



Moira Rogers

The 13th Step

By Moira Rogers

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The first time he saw her under the flashing lights on the dance floor, Blake thought it was his imagination. The second time, he thought he'd seen a ghost. The third time brought a harsh curse to his lips, because he knew the truth was far more disturbing than either of those options.

Ella.

She spun around, dark locks swinging, and gyrated her hips in quick, skillful circles that made his cock harden. The multicolored lights reflected off the fine, soft leather of her pants. *Those'll take forever to get off her.* Then he grimaced. In five seconds, he'd gone from detached professional to horny, slaverer teenager. *Just like always.*

A man beside him watched her as well. "Hot, huh? Damn."

Blake murmured his assent then snorted. "She's trouble."

"You know her?"

"Used to." She shimmied and flipped her hips from side to side, her arms in the air. The tiny halter top bared her back all the way down to where the soft curves of her hips peeked out above the low-riding pants. If he didn't know better, he'd think she'd staged this little show. "She'll eat you alive."

The man sighed. "It'd almost be worth it."

He finished his beer and arched an eyebrow at the man next to him, ready to admonish him for being a horny idiot. A flash of pale blue fabric and skin dragged his gaze back to the dance floor.

She was staring at him.

The minute he made the mistake of meeting her gaze, she smiled. Even, white teeth flashed at him. They barely deserved to be called fangs, though their daintiness didn't make her any less capable of sinking them into a man.

A shudder wracked him as he remembered how good it felt to have those teeth on his skin. *In*, he corrected silently. *In* his skin. Too damn good, and exactly why he'd left her.

He watched as she walked off the floor, disappearing into the crowd. He knew he should turn around. Leave. He should get the hell out of this club, out of Vegas—hell, out of the damn state of Nevada.

Instead he followed her, a man possessed. Obsessed. It should have been hard to track one scent in the jumble of bodies on the dance floor, but it wasn't just any scent. It was her. It was Ella.

He caught a glimpse of her when he reached the far side of the crowd. She waited for him, obviously posed for effect with her hands braced against the door. Her back formed a graceful arch down to her ass, which looked damn fine hugged by tight leather on display for him.

Anyone who didn't know better would think she'd struck a pose of submissive offering. Like everything else about her, though, her invitation was a trap. Oh, she'd bend over for him. She'd wiggle and moan and beg him to fuck her, and she'd feel so fucking good around his cock that he'd wonder if this time he just might die from it.

And even bent over a table, held immobile with his hand twisted in her hair, she'd own him.

She knew it, too. He saw it in the teasing glint in her eyes as she twisted her head back to look at him. Her tongue snuck out, swiped across her lower lip, and she blew him a kiss.

He took another step. She straightened and disappeared through the door, a smooth, old-fashioned piece of wood with a tiny black sign that read Employees Only.

He growled and followed. He had come to Las Vegas for a job. Falling off the wagon wasn't part of the plan. Now every instinct screamed that there *was* no

job, that Ella had lured him to the city, to the club, for reasons he'd yet to discover.

Self-serving reasons, no doubt. Nefarious ones. The knowledge irked him. He slapped his hand against the wood of the door with a dull thud. It popped back into the wall. "What the fuck is this all about, Ella?"

"Missed you, too, baby." She looked relaxed, leaning back against the wall. When he glared at her, she shifted her arms, holding them above her as she slid a few inches down the wall with a devastating smile and shimmied her way back up again. "Not even a little bump and grind for old times' sake?"

"Old times are old times for a reason." He ignored the heat that washed through him and settled in his stiffening cock. She was bound to mention it, anyway. "There's no bounty here, is there?"

"Oh, that's right..." She turned again, presenting her smooth back as she braced her hands against the wall. The leather pants fit her ass like someone had sewn her into them. She twisted her head and grinned at him. "You like to embrace your inner animal."

He moved. One hand slammed into the wall next to her head, and the other slipped tightly around her waist. He spoke low in her ear, his voice rife with frustration. "I'm not playing, Ella." He wanted to run his hand up under the halter that left the bottom curves of her full breasts exposed. He wanted to catch her nipples between his fingers, squeeze them until she cried out from the pleasure and the pain of it. He didn't. "I'm done with that, remember? Done with you." The words served a double purpose. *Remind her. Remind yourself.*

"I paid your damn fee." She rubbed back against him, grinding her ass against his cock in a blatant move. *Too blatant.* Ella was patient, could wait inches from the line for as long as it took him to lose control and cross it.

Which meant she was desperate for something. He sucked in a shocked breath and laughed in her ear. "I'm not a whore." If he'd ever held the upper hand with her before, he hadn't known it. It was a heady feeling, intoxicating, and it threw him into hard, full-fledged arousal with brutal efficiency. A woman like Ella, at his mercy. It tripped every dominant alpha kink hardwired in his

brain, all the ones she usually catered to so carefully. "What do you want? I might give it to you."

He knew he had her when she tried to slip away. "Fuck you."

Blake stilled her with another low, lusty growl. "You should know better than to run from a wolf, honey." His traitorous hand moved up over her ribs, his fingertips brushing the swell of one magnificent breast. "We chase."

She moaned for him, and that sounded real. She may have faked submission for him, but she'd never had to pretend desire. He could smell her arousal, hear it in her too-quick breaths, feel it in the hardness of her nipple. He gave in to temptation and pinched it, tightened his fingers until her rough, panting whimpers turned into a low keen.

There had been a time when he'd been able to play her body almost as skillfully as she could play his emotions. Maybe he hadn't forgotten *all* of the notes.

His cock ached so he stepped closer, trapping her against the wall with his hips close against hers. "Tell me what you want," he repeated as he shifted his hand to her other nipple, grazing the taut nub with his thumb. "Why you called me."

He could feel the tension in her body, the inner struggle. He had no doubt she was scrambling for a way to regain the upper hand, to put him back in his place. Her wolf, her trained pet.

Not so trained anymore.

He felt her surrender in the sudden passiveness of her body. Her head fell back against his shoulder, and she rubbed her ass against his cock again. "I'm in over my head. This guy I'm mixed up with... He's too powerful. I needed help. And you. Your power."

Your blood. She didn't have to say it to make his erection twitch in his jeans. He'd never met a vampire with a stronger ability to cloud the mind, to control it, than Ella. She could drain you dangerously dry and you'd beg her not to stop. God knew he had on more than one occasion, and the memories still assailed him sometimes. They woke him in the night, kept him thrusting into his own

clenched fist, thinking of his blood on her tongue.

He shook himself, cursed the hungry, unfocused look he knew he wore. "Only if you keep your fucking mind games out of it. I gave that shit up when I left you." It was a lie, but only a little one. None of the other vampires he'd fucked had been able to come close to the kind of explosive, blinding pleasure Ella could bring with a thought. With a bite.

"Fuck me first." The words held a world of pleasure, of promise. She twisted between him and the wall and raised her hands above her head again. This time, the blue silk slipped off one breast, revealing pale flesh and one dark nipple he knew would feel like heaven on his tongue. "I've been wet since I laid eyes on you. If I take blood now, I'll make us both come the second I taste you."

Blake trembled as he lowered his lips to hers, meaning to invade her mouth, to conquer with teeth and tongue. Somewhere between the thought and the action, the lines between his brain and his body crossed again, just like they always did when he touched Ella. As a result, he kissed her gently, with every bit of the need that had built in him over the last two years.

His hands slid into her hair as his tongue parted her lips and snagged on one of her fangs. He tasted blood just as she did, and she went rigid, shuddered. Her heart rate, normally sluggish, sped up almost to match his own, and he knew she hadn't been lying. Just that tiny bit of his blood, his essence, had nearly cost her the control she valued so much.

He wanted to howl.

He nearly ripped her pants in his haste to get them open and push them down enough to get his hand inside. He reached under expensive lace and found her hot and slick inside the leather. A whispered curse escaped him, hissing out against her lips as he stroked her pussy, fingers slipping easily over her wet folds.

She made the most delicious noises as he centered his touches on her clit. Tiny whimpers, muffled against his lips and lost in his mouth, and each one shot straight to his cock. He knew her noises, knew the fake ones and the artistic exaggeration and all of the ways she tried to play him.

And he knew the noises she made when she was about to come.

"Fuck." Blake reared back and lifted her, pinning her up against the wall with his hip under her leg. The change in position put her bared breasts within easy reach, and he rolled his tongue around the tip of one with a needy growl. When she gasped and arched, he caught her nipple in his mouth and sucked hard, then pulled his hand away.

"Blake!" It was a curse and a demand, rolled into one. Her fingers stabbed into his hair and curled around the strands. She tugged his lips back to hers and kissed him as she rocked against his thigh. "God, I missed this," she whispered against his lips, an admission that was too raw to be anything but real. "Why can't anyone else kiss like you?"

He dragged his mouth from hers. "Because no one else has loved you like I did." It wasn't an admonition or a confession, just a statement of fact.

He stepped away from the wall, bringing her with him, and looked around. A table sat against the wall by an ice machine, and Blake laughed low in his throat. "Damn leather pants. I can work around that."

"You always could work around damn near anything." She nuzzled his neck and dragged her tongue along his skin. Having her mouth there, teasing the pulse in his throat, was almost too much.

He dropped her on the table and straightened, staring down at her as he tugged on her pants. "If I put my mind to it." The leather slid down her supple thighs to tangle around her ankles, held there by the boots he hadn't removed. "Bend your—"

He looked up into her eyes and realized too late that he was back to asking, back to following her lead, so he pressed her knees down toward the table. He gave her time to resist, but she didn't. He knew she wouldn't.

Her breathing hitched again when he tore the silk underwear from her hip and pushed them aside, exposing her cunt. He swiped his thumb over her then licked away the wetness that slicked his skin. "Want to run yet?"

"Maybe..." She wiggled a little on the table, tested his grip, and laughed when he kept her pinned in place. "Depends. What's gonna get me fucked the

fastest?"

"Nothing." He leaned over and reached into the ice machine, pulled out a small piece of ice. Ella wanted fast because she wanted to get him off and get him gone. That wasn't part of his plans, so he touched the cube to her neck, her nipples. "I want to feel you come under my tongue," he told her before popping the cube in his mouth to melt.

A noise escaped her, something that could have been surprise or excitement or maybe just a hint of nervousness. He had the upper hand, and she knew it. Maybe hated it a little, but not as much as she hated the fact that she wanted everything he would do to her.

With the pants tangled around her ankles it was easy to hold her in place, to keep her from pushing her knees together. He had her trapped, on display, every glorious inch of her, and the thrill of triumph raced through him when she pushed her hips up a little in a silent plea.

Blake bent over her, his thumbs rubbing circles into the soft skin of her inner thighs, closer and closer to her cunt until he reached it and parted her. When he lowered his mouth and slipped his tongue inside, she bucked off the table with a hoarse curse. He grasped her hips and held them still.

God, he'd missed the taste of her, how she felt like silk on his tongue. He wanted to devour her, to make her scream his name. To make her forget everything but him and the way he could make her feel. Her flesh was hot under his ice-cooled mouth, and he fought for control. He wanted to climb up her body, to sink his cock into her. He'd fuck her until they were both crazy from it, and just when he'd pushed her to the edge, she'd bite into him, send him reeling—

No. He groaned and pushed what was left of the ice into her with the tip of his tongue. She tried to wiggle away, but he followed the ice with two fingers and flicked his tongue over her clit. He needed to make her come first, so she'd have enough control to drink from him without using her magic to cloud his mind. He didn't want it to feel good when she bit him; he wanted the pain. He needed it, because he'd all but forgotten why he'd ever left her in the first place.

His tongue dragged over her clit again, and this time she hissed his name

and thrust her fingers into his hair. He hadn't bothered to get it cut recently, and she wrapped the locks around her hand. She held his mouth against her body as if afraid he'd pull away, and the thought made him want to laugh.

He eased a third finger into her, stretching the tight channel the way she liked, filling her as he worked her with his tongue. Her legs trembled under him, and Blake knew she was close. In that moment, he'd never wanted anything as badly as he wanted her shuddering under him, her cunt convulsing on his hand.

He lifted his head and bit out a curse as he curled his fingers inside her, searching. "Fuck. Goddamn, Ella, come—"

"I can't—I haven't—" She sucked in a breath when he found her G-spot, her whole body going rigid. Her hips bucked up against his hand and every mask fell away. "Please, please, God, baby, help me—"

He growled and bit her thigh, thrusting his fingers harder. "*Come*," he commanded. "I won't tell you again."

The order pushed her over the edge, driving her hips up against his hand again as her cunt clenched around his fingers. She had always been quiet when she came, but she made up for it with her abandoned expression. He drank in the sight of her slack jaw and parted lips, the way she squeezed her eyes shut and arched her head back until the smooth column of her throat formed a vulnerable line he had to taste.

He eased his hand away and licked a path up her body as he pulled her upright. He closed his teeth on her neck, fighting the rush of possessive pleasure that flooded him. He was so hard it *hurt*, and he fumbled with his belt and jeans, needing to be inside her more than he needed his next breath. By the time she'd recovered enough to raise her head, he'd already freed his cock. "Now," he whispered hoarsely in her ear. "Now you're getting fucked."

He jerked her off the table and turned her in the same motion. Her skin felt flushed and damp, and she whimpered when he spread his hand over her lower back and slid it up, urging her down over the table. He tightened one hand on her hip and the other in her hair and plunged into her, biting back a cry at the way her body welcomed his, hot and eager and wet.

She gasped then groaned out a command. "Harder."

"No." Blake clenched his jaw and gentled his thrusts, slowing them until he barely moved at all. "Not this time, Ella. I'm in charge." His blood pounded through his veins, and he knew she could hear it. He wanted to lean forward, brace his arm next to her, invite her to bite into the veins he already knew would stand out in stark relief under his skin.

But that was madness. "You don't own me," he whispered, his voice raw. "Not anymore."

"Blake—" It was a tortured whisper this time, and she twisted her head to look over her shoulder at him, seeming unconcerned by the grip he had in her hair. Her dark eyes were almost black in the dim light of the hall. "Please. You're the only one who can get me off. *Please—*"

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against her hair. Getting off was what their relationship meant to her, what it had always been about. She found him entertaining and she could control him and he could make her come, and he would never mean more than that.

It was a hard lesson. One he thought he'd already learned.

He slipped both arms around her and gave her what she wanted, a single, deep thrust. "You never got it, Ella." He panted. He did it again, stronger this time, speeding his movements until he pounded into her. The world went white as his hips snapped against her ass, and Blake ran a frantic hand down her body to rub her clit. "It's more than this. More than sex."

She screamed this time, threw back her head and cried out his name as he drove her brutally over the edge. She came hard, and the clenching heat around his cock felt even better than he'd remembered. His shout echoed hers and he bit her again, muffling the desperate groans he couldn't hold back.

His control shattered, his balls tightening as pleasure pulsed and then exploded through him like a grenade. The world was perfect, only the two of them in it, and Ella shook under him, pressing back into his erratic thrusts until he stilled. When the haze of animal lust and satisfaction cleared from his head, he loosened his hands, realizing too late he'd left bruises on her. He never meant to

but he usually did, ugly marks that marred the creamy smoothness of her skin.

A familiar, sick feeling washed over him, driving away the euphoric warmth of afterglow. His cock slid out of her as he straightened. She didn't move, so he fixed his pants and then dragged her back up to sit on the table. "Look at me."

Her eyes drifted open. "Yeah?"

He steeled himself against the almost relaxed look on her face. Ella didn't relax, didn't let her guard down. She was untouchable. Stone.

It should have been harder for him to tilt his head, to expose his throat to her. "Drink."

"No." One slim hand pressed against his chest, pushed him back a step or two and forced him to remember her tiny body held a strength that matched his own. She slipped from the table and peeled the pants back up. "Not in the hallway. I have a room upstairs."

Panic surged in him for a split second before he tamped it down. He couldn't go to her room. He'd end up tangled in sheets that smelled like her hair. Tangled in *her*. "Fuck you, Ella. Do it here."

"No," she said again, and this time he could hear the edge under her voice. The fear. She struggled with the zipper of her pants for a moment, her usually deft fingers clumsy. "Please, Blake."

He'd never heard her say that word so many times in so short a time period. He gritted his teeth and nodded. "Fine. Fifteen minutes." With any luck, he could find a room, get some sleep, and head back home to New Mexico at first light.

Her relief was almost palpable as she led him around a corner to a service elevator. The metal doors were polished until they gleamed, giving him a clear reflection of her face as she slipped a slim card out of her back pocket and swiped it through a card reader above the panel. A green light flashed on, and she punched the top button, still silent as the elevator started a smooth, quiet ascent.

"Is this your place or something?" He stayed perfectly still behind her. "You

seem to know your way around."

"I own it," she admitted after a quiet pause. "I own a couple places in town, now."

"Good for you." The words held no rancor, no bitterness, and it surprised him. "Really."

"Except now I'm in a bit of trouble." The elevator made a soft *ding*, and the doors slid open, revealing an almost spartan apartment completely at odds with the lush decorations downstairs.

Ella stepped through the doors and then turned, holding out her hand in invitation. "Welcome to my evil lair."

Blake arched an eyebrow at her and ignored her proffered hand as he walked into the apartment. "Where do you want to do this?"

The doors whispered shut. Ella took a breath and stayed where she was, her gaze on him. "You don't even want to know why?"

"You said you were in trouble, and that you needed it." He half-sat on a nearby table and ignored her vulnerable expression and the way it made his chest ache. "Did you lie?"

"No." She leaned down and unzipped her boots, and the fall of her hair shielded her face from him. "I'm backed into a corner. I have to challenge the City Head."

The words were vintage Ella. He'd stayed with her long enough to understand that vampires played power games like no one else. Their immortality gave them the time and patience for social plots of Machiavellian proportions. The politics of humans seemed simplistic in comparison, and they found the shifters laughable. Animals.

He also knew that men still dominated the schemes. For all their superior posturing, vampires weren't all that different from the other races. Just another boys' club, one into which Ella had insinuated herself. She didn't play by the rules, no matter whose they were. She'd been challenging and defeating men long before he met her, and she'd be doing it long after he was gone.

The knowledge had once depressed him. Now, it only amused him.

"No one *has* to go looking for dominance, Ella," he noted blandly. "Leaders have to defend, but challengers have a choice."

She paused in the act of pulling off her second boot, lifting her head to study him. Then she snorted and rose to her feet again, leaving her expensive boots crumpled by the door. Without the added inches she seemed even smaller, a delicate looking woman who could bend steel. "I've always found it odd," she admitted, crossing the room in a graceful prow. "You know that the betas may challenge you. And yet you simply...wait. Wait for it to happen."

"What else am I supposed to do? Kill everyone who might pose a threat?" Blake scoffed. "I'll leave that to you vampires. It's no way to live, if you ask me." He studied her and tilted his head again, exposing the side of his neck. "This is cheating, you know. You deserve to be beaten."

She braced her hands on her hips, and the look she gave him could have flayed flesh from bone. "*I'm* cheating? At least I'm *asking* you." Her hand tangled in his shirt, yanked him down until his face was even with hers. "How do you think Raul has gotten so much power? He keeps people like you chained in his fucking basement for midnight snacks. And he's sent three assassins after me this month."

His heart thumped painfully. She was always her most beautiful when she was angry. "Doesn't make you any better. Just means you're both sorry bastards." He bared his neck again. "Now fucking *drink* so I can get the hell out of here."

Ella hooked her foot around the leg of one of her dining room chairs and yanked it out. A moment later, she threw him onto the chair, rocking it back on two legs. Then she jerked him forward with the grip she still had on his shirt. The fabric ripped with a sound that seemed to satisfy her.

"I like this shirt." He steeled himself against her anger, her excitement. God, he'd come again if she bit him the way she used to. The mere thought was enough to stir arousal, and he was way too damned old for that. "Remember. Stay out of my head."

She swung one leg over his lap, straddling his knees as she looked down at him. "You want it to hurt?"

"I want it to feel like someone's biting the hell out of my neck," Blake snapped. "I want it to feel like what it is."

"I'll try." Cool fingers brushed his hair away from his neck, and she settled onto his lap with a serious look on her face. "You're the Everclear of shapeshifters, lover. A girl can get drunk on your power if she's not careful."

Her touch made him shiver, and he arched up against her, already hard again. "I'm not your lover, Ella. I'm just some stupid bastard you fuck when it serves your purpose."

She curled her fingers in his hair and tugged his head back. "I wish that were true. More than you'll ever know." She didn't wait for a response, didn't give him a chance to make one. She breathed against his neck, hot and damp, then bit him.

The sharp sting bloomed into searing agony. He wanted to throw her off of him. He wanted to throw up. He just wrapped his hands around the bottom of the chair and held on, gritting his teeth.

Ella made a distressed noise against him and brought one hand up to gently stroke the side of his neck. He felt the brush of her tongue before she lifted her head. "Just a little," she whispered, pleaded. "I don't want to hurt you like this...."

He lifted his hand to his neck and grimaced when it came away streaked with blood. "It hurts worse the other way. It always has."

She pulled his hand away and lowered her mouth again, running her tongue over the wounds until the magic inside of her had healed the puncture marks.

Then she slipped from his lap and fled.

Blake watched her go, fury building inside him. She knew he'd chase her, was using his own instincts to manipulate him. She wouldn't stop until she got what she wanted—*him*, back in her thrall. Under her spell.

Fuck that shit.

He followed, slamming through the door and into her bedroom, his chest heaving. He grabbed her by the arms and hauled her up until they were nose-to

nose. "I should leave. You got yourself into this mess, put yourself on the City Head's radar by being so goddamned power hungry." He pressed his mouth to her ear. "And stop fucking playing me, Ella. It's no good anymore."

She snarled, a sound that was anything but human. "I hate you. You make me weak. I should have just done it, done what I wanted. I shouldn't *care*."

"Yeah, maybe you should have." He let go of her and scrubbed his hands over his face. "You have *no idea*, Ella. No idea how long it took me to get the taste of you out of my mouth. There were times I couldn't *come* unless someone was biting me, unless I was pretending—" He bit off the words with another curse. "And here you are, wanting me right back in that hole, just because you can't stand to watch me hurt. Well, guess what? If you ever stuck around, you'd see me hurt plenty."

"Oh, you couldn't come unless you pretended?" Her hand struck his chest, driving him back against the door. "Well I couldn't come at all. Before you, the last guy who could get me off with any consistency fought in the Revolutionary War."

He should have known she'd think reliable orgasms were the point. "That's not me, Ella. That's your obsessive need for control." He framed her face with his hands and stared down at her. "You destroyed me once, and you're about to do it again."

Blake slid his hands down to the back of her neck and unfastened her silk halter. It fell to her waist, and he cupped her breasts, his eyes fixed on hers, and whispered, "Why is the power so important? Why is it more important than me?" The question and its possible answers haunted him. He had to know.

"Because I'd lose you eventually." Her head fell back, and her eyes drifted shut, leaving him staring at the way her long eyelashes stood out so starkly against her pale skin. "You would keep me safe for a decade or two, but I'd be weaker when you were gone. Maybe too weak to protect myself."

"I won't live forever," he agreed. He closed his own eyes and nuzzled her face, then sighed. "Tonight, Ella. Then no more. I—I can't do it. I can't live like this."

"Tonight." Her fingers rose to his shirt. She tugged open the first two before slipping her fingers underneath the fabric and touching his chest. "If this is the last time, I want everything."

He kissed her as they undressed each other. It took forever, both of them bumbling over buttons and zippers, but it didn't matter. His mouth moved over hers, gentle and caressing. Loving.

Blake was panting by the time he picked her up and laid her across the end of her bed. He lowered his mouth to her stomach and traced his tongue around her navel. "What do you want?"

Her hand fell to his forehead and brushed his hair back. "Remember San Diego?"

"The part where I tied you up, or all the stuff I did after that?"

Ella twisted onto her stomach and rose to her knees, giving him a torturous view of her ass as she crawled up the mattress. A sturdy, plain-looking dresser sat next to the bed, and she dragged open the middle drawer before sliding back onto the pillows. "Anything you want." She smiled slowly, flashing those tiny fangs at him. "Anywhere you want."

He snagged her halter from the floor before following her to peer into the drawer. "Christ, Ella. What do you *not* have in here?" He pulled out a thick piece of metal shaped vaguely like a cock. He twisted it and it began to vibrate. "We didn't have one of these in San Diego. It's nice."

She just twirled a lock of hair around her finger. Her expression fell far short of innocent. "I don't know how I survived almost four hundred years without the internet."

He dragged her hands up to the headboard and wrapped the ice blue silk around her wrists, binding them. He knelt over one of her legs and flashed her a wicked grin. "I imagine you got creative with whatever you had on hand."

"And now you're going to do the same?"

He murmured his assent and warmed the metal, then touched it to her inner thigh. "The only question now is what to put where." He leaned over her and licked her nipple lightly as he slid the vibrator up, letting it flutter against

her clit.

The reaction he got was even better than he'd hoped for. She spread her legs and thrust her hips up, her breath escaping as a hissed curse. The scent of her arousal filled the room, making it hard to concentrate on anything other than how much he loved having her stretched out and at his mercy.

He twirled his tongue around the stiff peak of her breast and then bit her. "Remember the safe word?"

"Y-yes..."

Her taste fascinated him. He relished the way she shifted and arched under him, straining for the pleasure he held back. She didn't give up control easily, and he knew what it meant for her to do it now, with him. If things were different....

He licked the sharp ridge of her ribs beneath her skin and sat up, watching the polished metal of the vibrator slowly disappear between the smooth pink lips of her cunt. Ella jerked again and this time Blake cursed, struggling for control. "How bad do you want it?"

"Bad." She was writhing a little, trying to work it deeper. The headboard creaked as she arched a little, and she swore and squeezed her eyes shut. "That is three hundred dollar designer silk. If I rip it, I'm going to—"

He pushed the vibrator deeper, cutting off her words. "You're going to think it was worth every penny." She whimpered, and he slid the metal out of her entirely. "Aren't you?"

"Blake!" Her feet scrambled for purchase, and she thrust her hips upwards in a pleading gesture. "You want me to beg?"

He knew the look he flashed her was one of pure, unadulterated lust. "You already *have* been begging, Ella. Just not with words." He almost thrust the vibrator back in then trailed it down to her ass instead. "In your case, it's always more honest when you're not talking, isn't it?"

"You're the only one it's honest with..." She was panting a little, excitement bringing an unusual flush to her normally pale skin. Her tongue darted out, wet her lower lip as she moaned softly. "You're the one who can fuck me anywhere

and make me beg for more."

He reached back into the drawer for the small, stylish bottle he'd seen before. "You can't get this stuff at the corner drugstore." She tried to twist away when he flipped open the cap and trickled the lube over her skin, but he held her still. "Cold?"

Ella bared her teeth at him in a snarl, but there was nothing reticent about the way she rocked into his hand. She wanted it, always, wanted him and anything he could dream up. Every second he made her wait drove her closer to the edge of sanity.

His fingers slipped as he spread the lube on her skin, massaging gently. "Remember that phone booth in London?" The blunt tip of the vibrator prodded her ass then began to slide inside.

She didn't answer. Her body tensed, her eyes snapping open, and she stared at him, wild-eyed and panting, as he worked the slick metal slowly deeper. He could remember all too easily how good it felt to fuck her like this, how hot and tight she'd be, how much she'd squirm and whimper as he eased his cock into her ass.

But if he did it now, it would be over too soon.

Hell, he wasn't sure that was a bad thing. He should have already been gone. He should have told her to go fuck herself. To go find another fix. Now, when he went home, he'd be right back where he started. The physical need, the withdrawal, would be negligible. But, God, it would take him forever to heal his heart.

Ella twisted and begged, and he almost climbed off the bed and walked out. *Goddammit, I should. I should save myself.*

Instead, he eased the metal rod out of her and dropped it to the floor. Her eyes were wide and drunk in the sight of him as he moved up over her and positioned his cock at her entrance. "I should leave now," he whispered, then buried himself in her pussy.

She was tight and wet and already clenching around his cock, so close to orgasm that he knew he could push her over the edge the second he wanted to.

Instead, he let her beg. She filled the room with hoarse cries, begging him to fuck her harder, faster. Begging him to let her come. He wanted to, wanted to pound into her until the sheer pleasure of release washed through him, obliterating everything but the clutch of her body, the smell of her skin. But he held back, sliding his arms under her shoulders and slowing his thrusts until he barely moved.

Blake had always liked taking it slow. He liked the easy buildup that took forever, the leisurely climb to orgasms so intense you thought you might implode when they came. Not Ella. She liked it quick, hot, and dirty.

Not this time.

He closed his teeth on a sensitive spot at the base of her neck and sucked lightly. Her breathing hitched, a low moan tickling his ears. "Blake—baby—"

His hair fell forward and tickled them both as he thrust hard, just once, his skin slapping against hers. "No good?"

She cried out, her voice filling the room. Her lips sought his, found his cheek instead, and he felt her harsh breaths against his skin. "Too good," she whispered. "You make me—make me crazy—"

He lifted his head and looked down into her eyes. He lifted a hand and brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. "Bite me, Ella." He knew he sounded needy, lost. "Make us both come."

Ella's hands were in his hair before he registered the sound of tearing fabric. The remains of her expensive blue halter hung from one wrist, the silk tickling his back as she fisted her hands around the long strands of his hair and tilted his head back.

Pleasure exploded through him with the first touch of her mouth, so violent and overwhelming that he barely noticed the prick of her teeth. His entire body throbbed, and he gave himself over to the ecstasy of her bite. It was total bliss, so profound and complete he couldn't even tell when he actually came. All he could do was cling to her, thrusting wildly.

And it didn't stop. At some point she rolled them over, and he was vaguely aware of the expensive silk beneath his back. She bathed them both in pleasure

The 13th Step

that went on until the edges of the world grew blurry and he wondered if this would be the time when she took too much, when she drained his body as dry as his heart.

He felt so light-headed when she pulled back that her tongue against his neck was a faint tickle that felt like a dream. He felt her lips against his ear, felt her breath as she spoke. "Thank you, Blake. For everything."

He had to summon every bit of his will to speak. "Tangerine," he whispered. Their safe word, to let her know before he slipped into oblivion. *No more. It has to stop.*

She sighed, a tiny, sad sound. "I am so sorry," she whispered, a faint hint of an accent coloring the formal-sounding words. "I wish you well in all you do."

This was the real Ella, the one he rarely got to see. He knew what it meant. She understood. No more. He wanted to echo her words, but the room spun and darkness clawed at him.

She would be gone when he woke up. He would dress, and he would leave, and he wouldn't look back.

Carnal Powers Series

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Sex has always been awkward for Kiara, mostly thanks to a strong empathic gift that men seem to find far more interesting than the woman who possesses it. Tired of men who assume a psychically shared orgasm is the end of their responsibility, she's spent the last few years concentrating on her job. But when her latest patient brings her face to face with a shapeshifter private investigator with sexual energy to spare, she can't resist the temptation to offer him what she senses he wants: her absolute surrender.

The last thing Adrian needs is a distraction. His latest case has taken a turn for the fatal, and the pretty psychic nurse is looking like she might be the next victim. But no alpha could resist her trusting submission, and what starts as a passionate one night stand turns into something far too deep. When it turns out the only way to keep her safe may be to declare himself the leader of Mystic Valley's shapeshifting wolves, he'll have to decide if he's ready to accept one responsibility he never wanted—even if it means losing her forever.

Read the First Chapter of Last Hope

Kiara Avery sighed and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear as she climbed out of the ambulance. “Jesus, look at the door.” Bloody handprints marred the beige surface as well as the handle. Someone had obviously scrambled to get inside, probably to call for help.

“Freakin’ bloodbath, Avery.” Bobby Sanchez jumped down from the driver’s seat and jerked his head toward the edge of the brick building and the row of hedges rounding it. Pools and smears of blood covered the concrete walk and disappeared into the grass. The moon hung, round and high, in the sky, and Kiara could just make out a pair of jeans-clad legs behind the shrubs.

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, and she shivered in the chilly night air. “I hate ride-alongs,” she whispered, then hefted her emergency bag. “Let’s get a move on.”

The scene was worse than she’d expected. The legs were connected to what had probably been a large man, but most of him was covered by a blanket. *Most* of him. Someone -- or something -- had torn him apart with terrifying ferocity. Sanchez had to step around a hand that lay a few feet from the rest of the arm, and Kiara followed him as he strode toward the small huddle of cops clustered several yards from the body.

A girl huddled on the ground next to them, a rough blanket wrapped around her body. Judging from the torn clothing scattering the ground, she was naked.

She didn’t look dangerous. She looked *young*, with a sweet, round face and dazed blue eyes. The harsh streetlight next to the building washed out the color of her hair, but Kiara could see streaks of blood in it, darkening the light auburn strands. She didn’t look capable of the carnage they’d seen, but it was clear from the nervous way the cops watched her that no one was entirely sure if she was a victim or a suspect.

Kiara ignored the men and knelt on the grass, stripping off her glove. She laid a bare hand on the girl’s cheek, and waves of fear and rage tingled through her, followed by a sense of shock that left her numb. She had to will her tongue to move as she glanced at the men beside her.

“How long ago was she attacked?”

One of the officers shook his head. “The call came in just after eight, but we still don’t know what happened.”

Kiara did. The stunned terror radiating from the young woman was something she’d felt before, from countless victims of violent crime. “He tried to hurt her,” she said flatly. “She fought back.”

Another cop, a burly man with wavy blond hair, snorted. “Yeah, looks like self-defense to me. Guy’s in about fifteen pieces.”

Kiara looked up at him. Her defenses were down, and his emotions rushed in, filling her with revulsion. He was disgusted, full of hate. Scared. “She fought back, Officer Douglas,” she said again. “The only way she knew how.”

He stared at her for a second, then turned away with a sneer. “Fucking freaks.”

Sanchez stepped up to the man, his anger scraping at her already raw nerves. “What did you say?”

“Bobby.” She shot him a quelling look. “What do the witnesses say happened?” When her question was met with silence, she glanced back up. “There *were* witnesses, right?”

The officers remained silent, which was answer enough. If there hadn’t been, the girl would be in handcuffs already.

Kiara took a deep breath and turned to Sanchez. “Can you get the backboard and gurney? We have to take her in.”

The first officer made a noise of protest as her partner jogged toward the ambulance. “We still have to get a statement.”

“Get it at the hospital.” She ignored the cop’s stuttered protest and concentrated on checking the girl’s vital signs.

The girl finally moved, her gaze fixing on Kiara. She shuddered and tightened the blanket around her shoulders, pulling away from Kiara's hands. "I don't need to go to the hospital. I'm fine. And my boyfriend will be here in a few minutes."

Kiara pulled the stethoscope from her ears. "You've been through a bad time. You should let us take you in, get yourself checked out."

"I need a shower." Her ragged voice dropped to a whisper, so soft Kiara could barely hear it. "I smell like him."

"I know." She laid her hand on the girl's face again, concentrating on calming her. "My name is Kiara. What's yours?"

Her empathy did the trick, soothing the prickles of energy inside the girl. She closed her large, shocked-looking eyes. When she opened them again, her gaze was much calmer. "Claire. My name is Claire."

"Claire." Kiara smiled as Sanchez came back with the board. "Are you *sure* we can't talk you into going to the hospital? You could be hurt and not even feel it because of the adrenaline and shock."

Claire's head jerked around, her gaze fixed on some point past Sanchez in the direction of the parking lot. Relief flowed out of her so strongly Kiara was surprised everyone couldn't feel it. "I need to talk to my boyfriend first. It would be bad if he came here and found my blood but couldn't find me."

Kiara glanced back and saw a brown-haired man spring off a motorcycle and hurry toward them. He didn't slow until he reached them, his worn boots slipping a little on the slick grass. "Claire? Baby..." His nostrils flared as he scooped her into his arms. "Where is he?"

Officer Douglas scowled at them. "You're standing on part of him."

The man snarled at the cop, who immediately backed off. "He's lucky you didn't leave him for me, baby," he whispered, stroking his

thumb over Claire's jaw. "Did he hurt you?"

"This doctor thinks I should go to the hospital." As Kiara watched, Claire's eyes drifted shut. "Her name is...is..."

"I'm a nurse," she corrected gently, holding out a hand. "Kiara."

He shook it briefly. "Lars. Does she really need to go?"

"Yes, she really does. Can you convince her?"

He pulled the girl closer. "She'll go. Can I come with her?"

Kiara found herself choked by another rolling wave of emotion, so Sanchez answered. "You can ride in the back. Come on." He hoisted the board under his arm and helped Kiara to her feet. "Can you carry her?"

Lars was already rising to his feet, his girlfriend cradled in his arms. "I've got her."

Claire tucked her face against his neck. "You are such a bossy ass."

Sanchez shot Kiara a grin. "I think she'll be all right, Avery."

She half smiled as she tugged open the doors at the back of the ambulance. "You're probably right." She hopped in and beckoned to Lars. "Bring her on in, and we'll get going."

He did, and she soothed Claire again as they laid her out on the collapsible gurney. "You're going to be fine," she whispered, letting her certainty flow over to the younger woman. "Fine."

The tense set of Claire's shoulders eased a little, but she clutched her boyfriend's hand tightly. "They think it was my fault. Am I going to be arrested?"

"It wasn't your fault, Claire. No one is arresting you."

"Hell, no," Sanchez chimed in from the driver's seat. "They have witnesses who saw the guy attack you. He got what was coming to him."

"I didn't mean to kill him." She squeezed her eyes shut and made a low noise. "I think he was one of them. One of the guys who's been on the news. He said the freaks were going to get what they deserved. And he knocked me into the wall, and I just lost it."

"Shh." She knew exactly who Claire meant. Anyone who had turned on a television in the past month had seen the videos and letters played endlessly on the news, videos promising a bright future for humans free from the monsters. *Humanity's Last Hope*. Kiara fought to control her shudder. "I know you only wanted to stop him."

"Did I?" The low, menacing tone of Claire's voice was echoed by the sudden shift in the emotions in the back of the vehicle. "Maybe. Except I want to stop his friends too. I could smell them on him. I could find them..."

Lars's hand tightened around hers. "Don't worry about that right now." The look on his face was easy to read. *Leave that up to me.*

Claire snarled her displeasure, and the emotions in the back of the ambulance ratcheted up another notch. "I will kick your ass if you try to stop me."

Kiara had to stifle a growl as the two shifters fought a silent war for dominance. She attempted to distract Claire as she started an IV. "What breed are you? I had a roommate in college who was a jaguar."

"I'm a coyote." Claire's gaze was still locked with Lars's, but her voice had gone from angry to oddly warm. "He's a territorial jackass."

Kiara smiled. "But you love him anyway, right?"

It was Lars who answered. "Damn right." He kept his fingers wrapped around Claire's even as he watched Kiara closely. "Don't hurt her. She's been hurt enough."

"I'm already done." She reached for the piece of medical tape she'd

already torn off the roll and smoothed it down over the port, securing it. “No sweat.”

“No sweat,” Claire echoed, finally meeting Kiara’s eyes. “You’re not going to medicate me, are you? I don’t want to be out of it.”

She shook her head. “IV access is standard for emergent cases. We might have to give you fluids or medications in the ER. But I see no reason for you to be sedated.”

“Good.” Claire closed her eyes. “Are the police...? Are they going to come to the hospital to talk to me?”

Kiara bit her lip. “Yes.”

“You’re sure there were witnesses?”

“I’m positive.”

“Okay. Okay.” For the first time since they’d gotten Claire into the ambulance, the heavy press of emotions eased. A few seconds later, Claire’s fingers closed around Kiara’s wrist, her grip surprisingly strong. “Watch out for the blond cop. He was talking about you when he knew you couldn’t hear anymore. He reeked of fear. Fear and hate.”

She swallowed. “I know.” It wasn’t just Douglas. She’d tasted the jagged tang of the other officers’ emotions, as well. Mostly, they’d been scared and disgusted by the carnage. But she’d felt an undercurrent of loathing too. “Some of them hate people like us.”

Lars studied her, his gaze sharp. “Us?”

“Empath.” She reached for several packages of gauze and focused her attention on Claire’s scrapes. She winced a little but sat mostly still as Kiara carefully examined her split lip and the cut on her arm.

Kiara worked quickly, answering the occasional question from Sanchez as he radioed in to the emergency department. Claire made the

fourth victim of the HLH she'd seen in the past three weeks, either in the ER or during her paramedic ride-alongs. Perhaps it would all stop now that one of the attackers had been killed. Maybe...

She shook herself and tamped down the fear that welled inside her. If anything, the hate group responsible would retaliate, wanting vengeance. Up until now, the police department's priorities hadn't seemed to include stopping them. Why would that change?

Kiara glanced at the blood she'd tracked into the ambulance. It covered the soles of her shoes and had soaked into her pants where she'd knelt in the grass next to Claire. It reminded her that more than assault had happened tonight. Someone had died.

Why, indeed?

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Author Bio

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. Toss in a dash of whimsy and a lot of caffeine, and enjoy with a side of chocolate by the light of the full moon.

By day, Bree and Donna are mild-mannered ladies who reside in the Deep South. At night, when their husbands and children are asleep, they combine forces to unleash the product of their fevered imaginations upon the page. To learn more about this romance writing, crime fighting duo, visit their webpage at <http://www.moirarogers.com>. (Disclaimer: crime fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)