

A romantic scene between a man and a woman at night. The woman, with long red hair, is seen from the back, her arms wrapped around the man's neck. The man is looking down at her. They are in a dark setting, possibly a park or a street at night, with some lights visible in the background.

ANN
CORY

Beauty's
BEAST

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Chapter One

Mercedes drove along Highway 101 with the window down. A gentle breeze passed through the car and left a hint of salt on her lips, but she barely noticed the beauty around her. Her planned week to get away and seek adventure ended up a bust. Instead, she drove around feeling sorry for herself. It got so bad she considered sending out invitations to her very own pity party. Sadly, there wasn't anyone to invite.

Restless and unsure of where to go, she decided to just drive. Hell, she'd drive all night. She didn't have to be anywhere and no one missed her. The deserted highway reminded her of a ghost town. It only lacked the rolling tumbleweed. At least the full moon and the ocean would keep her company.

As she passed through a small blink-and-you'll-miss-it town, patches of dense fog drifted in. To be safe, she flipped on the fog lights, not wanting to hit some poor animal trying to cross the road. Off to her right a figure caught her attention. She glanced into her side mirror and did a double take.

A man appeared in a small clearing within the fog. Mercedes slowed her speed and then came to a stop while she assessed the stranger from a safe distance. What was he doing out there? Had he been walking there a moment ago when she passed by? It seemed a risky night to be out walking on the road alone. Should she offer a ride?

She sucked on her bottom lip. She'd never picked up a hitchhiker before, and after seeing a movie about a murderous one, it sounded like a dumb thing to consider. On the other hand, for all she knew the guy's car ran out of gas, or broke down and he was on route to the nearest gas station. From her angle, she didn't see a backpack or gear with him.

"It can't hurt to ask if he needs help," she said aloud.

Mind made up, she put the car in reverse and stopped a foot away from him. The stranger turned, his face half concealed by the dark. Her body buzzed and an odd sensation swept through her.

For what seemed like an eternity, she waited in the car, her blinkers casting a faint red glow amid the fog. Her breath slowed. Why did he wait? Maybe it had been a mistake to stop and she should drive on. No telling what sort of crazies walked around out there. Scenes from the horror movie replayed in her head.

A procession of heavy knocks against her window made her gasp. Hand to her chest she waited for her pulse to resume and rolled down the window a crack. She almost convulsed at the deep green eyes staring back. The interior lights highlighted every chiseled line of his face.

He squatted to eye-level. "Evening, miss. Are you lost?"

Her throat went all raw and cottony. She forced down several swallows before she could speak. "Um, no. I wondered if you needed help."

"Nope, I'm good."

"Are you sure? Because I can offer you a ride if you'd like."

He shrugged. "I don't mind the walk. It's a peaceful night."

The whiskey rough lilt in his voice sent thrills throughout her body and made her pulse speed up.

"It's not very safe, with the fog and all," she reasoned. "I read it gets really thick around here."

His chuckle filled her with warmth. "I'm somewhat of a risk-taker. But I appreciate you stopping."

"Wait. I-I'd like to give you a ride. Please?" Mercedes heard her own voice beg and wondered why it mattered so much to her that he got in the car. She'd never given a strange man a ride before. Why did this one make a difference?

He smiled and fine lines bracketed his eyes. "Okay, you convinced me. It couldn't hurt to give my legs a rest. By the way, nice wheels." Her candy apple red Mercedes garnered more attention than she did.

"Thank you." She resumed breathing while he walked to the other side of the car.

He opened the door and ducked down. "Hope you don't have a problem with me sitting up front. I find I get lonely in the back."

She stopped herself from saying he could do anything he liked. “No, of course not. Up front is great.”

As the stranger situated himself in the seat, she took in his rugged, handsome face. If she could order the perfect man from a menu, then she was looking at the ultimate feast. He was the epitome of everything she’d ever wanted in a man: Good-looking, strong, built like a steel truck. Powerful hands. Dark hair that hung to the peak of his shoulders, and a full mouth she wanted to savor.

There was more, though. Traits that went beyond the visual. The signals he sent out drew her in. They were dangerous, hypnotic, and erotic rolled together with an energy that zapped away her inhibitions.

She moistened her lips. “How far did you want to go?”

He turned in the seat to face her, his eyes smoldering. “As far as you’ll take me.”

A shiver passed through her. An internal switch flipped, and suddenly she was a cat in heat. Just *bam*. Soaked and ready to go.

Mercedes placed her hands on the steering wheel and pulled back onto the road. She drove at a comfortable fifty-five miles an hour while her heart beat at least three times that speed. To her relief the fog lifted.

The silence between them made her mind wander. If she could think of something intelligent to talk about, that might help, but she drew a blank. With a casual cool, the stranger slipped off his leather jacket and tossed it to the backseat. As it passed alongside her, she caught a whiff of his scent. God, what she wouldn’t give to bottle that up and bathe in it every night.

Embarrassed by her thoughts, she straightened up and tried to keep her eyes focused on the road. Every so often, she found herself stealing brief glances at him. Catching tiny blips of his physique that made her wet with desire. He literally oozed sex appeal with his sinewy shoulders and firm biceps outlined by his form-fitting shirt and tight abs she could scarcely see amid the low-slung jeans.

She didn’t know why her body reacted so strongly.

Questions plagued her. Where had he come from? Where was he headed? Why did his presence affect her in a way other men never had? She wanted to ask, but enjoyed the element of not knowing, too. He was a beautiful dark mystery that held her captivated.

His sensuous voice snapped her out of her jumbled thoughts. “Thanks again for stopping,

in case I didn't say so before. I appreciate it."

A rush of heat went through her. "It's my pleasure."

"I didn't realize how long I'd been walking. You came at a good time."

His words turned her body to liquid. She smiled at him in response and saw his lusty gaze fixed on her. Feverish waves tumbled through her like a restless sea.

She didn't believe in lust at first sight, or at least she hadn't until now. Something about him made her feel reckless, and she'd never been reckless. At least not to her recollection.

Mercedes tried to switch gears with some light conversation before she drove right off the road. "So, where's your final destination? Or am I being too forward?"

"Not at all," he replied. "I'm headed to Astoria. Actually, it's a place just before Astoria. There's a job there."

"What do you do?"

"Construction, mostly."

No wonder he had a hard body. "Is it tough work?"

He glanced out the window and nodded. "Yeah, but it pays well."

She studied his profile between the streetlights and shadow. He was perfection. Her body trembled and itched with need. His scent of ocean mixed with musk overwhelmed her sense and turned her mind to mush. How would he feel like inside her? A one-night stand had always been her ultimate fantasy, but as a rule, she didn't engage in them. Perhaps tonight she could make an exception. Only, she still couldn't figure out why. Why him?

This guy was different. He was...well, perfect. And she couldn't ignore the ravenous need gnawing away at her core. The illicit thoughts racing in her mind were nothing like the Mercedes she knew. She was shy and quiet, conservative even. But right now, she wanted to reach over and rip the stranger's clothes off. It didn't make a lick of sense.

Handsome adjusted his seatbelt across his chest, his hand smoothing along the fabric strap. She imagined that same hand smoothing along her leg and up between her skirt. Mercedes turned up the air conditioner a notch and snuck another peek at her stud muffin of a passenger.

From the comfort of her seat, she undressed him with her eyes, imagining him tone and fit beneath his shirt, with muscles that moved and bunched in response to her touch.

She gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. *Think. Breathe. Behave*, she warned herself.

“So,” she started, once again trying to engage him in conversation. “You said you’d been out walking a long time.”

His broad shoulders raised and lowered. “It feels that way. I’d say, maybe four hours tops. At least it’s not raining.”

She pictured him wet, his clothes soaked against his body, outlining every delectable inch. “I take it you’re not a fan of the rain?”

He swept a hand through his dark hair. Again, she noticed his hands and imagined how good they would feel against her skin.

“Not when I’m out walking in it. How about you?”

A thrill fluttered through her belly. “I don’t mind it.”

She cast him a seductive glance.

Their eyes locked briefly before he shifted in his seat, the seatbelt straining against his chest. All she could think about was seducing him. She ached to feel his flesh against hers. If he’d just reach under her skirt he’d find out how hot she was for him.

The car started to drift over the line and she fought to regain control. What the hell was wrong with her?

“Sorry about that. Thought there was something in the road.”

From beneath the fringe of her lashes she noticed his eyes burned on her. Mercedes lowered her gaze and watched his erection grow beneath the black denim. An erection that would pop that threaded seam any second if she didn’t attend to it.

Terrified she’d have them plunging into the ocean, she pulled the car over and flipped off the ignition. Her entire body quivered out of control. She seriously needed to get a grip. Here she’d been worried the guy was a psycho when she was the one acting crazy.

“What’s wrong,” he asked, his tone thick with concern. “Did I do something to upset you?”

Mercedes turned to him. “No. I mean, yes.” She didn’t know how to explain that both her mind and body were a wreck and it was all because of him. “But not in a bad way,” she added and put her hands over her face, shaking her head. “I’m so sorry. I just need a few minutes.”

“Do you want me to get out? It’s okay if you do. I won’t take any offense.”

Adrenaline rushed through her. If he got out and disappeared into the darkness, she’d go stark raving mad. “No, please don’t go. Ignore me. I’m going mental or something.”

He turned his full attention to her. "Talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

Mercedes took a deep breath and let it out. No matter how stupid she'd sound, it had to be said. "This is going to sound strange, fucked up even, and I can't explain it, but here goes. Since you got into my car...No, scratch that. Since the second I looked into your eyes, I've been filled with the most...carnal thoughts. I want to drive you to your destination, honest I do, but I can't concentrate with you sitting beside me."

There. She'd said it. She'd put it out there all naked and exposed.

Mercedes pictured him flinging the door open and running away shouting about a mad stalker woman in a Mercedes Benz.

But he didn't clutch the door. His mouth twitched and then spread into a charming smile that made her heart race.

"Would it help if I told you I feel the same?"

Her breath hitched. Despite the heat burning her face, relief spread through her. "You do? Or are you being nice?"

He shook his head. "No, it's crazy. I'm over here trying to keep it together when all I want to do is touch you. I don't even know you. I don't even know your name."

She bit her lip. "It's Mercedes."

"I'm Nox," he replied.

And he wanted to add that he was infatuated by her, but he thought better of it. At least for the moment. Whatever enchantment she'd thrust over him since she offered him a ride, he wasn't about to get out of the car without savoring her lush pink lips. It would help during the night when his dreams turned dark.

He stared into her eyes, illuminated briefly from the glow of the streetlight. Baby blue and framed with the thickest eyelashes he'd ever seen. Each languid blink made his pulse rise. He couldn't wait to touch her body. Taste her. Caress her curves. Witness firsthand the wicked way she smiled in the heat of the moment. She'd been brave to lay everything out in the open. He'd been too worried about scaring her off. Hell, the overwhelming need for her bothered him.

Nox trained his gaze down her long red hair that hung suggestively to her breasts. Did she have any idea how seductive she looked? Whether intentional or not, she tormented him. He smiled at the pointed darts beneath her thin shirt and imagined his mouth wrapped around the

hardened peaks. Even if she hadn't voiced her arousal to him, her body spoke loud and clear. The smell of her desire left his cock burning to feel the sticky wetness there. If he had enough nerve, he'd tear her insignificant little tease of a skirt away so he could devour her cream.

Uncomfortable by his erection jamming into his zipper, Nox tensed. He wasn't going to get anywhere by sitting and staring. He repositioned himself to gain better access to her body, intent on seduction.

"Mercedes is a sexy name," he said. "Is that why you drive this car?"

Her hand reached up and pushed a stray hair from her face. "No. Pure coincidence, I promise. It's kind of silly now that I think about it."

Silly, no. Sexy, yes, he thought. "The name fits. You can tell a lot about a woman by the car she drives. I'll bet you didn't know you have a lot in common with your car."

She snickered. "Now you're making fun of me." The innocence in her laugh made his cock twitch.

Nox shook his head. "No I'm not. Think about it." He reached over and placed his hand on her upper thigh. When she didn't resist, he continued.

"Aside from the obvious curves, I'll bet both you and your car like to be handled with a firm hand." His fingers tugged at the hem of her skirt. To his surprise, she wasn't wearing panties. His cock wrenched at the sight of her naked sex. "You probably both like to be kept in line." Her breath came out slow and ragged.

So far so good.

His hand moved between her legs. He parted her velvet folds and sank two fingers inside. Nox sucked in his breath. She was soaked. "And you both like to be taken for a long, hard ride."

Her face flushed a most sensual shade of red.

Nox couldn't take it any longer. The woman made him crazy insane and he had to have her now.

He paused, ready to ask if he should stop, but her heavy-lidded gaze told the full story. She wanted him just as bad.

At once, he pressed his fingers inside her moist center and watched her jaw go slack.

"Like that?"

"Mm hmm," she sighed and spread her thighs.

He pushed his fingers in further. Her tight little pussy gripped them as if holding on for

dear life. But he realized two fingers would never do. To accommodate his cock she'd have to handle more.

Nox eased in a third finger and pumped vigorously. Her eyelids fluttered and she moaned louder. He couldn't believe the way she creamed his fingers. Wet was an understatement. Her scent teased his nostrils. It wouldn't be easy to hold back, his cock was ready to burst, but he'd use all his strength to do it.

"I can stop any time," he said. "You say the word."

"Please," she whispered. "Please don't stop."

With the green light to go further, his cock wrenched again.

He needed more space to get where he wanted most. Nox knelt to the floor of the car and pushed his seat all the way back, giving himself plenty of room. He winked and patted the empty seat.

"I want you to sit here with your legs bent and spread."

She crawled over and sat in front of him but kept her legs together. A demure look sprinkled her face. Nox reached up and caressed her cheek. Skin petal soft.

"You don't have to play shy with me. Anything I do is meant for your pleasure."

Her long black lashes fluttered slow, eyes trained on his. "Okay."

He pulled her skirt up to her waist. She smelled exotic. His body thrummed with excitement. "Now let me see you."

A smile bowed her lips and she opened her thighs.

The sight of her pink pussy and ripe clit sent his body into a spasm. "You're beautiful," he groaned.

Nox stared into her eyes. After he tasted her, he wouldn't want any other man to touch her. It didn't make sense to be so possessive. This was just a one-time thing. He reminded himself that he'd never see her again.

A frown marred her brows. "Don't you want me?"

"What?"

"You're hesitating," she said with a hint of shy. "Don't you want to be with me?"

Hell yeah he wanted her, and in a way he'd never wanted anyone before. "You better believe it, sweetheart. I want every delectable inch of you."

Nox splayed her smooth folds and leaned forward, closing his mouth around her clit. He

suckled the tiny bead and felt her thighs tremble alongside his face. Her whispery words were music from her lips.

“Mm. Oh yes, oh yes. Yes. Please,” she begged.

He growled deep in his throat.

Overcome with an almost rabid need, he laved his tongue through her pussy and suckled her clit. Her erotic scent goaded him on and made his cock needy. He meant to take it slow, but he wasn't sure he could for long.

“Fuck,” he rasped. “You bring the beast out in me.”

She rocked her hips forward and tilted her pelvis. “I like it. Taste me again.”

Nox surged forward, propelled by a mad hunger. He lapped and rolled his tongue around her clit. Inhaled her spiced peaches and cream scent. Splayed her folds and delved his tongue far as it would go. She was all wet and velvety soft. When she arched her back, he pushed deeper. Parted her wide with his lips and fingers.

She rocked against his mouth, her soft cries resonating inside the car.

“More, please more,” she pled.

He pumped his fingers inside her gushing pussy and listened to her sinful moans.

“Come for me. Pour all that sugar on my tongue and come for me,” he coaxed.

“I-I can't.” Her voice held frustration.

Nox was determined to give her what she wanted. “Yes you can. I'll make sure of it.”

He pumped his fingers faster and throttled her clit with his mouth and tongue.

Her hands fisted in his hair while she squirmed.

“Yes! Oh Nox, Nox, yes,” she cried.

The sound of his name from her lips sealed the deal.

She cried out his name over and over again while she came, her hips bucking wildly against his face. He didn't let up until the spasms lessened.

Nox straightened and pulled her in close. He pressed his lips against her neck and strung his hands through her hair. Silk. It reminded him of long silk red ribbons. It almost didn't seem real.

Mercedes gently broke from his embrace and took hold of his hand.

A wicked smile graced her lips. “I've never had an orgasm that intense before. I don't know what else to say except...thank you.”

Before he could respond, she wrapped her lips around his fingers and sucked. The gesture caught him off guard. He looked on, watching her beautiful plump lips slide over his fingers. The decadent way her cheeks hollowed out as she sucked.

“Your cream tastes good, doesn’t it,” he asked in a strained voice.

“Mm,” she agreed.

His cock stirred, already painful and eager for release.

“You realize that was a warm-up. I’m not done with you yet, beautiful.”

She smiled and finished licking the cream from between his fingers. With his free hand, he unbuttoned her shirt and let it fall open. Her full breasts mesmerized him—round and perfect.

His hand smoothed along one breast and then the other. The crests of her nipples etched along his palm and seared his skin like lit matches. He wanted this woman. And when they parted later, he’d spend the rest of his life wanting her all to himself.

Chapter Two

Mercedes shuddered under his almost savage glance. A look of ownership and dominance gleamed within his expression. Sinfully sexy. She could stare into his eyes for the rest of her life. And god, the way he made her feel—like she was the only woman in the world, when she knew that was impossible. A man like him was certain to have his share of lovers somewhere, perhaps everywhere. He might be on his way to one of them now. If he pleased them the way he pleased her, they were fools to let him out of their sight.

At this point, she didn't want to let him go. She'd never had a man bring her pleasure first without any thought to himself. The way he touched her it was as though he'd known her for years. Knew how to bring her to an orgasm with the swipe of his tongue where other men had failed. She felt good around him. Free to give him the reigns and allow him maneuver her in any way he saw fit.

At the same time, she worried she would forget him. Recently, strange blackouts and inopportune memory lapses had left her on lonely lane. Bits and pieces of her life came back to her when she least expected, but names and faces didn't.

The memory lapses started right after she'd volunteered to go through a series of sensory tests at a clinic for some extra cash. Everything that happened after she walked through the doors remained a blur. Along with the memory lapses, she'd also developed other odd quirks and abilities that she couldn't explain, and for the most part frightened her.

Without her journal to record her days, she wouldn't remember much of what she'd done.

She felt desperate to do anything he asked if it meant more time with him, more time in this moment to somehow brand it into her mind forever. So desperate, she was willing to go animalistic on him to make sure he understood how bad she wanted him.

Mercedes met his eyes. He gazed back with a look that sent a violent rush of lust and carnal desire through her. She ripped at his shirt, the top two buttons popping off.

An amused expression covered his face. "What's the rush, beautiful?"

"I just want to feel you." She licked her lips. "Every single part of you."

"And you will. I promise," he said, his voice a rough caress.

She eyed his muscle-ridged body. "Now," she begged. *And forever*, she added to herself.

Moonlight bathed his skin and accentuated the taut ripples of his arms, shoulders and chest. She pressed forward. Flesh against flesh. She loved the size and feel of his hands. Every touch branded her and burned down deep.

He trailed his finger along the slope of her neck and circled her breast.

"I'm going to kiss you here," he whispered.

Blood drained from her face at the thought. "Yes."

He cupped her breast and brought it to his mouth. She parted her lips and sighed deeply. God he had the sexiest mouth of any man she'd ever seen. His tongue swirled one nipple and then the other until they were erect raw nubs. He took turns pinching and nipping and she squirmed at the way her pussy tingled. In turn, she ran her hands along the sleek planes of his chest. His skin hot to the touch, so hot she was surprised her fingertips weren't charred.

She loved how his eyes remained fixed on her. Almost predatory. The green of his eyes deepened and filled with dark lust. He made her weak, as if holding onto him was the only thing she could do. There was no mistaking it. She knew he was the kind of man who always got his way.

Sinking into his muscular frame, she arched her back and presented her breasts for his mouth.

"Please," she whispered, feverish with need.

He smiled and traced a finger around the crest of her hardened nipple.

His other hand moved between her thighs and thrust three fingers inside her. She trembled from head to toe. At the same time, he leaned forward and took her nipple between his teeth. With each thrust, he nipped a little harder. Her mind and body reeled at the sensations racing through her body. This was her heaven and she could stay here forever. Her nerve-endings were on fire and she was barely aware of her own whimpers of desire.

He withdrew the tight bead from his mouth. "Can't get enough, can you sweetheart?"

The question bothered her because the answer did too. No, she couldn't get enough. Not of him or his dangerous touch.

"Here, let me on the seat and you sit on my lap facing away from me."

Turned on by his sharp, authoritative voice she did what he said. Their bodies brushed in the small space of the car as they switched positions. She waited for him to sit and then eased back onto his lap, his erection hard against her back. His body was a wall of hard, thick muscles, moist with sweat. He curled his fingers around her waist and pulled her closer to him.

"We'll take it nice and slow." The deep, highly erotic timbre of his voice charged her body with heat. The slow burn sent a rush of sensations through her. He was wider and thicker than she'd originally thought. Hotter too. How would she accommodate him?

She sucked in her breath and waited. "Now," he whispered behind her and pressed his cock inside her pussy.

"Oh, ohh," she moaned as he pushed further inside. The beautiful friction of each blessed inch as he slid his cock into her made her eyes water. She clawed at the dashboard, uncaring of the nail marks she left along the interior. Mercy his cock was the hardest, thickest thing she'd ever had inside her.

"Stroke your clit," he whispered into her ear.

Mercedes didn't dare hesitate. She fondled her clit as though it was her lifeline. At the same time, Nox gripped her hips and thrust in and out, his thickness sliding between her soaked folds.

"Ride my cock, sweetheart. Ride it until you can't handle any more."

Beads of sweat formed along her forehead. Eager to get lost in the sensations, she brought herself up and down his cock while rubbing her clit at the same time. Damn if she wasn't close to another orgasm.

His fiery breath blew against her back sending luscious shivers along her spine.

"Yeah, that's it," he repeated, his large cock working her sensitive flesh. "You've got a sweet little tight pussy."

Her body shook. "Mm, hmm."

The air in the car heated, the steamy interior resembling a sauna.

He pushed up into her each time she slid down, filling her and stretching her. Her pussy clenched his cock, greedy with need.

The knot in her belly slowly started to unravel. “Yes,” she cried. Against the burning in her thighs, she kept going. Riding him hard, moaning into the sweet friction. Manipulating her swollen clit.

At last, the knot broke free.

Her eyes widened. Her pulse thundered.

Fierce shudders racked her body with such force it made her toes curl. She held onto the dashboard for dear life while Nox pumped twice more and climaxed with a roar that rivaled that of a lion.

His legs shook beneath her. Their skin slick and saturated with sweat.

He withdrew his cock and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“I’ve never experienced a ride quite like that,” he murmured, his mouth soft against her shoulder.

Neither had she.

Mercedes rolled the window down for some much-needed air and turned her body toward Nox. He grunted and leaned forward, peppering kisses along her breasts. It stirred her, but in a gentle way.

“You taste good everywhere.”

She smiled, unsure of how to act. This was new for her. It wasn’t just the first time having sex with a stranger, but it was the first time her body felt undeniably satisfied. Sated with a contentment she never believed existed. Nothing had been the same from the moment she laid eyes on this man.

Yet, as the blissful afterglow faded, uncertainty filled her mind.

How could she feel this way with someone she just met? Why did she feel confident in his presence? Her mind and senses sharper.

She hated that soon he’d leave and she’d never see him again, which was why she didn’t want answers to her barrage of questions. The less she knew of him, the better.

Mercedes moved back into the driver’s seat and fixed her clothes.

“I can tell your mind is going a million miles a minute,” he said, zipping his jeans.

She gave him a tentative smile. What was there to say? Words jumbled around in her head and didn’t make much sense. It was one thing to admit to lust, but another to confess she wanted him forever. Then he’d *really* think her a mad stalker woman.

Little pings of warning bounced around in her mind. Things were too comfortable. Too much like a longtime lover, and not enough like a one-night stand. The more time she spent with him, the more she wanted to feel his hands on her body again. She had to show restraint and keep her thoughts to herself. She had to start distancing herself from him starting now.

Mercedes let out a long exhale. "I guess we should get going," she said. "It's getting late."

"I guess so," he answered, and turned his face away from her.

She started the car and pulled out onto the desolate highway with her body throbbing and her heart breaking.

They drove for several miles in silence when Nox sat forward and gestured ahead.

"Would you mind pulling into that motel there?" The sound of his voice after so long startled her.

Mercedes hoped nothing was wrong. "No problem."

She turned up the steep sloped driveway.

"This looks like a good enough place to sleep," he said with a wave of his hand.

Her gaze drifted to him. He still wouldn't look at her. Obviously, he'd gotten what he wanted and didn't require her company anymore.

She drove through the parking lot and stopped in front of the motel office. Her mind scrambled for something to say that would make him stay, but again she drew a blank. "Are you sure you want to sleep here?"

"Yeah. I mean, I didn't realize how tired I was, but when you mentioned it was getting late my body agreed."

"Oh, okay, sure." What else was she supposed to say? The guy had been walking for hours and he was tired. Why was she taking it personally?

"Thanks for the ride, and everything else. I won't forget you."

She nodded like a robot. The guy was being polite. He was letting her know that he didn't really like her without coming off like a complete ass. She couldn't fault him for that; it lessened the pain.

A little.

He reached for the door handle and then paused, his gaze fixed on the dashboard. "Part of me wants to invite you to stay the night, but I shouldn't. It isn't a good time right now for me."

Mercedes nodded, doing her best to hide her true feelings. "I understand."

"You're beautiful." He faced her and kissed her cheek. "Good night."

"Night," she murmured.

Nox opened the door and climbed out. He paused, with his hand on the door. Her pulse drummed. Had he changed his mind? Time seemed to stop. Her breath certainly had. Silently, she pled for him to duck back down and tell her anything but goodbye.

And then he closed the door.

She watched him enter the motel office and talk with the night attendant. He didn't look back at her. Not once. It was over and she sat there like a pathetic idiot, staring at a man who had clearly moved on.

The torture had gone on long enough. She shifted into drive and followed the parking lot back out to the road. The long, lonely open road. Tears rolled down her face. Did she really think he'd stop his whole life for her? That after a brief tryst a handsome and amazing man would blindly fall in love with her and want a forever kind of thing? This was real life, not fantasy. The whole reason she'd never had one-night stands before was that she didn't want to feel the way she felt right now. Alone and confused.

Granted, he'd been a gentleman about it. She was certain there'd been pain in his voice when he'd said good night. Or maybe that's what she wanted to think because it made her feel better.

Mercedes drove on, surprised an hour had passed and she still grieved Nox's absence. She wondered if he would really remember her. A distressing thought crossed her mind and she pulled the car over.

Frantic, she reached under her seat and snatched her journal. With single-minded purpose, she jotted everything down, filling page after page with every detail of him. The way he looked, tasted and smelled, and how it had been the best fuck ever, despite the way it ended. With her track record of lost memories, she didn't want to forget a single thing about him. She closed the journal and hugged it to her chest.

"I promise I won't forget you either, Nox," she whispered, and let new tears fall.

* * * *

Key in hand, Nox unlocked the door to his motel room, and fell back onto the springy bed. With his leg outstretched, he kicked the door shut.

That was close. Too close, he murmured to himself, his heart rate skyrocketing.

He glimpsed the full moon through the dusty window and checked the clock. Midnight wasn't far off.

Fuck.

Of all the nights to deal with the effects of a full moon, it had to be tonight.

I can control this, he told himself. Maybe if he thought of Mercedes, he'd calm his mind and the change wouldn't happen.

Mercedes.

He loved her name. He couldn't get over his instant attraction to her. One look and the sultry red-haired siren had him by the balls. Literally. His mind recalled the sensuous way her lips moved when he savored her cream. The flush of her skin when she soaked him with her climax. He also recalled the anguish in her voice when he suggested the motel and said goodnight. The way he'd left things made him feel like shit, but he had no other option. There were things about him that she couldn't know. It was better to put distance between them, at least for now. Maybe once he finished what he set out to do, he'd look for her. *If* he survived.

Nox inhaled deeply and it was as if she was in the room with him. Her scent clung to. Strong and heady. Her cream still lingered on his lips and on his fingers. A taste that made his cock so hard he had to free his erection at once.

He sat up and leaned against the headboard, picturing Mercedes as she straddled him, nipples erect and eager for his mouth to capture. He gripped his cock and tugged hard, his fingers embedded deep into his flesh.

He thought of her writhing body as she rode him. The way her pussy gripped him all tight and slick. It had been years since he was with a woman, and even then, he'd never had such an immediate connection. From the second he laid eyes on beautiful Mercedes, he'd wanted her. Nox fisted his cock harder, faster, recalling the deep heat between her thighs.

Despite the burning pain in his muscles as he pumped and squeezed, he couldn't let up. He imagined her plump lips wrapped around his cock, taking him all the way in.

Right there, right there, yes, oh yesssss.

The climax hit him like a truck and sent him into a mind spin. White heat spilled along his hand and coated his fingers. A throaty cry broke free and reverberated around the room. He desperately wanted to hold her right then. To have her breathless body in his grasp. To feel her

pussy hold and release his cock while she quivered on his lap. And not for just one night. But he knew better than to hope for a long-term relationship. She'd never be with someone like him. Not if she found out the truth of what he was. The thing he became at every rise of a full moon.

Nox reached over and grabbed a tissue to clean himself. His arm muscles burned from jerking off so fast, but at least he'd been able to get his mind off the anguish that was to come. He glanced at the clock as the numbers blazed midnight in a bright red hue.

I can control it.

His hands changed first, his fingers drawing long with claws.

Damn.

He slipped out the door and hurried toward the patch of trees behind the motel. In the darkness, he stripped off his clothes and concealed them in a bush.

With a sense of resignation, he stalked deeper into the woods to become the beast that lived inside him.

Chapter Three

Mercedes opened her eyes at the first break of dawn. It took her a moment to realize where she was. Her neck ached from sleeping at an odd angle. The journal, her only glimpse into her past thoughts, still lay on her lap. She opened to the last pages she'd written and read them several times. A smile curved her lips. She whispered his name in relief.

Nox. He hadn't been a dream. He was real, and had been in this car with her.

She straightened and peered out the window behind her. Several cars passed by, rocking the car gently. Her attention turned to an object in the backseat. A jacket. *His* leather jacket. He'd forgotten it.

Mercedes grabbed it and put it to her nose, inhaling musk and ocean air. If Nox planned to hitch all the way to Astoria, he'd need it to keep warm in the night.

Without a second thought, she started the car and drove toward the motel. She ignored the voice in her head telling her it was a bad idea and that he didn't want anything more to do with her. Not only did he need his jacket back, but she also needed one last moment with him.

Traffic was light, and she found herself pulling into the motel parking lot in under an hour.

Mercedes parked in the first spot she came to and hurried to the motel office. A sign hung on the door that it would open at six, which was still another forty-five minutes away. Not knowing which room Nox was staying in, she didn't have much choice but to wait.

Glad to be out of the car, she stretched her limbs and worked the kink from her neck. She had a feeling the forty-five minutes would seem like eternity. Restless, she decided on a short walk to get her blood flowing again.

She glimpsed a trail leading into a forested area across the parking lot. As she

approached, a breeze blew and the familiar scent of musk and ocean curled around her head, making her dizzy.

Nox.

There was no mistaking his scent. He'd come this way, but when? Why? Had he been restless too?

Mercedes started on the trail when Nox stepped out from behind a leafy bush. His rumpled clothing looked as if he'd slept in them, and his hair was mussed. With the two buttons missing from his shirt, it lay open, exposing the smooth planes of his chest. A sight she'd never tire of seeing.

His gaze shifted upward, eyes widening when he saw her.

"What are you doing here?"

Was that surprise or irritation she heard in his tone? She studied his face. Traces of dirt streaked across his face, and blood was smeared along the corner of his mouth. Her mind reeled. *Think of something to say*, she ordered herself. *Say anything!*

"Uh, hi," she blurted out. "Morning. I, um. I don't know why I came back." Flustered, she searched her mind. "Oh wait, now I remember. I brought your jacket. You left it in the backseat and I worried you'd get cold at night. It's in the car, I'll go get it."

"You didn't have to bring it back."

Her body trembled. It hadn't been that long but already she'd missed the sound of his voice. "Honest, I didn't mind. Besides, it's a nice jacket."

He wiped his forehead with the back of his arm, leaving another streak of dirt. "Well, thanks for bringing it."

"Sure." She still couldn't tell whether he was glad to see her or not. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

She pointed to her mouth. "You have blood on your lip. Right there. What happened?"

"I was out...hunting." He roughly wiped at his mouth.

"Hunting?"

He lowered his gaze and studied the ground. "Yes. For...a great jogging trail. I must've cut myself on one of the branches without realizing."

Mercedes nodded her head. She could tell he wasn't pleased to see her. She felt like an idiot.

“Okay. Well...” She pointed behind her. “I’ll go get your jacket now and let you be.”

He reached his hand out and touched her arm, sending her pulse racing.

“Wait. Don’t go. Did you want to get coffee? Talk a little? I feel I owe you something after the way I left things last night.”

She frowned. Great, he thought she wouldn’t leave him alone unless he did something nice. “You don’t owe me anything, Nox. I’m not like that.”

“No, that isn’t what I meant.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’d like a chance to explain.”

His eyes were soft, almost pleading.

As if she could deny him. “Coffee sounds great.”

“Let me fix up my room and turn in my key. I’ll meet you in the café.”

“Perfect. I’ll get us a table.”

He took a step forward and paused. “I’m glad you came back, beautiful.”

Heat rushed to her face. Before she said or did something stupid, she hurried toward the café.

Nox let out the breath he’d been holding. Had she seen him any earlier, she wouldn’t want to have anything to do with him, much less have coffee. At the same time, he hated that he lied to her.

He returned to his room, straightened his bedspread and washed his face of the blood and dirt. The manager was just unlocking the office door when he dropped off his key and thanked him. On his way to meet Mercedes, he considered leaving without saying a word. He’d hate himself for it, but couldn’t afford to get closer to her. The timing was all wrong.

Before he could make up his mind, she waved to him from inside. The morning light illuminated her fire-red hair and made him want to sink his fingers in it.

Caught, he waved back and entered the café.

“Are you hungry?” He asked and sat down across from her.

“A little. I wouldn’t mind a muffin.”

“Order anything you want.” Nox didn’t know how much money he had left on his bank card, but hoped it was enough.

After they’d ordered, he sat back and watched the way she flipped her hair back over her

shoulders. She appeared nervous and he wanted to put her at ease.

“So you must have an important job to afford a nice car like yours.” Immediately he wanted to take that back. Could he have sounded more ridiculous? Why didn’t he ask what she did for a living instead?

Okay, he was nervous too. They’d make a fine pair.

“Actually, I bought it on a whim,” she replied, not seeming insulted by the question. “Much as I love it, I can barely afford the payments. I’m always in between jobs.”

He nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“I guess so if you’re doing construction and stuff. Then, you travel a lot?”

“From time to time. I go wherever the job takes me.” Nox didn’t want to talk about himself. He hated the deceit spewing from his lips. What was he doing here?

“Do you know how long you’ll be working the job in Astoria?”

He’d missed the sound of her voice, and the way she looked at him. It made him feel wanted and not so alone. And here he was feeding her a bunch of crap.

“It’s sort of an in and out job,” he answered. “I don’t expect it will take long. Hopefully I’ll have a skilled crew to work with. Otherwise it becomes a pain in the ass.”

With each lie, he felt dagger in his gut. He’d lied to women before and never thought twice about it. Why did Mercedes have such a hold over him when he barely knew her?

“I can imagine.” He loved the way she blew on her coffee before she took a sip. “I always thought construction was dangerous work. Have you ever been hurt on the job?”

“Uh, yeah once. I—no, wait.”

Nox had enough. He brought his fist down against the table, hard enough to make the coffee cups rattle in their saucers.

“I need to stop this right now.”

Concern sprinkled her features and she started to get up. “Oh. Okay, I’m sorry. I should go.”

He leaned over and grabbed both her wrists.

“I don’t want you to leave.”

She gave him a guarded look. “Okay.”

He loosened his grip and took a big gulp of coffee.

“I’ve been lying to you,” he confessed. “I’ve lied to you a few times now and it’s not

sitting right with me. Anyone else and I could care less, but you—you're different."

Her gaze didn't falter from his.

"You don't owe me any explanation, Nox. It's not like we're a couple."

If he could change that, he would. "I know. Give me a chance to come clean. I don't want to leave you with all these lies between us. It's not what I'm about. Call it a pride thing."

"Okay." She rested her chin on top of her hand and smiled. "What have you lied about?"

"There isn't a construction job in Astoria. Or at least, not one I plan to do."

She shrugged. "Big deal. It's not really my business where you go. Just because we were intimate doesn't mean you have to bare your soul to me."

"It's more than that," he continued. Suddenly it felt as though the temperature in the café had risen a few degrees. "I also lied about jogging earlier. I was hunting, but not for a trail."

Her brows arched. "What were you hunting for?"

"Food."

"Ah, so you're one of those warrior types who likes to hunt for your own food. Again, it's nothing you need to explain. Is that it?"

Nox thought about the right way to answer while she finished her muffin.

"That I've lied about, yes."

"Well, that was pretty painless. Do you feel better?"

Sweat beaded along his brow. Inside he was screaming to bolt for the door and not look back. But looking at her face, her eyes, her lips, he couldn't. "No. I feel worse."

Her cup was in mid-tilt to her mouth. "Why?"

He didn't know how he was going to tell her, or how she'd react, but she deserved to know.

"Because I haven't told you the truth about me."

Mercedes felt the hairs on her neck bristle. "The truth?"

"Of what I am."

Oh god, here it was. The guy was a murderer. He was trying to tell her he hunts young women. Probably targets the women out driving around offering hitchhikers a ride home, and he's giving her a head start before he comes after her. It was the damn horror movie all over again.

Her hands trembled so bad she had to put her coffee cup down or risk dropping it. “So, um. Then what’s the truth about you?”

“I become a beast at night.”

If memory served her correctly, and it was rare, she considered most men beasts in the bedroom. She belted out a laugh and then noted the seriousness of his expression. The waitress looked over at their table and her ears burned. Mercedes leaned in and lowered her voice.

“How do you mean a beast? Define beast from your perspective.”

“I become several different creatures in one. I take on the form of something hideous.”

Pain tugged at his eyes, and in his voice. He didn’t was appear to be joking around or teasing her. In fact, he was the picture of sobriety. She stared at him a good long time while absorbing his words.

“You...you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“I’ve never been more serious.”

“How can that be?” Even when she tried, she couldn’t picture what he’d described. “Turning into a beast, how does that happen?”

“I’m a scientific experiment gone wrong. A mistake robbed me of a normal life.” He sat back and rested his hands on his thighs. “I become a beast in every sense of the word. If you want to leave right now, it’s okay. I’ll understand.”

Sure, she wanted to hightail it out of there, but Mercedes resisted the urge. If she was going to run, she wanted to know what she’d be running from first. “I’m good at the moment.” She took a clumsy drink of her coffee, almost wearing it instead, and cleared her throat. “When do you become a beast? I mean, you aren’t one right now.”

“No. It happens when I get angry or feel threatened. And after midnight during a full moon, which is why I was in a hurry last night to get to the motel. I couldn’t have you see me change after we’d been intimate.”

“I see.” It made perfect sense, and she hated that she felt relieved while he looked worse for the wear.

“I’ve been working on ways to control it,” he continued. “I don’t stay in beast form as long, either. I hope one day I’ll stop changing or find a cure.”

Mercedes struggled to process his story. She’d come up with a number of explanations for why he left the way he did last night, but this one didn’t even crack the top one-hundred list.

She drummed her nails on the counter, wanting to know more without bombarding him with questions.

“So you’re always on the run because you’re a beast?”

“I run because I’m being hunted.”

“By who?”

“By the people who made me this way.”

Her breath hitched. “How can they find you?”

“They placed a chip inside me. I don’t know where. It triggers whenever I change.

Something about the chemical changes in my body that sets off some sort of homing device back at the lab. That’s why it’s important that I keep a handle on my emotions. Otherwise it won’t matter where I go, I’ll be found.”

Her mind whirled from all the information. “That can’t be an easy way to live,” she said, wanting to fill the silence with something.

“No, it isn’t. That’s why I’m going to Astoria. To end this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m tired of the cat and mouse game. This time I’m hunting them.”

Her pulse sped up. “Why would you do that? You could get hurt.”

“It’s what I need to do. I’m out of options.” He shrugged.

“If you were a mistake, why are they trying to capture you?”

“They consider me their property. They want to chain me up and do more experiments. If those fail, they’ll destroy me.”

Her entire body convulsed. How could she be okay with letting him do something so dangerous that he could die?

“Let me drive you there,” she offered. Maybe on the way she could convince him not to go through with it.

“No.” He shook his head and leaned in. “No way. I don’t want to involve you.”

She shrugged. “Too late. You involved me the second you told me.”

His eyes narrowed. “I told you because the lies were eating me up inside. I happen to care a great deal for you. I’m not sure why, but I do and won’t let you get mixed up in my issues.”

“I’m driving you there. Like it or not.”

“I won’t get back in the car.”

Mercedes bit back a laugh. Two could play this game.

“Fine. Then I’ll drive beside you the whole way and hold up traffic.”

His mouth twitched and then bowed into a wide grin that melted her heart.

“Damn you’re a stubborn one. Something tells me that no matter what I say, you’re going to win.”

She clasped his hands in hers. “You’ve got that right.”

“You’re an amazing woman, did you know that?”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

He circled his thumb around her hand, sending goose bumps up her arms.

“Last night I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I’m glad you came back.”

The words were music to her ears. “You sure you didn’t leave your jacket on purpose?”

“No, but I wish I had. It would’ve been clever.”

The waitress came over and left the bill. She watched Nox reach into his wallet, but she was quicker. “I’ve got it.” From her pocket, she pulled out a ten.

“I have money,” he said.

“I didn’t say otherwise. I got it. You get the next one.”

“Fine.”

Mercedes stood and pushed in her chair. “This letting me win thing suits you.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

She chuckled. “You ready to get out of here?”

“I am.”

Chapter Four

They laughed and took their time getting back to the car. Before she climbed in, she noticed her journal on the seat and quickly shoved it beneath the seat.

He climbed in and gave her a skeptical look. “What was that?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing. Just a book I’m reading.” She buckled up and cursed to herself. Now who was telling lies? “Actually, it’s my journal.”

“Can I read it?”

“Not a chance. It’s private.”

“You women and your journals.”

When they were back on the road, the tension eased from her shoulders a little. It felt right to have him next to her. Even as they rode in silence, it was enough to have him there.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“When you said you were a scientific experiment gone wrong, what part went wrong? That you became a beast, or that you were supposed to become something else? Unless you don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s fine. I don’t want to keep anymore secrets from you.”

She smiled inwardly.

“Initially I agreed to be part of an experiment for what I thought was stem cell research. My brother could’ve benefited, and I wanted to learn more. So there I was, hooked up to machines and the nurse gave me a sedative. Because I’m immune to most sedatives, it didn’t work at first. I told them I’d need more, and they complied. After a few minutes, I closed my eyes and waited to drift off, but didn’t notice any changes other than some pressure on my

eyelids and mouth. I guess they figured I was out, because I heard the doctor order a series of injections that I'd never heard before."

He paused and shifted in his seat.

"I tried to move my lips, even open my eyes, but I couldn't," he explained. "They'd taped them both closed. My body was paralyzed but I was awake and at their mercy. I heard more people enter the room and they were talking about creating a killing machine they could control. To kill people who stood in their way and questioned their tactics. They intended to have me tear these people to pieces, and well, to get rid of all traces of their existence."

She shuddered. "Oh god."

"They shot me full of drugs," he continued, his voice shaky. "Hell, I don't even know what any of it was. I stopped counting how many times they stuck me with a needle after I got to fifty. I did everything I could to force myself to speak or move, but nothing worked."

"That must have been terrifying."

"I'm sorry I ever volunteered. I had good intentions and they didn't. They used me."

Mercedes wiped away a tear. It hurt her to know he'd been through such a horrific ordeal. Against his will. She took a deep breath and asked the one question she almost hated to ask. "Did you ever kill anyone?"

"No."

She sighed with relief.

"That's the thing," he said. "They would order me to do something and I didn't go through with it. They had chains and leashes around me to keep me from taking off, but they couldn't stop my mind from working. When I didn't comply with their demands, they pumped me full of more crap. All they really succeeded in doing was making me stronger, and building my immunity. I don't remember how it happened, but I escaped. I've been on the run ever since. Five long years of never staying in one place."

She looked at him, amazed at his bravery. "What do you think happened? Why do you think they couldn't make you do their bidding?"

Nox raised his fist and stuck out his thumb. "For one, I don't believe they counted on my mind to be stronger than the medication. And for another, I don't believe they knew what the hell they were doing. More than likely the injections worked on monkeys, but I'm certain Dr. Bodwell himself didn't count on a strong healthy male who had the ability to keep control of his

thoughts.”

Mercedes lost control of the car. She jammed on the brakes and skidded to a stop at the side of the road.

She whipped her head Nox’s direction, ignoring the death grip he had on the door handle.

“What did you say the doctor’s name was?”

“Bodwell. Doctor Stephen Bodwell.”

Her lungs tightened. She flung off her seatbelt and pulled her journal out from under the seat. In big bold letters on the very first page was the same name. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you know him.”

“Oh, I know him all right.” Her pulse raced. “And I know exactly where you want me to take you. His lab in the mountain.”

Nox knitted his brows. “*How* do you know him?”

“I volunteered there, too. I needed money for college tuition and it looked like a quick fix.”

His jaw clenched. “Was it for the same experiment?”

“No. It was different.” Mercedes couldn’t believe she remembered any of it. Around Nox her mind seemed to work better. “It had to do with sensory deprivation and studying the body’s reactions and impulses. I don’t know what all they did to me in there, but I’ve never been the same since.”

“How do you mean?” Anger resounded from his voice.

“I’d go to work, pay bills, you know, go through the motions of life. And I’d do okay for a while and then I’d wake up one morning lost. My most recent memories would be gone. Blank. My house was foreign to me, filled with things I didn’t recognize. Closets full of clothes and shoes that didn’t look familiar. And I’d wonder about the woman who lived there. Pictures hung on the walls of complete strangers, but I had to have known them because I was in some of them. People claimed to know me and I didn’t know them or their names. After I’d settle into a routine that I could handle, it would happen again and I had to start all over again.”

“Dammit. How did you get away?”

“Well, that’s just it. I don’t know how long he kept me there. It could’ve been days, hours, minutes, I don’t know. He said the tests were inconclusive, thanked me for my time, handed me a check, and I left.”

“I hope he didn’t physically hurt you.”

“I don’t think so. Other than memory loss and little quirks that often I’m not aware of, I’ve been getting by. Until you. Since we met, I’ve had the strangest impulses. Mostly sexual, but emotional too. I can barely control myself when you’re next to me.”

She could see him fight a smile.

“Really? How so?”

“Around you my senses are on fire. Your scent is strong and it awakens every part of me.”

That time he didn’t fight the smile. “I shouldn’t be flattered.”

Mercedes folded her arms. “Let me guess. You are.”

“A little. I want you to know that I support you acting on those impulses.”

“I’m sure you do.”

His impish smile faded. “But after I told you my secret, I’d say that’s totally out of the question.”

“Why?”

“Because of what I become.”

“It isn’t like you asked to become a beast.”

He smirked. “You’re an amazing woman.”

“You mentioned that already. Keep it up and I might start believing it.” She unfastened her seatbelt and turned her body so she faced him. “So you really want me to act on my impulses?”

“Oh yeah.”

She leaned in only to be met with his hand in her face. “Uh, but, not here.”

He was going to refuse? “Why the hell not?”

“We’re on the side of the road.”

“You didn’t care if anyone might have seen us last night.”

“It was dark. It’s still daylight out.”

Mercedes shook her head. The guy was unbelievable. “Geez, shy much? We can wait until dark if that makes you feel more secure.”

“I don’t think I’ve been called shy once in my whole life. And I was more concerned for you.”

She chuckled and went to turn the ignition. "Fine, fine. We'll do it your way. In the dark. Later."

"Not so fast."

"But you said..."

"I can act on my impulses too."

Well she wished he'd hurry up. Her panties were soaked.

Nox leaned in and trailed his lips along her the rise of her cheek, down her neck, and up to her ear. "I don't know what kind of magic you work beautiful, but you've got my full attention."

His lips brushed the side of her face and captured hers with a passion she returned. Mouth parted, she invited the deep strokes of his tongue. His fingers stayed busy tracing her thighs and slipping between her legs. He pulled back a second and sucked in his breath.

"You've got to be kidding me. You're so fucking wet."

She smiled and parted her legs wider. "I blame you."

"Damn beautiful, you turn me on." His fingers slipped between her legs again. Mercedes quivered at the way he stretched her flesh.

"Oh, god," she cried as he penetrated her with four fingers, sending sparks of arousal to all her nerve endings.

Nox pumped his fingers inside her soaked pussy. The temptress had snared his senses again and made his cock impossibly hard. He suckled the slope of her neck while he switched between fast and slow thrusts, his fingers sticky sweet. She squirmed in the seat, gripping the steering wheel. Her intoxicating scent spiraled up and around him. All spice and wildfire. It stirred a ravenous craving.

"I've got to taste you, beautiful."

He bent forward and buried his face between her thighs.

His tongue captured her clit and toggled it until her legs shook around his head. She brought her hand down and spread her sex wider for him. He didn't waste time. His hunger point too far gone to turn back now.

Like a starved animal, he suckled her clit and quenched his thirst from her liquid heat. Her hips grinded against his mouth. Breathy whispers drifted from her perfect lips. He loved her

taste. The softness of her pussy. He'd never tire of exploring all her sensuous places.

An impatient yearning to thrust his cock inside her grew within him, but he staved it off. If he didn't control his urges, he'd ruin his favorite part—watching her in the throes of an orgasm.

He returned his focus to her pink slit, entranced by all its secrets and textures. He flicked his tongue against her clit and tasted her with a slow, deliberate lick. She arched her back and mewled like a kitten. Again, he tasted her, savoring her womanly musk and spice flavor on his palate. Her fingers that held her slit open were covered in her juices. He snaked out his tongue and licked at them, and then took them into his mouth while pumping his fingers inside her hot, moist pussy.

His mind exploded at the sheer wetness of her. Somehow, he'd opened a floodgate and it stroked his ego. To know he could deliver such pleasures with his hands, tongue, lips and mouth. His tongue reunited with her swollen clit and teased it with fast, furious licks. Her fingers pulled and tangled in his hair.

"No Nox," she cried. "Put your cock inside me. Fill me. Please, I beg you."

He ignored her pleas. All he could think about was bringing her over the edge.

His fingers pumped a little quicker while his mouth devoured her clit. He licked it, sucked it, toyed with it as her body thrashed wildly.

The volume of her moans increased and elongated. He felt her legs tense and knew she'd come soon. His fingers delved inside her again, mouth at the ready to welcome her cream.

"Don't stop. Don't. Stop. Yes..." Her winded words faded to a gasp. A final slow suckle of her clit let her break free and she came, coating his tongue and fingers with her pleasure. He watched, mesmerized by the way her body quaked. How she rode each wave like her body was paper in the wind. She sobbed, then moaned, and then filled the air with joyous laughter.

Nox rose and situated himself in his seat.

"Come over here. I want to feel you on top of me."

Mercedes climbed over and straddled him. To give herself more room she reached down along the side of his seat and pushed the lever so he reclined.

She moved back over him and shuddered. The rough denim material against her inflamed clit had her ready to claw his shirt away. Instead, she tore at the buttons of her own shirt and

smoothed her hands along her breasts. Her gaze traveled along the muscles of his forearms, his broad chest, his mouthwatering physique.

She made quick work of the buttons and zipper of his jeans. Too much material in the way of what she craved. She slid her hand inside the slit of his boxers and whimpered at the thick flesh against her palm.

Before he could speak, she captured his mouth with hers. Mercedes slipped her impatient tongue between his lips to savor his spiciness and swallowed down his fervent breath.

He pulled his lips back and leaned into her ear. "I want to be inside you."

That was exactly what she wanted.

With a nod, she took hold of his cock and pressed it to her sex. In one quick move, she went down on him.

When she took him all in, she sighed and rocked her hips, slow at first and then faster.

Pinpricks of desire raced throughout her body, traveling at the speed of light.

"Yes," she whispered.

His mouth curved into a seductive smile. "You're beautiful. Breathtaking."

She gazed into his lustful eyes. In their reflection, she felt beautiful.

Nox rested his work-rough hands at her waist and brought her into him. Deeper and faster. They moved as one. The brink was within her grasp. Close, so very close.

"Come for me," he groaned.

"Soon," she whimpered.

He trailed one hand to her clit and pressed his thumb firm against it. With each undulation, he circled the swollen nub. At the slightest stir of an orgasm, Mercedes smiled.

She needed this. Her sweet moment of escape.

"Come with me," she gasped.

Mercedes struggled to draw him in deeper, angled just so to hit her pleasure point. With a soft mewl she found the magic button that spilled her juices and sent her into a temporary bliss.

She reveled in the freedom of the orgasm as Nox pumped his hips swiftly and howled his own battle cry of satisfaction.

He rested his hands on either side of her face and brought her to his mouth. The kiss, sensual and hot, made her spasm. She moved her lips along his cheek and left a trail of kisses.

"I guess we should get back on the road," she whispered into his ear.

“Why don’t you just stay here a little longer?”

“But you need to be somewhere.”

“Here is good, too.”

She nestled into his chest and breathed him in.

“You’ve turned my whole world upside down,” he murmured. “And I don’t regret a second of it. I don’t ever want to let you go.”

There was that possessiveness again. It excited her in a dangerous way. Made her feel wanted and important. She licked her lips and tried to ignore how much he made her body burn for him.

“I’d say the feeling’s mutual.”

He tilted her chin to him with his thumb. “Yeah? You want to be my woman?”

“More than anything.”

His eyes trained on her with a protectiveness she longed for.

“But, in order for us to be together, you have to take care of something.”

Mercedes unhooked herself from his lap and situated herself back in the driver’s seat.

“Yes, I do.”

He put his seat back upright and stroked his finger along her arm. “I look forward to a time when you fall asleep in my arms.”

“Believe me, I want that too.” She toyed with fray ends of the steering wheel cover. Oh yes, she wanted to know what that was like.

Mercedes started up the engine and signaled back out onto the road.

They drove for a while, stopping once for food and drinks to stay awake. If she had her way, she’d distract him long enough to get on a different road and drive for weeks. She tried to coax him into going to sleep, knowing he hadn’t gotten any at the motel, but he refused to close his eyes.

“Not a chance,” he replied after her third attempt. “Do you know what I’m going to do?”

“Try to get your freedom back,” she said.

“Yes. And the way I see it, the only way to do that is to kill Dr. Bodwell. It’s hard to sleep when I’ve got that plan hatching in my head.”

“*Kill?*” The harsh words from him made her flinch.

“You think I’m in the wrong, that I’m being unjust? He took away my life, and ruined the

lives of others. And who knows what else he's done. Do you think he should be slapped on the wrist and sent on his way?"

She regretted saying anything. "Okay, when you put it in those words it changes things."

"He's a monster, but he's also creating monsters. He's doing inhumane things to unsuspecting people." His voice rose and she could see the tips of his ears turn red. "Do you like knowing that you were toyed with, because I sure as hell don't."

Mercedes didn't know what to think about it. In some ways she likened it to someone coming into her room while she was asleep and stealing something, but what they stole she didn't know. Sure, it bothered her and made her uneasy, but in the end, she didn't know what went missing.

"With the memory loss I forget to stay mad. Does it freak me out to know someone messed with my head? Of course. I hate having to read about my life in a book. I hate looking into a mirror and seeing a stranger. But I don't know to what extent he messed with me. Hell, I wouldn't have remembered his name if I hadn't written it down in my journal."

"Is that how you remembered me this morning?" His voice softened. "Did you write about me in your journal?"

Her face flushed. "Yes I wrote about you, but I remembered you anyway. The journal entry just confirmed that you were real and not a fantasy."

"I'd like to read what you wrote sometime."

"I told you. It's private."

"We'll see about that." He flashed a sexy smirk that made her laugh.

"You know very well I'm having a difficult enough time keeping my hands to myself. When you're this close to me in a small space my entire body is on fire."

"So, you're saying that you want me bad."

"You're impossible."

She had a feeling he was grinning like a fool, but refused to acknowledge it. Looking at him would only make it worse.

"Hey, I don't want to hold you back," he teased. "I can take the wheel and you can do whatever you'd like to me."

"Then we'll never get there. And you need to save your strength for the big showdown."

She glanced at him in time to catch his lower lip stuck out in a sexy pout.

“Okay, okay. I’m just not used to being viewed as such a sex object.”

Mercedes put her hand up and groaned. “Oh please. Don’t go any further with that.”

“I’m just saying.”

“You shouldn’t say any more.”

Chapter Five

It was just after seven when they came to a gravel road at the base of the mountain. As they neared, her anxiety heightened. Aware Nox was staring at her she met his gaze.

“Is something wrong?”

“How did you know about this turn off?”

She frowned. How *did* she know? When she came here before, she took the regular road up, and that was five years ago. She’d never been back since. “I’m not sure. I guess it’s something I retained in my memory, though I don’t know why. It’s weird, isn’t it?”

He clicked his tongue. “In a way, but it’s to our advantage. I’ll have an easier time getting in without them seeing me. You should kill the lights.”

Mercedes turned off the headlights and drove up part way. She noticed a grove in between a couple willows and pulled in. Nox had his seatbelt off and the door opened before she shifted into park.

“Stay here. I’m going the rest of the way on foot.”

She unfastened her safety belt. “I’m coming with you.”

He turned fast, his eyes dark and narrow. “Absolutely not.”

Mercedes folded her arms. “So I’m supposed just sit here?”

“Yes. You said you’d drive me. That was all I agreed to. Nothing more.”

“But...”

His jaw clenched. “This isn’t the time to argue, and no, you won’t win.”

“Nox.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you drive me,” he grumbled.

She winced at the irritation in his tone. Getting him riled up wouldn’t help. With a sigh,

she nodded. “You’re right. I’ll stay here.”

“Promise?” Gone was the edge to his voice.

Mercedes chose her words carefully. “I don’t want to get in your way.”

“I’ll be quick as I can. You do realize this is for us.”

“I know. Please be careful. I’m scared for you.”

He leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips.

“I need you to think good thoughts for me,” he said and closed the door behind him.

She sighed and watched him disappear around the mountain. “I already am.”

* * * *

Mercedes waited while the sky grew darker. It was quiet and her mind spun with too many *what if?* scenarios. She kept to her promise and didn’t go after him right away. But now she was finished waiting, and decided to make sure he was safe. Nox could go all beastly on her ass and yell at her later.

She slipped out of the car and pressed the door shut. She took the same path Nox had and within ten minutes, she was gasping for air. The trail stretched on longer than it appeared from the car and wound around in a big circle.

Lungs aching and her body slick with sweat, she struggled to keep her momentum uphill. This wasn’t the brightest of ideas. She kept her mind busy while she trekked up the mountain. Mainly with thoughts of Nox and how much she admired him. It helped take her mind off the searing pain in her body. Exercise hadn’t ever been on the top of her priority list.

Around the same time she was ready to collapse into a sobbing pile of goo, she saw a door that had been pulled off its hinges, and had a pretty good idea who was responsible. Grateful not to have to hike any further, she entered.

Inside it was dark with a single faint light running across the ceiling, and smelled of must, dank water, and too many chemicals. All together, it made her throat burn each time she inhaled. A few steps in, tunnels split off into three separate directions, without a sign or arrow anywhere she could see. It was the oddest laboratory she’d ever seen. It was a cross between a cave and an underground parking lot. To her recollection, she’d never been in this part.

Unsure of which way to go, she chose the tunnel on the right and soon picked up Nox’s scent. It was faint, but she caught enough of it to know he’d been there. Aside from the clicking sound of her shoes and an annoying drip, it was quiet. Her legs had gone from exhausted to

rubbery and it slowed her pace.

She rounded a corner and a new scent hit her. The origin didn't register at first, but with each step, it grew stronger until she couldn't mistake the scent. Blood. Nox's blood. He was in danger.

She ignored the discomfort of her legs and hurried through the twists and turns of the tunnel, milling through the never-ending labyrinth until she came to an area with a steep decline. Careful to not lose her balance and tumble down head first, she took it easy. If she got hurt, it could mean the death of them both.

Once the walkway leveled out, she quickened her pace. The cave opened up again into a well-lit room, and the sight against the wall made her breath catch.

Mercedes saw him, or at least the beastly side of him. His fangs, fur and scales showing, he was chained to the wall like an animal awaiting slaughter. He had the head of a boar and the body of a collection of creepies from her childhood nightmares. She forced down her instinct to scream. Regardless of his crude appearance, he was the man she burned for.

"Nox," she whispered and approached him slow.

He raised his head, eyes wide and bloodshot. "Mercedes? What are you doing here? I told you not to come here."

"I couldn't wait any longer."

"Listen, I want you to get out of here. Right now."

How could he ask her to do that? "I'm not walking away from you."

His eyes narrowed to slits. "I said go."

"No," she returned, choking back a sob. Even in his beast form, she couldn't mistake the deep green of his eyes.

"I didn't want you to see me like this," he muttered. "I wish you'd go and forget you met me."

The harshness of his appearance didn't concern her. The many wounds covering his body did. "I'm not going anywhere without you. Deal with it."

He stared at her with a blank expression. "How can you look at me without screaming? I'm hideous."

"The man I happen to care deeply about is still in there. Control your emotions and let me see him."

“It won’t work.”

“Try,” she pressed. “For me.”

He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. She struggled to keep the tears at bay, wanting to be strong for him. In the next moment, he changed back into her handsome Nox. His shirt and pants were torn to shreds and not covering very much. Blood streaked down his body and raised welts covered his arms. When he opened his eyes, they reflected defeat.

Mercedes let her gaze fall over his battered and bruised body. “It pains me inside to see you this way.”

“The wounds don’t hurt,” he said glumly. “They might look it, but I don’t feel them.”

“Well, I do.” From deep inside her belly, an odd sensation rushed through her. Like her body was charged with electricity and demanded release. In her mind, she knew without a doubt that she had the power to heal him.

Following her instincts, she reached up and smoothed her hands along his arms. A bright white light followed the sweep of her hands and illuminated Nox’s injuries, and then the wounds began to heal.

She repeated the motion over his swollen knee and back up the rest of his body. “Better?”

Nox stared on in awe. “How did you do that?”

The light disappeared and she relaxed her arms. It left her dizzy but she didn’t care. “I don’t know. I’ve never done it before. I just did what felt right.”

His gaze locked with hers. She sensed his sadness.

“Be honest with me. Do I frighten you?”

She should be afraid, terrified even. Under any other circumstance she’d run from a man who could become a creature. But this was Nox and she knew him. Even in his current state, to look at him made her body liquefy all over again. “No. It makes me want you more.”

His lips curled. “You saw me as a disgusting thing. How were you not sickened by me?”

“Because I know the real you.”

“Impossible,” he retorted. “I don’t even know the real me. You need a man who can stay a man and give you everything you deserve.”

“Stop it,” she snapped. His pity trip was getting on her last nerve. “You’re only saying this stuff because of a bruised ego. I want you. Do you hear me? I. Want. You. Hell, I’m pretty damn certain that I love you. So knock off the ‘you’re not good enough for me’ bullshit, because

you're not getting rid of me."

"I love you too." He smiled for a second and then lowered his gaze to the ground. "I want to be with you. Hell I don't want to go a day without looking into your beautiful eyes. But you need a real man. One who doesn't change into a circus freak. I can't imagine the kind of life you'd endure with me. I don't know there's a cure. I may get worse. The future isn't up to me."

Mercedes stepped forward and rested her hands on either side of his face.

"You better look at me when you say that," she soothed. "I'm not afraid of what you become. I know around you my memory is sharp and my body radiates with an uncontrollable desire. Yes, we might end up hurting one another for one reason or another. Instead of throwing it all away, why don't we see where it leads us? Neither of us will ever know unless we try. We're good together."

"You've no idea how much I want all that to be true."

"It is."

She could tell he wanted to argue the point until she gave up on him, but he'd be waiting a long time. In her mind, she saw herself freeing him from the chains that stood in the way of their future. It worked before when she healed him.

Mind made up, she jutted out her chin. "I'm going to get you out of here, and I don't want to hear another word out of you."

Nox pursed his lips but didn't say anything. A smart move, she thought, considering she planned to shoot down any of his attempts to sway her.

Mercedes wrapped her hands around the upper chains that bound his wrists and pulled.

"These are strong chains," Nox interrupted. "They're made to bind the strongest of beasts, not an average human."

"Shut up, you're ruining my concentration," she spat.

"You'll hurt yourself if you aren't careful."

She tuned him out and focused on the chains. Eyes closed she visualized the power in the chains weakening. Envisioned them turning to liquid. From her center, the surge of electricity grew. With a bit more force, she looked through the chains and saw their demise. Heat traveled swiftly through her upper body and white light sparked from her fingertips.

The chains broke apart and turned to ash. Mercedes bent down and repeated the same visualization on the chains around his ankles. When those too broke away, her body went slack

and she sank to the ground.

Nox knelt at her side and kissed the top of her head.

“See, you’ve gone and sapped your strength.”

She looked up and glared. “Would it kill you to thank me?”

He let out a quiet chuckle. “Thank you.”

Nox slid his arms beneath her legs and around her back. “We need to get you out of here. I’ll see you safely outside and then I’ll come back for Dr. Bodwell.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and felt her body lift from the ground. “I can go back on my own,” she said. “I promise I’ll stay put this time.”

Again, he chuckled. “I don’t trust you to do that.”

Mercedes smiled. He knew her too well already.

“And anyway,” he continued. “I can’t be mad at you. Had you listened to me I’d still be chained to a wall feeling sorry for myself.”

She wanted to whoop or clap her hands. The old Nox was back.

“See, I’m good for you.”

“Undoubtedly. I also can’t go after Dr. Bodwell if I’m worried about your safety.”

“Fine.”

She clung tighter to him. Being so close helped strengthen her, and the feeling returned to her legs, but she didn’t want to say anything just yet. They were together and it felt good.

Chapter Six

Nox hurried through the cave with Mercedes secure in his arms. There wasn't time to worry if anyone followed them. He could deal with that later. In all his time as a beast, he never expected that one day *he'd* need saving. It amazed him the powers Mercedes held. Powers she didn't even know about. They also concerned him. Her powers made her a valuable commodity to mad scientists like Dr. Bodwell. If he discovered them, she'd be at risk.

"You can put me down," she said, a welcome interruption to his morbid train of thought. "Not that I'm complaining about being carried, but we'll get out faster if I'm on my own two feet."

Nox paused. "You make a valid point."

Gently he set her back on her feet and pulled her into his embrace. He tilted her chin toward him, ready to give her a kiss he hoped would make her weak all over again, when Dr. Bodwell stepped out from the shadows.

A sinister smile crossed the doctor's lips. "I applaud your attempt to escape. Too bad it didn't work."

Nox turned his body so he shielded Mercedes. He wanted to get her out before things turned ugly. "Let her go. She's not involved."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news," Bodwell said smugly, "but she's very much involved." His smile widened as he looked at Mercedes. "Oh yes, my dear, I never forget a face, especially one as beautiful as yours. Though I understand you've become somewhat forgetful?"

"Don't talk to her," Nox spat.

Anger coursed through his veins. If he didn't get control, he'd turn into the beast before he wanted.

Bodwell took a step forward. “Aren’t you curious as to why I’m not the least bit surprised to see her with you?”

“Not really.”

“It was the way I meant for it to be.”

Mercedes stepped out from behind him, confusion apparent in her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m responsible for your matchmaking. I intended for you to be mates. Call it a real life beauty and the beast fairy tale. My staff and I studied what would drive a woman who could have any man she wanted to fall for a repulsive half-man, half-creature. I personally injected pheromones and impulse triggers to draw you to one another. I see that five years later it still works.”

Nox tried to block Mercedes but she kept moving away from him. “You mean you set us up to desire each other? We’re being controlled by substances you injected us with?”

The doctor shrugged. “You two are the only test specimens that it worked on. It’s a shame I’m going to have to separate you just when you’ve found one another. Of course I’ll have my fun first.” Bodwell’s greedy stare traveled the length of Mercedes’ body and fixed on her breasts.

“Fuck you,” Nox spat. “You won’t lay a hand on her.”

The doctor pulled out a long needle. “You won’t be able to stop me.”

“Like hell. I don’t think you want to go head to head with the monster you created.”

“Idle threats don’t affect me in the least. Besides, you’re making me the enemy when I’m here to help.”

Nox waved his hand. “I don’t want your help.”

“You also don’t want to become a beast forever, do you? I can end your suffering with a simple injection.”

Did the guy think he was that gullible? “*You’d help me? Why?*”

“I wanted to make things right years ago, but you insisted on running from my men.”

“I don’t believe you,” he scoffed. “You want me to believe you’ll give me the cure and send me on my way?”

“I didn’t say I had a cure. I said I could make your suffering go away. Unfortunately, I must destroy you. Before you hurt her.”

“I’d never hurt her,” he said in a clipped tone.

Mercedes took another step forward. Nox tried to stop her but she balked at his reach.

“I’m fine. I want to hear it from the good doctor’s own lips. What exactly was your intention with me? I want to know my purpose in your sick little experiment.”

Bodwell’s eyes lit up, and it made Nox sick. “Your purpose was to lure unsuspecting men here, and then seduce them so I could turn them into my personal killing machines. You were very good at it and I enjoyed watching the many ways you brought them pleasure.”

Nox heard her gasp and clenched his fists. “She doesn’t need to hear anymore.”

“Yes I do,” Mercedes answered and gestured toward the doctor. “Go on.”

“The first beasts I created didn’t work out. I hadn’t perfected the formula and their bodies rejected everything else I tried. So I destroyed them. With Nox, I thought I’d finally gotten it right. He had the strength and his body responded well to the chemical changes. I didn’t count on him beating the drug with such a strong mind, refusing to kill.” He paused a moment, turning the needle around in his hands. “Then I brought you to him, thinking you could manipulate him in other ways. Make him think he’d be killing for you. Sex for bloodshed. Unfortunately, your mutual attraction was so fierce, I couldn’t contain it. So I had to separate you. I’d never seen that kind of passion and hoped you’d extend it to me. It didn’t work out that way and I cared for you too much to force you. So I wiped your mind clean of what went on here and let you go. I’ve kept tabs on you and every now and then send my men to wipe your mind clean again as a precaution.”

“A precaution,” she snorted.

Nox shook his head and asked, “Why don’t I remember her from before?”

“More shots,” Bodwell answered, as though it were a party joke. “All this time I didn’t think they’d worked. Don’t you remember what prompted your escape?”

Again, Nox shook his head. He hated that the doctor had all the answers, and that he’d never know the truth unless he allowed the man to speak.

“I told you I’d sent her away. You couldn’t stand not seeing her again. I always hoped she’d bring you back to me, and here you are. Isn’t science beautiful?”

“Sick bastard,” Mercedes muttered. “I’ll have you know that when I met Nox he was on his way here already. It had nothing to do with me.”

Bodwell smiled with his signature smugness. “I bet it appeared that way, though I’d

wager he didn't plan to come after me until he saw you."

Mercedes looked over at him. "Is that true?"

Nox blinked. What the hell? The asshole was playing with their heads. He *was* on his way to Astoria before Mercedes offered him a ride. Wasn't he? His pulse thundered as he stretched his mind. The more he tried to pick his brain the less certain he was.

No, he couldn't remember when the idea came to him, but he refused to give Bodwell the satisfaction. "Mercedes, he's messing with us. He wants us to turn on each other. Create doubt where there isn't any. Don't fall for it."

"You don't really think she cares for you, do you?" Bodwell chided. "Her emotions aren't real. They're a result of the introduction of chemicals and drugs over an extended period of time. The lust alone is impulse-driven. Drained of all the substances she wouldn't care for you at all."

"Bullshit," Mercedes sputtered. "You can go to hell."

"How am I the bad guy here? I'm responsible for bringing you two together. I'm a saint."

Mercedes approached the doctor.

"Move away," Nox shouted, his muscles tense.

"He won't hurt me," she returned and stood her ground. "I want to know. Can you cure him so that he'll never become a beast again?"

Bodwell smiled. "Yes, but I won't. He isn't worth the risk. The best thing to do is to put him out of his misery. And thereby, end yours."

Her brow arched. "How is it for the best?"

The doctor spread his hands. "At some point your passion will fade and he'll attack you while in his beast form. If for some reason I'm wrong about that, there's still the chance you'll wake up in his arms and he'll be a complete stranger. With all the drugs pumped into you, the memory lapses will worsen. In short, one way or another, you'll destroy each other. Why put yourselves through all that? I promise you, lust isn't worth it."

"Well love is," Mercedes quipped, and snatched the needle from the doctor's grip.

Concerned for her safety, Nox couldn't hold back his rage. His body began to change.

"You'll want to go easy with that sweetheart," Bodwell cautioned. "It's loaded with a highly concentrated substance. I realize you've forgotten, but all it takes is for me to say a sequence of words and you'll do whatever I tell you. And I'll tell you to kill him."

In his beast form, Nox pitched forward and pinned the doctor to the wall, his massive elbow lodged against his throat. "I'll crush your windpipe first."

Nox reached his hand out to Mercedes. "Give me the needle, beautiful."

"No," she snapped. "I'm through being someone's puppet."

"It isn't within you to hurt anyone. *I* will do it."

The doctor strained against him and then chuckled. "Mercedes..."

She faced him, hands on her hips. "What?"

"Don't listen to him," he urged. "He's taunting you."

"The beast loves another," the doctor finished.

Nox pressed his elbow even harder into the doc's neck until he started to choke. "I told you to shut the hell up."

Mercedes strode up beside him, her eyes cold and dark. Bodwell's words had turned her against him.

"What did you say to her you sick bastard?"

The doctor smiled despite his lack of air.

"Let him go, Nox." She raised the needle, holding it like a dagger.

"Baby, don't. You're above his control. Whatever he told you doesn't mean you have to follow through. You don't take orders from anyone."

"Shut up," she hissed. "Let him go or I'll stick this needle in me, and my death will be on your hands."

Nox held his breath. There was something in her eyes that made him believe she'd do it. He recalled a memory, years ago, when she stood before him. She'd said the same thing to him and he'd complied, not wanting to risk losing her. They had been together. He'd loved her even then.

"I'll do this for you," he said and released the doctor. With all his strength, he forced himself to change back to his human form, knowing it would weaken him, but hoping it would make a difference in her eyes.

"It's me, beautiful. You know me. We're good together, remember? Don't do this."

She turned her attention away from him and to the doctor slumped on the floor, his hand massaging his neck. "What should I do?"

"Kill him. You don't need him. He'll always be a beast. I'm the only one who can take

care of you the way you need.” He got to his feet and held out his arms. “I can love you the way you want.”

Nox paled at the sight of her body pressed against Bodwell’s as she moved into his arms. Much as he wanted to rip the doctor’s head off, he worried Mercedes would be caught in the middle.

“Now my darling,” the doctor started. “I can see you’re hesitant, and that’s okay. Let me have the needle.”

She nodded. “Anything for you.”

Stunned, Nox watched Mercedes move slightly back from the door, bring one arm forward in a swift motion and drive the needle into Bodwell’s body.

The doctor fell back against the wall, eyes wide and horror-struck.

Mercedes moved away and gripped Nox. Bodwell clutched his stomach and sank to the ground, his breath labored. When the doctor lay motionless, he couldn’t help but smile. Good riddance.

Mercedes loosened her grip from him and swayed.

He caught her before she hit the ground and held her tight against him.

Nox buried his face in the silken strands of her hair. She smelled and felt like all the things he used to love. Sunsets and clean mountain air and camping trips. Back when he lived, back before all the madness.

“It’s going to be okay,” he soothed. “You’re safe now. I’ll always keep you safe.”

With Mercedes tucked in his arms, he hurried through the tunnels. He needed to get her out of there. She’d been incredibly brave and he couldn’t wait to pamper her, lavish her, and of course ravish her.

They were near the exit when several beastlike creatures stalked toward him, barring his way. He’d had enough of the hunt. “It’s over,” he said in a sharp tone. “Dr. Bodwell is dead. You’re not under anyone’s control anymore. And neither am I.”

The creatures moved out of his way and he carried her to the car. Nox set her down carefully in the passenger seat and buckled her in.

“I’m going to take care of you,” he soothed. “I promise.”

Chapter Seven

Nox glanced around the suite from his position in the most comfortable bed he'd ever encountered. It was made even better by the beauty lying beside him. Finally, he'd know what it was like to fall asleep with her in his arms, and wake up to the sound of her gentle breathing.

Mercedes opened her baby blues and smiled at him.

He clasped her hand and gave it a tender squeeze. "Hi, beautiful."

"Hi," she replied sleepily and glanced around. "Where are we?"

"In a five-star hotel. I thought it was time we slept in an actual bed for a change."

"Good choice." Her brows furrowed. "How did I get here? I flaked on you, didn't I?"

Nox chuckled. "Not at all. What do you remember?"

She bit her lip. "I remember freeing you from the chains and you were carrying me. After that it's fuzzy."

He nodded. "I'll be happy to fill in the blanks another time. For now, I just want you to relax. I think you overexerted yourself."

In time, he planned to tell her everything, including how she'd been the one to kill the doctor. It was her right to know and he refused to keep secrets from her. "All that matters is that we're free of Dr. Bodwell and his freak show."

Her eyes lit up. "You mean he gave you the cure?"

"No. I wish. But maybe in time I'll find one. Someone has to know something."

Again, her brows furrowed. "What if I have another memory lapse and forget who you are?"

"It's not going to happen."

"Do you know for certain, or are you trying to make me feel better?"

He gathered her up in his arms. "I'll be right here to help you remember. You said your memory is sharper around me, so maybe that's all you need. I know that around you I'm better able to control my beastly urges."

"Gosh, I hope not," she said and flashed a wicked grin. "I kind of like it when you become a beast. It turns me on."

"Okay, now I know you're feeling better."

"Are you kidding? My body is so hot for you right now. I could probably be in a full body cast and not feel an ounce of pain. Your touch is magic. It ignites me."

Her suggestive demeanor made his cock painfully hard beneath the sheets.

"We can always pretend you're in a cast."

"Excuse me?"

Nox smoothed his knuckle against her chin.

"What I mean is, you can lie still and I'll take good care of you."

He pulled back the satin sheets and eyed her sinful body. "You deserve nothing less than to be pleased to the fullest extent. I swear you'll never be left wanting. Though you might want more."

Her breath hitched at the scintillating thought he proposed. "That's a heavy promise. I hope you can back it up."

"I intend to. I hope you can handle it."

Mercedes shivered at the possessiveness in his eyes. She didn't doubt he'd keep to his word.

His gaze drifted along her body and rested at the apex between her thighs. To further his arousal she spread her thighs. The subtle twitch of his lips let her know she'd succeeded.

Nox took her hand and brought it to his cock. The hot flesh sizzled against her palm and made her pussy clench.

"When we're through, you'll beg to have this heat inside you all the time."

Mercedes gasped. The image alone made her wet.

His hand slipped between her thighs and cupped her moist sex. In return, she tightened her grip on his cock and stroked.

He leaned forward with his mouth along her ear and whispered, "Not yet."

She trembled at the way his voice sent tiny quakes throughout her body. Nox clasped her hands and placed them above her head. Weakened by his words she had no choice but to comply.

“You’re a vision,” he stated. His heavy-lidded stare elicited a tiny spasm in her belly.

Exposed and vulnerable, she awaited his next move.

He climbed over to rest his body on top of hers. The muscles in his forearms flexed and braided until her mouth watered. His erection pressed against her belly. She resisted the temptation to shout “fuck me” right then, though she wanted to. Her thoughts returned to his earlier words about his heat inside her and she trembled.

“I see in your eyes you want me to rush.” He spoke in a low tone.

She nodded, afraid to say a word.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m going to take my time tasting every inch of your sweet body. The more you want me to hurry, the more I’ll take my time.”

Mercedes silently cursed him. His eyes smoldered as he drank her in. She bit her lip with impatience, wondering where he’d touch.

He brought his head down and pressed his cheek to hers. “You smell exquisite.”

She inhaled and let his scent infuse her senses in turn.

He turned his face and poised his mouth over hers. The seductive green orbs of his eyes beckoned to her. They promised her that every hot fantasy she ever dreamed would come to fruition. She saw a fiery passion within them, a passion reserved for her alone. Nox was her man, and he was all hers.

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

“With pleasure,” he answered and claimed her lips.

His electric touch seared her flesh. Mercedes opened her mouth and welcomed the presence of his tongue. He tasted like a blend of dark spices. She wanted to stay in the moment long enough to identify each one. He explored her mouth further. Tongue against tongue. His breath blew hot like a desert wind. She gulped it down, wanting his essence and everything else about him inside her.

His mouth broke away long enough for her to catch her breath before he claimed her lips again. The kisses deepened and grew forceful. He rested his palms along her cheeks and took her mouth, again and again, until her head spun.

Nox withdrew his lips and moved down her body a couple inches. He gaped at her

breasts with feral eyes.

“Lick them,” she begged and arched her back.

“You’re mine,” he said, his voice deep and predatory.

Mercedes squeaked out a “yes” and sighed as he wrapped his mouth around a nipple. His other hand caressed and massaged her breast while he suckled. Pleasure streamed through her. He brought the one nipple to a full peak and then provoked the other with similar results. She moaned and sighed against his relentless mouth. Her body buzzed while her mind escaped into an unknown oblivion.

“Nox,” she whispered.

He cupped her breasts and licked her nipples, swirling his tongue around their puckered peaks. Teased them into submission until they were raised and pebble hard. Then he blew gently. Mercedes mewled.

Nox smiled and scattered kisses between her breasts, down her ribcage, her waist and all around her bellybutton. The ends of his hair brushed along her skin, sending thrills to all her nerve-endings.

His mouth lingered around the soft curve of her belly and made a slow descent to her tapered mound. “My favorite part,” he growled and parted her folds with a long, slow lick.

“Mm, feels good,” she murmured and swiveled her hips against his mouth.

“There’s more to come.”

She loved the way he said *more*.

His fingers splayed her pussy wide and he dragged his tongue slow and deep. Her body jerked with a mind of its own. He tethered her clit with featherlike strokes and watched her, his eyes dark and intense. Mercedes looked on, breath held, waiting for what he’d do next.

In answer, he pressed two fingers inside her wetness. He groaned and laved his tongue along her clit. She rested her head back against the pillow and watched him. Watched his head buried between her thighs. Noted his fingers pulsing in and out of her pussy. Observed the way his arm muscles bunched. She watched as if removed from herself. Unable to believe that all the pleasure was meant for her.

Nox pulsed his fingers between her folds until she couldn’t hold back. One wave after another burst through her. Her body more alive than she’d ever known it to be. Desperate for more of his touch, she pulled his face up to her and tasted her cream on his lips.

“I plan to love you like this every day and night,” he declared and lay down next to her, his cock nestled snug along the cleft of her ass.

“Then I’m glad I stopped for you.”

She hooked her leg over his and tilted her pelvis. Nox eased his cock inside her and pulled her in close. They moved together, their bodies pressed tightly together. His hand slid up to her breast and pinched her nipple between his fingers.

Mercedes moaned. “More.”

He thrust into her with a relentless speed. She loved the feel of his warm breath along her upper back and shoulder. The sound of his grunts as he fought for control.

He reached down and circled his thumb around her clit. Slow, then fast. Soft, then rough while he thrust his cock deep. Each stroke deeper than the one before. An orgasm loomed in the depths of her belly and insisted to be freed.

“Faster,” she demanded. “Fuck me faster.”

“Are. You. Close?” He asked in a strained rasp.

Mercedes groaned. She was so close she could hardly see straight.

He toggled her clit swiftly between his fingers and that was all she needed.

The dam broke loose and a torrent of moans escaped her lips in quick succession. Powerful spasms assaulted her one after another. Behind her she listened to Nox unleash a throaty roar, his thrusts slowing as his heat spread inside her.

He thrust one final time and withdrew. Ever so lightly, he dusted her shoulder with moist kisses.

Pleasure ebbed through every pore. Her body felt light. Sated. Beautiful. She couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re an amazing man,” she sighed. “I love every single thing about you.”

“The feeling’s mutual, beautiful.”

“A small part of me would be satisfied if we stayed right here in this bed forever, but there are so many things I want to do and share with you.”

“Just so you know, I plan to fill your days. I want you to look back one day at a life full of good memories.”

Mercedes let out a contented sigh. “I’m not afraid of my memory lapses with you around. I don’t think I could forget you if I tried.”

“Especially since you wrote all about the night you met me in your journal.”

She thought that an odd thing for him to say, and then her gaze fell to the bedside table with her journal lying on top of it. She hoisted up to her knees and gave him a heated stare. “Did you read what I wrote?”

“Of course not. You said it was private.”

She didn’t believe him for a second. “Yes you did, admit it.”

“I swear I didn’t read it. But you didn’t say anything about writing in it.”

“Nox.”

He beamed, proud of himself.

“What did you write? Tell me.”

“I’m afraid that’s private.”

Mercedes straddled him. “Tell me or I’m going to find out if you’re ticklish or not.”

“You don’t fight fair,” he said and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I wrote that I love you and will forever belong to you. And I signed it Beauty’s Beast.”

Her lip trembled. “That’s sweet, Nox. I’m speechless.”

He shrugged. “That’s okay. What I’ve got in mind doesn’t require much talk.”

She didn’t even have to ask what he meant. His erection drummed against her thigh.

“Are you serious? Already?”

“I’m testing those impulses, beautiful.”

Mercedes moved down his body and nuzzled between his legs. She wrapped her hand around his cock and stroked. At once, he groaned.

“This time I’m going to pleasure *you* to the fullest extent, and you better believe I’ll leave you wanting more.”

About the Author

Born with an overactive imagination, Ann Cory has always had a love of words and putting them to paper. With the loving support of her husband and son, she is able to devote her time to the very stubborn and demanding muse.

Ann enjoys writing erotic romance where she delves into the dark realms of paranormal, vampires, shape-shifters, and urban fantasy, while adding excitement and spice to contemporary, BDSM, alternative, and historical themes.

For updates and more, please visit her website www.anncory.com.

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***Their Lady Liberty* by Ann Cory**

There's nothing Liberty likes better than to spend her time with the two men who ignite her body and show her pleasures like no others. She belongs to them both, and doesn't want it any other way.

Brandon and Neil can focus on little else but thoughts of Liberty's hot body and carefree ways, both always dreaming of the next time they'll be together. As Brandon and Neil see it, there are worse things to be than at the mercy of a sex goddess.

Behind the steamed up windows of Brandon's van, the threesome meet up for an afternoon rendezvous. Here they can love freely, and live out their most decadent fantasies with... *Their Lady Liberty*.

***Breakfast at Tiffany's* by Ann Cory**

Cool smoothies and hot sex...

Tiffany has dreamed of opening her very own smoothie bar. Creating fun and tasty concoctions is her specialty. But first, she needs to sell her idea, and that will require bringing samples of her best recipes. She calls on Marcus and Shane, her hot and handsome best friends, to help her decide which ones to choose.

Marcus and Shane have worshipped Tiffany for years and would do anything in the world for her, even share her if her heart so desires. In support of her opening her own smoothie bar, they agree to be her guinea pigs. However, a morning of taste testing quickly becomes more about pleasure than business.

***What the Cuff?* By Celia Kyle**

God really should have reconsidered making werewolves. That, or Lyssa needed to get better taste in men and stay away from those with wandering eyes—and other things. Drunk as a wolf, she stumbles to her best friend’s house to sleep off her whiskey induced haze and wakes to...*cuffs?*

Caleb sees his chance and takes it. His buddies on the force ribbed him but good for buying silver plated cuffs. But with a werewolf in his bed, the woman he’s yearned for since they were teens, he wasn’t taking any chances. Lyssa was his. She just didn’t know it yet.

***Rules of Fire* by Tia Fanning**

Once upon time, a long time ago, in a far away land, a young girl journeyed to a magical desert temple and met a handsome prince...

To most, this sounds like the start of a beautiful fairytale. To me, it’s the start of a horrible nightmare.

My name is Angel, and I am that young girl all grown up. You might have noticed me around. I am that “strange chick” everyone talks about— the one who enters a room and somehow causes all illuminated candles to extinguish. The one who has an irrational fear of salamanders. The one who freaks out and runs away every time she sees a large bird with crimson and gold feathers.

But if you knew the rest of the tale, you would understand.

I have spent the last seven years of my life secretly following the Rules of Fire. My family and friends have no idea of the danger I'm in, nor can they fathom how something as simple and elemental as fire can be my undoing. They don't know that, just beyond the flickering flames, *he* beckons me...

And I yearn to go to him.

***Dragon's Blood* by Brynn Paulin**

For centuries, there have been legends of Vampires—the fault of one careless dragon. But humans only know part of the story. Walking amongst us are Dragons, shape-shifters who feed on blood.

Reluctant Dragon Elder Janos Aventech's vacation in New York is about to come to an abrupt end. Riding on the subway, he stumbles across a Dragon mate—one of the few human women with whom his people can unite and be truly happy. And his people's enemies are out to get her. As his attraction to this woman grows, he knows he must find her mate and see her safely into that man's arms. It's destined. But as every minute passes in her company, Janos begins to see he'll never willingly let her go, mate or not.

If only she were his mate...

On the subway, Scarlett couldn't stop staring at him—then he turned crazy. When he essentially kidnaps her off the train, she knows she should be irate and terrified. Instead, she finds her initial attraction growing. But what's all this stuff he's spouting about mates and enemies? She only wants to return to her life, not get caught in the middle of a war. But it's too late for that. She's destined for a Dragon's bed, and in Janos' arms, she can only hope it's his.

***Red: A Seduction Tale* by Maddie James**

Garnet Boudreaux is going home. Not back to her nice little apartment in New York City, but to her childhood home in the bayou. She doesn't want to go, and isn't certain what will be waiting for her when she arrives. But standing there in the voodoo shop on Bourbon Street, in the middle of one helluva party, she's told by Madame Madeleine Dupuis that she has no choice. She presses two pouches into Garnet's hands, wraps a red cape around her, and tells her she must go—and go now—to see to her grandmother.

Max LeBlanc spies the lovely redhead across the street and knows in a heartbeat that she is the one. A rougarou always knows when he's met his mate. Some may call him a lycanthrope, a werewolf if you will, but in Cajun bayou lands, he's known simply as *The Rougarou*. He'd waited several hundred years for this moment, and for her. There is nothing left for him to do but mark her and claim her as his mate. Soon.

***Oriana and the Three Werebears* by Tia Fanning**

Oriana Ricci has taken over the family business—flying cargo and rich tourists around Alaska's barely inhabited Kodiak Archipelago. When her plane malfunctions and she's forced to make an emergency landing, she finds herself stranded in the middle of a National Wildlife Refuge. With no civilization for miles and no hope of rescue, she thinks all is lost...

Until she stumbles upon the entrance to an underground bunker.

Jack, Jordan, and Jonathan McMathan own and operate a secret intelligence firm contracted by the US Government. Hidden away in an old Cold War spy station located the middle of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, the brothers are not only able to do their top secret jobs safely without fear of discovery, but are better to protect their other, more personal secret: They have the ability to shift into Kodiak bears.

Like a fairy tale gone bad, the brothers return home to find their lunch tasted—or eaten, their computer chairs adjusted—or broken, and a beautiful blonde sleeping in one of their beds. This situation poses a big problem for the brothers...

Their location is now compromised. But more importantly, what are they to do with the lady?

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