



Loose Id

PUTTING OUT FIRES

SIENNA BLACK

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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Multicultural Paranormal

Carlin Rhodes is a firefighter, first and foremost. He loves his work, he's good at the job, and he's reliable to a fault. Some might say he's too focused. A night out on the town with a good friend is exactly the thing he needs to loosen up. Even if that good friend abandons him at the doors to the Baseline and leaves him to find his own fun.

Zaid, a fire-called Djinn, dances at the Baseline, a nightly routine that bares it all for his customers and keeps him entertained while he avoids his destiny as a leader of his kind. When Carlin watches, though, it's more than having fun. Zaid is intrigued and curious, drawn to the somber, focused man.

And like a moth to a flame, the firefighter is drawn to the fire-called djinn—and into a fight to save his city from the flame, when Zaid's destiny comes calling.

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: anal play/intercourse, dubious consent, male/male sexual practices, violence.*

Chapter One

“No one gets invited to the Baseline. Not unless you know someone.” And yet here he stood, awash in the teal glow of neon from the elegantly scripted sign that hung above the double doors. Music thumped behind them, just loud enough to be heard, but not so clearly that he could name the tune or dance to the beat. His heart picked up the rhythm, though, speeding adrenaline through his veins. Carlin Rhodes had been in the city five years and not yet scored an invitation. The rumors made it seem as if getting in took an act of God.

Toby couldn't get much further away from angelic, no matter how he played up his looks. Golden blond hair spilled over his shoulders in soft waves. He wore a silk shirt tonight, light and billowing. “*A romantic's shirt,*” he'd claimed as he stood in Carlin's door, but the black leather pants and silver-studded boots gave the lie to ideas of romance. Toby wasn't interested in serenades and poetry. He inspired wicked thoughts and hotter fantasies. He liked it that way.

He draped his arms around Carlin's shoulders and straddled his left hip, one leg on either side. He rocked against Carlin in time with the beat and made a low purring sound of pleasure. No way could he be an angel. Angels didn't tease.

“I met a guy who knows a guy. Surprise, baby.”

Carlin's good mood disappeared as he tilted his head, tucking his ear out of reach when Toby went for an earlobe nip. Predictable, if uncomfortable. “Don't.” He shrugged his shoulders to loosen the other man's grip and sidestepped out of his embrace.

Toby heaved a sigh. “You know I'm just playing, Carlin.”

“Yeah. I know.” And that was the problem. Carlin pushed his hands into his pockets. He made an easy target, the odd man out among their group of friends. The only man not in a relationship. The only one who didn't wear his preference of bedmate on his sleeve.

Not that he wanted that kind of attention, not from his friend. Friend, he reminded himself forcefully. There'd never be more between them. Not for lack of wanting. Not for lack of dreams.

But Toby didn't have plans to settle down. He liked his freedom too much. He enjoyed letting his whim, and his eye, dictate his plans. He didn't want to be tied to one man when a better might come tomorrow.

Carlin didn't want to be anyone's “just in case”.

Toby leaned against his shoulder. Sometimes the man *did* behave. He didn't hold, rub, or fondle. “Please don't tell me I got all dressed up and you're going to back out. You said you'd trust me. I told you I was going to blow your mind. You won't let me blow anything—”

“No.” Carlin stopped him with a laugh. “Hell no. Are you kidding? This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me.” He wound his arm around Toby's shoulders in turn and squeezed, felt him relax into the brief one-armed hug. “I owe you, man.”

Like flipping a switch, Toby's mood brightened again. He beamed and slung an arm around Carlin's waist, fingers knotting in the back of his jacket. “Least I could do, considering that you'd have birthed a small mammal if I threw a surprise party. Still, five years of gainful employment deserves more than a beer and a cupcake.” He tugged them both forward. “So come on, stop being chicken. Let's celebrate.”

The bouncer at the door didn't crack a smile as they strode up, despite Toby's outrageous flirting. With a job like his, he'd have to be incorruptible. The Baseline boasted an exclusive crowd, maintaining its reputation as *the* place to be seen. No doubt he'd heard it all, been tempted by the best offers, and learned to ignore even the greatest temptation.

Carlin had to admire his willpower. He definitely respected his size. No small man himself, Carlin still found himself looking up. Only a fool would tangle with a bruiser like this.

The big man smirked as if he'd heard the thought, then opened the door without saying a word. Toby murmured something and flashed another megawatt smile, but Carlin missed the details, abruptly lost in a wash of lights and noise.

Not noise. Music. Music Carlin could feel against his skin, in his heart and teeth. The baseline throbbed, vibrating through the air around the mass of bodies twisting and swaying below the balcony where they stood. Colored lights pulsed on and off, illuminating the dancers for an instant, then casting them into darkness again. Someone lifted his arms in a burst of yellow. The color reflected in the sheen on his partner's shirtless chest as he wound his arms around the exposed torso and ducked his head to taste skin.

Carlin groaned. He couldn't help it. The place was full of every indulgence he couldn't—wouldn't—allow himself. Hard-bodied men wearing just enough put themselves on display. Even from up here, Carlin could see slender, almost fey young things with their hips locked tight against partners with broad, muscled backs and thick, tattooed arms. It was a gay man's paradise. A stereotype. A fantasy.

Toby bumped his shoulder again. "I want to dance," he shouted over the music. "You coming with me?"

The dance floor beckoned. Carlin wanted to be down there, lost in a sea of bodies where it didn't matter that he couldn't dance to save his life. The music would move him, and he'd find a rhythm. He'd give in before the night ended, of that he had no doubt. He could already feel his hesitations melting away.

But for now, he shook his head and leaned close to be sure Toby could hear. "I want to look around awhile. I'll find you."

Toby grinned. "Can't miss me," he boasted, throwing his arms wide. The back of his hand bounced off a passing shoulder. The offended man turned

back, paused, and grinned, showing off a gorgeous smile. Toby beamed back, and the stranger offered a hand. When Toby took it, they disappeared into the darkness of the club. Carlin was left alone without so much as a backward glance.

Not a surprise.

Shaking his head and squaring his shoulders, Carlin braced his hands against the balcony railing and took another look around. No point in wasting the opportunity.

Staircases angled down to the dance floor on either side of the balcony, but the Baseline had more to offer than a single space. It sprawled in all directions, taking up many floors. Carlin knew, from rumor and report, the light filtering through the windows that circled the floor above came from private suites that were rented out months in advance. Parties were planned, secret rendezvous occurred, and what happened behind closed doors never left the room. Those who talked guaranteed they'd never be invited back again, and that was a penalty no one wanted to pay.

He watched from above for another few moments, but there was too much energy in the air to be still for long. He drifted, moving with the flow of other traffic, and followed the crowd to another set of stairs. Open steelwork spiraled down to the lower level. When he reached the bottom, he found himself in a hallway with no visible exit to the dance floor. The music pounded and pulsed just on the other side of the wall, tempting and frustratingly out of reach.

All right, so he'd have to spend some time getting his bearings. He turned back toward the stairs, meaning to retrace his steps, but stopped for the man coming down toward him. Carlin wasn't in a hurry. No need to crowd a stranger.

The other man slowed and lingered on the bottom step when he spotted Carlin. Even in shadow, Carlin could see him hesitate, then decide, shoulders squaring as he stepped down the final distance and drifted toward him. "Hiding or lost?"

Closer now, Carlin could tell he was smiling. Carlin ducked his head, mouth curling in response. "Just looking around. Figured I'd get where I wanted to go eventually."

The stranger laughed, more breath than sound, and breezed even closer. Some sort of sweet spice wafted from his skin. "Want a tour guide?" He stood inside Carlin's personal space without apology. He was shorter and narrower than Carlin, one of the throng of almost delicate boys. Another step closer and he lifted his hands, sliding them between Carlin's jacket and shirt, long, thin fingers dancing over his ribs.

Don't tense up, Carlin told himself, even as he caught the other man's wrists and stopped him, careful not to grip too hard. "I'm not looking for company."

The stranger laughed again. "Just want to watch, huh? That's too bad. But I know what you need. Follow me."

He stepped back, and Carlin let go, watching him turn with a stunning sort of grace. He glanced back once, then opened a door Carlin would never have found on his own.

A new song spilled out of the opening, clashing and conflicting with the beat from the dance floor. This one moved faster, too quick for dancing, Carlin thought, and people shouted, calling out words he couldn't quite understand. He moved, though, curiosity urging him through the door.

The kid was a mind reader. This was exactly where he wanted to be.

Two dozen men sat at small round tables, faces and expressions lost in shadows and low light. Some sat alone, others in groups of two or three, but they didn't bother talking to each other. Every man's gaze followed the figure on stage.

As if there could possibly be anywhere else to look.

The dancer had already lost his shirt and left it crumpled on the floor behind him. The buckle on his chaps dangled open. The top few buttons of his

jeans were undone, revealing some sort of dark fabric beneath, but the striptease wasn't the thing that held Carlin's gaze.

He'd seen performances like this before, in movies, flipping channels late at night, in privacy. As dancers went, the guy was good, but fancy footwork didn't get Carlin worked up enough to make his breath short and his jeans too tight. It hadn't, not until tonight, in this place, with this man.

He was tall and lean-muscled, the picture of physical perfection without going overboard. He flowed as he moved, muscle shifting smoothly beneath bronzed skin. His taunts and temptations were subtle: the roll of a shoulder, the twist of a hip. His grin, startlingly white and more than a little wicked, set off pulses of heat that fanned out from a knot of pressure low in Carlin's groin and spread to his scalp, making his skin tingle in their wake.

He was as dark as his complexion promised, the stubble of beard growth shadowing his cheeks and sparse hairs arrowing down his stomach to disappear beneath the waistband of his briefs. He wore his hair pulled back in a ponytail that swept his shoulders as he rolled his hips and turned his back to the crowd. Carlin had never before considered a back a thing of beauty, but for this man, he would make exceptions.

"Sit," his tour guide prompted, nudging him lightly with a narrow hip.

Carlin didn't need a second invitation. He lurched forward, then regained some grace, threading his way through tables as he angled toward the row of stools hugging the stage. A few other men sat there, expressions intent and necks craned. Carlin nearly missed his seat when he looked up again.

The chaps were off, forgotten in a lump. The dancer skimmed a hand down his chest and, judging by his expression, very much enjoyed his own touch. His hand continued, over his abs and beneath the edge of his jeans. Another twist of his hips and he doubled as he pushed them off, revealing a black Speedo, long, elegantly muscled legs, and an ass that begged to be touched.

"His name's Zaid," the tour guide said as he settled on the stool beside Carlin's. As if he'd heard, the dancer turned his head, flashed them both a grin, and winked.

Amber eyes. Carlin startled and stared hard. No, not amber. Copper, streaked with gold. It had to be a trick of the light. No one's eyes shone that way. Contacts, maybe. They couldn't be real. He couldn't have seen that much detail from this far away. Could he? *Look again*, he found himself willing the dancer. Look at me.

"He likes you," the imp at his shoulder announced, mouth close enough to Carlin's ear that he could feel breath against his skin. "Not many people get the flare."

"The flare?" Carlin couldn't look away. Zaid now twined around one of the poles built into the stage. Whether his hair had come loose or he'd taken it down hardly mattered. Carlin's fingers itched to rake it back, to make fists in it, and pull him close enough to crush their mouths together. Never before, never like this, not even in his wildest high school fantasies had he wanted a man—a stranger—the way he wanted Zaid.

And again it seemed he'd been heard, though this time Carlin knew he hadn't made a sound out loud. Still, the dancer's gaze snapped back to his, and one corner of his mouth quirked before he made another turn around the pole.

"You know, that color thing he does with his eyes."

"He did—" Carlin turned his head and found the other man had leaned close enough to kiss. He set his hands on his tour guide's shoulders carefully and urged him back onto his own stool. Space between them, he tried again. "He did that on purpose?"

"I don't know how much he controls," his guide admitted with a shrug and a crooked smile, "but some of these guys are here every night, hoping for the look you just got. You managed first time through the door." He clucked his tongue. "He likes you, all right. I'm impressed."

The dance ended, and Zaid took his bows to a storm of applause and whistles that twenty men, no matter how enthusiastic, shouldn't have been able to make. It echoed off the walls, and Carlin's ears rang. Zaid's prowling across the stage toward him made his heart stutter and leap.

Zaid sank into a crouch, one hand bracing his weight. The glow had gone out of his eyes, but they still stunned. Rich caramel and honey, they were framed by long, dark eyelashes. Amusement danced in them, and he grinned again. "Impressing Dash isn't easy either. He's picky," he teased, reaching down to muss the slender man's hair the way an affectionate brother might torment a sibling. "And he talks too much. You distracted me."

"No one noticed," Dash argued.

"That," the dancer answered, almost purring, "is because I'm a professional."

His gaze shifted again, and Carlin struggled not to gasp. Something in those remarkable eyes made his insides twist tight in anticipation.

Carlin didn't want it to stop.

"Zaid, but you knew that," he said as he held out a hand in offer to shake. "So the only one out of the loop is me. What's your name?"

It took two tries to pry his tongue loose enough to answer. He slid his hand into Zaid's, and the hairs on his arm lifted the way they did when he first slipped into a warm bath. Another pulse that centered in his balls before it spread had the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end too. "Carlin. Carlin Rhodes."

"The pleasure's mine. Relax," he added, a chuckle escaping him. "I only bite when I'm *really* feeling frisky." That said, he rose and went to collect his clothes. "Time to change." He glanced over his shoulder and cocked an eyebrow. "Coming?"

Carlin startled again and glanced at Dash. "Me?"

“You,” his companion confirmed. “I’m not allowed. Too young, he claims. I call that discrimination.”

“My room, my rules.” Zaid’s voice was rich with amusement. “Come on, Carlin. Don’t make me wait.” He took one last glance over his shoulder at the lingering crowd, then disappeared between curtains that seemed to part before him without a touch.

Dash sighed and slid off his stool. He caught Carlin under the elbow and pulled him to his feet, then slipped around behind him and propelled him toward the dark end of the stage. “Through the door, take a right and you can’t miss it.” He paused until Carlin found the knob and pushed it open. Then he sighed. “Have a little bit of fun for me.”

Chapter Two

Zaid wanted more of whatever that man had. That thing that burned just beneath his skin and drew his eye, reeled him in as surely as if bait had been dangled before him. It rivaled the music and his own heartbeat. It had taken every ounce of his concentration to hold curiosity and lust at bay.

He'd seen a thousand men wander through with hungry eyes and desperate hands. Sometimes the loneliness became too much to bear. He'd taken dozens to his bed, but none of them satisfied him for long. It was the same in every city, in every club and dance hall he'd ever frequented. He performed to make his audience happy. He sated needs by sharing a little of himself, by giving a man a taste of Fire, but it never lasted. It had been far too long since anyone offered more than temporary distraction from the pains of the world.

This man, though, lacked all the hallmarks of Zaid's usual. There was something quiet about him. Not demanding, not desperate like the others who had watched him tonight. There'd been desire in his gaze, yes, but it didn't rule him. To tell the truth, he'd looked surprised, and a man taken off guard by his own wants was too much to ignore.

The knock, when it came, was quiet, almost hesitant. A new approach. Zaid caught himself smiling at his reflection in the mirror. "Come in," he called. The doorknob turned with glacial speed. It made his smile widen.

The man, Carlin, peered around the edge of the door with wide eyes as though he feared what he might see. His gaze swept the room, missing the sole occupant on its first wary pass. Zaid knew when he'd been spotted. He heard

the sharp breath sucked in, watched color blossom in the other man's cheeks as his gaze darted away.

"You're not decent."

Zaid bit back laughter and considered his reflection again. He hadn't bothered to belt his robe shut and the black satin briefs were long gone, but not decent? He had ample reason to take offense. He settled on amused, though he let one dark eyebrow rise slowly.

"I've spent hours working on this body," he explained, making no move to cover it. The shift of his shoulders made terrycloth inch even more perilously close to sliding off. The midnight contrast to his skin suited him. He skimmed a hand over well-defined abs and left his fingers pointed toward the thatch of dark hairs that matched his robe and revealed his cock. He glanced up, found Carlin watching despite himself, and stroked a finger along his length. It thickened, stirring, and Carlin wet his lips, then forced his gaze away again.

Perfect.

Zaid turned to face him now, unashamed as he leaned against his dressing table, legs spread and hips canted forward. "I think I deserve an apology."

"I-I didn't mean—"

"I know." Zaid gestured toward the door. "Come in, please. Close it behind you."

"But you're not dressed."

"No, but I'm comfortable. You came here to see me. Should I put it away?"

Carlin hesitated another few seconds, then shrugged inside and pushed the door shut behind him. He leaned against the wood as though he took some strength from having something solid behind him. Odd, for a man built like this one was, and yet somehow endearing. Zaid watched him struggle with the impulse to look down, take in Zaid's body and his nakedness. When he lost—a

battle he had no hope of winning, Zaid thought somewhat smugly—he closed his eyes and murmured something soft beneath his breath.

Zaid chuckled. “Water? Or maybe you'd like something stronger to drink?” He straightened and moved, drifting toward the wet bar he kept for these occasions. He took his time as he set up tumblers, plucked cubes out of the bucket, and silently debated the merits of rum versus whiskey. Ice chimed against the sides of the glasses.

“I'm... Water would be great,” Carlin amended after clearing his throat.

Water. *How tame.* Men like this, sedate or shy on the outside, were usually practiced actors. Their reticence was a game. Not this one. Zaid could read it in the set of his shoulders and the angle of his chin. He felt genuine uncertainty. Interesting.

But he'd asked for water, and Zaid didn't want to push hard. Not yet. He filled the glass, fingertips grazing Carlin's when the drink changed hands. He could all but feel the buzz of anxious energy that hummed just beneath the other man's skin. Zaid lifted his now-free hand and brushed his fingers against Carlin's jaw.

Carlin reared back, tensing, then stopped himself. He let out a short, hard breath and relaxed, murmuring, “Sorry.” He scowled at the glass he held and downed a mouthful of water like a punishment.

“Don't be,” Zaid countered. “You're not used to being touched.” He let his hand drift to the bigger man's shoulder. “Is that why you came to see me? In hopes I'd cure you of this fear?”

Carlin's eyes widened in surprise. The breath he expelled this time came out as laughter. “Cure me? What? No. I...was just looking. Just watching the show.”

Zaid's mouth curved faintly. “No one just watches, Carlin. Not here.” And yet, the note of sincerity in his voice remained. “Are you here alone?”

He shook his head quickly. “I came with a friend.”

Zaid moved a half step closer. Carlin's pulse jumped visibly. "That's some friend. It's not any man who can score an invitation to a place like this."

He smiled quickly. "Toby's good."

"And yet," Zaid pointed out as he slid his hand down Carlin's arm and laced their fingers together, "you came to me alone."

Carlin's cheeks flushed again. "We're not that sort of friends."

Zaid ducked his head to mask a smile and tugged the bigger man along, one cautious step after another, toward the couch he kept for private meetings. Settled thigh to thigh, it made a comfortable place to rest. Curled closer, it left just enough room for play. Crushed velvet felt like heaven against bare skin.

Out of deference to Carlin's nerves, however, he draped one side of the robe across his lap, covering himself as he settled and waited for his company to sink to the cushion beside him.

If the glass in his hand had been flawed, Zaid thought it might have cracked in Carlin's grasp. He emptied it, draining the last few sips in one long swallow. A bead of water escaped his mouth and raced toward the corner of his jaw. He let go long enough to lift a hand and swipe it away.

Zaid beat him to it, claiming the drop with his thumb. It allowed him to touch the man without prompting yet another flinch. Good. Better. Their shoulders grazed, and Zaid prompted, "Tell me why you're here."

Carlin took a breath to speak, stopped himself, and smiled. "I guess the easy answer is I'm celebrating." A moment's pride squared his shoulders and lightened his eyes. "Five years, today, on Engine 29. Fire department," he clarified.

Ah, now it makes sense. Fire will always find its own. And Fire was irresistible. Zaid murmured, "Congratulations," even as he moved, giving Carlin only a moment to register the shift. His eyes widened, and the pupil swallowed color in surprise; then Zaid brushed their mouths together, and Carlin's lashes tickled Zaid's cheeks as his eyes closed.

He knew in a second that he'd made a mistake. He'd forgotten this man wasn't like the others, desperate for a favor or seeking the answer to his wildest dreams. Carlin hadn't begged to be invited backstage. Zaid had chosen him without prompting and without pleas. A fierce need to take, to consume the man, swept through Zaid, and it was all he could do not to give in to the heat that flashed up between them, an invitation to lose himself in another. It shook him to the core, but the kiss went on. It had to go on.

Carlin made a low sound, half a question, and one hand drifted to touch Zaid's hair. It made just the faintest pressure against his head, irritatingly light. Zaid wanted more. He growled in response and deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue between Carlin's lips so the bigger man would open for him, licked deep, thrilled by the coolness of Carlin's mouth in comparison to the heat of his own. He smiled and nipped, startling a flinch out of the fireman, and Carlin's fingers spasmed into a fist, locks of Zaid's hair caught between them. Perfect, but still not enough. Zaid nipped again.

Carlin jerked his head back, retreating. He didn't bother closing his mouth against panting breaths. It took a second for his gaze to refocus on Zaid, still hovering half a breath away from another kiss. He wet his lips and murmured, "Whoa. That was... Didn't expect it."

Zaid smiled and shifted forward, pushing Carlin deeper into the couch. When his robe slipped open this time, he didn't think Carlin would mind. He heard no protest as he straddled the big man's thighs, trusting he'd keep him from sliding off his knees. He looped his arms around Carlin's neck, letting long fingers play in the short hairs at the nape of his neck, and reveled in the feel of the thick ridge of Carlin's erection.

"So much better." His hips rolled, and he hissed at the rasp of denim against sensitive skin. "Do you want to hurt me, Carlin?"

"N-no, not at all."

Zaid grinned and let a hand tumble down his chest, stopping only when he hooked his fingers beneath the waistband of Carlin's jeans. "Then these need to come off. Denim's nice, but I favor skin to skin."

Carlin frowned. "You want to sleep with me?"

Zaid laughed and brushed his thumb against the furrow between the fireman's brows, easing it away with that caress and another kiss. "I want to have sex. Sleeping can come later. Now. Tell me you're not taken."

"I'm not taken," he echoed dutifully.

Zaid's hand wandered back to Carlin's waistband. He twisted open the top button with practiced ease. "Tell me you want me too."

Carlin's hips shifted, lifting off the couch. The motion drew Zaid's attention back to the promise of the package hot and hard beneath his palm. "I want you too," he murmured.

The zipper parted with a muted buzz of sound, revealing dove gray boxer briefs. Zaid chewed the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing aloud. Carlin would take it the wrong way, and the laughter that threatened wasn't meant to mock. "You really are a good boy, aren't you? We don't get many of those around here."

Carlin didn't feel at all like a good boy. He sure as hell didn't want to behave. Getting naked with a hot dancer hadn't been in the plan when they'd left his place tonight, but here and now, he couldn't say he minded much. Or at all.

He tried to forget how long it'd been since the last time he'd dared to act on an impulse. He refused to keep track of how many times he'd pushed desire aside and not taken a chance or pursued an opportunity. He'd put his career and his reputation first for so long that sometimes he worried he'd forgotten what it felt like to have another man's hands on him.

He remembered now.

Zaid slid his hand between layers, pressing his palm insistently against Carlin's cock. Heat from the touch arrowed through him, racing along his nerves and traveling up his spine. Sweat broke out on his skin, and he licked the first salty drops off his upper lip. A groan escaped him as Zaid gripped, squeezing him eagerly through his shorts.

"That's good?"

"That's the best thing I've felt in a long time." He lifted his hips again, pressing into Zaid's hand. When the dancer leaned in for another kiss, Carlin curled a hand at the back of his neck and pulled him deeper. He could feel the heat of Zaid's cock against his stomach, and he worked a hand between them, fingers brushing hot skin cautiously.

Zaid jerked and murmured, the sound buzzing against Carlin's lips. He moved, trailing kisses down the side of Carlin's throat, following the pulse that thundered beneath his skin. He tucked his nose into the hollow and reached for Carlin's hand, lacing their fingers together.

He should have guessed there was more to the gesture than holding hands. Truthfully, though, it was a wonder his mind worked at all. Every nerve fired in overdrive, lending each touch twice the impact. When Zaid slid their tangled hands to his groin, curling their fingers around both cocks, Carlin nearly shouted out loud. When Zaid rocked his hips, thrusting against Carlin's length as he pushed their hands down in counterpoint, only biting the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood kept Carlin from coming on the spot.

"Don't be shy," Zaid whispered, breath swirling hot and moist against Carlin's jaw. "Don't hold back. Let me make it good." He thrust again and let his head fall forward, dark hair spilling against Carlin's shoulder in cool counterpoint to hot skin. He shuddered, a low groan escaping him, and scraped his teeth against Carlin's skin as his hips rolled again.

Carlin fisted his free hand once more in Zaid's hair. The smell of him intoxicated, warm skin and something tempting, with the bite of spice. Smoke, and a hint of...

Smoke.

Habit and hours of emergency training began to chase thoughts of pleasure out of Carlin's mind. The heat of passion was one thing, and the heat between bodies something else, but neither of those started real fires. Though he might be hot enough to sizzle, the smell lingered in more than just his mind.

"Zaid." He pushed the dancer away from his throat with a strong but careful pressure. "Candles. Do you have candles or a space heater or any kind of open flame in here?"

Dark eyebrows knitted over golden amber eyes as the question registered. He shook his head. "I don't keep candles. There are too many costumes. Loose fabric that's easy to burn."

"Someone else doing a show? I smell smoke," Carlin explained.

He felt more than saw Zaid tense. The dancer's gaze unfocused again, for just a minute, and Carlin had the sense that someone or something brushed past him, close enough to stir hair but not quite to touch. Then Zaid sucked in a sharp breath and skidded backward out of his lap. By the time Carlin had fastened his jeans, Zaid stood at the door.

"Not this way," he insisted when Carlin joined him. He caught his sleeve and tugged, backing up. "There's a fire."

Chapter Three

If there'd been time, Zaid might have laughed. Tempered his words with a quick smile and a wink to let the other man know that things were under control.

This was not that sort of blaze.

Smoke whispered against the other side of the door. It licked and coiled and followed the grain of wood to the floor. It slipped beneath the crack at the bottom and began to climb, ghostly tendrils reaching toward Zaid, beckoning. Pulling. Luring him in.

One or two of the others working at the club knew Zaid called fire a liability. They assumed him a firebug, turned on by the heat and color and potential for pain. Only one of them knew he'd been born at the heart of an ember by the power of a wish. Powerful magic and fairy-tale fluff, but true nevertheless.

Dash had caught him in a moment of indulgence. He'd danced all night and entertained the fortunate in his dressing room until the sun began to rise. Ordinarily he would have waited until he reached home to let go of control and burn away exhaustion in a flash of cleansing fire. It brought restoration and rebirth in an instant, an ancient trick all *ifrit* knew.

That night, he'd been too tired to even contemplate the blocks home. He'd taken a chance. A sharp gasp and the clatter of keys as they hit the floor gave away his observer and the fact that he'd been caught. Zaid had never seen what he looked like at the heart of flame, but he'd watched others perform the ritual often enough that he knew it would seem impossible to survive.

And yet he had. They'd talked for hours. Dash walked him home, asking questions all the way, and Zaid answered those he could. They'd ended up in bed together, that first and only time. When the day moved on, they walked back to work arm in arm, and Dash made a promise he'd yet to break.

He'd hired on unofficially as a screen and bodyguard. He kept unwanted hands off and escorted those who'd been chosen. A surprising task for a boy— young man—who looked so easy to manipulate, but Zaid's new confidant had unexpected strengths. He'd become friend and manager and keeper of sorts, which made it odd that he hadn't come to warn them about the fire.

No, Zaid amended as the smoke curled higher, climbing toward the ceiling. Not so odd at all. He'd have had no warning. The fire now crackling audibly beyond the door had not been started by a mortal man. There'd been no striking match, no tinder for the flame.

The cloud that hovered above them now seemed to form a head that bobbed in acknowledgment of Zaid's understanding. Not man-made and not accidental. This was djinn-made fire.

“Zaid.” Carlin shook him by the shoulder. “Are you listening to me?”

Back to the fireman and the worry in his eyes. Zaid managed a faint smile and brushed a thumb against his cheekbone. Relief lightened Carlin's expression, and Zaid turned his back to the door that wouldn't last long in the path of the inferno outside. He could feel its approach as surely as he breathed. He could sense the malice and the wicked glee it exuded as it destroyed the tables and chairs around his little stage. It was hungry, and it followed an invisible guide. It wouldn't claim him tonight, though. His attacker hadn't counted on ordinary mortal senses to alert him to a fire that had been masked magically. Now that Zaid was aware, he could survive any conflagration.

Carlin, on the other hand, was very much at risk. “There's a back way,” he told the bigger man, reaching for his hand. “We'll have to climb boxes, and the door may stick, but we'll get out.” If they moved. The door behind them creaked

threateningly as if to emphasize the point. The smoke, which had been purely white before, now billowed in beneath the crack in shades of darkening gray.

Carlin seemed as much in a hurry to go as Zaid, but not the right way. He patted himself down as he faced the door the fire might claim any second. Zaid frowned, letting just a hint of impatience tighten his voice. "What are we waiting for? What have you lost?"

"My phone," Carlin answered, brow furrowing. "I have to call the station, let them know what kind of situation they're walking into. If it's going to go fast—"

"Too fast to issue warnings," Zaid said, hand on the bigger man's forearm, stopping his body search at least temporarily. "At the very least, call from outside. What good does it do to warn them if you die in the process?" He could see the war of conscience clearly painted on Carlin's face. He understood the man's dilemma. He'd signed on for a job with a strict set of rules.

But the Fire-called djinn didn't know them, and even if they did, they wouldn't all obey. Now wasn't the time to linger within the narrow scope of the human world. Maybe, in some ways, Carlin knew more about a broader range of things, but when it came to a djinn's fire, Zaid had him beat. He wouldn't be denied.

He curled his fingers into Carlin's sleeve and pulled, far too insistently to call it a simple tug. "Outside," he said again. "Carlin. Safety first and then solutions, yes?" He put as much hope as he could in the smile he flashed his companion. There wasn't time to stand and argue like this.

The fire intensified, waves of heat surging through the door. Now a piece the width of Carlin's hand splintered off and fell backward, devoured by the flame. Black smoke roiled through the opening, carried on a wave of heat so forceful that both men stumbled as if pushed. A reaction to Zaid's too-casual reaction? It was more than possible. A djinn, an ifrit, could push his senses out along with the smoke, using it as a sort of spy. He could watch and hear and feel everything. The question was why, and who?

“Here.” Carlin stopped to tug the collar of his shirt over his own mouth and nose. Makeshift filter in place, he turned to Zaid and tugged the robe shut, lifting a section of the collar to press it over Zaid's mouth and nose as well. “Breathe through this. It won't keep us completely safe, but it'll help, for a while. Better than ash in our lungs.”

Zaid didn't need the protection, but explaining now would take too long. He smiled instead, knowing it would touch his eyes, and brushed past the bigger man to the storage room door. It took a decent shove to push it wide enough that Carlin's shoulders would fit through, but once inside, they had a little more room to move.

And not much light to see by. Carlin would have to let his eyes adjust. Zaid pressed forward, unhindered by the darkness. “The other door's back here.”

True to his word, boxes littered the floor, making an obstacle course that fouled Carlin once or twice. He stumbled and cursed, and Zaid reached for his hand, keeping his voice steady, reassuring, though the fire that ravaged his dressing room all but howled behind them.

When they'd reached the back wall, Carlin moved boxes, tossing them aside as Zaid worked at loosening hinges that hadn't moved for years. He let the robe slip away from his face, certain that Carlin wouldn't know the difference. Human eyes would never be able to distinguish something that subtle in a room so dark, and holding it in place made the progress twice as slow. Fire could not hurt Zaid. Smoke would not burn his lungs, a fact that brought him cold comfort when Carlin began to cough.

The scent of flaking rust smelled sharp even through the smoke. The protesting shriek of hinges rang in Zaid's ears as the door finally inched inward. “Carlin,” he shouted, and the big man loaned his weight to the effort. The door before them shuddered and groaned; the door behind began to burn.

Then with a last squeal of metal on metal, their escape route opened wide and a rush of cool air swept in to combat the wall of heat approaching. Neither

man lingered to witness the clash. They stumbled out of storage together, feet tangled in spilled costumes that would only feed the fire. Zaid felt a moment's sorrow for all that loss, but clothes and furniture could be replaced. No matter how many times a soul returned, a life could not.

The walls of the back hallway were concrete, which would slow the fire, cool substance leeching heat from the flames, but they didn't need fuel to progress, just intent and control. Zaid did not intend to stay and see how long it took his enemy to regain his momentum. Orange light already flickered, splashing against the walls to herald the coming torment.

He knotted his fingers in Carlin's shirt and pulled him stumbling after as he raced for the EXIT sign that flickered only dimly, half of the bulbs burned out. It took several tries and a solid shoulder slam to move these doors too, but they gave eventually. They jogged across a parking lot free of cars and turned back when they were safe to watch flame lick at the opening they'd passed through.

Carlin didn't ask permission. He pulled Zaid into his arms. Zaid felt him shudder, forehead pressed against the top of his head. "Close," he murmured. "Too close for me."

"Too close for either one of us," Zaid answered. And added silently, Too personal. Too angry. Who are you?

The answer came in a rush, as if he'd asked the question out loud. No, with this one, he wouldn't need to. Thoughts weren't safe and certainly not private. "*Amouk*."

The silent but very present other let slip a thread of dark amusement as acknowledgment of his name. Images of the wild-eyed companion of Zaid's past flickered through his memory. Tall and broad and handsome as sin. Wicked and cunning and out of control. He'd begun the downward spiral into madness ages ago, consumed by the power that flowed through the djinn and could sometimes overwhelm even the strongest will.

That he'd come here now, with the intent to do harm, boded well for no one. Tonight, the battle was his, but it wouldn't end here.

Zaid had lost his grip on Carlin while he searched, or Carlin had let go. Either way, he stood a few paces away now, shoulders hunched as he stabbed thick fingers at the phone in his hand. "Come on, c'mon," he muttered before shaking the phone, then folding it in his fist. He looked, for a moment, like he might hurl it across the parking lot, but he closed his eyes, tipped his head back, and exhaled heavily instead.

When he opened his eyes again, Zaid moved back to his side. "What's wrong?"

"No signal," Carlin answered, jaw tight. He glanced up, and his gaze went to the building, already visible flames reflected in his eyes. They could hear raised voices, cries and shouts that under other circumstances might have been mistaken for happier sounds. Above that came the telltale whine of sirens and the growl of heavy engines.

"Good," Carlin exhaled. "Thank God. Cell tower must be flooded and blocking me out. I couldn't get through." He started to move toward the building again, skirting its edge. His shoulders sat high and tight, and he looked for all the world like a warrior preparing for battle.

Zaid caught his wrist, then laced their fingers again. "We have to go."

"What?" Carlin's attention still rested on the flames that now licked impossibly up the side of the Baseline's building impossibly. Eyebrows knitting, he said, "It's burning. That's concrete, isn't it?" He shook his head. "I have to help. Make sure everyone got out. If my rig's here—"

"Are you on duty?" Zaid caught his chin to keep him from looking away. "Is this your job, tonight, or is your time your own?"

Carlin paused, then admitted reluctantly, "I'm off."

"Then take me home." Zaid stepped close, pressing against Carlin's body. He shivered pointedly and allowed himself a measure of relief when the fireman wound a strong arm around him and tucked him close.

Though the shudder had been forced, Zaid had reason to be afraid. One dishonest act might save an innocent man so much more. He would apologize later. For now, he had a duty to keep Carlin safe.

For the first time in far too long, Carlin hadn't come home alone. He should have been celebrating or delirious with relief. It should have meant that he wasn't out of luck on the dating scene. That he'd found someone who understood that his need for discretion had nothing to do with the strength of his desire and everything to do with a career he wanted to keep.

Tonight, he just felt grateful that they'd made it back safely. He'd seen too many tragedies not to know that things could have been much worse. If they'd had no second exit, if the doors had been locked...

It didn't matter. They were out, and they were home.

"It's not much," Carlin said, locking the door behind Zaid. "The heater works, and the roof doesn't leak, but it's not very fancy." It suited him, though. The apartment had all the necessities, and he didn't struggle to make rent. He lived well within his means, embracing his simple needs and simpler tastes. His home reflected them, a haven when he needed it.

Zaid looked completely out of place, and yet still as comfortable in his skin as he had been on that stage. "It doesn't have to be." He stepped into Carlin's personal space and gathered fistfuls of his shirt. He leaned, and Carlin looped an arm around him again. "I don't need fancy. I just need calm."

Carlin smiled crookedly. "Calm I've got. Maybe even boring. I don't usually go out like tonight," he explained.

Zaid stretched to kiss the underside of his jaw. "Lucky me."

There were a dozen reasons why he shouldn't tip his chin down and make the gesture a proper kiss. More, probably, Carlin reasoned, but that didn't stop him. It didn't keep him from making a low sound of need when his lips brushed Zaid's, and the dancer responded by tracing Carlin's mouth with his tongue.

He slid his hands into Zaid's hair again, making careful fists as the kiss deepened, their tongues twining together, retreating, and joining again. Zaid's hips rocked forward against Carlin's, the hard length of his erection notable. Or not so, given the little he wore.

"I have clothes," Carlin murmured, mouth still grazing Zaid's. "Sweatpants you can borrow."

Zaid chuckled. "Should I be offended that you want to cover me?"

"No! God, no...no," he said again. "I just thought you might be more comfortable. Warmer." Though heat seemed to radiate from his skin. "You don't have to cover if you'd rather not."

"Good." Zaid leaned close again, pressing a kiss to the base of Carlin's throat. "Because you smell like smoke and probably need someone to wash soot off your back." He turned away then, crossing the living room and angling for the hallway that led deeper into the apartment. He was out of sight when his voice drifted back. "Which door's the bathroom?"

Zaid hadn't asked. Carlin didn't mind. He caught himself grinning and let the other man's casual confidence settle him too. He was here, tonight. He belonged here, and Carlin wasn't going to let himself dwell on how good it felt not to be alone. He wasn't going to think about what had driven them here, because it didn't show when he looked at Zaid. If he hadn't known, he'd never guess that just twenty minutes ago they'd escaped a disaster. No, for now, he meant to enjoy Zaid's company. He'd take what he was given, take a shower with the other man. Then he'd call and make sure he wasn't needed. He already knew he'd have a hard time leaving Zaid if it came to that tonight. He shook his head and followed. "Second on the right."

There wasn't room in his postage-stamp apartment for a deep-bottomed tub or a walk-in shower. The bathroom bordered on being too small even for Carlin's taste, but standing in the doorway now, he felt no urge to complain.

Zaid had already started the water running. The first tendrils of steam drifted past the shower curtain, fogging the mirror by slow degrees as they passed. Zaid's robe sagged off his shoulders, revealing an expanse of honeyed caramel skin that made Carlin itch to taste it. He balled his hands.

Zaid glanced over his shoulder and grinned, his eyes seeming to flash with molten color again. His gaze dipped lower, pausing near Carlin's belt and the probably evident proof of his arousal, then rose. He straightened, letting the robe slip away to pool in a puddle of midnight at the side of the tub.

Carlin's mouth went dry as Zaid crossed the few steps toward him and hooked his fingers just inside his waistband. He tugged Carlin forward, murmuring, "Close the door. It's cold out there."

He didn't have much time to do it. Zaid's hands were busy, unfastening his belt and pushing his shirt up, warm hands smoothing over his skin as he worked it off, then went back to unzip his jeans. Their gazes met while Zaid pushed them down, and Carlin stepped out eagerly. Zaid curled his hands at Carlin's hips and pulled them forward so their erections met. Carlin groaned, and Zaid murmured, "Shower with me."

Zaid held the curtain for him as Carlin ducked the rod. He reached for Zaid, but the dancer pushed his hands away, eyes dancing. "Clean first."

In his hands, a bar of ordinary soap became a very clever torture device. He used its edges to trace lines of muscle and worked the lather into the nest of dark curls surrounding his cock. He thrust through his fingers on the pretense of getting clean, and Carlin dug his nails into his palms, watching, wanting, and forbidden to touch.

Then he did the same for Carlin, washing head to toe. He kissed his chest when the soap rinsed away. He sank to his heels and pressed another against

the hip bone. He avoided touching Carlin where he most wished for it until he'd slicked his hand with lather and straightened again.

He swallowed the urgent groan that escaped Carlin when Zaid curled his fingers around his erection and began stroking. He pressed Carlin to the back of the shower, and Carlin grabbed the rod to stay on his feet as Zaid leaned into the kiss with a whimper of his own.

Not long. This wouldn't last long. He could feel his balls draw up and his body tense. His cock jerked in Zaid's hand, seconds away from release. He grabbed Zaid's wrist to slow him down, but the dancer was determined. He squeezed gently and bit down on Carlin's bottom lip. One last stroke.

Pleasure rocked through Carlin. He tried and failed to choke back the cry that erupted from him as he came in thick, urgent pulses through Zaid's hand. Too long since someone else held him. Too long since another man's touch pushed him over the edge.

"More," he rumbled when he could open his eyes. "More." This time he took the lead, trading places with Zaid. Carlin closed his hand around the other man's cock, and Zaid arched off the wall of the shower, gripping Carlin's shoulders instead.

He stayed close, thrusting desperately into Carlin's fingers as he bit and licked and sucked at Carlin's neck. His gasps became whimpers, his whimpers groans as his hips rocked faster. "Carlin, kiss me."

The moment their mouths met, Zaid came with a sound that buzzed against Carlin's teeth. He bucked against the grip on his cock, hips twisting and driving forward until only shivers remained. Then he sagged back against the wall again, wet hair hiding his face.

Carlin let cooling water rinse off the evidence of his need, then caught Zaid's jaw and tipped it up. He brushed his hair back, searching his gaze. "You okay?"

Zaid's smile spread slowly but stretched broad. He straightened with some effort and pressed their mouths together. "Very."

Then he pushed the curtain back enough to reach for a towel and murmured, "Turn the water off. We'll start over. Drying off will be just as much fun as getting clean."

Chapter Four

"You missed a good one last night. And by the way, you're late." Jacob met Carlin at the station door and pressed a cup of coffee into his hands. "Everything okay?"

Carlin stared at the other man for a moment, trying to focus on his friend while his mind caught up. "Yeah," he said after clearing his throat. "Overslept. Sorry about that. I missed something?" He brushed past Jacob and headed toward the break room, setting down the mug he carried so he could peel off his coat.

He'd never been late to the station before. Then again, he'd never had such a good reason to stay in bed. It had been very easy to let Zaid lure him back in. The dancer's hands were warm and his body eager. What began as a promise of five minutes stretched to ten and then half an hour. Carlin could have stayed longer, would have happily, but his sense of duty prevailed. At least he had something to look forward to at home. Don't assume, he tried to warn himself for the umpteenth time. He might not be there. He's not yours to keep. It wasn't working. Things had changed overnight, and he wasn't ready to be reasonable yet.

"You missed a fire," Jacob told him. The other man studied him warily, as if he could see the change in Carlin too. "I'm surprised you didn't turn up. They ended up sending out half the city. Exactly your kind of thing. I'm telling you, it was a beaut."

Leave it to Jacob to say something like that. Most of the guys on the crew had a healthy respect and grudging admiration for the flames, but Jacob saw a burning building with an artist's eye for the beauty of the thing. He spoke in

poetic terms about brush fires, and a good fireplace roar could bring a tear to his eye. He took a lot of guff for his sensitive side, but Carlin trusted no one else as much when they shared a line.

Despite the fact that he knew the answer, and the wave of guilt that formed a lump he had to swallow again, Carlin took a deep breath and asked, "What burned?"

Jacob straddled a chair turned backward. "The Baseline," he answered as Carlin sat at the table. "You know, that club over on the edge of town. The kink club. Catered to a little of everything, from all I can tell. You should've seen it, Carl." His eyes were alight with excitement. He gestured, recreating images with his hands. He tried anyway.

"It was like hell cracked open," he went on, "and we were standing on the edge, looking down into the pit. Never seen colors like that anywhere but in my dreams. And the heat. We had a couple trash cans outside go up just by proximity. Had to swap out some gear, just so it wouldn't melt down."

They'd been right to run when they did, Carlin told himself. In a fire that hot and hungry, they'd never have survived if they hadn't left fast. Guilt threatened again, all the same. Fighting fires was his job. He ran *toward* burning buildings, not away.

On his own. Not when he had someone to take care of. Not with Zaid at his side. His safety came first. "Did everyone get out?"

Jacob waved a hand, nodding. "Pretty much without a scratch. Sent a couple-three people on the rig for smoke inhalation, but the customers, the bartenders, they all got out safe. Which, I'm telling you, was a freaking miracle. Shame you missed it. You'd have been vibrating for days."

"Yeah. Shame I missed it," Carlin agreed, hoping his discomfort didn't show on his face. There was no easy or graceful way to bring up the fact that he'd been there last night. Not with Jacob's opinion that the club did its business catering to the whims of the kinky. Not without sharing more of his

personal life—and preferences—than he had in the five years since he'd signed on.

Which was, of course, the next thing Jacob latched on to, grin turning wicked. “So!” He tapped out a tattoo on the back of the chair. “About this showing up late thing. Spill,” he prompted. “We use you to check the station clock. You can't let us down, man.”

Carlin ducked his head. His ears warmed, and he had no doubt that they'd blaze with color soon if they hadn't started already. “I had the night off,” he hedged. “I took some personal time.”

Jacob's grin widened. “What's her name?” When he got no answer, he leaned forward. “*Their* names? Carl, you *dog*. Who knew you had it in you?”

Carlin shook his head, finished off his coffee, and carried the mug to the sink. “I don't kiss and tell, Jacob. You're gonna have to live with that.”

“Come on.” The chair squeaked when his friend stood. Carlin turned to watch him step closer, still grinning. “At least give me a little tease. Blonde, brunette?”

“Black.” And built. Carlin's mind wandered momentarily, remembering the flex of muscle beneath his fingers as they'd tangled this morning. Coiled strength and so much potential, held in reserve in favor of pleasure instead. He cleared his throat as his gaze refocused. Springing a hard-on now would be embarrassing to say the least.

“Does she have a sister? I like dark-haired girls.”

Carlin laughed out loud and backhanded him in the chest, nudging him out of the way. “I didn't ask. Pretty sure you're looking for a different type, anyway.”

“A different type of what?” Peter Hayes stepped through the break room doorway, stifling a yawn with the back of his hand. He looked as though it'd been a rough night, and made a beeline for the coffeepot, blinking sleep from his eyes.

"Date," Carlin answered, sobering a bit. The fire really had been bad if the captain bunked down here last night.

"Girl," Jacob amended. Carlin didn't correct him. "Carl's holding out on us. He went out partying while we were busting our butts."

"Good for him." Peter managed a smile, but there wasn't much energy behind it. He sat as though getting off his feet was the only thing that mattered. "Hell of a night." His already baritone voice deepened with the effects of hours breathing smoke and shouting commands to his crew. "And the day's not shaping up to be better. Just got off the phone with Arson."

Carlin folded his arms across his chest. "They get anything?"

Peter shook his head and drank deep. He set the mug down with a grimace and rubbed his face. "No fingerprints, no evidence. Breaking and entering's out since the club was in full swing. No shorted-out wiring, no accelerants so far, and no point of ignition. It's like the whole place went up at once."

Jacob whistled long and low. "That's one hell of a flare."

Carlin grunted. "Means we're missing something."

"Missing a lot of things." Peter picked up his coffee again. He considered the liquid inside. "Could use a fresh set of eyes, Carlin. You up for a trip over?"

Carlin's eyebrows rose. "Me? I'm not Arson, Cap. I don't have that kind of training."

"But you might catch something that looks wrong. Jacob and the rest of us, we've been over that place backward, forward, and sideways. Seeing the same old burned-out corners over and over again. You'd be walking in clean."

Not exactly, but he still couldn't confess. Besides, he'd only seen a few rooms of the building. His memory really wouldn't be tainted by things that had been there before. He had no good reasons to protest.

So he let his shoulders lift and fall. "Sure, Cap, I'll go. Whenever you're ready."

What he needed to do, the voice at the back of his head protested, was get on the phone and call home. Rouse Zaid from his well-deserved rest and ask his help in coming up with answers. Fires didn't start from nothing, not in the ordinary, everyday world of men. But they'd left that world far behind last night.

"How do you do it?" Carlin had asked when they lay spent and pleasantly boneless together. Zaid had a leg draped over one of his, and his fingers traced idle patterns against Carlin's chest.

"Do what?" he wondered lazily, voice so low and smooth, he sounded utterly satisfied.

"How do you make your eyes change color?" The first instance, in the club, Carlin could have chalked up to a trick of the light, but Zaid's eyes had flared hot amber not ten minutes ago, an instant before he'd come and collapsed against Carlin's chest. This time, he was sure he'd seen it. "I've never seen anyone else do that."

He felt Zaid hesitate; then the slender man moved, levering himself up enough that he could steal a hot kiss. "I'm full of secrets," he promised. Another pause preceded, "Are you sure you want to know?"

So it was serious, then. Carlin frowned. "Yeah. I think I need to know."

Zaid held his gaze another moment; then it happened again. His eyes changed, brightened, color shifting from their already unusual amber to molten gold. "It's magic," Zaid told him, not looking away. "A trick I've known since I was very young. Something that's easier to do when I see something—someone—I like."

"Magic," Carlin echoed. "Magic's all...distraction and sleight of hand. I'm right here, right up close. You're not distracting me..."

Zaid's wicked smile returned, and his hand drifted down Carlin's body until his fingers sifted through wiry curls. "Aren't I?"

Carlin's hips moved of their own accord, bumping up toward Zaid's fingers encouragingly. "Okay," he admitted on a dry throat. "Maybe a little, but that still doesn't explain..."

Zaid kissed him, a slow, thorough exploration of his mouth with lips and tongue. When they parted for air, Zaid murmured, "Not all magic works the way you think. Trust me, Carlin. Trust the magic in me."

And he had. Trusted Zaid completely, then and there. In the moment, it had felt right. Now, when he ought to explain himself to his crew, his friends, he'd begun to doubt.

Someone else on the crew might have been able to get away with suggesting the supernatural when all other leads dried up. Someone with kids. Someone with a vocal, familiar love of the fantastic.

Not Carlin. Jake had reminded him of that with the crack about setting clocks by his schedule. He was reliable, predictable, not inclined to flights of fancy. Nobody would buy that, more or less overnight, Carlin had gone from the station's rule-monger to a believer of things that just couldn't be.

It felt a little like stepping back into a shower, but not with naked company. Hell, not even with heated water. Just how desperate *was* he that he hadn't questioned the night's happenings? Not beyond a half second's pause when Zaid's hands weren't on his body or the other man's tongue wasn't in his mouth. He'd just let desire take over, push common sense into the basement, and lock the door.

What if Zaid wasn't what he said? What if things hadn't gone down the way Carlin let himself believe? Maybe the guy was an illusionist, good at the flash and distraction that got through Carlin's defenses in the first place, but was there more to him than that? Had that been the plan all along?

Carlin ground his teeth, feeling abruptly like the world's biggest fool. Yeah, he needed to talk to Zaid. He palmed the cell phone he kept tucked in his pocket and muttered, "I'm just going to step outside to make a call."

He got himself under control before he punched the first number. Even if he had been set up and unwittingly let an arsonist do his dirty work unchallenged, he wasn't going to get answers by going after Zaid with guns ablaze. The fastest way to get a lie out of a suspect was to put them on the defensive. Carlin wanted answers. The real truth.

So he took another deep breath, closed his eyes, and flipped his phone open. The trill as it woke from automatic slumber sent a chill racing up his spine. Eyes open again, he scrolled through his contacts until he got to his own number, listed as "Home." Another breath, another second's hesitation, and he pressed the green handset key, initializing the call.

Of course it rang through to the answering machine. He'd left Zaid sleeping bonelessly in the bed when he got up, dressed, and headed in to work. Even if he hadn't, no one answered another guy's phone.

When the machine beeped shrilly, he cleared his throat. "Hey, Zaid. It's Carlin. If you're there, pick up the phone." If he was there. They hadn't talked about whether he'd stay, either, or whether they'd meet again. "Zaid, if you can hear this, it's okay, it's me. Answer the phone." He could have been a onetime adventure. A once-in-a-lifetime thing. Hell of a way to start and end a relationship all at once.

He took another breath, about to say Zaid's name again, when there was a fumbling sound at the other end of the line, a clatter, and a muffled curse, then a very husky, very sexy, "Carlin? What's going on?"

Oh, how he wished Zaid's voice didn't rock through him, settling deep into his body with a curious, if welcome, warmth. Like a weight, solid and almost reassuring. Like the now-familiar grip of a warm hand on his cock. Damn, he was getting hard. Not here, not now. This was business, not fun.

"Yeah, it's me." He cleared his throat again. "Look, I need some answers from you. No bullshit, no poetry, just the truth, okay?"

Warmth abandoned him. Carlin could almost see the indignation in Zaid's face. "The truth. Of course," he answered, voice gone cool. "What do you want to know?"

Did you set me up? The words hovered just behind Carlin's lips. *Did you play me so one of your friends could burn the Baseline down? Was it all just a game?* "I need to know how this guy set a fire that burned hot enough to set off the trash cans outside without using an accelerant and with no one getting hurt."

Zaid made a low sound that might have been laughter. It was too quiet to tell. "Luck," the golden-eyed man finally offered. "A knack for the theatrical. A very twisted sense of humor, but not because he was being cautious. I promise you that Amouk doesn't care about causing harm."

"No one's laughing," Carlin pointed out.

"On the contrary," Zaid argued. "I'm pretty sure Amouk has been laughing, or gloating at the very least, for hours. Probably suffering a cramp from all the grinning he's done. He won that round, and he'll be rightly pleased with himself."

"Rightly?" Carlin felt his shoulders creep toward his ears and choked down the urge to splutter. "No one deserves to be rightly pleased about last night. I don't care who he is."

"Or what," Zaid countered before his voice dropped to a liquid baritone that tightened Carlin's groin again. "I'm pleased about last night. I could have sworn that you were too."

Carlin gritted his teeth, speaking through them. "I'm talking about the fire, Zaid. The destruction of the club. Don't change the subject." *And stop turning me on.*

Zaid sighed. "It wasn't a fire started by physical means. As I told you, it was magic, and fire magic is Amouk's forte." There was a long silence, and Carlin started to think he might be as reluctant to hear what came next as Zaid seemed to say it. "The ability to create and control it flows through my veins as well, Carlin, but I swear to you I had nothing to do with what happened last night. I don't have the love of its destructive potential that he has."

Magic. The word rattled around inside Carlin's head, tripping up his heartbeat. "Fire magic." Now *he* paused. Wet his lips. Lowered his voice. "What are you trying to tell me? What exactly *are* you?"

The silence on the other end of the line felt heavy. Then Zaid took a breath. "Djinn. A genie," he amended. "Not like the djinn your scholars and fans of mythology write about. I have no bottle. I can't grant a wish. We are creatures of desire, Carlin. Intent is everything. Amouk intended to intimidate, impress, and put on a show with that display. My shows are of a more...personal sort." The purr in his voice couldn't have been any clearer. "And it worked. Any investigation, the smallest mention in the news, and he gets what he wants."

It had worked for both of them. Carlin's jaw ached as he spoke. "Investigation is what I do, Zaid. That's my job."

"I'm not blaming you," the other man assured. "Just pointing out things you may not have considered. Amouk is a... What's the word? Glory hound? You'll feed his ego."

"Same story with most arsonists," Carlin muttered under his breath.

"Yes," Zaid agreed. "But Amouk isn't most arsonists. Luckily for you."

Carlin shoved a hand through his hair, jaw clenched tighter to keep himself from snapping. Walking away from a fire like the one last night counted as lucky, yes, for everyone who'd been inside. Still, the glib way the words tumbled out of Zaid set Carlin on edge. It wasn't right. It needed to be challenged.

“Hey, Carlin. We going or what?” The captain held up his ring of keys, jingled them, and hooked a thumb toward the red pickup that was a privilege of the position. “I’m starting her up.”

“I’ll be right there,” Carlin called, peeling the phone away from his mouth enough that he wouldn’t deafen Zaid. He watched the captain round the truck and took a breath. “Look, I have to go check out the scene. Don’t go anywhere.”

He could tell Zaid was grinning now by the brightness in his voice. “If you wanted me to stay put, maybe you should have tied me up before you left.” Even amused, he made the suggestion sound like warm honey being poured into Carlin’s ears.

This time, though, it didn’t sink to his groin. It tightened Carlin’s shoulders and stripped away a measure of his usually even-tempered control. “Not now, okay? I told you. Work. You don’t have to stay at my place. Go do errands or...whatever you do when you’re not dancing. Just leave me a way to get in touch.”

“I’ll leave you a number,” Zaid promised. “Since telling you to swing by work won’t help you anymore. Well, at least not today.”

He wanted to ask what that cryptic comment meant, and just as suddenly wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Maybe there was a string of clubs that catered to his brand of exotic. Bars where demons seduced the average guy on a nightly basis. Places Carlin had never heard about and, against his better judgment, wished he’d known. It would nag at him all day, despite the need to focus on the case so nothing got overlooked or discounted before it had been truly run out. “Yeah,” he heard himself say. “Do that. Please.” Suspicious or not, he wanted to be able to find Zaid again. For work reasons. For personal reasons. God, he was helpless. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“I hope so, lover. I’m trouble when I’m bored.”

He was a simple man. Thick through the shoulders, no doubt all muscle. Tall and capable of moving with a grace that surprised if it didn't quite impress. No human built like that should be able to walk around the block without stumbling, much less carry himself so well. Amouk had to hand it to Zaid: he had taste.

But a knack for the aesthetic didn't excuse anything else. Zaid had forgotten what and who he was, and the time had come that he be reminded. The world in its current state proved that beyond the shadow of a doubt. Man—humanity—had squandered and corrupted all the bounty given. They had come to take the elements for granted, according them neither their proper reverence nor respect.

The elements had begun to reclaim what they were owed. The djinn who served them had been called to take up their old responsibilities. Whip the humans back into shape. Teach them the old ways. Tutor them on how to live in a world that was better in all things, and bar them from petty, grasping attempts at control.

Zaid and Amouk had once served side by side, two powerful voices for the element of Fire that had none of its own. There was only the roar of flame and heat as it consumed all things in its path. As it was meant to do. Beautiful, Amouk allowed, to those who truly knew how to see and listen. Breathtaking to the djinn born in its heart. Impossible to understand for the humans who feared it.

His purpose was to translate. To explain. To lead the humans to a greater understanding, to bring them into Fire's service. By any and all means. No matter who stood in the way.

The human and his superior crouched beside the remains of a ruined trash bin. Gloves on, they sifted through the contents that had been pried out of the once-molten container. Searching for answers, no doubt. An explanation that minds constrained to a world of rules could accept and understand. Limited. They were so limited.

Still, it might be fun, Amouk thought, to sample the bigger of the two, to learn just what it was about him—other than his looks—that had so captured Zaid's interest. Now and then, one of them could be surprising. Now and then, there was one with the sort of potential that could be of use rather than a hindrance or a nuisance. It was possible that Zaid, in his clumsy, fumbling way, had found a true gem in the city's refuse. And if he had, Amouk would claim him for his own.

So he left them to their pawing and sifting through ruined scraps of a damaged society. He summoned a hot wind that lifted him, lingered for a moment, watching both men look up, eyes squinted against the heat they could feel as well, searching for a source. Then he let the dancing currents carry him away. Back to the heart of Fire itself, to give his report and plan his next event.

Chapter Five

Zaid was not a domestic type of man. Sitting around someone's home waiting for them to come back didn't suit his style. Certainly not in a place like Carlin's. It was stiff and impersonal, the perfect reflection of the way the man saw himself.

Carlin didn't think he had anything to offer someone else. He didn't look to the future and expect to be happy or settled. The walls of his apartment were stark and white. Oh, sure, there was an eclectic arrangement of artwork and framed photos scattered around, but Zaid would have bet good money none of them meant anything.

The furniture didn't match, which might have worked as a casual decor if there'd been a sense to the chaos. The pieces not only shared no common colors, but they were from wildly clashing time periods, bought at yard sales and weekend auctions, no doubt. Nothing meshed, nothing jived, and more importantly, nothing looked as though it had been lived in or around. It was just furniture. It told no stories, held no secrets. It was no more or less important than the space it occupied.

They'd made good use of the bed, but even that protested with the creak and groan of unstressed hinges and untried wood. That thing hadn't seen much action, if any, before Zaid broke it in. Certainly not the wall-thumping enthusiasm he'd coaxed out of Carlin with a few simple touches and a lingering caress or two. The man needed him more than he knew.

Now there was an honesty between them. Zaid had confessed his true nature and heard the chill in his lover's voice. Not anger, at least not yet. Not

surprise or fear. Carlin had distanced himself, erected walls that kept Zaid at arm's length, and it'd taken no more than a second or two.

Which shouldn't have surprised Zaid. After all, it hadn't taken much more than that to peel away layers of self-imposed isolation and have Carlin arching after his fingers, panting for his touch. It'd only been one night, so it shouldn't have mattered that an evening's enjoyment had faded in daylight.

Shouldn't. It did. That, more than anything else, sent Zaid out onto the street.

At least out there, he got a sense that the world still moved around him. Walking with the rest of the city's wanderers, occasionally bumping elbows or shoulders with a stranger going the other way, he felt alive. Connected. Part of the grand scheme, not just above it, a detached observer waiting for the time when he would be expected to act.

No one deserved that fate.

He found a cozy-looking café and settled into an overstuffed chair after buying a bottle of water. Purified, straight from the tap, frothing and bubbling in someone's hot tub, Zaid couldn't get enough of the stuff. The irony of a djinn called by Fire choosing to surround himself with water didn't escape Zaid. He just didn't care enough to act differently or deny himself as, perhaps, he should. He was a rebel, a contradiction, and he loved that part of himself.

Apparently, it had caught the attention of those who didn't. Something had, at least. Zaid had made a conscious choice to get involved in the human world. He didn't want to stay hidden, missing out on everything that made a life worth living for them. He didn't lie as perhaps he should have, and now? Had he been the one to lure trouble to this city?

He enjoyed being unpredictable. He didn't want people to have an easy time guessing which way he'd jump when challenged. He didn't want to broadcast his choices before he'd committed to them, no matter how quickly made. If he could be figured out, he became boring, and if he became boring, what was the point of life?

Ordinarily that meant he made as few friends as possible. One or two, perhaps, who could be trusted, relied on if push came to shove. People like Dash, though to be honest, the boy had been a surprise. Zaid smiled at the thought.

None of the elders would have imagined that a Fire-called djinn would put his trust in the hands of a human boy with nothing more than a high school education. Dash couldn't protect him in a time of need. He wouldn't fight. He didn't intimidate anyone and only made Zaid laugh when he tried. He wasn't particularly clever or even that well liked. He was, however, resourceful. He could and did broker information with astonishing ease. If Zaid needed names, places, or to know what was happening in the city, Dash could find it out in short order. He could get Zaid information in excess.

And that was a comfort on a day like this, when the patterns Zaid had built for himself were threatening to come apart at the seams. Amouk. Here. Now. That was nothing but bad news. Zaid needed to know just *how* bad before he could decide on a course of action. Or, to be fair, on a course of inactivity.

He was sprawled—no, poured—into his chair when Dash found the place and stepped through the door. The boy didn't say anything as he dropped off his messenger bag and went on to the counter. Judging by the almost vacant look in his eye, he'd only recently rolled out of bed. With no one expecting him for work or school, Dash set his own schedule. If it could be called that. Zaid wasn't certain whether his accomplice owned a watch. Some days he considered it a miracle the kid could even tell time.

Dash wandered back to Zaid's corner and dropped into the chair opposite, hands wrapped around an oversize cup of something that steamed and wafted tantalizing hints of spice into the air. He sipped, slouched, and stretched his legs across the space between them, bracing his feet on the cushion of Zaid's seat. "Okay, so I'm here. What's up?"

Zaid smiled. It widened until he found himself on the verge of laughter. It was a good feeling, one Dash nearly always inspired. So there was more than

information that kept him interested. As a matter of fact, if Dash had been a little older, Zaid would surely have explored more of what the boy had to offer, particularly in bed. Their night together had been enjoyable enough that Zaid didn't think he'd mind a repeat. If. He cleared his throat instead. "I was hoping that you could tell me. After all, that is what I pay you for."

Dash's eyebrows darted up. "You mean I'm finally getting paid? Damn. People need to burn the shit out of places I work more often." Zaid cocked an eyebrow, and Dash's shoulders hitched. Holding up a hand, he took another long drink of coffee, exhaled noisily, and set the cup aside. Then he leaned back in his chair, steepled his hands, and lofted an eyebrow of his own. "What do you want to know?"

Zaid pressed his lips together to smother another grin. "What are people saying, Dash? About what happened at the club last night," he clarified, hoping to forestall another round of the "drag it out of me" game.

Dash shrugged. "Freak fire. Miracle no one died. Someone must have fallen asleep in the bathroom after getting a 'job and dropped a fag." He paused. "The cigarette kind. No one saw anything, no one knows anything. Yada yada, the usual BS."

"The usual," Zaid echoed with a nod. "The nonanswers the police get when they ask." He leaned forward slightly. "I'm not a cop."

Dash smirked. "Believe me, I know. If you were, there'd be a hell of a lot more confessions just on the chance you'd be the one to lock them up. Lots of buzz about you still."

Still. It had been a year since he'd turned up in the city, and still people talked. It was flattering, but not that surprising, really. Humans tended to fixate on and gossip about the things—the people—who were different. Zaid counted. He'd almost gotten used to it. "That's nice," he allowed. "Good for the ego, but it's not what I want."

Dash shifted forward to the edge of his chair. "Picky, picky. Okay. How about the people who are talking about the guy they saw walk through a wall of

flame? Glowing eyes, big, bald, buff. Scared the hell out of them, but when they looked again, he was just gone.”

Amouk. “That's more like it. How many are talking about him?”

Dash shook his head. “Three, max. People don't just walk through fire without burning, and if you say they do, you get labeled crazy. Even the people who swore they saw him are starting to change their stories. It's just too weird.”

For the average, everyday clubgoer, yes. For Zaid, men who walked through fire were part of the regular routine. Had been once upon a time, at any rate. He could do it without breaking a sweat, pun intended. Any of the Fire-called could, but Dash was right. It wasn't something he boasted about at parties. And only one of his brethren had spoken in his head last night.

“Any whispers about it in the dark side of the city?” There'd been some hemming and hawing on Dash's part the first time Zaid had questioned him about exactly who his sources were and why he knew about supernatural things that most straitlaced mortals either put out of their minds or went out of their way to ignore. Now, all the question warranted was a second's hesitation and another long swallow of coffee.

“Your guy's got a reputation,” he said when the cup went down again. “But you probably already knew that. Asking for details when someone said his name got me stared at like I grew a second head, and a lot of cold shoulders. You sure you want to get involved with this guy?”

The answer to that was a resounding no. Zaid ducked his head, hoping to hide the hesitation in his eyes. “I don't have much of a choice. He came to me. That makes me involved.”

Dash frowned. “What do you mean, 'came to you'?”

Zaid said. “He called to me while Rome was burning, so to speak. He wanted me to know he was there and responsible for what happened. Not good,” he added before Dash could. “I know.”

“More than not good. The guy's a serious badass.” The crease between his eyebrows remained. “But if you already knew he was here, why are you asking *me* about him?”

“Because”—Zaid did his best to keep his voice casual and unconcerned—“I need to know if he's here alone.”

Dash paused again. “I haven't heard anyone say he had company. Is alone good or bad?”

“Good, in this case. More than one of him in the city would mean a whole different sort of trouble.”

“But...” Dash eyed the coffee cup like it might offer comfort. Zaid could feel need crawl across his skin in reflection and heaved a quiet sigh when Dash gave in and picked it up. “But there *is* more than one of him. There's you.”

Zaid shook his head immediately. “Don't mistake me. I don't mean more than one of us that share breeding or even lineage. I can tell you that there are others in the city. More than you probably want to hear. Water, air, earth, everything represented in balance. I mean others like Amouk. Bent on, maybe created for, destruction and nothing else. More than one like that, and the whole city would burn.”

It had happened before, countless times throughout history. Some power-hungry man got his hands on one of the djinn and used it for his own purposes, the corruption and desperation touching master and servant alike. It wasn't coincidence that made Zaid mention Rome. Nero had a djinn at his command.

Dash swallowed visibly. “No one said anything about him bringing friends, cross my heart.” He made the gesture. He wasn't a particularly superstitious man that Zaid had noticed, but Zaid had also seen him rattled hard enough to change his mind before. This conversation scared him. Probably for the best. “You want me to tell you if that changes?”

"The second that you hear it has, if possible," Zaid answered smoothly. Picking up the cell phone on the table between them, he palmed it and stood. Ah, the joys of technology. No more waiting weeks for a simple message. Now people could communicate worldwide in a few seconds. For the most part, it was a blessing. "Keep in touch. I'll do the same." Zaid reached for his wallet, pulled out a few bills, and dropped them on the table. It was a reward for Dash's time and loyalty. "I have appointments to keep. I'll see you soon."

He looked back once, just before he reached the door. Dash sat staring at the money for a moment, then shook himself and scooped it up, pocketing it deftly. *Good lad.*

"You wanted to talk to me?"

Carlin smacked the back of his head on the edge of the apartment door. He hadn't closed it before Zaid appeared out of nowhere and scared a year off his life. "*Jesus*," he breathed, one hand clapped over his chest. "A little warning or something." Dancer, he reminded himself, and hard on the heels of that thought came another. *Genie*. "You need a bell."

It had been a long day at the Baseline scene, and he'd been looking forward to the quiet solitude of his apartment. He had, though, also wanted to talk to Zaid. Needed to talk to him to get things straight. Sometimes it was best not to wish for too much at once.

He pushed the door shut and rubbed the sore spot at the base of his skull before he paused again. "Didn't know if you'd still be here."

Zaid smiled, warm and broad and entirely too welcoming. "You did tell me to stay. Your wish was mostly my command."

"It wasn't a command," Carlin argued immediately. Then the words sank in. "What do you mean, 'mostly'?"

Zaid spread his hands. "It was a long day, and I'm not used to sitting around. I saw a friend. I came back. I'm here now. Just as you asked."

He crossed the room with long, easy strides, and they now stood toe to toe. He lifted a hand to reach for Carlin's jaw, and Carlin found himself wanting, needing, damned near leaning forward, eager for the touch. Zaid's lips were against his jaw, warm breath drifting up to caress Carlin's ear, and the protests on the tip of his tongue died away. He cleared his throat all the same and pulled back a little. Distance. Perspective. He needed a basket of both.

"Good. That's good, but I need to...think." He plucked Zaid's hands off his waist, flashing an apologetic smile as he let go. "Been a long day. My brain's worn out, so it might take a while." He stepped past his amber-eyed lover, heat blazing across his shoulder where their sleeves brushed as he moved. Crazy. Fantastic. Definitely insane.

Carlin claimed an end of the couch and sat with a heavy sigh. He was far too aware of Zaid's lingering gaze, of the way the man crossed the room without making a sound and sat on the edge of the coffee table, facing him. He didn't speak, just laid his hand on Carlin's knee, a touch that simultaneously calmed Carlin and turned him on, as the sudden pulsing of his cock demonstrated. How could something that simple feel so good? How could he need it so much when he didn't even know if he could trust the guy? In his world, Zaid hadn't existed twenty-four hours ago.

Cautiously, with a little less grace than he wished for, he lifted Zaid's hand, balancing long, elegant fingers against his palm. He sought out Zaid's gaze, let the corner of his mouth twitch up into something that might have been a smile, and said, "I need to understand how this works."

Zaid's eyebrows lifted, and amusement made his eyes seem to glow. "You'll have to be more specific," he said, touching the tip of one tooth with his tongue. "Which this?" His fingers curled against Carlin's palm. "This?" He stroked them across the web of lines that crossed Carlin's hand. "Some would say this is your fate and can't be changed or explained. This?" He put both hands on Carlin's knees again, pushed them apart, and slid forward on the table so he fit between them.

Carlin's pulse leaped into his throat. He swallowed against it and shifted on the couch, trying to keep things casual and comfortable while his cock swelled, pressing insistently against the fly of his jeans. "Zaid—"

"This is called chemistry," the other man interrupted, sliding closer still and leaning forward so that their breath mingled, mouths nearly touching. "Complicated, chemical..." And now they did, heat leaving Carlin's lips tingling when their mouths parted again. "Maybe even magic. You smell good."

"I smell like smoke," Carlin argued, voice barely louder than a whisper. Hopeless. Completely. "Smoke and soot and who knows what else. That's not magic."

Zaid grinned. "Maybe not for you."

Right. This was a man who claimed to be a creature. A djinn. Maybe the smell of dirt and smoke did turn him on, if he could be believed. Maybe the attraction Carlin felt for him *was* magic. It was certainly powerful. The urge to catch Zaid's wrists, pull him onto the couch, and forget his pesky need for answers was strong. Carlin fought to keep his eyes open. "No. Not for me."

Zaid's head tilted in the second before he sat back, confusion clear in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Carlin wet his lips without thinking. Zaid's gaze immediately dropped to his mouth, and a groan escaped Carlin before he could stop himself. Space! He shoved to his feet and stepped around the table, rubbing his head again. The ache from the earlier bump helped to remind him that he had business to talk about. "Like I said, I had a long day trying to figure out what else I should have asked last night." He took a deep breath, forced his shoulders down, and turned back to face Zaid again. "How do you do it? How do your powers work? Not just yours," he amended when Zaid took a breath. "All of you. Whoever torched the club last night. How can one of you do something like that without leaving a clue or a trace of evidence other than the burned bones of what was one hell of an impressive building?"

He could all but see the thoughts crossing Zaid's expression. Judging how much to say? Deciding whether to tell the truth ? There was a moment where something wicked flickered into those incredible eyes, and another when Carlin saw Zaid clearly put that idea aside. He breathed a silent thanks for that. He only had so much self-restraint, and despite himself, he wanted to give in to Zaid. He wanted another hour or two of last night's acrobatics to fortify him before he dived into an investigation that could very quickly turn ugly.

Zaid shifted to the couch, leaned back into the spot Carlin had vacated, and made himself comfortable, feet braced on the edge of the table. He'd taken his shoes and socks off, and his toes were as long and graceful as his fingers. As if he knew Carlin had noticed, he curled them, tendons popping softly. "It's willpower," he answered at last, shoulders shifting in a gentle rise and fall. "That's the simple answer, anyway. What the djinn want, we get, one way or another. The Fire-called are just more...showy about it than the others. Nature of the beast, I suppose." His smile warmed. "And yes, before you ask, I used a little of that will on you, but it didn't take more than a nudge to knock your reservations away. So, no, to answer the next question, you aren't being mind controlled. What we did last night you wanted as much as I did. More, maybe," he amended, "given how hungry—"

"Zaid." Carlin could have let him ramble just to listen to the music in his voice, but he really did need to get to the bottom of this. "We're not talking about you and me."

"We are," Zaid argued. "We're talking about everything. It's all tied together, but..." He spread his hands. "Fair enough. How does one of us control a fire that could very well have consumed the whole city?"

A chill swept through Carlin hearing his question rephrased that way. He hadn't let himself think of the blaze in quite those terms yet, but judging by what he'd seen at the site, Zaid might still have been downplaying the potential for destruction that had been somehow held in check last night. The whole city

for certain. Hell, maybe the whole county. "Yeah," he rasped on a dry throat. It would do. It was enough. "Exactly."

Zaid held his gaze for another long moment, the corners of his mouth upturned to reflect his smile. Then he lifted a hand and turned it over, uncurling his fingers from his palm like the petals of a flower slowly opening to sunlight. Rather than a pistil and stamen jutting from his palm, however, a small flame bobbed and flickered on his skin.

Carlin gasped audibly. Embarrassed, he shut his mouth, but he was having a hard time believing his eyes, despite the fact that he'd been standing here the whole time. That flame wasn't an illusion. There was no question that it hadn't been there a second ago. "How?"

"I willed it," Zaid answered, far too casually. "Just like I told you." Head tilting again, he amended, "Well. Because I *called* it, to be more accurate. A little flame to start things off, and then..." The flame flared, doubling, then tripling in size until it filled the cupped bowl of Zaid's hands. "It will grow as large as I ask. Allow it," he corrected. "Fire is a hungry thing, and it needs a handler more than it seeks permission."

He tipped his hand, and the flame poured like water into the other. It wreathed his fingers, danced in the spaces between them when he spread them apart, and flickered in the reflection in Zaid's eyes. "It is power and temptation and *life*," he breathed, attention entirely focused on his blazing hand. There was an almost frightening awe in his voice. "It wants to live. And I want to set it free."

"No!" Carlin surged forward, stopping short when Zaid made a fist and tucked his hand against his chest. Long tendrils of his hair lifted, stirred by the heat still leaking from his hand, no matter the fact that the flame could no longer be seen. A curl of smoke twisted up from his shirt. A few more seconds and Carlin wondered if it would catch and burst into flame.

Zaid didn't seem to care. His eyes were golden again, his wary, molten gaze fixed on Carlin's, as if at any second he expected to be attacked. As though he had to protect the flame.

"Please don't," Carlin amended, pitching his voice low as he summoned a quick, hopefully friendly smile. "I'd rather not have the place burned down around my ears. Security deposit, you know?" It was a lame joke and would have been even in the best situation. This decidedly was not the best. "Please, Zaid."

They stayed that way—Carlin straining but still, Zaid tense and studying him warily—until the knot of tension broke. Zaid's posture relaxed, the fisted hand opening once more. The fire he'd held burned itself out, disappearing at last with a final *pop* of heated air and a fading wisp of smoke. Carlin managed the first deep breath he'd drawn since coming home and stretched, the muscles in his lower back aching in protest. Potential disaster averted, for the moment anyway.

When it felt safe to really move, Carlin did, taking up the spot on the edge of the coffee table that Zaid had claimed. The exotic man sat studying his fingers almost wistfully, opening and closing them into a fist.

"It's been a long time," he said finally, lifting his gaze to Carlin's. "A very long time since I've been that protective, possessive of the fire. There's a reason I don't call it more often," he explained, lips twisting wryly. "It takes a level of control that demands discipline and patience. Fire will rule the caller if it can, and it's easy to let that happen. It's easy to give in to its need. I don't like that part of myself, the eager servant. I don't want to be a puppet like some of us become."

The coffee table groaned under Carlin's weight, but he ignored the sound, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "So what you just did was dangerous?"

Zaid laughed, teeth a splash of white against dusky skin. "Fire is always dangerous. Haven't you been listening?" he teased. "It's a living creature, Carlin. An entity with a will and a want of its own. Yes, what I did is

dangerous, but there are those of my kind who think the risk is worth the danger. Who think the thrill of setting the flame free is better, more important than anything else in any world.”

“Like this other guy. Amouk. He thinks that way?”

“Oh yes,” Zaid murmured. “Amouk is Fire's most devoted servant. Its most loyal instrument. He was just getting warmed up last night, trust me.”

Carlin felt muscles in his jaw tighten and knew he was clenching his teeth. The pressure traveled to his temples like the first dull ache of a migraine. “Great. Perfect. So how do we stop him?”

Chapter Six

Calling elements drew attention, particularly out of season, and more so in a city. There were those among the djinn who preferred to work discreetly. Out of the human eye, hidden from almost any means of detection. They nudged things into a semblance of proper order. They guided with a gentle hand. They didn't appreciate someone coming in and disrupting their quiet, comfortable routines. They would no doubt try to find a way to interfere.

They were ineffective and slow. They needed to be shown the way.

It had been Zaid's job to teach them, Amouk reasoned. A job that he'd been trained for since the moment he stepped out of the Fire. They had studied side by side once, he and Zaid, agreeing that nothing would tempt them, no curiosity or desire would lead them from the path. Nothing else in the mortal world would ever be more important than that sacred duty.

It was an oath Zaid had forgotten, one he'd failed to uphold. The younger djinn was flawed and weak. He'd been so corrupted by the humans who fascinated him, he'd ignored the burn of Fire in his veins. He'd become content to substitute it with moments of passion and the caress of flesh. He'd become as pathetic as they were.

Amouk would set things right.

He'd shielded himself after burning the club. He could feel the others looking for a sign of him. Because he hadn't taken life, they wouldn't seek to snuff out his. Instead, they'd want to banish him from their city. They would create barriers to keep him out. He'd become an outcast, unwelcome even among his own kind.

So he hid himself, as he'd been taught long ago, when powerful men sought otherworldly means to increase their reach, build their armies, and control their own destinies. He drew in on himself, cloaking the fire in his veins with a willful disguise. He took to the street and mingled with the mortals. There was more than one way to make his point.

Finding the boy was easy. After all, Zaid's little friend had been looking for him. Amouk heard his name whispered nearly everywhere he turned. No one dared speak it aloud, fearing perhaps that they might burst into flame if they did. An entertaining thought. It appealed to his sense of purpose. Maybe, when all the rest had been finished, he would make some of those fears reality.

But for now, the boy, who slouched down the sidewalk toward Amouk, shoulders drawn up toward his ears, hands plunged so deeply into his pockets that he ought to have been scratching his knees. He met no one's eyes, barely looking up through the fringe of his bangs as he walked. This blatant show of insecurity somehow appealed to Zaid? It was worse than Amouk thought.

He planted his feet when he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Shoulders back, chin lifted, he watched Zaid's informant shuffle on until they were nearly toe to toe and the other staggered back with the breath of a curse and a muttered apology. The smaller man glanced up briefly, mouth twisted into a grimace that looked nothing like a smile, then prepared to sidestep the obstacle and move on.

He stopped and looked again. Amouk knew what he saw when his eyes went wide and his jaw slightly slack. He watched recognition flare in his eyes and was rewarded by the glint of fear that followed. "You—"

Amouk dropped a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You've been looking for me," he said smoothly and smiled. "I know. I've been looking for you. How fortunate that we've run into each other this way. Perhaps you'll walk with me." It didn't take much effort to turn him back the way he'd come and to propel him forward. "You're a friend of my brother's."

"Brother?"

Amouk steered him around a woman with a stroller. "Zaid. You know him. You are his friend."

"But I don't know where he is," the boy protested. "And I'm not a threat." Though he didn't struggle or call out to the people they walked by, his shoulders stayed high. Fear shuddered through him in tremors strong enough Amouk could feel them as they moved.

"It would take a great deal more than you can do to be a threat to me," Amouk agreed. "And for the moment, I mean no harm to you, so let us be friends as well, boy."

"Dash." The word came out a squeak. He cleared his throat and repeated it again. "That's my name. Dash."

"Very well. Dash." A pointless name for a pointless being. "Shall we be friends?" Amouk kept them moving toward an alley, fingers pressed hard against Dash's shoulder. "Acquaintances, at least. Friendly strangers. We need to come to some sort of agreement. I have things I need from you."

Dash swallowed audibly. "What kind of things?"

"Nothing that will harm you," Amouk promised. It did no good to sacrifice the messenger. "I simply need you to bring Zaid to me."

The boy started shaking his head before he'd finished speaking. "I told you, I don't know exactly where he is. And even if I did, I can't make him go anywhere. I don't think I can help you." He shifted his weight and twisted his hips, trying to work himself free of Amouk's grip.

So Amouk let go.

Eyebrows rising, he folded his arms across his chest and watched Dash edge toward the mouth of the alley again. When he'd nearly reached the sidewalk, Amouk broke his silence. "Is this the way one friend helps another in this city?"

Dash hesitated. "I thought we were acquaintances."

“Not you and I.” Amouk smiled, though he doubted it looked sincere. Animals bared their teeth at one another. Let Zaid's pet take this expression as a threat. “You were right to insist that I not presume. I meant you and Zaid. You would consider *him* a friend, would you not?”

Dash's shoulders hitched up and down. “Yeah, I guess.”

Amouk nodded. “Good. Then help me find him. We need to speak.”

“Look, I don't think I *can* help you,” Dash snapped, temper finally fraying at the edges. “He doesn't jump when I tell him to. He's not just going to run over because I say he should.”

The breath of anger felt like a jolt of energy. It was beautiful.

Amouk breathed it in, eyes sliding shut for a moment. Yes, the humans had Fire inside them as well. Most of the time, it lay dormant, full of untapped potential, but now and then, when tempers slipped and patience ran out, it showed itself. Fire wanted to be free and unrestrained.

“You underestimate your power,” Amouk all but rumbled, reaching out to slap his hand against Dash's chest without opening his eyes. His power called to the spark inside the boy and held them together like magnets. Along with it came another rush of pleasure, and Amouk grinned, now letting his eyes open.

They blazed. He could see the reflection of that in Dash's wide-eyed stare. Terror coiled around them as they stood locked together, and glee roiled inside Amouk's chest as well. “He will come,” he told Dash in a low voice. “He will come.”

Zaid laughed, though it was almost gentle, Carlin thought. Tolerant, at the very least. “Stop him?” He stared a moment, then shook his head and sat forward, closing the distance between them again. “You want to stop him.”

Carlin summoned a brief, fragile smile. “I'm a firefighter, Zaid. Stopping arsonists is what I do.”

“Arsonists.” There was another moment of staring. Then Zaid caught Carlin's face between his hands and pulled him into a kiss. It began as something sweet, but within the space of a second, it had heated to almost brutal, definitely fierce. It left Carlin reeling while Zaid spoke.

“You are a hero, Carlin. I saw that the moment Dash brought you in last night. But”—he smoothed a hand over Carlin's shoulder, leaving heat in the wake of his fingertips—“there are some battles you are not equipped to fight, and others that you cannot win. You can't *stop* Amouk. That would be like...” He glanced off to one side like he might find the words he wanted floating in midair.

Carlin took advantage of the distraction, however small. “If you're building up to telling me to leave it alone,” he said, keeping his voice even, “then don't bother. This is what I *do*. People could have been hurt last night, Zaid. You can't ask me to let him just travel my city, setting random fires, even if he is a friend of yours.”

Zaid's gaze snapped back to Carlin's, amber eyes flaming to ruby-backed gold. “He's not a friend.”

He hadn't forgotten, couldn't forget, that the man who sat across from him wasn't human. He couldn't let himself get lured into comfort again. He'd seen the remnants of what one of Zaid's kind could do. He wanted to believe that Zaid wasn't that sort of...man, but it was impossible to ignore the voice in his head that urged him to find a corner and hide. Zaid. Amouk. They were terrifying.

His heartbeat settled back into a steady rhythm after a moment. “Sorry,” he offered and looked down at his hands. Anything to avoid that dangerous gaze. “I don't mean to keep putting my foot in it. You have to understand that until last night, my life was pretty simple. There are parts of it that still are.” He looked up again. “If he's going to do anything like last night again, it's my responsibility—”

Zaid made a low, rough sound and caught his face again, pressing him with another desperate kiss. “No,” he murmured against Carlin's mouth. “No, you fool, that's exactly the point. It's *not* your responsibility. Can't you see that?”

Before he could answer, Carlin found himself on the couch once more and slightly out of breath. He'd been moved, tossed, like he weighed nothing at all. Zaid had demonstrated some of his strength the night before, but he hadn't tried moving Carlin bodily. It felt a little like being tackled on the football field back in his high school days. He felt the same disconnected sensation of moving without choosing his own direction, the same shift of perspective on the world around him, and the sudden weight of another body pressed close to his.

Zaid straddled his lap, knees making deep depressions in the couch cushions on either side of Carlin's thighs. Hands against his chest, Zaid kept Carlin trapped there, unable to move more than enough to scratch his nose.

“What was that for?” Carlin wondered, feeling as though his eyes were open impossibly wide. “What'd I do?”

“You're being stubborn,” Zaid told him. “Which comes in handy when we're playing dirty games but doesn't help when you're being stupid.”

Carlin blinked, then frowned. “Hey!”

Zaid laid his hand over Carlin's mouth. “Stupid,” he repeated. “You should listen to the man who knows about the djinn and exactly how little Amouk cares if he hurts the helpful human who gets in the way.”

Carlin pried his hand away, eyebrows lifting as he asked, “You're trying to protect *me*?”

Zaid smiled a megawatt grin. “Now he catches on. Playing slow has a certain kind of charm.”

“I'm not playing,” Carlin argued. “You can't just manhandle me. And,” he said, holding up a finger to stall yet another visibly wicked thought before it crossed Zaid's lips, “you can't sit on me twenty-four hours a day.”

"I can think of better ways to keep you here than sitting."

Carlin should have known that was coming, and the finger had proved to be a useless tactic. "Zaid," he began, then let his hand fall. "It's not that I don't appreciate it, but I'm a grown man."

"Of that, I'm well aware." Zaid braced a hand on the back of the sofa, then did the same with the other, boxing Carlin in. It forced them close together again, and given their positions, Carlin found himself at eye level with Zaid's mouth.

His own went dry. "A grown man who's been tasked with figuring out what's going on in this case. I can't just give up and walk away."

"People give up all the time," Zaid argued before ducking his head and sealing his mouth over the pulse pounding just beneath Carlin's left ear. The tip of his tongue pressed against it in counterpoint, a syncopation to his heartbeat.

Carlin swallowed, quite aware of the fact that the little gesture would be magnified from Zaid's vantage point. The tightness behind his fly returned threefold. *Damn, Zaid.* "I don't."

Zaid hummed, amused, and caught Carlin's earlobe between his teeth. "There's always a first time," he murmured, lips grazing now-exceptionally sensitive skin.

Carlin swallowed again, this time masking, he hoped, the urge to whimper. "Zaid..."

The other man lifted his head, the promise of a long night's indulgence all too clear in his eyes, in his smile, in the pattern his fingers traced at the nape of Carlin's neck. "Yes?"

Carlin's eyes were crossing. "I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you."

"Oh, I'm serious," he promised, voice gone an octave lower. It seemed almost to buzz around inside Carlin's skull.

“With talking,” Carlin protested, though his voice sounded weak, distant, and unconvincing to his own ears.

Zaid's grin blossomed. “Talk is cheap,” he quoted. “Actions speak louder than words.”

To call the kiss “hot” would have been grossly understating the effect Carlin felt immediately. His clothing felt too tight, his skin too restrictive. Zaid's mouth against his was the sole point of connection that didn't feel as if it had suddenly been submerged in some warm, thick liquid, pampering and embracing all at once. He wanted to sink into that heat, be surrounded by it and full of it. He needed it as badly as he needed his next breath.

Zaid grinned against him as the kiss cooled to an end, pulled back to hold his gaze for a long moment, then slid backward out of Carlin's lap and into the space between his knees.

A move like that, with the promise in Zaid's eyes and the heat of his hands seeping through the denim covering his legs, could have roused Carlin if he'd had his mind on tragedy. Already hard and struggling to keep his mind on the serious matter of a supernatural fire starter, it damned near knocked him out.

Zaid caught his bottom lip in his teeth, smile turned playfully coy, and a single dimple revealed as he undid Carlin's belt and tugged his zipper down with excruciating care. “That's better, isn't it?” he asked as he peeled Carlin's jeans back, easing some of the pressure on his erection. He lifted his gaze, amber striking when contrasted by the long ebon fringe of his eyelashes.

“Yeah,” Carlin all but groaned. “Better, but we were talking. We need to settle this.”

Zaid shook his head. “There's time for that,” he promised as he bent his head and pressed a kiss to the bottom of Carlin's stomach, lips grazing the skin just above the waistband on his shorts.

Somehow Carlin's fingers were in Zaid's hair. He didn't remember moving his hand, but there it was. He made a careful fist, long strands of silken hair

wrapped around and between his knuckles. His hips lifted, body responding without his mind's consent as Zaid rolled the elastic down and slid a hand into Carlin's Jockeys, freeing the aching length of his cock.

Another glance from beneath those unfair lashes, and the last of Carlin's will to protest died away. He wasn't a desperate man, had wanted but never needed to be touched, tasted, and teased this way, yet he couldn't resist Zaid. With a growl that issued from under his ribs, he let his head fall back against the couch, eyelids fluttering shut for a moment. He gave himself over to the heat of Zaid's hand, the careful caress of long fingers on flesh far too eager to be stroked. He gave up and let go. There was no denying the fact that sex felt good.

Or that Zaid had more than his fair share of talent.

Carlin felt breath first, tickling his skin and cooling all at once, proving his arousal and the leak of fluids already escaping him. He meant to open his eyes, to watch Zaid and take note of what he did. He wanted to learn as much as he enjoyed. He wanted to be able to return the favor with the same confidence and skill.

Then he felt Zaid's mouth, soft lips parting around the length of him, and he could no more summon the will to open his eyes than he could to breathe. *God. Incredible!* The heat, the teasing touch of Zaid's tongue as it wrapped his cock, followed the curve and shape of him. The pull and release of pressure that echoed and heightened the heavy pulse already centered low in his body. Carlin's fist tightened, and his hips rose again. "More," he heard himself say. "More, Zaid, please."

The response was immediate and enthusiastic. Humming, the sound and vibration filling Zaid's mouth and traveling directly to the center of Carlin's body, Zaid swallowed him deep, slick heat surrounding Carlin's cock. Zaid's cheeks hollowed as his head bobbed and his fingers left faint marks in Carlin's thighs, kneading in time with the way his mouth worked.

Time and again, Zaid brought Carlin nearly to the point of release, testing him, tempting him to surrender and let go. Then he stilled or opened his mouth enough to gasp for air that felt cold in comparison. They were little stomach-tightening shocks, surprises that shook Carlin's senses to life and gave him another few seconds to hold off ecstasy, to draw out the pleasures Zaid coaxed from his body and make the anticipation that much sweeter for the waiting.

But Carlin's endurance was not unlimited, and eventually he caught Zaid's head between his hands and forced it still, his chest, stomach, and balls drawn tight. "Wait," he gritted between his teeth. "Not yet. Not so fast..."

Wicked Zaid would not be stopped.

The shift of his jaw was subtle, a change of angle that made it possible to close his teeth enough to startle Carlin and make him flex his hips. One last uncontrolled stroke into warm depths, cock cushioned against Zaid's tongue. A second that robbed Carlin of breath completely and left him panting, jaw dropped and mouth open, a hoarse sound escaping him as he came.

He'd never felt so spent, like he'd been turned inside out. He couldn't imagine there were muscles that hadn't tensed to hold him helplessly in place while white-hot pleasure rocked through him, counting out each burst of release. He'd be sore when his body was his own again. When the room stopped spinning, he'd still be dizzy.

Zaid released him carefully, planting damp kisses along the insides of his thighs. He sat back on his heels for a moment, his own chest rising and falling rapidly, then stretched to claim another kiss, tongue sliding deep into Carlin's mouth as he murmured nonsense.

Carlin had never tasted himself on another man's tongue. What had once seemed like it might repulse him now appealed and filled him with a quiet, forbidden thrill. Body still feeling as though it responded too slowly, he slid his hand into Zaid's hair again and managed a smile that moved his lips against Zaid's. Carlin sucked hungrily on his lover's tongue and scraped his teeth against the other man's bottom lip.

He meant to murmur a thank-you. Zaid stopped his lips again with a touch. "Catch your breath," he said quietly. "I'm going to get water and a cloth to clean you up." He stood, and the jut of his erection was impossible to ignore. Carlin reached, but Zaid backed away with a *cluck* of his tongue and a shake of his head.

"Later," he promised. "Trust me. You'll have me as often, in any way that you want, but you have to let me take care of you first."

Carlin didn't have the energy to argue or protest. He simply nodded and let his hand fall heavy at his side. Zaid was right. Later. In a minute or two, he'd be ready. Then he could more than return the favor. Then they could restage the acrobatics of the night before. And when he'd rested, he would go back to work. He'd convince Zaid he could handle the enemy djinn.

But not just now. Now he needed to sleep.

Guilt was not an emotion that Zaid knew well. It went against his very nature. He was a creature of whims, more or less, free to do as he chose so long as he followed a somewhat fluid set of rules. He'd never been particularly troubled by matters of conscience, expectation, or moral society. The world he moved through wasn't the world he came from, and as such, he had no real obligation to explain himself or behave.

The problem was that somewhere along the way, in a couple of centuries of living among and playing with and learning about humanity, he'd fallen in love with it and all its many faults. Which, in turn, occasionally caused him trouble.

Like now, when leaving Carlin asleep on the couch and walking out the door took a supreme effort of will.

It should have been easy to simply walk away. Zaid knew he'd be coming back, problem solved, the triumphant hero. The hard part was knowing that his sleeping lover would be disappointed at best and furious at worst. He'd

have to stand up for himself when he told Carlin that he'd faced down Amouk alone.

Carlin, understandably, wanted to protect *him*, not play the part of the mortal in need of rescue. More than being angry, which was a short-lived emotion and would fade with time, he would be upset. There was no telling how long that sort of changeable reaction might linger. It could ruin their relationship.

Something twisted in the pit of Zaid's stomach. That was the other part of the current difficulty. Despite knowing Carlin for a little less than two days, Zaid had already started thinking of himself as part of a couple. A unit. That could be—no, was—a problem.

He couldn't afford to let it hold him back now. He lingered in the doorway, hand on the knob for far too long, then set his jaw and closed it behind him. The dead bolt slid home with a quiet *snap*, and he walked away, refusing to look back.

He didn't reach for his cell phone until he'd gotten a block away. Pressing one of his programmed numbers, he listened to the echo of the ringing as he walked, attention skimming over the other people still on the street, heading home at the end of busy days.

If pressed for details later, very few of them were likely to remember that he'd been out there with them or, more importantly, what he looked like. That was another bit of a djinn's talent. It was just as important to be able to go unnoticed as it was to command attention. The clever djinn knew when to use both to best effect.

"Yeah." Dash finally answered his phone. His voice sounded thick and heavy with sleep.

"Sleeping again?"

There was a long pause and an indrawn breath, then silence. Zaid took the phone away from his ear, peering at the lighted screen to see whether he'd

been disconnected. Dash's voice came through faintly when he finally spoke. "Man." He exhaled and laughed, a nervous, almost uncertain sound. "Don't bust my chops for catching z's when I can. You haven't exactly been going easy on me."

"I keep you busy," Zaid agreed, forehead creased. "You don't get bored; we're both happy. Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," he said again and yawned into the phone audibly. "Everything's cool. Just worn-out." He hesitated half a second too long, and Zaid took a breath to prompt him for more information. He was cut off. "Oh, and if your guy's got an army backing him, they're the quietest army I've never heard of."

"If he's got an army, it will be quiet. We're not flashy people, Dash." He paused and amended, "I'm not anyway. Amouk wants attention, but only on his terms. He'll go to ground until he wants to be noticed. That's why I'm relying on you."

"That's why you pay me the big bucks, right?" The amusement in Dash's voice pulled a smile to Zaid's lips. "I think I got something for you. Heard a rumor about where you might find your friend."

"Tell me." Zaid stopped moving, though his heartbeat skipped ahead. No point in wandering aimlessly if Dash knew where he needed to go. Hope began to trickle through his veins. Maybe, if he could find Amouk, reason with him, turn his attention somewhere else... "Tell me," he insisted again.

Dash yawned into the phone. "I'll show you," he said lazily, as if the information he had weren't important. As though he had all the time in the world. "Meet me downtown. Jefferson and Twenty-third. There's this crappy shop down there. Guy who owns it is a real asshole, but everybody talks to him. Word is, that means your buddy too."

"What did they talk about?"

Dash laughed. "I'm good, but I'm not *that* good, Zaid. I'm gonna go poke the dude, see what I can get out of him."

"Alone?" Zaid shook his head even though Dash couldn't see. "I don't want you doing any more alone."

"Then come with me," the young man answered, and Zaid could hear the shrug. Sometimes a gesture did translate across a phone line. "Meet me down there. We can play good cop, bad cop."

"This isn't a game," Zaid snapped into the phone. "It's not a laughing matter."

Dash paused, then cleared his throat. "Yeah, I know. Sorry. Look, I need to get something to eat. I'll grab something and wait for you down there. Cross my heart," he added without prompting. "I won't go in without you. See you in fifteen."

He hung up without saying good-bye, leaving the dial tone whining in Zaid's ear. Zaid pressed his lips together as he pocketed his phone. The boy still needed to learn a sense of self-preservation. Yes, his impulses sometimes paid off, but sooner or later, they would lead him to a bad end.

Faster, if he got too tangled up with Amouk, and gathering information from a willing source was only one way to learn about goings-on in the city, or even the world. For most of the humans he'd met, that option was an end. Not so for Zaid. Pocketing the phone, he scanned the street for a likely place to try another approach. He needed quiet and a place of shelter where he wouldn't be disturbed for a moment or two. An empty doorway. An alley entrance. Even the not-so-stable fire-escape platform on the abandoned apartment building there on the corner. That was out-of-the-way and unvisited, unlikely to draw attention if he sat there awhile.

Catching the ladder up was as simple as taking a longer step in preparation for the jump and pulling himself up. He worried for a moment that the noise of old metal and loosened bolts might draw the curious to investigate, but no one came. He perched, ready to leap down and find another place if necessary. One moment stretched into several and not a soul so much as glanced his way. Good enough. It would do.

Reassured, Zaid sat, folding his legs beneath him and resting his hands on his knees. His eyes drifted shut slowly, and he slowed his breathing, letting it fall into a steady pattern, rhythmic and deep. The sound of people talking as they wandered past, the music drifting from the open window of a passing car, all faded into the background, a disconnected soundtrack of the world that played while Zaid let go of his physical body and drifted into the ether to search.

It wasn't exactly what human mystics called astral projection. Zaid's soul didn't leave his body. He simply opened his mind. Oh, certainly he could travel a great distance much more quickly than he could in his body. He could witness events far removed from where his body sat. He could appear to another one of the djinn or the most perceptive among mankind. He could seem, in that way, to be in two places at once, but his true essence, that which gave him life and allowed him an existence, remained in the shell seated on rusty metal, subject to the elements just like any other creature of flesh and blood.

In this state—coasting, as he called it—Zaid could simply see beyond the ordinary, everyday world. He could let himself drift over the city. Seeking out others like him.

They appeared to his mind's eye as bright sparks of color, sometimes shifting, sometimes steady, sometimes glowing urgently. Each of the djinn reflected a bit of their element. Some were full of the rich, ruddy browns and ochres of earth, others bright with the blues and greens of the world's oceans. Others seemed to shift as though pale clouds streaked across a sky full of warm breezes. More, like him, flared with hot oranges and reds, kissed by fire.

He was seeking them now, filtering out the colors by force of will. Though it comforted him somewhat to know that he wasn't alone, he didn't need to know where his cousins were at the moment. He had only one concern: Amouk.

As if by simply thinking his name he could summon the other djinn, Zaid saw a flare of white-hot light appear on the other side of the city. It grew as he turned his attention toward it, and changed in color, no longer a pure, unflawed spark. Now there was a haze of blue at its center, and within that, a hint of an angry, pulsing orange. Air and fire tangled in each other, feeding one another, but not like an ordinary flame. This was special. Dangerous.

And it continued to grow. Zaid's perspective seemed to shift, taking him closer to the new glare as though he was being drawn into it. It had a pull on him that, try as he might once he realized what was happening, he could not resist. He willed himself to wake up. To return to his body as the orange-within-blue being streaked closer, flaring and dancing with a kind of erratic joy as its light expanded to touch and then engulf everything that Zaid could see.

Connected as he was to his physical body, he could feel the trickle of sweat racing from his scalp down the back of his neck. He could feel muscles strain and bunch as he struggled to move them, but they could not truly respond to the increasingly frantic messages from his brain. *Wake up! Move! Do something!* He felt his lungs fill with air and willed himself to shout for help.

Then he realized that he was no longer alone inside his mind. The voice that had spoken to him the night of the Baseline fire, the voice that he recognized and had dreaded hearing for decades, invaded. Three times as loud, ten times more impossible to ignore and block out. *"There you are, little brother,"* it—he—said. *"Were you looking for me?"* Amouk's voice was far from amused. It was mocking and cruel, like fingers being driven deeply into flesh. *"Clever boy. You've found me. We are reunited. Together at last, as we were meant to be. Now you can help me do what must be done."*

Chapter Seven

Carlin woke with a start and something ringing in his ears. With his vision swimming and his hands feeling like they'd been weighted with lead, he wasn't exactly sure where or when he was. It took another few seconds, too long, to recognize the sound of his cell phone ringing to catch it before it went to voice mail. It hardly mattered. There was only a moment of silence before it started again.

"Rhodes," he mumbled as he pressed it to his ear and knuckled sleep from his eyes. He must have been more tired than he thought. And where was Zaid? Had he slept so long that the other man left again? Embarrassing. Disappointing. He'd have to find a way to make it up...

"Where the hell have you been?" Jacob, all but shouting over the line. Carlin could hear the clatter of an alarm in the background. "Aren't you supposed to be at the station by now?"

Adrenaline kicked in, and the world began to make sense. The sound of people moving and shouting to one another registered at last. "What's going on? What's the call?" Carlin climbed to his feet, already trying to remember where he'd dropped his keys and whether his radio was in the car. "What's burning?"

"Half the freaking city from the way dispatch is talking." Jacob paused. "Are you okay? You sound funny."

"I fell asleep," Carlin confessed. "I'll be okay. Just need another couple seconds." That was out of the ordinary too. He'd trained himself to wake in an instant, ready to go and fighting fit. That nap, or whatever it was, couldn't have

been natural. He hadn't taken anything, hadn't done anything strange. He'd had sex with Zaid, but that...

Somehow the djinn had drugged him or magicked him to sleep. Carlin shook himself. Dealing with that would have to wait. Fire first, then his personal problems. "Where's the engine going?"

"Downtown," Jacob answered. "Corner of Jackson and Twenty-third. There's an abandoned apartment building going up, and it's touched off a couple businesses on either side."

Carlin frowned. "Yeah, I think I know the place. People keep complaining that they want the thing torn down, right?"

Jacob snorted. "That's the one. They'd just better hope they didn't take matters into their own hands. I was about to dig into a piece of Mona's pecan pie. You know how long I've been waiting for that? Drives me crazy when she bakes..."

"When do you roll?" Carlin shoved his feet into his boots and headed for the door, keys swept off the table beside it and into his hand.

"Thirty seconds."

Damn! "I won't make it, but I'll meet you down there. Snag my gear."

"Already on it," Jacob reported. He hesitated for a second, then said, "Don't miss this one, Carlin. Call it a crazy hunch, but I think we're going to need you." A sharp voice rang out, unintelligible but urgent, and Jacob cursed. "Gotta go. See you there." The call cut off.

Carlin fisted the cell phone, squeezing so hard that the plastic casing creaked and threatened to snap. He resisted the urge to hurl it across the room. There was no telling who else might try to contact him. Who knew? Zaid might even confess that he'd set another fire. That would be convenient, given there wasn't any time to go looking for him first.

Zaid had to have something to do with this. He'd obviously slipped something into Carlin's mouth or had it on his lips, drugged Carlin somehow to

get and keep him out of the way so he could work. He never slept that hard in the middle of the day. Sure, he usually passed out after he got off. He felt lazy and heavy, and he wanted nothing more than his bed, but this was different. He should have known better. No one had ever gotten under his skin and into his heart that fast. Zaid was too good to be true. *Screwed up again!*

Underneath the anger that he let blaze on in the hopes it would clear his head, though, was a worrying knot of concern. If Zaid really was involved, why be so blatant about it? He'd been in the city how many years without giving himself away? Why the sudden change in behavior? What was going on?

No more time for what-ifs and wondering. Carlin had a job to do. One he should have done last night, and neglected in favor of his hot new friend. He'd let Zaid convince him to walk away. He couldn't do that again. He wouldn't.

He was going to the fire.

They stood in the middle of a void, featureless and unremarkable except for the flames that danced around them, caressing Zaid's skin and kissing it with light and heat but doing no damage. Of course he wouldn't burn. Fire had chosen him from the very beginning. He'd been gifted with the ability to call and command it, to understand its desires. He could choose to feed it or snuff it out.

And yet, with only a few seconds to piece together what had happened, where he was and what this barely controlled blaze wanted, he knew there was nothing he could do to stop it if—when—it broke free.

It didn't burn because nature demanded it. It didn't hunger because the land was overgrown and needed to be cleared so that life could thrive. There were no fields or crops or forests being choked out by weeds and tangled vines here. There was no easily consumed fuel nearby, subject to a curious wind and a wandering spark. Nothing surrounding Zaid should have burned at all.

Because as he stared, temples pounding, the world came into slow focus around him again, features and landmark structures fading in from the gray nothing that had a moment ago made up his world. The balcony beneath his feet glowed with the heat it had absorbed already. It sang as it quivered and shifted, kept just far enough away from the point of melting that it would keep its shape.

Beneath them on the street, Zaid saw figures—firefighters—battling an inferno that flickered in shades of black and silver and gray. If any one of them stood where he was, he knew, they would burn beyond easy aid. Their clothes would erupt into flame from the ambient heat. They would be unable to draw a breath that didn't sear their lungs. This was not the place to be if a man wanted to survive.

And yet Zaid felt the urge to pull them into the heart of the fire with him. He wanted them here. If they wanted to fight, let them do it from the inside out.

Not that Amouk would give them the opportunity to get that close to the source. To him. He leaned against the white-hot railing, fingers wrapped so tightly around the bars that he left indentations. His expression was alight with glee, and Zaid understood why.

Building a fire like this one, fanning its hunger until it craved metal, concrete, and glass as much as it would feast on a stand of dry trees, took such skill that it was exhilarating. Compare it to racing down a hill on a bicycle with no brakes and not a finger on the handlebars, and that ride would seem boring. It was ruthless and dangerous and unstoppable. It was a freedom the likes of which the djinn seldom knew.

As creatures of myth and legend, yes, they were powerful, but just as the legends said, they could also be controlled. There were more than a few of their number who resented that more than anything else in the world. Humans had, now and then, managed to bind a djinn's will to their own, something that was an affront on every level.

And in response, there were djinn who made it the purpose of their existence to take revenge on the human race as a whole. By any means necessary and available. Amouk counted himself one of that faction.

"It's glorious, isn't it?" he wondered aloud, as though he could hear Zaid's thoughts. "The sheer power of a fire released. The desperation of the fools who think it can be put out. Life, not light," he said and clucked his tongue. "They should honor both. They should show some respect."

He made a careless gesture as he spoke, and the fire responded to his will, leaping up where, a moment before, the firefighters had forced it back. They'd soaked the sidewalk with water and foam that should have prevented anything from lighting again.

Anything natural. This was no such fire. This was Amouk's will given form. It was cruel and angry, not a cleansing force as fire was meant to be. This was pure, wicked punishment, and it made no sense.

"Why are you doing this?" Zaid asked, tongue finally his to command as he watched the firemen beat a retreat and regroup beyond the fire line. They pushed their helmets back and scratched their foreheads. The captains of four units conferred together, heads shaking as they tried to hash out a strategy.

Already the fire had spread beyond the confines of the apartment building. Businesses had caught errant sparks, and the owners watched their livelihoods go up in smoke. More waited in nervous anticipation. Beyond the businesses stood people's homes. All their worldly possessions. Their hopes, their memories.

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded again. "Just to show me how strong you are? You called my name last night. You trapped me here today. For what purpose? What do you expect from me?"

Amouk turned to face him, eyes nearly glowing with pride. Zaid understood the expression, though he wished he'd never seen it. He knew why the bigger djinn seemed to blaze, surrounded by an aura of fire. He knew all too well the intoxicating feeling of giving in to the flames, feeding on their power

and letting them fill him until he overflowed. That feeling, that ability to dazzle and be dazzled, had gotten him through many a performance, not only in this city or lifetime, but in other places, under other names.

So yes, he understood the temptation to touch and strive and revel in fire's glory. But there had to be a reason, didn't there? Not even the oldest among their kind gave in to this sort of destruction without a reason. "Please," he begged. "Tell me."

"Why?" Amouk's hairless eyebrows rose. "You, of all of us, can ask me why? You who surround yourself with mortals for entertainment? Who sell your talents in basements for their amusement? You, who whore yourself to the unworthy for a brief moment's connection? You can ask me why?"

He advanced on Zaid, and as he moved, he seemed to grow, drawing power from the very flames he fed. "I will tell you why, little brother." He stopped but still towered over Zaid. "Because they take. Because they destroy. Because they've made you forget what you are."

He reached for Zaid with hands now made of flame, and Zaid shrank away from him. For a moment, Amouk hesitated, as though the refusal might have stung. Then he lashed out too quickly to avoid and caught Zaid by the arm. Flames licked his skin again, but these were not the friendly embraces of the fire he knew; and yet his own powers jumped and sparked inside him, eager to answer and perhaps join that which blazed around him.

"That," Amouk said. "That struggle you feel? That is what you are, little brother. You are flame and life and power. Not an entertainment. Not someone's toy. Do you know how many of us have fallen prey to a mortal's will? How many have been burned out, used up, rendered nothing by the desires of the short-lived? Oh, they are tempting," he allowed. "While they burn, they are bright and they seek us out, eager for more of the fire and the passion we possess. But they do not last, and they fear losing what we offer. They take," he repeated. "And they give nothing back."

He pulled Zaid closer and lowered his head. Their foreheads nearly touched, and even to Zaid, the heat that poured off of Amouk was almost too much to bear. The fire in his blood roared and surged in his ears in response to Amouk's will. He would blaze *himself* soon. There was a part of him that wondered if he would be able to stop if he let the inferno churning inside him out.

"You were one of the best of us once," Amouk said. "Did you know? When Fire called you, you made history. Why do you think you were allowed to walk the world on your own for so long? Why did no one come to you and give you a purpose? Show you a way?"

Without warning, Amouk closed the last distance between them, and their foreheads met. Zaid was instantly awash in images that had nothing to do with *this* fire, this place. They were old, he could tell, and processed through someone else's mind, but they seemed as real as something he'd witnessed himself.

He recognized the landscape, the rocky environment of the place of his birth. It made his chest ache dully. He found it hard to breathe, but he could smell the bite of bitter sulfur that always tainted the air, felt the grit of pulverized stone on his tongue. Home.

Long ago, in the midst of a gathering that seemed somehow familiar, tightening the knot in his chest even more. There were dozens, maybe hundreds, of djinn in sight, all gathered and moving toward an altar made of sacred fire, all coming together to witness an important event.

Then he was there, Amouk, tall and strong and sure of himself, broad shoulders pushed back proudly, chin lifted. He stood before the gathered, and he raised his arms. At the same time, the flames behind him leaped skyward. The djinn congregation quieted.

"The time has come to embrace new power," Amouk called out over the crowd. "The Fire-called take another stride toward reclaiming their rightful

place as masters of this world, leaders of those chosen to speak with the voice of the elements.”

The djinns murmured and nodded, heads bobbing in agreement. They had been summoned to witness a momentous event. Anticipation filled the air.

“I have foreseen this birth. I know that Fire will give to us today a child with the greatest potential of any who have come before. He will usher in a new era of power. He will lead us to our rightful place. Pure of spirit, born from the cleansing flame, we are given a new prince, brothers. We are given new strength.”

The fire behind him roared again and then, in its heart, formed a pocket of white-hot heat. Zaid squinted as if he truly had been a witness to this moment. All around him, he saw other djinn shield their eyes and turn away. It was too hot, too bright, too painful to stare directly. Even the murmur of voices died away, until only the flames cracked and whispered in the quiet.

And then, just as suddenly, the brightness disappeared. Curious voices rose again, and when Zaid dared look toward the altar, he saw the figure at Amouk's side. Slender. Bronzed skin and golden eyes, long ebony hair. The same confidence that shaped Amouk. A brilliant smile.

Zaid stared in disbelief at himself.

The vision ended. Zaid found himself on the roof of a new building, looking down over the city he'd come to know and love. People passed on the streets beneath them, heedless of the men watching from high above. Customers passed in and out of businesses that had seen better days and yet continued to make their owners some money. Cars passed, life went on, and no one suspected that a judgment had been made, that their lives had been deemed insignificant. That it was all about to change.

Amouk stepped into his line of vision, looming over him. Mingled disappointment and anger shone in his eyes. “You were supposed to usher in a new age. A new way of life. And yet, we—I—have watched you forget us and

ignore your calling in favor of *them*.” The word dripped with contempt. “The time has come to reawaken you. Time for you to fulfill your destiny.”

The vision had shaken him. Amouk's words stirred something inside him, a feeling, a sense of purpose long buried and deliberately set aside. He stood at the edge of a choice, as echoed by his precarious position on the rooftop's edge. He'd told Carlin that he was meant to be what Amouk expected. He could give in now, knowing that the bigger djinn would no doubt use him whether he willed it or not. He could choose not to fight, and he could watch Amouk tear apart his city.

Or he could fight. He could resist. He could refuse.

He lifted his chin and hardened his gaze. “What makes you think that after so long, I would simply do what you say? Why should I, who you call important and unique, bend my will to yours, Amouk? Why should I do what you say?”

Wrong choice. He'd made the wrong decision. Zaid knew it immediately, even before Amouk began to smile. Still, the bigger man shook his head, making a show of his opinion. He sighed and spread his hands. “I had hoped,” he began, “that you would simply remember what you are and not force my hand, but I had forgotten just how stubborn you are. So”—his gaze shifted to a point over Zaid's shoulder—“I bring you encouragement.”

He didn't want to turn around. He didn't want to see what Amouk so badly wanted to show him. He closed his eyes and made fists, willing himself not to move, not to look, not to care.

Until he heard the gasp and the hesitant, “Zaid? What the hell's going on, man? What's he going to do to me?”

Dash. Zaid would have known that voice anywhere. His shoulders hitched, but he let that be his only reaction before he opened his eyes again and turned slowly.

His friend stood at the center of the roof. He hadn't been bound, hands and feet free. There were no marks on him, so he didn't look like he'd been injured, and yet his eyes were wide with fear. "I was on the street," he started. "And I ran into—I found him, and then the next thing I know, I'm up here and you're over here and *I can't move*." Panic pushed his voice higher. He would have trembled if Amouk hadn't held him still.

"He cannot move," Amouk confirmed, a low rumble behind Zaid's ear, "but he can burn. And he will, if you refuse me."

"No." Zaid blurted the word, flinching forward a step.

He should have known better. Flame flashed up around Dash's ankles, not hot enough to burn without color. It didn't catch on his clothes, not yet, but it was enough of the show that Zaid saw Dash's chest heave. The boy looked down toward his feet, then up again and paled. "Zaid?"

Zaid turned back to face Amouk. "Don't do this. Don't punish him in my place."

Amouk's smile remained. "It's all your choice, little brother." His gaze flicked toward Dash and back. "Perhaps I'll let him dance when the fire starts feeding. All this talking and waiting bores me."

Zaid felt the flames at his back grow larger.

Dash cried out, "Oh *shit!* Zaid! He's going to burn me? Don't let him do this! Help me! Someone help! I'm sorry. Whatever I did! Don't let him kill me!"

The whole point, Zaid knew, was that he harden his heart. Prove to Amouk that they had been made of the same stuff, that one fleeting human life was expendable. He knew—and knew that Amouk had counted on it too—that he could never be that creature. Not now. Not after so long among the mortals of the city. That he could never sacrifice someone just to save his own pride.

So he closed his eyes again, ears ringing with Dash's pleas for help, and he took a breath, filling his lungs with cool air before he let it out again. Before

he lifted his gaze to Amouk's and summoned the courage to say, "Let him go. I'll do it. Make me what you want me to be. Remind me, brother."

Triumph blazed in Amouk's eyes. Behind him, Zaid heard a rush of air and noise as the flames surrounding Dash consumed themselves. He heard the boy gasp and crumple to the gravel rooftop, a sob escaping him.

Then Amouk slammed a hand down on Zaid's shoulder, and it felt as though he had been struck by lightning or tied to a power line. Heat and pain flooded through him in equal measures. The sense that he might fly apart at any moment returned with doubled urgency. Like the hoses the firemen aimed at the blazing street, Amouk poured power into Zaid until he should have burst from the pressure of holding it in.

He absorbed it instead.

All the desperation, all the energy Amouk forced into him pooled and churned and built like a rising tide, but he didn't drown. Though his chest felt too tight to allow him breath, his vision tinged red and orange, and the world seemed to waver through a wall of heat; still, he held it in, controlled it, potential in check until... What? What was the word, the key, that would release it? And what would happen when it rushed out?

"Show them," he heard Amouk whisper. "Teach them. Correct them. Make them see."

Amouk pushed him, none too gently, and Zaid staggered forward, the next step carrying him over the side of the roof. Rather than falling as he thought he must, he stood on a cushion of hot air. While he wrapped his mind around the reason, it ever so gently lowered him to the surface of the street, like a chariot of the elements, fit for a prince. No. A god. His grand entrance. The world was waiting.

Chapter Eight

Carlin had never seen anything like it. Even the aftermath of the fire at the Baseline seemed tame in comparison to this. Flames burned hot enough that the asphalt in the street had turned soft and tacky, threatening to trap anyone who dared get that close. The heat radiating from the blaze became unbearable fast, even with top-of-the-line protective gear. It was an impossible conflagration, and yet, here he stood as a witness while the world burned.

All right, so he was being a little dramatic, but he found it hard to choose the right words to describe something on this large a scale. If he'd gone out on a call with a wilderness crew, somewhere in California in the middle of the dry season, he'd have expected this sort of thing. Here, in the city, he couldn't understand how it had happened at all.

The building where the fire started had already been gutted, and now threatened to collapse from stress and heat. They should have been at the end of the fight, wrapping things up. Pockets of still-smoldering embers would have made sense, but the wall of fire he faced blew his mind.

“Carlin! We need you on the hose. Whalen's out. Heat's getting to him.” The captain shouted from a few running strides away. “You good to go?”

Carlin gave a thumbs-up and jogged to join the line. He got his hands on the bucking hose, braced his feet, and leaned into it, holding it as steady as he could with the two others assigned. They aimed the stream of twisting water through the gaping doorway of the fifth business—he thought this one had once been a copy shop—to go up today. With any luck, it would be the last. No, strike that. With a lot of luck and a miracle or three.

Movement in his peripheral vision didn't strike Carlin as odd. There were people everywhere trying to help where there was need. Those untrained civilians and gawkers lingering around had been cleared out and forced back behind makeshift barricades, but there were four engine companies on the scene. Of course there were going to be people moving around him in all directions. He expected it, accepted it. It shouldn't have caught and held his attention.

Except that the figure walking toward him didn't hurry. It—he—strolled casually through the chaos. He carried nothing. He didn't gesture or shout out commands. Carlin looked over, glanced twice, and turned back to the matter at hand. He took a breath to call for a medic. Maybe this guy had been in a building and inhaled one lungful of smoke too many and gotten lost and disoriented.

But when he looked a final time, he knew the lone figure was no such man. Carlin recognized the long, dark hair, the eyes glowing the same color as the flames behind him, the sun-bronzed skin.

Zaid.

He pushed firefighters out of his way as he moved, making broad, sweeping gestures that somehow gathered up the flames and sent them where he directed. Lines of fire followed the arc of his arm, lashing out like a whip that Carlin had no doubt would do more damage than true rawhide could.

And for a few moments, it kept the crews away from him. No one wanted to challenge the man or creature who could call new walls of fire out of nothing. They didn't want to get near someone who could seemingly burn alive and yet not writhe in pain or cry out. Hell, it didn't look like it bothered him at all.

Someone had to do something. The crews knew that. The captains demanded it. After the first moments of panicked retreat and stunned silence, shouts rang out across the site, orders jumbled together as those in command struggled to make themselves heard. Carlin watched as every hose was turned

toward Zaid, as men braced themselves and squared their shoulders, lifting their chins as they faced down the impossible.

Jacob, who stood at the nozzle of Carlin's line, shook himself and straightened. "Let's get this son of a bitch," he said. He started forward, and where he went, Carlin had to follow or have the hose jerked from his hands. Four steps, five, and one more to get closer; then Jacob stopped, set his feet, and called out, "On three!"

The count flew by. Jacob opened the nozzle, and the hose between Carlin's hands swelled and bucked like an untrained bronc. Water shot toward Zaid in a stream powerful enough to knock any man off his feet and send him tumbling away from the force of the blow. Any human man, that was.

When the water hit Zaid, it might have been the spray from a plastic pistol. It flared, splashing off him dramatically, but as the spray rebounded, the smaller streams evaporated, sending up clouds of steam and making a huge amount of hissing noise, not deterring him at all. Ineffective was an understatement.

Jacob did a double take and blurted out, "What the hell?"

Zaid's attention shifted toward him, those oddly glowing eyes narrowed, and he flicked his fingers like he might shake off some of the water that'd just been aimed at him.

The reaction was immediate and colorful. Jacob swore and staggered sideways, hose dropping from his hands. "Hot! Too hot," he shouted, slapping at them like he was dousing flames of his own. "I'm burning," he insisted, even though Carlin couldn't see anything. Before he could move, however, Jacob started peeling off his gear, frantically dancing where he stood. "From the inside. Oh damn, there's fire inside my gloves!"

He had them off in the seconds it took Carlin to move. Carlin caught the other man's fingers, turning them so he could inspect now-exposed hands, but there was nothing. No flames, no heat, not a blister or even a rash. And yet

Jacob hissed and twitched and tried to jerk away from Carlin as though he was in pain. Carlin glanced at Zaid.

Zaid stared impassively back.

Carlin set his jaw and flagged the man at the engine, a kid new to another station and one he didn't know well. "Shut it down," he ordered. "Injured man." Whether there was physical proof or not, Jacob thought he'd been burned. "Dempsey," he snapped, the third man on the line stepping around him. "Get Jake to a medic, get him looked at. Maybe I'm missing something."

"But..." Dempsey stared at Jacob's unmarked hands as well.

"Just go," Carlin insisted. "Tell them I ordered you. Go. Now." He steered Jacob into Dempsey's awkward embrace, then turned back to face Zaid, a deep frown chiseling into the space between his eyes.

And found himself nearly toe to toe with the other man. Not close enough to get caught in his fire but certainly enough to feel waves of heat ripple off him. "Hello, lover," Zaid purred like a very satisfied cat.

Under normal circumstances, Carlin might have flinched at the endearment where other people could hear. He'd have shrugged it off, tried to discount it. Here and now, it didn't matter. He had only one question: "Why?"

Zaid's eyes were almost mesmerizing as they shifted from gold to orange to angry red and back again. His mouth lifted at the corners, the smile a patient one. Indulgent. "It's time," he said calmly. "Time for me to embrace what I am. You know this part of me."

Carlin couldn't help but shake his head. That he wasn't human? Yes, that part he knew. That part he was still struggling to truly comprehend, but this was different. "I don't know this part," he argued. "You lied to me. You tricked me."

The smile widened into laughter. "You can't exactly blame me for that. You're easy to trick." The sound of running feet echoed at Carlin's back. Zaid's multihued gaze shifted over Carlin's shoulder, and again he gestured.

The footsteps stopped. Carlin twisted around to see another fireman, a guy he recognized as a local but couldn't name, suspended a few feet off the ground, fire ax in hand. When he turned back, a protest on his lips, Zaid tilted his head, then shook it. "You should really tell them not to try to stop me."

This wasn't the man Carlin knew. Sure, Zaid had a sense of humor, and even in their short acquaintance he knew that sometimes those jokes carried a biting edge, but nothing like this. He hadn't demonstrated cruelty. Carlin hadn't seen this kind of glee before. "What makes you think they'd listen to me?" Maybe if he could keep him talking, distract him, someone would figure out what to do.

"I think you could make them," Zaid answered. "If you thought it was important enough." A flick of the wrist, and the suspended man was tossed away, landing heavily on his back a dozen yards away.

Damn! "It's important," Carlin told him. "I can't let you hurt these people, and I won't let you burn the city."

Zaid's teeth flashed. "Then you have to try." He went stiff for a moment, eyes fluttering shut. When they opened again, Carlin could see how tense the muscles of his neck were. "You don't want anyone else to get hurt, and who knows which way my whims will turn."

Carlin's eyes narrowed in turn. Something had changed just then, but he couldn't put his finger on what, exactly. "Is the fact that you haven't tossed me around a whim?"

"Of course," Zaid answered through a bright, broad grin. "But don't test me. I'd hate to have my mind changed. No telling what your punishment might be."

Or whom it might come from. Though Zaid didn't speak the words himself, Carlin was guessing something else was going on. "Back off," he called without turning his head when he heard someone else approach them at the trot.

"Carlin?" He recognized Peter's voice, even rough with the long day's exertion. "What's going on?"

"Nothing I can't handle, sir," he answered as casually as possible. His mind was shouting for the other man to get away, to stay back, not get involved. If anyone else got hurt because of him, because of his desperation, because he'd been lonely... He still hadn't looked away. "It's under control. We're under control, aren't we, Zaid?"

Zaid's chin lifted, then jerked down roughly. "For now," he allowed, then took a deep breath. "But the fire's hungry. Angry at being held back. I can't—won't—promise that I'll hold it forever."

"You know they're not going to let us stand here that long," Carlin said lowly as he heard Peter's footsteps head away. "Now that they see you, you're their target. They're going to pin everything on you. Even if I tell them that you're doing this against your will, I'm not going to be able to help you out."

"This is my will," Zaid insisted, though something in his eyes contradicted the words.

Carlin went with his hunch and shook his head. "No, it's not. You said I know you, and I might not know you well, but enough that I can guarantee you don't want to burn this city down. Or hurt anyone," he added. "If that was your style, you'd have already done it and been long gone. This isn't you, Zaid."

When his lover's expression twisted, dark eyebrows pulling together and a glow the color of flame flickering in his eyes, when he lifted a hand and called fire to wreath it like a blazing glove, Carlin's heart skipped a beat. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe he really was that easy to trick and he'd been suckered, but to what end? Zaid hadn't made him do anything, hadn't compromised him in the least. He hadn't asked for any favors or information or even tried to threaten him. Zaid had given pleasure, taken some, Carlin thought, but that was it. What did he have to gain by using Carlin?

"Turn it off." Carlin took a chance, lowering his voice even further as he took another step, practically daring Zaid to burn him if that was the intent.

“Prove to the rest of them that you haven't completely lost your shit and picked up a death wish instead.”

Wrong choice of words. The corners of Zaid's mouth lifted. “Death wish. Do you really think any of this”—he gestured at the crewmen and vehicles scattered in the streets—“could kill me? I'm older than even the thought of these things. They have no power over me.”

Carlin smirked. “Ever heard that saying 'Pride goeth before a fall'?” He shook his head. “Zaid's not a braggart either.” Eyes narrowed, he asked, “What's gotten into you?” A little voice at the back of his mind added, Or who?

Zaid stepped forward abruptly, eating up the little distance left between them. His hands clapped Carlin's head, holding him in place before the bigger man could think to move or shy away from the flames that winked out a second before they would have touched his skin. Not that their absence spared him any pain.

It felt, Carlin thought, like Zaid had driven his fingers through the skin and bone and other tissue that he touched. It was cold at first, sharp and edged, then heated all at once into an inferno inside his skull. He would have closed his eyes, but he couldn't. By rights, flames should have leaped between them. He wanted to cry out or scream, but he couldn't summon a sound. He should have fallen, but he'd locked his knees. He could do nothing but stare into Zaid's eyes and know that he'd gone a step too far, and this was how he'd end.

Except that he didn't. Zaid held him in that torturous grip until sweat slid down Carlin's spine and soaked the waistband of his shorts. Until there was nothing in the world *but* Zaid. Then he said the impossible, words Carlin had been hoping, but didn't expect, to hear. Zaid's lips peeled back, half grin, half grimace. The words were only a whisper.

“Help me.”

It was all Carlin could do to keep his eyes from crossing. "Help you?" he gritted out between his teeth. "How?" Even if it meant stepping into the heart of a fire, he'd do it to stop the pain inside his skull.

"You were right," Zaid answered in kind. The muscles in his jaw and cheeks tensed and bunched, as though he was chewing through a barrier to get the words out. "You were right, Carlin. It's not me. Not my will. We have to stop him."

"'Stop him' who?"

"Amouk." A name that short, that simple to roll off the tongue, shouldn't have had such weight behind it. Even with Zaid's fingers buried in his brain, Carlin could feel a weariness and wariness that came with the sound.

"Where is he?" Carlin willed his eyes to move so he could look for the stranger who'd wreaked such havoc in his city. He wanted to see the other man—djinn—and look him in the eye. He wanted to stand on equal footing with him, if there was any such thing when it came to creatures that couldn't possibly exist.

"Here," Zaid told him. "You won't see him," he added, as if reading Carlin's mind. "Not unless he wants you to. Not unless there's a reason to be seen, but he's here and we have to stop him, or this city *will* burn, and you and everything in it." He paused, an expression of pain twisting his features. "I can't let that happen to you."

Carlin almost argued that this wasn't the time for emotional conversations, but if that was out of place, fighting about it was even more so. "What do you want me to do?"

"Kiss me."

Or maybe it was the time. "Are you out of your mind? Here? Right now? I can't, Zaid."

"I need you, Carlin." His eyes were blazing. "I am capable of becoming what Amouk wants me to be. I am meant to be the monster he wants. It has

taken years of dedication and restraint to get where I am, and I have only managed that much because of the choices I've made. Working at the Baseline, surrounding myself with humanity. It grounds me, keeps me humble, and I need that reminder. You anchor me, Carlin. You, above anyone else, remind me of the good in this city. So please. Help me. Kiss me.”

Carlin hesitated, despite the pain beating a tattoo in his temples. He hesitated and took a breath. Held it. Let it out, and felt like he breathed flame. “This is my job, Zaid. My life. I work with a half a dozen guys at a time. They see me kiss you...”

“They won't fire you. They wouldn't dare. And if they do, you'll find another job. We'll find another job for you. Together.” That odd expression crossed his features again. “He can't hear me for now, Carlin, but I can't hold him off much longer. I need an answer. I need your help. Will you kiss me or not?”

His job or the city. The life he'd worked for or the man who'd turned his world upside down? Whichever decision he made would change everything, and thinking about it wasn't choosing. So he gathered his will, straightened his shoulders as far as they would go.

And leaned into Zaid, fit their mouths together, and kissed the djinn with everything he had.

If he'd been given to romantic thoughts, Carlin might have been able to convince himself that the sudden roaring in his ears was love or lust or whatever emotion flooded through the stricken at the moment when they came together with their partners. Then he felt the air pressure change, and all thoughts of romance fled with the tug at his sleeve.

The air was hot and moving fast, creating a funnel that pulled at him, sliding his shirt up his body and making even his short hair stand on end. Zaid's longer locks lifted and whipped about crazily, making erratic patterns against the wall of flame that now surrounded and swirled around them. Carlin couldn't see anything beyond it, and for all he knew, the city had been wiped

away entirely. He would have stepped back and tried to find a way out, but Zaid grabbed his hand and held him in place.

"Don't let go," he warned, lacing their fingers together. "If he separates us, it will go badly for you."

Carlin laughed. "Badly? That's an understatement, Zaid. You know what those are, right? Because a fire...tornado or whatever this is? Looks pretty bad to me already. Did you do this?" The pain in his head, at least, had dulled to a throb.

Zaid jerked his head in a negative. "This is Amouk's doing."

"Amouk. I thought you said I wouldn't see him."

"Unless I willed it so." The voice came from everywhere at once and made Carlin's eardrums buzz. It echoed inside the funnel like they stood in an amphitheater, all sound focused toward him. It didn't distract him enough to miss Amouk's arrival, though. The man had to be nearly eight feet tall and broader in build than Carlin. Rather than Zaid's bronzed color, Amouk's skin reflected all the colors of the inferno raging around him, and his eyes blazed white-hot heat.

Despite himself, Carlin was impressed. "Can you do that?" he whispered from the side of his mouth. He didn't dare take his eyes off Amouk for fear of what he might do.

"Only when I'm angry," Zaid replied. "It's the same with him." He tightened his grip on Carlin's hand. "Don't let go." Then he took a half step forward, putting himself slightly in front of Carlin. Even now, he seemed taller. Wider across the shoulders. Not the sort of guy he'd want to meet in an alley, anyway.

"This is *my* city, Amouk," he said. "I've made it my home, and I will not destroy it. Not another block. Not another body. I will not be what you want me to be." He squeezed Carlin's hand. "And you will not harm this man. He is mine. I make my claim."

Amouk paused and, despite having no irises that Carlin could see, still gave the sense that he was looking between them, weighing his thoughts before he burst into laughter. "I want nothing from that man, nor anything to do with him. I would rather remove him entirely than consider him. He means nothing to me. You, on the other hand—"

"Are no longer your concern." Zaid's shoulders straightened, and the air pressure changed again. Carlin thought he saw the fire wall thin, allowing a glimpse of a building and a truck outline for a moment before the gap closed again.

Amouk's heavy brow furrowed. "You know not what you do," he said, voice dropping into a register that made the ground under Carlin's feet tremble. "Take the man, take a dozen, but do not try to banish me for his sake. For the sake of a human."

"For the sake of a hundred," Zaid argued, voice tight. "A thousand. A hundred thousand. For the humans and the places and the memories. You are not *welcome* here, Amouk. It is time," he said, every word sounding like it took effort, "for you to leave."

The fire wall thinned and broke behind Amouk again. The big djinn staggered a step backward, honest surprise registering on his face, then stopped and leaned forward as though he leaned into a wind. Zaid's hand tightened on Carlin's so tightly that his knuckles ached and his fingertips throbbed from the loss of blood flow.

"Do you think that this will end if you send me away?" Amouk demanded, incredulity in his voice. "If not me, then someone else will come to cleanse this city."

Zaid shook his head slightly. "And I will send them away as I send you. This is *my* home," he repeated, an edge to the words now. "And I will not be removed or replaced while there is power in me." A shudder went through him, and Amouk took a second step back. "Leave," Zaid told him. "Of your own will. Leave and stay away."

Amouk grinned nastily. "I will not make it that easy. If you want to make this choice, then make it, Zaid, with all the consequences that it brings." He spread his legs and braced himself against the wind, looking every bit the flame giant Carlin thought him to be. "I will not leave."

"What are the consequences?" Carlin asked, stepping forward the half step Zaid had put between them. He kept his voice pitched low, but had no doubt that Amouk could hear him clearly. "What happens if he doesn't leave?"

"I banish him." Muscle stood out in Zaid's neck. "The body you see is consumed, and he is sent back to our realm, to reconstruct and heal. It is a fate all of us would kill to avoid."

"And a just punishment for your betrayal," Amouk said. "Do it if you must, boy. Send me away, then live with your conscience and the knowledge that this is a temporary end. If you can." His grin widened until he broke into laughter. "I cannot wait to see you when we come again."

"*Enough*," Zaid snapped and lifted his free hand, palm toward Amouk. Carlin could see the way it shook, but he kept quiet. There was no telling what would happen if he interrupted now.

"You are banished," Zaid said, chin lifting. "Forbidden to remain in this city, forbidden to return. If you do—*when* you do," he amended, "you do so on the promise of facing my wrath, and I promise you that I—that we—will be ready for whatever you might bring."

Amouk made a low noise, laughter or a cough, Carlin couldn't tell. His posture didn't change, but as Carlin watched, his edges began to...stretch. The lines of his body moved as though they were being redrawn by the hot wind swirling around them, color and shape wavering in ripples of heat. His cheek twitched, the djinn's only acknowledgment that anything had changed; then his forehead creased again, and for one moment, Carlin thought he read pain in his face.

"You are banished," Zaid repeated and took a deep breath, holding it until Carlin's lungs ached for him. Then he exhaled slowly and closed his fist. "You

are banished,” he said a third time and jerked his arm back like he might if unplugging something from a wall socket far away.

The odd smearing effect was impossible to ignore now. As Amouk pulled apart and his form wavered into nothing, he threw back his head, letting out a roar that nearly knocked Carlin off his feet, and shattered, if that was the right word, the fiery walls of the funnel, revealing the city behind it. Licks of flame danced on the air for a moment, and the clap of sound that came from releasing heat suddenly was deafening.

And then it was silent. So quiet, it felt heavy. Oppressive. Hard to breathe.

Zaid murmured Carlin's name, and his knees buckled. The grip on his hand went slack. Carlin was lucky to catch him before he hit the ground.

Epilogue

Zaid woke up cradled in a cloud of comfort and warmth. It took him a moment to reconcile the sensations with the memory of facing down Amouk with Carlin at his side. He had been out in the city, nowhere near the comfort of a bed, but the banishment took much out of him, and judging by the fact that he remembered nothing about the trip here, he must have blacked out.

Here. He turned over slowly. At least he hadn't been carried away from the scene alone. Carlin slept on the bed beside him, but even now there was a crease between his eyebrows. Zaid lifted a hand and, as gently as he could, stroked his thumb along the line, willing it away by touch. It eased a bit but didn't disappear, so instead he shifted closer and lowered his mouth to the other man's, kissing him softly. Perhaps that would help.

Carlin made a low sound and mumbled something Zaid couldn't make out. Rather than easing the frown, it deepened momentarily; then Carlin's eyes opened, and he focused on Zaid. "Everything all right?" His voice was rough and full of gravel. He sounded as tired as he must have felt.

And still, Zaid smiled at him. Oh yes, he'd made the right decision, choosing this life and this man rather than the destiny he'd been created to fulfill.

He nodded slightly and kissed Carlin again, pleased that his lover's lips moved against his before he pulled away. "For now," he answered. "And that will have to do."

Carlin pushed up onto an elbow. A low groan escaped him, and his expression tightened as he moved. Once he'd settled, he managed enough breath to speak again. "You passed out," he reported. "Scared the hell out of

me. And made me come up with excuses for the whole wall-of-fire-disappearing thing to my captain. I think I said something about a weather fluke. He didn't believe me," he added wryly, "but seeing as you were out cold, he let it slide. Got a nasty incident report in my future, though."

Zaid's eyebrows rose. He turned onto his back and tucked an arm under his head, letting the other hand ghost over the T-shirt covering Carlin's chest. "Forgive me? If I could have stayed awake, I would have, and gladly explained myself to your captain and anyone else you asked."

"You'll get your chance," Carlin told him, folding his hand around Zaid's. "Promise. You'll get sick of explaining." The frown returned. "You really all right?"

Zaid nodded. "Tired. Banishing Amouk was not an easy thing to do." He remembered another body suddenly, and he stiffened. "Carlin, did you find him? Dash was there. Amouk brought him—"

Carlin nodded, cutting him off. "We didn't know how he got there. Didn't know how he made it through, but we found him. Half buried under a pile of rubble that should have crushed him. Hell, he should have roasted alive. Aside from a couple of burns on his feet, he was all right. They're keeping him in the hospital a couple days, just in case, but he made it." A half smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "You were the first thing he asked about too."

Zaid exhaled and relaxed, forehead against Carlin's shoulder. "Good. I'll see him. Later, tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, yeah," Carlin agreed, and after a moment, Zaid felt himself gathered closer to the big man's chest. "I thought, for a minute...I thought I lost you. To Amouk or whatever was going on."

"For a minute," Zaid echoed, "you did. But it's done for now." For now. Foreboding words that still didn't convey the fight that would come if—when—Amouk returned. "For now is enough for me. Does it suit you?"

He could see Carlin thinking. Warring with himself. They had things to talk about, more decisions to make, but they could wait, for a while. Now was a time to rest. And finally, Carlin nodded, once, then again more certainly. “Yeah. It works for me.”

THE END

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Sienna Black

Sienna Black is a thirtysomething author living in northern California with her partner and a handful of animals, large and small. She's been writing since she was small, but she's a relative newcomer to the world of m/m fiction. To say that she's thrilled to have found an audience would be an understatement.

She writes primarily paranormal romances for her boys, but there's no telling where they'll lead her next.