it now, before things got disturbed. Before the essence of what had happened here vaporized and was lost forever.

At moments like this, he hated his skill with every fiber of his being, but it was what he did. What he *had* to do. He stepped back into a corner as the tech replaced the sheet, covering the remains of what once had been a laughing, happy woman. Forcing that image aside, Buck closed his eyes and breathed slowly. Let it come. Let it fill the air.

Look at it with eyes that saw beyond reality. Eyes that would never open on daylight or see a child smile. Eyes within eyes. Thoughts within thoughts.

Mists swirled and Buck looked past them to the terrible roiling darkness they concealed.

Sex.

Lust.

Heat...two bodies, fucking.

*Hunger.*

Not the hunger to orgasm, but another type of hunger. Pushed high by the frenzied meeting of flesh to flesh, skin to skin.

There was a laugh, a woman's laugh, happy and excited—she was enjoying it, relishing the rush of her climax creeping up on her.

He fought further into his mind. He couldn't *see*—there was only the woman, her hands above her head, hanging on as she did what she did best—took a man's cock into her body and pleased them both.

Then it changed. Her laughter turned to gasps and one blinding second of sheer terror. Buck gasped with her, feeling the sudden agonizing rip of teeth against throat, her hot blood against her cheek, of knowing her life was about to be snuffed out.

The mists thickened. He nearly groaned as he tried to peer past them, to see who or what was tearing her apart.

But there was nothing. Nothing but a sharp chill, an icy cold sense of dread that froze the sweat on his spine.

Then, just as he was about to pull away, frustrated and angry at himself for his failure, he caught a glimpse of something.

Two somethings.

Eyes, the color of old amber, glowing with a dark fire. The pupils slitted and black like a cat's. Feral, powerful.

Ancient.

And staring directly at him from above the torn and bloodied flesh.

He sucked in a quick breath and swayed, pulling himself out of the vision with a force that made him dizzy.

The ripples of unease continued to shiver down his body. Whatever this thing was, he'd not run across anything like it before. Ever.

“You okay?” Cheney was at his side.

“Yeah.” Buck ran a hand over his face. “This is bad. Real bad.”

“You see anything?”

“Yes and no. They were having sex. She was having a good time. Until—”

“Until what?” Cheney kept his voice quiet, encouraging.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t see him. It. Whatever it was. It was fucking cold, I can tell you that.” He shivered and rubbed his arms with his hands. “All I saw was his eyes.”

“His eyes?”

“Yeah. Strange eyes, Cheney. Real strange eyes. Not ones you’d forget in a hurry.”

“Hey, lady. You can’t come in here.” The tech yelled at somebody standing at the door and both Buck and Cheney turned to see a petite figure observing the scene.

She gestured to her badge. “County Coroner’s Office.”

Slowly, she moved her head and her gaze found Buck and Cheney as they stood in the shadows.

Buck froze and he barely realized he’d grabbed Cheney’s arm as dizziness swamped him.

“What?” His partner blinked.

“Those eyes I saw?” He stared at the woman. “She’s got them too.”

“Dude. Snap out of it.” Cheney’s tone was sharp.

Buck looked again.

The woman’s eyes were black. Completely black. But as normal as pure black eyes could be.

He shook himself free of Cheney’s arm. “Sorry. I guess I drifted there for a minute.”

“Understandable.” His partner straightened. “C’mon. Let’s go see what the County’s sent us.”

“Yeah. Let’s.”

Buck schooled his features into their usual calm expression. He knew what he’d seen. And that probably no one else had noticed.

This woman wasn’t what she seemed.

Of course, these days, who was?

## Chapter Two

“He’s escalating.”

Lian Herrick watched the effect of the captain’s words on the roomful of men. They all looked somber, a few nodded, and one—the detective she’d noticed at the crime scene—well, he was still staring at her.

She stared back, too used to men looking at her to be intimidated by it.



He broke eye contact first and went back to studying the photos on the board behind the captain.

“This is the fourth.” The captain tapped a map with red dots on it. “All in the Pleasure District. All Pleasure Pets. No pattern of houses—he’s hit a shifter place, a vamp place and two non-aligned houses.”

She made a brief note. She knew non-aligned houses would service any client, regardless of their personal orientation. Some Pleasure Pets preferred vamps, others werewolves or miscellaneous shape shifters. Some just liked to fuck.

And four of these Pleasure Pets would never fuck again. Lian forced away the images, the visions of blood and body parts that had crowded her brain and nearly made her sick at the crime scene. Her nostrils could still detect the scent of violent death even though she’d stayed at the doorway, fighting to hold on to her composure. And her breakfast. Something about that smell lingered.

“What’s with the lady?”

A sharp question broke the silence and she looked over to meet those oddly blue eyes, which had been fixed on her or flickering her way for most of this meeting.

The captain sighed. “The *lady* is on loan from County.”

“Oh goody.” Another detective grinned. “Can we keep her?”

The captain lifted his head. “Dr. Herrick, why don’t you say hello to the apes in this zoo?”

Lian put her notebook aside. “Thanks, Captain.” She stood, drawing herself up to her full five-foot-five inches. “I’m Dr. Lian Herrick. I consult for the County Medical Examiner’s office. I’m not here to interfere with your investigation, merely to help out in any way I can.”

“I can think of a few ways, honey.”

The voice from the back of the room brought guffaws and a couple of grins.

“I’ll bet you can.” She lifted an eyebrow. “Sorry. I don’t do apes. They always have limp bananas.”

General laughter greeted her response. As it usually did.

“You consult? How?”

Damn. He wasn’t going to let it go. “I’m sorry. I didn’t get your name, Detective.”

“Shand. Buck Shand.”

“Well, Detective Shand, I’ve had some experience with out of the ordinary crimes.”

“How out of the ordinary?”

She stared at him, noting the sharp cheekbones, the casually untidy hair and the shadow of a beard that would probably be black by the time the night rolled around. His gaze pierced her, shades of blue that varied like the ocean as clouds scudded across the skies above it.

“*Very* out of the ordinary. Serial killers, to be precise.” She met his gaze with a slight lift of her chin. “As you know, we don’t get many serial killers anymore. AGs are much too adept in sensing and solving most murders these days. It’s why crime’s down so much and why you’re all eating pizza with your families at dinnertime instead of chasing the bad guys twenty-four-seven.”

There were a few nods. One of the benefits of the new order of things was that crimes weren’t easily concealed anymore. DNA that contained a particular strain of elf, for example, led within hours to the perp.

Everyone’s DNA was on file somewhere. Lian knew it, these cops knew it—so when something like this latest monster came along and avoided detection, it was her job to go find out why.

“*Really?*” Detective Shand drawled the word into an insult. “Serial killers? A little thing like you?”

Her eyes narrowed as she struggled with her temper. “Yeah. Good things come in small packages, Detective.” She glanced down at his crotch. “As I’m sure your girlfriends have told you.” She looked back up at him, meeting his eyes. “Oh, by the way? They lied.”

Laughter echoed loudly through the room.

“She’s got you, Buck.” A tall man stood and crossed the room to pick up Lian’s hand. “Welcome, Dr. Herrick. You’re an asset to the team.” He kissed it and brought a chorus of smacky lip noises from his peers. “I’m Cheney Fisher. If there’s anything I can do to help...” His eyebrows waggled at her.

She grinned back. “I’ll make a note.” He was harmless. Charming, handsome, but harmless. Unlike the blue-eyed devil who still stared at her like he wanted to get inside her head. Or her pants. She couldn’t decide which.

The captain thumped on the table. “If you’ve all quite finished?”

The noise in the room dropped off as the necessary light relief concluded. Lian understood. Something like this, a horror like this—well, there had to be a release somewhere. A mechanism for dealing with death. A way of putting it aside for just a few moments and remembering that everyone was human.

In one way or another.

“We have nothing from forensics. Just like the other ones. No hairs, fibers, blood that didn’t come from the vic, nothing.” The captain frowned. “This guy either cleans up after himself with amazing precision or he doesn’t exist.” Shand frowned. “He exists, all right.” His gaze drifted to the photographs in all their gory detail. “He feeds.”

Lian sat up. “What do you mean, he feeds?”

“Buck?” The captain looked at him. “Anything?”

Shand shook his head. “Can’t see him, Cap. Can’t get a reading, a smell on him, nothing. It’s like you said, he doesn’t exist on any plane I can reach. But he’s there. He leaves a cold chill down my back. I sense—” He paused, like he was looking to explain the inexplicable.

Which, thought Lian, he was.

“I sense a hunger. A screaming, unsatisfied hunger.” Shand sighed. “That’s all I get. And I only got that from the latest crime scene.”

“You weren’t at the previous ones?” She asked.

“Nope. Vacation.”

“And you’re a cognitive, right?” Lian made a note next to his name.

“You could say that, yeah.”

“Hell, Buck’ll say whatever gets him into bed with his current girl, Doc. Don’t let him fool ya.”

Hoots greeted the statement. Under cover of the general conversation, Shand leaned to her. “So what are you?”

“Busy.” She scribbled something else in her notes.

“C’mon. I showed you mine. You gotta show me yours. Fair’s fair.” His blue eyes were warm now, friendly.

Lian wasn’t buying it. “I’m part Fae.”

“Where’re your wings?”

“At the dry cleaners. Now shut up. I’m trying to work here.” She deliberately turned a shoulder on him.

The captain slammed his hand down. “Okay, assholes. We got ourselves a big fat nothing here. Four dead girls and not one thing to go on. Go out and get me something. Anything. Before we have to add more photos to this fucking

wall.”

It was a measure of the captain’s concern that he didn’t apologize to her for his language. She was glad he hadn’t. He’d accepted her onto the team. Which could not be said for Detective Buck Shand.

His eyes were that flat blue again as she noticed his gaze. Gathering her things, she turned to leave only to find his hand beneath her arm. “How about a cup of coffee? You’ll need to find your way around this maze if you’re going to be here for the duration.”

She eased away. “I’ll manage.”

“Aw, c’mon, Doc. We’re all friends here.”

Her skin rippled at his nearness, his scent. He was, perhaps, more than he seemed on the surface. Definitely a cognitive, possessed of a rare ability to sense that which existed on a different plane. There weren’t many cogs around. And Detective Buck Shand might well be a variety she hadn’t run across before.

She was going to have to work with the guy, personal responses notwithstanding. So she shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

He watched her ass as they carried cups of what passed for coffee to an empty table. She sure had a fine ass on her. Full, round, swinging in that particular way women have had for thousands upon thousands of years.

It still had the same effect on Buck Shand that it probably had on the first caveman who’d noticed it and gotten a hard-on from the sight.

Her jeans hugged her butt even though it was partially covered by her tidy black jacket. She’d caught the right blend between “one of the guys” and “professional consultant”. The running shoes were a nice touch. She didn’t care that she was short nor did she try to add height by wearing those ankle-shattering heels some women swore by.

Hair the color of sunlight fell halfway down her back from the clip she’d stuck into it at the nape of her neck and he had to wonder what it was like falling free over her bare flesh.

Hell, he was human. Sort of. As human as the next guy, anyway.

Since the *next guy* was Cheney, that was a given.

The three of them slipped into their seats. “So give, Doc.” Buck looked her straight in the eye. “What do you know? How are you supposed to help us?”

She avoided his gaze, her black eyes dropping to her notes. “I don’t know any more than you do right now. Probably less. You’ve worked the first three.”

“Not personally, but I’m getting there.” He leaned back in his chair. “No evidence, just four bodies. The first ones were mild compared to this.”

“How was this different? What made you link them and put one perp behind all the kills?” She met his gaze.

Once again he was stabbed by those ink black eyes. It was odd, not knowing where the pupil left off and the iris began.

“The lack of evidence.” Cheney filled in the gaps. “The first one—well, there’s always something that can be overlooked. It was a Pleasure Pet, a vamp house. And let’s face it, those places can get kinky sometimes. It got chalked up to sex gone really wrong or a girl wanting to cross over.” He frowned. “Can’t see why she’d want to do that, but it happens.”

“Any vamp cops work the case?”

Buck shook his head. “We don’t have any. You know the rules. It’s hard to solve a crime when the investigating officer licks up the clues.”

Lian lifted an eyebrow. “There may be rules, Detective. But rules were made to be broken.”

Cheney chuckled. “I like you.”

“Thanks.” She waved the compliment away. “And the next two murders?”

He watched her face as Cheney filled her in. Buck knew enough about them to do it himself, but he found he’d rather keep his gaze and his focus on her, instead of rattling off facts, dates and statistics.

Cheney was better at that. Much better.

“We got one in a shifter Pad. This time it was a bit more brutal. Throat cut, but the body wasn’t mutilated other than a few bite marks. Those weren’t even considered as evidence of anything other than sexual preference.”

Lian nodded but said nothing.

Buck didn’t make the mistake of underestimating her. There was a lot going on beneath that tranquil surface. Of that he was absolutely sure.

“This unfortunate Pleasure Pet was involved in a spat with her boyfriend. Nasty too. It took a while before anyone stopped trying to find him, especially since he showed up in the werewolf database. He’d conveniently disappeared and only turned up a couple of days ago.”

“He’s been eliminated as a suspect?”

“Yeah. He was doing thirty days out of state for drug possession.” Cheney huffed out a breath. “By then, we’d had the third killing. It was in an all-comers Pad. No magical or sexual preference. Same sort of thing. Violent and messy. Throat cut, body messed around with, but still nothing on the scale of what we saw this morning.” He sighed.

“Nothing’s *ever* been on the scale of what we saw this morning.”

Lian tapped her short fingernails on the table and her black eyes seemed unfocussed for a few moments.

Buck waited patiently. She was digesting information, processing it, working it out in that cute little head of hers.

He blinked. *Cute*? Where the hell had that come from? She was anything but cute. She had eyes blacker than the night, a sharp mind and she came from the offices of the county at the request, he assumed, of some high-level asshole who hated the thought of a serial killer on the loose ruining his anti-crime re-election campaign.

And she was hiding something.

Buck was a cognitive. His little bit of the afterglow had stirred the portions of his brain that saw things differently, sensed things that others couldn’t begin to understand. He could easily peg an AG even without seeing their blue dotted ear. Give him five minutes with ’em and he knew what kind of AG they were.

He could even read a bland’s mood now and again, if they were real worked up about something or horny as hell. He tried not to, since it got way too close to an invasion of privacy thing.

With all these handy little qualifications and modifications to his brain at his disposal, he was still coming up empty handed when it came to Dr. Lian Herrick. She had the slanted almond eye shape that hinted at something Asian in her heritage. Her skin glowed warmly, so a vamp was out. They were cooler and paler in color. There wasn’t a giveaway little ridge down the back of her neck where her skin split on regular basis. Shape shifters probably didn’t even know it was there, but Buck did. It was all part of the job.

She’d said she was a Fae. It was a good choice. Small and delicately boned, she could have been. Her ears weren’t pointed, but that didn’t matter very much, since Fae came in all shapes and sizes and varieties.

Yes, she was definitely a Fae.

No, *wait*. He frowned. For a few seconds, he'd felt the calm and tranquil sensation that came with understanding one of his fellow AGs. But—*it hadn't come from him*. His eyebrows drew together as he forced whatever it was out of his mind.

Cheney hadn't noticed anything and was continuing his conversation with the doc. She was poring over the notes, asking questions, jotting things down on that pad she carried with her.

So what the hell just happened?

Buck ran his hand over his face wearily. This fucking case was getting to him and it wasn't even half-begun.

"You okay, bud?" Cheney glanced at him.

"Yeah." He pointed at the gory stills of the crime scene. "It bothers me, this shit."

"No kidding. Bothers us all."

Lian glanced at him. "You sensed nothing at all? No odors? No—" She struggled for words. "No inkling of what might have done this?"

Her eyes were expressionless, dark pools that a man could drown in. She was simply a consultant asking the right questions.

Buck didn't like it one bit.

"No. Nothing. Cold, is all. An icy cold that was more brutal than anything I can remember. Describing it is like trying to tell you what yellow smells like. And..." He paused. There were those eyes. But he wasn't sure if he was ready to talk about them yet. Not to her anyway.

"And?" She caught him up on it.

"Nothing. That was it. Just emptiness. Like the scene itself, empty of anything and everything that might have given us a lead."

"You had the wolf team check it out?" She turned to Cheney.

"Yes. Once we figured there were connections, we had them at each of the scenes. Don't know if they've done the latest one yet, but they didn't pick up a damn thing. Just like Buck."

Buck nodded. "If there was anything there, they would have scented it."

"How many wolves you got here?" Lian lifted an eyebrow in query.

"Enough." He stared back at her. Cops who harbored a fuzzy critter in their genes weren't thick on the ground, but often worth their weight in gold. In their human form they could smell a fart from twenty yards and identify the ass it came from.

Of course, they had to take a few days off each month around the full moon. It was referred to as their "period". Not in their presence, however, since they were mostly male. Several were as bad-tempered as the critters they became when the moon rose.

Didn't pay to piss off the wolf team. You could find a pile of something you didn't want to deal with on your front doorstep if you did.

"Well, I don't see a correlation between the killings and the lunar cycle, so that lets out werewolves as suspects."

Buck nodded. "A wolf didn't do this. It would have ripped the body, yes. But it would have eaten the bits it wanted, not messed with the rest of it." *And not left a breast neatly beside the torso or a perfect foot with a glittering toe-*

*ring...*

Cheney pushed his chair back. “Well, I gotta go.” He glanced at the clock. “Shift’s up for me.”

Lian blinked. “You’re going home?”

“Yep.” He smiled. “I’ve been here for twelve hours already. I’m useless without a good night’s sleep. Plus I’ve got to relieve the babysitter.”

“Oh.” She looked mildly puzzled. “Well, in that case, have a nice evening.”

“Buck’ll be here for a while yet. He’ll take care of you.” Cheney brushed her shoulder and grinned at Buck. The message was unmistakable. *She’s all yours, bud.*

“See ya.” Buck flicked a hand in the air, then scooted his chair closer to Lian, dragging his file with him on the pretext of sharing information.

Her scent crept into his nostrils, something softly musky with a hint of strange flowers beneath. He barely managed to keep himself from scooting even closer and sniffing her neck. It was one fine womanly perfume, that was for sure. Lian casually shifted away from him, irritating him. “So where do we go from here?” She leaned back, putting even more space between them.

“We talk to people. Check the desks at the Pleasure Pads to see if there’s a common denominator. Talk to the girls themselves. Some of them were working—perhaps they saw or heard something that might be important.” He smiled at her, putting a lot of warmth into his expression. “You know, like a *clue*?”

She didn’t smile back. “Thank you, Sherlock Holmes. That much I’d figured out myself.”

“How old are you?” Buck watched her face as she flashed him a startled look.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. How old are you?”

“None of your business.”

“Okay. Let’s try this one. You dating anybody right now?” He paused. “Excuse me. I put that badly. Are you in a *relationship*?” His fingers made quotation marks around the last word.

Lian’s eyes remained impenetrable. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s my job.”

“Your job doesn’t include asking personal questions, Detective.”

“I’m a curious man. It’s my nature.”

“In that case, I suggest you control your nature and stick to your job. Ask the right questions about the case and leave the rest alone.”

“You’re good.” He smiled at her, honestly admiring her effortless put-down, delivered in a calm and efficient manner. It hadn’t worked, but she was still damn good at it.

“Thank you.” She pushed papers toward him. “Back to this.”

Buck sighed. “Look, I’ve told you the game plan here. It’s grunt work at the moment. Perhaps the autopsy will tell us more than somebody played jigsaw puzzles with a human being, only took it apart instead of putting it together. But until then...”

“Yes, until then.” Lian straightened and looked at him, her gaze unblinking. “What did you see, Detective Shand?”

Her voice had lowered, soothing, stroking something down low in his body that responded with a warm purr.

“Huh?” He couldn’t seem to look away from her. Not that he wanted to. He wanted to see if her lips tasted like



flowers. He wanted to touch her neck, her creamy skin. He wanted her breasts in his hands, hot and peaked with desire. Her nipples...

“What did you see? Tell me...”

Lian’s eyes, deep pools of welcoming shadows, were heating as he held her gaze, glowing—if black could glow. He felt—something. And that something stirred his cock into immediate and painful hardness. He could lose himself in that gaze, fall in and drown and do it over and over again. “Tell you...”

“Tell me, Buck. Share it with me. Give it to me. I want it. I want it *so bad*...”

He nearly groaned as the door in his brain opened onto visions that shocked even him.

A bed, a floor, a desk—Lian was naked on all of them. Naked and spread, her pussy dappled with blonde curls and wet, so wet, gleaming with diamonds and dewdrops, aching for his cock. He could feel it, feel her shudder as he took her, sank his erection balls-deep into her cunt, slamming into her with a lust so fierce he could taste it on the back of his throat.

She reached for her breasts, lifting them, offering them to his ready mouth. They were ripe fruit more than ready for tasting. She was astride him now, leaning down, brushing hard nipples across his lips. “Tell me, Buck. What did you see?”

“*Eyes*...”

He spoke. One word and he jerked back from that place that had opened so unexpectedly and without his permission. He ripped himself away from the pornographic images he’d been so thoroughly enjoying, hard beneath his jeans to the point of agony—and unbelievably furious.

“What the *fuck* was that?”

“Pardon?” Lian’s face was completely expressionless other than a slight questioning slant to her eyebrows. They could have been chatting about the weather for all the emotion she showed.

And they hadn’t been chatting about the weather. Buck had never gotten an instant hard-on from an incoming low-pressure system. He swallowed down a lump of lust and glared at her. “You gettin’ in my head, lady?”

Her lips made a little moue of distaste. “What on *earth* could I possibly want in there?” She flicked her notepad to a fresh page and stared at him expectantly. “Tell me about the eyes.”

Shit. She’d gotten that out of him somehow. He was damn well going to figure out exactly how, too. He refused to believe that his own suppressed desires had stimulated that little episode with the naked bodies and the fierce fucking. But for now, he had no choice but to answer her question. Not doing so would bring more. And he wanted to be the one asking. He didn’t like it when the shoe was on the other foot.

“They were strange eyes.”

“I’ve been told I have strange eyes. Were they like mine?”

Buck shook his head. “Nope. These were—” God, they were almost impossible to describe.

“Can you draw them?” Lian pushed paper and pen toward him.

“I dunno. I suck at art.” He doodled, shaping a bulging almond eye socket then doing his best to recreate the slitted pupil. “Something like that.”

“Cat’s eyes?”

“No. Yes. More than cat’s eyes.” He frowned at what he’d drawn. “They were fuller, more prominent than cat’s eyes. More feral. And the color...”

“What color were they, Detective?”

“Burning amber. No whites, just this strange sort of flickering fiery orangey brown.” He shrugged. “I’m no good at this shit, Doc.”

“You’re doing fine.” Her voice was encouraging.

“I saw a piece of amber someplace in a museum. It was lit from behind. These eyes were like that, only the light behind them moved. Like fire.” He leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. “Best I can do.”

Lian reached into her briefcase next to her feet and pulled out another folder. “I want you to look at something.” She flicked through papers.

“Okay.”

Buck watched her. There was something real strange behind those eyes. She was a puzzle, a mystery, and he wasn’t real fond of either. But he sure wouldn’t mind investigating Dr. Lian Herrick. And of course, he’d have to peel her out of those clothes first...

“Here.” She pushed a small photograph across the table. “Look at this.”

He leaned over it and pursed his lips into a silent whistle. He was looking at a photo of a painting. A scroll type painting, not framed like an old master, but hung from some ornate pole. Black cord and tassels fell heavily from either side, but there was no point of reference to tell him anything about how big the thing was.

Holding his attention was the subject matter. He’d seen examples of Oriental art before, so he recognized the soft brush strokes and the almost monochromatic color scheme. There was a stark mountain rearing up one side of the painting, rising from a plain that was bare of life, of plants—just a wasteland disappearing into the distance.

Above this desolate scene were clouds—roiling, stylized, angry clouds.

And within those clouds—an eye.

As Buck took in the detail, a slow icy finger danced its way down his spine. It was all there. The strangely spherical shape of the eye, the slitted pupil and the little flicks of flame in that dark glowing shade of amber. It was a photo. Nothing moved, of course, but for an instant, he could have sworn the light swayed and shuddered inside the eye. He lifted his head, feeling a sense of unease turn the muscles into a knot of aching tension. “What the fuck is this?”

“Is that what you saw?” Lian’s voice was cold, commanding.

“Close enough.” He sighed. “Yeah, damn close.”

“Okay then.” She gathered her papers, closed the files, tapped them neatly on the table and then packed her case.

“Okay what?” He watched her.

“Okay I’m done here.” She stood.

“Hey, wait up there, Herrick.” Buck grabbed her arm angrily as he stood, trying to conceal the fact that his jeans weren’t fitting quite the way they were designed to. “What do you mean, you’re *done*?”

“I have some research to do.”

“Can’t I help?”

She looked at him, then pointedly at his hand where he held her in place. “No.”

“Fine.” He released her. “And I was going to buy you dinner too.” When all else fails, try food and being polite. He even dredged up his best charming smile. It was a last resort for Buck and he knew it.

She turned away but paused at his final comment. She glanced back over her shoulder and gave him back the most beautiful smile he’d ever seen. It shot straight to his cock and made matters worse, but at that second, he didn’t care.

He simply lusted.

“I’ll take a rain check, Shand.” She walked crisply away.

“When?” He called after her, making several heads in the café turn.

“When I get back.”

She was gone. There was clearly no point in wondering *back from where?*

*Goddamn and fuck it.* Women, when all was said and done, were pains in the ass. Especially this one.

Buck nursed his annoyance all the way to his truck. He didn’t know when Lian was returning, he had a real nasty case on his plate and his partner was probably home even now playing with his little kiddies.

This was one of those moments that just screamed for a beer. Or three.

## Chapter Three

The night sky lay heavy over the landscape as Buck nursed his beer by his living room windows. Ordinarily, he’d have come home, dug himself up something to eat from the fridge—or even cooked something if he’d had the urge—then tumbled comfortably onto his couch and watched a game until he was relaxed enough to sleep.

He could have gone out, checked in with friends, picked up a date or even called up one of his occasional “sweeties”, women who knew him and would welcome him over to their place for an evening of sweaty sex without any commitment other than a bottle of wine.

But tonight he wasn’t in the mood for any of it.

Lingering thoughts of a shattered human life dragged at his mind, refusing to let go and disappear so he could rest. Hence his silent contemplation of the night with his equally silent companion—his third beer.

It was a different world out there from the one his forbears knew. It had adjusted, accepted the changes—although not without difficulty—and moved inexorably onward. Species will survive at any cost. Buck knew that with a certainty, not just from what he’d seen on the job but from his reading. Behind him, one wall of his apartment living room was covered with bookshelves and filled with books. All of which he’d actually read. Something that would probably come as a surprise to his colleagues since Buck managed to play it low-key on the job.

Some were modern treatises on AGs. Others were reprints of several-hundred-year-old volumes, and these were the ones that fascinated him. In them he found a sense of the world as it was back then and a better ability to understand what it was now by comparison.

Perhaps it was the cop in him that drove him to forage through history. He knew there’d been cops in the Shand family for as far back as anyone could remember. His great-great-grandfather had been killed in the line of duty during the AG uprisings of over a hundred years before.

Thank God that had been calmed and settled. It had been every bit as violent and vicious as the racial equality battles

of the nineteen hundreds. But the AG riots had been defused by something as simple as children. As more and more of them had been born with the AG DNA mutation, fewer and fewer parents looked at them as threats. It's hard to hate a tiny child who happens to sprout wings now and again. Especially when it's your own.

Life had adapted, accepted and progressed. Buck had read of global warming, greenhouse gases, the oil crises of the twenty-first century. Fossil fuels were redundant these days. Everything was renewable and most of it solar powered. The air stayed clear and as fresh as possible given that people still lived, created sewage and threw away their trash in a less-than-effective fashion. Instant disposal units were still expensive, no matter how much energy they created for the homeowner.

A movement in the street four floors below caught Buck's eye. Several women were out for the night, flittering down the street in a flurry of shining, sparkling wings.

On their way to a Fairy Bar, most likely.

It was strange, the variety of mutations, the control of each individual over those mutations and the preferences people exhibited. Some, like these girls, relished their wings. There was a whole fashion trend based around the need to keep those fluttery membranes unhindered.

Others, like himself and Cheney, preferred to keep whatever abilities they had under wraps. It was a personal choice. The blue spot marked an AG so it wasn't as if they were hiding it from anyone.

Buck was just happier living life as much like a bland as possible and only using what he referred to as his "gift" when he needed to. Some might wonder what he was, but basically it was nobody's business but his own. And the Police Department's, of course.

The women in his life seemed to respect that. Probably why they were in his life in the first place. And other than an initial curiosity, they sensed that he was just what he appeared. A regular guy out for some fun and a good time.

They were almost all bland. He was, deep inside, a little scared of taking an AG to bed. It was rumored that sexual activity stimulated the mutation, although science had yet to validate that assumption.

The one time he'd fucked a woman with pointed ears and a green tinge to her skin, he hadn't found her changing beneath him. All she'd done was pant and gasp and sigh as he'd brought her to orgasm.

She'd looked a bit greener afterward, but that might have been the large numbers of tequila shots they'd both downed just before the sex.

And he'd found he had to work to keep his mind closed to her. Sex was for sharing bodies, not thoughts, nor emotions. He wanted to fuck, not see her essence on another plane while he was doing it. That certainly wouldn't improve his performance if she was thinking of her next day's schedule while he was licking her pussy.

Or worse—imagining him as the latest movie star. Shit. That would be a cock-killer of a vision.

There were horror stories of sex partners becoming wolves at the moment of climax. Buck didn't believe any of them. Nor did he believe that women vampires devoured their lovers from the balls up.

If a guy didn't recognize an AG up front, he deserved whatever he got. If an AG wanted to emerge in bed as something else, good for them. Just as long as they were honest from the get-go.

It was no different than the old days. If you were gay, make it clear. If you wanted anal sex and your partner didn't—work it out or get out of bed.

It was only when it wasn't worked out that it landed on his desk. And these days even those kinds of messy assaults were diminishing.

Except for now. Except for that Pleasure Pet who'd never had the chance to work anything out at all.

Buck's thoughts had circled around to the very subject he was trying to avoid. Murder. And—as a direct correlation—Dr. Lian Herrick.

Spurred by a need to do something useful with his time, Buck pushed himself away from the window, grabbed another beer from the fridge and walked to his comp center unit. State of the art equipment hummed contentedly then flickered into life as he hit his keyboard, moving his fingers beneath the projected laser light that created a pattern of keys on the desktop.

“Hello Buck.” A sultry voice greeted him and a black and white image of a sexy face smiled from the screen. “How can I help you this evening?”

“Hi, Marlene.” Buck grinned. Marlene Dietrich was as hot today as she had been in the 1930s and he'd needed no prompting to select her as his computer's personality. “I need information please.”

“My pleasure, *dahlink*.”

God, he loved that accent. “Bring up Google.” God, he loved Google too. Never had gone out of fashion in spite of a million imitators.

“Here you are. Would you like me to help?” Marlene sounded hopeful.

“No thanks, babe. I got this one.”

Marlene obligingly fell silent. What more could a man ask? She shut up when told to. Technology was pretty impressive these days.

“Okay, Dr. Lian Herrick. Let's see what information the world of cyberspace has on you.” Buck began by simply typing in her name and hitting *Search*.

A host of hits came up on the screen, most of them from scholarly institutions citing papers or references. He scanned through the first couple of dozen, finding nothing that told him anything more than that Dr. Herrick had published papers, most of them in reference to one crime or another.

So she certainly seemed to have the academic references to back up her arrival on his crime scene.

He did another search, leaving out the Doctor part this time.

Lots of hits on Herrick, but nothing pertaining to a Lian Herrick. No bio, no photos—since he tried “images” as well—the lady had covered her tracks. Which was, all things considered, quite surprising.

Buck leaned back in his chair and thought about it. It was real hard to keep one's face off the Internet. Most everybody, at some time or at some place, had been digitally captured. Whether by friends and families or by some professional photo-hound. At a conference perhaps, or a meeting?

But for Lian, nothing.

When he searched on just “Lian”, he came up with about ten thousand oriental references to the meaning of the word. *Lotus*.

There were even several X-rated porn sites offering hot sex shots of the lotus blossom as represented by nude women. He passed on those. He had his own stash of porn sites and didn't need more.

“So where are you hiding, little lotus?” He closed down Google. “Marlene?”

“Yes, Buck?” Marlene appeared looking hopeful.

“Log me in to the Department network, will you?”

“Of course, *dahlink*.” A few whirring clicks later, the PD logo appeared on the screen with his welcome message

beneath. He scrolled to the search feature and prepared to rummage through the more restricted files available only to officers of the law with the appropriate passwords.

And any overenthusiastic teenage hacker who didn't have a girlfriend and knew a shitload too much about Internet security protocols.

Once again he typed in Lian's name. This time, he fared slightly better.

She was absolutely a fixture of the Criminology Section. She'd been cited more times than he could count, seemed to specialize in AG DNA analysis, had been used as a consultant on several unusual cases and testified several times as an expert witness.

The one photo he located was grainy and showed little more than the top of her head as she stood with a group of people outside the County Seat. If she hadn't been blonde, he wouldn't even have seen that amidst the suits.

Okay. Dr. Lian Herrick was a real person and that was her real name. She was affiliated with County so that checked out too. But as far as anything other than her professional persona, he had zip on the lady.

"Marlene?"

"Yes, my sweet?"

"I need you to go take a nap now." Buck's fingers darted over the keyboard.

"You're going to be naughty, aren't you?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Can't I watch?"

"No, honey. Not this time."

"We're not going looking for those erotic sex sites tonight?"

"Nope."

Marlene's image pouted. "You never let me have any fun, Buck."

"Next time, okay? Now go nap, sweetheart. A man needs his privacy from time to time."

Marlene snorted. "Like I've never seen a guy jerk off before." A sigh echoed through the speaker system. "But if you say so..." She faded from the screen, leaving it black and empty.

He drew a breath and then typed in a series of meaningless numbers and symbols. The screen remained blank after he hit *Enter*, then a large warning image appeared, threatening all sorts of dire consequences if he continued along his present path.

He grinned. Let 'em try.

He typed in a few more characters. He hadn't hung around his commanding officer's desk for nothing. Leave it to the captain to write his passwords on sticky notes and smack 'em on the underside of his blotter. Sometimes people were too damn predictable.

He hadn't used this information more than once. But he needed this access now, not just for personal satisfaction, but for information that might just be pertinent to his case.

If he was going to sneak stealthily around highly classified federal databases, he might as well make it worth his while.

After a few more warnings, one outright threat and a cute laughing skull thrown in by some bored programmer, no doubt, he got to where he wanted to be.

In the upper levels of secret information.



And there he found her.

A dossier, easily accessed by those who had a need-to-know. Dr. Lian Herrick was laid bare, cybernetically speaking. Her academic qualifications were there, all the way to the D+ she got in Modern Dance in high school.

*Note to self. Don't take the good doctor dancing without sturdy shoes.* Buck grinned and accessed the background file, passing over the scholarly GPA scores and honors earned. She was smart. He already knew that.

A red asterisk marked the top line of Dr. Herrick's personal history. He read the paragraph with interest.

*Dr. Lian Herrick is a direct descendant of Xi Ling Wu. Wu was destroyed in 2147 after being identified as Gui Lian—pronounced shu-lan. When Wu manifested signs of paranormal ability, he became Gui—demon. Discussions with Hong Kong historians confirmed the legends of its existence. Unfortunately, this rare Chinese demon proved uncontrollable. His victims were slaughtered with excessive unpleasantness. See File 43-7-47-slash-049. It is not known whether Xi Ling Wu's DNA was a scientific fluke or a strain that may emerge again. Suggest watching entire Wu clan for further evidence of contamination by this entity. If observed, subject is to be terminated immediately.*

Buck leaned back in his chair and blew out a breath he didn't even realize he'd been holding. The entry was dated nearly seventy-five years ago. There was no further mention about this Gui Lian creature, so he figured it hadn't cropped up in the Wu family or their descendants since that time.

They'd moved on quietly, apparently, with a preponderance of scientists appearing in various spots on Lian's family tree. Not surprising, all things considered. The Wu family would probably want to either research or eliminate the demon gene that had placed their name into this particular file and maybe the legends in the places they had lived. It explained her fervent devotion to her work. Was she driven by her own demon? A fear it might reoccur in her? Icy chills slithered down his spine as he thought about it.

Dear God in Heaven, had it reoccurred already?

He quickly opened the file on the demon killings. What he found was a series of reports and photos that made him blink and swallow down the harsh taste of that last beer as it threatened to come back up.

The photos were explicit. Not that they'd been taken with that particular goal in mind—they were simply crime scene shots saved forever in a combination of pixels that assembled themselves into something that he could only describe as fucking *appalling*.

A dart of relief shot through his brain. This wasn't done by the creature who'd devoured the victim he'd seen so recently.

This was—different. And clearly sexual. The remains showed careful and considerate violations. The face was gone, gnawed to the skull which showed whitely amidst the tattered flesh.

The breasts were also gone, torn away, leaving gaping bleeding ruptures in white skin. Further down the genitals had been similarly mutilated, a gash of meaty horror left gaping between the thighs.

At first glance, Buck's thoughts drifted to the old unsolved mystery of Jack the Ripper. It could have been that kind of crime or even one of Jack's victims. The sexual fury was pretty clear. Putting his emotions into a box and clamping the lid shut, he glanced over the forensic report.

*Fourteenth victim. Female. Hong Kong resident. Similar injuries to others, leads investigators to conclude one perpetrator responsible for all homicides.*

Jesus. This was a serial killer with a serious grudge against women. He browsed the file, learning that all the victims had been in the Far East, which probably explained why the file was locked away. There had never really been a state

of full disclosure amongst nations, peace treaties, accords and general international backslapping notwithstanding.

*Theory: ancient demon is now manifesting in afterglow DNA mutation. Further information requested from Chinese experts.*

There was little else. Apparently this had been the last victim. And whatever it was had either died or disappeared off the map. Which was probably a good thing for every woman in Asia.

He leaned back in his chair. So Lian Herrick was distantly related to some sub-human Chinese demon. Perhaps that explained her eyes, although he couldn't see her transforming into some ravenous beast. That was more his line of interest, at least when he had a willing woman in his bed.

He grinned at himself, then sobered. This went way beyond sex, and joking about it didn't make it any better. But it was what cops seemed to do. He shook off the uncomfortable feeling that he was treating this crime with a lack of respect.

He wasn't. It might have been a couple of hundred years ago, but the evidence was still there, on his monitor, as freshly gory as if it had happened yesterday. And he knew the images would join the others that haunted his dreams on a regular basis. It was what happened in a cop's brain. Part of the job that never got advertised by recruiters. This'll teach me to poke around in restricted files.

He clicked his way back out of the report and noted as he left there was one recent file titled Current Status of DNA Mutation Situation (Afterglow). It was authored by a scientist whose work Buck had read. Reputable and not given to hyperbole, this dude knew his stuff and presented it clearly, without all the technical babble that made it incomprehensible to anyone without a Ph.D.

Out of curiosity, Buck opened the folder and read the summation paragraphs.

*As of the above date, our researches show that the DNA Mutation Effect from Afterglow is increasing in frequency and intensity. More subjects are presenting symptoms of mutations and a variety of new or hybrid personalities are emerging.*

*We have seen banshees, trolls and gargoyles, some evidence of a leprechaun mutation and one possible centaur. Abilities such as levitation and telekinesis are on the rise. We continue to monitor and evaluate humanity's adaptations. At this time, we cannot predict what may emerge next.*

*To our surprise, we observed that the control of the human host is weakening. While it has been the accepted norm that AG characteristics are under the control of the human possessing them, this assumption is weakening in the face of increasing events observed by our research team. AGs are now beginning to retain their alternate forms for longer periods of time. The transition is occurring more frequently and occasionally when not expected, anticipated or desired.*

*Where this will lead our species has yet to be determined. Whether it will result in humans becoming co-residents on our planet with their mystical brethren, we cannot say. Further observation and evaluation is required before a preliminary assessment can be made.*

Buck thought about this for a while. It was something he'd not realized, nor expected. AG people not being able to control their AG mutations? Sheesh. That would be so not good. A housewife changing into a werewolf in the meat section of the supermarket? And what about vampires and the night? If they switched during the day by accident, it would really not be a good thing for them. Not even a can of diet Bloodsi would stop them from burning—maybe not

to death, but it would be nasty either way.

And what about him? Would he find that door in his brain opening wide and staying that way? *Fuck*. He didn't know if he'd be able to survive with a constant parade of images bombarding his head all the goddamn time.

The mere notion of not being in control of what he looked at as his gift made him nauseous and he closed down his investigation, relieved to see Marlene's sultry face smiling at him.

"Was it good for you, Buck?" Her lips pouted and shone as she spoke.

"No, baby. Not this time it wasn't."

*And ain't that the truth?*

## Chapter Four

It had been more than a week since Lian had walked into the precinct. She'd spent most of the time hunched over her computer and in her own private world of research, drowning in legends, facts, fantasies and crime scene photos awful enough to send a normal human being screaming from the room.

And still she hadn't managed to fully identify those damned eyes. She was angry—at herself for what she perceived as her failure and also at a certain detective who lingered in the back of her thoughts a lot more than he should have. He was a distraction she didn't want and apparently couldn't avoid.

She wasn't certain he'd accepted her "Fae" mutation either. He'd looked skeptical. Of course, taking a wee trip into his head probably hadn't helped matters any. But she'd needed to know what he'd seen and felt.

Telling him she was a cognitive would have established a bond she didn't want. Telling him she was so much more—that was out of the question. If he ever found out she was in the zero-point-two percent of the population that fell into the "uncategorized" section of the AG roster... No. Not a chance in hell.

For most of her life, she had carefully controlled her emotions and her abilities. From an early age, her teachers had instructed her, given her exercises not dissimilar to mental yoga, taught her to meditate and finally to co-exist with her AG talent.

It was a damn good thing too. Once she'd manifested, her family knew where the gene had come from. She was *Gui*, demon. But not, thank God, a killing demon.

No, Lian Herrick was what people a thousand years ago would have called *succubus*.

Her eyes, her body, her scent were all a lure to men. When she got one in bed, she could invade his mind while accepting his body. She could, if she chose, enslave her lovers for life. She did not choose. She did not date, indulge in casual sex or even consider herself attractive. She knew that to betray interest in a man was to begin the process of reeling him in like a fish on the end of a line. It would end in bed and then she'd have to prowl around in his head to wipe out the memories of the sex unless she wanted him in her life as a permanent fixture.

Thus she hid her AG nature behind a veil of mental control. It wasn't until she'd met Detective Buck Shand that her veil had started to weaken. A dream of her own had featured a very naked version of him and she'd awoken sweating and shivering on the edge of an orgasm—something that hadn't happened in longer than she could recall. She'd meditated right afterwards, pushing down the sexual hungers, the need for something hard deep within her body. She'd restored her mental balance for a time, at least.

But seeing Shand again was going to be a challenge to her restraint. Which was odd, because she didn't even really *like* the guy. He was abrasive, a little rude, abrupt and showed signs of condescension. Whether it was because she was a woman, she was short or just that she wasn't from his precinct—maybe all of the above—she didn't know. Didn't matter that he was possessed of all the physical attributes she found attractive in a man. She was going to ignore the eyes, the body, the fingers that looked elegantly out of place on a cop—nope, didn't matter.

Not to her. She was so *not* going to fall into Detective Buck Shand's bed. It would be very bad for both of them. Lian chuckled to herself. He had no idea what a narrow escape he'd just had.

Heading for the detective's meeting room, she tucked her folders tighter beneath her arm and mentally prepared herself for the information she was about to deliver. It wouldn't satisfy anybody, of course, but it was at least a place to start.

She'd push Shand out of her head and other places. Ignore those blue eyes and focus on her job. As she always did. But for some reason a lingering sense of disappointment wriggled at the back of her mind. He might have had a narrow escape, but she couldn't rid herself of the feeling she might be missing out on some hellaciously fine sex. Oh well. She'd passed on sex before. She could do it again.

However, when the door swung shut behind her and she looked at the detectives assembled, only one pair of eyes drew her gaze. Hot need rippled through her pussy and she cursed beneath her breath as incredibly erotic images flashed across her mind for a microsecond, making her shiver.

She *could* do it again. She *could* ignore Buck Shand and her sexual response to him. She absolutely *had* to.

“So that's it.”

Buck dragged his eyes away from Lian to glance at his notes. She hadn't given them much, that was for sure.

The captain seemed to agree. “Not a lot to go on.”

“I know. I'm sorry. I accessed every database there is.” Lian nodded. “I've got requests out to international groups, scientific research centers—you name it and I've been digging around in it.”

“And we appreciated it, Dr. Herrick.”

Nods greeted the captain's diplomatic acknowledgement.

“So you think it's an *Asian* male?” Buck shot the question at her, wondering if she'd drop her mask of professional efficiency for a second or two.

She didn't. “Yes. As near as I can tell from what I've learned, this particular killer bears close resemblance to one that cropped up a few generations ago in the Far East.”

He tilted his head in acknowledgement. It verified what he'd dug up himself during his unprofessional prying.

“But there are differences.” She tugged absently on her lower lip. “That perp was sexually motivated. All his kills were violently sexual. Genital mutilation, that sort of thing. He was incredibly savage and never apprehended. But

the technique differs from what you've got here. That demon wouldn't have left a sexual body part untouched. This one—well, obviously he did.”

She shifted and glanced at the ever-present crime scene photos, one of which featured that carefully positioned breast with its rigid nipple.

“So if it's not about sex, what is it about?” Buck had to ask.

“The kill?” Lian lifted one eyebrow. “I'm not a profiler, Detective Shand. My expertise isn't in getting into the perp's mindset. I leave that to you guys.” She stared at him. “You specifically, I believe.”

“Now and again.” He waved off the comment. “Nothing in any database about a killer who's invisible?”

“If you mean the lack of DNA at the crime scene? No.” She sighed, a movement which did rather nice things to the breasts beneath her black shirt. “With our state-of-the-art DNA files and current rules and regs about testing and so on, we should have a DNA sample on record for pretty much everyone on the damn planet. And even if there're a few people out there not in the database, there should still be *unknown* DNA present. This whole business of a total lack of anything to identify the perp? Well, that's a real puzzle.”

Buck shrugged and mentally stopped stripping the good doctor. She had one hell of an effect on his libido. It was really starting to piss him off, since he wanted to focus on his job, not her body.

“Okay.” The captain spoke. “So how do we go about catching this monster? Grab every Asian male afterglow off the streets and see if they turn *invisible*?” He spread his hands helplessly. “I'm open to suggestions here.”

The conversation thrummed around the room, comments and ideas being thrown into the pot only to be discarded as others chewed over them. It was how they worked, Buck realized. Using each other as sounding boards, trusting in each other's strengths and skills to think a concept through and determine its worth in regard to the current case.

Which fell into the category of *a bitch and a half*.

Everyone jumped as a loud chime sounded and one wall lit up with the image of a communications tech. “New call. Just came in. Sounds like your guy.” The tech was stuttering in her nervousness. “Fourteenth Street. Corner of Maple. It's in the Bogs, guys. One DB. Or at least they think it's only one. The caller's hysterical. Talking about the blood...”

There was a microsecond of stunned silence. Then the captain moved. “Shand, Fisher—take the lead.” He glanced at another detective. “Thomas, take your team and get out there now. Canvas everyone. Talk to lampposts if you have to, but get us some kind of witness.” Looking back at the tech he tilted his head at her. “Call the ME's office and Forensics. Get me a squad en route ASAP.”

Chairs were scraping even as he spoke and Buck glanced at Cheney. He knew he probably wore that same look—a mix of apprehension, intensity and something that screamed *cop*.

“Any of you going out into the streets, I want you to suit up. This is the Bogs, guys. Bad place to be. Two of you at all times. Nobody likes us over there. But right now we've got a job to do. I don't give a shit about hurt feelings or bad tempers. I don't want any hurt cops, okay?”

Nods greeted the captain's orders. They all knew the Bogs. It was the gathering place for the few remaining dregs of society. Buck grimaced inwardly at the mere thought of the gang turfs, the drug houses—it was one of the few places in the city he'd rather not go.

Afterglow had changed so much. But there were apparently a few facets of human nature that had been left untouched. None of them particularly charming. And most of them could be found in the well-named Bogs, lurking

in the grubby darkness between the empty windows and boarded up buildings.

It was almost a self-contained society, policing itself and rarely invoking a call to outsiders. What happened in the Bogs was taken care of in the Bogs. There weren't many occasions where law enforcement was summoned to deal with a problem.

The Bogs took care of its own business and resented interference from anyone else. Buck knew this call had to be a doozie for it to come in to their precinct. His gut was telling him something he really didn't want to know.

*Their killer had struck again.*

He grabbed Lian's shoulder. "You're with me."

She moved beneath his grasp, but not to pull away. Her body turned as he turned, in synch with his steps. "Yes."

They hurried to the door, Cheney in front, calling over his shoulder. "I'll take my car, check the scene, then do witnesses in-house. You got the DB. Okay?"

They were halfway to the garage already by the time Buck had chance to respond. "Got it. Meet you there."

It was their usual routine—Buck having the gift to read the crime scene better than Cheney and Cheney knowing how to get the most out of witnesses. Buck opened his car door and slid behind the wheel, wondering if there *would* be any witnesses this time around. He was so focused it was almost a surprise to realize that Lian had taken the passenger seat and even now was buckling her belt.

He twisted his lips at her in a semblance of a smile. "You might want to cover your ears."

The truck hummed its way rapidly to the exit and Buck reached for the dashboard as they hit the street. He punched the little button for his siren. Technology had yet to come up with a better way to clear the road for a police vehicle, although the sound had been fine-tuned to just short of breaking glass in every window they passed.

"Jesus *Christ*." Lian cringed and covered her ears. "You weren't kidding."

He couldn't spare the time to answer. He practically flew down the city streets, his composite tires barely maintaining their grip on the asphalt. For the umpteenth time he wished for those wonderful science fiction cars that defied gravity. It hadn't happened and probably never would.

A siren and a lead foot on the accelerator were the best he could hope for. The engine might not use gas anymore but it was big, powerful and would get him to the crime scene as quickly as anything else out there. Right now, *that* was all that mattered.

The journey took less than fifteen minutes and they were in the Bogs in record time. There was no mistaking their destination. Flashing lights and a large number of police vehicles converging on the scene were a dead giveaway. So was the fact that there was hardly anyone else on the street. Unlike a regular crime scene, which drew attention from the curious, the nosy and the downright sick, something like this in the Bogs had the reverse effect. It sent the residents deep undercover.

Sometimes a good thing, sometimes a bad thing. Buck had no idea what it would prove to be in this case. He parked the truck in the nearest gap, "suited up" by pulling his laser pulse pistol from the glove compartment, made sure Lian was out and then double clicked his key lock mechanism. He'd prefer his wheels still be there when he was done, and one never knew in the Bogs...

Lian's ears were still ringing as she followed close behind Buck and into the derelict-looking building that was



clearly the primary crime scene. Already uniformed officers were doing official-looking things, like clearing away some debris off the street to make way for the Forensics team who would need the space for their equipment. They didn't need traffic control—there were no cars moving on the street at all. It was oddly silent, even for this hour of the morning.

The cop at the door waved them up, his face an expressionless mask, his weapons very much in evidence. There were no exchanges, either humorous or otherwise. Not this time. She couldn't begin to guess what he was thinking, or know if he'd seen the actual body.

But there was a look on his face that spelled *bad*.

It was a look she didn't want to see, a look that sent a small chill dancing down her spine. As she followed Buck into the gloom, the chill grew stronger and her nostrils flared then contracted at the recognizable scent of fresh blood. One flight of stairs, two doorways—and they were there. Grim-faced and somber, two cops stood outside the door watching them as they approached.

“This it?” Buck glanced at the closed door and took a pair of gloves from his pocket, indicating to Lian that she should do the same.

One man nodded. “Yep. We took one look and left it for you guys. Nobody's been in since.”

The other swallowed, a harsh gulp. “Only footprints we saw are those of the girl who found—whatever it is. *Was*.” He corrected himself. “Best we can tell, scene's untouched.”

Buck took a breath. “My partner's on the way. When he gets here, tell him about the girl. She still around?”

“Downstairs having hysterics in one of the patrol cars, last I heard.”

“Okay.” He glanced at Lian. “You ready?”

She shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“No.”

With that terse comment, Buck opened the grimy door carefully and the harshly relentless smell of death washed over them.

Hesitating, he looked down at the floor. “You got gloves? Got shoe covers with you?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

Buck paused, took a pair from his own pocket and put them on. “Use 'em.”

She did as she was told, unfolding the little package and slipping on the transparent stuff, feeling the cool clasp as it molded to the skin of her ankles, covering her feet. The gloves followed.

Why they needed such protection was pretty obvious from the moment he pushed the door wide. The room was large, dominated by a profusely draped four poster bed. Heavy fabric hung from the cross bars, falling behind the headboard and tied back to either side. It was almost medieval, the wood carved ornately, the fabric trimmed with a long, knotted gold fringe.

Or it probably had been gold. Now it was all red, blood red, a virulent sunset of red falling from everything.

The wooden floors were puddled with it, the carpet beneath the bed drenched with it. There seemed to be no pattern to it, no clearly distinguishable arterial spurts or spatters. It was everywhere, seeping, soaking, staining—

Lian sucked in air through her mouth, trying not to gag at the stench. “*Fuck*.”

“Keep to the perimeter if you can.” Buck inched his way carefully into the room, stepping on the edges of the floor, avoiding the worst of the blood pools.

She copied his moves, heading in the opposite direction, fighting the inclination to press her back to the wall. She wanted to leave as few traces as possible that might contaminate any evidence still there.

Her gaze went to the bed, but her brain had trouble acknowledging what she saw.

It was simply an unrecognizable mess. Garbage that had once held life now lay strewn over rumpled linens, globs and blobs of what might be flesh mingled with shattered slivers of something that was most probably bones.

She closed her eyes for a moment, reaching for calm, for that place where she could absorb the information and process it, rather than run screaming from this chamber of horrors.

Across the carnage, Buck made a sound of agonized disgust, a grunt deep in his throat that she could feel and understand. He was experienced at his job, but this—it was almost too much, even for him.

Strangely enough, knowing he was equally affected, strengthened Lian's resolve and she opened her eyes once more, this time surveying the room as a whole and trying to gather visual details.

Something on the floor next to the bed caught her eye. "Buck? Over here..." She motioned with one hand and he retraced his steps to stand beside her at last.

They both looked at what she had seen. A leg was sticking out from beneath the bed hangings.

Buck grunted. "There were *two of them* this time." He closed his eyes and absently reached for her hand. She grasped it willingly, knowing he would be trying to capture anything he could of this terrible act. He would be opening his mind, using his unique skills—although how he could possibly live with whatever he saw, she had no idea.

"Two of them. Blondes. They were ready to play with him. They were looking forward to it. Lots of cash, one of them thought." His voice was gentle—almost calm—and Lian watched him, distracted for a few moments from the chaos around them.

"Sex. He wanted sex. Fuck both of them together. One up the ass, one with his fingers..."

A wave of heat crashed into her, making her stagger and cling to Buck's hand.

*Yes. Sex. Craving sex. Hunger—fuck me, feed the hunger.*

Stunned, she struggled against an arousal that licked fire from her feet through her crotch to her breasts and her lips. It was painful, like a red-hot brand against her inner sanctuary, awakening the succubus within in one powerful strike. She could *feel* it, feel the need, the desperation for this fucking, the sense that such pleasure lay ahead. That nothing would stand in the way of slaking this thirst, nothing could stop the urge to plunder, to take, to fuck—

She ached as the need swamped into her mind, a savage desire to take sexual fulfillment, to fuck, to do whatever was necessary to ease the screaming hunger for release. Her pussy wept and throbbed between her thighs as she fought to push her succubus back into the fortress locked within her brain.

Buck's fingers tightened into a vise-like grip on hers and the pain helped her control her emotions. She dragged her mind into focus, sweating from the effort.

"They didn't know what was coming. They lay there, the two of them, laughing as they teased him. They touched themselves. Touched each other. Played with their nipples. He liked that." His voice was hushed as he narrated the scene playing before his mind's eye.

"They were willing and ready. One of them sucked the other one while he watched them. It was all fun and games and sex. Then he got in on the act. He made one come." Buck's eyelids clamped tighter. "I can't—shit, I can't see *him*, but she's coming. She's screaming." He shuddered a little. "Now the other one. He's fucking her ass. Turning

her over. She's ready for him. Pulling at her butt cheeks. Showing him what she's got. He goes for it ..."

Suddenly he started to shiver and his hand shook in Lian's grasp like a leaf in a gale. "It's cold. So fucking cold—I can't—I *can't see*—"

Lian moved in close, holding Buck's hand and wrapping her other arm around him as he trembled violently. "He's ripping them, both of them. I see blood—God, so much blood. And it's so fucking *cold*—"

She continued to hold him, staring at his face as his voice trailed off. Then he opened his eyes and stared at her, his face white as a sheet. "That eye. He's looking at me with that eye. Jesus fucking Christ, it's like he's looking at me. Right this goddamned minute. Oh *God*—"

She clasped her arms as far around Buck as she could, clinging to him, pulling him tight against her warmth, trying to help him as he rode out the terrible shudders racking his body. He was rigid, muscles clenched—and aroused, his cock solid and pushing against the front of his pants. She couldn't help rubbing her stomach against it, still scorched by the touch of some primeval sexual need, still tingling and ready to fuck anything and everything in sight.

Whatever had been in that room, whatever had fucked and killed there—it had left a strong signature, a violent aftermath of power that licked frantically at the two of them.

Her breasts were tender, her nipples hard to the point of pain beneath her bra. Holding Buck this closely wasn't helping, since his scent mingled with the scent of death in her nostrils. She could tell them apart, the sickly sweet smell of the victims fading a little as it was replaced by the fresh salty musk of the man in her arms.

Who was finally getting some color back into his face and some warmth into his frozen limbs. "Christ. Let's get the fuck out of here." He rasped the words, easing himself away from her and pulling her toward the door.

"You won't hear me complaining." She followed him willingly, both carefully stepping on dry wood and finally erupting out of the room to tumble against the opposite wall and pant like runners at the end of a race. The two cops stared at them, then at each other in confusion.

Cheney appeared at the top of the stairs, hurrying to Buck. "You okay?"

Buck nodded, then shook his head. "Yes, but not really." He took a breath. "Two vics, Cheney. Parts intermingled. Both women. He had sex with both of them, but it's the same perp and I'll bet a week's paycheck the lab boys won't find squat." He hissed a disgusted breath through his teeth.

Lian nodded. "Definitely two females. There're—" She cleared her throat. "There're some parts under the bed." She swallowed down the remains of her breakfast. Damned if she'd lose it and vomit in front of the law.

Cheney looked at her with respect. "You didn't need to see that, Doc." He lifted an eyebrow at Buck. "Did she have to go in with you?"

Buck met his friend's gaze. "Yes she did, she had to see it fresh. There might have been something there—" He turned and met Lian's eyes for the first time since they'd come out. "Was there? Did you pick up anything?"

She stared back. "Less than you. Nowhere near the details. But..."

"But what?"

"I sensed the savage sexual need. A sexual hunger that needed to be fed, the same thing you felt." She frowned as she tried to organize her thoughts. "But I didn't sense an urge to *do* what that thing *did*." She shook her head. "It's odd."

"How?"

Buck pressed her for an answer she wasn't sure she had. Lian took a breath. "I don't think that whatever was in there would have killed if it had been left alone. I think—Jesus Christ, *Buck*—" She grabbed the front of his jacket with

her fists. “I think it’s being *controlled*.”

## Chapter Five

“You’re a cognitive too, aren’t you?”

Buck fired the question at Lian as they buckled themselves into the truck, both equally anxious to get away from the carnage. They’d left Cheney abruptly, Buck knowing he wouldn’t have to explain his need to leave.

She swallowed then nodded briefly. “Sometimes, yes.”

“You picked up on stuff back there. You knew I was sensing things.” He had to put this into words. There was an overwhelming desire clawing at his guts to understand this killer, to stop him, and to find out how Lian was involved—if in fact she was.

“Yes.”

“Goddamit it, woman. What the fuck’s going on here?” He reached for the key and turned on the engine, cranking the heat up in a vain attempt to warm up his still-chilled limbs.

“Christ, you think I don’t want to know?” She rounded on him, eyes fiercely black. “You think I can look at—at—*that* and *not* what to know what did it?”

“Then level with me.” Buck shifted the gears and rolled them away from the Bogs, putting distance between them and the horror of the crime scene. “Stop hiding behind that inscrutable expression of yours. Tell me what you know, what you think and what the fuck you *are*.” He bit back an oath. “Because you’re driving me fucking nuts.”

Lian was silent for a few minutes, giving him time to push his temper back down to manageable levels. He was being unfair, he knew, taking out his reaction on her. He’d run into something incomprehensible, something beyond imagining, and it made him crazy furious that he didn’t know which way to turn for answers.

His senses were telling him things that made *no* sense. For once he could see, but not see. He could feel the sex, feel the fundamental urge to fuck. And he could feel the agonies that came on the heels of the orgasms. He could almost hear the mental screams as the victims died, the sweet tang of release still in their throats as their deaths overtook the shudders of completion.

The lingering effects of the redolent sexual images rode on his shoulders like a heavy weight, stirring his cock, firing his blood even as he fought the simplistic response of his body. He was aroused and on fire deep down in his essential being, a man who had just observed a fiercely hot porn film with an ending that redefined horror.

Buck was furious he couldn’t shut off his cock or stop his balls from aching. He was equally furious that every fiber of his manhood was screaming for the woman sitting next to him. Her scent seemed to fill the cab of his truck, washing around his senses like a soft enticing cloud of heat.

And still she was silent.

He risked a glance over at her to see her eyes fixed on her hands where they lay entwined in her lap. Her knuckles were white as she clenched them together.

“Lian?”

She didn’t move.

“Lian, talk to me.”

They pulled in to the underground garage of the station as he waited for her to respond. Automatically, he drove to the lowest level, parking his truck in the usual large corner space. It was one of the few spots that gave him room to turn the beast around without damaging any other vehicles, and it was also out of the way. He liked the idea of his own parking place, ignored the teasing of his peers about the correlation between truck size and penis size, and most often didn’t even think about it.

Right now, all his attention was on Lian, not the shadowed spot in a quiet corner of the garage in which they found themselves.

Buck turned off the engine and in the ensuing silence turned in his seat to look at her. A pulse was throbbing madly in her neck above the collar of her black shirt and he could have sworn she was sweating.

“Lian.” He reached out and covered her hands with one of his, managing not to jump when he felt the fiery heat of her skin against his chilled flesh.

She shuddered and straightened, finally turning her head to stare at him. Her eyes were darker than night, her skin luminous in the shadows. He couldn’t keep his gaze from falling to her lips, richly succulent and sheened with moisture. At that moment the only thing in the world he wanted was to taste those lips.

And with that thought came a rush of desire that nearly blew his ears off. Hard as nails, his cock thrust viciously against the fly of his jeans, his balls painful and taut, his breath coming more quickly as his pulse throbbed low in his groin.

“What are you, Lian?” He groaned the words hoarsely, trying to stop his hands from reaching for her.

“Oh God.” She gasped, her fingers quickly finding and unlatching her seat belt. “Don’t let me do this, Buck.”

“Do what?” He unlatched his own belt then punched the lever to move his seat backward and extended his arms to her. He scarcely knew what he was doing. He was drowning in her, falling into her eyes, soaking up the heat radiating from her body and needing her lips against his in the worst way.

Then she was on him.

Whimpering and making little noises in the back of her throat, Lian fell into his arms and onto his lap, straddling him eagerly. “No, no...” Her hands tugged at his shirt as she freed it from his belt and hungrily ran her palms over the bare skin beneath.

“You’re right. We shouldn’t...” His fingers undid her buttons in no time flat and her bra was on the floor of the truck before he realized what he was doing.

By then it was too late for either of them.

Her pussy ground into his cock, a thrusting wiggle that made Buck want to cry out. He would have done so, but his mouth was full of her lips, her tongue—her unique flavor that seduced him every bit as much as her naked breasts rubbing against his chest.

Awkwardly he tore off his shirt, needing the touch of flesh to flesh unimpaired by clothing. She ripped open his belt and his fly, tearing down the zipper and diving beneath to find his cock with her hot hands even as her tongue darted

inside his mouth.

She was all over him, around him, almost inside him, driving him insane with each and every sliding brush of her body against his. Her panties didn't hold up against Buck's quick rough tug and then—and then there was the blindingly magnificent sensation of hot wet pussy lips abrading his rigid length.

They were almost savages, he realized. Driven to take each other, to fuck each other, spurred on by a brutally violent scene that had released both their inner lusts.

“Don't let me, Buck—don't let me hurt you—”

“I won't. Just fuck me, dammit...” He struggled to get his cock into her cunt as she slithered on him, fingers digging into his muscles, thighs clamping his tightly.

She arched then, tearing her mouth from his, her back bowing almost violently as she thrust her breasts to his lips.

“Suck them. Bite me, oh fucking Christ...”

She trembled as he obeyed, sucking fiercely on the succulent furred buds, squeezing her breasts together roughly so his tongue could reach each nipple and devour it in turn with the least amount of time wasted in between.

Her pussy leaked hot honey over his cock, a fire that burned with a harsh sweetness, drowning him even more in the sensation of this luscious woman and her passionate need for him.

He pulled back, hands on her buttocks, trying to move her into position and glancing at her face as she straightened and put her hands on his shoulders.

“*My God...*”

He stilled. Her eyes were black, totally black, all the whites obscured by those ebony pupils. Her hair flew around her head like an aura and her lips were red from his savage kisses. Her fingernails dug into his skin, lacerating it and making him wince.

“*Buck...*” She whispered his name, a word he heard in his mind rather than his ears. “*Not like this. Fuck me, please fuck me. But open your senses while you do it.*” Her urgent plea resounded deep in his head. “*Please...*”

Helpless against the overwhelming and crushing need to be inside her, he obeyed and released the latch on that inner door to his cognitive senses just as her pussy enveloped his cock with a boiling embrace.

He cried out, sounds that made no sense, lost in the tiny space where they mated, male to female, spirit to spirit.

No longer was she some ravenous sexually desperate creature, nor was he a violently aroused male penetrating a female.

They were joined together, fucking, in the front seat of his truck.

But they were also joined together somewhere—*somewhen* else—another reality created by desire and designed just for the two of them. A part of Buck's mind soared with Lian above their writhing bodies, which even now were hammering against each other.

While their flesh pounded, their souls mingled, blending, separating, then blending again, a mating that answered a far greater need than a simple fuck could ever fulfill.

She was part of him, spirit within his spirit, just as he was part of her. He could feel her pussy on his cock and all the incredible sensations that went along with it. But he could also feel himself inside her, the little trembling shudders of her cunt and the electrically erotic excitement of her growing orgasm.

He was both of them, as was she. They were fucking as mortals and also as AGs, beings for whom the confines of the flesh meant little and the melding of the spirit meant everything.

She was light and warmth and passion—he was desire and strength and need. They were yin and yang, male and female, mating in a way that Buck could not begin to describe in words.

She shone around him and inside him and he felt his own glimmer of heat reflect within her. As they approached the moment of climax, both body and spirit tensed, a second of eternity when nothing could separate or part them. Then Buck's cock exploded, Lian's cunt shattered around it and their spirits soared freely into a place where there was nothing but the sensation of utmost pleasure. How long he trembled there, lost in a dual state of bliss, Buck had no clue whatsoever.

It could have been seconds or eons.

But all too soon his brain told him it was over. He was holding a trembling woman in his arms as she lay panting against his chest, her pussy still claspings his softening cock as she rode out the last tremors of her orgasm.

They were still in his truck. In the lower level of the precinct parking garage no less.

And he'd just had the fuck of a lifetime with something out of this world.

Well, *shit*.

“Oh dear.” Lian stirred against Buck's hard chest, unwilling to move a muscle but knowing she'd soon have to.

“Sssh.” His hand lifted to her head, holding her against him. “Rest for a minute or two. I don't know about you, but I can't move right now.”

“Okay.” She sank back gratefully, welcoming his warmth and the caress of his fingers in her hair.

“We have to talk, Lian.”

She stifled a chuckle. “Isn't that supposed to be my line?”

He tugged on a wayward bit of blonde silk. “Smartass.” Then he sighed. “Tell me, honey. What are you? What just happened here?”

“I don't know where to start.”

“The truth, I guess.” He sounded contemplative. “I've seen most everything, Lian. I doubt you can shock me. You're a powerful AG, aren't you? I just don't know what kind.”

“Honestly?” She shrugged. “Neither do I. I'm what they call unclassifiable.”

“Really?” She could hear the surprise in his voice.

“Yes. I have bits and pieces of skills. Some cognitive abilities, which are heightened by—er—sexual environments.”

“No shit, honey.” Buck's chest rose and fell as he chuckled at that understatement.

Lian knew she had to level with him—there was no other way. “I'm mostly a demon, Buck.”

He stilled beneath her. “A demon? What kind of demon?”

This was what she hated most. Revealing what she considered her weakness, her flaw. Announcing that she was some kind of mutant freak. Mentally preparing herself for his withdrawal, she kept her voice level. “I'm a succubus.” There. It was out. And for a few moments there was utter silence in the small confines of the truck.

“No kidding.” He paused. “Wow.” He paused again. “You mean you can't get enough sex? You'll be on me demanding I fuck you every other half hour or so? You'll fuck me until I'm too weak to stand? Drain all my masculine essence until my balls are prunes and I can't get a hard-on to save my life?”

“Something like that, yes.”

There was another long silence.

Then— “*Cooooool*. When do we start?”

Lian felt tears sting her eyes even as laughter bubbled in her throat. “God, Buck, you’re—you’re *incorrigible*.”

“Thank you. I think so too.”

“Don’t you understand what I’m saying?” She pushed away from him to stare into his eyes. “I’m a demon. A horrible creature. I can suck men dry.”

He grinned. “Prove it.”

She rolled her eyes. “I have to move. My thigh’s cramping.”

He sighed dramatically. “See? There it is. You have your way with me then poof. Gone. I’m cast aside like yesterday’s newspaper. Some succubus.”

“Oh good grief.”

Awkwardly they disentangled themselves, cursing and groaning as limbs parted, skin peeled from skin and naked bodies shivered.

“Damn, woman.” Buck moaned a little as he lifted his hips and pulled his pants back up. “You really fucked me but good.”

“You’re no slouch yourself.” She fidgeted with her own pants. “Where’s my bra?”

“Down there, I think.” He pointed to the floor somewhere beneath the glove compartment.

“I’m not sure you understand what I’m telling you, Buck.” Somberly she refastened her clothing. “A succubus is a demon. An insatiable devouring sexual entity. I’ve lived with this knowledge pretty much since puberty.”

He studied her, his blue eyes steady. “That must have been one helluva thing to manage for an attractive young woman.”

She nodded. “It was. I couldn’t trust myself to get into a relationship. When I did, it was pretty awful. The guys thought sex with me was going to be this incredible experience, but they didn’t understand what I was or would become when I got—aroused.” She shook her head. “I developed my cognitive skills so that I could sort of erase the worst of those memories.”

“Hmm.” He thought about that. “So I wasn’t imagining you inside my head a while back.”

She felt the color rise into her cheeks. “Well, no. I’m not above using that skill if there’s something I really need to know.” She grimaced apologetically.

“Wicked woman.” He grinned. “So you’re a devouringly passionate, sex-crazed succubus. Are you going to wipe my memories too?”

“Should I? Do you want me to?”

“Hell no. Are you nuts?” Buck stretched his spine and settled more comfortably into his seat.

Lian swallowed. “The fact that you opened your mind to me, let me inside you while we were—er—”

“Fucking?”

“Yes.” She blushed. “That makes it different. Plus you are who you are, a man at ease with his nature. I haven’t ever done this quite like we just did. Nobody has ever released himself so freely—”

She broke off, unsure of how to explain herself.

“So the fact that we did some weird mind meld thing while our bodies were doing what comes naturally—that makes it different?”



“Hell yeah.” She grinned at him, unable to stop the smile on her face. “Oh hell yeah.”

“Come here.”

Buck leaned toward her and she willingly moved closer. He was going to kiss her, she knew. *Really* kiss her, knowing what she was, what lurked inside her muddled brain. He wanted to kiss her in spite of it.

And she wanted that kiss with every molecule of her soul.

He was gentle, warm, touching her mouth at first then licking at the seam and urging her lips apart. His tongue slipped inside as she welcomed his intrusion, sucking on it, teasing it with her own then sliding past it to learn his contours, the hardness of his teeth, the softness of the skin around them.

Warmth blossomed between them, the warmth of lovers sated and the promise of passion to follow. Buck held her face cupped in one hand, not doing anything more than kissing her.

She lost herself in that moment, overwhelmed by the tenderness, the delightful knowledge that this might well be the first real kiss she’d ever experienced. The dark confines of the truck disappeared, leaving only Buck and his mouth. Her body still thrummed with the remembered pleasure of an orgasm that had shaken her world. But her mind and her heart relished the simple joy of a man’s mouth on hers, a man’s hand cradling her cheek and a man’s warmth enveloping her.

Finally they parted on a sigh.

“Mmm. Nice.” He whispered the words as he stroked her cheek then let her go. “I can’t let this stop here, Lian. I won’t.”

She gazed at him. “I don’t want it to either. But it’s complicated, Buck.”

“I know.” He seemed to pull himself together, shaking off the sensual tenderness and becoming once again the cop on the case. “First things first.” Reaching for the keys, he withdrew them from the ignition and nodded at her door.

“If you’re ready, let’s go inside and deal with the case. For now we work. Later, we...” His lips turned up wickedly at the corners. “Later, we’ll play with that demon of yours.”

Unused to such blunt honesty, Lian could only follow his orders. “Okay.”

They walked quietly across the empty garage to the elevators. She couldn’t think of anything to say that hadn’t already been said and sensed Buck’s thoughts turning back to the murders. She simply took comfort from his presence at her side.

It wasn’t until they reached the squad room and found the captain frowning over the latest crime scene photos that he finally spoke.

“Cap, Herrick here thinks she may have picked up on something.”

“What?” The captain’s head snapped up.

Lian lifted her chin. “We both sensed much the same sort of thing that Detective Shand felt at the earlier scene. The lust, the hunger to feed, the overwhelming sexual urges.”

“So?”

She didn’t mistake the captain’s curtness for anything other than what it was, a man desperate to do his job and stop such senseless butchery. “I have some limited cognitive abilities of my own. What I felt was a creature driven by lust. The killing? That may not have come from him.”

The captain frowned and motioned to chairs. “Sit. Explain.”

Lian wearily took a seat and ran a hand through her hair. “I’m not sure how to describe it. You’ve seen the photos. It was bad, as bad as it gets, I reckon.”

Buck nodded. “I’ve never seen worse, Cap.”

“You don’t have to tell me. In all my years, I’ve never seen worse either. Go on.”

She marshaled her thoughts. Neither man would appreciate a lengthy exposition. “It’s my opinion that this creature, whatever he—it—is, wants the sex. The urge to kill is coming from elsewhere, a direction to its mind, perhaps. An exploitation of its instincts. I don’t know. There’s a conflict I sensed, a confusion when the killing begins. Almost as if it’s being told what to do from that point on.”

The captain frowned. “How the hell is that possible?”

Buck shrugged. “Who knows? At this point, after seeing that slaughter, I’m ready to believe anything. To take a stab at any crazy notion if it gets us close to stopping these killings.”

“So we’ve got a creature that seems invisible and leaves no DNA or forensic evidence after having savage sex and then ripping girls to pieces. And now you’re telling me that the sex is one thing and the killing’s another?”

“Yes.” Lian stared at him. “As insane as it sounds, yes. I think this *whatever it is* is being controlled. Being *forced* to kill. The sexual urge is incredibly strong, and there’s violence mixed in to it, no question. But I doubt it would go as far as it has without a nudge from something or someone else.”

“Jesus H.” The captain stared at the photos again. “How the hell do we deal with this?”

Buck leaned forward. “We can’t do any more than we’re doing right now. We have to follow our procedures. The techs are still working this scene—perhaps they’ll find something, some minute particle that’ll put us ahead of where we are right now. Fisher’s talking to people. If anyone can get info out of the Bogs crew, he can. Maybe a girl saw something she didn’t think mattered. Sooner or later, Cap, this thing’s gonna make a mistake. When it does, we’ll be there.”

Lian nodded. “Shand’s right, Captain.” She moved a little on her chair, her head tilted closer to both men. “There is one more thing I’d like to pursue.”

“What’s that?”

“I have access to a private resource I haven’t yet tapped. But it has to remain absolutely and completely between us...”

## Chapter Six

Buck slid an apprehensive glance at the two fierce-looking stone statues standing rigidly on either side of a carved door. “They bite?”

Lian chuckled as she lifted her hand to the massive metal latch. “Chinese Fu dogs. Male and female. They protect the

building from evil spirits and wrongdoers. Originated in the Han dynasty, I think.”

“That old?”

“The symbolism, yes. These two? Probably not.” She pushed the door open and waited for him to follow her inside.

“Okay. Good to know.”

He walked after her into shadows, almost blind for a moment as they left the daylight and entered a large room redolent with the fragrance of flowers and incense. It took a moment for his vision to adjust as the door swung shut behind them.

Light filtered in from small windows high above, revealing a lot of what Buck would call clutter. But this clutter was probably priceless to anyone interested in Oriental antiques.

There were hangings covering the walls, delicate silken works of art mixed together in a subtle blend of colors and shapes. One large glass-fronted cabinet housed jade, carved, polished, huge statues, small trinkets, beads and whatnots, seemingly tossed in disarray on the shelves.

Fans littered other tables, porcelain vases stood as high as his waist, tiny bowls glittered translucently on pedestals—he gulped, almost afraid to move lest he knock something unique and expensive onto the floor. “Talk about a bull in a china shop.”

Lian laughed then headed to the back of the room.

To his surprise there was a woman there. He would have believed her part of the antiques except for the fact that she was sitting in a rocking chair and stroking an enormously fat cat that nearly covered her lap.

“Little Lotus. It is good to have you visit.” The woman’s head turned toward Lian, shocking Buck.

She was Oriental, dressed quietly in a simple dark robe. Her hair, grey and neatly pulled into a knot, had two ornate sticks pushed through it. But it was her eyes that caught at him.

They were *pure white*. No pupils, no appearance of injury or cloudy obscured vision, just pure white. It was, for lack of a better expression, spooky as shit.

“Hello, old Mother.” Lian took the woman’s hand and bent to kiss her cheek. “How are you?”

“Better for knowing you are well, child.” A smile crossed the old woman’s face. “And that you have brought a strong man with you.”

Lian beckoned to Buck. “This is Detective Buck Shand, Mother. He and I are working together at the moment.”

The smile grew. “That is not all you are doing together, child.”

He shifted a little and cleared his throat with the natural discomfort of a man discovered to be sleeping with this woman’s—relative? Daughter? Granddaughter?

“Now, old Mother. Don’t embarrass him.” Lian laughed. “Buck, I’d like you to meet old Mother. She has outlived many generations and will outlive many more. She is the head of our family in every way that counts.”

“Um—hello.” He had no idea whether to extend his hand or not. He was feeling more than a little awkward about this whole deal and the expressionless white gaze fixed on his face was starting to freak him out. “Nice to meet you.” A gnarled hand reached out to him. “I am honored.” The cat deigned to look up at that moment, surveying Buck with its own inscrutable gaze. Apparently he was deemed insignificant, since the feline eyes closed and the critter went back to sleep.

“You will take care of Little Lotus.” The eyes never moved from his face. “I may not see well, but I can sense much more than some people realize.”

He took the fragile hand in both of his. “I will do my best, old Mother.”

“This is a good one, Little Lotus. A strong one. He will give you many fine children.”

“Er—” Buck was caught off guard by that particular comment.

“He has a fine cock. He knows what to do with it.”

“*Sh—um—shoot*, ma’am, I don’t—” He knew his face was burning and he didn’t dare look at Lian.

“Mother.” Lian’s voice was crisp. “We have business. Stop this immediately.”

The fingers released Buck’s hand and the woman sighed. “Such silliness. Afraid to talk of what matters between a man and a woman. Always hiding from your nature, Little Lotus. This man—” A finger poked at Buck. “This man will indulge that nature. He will release it. And you. If you let him.”

Lian rolled her eyes and gazed heavenward. “I’m glad you are still well enough to make visitors blush, old Mother. But that is *not* why we’re here.”

“I know, I know. You have business. Go then. Leave an old woman to her cat and her memories. But be glad I *am* old, Little Lotus. Were I younger, I might take this man away from you and drain him myself.” She chuckled deep in her throat. “He is, as you young things like to say, *hot*.”

Ever the gentleman, Buck picked up her hand again and dropped a light kiss on the aged knuckles. “And if that were the case, I would be ruined for every other woman.”

The cackle of laughter followed them as Lian pulled him away and toward the back of the room.

“He’s a good one, Little Lotus. A keeper. Don’t forget it.”

Ignoring the parting comment, Lian marched to a silk screen. “This way, Buck.”

“Hey. Slow down. I have to save my strength. I’m a keeper, ya know. You heard her.”

“Oh shut *up*.”

Exasperation riddled her voice, bringing a wicked grin to Buck’s face. “You’re blushing.”

“Am not.” Her hand reached to a small panel and she pushed a button, which smoothly moved the screen to one side, revealing a passageway. “Come on.”

Pushing his humor away, Buck followed her, curious now as to where they were going. Lian had revealed that there was a database of sorts—her words—kept unofficially by her Oriental relatives. It contained information that might be of use to the case.

The captain had willingly given permission for them to use it—at this point they were all ready to grab at whatever straws blew their way. They’d worry about the legal intricacies later, when the monster had been stopped and destroyed.

The passageway led downward, a winding staircase at its end and then another door, this one solid and not unlike a bank vault in style and strength.

“Wow. This isn’t someplace you drop in unannounced, is it?” He gazed thoughtfully at the shining steel composite soaring above them.

“No, it’s not. And I’m putting my trust in your ability to keep secrets, Buck. Very few know of the existence of this place. Even fewer have been inside.”

“Understood.” Buck blinked as a few lights flickered and she passed her hand over a very modern-looking palm print identifier. Oriental symbols flashed, more buttons were pushed, she bent to a small aperture for a retinal scan and finally, silently, the door swung inward.

The scene it revealed caught Buck by surprise. This was no Far Eastern junkyard of antiquities. This was—well, he'd never been on a spaceship, but if he thought about it this was probably what he'd have expected it to look like. There were quietly humming banks of electronics, gleaming against a pristine white walled room. The floors were shiny and polished, reflecting a myriad of tiny LED lights. Several large screens were placed over workstation areas, there were a few empty chairs in front of surfaces gleaming with state-of-the-art laser keyboards. In the center was a square table above which hung a hologram cube—something Buck recognized from a piece he'd read in the latest tech journal. This wasn't supposed to exist yet. The editorial piece had claimed it was only theory. "Holy *shit*." He sucked in air as he stared around him.

"Yes, it does sort of take one's breath away, doesn't it?"

Lian sounded a little smug and he glanced at her. She was indeed smiling, but she was also craning her neck, looking around. "Karl? Hey, Karl, you in here?"

He followed her gaze. Who the hell was Karl? At this point, it could have been an android or a real Chinese Fu dog for all he knew. It was quite possible there wasn't much left in this world that could surprise him.

"Lian? Lian, honey, is that *you*?"

Okay. He was wrong. There was still something left that could surprise him and the head that popped up over the top of some sleek piece of equipment did just that. It wasn't just that the guy was good looking—it was that he fulfilled all the qualifications of being drop-dead gorgeous.

A warm brown gaze danced over Lian's face, echoing a smile that curved full lips. A hint of sexy stubble, sharp high cheekbones and tousled sandy blond hair falling casually around the face completed the picture. He was every dude Buck had ever seen staring from the covers of those god-awful romance novels, or from inside the pages of women's magazines under the heading of Sexiest Man Alive.

And he was staring at Lian like she was dinner and he was starving.

"Doll, seeing you is a breath of fresh spring air in the middle of winter. You gonna come over here and get naked for me? I got a real bad hankering for some sweet pussy, darlin'..."

Buck cleared his throat. *Loudly*. It was either that or grab something hard and blunt and pound this dickhead into his electronics.

"Cut it out, Karl. I'm here on business."

There was a dramatic sigh. "You never let me have any fun. Gimme a sec and I'll be right there. This sequencer's gone hinky on me."

The head disappeared, there were a few taps, curses and then the click of something being put back into place.

"There. That oughta do it. For now, anyway."

Karl emerged from behind the equipment. Or sort of emerged. He wasn't where Buck expected him to be.

He was about three feet lower.

Perfect in every way but one, Karl the electronics wizard and smart-mouthed asshole was, in fact, a dwarf. "Gimme a kiss, sweet thing."

Correctly deducing this wasn't intended for him, Buck watched as Lian bent over and dropped a light peck on Karl's forehead. "Hi, Karl. Good to see you."

"Mmm." Karl stared her straight in the crotch. "One of these days, baby." He licked his lips, his tongue darting in and out suggestively.

“Detective Buck Shand.” Buck aggressively stuck out his hand. “I’m pleased to meet you. Right now, anyway. Keep going the way you’re going and you won’t be pleased to meet me.”

“Ah, yeah. There it is. The growl of the dominant male.” Karl turned and looked Buck up and down. “Hey, Lian. This one’s not bad.” He stared at Buck’s crotch as well, a hungry look in his eyes. “He swing both ways, you think?” “No.” Buck resisted the urge to cover himself with both hands. “*Lian...*” It wasn’t a whine or a whimper, but it was damned close. They were here for information and so far he’d been nearly hit on by a senior citizen and now propositioned—almost—by a handsome dwarf.

“Knock it off, Karl. We need help.” Lian walked to the center table and stared at the empty glowing cube. “What have you got for us?”

Karl sighed, cast a last lingering look at Buck’s crotch and then ambled over to hop up on a stool in front of a glowing control panel. “You guys are no fun.”

“Neither is this killer.”

Buck’s somber statement echoed through the room. It was time to drop the cute shit and get down to business.

“You’re right about that, Detective dude.” Karl’s fingers whizzed over lights and buttons. “I’ve fed in a lot of the data Lian passed along. Done a few things with assumptive programming. Run some simulations, that sort of thing.”

Buck tried to look knowledgeable. “That’s good.”

Lian simply grunted. “Gimme, Karl. We’re in trouble if we can’t get a handle on this thing.”

“What can you do that our guys can’t?” Buck watched the small man work.

“A whole bunch of stuff.” He absently leaned over and flicked a switch. “This facility has been running for nearly two decades. Thank Lian’s grandfather for it.”

Buck looked at Lian knowing she’d hear the unspoken question.

“On my mother’s side.” She acknowledged him. “He was a total genius. My family has always been involved with the DNA mutations.” Leaning back she drummed her fingertips on the table. “The Feds have a good database. Solid information. We specialize in the unclassifiable. The odd men out, as it were. Those mutations that don’t fall neatly into any definite category. We don’t care about names or numbers or varieties. This is all to do with genetics. The essence of humans as they mutate, if you want to look at it that way.”

He chewed that over for a few moments. “So you’ve got what amounts to a catalog of oddballs?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” She nodded. “I’m in here. My DNA is unclassifiable.”

“You’re not an oddball, darlin’.” Karl shook his finger at her. “I keep tellin’ you that.”

“Wait up a minute here—” Buck interrupted. “We have no DNA from our killer. Nothing we can put into any database for a match, oddball or not.”

“Exactly.” Karl looked pleased. “That fact, in and of itself, is something to work on.”

“*How?*” Buck’s brain was skidding around itself in circles.

Karl leaned forward patiently. “The ability to mask or remove one’s DNA is a genetic skill. Just as definable a skill as sprouting wings or going furry on a full moon.”

“Hmm.”

“So we look for mutations that might involve that skill. Some odd wrinkle that will permit total removal or complete alteration of DNA. Creatures that can—for want of a better expression—become invisible.”

“Oh swell.” Buck’s mouth drooped. How the hell did one catch an invisible killer, let alone gather enough evidence

for prosecution?

“Fortunately, there aren’t that many.”

“That’s good.” Lian sounded a helluva lot more positive about this than he felt.

“And with the other data, the chill in the air, the sexual violence and...thanks to you, Detective...the *eye*...” Karl paused dramatically. “We came up with *this*.”

The cube above the desk shimmered a little as a shape began to coalesce within its borders. Buck stared, fascinated, as first the outline of a man formed, only to shift, to change somehow into a thing more reptilian than human emerged.

When it was finally complete, he couldn’t drag his eyes away.

“Behold, ladies and gentlemen. Observe the magic of technology.” Karl waved his hand with a flourish. “I give you the *basilisk*.”

Lian narrowed her eyes and stared at the creature solidifying before her in a mass of pixels and particles. The skin was gleaming, the hint of scales adding to the iridescent sheen. The head was softer than she’d expected, although the jaw line hinted at some crushing strength it might well take for granted.

But it was the eyes that dominated—large and bulbous—they were almond shaped as Buck had said. Slanted at enough of an angle to be noticeable and a deep, rich amber. The pupil was a contracted oval, that typical reptilian slit that was unmistakable.

She could well imagine what one single eye would look like to Buck, glowing from the darkness, alive as this model was not. “Is this what you saw, Buck? Those eyes?”

He seemed almost frozen next to her, then he sucked in a breath, circled the table to take a full inventory and returned to her side. “Yeah. That’s it.”

Karl preened. “Told you I was good.”

“You’re fucking *amazing*.” Buck kept his voice low. “It looks *real*.”

“It’s not. I’m not even sure if the coloring is right. And the proportions may be off. I can only deduce so much from the data I have. Putting in a few reptile genes and adding a dash of chameleon—” Karl broke off and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s not anything I’d stand behind one hundred percent, Detective. But it may be a place to start.”

Lian continued to stare at the dragon-like apparition, noting the sharp, curved talons and the powerful muscles. The tail was short and barbed and the top of the head was ridged with a small row of spikes.

Karl noticed her gaze and fiddled with a few buttons. The crest flared upward, a membrane tipped with viciously sharp death.

She jumped and Karl chuckled. “Just a few special effects there.”

“Sheesh, Karl. Gimme a break, will you?” She held her hand to her chest and patted her heart. “What do you know about the basilisk?”

Buck nodded. “My question too. We both need that info, Karl. Whatever you’ve got.”

The little man hopped up onto a large padded chair and settled himself. “It’s a lizard, of course. You know that. South American, I think. That’s the everyday critter.”

Lian pushed herself up onto a metallic counter and swung her feet thoughtfully. “I guess it’s the mythical one we’re dealing with here. South American lizards aren’t likely to murder Pleasure Pets.”

Buck glanced at her. “Thank you. I was wondering about that.”

She ignored his sarcasm. “Go on, Karl.”

“Well, mythically speaking, the basilisk was a monster. But the description varies according to the civilization. A lizard, a snake with legs—even a rooster with scales and fangs. Take your pick.”

“Great.” Buck wrinkled his nose. “Not a lot of specifics, huh?”

Karl shook his head. “Sorry, O great detail-oriented servant of the people. It was described according to the legends of the time. You hated snakes? You got the snake version. You had a thing against chickens? Behold. Killer Reptile Rooster.” He paused. “Although I’m not sure how they arrived at that one. Maybe the crest...”

Lian followed her own train of thought. “Well, given the effects of Afterglow, I suppose it would be safe to assume that sometime, someplace, there was a real basilisk. As in the monster genus. And it’s back now.”

“Yep.” Karl looked somber. “I’m guessing the chameleon component is what allows it to vanish. For lack of a better word. The factor in a chameleon’s physiognomy that permits color change and blending has been ramped up in this beastie. It can not only blend with its surroundings, it can disappear from them entirely.” He shifted uncomfortably. “Much as I hate to say it, this is only a guess. I like assumptions even less than you do, Detective.” He glanced at Buck who shrugged in acceptance.

Karl continued. “But this is ninety percent guesswork and ten percent technology here.”

“Look, it’s more than we had when we walked in.” Lian straightened. “If we take this as our prototype for the killer, then we can ask a few more things. Like why does it kill? Does it need flesh for food?”

Karl pursed his lips. “In real life? It’s a small omnivore. It’ll eat what it likes, which includes the occasional small bird or fish. It will also eat flowers. This doesn’t make it a full-blooded predator. In fact, it’s *prey* for a large number of other species. Basilisk burgers are the preferred snack of a lot of critters higher up the food chain.”

“That’s a terrible visual and not a lot of help.” Buck shuddered.

Karl looked at the two of them, his gaze moving from Buck to Lian, all traces of humor gone from his handsome face. “Lian, you mentioned sensing something else. Control.”

Lian nodded, not sure where Karl was going with this.

“You remember the Svengali mess?”

“Oh shit.” Buck sat up straight. “Yeah. I remember.”

Lian frowned. “I heard something maybe...but that was decades ago, wasn’t it? I thought that had been shut down.”

Karl steepled his fingers together and met her gaze. “It was. The notion that Afterglow had also released a psychological torrent of skills that could be tapped into and controlled—well every civil rights and privacy group screamed bloody murder.” He winced. “Sorry for the phrasing there. Bottom line, the government stepped in and shut the project down.”

“For good.” Buck’s voice was flat.

“Yeah. Taking the lead scientists out, putting ’em up against a wall and shooting them will pretty much do that.”

Lian gasped. “You’re kidding.”

Buck turned to her. “No, he’s not. These weren’t sanctioned experiments. They were damn close to torture. Those assholes got what they deserved. I read a few files on the subjects they found in those labs. They weren’t human any



more. Or AGs. They weren't anything you'd want to see in your darkest nightmares."

"*Christ.*" She rubbed her arms as chills swept over her. "So you're thinking someone is doing that again? Trying to control an AG? Mentally or psychically or whatever?"

Karl nodded. "I haven't found anything to suggest a basilisk would turn serial killer. It's prey. It needs to survive, and therefore it probably has strong sexual urges. It wants to mate and breed more basilisks. So I can see the need to hang around places with a high sexual atmosphere. It might even respond to female pheromones and get a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction out of fucking like a crazy bunny. But it doesn't kill after mating."

"Unless it's being *told* to." Buck finished the thought.

"You got it, champ." Karl slid from his chair. "So all you gotta do is find the dude who's hosting a basilisk AG gene. Then stop him from chomping down Pleasure Pets and ask him who's broadcasting the *kill* switch." He paused. "Oh—and get me some of his DNA while you're at it, will you? I'd love to run *that* through some of my analysis equipment."

Buck's face was expressionless. "Piece of cake."

## Chapter Seven

It was late when they left Karl and his grotto of technological magic. Buck hadn't realized how much time had passed, locked away in a world of impossibilities and theories.

It had been such a surreal experience, he was almost surprised to find himself on the street, with life going on around him uninterrupted. He took a breath and looked at Lian. "Well. What now?"

Her strangely dark eyes were unfocused and he knew she was also processing all the information they'd gathered. He was in tune with her mind, aware of her body and learning all the time that some sort of bond existed between them that went beyond the norm of horny male and attractive female.

Although he had to admit that he was hornier around her than he'd ever been with any other woman in his entire life. There was something different though. It wasn't *just* the sexual chemistry.

He realized that during these past hours he'd relied on Lian's intelligence. Her sharp mind, her immediate grasp and leaps of intellect that matched and often outpaced his own. While always aware of her body, he'd enriched his mental picture of this woman to include so much more.

It was fucking scary on some levels, arousing on others. Yet no matter how he looked at it, it was *right*.

And he confessed to himself he was thinking intensely about her in order to *avoid* thinking any more about the horror that roamed free—and that he seemed helpless to catch.

Lian turned and sighed. "I don't know what's next, Buck. We've got new data, sure. I just can't figure out how to use it." Her eyes sharpened as she watched him run a hand through a few windblown strands of hair. "And I'm sorry to

change the subject entirely, but I just got a real powerful shot of *do-me-sizzle* when you did that hair thing.”

Buck blinked. Then grinned. “*Do-me-sizzle*? I knew there was a reason I liked you, Herrick.” He moved closer and let one finger drift down her cheek. “What about when I do *this*?”

She looked at him, licked her lips and smiled. Such simple gestures, yet they sent a bolt of electricity right to his balls. “Shit, Lian. How can we do this? Jump from the case into sex like it was nothing at all?”

“It’s not nothing, Buck. It’s a link we have. And I reckon it’s an escape for us both right now.”

He leaned to her and rested his forehead against hers. “Can we go to my place? Can we get naked and explore each other in every way there is? Can we spend the night inventing new ways to have sex? Or should we push all that aside and work on what we *need* to work on, figuring out how to stop this monster?”

Lian grinned. “Can’t we do both?”

“Dunno. The sex may kill me.”

“Possibly. But if I’m the only survivor, I promise I’ll keep up the good work.”

“You’re all heart, lady.” Buck dropped a light kiss on her nose and took her hand, walking them back to his truck.

“Let’s go home. Let’s fuck like minks for a while. Clear our minds, drain our bodies and then see if the exercise can stimulate our creativity.” He sighed. “Because I gotta say I’m out of ideas here, in spite of your friend Karl’s data.”

Lian buckled her seatbelt. “Any data is useful, Buck. We know more now than we did this morning. All we need to do is sort it out and figure out how to use it to catch him.”

“Yeah.” Buck snorted and started the engine. “Like I said before, piece of cake.”

A hand slipped down to his thigh and squeezed. “We’ll think of something. I have faith in us.”

He bit his lip. “A bit higher if you wouldn’t mind?”

“Perv.” She laughed. “Drive, Detective. The brain is at its most creative when relaxed. We need to relax.”

“Hmm.” Buck determinedly kept his eyes on the road.

“I’m thinking...” There was a decidedly naughty tone to her voice. “I’m thinking I might want to play a bit. After getting you naked, of course. Since we’re attuned on so many levels apparently, perhaps you wouldn’t mind if I spent some time on this big fella here...” Her hand crept up and teased his cock beneath his jeans.

“Uh...”

“I reckon some soft and wet tongue action might be good.”

He gulped. “Uhh...”

“Along with the delicate touch of a few fingers, of course. And a warm sucking motion.” She smacked her lips together loudly.

“Christ. I’m sooo dead, aren’t I?”

“Yep.”

Buck gunned the engine.

“Do you think we should check in with your captain first though?” Lian withdrew her hand.

“*Noooooo...*” He knew that was a squawk that should have shattered his windshield. He pulled his brain back out of his hardening cock. “Not until we have something practical for him. The department’s doing everything they can. When we’ve got a plan, we’ll tell him.”

“Okay, you’re probably right.” Lian’s hand went back to his crotch. “Now, where were we?”

By the time Buck had reached his apartment—miraculously without racking them up on a road sign or getting busted

for excessive speed—he was hard, ready and damn near foaming at the mouth to get into her hot little body. He all but dragged her through the building to his door and barely managed to unlock it before reaching out and pulling her roughly against him. His cock clashed against her softness and his mouth was on hers as the door slammed shut behind them, locking them into their own private world.

“*Mmmmpf.*” She mumbled something, her lips parting, her tongue darting out to find his and toy with it, dueling and then teasing as her hands tugged at his jacket.

He would have mumbled back, except for the fact that at that exact moment her hands ripped his shirt open and found his bare skin. He returned the favor, slipping his fingers beneath her top and urgently seeking her breasts, groaning with frustration at her bra and pushing it roughly up so that he could cup them and tease her nipples. She gasped, leaning back, thrusting herself into his grasp, forcing the center of their bodies together and grinding fiercely as her arousal kept pace with his.

“Wait.” Buck sucked in air and held himself away from her. “We’re going to do this right this time.”

“We did it *wrong* last time?” Lian cocked an eyebrow at him as she slipped out of her shoes and unzipped her pants, letting them fall to the floor.

“We did it in my *truck*, for chrissake. This time we’re going to stretch out, roll around, scream, shout, come a zillion times and then do it again.”

“Okay.” Lian’s hands unsnapped his jeans and quickly freed his cock. “*Oookaaaaay.*”

He felt his arousal fall heavily into her grasp and his heart skipped a few beats when she curled her fingers around him and stroked his length, delicately and with a great deal of interest.

She studied him as her hand moved, teasingly and tenderly. “Think we should take this into the bedroom?”

“Huh?” His thoughts fractured as she found a particularly sensitive spot.

“In the interests of doing it *right.*”

“Oh.” He sucked in a breath. “Um.”

Her low chuckle sent shivers up his spine. Or maybe it was what she was doing with the tip of her thumb.

“C’mon.” She tugged. On his *cock*, for chrissake. Obediently he followed, since a man was generally inclined to do what he was told when a woman had him by the dick. Literally.

As if by instinct, Lian found his bedroom door and led him through, ignoring the rumpled sheets and everyday clutter. Buck managed to ignore them too. Not a challenging task, since every cell in his body was attuned to the warmth of her hand as she held his cock. His hips wanted to thrust into her grasp so badly, his balls tingled and he never wanted her to stop doing whatever it was she was doing to the underside of his arousal. Some kind of tiny little flutter that threatened to turn his eyeballs inside out. And he also wanted her naked while she was doing it.

They reached the bed and Lian stopped, leaning in and licking along his lips as she squeezed just beneath the flared head of his erection. His mouth opened on a gasp of pleasure, her tongue darted inside to touch his, then she pulled back, smiling as he moaned.

“Hang on.”

Buck would have pointed out that she was the one doing the hanging-on and she was doing it just perfectly thank you, but words, for some reason, weren’t actually making it to the surface of his sex-fuddled brain well enough to come out of his mouth.

With one hand, Lian managed to free herself from the rest of her clothes. He reached to help her but she shook her

head, apparently enjoying the control she was exerting, the fact that *she* was calling the shots.

In one of the most erotic moments Buck could ever have imagined, she slithered her naked body down along his, managing to brush him with her breasts, run a hand over his chest and push his pants down to his knees all at once. Then she was on the floor in front of him. Still holding that one piece of his anatomy that was now shrieking for more.

“Ahh, Buck...” Lian’s voice trailed away as she licked her lips. For a microsecond the world stopped for Buck. The sheen of moisture she left behind reflected a gleam from his nightlight, her gaze met his for one excruciatingly long moment and then she moved her head, opening her mouth wide and finally—*finally*—taking him inside.

His heart missed a beat as her hot tongue learned him, seeking and finding his ridges and valleys and playing with them along the way. Her cheeks hollowed as she began to suck, instinctively knowing how much pressure to put on which spot to give him the maximum pleasure.

He braced himself, wondering how long his poor male self could withstand this sensual onslaught and if he should stop her right now. It didn’t seem fair that he should get all this wondrous attention.

Ah, *fuck it*. It wasn’t polite to interrupt someone. Especially not when she was clearly enjoying giving him the blowjob of a lifetime. Having dealt with the fairness issue to the best of his ability, He closed his eyes and fell into the wonder of Lian’s mouth.

She was thoroughly enjoying herself. She could feel every shudder, every twitch of Buck’s muscles as she sucked his cock. His scent surrounded her, musky and very masculine, combining with the salty taste of his skin, enveloping her in everything that he was.

She soaked it all into her mind even as her mouth worked his rigid length, drawing tiny droplets of pre-come from the head. She licked them delicately, letting her hands roam where they willed, knowing everything she did brought him pleasure.

He groaned as she brushed her fingertips over his balls and sighed as she returned to firmly squeeze the base of his cock, sucking hard as she did so. Experimenting with rhythms, she knew instinctively when she’d found the right one. Something about his skin, his stance—some abstract energy flared when her mouth moved in a certain way up and down, slipping over her own saliva like silk on steel.

Lost in him, she was almost surprised to feel a flash of heat on a different plane, licking up the length of her spine. Drawing back, she looked up at him, his face taut and his cheeks flushed. His eyes were closed.

“Buck.”

His lids opened slowly to reveal eyes burning with heat and desire.

“Buck, hold back.” Lian knew he would understand. This *wasn’t* about the link that existed between them on another level—and which they had yet to explore fully. *This* moment was simply about a man and a woman and the sexual passion they both experienced.

“I don’t know if I can.” His voice was hoarse and the chords in his neck were tight, shadows creasing his skin where it lay revealed by his open shirt.

“Try.” She licked up beneath the swollen head, teasing that particular spot that had brought a moan from his throat. He shuddered, his hands reaching out blindly for her head, fisting in her hair as he found her and gently urged her

back onto his cock. “Ahhh—*Lian*...”

Sucking him deeply, she relaxed completely and took the tip of his cock as far into her throat as she could.

This time it was Buck who pulled away, responding to that strange fire that flared between them. “I can’t, honey.” He reached down and lifted her to her feet. “The closer I get the more I lose control of it.” His hands rubbed up and down her bare arms as his gaze ate hungrily at her body. “And you’re getting me damn close.”

She smiled then, a flood of excitement sweeping over her. It worked both ways, this giving of sexual pleasure. Her breasts were sensitive to the air currents in the room and she could feel dampness between her thighs.

“Get naked, Shand.” She sat on the edge of the bed and leaned back, blatantly parting her thighs a little and letting him get a full frontal view of her pussy.

“Yes, ma’am.” Buck scrabbled at what was left of his clothing, jerking his shirt off his shoulders awkwardly and stumbling over the pants, shoes, socks and briefs that hobbled his ankles.

Lian stifled a giggle. His cock bobbed fiercely as he hopped from one foot to the other, kicking off the clothes. He was all *man*—maybe not the handsomest nor the most sexually endowed. But he was the one she wanted like she’d wanted no other in her lifetime. He was the one who met her desires with matching desires of his own. The one who knew—

A sharp knife of desire pierced her core and she gasped. He caught it too, just as he freed himself from the final irritating sock. “Now who needs to hold back?”

She gulped as he pushed her legs apart and stood between them, staring down at the hot folds of flesh his movement had revealed. “Jesus, Lian. You’ve got the sweetest pussy.” This time it was Buck who licked his lips and Lian who shivered as his tongue promised delights beyond imagining.

“Then lick it, Buck. Take me. Drive me mad.” She paused. “If you don’t mind, of course.”

The snort was short lived, since Buck immediately sank to his knees, pulled her thighs wide apart and slid her body to the edge of the bed. And then...

Oh the sensation of hot wetness, pressure on folds that came alive, skin that burst into flames as he tongued her, tasting her and sucking at each and every tiny piece of her pussy he could find.

And by the feel of things, he found them all—and then some.

Lian sagged onto her back, relaxing into Buck’s lingering caresses, aware of how her body was awakening to full arousal and climbing higher with each delving stroke of his tongue.

She could feel his breath on her clit, his fingers stroking the tender flesh of her thighs, the slight brush of his beard stubble against bits and pieces of her inflamed body.

She groaned aloud as he thrust his tongue into her tender places, writhed as he wiggled it around, then gasped as he withdrew to toy with her clit, laving it softly until she could feel it harden into an almost painful and exposed nub of passion.

Her breasts ached and she let her hands drift to cup them, toying with her nipples and adding to the sensations now swamping her body—and her mind.

It was a battle, she realized, keeping the two apart. Keeping her “other” self quiescent in the face of the sexual tumult. It wanted out, it wanted to play, to drink the desire and play in the passion Buck was lavishing on her. It wanted *Buck*. She wanted Buck. Everything that was Lian desired this man without hindrance.

Her hips lifted into his face, a mute encouragement, a plea for more—more of what he was doing, more of his

tongue, his lips—more of him. But if she had too much more, she'd come, explode against him, empty and wanting. She forced herself down a notch and moved. "Buck. It's time."

With a last lingering kiss, she felt him nod between her thighs. "Yeah. I'm about ready for lift off myself." He rose up as she slid back on the bed, her arms lifting to welcome him. "I don't know how long I can last, Lian. I'm on a hair trigger here after what you did to me."

She grinned as he positioned his hips between her thighs and she felt the first touch of his cock against her pussy. "You and me both."

"God, I haven't even suckled these either." He leaned over and ringed a hard nipple with his tongue, then closed his lips around it and tugged, sending jagged and sharp bolts of delight all the way to her cunt.

"Later." She groaned and lifted her legs, bending her knees and pressing them against his hips. "I need you inside me, Buck. *Now*." She gulped. "I can't hold that door closed if we do this much longer."

It was the truth. Any more foreplay and her fragile mental control on her inner demon would shatter. She wanted this to be a wonderful but simple fuck, an orgasm she could experience as a woman beneath the hands of that one special man. No soaring into other places, no leaking psychic energy into Buck or experiencing his in return.

He nodded. "Agreed. But damn, Lian. Even with the doors shut, this is pretty fucking amazing."

She was amazed he could still be coherent, since she had struggled to get words into complete sentences. And with the head of his cock now lingering between her pussy lips there was only one thing uppermost in her mind.

She lifted her ankles, locked them behind his back—and pulled.

Two gasps echoed through the silent bedroom as his cock slid all the way home into her wet and waiting cunt. She felt herself swelling to accept him, her inner channel expanding to fit him snugly.

When he was fully seated, he paused and she felt an instant's regret that this moment would end when he moved. He felt so *right*. So *perfect*. Just where he was. Closing her eyes she lifted her hips a tiny fraction, feeling his body graze her pussy where they were joined.

It was—beyond delight.

Buck grunted and withdrew, plunging back again, harder this time, making sure he collided with her aroused flesh, grinding himself a little against her and finding the places she knew would make her come in about two seconds flat if he kept that up.

"Shit, Buck..." She panted, her body damp as she struggled to meet his moves, hold back her climax and tamp down on her succubus who was screaming for release. Pretty much the way the rest of her screamed.

He hammered into her, his muscles tightly bunched, corded in his arms, with his eyes almost closed.

"*Lian*..." Drops of sweat beaded his forehead and she guessed that he too was struggling to contain the energy that would engulf them if they allowed it admittance.

His cock ravaged her cunt, pulling out then rushing back, driven by desire and a frantic need to fly off into orgasm. She met him every step of the way, her body arching off the bed as her spine shot lightning bolts into her cunt and his body abraded her clit with each stroke.

Then it happened. She broke, her physical need overwhelming every other thought, shutting off every part of her brain except the one tuned to the spasms that began to ripple along the length of his cock.

He cried out something unintelligible and forced himself as deep as he could go, exploding inside her, hot jets of his

come washing her inner walls and driving her fully into orgasm.

Lian sobbed out harsh breaths, whimpering as the exquisite sensations swamped her, knowing that inside her cunt Buck was feeling every single clenching ripple and responding with quivering bursts of his seed.

Locked tightly together they rode out the waves of pleasure, bodies taut and trembling, limbs tense, spines stiff and lungs emptying with each new wave of completion.

Her heart soared as she let her body roam free, trying to grasp each and every millisecond of this simple, complex and exquisite experience. Buck was on top of her, inside her, riding her and loving her, lingering inside her until the last of her tremors faded away to a glow of spent passion.

A drop of sweat splashed onto her belly and she opened her eyes to see him staring at her, looking as dazed as she felt.

“Jesus.” He blinked. “Jesus, Lian.”

“Yeah.” Weakly she nodded. “Same here.”

“I probably should move, huh?”

“At some point, I suppose.” She sighed. “You getting uncomfortable?”

He chuckled, his stomach moving with the indrawn breaths. “You’re kidding, right?”

She could feel his cock, lying loosely inside her now as it softened. Experimentally she tightened her inner muscles.

“I like you right where you are, but your shoulders are going to cramp soon.”

Buck sighed. “I could stay like this for hours.” He shifted a little. “Sadly, my friend here has other ideas.” With a twist of his hips, he slid free of her body, their liquids easing his path. “And I’d only end up squashing you.”

Lian winced a little as she stretched her cramped legs. “Pity though.”

He tumbled beside her and pulled her into his arms. “We’ll do it again in a minute.”

She chuckled. “Right.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Of course I believe you.” She snorted and cuddled close, loving the fragrance that mingled around them—male, female, sex—a unique blend of scents that warmed her down to her toes. “I’m going to need more than a minute to catch my breath though.”

“Okay.” He sighed a long satisfied breath.

There was silence then, a comfortable sweaty sort of silence. He turned his head and glanced at her. “How much more than a minute?”

## Chapter Eight

An hour later they were in Buck’s shower.

He had dragged her from the rumpled bed, ignoring her groans. He'd set out towels, turned on the faucet and promptly lifted her into the tub, following her in and closing the shower doors behind him.

Laughing and playing, they'd soaped each other, shampooed each other, rinsed each other off and done it all over again, luxuriating in the feel of slick skin and the passion rising once more between them.

Buck paused from his self-assigned task of licking drops of water off her nipples. "You know, it occurs to me that I never even bothered to ask if you'd had your NB shots."

She huffed at him, her eyes closed against the streams of water from the shower. "Of course I have. You?"

"Yep." He returned to her breasts, secure in the knowledge that they weren't making babies—the NB, or "No Baby" shots protected them both. It also eliminated any nasty sexually transmitted diseases. One generation and the world had been rendered free of that particular threat. Sometimes science had its uses, mused Buck as he nipped with his lips and tugged on one hardening bud.

Lian's hands roamed over him, her nails dragging over his butt, then slickly sliding along his cock and up over his groin to toy with his navel.

The desire and heat were building once more. It seemed they couldn't get enough of each other. Something Buck wasn't about to quarrel with, and certainly not at this particular moment.

He soaped his hands and slid them around her, tracing her spine down to her buttocks and into the cleft between them. He pressed inward a little, feeling her tiny shudder of surprise and excitement as he stroked her anal muscles. They softened beneath his touch and he slipped a finger past them, loving her indrawn breath of delight.

"Yes?" He breathed the question against her breast.

"Mmm." Her hips moved a little. "Yes. With you? Yes."

A quick harsh shot of desire darted down his cock and he eased back, turning Lian away from him. "Lean over, honey. Spread your legs wide for me."

He wasn't sure if it was the shower water blinding him or the lust that billowed up from his balls, but he found himself blinking away a cloud that threatened to obscure his vision as she followed his directions, bending over and placing the palms of her hands on the shower wall.

Her buttocks were white and round, her ass a work of art carved by the hand of a master. The dark cleft between gleamed with moisture and he reached once more for the soap, lathering her cheeks and making sure the slick foam was everywhere.

Her moan urged him on as he soaped her anus and he reached lower, knowing he'd find the hot honey of her body coating his hand. He slid the liquid around, blending it with the lather, lubricating her, arousing her as much as he was arousing himself.

Then he eased two fingers inside her. "God, you're hot. And wet for me."

"Yes. Oh yes, Buck. God I'm so fucking turned on right now..."

He withdrew his fingers and slicked her moisture over his cock. "I'll go easy, honey."

"Don't care." She shook her head, scattering wet strands of hair around her shoulders. "I want this. We said *every way there is* between us, remember?"

"I remember."

Buck moved to her body, gritting his teeth against a groan as his cock touched her anus and held there for a moment. He wanted her with him in this, and reached around her hips to her pussy. "I want this. I want you. But if you don't



like it, stop me, okay?”

He found her swollen flesh, lips puffy and wet. Gently he stroked her, knowing now where her favorite places were, and how to arouse her fully.

“Christ.” She pushed her ass toward him. “Hurry up, dammit.”

Oh no. He wasn’t about to hurry this. Ignoring the shower, oblivious to everything but Lian’s ass, Buck carefully began to press inward, feeling her tense then relax and allow him entry.

“Fuck, you’re so tight.” He gritted his teeth against the urge to plunge deeply inside her. He didn’t know if she’d done this before or not, and didn’t care to think about the implications. He just knew he wanted her to enjoy it as much as he was.

And her shiver of pleasure as he invaded her darkness told him he was succeeding.

“Oh my God. That feels—I can’t describe it—” Her words were almost a whisper as her fingers flexed against the shower wall.

Buck’s senses flared, he seemed to be able to read every twitch of her body, every indrawn breath, using them to gauge how she responded, how she felt as she accepted him. And how she felt as he went more deeply into her. His fingers kept up their soft strumming on her clit and around his cock her inner muscles quivered. He was well in now, past the natural barriers of her body, filling her ass with his cock, clutched by a snug enveloping warmth that was different but incredibly arousing.

Blinking away the water droplets, he eased back then pushed in once more, beginning a gentle rhythm of pleasure, loving the lingering clutch of her body as he withdrew and the slight resistance as he re-entered her.

She was with him, settling her stance, moving with him, a counterpoint that welcomed him more deeply each time. Hot honey from her pussy soaked his hand, to wash away under the shower droplets then return in force as he delved between her pussy lips and stroked the entrance to her cunt.

She began to tremble, her legs shifting, her body tightening—her skin moving in response to the ripples of her muscles just beneath.

“Buck...don’t stop...”

He couldn’t answer. He had no intention of stopping, but his entire focus was on this act, this invasion permitted by passion and strengthened by trust.

His cock was rigid, each nerve ending alight to the strange friction and slide of lubrication. He burned, racked with the need to thrust, but ignoring it in favor of a slow sweet possession.

“Now, Buck—Jesus Christ—*now*—”

Her body was rigid, clamping down around his hand and his cock, poised on the brink of orgasm.

He pressed in with his hand as he thrust forward with his hips, his cock seating itself inside her and beginning to pulse frantically as his balls throbbed and tightened against her hot flesh.

She exploded around him on a shriek, her pussy convulsing around his fingers, her ass contracting sharply around his cock. It was enough to send him over the edge too, and he let go, erupting inside her, feeling his own come spurting and soaking them both in such unaccustomedly tight quarters.

The sensation was unique, amazing and his mind blanked as he came, buried to the balls in the ass of the most unique woman he’d ever met.

And at that moment, when both Lian and Buck were being nearly ripped apart by their orgasms, the doors to their

inner psyches finally crashed open.

Lian screamed. Or thought she did. She wasn't sure.

Reeling from an amazing orgasm and with Buck's cock firmly in her ass, her succubus emerged full force, swamping her with fiery flames, dancing in the climax she shared with Buck and sending her thoughts soaring high above the two bodies in the shower.

She could feel him, hard inside her. And yet she could feel herself, grasping his cock in tight rhythmic clasps. She could feel his balls pumping his seed and feel the thunder of his heartbeat as he orgasmed. And she grew stronger with each pulse.

There was something else too. A clear stream of thought pierced the blaze of sexual fulfillment. She welcomed her enhanced energy, melded with it, absorbed it and watched their bodies writhing together, dappled with drops of water. Buck's elemental energy was breaking free too, streaming toward her, eager to share the moment on another plane of existence.

She expanded her senses, welcoming him, wrapping herself around him, loving him and sharing all that she felt, all that she was, with him.

He was strong and secure this time, ready to meld with her, ready to become one as the passion between them exploded. She held no dangers for him, no threats. She simply was who she was. And Buck accepted her on every level.

It was joyous in a way few others would understand.

And when she allowed him to see the thought that had emerged from the passion they'd shared—Buck snapped back into himself.

Lian followed, finding herself limp and sated and pounded by a stream of now-cooling shower water.

"No." He rinsed the moisture from their bodies and reached for the faucet.

"What do you mean, no?" She blinked at him.

"Here. Dry off and we'll talk." Sternly he handed her a towel. Not exactly the post-coital glow she'd been hoping for.

"I don't see there's anything to talk about." She vigorously rubbed her hair then wrapped the towel around her and stepped carefully out of the tub.

He noticed her caution. "You okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She smiled and gently touched his cheek. "I'm fine, Buck. Better than fine. I'm exhausted, about as sexually fulfilled as any woman can get and still survive, and ready to nap for about a week."

The frown between his eyebrows eased and he leaned in to kiss her gently. "That's good. I could go for a nap myself." He led her into the bedroom, removed both their towels and settled them naked and curled into each other before he spoke again. "Your idea sucks though." He pulled a quilt around their shoulders, tucking them both into a cocoon of down.

"Does not."

"Does too."

"Oh that's mature." Lian sniffed.

"Better than your half-assed notion."

“Got a better one?”

A grunt was her only answer. She knew she was right. She knew that in one spectacular moment of physical release she’d stumbled across a way to stop their monstrous serial slayer.

Now all she had to do was convince her sleepy lover.

She settled her head more comfortably on his shoulder and was greeted with a muffled snore. She sighed and closed her eyes. It was an argument that would have to wait until morning.

And when the morning arrived, and the two of them stalked into the precinct, they were *still* arguing. Loudly too.

“What the hell are you two yelling about?” The captain poked his head out of his office. “Get in here. Both of you. And quit that damned shrieking.”

Lian strode right up to the captain, stared him in the eyes and huffed out an angry breath. “Your detective Shand is a fucking idiot.”

The captain blinked at her. “Tell me something I don’t know.” He ignored Buck’s grunt. “He’s also a damned good cop. Now ease off the throttle, lady, and tell me if this has anything to do with our case.” He glanced at Buck then back at Lian. “Or if it’s something between you two I probably don’t want to know about, since we’re *all* supposed to have our minds on business here.”

Lian bit back a hot retort and spun on her heel, pointing at Buck. “This oaf doesn’t know a good idea when it bites him in the ass.”

“About the only thing she hasn’t done.”

“What was that?” The captain narrowed his eyes at Buck’s low mumble.

“Nothing, Cap. Just that the good doc here has this half-assed idea of how to set a trap for our killer.”

“Really?” The captain turned back to Lian. “You do?”

“It won’t *work*. It’s too risky. I’ve told her that over and over again.” Buck came up close behind her, too close for her temper.

“You didn’t *think*.” She refused to look at him. If she did, she’d be lost all over again.

“Sit down and shut up.” The captain snapped out the command, pointing at two seats in front of his desk and both of them subsided into their assigned chairs. “Better. Now. Dr. Herrick. You go first.” He held up a hand to halt Buck before his mouth was half open. “You’ll get your turn, Shand. Let the lady speak.”

Carefully, Lian told the captain something of what she and Buck had learned the day before, omitting references to Karl and his magic technology as best she could, simply referring to his lab as a vague “database”. She sketched a verbal picture of what they concluded this creature might be. And when she reached the part about it being controlled, Buck finally interrupted.

“She’s right, Cap. If this basilisk thing is being controlled, it explains a lot. At least about its actions. And it ties in with what we’ve both sensed.”

The captain looked somber. “I don’t even want to *think* about something along those lines. But I have to agree that it makes sense.” He rubbed a hand across his face and sighed. “What’s your plan, Doc?”

Lian drew a breath. “*Bait*, Captain. Offer it—him—bait. Something he can’t turn down.”

Buck gave a harsh laugh. “Yeah, like it’s gonna come out just for us because we put a bowl of kibble on the floor.”

She let that pass. “I’m not talking *any* bait.” She leaned forward, gazing intently at the captain. “This is a creature that is lured by sex. Additionally, all its victims thus far have been blondes.” She shook her head at Buck, forestalling

his angry words. “Could be a coincidence, I know. But...” She turned back to the captain. “I’m blonde. I also have some...*abilities* in the area of sexual projection.” Fighting back the urge to blush, she met the captain’s gaze head on. “I can call on those abilities pretty much at will, Captain. Our biggest problem is that we don’t know where he’ll go next. We can’t slap surveillance on every Pleasure Pad out there. We need to bring him to *us* this time. Put me in a Pleasure Pad. Bug the room. Wire the room. Do anything you damn well want to in that room, but then leave me in there. I’ll *broadcast*—for lack of a better word—some strong sexual impulses. Draw him to me.”

“Then what?” Buck growled at her. “We don’t know if we can kill this thing. If it’ll sense the surveillance. You gonna be alone with it? I don’t think so and sure as shit it’ll smell a cop under the bed, sweet cheeks.” He looked at the captain then, fury and worry written large on his face. “It won’t work, Cap. It’s much too dangerous. For everyone involved.”

The captain was silent, his eyes roaming both her face and Buck’s as he thought over what they’d suggested.

“Plus it wouldn’t necessarily get us the guy *behind* the creature. If there is one.” Buck threw that out as a clincher.

“You got a better plan?” Lian barely moved as she spoke. “We’ve come up empty on just about every front there is.” The captain sighed, his eyes somber. “Unfortunately you’re right on both counts, Herrick. No we don’t have any kind of plan and yes, we’ve come up empty on this one.” His mouth firmed. “And I don’t like it.” He paused. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean I approve of this plan either. Shand’s right. It’s dangerous.”

She slumped in her chair, Buck let out a muttered “yessss” and Cheney Fisher chose that precise moment to tap on the door and walk in uninvited.

“Private party?”

Resignedly, the captain motioned him in. “At least you knocked. I should be grateful for that, I suppose.”

Oblivious to the thinly veiled reprimand, Cheney strolled across the room, dragged out a chair and took a seat in front of the captain’s desk. “My incredibly well-developed mental abilities told me you needed me.”

Buck snorted. “More like you saw us through the window and got nosy.”

“Yeah. That too.” Cheney was unfazed.

“Since you’re here, you might as well give us your take on this wild-assed idea these two have come up with.” The captain stared at him.

Cheney delicately raised an eyebrow. “Wild-assed? My goodness.” His green eyes flickered between Buck and Lian.

“One has to wonder how *that* happened.” A wicked grin danced around his lips.

Buck shifted uncomfortably. “Shut up, Cheney.” A light touch of color flared in his cheeks. “Just listen.”

Lian leaned back in her chair and withdrew a little, letting the men talk over the case in that inimitable cop style they’d perfected. She observed Cheney as the conversation continued, cataloging his style—and his appearance. She’d dismissed him as harmless the first time they’d met. To her, he was. But to other women?

Well, he was tall. Very tall. Probably played sports in school. First pick for the basketball team, without a doubt. He was lean and rangy, but his shoulders hinted at strength and there was a solid chest under his loose T-shirt. The blond hair was neatly trimmed and overall he presented a picture of “nice guy”. Attractive, an easy smile and comfortable in his own skin.

A tiny little door opened in her mind and she probed more deeply, her curiosity stimulated by the nature of his interaction with Buck.

Buck, she knew, was an intensely private person. What the world saw was what he wanted the world to see. The fact that he apparently dropped those shields with Cheney spoke volumes to her and encouraged her to peer past the surface and into the man beneath.

Cheney was an AG. The blue spot on the ear was noticeable, and Cheney did nothing to hide it. Again, he presented the “I am who I am” image with skill. His gaze was focused and intense as he listened, interrupted, gestured to make a point and discussed the case. He was intelligent, well-spoken and definitely a good cop.

These things she could sense with ease. But what was inside? What kind of AG was he?

Cautiously, Lian opened the door a little wider and let her senses probe the mind of Cheney Fisher.

She stilled as pictures began to unfold.

It was enchanting—a fairy glade, lit by a blushing sunset, draped with dewdrops on spider webs and dappled with flowers scenting the air. Soft warmth flooded her and she watched as Cheney, clad in a romantic-looking pirate shirt, open to the waist, strolled toward her, hand outstretched and face alight with a smile.

His pants were tight, his boots shining—and large glittering wings protruded from his back, framing him, turning him into a perfect picture of sensual delight. It was like looking at an X-rated version of a fairy tale, and she was charmed into smiling back.

She nearly reached out to take his hand, but caught herself in time and quickly closed the door in her brain. And glared at Cheney.

Who turned, briefly flashed a smile, and then resumed his conversation without a pause.

“Yes, I can do it.” He was nodding at Buck. “You know I can do it.”

Buck’s expression wasn’t encouraging. “That’s all well and good, but you still won’t be in the room with Lian.” She blinked. “Do what?”

Buck narrowed his eyes at her. “You take a nap?”

“Something like that.” She gazed back, unruffled. She knew Buck’s hostility was a façade covering his fear for her. Cheney settled in his chair and smiled impishly at her. “Enjoy yourself?”

She snorted. “Tell me. *What* can you do?”

“Aha.” Cheney grinned. “All *kinds* of magic things.”

“Quit flirting and tell her.” Buck growled out the words.

“Flirting? *Moi*?” Cheney looked hurt.

“Cut it out.” The captain looked tired. “Dr. Herrick, Cheney says he can take over a Pleasure Pad for a night. Run it. Be on site for you and nobody will know he’s a cop.”

“Okay.” She nodded, willing to accept that. Perhaps Cheney was a shifter. “Does that work?”

“No.” Buck spoke up.

“Yes.” Cheney’s voice rode over his partner’s. “Yes it works. It’ll get a cop in the building without anyone knowing about it. We could swap out every Pet in the place for a female cop, but I’ll bet you anything you want this thing would know and stay away.”

Lian nodded. “Agreed. It’s far too clever to fall for that.”

“You expect me to let you do this with one lousy cop at your back? *One cop*?” Buck’s tone left no possibility of

misunderstanding his opinion of the plan.

“Not one, Buck. Two.” She straightened in her chair. “Look, here’s the way I see it. If Cheney here can get into the Pleasure Pad without detection, we’re in good shape and have one cop more than I thought we’d have. I know I can send out lures. *You* know I can do that, Buck. If anyone can draw this thing out to play, I can.”

“Yeah. So?”

“You’ll be my second back up.”

“I can’t be there, Lian. I can be nearby, but you know *I can’t* be there or we’ll lose the bastard.” His face twisted.

“You’re wrong. You *can* be there with me. All we have to do is let go.” She willed him to understand. “We have a—  
a *link*, Buck. If you want to call it that. I can’t describe it any other way. You and I can be in touch with each other from the moment the door to that room closes. No one will know. It’s an additional weapon we have that’ll work in tandem with the surveillance equipment. And also helps guarantee my safety to a certain extent. There’ll be nothing to alert him to what I’m doing unless he’s got something that twigs him to electronics, which I doubt. They’re static. Inanimate. He’s there for *sex*. He’s focused on the women. He picks his targets apparently at random.” She leaned forward intently. “Don’t you see? He’ll never expect that he’s *chosen* to walk into a trap. It’s his strength, being so damn unpredictable. It can also be his weakness.”

Buck tugged on his lower lip as he turned the idea over in his head. “You think you can broadcast your lures and still keep in contact with me on that level? That’s a helluva lot of multitasking, Lian...even for you.”

She lifted her chin. “I know. You’ll have to help me, Buck. You’ll have to meet me halfway. I don’t even know if we can establish a contact from a distance, let alone sustain it. And I doubt we’ve got time to run experiments. We’d have to pick a Pleasure Pad carefully. Get the right location so you and I aren’t too far apart physically.”

A loud clatter from the squad room outside made them all jump and screens leaped into life along with the sound of voices buzzing and chair scraping.

“Fuck.” Buck and Cheney were on their feet seconds before the captain, and out the door just as rapidly.

The captain was pale as he looked at Lian. “You’re right. There is no time. We’ve got another one.”

She swallowed. “We go with the plan then?”

“I don’t see another choice.” There was pain and frustration in his gaze, mixed with worry. “It’s on your shoulders now. Set it up any way you want it. But get it done.”

Lian nodded and left the room.

## Chapter Nine

Late the following afternoon, Buck ran a hand through his hair in frustration as he sat with Cheney in the precinct and went over the plan once again. They’d pushed aside the carnage that was this monster’s latest kill.

Buck worried he was becoming immune, because his brief look at the newest crime scene had done nothing but make him more anxious than ever about Lian's plan.

"I can do it, Buck. So can she. Will you stop spazzing yourself into knots? It won't help." Cheney's voice was calm, belying the concern in his eyes.

"It's a half-assed plan at best and it puts Lian right in the hands of this killer." A quick vision of yesterday's victim flashed through his mind and he winced. "You think I want to see her end up like—like—?"

Cheney's lips tightened. "She won't. Neither of us is going to let that happen."

Buck wished he was as sure as his partner, but then again there was a niggling issue of his emotions adding to his stress. He was falling hard for the good doc and he knew damn well it was muddling his rational way of thinking.

"Ah, fuck it." He leaned back and stared at his partner. "I've got it bad for her, you know."

"I'd never have guessed." Cheney's mouth curved wryly. "Other than the fact you can't take your eyes off her, you're guarding her like a St. Bernard with overdeveloped responsibility issues and I reckon she gives you a hard-on when she breathes." He grinned. "God help us if she farts. You'll go off like a goddamn rocket."

"Thanks for your understanding and support there, buddy." Buck glared at him. "Wait 'til it hits you like a ton of bricks. Ain't a damn thing you can do about it. One minute your life is rolling along like always and the next—you're road kill. Flattened in one instant of time when everything shifts and takes you someplace weird you've never been before."

Cheney chuckled quietly. "Well, I reckon Shakespeare probably described falling in love a little more eloquently, but I get the point." He flexed his shoulders. "I doubt it'll happen to me though."

"Oh yeah? You got an immunity pill?"

"Of course. It's all about control." Cheney tapped his head. "I go where *I* want, not where anyone else takes me."

Buck shrugged. "Time will tell."

Cheney turned the conversation back to their plan and together the two men pored over notes, some hastily scribbled, others thick files on victims. Both could feel time breathing hotly down their necks. The killer was escalating, without a doubt.

Finally Buck leaned back and tapped a finger on the top sheet. "Okay. So this is the Pad we'll use. Gantry Cooper runs a clean house even though it's on the fringes of the Bogs. We're in the killer's general area, if he sticks to his previous locales, but far enough out of the worst places that we can set up a task force nearby without sending all the rats back underground and betraying our presence."

Cheney winced as his chair scraped the floor and he stood. "I'm out of here. I'll go pull in Gantry, tell him what's up and persuade him it's in his best interests to cooperate fully. I won't get many arguments. Everyone's getting nervous now since word's spreading. Business is probably taking a hit so it should be a done deal by noon."

"Okay." Buck nodded and stood as well, collecting the paperwork into one untidy bundle. "I'm gonna shove all this into a drawer for now. We've got everything we could possibly use out of it. From here on—I guess we work on intuition, magic and prayer."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Cheney's voice held a note of amusement. "Don't sweat it, Buck. She'll be fine."

"Yeah. Easy for you to say."

"Gonna name the first kid after me?"

Buck gave his partner the "eat shit and die" look.

“Just asking, my friend. Just asking.” He walked away.

Buck wished he had Cheney’s certainty about the outcome. But all he could think about was Lian lying at the mercy of a killing monster who wanted to fuck her brains out and then tear her apart.

He gulped down nausea at the mental images he couldn’t keep under control. Then he took a deep breath. He *had* to keep this shit under control. So he’d gone and done the unthinkably stupid and fallen in love with Dr. Lian Herrick, who was about to offer herself as bait to the worst serial killer they’d run across in several generations.

She’d touched his *other* self, fucked him into semi-conscious bliss, and was everything a man could want in his life. If this operation worked, he’d have to follow that train of thought and see where she stood on the whole continuing relationship thing.

But right now, he needed to focus, and focus *fully*.

Taking advantage of the empty room, he closed his eyes for a moment, standing completely still and forcing his brain to settle down. Tiny flickers of fire that he knew represented Lian still licked at the edges of his thoughts and for a moment he opened that door and felt the light brush of her mind against his. She was thinking of him too.

Okay. So they *could* reach each other on a different plane at a distance. That was reassuring and Buck relaxed a little. He sensed her absorption in whatever she was doing, although he couldn’t get a fix on her location. But at this point it didn’t matter. She was calm, concentrating on something and he could almost feel her excitement mixed with a dash of apprehension.

That was good too. She wasn’t treating this as casually or as lightly as she’d like him to believe.

He knew those feelings would keep her alert, add an edge to her that she might well need if he couldn’t reach her in time.

Ah *fuck*. This was madness. The killer was insane and Buck was about to put his woman into the clutches of some invisible, undetectable monster with the full support of his partner, his captain and most of the damn precinct.

Yeah. They were *all* fucking insane.

Lian walked out into the sunshine between the two Fu Dog statues and stared thoughtfully at the small pendant in her hand. She’d taken time to stop by and visit Karl in response to his text message and found him putting the finishing touches on it.

“You need this, doll.” He’d known she’d come into the lab before she’d said a word.

“I do?”

“Yeah.” He pushed his goggles up on his head and looked over at her. “The more I got to thinking about this bugger you’re taking on, the more I realized I might be able to toss in a bit of help.”

“Anything you have will help, Karl.” She crossed the room to stand beside his tall chair and looked down at the assorted electronic bits and pieces that surrounded a beautifully carved piece of jade.

An arm crept around her and cupped her butt cheek. “Gotta keep these buns intact, precious. Some day you may ditch the cop and drag me off to your bed. Where you’ll do terribly wicked things to me, hopefully for weeks on end.”

Lian gently removed Karl’s hand and put it back on the arm of his chair. “Don’t hold your breath, sweetie.”

“Cruel, *cruel* wench.” He chuckled. “Anyway, this is my little gift.” He picked it up and threaded a thin silver chain through the bale. It really was quite lovely.



“Mmm. Nice.” She studied the light as it delineated the carving of a Chinese symbol into the green stone, shades of darker jade shadowing the peaks and valleys created by a skilled artisan.

“It’s the symbol for life.”

“Ah. Okay.”

“And...” Karl paused dramatically, then turned the piece over, showing her a small engraving inset into the silver backing. “This—*this* is the *pièce de resistance*.”

“And this is...?”

Karl stroked a finger around it. “Inside here is *my* kind of magic. It’s a prototype, mind you, not tested on anything other than a rat or two. I figure we got plenty, and who cares about rats anyway, right?”

“Karl? What *is* it?”

“It’s a DNA scrambler.” Karl looked proudly at Lian.

“Huh?”

He sighed. “Okay. Bypassing the technical stuff, which only someone as brilliant as me could possibly hope to understand, what this little puppy does is send out a quick flash of subatomic particles that will scramble DNA for a few seconds.”

She narrowed her eyes as she absorbed Karl’s statement. “You’re kidding, right?”

He shook his head. “I never joke about my work, babe. You know that.” His handsome face was intense. “It’s not perfect. It doesn’t last much longer than a couple of microseconds. But it interferes with the communication between DNA cells. Particularly those that are about to morph into something else.”

Lian frowned. “So...let me see if I can understand here...suppose there was a guy in front of me and he was about to shift into a werewolf or something. I flash this and he can’t?”

Karl nodded. “Yes. And no. He *can* shift and he *will*, but you can delay that shift with this for a tiny instant of time. And to judge by the rats, when he does shift it’s going to be a bit disorienting.” A wicked grin followed this mild statement. “They threw up.”

“Karl?” She lifted an eyebrow. “Rats don’t have the DNA mutation. They’re not AGs.”

“Er.” Karl’s gaze slid away. “Yeah. That was a bit of a problem. So I sort of altered a couple of ’em.”

“Eeeek.” She looked disgusted.

“Yeah, no shit. A fairy rat isn’t exactly sparkles and glitter ya know.”

“Christ, this *is* unproven technology, isn’t it?” Lian’s head spun as she considered the variables between a Karl-mutated AG rat and the thing she was trying to lure out into the open.

His expression was somber, all traces of humor gone as he glanced at her. “Make no mistake, Lian. You’re going up against a critter that’s way beyond anything we’ve run into so far. And whoever’s behind it is even worse. I have no insight at all into what would stop it, kill it, blow it to smithereens or whatever. And even if I did, there’s no clue as to what would reach the controlling mind and stop that in turn.”

“I know.” She nodded.

“So this is the best I can do.” He flexed his shoulders. “Can’t let my best gal go into danger without something of mine alongside her.”

Lian leaned over and kissed his cheek. “I love you too, Karl.” She could sense the worry coming off him in waves. It was unsettling, but warmed her heart nonetheless.

“Enough to get naked and make me a happy man for an hour?” The wicked gleam was back.

“In your dreams, honey. Sorry.”

Karl had shaken his head, looked downcast for a minute or two, then shown her how to touch the pendant and activate the device. It lay in her palm now as she stood outside in the sun, looking just like the innocent piece of jewelry it mostly was.

But knowing it was there and that Karl had made it out of a combination of love and concern—well, perhaps those were two weapons that shouldn’t be underestimated.

Lian put the pendant around her neck, feeling it settle comfortably between her breasts. She could certainly keep it on for the coming encounter. Always assuming the thing would answer her summons.

*Too many damn variables, too much that could go wrong.*

She shrugged away the brief thought. There was no one else who stood a chance in hell of stopping this monster. It had to be her.

And Buck.

She’d fallen in love with him, hook, line and sinker. She’d maybe tell him so at some point if they made it through this night in one piece. Where it would go from there was anyone’s guess.

But that love, that emotion linking the two of them—well, that was a weapon too. Didn’t someone sing a song years ago about the power of love? She walked to her car, comforted and warmed as she took a moment to appreciate how fortunate she was.

Love was on her side. Let that killing basilisk shifter try and fight against it. He’d lose, without a doubt. She was confident it would all work out.

She was less confident about the *real* monster—the one pulling the strings.

They gathered for a final rundown as the sun was setting. Just the three of them, Buck, Cheney and Lian. They’d opted out of meeting at the precinct, preferring to grab whatever relaxation they could over coffee at a nearby café. “I’m good to go.” Cheney polished off a pastry. “Gantry is taking the night off and walked me through the process, which is pretty simple. Guy comes in, pays up, comes and goes. They’ve got some appointments already booked, but none that are new or offbeat. I took a quick look at the schedule. All repeaters. So if he’s gonna come to Lian, we’ll know. Anyone new gets vetted real good. Anyone Oriental gets a double dose of surveillance.”

“Kay.” Buck stared at his coffee as it cooled. “I’ve got a bug set up in the room and it’s minimal. Mind you the tech who installed it is still smiling. He had to book an appointment, go undercover as an electrician and get his rocks off even as he was telling the girl she had a faulty light bulb over the bed. The things some guys have to do for the job.” Lian managed a chuckle. “So there’s a camera over the bed and I’ll be in that room tonight. Good. Audio too?” “Of course.” Buck nodded. “They ran a check. It’s all working. And it’s the best and smallest we have, so with luck Mr. Bad Dude won’t sense it.”

“And I have this.” She pulled the chain from the neck of her blouse and showed the two men her pendant. She gave them a brief idea of what it might be able to do.

Cheney looked skeptical, but Buck pointed a finger at him. “I’d be thinking the same thing if I hadn’t met Karl. The guy’s the closest thing to a wizard I’ve run across. If he thinks Lian should have it, then by God she’ll have it.”

“Fine by me.” Cheney tilted his head in acknowledgement. “Just don’t bet your life on it, honey, okay?”

“I’m not planning on betting my life on a single thing, Cheney. I have electronic surveillance, my pendant *and* my mental link to Buck. Plus with you monitoring the comings and goings—” She winced. “Pardon the pun there—I reckon we’ve done all we can to set this up as safely as possible.”

“I’ll be one building over, babe.” Buck reached out and touched her hand absently. “If I pick up one little shiver from you, I’m letting Cheney know and he’ll be in there with you in seconds flat. I’ll be right behind him.”

“Gotcha.” She nodded, then grinned. “Now all I have to do is go put on something that says *do me and pay for the privilege* and I guess I’m ready.”

“Need help?” He looked hopeful.

“Nope. Thanks all the same.”

“Wise answer.” Cheney chuckled. “You two need to keep a tight rein on those impulses of yours until the time is right.”

“Who asked you?” Buck glowered at him. “Shouldn’t you be meditating or something? Gathering your strength for your little act tonight?”

Lian’s gaze followed Buck’s. “Yeah, Cheney. What exactly *are* you going to do?”

“Me?” His face was innocence personified. “Very little. I’m just going to make sure everybody sees what they’re expecting to see.”

“Oh.” Lian looked blank. “Not sure I know what that means. *Exactly.*”

“Good. That’s the way I like it.”

She met his look straight on. “Maybe I should introduce you to Karl. He likes mysteries.”

Buck snorted. “Don’t bother, babe. Cheney’s got a lifetime of practice at being a secretive asshole. I doubt even Karl could peg him without a week or two of analysis and maybe dissection.” He took her hand before she could speak.

“And that’s the way he likes it so leave him alone, okay?”

Her gaze flickered from one man to the other. Then she sighed. “Okay.”

## Chapter Ten

The sun was setting as Lian walked into the Pleasure Pad, a coat firmly belted around her body, her high heels clicking on the stone steps. They were a nuisance—she avoided them like the plague in her everyday life. But for some weird reason, the thought process that connected spiked shoes with sex had never really left men’s minds. So she put up with them, thankful she wasn’t going to have to hike very far. And she did like the sound they made, all things considered.

Yeah, her mind was wandering. But better in the direction of designer shoes than what she was clicking her way

toward.

There was a sizzling sort of crackle around the edge of her psychic senses. A mental alert status that had crept up on her as she'd dressed—no, make that *undressed*—for the evening. The succubus in her had lapped up the sensation of wearing nothing more than a black thong and a lace tank top beneath her coat. And sighed when said coat had been buttoned and belted very securely.

Forcing down the mixed emotions, Lian stepped inside, glancing at the desk and expecting to see Cheney behind the counter.

She blinked at the man standing there. It sure as hell wasn't Cheney.

"Hey, doll. You got room fourteen tonight, okay?" A stubby hand held out a key and the fingernails showed signs of needing a good scrubbing.

She blinked. "Uh—sure. Thanks." She took the key and tried to drag her gaze away from the scruffy middle-aged guy with a definite paunch and a head of hair that was slowly sliding down toward his ears, leaving the top of his head bald and shiny.

For one second, the man's eyelid drooped into a wink, then flicked up again.

*Shit.* It *was* Cheney. She swallowed. If he was a shape shifter, then he was extraordinarily good at it. Her senses danced a little and her vision blurred, only to clear and reveal no more than a tired man handing out room keys to Pleasure Pets.

*Wow.* There were hidden depths to Buck's partner, apparently. She'd love to get inside his head and prowl around for a while. But—not tonight.

She headed down a shadowed hallway and turned right at the end, noting the room numbers as she went. Room fourteen was the last one—conveniently next to an exit which looked like it hadn't been used since before the Afterglow. Lian snorted to herself. She'd bet any amount of money that Buck had already checked it out and made sure it was in working order. He'd probably come in that way if necessary. Cheney would have to make the walk she'd just made. It wasn't more than half a minute, but given what they were up against, every second would count. The room itself was pretty much what she'd expected. A large bed, a chair, a bureau that had seen better days up against one wall, and a small window, now covered with drawn curtains. A door led to a tiny bathroom, which probably served its purpose, but did so without pretensions to anything other than basic hygiene.

There were two lamps on the top of the bureau and two more on the wall over the bed. One of which, she knew, hid the surveillance equipment.

She removed her coat and hung it on a handy peg behind the door. Her bag she kept in her hand, then decided it could probably go under the bed.

"Well this is extraordinarily lovely." She spoke aloud, knowing Buck would appreciate the sound check.

She pulled down the quilt and carefully lay on the bed, plumping the pillows up behind her so they'd be comfortable. She crossed her legs at the ankles and leaned her head back, tugging the clip free and letting it spill over her shoulders. She thought it would be a nicely artistic contrast to the skimpy black lace of her tank top which did little to hide the breasts beneath.

In spite of everything, her succubus purred. This was erotic in some strange way, lying almost naked on a strange bed in sexy high-heeled shoes and knowing she was about to lure a man into her coils.

She wished it was Buck.

The mere thought of him sent a frisson of pleasure coursing through her and she shifted a little as her body responded. *Ah, Buck.* His hands, his mouth, his cock plundering deep inside...

*"I hear you, babe."*

Lian almost jumped as Buck's thoughts pushed their way into her mind. For a few seconds she allowed herself the luxury of twining around him, stroking him, teasing him until his awareness leveled with hers.

*"Later, sweet thing. I see you. Green lights all around. Put out the call."*

Buck's words faded a little as he refocused on whatever it was he was doing. Watching her, most likely.

It was time. Time to summon her succubus fully, and time to see if the bait would be enough to hook their fish. Or whatever it was they were actually trying to lure.

Suppressing a shiver of nerves, she closed her eyes and let her mind open—wide, then wider, giving the demon within free rein. Her skin heated with pleasure, her lips parted and she could hear her blood as it pulsed in her veins. Her breasts grew tender, almost too tender, the black lace a scrape of arousal against the hard and jutting nipples, the weight of the jade pendant exerting cool pressure against her naked curves.

Slowly she slid a hand down over the naked curve of her belly, letting her hand drift between her thighs and rubbing in a vain effort to ease the ache of desire.

Lian needed. She *craved*. She wanted to be fucked and filled and fucked some more. She wanted the taste of a man's cock in her mouth and the feel of it in her cunt. She moved again, uneasy now, desperate for something to wrap her thighs around, to grasp with her fingers and gnaw on with teeth that would bite sharply yet bring wild and painful pleasure everywhere they touched.

She lay on the bed in the room of an anonymous Pleasure Pet and released her demon, uncertain if she could control it sufficiently to stay alert. If she failed—it would all be over.

And she would never see Buck again.

A drop of sweat rolled down Buck's spine as he sat alone in a small, stuffy office and kept his gaze glued to a tiny laptop monitor. He had all kinds of backup within call, but he wasn't about to let any of 'em take a look at what he was watching. They could listen to the audio—that was all. And they were doing that from the garage around the corner.

But this? Lian's body, Lian's hand and what Lian was doing with both? Hell, no. That was his and his alone. He could certainly sense the vibes she was sending out, as could his cock. But they had a special link between them. God only knew if anyone or anything else was picking up on her message.

The intercom unit buzzed. "Got a problem." It was Cheney.

"What?" Buck stiffened in his chair, never taking his eyes off Lian, still alone in her room.

"Looks like your lady's signal is working."

"And?"

"We got a line out the door, most of 'em hard already." Cheney sounded out of breath, but with an undercurrent of mild amusement.

"Fucking shit." Buck ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "I never thought of that."

"I'm handling it. The girls are thrilled. Grady's gonna have a coronary when he sees the take." There was a pause,

then Cheney spoke again. “No one that fits the bill yet.”

“Copy that.” Buck nodded to himself. Then prayed. Prayed it would work and they could nail the bastard, and followed that up by praying it *wouldn't* work and he could take Lian home and nail her instead.

He had no clue how long she could keep up her broadcast. If short bursts would work better or a sustained howl of sexual need would reach him. He also had no idea how long he was going to be able to fight down his own arousal. If his team was sensing the same thing, they'd be going in with guns drawn in more ways than one.

*Shit.* This was a plan that had been doomed to disaster from the start, and why the fuck he'd let her talk him into it, he had no clue. Unless it had something to do with the fact she was right, smarter than he was for thinking of it, and he knew she shared his desperation to stop these senseless killings.

The fact he was head-over-ass crazy about her—well, he'd just have to ignore that at this moment, along with his crippling painful erection.

“*Christ above*, Shand.” The voice of one of his team came on the line. “You got anything yet? This assignment is gonna leave a lot of us with some *real big* problems if you get what I'm sayin'...”

He snorted. “Don't overestimate yourself, Thomas. It ain't *that* big, no matter what the wifey tells you.”

He heard the soft ripple of male laughter, then there was a click and Cheney's voice sounded again.

“Buck. Got a possible. He's about four guys down in the line. Fits the profile.” The words ended in a quick click.

“Thomas. You copy that?”

“Yes. Green light here on your mark.” It was crisp and professional, all business, joking pushed aside as tension of another kind replaced the distinctly sexual buzz they'd all been enjoying up to now.

Buck watched the screen—Lian was still alone. “*Lian, honey. He may be there.*”

“*Okay, Buck. I'm okay so far.*”

He'd warned her. It was all he could do until—*fuck*. He so didn't want to even *think* about what might happen next.

Part of Lian was drowning in the pleasure of freeing her demon and letting it out to play. The other part was struggling to keep a tenuous hold on her mental link to Buck and a fragile awareness of every sound outside her door. She'd taken in the room with one glance, knew where the few items she needed were located and sizzled with tension, waiting for the moment that handle on her door would turn and it would open.

Her mind felt filled to overflowing with everything she needed to know, to feel, to do. And beneath it all was a chill of fear that even her succubus couldn't quite eliminate.

Her body thrummed with sexual excitement. Her demon howled even as her rational thoughts skipped around various scenarios. The waiting was the worst part. Knowing *it*—as she'd come to think of him—was possibly there, on the premises, heightened every sense she possessed. If anyone had measured her adrenaline levels at that moment, they'd probably blow every single reading off the scale.

She was glad that Buck was there, and even gladder that he wasn't continually trying to connect his thoughts to hers. She could see the warm glow of his touch in her mind's eye. That was enough.

She closed her eyes for a second or two, taking a deep breath and forcing herself to organize her overloaded brain.

Then there was a slight scraping sound—and the door opened.

“Hi.”

He wasn't terribly tall, but he was solid and well built in the way of a man who worked out a *lot*.

"Hello." Her demon sighed and smiled, wriggling inside her head with excitement.

"I'm Harry." He looked around him as he closed the door.

"Nice to meet you, Harry." Lian slithered a little on the sheets. "Do you like to play?"

His almond eyes crinkled into a smile as he slipped off his T-shirt, showing corded muscles and a lean, honed body that screamed martial arts expert. "Oh yeah. I'm real good at playing. Especially with a pretty little thing like you."

His pants fell to the floor, revealing that he also didn't think much of underwear since he wasn't wearing any.

"Mmm. Like to get right to the point, I see." She managed a chuckle. Her succubus was licking its lips as a thick cock, already distended with arousal, targeted her as she lay on the bed.

"I like fucking. I'm good at it." He stood proudly, nude and gleaming, showing off his body. As he had every right to, realized Lian. He was in *really* good shape.

She shifted a little, parting her thighs and making sure he was staring at her pussy, barely hidden by the black thong.

"Yeah, I'll bet you're great." She took a breath and reached down, pulling her lace tank off in one smooth move and tossing it aside. "Anything in particular you like, Harry?"

"I like it all." His eyes were everywhere, moving from her breasts to her thighs and her pussy and back again. He didn't seem to care about her facial features. He was fixated on her sex. She was there to satisfy his lusts, not appeal to his sense of beauty. Which was exactly how it was supposed to be for a Pleasure Pet.

Her demon giggled in her head, almost drowning out Buck's link. She forced it back even as her hands slipped up to her breasts and cupped them, stroking the nipples to rigidity with her thumbs. "So what's it to be, handsome?"

He moved onto the bed and pushed her knees wide apart. "Gotta get rid of this first." Swiftly his hands slid beneath her thighs and she gasped as his mouth crashed into her pussy and his teeth grabbed her thong, tearing at it and pulling it away from her.

"*Lian...*"

Buck's strangled gasp sounded in her mind. "*It's okay. I'm okay—*" It was the best she could do as Harry ripped away the remains of her thong and let her naked limbs drop back on the bed.

"Condom?" He asked the question casually, without taking his gaze off her pussy. "God, you're sweet." His hand reached for her, touching, learning, probing her intimately, arousing her succubus even more and making her shiver with an equal mixture of fear and pleasure. "Got one hell of a fine pussy there, girl. Can't wait to get into your cunt." He glanced briefly at her face. "You're gonna love me fucking you."

She managed a smile as she reached to the bedside table and the condoms artfully arranged there. "I can tell, big boy." There was no physical reason for needing a condom, but it was something that Pleasure Pets did. Some measure of distance established between a Pet and her client and an additional opportunity for sex play. She was very grateful for it right now.

Harry reached for it, but she whipped her hand back. "Uh uh, stud. Let me." She stared openly at his hard cock. "Let me have some fun too, okay?"

He shrugged and thrust his hips toward her. "Go ahead."

She made a production out of removing the condom from the wrapper and barely taking her eyes off his cock.

"Christ. Dunno if this is going to fit that bad boy. You're big, Harry. So fucking big—"

He got even bigger as she spoke, a tiny bead of moisture emerging to gleam in the low light of the bedroom. "Yeah.

Big enough to keep you happy, doll.”

The words were hoarse as she moved her hand to his thigh and lightly dragged her nails upward toward his balls.

“Like that, lover? Does it feel good?”

“Mmm.” His gaze was glued to her pussy.

Lian hungered. Her demon screamed out in delight as her fingers found the sac and its hard contents, touching, fondling, rolling them gently in her palm. She wanted to suck him deep, get him wet and slippery. Then she wanted to take him inside, to ease the savage need, to feel him explode inside her and have him make her come so hard she would howl with it.

Battling the urge with every remaining conscious brain cell she possessed, she fought her inner self and continued to arouse him with touches, looks, a lot of lip licking and finally the delicate protection.

As she unrolled it down his cock, her demon burst free, flowing over Harry like a cloud of wet honey—hot, needy, sucking on his nipples, then biting them, laughing and fleeing down his spine to investigate his ass and lower to his balls and that sweet spot behind them.

He groaned aloud. “Fucking shit. *Fucking sheeeiiiit*. I gotta get in your cunt *now*.”

“What are you waiting for?” She invited him with her words but managed to hold still, a battle that had every one of her muscles knotted with tension. The demon inside her craved the fucking. Lian didn’t want this man penetrating her in any way whatsoever.

She simply continued what she was doing—mind-fucking him, letting him feel the full force of the succubus, holding his sheathed cock in her hand, sensing the trembling rigidity as her powers overwhelmed him.

“Fuck—” He closed his eyes, his neck corded, his biceps bunched tightly.

Lian shivered, knowing he was seconds away from coming.

She shivered again.

Oh Christ above—

“*Buck—it’s getting cold in here—*”

## Chapter Eleven

Buck was through the door and running flat out before Lian’s faint link had fully impacted. He was yelling into his intercom, alerting his backup task force and letting Cheney know even as his feet pounded out of the building and over the short distance to the Pleasure Pad’s back entryway.

Heart pounding and blood pulsing loudly in his ears, he was inside, pausing for barely a second to get his bearings and make sure he turned in the right direction. He was panicking and a part of his brain knew it.

He could not afford to panic.



There—number fourteen—Lian’s room. Cheney came around the other corner in a rush, masquerade gone, weapon drawn. His face was intense and he looked at Buck. Buck nodded, held up a finger to his lips and gently turned the handle on the door. The rest of the team would be waiting in the corridor, out of sight, poised for a signal, some sign that they were needed. Until then, silent and steady seemed to be the best course of action, for everybody. The exits were covered, the place locked down as much as possible.

Buck sensed nothing from Lian and the sweat was already pouring down his spine as he refused to even consider what might be inside.

As quietly as they could, Buck and Cheney opened the door and Buck peered cautiously around the edge into the shadowed room, Cheney’s breath hot on his neck.

They both froze at the tableau in front of them.

She was naked, holding her pendant tight in one hand and a very large gun in the other. The barrel was pointing directly at the head of the—thing—between her legs.

Buck couldn’t breathe. The air was icy cold, drying the sweat on his back into chilled particles. But it wasn’t the temperature that made him shiver.

It was the monstrous blend of human and creature that was paralyzed into immobility on Lian’s bed.

The legs of a man were tucked beneath him, kneeling, encased by Lian’s slender thighs to either side of him. His cock was hard and sheathed. But from the navel upward, all traces of humanity were gone.

Distorted muscles bulged in arms that bore no resemblance to anything that should be fucking a woman. They ended in sharply savage claws, gleaming with edges that looked like razors.

The body was thick, shimmering a little as it tried to fully shift its entire being but couldn’t. Whatever neck there was—well, it was probably there somewhere, but it quickly became the large and oddly familiar head of a reptile.

The unmistakable eye of the basilisk stared glassily at her, an image Buck knew only too well. The jaws were parted, massive fangs drooping from beneath scaled gums, a testimony to this creature’s power and killing ability.

Time stood still as Buck saw his woman and this monster locked in some sort of paralysis.

Then her finger moved infinitesimally.

And she shot the creature right between the eyes.

The noise was deafening as Buck and Cheney followed suit, pumping laser shockwaves into the scaly head, the eyes, any part of it they felt would be vulnerable.

And thank God, it was. Blood spurted, bones shattered and flew, and Buck registered Lian scrambling off the bed even as he fired again, just for good measure.

The thing on the bed was subsiding, shifting and writhing in its death throes until there was little left but the strange stench of cordite, a short, stout male body—and a mess where his head used to be.

There was a huge scuffle at the door as the backup force had come running at the sound of gunfire.

“Shit. Where? Who?” They burst in, guns drawn, ready to take down anyone and do whatever was necessary.

“Clear, guys. Stand down.” Cheney glanced over his shoulder at them as he issued the sharp command. “Get the forensics team in here quick. Don’t want this critter to go invisible on us.”

“He won’t. Not now.” Lian spoke up for the first time, staring at Buck with relief on her face. Along with spatters of blood and other stuff he didn’t even want to think about. Her gaze was taut, her eyes black as ink. “Buck—help me. God, *please help me.*”

It was a whispered plea that sent Buck's fears skyrocketing once again until Lian's demon burst into his head, snarling, fighting, snapping at his control, demanding his cock, his tongue—

*Fuck.* She'd loosed her own monster and it wouldn't go away until Buck took care of it.

He pulled her close to his body, her breasts crushing his chest, his adrenaline levels blocking out the worst of her sexually voracious desires. Helpless in that instant, his attention was distracted by a scream from outside—then another. Cheney spun around. “Check that out.”

The men hurried away as Buck dragged Lian into the small bathroom. “Take care of this, Cheney. Give us a minute.” She was on him as soon as he pushed the door half closed, her body writhing against his, her teeth digging into his chest, her hands all over him, searching for his cock and clenching in frustration at the thick pants he wore.

“Easy, babe.” Buck stroked her gently, ignoring the blood, conscious only of her frustration and how he could help her. “I can't fuck you here, Lian. Lian—*honey?*”

Whether she heard him or not, he had no clue. She was lost to him now, a victim of her own demon. He didn't dare meet her on that level. There was too much riding on these first moments and he couldn't afford the luxury of stepping away.

He did the next best thing. He thrust his hand roughly between her thighs, jarring her as he found her pussy, forced the swollen lips apart and began to rub her clit—hard.

She moaned, bit his neck and pushed her hips into his grasp. “*More.*”

He pushed against her. There was nothing gentle in his touch, nothing seductive. This was a means to an end, forcing her into her orgasm. It was the only way he knew to shut her succubus down and bring her some relief.

She was wet, liquid spilling over his hand, hot and slick, easing his movements with her own lubrication. He thrust a finger inside her—then two, moving them, seeking out the places she liked, the spots that gave her the most exquisite pleasure.

More than ready for him, Lian moved on his hand, thrusting, pushing, always seeking that one extra touch, that one stroke of a hard finger that would send her over the edge. She ground her pussy into his grasp, moving her hips from side to side, spreading her thighs in a wanton effort to hit that peak and tumble over the edge.

Rubbing her, penetrating her with his fingers—and finally resorting to reaching around her to put a finger up her ass, he helped her along, feeling her nipples rammed against his chest and her breath fiery as she panted against his neck. He was holding her, fingers inside her, letting her ride the ride as she pleased.

And within seconds she was convulsing around him, her demon shrieking in his brain, her body a mass of spasms in his arms.

She came and came, a seemingly massive and endless orgasm, the force of which made Buck stagger. He realized he wasn't even hard. He wasn't part of this right now. He was simply holding his woman—and she was safe. She might be coming her brains out, but at least she was alive. The grey matter dappling her hair wasn't hers. The blood staining her white skin wasn't hers.

And the pendant, untouched by any bodily fluids—well, that *was* hers and right now it almost looked as if it was glowing.

Buck's throat choked with emotion as she began to relax in his embrace, and he leaned his forehead down to rest it against hers.

She sighed, a deep sigh of relief and contentment. “Love you, Buck.”

“I love you too, Lian.”

For the first time in his life, Buck Shand spoke those words to a woman. They came naturally.

They came from his heart.

Lian was vaguely aware of Buck wrapping her in a towel. She knew he picked her up and carried her out and she heard him tell Cheney they were heading back to the precinct.

Cheney said something, then they passed some people carrying things—her eyelids were heavy and a delicious lassitude overwhelmed her muscles. There was a lot of noise and bustle and then the wonderful scent of open air. She must have fallen asleep before Buck put her into his truck, because the next thing she knew, she was back in his arms and smelling the coffee-sweat-disinfectant odor of the precinct house.

Then the sudden shock of a shower roused her and she found herself beneath warm water. Surfacing to consciousness, she realized there was blood around her, running over her skin in rivulets to the drain at her feet.

“It’s okay, honey. It’s not yours.”

Buck, hands full of shampoo, in his briefs and T-shirt, was in there with her, scrubbing her, washing her hair, turning to rinse her off. He was all business, cleaning her from head to foot.

She stood there and accepted it all. She had little strength to do otherwise even had she wanted to. Her mind whirled, filled with images—sensations—thoughts of the beast she’d killed and the demon inside her.

“Am I okay?”

“You bet.” Buck turned off the shower, apparently satisfied with his work. A clean towel appeared, and she gasped as he dried her roughly, making her skin tingle. “Here. Put this on.”

Awkwardly, she tugged the orange pants up over her legs and recognized the matching shirt. “Am I a suspect?”

Buck laughed as he exchanged his own wet clothes for dry ones. His weren’t orange, but looked like they were more at home in a gym than in the precinct. “Nope. It’s all we had handy.”

She sighed. “Thanks. I’m still a bit scrambled I guess.”

“I know. But this won’t wait. We gotta see the captain. And I’ll grab you some coffee on the way if you want?”

“Water would be better. My throat’s as dry as sand right now.”

“Anything, babe. I can do water.” He slipped his arm around her and held her close as she stepped into the rubber sandals and they left the showers. “You only have to ask. You’re the heroine of the day right now. Any request will be granted.” He chuckled.

“How about two weeks alone with you on a tropical island?” She slanted a gaze at him from the corner of her eye.

“Mmm. That’s not a request. That’s a dream of *paradise*. But I’ll see what I can do.” His arm tightened a little, then eased as he passed a small fridge, snagged her a blessedly icy bottle of water and then led her to the captain’s office. The captain urged them in, sat them down and then shook his head. “You two look like hell.”

“Thanks.” Lian swigged down the water.

“You don’t exactly look like you’ve taken a walk in the park yourself.” Buck glared back.

Lian agreed. The captain’s hair was a mess and there were dark shadows beneath his eyes. It was late now, very late. But it was quite possible this man had been behind this desk for close on twenty-four hours and wasn’t about to call it quits yet.

“You got him then.” It was a statement directed at Lian and spoken in tones that mixed relief with a measure of concern. “You’re okay.”

“Yes, I’m okay. Thank you.” She nodded.

“As to whether she got him—well, she got *something*.” Buck shrugged. “The techs should be able to tell us more soon.”

“*We* got him, Buck. It was a team effort.” She nudged his sleeve.

He snorted. “Honey, Cheney and I have really good weaponry. But you plugged him right between the eyes before we got off our first shots.” He turned to the captain. “She took him out, Cap. With an old-fashioned gun, no less. Bullets and everything.” He blinked at Lian. “What the hell was it and where did you get it?” His brows drew together. “And why the hell didn’t you tell me you had it?”

She snickered. “A girl has to have a few secrets, Detective.”

“Not when they involve lethal firearms, lady.” He glared at her.

She smiled politely at him. “It’s a family heirloom. A Glock 45. My grandmother taught me how to shoot it. It’s noisy and smelly and of course your guns are better, faster and more accurate.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “And *much bigger*.”

Buck choked back a snort.

“Glad you had it with you, Herrick.” The captain interrupted the byplay. “How’d you know you’d need it?”

Lian straightened, marshalling her thoughts. “It was the cold, I think. Before that, he was just a regular john looking for action. Young, handsome, definitely some oriental background. He had an AG mark, but nothing leaped out at me. He was exactly what you’d expect under the circumstances.” She thought about that. “Which explains why he had no trouble getting himself a Pet or two. He was all about the sex. And he handled it well, making everything clear up front, not jumping on the girl or being violent in any way. He was there for one thing and one thing only, as far as I could tell.”

“Okay, that answers a few questions.” The captain nodded. “Then what? You up to walking us through it?”

“I guess.” Lian took another drink. She was tired—as exhausted as if she’d run a marathon. But she knew all too well that if she didn’t cover this ground now, there might be details she’d forget later.

“We talked. Not much. He got naked and got onto the bed. It sort of progressed from there as you’d expect. But then...” She paused.

“Then what?”

Buck gently encouraged her, probably not even realizing he’d taken her hand. But she did. The warmth of the gesture helped her continue. “Then I did my best to ramp up his arousal level. I worked with the assumption that the creature would change before orgasm. So I had to get him to that point. And as he got really hot under the collar, the air temperature started to drop. I remember shivering...”

“That’s when you told me over the link you were cold.” Buck’s fingers tightened around hers as he turned to the captain. “I’d sensed that cold, Cap. I dropped everything and went running.”

“That much I know.” The captain raised an eyebrow. “Let’s hear what Dr. Herrick did while you were breaking land-speed records.”

“Sorry.” Buck subsided.

“The cold helped me focus.” Lian swallowed. “He was all for fucking me, getting ready to—to—penetrate me. I

didn't want to give myself away too soon, so I just kept going, turning up his furnace, loosely speaking." She stared absently at her hand, entwined with Buck's, as she organized her thoughts coherently.

"He was there, on the edge. I could sense it beginning for him. Then the cold got really bad and he started to sort of shimmer. His head first, shifting, changing, blurring to where I wasn't sure what I was seeing."

"It was the basilisk then?" The captain sought confirmation.

"Yes. As soon as I saw the eyes take shape, I knew it was him. And it was happening quickly, although it seemed like it was taking forever. Does that make any sense?"

Buck nodded. "Yeah. I know I got there within seconds, but to me it was hours." He squeezed her fingers.

"Anyway—" she flashed Buck a tiny smile and continued, "—the claws were out and flashing and I managed to reach my pendant." She touched it where it lay on her orange shirt, a tiny green disk that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. "I hit the on switch and damn if it didn't work." She turned. "We owe Karl a real big vote of thanks for this one. I'd have been dead meat without it."

Buck glanced at his boss. "It's basically some sort of DNA interference signal. It can't stop the process, but the shift takes longer. Prototype. Top secret."

"*Riiight*." The captain lifted an eyebrow. "It worked. That's all I need to know."

"So I froze him, sort of." Lian pursed her lips. "And we stared at each other. It was the weirdest thing. I didn't sense much of anything from him other than a need to get inside the nearest warm—er—well, you know."

"Got it." Buck snapped out the words. "Move on."

"Honestly? If I hadn't known the danger, I'd have let him. If I'd been a Pleasure Pet, there wouldn't have been a damn thing to tell me that he wasn't just shifting into his AG entity. No slaverling, no tearing his claws into my skin and lapping the blood—nothing. I have to assume the urge to kill is released with his orgasm. And I froze him before it could happen."

She sighed. "And then I pulled my gun out from under my pillow and shot him without a second thought." Lian gulped. "God help me, I killed him."

She began to shake as the realization of what she'd done crept from the recesses of her mind into her consciousness.

"I could feel my finger on the trigger. And all the time it just stared at me, like an inhuman statue. And then there was this loud bang and I knew I'd gone and done it and there was a hole in his head and blood—and then more blood —"

"It's okay, babe. It's okay." Buck slid his chair close and put an arm around her. "Cheney and I got there within a second or two. We took care of what was left. But I reckon she'd done the job for us, Cap."

The captain nodded. "We owe you a debt, Dr. Herrick."

She shook her head. "Buck and Cheney would have got him. I didn't need to shoot him. You were there, Buck. You could've done it."

"That's debatable." Cheney walked in unannounced and pulled up a chair. "Figured you'd want what we got as soon as we got it, Cap."

Cheney looked as tired as the rest of them, as if a weariness of body and spirit had cloaked them all in shades of grey.

Lian turned to him. "What do you know? Any news?"

Cheney's eyebrow lifted a little in amusement and his eyes twinkled with a suppressed laugh in spite of the lowered

lids and the deep creases at their corners. “It’s taken some time to get it all straight, Doc. There were a lot of—um—side effects to your hoochie coochie broadcast.”

She blinked. “Huh?”

Buck snickered as Cheney cleared his throat. “How can I put this delicately?” He thought for a moment. “You were sending out a pretty strong signal, if I can call it that. It got the job done. But it sort of swamped everyone within a couple of hundred yards radius. We had multiple orgasms. A lot of multiple orgasms. There was...” Cheney coughed politely into his hand to hide his laugh. “Considerable coming and going.”

“Oh good lord.” Lian let her head rest on Buck’s shoulder. “You’re kidding, right?”

Buck shook his head. “Nope. When I was carrying you out, you could hear the screams in just about every damn room.”

“The line stretched around the block before we closed the place off.” Cheney was grinning hugely. “Even our guys.” He cleared his throat. “Well, let’s just say they’re professionals, but they may have some explaining to do when they get home tonight.”

She blinked again.

“The fact there’s a *giveaway* on the front of their pants, honey.” Buck whispered into her ear.

“I was *that* strong?”

“Yep. We’re going to have to figure out some kind of cover story, Cap.” Buck glanced at the man who was doing his best not to chuckle. “Don’t want it known that Lian here has a siren’s song that can get a man hard across half a mile or so.”

“Quite.” The captain nodded and shuffled a few papers awkwardly on his desk. “Anything else, Fisher?”

Cheney sighed. “Yeah.” He pulled out a small data pad. “Forensics is bringing in the remains, of course. But they got an initial DNA sample and ran it on the spot. Came back positive to a Weng Chu. Guy owns a laundry on the far side of the Bogs.”

Lian frowned and stared at the photo Cheney was holding up on his pad. “That’s not the man who came into my room.”

“It is and it isn’t.” Cheney narrowed his eyes. “He—Chu—is a shifter. I picked that up when he came through the line. So I figured he’d shifted into *gorgeous hunk* mode for the night. But he fit the profile, of course, so we had him under surveillance. There were other shifters, but none like him. I never sensed he was *multiple* shift capable. I didn’t even know there was such a thing.”

“Me neither.” Buck sounded puzzled. “I thought it was one critter per shifter and that was it.”

“It’s supposed to be.” Lian chewed her bottom lip. “This is new to me.” She moved slightly away from Buck and looked at the captain. “I have one request, sir, if you don’t mind?”

“Name it, Doc.” He smiled at her paternally. “If it’s within my power, you got it. After what you did tonight—” She waved that away. “I’d like a sample of that DNA. My research lab—the place I told you about—”

“No problem at all. I’ll make sure you get some. And whatever or wherever that lab is, I hope you’ll put in a good word for us. We could use some helpful information now and again.” The captain looked somber. “We stopped a serial killer tonight, make no mistake about it. But we’ve got unanswered questions too.”

Buck looked at Cheney and Lian and then at the captain. “Like who’s behind it? Who was pulling this creature’s strings?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t pick up anything.” Lian clenched one hand. “If there’d been one iota of another presence, I like to think I’d have caught it.”

Cheney shrugged. “I didn’t either. Thought I felt something early on, but it wasn’t anything to do with the basilisk shifter. Most likely a case of too many wild hormones in the air.”

The captain sighed. “Okay. Go home. All of you. Cheney and Fisher—reports on my desk forty-eight hours from now. Dr. Herrick—our grateful thanks. I’ll be filing my own report with County in a few days when we’ve got more to go on.”

Buck stood, pulling Lian with him. Cheney followed suit. “Gotcha, Cap.”

Lian smiled at the captain. “You look as tired as I feel. You need to go home too.”

He smiled back, a totally genuine look that changed him from a cop into a warm and friendly man. “I will. Thanks, Doc. You’re welcome here any time at all.”

In an old-fashioned gesture that charmed Lian, he took her hand, lifted it to her lips and dropped a light kiss on her knuckles. “I can’t begin to imagine what it cost you to do what you did tonight. Just remember all the lives you saved. The women who will live now, because of you.”

She swallowed. “Thank you for that. I’ll try.”

“C’mon. Let’s go home.” Buck tugged at her arm.

“Yeah. I’m getting a bit nauseous. Jeez, Cap. Anybody’d think you were human or something.”

The captain snorted. “Get the fuck out of here, Cheney, before I decide to let you write reports for everybody.”

“I’m gone.”

## Epilogue

“Buck, you don’t need to do this.”

“Of course I do. Are you nuts? You’re so tired you can’t see straight, let alone drive.”

Cheney heaved a big sigh as he watched his partner arguing with his woman on the steps of the precinct. Buck was going to lose, sure as shit. He just didn’t know it yet. And, come to think of it, this was one time when the dude was right.

“Lian.” Cheney drew her attention away from the irate man in front of her. “You’re exhausted. If your ass dragged any more it’d leave a trail. Let Buck take you home. Curl up together and get some sleep. Wake up and fuck like rabbits if you want to, but for God’s sake make your mind up and quit arguing. You’re both giving me a headache.”

“But—”

Buck grabbed her and hugged her. “You heard the man. Don’t argue with me, honey. *Please*. I need you beside me

tonight.”

Cheney managed not to make gagging noises. To think his partner had sunk to *this*. “Yeah, Lian. If you don’t, Buck’ll have nightmares and call me at some ungodly hour whimpering and begging me to make ’em go away.” She gazed at him with a certain touch of professional interest. “*Can* you?”

“No, but that hasn’t stopped him yet.”

“Er, Cheney? You’re not helping.” Buck glared at him then returned his attention to Lian. “He’s right though. I need to know you’re safe. And the best way is to have you where I can keep an eye on you.”

Cheney drifted a little, letting his mind free to wander in a peaceful meadow. He made sure that image percolated through the heat surrounding his two friends.

Lian sighed. “Okay. I surrender. I’m tired and I want to know you’re safe too.”

Buck hugged her more tightly and dropped a kiss on her lips. Then went back and did it again, with more intensity.

“Hey. I’m still here, ya know,” Cheney reminded them.

“Why?” Buck didn’t look away from Lian, just separated their mouths for a second or two.

Cheney shrugged. “No reason at all, I guess. Just like watching the two of you make out in public.” He dug for his keys. “But it could get boring real quick. I’ll see you guys around.”

“Bye.” Buck sort of waved his hand at Cheney, but it was more of a *get out of here* type thing than a goodbye. Since he was now kissing Lian with enthusiasm, Cheney could understand it.

He walked away, humming under his breath, letting the night air flood his lungs and wash away the remains of what had been one hellaciously long night.

Buck was well and truly caught. Cheney knew him well enough to recognize the signs of a man tumbling head over ass into that weirdly strange thing poets called love. It wasn’t something he wanted or sought. Too much nonsense, fuss and bother and potential suffering went along with it, if half of what he’d read was true.

It would be an interesting experiment to watch Buck and see how it all played out.

Of course, Lian was one hell of a woman. Bright, attractive, incredibly intelligent and with a fierce kind of courage that had caught him totally off guard. She’d pulled the trigger on that beast without a blink, while stark naked and possessed by some kind of sexual alarm system that had aroused more people than he could count.

There weren’t many women who could do that—he couldn’t think of one, off hand—so she earned his admiration. If Buck got himself in solid with Lian and they hooked up permanently? Cheney’d be the first in line wishing them the best and happiest of futures.

It just wasn’t in the cards for him.

What *was* in the cards was a deep-seated need to see this case through to the end. To pursue and apprehend—or destroy—the mastermind behind the killing machine. He hated loose ends. He might not keep his home tidy, but he liked to keep his professional life as neat as possible. And this was *not* neat. It was a job half done. Buck had shouldered the burden of this case up to now. Cheney was ready to take over.

He strolled to his car, his thoughts meandering over the basilisk, the shape shifter who had more talents than he should have had, and the variety of ways in which he could have been created.

If he was *created*. If not? Was there a mutant strain out there of AGs who possessed more than one alter ego? And how did one control one of these things strongly enough to make them kill without a blink?

He sighed and leaned against the door of his car, staring into the dark night sky. He could call Gabrielle if he wanted



to ease his lust. God knows his balls had ached enough when Lian was sending out her lures, but all that had vanished at the sound of a bullet from an old fashioned gun.

Gabrielle was always happy to see him, smiling her pixie smile, stripping off her clothes and sprouting wings at a moment's notice. He enjoyed taking her into magic places and fucking her every which way they could think of. Wings defied gravity sometimes and Gabrielle was an inventive little fae.

But tonight didn't seem like it should be a fairy night. Tonight was something else, something darker, something—something tickling and taunting the edges of his consciousness.

He almost looked over his shoulder, then gave in and threw a glance behind him. There was nobody there, of course. But for a millisecond, he'd felt the tiniest glancing brush of—what? He opened his senses more fully, but there was nothing around him that was out of the ordinary.

There was only the silence of the deepest part of the night.

And an inexplicable uneasy feeling that sent a slight shiver down the spine of the tall detective leaning against his car. No more than twenty yards away, in the ink black shadows of a building, somebody stood completely still. And watched Cheney Fisher...

## About the Author

Sometimes dreams do come true. Wynne Hayworth's dream has always been to write good books that people will enjoy. Stories that make them smile, even if there's blood spatter tossed into a few of 'em. Humor is, to Wynne, a vital part of life. Without a laugh or two now and again, things can get horribly depressing, thus there's always going to be a strong dash of fun in everything Wynne writes. That's her promise to herself—and her readers.

To learn more about Wynne, please visit [www.wynnehayworth.com](http://www.wynnehayworth.com). She loves to hear from readers and you can drop her a note at [wynne@wynnehayworth.com](mailto:wynne@wynnehayworth.com).

*Signed, sealed, and seduced.*

## His Final Seduction

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When an affair with her boss wrecked her legal career, Sydney James finally admitted her sex addiction and swore off men. After a year of self-imposed celibacy, her friends surprise her with a trip to a Caribbean resort. Only they fail to mention her destination is the infamous erotic getaway, Club Carnal.

She fully intends on fleeing temptation—until the club's hotter-than-the-tropical-sun manager puts a kink in her plan.

And her celibacy.

Moments from death, Damien Blake signed a contract with a succubus who promised to save his life...for a price. In exchange, he must use his newly granted sex-demon powers to seduce and steal energy from one hundred women. Now, ninety-nine women later—just one conquest away from freedom—he meets his final victim, the alluring, enigmatic Sydney James. Long-dormant emotions sizzle to life and ignite a fire in his blood unlike any he's ever known.

But when a lethal clause in his contract is revealed, Damien is forced to make a deadly decision. Spend eternity in slavery...or kill the woman he loves.

*Warning: If you like hot sex with even hotter partners, then you've come to the right place. Here at Club Carnal, anything and everything goes...foreplay for dinner, hands-on body massages, toys that take on a completely new meaning, girl-on-girl action—and, if you're not careful, you might run into a sex demon. Or two.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for His Final Seduction:*

“You booked me at a sex club?”

Gripping the cell phone so hard she feared it might break, Sydney shook with rage. A sex club? What the hell were her friends thinking? She felt like a bitch who'd been shipped off to a breeding farm because she was in heat. Sure, she'd been in an anti-relationship funk the past year, but it was no one else's damned business.

“It'll be fun.” Genny's gloating voice shrieked though the earpiece. “You know what they say...‘what happens in the Caribbean, stays in the Caribbean’.”

“This isn't Vegas, Gen. It's a sex club.”

“A world-famous sex club, I might add. You can't imagine the kind of favors we had to pull just to get you a reservation.”

“There's no way I can stay here, Gen.”

“Sure you can. You haven't been out on a date since you moved back from LA. If you were a guy, I'd wonder if your dick hadn't shriveled up and fallen off.”

“Damn it, Genny.” She shoved her hand through her hair. If she'd been within arm's distance, she'd have strangled her long-time friend.

“Come on. When's the last time you got laid?”

“That's none of your business.”

Genny's laugh sounded like something that belonged to a hyena. “Don't remember, do ya?”

Sydney let out an exasperated breath. She remembered all too well when she'd last had sex—she just didn't *want* to remember the office escapade that had ended her aspiring legal career. “I can't believe you did this to me. Sending me here is like sending a recovering alcoholic to a party with an open bar.”

“Oh, stop being such a prude. It's not like you're going to fuck every man on the island...just a couple of them.”

“I'm not fucking anyone.” Sydney turned her back on the box of sexual goodies and walked onto the balcony to get some fresh air.

Didn't her friends understand? Sex got her into trouble. Bad trouble. It always had. It was the reason she'd sworn off men. She needed to get a handle on her libido. Her sex drive *couldn't* be the driving force in everything she did.

“Come *ooooon*. Get lucky with at least one guy. I'm sure you'll remember how good it feels. Hell, get lucky with a

woman. I know how much you've always wanted a little taste of the lesbian lifestyle..."

"I do not!" Surrendering to the muggy heat, Sydney peeled off her top shirt and used the cotton material to swipe at the sweat beads popping up on her forehead and neck.

"I just wanna see you have a little fun. You were party-girl extraordinaire in college, and after graduation, you were the up-and-coming lawyer every woman would have given her right breast implant to be. Now, let's face it...my grandma gets more action than you."

Genny's laughter bubbled through the phone's earpiece, and Sydney clenched her fists. Strangulation sounded like a better idea with each passing moment.

"Tell me I don't need to remind you how to have sex. Okay, first you—"

"Fuck off, Genny. I remember all the mechanics." Not even the blissful brilliance of the rolling hillside in the distance or the lapping waves put a damper on her anger. "But it doesn't matter because I'm boarding the next flight out."

"That's fine," Genny agreed easily, a smile in her voice. "There's not another plane scheduled to leave until Saturday, so like it or not, you're stuck there. You might as well make the most of it."

"Shit." She closed her eyes. What was she going to do? Locking herself in the closet sounded like a good alternative. "Just accept your fate, get drunk, find yourself some good-looking guy—or woman—and let your imagination and hormones run rampant."

A knock at the door preempted Sydney's rebuttal. "I gotta go." She ground out each word with deliberation. "But don't think for a second this conversation is over."

"Wait. Is it a guy? Is it—"

She clicked off before her friend got another word in. The conversation had gone on too long anyway. She tossed her shirt and iPhone onto the bed.

Rolling her eyes, she ripped the door open and almost fell on her ass.

The man she'd seen earlier—the one who'd set off a slideshow of X-rated pictures in her mind—relaxed against the doorframe, one foot crossed over the other. He was gripping a laptop-sized box. White linen pants encased his legs and tanned skin peeked through his unbuttoned shirt, revealing a chiseled chest and a sprinkling of dark hair. A restraint tied wet, jet-black locks at the nape of his neck, and a smile hot enough to heat the entire southern hemisphere decorated his face.

Sydney leaned against the door to alleviate some of the pressure from her suddenly shaking knees. "M-may I help you?"

"I sure hope so." He thrust the box toward her. "My name is Damien Blake. I'm the owner of Club Carnal."

"I-I..."

And just like it had happened in the lobby, a wave of lust annihilated her senses. Her grip on the door tightened and her legs started to buckle. It took every ounce of willpower she possessed to resist the impulse to rip off his linen pants, throw him down in the middle of the hallway and ride his cock until she screamed.

*Whoa.* She shook her head, sucked in a deep breath. *Where the hell did that thought come from?*

"W-what's that?" She pointed to the box he held toward her and, unable to control her shaking hands, grabbed the container and quickly pulled it to her chest.

His smile grew. So did the fire nipping at her clit. "A gift."

God, even his deep voice seduced her sanity into relaxing its rigid control and, as his gaze skimmed over her body, an elixir of heat under her flesh erupted into a boiling frenzy.

“Mind if I come in?”

“N-no,” she lied, taking an unsteady step to the side.

As he walked past, his shoulder brushed hers. A potent cocktail of sun and sex teased her nose, and she shook her head, tried to beat back the sudden rush of hormones his accidental touch unleashed.

“I hope your accommodations are to your liking, Ms. James.”

“They’re perfect.” She turned as slowly as possible, needing the time to soothe her frenzied wits. “Is there something wrong, Mr. Blake?”

“Wrong?” His face split into another dazzling smile. “No, nothing’s wrong. And please, call me Damien.”

“Okay.” She crossed her arms and clutched the box against her breasts. Was it the Caribbean heat or something more potent stirring her senses to new heights? Never before had a man’s simple presence caused such a fierce reaction in her body. “Is there something I can help you with then?”

“As a matter of fact, there is.”

He planted his hands on his waist and the edges of his unbuttoned shirt split apart, revealing even more tanned, toned skin. Like a toddler ogling a cookie jar, her gaze caressed every muscular rise and fall. The thought of tracing each of those defined lines with her tongue scattered gasoline on the simmering fire in her loins.

“I was hoping you’d join me for dinner, Ms. James.”

Her brow shot up. A strange, gorgeous man—the owner of an entire island—wanted to take her to dinner? *Seems more than people’s clothes were off down here.*

“The chefs have a wonderful lineup this evening,” he tempted her further.

“Dinner? Me?”

“Yes.” His laughter fanned the flames of lust. “What do you say?”

“I, uh...”

She scrubbed a palm over the side of her neck. How was she supposed to think about anything when her clit burned with the intensity of an out-of-control wildfire?

Shit, none of her reactions made sense. Before, she’d never accept gifts or agree to dinner with someone she’d met less than five minutes earlier, but as carnal thoughts tripped up the logic centers of her brain, the words just came out.

“Sure. I guess.”

“Wonderful.” He pointed to the package clutched to her chest. “While there’s no dress code per se, I took the liberty of bringing you a little something for the occasion.”

“You brought me...clothes?” Confusion wrinkled her brow and she looked at the box. He didn’t even know her, and he was bringing her gifts? Something wasn’t just off, it was alternate-universe off.

“Yes.” He lifted his right hand and stroked his middle finger down the side of her neck. Her eyes drifted shut. “It’s just something to accentuate the beauty of your body.” His other hand settled on her waist, drew her closer. “The contours of your curves. The brilliance of your breasts.”

On the verge of going supernova from his boldness, Sydney went limp and the box fell to the tiled floor. The only thing keeping her from joining it were the masculine arms that banded her.

“I’ve got you, Sydney.”

He sure did.

Rational thought dissolved. Her hands inched up his muscular forearms. The heat of his skin kick-started a chain reaction of lust cascading through her blood, boiling the fluid with fantasies and desires long denied.

“Who are you?” she whispered, losing herself in the sensual fantasy he spun with a single touch.

“Whoever you want me to be...”

He slipped the strap of her tank from her left shoulder and tugged the thin cotton until he exposed her breast to his hungry gaze. A thick spell of erotic mojo dampened reality, and the thought to stop him, to demand an explanation, never occurred to her.

*When you tempt a dragon, be prepared for the fire...*

## Dance of the Dragon

© 2009 Cathryn Fox

Zoologist Chloe Stevens is certain she’s on a wild-goose chase. There are worse things than being forced to travel to a remote South Pacific island, but to search for a *dragon*? She’s sure the real reason she’s been sent to find a creature that doesn’t exist is that her boss—and ex-lover—wants her out of the way while he properly *initiates* a new team member.

Whatever. Might as well relax and enjoy her all-expense-paid “assignment”, aka vacation on Ryuu Mountain. The secluded resort is the perfect place to indulge in a little carefree, hedonistic sex. Especially with Jared, the drop-dead-gorgeous bartender.

Their hot fling quickly melts into something deeper. When Jared reveals he is more than he seems, Chloe has a decision to make. Whether to take her discovery public and make her mark in the scientific world. Or keep his secret to herself—and surrender body and soul to the only man who sets the woman in her on fire.

*Warning: This book contains frank language, hot, hedonistic sex on a tropical island and big, scary, shapeshifting dragons who wouldn’t think twice about “gobbling” you up (in more ways than one).*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Dance of the Dragon:*

Chloe added a dash of lime and a pinch of sugar to the two ounces of rum already in the blender. As her entire body quaked in a way it had never quaked before, she worked to keep her voice steady when speaking. “Now you need to drop in the strawberries one at a time, slowly, carefully, adding just the right amount at just the precise moment until you get the perfect creamy texture.” Her own suggestive words began to heat her up and she could hardly believe how naughty she was acting.

She glanced over her shoulders and watched Jared’s powerful muscles bunch. His nostrils flared, his throat worked as he swallowed and he seemed like he was in pure agony. Her gaze traveled to his eyes, taking note of the rich amber ring, which seemed to grow, intensify and overshadow the green. He looked so passionate, so feral. Lord, it thrilled her to know that he wanted her as much as she wanted him. It bolstered her confidence and made her feel powerful, sexy...wild.

“Creamy is good,” he said, his voice deep and raspy. When she turned back around he took one predatory step closer

and looked over her shoulder. As he leaned into her, his breath felt hot and seductive on her neck. A shiver prowled through her and there wasn't a damn thing she could do to stop her body from shaking.

He burrowed closer. Sensual overload nearly fried her brain and, she suspected, the sexually scented gush of moisture between her legs hadn't gone unnoticed by him. His hard cock pressed against the small of her back, alerting her to his arousal. Moisture pooled on her tongue, and she itched to take every inch of this luscious man into her mouth. She added one strawberry to the mix and blended the concoction together, noting the way it had already begun to thicken.

His fingers closed over her hips and burned her flesh. He put his mouth close to her ear and whispered in a low tone, "Is it creamy yet, Chloe?"

Good Lord, it was creamy all right. Or rather, she was creamy. Hot, wet, creamy and aching for a rock-hard cock. Just like the one pressing into her back. She reached for another berry, but her hands were so damn shaky it slipped from her fingers and rolled onto the sandy floor, ruined.

She stepped back, her body bumping against Jared's. She made an attempt to retrieve the berry, but Jared stopped her. "Here, let me get that for you." In one fluid moment, Jared moved in front of her—a suggestive look in his eyes. With his chest crushed to hers, he slowly sank to his knees, his body never breaking contact with hers. He wet his lips, and Chloe nearly orgasmed then and there.

His hands trailed urgently over her curves, his thumb pressing into her flesh before he cupped the hem of her dress and cast her a smoldering look. She swallowed, hard, as passionate eyes captured hers.

Oh, boy!

He tossed the ruined berry into the trash and grabbed another from the bowl on the counter. After tucking himself beneath the high countertop, out of sight from any patrons should they happen by, he tapped on her thighs. Feeling wild and wicked, she gave in to impulse and widened her legs as she glanced out over the beachside bar. Dear God, what would she do if someone sauntered up to the hut for a drink? They might not be able to see Jared beneath the teak counter, but the color blooming on her cheeks and her rapid breathing would surely raise their suspicions. Despite that, she couldn't stop if she'd wanted to. Truthfully, she'd never done anything so sinful before—so deliciously, excitingly sinful.

Without preamble, he pressed the cool berry to her thighs and trailed it upward, coming perilously close to her damp panties. He sensuously brushed the fruit over her flesh, then placed it between his teeth. With one quick thrust, he ripped the lace from her hips. She gasped and gripped the counter, but that gasp turned into a heated moan when Jared leaned forward and swiped the cool strawberry tip against her clit. "Oh. Sweet. Lord," she cried out in heavenly bliss. Buried between her legs, Jared spent a long moment running the berry over her swollen clit, then pulled it from his mouth and squeezed until the cool, sweet nectar dripped over her pussy.

"How many strawberries until it gets really creamy?" he asked from deep between her thighs.

She was holding the counter so tightly, her knuckles began to turn white. "Just one, Jared. Just one," she managed to get out.

"Maybe I'd better check." He inserted one finger. "Mmmm, you're right. Very creamy indeed."

Oh, bloody hell. Someone was coming. As she wrapped her mind around that very important fact, she whispered, "Jared...coming..."

He chuckled. "That's the point, sweetheart."

Breathing hampered, she rushed out, "No, Jared. Someone coming...counter." She inched back, dipped her head and spared him a quick glance.

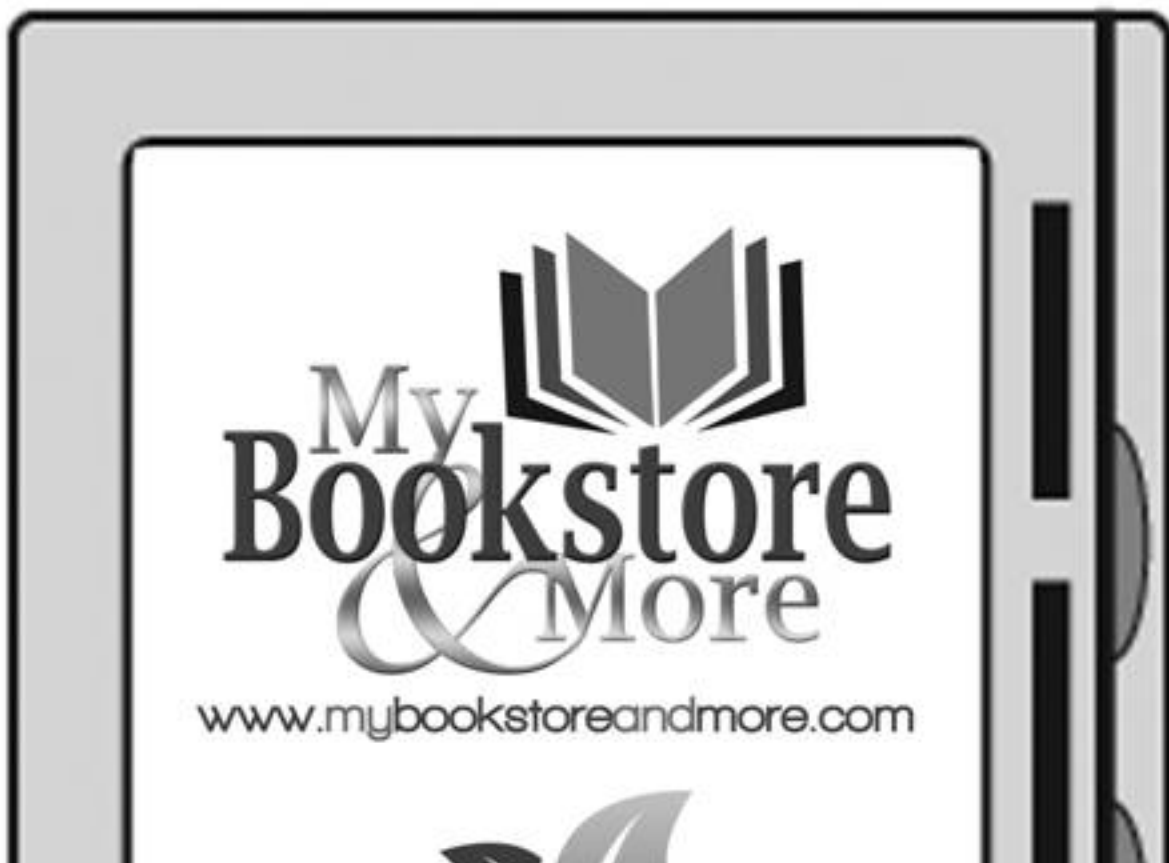
He moved his finger inside her. "I'm a little buried in something, babe. You'll have to cover for me," he murmured and scraped his thumb over her clit.

She was so turned on, moisture broke out on her body. A small bead ran between her breasts, leaving goose bumps in its wake. Heck, she needed him to ease the ache inside her more than she needed her next breath, but someone was approaching quickly, and she was hovering on the brink of an orgasm, barely able to form a coherent thought.

"Jared..." she whimpered, not sure she could actually pull it off.

Ignoring her protest, he ran the berry over her drenched cunt, teasing her engorged clit one last time before plopping the fruit into his mouth. He took a bite, letting the juice drip over his chin. "I must say there's nothing I like better than strawberries and cream."

Oh sweet mother of God. Breathe, Chloe, breathe...





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