



SANDRA SOOKOO

UNRAVELED
SOULS

Unraveled Souls

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Blurb

Noelle Radliffe can communicate with ghosts. They haunt her nights and show her dreams of things that haven't yet occurred. When she has a vision of a dead lion and sees the name of a man, she searches the city to find him only to become sidetracked by an addiction she can't fight.

Enter Nicholas Pemberton. Although charming and charismatic, he hides a secret, one that is deadly as well as mysterious. He's a shape shifter and the urge to change into a lion is a battle he constantly wages with himself, second to the recently discovered obsession he feels for Noelle.

As the two fight their mutual attraction to each other, Nicholas attempts to elude the local police force intent on linking recent murders to his name, while Noelle continues to seek peace in her life and to understand her purpose. Their connection is too strong to ignore. As passion ignites, so does the danger. Lives are threatened and destinies collide, but will love be enough to save their souls?

Dedication

To my editor, Victoria. Thanks for believing.

Chapter One

Blood everywhere.

The abstract splatter from the violent spray dotted the rose-patterned paper of an unfamiliar drawing room, blending a macabre design with the sedate ordinary. A thick pool of ruby liquid collected under the body of a blond-haired man, a dagger buried to the hilt in his chest, the inlaid jewels on the handle winked in the soft candlelight.

Dead.

Noelle Radliffe woke up, gasping for breath, as sweat drenched her body and molded her white cotton nightgown to her chest. Another dream, another death. She pushed the mop of brown curls out of her face and swung her legs over the side of the bed as her heart pounded. Not for the first time did she wonder why the visions came to her. Every night there was a new scene and a new body. When would it end?

At least she didn't see a ghost, which is what usually followed such a dream. To make sure, she cast a wary glance around her darkened bedroom. Nothing but shadow-drenched furniture met her gaze. Relief chilled her skin as adrenaline spiked through her veins.

As her breathing returned to normal, she left her bed to pad across the room, grabbing a lace-trimmed robe of deep purple silk. Coolness seeped into her bare feet from the polished wooden floor. Even for early May, it seemed spring couldn't quite gain a foothold and shake off the cloying mantle of winter. She threw open the heavy drapes of gold brocade, yanked apart the lace panels, and opened the French doors that led to a tiny patio.

In times of extreme stress, she always sought solace from the garden she lovingly planted each year. Too early in the season for anything but crocuses and the occasional daffodil to survive, it was only a matter of time before she would be able to manipulate the rich soil and create a living work of art. But for now, the darkened patch of green space imparted the necessary calm she needed to continue to live another day, put the horrors of the night behind her. Wrapping the robe about her body, she cinched the sash tight at her waist. A slight sound, no more than a pebble being disturbed against the cobblestone bricks, alerted her to another presence in the garden.

"Elle, are you sick? The sun will not rise for an hour yet. Go to bed."

Noelle smiled, and turned to gaze at her cousin, Kitty. "Unfortunately, my body is in the top of health. It is my mind that refuses to conform to normalcy."

Two years ago, Kitty had moved into the bungalow with Noelle out of concern that stemmed from the death dreams—and Noelle's penchant for talking to ghosts. The girls had concluded that the talent toward sensitivity for paranormal sympathies stemmed from the Radliffe curse, and vowed to never let anyone, especially the scientific community, know. Thus the need to room together, for accountability if nothing else. If no one ascertained her secret then they could not persecute her in the interest of academic superiority.

"I am not ill, but you already know this."

"I do indeed know."

"Why do you persist on gliding about the house as if you were a ghost as well? This

residence is already over capacity in that regard."

"I sensed your distress. Remember when I used to feel what you felt when we were children?" Kitty held a black woolen shawl about her chest. A frown marred her pink rosebud mouth and brought the heavy splash of freckles on her cheeks into sharp relief as she stepped into a patch of moonlight. "I assume a dream brought you to your thinking place?"

"Yes." The sight of Kitty's auburn hair, bound in two thick braids over her shoulders, struck Noelle as amusing. She resembled more of a schoolgirl from the newly opened Holy Cross Catholic School down the street than a woman of twenty-four. She'd almost always worn her hair thus as a child. Some things managed to stay the same, no matter the progress in the world or how far a person travelled. "And more troubling is the fact I have dreamed of this man twice now. Both times he has met with a violent end."

"And once more will herald his death in real life." Kitty shivered and ran her hands up and down her arms. "What will you do?"

"The same thing I have always done." Noelle bent to touch a fingertip to a silky, soft petal of a white crocus. "Be aware of the implication and wait to see if I have a third dream. To do anything else at this point would be premature."

"Perhaps." Kitty worried her bottom lip with smallish teeth. "Did you recognize the man in the dream? Is he handsome? Perhaps you dream of him because he is your future husband."

"I never thought I would see the day when you would fall for silly superstitions such as that. I take the dreams seriously. Old wives tales do not carry the dire implications that my visions do."

"Flying off the handle is not like you, cousin. It is not silly, and many facts lie buried in superstitions. You have told me so often enough." Kitty snickered. "Are you afraid you might indeed dream of a future husband?"

"I will overlook your insult and take it in the spirit of helpfulness you intended." Her cheeks burned at the implication. "I do not look at many physical features. The cause of death is what holds my attention in the dream."

"I'll bet he's handsome." Kitty continued as if Noelle hadn't offered a sharp retort. "Besides, does not the same hold true if you dream something other than death three times it will come true?"

Noelle sighed, glanced at her cousin in some consternation. "I could not say. The only dreams that ever repeat for me are of the gruesome variety."

"Then you must concentrate on the handsome man."

"I did not clearly see his face." She frowned. "Why keep harping on the fact?"

"Then you *do* know him?"

"I'm not sure." Noelle straightened and wrapped her arms around her mid-section. "I have never been able to see his face clearly but there is always a jumble of items around the scene. Books, paperweights, pages filled with heavy black handwriting. He might be a scholar for all I know."

"You do not wish to seek him out because of his supposed profession?"

The shrill call of an early morning bird caused her to jump and her heart to pound, whether from fright or disjointed reminders of the dream, she could not say. "There is no need to seek him out until necessity demands it. I would appear a fool otherwise." Her laugh was little more than a string of varied-pitched notes of bitterness. "My reputation is

already ragged enough, do you agree?"

"Not quite. You have just cause to be alarmed. Institutions are not the most pleasant of places to live out your days."

"In that case, you must remember your promise to kill me if that event occurs." Tired of conducting the conversation in the chilly garden, Noelle moved into her bedroom. "I would prefer it if you would use belladonna-laced tea, but I will leave the option to you."

Kitty emitted an unladylike snort. "You desire a death by sleeping when it is that very restorative act which bothers you so much?"

"Yes. The apothecary assures me it is not at all messy and will not hurt."

"And you believe everything old Mr. Dramas tells you?"

"Not everything. I have a brain and know the difference between truth and wives' tales." Her mind conjured an image of the pharmacist she studied under. Short and stooped, the little man retained little of the hair on his head but much of a heavy Italian accent. "But, I think Francine would be put out if she came here to clean up bloodstains." The thought of their outspoken housekeeper scrubbing a stubborn red stain made Noelle smile. She collapsed on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Perhaps death is not enough of a deterrent to my ghostly friends. I daresay they would continue to drop in for visits in the afterlife."

"Doomed to be haunted." Kitty sank into a wingback chair near the head of the bed. "Instead of hiding your special talent, let the scientific world help. What if one of the men you fear could help you? They may not banish your sensitivities altogether but they could aid you to accept your gift or at the very least live in some compatibility with it."

"Do I have a choice?" Noelle threw the bedclothes over her face. "Whether professional people know about my problem or not, at the end of the day, I am the one who must live in this world." The covers were yanked off and she stared into the concerned face of her cousin. "Was there something else?"

"No." Kitty patted Noelle's cheek. "Try to sleep, Elle. Maybe you will see things differently once the sun comes up."

"I rather doubt it." She watched Kitty's upside down image as the woman left the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind her. "Nothing will ever be different."

* * * *

The scene shimmered then slowly came into focus from a white blur. The same library-type room as before, but the occupants had changed this time. Books littered the floor, upended, pages fanned out, spines cracked, some torn or even shredded. A fountain pen lay broken on the Oriental carpet, its ink spilling a dark stain into the fibers to create its own pattern. She squinted in order to read the entry on one of the jagged papers. A journal of sorts, heavy black script covered the page.

"May 3rd, 1900, Volume 5, Series 14 regarding the life and experimentations of Nicholas Pemberton. Today has been the most dangerous of all the rest combined. I—" No other words were legible due to dark stains and a severe tear.

Frustrated, Noelle's gaze swept the room. In the middle lay a lion, slumped in a heap. The brown tip of his tail resembled an artist's paintbrush while the yellow-tan fur of his flanks was marred with scarlet streaks.

Blood again.

Upon further inspection, she could see droplets scattered around the perimeter of the

room to culminate in a large, congealed puddle beneath the lion's breast. Most startling of all was the same jeweled dagger that lay nearby, its red-stained blade gleamed like demon's eyes in the dim light.

Death.

The metallic scent of it clogged her nostrils, lay so thick on the air she could taste it on the back of her throat. Noelle attempted to push the vision away, flailed her arms, and pumped her legs trying to run. Whether by accident or design, she tumbled to the floor. The wood jarred hard into her right shoulder.

"Umph."

Startled, she levered herself into a sitting position, confused for a moment as to why she was on the floor.

The dream.

She absently rubbed her shoulder, glad for the heavy drapes at the window, which blocked out the morning sun. Already, it peeked insidiously through the tiny space between the panels to shoot a bright ray across the floor and over her legs. She moved her hand into the beam and smiled when it warmed her palm. At least the night was over. Now she would not be compelled to sleep, which meant no more dreams.

And that meant several hours of peace.

Hopefully.

What significance did the lion play in the dream, and why had the same dagger been used at both murders? Did it matter, or was it merely a coincidence brought on by convoluted dreaming? Knowing the result would be the same regardless of the why, Noelle pushed herself off the floor, wondering anew what sort of anguish her soul experienced during the dream to shove her from the bed. If the visions became worse, she would have no choice but to seek professional counseling.

And she vowed to avoid that eventuality at all costs.

Noelle shoved her arms through her robe and left her room to pad down the short hall. The craving for strong tea brought her into a smallish kitchen where her cousin sat serenely at a round oak table, just like every other day in her life since Kitty came to live in the house. Familiarity brought the return of her confidence and chased away the last of the gloom that clung to the remembered snatch of dream.

"Good morning, Kitty." She pattered about the cupboards, filled the blue ceramic mug that had a chip in the handle with the tea her cousin had already heated. Noelle slipped into the chair across from Kitty. "I dreamt of the same house again."

Interest lit Kitty's mossy green eyes. "The third time."

"No." Noelle shook her head. "I did not see the man anywhere, only a lion, dead by the same dagger that killed the man." She took a restorative sip of tea and smiled when the liquid warmed her throat. "Do you find that odd?"

"Compared to what? The previous vision or the tame dreams of Sister Agnes Catherine?" Kitty giggled. "Have you ever been curious what she dreams of?"

"No, on both counts." Noelle's lips lifted with a grin. "Do not, under any circumstance, tell Sister Agnes about my current ... difficulties. I am sure she will feel compelled to haul me before Father Simpkins so he can cast the Devil from my mind." She met Kitty's laughing gaze. "Again."

Both girls dissolved into peals of laughter then Noelle sobered. "I saw a name."

"A name? That never happens." Kitty's mug hit the table with a thump. She quickly

mopped the amber-hued spill with a linen napkin. "Do you remember what it was?"

"Yes, and there was a date. May third."

"But that was only yesterday."

"I am aware of the fact, but I cannot help what my visions reveal. Should I attempt to locate this man? And if I do find him, what will I say to him?"

"You do need to seek him out. Do not mention your visions, death, or ghosts until you are certain he is a stable, trustworthy individual."

"How will I determine these traits if I don't know where to find him?" She sighed.

"His name is Nicholas Pemberton. Is it a name you recognize?" She watched her cousin closely. Kitty knew a vast number of people from various social circles to which Noelle did not pay attention. "Well?"

"He sounds vaguely familiar, like a tickle in the back of my mind."

Noelle sighed. "Please think upon it." She traced the pad of one finger around the rim of her teacup. "Death is not exactly the easiest of conversation starters."

"I've got it!" Kitty left her chair, mumbling to herself as she headed down the hall. Before Noelle had time to form another question, she returned, a slight grin on her face and a battered and creased calling card in her hand.

"Will you tell me of your epiphany or shall I guess?" She sipped her tea as her mind spun. "He could be anywhere."

Kitty dropped into her chair. "He could indeed, but I happen to know his exact location. I frequented his shop only a month ago for new ribbons." She slid the card across the table. "Fate is on your side this morning."

"Which is a refreshing change of pace, do you agree?" A frown pulled at her lips as she read the blocked type. *Nicholas Pemberton. Textiles and Notions. From cotton to silk, if you desire it, I will procure it.* "I suddenly feel the urge to take lunch in the city. Would you be inclined to join me?"

Chapter Two

Acrid, black smoke hung thick in the air of the laboratory. Coughing, and with streaming eyes, Nicholas moved to the side of the half-sunken basement room situated below his mercantile and wrenched open the two small windows. He resisted the urge to stick his head out into the freshness of the afternoon, partially because it would be bad form to be seen thusly to the passers-by on the street above and partially because he tried the stunt before which resulted in his head becoming stuck between the glass and the casement.

"Am I to assume the smoke signifies yet another failure?" He removed a handkerchief from the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket and wiped at his face.

His brother, Samuel, raked a hand through a shaggy mass of sandy-blond waves to leave them in a disheveled heap. "Actually, in the words of Thomas Edison, I would rather like to think I have found simply another way the experiment will not work."

Nicholas hid a grin behind his handkerchief. His brother, Samuel, would believe the gesture as amusement and a dismissal of his recent attempt when just the opposite applied. "Leave off with the lab for awhile. We will take lunch at the Carlisle then perhaps pay Daniel a visit."

"Why? So Daniel, the only mentor who has remained by my side in recent days, can laugh at me? No thank you, but I will accompany you to lunch. I cannot recall when I ate last."

"You need an assistant." Nicholas left the window when the air started to clear. His brother, while seemingly absent minded, was considered an up-and-coming genius in his own right. He wouldn't be surprised if Sam invented a device or medicine that changed the world in his lifetime.

"That is what Daniel's supposed to be." Samuel's eyes flashed brown fire. "But no, once again I fell to another's superiority in the fields of science and astronomy." He scrubbed a soot-darkened hand over the blond stubble on his chin, leaving behind black streaks. "He is now considered a front runner for a highly coveted position on the board of science of Indiana Central University when it opens in two years. That honor should have been mine. He should have been working for me, not the other way around."

"Then grow a backbone and put him in his place. Fight for that job. Bring in some of your inventions so the board members can see them in person." Nicholas threw his handkerchief to Samuel and studied his brother.

At twenty-seven, Sam wore a perpetual air of meek and mild on his slight shoulders. To the outward observer, he could appear passive or almost sickly. Nicholas knew the quiet strength that lurked beneath the cultivated facade. His little brother may be soft-spoken, but he had witnessed his sibling best bigger men in the boxing ring at least once a week when Samuel needed to relieve stress. The fact he shunned the general population because he rarely liked to explain his theories to people who would not understand them in the first place often became his downfall in academic circles.

"You know, as well as I why challenging Daniel would be impossible at the present time." Samuel met his gaze over the rims of his round metal spectacles.

"Yes, of course I know. I can never be allowed to forget." Nicholas's words were

little louder than a whisper. Old scorn and humiliation rushed over him in a familiar wave of pain so sharp it cut through his gut. "If it were not for your loyalty to me, your career would undoubtedly flourish."

"Talk of that will only make your head swell." Sam's lips twitched with a smile. "You cannot afford more health issues than you already have." He wiped at his chin then flung the soiled bit of linen on the cluttered worktable amidst bits of broken beakers and glassware. "We will discuss my newest theory over lunch."

* * * *

Sipping from his water goblet, Nicholas let his gaze lazily scan the noisy, crowded dining room of the Carlisle Hotel. White linen covered tables set with sparkling crystal created a genteel backdrop for the low buzz of conversation. The delicate pastels and laces of female skirts softened the jarring noise of silverware scraping and clattering against expensive china while the more somber, darkened suits of the gentlemen lent a depth to the living watercolor. Off to one side, soft music floated on the air from a harpist.

"Do you perceive a threat this afternoon, brother?"

His concentration reverted to Samuel. "There is none here. You may relax." Now, finished with the soup course and halfway into their entree of roasted chicken and root vegetables, a swift movement out of the corner of his eye arrested his attention. "Do you recognize the woman at the table catty-corner from ours?" He kept his voice low and his eyes locked on his quarry.

"Be more specific. There are two."

Nicholas lifted a brow at the sarcastic bent of Samuel's words. "The one with brown hair. Or if you need further clarification, the rather disjointed female talking to the empty chair beside her."

"I have no idea, but it would seem to be quite a heated debate."

"Indeed." He stared with ill-bred curiosity as the woman's pale hands gestured with choppy movements as if she were accustomed to punctuating conversation with movement. Even at the short distance, he could see the flash of her indigo eyes as the sun hit them at just the right angle. The tail end of a pheasant feather bobbed at the crown of her black straw hat with the force of her agitation. "Should we introduce ourselves?"

"No. It appears she has the issue well in hand." Samuel calmly picked at his halved chicken. "Females have been your downfall in the past. I would caution you to remember what happened last time you became involved."

"I have faith a different outcome might be possible." Nicholas glanced again at the curious woman. She no longer spoke to the chair but to the young woman across the table from her. It seemed the red-haired female talked her companion out of further suspicious behavior as they both dug into their rice pudding in silence. He grinned when the first woman meticulously picked every raisin from her dessert and gathered them on the tablecloth. "The companionship of a desirable female is just the thing I need."

"That will definitely *not* be possible until we find a cure for your affliction." Sam pushed his mostly empty plate away. "You are a danger to yourself and others under strong emotion. I cannot, in good conscience, let you loose among the unsuspecting public."

"What if I were to tell the truth upfront this time? Then the woman in question could

be warned and able to run if there should be just cause." Nicholas's gaze flicked from his brother's shocked expression back to the woman at the nearby table. His heart leapt into his throat when she met his eyes with what he could only interpret as a challenge.

"Are you crazy?" Samuel hissed the words as his hand clamped down on Nicholas's wrist. "Once the truth gets out, I can guarantee Captain O'Doud will come looking for you. He constantly monitors us, which is annoying enough. I would rather he not set up camp right outside our front door."

"The police captain has no evidence and therefore has no power over me." He pried his brother's fingers from his wrist then wiped his lips with a napkin. "He and I have danced around the issue for weeks now. If he had proof I absolutely committed a crime, he would have presented it." As if drawn by a magnetic force, Nicholas looked at the woman. She watched him in return, her eyes full of questions, her full, pink lips parted with a faint smile. Something inside him stirred in response to the sensuous curve of her mouth.

He had to know her name.

"If you proceed down this rocky slope, I will be forced to use the chains in the laboratory on you for the protection of everyone."

"You jest." He narrowed his eyes, not liking the serious expression on Samuel's face. "I can control myself. You know this." Even still, a nervous tic developed above his left brow.

"Perhaps, but until I complete my current experiment, I would rather not take a chance of you becoming ... unruly."

Nicholas sighed and resisted the urge to seek out the woman. "I have lived with my affliction since birth, and have kept it in submission for three months. Why do you think it will surface again, and now?"

"Because there will be a solar eclipse at the end of this month."

"And this is significant how? There have been many such events over the years."

Samuel shrugged. "This time will be the best opportunity for a total eclipse that scientists have seen in this part of the world since the day before you were born." He pushed his spectacles farther up the bridge of his nose. "It is my belief the unstableness of the magnetic fields inside the Earth during such an event triggered or even caused your affliction. Therefore, it would stand to reason another occurrence of the same could bring about its closure. There is also growing evidence that the sun and moon have powers scientists have not yet begun to study. Who can say how such energy can affect a person who is already sensitive to paranormal tendencies."

"Do you have research to back your theory?" His pulse increased at the thought of finally being free of the curse, affliction, or plain bad luck he'd lived with all his life. "I hesitate to look forward to it."

"Only time will tell, but I intend to study the phenomena until the event occurs. Which is why," he cocked a brow, "you must control your urges until the danger has passed. If another incident were to happen while you were ... not yourself, it could jeopardize all of our work. I refuse to relocate again, especially now when I am very close to completing the prototype for the trauma breather."

"Fine, for the sake of your experiment, I will behave. When shall we test the breather?" Ribbons of excitement slipped through his stomach at the thought. All their lives, he and Sam had tested experiments and contraptions, with varying degrees of

success.

"In the next few days I would imagine."

"Excellent." He raised his water goblet to his lips then nearly choked on the offering when the woman they'd been observing stood and crossed the floor until she stood at his table. "Good day, madam." His hand shook as he returned the glass safely to the tabletop.

"It remains to be seen whether the day will be good or not, and I am a miss not a madam." Before Nicholas could remember his manners and stand, she pulled out a chair, perched on the cushioned edge as her dark blue gaze pinned him in place. "I feel compelled to warn you of a dire circumstance that might come your way in the near future."

"I beg your pardon?" Her abrupt leap into conversation left him staring at her in open-mouthed astonishment. "Perhaps we should make a quick round of introductions before you reveal the cloud of doom that is very obviously on the tip of your tongue." The arrival of her companion distracted him from the resignation that crept into the impertinent woman's expressive eyes.

She heaved a sigh. "You are correct, of course. I apologize for my lack of etiquette. Such things fall to the wayside when I am gripped by passion." As she moved her chair to accommodate her friend joining the table, her knee knocked against Nicholas's. A brief tingle emanated over his thigh from the point of contact. For one moment, his brain refused to budge from the image of the strange woman in the throes of a very different sort of passion than she meant. "My name is Miss Noelle Radcliffe, and this is my cousin Miss Kitty Hamilton."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, unorthodox as it may be."

"I'm afraid unorthodox is a normal occurrence in my life." A frown marred the perfection of Noelle's lips and caused a line to appear between perfectly arched brows. "Now, I have received a vision which featured your likeness—"

"Enough. I refuse to hear more." Nicholas cut her off mid-sentence as anger filled his chest. "I am sick to death of people like you intent to exploit myself or my brother. I should have the owner of this establishment toss you into the street." He rose to his feet as his cheeks heated with emotion.

Three pairs of eyes looked at him ranging in fear from Kitty, annoyance from Noelle, and distaste from his sibling.

"Perhaps, brother, we should introduce ourselves and listen to what the ladies mean to say before we give them the wrong impression by jumping to unfounded conclusions. Not everyone is your enemy." The rays of the sun that slanted in from the lace-shrouded windows glanced off the rims of Samuel's spectacles as he glared. "Sit down."

"Forgive me." Nicholas sank into his chair as most of the anger left him. Keeping his emotions in check proved to be a bigger challenge than he first boasted. "My brother, Samuel Pemberton, scientist, astronomer, and in recent days he has become my keeper." The irony did not escape him, and part of him resented the fact.

"And this is *my* brother, and biggest supporter, Nicholas." Samuel grinned at the two females. Nicholas was struck by how that expression transformed his normally serious sibling's face into a glimpse of the young man he should be had he not been saddled with Nicholas's affliction. "Now, please explain this mission of import you are on which brought you to our table." His speculative gaze rested on Kitty, who blushed but did not look away.

"Noelle sometimes has ... visions which have an uncanny knack for coming true, especially when she dreams of the same thing three times." Kitty clenched her hands on the tablecloth. "But this time she was able to see a name."

"Ah, and that would be where I enter into this superstitious farce." He turned slightly to Noelle, conscious of a faint, floral scent he could not name. "By all means, enlighten us." He refused to let the glint of anger in her eyes cow him.

"Label me as a silly, empty-headed twit if you want, but I do have visions even if I cannot explain the why." She wrinkled a pert little nose that turned up just slightly at the end to give her a permanent expression of mockery or playfulness. "Suffice it to say, I have now dreamed of your murder twice. Each time, you've been stabbed with a jeweled dagger."

"Is that so?" He glanced at his brother, who shrugged then continued his perusal of Kitty. "Could you clearly see my face in these visions?" His own life was strange enough without adding any more activities of the occult on top of it.

"Well, no, your face was always turned away." Her confidence appeared to falter. "But I recognize your blondish hair and fit build." A hint of a blush tinged her cheeks. She laid a small beaded handbag on the table in front of her.

"So then you and your cousin decided to run helter-skelter through the city, annoying every blond man you saw?" He resisted the urge to lean closer to the woman in order to identify her elusive scent. "I can only imagine how well that would be received."

"No. I am not the mad woman you think." Her glare sent midnight blue barbs through the air between them. "I saw your name on a torn journal page in my second dream. Kitty recognized your name as a local merchant she has frequented and we tracked you to your store. You were not in evidence, and since the Carlisle is the closest cafe to your store location, we decided to start here after partaking in lunch." Her smile stirred his compassion and interest. "However, the dead lion in a subsequent dream is something I cannot understand."

Cold dread dripped down his spine and swept away any further emotion. "A lion, you say?" Nicholas could imagine the tiny ice shards in his blood. A look at his brother confirmed Samuel felt the same way. He shook his head slightly and inclined his chin in acknowledgement. "Are you sure it was a lion and not a housecat?"

"You do me a great disservice, Mr. Pemberton, for I am not an imbecile." Noelle rose from her chair with the grace only an irate woman could command. "It matters not to me which sort of feline I saw. It was the same jeweled dagger that killed the animal and that is the sole reason I sought you out. I have warned you, now our association ends." She turned to her cousin. "Come Kitty. I have done my duty and warned this ungrateful representation of manhood of his fate. I will not stand for more of his ridicule."

Nicholas bounded to his feet, but his haste was not enough to stay the ladies' departure. "We are in serious trouble." He watched as the women exited the dining room then scurry down the sidewalk outside.

"So we are, and even more since they neglected to pay their bill." Samuel accepted the slip of paper the irritated waiter handed him.

"We need to ascertain what they know." Nicholas tapped a forefinger against his chin. "Lucky for us, Miss Radcliffe left behind her calling card." He poked the beaded bag. "What say you to a personal visit?"

Chapter Three

Noelle stared hard at a line of glass jars filled with similar-looking dried green leaves that decorated the back counter at the apothecary. Concentration eluded her as Kitty continued to babble.

"Those Pemberton brothers were quite handsome. No wonder you refused to tell me what Nicholas looked like in your dream." Kitty leaned a shoulder against a white-painted wooden cabinet. "You wanted to keep him to yourself. Maybe he *is* your future husband."

As much as she loved her cousin, sometimes her remarks burrowed deep under Noelle's skin and itched like a flea bite. "Kitty, enough!" She turned so quickly her skirts of lightweight navy wool twisted about her legs. "Nicholas Pemberton is not the kind of man women marry. Maybe his brother is, but definitely not Nicholas."

"Why not? That cleft in his chin is so romantic, not to mention those eyes. Just like buckwheat honey, and so intense, as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. He seems to me the precise sort of man who understands women." Her sigh died an early death when Noelle slammed a measuring spoon against the counter. "You disagree?"

"Of course, on two counts. His eyes are more of a deep brandy color, and he certainly does not inspire romance. He is rude and obnoxious." Not for all the hunting trophies in Teddy Roosevelt's private collection would she admit to noticing Nicholas' chin.

Kitty's trill of laughter swept through the small shop. "Oh, you *did* pay attention to his physical attributes. I thought you were only concerned with your mission and nothing else."

"Listen to me carefully, Kitty, because I will not rescue you from that man's clutches if you lose your common sense and become enamored by him." Noelle planted her hands on her hips and held her cousin's gaze. "Men like Nicholas think of women as their personal belongings. They use them up until the poor things are convinced they can no longer function without him." She lifted a hand to her mouth and tapped a forefinger against her bottom lip. "Women long to marry men of Samuel's ilk because he will take care of them, provide a stable home and a family, while women pursue men like Nicholas for the adventure, the purely intense sexual satisfaction of knowing him *that way*." Her pulse increased at the thought of glimpsing Nicholas, naked and sated, after a bout of lovemaking.

"Calm down, I think Samuel is a good prospect as well, even if he is a scientist." A grin pulled at Kitty's lips.

"Yes. His profession could prove an issue, so we must make a concentrated effort not to make my dreams and ghostly visitors known to him."

Kitty slid her a sly glance. "But you must admit it was a rare treat to meet two such men today, regardless of their personalities or fields of study."

Firmly shoving thoughts of Nicholas from her mind, Noelle turned her attention to the herb bottles, ducking under the counter to root around in a cabinet for a bottle of witch hazel. "Perhaps, but the Pemberton brothers are merely two men in a city teeming with likely candidates if that is what you are looking for."

"I am quite happy teaching school, you know this, but the opportunity to be wined and dined by a suitable gentleman is not to be frowned upon. Whether marriage follows such tentative meetings or something else, I could not begin to say."

"Good luck." Noelle peeked over the cabinet as Kitty moved around the counter.

"No luck, just a hearty dose of feminine wiles." She tittered. "Oh, I need to get back. I have a meeting with the superintendent."

"Have a nice afternoon." She resumed the task of examining the contents of the cabinet. The harness bells strung on the doorknob jangled as someone came in, accompanied by a sharp intake of Kitty's breath.

"I will, but keep our conversation in mind. I would not say no to spending time with a man if his intentions were right—or even if his intentions were a slight bit wrong. Being wicked does have its advantages."

The bells chimed again as Kitty left. Noelle didn't look up until a male throat cleared, followed by a low snicker. Thinking the new arrival was Mr. Dramas, her boss, she continued her quest. "Be with you in a moment, sir."

A cough sounded next. "No need to be so formal, Miss Radcliffe. We have already been introduced." The rich timbre of the voice caused the air to vibrate.

Prickles danced along her skin. The hair on the back of her neck rose. She recognized the voice belonging to Nicholas. "Damn." The cabinet muffled her expletive and she bumped her head when she removed herself from the dark depths of that same piece of furniture. As her stomach fluttered from what she could only assume were nerves, Noelle rose to her full height of five and a half feet and met the amused gaze of the devil himself. "What do you want?" She touched her fingers to her head and felt the tender spot, hoping it wouldn't evolve into a knot.

"What every man wants." A slow grin parted sensuous lips, and the strong afternoon sun caught the blond waves of his hair, turning them to a masterpiece of molten gold that flopped toward his forehead. "Wealth, success, and a willing female to warm his bed and tempt his scruples." He kept his hands behind his back.

"In case you could not discern the fact for yourself, this is an apothecary shop, not a den of prostitution." Noelle's cheeks burned as he continued to appraise her. Slowly, and with obvious enjoyment, his gaze slid down her body. Her skin warmed as if he had physically caressed her. She pressed her hands together at her waist. His presence filled every nook and cranny of the small shop. She cleared her throat, glad when his eyes met hers once more. "If you have no legitimate business here, I must ask you to be on your way."

"Oh, but then you would be mistaken. You see, I do have business here." Nicholas drew her small beaded bag from where he concealed it behind his back. It dangled from his forefinger by its braided cord of black satin, insignificant against the virility of the man. "I had no idea such hostility would be my reward for the return of your possession."

Noelle lunged for the bag, but he held it over her head out of reach. "I thank you for bringing it to me. I had planned to drop by the Carlisle this evening to retrieve it." She refused to give him the satisfaction of jumping after the purse like a puppy with a bone.

"I saved you the effort." Nicholas lowered the bag, but kept it secure in his grip. "There is something I have been curious about. When I saw you in the dining room earlier, it appeared you were talking to yourself, or at least to an empty chair. Do you often exhibit yourself in that manner?"

Invisible hands twisted her stomach into knots. "Uh, I certainly was not talking to myself. I am not mad if that is what you mean to imply." She could not reveal she conversed with ghosts. Her reputation was on shaky enough ground. "You are mistaken."

"Indeed. I must beg your pardon then."

A sigh escaped as relief washed through her. "Thank you." She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "Well, I'm sure you must have other appointments." Would the man never leave?

"There is another reason for my visit." He held the bag out to her.

"So I surmised by your reluctance to go away." Her fingers brushed his. Threads of heat licked over her skin. Her gaze flew to his face, and once again, the faintly mocking expression annoyed her. "Men like you can rarely be forthright in your intentions." She tucked her bag under the counter. "My visions are never wrong. They may come to fruition days after I have seen them or they may take months to be revealed as the truth, but the end result is the same."

"I must say—"

She didn't allow him to continue. "It is your choice to believe me. It will not affect my life, but at least I can sleep with a clear conscience having warned you." Noelle ignored the twinge at the tiny lie. Sleep was always elusive, no matter what she did to court it. Dreams and ghostly visits didn't mesh well with rest.

"If you would allow me to proceed?" A light brown brow quirked. "I never said I did not believe you. I merely desire to know how much you have learned about my brother and me."

"Learned about you?" When his expression remained serious, she frowned. "I know you two are siblings, obviously, and that you run a mercantile shop. Other than what I saw in my dream, you remain a stranger to me." She didn't trust the speculative light gleaming in his eyes. "Thank you for the return of my purse. I wish you well in life." Her heart pounded, but she couldn't wrench her eyes from his. She was effectively frozen to the floor, playing rabbit to his predatory hunter.

Nicholas moved to the counter, his steps steady as he prowled its length. "Who else have you told about the dream?" He placed his hands, palm down, on the scarred wood and leaned forward.

"Which one?" Her voice dropped to a whisper, and she moistened her suddenly dry lips. "You or the lion?" The aroma of apples, oak, and the faint note of tobacco swirled about her. Noelle blinked and poured all her concentration into resisting his charm.

"Both. The lion is strange enough, but since the dagger features into both visions, I would caution you to keep the knowledge to yourself."

"My cousin is aware of my dreams. Outside of her, no one is privy to them." She swallowed. "If I choose to share my visions with someone else, you really have no say in the matter." With a supreme effort of will, she severed the invisible connection between them and retreated until her back connected with the wooden cabinet.

"I refuse to argue this point so early in our relationship." Nicholas straightened. His eyes were hard glints of brown, clouded with hidden secrets. "Suffice it to say, if any sort of rumor regarding a lion begins to circulate around town, you will be the first person I come looking for."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Pemberton?" Cold anger fueled her movement now. Noelle shot around the counter to poke a forefinger into his lapel, annoyed at his audacity. "In case

you misplaced your brain, you and I have no relationship nor will we share one in the foreseeable future." The hard wall of muscle beneath his clothes caught her unaware and she dropped her hand.

A grudging smile crossed his lips. "It's premature to debate semantics. I will be in touch." He turned on his heel and strode out the door.

Noelle stared at the space he had previously occupied as thoughts chased around her mind like leaves in a whirlwind. First and foremost was her unabashed dislike of the man. She did not trust him, and she sensed he harbored more lies than truths.

* * * *

With a yawn, Noelle extinguished the lamp on her bedside table. Reading and studying herbal components kept her awake until the wee hours of the morning. The reason behind the wakefulness was twofold. One, she desperately needed to understand the concept behind tinctures and potions—Mr. Dramas intended to go into semi-retirement soon and would leave the apothecary shop in her hands—and two, nocturnal reading stimulated her mind, which kept sleep at bay. If she could thwart the dreams, she would.

Now, as her eyelids drooped and her brain lagged with exhaustion, she settled into the coolness of her bed pillows and welcomed rest. *Please, please, please let me pass one night without a vision.* Noelle pulled the quilt up to her chin and contemplated the shadow-veiled ceiling. The elusive mystery of sleep teased her as images of Nicholas projected themselves on her mind's eye. She huffed then turned to her side. She did *not* want to spend time thinking of him. He personified everything rude, arrogant, and disrespectful. Not even the cleft in his chin or his warm, brandy eyes could cancel those traits.

She kept her own eyes screwed tightly closed, but memories of him intruded once more. His height topped hers by mere inches, which was quite convenient, as she did not need to crane her neck to look up at him. Wide shoulders, solid chest, and a jaw that would lend itself to stubbornness more often than not caused her insides to warm in spite of her best intentions to banish him. Noelle flopped onto her back as the bedclothes twisted around her limbs. There was no reason to waste more time on the man. She warned him of his impending doom and now she could rest easy. There was no cause to think their paths would cross again.

Damn the man to hell. She suspected even the devil would reject him.

Blowing out a breath that ruffled loose tendrils of hair, Noelle opened her eyes, and then groaned. The gray, misty shimmer that signaled the imminent arrival of a ghost met her gaze. The mass throbbed and rolled until it finally took the shape of a young man in a cap and coveralls with a checkered scarf tied jauntily around his neck. She pushed herself up on the bed and blinked. She had lost her fear of the unknown long ago. Now, ghosts and the communion with such beings became as commonplace an occurrence as brushing her hair.

"Good evening." Noelle shivered in the face of the sudden cold, which accompanied the specter.

Usually, when ghosts paid her a visit, and after they regaled her with stories from their lives, they directed her to places where they'd hidden money or valuables. If the treasure did not legally belong to the ghost's next of kin, she kept it for herself, pawning

and selling the jewelry then stowing the cash in the bank or her personal safe in her home. She had made a tidy sum over the years, which allowed her to continue paying the mortgage and living a comfortable existence. She could be independently wealthy from a few more sizable fortunes, but sooner or later, Noelle knew she would have to explain her sudden increase in her monetary stature. Kitty remained ignorant of the windfall, and Noelle was conflicted about telling her cousin. Some things were best kept private.

And she meant to keep it that way. At least for the foreseeable future until she could invent a convincing cover story.

When the ghost blinked and floated at the end of her bed, Noelle sighed. "How may I help you?" She hoped she could.

The young man's face creased into a severe frown. "You could do us all a favor and stay clear of Nicholas Pemberton."

"I beg your pardon?" She narrowed her eyes. "How are you familiar with him?"

"Do you really wish to know? It will not be pleasant." His monochromatic lips were set into a thin line, his eyes dark.

"Yes." Her courage dissolved and the darkness absorbed the word.

"I was murdered three years ago as I walked home from the glass factory one night. I never saw the attack. Didn't hear him coming until it was too late, but the pain. I had never known such pain in all my life."

Her throat dry, Noelle swallowed a couple of times. "This pertains to Mr. Pemberton how?" Dread played down her spine. Surely, he did not... Was he capable of violence? Doubt swept in to mingle with the dread. Anyone could play companion to hostility. Human nature practically dictated through history confirmation of the fact.

The ghost's eyes blazed dark fire. "See for yourself." He wrenched open his shirt, revealing his bare chest. "*This* is what he did."

"Good lord." She crept to the foot of her bed to examine him at close range. Four deep slashes marred the skin, or at least what would have been skin had the man been alive and not an amorphous gray-blue form. Another four grooves dug across his abdomen, the skin torn and puckered around the wounds. "Is that..." Bile rose in Noelle's throat when the ghost turned slightly to the side to show off his ribcage marred by furrowed flesh. She again swallowed hard. "They look like teeth marks." She lifted her gaze to the ghost's. "How exactly did you die? Are you saying he cannibalized you?" A shiver shook her body.

"Nicholas Pemberton killed me, but not as himself. As a feral, hungry lion."

Chapter Four

"I have come to the conclusion that the female mind will forever remain a mystery to me." Nicholas stared at his reflection in a wall-mounted mirror at the end of his entry hall. "For years I expected a woman to be soft and controllable, with simpering wiles and fluttering lashes, but Miss Radliffe does not fit into such a feminine mold." After a few seconds of deft maneuvering, he knotted his necktie, the final addition of his ensemble for the day.

"The more troubling question is why does that bother you?" Sam closed the three buttons on his tan jacket. "In case you have not noticed, the earth revolves around the sun, instead of you, and what's more, not every female you come across is going to find you attractive. In fact, some are actually put off with your superior attitude."

"I am well aware of the fact, brother." Nicholas slipped into a gray vest that perfectly matched his slacks. "My point is why does Miss Radliffe react in such a negative manner toward me? I have done nothing yet to provoke her anger."

"You forget I know you better than perhaps you know yourself." Samuel gathered up an umbrella with a bamboo handle and an apple from a bowl on an occasional table in the hall. "You come across as arrogant and little better than a womanizer." He looked over the tops of his rims. "Where is the consummate charm I hear about? I have not seen it in recent weeks." He moved into the stairwell. "You have been exceptionally grouchy of late."

"Well, what do you expect?" Nicholas plunged down the wooden stairs after his brother. "You forbid me from being too intimate with any female for fear I will hurt them, you caution me from being out of the house after dark, and I am stuck here or in the store most other times." He paused on the landing. The doorway beyond opened into his mercantile shop. The stairway continued downward into the basement where Sam's lab was located. "You would be out of sorts, too."

"Once we banish the sickness, you will be free to go about the carefree, ne'er do-well lifestyle you crave." Bitterness dripped from his words as he stared at Nicholas from a few steps down. "Then you can leave your home and wreck havoc without a thought to those of us who helped you achieve freedom."

"That is not true." Nicholas gripped the metal pipe mounted to the wall that served as a handrail. "I am grateful for your tireless work. You know this." Guilt coated his stomach as he acknowledged to himself that his resentment against Samuel's rules had multiplied in recent days. "I know you do it to keep me and others safe, but there is no need. I am confident I can control the urges. All I am asking is for you to trust me and allow me a modicum of entertainment."

"And wait for what? Your death or someone else's?" Samuel thumped the umbrella against a step. "Or worse yet. An innocent bystander is harmed and Captain O'Doud is on our doorstep once more?" His eyes flashed with the force of his glare. "How much longer will he be content to leave you alone before he takes you into custody on suspicion of murder? How much longer will I be expected to put my life on hold for you?"

"I cannot say, and besides, neither you nor I can foretell the future."

"True, but what of Noelle's vision? I do not need to warn you that there are people

out there who mean you harm, especially if they know of your true nature." He blinked. "A capture in your altered state would mean large monetary gain for collectors, not to mention the awkwardness to explaining away a lion in metropolitan Indianapolis. What happens if you were captured and shifted back while incarcerated? Then the opportunity for blackmail and greed increases exponentially, along with your propensity for trouble when in your normal, human form. You are not a positive influence within the female community."

Nicholas fumed in silence, wondering why Samuel was so firm in his resolve. Usually, he caved under enough debate, then he could do whatever he wanted. This, in retrospect, had resulted in a few messes around town wherein his brother had had to set things to rights in angry silence.

"Why do you care, Sam? You must have your own angle in all of this."

"No angle." He glanced at Nicholas, his face hidden in shadow. "I do not wish to see either young lady harmed. They do not deserve to be tainted by you."

"Ah. So that is how the wind blows, eh?" He grinned when Samuel turned sharply and descended the lower stairs. "Which one of the young ladies interests you?" He chased after his brother. "Might I say that either of them would fit your temperament nicely?" He couldn't believe his good fortune. If Samuel were distracted with courting then his attention would wane from Nicholas; thereby, leaving him his much sought after freedom.

"What would lead you to believe I harbor romantic notions about either of them?" Samuel fumbled with a switch on the wall. Two naked light bulbs flickered then came to full illumination, flooding the crowded room with moving shadows and swatches of pale gold. He threaded through the piles of textbooks that littered the floor, stepped behind a cluttered worktable, and dumped the umbrella and apple into a clear space. "I simply said—"

"It was nothing you said, brother, it was all in how you phrased it." Nicholas picked up a beaker half-full of some sort of yellowish liquid. "Besides, I saw you eyeballing Miss Hamilton at lunch yesterday. You, who have never shown much of an interest in any female before now, suddenly find yourself unable to think of anything else but her?"

"There is nothing wrong with my mind." Sam moved to the side of the room and cranked open the windows. "If I were you, I would leave that particular vial alone. I have not yet determined how horse urine reacts with mold, and I would hate for you to be the unwitting vessel where they come together."

"Interesting." Nicholas set the beaker down as if it were on fire. "No need for scare tactics." He edged around the table and pinned Samuel with a look. "Let's run down the women's qualifications and match them to yours. Noelle appears to be quite headstrong. She might bully her way into your lab and rearrange your experiments."

"I can barely tolerate you in my laboratory."

"Right, but at least I do not tell you how you should conduct things. I merely visit and mess about with objects that are lying around." He grinned. Samuel waved him away as if he were little more than an annoying bug. Perhaps to him, he was. "But Miss Hamilton would be a much better fit. She does not appear to be as surly as Noelle, and she has the added bonus of being relatively normal. No tendencies toward the occult. It would seem Noelle and I have enough oddities for all of us."

"Kitty has no special abilities that we know of at this point, but people always have

secrets. I do wonder if that trait is hereditary or if it's merely unique to Noelle." He donned a pair of black rubber gloves. "But I will admit that I wish to know more about her." His eyes reflected indecision. "It might be fulfilling to talk with someone else who was not my brother."

"Perfect!" Nicholas managed to stifle most of his elation. "So, what is the best way to ease into non-threatening banter with a woman? Take them somewhere they will feel safe and protected, but intimate enough for conversation. There are plenty of places in the area." The urge to rub his hands together in glee nearly overcame him. He shoved them in his pants' pockets instead. "What do you say?"

"What will I talk about?" Samuel frowned. "Women fluster me."

"Hell, Sam, they fluster all of us because they are unpredictable creatures." He clapped his brother on the shoulder. "Just lead the conversation back to her. Let her talk about what she likes, what she is interested in. It has always been my experience women love to yap about anything, especially themselves." Already, Nicholas's mind flew to the possibilities of drawing Noelle out of her cold shell. He wondered if she were as disinterested as she seemed, then he berated himself for the thought. Why did he want to have anything else to do with a woman such as her? "To help you in this new endeavor, I will keep Noelle occupied so you can talk privately with her cousin."

"Very well. You make the arrangements. I have work to do."

"You will not regret it." Nicholas bounded up the stairs to his store, annoyed for the first time in a long while that the store took precedence over his personal life.

* * * *

His lighthearted mood carried through the morning until it vanished altogether when the front door opened and admitted his nemesis, Captain Ignatius O'Doud.

Damn the man! Why could the officer not take a hint and move on? Nicholas surreptitiously watched the captain's progress around the perimeter of the store. Tall and slender, he glided around the tables, which contained kitchenware, and skulked in between wooden shelves laden with bolts of fabric and lace. Why did O'Doud feel the need to pester him again?

"There you go, Mrs. Furber." Nicholas pushed a brown paper wrapped parcel across the scarred wooden counter and into the waiting, blue-veined hands of his customer. "Have a care, now. I wrapped that serving platter real well, but it will not survive a wild ride home." He winked, inordinately tickled when a blush stained the elderly lady's cheeks. He knew the geriatric set expected a bit of harmless flirtation when they visited, and he had always been a sucker for the baked goods they brought him in return for his help. "Do you require assistance into your carriage?"

"Oh no, sonny. My husband is waiting around the corner. You know how he hates being in here with all the womanly fripperies and such." She placed the package into a woven reed basket, gave him a cheery wave, and then maneuvered through the clutter to the door. Her heels scraped against the grit and dust on the wood floor, reminding Nicholas that he should sweep and polish it at the first opportunity.

Once the woman was safely on the pavement and out of earshot, his gaze sought the law man. "Captain O'Doud, how can I assist you today?" Even to his ears, the gaiety in his voice rang false. "I am surprised you came this afternoon since we spoke last week."

"So we did." A slight Irish accent flowed around the words. He advanced closer to

the counter. "You fascinate me, Mr. Pemberton, and when that happens, I make it my business to know everything about such a person."

"Then it pains me to disappoint such rampant curiosity, since there is nothing about me to warrant such scrutiny." Nicholas wiped his sweaty palms on his tan work apron and thrust a pencil into one of its pockets. The man disconcerted him as no one else could. He was never sure what thoughts lurked behind O'Doud's inscrutable blue eyes.

"Then you would be wrong." Ignatius rapped his knuckles on the counter as a smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "Because, at the moment, you are the most interesting person I have seen today."

"I see." He refused to let the other man see his unease. Instead, he pasted what he hoped was a carefree grin on his face and came around the counter. "Well then, what would you like to discuss today?" The law enforcement man remained a mystery.

O'Doud ran a hand through his close-cropped black hair then scratched those same fingers through a short beard. "Oh, my subject matter has never changed. I'm very interested to know what you have been up to in the last few months or so." He smiled but it did not light his eyes. "I mean to solve the mysterious death of a certain young lady who died in the park in February, as I think you well know." He moved to the end of the counter to poke around in a large hatbox filled with remnants and scraps of fabrics and ribbons.

"I do know of your determination, but as always, I cannot help you with the answer." Nicholas crossed his arms over his chest and gave O'Doud a glare. Enough dancing around the issue. He wanted the matter over with now. "So, if there is nothing else?"

"Mmm, I think I might take a yard of this crocheted lace. My mother fancies trimmings such as these for her handkerchiefs and bonnets." Ignatius fingered the scrap of cream-colored lace. "And I need a card of buttons. Ivory if you have them. My aunt Fiona is nearly finished with knitting a sweater and will require those."

Nicholas clenched his jaw in response. O'Doud's tactics to draw out the interview process never failed to irritate him. "My pleasure." He opened a drawer under the counter and rooted through the numerous cards of buttons until he found a few O'Doud might like. "Why don't you choose one of these while I wrap the lace?" He dropped the notions on the counter then drifted toward the basket.

"You know, Mr. Pemberton, the young lady who I found dead that morning was the youngest daughter of the butcher next door. He and his wife were devastated about their loss, as you could expect."

"It is only natural." He practically yanked the scrap of lace from O'Doud's long fingers, jotting the price on a notepad he kept near the cash register. "Unfortunately, I cannot remember if I met the young lady in question." When the captain merely blinked and kept his blue eyes trained on him, Nicholas shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Three months ago was the last time he had lost his mind and slipped into his alternate persona of an animal. Could it be possible his shifting and the death of the girl coincided? He frowned, unable to remember much of the incident beside the pain and a few blurry images tinged with blood. More often than not, memories following his descent into the paranormal were not forthcoming, and only snatches remained. The more he applied himself to the task, the more details surfaced. A high-pitched scream, a pair of frightened hazel eyes, and the snag of his claws as they slashed through flesh haunted him.

Nicholas shuddered and forced any recollection back into the dark depths of his soul. "I wish you the best of luck in finding her killer." He would continue to play O'Doud's game, and hopefully, the man had no evidence to tie him to the crime. The fact didn't lessen his guilt, which chewed on his stomach with the intent to eat away at him.

"Ah, I do not need luck, Mr. Pemberton." Ignatius let a string of jet beads slip through his fingers. "My job is very much like these beads. Each one represents a fact, a word, an admission of some kind, be it of guilt, denial, or confirmation. By themselves, they appear unimportant, scattered. Only when a skilled craftsman strings them together in a necklace do they begin to make sense."

Cold fear dripped down Nicholas's spine. How close to uncovering the truth was O'Doud or did he simply delight in tormenting his suspects? Perhaps Samuel was correct after all. Maybe he needed to be chained in the basement and not let loose to see the light of day until his affliction could be banished, if at all. And if it could not, what sort of life would he be left with? He wiped his forehead with a shirtsleeve. "Interesting theory, but ask yourself this. What happens when you string together a necklace and the only thing you have is simply an accessory with no sinister connotation?"

Ignatius's lips twitched. "A logical assessment, and may I point you in the direction of a certain doctor by the name of Freud? I have studied his book for hours, and find his reasoning helpful in the dismantling of the criminal mind." He carefully laid two peppermint sticks on the counter next to his other purchases. "My total, please."

His mouth dry, Nicholas swallowed a couple of times then punched a few keys on the register. "Eight dollars, or I can open an account for you and you can settle with me at the end of the month."

"No need, Mr. Pemberton. I have the cash here." O'Doud handed over a few bills, holding back one of the candies. "It is my fondest hope that by month's end I will settle something far more satisfying with you than a store account." His piercing gaze rooted Nicholas to the floor. "It will be the perfect start to what I hope is a peaceful summer." A black brow lifted in challenge.

"Well, considering I am not a craftsman of the dark arts, I cannot see into the future, but that is my hope as well." When his attempt at levity fell flat, Nicholas's hands shook as he gave the captain his change. He placed the scant items into a brown bag and slid it in O'Doud's direction. "Thank you for the business."

"You run a nice shop, Nicholas. Perhaps you should focus your attention on it. They say idle hands are the devil's handiwork. I believe that applies especially in your case." His eyes twinkled as he scooped up the bag and stuck one of the peppermint sticks in his mouth like a cigarette. "I will be in touch and would appreciate it if you remain local."

When the captain left the store, Nicholas rushed over to make certain O'Doud walked up the sidewalk. Only then did he allow himself to relax, willed his heart to calm and his blood pressure to slow. He slumped against a shelving unit, exhausted and drained from the continuous game of cat and mouse he and O'Doud played. When would it be enough? When would he finally break under the pressure and turn himself in just to stop the polite torment the captain brought him?

Not having the answers, and loathe to delve into his tormented soul for the reasons why, Nicholas did the one thing he always did after a visit with O'Doud. He moved swiftly to the counter, unearthed a bottle of bourbon from its hiding place under a ready-made dress in the corner, and took a deep swig. As his throat burned from the alcohol, he

wondered how much longer he could live the charade.
If he gave up, what did the future hold?

Chapter Five

Invisible eyes watched her from the thick growth of her garden foliage. As a gentle breeze stirred a green fern frond, Noelle saw the unblinking, golden eyes of a savanna cat. Its broad nose regal, its upper lip curled in a snarl, the animal thrust itself through the plant life and approached her with a determined stride. The big paws made no sound on the grass or the tiny cobblestoned section of the patio.

Sweat drenched her back. She attempted to back away from the terrifying creature, but her feet would not obey her brain's command. "Get away."

Of course, the lion did not intend to do what she asked. It merely emitted a low growl that sent prickles over her skin. Noelle retreated and tripped over the hem of her gown. She tumbled to the ground, felt the coolness of the earth beneath her fingers, smelled the crushed grass, and still the lion stalked her. The feline licked its furry mouth, almost as if it anticipated what she would taste like when it pounced.

She had no doubt that the cat wanted to feast on her flesh. Her heart pounded. Perspiration beaded on her forehead and upper lip. She didn't want to die. Not like this. Struggling to regain lost footing, she realized one of her heels was stuck in the fabric of her gown.

The lion sat on its back haunches and studied her. Waiting for her acceptance of fate or destiny, she couldn't decide which.

"No." Noelle shook her head. "I refuse to give up." Fingers scrabbling over the dew damp grass, she closed her hand over a fist-sized rock in a flowerbed. "Go away!" She flung the rock at the cat, but missed entirely.

The lion blinked. A mocking light appeared in the golden eyes. It opened its jaws wide and let out a loud roar.

Bile rose in Noelle's throat at the sound. She glanced frantically toward her bedroom door. Instead of the cheery square of yellow light, all her gaze focused on was the ghost of the young man she'd talked with earlier—the one who claimed to have been mauled by Nicholas in lion form. She rubbed her eyes, implored her sleeping self to wake up. Was the ghost real or part of the dream?

"What do you want?" Her gaze swung between the ghost and the lion. The animal slowly stood and took two steps toward her.

"You don't believe my claim that Nicholas is a lion." It was an accusation. The ghost's eyes blazed a hostile blue for a few seconds. "He is dangerous in many ways. I am compelled to warn you away from him."

Noelle yanked the hem of her dress from her heel. The sound of ripping fabric filled the air. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself." She watched the big feline as her fear edged itself into new heights. Would it hurt when the claws shredded her flesh as they did the ghost's?

"Suit yourself, but it is the job of the spirits you feel an affinity for to keep you safe. We are bound to you for whatever reason. Perhaps we need something from you, or maybe you require information from us. Because of that, we cannot move on from this plane of existence and have determined to take care of you the best we can." Annoyance flickered over the young man's pale face. "Trust me when I say Nicholas Pemberton is

not for you."

"That is not for you to decide." She glared at the ghost. "How I conduct my life is none of your business. I am sorry you feel bound to me, but I do not need your help or warnings."

The ghost shrugged. "Pride will be your downfall, Noelle. I will try again, only next time, I won't be as nice." He faded into nothingness on the next gentle gust of wind.

Noelle glanced about the small garden, only then remembering the lion. The animal pounced. She crouched on the ground, screwing her eyes shut, steeling herself for the pain of teeth and claws. When neither of those things occurred, she pried open her eyes and gawked at the new image.

Instead of the fierce African cat, Nicholas, the human, stood before her, gloriously naked except for a swatch of fabric tucked around his waist, obscuring his manly bits from view. Moonlight danced on the golden hair of his chest and gave exquisite shadows to the contours of his sculpted chest. Mute, Noelle stood, stretching out her arms, intent to touch him.

She needed to convince herself that he was real and not the beast the ghost claimed.

Her hands passed through the apparition. Nicholas gave her a slow, smoldering grin. He reached for knot of fabric, tugged it from his skin so that it slipped down his body, snagging on his undeniably erect member. Oh, what she would do to pull the covering off the remainder of the way! Liquid heat gathered between her thighs to wet her undergarments. She tried again to touch the man, but he faded away just as the ghost had done moments before.

"Come back!" Noelle lurched forward. A sense of unfulfilled longing tightened her chest. "Please." She whirled around, alone once more.

What was the point of having the ability to communicate with ghosts when they didn't tell her anything useful? And what did it mean that she dreamed of not only the lion but also of Nicholas in a very intimate manner? Did she want that particular vision to come true?

* * * *

The nap earlier in the afternoon had left Noelle tired and cranky. Not for worlds would she reveal to her cousin what she dreamed of this time.

"Can you believe the audacity of the man?" She craned her neck as she peeked over an evergreen shrub. "How incredibly bold of him to ask us to meet him, and what kind of spineless women are we to follow his dictates as if we have nothing else better to do?" Her cheeks burned when she caught sight of the gentleman in question, lounging with unconcerned ease on a white painted bench as his brother paced in an agitated fashion near a bed of yellow and purple pansies. She glowered in his direction.

"Our schedule is open, so why should we not meet him?" Kitty yanked on Noelle's skirt, pulling her cousin down. "It is a public place, both Mr. Pembertons are handsome and available, and if you would stop complaining, you might enjoy yourself."

"That is the point, Kitty." Noelle huffed her exasperation, but couldn't resist parting a few branches of the shrub for an additional look. "I do not wish to enjoy myself with that man. He could be dangerous. He might be a murderer. He has the potential to be—"

"Charming, personable, friendly?" A mocking, baritone voice inserted from above them.

New heat flooded her face as she glanced at the top of the hedge. Nicholas wore a grin mixed with polite inquiry and something darkly intimate. It caused the warmth in her face to spread throughout her body. "Why am I not surprised you are so ill-bred you would spy on two unassuming women?" Beside her, Kitty stood and emitted a snicker, which she turned into a poor excuse for a cough when Noelle looked in her cousin's direction.

"You, my dear Miss Radliffe, would never be perceived as unassuming." He reached out a hand as his eyes sparkled. "Although that carefully cultivated image is somewhat tarnished by the fact you are hiding behind the shrubbery, watching me, or shall I say spying?"

Insufferable man.

When her fingers touched his, a curious tingling flowed between them. She sucked in a startled breath. "I do not spy. I simply needed to do a bit of reconnaissance before I let either myself or my cousin meet with you since the invitation was extended at such short notice."

"Ah, I did wonder how soon it would be before you harped on that." He drew her hand through his crooked elbow.

Noelle threw a pleading glance to her cousin. "Say something."

"Say what?" Kitty's grin lit her face. "He is correct, you know."

Annoyed with her cousin, her companion, and herself, Noelle transferred her attention to the younger Pemberton brother. His mussed hair and wrinkled, smudged linen suit indicated his sudden removal from an experiment. She wondered what his latest project consisted of, but had no chance to ask as Kitty dragged him along the paved path in front of her and Nicholas.

"I have to speculate what you will do now that your only supporter has deserted you."

She ground her teeth at his teasing tone. "Kitty would never leave me alone with someone who possesses a questionable history such as you. She is merely enjoying the evening with your brother, both not ten feet away." Noelle shot daggers at her cousin's back when Kitty laughed at something Samuel said. "Although her interest in your brother concerns me." When she attempted to extract her hand, Nicholas held it in place with gentle pressure.

"Why? When he wanders out of his laboratory to join the rest of the world, he is a very interesting and charming individual, and it appears Miss Hamilton is on the verge of being smitten with him." He patted her hand. "Perhaps the more fascinating development is that Sam looks equally enamored of her." He heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Young love at its finest. I thought that was the pinnacle of every woman's hope."

Panic seized her insides and twisted with invisible fingers. What would happen if Kitty did fall in love and moved away? Would she, Noelle, succumb to the madness of her own mind with only ghosts and visions to keep her company? Who would keep her sane and offer a lifeline when she needed one?

She decided to ignore Kitty's interest for the time being. "At this point, it is too early to tell if she and your brother will suit. On the surface, two people can move in harmony because at the initial meetings, both males and females wish to present the best side of themselves. It is only months or even years into the relationship when the discovery of hidden secrets and vices become known. I am confident Kitty is intelligent enough not be

taken only by Samuel's physical attractiveness. It would behoove her to delve deeper."

"How jaded you are, Miss Radcliffe."

"I am not."

"You are a terrible liar." Nicholas slowed his steps so Noelle had no choice but to match his stride. "What makes you think poor Samuel is anything more than he appears?"

"Everyone has secrets, Mr. Pemberton." Was it her imagination or did his muscles tense ever so slightly beneath her fingers? "If I were prone to gamble, I would wager a week's salary you hold mysteries you are loath to share with the world." The warning from her ghostly visitor of the night before rang clear in her head as she looked at her companion. If she expected shock or admission in his expression, Noelle admitted to a fair amount of disappointment when his eyes remained hooded, revealing nothing.

"Interesting theory. I do not dispute your logic, but in the same vein, perhaps you also harbor untruths best kept buried within?" The teasing from earlier vanished from his voice and in its place was a soft, low purr reminiscent of a housecat. "What do you hide behind those indigo eyes?"

The shiver that began life at the base of her spine traveled through her nerve endings and brought a new, prickling awareness to her skin. She forgot to breathe when he moved his head close enough that his gentle exhalation warmed her cheek. The scent of apples and tobacco once again teased her consciousness.

"What would the world say if you were to reveal your true self, I wonder." Nicholas let go of her hand and moved away. "Would they be shocked, appalled, horrified, or maybe merely fascinated that such a buttoned-down female could harbor such a thing?"

"I have no idea what you mean." Noelle shook her head, determined to put him and his guessing from her mind. She quickened her steps on the walkway to catch him. No matter how much he annoyed, she knew her talent for talking with the departed must remain her knowledge alone. "Perhaps there are things not suited for general discussion with relatively strange men."

"There is only one way to remedy that situation, Miss Radcliffe. You must spend time with any man to understand what drives him."

"I suppose you refer to yourself?"

"If the situation warrants."

She refused to glance at him. Instead, she focused on her cousin as Kitty and Samuel paused to watch a street performer entertain a small crowd with magic tricks. "I never mentioned your name specifically, but how very arrogant of you to think so."

"No arrogance involved, merely deductive reasoning." He resumed ownership of her hand and once more drew it through the crook of his elbow. "You and I were conversing; therefore, I assume you wish to know me on a more personal level in order to ascertain my alleged secrets."

"Oh, then you confirm you hide something that torments your soul?" Her heartbeat accelerated. Would he reveal anything about a lion, or even admitting to owning one of the big cats? The ghost could have been mistaken when he said Nicholas, himself, was the feline who brought about his demise. People simply did not change into wild beasts, did they?

"My soul is perfectly intact, thank you." His eyes gleamed in the lights that dotted a nearby gazebo.

"Some deep, down urge that screams to be released lest you lose your sanity?" This

time, the tightening of his muscles was unmistakable. She looked at his profile from under her lashes. His jaw clenched. The skin at the corner of his left eye twitched.

"Every member of the human race harbors some sort of urge." Nicholas paused on the path, this time to let a young couple walking a Great Dane pass by. "What about you, Miss Radliffe? What do you long to do that will set you free?" His eyes met hers, and she once again felt trapped from the sensation of drowning as she stared into those brown depths.

She wrenched her gaze away, groaning. "Hells bells." Coming up the pathway toward them was none other than Sister Agnes Catherine.

A chuckle from Nicholas resonated within her chest. "It is a nun, Miss Radliffe, not a minion for the devil. I cannot help but wonder why the appearance of one little handmaiden of the lord causes such confliction."

"You will see." She yanked her hand away and regretted the loss of his warmth instantly. "Sister Agnes, what a happy surprise to see you this evening."

"Lying is a sin, young woman." The nun lifted a feathery gray brow. "As is contemplating fornication."

Noelle's jaw dropped. Her mouth worked until she must have resembled a fish. "I ... that is the farthest thing from my thoughts." A glance at Nicholas showed him to be just as stunned. She cleared her throat.

"You may not, but your escort is. He has the look of a man on the prowl." Her faded green eyes rested first on Nicholas then on Noelle. "I expect you to visit Father Simpkins and the confessional at the first opportunity. Your mind is already in danger of unhinging; you do not need your body to follow."

The slow burn of anger tightened Noelle's chest and flamed her cheeks. "While I thank you for your interest in my religious health, I feel I must tell you, once again, I am not Catholic, so making yet another appearance before Father Simpkins in order for him to cast out non-existent demons from me will not make my soul any cleaner." She ignored the blatant laugh from Nicholas. "And if I were to indulge in those sorts of activities you accuse me of, I can assure you it would not be with Mr. Pemberton. Enjoy the remainder of your evening, Sister."

"I may be married to the church, Noelle, but I have experienced some of the things life has to offer. The more pleasant the indulgence, the greater the need, and with that need comes big risk, and what follows the risk is not for the faint of heart. I promised your mother I would look after you, and I intend to keep that promise, whether you like it or not." The nun held her gaze for a long moment. "Things are not always as they seem. Be wary and visit the doctor for something that will help you sleep. Your cheeks are smudged with dark circles."

"Yes, sister." Noelle heaved a shuddering sigh as Sister Agnes retreated, forgetting in her relief about Nicholas's presence. "Of course this means she will be at my door bright and early tomorrow morning, regardless of my tendency for sleepless nights."

"You need something to occupy your brain in those instances, or at the very least engage in an activity that would encourage fatigue."

"Your time in my company has ended, Mr. Pemberton. Thank you for the stroll." As her cheeks heated, she stalked away from the unbearable man, intent to join her cousin, but he snaked a hand around her upper arm, halting her forward movement. "Do you require me to put my statement in different terms? I do not wish to further our

acquaintance." Her breath came in small pants, whether from her annoyance or the force of his gaze, she couldn't say.

"And I want nothing more than to know you better." The band in the gazebo struck up a lively Ragtime tune. They made a colorful splash in their red and white striped jackets. "There is a vital fact about me you need to be privy to." He pulled her to a bench on the far side of the gazebo, partially hidden by a lilac hedge in bloom. "When I find something that interests me, I will pursue it, no matter the costs or consequences."

Animated flutters filled her stomach. Noelle swallowed, suddenly wishing for liquid refreshment to wet her dry throat. "There are times when even you must learn to deal with disappointment. I am quite certain you do not always get what you want." She scooted down the length of the bench, her skirts twisting beneath her, as Nicholas advanced closer. Having no more room to flee, she stared at him with a mixture of alarm and fascination.

"Oh, I am rarely disappointed." He caressed the bare inside of her arm with the lightest of touches. "Especially when the prize in question is so unique, so rare, that no one else has anything like it."

"Then your sudden and unwarranted interest in me proves your theory wrong." Her words turned into a rasping sort of sound. She couldn't quite catch her breath as Nicholas continued his relentless assault on her skin. The shivers that covered her body had nothing to do with the chill in the air. "I am hardly rare. There are females in this very park much more suited to your attention."

He drew fairy light circles on her palm and curlicues on her wrist as his eyes darkened to the color of cherry brandy. "Ah, but then you would be the one who is wrong." He leaned close until her body pressed intimately into his side. "I find you to be an intriguing woman. You have a secret, that much is true, and I have never been a patient man, so because I wish to know what lurks beneath your semi-cold facade, I will carry on with my pursuit of you until you tire of running."

"If I choose not to play your game?" Her eyelids drooped as his fingers repeated their magic on the side of her neck with whisper soft touches.

"That is the difference between the hunter and the hunted." He brushed the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip, cupping her cheek in one palm. "The hunter is a predator at heart and will do everything in his power to bring the prey into his possession. The hunted, no matter that they have the will to run away, do not possess enough skill to outfox the predator and will eventually grow weary of the fight or flight."

His hypnotic gaze drew her closer until mere centimeters separated their faces. She felt a moment of sympathy for the antelope on the African plains. The touch of his hand, his body against hers, ignited a bonfire in her blood, as if her very cells craved his attention. "But even the most dominant hunter will come across an adversary who it simply cannot have." She stared at the slight cleft in his chin, the sensual curve of his lips, wondered what his kiss would taste like. Noelle could discern every individual piece of stubble on his jaw line and itched to know if it would sting against her hand. "Thus it will go hungry."

Nicholas brushed his lips over hers with the softness of butterfly wings. "Perhaps for a time, but his hunger for that particular prey only grows more powerful until eventually, when the predator does catch the elusive objective, he allows his baser instincts to take full control with so much abandon and passion, the prey has no choice but to submit to

his will."

As though her bones melted into liquid from the heat force in her body, she slumped against the back of the bench, not caring that the hard wood dug into her skin. "Not without a fight." When he nibbled a hot path on the underside of her jaw, she emitted a tiny sigh. "Even though the lesser species is cornered, it will not give up without a battle." Rivers of molten fire coursed through her veins, filled every recess, to pulse between her thighs with enough strength to steal her remaining breath.

"Yes, but the stronger one will always win, and he will always take what he wants." His eyes bore straight into hers as if he searched her soul for answers she had no questions for. "And in that final moment, between surrender and domination, an understanding passes between the two." His fingers traced each of her ribs and Noelle could feel the heat of his hands warm her breasts. She pressed closer, ached to feel his touch on such an intimate part of her, but his hand stilled, his gaze all-consuming.

"Please..." She broke off and sank her teeth into her bottom lip, refusing to beg, denying him the satisfaction.

"The predator does what he is born to do, and the prey does the same. One will live, and one must die. This is how every being in the world operates, moves in an eternal dance." Without warning, he pulled away, retreated to the opposite end of the bench with an unreadable expression on his face, and then finally scrambled unsteadily to his feet. "So, in rebuttal of your statement, Miss Radcliffe, I intend to further my acquaintance with you in the coming days." He touched a finger to the brim of his bowler hat and melted into a stream of people who strolled the walkway.

Noelle stared after him, glad for the hedge that hid her from prying eyes. Not only did her face burn, the rest of her body was drenched with sweat as if she'd awoken from a particularly vivid dream. As her breathing returned to normal, she blew out a breath. She could remember his every touch on her skin, every inflection of his voice, every subtle scent of his shaving soap.

Except it was not a dream. The reality of the man could never compare to any specter she could envision. She closed her eyes. Images of lions and Nicholas danced across her mind's eye. Were they intertwined? Was he actually a feral beast capable of killing? Flashes of her earlier dream haunted her. Did he threaten innocent lives?

She had no evidence, but she did know one thing. Nicholas Pemberton stalked her, and she needed to decide if she would be his willing prey.

Chapter Six

"You are certain Miss Radcliffe will be at the markets this morning?" Ever since the previous evening, Nicholas had been obsessed with Noelle. He meant their interaction at the park to be a mild flirtation, not an introduction to seduction.

Sam frowned as he sipped from a coffee cup. "When I spoke with Miss Hamilton regarding their plans for the day, she told me Noelle always shops the markets on Sunday mornings. However, you are more than welcome to join Kitty and me for brunch. There is no need to go haring off through the city to badger and bedevil the woman."

What he wanted to do with Noelle did not fall into either category. Nicholas growled, annoyed at the woman's ability to rattle him. "Enjoy your morning, brother. I know I will."

"Try to refrain from causing a scene. There is not time in my schedule for putting up the funds for your release from jail. O'Doud is welcome to your company today."

Nicholas didn't reply. He jammed his hat on his head and slammed down the stairs, exiting into the alley between his building and the butcher shop next door. He paused, took a deep breath to calm his nerves.

Downwind of the butcher, the faint scent of blood and freshly cut meat assailed his nostrils, made sharper by his animal senses. The need to shift caught him unaware. A buzzing noise filled his ears, soft at first then raging louder to block out familiar street sounds. A faint red haze passed over his vision until his fingers clenched into fists. Saliva sprang into his mouth, dripped from one corner as his canine teeth throbbed with pain. He wiped his lips with the fingers of one hand, noting the light sprinkling of blond fur. Three months he had been able to control it. Three months he had lived life as if he were a normal, human man. Now, with one innocent scent of raw meat, the urge gripped him, refused to let go. Throwing a hand against the rough, brick wall, he concentrated on the texture beneath his palm and the other hand pressed against his stomach.

"Damnation." Concentrating, Nicholas took deep, steady breaths, willing the terrible, mind-scrambling tendency to pass. The veil lifted and exhaustion swept in to take the place of the need to shift. He glanced up at one of the second floor windows, debated the merits of returning to the apartment and throwing himself on the mercy of his brother. Maybe Samuel was correct after all. He, Nicholas, had to no right to move freely through the general public while his affliction was obviously still a threat. Perhaps he should be murdered in cold blood. That was the only way to put an end to his killing potential with any kind of certainty.

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. His death would solve nothing, and would land Sam into trouble with O'Doud. He doubted his brother could actually point a gun at him anyway. He wrenched away from the wall as his sense of well-being returned, inch by skittering, wobbly inch. The thirst for blood lifted. Nicholas blew out a relieved breath and set his sights on finding Noelle. Ironically, she would be the distraction he needed from the call to shift, but what would he do to banish *her* from his thoughts.

* * * *

The Indianapolis City Market teemed with color, crowds, and noise. Nicholas kept to the perimeter of the warehouse-style building, ducking in and out of various stalls. He'd already nosed through the collection of vendors situated outside. No sign of Noelle. Hell, it was a pointless search. Older women clad in dark blacks, browns while younger women, and girls wore whites and ivory dress, all with the same tired, crumpled hats on upswept hair filled the aisles. Was there any individuality in the world? As he strolled through a large group of German immigrants hawking sweet, roasted nuts, he spotted a familiar tall silhouette. Nicholas's stomach dropped.

O'Doud.

The officer moved slightly, revealing a woman in profile. Nicholas stopped abruptly and stood rooted to the concrete floor, much to the chagrin of the men walking behind him. O'Doud and Noelle. Together. How did that happen, and why? What game did O'Doud play now? His mind swirled. Not an ideal turn of events. It was imperative he find out why O'Doud talked to Noelle. Her questions from the previous evening rang clear in his ears, and if the law enforcement man got wind of her premonitions and theories, O'Doud would lean harder on him and his brother. A plan was required, and fast.

With a scan of the stalls nearest him, Nicholas dashed over to one and bought a bouquet of lavender dotted with a few white tulips. He lifted the flowers to his nose, inhaling. The fresh floral offering put him in mind of Noelle. His gaze travelled to her, but this time, she met his eyes. He could see the dark blue of her irises across the crowded space as if he stood close by. Nicholas tightened his grip on the paper-wrapped bundle, took a step forward before stopping again. O'Doud turned toward Noelle and offered her a bit of pink fluff from a red and white striped box. She accepted the gift then popped it into her mouth. A smile parted her lips, a giggle escaping when the confection stuck to her cheek. O'Doud wiped dabbed at her face with a handkerchief.

Jealousy burned in his chest as he watched them. What right did O'Doud have to pretend such an intimate acquaintance with her? Another thought slammed into him. What if O'Doud *did* previously know her and courted her even now? He shook off the distasteful thought. What difference did it make who the woman talked to in a public market? Nicholas did not own her. Hell, he doubted if he'd be able to get close to her after the antics of last night, but he'd be damned if he'd let O'Doud have her. Annoyed with himself for dithering as if he were an elderly spinster picking out buttons, Nicholas squared his shoulders and strode forward until he reached the stall where the two talked in low tones.

"Imagine my great fortune when I entered the Market this morning and find not one, but two, esteemed acquaintances." He deliberately attempted to keep a light note in his voice. Noelle's sharp gaze on his face told him he wasn't successful. He presented the bouquet to her. "As soon as I saw these, they reminded me of you. I hope they will grace your dining table, Miss Radliffe." He took in her smart hat with a rakish peacock feather, dark skirt, and blouse of ivory lace with a handsome emerald brooch at her throat. He wondered how an apothecary's assistant could have afforded such a bauble. Nicholas looked closer. As well as the matching ear bobs. Did her relationship with O'Doud go deeper than he first suspected? Over his dead body. "Or, if I may make the bold suggestion, perhaps you'll brighten your bedroom with the bouquet and perhaps think of me with fondness?"

"Thank you, Mr. Pemberton. This is quite an unselfish gesture, and not at all like what I have heard of your reputation." Her fingers brushed his as he handed off the flowers. A small tremor passed between them. "I am suspicious as to your intent." Despite her words, she lifted one of the blooms to her nose and smiled.

Seeing the flowers against the paleness of her cheek created a stab of lust so strong in his gut, he almost double over. "I have no ulterior motive other than to recognize a beautiful woman with an equally beautiful floral arrangement." Conscious of O'Doud's eyes on him, Nicholas turned slightly to acknowledge him, frowning at his official, somber uniform. "Shopping this morning, O'Doud? Searching for a special trinket for your mother?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Pemberton, I often stroll through the markets in the morning hours as part of my rounds. I have many friends here, and enjoy spending my time with them." He scratched long, slender fingers through his close-cropped beard and nodded in Noelle's direction. "It was a happy accident I ran into Noelle, quite literally. Nearly bumped the sweet woman to the floor with my lack of attention, but she has been magnanimous enough to forgive me."

"How wonderful for you." Nicholas narrowed his eyes as he dismissed the man and turned to address Noelle once more. "You must know O'Doud personally if he's allowed to call you by your first name." Renewed jealousy smoldered hot within his chest. He didn't attempt to analyze the reason, choosing instead, to think of new reasons to spend time in her company.

"Ignatius asked my permission and I gave it. If you would collect enough manners, I would give you the same favor. You only need to ask." Her eyes sparkled. "He's a very intelligent man. I am quite taken with him." Noelle smiled up at the officer. "I wouldn't say no to seeing him in a more intimate setting." Remarkably, O'Doud's neck turned pink.

"Oh, now, I am merely doing my duty to the community."

Nicholas ground his teeth at the light flirtation between them. He fully expected her to bat her eyelashes at the man. "Be that as it may, Noelle, if you would allow me, I would like to escort you around the remainder of the market."

"First, I did not give you permission to address me thus, and second, that will not be possible as I have promised Ignatius I would sample more of this creation called Fairy Floss."

She gestured toward the stall where a man in a three-piece checkered suit twirled a fork within a roundish device. The smell of caramelized sugar filled the air now that Nicholas concentrated on the scene. He must have missed it before. When the man drew the fork up, thin, shimmery strands of what looked like pink wool sparkled in the sunlight that streamed in through the high windows. The vendor popped the wad of spun sugar into a box and passed it on to an eager gawker.

Noelle's smile didn't diminish as she watched. "His name is Thomas Patton. If what he says is true, he has been entertaining the crowds at the Ringley Brother's Circus with his new invention." She turned to Nicholas. "Is it not the most fascinating thing?"

"Indeed." He gazed upon her face as she glowed in rapt attention at the candy maker. "Most fascinating." The sound of a throat clearing recalled him to the conversation. "O'Doud, it would seem you have won the hand of this lady today. Be sure to keep an eye out for criminals. I would hate for one of them to slip by you unaware." He turned to leave, but the lawman's hand on his shoulder halted his movement. His heart pounded.

Would this be the day O'Doud would accuse him, drag him out, hands bound, for all to see?

"Actually, I must return to my rounds. Perhaps you would accompany Noelle around until she finishes her shopping?" He adjusted the visor of his hat and the gold-tone eagle emblem caught the light. "It would behoove you to behave like a gentleman around the lady. I will be watching you."

As his heart quit its frantic thundering, Nicholas looked from O'Doud to Noelle. The amused sparkle in her eyes chased away the remnants of his earlier jealousy. "Have no fear, O'Doud. Despite your poor opinion of my character, I do not force myself upon women." A tiny seed of doubt sprouted to fruition inside his mind as another urge to shift tickled him. That could not be allowed to happen again.

"See that you are the picture of good behavior. I have eyes and ears all over this city and you will not go unnoticed." He dropped his hand from Nicholas' shoulder. "Noelle, duty calls, I am afraid. Do not hesitate to call upon myself or any of the capable men in my department if you feel threatened, now or at any time in Mr. Pemberton's company." He tugged on his hat's brim. "With your permission, I would like to call upon you in the coming days."

"I think that is a wonderful idea. I am anxious to hear more tales of the criminal mind. Take care, Ignatius." Her expressive eyes followed his tall form as O'Doud departed.

Nicholas took possession of her free hand and slipped it through the crook of his elbow, determined to make her forget the officer's attention. "Where else did you wish to go this morning, Miss Radcliffe? I am at your disposal for as long as you have need." A slight niggle of fear wound its way around the base of his spine. Did O'Doud talk with Noelle about Nicholas' crooked character? Had he already tainted her mind, warped her opinions? Another theory slammed into the first like a freight train derailment. Why did he care what the stubborn woman thought of him?

"Ah, then that is truly unfortunate, and a waste of your time, because I have no need for anything you could offer."

He tightened his grip when she would have pulled away. "So you say now, but I imagine a time in the near future when that notion will be reversed." He envied her easy banter with O'Doud and wished she would be the same with him, not that her acerbic wit was off-putting. Just the opposite. Nicholas accepted the challenge, and the thrill of the hunt caused his heartbeat to accelerate. "If that is how you truly feel; however, I will leave you to accomplish your shopping alone. Good day, Miss Radcliffe." Before she could form a rebuttal, he dropped her hand and strode away.

"You may address me as Noelle."

Heels echoed on the concrete floor, sharp as pistol shots. Nicholas did not stop though he allowed himself a small smile of victory. "I beg your pardon, are you talking to me?"

"Nicholas, wait." She tugged at the tail of his jacket until he obliged and turned to face her. "I said you may call me Noelle."

"Oh, then you choose to allow yourself to be seen in my company and treat me with some small level of friendship?" He focused his gaze on her lips as she took the bottom one between her teeth in what he now recognized as a nervous gesture. He swallowed a groan. "I thought you preferred O'Doud's company since he is such an upstanding

member of the community." He wouldn't make her plead for his attention, but he did intend to make some of her coolness toward him thaw. Begging could come later—for many things.

"Ignatius is a gentle soul, but..." A blush colored her cheeks.

"But?" He lifted a brow.

"He is very proper, if you must know." When a passerby knocked into her elbow, throwing her against Nicholas, her blush deepened as she struggled to regain her balance. "While I find you to be irritating and annoying by turns, you also possess interesting qualities I want to pursue."

What was this? He met her gaze; saw nothing but a twinkle in the depths. "Never say you are interested in me. I think I misunderstood, or perhaps I grow old before my time." He put a hand to his heart and assumed an exaggerated stagger, gratified to see her lush mouth curve upward with a smile. He could spend days acquainting himself with that mouth. What would those lips feel like wrapped around his—"Could you repeat your last statement?"

"For whatever reason, I want to know more *about* you, not form a romantic attachment *to* you." She narrowed her eyes and her smile vanished. "I wish to continue our discussion from last night."

So, we have returned to the ice queen.

"Which conversation would that be? I seem to remember the bulk of our time together consisted of a flirtation in the park." Slowly, with a hand at her elbow, he drew her to the opposite side of the building, out of the ebb and flow of pedestrian traffic. "If you would like to continue in the same vein, I would be more than willing to cooperate. You seemed to show an affinity toward the softer emotions then."

The only indication she heard his statement was the return of her blush. "Actually, I am more interested in our discussion regarding predators and prey." She pinned him with a frosty look. "Specifically, whether you own one of the large cats most big game hunters quest after. Panthers, tigers, or perhaps a lion or two?"

The breath whooshed out of him as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. "Why do you imply I know anything about cats, big or otherwise?" Cold fingers gripped the base of his spine and squeezed. "I have never owned a pet. Never had that particular urge before, and if I had to guess, Samuel might be allergic." He regarded her warily, went so far as to take a step back, wondering if she could guess his secret. "Did O'Doud put you up to this?" Anger swept everything else before it. "If so, you may tell him to stop sending others to do his investigation and talk with me himself."

"Ignatius has no idea I planned to talk with you. I merely wish to have my questions answered to assuage my own personal curiosity about you, but how interesting your mind immediately jumps to potential guilt."

The coolness of her gaze dissolved his anger, and in return, threw him back into the heady swirl of her emotional pools, unreadable or understandable to him. Distracting her from her cause was vital at this point. "You do not wish to talk about cats, Noelle, when there are much more interesting things we could converse about." When he attempted to pull her close, she evaded his maneuver with the ease of long practice.

"Oh, come now, Nicholas, surely you have some level of fascination for the feline species? The very independent creatures would be the perfect companion for you and your brother. Prowling around your store to keep it free from rodents, or perhaps having

free reign of the house when Samuel works his experiments?"

"Such a creature would only be in the way, I can assure you." Realizing she'd somehow wedged him in between a collection of wooden packing crates and her body, he swallowed and ran a finger beneath his suddenly too-tight collar. "There is simply no room for another inhabitant in the house." The heat from her body radiated into him, causing further discomfort, and he wished he hadn't worn such a heavy tweed jacket.

"That is such a sad outlook to life." Her voice lowered to a sultry whisper. She plucked a sprig of lavender from the bouquet, her eyes hooded. "There are some in the medical and natural-healing communities that say stroking a housecat can considerably lower a person's anxiety and fear."

"Is that right? I should pay more attention to professorial papers then." His mouth went dry as she drew the lavender down the right side of his face then did the same to the left. The sweet scent wrapped around him, holding him captive.

"The knowledge extends further than academia, Nicholas." Noelle tickled his chin with the flower, touched the plant gently to his lips with the lightest of caresses. "You should try it yourself, in the interest of science of course. Stroking the soft fur, feeling the warmth of their body next to yours, tracing each sinuous limb until they purr might soothe your nervousness." She leaned in closer until her breath warmed his lips. "I can sense your distress by your racing heart and the perspiration on your forehead. A companion would serve you well."

"Any distress you see is caused by the stifling conditions of the market, nothing more." He wanted to take her in his arms, feed into her flirtatious energy, but his limbs wouldn't obey the command of his brain, so he stood limply before her. When she grinned, her eyes lit with mysterious, feminine power. His groin stirred in response.

"A pity." She let the lavender sprig drift down his chest then at the last second tucked it into his breast pocket. He stiffened beneath her touch. "For a moment there, I thought you might harbor romantic feelings for me, or perhaps even stronger, lustful intentions." Noelle lifted her gaze to his, her eyes dark and wide from the fervor of her actions. "I would be willing to explore either."

He sagged further into the stack of crates. His heart hammered, his blood rushed in his ears. The uppermost containers wiggled. Nicholas wondered if they would fall, but kept his focus on the woman in front of him, which was not a difficult feat. She exuded sexual energy so strong he could feel it in his own body, and what was the more astonishing fact, she knew it. Her every action was geared to eliciting a reaction from him. "I would be willing to—" He gawked when she pressed into him farther, close enough that the paper wrapping of her floral bouquet crackled between them.

"Think about what I said." She brushed her lips across his with such feather light care he might have imagined the action except for the burning sensation she left behind. Noelle pulled away. "Acquire a cat, Mr. Pemberton, in any way you can. If you cannot find one in the streets, perhaps turn your attention inside yourself." She patted his cheek with her free hand. "I will be in touch with you, make no mistake, and I will chip away at your secret until you reveal it to me, intentionally, or..." She let one finger drift along his bottom lip. He shook until he feared he'd break apart. "...under persuasion. It is your choice."

Liquid heat coursed through his veins. The hair at the back of his neck rose and prickled. His brain seemed to be the consistency of oatmeal. He watched the gentle sway

of her hips as she walked away from him, melting into the crowded market, leaving behind the strong scent of lavender. With a sigh, Nicholas collapsed into the crates, only then knowing the foolishness of his actions. The topmost wooden containers toppled down onto him, and he comprehended two undeniable facts.

Noelle Radliffe could match him in any game of seduction he meted out. She would not be satisfied until his soul, and any other part of him, was laid bare at her feet. He groaned and threw the closest crate to the floor. Would he have the strength of body and soundness of mind to outsmart her, and if he did not, what would happen then?

Chapter Seven

Noelle turned over and snuggled into the blankets, tucking the bedclothes under her chin. Just a few more minutes then she'd drag herself from her cozy nest. In the moment between full wakefulness and drowsy slumber, she heard a noise. It was annoying enough to grate on her nerves and jar her brain with its faint high-pitched whine.

With a sigh, she pushed herself up against the pillows and cracked open one eye. A spot of shimmering air hovered at the foot of her bed, accompanied by bone chilling cold that filled every corner of the room. Forcing open the other eye, she hid under the covers until only her head above the nose was visible.

"If you want to talk, this is your only opportunity today. I have a busy schedule." The ghostly visits were becoming a nuisance instead of a quirky pastime.

"I never thought you were a liar, Noelle." The glowing bit of air slowly took on the shape of a slim female, clad in a dark dress with a ruffled white apron tied around her tiny waist. "The only pressing appointment you can think of is daydreaming about Nicholas Pemberton."

"Pardon me, but that is so far from the truth it is comical." Noelle's cheeks burned and she was glad for the blankets that hid her reaction to the scoundrel's name. "My life is the apothecary shop, and I—"

"Spare me the excuses." The specter held up a pale hand. "You might be able to fool yourself with your ramblings, but I have seen more than enough interaction between the two of you to draw my own conclusions."

"What do you mean?" Chills danced over Noelle's spine. "Do you, ah, accompany me throughout my daily chores?" She watched as the ghost draped herself over the end of her bed, letting her head and feet dangle off the sides. "For that matter, who are you?"

Remarkably, the other worldly visitor laughed. "Before I became a ghost, I thought human beings were intelligent, but it wasn't until after I died that I knew the truth. They are among the lowest life forms on this planet, perhaps even the universe." She righted herself into a sitting position and met Noelle's gaze. "Yes, the ghosts you are responsible for have the ability to go anywhere we wish and sometimes do follow you to work or wherever."

Noelle shivered. This was not a good turn of events. "I cannot see you or them at those times."

"That is the point. I have learned more as a ghost than I ever did as a living, breathing person, but we do not always understand what it is we see. Think of it as a rather faulty crystal ball." A wide smile parted the ghost's lips. "My name is Thalia Lovelace."

"Pleased to meet you." Noelle lowered the blankets from her face. "I suppose you will now attempt to warn me of the dire fate that will befall me if I indulge in my curiosity regarding Nicholas? It seems to be quite the popular theme amongst the spirit world."

"You are partially correct." The ghost tapped her chin with a slim finger. "Perhaps I should explain my world a bit better. Only a rare segment of the human population has the unique disposition or temperament that can allow them to commune with the

deceased. You happen to be one of them and have always been attuned to our world, is this correct?"

The knot in Noelle's stomach twisted. She pressed a hand to her midsection, praying that it would go away. "Yes. Even as a child, I talked to shadows. It wasn't until later in life that I recognized that the shadows were actually ghosts who were lost." She shrugged, determined not to dwell on those events. "Oftentimes, the departed spirits were my only friends. Even now, people think I am odd."

"You are not odd. You possess a gift."

"More like a curse. My life is not an enviable one." An image of talking with a wayward spirit at the hotel dining room when she first met Nicholas sprang into her mind. "People consider me crazy at best."

"Do not fret about what they think. Life is fleeting and they will not be remembered for anything more than idle prattle. We in the spirit world are not lost. We are stuck in this plane of existence for a specific job. Mine is making certain you do not become involved with Nicholas. He is not for you."

"So everyone keeps reminding me." Noelle blew out a breath with enough force that it ruffled the strands of hair framing her face. "I do not require assistance. You are free to move on." The fact that the spectral community hung around because she needed help was disconcerting. "In fact, anyone who listens in hiding can go away. I do not need you."

Thalia's laughed reminded Noelle of a wind chime she once heard, tinkling and haunting. "Perhaps not, but we need you. In time, you will sort out the reasons, but for now, please listen to me."

"Why can Kitty not see ghosts, too?" The sudden desperation to hear the answer surprised her. She didn't want to be alone with her burden any longer. She craved understanding, like-minded companionship.

"Your cousin chose to ignore the voices at a young age. At one time, she did share your gift, but her parents sent Kitty to many doctors and professionals of science. Eventually, they convinced her she imagined the voices. Once a person neglects the gift, it will go away and the ghosts become lost in the void of eternity."

"I see." Noelle frowned. She picked at the elaborate stitching on her quilt. When she and Kitty were young girls, there was a time when their parents kept them apart while Noelle claimed she could talk to shadows. After so many times of asking why her cousin couldn't come over, she stopped mentioning the ghosts. Only years later, it had been Noelle, herself, who rekindled the relationship with her cousin. "I am glad Kitty believes me and loves me in spite of my gift."

"Be grateful for her. Without someone to keep you grounded, the spirit world will close in around you, and the demands on your time will grow so discordant, you will slowly sink into madness."

She snorted. "Are there different degrees of madness?" She threw off the bedclothes and slid from the bed. "I appreciate your empathy and I will make a concentrated effort to help you and your brethren, but I must determine why Nicholas fascinates me. Until I know this, I cannot move forward."

The ghost rose gracefully into the air. "Remember, also, that the obligations to your gift will grow as long as you are willing to help. You cannot balance everything in life, especially if the man you are interested in has paranormal troubles of his own. There will

be no accountability, and you both run the risk of being destroyed in the process of trying to escape fate."

"At least I will have lived."

* * * *

Late the next morning, Noelle pattered around the apothecary shop, filling orders and restocking the shelves. Her employer, Mr. Dramas, would be in during the afternoon to teach her the art of making libido potions. She didn't put much stock in the legitimacy of the concoctions, but admitted interest nonetheless. Imagine a man in the thralls of an herbal application so strong he chased after a woman until they ended the evening locked in a heated embrace with hearts pounding, bodies flushed with passion, and—

The bell above the door tinkled brightly into her daydream. She raised her gaze and nearly slumped over as her knees wobbled. Nicholas stared at her, a determined glint in his eye, his work apron tied around his waist, the pockets filled with scraps of paper and pencils as if he'd left his store in a hurry. Noelle wondered what demons drove the man.

"What a surprise, Mr. Pemberton." She wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt as he approached the counter. "What can I do for you? A tincture for heartburn? Perhaps a tonic for a skin ailment? Or maybe a treatment for virility?" She didn't know what it was about the man that brought out the worst in her, but she couldn't control the ugliness that came out of her mouth, almost as if she wished to verbally spar with him.

"I think we are both well beyond the formalities, Noelle." He rested his hands, palms down, on the scarred, wooden counter. "Sam is minding the store under duress, so I will say my peace and leave." He leaned a bit forward, his mouth set into a hard line. She sprang back as if he'd touched her. "You and I have unfinished business. I would like to see you again in a less public setting this time and with no unexpected guests like O'Doud."

Noelle shivered. The space between them vibrated with tension. Their last two meetings had been amidst the backdrop of other people and therefore relatively safe. What would he do if they were alone? What would she? "It is not an ideal time for me, what with Mr. Dramas attempting retirement soon, and Kitty—"

"Your cousin is perfectly content to take care of herself, and if she needs companionship, she seeks out Samuel. Have you not seen them together?"

"Not since two days ago." She frowned, absently picking at a strand of dried peppermint until it cascaded all over the counter in tiny, crunchy bits. "I do not deny there is a small amount of attraction between you and I, but being alone together is not the answer to this particular problem." She avoided his gaze. Especially since she seemed to be possessed by another entity while in his company—an entity that wanted nothing more than to run her fingers along his skin, explore the secrets his mouth held.

"A small attraction? That is much like saying the railroad was a tiny advancement in America's future." He grinned, the sure smile of a man who has won an argument. "What are you afraid of?"

"I am afraid of nothing." Noelle swallowed, wished for a glass of water as she regarded him with a new level of wariness.

"I beg to differ. I can see it in your eyes. Do you feel you might forget yourself in a moment of insanity and offer yourself to me?" His smile deepened to become that of a man on the prowl to match the intensity of his gaze. "Do you fear we might spend endless

nights wrapped in each other's embrace with nothing in common but hot friction between our bodies or the desire that burns in our blood?"

"I ... I do not think that." Noelle's throat grew drier as a fantasy played out in her mind with her and Nicholas once again intertwined in bedclothes as a breeze cooled overheated skin. "There is no indication I would allow you such liberties."

"There is every indication. You are curious. The more you think of such scandalous things, the more you want them to occur. You wish to experience every heady detail, know every lewd embrace and wicked lovemaking position until your mind and body are replete from that knowledge."

"How dare you!" She clutched a handful of her skirt in her fist and took another step back as a new thought slipped into her brain. *How many positions are there for that sort of thing?* Did he think her too inexperienced? Did it show in her demeanor? Noelle shook her head to banish such carnal musings. "If you persist with this vein of conversation, I must ask you to leave."

He slowly prowled to her side of the counter, stepping close into her space. "Tired of being pursued already?"

Tingles played havoc with her internal organs, made her nipples tighten with an awareness she didn't understand. "What if you are wrong?" She tried to ignore the pull of his gravitational force, but it was impossible endeavor. Her gaze trained on his mouth, remembered the firmness of his lips from the very brief kiss she'd given him yesterday. Noelle wrenched her eyes away to focus on his face. The knowing light in his eyes strengthened her resolve to oppose him. "How do you know *you* are the predator? What if you are the prey in this instance?" She grinned as he paled. "In fact, I think being hunted might be the best thing for you. At least it would counteract your arrogance, give you a new perspective."

Whatever obscure thought shook his confidence earlier vanished as a cocky grin emerged. "An interesting theory, but it is flawed." He brushed a hand along her cheek. She refused to show how much the brief touch affected her. He couldn't know she felt ready to burst from her skin. "Only the most experienced in any species are the hunters."

"Or is it that you cannot fathom being thrust into a subservient role? In every relationship, you have the upper hand. With your brother, at your store, in a romantic involvement. What would happen, I wonder, if someone decided to pursue you, to boss you around, to re-order your life, and demand that your body perform for their amusement? How would you react?" She cocked an eyebrow, and something within her changed in that moment.

All of her life she spent running from something, hiding who she really was, trying to be something everyone else wished her to be. Noelle stared at him in awe, not of him but of his ability to make her see herself in a different light. Meeting this one man and his mysterious life seemed to flip a switch inside her that made her want to explore what she had to offer to the world, be the woman she always dreamed she could be, the woman she dared to become. "If I were you, Nicholas, I would be very careful whom you decide to chase because sometimes the prey will turn on you, and you will realize they were not meant to be prey at all."

"Is that a challenge, Miss Radliffe?" His voice had dropped to a whisper, a stimulating rasp fraught with exciting promise. "If so, I must tell you I have never backed down from one in my life." He put his lips against her ear. His breath warmed her as if

she stepped too close to a flame. "I do not intend to let you intimidate me, and neither do I plan to run."

A thrill raced through her that fractured into tiny pinpricks of heat as she reached out a hand to touch his chest. The feeling died an early death when she glanced over his shoulder. "Good God, does the woman have no one else to bother?" What did Sister Agnes want this time? Another thought occurred to her. "She will not be pleased to see you."

"Not many people are." Nicholas half-turned. A grin parted his lips that sent tingles down Noelle's spine. "Sister Agnes is hardly a threat. If you wish, I can charm my way around your two-legged mountain and send her on her way."

"Be that as it may, if she catches me with you for the second time in as many days, the lectures will be very long indeed, not to mention she will guilt me into volunteering at the church, which I refuse to do because my heart will not be in it. Charity should never be born from coercion and neither should repentance." She bit down hard on her bottom lip as the doorknob turned. "Quick. Duck below the counter so she cannot see you."

"I will not cower—"

She clutched a handful of his shirt. "If you do this for me, I will," she rolled her eyes, "consent to have dinner with you."

"Done." Pleasure etched across his face, and his grin was wide and triumphant. "Tomorrow night." Nicholas promptly sat on the floor with his legs crossed. "At my home. No arguments and I would say clothing is optional, but I fear you are not quite ready for that amount of risque behavior."

Her cheeks warmed at the implication as the door opened. The bell tinkled and Sister Agnes came into the shop, gently closing the door behind her. "Noelle. Are you alone? I thought I saw a man's shadow before I came inside."

"Uh, you must have been mistaken, Sister, or you are seeing ghosts." She resisted the urge to glance at Nicholas. "Is there something I can help you with?" Of all the most inopportune times for the nun to show up, this was the absolute worst. Noelle was very aware of her proximity to the man on the floor. His presence beside her made an expectation of urgency grow between her thighs that she had no idea how to combat.

"I hope you are not infatuated with that man. He will cause nothing but heartbreak." Agnes clasped her hands in front of her as she looked over the tops of her half-moon spectacles. "Women who cavort with that sort of man deserve what life hands them."

Noelle's lips twitched. "What type of man are you talking about so I can be sure?"

"The kind who pursues women for the intent of bedding them, and once they take what they want, the men leave, rendering them impure, emotionally hurt, and oftentimes pregnant. That is not the life I want for you." The nun advanced to the counter. "Is that what you long for?"

"To be pregnant without the means to care for the infant? I do not need to worry about that occurrence, I can assure you." Noelle's mind wandered to the latest totals she'd read on her last statement from her bank. "In fact, if I chose to have a child right now, it would live out its life very comfortably."

"Then you wish to debase yourself with him?"

"I did not say that, exactly." She frowned as she looked at the smaller woman. "Is the point of your discussion my body or my soul? Because both are my own, and I have control over each."

The nun scoffed. "I have glimpsed the unhappiness in your eyes. You want more than life can loan, you search for answers that this world cannot give, but you must be careful." When Noelle remained silent, Sister Agnes continued. "You need a stable man who will commit to you and you alone, not use your body as his own personal plaything. Mutual respect must be present in a relationship, dear heart; otherwise, only the temptations of the flesh bind you, and oftentimes, that is not enough to build a lifetime on. Sin will not breed happiness, only sadness."

"How can you be sure this particular man will be as you say?" Her cheeks warmed, not from the nun's words, but because Nicholas slipped a hand beneath the hem of her skirt to run a fingertip along her anklebone. "You only met him for a few minutes the other evening, and does not everyone have some level of redemption inside them?"

"Ah, then we *are* talking about the same man, and no, he is not redeemable." The nun narrowed her eyes. "He, in particular, is dangerous to know. There is something deadly about him that I cannot put my finger on. It would behoove you to stay clear of him, because be forewarned, the road before you will be littered with dark turns and curves. Once you traverse such a highway, you will never again be allowed to return." She shook her head. "There can be no joyous ending with such a vile man."

What dictates that she has any authority to order my life? Noelle lifted her chin in a gesture of defiance. "This may come as a shock to you, Sister, but I may not desire a traditional future. My life thus far has hardly born the hallmark of respectfulness." Tiny shock waves wiggled over her leg as Nicholas inched up her calf, sweeping fingers lightly over her skin, warming her through the thin wool of her stockings. She swallowed and gripped the edge of the countertop. "This is a time of great change in the world. Perhaps my life will follow suit."

"You have always been quite innovative, Noelle, even with your propensity to talk with ghosts. Do not allow your fascination with the unknown and the enticing to block out all common sense. Keep the connection to the occult if you must, but I beg you to cut any association you have with this man before it is too late."

Beside her, his fingers danced at her knee, traced the edge of her stockings, the fastenings of her garters. Noelle pressed a fist to her mouth, bit down hard on a knuckle to prevent crying out and revealing his presence or her desperation. "I ... I understand your concern, Sister Agnes. I will strive to be careful and conduct my life with my eyes open and wary, but you must give me the freedom to do so."

The older woman's faded green eyes bore into hers, a shadow of what the intensity probably was. "Of course. Life is for living. I will always be available to you should things become unbearable." Without another word, the nun turned on her heel and left the shop.

Noelle sagged against the counter, waiting until the Sister was no longer visible outside the windows. "I wonder what she would have done had she known you were with me, touching me inappropriately and without my permission, I might add."

"I can venture a guess the poor woman would run out heaping curses and murmuring prayers over my head and follow it off with a proper dousing of holy water." Nicholas rose to his feet. "How should I touch you then, if my previous attempt was not correct?"

"To tell you the truth, I have no idea." She sucked in a breath at the devilish glint in his eyes. "I have had no cause to experiment." When the glint became a decided gleam, Noelle's stomach clenched. *Why did I admit such a thing?*

The earlier bravado she clung to fled in the face of his overwhelming charisma. Pinned between him and the counter, she did nothing to deflect the embrace she knew was coming. She wanted to let it happen, needed to put her raging curiosity to rest, and then perhaps she could finally oust the man from her mind and resume living her life in her accustomed way.

"Ah, then allow me to begin your education." A slow smile parted his lips, and Noelle could almost imagine him as the big cat she suspected he was. He would look thus in the African savanna with his bared teeth and bright eyes as the unconcerned gazelle ate only yards away. "Unless, of course, you would rather remain ever the curious virgin?"

Shocked again that he dared to mention sex or anything remotely related to it aloud, she planted her hands on her hips. "That is no concern of yours and does not indicate whether or not I'm curious." She never broke eye contact, felt compelled to look at him. "Knowledge is a powerful tool, so it would behoove you to teach me just enough to satisfy my questions."

"Indeed I shall, but it will only bring more questions you will not have answers for." He slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her close, but not close enough that their bodies were flush. "I guarantee you will beg me for another lesson." His other hand cupped her cheek, and he ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

Shivers jumped along her skin at his touch. With a great effort, she stifled further reaction. "And I can guarantee you this. I never beg for anything." His scent of apples and tobacco circled around her with dizzying accuracy, drawing her closer into his web. Her heartbeat accelerated as she fell into the dark pools of his eyes. He never blinked, just steadily watched her with unnerving calm. Finally, when Noelle wanted to scream or run away, he fitted his mouth to hers.

With a tiny sound of surrender, she placed her palms against his chest. Her eyes fluttered closed. His lips were not overly soft, but she felt a masculine hardness to them as they moved over hers with an excruciating leisure that frustrated her. Not knowing how to communicate her wish to deepen the kiss, she pulled away, opening her eyes.

"Obviously, your tender sensibilities can withstand a bit more forceful handling, yes?" He lifted a brow, mocking, almost daring her to protest his audacity.

"That would be nice since the last kiss cannot have been your best work." This time, she prepared for his advance and didn't stiffen in his embrace. The arm around her tightened, and he pulled her roughly against him, thigh to thigh, hip to hip, chest to chest and every point in between. The rational part of her mind screamed a warning while the irrational part wanted to explore the bulge at the front of his pants that pressed insistently into her abdomen. Noelle swallowed. "Any man can kiss chastely. Show me why Sister Agnes is so concerned for my soul in your company."

He growled, low in his throat, took her face in both of his hands, and claimed her lips in a kiss that was as different as night and day from the one previous.

No gentleness softened this embrace. Nicholas ravaged her lips with the mastery of long experience. He worried first one corner of her mouth then the other then swept the tip of his tongue along the crease, demanding she open for him. Foreign sensations coursed through her body, and the only thing she was certain of was her lips tingled and her skin felt as if it were on fire.

He nipped at her lips as if annoyed she hadn't crumbled under his assault. Noelle slipped her hands around his neck to bury her fingers into his thick hair. She followed his

example, bit lightly into his bottom lip, and sucked it into her mouth, tasting the faint essence of coffee. When he made a soft moaning noise, she smiled. In that one, unguarded moment, Nicholas took command of the kiss once more. His tongue slipped inside her mouth to stroke hers, caressed it as if he intended to make it his. She shivered. Her skin stung and she heard her blood rush in her ears.

Awash in a sea of desire and lust, Noelle responded by instinct alone. She mimicked his action. For every thrust of his tongue, she matched it, pushed him to his limits, and applied slight pressure to the back of his head to fit his lips better to hers, silky heat, softly tempting. This time, when they broke apart, it wasn't Noelle who pulled away first.

She blinked. Her breath came in small pants. She dropped her arms to her sides, and finally, she grinned. "I must say, based on that first kiss, I can see why women fall at your feet." Noelle crossed her arms over her breasts, hoping to hide her hardened nipples from his view. She couldn't allow him to see how affected she was from their shared passion.

Nicholas touched a shaking hand to his lips and returned her grin. "I would not say no if we were to move into the back room to continue this exploration."

She danced out of reach when he would have touched her again. "That is quite enough for one day." She moved quickly to the door, wrenched it open and looked pointedly at him, determined to steel herself against his hypnotic gaze. "It would seem you are destined to be disappointed."

"But I thought..."

"That I would be an easy conquest like the laundry list of other women you have charmed?" Noelle gave up the urge to stifle a laugh and let it escape instead as a twinge of power swept over her. No wonder men pursued women with a single-minded determination if this was the result. If knowledge was power then power had to be strength. She grinned, buoyed by the newfound confidence. His expression darkened, but he strode to the door, albeit with a slightly awkward gait. "It would seem you have a few things to learn about me, Mr. Pemberton. I am much smarter than you think. It will take more than a few kisses to convince me to shed my clothes, and my inhibitions, for you."

"I have never questioned your intelligence." Nicholas frowned as he backed through the doorway. "I hold you in the highest respect."

"Ah, but then you are mistaken. Sexual domination does not equal respect. Perhaps you should rethink your offensive and try again at dinner tomorrow. Good day." With quick, efficient moves, she slammed the door. Only his rapid jump saved his nose from becoming battered.

She gave him a cheery wave through the window, and when he retreated down the sidewalk and couldn't be seen any longer did she allow herself to sag against one of the shelves in a boneless heap. Noelle knew she'd made a grave mistake by allowing Nicholas to kiss her. Now, instead of being satisfied and able to banish him from her mind, he had gotten under her skin and into her blood until she craved more. Like a person suffering from opium addiction, she hungered after him. How much more of the flirting and sweet torment could she endure before she became unraveled?

And if the ghosts continued to be more demanding, what then?

Chapter Eight

"Damn it, Sam, this dinner was supposed to be between Noelle and I, by ourselves." Nicholas thrust his arms into the sleeves of a brown suit jacket, glad for the lightweight wool that would be perfect for the evening air if he chose to stroll with her after a few glasses of wine. "Changing venues and having you underfoot is not part of my plan."

"I am well aware of what you plan is, brother, and I will neither condone nor allow it." Samuel blocked the door when Nicholas would have left his bedroom. "Obviously, Noelle thought the same thing which is why she demanded dinner at the Carlisle instead of here, at a bachelor's residence, with nothing to protect her from your less than chaste intentions."

"You could be correct." In spite of the situation, a smile curled his lips. "Knowing Noelle, she has her own motives, and this recent decision was designed to vex me."

All day he'd stewed about their embrace, wondered if she'd felt the same power, barely held in check, as if it clawed his chest in order to be released. No matter that her parting words were a dressing down, her actions contradicted them. He wanted to find out how deep her feelings ran. Never had he worked so hard to pursue a female, but Noelle had engaged his brain with the hunt as well as his nether regions. It was more than a matter of how quickly he could coerce her into his bed. Now, it was truly a game of cat and mouse, with each of them attacking then feigning retreat, waiting for the next move.

He looked forward to each new campaign. Regardless of the length of the pursuit, the result would be the same. The longer it went, the sweeter the payoff would become, and whether Noelle realized it or not, she was just as invested in the game as he. Yes, she was inexperienced in the ways of male and female relations, but he suspected she would be a hellcat in the bedroom. The urge to find out what secrets hid beneath her facade of well-mannered integrity burned bright within him.

"Yes." His lips stretched wide with a grin worthy of the Cheshire cat. "I am convinced Noelle has her own motives. I will go along with her plan this time, but I refuse to jump through many more hoops for the woman."

"Just the fact you are jumping through hoops at all is proof your grasp on sanity is slipping." Samuel cleared his throat. "But, be that as it may, the ladies are waiting, and if I so much as see any ungentlemanly behavior on your part, I will drag you back here and lock you in this room. Do you understand?"

The hard glint in Sam's eye troubled him. "Where has your backbone come from? What happened to my meek and mild brother?" He pushed past his sibling, grabbed his hat, and then took the stairs at a fast clip. Samuel's footsteps rang out behind him.

"Meeting Kitty has had a beneficial effect on me."

Once on the pavement below, Nicholas gave his brother a sharp glance. On the surface, he appeared the same. Shaggy curls, face hidden behind smudged spectacles, brown eyes winking with intelligence, but now, an indefinable something lifted his shoulders, made him hold his head higher, walk taller. Confidence, perhaps? Love? *Ridiculous notion*. Love was merely a byproduct of a jumble of excess, and misplaced, emotions brought on from sharing a sexual relationship with someone. Once the initial spark from that joining evaporated, oftentimes two people deluded themselves into

thinking they were in love when, in reality, the excitement and newness of the sexual chemistry had simply worn off and they had nothing else in common, but stayed in the relationship hoping for a return of the fire.

At least Nicholas had always assumed thus. His longest liaison with a woman was a year, but even then he'd seen the fatal flaws of boredom in himself well before they parted ways. Was it possible his views on the behavior between men and women were wrong? Did he miss some vital part of life because he focused solely on the physical? He sneaked a glance at his brother, seeing again the happy glow to his skin and the tiny smile that hovered on his lips.

Damnation! Sam was in love.

Nicholas shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants and frowned as they began their jaunt over the city sidewalks. He stumbled over a few loose pebbles as a new thought intruded into the gloom that enveloped his mind. If Samuel and Kitty were to marry, what would become of him? Obviously, he could not expect his brother to perpetually care for him, keep the tendency to shift at bay or clean up the mess when the shift wouldn't stay hidden. A new wife would hardly be thrilled to know the brother-in-law required chained restraint in the basement on occasion in order to curb a killing spree.

He needed his brother more than Samuel needed a woman.

"You have nothing to say about my announcement?" Annoyance ran through Samuel's voice. "It was hard enough for me to admit out loud, let alone to you."

"I do not recall an announcement, only you are apparently lost in the wonder that is Kitty Hamilton." Nicholas' gut clenched with sudden jealousy. He refused to lose his brother to the wiles of a woman, no matter how tempting. He needed to make him stay. "You know, Sam, you have not had a single breakthrough with your experiments since her arrival in your life. I doubt I need to remind you of the seriousness of my situation."

Almost as if he were a bowl of rising dough suddenly deflated, Samuel's shoulders drooped and the happy smile fell from his face. "That fact has not escaped me. I have turned my attention to the problem, but perhaps a more diligent stance is needed." His eyes met Nicholas's with no fire, no gaiety, and more than a modicum of anger. "I have been in Kitty's company for two evenings. That will not make a difference in my research nor will it fall behind schedule. Never fear."

"Perhaps, but you must consider a life with Kitty that includes your brother, the shape shifter, looming over your head." He clapped a hand on Samuel's shoulder, frowning at the tension he felt there. A twinge of guilt pinged through his stomach, but he banished it before it could become a problem. Samuel couldn't leave. Not yet. "And you did promise to devote your life to me before she came along."

"I have no plans to discontinue my research regarding your affliction."

"Tell me how involving yourself with a woman is helping my cause." Irritation churned within him that his brother didn't fall all over himself to rush back to his laboratory. The old Samuel would have collapsed under a tiny bit of bullying.

"Tell *me* how the mindless pursuit of Noelle is helping your cause?" Samuel swung around to face Nicholas as soon as they reached the hotel. "My whole life I have been second. To granddad, to dad, and now to you, and thanks to luck or fate, you are the most demanding of the lot." Samuel jabbed a finger into Nicholas' chest. "Every one of you have made jest of my intelligence and inventions, but who do you come running to when

you have a problem?"

"If it bothered you, why did you not speak up?" He glared at Samuel, shoved him away, unused to such a strong reaction from his sibling. "If I recall the events of the last year, *you* were the one who said there had to be a solution to my illness and that *you* could find it using scientific methods."

Sam stumbled, but recovered and shoved his spectacles higher on the bridge of his nose. He flexed his arms and for the first time, Nicholas could see the boxer his brother became in the off hours. "I am working on it, which you would know if you stuck around long enough to actually listen to what I had to say instead of haring off at the first scent of female hormones in the air." He planted both palms against Nicholas' chest and shoved. "Even after I cautioned you against courting disaster, you keep managing to think with your cock like a barnyard animal not caring that the added stress to your body will undoubtedly trigger your shifting tendencies."

"This is not the time or place to discuss the issue." Nicholas blocked the punch Samuel threw his way. When Samuel refused to settle down and head-butted him instead, he threw his arms around his brother in an effort to restrict his movement, surprised by his muscled strength.

"You never want to talk about anything that does not reflect well on you." He struggled against Nicholas. "In case you were not aware, scientists have figured out the Earth revolves around the sun, not you."

"So you keep telling me." Nicholas grunted. "Damn, Samuel, what has gotten into you?" He reeled back when his brother pummeled him with both fists, the last clipping him in the chin.

"That will be quite enough!" A familiar feminine voice filled with anger distracted him for a moment. "You two are acting no better than ill-mannered dogs and should be treated as such."

Before he could do much more than blink at Noelle's sudden appearance, she emptied a water pitcher into his face while her cousin did the same to Sam. He coughed and sputtered, conscious of the passersby on the street who stared. "Very unorthodox, but an effective way to end the fight." He dug in an inner pocket of his jacket and withdrew a handkerchief. "How did you know we were out here?"

"Do not be a bigger ass than you can help." The look Noelle bestowed upon him proclaimed him two species below that animal in intelligence. "The whole dining room heard your altercation." Her lips turned down with a fierce frown, Noelle handed Kitty her pitcher. "Imagine my surprise when I peeked outside the window and saw you, quarreling like children in a school yard."

"Noelle, Kitty, I apologize for my rowdy display." Samuel wiped his face with a sleeve and shot Kitty an imploring glance. "My brother and I had a bit of a disagreement that will not be settled with a dousing of water."

"It was a childish prank and very much out of character for you." Kitty turned up her nose and flounced inside the restaurant, trailing a repentant Samuel in her wake.

Nicholas lifted a brow as he tucked his now damp handkerchief into a pocket. "Shall I prepare to listen to your lecture here, or would you like to deliver it elsewhere? The words are fairly bursting from your head." He swept an appreciative glance over her body, lingered on the low sweep of the neckline in her burgundy evening gown. The tops of her pale breasts mocked him from their unattainable perch.

"There will be no lecture." Noelle shivered and wrapped a gray shawl about her shoulders to hide her décolletage from view. "You will not learn anything from the words nor will it prevent such behavior in the future. I would rather save my energy."

"Ah, but that is the very nature of the unpredictability of the male mind." He ran the fingers of one hand through his wet hair. "Would you like to accompany me inside?"

Noelle looked through the front window. "It appears Kitty is giving Samuel his own lecture, if his sad eyes and her flushed face and wagging finger are any indication. I want no part of that conversation."

How fortuitous. Nicholas couldn't conceal his grin as he offered his arm to her. "Allow me to escort you through the streets as your defender from the shadows and deliver you to your door unharmed."

The anger drained from her face as if an invisible rag wiped her visage clean. "You are a difficult man to read, Nicholas Pemberton." She slipped her hand through his waiting crooked arm. "I wonder if you attempt to manipulate everyone you meet."

"Perhaps it is merely my charming personality and you choose to misunderstand my intentions." He felt the slight pressure of her fingers on his arm. When he leaned closer, her scent became apparent to him. *Lavender.* The same as the flowers he'd given her two days ago. "Tell me, Noelle, did you keep the bouquet from the market?"

"Oh, no, I must have set it down somewhere and lost it as I shopped." She turned her face away so the only thing he saw was the side of her straw hat, dyed a dreary black and lined with equally tired looking dove's feathers.

She lied. Nicholas knew it as he knew his own name, for she had left the market directly after their talk. *The question now that begged asking was why?* As unobtrusively as possible, he inhaled again, just to be certain. Unless she always kept lavender around her clothing, the aroma that clung to her shawl was definitely the same, and for the last couple of days that he had been in her company, Noelle's scent had not been that of the purple flower.

"A pity." His chest tightened when she turned her head to meet his gaze. "I did try to pick a bundle I thought would compliment you since women are as unique as any flower."

"The bigger disappointment is you did not try hard enough."

Was that a note of censure or challenge? "You could be right." They walked in companionable silence for a few blocks. Various couples strolled by, but Noelle only nodded to a very few and actually talked to less than that number. Nicholas didn't mind at first, but it troubled him as they neared a darkened stretch of homes, lit here and there by yellow squares of illuminated windows.

"Do you not know these people? Are they not your neighbors and acquaintances?"

"I have learned over the years it is a pointless exercise to say hello and give greetings to people who will snub you no matter what. After awhile, I do not wish to waste the time or energy required to keep up the pretense of civility."

"I am afraid I do not understand. You are not a hideous, snarling beast, are not deformed like the famous hunchback in Paris, nor is your personality unpleasant, at least to people other than myself. So why is there such a disconnection between you and the other inhabitants of this charming community?"

She drew in a shuddering sigh and blew out the breath as she paused before one of the small bungalow style homes. "How far can I trust you, Nicholas?"

"Contrary to your current low opinion, I am able to keep secrets very well." Her question surprised him. He took both of her hands in his, met her gaze with what he hoped was nothing but sincerity. "I would like to think you could trust me without question, but only you can make that decision." A buggy rattled along the street. The clip clop of the horse's hooves rang against the pavement as he waited for her reply.

"The denizens of the neighborhood seem to believe I am involved in the occult. They have no proof, and I do not talk about the odd occurrences in my life to anyone besides Kitty." She tugged one hand free but kept the other firmly in his grasp. "Kitty is my rock. She keeps me sane when my nights would ordinarily haunt me."

"I understand completely. The nocturnal hours are oftentimes the longest and loneliest." He followed her to a house tucked away from the street. Ivy climbed the front brick wall, lending a veil of camouflage to the tree-filled yard beyond. "This must be what the esteemed Sister Agnes meant when she said you talked to ghosts." For a moment, he thought she would run. The muscles in her arm tensed, and her fingers went slack in his. However, she lifted her chin a notch and urged him up the cracked walkway. "You can talk to the dead, correct?"

"Yes." The whispered word seemed to hover on the air before it dissolved altogether. "I suppose it was only a matter of time before you found out my secret." She rubbed her thumb over his knuckles. Undoubtedly, a gesture of nervousness, it caused warmth to curl in the pit of his stomach. "I have been able to talk with the deceased for as long as I can remember."

"Is the ability a family trait?" Nicholas remembered his brother's interest in the issue. "Does Kitty share your talent?"

"No. As with many things in my life, communing with ghosts and receiving the visions are my own unique gift. I have been unable to ascertain why it happens."

"How do you feel about it?" They followed the walkway around to one side of the house where Noelle unlatched a wooden gate and ushered him inside what appeared to be a small garden area.

"My fondness of the ability ebbs and flows, but since there is nothing at the present time I can do about it; I have made my peace with my talent or my curse." She hesitated as if arguing with herself. Finally, with an almost imperceptible nod, she latched the gate behind them. "I do not invite many people here. It is my private sanctuary."

"We can move indoors if you feel uncomfortable." He sat on the lone wooden bench nestled amongst a few shrubs. Vines with night flowering blooms crept up the brick wall of the house, their perfume heavy on the air. The occasional chirp and call of nocturnal animals gave the area a romantic feel that Nicholas wished to use to his advantage, but he paused with uncharacteristic vacillation. He didn't want to mar the tranquility of her garden or abuse the tentative peace between them.

"We will wait here until Kitty arrives home."

To his surprise, Noelle sat beside him on the bench and settled herself into his side. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, content for the moment to hold her close without argument, without innuendo and verbal banter, to enjoy the company of a woman without the need to spend the time in carnal pleasures. The knowledge shook him to the core so much, he wanted something to fill in the void, not willing to further analyze why he enjoyed the silence.

"Have you ever studied the stars, Noelle? Each constellation tells a story and if I

have ever learned anything from Samuel, it would be to differentiate each brilliant point of light." Gently, he removed her hat and laid it in his lap, being careful to push the hatpin into the brim. "This garden is the perfect spot for star gazing." With every breath he took, the floral scent from her hair assaulted his nose. This aroma was not lavender but lighter, subtle. He wondered what it was and would gladly spend a few months in the attempt to discover it.

"I suppose I am too busy to pay much attention to the sky." She tilted her head back as her eyes searched the heavens. The bright spots of stars reflected in her dark depths. "Entertain me for awhile."

Nicholas swallowed a groan. With her face uplifted, her lips barely parted, and her eyes wide and sparkling, Noelle appeared ready for a kiss. For the first time in his life, he refused to take advantage of a situation and give into his baser instincts. Instead, he cleared his throat and looked into the velvet sky.

"Look, just there. See those three stars in an arc? That is the belt of Orion."

"Ah, and he was a hunter, correct?" When she laid a hand on his thigh, Nicholas nearly jumped off the bench.

"Yes."

Her soft laughter blended with the night sounds. "Will you tell me the story, or shall I make up my own?"

"Forgive me." He grasped her fingers then released them just as quickly.

"Apparently, when Orion met Artemis, who was the goddess of the hunt, her brother Apollo feared for her virginity. Apollo sent Scorpius, the Scorpion, to attack Orion, who leapt into the sea to escape. Apollo then tricked his sister into shooting at a dark spot on the waves, which was actually Orion. The goddess tried to revive Orion, but Zeus killed him with a thunderbolt. Artemis placed Orion in the heavens, where he continues to be hunted by the scorpion to this very day."

"Everything comes back to the hunter and the hunted." She shivered and pulled the shawl tighter around her. "What would have happened if Artemis decided to give Orion her virginity anyway?"

"I am certain there would have been a fight in the heavens for Orion to have the honor, but in the end, they both would have been satisfied." She still looked up only this time her dark gaze captured his. He swallowed as his body temperature rose a few degrees. "Those gods and goddesses were always running around, having sex, and killing each other. Nothing more than stupid stories."

"Always hunting. Someone must be the victor." She moved her hand slightly on his leg. "Does there come a time when the hunted gives up just to see what will come next in the hopes the hunter will spare their life?"

"Perhaps." His willpower wavered. He cupped her face with his palm. "Even the hunter will have a change of heart from time to time, and only the smartest of the prey knows when to take advantage of the reprieve." Slowly, and with great care as if she were made of the most delicate china, he lowered his lips to hers.

Chapter Nine

Flutters filled Noelle's stomach at the tender kiss. He neither demanded her surrender nor encouraged any sort of response on her part. It was almost as if he weren't exactly sure what motivated the embrace and was confused by the whole event. The unexpected gentleness tugged at her heart. All too soon, Nicholas lifted his head and stared into her eyes. He uttered no words and he didn't move away, merely studied her with a faint frown on his lips and a deep furrow on his forehead.

"You seem troubled, Nicholas." She turned more fully toward him to study his face in the faint moonlight. A lock of blond hair tumbled across his forehead. She brushed it back then let her fingers linger along the curve of his jaw, felt the subtle prick of the stubble on his face. The substantial solidness of his presence gave her a level of comfort she'd not picked up from him before, and the very foreignness puzzled her. The checked power he usually exuded was still present, but now it appeared diffused into other, softer emotions. She fully expected him to purr, if human males could do such an outrageous thing. Noelle wanted to stroke him again to see if he would indeed do it. "I am sure Samuel will forgive you. Brothers have disagreements. It is what families do."

He raised a hand and pressed hers to his cheek, turning his head to kiss her palm. His lips tickled her skin, but he didn't release her. "My brother and I have had an ongoing argument about one singular event most of our lives. I sometimes believe, even though he is younger, he has more common sense and courage than I possess in my pinky finger."

Noelle wet her lips as she watched her reflection in his eyes. Would he reveal his secret? She slipped her hand from his grasp to curl it around the back of his neck, raking her fingers through his soft, collar-length hair. Would she finally know if he was the lion she saw in her dream? "Every man or woman has an opportunity to be brave. It is more a matter of when that person chooses to unleash that power."

"What of you?" He leaned his forehead against hers. "When will you choose to show the world you are not afraid?"

"Perhaps now is not the time when I meet my destiny." She touched her nose to his, disappointed he hadn't revealed enough.

"And what if your destiny has already arrived, but you are doing everything you can not to acknowledge it?" His words whispered over her cheeks, warmed her lips, as his fingers played up and down her ribcage, leaving a trail of fire everywhere he touched. "What if it means to haunt you regardless of what you wish?"

At the mention of haunting, her heart skipped a beat. The ghosts and her visions. If she could rid herself of them, would she? Did her apathy for the occult mean she would never know the joys of a normal life? Noelle cocked her head, not certain if he talked about himself or her. The lost look in his eyes played havoc with her insides until she wanted nothing more than to hold him in her arms and murmur soothing words to him to calm away his fears; she wondered, if in the process, she would relieve away hers. "If it truly is our destiny to meet these things then there is nothing we can do but encounter them and carry through." Unable to resist temptation any longer, Noelle pulled his head down and touched her lips to his with a simple kiss that left her reeling more than if their embrace had been torrid and hectic.

"Nicholas, I—"

A faint sound at the gate broke into the idyllic scene. She scooted out of his arms as questions chased through her mind, not the least of which being why the aberration from his normally dangerous personality. "I believe Kitty is home." Quickly, before she could give into the impulse and throw herself into his arms, she stood and crossed the cool grass to peek over the fence. She smiled when she saw Kitty and Samuel embrace, clearly having worked out the rocky patch in their relationship.

"This does not bode well for my future." Nicholas's voice at her ear sent tingles down her spine. "My brother will leave the nest soon."

"Let him grow up and come into his own, Mr. Pemberton, and you might find you will also change for the better."

"Perhaps I should take a page from your book. Nevertheless, I shall bid you good night." He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her fingers. "Take care, Noelle. Keep the ghosties and ghoulies at bay." With the soft creak of the gate, he took his leave, joining his brother then both of them headed down the darkened sidewalk.

Noelle sighed as unfulfilled longing gripped her. The man who passed a few moments with her in the garden was not the same man she'd known previously, and while his gentle side had been a refreshing change, she couldn't help but wistfully wish for the edgy, dark personality of Nicholas to return. The man who made her mind wander to illicit pleasure and forbidden things.

The slight touch of Kitty's hand on her shoulder brought her out of her musings with a start. "You look like a child whose favorite toy has been snatched away."

"It is nothing but wishful thinking." Noelle gave her cousin a wry smile. "There are some things that should never be explored no matter how urgent the curiosity." She unlocked the door to her bedroom and slipped inside, waiting impatiently for Kitty to join her.

"Ah, then you fully admit the elder Mr. Pemberton makes your heart race and your blood boil?" Kitty's eyes danced in the flare of the oil lamp Noelle lit at the bedside table. "If Samuel had not wrapped me around his finger so well, I might have considered stealing Nicholas away."

"From whom? I certainly do not own a claim to him, and from all outward appearances, he does not appear to seem interested in a lasting, meaningful relationship with me or any other female." In some agitation, Noelle unwrapped her shawl and flung it down on the foot of her bed. "In fact, the only thing he talks about is his prowess in the bedroom."

"Fascinating." Kitty reclined in an overstuffed chair that reposed in one the corner of the room. "Have you and he exchanged embraces? A woman can ascertain all she needs about the man from the way he kisses."

"Why the sudden interest in whether I have formed a romantic attachment?" She collapsed on the bed, content to stare at the shadow-shrouded ceiling, determined to not blush. "There is nothing between Nicholas and me except mutual annoyance and aggravation." Without realizing it, she touched the fingers of one hand to her lips, still able to feel his mouth on hers.

"The greatest relationships in the world have started with less." Kitty shot her a knowing glance. "And your face flushes every time the man is mentioned in conversation which leads me to believe you are more invested in him than you want to admit."

Noelle remained silent, opting instead to keep her gaze focused on the ceiling, anywhere but at her cousin who saw too much. Nicholas engrossed her in an organic way, much like something strange and unknown beckoned her until she learned about it. If she delved too deep into his life, what would she find and would that knowledge scare her? Was she content to only know of him on the surface level or did she wish to take all he offered at face value?

"I know you, Noelle. I know what drives you and what compels you to succeed, and you will not be content until you or he cries surrender." Kitty sat upright then drifted over to alight on the edge of the bed. "You are curious about the man, yes, but you are also inquisitive about what goes on between men and women once lust takes hold. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, I plan to seduce Samuel at the first opportunity."

"What?" Noelle rolled to her side in order to study her cousin. "You cannot be serious." Kitty's eyes sparkled in the dim light and a rosy blush stained her cheeks.

"Why not? Samuel will never initiate that sort of thing, as he believes an excess of emotions will cloud his judgment and harm his ability to perform experiment, but I think that is merely an excuse. He is shy about being intimate." A faraway expression crossed her face. "Except his kisses take my breath and leave me wanting so much more. Noelle, do you think it is possible I can be affected by a man in such a short period of time?"

"Oh, it is definitely possible." She remembered every kiss, every caress she shared with Nicholas, and swallowed a groan. "Whatever you do, please be careful or else Sister Agnes will come knocking on the door, and this time it will not be because of me."

Kitty's laugh tinkled about the room. "Does it make me seem a loose woman if I contemplate sinning with Samuel?" Her green eyes clouded with worry.

"No, cousin, it simply means you are a healthy young woman who has found a man she wishes to know on a more personal level with an eye to the future as his wife." Noelle gripped Kitty's fingers. "I wish you luck in moving into this next phase of your life. He is a wonderful match for you."

Jealousy grew in her chest and envy burned hot as a candle flame. Kitty would marry and follow Samuel wherever he went, both intelligent people who fed from each other's ideals. He would meet all of her needs and she would undoubtedly provide him with beautiful babies. Their life would be perfect and what would become of her, Noelle? Haunted by spirits, wracked with an unknown future broken only by the prospect of working in the apothecary shop. Perhaps she should take part of her fortune and travel the world. It would be a lonely existence without companionship. Her mind drifted to Nicholas. Would he want to accompany her? Stupid girl. Noelle dismissed the thought. Just imagine all the women he could find to charm in Europe or the wilds of Asia. She blew out an aggravated breath and wondered why she cared whom Nicholas chose to spend his time with.

She knew Kitty waited for a response. "Will you marry Samuel, do you think?"

"Perhaps, in time. I may even love him." Kitty removed herself from the bed. "You look fatigued. Get some rest." She smoothed tendrils of hair away from Noelle's forehead. "Regarding Nicholas. Look beyond his reputation. Ignore everything about him except the man. He might be redeemable after all, and if you are still curious, there is no better male of our acquaintance to be taught the finer points of the bedroom arts than he, and he most likely will be an attentive, exhausting lover."

"Good lord, Kitty. I am hardly a cat in heat, desperate to be serviced." Noelle shut

her eyes, pointedly ignoring her cousin. She heard Kitty leave the room. The door clicked closed behind her. Some moments later, Kitty's bedroom door shut softly down the hall. Noelle sighed, not willing to admit to herself that sliding down the dark slope of carnal pleasure with Nicholas was all she thought about since he kissed her thoroughly the other day. What would he do, what would he think of her, if she asked him to make love to her for the sole purpose of quelling her curiosity? If she went through with her harebrained plan, would she become the prey to his predator and thereby portray herself as one of the same weak-minded females he chased after, or would it make her stronger to pursue him and initiate the proceedings?

She reached over and extinguished the lamp, and lay against her pillows as her mind ran helter-skelter with questions that had no answers and her body prickled with longing.

* * * *

Moonlight and shadows played over the interior of the room, sliding silver pools over an Oriental carpet and highlighted stacks of books on a massive desk. A flash of brightness glinted off a letter opener to creep stealthily through the darkness.

Nothing moved. Nothing breathed.

Noelle moved her head back and forth on her pillow as if that slight stirring would dislodge the dream. As soon as she settled, drifting into unconsciousness once more, the vision continued, uninterrupted as if she'd never woken.

Cloying shadows swirled around her. A low growl shattered the stillness and continued in a prolonged whine filled with deadly intent, but no cat made an appearance. At the opposite end of the room, a door opened and a man's form emerged from the shadows.

Nicholas.

She wanted to call out to him, warn him of the danger she perceived, the evil she felt in the area. Her throat worked, strained, except no words came. She watched in silence, trapped within the dream.

He advanced further into the room, seemingly unaware of the menace that crouched from an undisclosed location, his back ramrod straight as his gaze warily scanned the area. Nicholas had barely crossed to the middle of the study before the cat sprang. The tan-colored beast hit him squarely in the chest and knocked him to the floor with a vicious snarl. Books and papers tumbled around them. He struggled, fought with the lion, and finally rolled to his back as the eyes of man and beast met.

Time seemed to slow down. The moonlight disappeared into a wash of clouds when thunder rattled the windows and jagged bolts of lightning streaked across the sky, throwing the combatants into sharp relief. Noelle tried again to warn him, but it was as if her vocal chords had been ripped from her throat. The lion's whiskey eyes gleamed with malevolent anger, crazy with bloodlust. No hint of fear touched Nicholas' face, only resignation and tiredness. He ineffectually pushed at the big cat's shoulders, struck the feline chest. No matter what he did, the animal didn't move.

Noelle finally found her voice. "Nicholas, watch yourself." She attempted to run toward him, but her limbs felt heavy and leaden.

He didn't appear to hear her.

One large paw lifted and the claws gleamed, sharp in the next strike of lightning. Nicholas crossed his arms over his face as the lion let out a roar that echoed through the

room. Teeth bared, eyes squinted and angry, the lion struck with precision. The sound of flesh tearing replaced the roar then a man's scream filled the night in undulating waves of agony and pain until it ended with a wet gurgle.

At the next crack of thunder, the lion's head shot up, turned, seemed to stare directly at Noelle from the haze of the dream. The blond fur was matted and dark with blood. With one last triumphant snarl, the lion twisted back to its kill.

"Nicholas!"

Her heart thundered. She sat upright with a gasp, clutching a hand to her chest and looking around her familiar room in fear. She filled her lungs with air, unable to block the images she'd seen in the vision, cringing as his dying screams rattled through her mind. Fingers shaking, she wiped sweat from her forehead then gave up the attempt when she realized her back and chest were damp anyway.

The third dream. Nicholas would die soon. I cannot let that happen.

She needed to warn him, had to tell him of his death and by a lion, no less. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, her knees buckled, but she recovered enough to grip the footboard. The coolness of the wood beneath her fingers strengthened her resolve to seek him out.

Stay safe. Noelle refused to analyze why she cared about his condition so much.

A crack of thunder made her jump. She stifled a cry, not wishing to wake Kitty. Knowing the real storm that raged outside her window must have played a big part of the dream didn't comfort her. The lion was a concern to be sure, but the fact she saw him die and had the power to prevent it in reality spurred her to action. Thankful she had fallen asleep fully clothed, Noelle sneaked to her bedroom door and eased it open, biting her bottom lip at the next clap of thunder.

Terror turned her blood to ice as she retrieved her shawl and slipped into the hall. The fear from the storm couldn't compete against the horror that ran around in an endless loop through her mind. It prickled at her consciousness until the only thing she knew with certainty was her wish to find Nicholas.

A peek at Kitty's door confirmed it remained tightly closed. Her breath came in small pants, and her throat restricted with each swallow. She just as quietly returned to her room and shut the door, being sure to throw the lock. If Kitty attempted to check on her in the wee hours of the morning, she'd find only an empty bed. Better to head off that crisis for as long as possible. Besides, Noelle was certain she would return before dawn. Just a quick trip to inform Nicholas of the dream then she would be back at home, safe and snug in her bed, warm and dry from the storm.

She must reach him before fate or something much worse caught up to him.

As Noelle wrapped the shawl around her shoulders, she slipped out the side door into the wet garden beyond. Without pausing to consider that she had no idea exactly where in the city the Pemberton brothers resided, she attempted to recall the address Kitty had rattled off when they first discussed his store. She hunched her shoulders against the driving rain, ignored the cool water that trickled down her neck. She cringed every time a new lightning strike hit close by, then hurried through the rain-darkened streets.

She had to warn Nicholas and hoped it wasn't too late to save him—from himself or the evil that followed him.

Chapter Ten

An insistent bout of pounding on the front door intruded on the late night reading Nicholas indulged in. He cocked his head and listened, but the knocking merely grew more impatient. Carefully setting aside his novel, Nicholas swung his legs out of bed, and stood with an irritated sigh. The adventures of Allan Quatermain would have to wait until he could dispose of whoever was at the door.

Grumbling, he searched the area for his slippers. They couldn't be found. Who would call at such a late hour? The one time he had the time for leisurely reading, an intruder interrupted him. Samuel left as soon as he arrived home from leaving Kitty. He intended to stay with Daniel, his mentor, for a few days to work out some issues regarding a particularly difficult invention.

A glance at the clock on the fireplace mantle showed it had just passed two in the morning. He cinched the tie of his robe around his waist and wandered through the darkened apartment toward the entryway. The knocking echoed in his brain. "One moment, please."

A mumbled bout of swearing accompanied the banging now, followed by an emphatic kick at the lower wood as a particularly loud crash of thunder broke in the near distance.

What the hell? Whoever was out there desperately wanted to get inside.

"Someone had better be dead or dying to rouse me from my reading." Nicholas wrenched open the door and was obliged to stumble back when a wet and bedraggled Noelle fell heavily into his arms. "What the hell?" Even though the words still echoed in his mind, he figured the situation warranted saying them aloud. In some aggravation, he set her aside in order to shut the door against the driving rain.

She clawed at his arm, her eyes wide and filled with wild emotion. "I must speak with you, now, immediately. There is no time to wait."

"Are you hurt, in trouble of some sort? Shall I rouse O'Doud from his warm bed to hear your declaration?" He looked her over, but other than being soaking wet and in the same gown she'd worn earlier in the evening, she didn't appear injured, only scared. "Noelle?" His heart slammed into his chest when she burst into tears, which was quite a feat while her teeth chattered. Whatever held her in its grip must be powerful. "Damn." Having no resistance against a woman's sobs, his strength dissolved into the consistency of mush.

"N ... N ... Nicholas, you must I ... I ... let me explain—" A shiver wracked her body.

"Hush, you are safe here." He debated with himself as the storm raged outside and Noelle's sobs broke the silence inside. *What to do?* The need to be chivalrous outweighed the need for propriety. His gaze drifted over her sopping clothes, the rivulets of water that dripped from her hair onto her cheeks, and made a quick decision. Since the storm caused the night air to turn chilly even though it was still in the early days of May, he'd lit the fireplace in his bedroom upon arriving home that evening. He'd take her there. "Come with me. Once you are warm, I will hear your story."

When she nodded, he grasped her hand, shocked at how cold her fingers were, and

led her down the hall. "I am compelled to inform you Sam is out for the night so there will be no one to chaperone your visit, and the only reason I am bringing you into my bedroom is for the warmth of the fire." He cleared his throat. "I have no other designs on your person, so please set your mind at ease."

Noelle sneezed and shot him a wobbly, albeit blue-lipped, grin. "I am not worried about the state of my virginity, so you needn't be either." She shivered again. "May I just say how comforting it is to know I am unable to stir you to passion in my current state?"

His own lips twitched at the blatant sarcasm in her voice. Nicholas chose to ignore it for the time being. Not for worlds would he admit just how much the wet clothes that molded so intimately to every delectable curve of her body affected him. Crossing the room, he took a folded quilt from the bottom drawer of his bureau and tossed it in her direction. "Wrap yourself with this and come sit by the fire. At least you will be warm and can partially dry out." *And stay covered, that is the key component.* If her temptations remained hidden, he could ignore the urge to run his hands over those curves.

But only slightly.

"You do not need to pander to me." One eyebrow arched. "I will say what I came here to say then I will go straight home." She jumped at the next crackle of lightning, cringed when a new boom of thunder rattled the windows. "Let me amend my statement. I will return when the storm clears." Her hands twisted in her skirt. "It was so dark on the trip over. I am afraid of thunder. My shawl caught on a bush. I did not stop to free it."

"I will locate it for you tomorrow. Even *I* cannot let you walk the streets alone." The pout on her lips caused his stomach to clench with need. "Come." He dumped a collection of books and papers from a wooden chair in the corner and drew it close to the dying fire. "Sit here and tell me what brought you through inclement weather to my doorstep." *Into the den of the devil.* Suddenly nervous, he had no idea what to do with his hands so he clasped them behind his back. Otherwise, he knew they would find their way into her hair and any point beyond that would be out of his control. In many ways, the insistent lust he felt for her was much more urgent than constantly keeping the urge to shift in check—and just as dangerous.

And he wanted to lose control.

"I dreamed of you for the third time."

"Ah, can I hope the visions were naughty?" He wished to lighten the somber mood, but his attempt at levity went unnoticed by her.

"Do not patronize me." She wiped her face with a corner of the quilt and kept her eyes on the flickering flames. "It was horrible, bloody. The sound of the animal's roars terrified me. You—" She visibly swallowed, and when she lifted her gaze to his, her pupils swallowed the indigo irises. "You died from a lion attack."

"A lion?" The breath whooshed from his body as if he received a punch to the gut. "What happened to the cat?"

Noelle gave him an emphatic nod. "The beast looked straight at me as if recognized me and intended to attack me next. I knew it was only a dream, but it felt very real. I could clearly see its teeth and claws. I woke up then and knew I needed to come here to warn you." She rose to her feet and the quilt slid off one shoulder.

He averted his eyes from the fleeting glimpse of her creamy skin, vowing not to let his body respond to her. For once in his life, he would attempt to heed Samuel's warning—if not for himself then for her.

"Nicholas, you must leave this place. It is not safe."

"Safe is a relative term." He laughed at her impassioned plea. "You fail to understand one crucial point." Nicholas lost the battle to maintain space as he closed the distance between them, came close enough to her to smell the floral scent from her hair, but didn't touch her. Not yet. "Everywhere I go, so, too does the animal. He and I are one and the same."

"What do you mean?" She backed away a few steps, her face lined with abject fear. "How is that possible?"

"If I knew how, I could fix the affliction somehow. Unfortunately, my brother and I have been radically unsuccessful in every endeavor we attempt. I can only work at taming the sickness." He hated that he was the source of her skittishness, but didn't know how to calm her after such an admission even though he really hadn't revealed much of anything. She had every right to run from the house and part of him wondered why she did not. "Samuel's most recent brainstorm includes the power of a solar eclipse. It remains to be seen if the idea will be the key to my freedom."

"And if it is not?" She turned away to stare once more at the fireplace whose flickering flames were nearly gone now. "What then? Will you allow your feral side to take over and rampage about the city, or will someone need to put you down like a rabid dog in the street?"

He flinched at her harsh words. "Does it matter as long as I am put out of my misery and innocent people are kept safe? Ask O'Doud. He already sniffs around like a bloodhound on the scent. It is only a matter of time before he finds out the truth. Samuel has installed manacles and chains in the basement if I become too ... unruly. He remains adamant that ending my life is a last resort." Nicholas moved to stand behind her, a hand on her shoulder. He felt her muscles tense beneath the fabric of the quilt. "I remain unconvinced as hope to be free slips away."

"Once you admit defeat, you have no more hope."

He followed the curve of her shoulder with one finger. "Now you know what I hide from everyone, and from myself. As time goes on, I come to more of a conclusion that I am beyond redemption. It is a very solitary, lonely place."

"That is your own stupidity at work." The perfectly arched eyebrow rose once more. "Have you exhausted your excuses, or will I be subjected to much more?"

What game did she play now? Nicholas changed tactics. "Will you tell Ignatius about me so that he may keep you safe? At least in his arms you will find no danger."

"I do not need his protection." Her voice held a note of her usual starch and it was that very stubbornness that drew him closer. "This thing with you is not my secret to tell. My only wish is that you do whatever is necessary to neutralize the problem and remain true to the man you are inside."

Every cell in his body ached to believe her. He clung to her steadfast reassurance even as a niggling hint of doubt reared its head. "And if every avenue is exhausted? What then?" Giving in to the lure, Nicholas slid his hand up the side of her neck to her hairline, massaging her scalp. His skin tingled where it touched hers. Every time his fingers encountered a hairpin, he plucked it out and let it fall to the floor with a soft clatter. When he removed the last pin, Noelle's hair cascaded down her back in thick, damp waves, and the floral aroma from it wafted up to tease his nose.

"You dig deeper, but only a fool will let such a problem defeat him." She tilted her

head back as he combed his fingers through the heavy mass. Her eyes grew darker. A hint of a smile touched her lips. "Are you a fool, Nicholas, or are you a man who refuses to let an obstacle slow you?"

"I have been called worse in my lifetime, but I am not a fool. You, my dear, have not answered my question." He twisted a strand of her hair around his finger, pleased when it curled naturally over his hand. "What of O'Doud?" He couldn't let himself be caught in her flirtations if she gave her heart to his rival, not that a woman's status had ever stopped him before. With Noelle it was different. He craved something beyond intimacy and the fact shook him to his soul.

Her shrug lifted her shoulders. The quilt slipped to the floor. "What of him? Ignatius is a wonderful man in his own right, but I do not desire him." She turned to face him, her eyes shining with hundreds of secrets. "*You* are the one who insists on talking of him. Perhaps you have ... unique and obscure tastes?"

The sound of her voice aroused him as effectively as any caress. "Hardly, especially since your very presence here is becoming an unavoidable temptation." His gaze fell to her lips as they parted in a slow, sure grin. He wanted to feel those lips on his skin. "If not Ignatius, who is it that you need? What type of man can make you leave behind the pretense of the staid and proper and can coax the wild abandon from you, make you flush with passion or writhe with waves of pleasure?"

"Do you truly want to know?"

"Yes." His heart pounded so loud he felt sure she could hear. His brother's warnings crumbled then finally blew away when Noelle untied the sash to his robe, pushed it open and pressed one hand to his bare chest. "Tell me." His throat went dry. "What kind of man can do that, I wonder?"

"You." She lifted her eyes to his. Stark need warred with fear, and Nicholas was unsure which emotion would come out the victor. "I grow weary of the game we play. I want to know what it is we talk about with innuendos and hints. I wish to have my body owned and possessed the way only a man can." Her other hand joined the first, hot against his flesh, so he could feel each individual finger on his skin like a brand. "You need to decide if you are strong enough to take me up on the challenge."

Nicholas growled low in his throat. "The challenge is the only thing that keeps me sane for the moment." He pulled her roughly into his arms so that the length of her body pressed against his. "Once you and I embark on this quest, I do not intend to stop along the way. You need to ask yourself if *you* are strong enough to survive the night."

"Why am I only entitled to one night?" She cupped her hands at the back of his head and guided him forward. "If you satisfy me, I think it only fair you give me what I want for as long as we have mutual need of each other." She touched her lips to his in the briefest of kisses and held his gaze as she did so. His common sense evaporated into the air. "It would behoove you to show me the best of what you have to offer because this is your first impression."

"You have no idea what you ask." Nicholas kissed her then, and held nothing back. He claimed her lips with an intensity that surprised him, fisted his hands in her hair, and tilted her head back to deepen the embrace. Their tongues met and fenced in a primal battle for dominance neither one wanted to surrender. When he pulled back, he was breathless, but then, so was she. "That was only a taste. There is much more to come."

"I suggest you begin the seduction without further delay." Noelle pushed the robe

from his shoulders. It fell to the floor to join the quilt, leaving him clad in only loose cotton pants that did nothing to hide the evidence of his arousal. Her eyes travelled down the length of his torso, leaving him bathed in a cold sweat, which heated when her gaze paused at the bulge in the front of those pants. Remarkably, she winked. "My seduction or yours, it makes no difference, but I did warn you that sometimes the prey will become the predator."

When she pressed a kiss to his shoulder and stroked her fingers over the breadth of his chest, Nicholas knew a moment of lightheadedness as his skin burned everywhere those velvety soft lips went. The woman had hidden her true personality all along. He couldn't help but wonder if he'd awakened something he'd be loathe to see go. He shoved the thought away in order to concentrate on the surprising woman before him.

"Ah, but if the prey has no experience in hunting down a victim, the bravado that drives it will soon flee as the danger becomes more apparent." With steady, deliberate care, he began the task of releasing the buttons at the back of her gown. The tiny fastenings offered no resistance to his nimble fingers and fell away until the dress gaped open and loose. "Seldom does the inexperienced hunter realize the danger she is in until it is much too late to save herself." With little encouragement, the damp gown slid from her shoulders. He pushed it down and over her hips until it pooled on the floor.

The swell of her breasts above the ivory satin corset quivered with each breath she took. "Perhaps she does not wish to save herself at all and wants to be claimed, over and over again." Noelle stepped calmly from the discarded gown and met his gaze with no fear. "What will the hunter do then?" Her bottom lip caught between her teeth, she untied the ribbons at her waist, and the first of two ruffled petticoats dropped.

"What instinct decrees or obliges the prey anything she desires." *So many clothes women wear. So much time wasted in getting them off.* He couldn't wait to strip away each layer.

His fingers shook as he followed her example and released the ribbons of the second petticoat, swallowing a groan when it, too, slid from her hips to the cluttered floor. Gently guiding her to the bed, he settled her on the edge in order to turn his attention to freeing her stockings from the hooks of her garters. Once the last fastening came free, he rolled the hosiery down one shapely leg. Her skin smelled of the same floral soap as her hair. He brushed at the soft skin, pleased when his touch brought out a rash of gooseflesh. Applying the same treatment to her other leg, Nicholas grinned when her breath hissed between her teeth. He discarded the stockings and placed a kiss on each knee.

Without speaking, he worked his fingers to manipulate the hooks and ribbons of the corset and soon it, too, dropped from her body with a whisper of stiff fabric and boning. The only remaining barrier that prevented him from seeing her glorious naked curves was the embroidered combinations of soft cotton. Even still, he could see her dark nipples through the undergarments, pebbled and waiting for his mouth. Unable to resist, he brushed his thumbs over the tips, continuing to grin when she uttered a tiny moan.

Finally, he broke the silence and shattered the tension. "My God, Noelle, you are quite a temptress." He felt the tremors that wracked her body, and wondered if fear was an underlying foundation for her bravery. Despite her flirtatious words, the woman was inexperienced in the bedroom. The thought added another level of heat to his already boiling blood. He would be the one to teach her the art of lovemaking. He would be the first to walk that path with her.

Did he want that responsibility?

His chest tightened with an emotion that didn't stem from lust, and it troubled him. To distract himself, he joined her on the bed, encouraged her to stretch out beside him. The tip of her tongue darted out to wet her lips leaving them glossy and oh so tempting. Nicholas swallowed a groan. "God." Shifting into a lion would never be as dangerous or satisfying as indulging in forbidden pleasures with Noelle. Splaying a hand flat against her stomach, he slipped the other beneath her head and touched his lips to hers in a kiss designed to tease. Light, flitting, barely there. She was like silk but hot as fire, and the more she squirmed from his attention, the more he wanted her—regardless of the outcome.

"No turning back from this point." He whispered the words against her breast just before he claimed one delicate bud, suckling it through the thin fabric. She arched her back with a soft cry as her eyes fluttered closed. He did the same with the other breast, his body slightly over hers.

"I do not wish to retreat." She opened her eyes wide and the indigo depths dragged him down into the sea of her desire. "I want everything you wish to give me."

Chapter Eleven

Noelle's breath came in small gasps as pleasure swirled and cart wheeled inside her body. Never had she felt the things as she did now, and each touch of his hand brought new sensations. Liquid heat gathered between her thighs in anticipation for something she'd never experienced. Every time fear sank into her brain to scream a warning, Nicholas would invoke a hundred other feelings that drowned out common sense. His ministrations blocked out the storm that raged outside. She barely registered the flashes of lighting or crashes of thunder.

She forgot everything else but him. Only he existed in her new universe.

Noelle swept her hands over his shoulders, felt the muscles tensed beneath her fingertips, and wondered if the rest of him waited to spring as well. He lay on his side, turned toward her, and indulged her need to explore. A glance into his eyes revealed passion, banked like a fire, and more than a dollop of admiration. She smiled and let her hands slide over the lean length of his torso. No excess pounds marred his physical perfection, indicating he exercised on a frequent basis. A heavy mat of dark blond hair covered his chest in a butterfly-like pattern. She leaned in and rubbed her cheek against the coarseness, sighing at the texture, inhaling the faint scent of tobacco and apples of his skin, hearing the rapid beat of his heart.

"I meant to ask you if you smoked. The smell of tobacco is a bit arousing and comforting all at once." She sat on her knees, pushing him gently to his back. "I have never seen you with a cigarette."

"On occasion, I indulge with a pipe, especially if my mind is troubled. It relaxes me, and sometimes will sidetrack my need to shift." He pulled her down until she half covered his body. "Sam hates it, so most times I take my pipe and walk around the block so that the smoke dissipates into the air. No harm, no foul."

"I see." Noelle applied herself to the task of nipping a line of tiny kisses along his jaw. His stubble scraped her skin, heightening her awareness of what she was about to do. The thought fueled her boldness. She teased the spot where his neck joined his shoulder with her tongue. Nicholas moaned and reached for her, but she shimmied away so that she sat on her knees once more. "Let me explore because every time you take command, I cannot think straight and you confuse me."

The grin that parted his lips had a touch of feline in it. "Which is the point of sex. Common sense is often never involved, merely the meeting and joining of two willing bodies based on mutual attraction."

"Perhaps." She tangled the fingers of one hand into his chest hair while the other smoothed over his abdomen. His muscles twitched as she circled his belly button with a fingertip then moved her hand lower to pause just shy of touching his member.

"You will have to loosen more of your inhibitions if you wish to continue since that part of me is a vital to what we will indulge in."

"Yes, but, I ... I have never..." Grateful when he took the initiative, she shivered as he grabbed her hand and placed it over his erection, holding her against him. "Well, this is a pleasant surprise." The solidness of that body part pleased her, and she stroked her fingers down its length. "I wondered how it could get up enough gumption to do the

deed." Noelle watched his face as she continued to manipulate him. He closed his eyes, groaning when she wrapped her fingers around him as best she could through the fabric of his pants and applied pressure. "I want to see you."

"That is easily remedied." Nicholas rolled away from her and off the bed to shuck out of his pants with a quickness she envied. Men had considerable fewer clothes to deal with. He cleared his throat. "You may look your fill, but I feel I must warn you. I have been tempted beyond the bounds of mortal men and will not tolerate many more delays."

"Nor will I." She followed him off the bed to stand before him, alternately shivering with cold and feeling as though she would burn to death as her eyes greedily devoured his naked form. "In light of that information, I suppose doing *this* would be very bad of me." She reached between their bodies to stroke him, every silky, wrinkled inch, trailing a fingernail along the underside. Her laugh died in her chest when he grasped her hands, capturing them between his own.

"Very bad. I will allow you to entice me *this* way." Nicholas curled her fingers around his flesh, wrapping his own hand over hers then moved them both up and down his length, slowly. He met her gaze, and his eyes were intense when he released her. "Now you do it." He sucked in a ragged breath as she did as instructed, and she was surprised when he grew longer and harder beneath her fingers. She looked at him, amazed by the pure bliss on his face, which made him appear younger, less anxious. Noelle swept her curled fingers along him once more, smiling at the strangled sound he finally made. "Enough, Noelle, or this game will be over before it begins."

The need to have him inside her drove her to explore further. If her simple touch gave him such pleasure, what would he feel when they were joined? What would she? The nagging doubt of how exactly they would fit together sprang into her mind. Would it hurt? Would she experience the same bliss, or was the act of sex based purely on the man's needs? She pulled away, suddenly afraid, but Nicholas would have none of her shyness.

"You are thinking instead of feeling. Do not be guided by your brain, only by your body's response." He growled, fumbled with the hooks at the front of her combinations. "The time for teasing is over." His eyes darkened until the rich, brandy color melted away to almost black. "Now I will begin your education on carnal subjects."

Noelle drew in a shuddering sigh as the last clothing barrier fell away from her body and she stood naked before him. Like the first time she met him at the apothecary shop, his gaze slid over her with agonizing slowness until her skin prickled and her nipples tightened. When she attempted to cover herself with her hands, Nicholas shook his head. He propped himself against the pillows and lifted one eyebrow.

"You are perfection. Join me, Miss Radcliffe. I have much to teach you."

Her eyes moved from his erection, standing stiff from a nest of golden curls to his face with its knowing smile. Noelle shivered, joined him on the bed, crawling up to where he reclined, her breasts jiggling with every movement. She noticed that fact didn't escape his observation either. Her grin matched his. She wanted to tease him, wished to prolong his torment. "I thought I would lie here and let you have your way w—" One moment she rested on her hands and knees, the other she lay flat on her back. Nicholas loomed above her, lines of strain marring the strong excellence of his face.

"I do not believe you, and besides, coupling means just that. It takes two, sometimes more, but I have no plans to share you with anyone. You are mine alone." He fitted his

mouth to her with such intensity it left her reeling.

She gave herself up to the wonder of his kiss. The slow, drugging movements of his lips lulled her brain into a state of contentment and peace while heat slowly consumed her body. His tongue plunged into her mouth with long, deliberate strokes as if to prepare her for what was to come. Noelle played her fingers through his hair, reveling in its thickness, and then applied herself to mimicking every movement of his mouth until they both emerged from the embrace, breathless and shaken.

Before she could form her next thought, Nicholas moved a bit farther down her body and took a nipple into his mouth. He teased the hardened bud, licked it, swirling his tongue around it. She whimpered and held his head more firmly to her breast as the flutters in her stomach increased, taking over her body to blend with shivers of excitement. When he transferred his attention to the other breast, Noelle arched her back. Need built inside her in waves she didn't understand, but she knew Nicholas was the key to unlocking the power, to releasing her from the sweet torment. His teeth grazed her nipple. She cried out at the unexpected pleasure. Moisture gathered between her legs and a mysterious pulsing began in her core to push inward sharp and insistent, with the force of the moon's tide on the waves.

As he moved away, she cried out at the loss of his warmth, but he didn't go far. His hands trailed down her body, seeking out every curve, stroking every swell of her flesh until she thought she might die from the fire he invoked. His hands kneaded her breasts, fitted their fullness to his palms, tweaking her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers as his lips worked magic over her skin, his tongue flicking along her stomach, her hips, her abdomen. He left her then to kneel between her legs, and she steeled herself for what was about to happen.

"Go ahead. I'm ready."

"Not quite, innocent. Noelle, look at me." Nicholas trailed his fingers over the soft flesh of her thighs, gently forcing them apart. When she met his gaze, he gave her a smile. "I will not lie to you and say it won't hurt, because it will, but the pain will be temporary and fleeting."

Her heart lurched at his words of reassurance. However, she had no time to dwell on them as he came back over her to place a gentle kiss on her lips. When he slipped his fingers inside her, played with the small nub of sensitized flesh of her sex, her hips arched off the bed involuntarily at the strangeness of the sensations that washed through her being. She pressed against his hand with a moan. He continued to play in her core as tiny ripples of shivering delight rose from that spot to pulse through her body, stronger and more insistent until one brief spasm echoed from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

"That's it, love, *now* you are ready for me."

Still in the throes of the foreign pleasure that left her dizzy and tired, Noelle opened her eyes briefly to see Nicholas shift himself more comfortably over her. The next moment she felt his hardness against her opening, waiting, impossibly waiting for God knew what. She wriggled her hips against him, hoping to encourage him to come more fully inside, but still he waited, watching her with darkened eyes. "Why do you wish to torment me?" Her words were scratchy as if she hadn't talked for days, and the determined glint in his eye made her shiver anew, this time with wicked anticipation.

"I want to see your reaction." He slipped a tiny bit inside then stopped again. "I want

to see the moment you are overcome with the greatest pleasure you have ever known, want to watch you as you cry out my name." Another creeping bit further until Noelle uttered a sound of frustration.

The sense of well-being she felt from the first round of contractions faded as he teased. She lifted her hips, nearly mindless from the unrelenting pressure that built steadily inside with no way to release it. "Damn it, Nicholas, I need to feel you—" Her words broke off suddenly as he thrust into her more fully, his hard length filling her. She sucked in a surprised breath; glad she could detect no trace of pain as her body adjusted around him. "That was not so bad." This time, when he moved and shoved himself all the way inside, a sharp prick of pain gripped her, prompting a cry. Tears welled in her eyes and she pushed at his shoulders.

"Steady, Noelle. It will pass." He smoothed the hair back from her forehead, kissing her eyelids, her cheeks, her chin.

She nodded and concentrated on the feelings that pulsed within, acclimated herself to the experience of him inside her most secret of places. Experimentally, she moved her hips as the pain vanished into the background as a new, stronger sensation took command. Her breath came in little gasps and she was conscious that Nicholas labored to breathe as well. He pulled slightly away. She whimpered in protest, but there was no need for regret or panic. He moved back into her in a slow, steady rhythm, much like that of rocking a baby, except there was nothing nursery-like about the blatant need he invoked in her. Noelle arched against his body in an awkward attempt to meet his thrusts, unable to grasp the concept of moving in tandem with him.

Reaching down, he slid his hands over her legs, hitching them up and around his waist. "Like this, love. Cross your ankles."

Blindly, Noelle did as he asked then was obliged to grip his shoulders when his slow, easy thrusts became more powerful, more hurried. The tiny ripples and eddies of gentle pleasure became something stronger like a beast that clawed within her to get out, be released. She needed to calm the sensations before they overtook her. Nicholas filled her to overflowing, thrusting so deeply inside, she feared she would break apart from the sheer volume of sensations assaulting her. Her body tensed, teetered on the edge of what she had no idea, but she dug her nails into the flesh of his back, urging him onward with garbled sounds ripped from her throat.

Finally, when she thought she could take no more, a curious convulsion began deep inside her core to spread out and envelope her body with a breathless floating. She cried out, a ragged, primal noise so foreign she doubted it came from her. Noelle melted into the mattress in a boneless heap as her legs slipped from around his waist. Nicholas moved once more within her before he, too, cried out his own pleasure and collapsed against her, tangled with her limbs in the sweaty sheets.

For several minutes, the only thing she knew was her pounding heart and the hammering of the blood in her ears. She heard Nicholas' heavy breathing and turned her head to press a clumsy kiss at his temple, tasting salt, smelling tobacco, and the new, sharper scent of lovemaking.

"My God."

"Disappointed?" His lips tickled her skin.

"Far from it." She moved her hand down his powerful back, felt the play of his muscles beneath his skin. With a happy sigh, Noelle nestled into the bedding as his

weight sat heavy on her chest, effectively pinning her. She didn't care, welcomed the feel of his solidness against her softer body. What she'd just shared with him was liberating, powerful. Essentially, nothing and everything had changed all at once, and she would never be the same, didn't want to be the same. In the space of a handful of explosive moments, she realized she'd left her old self behind to embrace the new, more defined version of who she could be. She'd meet the unknown possibilities that waited on the edge of tomorrow. The thought left her stunned, and the feeling of floating slowly wore away to leave her exhausted and sleepy.

She had almost drifted into slumber when Nicholas stirred and finally flopped onto his back, pulling her against his side. Noelle settled her ear against his chest and smiled. If he were indeed a big savanna cat, he would definitely be purring. "That was the singularly best thing I have ever experienced." His chuckle tickled her chest before bursting forth into the air.

"I am glad I could quench your curiosity."

Her skin warm and flushed, she smiled. "Oh, I am hardly satisfied you have taught me all you know."

"You are very astute. I have not, and neither did you cry out my name."

"Then we should repeat the actions at the earliest opportunity. After all, you did hint at different positions."

Nicholas let loose a bark of laughter and wrapped his arms more tightly about her. "Woman, you will be the death of me if you are not careful. You must understand one important fact about men—me in particular."

"Yes?" She traced an abstract pattern over his chest, giggling when his recently deflated member twitched.

"We require a refractory period, so you will need to wait between each session. Even I cannot accommodate your wish to begin again so soon."

"I will abide by your questionable rule for now because I am tired, but I do not plan to leave this house until you show me something else. Perhaps I can be on top next time."

He groaned. "Sleep first. Sex later. And I will make you this promise, however many times you want it, I will be happy to oblige."

With a sigh, Noelle let her eyes drift closed even as her mind whirled. He told her of his shape-shifting ability and she slept with him regardless of that information. Since the deed was done, a new, troubling notion inserted itself into her consciousness. Before, he held a level of fascination, but now, she feared she might be obsessed with him, and wondered what that meant for the future.

* * * *

Fog swirled and parted. Noelle's feet pounded against the rough pavement. She'd lost her shoes, but didn't remember where. The cool night air slithered over her overheated skin and brought the hair on her arms to attention. She shivered. The attempt to pull the diaphanous robe about her body failed. It dissolved under her fingers like sugar in water. Naked and shivering, she pushed through the mist. Her heart pounded so hard she feared it would burst from her chest. The rushing of her pulse in her ears alarmed her.

Why am I so afraid?

Off toward her left, an animal growled. A big animal. Noelle squinted, but couldn't see the source of the noise. Another couple of steps propelled her forward. Suddenly, the

animal sprang from the shadows to knock her to the ground. She struggled, pushed at the lion's shoulders, for she could clearly identify the cat now. It growled and she could smell the stench of rotting meat on its breath. She gagged. Fear clogged her throat as the animal lowered its head, fangs bared, golden eyes wide and feral.

"Nicholas?" Where did the blurry line between dreams and reality fade? Was he indeed a lion or wasn't he? She held the lion's gaze, choking down her terror. She refused to die not knowing the truth. "Nicholas, is that you?" The animal's muscles bunched and tensed beneath her hands. A drop of saliva dripped from a tooth to land on her forehead. Noelle shuddered in disgust. The dark mane that ringed its head quivered in the breeze.

Was it real?

The lion lifted its shaggy head as a new person appeared. Nicholas loomed over them in human form, warm and just as naked as she. He wielded a pistol and leveled its nose directly at the beast. "Nicholas?" She renewed her struggles as confusion muffled her brain. One razor sharp claw dug into her forearm. Hot pain lanced her skin. "What is happening?" If Nicholas's alter ego was indeed that of a lion, why then did they both appear before her at the same time?

He didn't seem to hear her. He reached down and grabbed a handful of the lion's mane in his fist, dragging the big cat from her body. "Now is not the time, beast. I refuse to give you control."

The lion snarled and whipped his large head back and forth violently. It freed himself of the restraining grip. Nicholas stared at the few hairs that clung to his fingers.

"Are you not the lion after all?" Noelle scrambled to her feet. She wrapped her arms around her middle, shivering in the cool air.

"He and I are one, but we constantly fight for dominance. It remains to be seen which one will win permanently." Nicholas aimed the pistol at the lion as he stared the animal down. "Be gone. I will deal with you later." He cocked the weapon. The mechanism rang out as loud as if he'd fired.

For one long, terrible moment, Noelle thought the lion would attack anyway, but with a huge roar, it turned and loped away until it vanished completely into the mist. She raised her eyes to Nicholas. A wave of relief rushed through her body and made her lightheaded in its intensity. "Which one of you is stronger?"

He shrugged. "I would like to hope my human side is, but the animal side has become problematic in recent days. At least for now, I live to fight for one more day."

"And if the beast emerges triumphant?" Icy dread dripped down her spine at the thought.

"Then I would warn you to run if you value your life."

Chapter Twelve

"What would happen if you did not open the apothecary shop this morning?" Dawn wouldn't occur for nearly half an hour yet he and Noelle had spent the better part of the night indulging in sexual fantasy or talking about everything besides themselves. Sometime during a catnap, Nicholas awoke to find her in the throes of a nightmare. He'd been at a loss of how to help. Her mumblings were vague and disconnected, that much was true, but what made his blood run cold was when she distinctly murmured the word "lion."

Did his paranormal status disturb her so much that even in her dreams she became terrified of him? For the first time in his life, he wished his sickness to disappear—not for his sake, but for hers. He didn't want her fear or pity. He wanted her respect and regard.

He shoved the thoughts aside, determined to concentrate on the woman in his bed. This was now. This was real, not some mythical, maybe scenario. "How dire would it be if a little old lady could not get an arthritis treatment for a few hours? Would a hormone-ravaged young man really fall into the depths of despair if he did not receive a love potion until the afternoon?"

"I do not mix love potions. Mr. Dramas sells libido supplements, but I have no clear proof they work. Is there a point to this inquisition?" Noelle stretched her arms over her head and the sheet slipped down to expose one nipple in a provocative strip tease worthy of any brothel in Paris. "If not, I would rather get in at least one hour of sleep before going home."

"Are you sure you wish to sleep?" Nicholas hauled her over him. Physically drained as he was from the night's escapades, his arousal sprang to life as soon as the heat of her body sank into his even though the sheet twisted around her. "If you will only grant me one hour more of your company, I can think of other ways to spend that time and it does not involve sleep."

She stared at him with a secret smile on her lips. "You, my dear Mr. Pemberton, have used me up until I am a shadow of myself." Noelle dropped a kiss on the tip of his nose. "I promised Mr. Dramas I would work at the shop today. Since you insist on furthering relations, the garden door at my house will be unlocked around midnight." Her eyes gleamed as bright as sapphires. "If you want to take advantage of the opportunity."

Guilt hit him in the gut like a well-aimed kick. He couldn't offer her a traditional relationship for the simple fact of his affliction. He always refused to become emotionally invested in any woman in order to keep them safe, and because he merely desired their bodies with no weight of commitment attached. With Noelle, he sensed it would be different. Women of her stamp expected marriage, a life together, babies. Women like Noelle deserved much better than he could hope to give. Self-loathing twisted his insides with invisible hands. Nicholas flipped her onto her back and smoothed the hair away from her forehead.

Women like Noelle needed to be kept safe from animals like him.

"I need you to understand I cannot offer you marriage."

"And I need *you* to understand I never asked you to give me that." She cupped his cheek with one hand. "I am perfectly content to leave our relationship at the physical

level, and it is quite unexpected that I have taken to sharing sexual pleasure so readily. Being married is not something I am interested in at this time."

For a brief second, his heart thumped painfully at her words, but the feeling vanished so quickly he must have imagined it. "I will not change my mind." Yet, what would he have done if she demanded it?

"Neither will I, so I would caution you against any maudlin displays of affection at this point."

He held her gaze, saw nothing but truth reflected there. He frowned, wondering at his disappointment, quelling the sudden urge to call her his mate. "It's for your own good—"

"Good Lord, Nicholas, have you turned into a worrying housewife? Unless you tell me why I should be afraid of you, this matter is settled." One eyebrow lifted. "Well?"

"My sickness is ... complicated and will keep for another time." He couldn't bring himself to reveal exactly what he was, had already let enough of his secret slip, by why the reticence? Surely, out of all the women of his acquaintance, out of all the people he'd met, she would be most likely to understand.

"It seems I have no choice but to be satisfied with that explanation for now. Now, kiss me or remove yourself from this bed." Annoyance wove through her voice. "Either way, I refuse to discuss it further."

"If anyone leaves this bed, it will be you, since it is my home." He couldn't help but grin at her shocked expression. Before she could offer a rebuttal, he claimed her lips with a string of deep, slow kisses that left her cheeks rosy and the ache inside of him renewed. "Please reconsider and stay." Nicholas mentally berated himself. He had never begged a woman for anything in his whole existence, so why, with this one, did groveling come so naturally? And why did he feel it wasn't nearly enough?

"I have obligations that do not involve you."

Her insistence on independence both troubled him and prodded his libido into reanimation. He watched her slip from the bed to pad about the room, collecting discarded clothing as she went. Nicholas desperately wished his brother were home so they could talk of new ways to banish the sickness that bound him because he knew his current, driving obsession with Noelle would not go away so soon.

What was more, he didn't want it to dim.

* * * *

Distracted by thoughts of Noelle, he was in no mood to be trifled with when Captain O'Doud sauntered into the store later that afternoon.

"I know good luck is coming my way when you deign to grace my humble establishment, O'Doud." His grip on a pencil tightened until it snapped into two pieces. Nicholas tossed the broken implement beneath the counter. "What can I do for you, Captain? Another scrap of lace or card of buttons?"

"Oh, I think I will look around if you don't mind." The melodious, cajoling Irish lilt in the lawman's voice belied his serious expression. "It does not appear you are overly busy, so I will take my time." He moved to a trunk in one corner that contained fabric remnants. "I passed Noelle earlier today on my rounds. She appeared very rushed and wearing a gown more suited to an evening social engagement than everyday work."

"Who can ascertain how the female mind works." Nicholas stood in what he hoped was a nonchalant pose, his shoulder resting against a wooden shelf behind the counter.

"Noelle does not follow traditional thinking or behavior." His eyes followed the other man as Ignatius pulled several bundles of fabric from the trunk. "Perhaps she has somewhere upscale to be."

"Interesting theory, but I somehow think you know more than you tell."

"Regarding Noelle or life in general? I have seen more than my fair share of oddities in my years." He gritted his teeth as O'Doud approached the counter.

"Depends on what your guilty conscience would like to tell me." Ignatius deposited his fabric selections onto the counter then began unrolling each one. When Nicholas didn't offer any other words, a tiny grin lifted the corners of the lawman's lips. "If I were a betting man, I would say you did indeed know the reason for Miss Radcliffe's wardrobe inconsistencies, and I would also venture to guess you were ill-bred enough to allow her to traverse through the early morning streets alone."

"Did she tell you that?" Nicholas pushed off from the shelf and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Do you think she did?" Ignatius smoothed each remnant with painstaking slowness. "Obviously, I am concerned about the welfare and safety of any young woman I come across, especially those wandering about with mussed hair and wrinkled clothes."

"If you wish to accuse me of a crime, then do it, O'Doud." Nicholas clenched his hands into fists, annoyed the officer had once again managed to taunt him into anger. "Although I must tell you, the last time I checked, engaging in a physical relationship with a willing female is not a crime in this city."

"True." O'Doud didn't look up from his task of knotting the ends of each remnant together. "However, it is a crime if you plan to use a woman's body for your own depraved acts and ditch her in a time of need or leave her in a more vulnerable state."

"I cannot think which slur I am more upset with, that you think my tastes run to the obscure or that I would do anything to harm Noelle." Nicholas stifled a growl and moved to lean a hip against the counter as the other man continued his bizarre craft project. "If you must know, I did offer to walk Noelle home, even summoned a cab, but she refused my every attempt to be a gentleman." He wanted to brag about the conquest, anger his rival, but the words wouldn't come. He owed more to Noelle's memory than that, respected her for more than just a romp in the sheets.

"Ah, then you admit you were with her overnight?" Ignatius yanked two pieces savagely between his fingers and the sound of ripping cloth erupted in the sudden silence.

"Damn." He'd fallen into O'Doud's trap. Nicholas held the captain's gaze, taken aback at the abject hostility that emanated from Ignatius. "Yes, Noelle spent the night with me, and if you have issue with that, I cannot help you. The last time I checked, you had no claim to her."

"She deserves better than you." The captain's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. He gathered up the lengths of fabric into a thick coil, crushing the material so tight his knuckles showed white.

"I agree." For once, the words Nicholas spoke to his rival were the truth. Now that he had shared something so intimate with Noelle, doubts crashed into his inherent confidence. For the first time in a long while, Nicholas questioned his motives. He wanted more than fleeting pleasure. He quickly shoved the dangerous thoughts to the back of his mind. He couldn't show weakness before O'Doud. "Noelle knew the risks involved when she consented to our liaison, but who am I to argue with what a woman

wants? There was little to no coercion on my part to get her into my bed." If he'd wished to incite O'Doud to a riot, he must have given the perfect response.

Ignatius vaulted over the counter to pin Nicholas against the bookshelf with a strength that belied his lanky frame. "If you harm so much as a hair on her head, I will make your life a nightmare." Grasping a handful of Nicholas' shirt, O'Doud spun him around and shoved him against the counter so hard the cash register pinged and the money drawer flew out in a flurry of currency and change. "If there is even a hint of a rumor that you've abused Noelle, treated her with less than the utmost respect, or sullied her name, I will personally hunt you down and make sure you meet your maker sooner than expected. To be honest, I would be doing the city a favor and my workload would be considerably lightened." Ignatius released his grip as his eyes shot twin darts of blue fire. "Do you understand?"

"Quite perfectly." Nicholas coughed in order to stave off the telltale prickles that signaled the shift. "Now, it would be in your best interest to leave this property before I do something we would both regret." He clenched his hands into fists as the slow burn of anger swirled through his insides. His vision blurred to red and his canine teeth throbbed.

"I can arrest you for threatening a member of law enforcement." O'Doud straightened the brim of his hat but retreated to the front of the counter once more.

"You could if I had threatened you, which I did not. I merely stated my opinion." Nicholas wiped at the thin film of sweat that covered his upper lip. "I suddenly find myself feeling under the weather, so if you don't mind—" He broke off when O'Doud shoved the fabric rags into his arms. "What is this?"

"Consider it a rope of sorts."

Nicholas lifted an eyebrow, which was no mean feat as a nervous tick had reappeared near his left eye. "Why give it to me? It was more valuable to my bottom line as fabric remnants. Now, it is useless." He unwound the patchwork length and held the end as if it were a poisonous snake.

"Not quite useless." The captain's lips stretched into a humorless grin. "I figured if I gave you enough rope, you would eventually hang yourself with it." He gave Nicholas a salute and turned on his heel. "I plan to be there when that happens, and I will enjoy watching you slowly die, strung up for your crimes like the dirtiest of criminals. Good day, Pemberton."

With a cry of rage, Nicholas threw the fabric to the floor, rushing over the dusty floor to the door and wrenched it open. The captain had already gained the end of the sidewalk and turned the corner. "O'Doud!" When his call didn't produce the lawman, he slammed the door closed and flipped the sign in the front window to reflect the shop as closed.

His heart pounded so hard he feared it would flop out of his chest. He needed to remain calm; otherwise, the chances of him harming someone went up exponentially. A wave of nausea swept over him, accompanied by a sharp, stinging pain in his midsection. Nicholas doubled over, a hand pressed to his stomach. Again, he wished for Samuel and hoped he would return home soon.

With itching, searing skin, he stumbled to the stairwell and tripped down to Sam's laboratory. He'd be safe here, at least for a time—unless he escaped. If he shifted into his feline form, he could potentially summon enough strength to leave the basement. His head pounded so violently he couldn't think any longer. Moving through the clutter on the

floor, Nicholas uncovered a set of manacled chains from the corner beneath the window. He sank down on an empty trunk and clamped one of the metal bracelets around his wrist. Blond, coarse fur now covered the backs of his hands. He watched as it slowly crept up one arm. Fear took possession of his soul like a dip into cold water.

Closing his eyes, he leaned his head against the cool bricks of the wall and took slow, measured breaths, letting his mind wander away from the urge to shift.

Noelle.

An image of her kissable lips and smooth curves caused his chest to tighten and his groin to stir with longing. He'd give everything he owned to be with her in that moment. While he was in her arms, he could believe he was a normal man who wasn't constantly hounded by O'Doud or haunted by a sickness he couldn't understand or control. Noelle made him want things from life he'd never contemplated before. Security, stability, and, dare he think it, fidelity to only her. But none of that would have a chance to develop if he were trapped in the body of a lion.

Sweat broke on his forehead. Nicholas felt a few drops make their way down his temples as he propped his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands. It was impossible. Tormenting himself with a future he would never obtain would accomplish nothing. He needed to apply himself to the task of ridding himself of the affliction—if not for him, then for Noelle. He couldn't live with himself if harm befell her from his hand.

Eventually, it would, just like he had harmed all the others.

A new thought shoved all others from his brain. Was it possible Noelle merely wished to pursue a physical relationship only? Would she change her mind if he were a different man? And if he were somehow successful enough to beat the sickness, would she still want him if he didn't represent danger and darkness? Did she only sleep with him because in his present state, he was relatively safe and she wouldn't need to commit a lifetime to him?

Nicholas uttered a groan that had nothing to do with his physical pain. If he couldn't have her, he wished he could forget, wanted the torment to be over so he could go back to his life as it was before he met her.

Before his life truly started. Before the obsession began.

Chapter Thirteen

Noelle glanced at Ignatius from the low table as she poured out two cups of coffee. Despite Kitty's assurances to join them, her cousin still had yet to make an appearance. She passed a cup and saucer to the lawman, lifting a brow when their fingers touched at the handoff. Did he engineer the fleeting brush, or was it an accident?

"Well, thank you for coming by to check on me. As I told you several times before, I met with no harm during my afterhours jaunt through the city. It was pure coincidence you happened to see me that morning, and would never have happened if I had stuck with my original plans." She dropped her gaze on the excuse of cutting a slice of apple spice cake for the captain. When Noelle offered him the plate, her hand shook.

"Thank you, dear." Ignatius accepted the dessert then twirled the fork between his thumb and forefinger. "For the ten years I have been defending this fair city against the criminal element I have come to pride myself on my honesty in dealing with not only the unsavory characters I meet, but also with the everyday citizens."

"I am sure the city appreciates it." Noelle sipped her coffee, concentrated on the warmth of the liquid as it slid down her throat.

"Perhaps." His eyes twinkled like lake water on a sunny day. "In the spirit of that same honesty, I am compelled to ask you this question." He placed his delicate china plate on the low table before him and laid the unused fork beside it. "Were you with Nicholas Pemberton that night by your own free will, or did he coerce you into his bed?"

"How dare you?" Noelle laid her cup and saucer on the table and blinked when the brown beverage sloshed over the brim. She shot him what she hoped was a scathing look, but the energy behind the glance faded away when she met his darkened gaze. "How could you possibly know what goes on in my life?" She gasped. "Did you arrange to have someone monitor my activities?"

"Not only yours, but those of Nicholas as well." When she began to sputter, Ignatius held up a hand, palm forward. "Sister Agnes called on me shortly after she met the two of you in the park. She was concerned for your well being, and since I already had already been watching the movements of both Pemberton brothers, I took her warning to heart."

"Why? What interest can my life be to you?" Noelle gripped the armrests of her chair and her fingernails dug into the soft cherry wood. "I make regular donations to various charities around town. That will ensure the community will overlook any ... eccentricities I may exhibit, I keep a modest house, am a law abiding citizen. What is the purpose in abusing my trust, running the risk of tainting my friendship?"

Did he know about her problems with the ghosts? Her increasingly disturbing dreams?

"Believe me when I tell you it is not my intention to irritate." Ignatius rose then maneuvered around the table to offer her his hand. "First and foremost, I am a defender of the law. It is my responsibility to keep the peace and uphold the honor of the citizens in my care, but there is an ulterior motive to my actions." A shy smile crossed his lips.

His easy demeanor alleviated her fears. Noelle couldn't help it. She returned his grin and took his hand, rising smoothly to her feet. "Will you share this wonderful epiphany, or would you rather I guess for the rest of evening?" The warmth of his hand on hers

wasn't unpleasant and conversing with a man who didn't talk with sexual innuendos was a refreshing change. A poignant memory of Nicholas' intense kisses surged to the forefront of her mind to cause her throat to fill with hot guilt.

"The reason I asked one of my contacts to discreetly follow you is because I find myself interested in you, not only as a resident of the city, but also as a woman I would like to court." He guided her to the front door, opened it with efficient movements and waited until she passed through before following her.

"Oh, Ignatius, I am flattered..." She trailed off when he pulled her hand through the crook of his bent elbow. How could she explain her position without hurting the man's enthusiasm? "...but at the present time I am not sure of my own mind let alone the state of my heart." At least that much was true. It had only been two days since she'd been with Nicholas. The dark promises of that night had yet to fade into obscurity. How could she, in good conscience, encourage the attention of another suitor when she still craved the feel of Nicholas' fingers on her skin or his lips crushed against hers?

"I am a patient man, Noelle. I can afford to wait."

She looked at his face in profile. In the light of the setting sun, he resembled a statue of one of the saints inside the church she'd glimpsed on the few visits she'd made to Father Simpkins. Confident, quiet, and seemingly at peace with his life, Ignatius attracted her on a different level than Nicholas did, and that fact puzzled her.

"Is it your curiosity regarding me as a person, or do you think I can give you additional information about Nicholas that you cannot glean by conventional investigative means?" Noelle nodded to another couple they passed, frowning when the people crossed to the opposite side of the street. "Am I really such a bad person that my reputation precedes me?" Is that how Nicholas perceived her as well? Tainted, weird?

"First, you are not a bad person." Ignatius brought them to a halt and gripped her shoulders. "Second, under no circumstances will I use you to further my investigation. I choose to spend time in your company because I feel you and I would suit. Plain and simple."

"I see." She pulled away from his grasp to continue along the sidewalk. "What is it you believe Nicholas has done?" The curiosity that burned within her chest increased. Why was the man so blessed interesting to the local police force?

"Perhaps I will tell you in time. At the present, I do not wish to distort your current image on the obscure chance you truly will continue to be with him."

Noelle's heart squeezed painfully. A future with Nicholas? How would such a thing be possible with the hoard of departed souls that followed her around like invisible dogs?

"You would wait for me to make up my mind about him?" She felt humbled and cherished all at once. Nicholas made her want to break every rule that society had, every inhibition she held herself by, but Ignatius would accept her for all her flaws, no questions asked, and he would love her because of them.

Love.

Would she and Nicholas ever realize a point in their relationship when they could share such an emotion or would what they shared always be rooted in lust and the physical? Could he tolerate her dabbling in the bizarre and the occult when she barely understood them herself, or would he condemn her for them?

Ignatius nodded. "Yes, I will. Once you realize you are a special woman who warrants more than the baser urges of the human condition, perhaps you will see me from

a different perspective." He stopped and took her hand, bringing it to his lips. "I look forward to that day."

On impulse, Noelle closed the distance between them to slip her arms around his waist. She held him close, gratified when he wrapped her in an embrace after a few seconds of hesitation. "You are a good man Ignatius. Thank you." Nestling her face against the scratchy wool of his uniform, she sighed. "You deserve much better than me."

"And you deserve much better than what you have. Trust me on that. You travel a road surrounded by darkness. When you seek the light, I will be the one holding the lantern."

As tears blurred her vision, she closed her eyes, content to be held by someone who wished to protect her. Perhaps the unraveling of her soul wouldn't be caused by the influx of strong emotions that would shake her apart; perhaps it would arrive with the soft gentleness of love and understanding.

Too bad it would come from the wrong man.

* * * *

Noelle woke with a start. Her heart beat wildly and sweat dampened her cotton nightgown to her chest. She sat up in her bed, let her gaze drift around the room. Nothing out of the ordinary. Pushing the hair off her forehead, she shivered. She'd dreamt of Nicholas with such intensity and vividness that she could swear his scent wafted through the room. Her stomach clenched at the thought. She missed him. The craving for his presence was so strong, she could cry with need.

Pathetic. Weak. Addicted. Hopeless.

Love?

With a sigh, she moved her legs over the side of the bed. Maybe a glass of warm milk would soothe her frazzled nerves and lull her into dreamland. Before she could make an inroad across the rug, the room suddenly dropped in temperature.

"Oh no, please not now." She scuttled underneath the bedclothes as a misty, amorphous shape gathered at the foot of the bed to eventually elongate and grow into the shape of a human female, this time a young woman probably no more than eighteen years old, clad in a somber, dark dress and covered with a white work apron.

"Are you ... is your name Noelle Radliffe?" Low and breathy, the ghost's voice caused Noelle's skin to prickle with gooseflesh.

"Yes, why?"

"I made the journey through the veil between our worlds to warn you."

Noelle made a sound of irritation. "Even the populations of ghosts take issue with my being with Nicholas? Since when does the world of the occult care how I spend my time?" In recent days, her spectral acquaintances had become pushy, demanding and downright annoying. As much as she wanted to help them with their problems, she couldn't summon the energy to focus on the specters until she sorted out her feelings for him.

"You would be surprised by how much we ghosts see." A grin parted the young woman's lips. "In life, I was the daughter of the butcher who resides next door to Nicholas Pemberton. Since he has not revealed his entire secret to you, I will not do that for him. You can continue to guess, but let me say your theories are spot on. Suffice it to say he contributed to my death." When Noelle opened her mouth to protest, the ghost

held up one pale hand. "I refuse to answer any questions regarding him. My time with you is limited, and I intend to carry out my mission."

"I am listening." Noelle bit her bottom lip to keep the hundreds of questions that circled around her brain from spilling out as chatter. "What, or whom, do I need to be warned of?"

"Unfortunately, we in the spirit world can only see bits and pieces sometimes. In this instance, the warning came in the form of an object. I do not know to whom it belongs to or how to locate it, but I can tell you to be wary of a walking stick. It is deadly, and can have far reaching consequences, not only in your life, but also in the life of Nicholas Pemberton as well."

A shiver passed through Noelle's body. She couldn't determine if it was due to the drop in temperature at the ghost's presence or her words. She pulled the quilt tighter around her. "First I dreamed of a dagger, now I must look for a walking stick? What will be next? A pearl necklace that strangles its owners? Perhaps a broach which has been used for countless murders? I grow weary of the ghostly games."

"Your sarcasm is misplaced, Miss Radcliffe. This is a serious matter, and one that will determine whether you stay on that side of the veil or move to this one." The ghost blinked and the smile vanished from her face. "Be vigilant. Trust only those who are close to your heart. This will be your only warning."

"Wait! I need to ask you some questions." Noelle flung the bedclothes aside, but by the time she scrambled from the bed, the ghost had faded into nothingness. Now, not only did she harbor conflicted emotions concerning two men, her life may or may not be in danger by an unknown assailant that might intend harm to her or Nicholas.

Life was nothing more than shades of gray, and not for the first time did Noelle wish she could lead a normal, uncomplicated life.

Chapter Fourteen

Saturday, May 12th, 1900, Volume 5, Series 14 regarding the life and experimentations of Nicholas Pemberton. This evening, Samuel and I intend to test the Artificial Breathing Apparatus, but have become sidetracked with what Samuel has dubbed Close Range Nocturnal Spectacles.

"Damnation, Sam. You look like a giant insect." Nicholas laid a pen down in the crease of his journal in order to study the full effect of Sam's invention.

The cap was comprised of leather and fit closely to his head, fastened beneath the chin with a few buttons on the strap, but what made the contraption unique were the eyepieces. Taken from two gutted cameras, Samuel had glued them to the brim of the leather helmet, added another piece of glass from a microscope, and fitted a piece of blue film between the lenses. The resulting mess made his brother appear like a bizarre character from a fantasy novel or a creature that haunted the most vivid of nightmares.

"Tell me again what the contraption is supposed to do." Nicholas reigned in his laughter enough to listen to the explanation.

"I have found if I look through the existing lens of the camera, through the film, the ambient light from the moon causes things in the dark to be illuminated. The microscope lens allows me to see them at a fairly close range. With this invention, we will be able to track things at night, but it will depend heavily on the fullness of the moon. Without that component, the invention is nearly worthless."

"You mean you can track *me* in the dark if I should escape." Nicholas rubbed his wrist where the skin had rubbed raw from his intentional bout of incarceration. Thankfully, Samuel arrived home late last evening to release him, otherwise; he would have gone crazy without food or water—and his thoughts as the only company. "Perhaps it is for the best. Of late, the urge to shift has become unbearable."

"That is because your attention is divided between controlling the will and satisfying your sexual appetite. You cannot have both without dire consequences." Sam removed his weird helmet and laid it carefully into a battered hatbox. "In the very near future, you must choose between sanity and Noelle. I think we both know which path you will be compelled to walk."

A wave of sadness flooded through his body as if his blood had turned to a thick, sluggish, melancholy liquid that reached every nerve ending, every pore. "What makes you certain I cannot walk that path with her?"

Samuel shot him a sharp glance. "After all of these years of living with you and your vices, it comes as quite a shock to hear you talk of contemplating a long term future with anyone, let alone a woman."

"People can change." Nicholas averted his gaze, chagrined at the bent of the conversation. He fiddled with a collection of empty test tubes and beakers, refusing to look at his brother. "Perhaps Noelle would be willing to overlook my condition."

"Put yourself in her position. Would you wish to align yourself with such a man?" Samuel put the lid on the hatbox then stowed it on one of the shelves that lined the back wall. "Face it, Nicholas, the only steady influence in your life will be me."

"Perhaps, but I have recently begun to think that is not true." The emptiness in his

chest didn't lessen. He missed Noelle. The compulsion to reveal every secret of his soul to her gripped him and wouldn't let go.

Nicholas moved to the windows and peered out at the darkened sidewalks above. No one scurried about the streets because of the lateness of the hour. He couldn't blame them. If it weren't for his brother, would he be prowling those same streets and parklands, intent to hunt his next victim? "Samuel, let me speak from the bottom of my heart." He swung around to face his sibling. "If you should choose to marry Miss Hamilton, do not put off living your life because you feel a sense of obligation to me. I would rather confess all to O'Doud than become a stumbling block to your future happiness."

"You have no cause to worry. I will not offer for Kitty if your future remains unsettled." A trace of bitterness tinged Sam's voice. "After all, isn't blood the substance that binds us?" He picked up a notebook, clutching it so tightly in his fingers that the pages bent. "It will always be the two of us."

Spikes of self-loathing shot through Nicholas's heart with the accuracy of an arrow. If he did nothing else in his life, he needed to be free of the sickness so Samuel could feel emancipated as well. "Your theory regarding the solar eclipse, does it still have merit?"

"Only time will tell. Very little is known about the energies released during any eclipse, but I feel there is a good chance your affliction can be reversed, or at the very least lessened, at the end of the month." He shrugged, and whatever negative emotions had held him captive before seemed to fall away. "The sun is an untapped source of power that could have a positive effect on the ions and molecules within the human body during times of strong eclipses. There have been reports that people feel sick or find themselves in the grip of uncharacteristic emotions during that time. Pregnant women are cautioned to stay indoors, but until scientists can study the phenomena more fully, we do not understand all its implications."

"In other words, I should not get my hopes up." Nicholas rubbed a hand over his chin, scratched his fingers in the few days' worth of stubble there. He could only imagine the image he projected, but couldn't summon enough energy to care. "Perhaps the best course of action would be to—"

"Stop such maudlin talk at once." The new voice, much deeper than Samuel's, intruded into his very private conversation.

Nicholas turned sharply in astonishment. Daniel Firstenour, Samuel's mentor and recent rival, stood in the doorway, dressed in a three-piece suit. The chain of his pocket watch stretched tight across the bulky expanse of a stomach that would run to full fat in a handful of years. Dark hair parted severely down the middle of his head, the hair gleamed with pomade under the dim lights. "What are you doing here and much more to the point, how did you gain entry?" He narrowed his eyes, not liking the smug expression on the older man's face.

"It was not a difficult problem, Nicholas, considering the street door was not locked, and my knock went unheeded. I saw the light from the basement and deducted one or both of you would be down here. A true scientist never abandons his work, even for a second." A grin creased his pudgy face and brought out a double chin. "It is unfortunate that you cannot learn to live with your sickness. Imagine the opportunities you can create within the scientific community. You should be playing it to your best advantage."

"How do you mean?" Nicholas threw a questioning glance at his brother, who shrugged and focused his own gaze on Daniel. This time, no respect was present in his

brother's eyes, only annoyance, and a hint of disgust. "Did Samuel talk to you about my affliction?"

"In passing, and I am not certain he meant to. The boy is genuinely concerned for your welfare." Daniel emitted a chuckle. The mix of a gurgle and a chirp echoed off the bricks of the basement. "You have the unique problem of well, being unique. Let the world know. Let academia study you. Who knows, perhaps someone in the field will come upon a solution."

"Why does anything in my life interest you?" Nicholas picked his way through the clutter on the floor to stop behind the main worktable. "I intend to only reveal my sickness to a few people, and even then I must swear them to secrecy. Time will tell if they understand."

"That is your own stupidity talking. The more people you tell, the more widely known you will be. There are great minds in the scientific community who would be willing to help you overcome the illness."

Nicholas snorted. "I would imagine they would be more interested in the fame such an action would garner them."

Samuel moved forward a few steps. "Not only that, but you have double crossed me before, Daniel. If anyone uncovers a solution to my brother's problem, it will be me." He threw his abused notebook onto the tabletop where it upended an empty beaker. "What is the point of your visit tonight?"

"My, my, someone has decided to be bold." Daniel stroked his goatee with a forefinger. "I am offering you a partnership of sorts. A few of my colleagues and I are in need of a new ... project, if you will, and I would like to extend our services to you. In exchange, you will allow yourself to have a battery of tests run, give interviews, etcetera. I think this is perfectly acceptable, especially if we find a solution, and such a small price to pay on your end."

"A small price?" Nicholas scoffed, outraged. "It is as steep as making a deal with the devil himself." Anger lit his chest as he stared at the man. "You used my brother and his inventions as a stepping stone for your own career on the pretense of mentoring him. That is unacceptable conduct for the gentleman you claim to be, but yet you presume I will fall at your feet because of your seemingly generous offer?"

"Nicholas, now is not the time—"

He cut Samuel's warning short with a sharp glance. "Now is the perfect time." Nicholas edged around the table until he stood directly in front of the overbearing popinjay. "Whether my affliction is resolved or not is not your concern. I refuse to endure public ridicule at the hands of the scientific community to further your career." With an effort, he resisted the urge to poke the man in his bloated stomach. "I will give you exactly one minute to remove yourself from this property. After that, you may have cause to experience my sickness in all its vivid, gory detail."

Daniel lifted an imperious brow. "Samuel, do you share your brother's contempt for my offer? You will be included in our study, of course, and all the accolades it would entail. Imagine the sudden influx of money and what you would be able to obtain with limitless funding."

For one agonizing moment, Nicholas thought Samuel would crumble under the pressure. The need for acceptance in scientific circles warred with his need to defend his brother collided on Sam's face, then he drew a deep, shuddering breath. "I will claim to

the authorities that I did not see you this night if those same people find you dead and dismembered in the park at dawn."

With a joyous whoop at his sibling's support, Nicholas grabbed Daniel's stiff collar in one hand and the waistband of his striped pants in the other and marched the man up the stairs. "One thing you must understand about the Pemberton men." He let go the waistband in favor of yanking open the door to the street. "We will always stick together. It would be in your best interest never to underestimate us." He shoved the man into the alley, slamming the door in Daniel's red and angry face.

Samuel cleared his throat from the landing. "You are aware there will be consequences to your actions."

"Undoubtedly." Nicholas turned to face his brother as pride warmed his insides. "Thank you for the support. You had a clear opportunity to rid yourself of me, but you tossed it away. I am grateful and humbled at the same time."

"I refuse to leave you to the jackals, as the case may be. We will see this through to the end, no matter what happens." His brown eyes flashed with remnants of fire. "Now, I cannot vouch for my response if you choose to go after my woman."

Nicholas smiled at his brother's attempt to change the subject and clear the emotional atmosphere. "You have no cause to be concerned. I have a feeling Noelle will be handful enough and then some." At the mention of her name, a curious tickling sensation bothered his heart. He locked the door, told Samuel goodnight, and moved to their residence while his sibling returned to his laboratory.

One overwhelming thought held him captive. If he couldn't convince Noelle to stay with him, which option should he choose for the remainder of his life: incarceration with O'Doud or infinite tests and evaluations from Daniel, which, in itself, was merely another form of captivity? It didn't matter. If Noelle were absent, anything he chose to do would pale.

How long would he be able to exist if the spark was gone? How could he convince her to stay with him once she knew exactly what he was capable of?

Chapter Fifteen

Another Sunday morning at the market, but this time Noelle didn't enjoy the experience. The crowded stalls, the colorful merchandise and the loud, boisterous talk of the vendors failed to hold her attention. She blocked out Kitty's cheerful chatter in order to concentrate on her thoughts. This time, it wasn't the constant exhaustion that prevented her brain from functioning, it was constantly thinking of a man.

Nicholas.

The mere uttering of his name in her mind undid her.

It had been four days since she had given Nicholas her virginity, and in that time, not once had he come to call on her. Not once had he sent flowers or even a note to her residence explaining his absence or even thanking her for the evening, as crass as that might have been. She expected *something*, but no word, no sighting was outside of enough. It was almost as if he had vanished. Noelle swallowed the tears that gathered at the back of her throat. She would need to live with her stupidity for the rest of her life. Sister Agnes had been correct after all. Apparently, since she'd given Nicholas what he wanted, he had no more use for her. The knowledge bruised her pride more than anything else.

She had no regrets and would not have traded the experience for a celibate life.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. The mantra circled through her brain like ponies on a loop. She angrily shoved produce into her basket. Every time his image surfaced, she ruthlessly beat it back into her subconscious. He deserved no more of her thoughts. "Bastard."

"Noelle." Kitty's voice hissed into her ear as her cousin jostled her elbow. "Whatever you are thinking about, stop, because you just said the vulgarity aloud."

"I am extremely out of sorts today." Noelle gripped the handle of her basket so tight her knuckles turned white and the woven reeds bit into her palm. She welcomed the sensation. It was a small distraction. "Kitty, have you seen Samuel in the last few days?" Perhaps the Pemberton brothers were out of town and Nicholas hadn't had a chance to call.

Pathetic. She was proud she *chose* to give away her virginity. She was still in full control of her destiny and could do what she wanted with the rest of her life. So then why couldn't she forget about Nicholas, and why did the knowledge that she didn't *want* to forget about him bother her so much?

"Sam and I went to dinner last night. The night before that, we watched a band in Brookside Park. We plan to go on a picnic later in the week. You are welcome to join us. You could use the time away. The dark circles under your eyes are concerning and not at all attractive." Kitty drew her to one side, out of the flow of pedestrian traffic. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason. I, uh, the shop's been so busy it has not afforded me time to talk with you, and I barely see you at home anymore." Her cheeks warmed under Kitty's sharp gaze. "You do not tell me how things progress between you and Samuel. I was merely curious." Her breath whooshed out of her body when she saw a tall man with blond hair walking in their direction. Upon further inspection, Noelle saw it wasn't Nicholas, just a man with similar features. A curious stinging enveloped her heart, feeding her

desperation to find out what happened to her missing lover. "Have you, um, heard any news regarding Nicholas?"

"Only that he has kept close to the house, working with Samuel on a couple of experiments and minding the store. Sam tells me his brother is in some sort of a funk." Kitty's eyes twinkled as she grinned. "Why the sudden interest in the man's whereabouts? Have you not seen the incomparable Nicholas recently?"

A denial sprang to her lips, drowned by another influx of tears. She quickly blinked them away. "No. He has been strangely absent. Not since that evening when we were supposed to have dinner with him." She couldn't bring herself to tell Kitty what really transpired between her and Nicholas, especially since he'd all but vanished. She felt it was too special, too intimate to share and wished to hoard it in her memories for a while longer.

"You are a very bad liar, Noelle."

"How do you know I am lying?" She didn't protest when her cousin grasped her wrist and dragged her through the crowds to an unoccupied table next to the food stalls. The warm, spicy scent of roasted, candied nuts from the Germans assaulted her nose and made her stomach growl. When was the last time she'd eaten?

"Sit." When Noelle did so, Kitty perched on the chair next to her. "What happened? You look like you did when our dog died years ago, and you never cry. Not even when our neighbor's heart attacked him. You always tell me crying is a waste of energy."

Noelle hesitated, but the sympathetic expression on Kitty's face crumbled her resolve to keep her indiscretion to herself. She wiped at the few tears on her cheeks and sighed. "That evening, I dreamed again of Nicholas. He fought with a lion. This time, the lion killed him. When I woke, a storm raged outside, but I knew I needed to warn him. I rushed out into the night."

"Why did you not try the telephone first, or at the very least, wake me? I would have helped. That is why I share the house, after all." For the first time, censure shadowed the depths of Kitty's eyes. "I suppose you did not think your plan through and walked the whole distance instead of hailing a cab?"

"Do not judge me, Kitty. I cannot explain my mindset once I come out of a dream."

"I am not judging. It surprises me because you are usually terrified of storms."

"True. I still do not understand how I made it through. Finding Nicholas was more important than my own safety." She plucked at her skirt, fussed with the broach at her throat, and then finally clasped her hands in her lap to stop them from shaking. "Needless to say, when I arrived at the Pemberton residence, I was wet, cold, and afraid. I warned him, though, so my conscience was clear at the time."

"I see. Did you leave once your mission was complete?"

"No." Noelle's voice dropped to a whisper even though no one could overhear their conversation amidst the cacophony of the market. "We, uh, Nicholas kissed me. After the first couple of embraces, I told him I wanted to, um, he and I became..." She helplessly drifted to a stop, sent her cousin an imploring glance.

"If you think I will let you off the hook, you are sadly mistaken." Kitty crossed her legs and smiled. "I want the whole, sordid tale."

"Fine. I gave him—" How did one tell a close relative exactly what transpired that was so life altering? After a shuddering breath, Noelle swallowed, determined not to be such a shy miss about her life. She wasn't ashamed of what she'd done, but it wasn't the

sort of thing a proper woman proclaimed from the rooftops, no matter how liberating the act had been. "Nicholas and I engaged in physical relations."

Kitty's jaw fell open and her eyes opened wide in her shock. "I never thought you would actually go through with it. I only suggested it to spur you on so you would kiss him or spend a few days indulging in the wonder of those kisses." A sly grin parted her lips. "Is he well endowed? If his reputation is to be believed he can easily satisfy a woman without much effort."

"That is none of your business." Noelle's cheeks heated. Flutters filled her stomach as her mind wandered to every kiss and caress, every ridge and plane of his body, every heated stroke. "What we did is over and done with. No matter how enjoyable it was at the time, I have not seen or heard from him in four days. Perhaps he found my inexperience unsavory and does not wish to repeat the scene." Tears sprang into her eyes. This time, she impatiently dashed them away before they could gain a foothold. She sniffed angrily. *Why the hell am I even crying over the man?* "I will learn from the experience and move on." She attempted a grin, but it was too watery of an affair to be successful. "Perhaps I will take another lover."

"I highly doubt that. You can barely survive this one." Kitty grasped Noelle's hand, squeezing. "Nicholas has gotten to you just like the rest of the women he has bedded."

"No." She shook her head. "I refuse to be lumped into that category. It goes much deeper. I cannot explain how I feel."

Kitty tucked a wayward tendril of hair back into place. "So I can ascertain. You cannot get him out of your mind. You crave him. He is like a drug and you want more."

It was eerie how close Kitty's correlation came to Noelle's earlier musings regarding the man. "That is exactly it, but please do not think I will pine after him." She rose to her feet and yanked her hand away. She needed to think of something other than Nicholas Pemberton. She needed...

...him.

"Of course you are not. I suspect that is why Nicholas has tried so hard to pursue you. Would you like to know why?"

Noelle nodded. One more scan of the immediate area didn't reveal Nicholas or anyone who might have resembled him. She hated the fresh wave of disappointment that crashed into her chest, despised herself for spending additional minutes thinking about *him*. "Why?"

"Before, you were aloof and unattainable. That represented a huge challenge to Nicholas. Now, it seems you are in the early stages of being in love with him." With a happy laugh, Kitty vaulted to her feet and hugged Noelle. "Dollars to doughnuts he feels the same way, and *that* is why he hasn't ventured out of the house. He has no idea what to do about it. Men never do. They are incapable of talking about what they feel and decide ignoring the issue will make it either go away or solve itself."

"Now you are the one who lies." Noelle pulled away, turning to gather her basket of groceries, mentally totaling what she would owe. "I told you before. Nicholas is not a man that women marry. They do exactly what I have done." She cleared her throat and willed the tears to remain at bay. "I wish I had listened to my own admonitions before I trod that dark road with him." Why, then, did her body clamor to experience the exercise once more?

"Do you regret it?"

For the first time in days, Noelle's smile was genuine. "No. I consider what Nicholas and I shared a great learning experience and a personal awakening. I feel refreshed, different. Why would that be cause for regret?" She patted Kitty's arm. "I need to stop by the apothecary for a few hours before I return home."

"Do you want me to keep you company?" Kitty's bottom lip popped out with a slight pout. "Samuel will be busy this afternoon, so I'm free."

"Not necessary, and besides, you are a snoop. I would rather be alone, thank you."

"What about your ghostly visits? I hear the conversations in your room, you know. They are becoming more frequent, aren't they?"

Dear Kitty. "Yes, but I am confident I can handle them. If that changes, I will let you know."

Kitty laid a hand on Noelle's arm. "Tell Nicholas how you feel. About him. About the ghosts and your doubt that you can have a normal, fulfilling life with either of those issues. No matter what else he is, I feel sure he will understand."

"Thank you. I will consider your advice." Noelle headed toward the exit leaving her cousin behind. She wanted a chance to think of Nicholas without Kitty attempting to analyze every word or sigh. Whatever else Noelle thought, she could still feel his hands on her body, and she wanted to relive the sensations in the privacy of her shop, to memorize in case she never saw him again.

* * * *

The door to the shop opened and closed softly. The bells hardly chimed a greeting. Noelle heard heavy, sure footsteps cross the bare boards of the floor. She didn't need to turn around from her perusal of the shelves to know who owned the gait. She knew it as she knew her own name. The scent of freshly burned tobacco was unmistakable.

Him.

She sucked in a breath and prayed for calm as her heart raced and her palms began to sweat. "Now you decide to show your face?" Noelle whirled around. "Did you figure since you got what you wanted from me the other night, you could try to hunt me down again and expect the same?" She crossed her arms over her breasts and glared. "Well?" She resolved not to melt in a puddle at the sight of him. Her body obeyed, but not by much.

Nicholas paused by the door. He flipped the sign in the window to reflect "closed" then slid the lock into place. "I came to explain my absence." He raked the fingers of one hand through his hair, mussing it so that one lock fell rakishly over his forehead. "After you left, O'Doud came to visit, accused me of defiling you. We scuffled. He accused me again of a prior crime. I felt the shift coming and chained myself into the basement." His words were short and clipped as if he'd practiced the speech many times.

"The shift? What does that mean?" Noelle held her breath. Would he finally reveal his deep, hidden secret? She moved to the far end of the counter as he approached. For her own peace of mind, she needed to keep a barrier between them.

"My affliction." Nicholas sighed and ran a hand over his jaw. When he met her gaze, his eyes were steady, clear. "For whatever reason, a curse, flawed genetics, or bad luck, under times of extreme mental fatigue, stress or stimulation the urge to shift into a lion comes over me. Sometimes I can control it. Other times I cannot. It is those rare times when it overcomes me that I do not remember what happens."

"Did you become a lion during your absence?" She wanted to believe him, but her common sense overruled the fantastical. "Or were you so disgusted by my performance that you could not bring yourself to call on me?" Despite her best intentions, he once again managed to bring out the worst in her. "I realize I am not as beautiful as some of the other women of your acquaintance; however, I deserve a better explanation of your absence than a tale of you being some sort of paranormal hybrid."

"It is your prerogative if you chose not to believe me. My story is the truth. Once I chained myself in the basement, I managed to stave off the shift at the halfway point. Only after I had been ensconced in my self-made prison did I realize Samuel would not return home for a day or so. The key to the manacles was out of reach. I was only able to be freed once Sam arrived home late the following evening."

"That only explains two of the four days you were missing."

"I had much to discuss with my brother, and he had theories of his own that we needed to work on before I could turn my attention to anything else. No matter how badly I wanted to tell you what happened, I was well and truly occupied."

"Oh." Some of Noelle's anger drained away as she looked at him. Did he tell the truth? Why shouldn't she believe him, because, after all, she *did* talk to ghosts? Snatches of her dreams drifted to the forefront of her mind. "Perhaps you will not be killed by a random lion at all. Perhaps my dream signified the battle between the two halves of yourself."

"Perhaps." He advanced around the end of the counter. Noelle retreated. Her heart raced. Her pulse fluttered. She fought the urge to throw herself into his arms. "Have you had a vision of which side will emerge victorious?" His voice dropped to a thrilling whisper. "Or do you perhaps wish to spend your time with me in your arms instead of your dreams?"

Could he now read her mind as well as satisfy her body? She stopped a sigh. "I have no further desire to spend my time engaged in that sort of activity." The tremor that shook her shoulders continued through her body until it echoed in her core with a hard throb. Regardless of the warning her brain called, her hormones rioted, screamed for the chase to begin anew.

"I do not believe you." A wicked smile curved his lips.

Resist the temptation. Noelle clenched her fingers into fists until the nails bit into her palms. "I am sorry to hear that. Now, if you would excuse me, I have work to do, the least of which is re-opening my shop." She attempted to dart around him, but he easily slid an arm around her waist. "Let me go." His touch sent frissons of white-hot need into her blood stream.

"Oh, but you see, therein lies the problem." Nicholas hauled her against the hard wall of his chest as his other hand pushed through her hair to pluck out the hairpins as if they were berries on a vine. "Regardless of the slight aberration, I have no intention of letting you out of my sight."

Noelle fought against the rising tide of desire that threatened to overwhelm her. But, oh how she longed for this very moment. The last hairpin dropped to the floor and her tresses tumbled down around her shoulders. She sighed when he tangled his hands in her hair to cup the back of her head. "Then you are destined for disappointment since I have gotten what I wanted. I no longer need you, but I appreciate the regard."

"I beg to differ."

She watched in fascination as his eyes darkened to a murky dark brown. Noelle lifted her face, met his kiss as his mouth came down hard on hers. Refusing to let him take control, she twined her arms around his neck and brought him closer, pasting her body to his. She stroked his tongue, claimed it, told him clearly he belonged to her alone.

When Nicholas wrenched them apart, his breath was ragged. "Noelle, we should—"

"I warned you that sometimes the prey decides it will become the predator. I guess you forgot to take my words to heart." She placed her palms against his chest and propelled him backward until he was pinned against the shelf. "Today, I refuse to be your prey. Today, I choose to be the hunter." When she came again into the circle of his arms, she was the one who initiated the embrace. She tormented his lips, nibbled at the edges, tickled the corner of his mouth with the tip of her tongue.

Nicholas made a low moaning sound in his throat. She teased the underside of his jaw until he shuddered then she repeated the action. With fingers that shook, Noelle unbuttoned his shirt. Her nails scratched against his thin cotton undershirt. Undeterred, she yanked the hem from his waistband in order to touch the smooth skin beneath.

"Are you tired of running yet, Nicholas?" She grinned when he slumped into the shelf. A few bottles tumbled to the floor, breaking with the faint tinkle of glass. The sharp smell of peppermint wafted around them. Must have been muscle liniment. The scent spurred her to continue with his torment. She shoved his shirt farther up then lightly bit the soft skin of his stomach, laughing when his breath hissed out between his teeth. "Just a reminder, Mr. Pemberton. Anyone can be the hunted. It is all a matter of control." She stepped away, careful to avoid the spill.

"My God, Noelle. I want you, now. Let's move into your storeroom." He reached out a hand, but she moved swiftly away toward the door, fumbled with the lock. "Please." The word was ragged and held a note of desperation she'd not heard from him before.

"No." Noelle smiled. She wrenched the door open, glad the sounds of city life just outside distracted her from the raw desire flowing through her body. As much as wanted him naked beneath her, she had to maintain a modicum of control. She wasn't willing to forgive him so easily. "For the moment, I hold the power, and I choose to use that power and demand you get out of my shop. I do not want to see you again."

"Noelle."

She shook her head and blinked back tears. She would not let him see her cry. "You need to understand that I am not a plaything to be used on a whim." She sucked in a breath and straightened her spine, determined to ignore her traitorous body. "Go away. I wish you the best of luck in your life." If he didn't leave soon, she'd break down, and her newly formed resolve would dissolve like a sugar cube in hot tea.

"Noelle, I did not mean to abandon you. I wanted nothing more than to rush over and make love to you again." His mouth worked as if he thought about his next words carefully. "What we shared was ... I have never experienced such—"

"Just go." Her vision swam with fresh tears. "I cannot listen to anymore." She averted her face as he passed through the doorway to the sidewalk beyond.

"This is not over. You and I are together for a reason."

That is exactly why I'm afraid. "Goodbye, Nicholas." Noelle slammed the door behind him.

She sank to the floor, finally allowing her tears to fall free down her cheeks. In spite of her brave words and bold actions, she couldn't forget him. Kitty's words rang in her

ears. Her addiction to Nicholas was complete and overwhelming. She was a fallen woman, and the only thing she wanted to do was feel his touch a thousand more times. Enough to fill a lifetime.

My God. I am falling in love with him.

If she gave in, would she always be a slave to the pleasures of the flesh, or was it Nicholas himself she lusted after? If he were indeed the predator he claimed, was she his only prey, and if so, would that continue to be the case? If not, could she handle that eventuality, or would her soul unravel completely without him?

Chapter Sixteen

Three days.

It had been three long days and even longer nights since Nicholas had seen her. The fact that it bothered him indicated his fixation. She was merely a woman, a bedmate. He groaned. No. Noelle was more than that. He flipped onto his back and kicked free of the bed sheets to stare at the shadows playing over the ceiling. The more troubling aspect of the conundrum was why he felt compelled to think of her at all. Usually, if a woman decided to break off the relationship, he'd let them go without protest knowing another one could be procured at any time.

His obsession with Noelle went beyond lusting after her body. She haunted him in every waking moment, inhabited his dreams when he slept, became the voice of his conscience. He wanted to learn why her smile seemed so sad at times, what made her happy, discover why she had the ability to talk to ghosts. He needed to understand her affinity for the paranormal and if she considered it an aberration or normalcy. He ached to know why she didn't require a long-standing commitment from him, burned to realize what he'd need to do in order to possess her now and always.

He groaned again, pummeled his pillow, and turned onto his side. It was an impossible problem, complicated by his own sickness. Even if he could somehow convince Noelle to spend the rest of her life with him, there was still his affliction to consider. How could he, in good conscience, ask her to tie herself to someone such as him for the rest of her life? Nicholas knew he would never be able to live with himself if she came to harm while he shifted into his lion form. He'd rather die than see her suffer because of him, assuming she would even consent to a courtship.

But then, he would most likely die without her anyway.

A curious squeezing around his heart made him sit upright with shock. How was it possible he had come to admire her so greatly in such a short period? No, his feelings went far beyond admiration. The confliction he struggled with, the sick, constant upheaval in the pit of his stomach didn't signal the urge to shift. It meant something much more serious.

I love Noelle.

No. It simply wasn't possible, but it was true.

I love Noelle, and nothing on Earth will come between us.

The knowledge terrified and thrilled him at the same time. He had no idea what to do about it with his current health issues. Would she care? Nicholas shoved his fingers through his hair and expelled a heavy breath. He needed to be with Noelle, to convince her he wasn't the dangerous killer O'Doud thought, to plead his case and hope she would take pity on his plight and, if he was lucky enough, perhaps she would return his regard.

* * * *

His nerve endings twitched, as he stood shrouded in the darkness of the night. No moonlight illuminated Noelle's intimate garden. Clouds had rolled in to obscure the sky. Idly, he wondered if another storm was in the offing. The revelation regarding his

romantic interest in her left him in a vulnerable position, hesitant and wanting to keep her at arm's length to ensure the sting of possible rejection wouldn't be as strong.

After all was said and done, there was still pride, but what did any of it matter if he couldn't become the man he felt he was when he basked in her presence?

From somewhere in the silent leaves above his head, an owl hooted. He jerked. His heartbeat accelerated. Unaccountably, his palms started to sweat. He wiped them on his trousers, as nervous as a hormone-crazed adolescent. He'd dressed in a hurry and wondered if he had encountered a colleague or acquaintance on his hurried walk across town, would they think him as deranged as he felt?

It didn't matter. Nothing ever would without her.

Before he could summon enough courage to knock on the French door, it opened and Noelle stood in the dark, rectangle opening. Her eyes were clear with no hint of fear or surprise, only an eager anticipation that stole his breath. A nightdress of what appeared to be white cotton stirred in the gentle breeze to caress the curves of her body. His gut clenched. Her hair flowed in a riot of waves over her shoulders. When she lifted a hand to gather the mass behind her back, revealing the creamy expanse of her décolletage, he couldn't disguise his appreciation.

He was lost and he never wanted to find his way back.

"Noelle." His voice was raspy as if he were out of practice with the simple task of speaking. He could hardly breathe from wanting her. "I..." He had no idea what to say next, so he stood mute under the maple tree.

"Do you plan to spend the remainder of the night in my garden? It would be much more comfortable in my bed." A brief smile touched her lips then, and she stood aside with one eyebrow lifted in question. "You cannot have both."

Needing no other invitation, Nicholas bounded across the garden to catch her in his arms. He cradled her against his chest, inhaled her sweet floral scent, and welcomed the heat of her skin as it seeped into his. He didn't waste time with words. Instead, Nicholas claimed her lips with slow, tender kisses, each one longer and deeper than the one before. He tangled his fingers in her hair, cupped the back of her head in an effort to drink her in, taste her; to own the one woman who would never judge him, who made his life complete and bearable.

Minutes went by, marked by the frantic beating of his heart against hers before he allowed her to breathe. "I needed to come, felt compelled to be with you. I cannot explain it."

"There is no need." She slipped from his arms in order to close the door. "I feel the pull as well. It has always been between us and will always be so."

"I wanted to talk with you, but after our last meeting I was unsure of my reception." In the darkness, she resembled one of the ghosts she claimed to speak with, mysterious, alluring.

Noelle laughed a secret, feminine sound that bypassed his brain and shot straight to his penis. "My intention was to hurt you, make you feel the same confusion I felt after your last absence, and now, here we are again, after another."

"Never again will we be separated. I make you this promise." Not willing or able to be apart from her, Nicholas closed the distance between them. This time, his kiss wasn't gentle. Urgency guided his actions, compounded by the stark need that ravaged his body like a fever. She didn't wilt under his assault, and he hadn't expected her to. She merely

followed his example until their embrace became fueled by something raw and primal.

Passion descended over him as a heavy, warm fog, and he gave himself up to it, let its powerful lure control his brain, obscure everything but the woman in his arms. The power that infected his blood bordered on madness. Nicholas ignored it; thrust it to the back of his mind. He needed Noelle. Plain and simple. She was the part of himself he never knew was missing until he met her.

The ribbons on the front of her lacy gown baffled him. He growled and removed his mouth from hers to concentrate on the fripperies. When the fastenings wouldn't cooperate with the pace of his mind, Nicholas grabbed the thin fabric and pulled, ripping it apart with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Damn you, Nicholas that was expensive." She shoved against his chest. "I hope you intend to make the loss of my sleeping attire worthwhile."

"I will let you make that decision once we are done." He put her hand to his lips and lightly bit her palm. He pushed the torn, ruffled fabric from her shoulders, seeking more. She stood naked before him with the glint of a challenge shining in her dark eyes. "After this night, you will be mine, Noelle. No other man can lay claim to you or I will kill them."

"You bluster and blow, Mr. Pemberton, but I have yet to find any sincerity in your actions." She swiftly worked the buttons of his shirt, letting it sag open as her fingers slid over the heated skin of his chest. "Sooner or later I will demand proof of your ability and your fidelity."

"Let me show you now and chase away the doubts." Nicholas smoothed his palms over her shoulders, glided them down her sides, skimming the curve of her breasts. He paused at the nip of her waist only to grasp the soft flesh of her hips. "You will not be the same woman after tonight." He eased her down on the bed, his erection tight against the front of his trousers when she lay back on her elbows displaying every naked charm.

"I would caution you against making promises you cannot keep."

With a low growl, he shed his shirt, kicked his shoes off, and joined her on the bed. "I will promise you this." He knelt between her spread legs. "Tonight's experience will be a first for you."

The sweet smell of her arousal proved to be too much to ignore. Once he touched his lips to the soft skin of her breast, his control slipped, lashed out against the restraints he always held against his animal self. Nicholas tamped down any other urges except the one to possess the woman beneath him.

His Noelle.

He licked a path over her breasts, taking time to tease her nipples with his teeth. When she arched her back and let out a tiny moan, he grinned against the skin of her stomach, swirling his tongue over her warm flesh. He inched lower. When he paused at her dark nest of curls, he met her gaze in the gloom. "Here we go, love. No turning back now."

"I belong to no one but you, Nicholas Pemberton."

Her words pricked his heart and caused that organ to swell with pride. "I vow the same to you. Please believe me."

Sliding off the end of the bed, he gripped her hips and put his mouth on her most secret of places. He flicked his tongue over the tiny, partially hidden bud, chuckled softly when she gasped and clutched at his head, first pushing him away then alternately

clasping him closer as she bucked against him. Not ready to give her reprieve yet, Nicholas tightened his hold on her thighs, easing them apart even as she reflexively clamped them together. He teased her warm opening, felt himself harden, as he tasted her sweetness on his tongue, and caressed her with a finger to coax out even more moisture.

Noelle's breath grew harsh and ragged as she emitted desperate, indistinguishable sounds. She thrashed about on the bed clutching handfuls of the quilt in her fists. When the first wave of tremors rocked her body and she convulsed around his fingers, Nicholas felt her stiffen then relax as her sweet moisture flowed into his hand. He tormented her again with his tongue, suckling at her sex until she gave a violent shudder. A smug smile parted his lips as he watched her. When she stretched and uttered a blissful sigh, he took full advantage of her euphoria to remove his trousers then joined her, settling himself more comfortably between her legs.

"Nicholas, please." She dug her nails into the flesh of his shoulders. "No more teasing." Her breath warmed his ear as she restlessly moved beneath him. "Hurry." Noelle emphasized the request by slipping a hand between them to wrap her fingers around his straining erection.

He jerked and sucked in a sharp breath. The fragile wisps of control he held snapped in that moment. With another growl, this one bordering on animal ferocity, Nicholas grasped her hands, pinning them to the mattress as he shoved into her with more enthusiasm than finesse. Her warmth closed around him, shattering any remnants of sanity he owned. Her grip on his fingers tightened with every new thrust. She lifted her hips and met and matched his every movement until they worked together in a timeless dance of dominance and mating. The pressure inside him built, dragging him down into the murky shadow world of pleasure and pain. He listened to the soft sounds of her enjoyment; each new utterance spurred him on as much as the glittery, half-crazed look in her eyes.

When her voice broke on a cry of joyous completion and her inner muscles convulsed around him, Nicholas drove mindlessly into her, seeking his own release into ecstasy. It followed soon after as his seed poured into the woman he loved. He whispered endearments into her ear, surprised that he meant every single one. He collapsed at her side, pulling her sweaty body against his, content for the moment to listen to their ragged breathing.

"You proved me wrong, Nicholas." Noelle pressed a kiss to his forearm. "Your prowess is incomparable."

"Thank you, I do enjoy it, but it greatly depends on the partner." His gut clenched when she wriggled her backside against him. He ignored the renewed sexual need in order to concentrate on the faint red haze that lingered over his vision. It concerned him that it hadn't dissipated with the conclusion of his activity. Instead of the state of repletion that always followed lovemaking, a frenetic energy built within his chest to pulse with a power he was all too familiar with. "Noelle, I must leave."

"Stay for the remainder of the night." She turned in the circle of his arms. "I will make it worthwhile and you did promise me you would never leave again."

"You do not understand." Nicholas stiffened as pain travelled the length of his body. His nerves filled with fire, his fingertips tingled. "The shift is coming. I cannot control it this time." He frantically scrambled from the bed, and then teetered on unsteady feet once they hit the floor. "In my haste to come to you and indulge in physical pleasure, I

neglected to give the same diligence to the other side of myself."

"You cannot go. Let me help you." Noelle slipped from the bed and attempted to wrap her arms around him. He thrust her away. "I want to ride this out with you."

"No. This affliction is not like an ordinary sickness." He shoved his legs into his trousers and doubled over when his stomach pitched and the pain inside him increased as if a million tiny knives cut his body. "Once the shift comes, my human side will have no more control and my actions will be based solely on animal instinct." His fingernails throbbed, a sure sign that any moment they would morph into deadly sharp claws. "I must leave and find Samuel. The restraints are the only way to ensure I will not harm anyone." He buttoned his pants then fumbled on the floor for his shirt.

"You do not scare me." She touched his shoulder and he leapt away with a snarl. "We will fight this together. We can find a cure, or live our lives around your sickness, but I refuse to abandon you. I care for you too much to let fate have her way."

"No!" Nicholas flung out an arm, cringing when the action knocked her onto the bed. "I beg you, just let me alone. I would rather die than hurt you." His head pounded and he couldn't focus on her words. "Please do not put me in a position to do something I would regret." He had barely shrugged into his shirt when the coarse, blond fur of the lion sprang over the skin of his arms like new grass. His canine teeth lengthened. His fingernails tingled and began to elongate into black claws. "Please."

"Do not do this, Nicholas."

He hated the disbelief that wavered in her voice as she stared at him, despised the horror reflected in her dark eyes. No matter how much she claimed to care for him, the proof of what he was would always trump emotions. His vision shifted and sharpened until he could see perfectly through the shadows. He sensed her racing heart, the adrenaline that coursed through her veins as she stood poised on the opposite side of the bed now, clutching a gray shawl around her body.

Prey.

He smelled her fear, and he liked it. Excitement for the hunt rose within him to join the red tide.

With a roar, Nicholas leaped over the bed, landing easily in front of her. Her cry of terror spurred him onward, fed his hunger. He lashed out with one hand, feeling the connection of his claws as they ripped through the soft skin of her arm. The sharp, metallic aroma of blood addled his already overworked brain. He threw Noelle to the bed, pounced on top to pin her body to the mattress as he stared into her wide eyes.

"Nicholas, don't do this. You are a good man, and I know you are in there somewhere. Remember who you are and what we mean to each other." She struggled beneath him. "You are not the animal." The soothing, singsong tone of her voice sank into his mind and he paused. "You must fight this. Deny the urge."

He blinked and shook his head, struggling to clear the compulsion to devour her. "Noelle..." Bloodlust took a stronger foothold. The need for a kill burned inside his chest until he could think of nothing else. He lowered his head, found the artery in her neck, ran his tongue over the pulse fluttering wildly beneath her pale skin. She would be an easy to dispose of then he would move on to the next—her cousin.

"Nicholas, stop, you don't want to do this." She pushed at his chest, struggled to shove him away. "Remember." Hysteria crept into her voice now. "Please."

His fangs bit into her flesh, lightly as if he tested the thickness of her skin. She

whimpered, but said nothing further. *It would be so easy to tear out her throat...* A trickle of blood met his tongue. *Blood. Noelle's blood.* Nicholas sprang back. "My God. I need to leave before it's too late for all of us." He reached out a half-shifted hand to touch her, wanting to reassure her, but she shrank before him, her face wet with tears. "Forgive me. I never meant to hurt you. I ... nothing matters now." The opportunity to confess his love passed. He doubted if she would believe him in his current state anyway.

He loped to the side of the room where the garden was located just as a volley of frantic knocks reigned on her bedroom door. Kitty called Noelle's name, demanding entrance, threatening to call the authorities. Nicholas wrenched open the patio door, didn't want to chance going back for his shoes. "I plan to seek out O'Doud. Turn myself in." Blinking as the red haze began to dissipate, he shook when a well of sadness swallowed his heart. "I am so sorry. I should never have come."

Turning, he escaped into the garden, intent to put an end to his split existence. The look in Noelle's eyes would haunt him forever. The fear was expected, the sadness and disgust was a natural reaction, but the disappointment cut through his chest with the accuracy of a knife. He felt every sharp stab as if her hands had wielded the weapon.

No matter how Samuel would implore otherwise, no matter how much he, Nicholas, loved the woman he'd now harmed, he knew the only sure way to spare everyone concerned was to end his life.

Chapter Seventeen

"*He* did that to you." The same ghost of the young man Nicholas had mauled hovered in the air above Noelle's bed.

She ignored him and kept her eyes tightly closed in order to concentrate on the pain. Kitty had gone to the kitchen to make her a cup of tea.

"I warned you to be wary of the man."

Noelle snorted. She opened her eyes to stare at the specter. "Nothing matters." She wished the ghost would leave her to the depressing thoughts she wanted to wallow in. Watching Nicholas transform into the beast he was inside had terrified her, but in a strange way, she sympathized with him. She understood now why he held her at arm's length. Through everything, he fought to protect her. She attempted to do the same thing for him because of her ghosts.

No matter what people wanted, the heart always wanted something different.

"You love him." The ghost did a back flip.

"I thought I did. I am not so sure now." At once, she knew the words weren't true. Every beat of her heart, every breath she drew belonged to Nicholas. After everything that happened, the urge to rush into the streets to find him gripped her. Only willpower kept her reclining on the bed.

"Love will not fade in the face of such trivial complications."

Noelle fingered the fresh wound on her neck as her mind relived the chaotic moments when she'd thought he would tear out her throat. "So nearly killing me is considered trivial?"

"No." The ghost dropped down to occupy the space at the end of her bed. "If you feel strongly that your destiny lies with Nicholas then I cannot stop you. I am merely a ghost sent to warn you away from potential danger."

"Ah, then it is not clear that Nicholas will be my destruction."

The ghost shrugged. "We only see scattered bits of the future. The only definite vision I have firmly places your lover at the end. I am attempting to spare you further pain."

"You do not understand. Without Nicholas, my life will be worthless and that sort of pain will not go away easily."

"Love is the most powerful emotion a human being can feel."

"Then please respect my decision to stay with him."

"It is your path. Only you can physically walk it."

She met the faded gray gaze of her visitor. "Do you think he will shift again and succeed in killing me or Kitty?" Could love forgive what he'd done or what he might do?

The ghost shrugged. "I am not a fortune teller, but I believe that in the right circumstances, anything is possible. You owe it to yourself to explore the possibilities." He cocked his head as footsteps sounded in the hall. "Your cousin returns. Take my words to heart, Noelle. We all have secrets we think can jeopardize our futures when in reality, the fear of not knowing is the only thing that holds us back."

* * * *

She lightly touched the tender spot on her neck where Nicholas had bitten her. Although she and Kitty hid the evidence of his madness beneath a strategically placed gauzy scarf, Noelle couldn't forget what he'd done. His crazed eyes haunted her as much, perhaps more, as any ghost she'd seen, but the words of her latest visitor rang clear in her ears. She glanced at her right arm, cringed to see the two long scratches that marred the skin in angry, red furrows. She wanted proof, now she had it. The knowledge brought no happiness or satisfaction.

The boy was right. In spite of her injuries, she loved Nicholas, now more than ever.

She drew in a hiccupping breath. What would become of him? Her heart squeezed at the thought of him incarcerated and abandoned in a dark cell, or worse, killed for that which he had no control over. She wondered where he had gone once he left her the night before, if he was safe, or ... if he had killed an innocent person. Her heart ached. She needed to find him.

Nicholas.

The rustle of fabric recalled Noelle to her surroundings. Sister Agnes approached, followed by Kitty. Both wore the same expressions of concern and worry, and both looked at her as if she would suddenly drop into hysterics at any moment. Perhaps she would, but not for the reasons they thought.

"I knew you would come during your time of need." The nun settled into the hard, wooden pew next to Noelle while Kitty sat on her other side. "Are you hurt?"

"Please further define the meaning of that word." Noelle didn't protest when Agnes gripped one of her hands in her much more fragile one. The nun's skin felt thin as paper and cold. "Physically, I am unharmed with the exception of a few scratches." She shrugged and stared, unseeing, at a statue of the Virgin Mary. For whatever reason, the patient, maternal smile on the marble lips annoyed her. "Mentally, I am divided and confused." Now, a fierce protectiveness welled within her. She wanted to keep Nicholas safe, defend him from anyone who wished him ill. Noelle sucked in a surprised breath. She wanted him. As a man or beast, she needed him, no matter how the world would frown on her decision.

Was this what the ghost meant about love's power? She adored every piece of Nicholas and if he would be a lion for the rest of his life, so be it.

"I told you that man would be your downfall. We need to contact the authorities at once." When Agnes rose, Noelle panicked and clutched her hand, not willing to be left alone with her thoughts. "Whatever urge it is that has you in its grip, Noelle, do not fool yourself into thinking it can sustain you for a lifetime with such a depraved person. You have no idea what else he will do on a whim."

"Neither can you, Sister. You do not understand what drives him." Hating the inactivity and her slip of the tongue that nearly revealed his identity, Noelle stood and paced between the front pew and the altar.

"Do you?"

"Not fully, but I intend to find out. Right this moment. That is the difference between you and me. You hide behind your habit, cowering in fear. I choose to face the obstacle and find a way to set the sufferer free."

"Foolish girl. I warned you. I tried to make you see the danger of an addiction, and now here we are with a mess on our hands." Agnes gazed at her over the tops of her half-moon spectacles. "I knew from the first meeting with Nicholas Pemberton that he was a

man with many vices, abnormal tastes. I can only imagine what he forced you to do."

Noelle's lips stretched with a grin. "He did not force me to do anything I did not fully endorse." Her fingers travelled over the scratches on her arm, tracing the slightly raised skin. "How did you know he did this?"

The nun's nose wrinkled as if she smelled something foul. "Oh yes, I know he did the job. I made it my business to investigate and report my findings to Captain O'Doud after that first meeting. I saw it in your eyes how he affected you. He has too much charisma for one person, and he uses that power to lure unsuspecting victims."

"I went into this relationship knowing all the implications." She lifted a brow. "You had no right to pry into either of our lives. I am perfectly capable of handling my own life."

"Yet you are here to plead your case before God and me. Something must have spooked you enough to come to the church for help. Did he demand your soul in payment for fleshly temptations? Did he take far more than you were willing to give? It saddens me to see how far you have fallen."

"Now is not the time to judge me!" Noelle clenched her hands into fists and took a deep breath, letting it hiss out between her teeth. "Nicholas is sick. Under normal circumstances, he is kind and proper and ... everything a man should be." She ignored the heat that infused her cheeks as well as Kitty's knowing glance. "He has never hurt me before, has always been attentive, and had at least the presence of mind to leave before he could do more than scratch me."

Kitty stood and stepped forward. "But Noelle, he could have killed you. I heard you scream."

"True, he could have, but he refrained, which means he can control the illness and retain his mind if he works at it." She could understand the nun's distrust. What she couldn't forgive was Kitty's willingness to dismiss Nicholas.

"Why do you feel the need to defend him?" Sister Agnes's mouth set into a thin line. "He is an evil man and deserves any fate that befalls him."

"No. He deserves your compassion, especially now. Is that not the mandate of the church? To help a person, any person regardless of their origins or their troubles, when they most need it?" Images and scraps of conversation played through Noelle's mind. Nicholas saying he needed restrained by chains. Nicholas claiming he would never hurt her. Nicholas murmuring tender promises and timeless endearments into her ear as he pressed light kisses onto her cheeks.

He loves me.

A thousand butterflies took flight in her stomach. Was it true? Did he truly care for her, think of her not as a willing body to warm his bed, but a woman he wanted to spend his life with? Anxious to leave the nun's stubborn presence and find Nicholas, Noelle blew out a breath. "There is good in him. If you look past his horrible affliction to see the man inside, you would understand."

"Perhaps I do not wish to understand a man like him." Agnes shook her head. "Miss Hamilton, please ring the station and ask Captain O'Doud to join us here at the church. Be discreet. Tell him to come alone. I need to speak to your cousin privately."

"Kitty, wait!" Noelle ran past the scowling nun to latch onto Kitty's arm. "Bring Ignatius if you must, but please do not mention Nicholas's name. I cannot bear to see him taken away because of me." Tears welled in her eyes to blur her vision. "He needs my

help, and I intend to give it to him until, well, until the end, I suppose."

"Elle, I would do anything for you, but Agnes is right. Nicholas may be dangerous, to you, to himself, and to the people of this city. I think Ignatius can help. He would do anything for you. If you truly care for Nicholas, do you not owe it to him and yourself to see he receives professional help?" Her gaze met Noelle's and her eyes were sad. "You trust me when dealing with the ghosts. Trust me now, alright?"

"Nicholas cannot die. I need him. I love him. What I feel for him is bigger than I anticipated, more urgent than anything I have ever known." Tears clogged her throat. "It's almost as if I want to laugh and cry at the same time and tear apart anyone who tries to harm him. I want nothing more than to be at his side and fight whatever comes our way."

"I know. Love is not a very tame or gentle emotion." Kitty removed Noelle's hand from where it rested on her arm. "Ignatius will know what to do."

Noelle nodded. "Be quick. Who knows what mindset Nicholas is in at this moment?" She watched Kitty walk swiftly down the narrow hall then turned to address the nun once more. "Go ahead and begin your lecture. I deserve your censure and your scolding."

"Come, sit next to me and we will talk as merely women." She patted the pew with a gnarled hand. "When your mother died, she warned me you had a mind of your own and that you were very stubborn. I laughed at the time because I knew I could mold you into what I thought a proper young woman should be. I had all the tools of the church at my disposal and wished to see you grow into a life of service to our Lord."

"When did you change your mind?"

Agnes emitted a very unladylike snort. "Almost immediately. You are unique, never destined to be another person's ideal of what you should be. You will always stand alone in bravery and stubbornness."

"Mama used to talk of you fondly. She told me she would have joined you in the sisterhood had she not met my father." Noelle sat next to the nun, slumped against the hard wooden back of the pew as a wave of exhaustion washed over her. So many emotions in a short time span left her drained almost as much as ghost interrupted sleep. "I am nothing like her." She closed her eyes. "I half suspect that is why Father succumbed to pneumonia not long after Mama died." It had been ten years since she lost her Father, and the ache in her heart had only lessened slightly.

"I believe he found the prospect of being on Earth without your mother distasteful. He gave up the will to live. No matter how much he loved you, and you were his world, he loved her more." Agnes patted Noelle's hand. "Such is life. Only a very few find their true soul mate."

Noelle's eyes flew open. "My parents had true love?"

"I believe that, yes." Sister Agnes uttered a heavy sigh. "Why can you not see that Nicholas Pemberton is a terrible match for you? He has a tortured soul and a sickness from the very devil himself. He would kill you if he had the chance."

"Perhaps, but I also think he would fight to the death for me if need be."

"Humph."

"If you have a chance to save someone from the pits of Hell, would you do it? As a servant of the Lord, is that not your mission?" She held the older woman's gaze. "I am asking you as my mother's friend, as my godmother, please help Nicholas if you can. Do not condemn him before I have the chance to help. I feel a connection to him that goes deeper than the physical intimacies he and I have shared. If he can be saved, I wish to

try." Her gaze slid from the nun's. "For whatever it is worth, he may be my soul mate, but I will never know if you don't give me the chance."

"I will consider it. In the meantime, I have something for you." One of her hands disappeared into a pocket of her black habit to withdraw a white, lacy handkerchief. "Please make use of them."

Noelle accepted the offering then carefully unfolded the fabric. Two medallions with very different portraits stared up at her. She the nun gave a wobbly smile. "Saint Catherine, patron saint of intelligent women. My mother talked of her often. Said I could challenge Catherine in a battle of wills."

"Seek her to help you through your upcoming trials. The other one is for my own personal amusement." The fragile skin at the corner of Agnes's eyes crinkled with her smile. "Saint Jude, patron saint of hopeless causes. I firmly believe this situation is the epitome of hopeless."

"Thank you, but I mean to prove you wrong."

"I do not doubt it."

The outside door to the church flew open, and Captain O'Doud strode into the sanctuary with Kitty trotting in his wake. Noelle rose as her heart lodged in her throat. What would he say? Did he even now hold Nicholas in custody?

"Noelle?" Ignatius clasped her hands in his. "I came as soon as I heard. Are you in much pain?"

"I am fine." As fond as she was of Ignatius, Noelle remained conflicted about bringing him into her confidence.

"It was Nicholas Pemberton who did this, I know it." His angry glance encompassed Kitty and Sister Agnes. "If you ladies would excuse me, I want to discuss this with Noelle. It is now a matter for an official investigation."

"They can stay." She gazed up at Ignatius's face, taken aback by the startling blue of his eyes as they blazed with high emotion. "Anything you and I will discuss, they already know."

"Not all of what I intend to say."

Her cheeks burned. Ignatius led her to a pew and settled her before seating himself beside her. Once Sister Agnes and Kitty left the sanctuary, thick and overwhelming silence crept between them, enough that she felt the weight on her shoulders. "Let me set your mind at ease. The scratches will fade do not worry. I am more concerned about the whereabouts of Nicholas."

"Noelle, I fear you put yourself in grave danger if you persist in being in Pemberton's company." Ignatius turned toward her, taking her hand in his. "I am currently in the process of investigating his life because I have reason to suspect he is behind the slaying of a young woman three months ago, and can be linked to no less than two other killings in as many years."

"I refuse to believe any of it until I talk with him." Her stomach pitched as she remembered the brief conversation with the ghost who claimed Nicholas took his life. And the butcher's daughter. Her, poor, misunderstood Nicholas. She attempted to remove her hand, but Ignatius held it fast. "I do know one thing for certain. Nicholas is not a killer." Depression settled in to swirl with the cesspool of other emotions in her brain. The facts of his altered persona began to accumulate and come together in a damning mix. Would she be the fool Agnes claimed if she continued to defend him?

She shook her head to clear the cancerous thoughts. No. Love could conquer all complications.

"You are entitled to your opinion, of course, but until we can locate and question him, I would feel more comfortable if you stayed away from the man. I don't want to see you hurt further." The subtle Irish lilt in his voice soothed her as no words could. "I hold you in the highest regard, Noelle."

"Thank you, Ignatius." Her breath caught as he leaned close. "I am not trying to be difficult. I cannot explain why I feel so strongly about his character." His scent wrapped around her, faintly citrus, vaguely masculine. Much different from Nicholas.

"I have watched him for weeks. He hides something. I have no doubt he will eventually be captured." The lawman brushed the fingers of one hand over her cheek then cupped her face in his palm. "It may go against your wishes. If he is guilty of these crimes, I have no choice to be who I am."

"And neither can he be anything but who he is." Noelle knew Ignatius intended to kiss her and wasn't surprised when that event occurred. His lips were firm and a bit wet. The bristles of his mustache tickled her skin. The kiss was pleasant enough in a platonic way, as though they exchanged an intimate greeting as good friends. Unlike kissing Nicholas, there was no heat or excitement, just fond affection.

She didn't want Ignatius like she desired Nicholas.

Noelle pulled away to meet his gaze. "While you flatter me with your attention, I am compelled to warn you my heart belongs to—"

"Pemberton."

She nodded. Tingles of need shot through her insides as she thought of him. "Yes. I am so sorry."

"Think nothing of it, my dear. I feared as much; however, I wanted to the chance to change your mind." Ignatius heaved a sigh. He dropped his hand and stood as uncharacteristic hesitation shadowed his face. "He has managed to elude an arrest and now he has bested me in love. It would seem I have more of a reason to count him as a worthy adversary."

"Will you help me locate him?"

"As if I would deny any request from you."

Noelle's cheeks warmed again, this time with embarrassment at his attention. "You are one of the last true gentlemen." She stood, ignoring the hand he offered. "He is a good man. Give him the second chance he needs."

"I shall. What if he is indeed the killer I know him to be? What will you do then?"

"Support him. Love him. See him through the rest of his life, such as it is. What else can I do?"

"I hope he is deserving of you, Noelle, but if you find he is not, or you simply cannot live with the fear or realize you have made the wrong choice, know that I will be waiting, you need only to call." He touched the brim of his hat, nodded, then turned sharply on his heel and left the church without a backward glance.

Drained, she slumped onto the pew, welcoming the hard bite of the wood that brought no comfort. Had she made a mistake vouching for Nicholas? If he was a killer, would she have enough fortitude to stand behind him and support him, or should she abandon him to his fate now and cower in the embrace of Captain O'Doud?

Ignatius was the safe choice. She'd have a stable, sane life with him. Nicholas

brought excitement and adventure, but also uncertainty. Noelle covered her face in her hands and let the tears that had been building, fall. Whatever happened in the coming days, she would need the patience of all the saints and the strength of God himself to pull through.

The alternative couldn't be contemplated.

Chapter Eighteen

"Sam, you go ahead. I think I will bow out. No need to become more of a target than I already am." Nicholas dragged his footsteps. He didn't want to crest the hill, didn't want to see Brookside Park unfold below, didn't wish to talk with Noelle and see the pain in her eyes, the disappointment. He wanted to be left alone.

He wanted to die.

"Calling defeat already? We are just getting started." Samuel drew him off the path and plunged a hand into the pocket of his tweed jacket. "I have found a temporary solution that might keep your urge to shift in check while you are around Noelle."

"Based on the assumption she will consider speaking to me."

Sam rolled his eyes. "You do her a great disservice." He pulled an object from his pocket. On first glance, it resembled a pocket watch, except a band of leather attached the back of the actual timepiece and a second metal plate ran beneath the strap.

"What is it?" Nicholas stood patiently while his brother strapped the device to his left wrist. The metal was cool to his skin. "What does it do?" Curiosity ran rampant within him as his brother buckled the invention then tucked a few wayward wires beneath the dial.

"I manipulated an ordinary pocket watch to monitor a human heartbeat. If your pulse becomes more accelerated than what I predetermine, you will receive a sharp jolt similar to that of electricity, which will force you to calm yourself." Samuel smiled as he twisted a couple tiny knobs on the side of the watch. "The more agitated you are the more shocks you will receive, so it would be in your best interest to monitor your emotions."

"Brilliant, brother." He clasped Samuel on the shoulder as they followed the path that would eventually bring them to the gazebo where a military band would entertain the crowds. "Now, the key will be to find out how excited my system can get before I—"

In the process of sweeping his gaze over the swarm of people, the one person he picked out from the mass was Noelle. Her chestnut hair flowed down her back, caught up at the sides with tortoiseshell combs, her figure showcased in a gown of a deep purple shade. Heat sliced through his body from that brief glimpse. An intense prick delivered enough pain as if from a small slap through the inside of his left arm. "Damnation!"

"I would say about that excited." A huge grin split Samuel's face, quickly followed by a bout of laughter. "And I should warn you, the more aroused you become, the greater the shock given. If I were you, I would try to temper your reaction." He lifted a hand to wave at someone nearby. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have promised to point out some of the basic constellations to Kitty this evening."

Nicholas flexed the fingers of his abused arm, glad to note the tingling was already fading. Cold dread gathered at the base of his spine and spiraled slowly upward when Noelle's gaze locked with his and she moved toward him, purpose and determination evident in her stride. He personally hadn't seen her for three days, not since his unforgivable attack, but he knew from Sam she'd met with O'Doud at the church the day after he left her. Bile rose in his throat. He swallowed it down, hoping it would stay at bay throughout the imminent interview with her.

As she drew near, he nodded. "Good evening, Noelle." He wanted to apologize, go

down on his knees and beg for her forgiveness, implore her not to leave him to his fate alone, but he did none of those things. Instead, he merely stared as if he'd never seen her before. Perhaps he had not. The only thing he could be sure of was how he felt. Now he was compelled to tell her and let fate decide the rest. "First, let me begin by saying—" His speech flew out of his head when she launched herself into his arms.

"Do not ruin this moment by asinine prattle." Low and throaty, her words wrapped around him and pulled him closer more than her physical embrace could. She pressed her lips to his in a gentle kiss that ignited roaring fires into his bloodstream before she pulled away. "Sister Agnes hates you, Ignatius is intent on your arrest, and even Kitty is leery of your integrity, but I have chosen to fight for you. Do not make me regret that decision."

Stunned, and still expecting censure or at the very least an hysterical female diatribe, Nicholas tugged her into his arms once more and held her close to his chest. "Thank you seems such a trivial thing in light of what you are doing for me." Her elusive, floral scent intoxicated him and her warm curves pressed intimately against his hard angles, triggering a fresh wave of desire. "Hells bells!" He dropped his arms as a powerful shot of pain streaked up his arm.

"I would hardly swear at the circumstances just yet." A mysterious smile parted her lips. "Nicholas?"

He shook out his hand until some of the feeling returned to his fingertips. "My apologies. Uh, it is only an inconvenience brought on by one of Samuel's inventions."

"Oh?" With a sparkle in her dark eyes, she grabbed his hand and examined the device. "What does it do?"

Already uncomfortable at being in the midst of the milling crowd, Nicholas guided her to one side of the path. "It, uh, it is intended to monitor my pulse so I will know when I am nearing an emotional upheaval that might trigger the shift." He couldn't concentrate with her so near. When the light of understanding flared in her eyes, his heart sank. She realized the concept of the invention.

He was in trouble. Nicholas swallowed and loosened his tie slightly.

"I see. Your little brother invented a machine to monitor your mood. I want to see what happens when," she stood on tiptoe in order to position her lips against his ear. Her moist breath heated that organ, "you become aroused. Let's try a little experiment, shall we?"

"I do not think this is the proper venue for that sort of thing." *Oh God.* He swallowed the lump of foreboding in his throat. Noelle slipped her hands beneath his brown corduroy jacket. Her fingertips ignited his chest through the cotton of his shirt. His abdominal muscles jerked and tightened. "Please stop. You will attract undue attention." Any moment now, the electrical shock would flash over his skin.

"Actually, it is you who will attract the attention." She grinned up at him and ever so slightly teased one of his flat nipples with a fingernail.

"Stop, I beg you." Liquid heat flooded through his veins. His erection strained against the front of his trousers just as his heart thundered, and the device on his wrist delivered the strongest jolt yet. "Dammit." Nicholas wrenched away, cradling his left wrist in his other hand. His fingertips pulsed as if the nails were permanently burned. "Christ, Noelle, do you have a wish to kill me?"

"Oh no, I merely want to tease you a bit." Remarkably, she winked and a splash of rosy color showed on her cheeks. "I have missed you. Very much."

Steady waves of pain burned through his arm. With a string of curses that should have made a more sensible female run in horror, he clawed at his wrist with the fingers of his right hand, wanting nothing more than to remove the pulse monitor. "Remind me never to let Samuel strap me into another invention." He pocketed the evil device and held his arm close to his stomach. "Noelle?" When she didn't answer, he swung around to ascertain what had captured her attention.

His stomach dropped into the region of his knees as Daniel approached. Nicholas touched Noelle's elbow. "Are you ill?" She looked a bit white around the lips and the color in her face had drained considerably. "Noelle?"

"Who is that man?" Her eyes locked on the approaching male with a mixture of horror and understanding.

Before he could answer, Daniel arrived with a hand outstretched. The other clutched a walking stick whose jeweled top flashed and winked in the soft glow from the lights around the gazebo.

"My name, enchanting lady, is Daniel Firstenour, and I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

Making a sound of annoyance, Nicholas stopped short of turning the noise into a growl. When it became apparent Daniel wouldn't move on and wanted an introduction, he sighed. "Daniel, this is Miss Noelle Radcliffe. Noelle, Daniel is Sam's mentor."

"Do you plan to attend the concert?" Daniel's lecherous grin created a wide slash across his doughy face. "If so, I would be delighted if you joined me."

"Uh, I..."

Nicholas felt the tremor that passed through Noelle's body. "Perhaps another time? It does not appear Miss Radcliffe is up to visiting." His grip on her elbow tightened.

"Nonsense. Come, I have reserved prime viewing seats on the other side of the lawn." Daniel reached out a beefy hand in her direction.

Noelle's gaze held Nicholas' for a scant second. "I am not feeling very well all of a sudden." A tiny sigh escaped and she slumped against his side, sliding inexorably toward the ground.

"Noelle?" Nicholas hefted her into his arms. Her head lolled onto his shoulder. "If you will excuse me, Daniel, I fear she will need to leave the festivities early." The unexpected turn of events put him in a bit of a pickle. She obviously needed medical attention, but he needed to let Samuel know about the changes.

"Is your brother with you this evening, Nicholas, because if so, I would be happy to inform him of your early departure?"

"Yes, he is around the park with Miss Hamilton. Tell him to stop by Noelle's residence at the first opportunity." He settled her more comfortably in his arms and studied Daniel's face. Not seeing any sign of underhandedness, Nicholas nodded. "I will stay with Noelle until her cousin returns."

"Fair enough. Have no worries, Mr. Pemberton. I will take care of everything." With a wink, Daniel moved away and the crowds milling about the path soon swallowed him.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Nicholas carried his burden to the edge of the park ground before he set her down on her feet with a thump. "What gives? I know you are not sick or unconscious. I can feel your pulse race, which indicates you are either excited or afraid. Either way, I deserve an explanation."

Noelle frowned and planted fisted hands on her hips. "That man is evil."

"Yes, he is, but how did you know?" Nicholas swallowed a groan. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her until she lost the haunted look in her eyes. Kisses would lead to caresses and those would turn into a bout of explosive lovemaking. His body temperature rose. Thank God he had the presence of mind to remove Samuel's device. "I have always told Sam that Daniel only hung around for his ideas." To distract himself from the lustful thoughts, he pulled her hand through his crooked arm and led her in the direction of her neighborhood.

"One of my ghostly visitors told me to be wary of a man who carried a walking stick."

"Did this specter say anything else?"

"No." Noelle kept her own council for several moments. "I cannot understand why this news didn't elicit more of a reaction from you. The handle to that walking stick is my biggest concern. It is jeweled."

"So are many things in this world. Will you faint dead away every time you come into contact with the finer objects?" When she would have pulled away, he laced his fingers with hers and encouraged her along the sidewalk. "You have never been afraid to speak your mind before. Why the hesitation now?"

The humid, breezy darkness swallowed the last purple shadows of twilight. Intermittent bursts of yellow light punctured the blackness as fireflies came out to indulge in their nocturnal mating dance. Nicholas intended to follow their example, and give his ladylove a proper reunion, but Noelle's steps slowed the closer they came to her home. "What now?" As much as he tried, irritation crept in to color his voice. He'd been apart from her too long, wanted to worship her body to show her how he felt, yet she played the part of a shy miss, fixated on an inanimate object.

As long as he lived, he would never understand the female mind.

"The hilt of the dagger which killed you in my vision was also jeweled. Very much like the one I just saw. Do you understand?" She twisted about until she stood before him, her hand still clutched in his. "This man, Daniel, he has something to do with the dreams, and he is not someone whose acquaintance you need to further."

"What does it matter? Many men own walking sticks. A handful of them have jeweled handles. Daniel is an annoyance and has stolen ideas from Samuel. That is merely human nature, and my brother has the unfortunate luck to keep him around. There must be another reason for your angst." Did her lower lip tremble? Would she cry? His chest tightened with the thought. "You are afraid, Noelle, and I want to know why." Nicholas cupped her face in both hands in order to stare deep into her eyes. "Tell me everything."

"I think that man means to do you harm, perhaps wants to kill you."

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "There will never be cause to worry about such an event. I promise." Invisible bands squeezed around his heart. No one besides Sam had ever been concerned with his welfare before. The compulsion to bare his feelings swelled to the forefront of his mind once more. "Noelle, I—"

"Hush. Come with me. We should not talk in the open." She tugged on his hand, urging him down the sidewalk so fast he needed to jog to keep up with her quickened pace. "I need to tell you something else as well."

"And that would be?" He stumbled awkwardly after her, finally obliged to unclench her fingers from his arm in order to remain upright. "If the future is as dire as you say, I

think it bears a discussion."

No answer, just more determined marching. When an energetic puppy raced across a lawn to snuffle and yap at the hem of her skirt, Noelle simply ignored the animal and stepped around it, plowing onward.

He sighed. As much as he admired her stubborn will and desire to slay her own demons, Noelle's silence disturbed him. What would happen if she were correct in her visions? If his life were in danger, did that mean Samuel's was as well? If so, his brother was in no position to defend himself from an attack, especially if it occurred in the park tonight. He murmured a silent prayer of thanksgiving when Noelle's bungalow came into view. The faint golden glow of lamplight illuminated her bedroom window. "Does someone wait for you? O'Doud perhaps?" A blaze of jealousy burned bright in the pit of his stomach. He would fight for her attention, no matter what title his rival bore.

"No, but your possessiveness amuses me. Our housekeeper always leaves a light burning so we can find our way home. She likes to fuss over Kitty and me." With another firm tug on his hand, Noelle pulled him into the garden. She withdrew a key from her pocket and worked the door lock in quick, efficient movements. "Hurry."

"Patience, woman. This battle will not be won by racing through the city streets." He tripped over a corner of the Oriental rug in front of her bed. "Why the need for haste?"

"I did not wish to announce my affection for you in front of my neighbors." She moved to the bedside table and turned down the light, plunging the room into intimate, amber shadows. "It is rather a private matter and they already are suspicious enough of me."

"I beg your pardon?" Nicholas slowly turned toward her, his gaze taking in her flushed face, bright eyes, and slightly parted, highly kissable lips. "You cannot mean that you..." His voice trailed off as his words died in his throat with a sharp inhalation. He could believe infatuation, even lust, but that a woman could possibly harbor stronger feelings for him was a foreign idea and it left him reeling. It was beyond his wildest hopes; however, the feeling he most felt was justification.

"Yes, you impossible, annoying man, you have captivated me with your charms, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, investigating why that is, regardless of the danger, real or imagined." She took a deep, shaky breath and held up a hand, palm toward him, when he opened his mouth to protest. "I am fully aware of all the reasons why you do not wish to stay with me, why you shy away from commitment." Noelle dropped her gaze to the patch of rug by his feet. "I could not let another day pass without telling you how I felt. You can choose to take my heart and throw it back in my face or derive diversion from my simple announcement I do not care. At least I will be at peace with my decision."

Nicholas allowed himself one moment to live in the wonder of her words before sweeping her into his arms. He hugged her so close he could feel the wild beating of her heart, the frantic flutter of her breath on his neck. "My darling girl, I will do none of those things." He set her apart in order to peer into her wide eyes. "I am not worthy of your regard, but I am an insanely happy man right now, and I cannot comprehend that you have forgiven me for what I have done to you."

Fear crept in to wrap black threads around his heart, flowed through his gut in shiny, dark ribbons. "Above all, I want you to remain safe, which is why I refuse to marry you. I would rather see you with a rival who can give you a life full of all things not tainted with

fear or terror, than bind myself to you, always knowing I could harm you." Nicholas tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, aching to possess her body one last time. "Do you understand?"

"No. Your argument is flawed. Loving someone means accepting all of them. When I gave you my heart, I gave you my whole self. I expect the same commitment from you."

Silent moments went by. He teetered on the edge, torn between wanting to protect her and wanting to keep her all to himself. At last, he took the fateful plunge. "I cannot run any longer. I love you."

"I love you, too." When she smiled at him, the room seemed to blaze brighter than the noontime sun. "Kitty and Samuel will arrive before too long, so if you intend to bed me tonight, you had better do it quickly."

"Hell, woman, you are too much temptation for me to withstand." Nicholas gave into the heat that engulfed him and claimed her lips.

He shoved his doubts and failures to the back of his mind. She loved him. Three simple words yet they brought with them a huge amount of hope. In spite of everything that had occurred, or perhaps because of it, the woman in his arms loved him without reservation, without a promise of a future. He walked the fine line between comfort and compromise. As he felt the softness of her lips beneath his, the sureness of her touch, he toppled over the side into the waiting chasm of uncertainty.

Nothing else mattered except that one moment. Death could wait.

Chapter Nineteen

Her head pounded with insistent blows. Noelle turned onto her side in the hopes of shutting out the annoyance, but it was an impossible task. The noise grew in volume until she pried open her eyes and she realized it was not her head, but knocking on the door that had awakened her.

She stretched out a hand and met nothing but the cold sheet. Memories from earlier in the evening flooded her brain. Her skin heated as she recalled every searing embrace and hotter escapade that had taken their love making to a new level. Noelle sat up, her body protesting even that simple movement. She grinned. Some of the positions Nicholas had taught her would leech the color from Sister Agnes's habit, especially when he'd encouraged her to bend over the side of the bed while he entered her from behind. Loving him gave new meaning to the word depravity. Loving him meant accepting him, good and bad.

And she wanted much, much more. She needed all of him, now and forever. He made her feel rational even in the midst of his insanity, and gave her purpose when it seemed there was none.

When a glance around the room didn't reveal his presence, her stomach clenched in alarm. "Nicholas?" Noelle slid from the bed, shivering as the slight chill in the air met her naked skin. Locating her combinations, she shucked into the clothing. "Nicholas, where are you?" Had he gone outside? Did he leave for his own home after they'd finally come to an understanding? She retrieved the pale pink corset from the end of the bed. For the first time in her life, she thanked whoever was responsible for inventing a corset that hooked up the front. If Kitty wasn't available to help, Noelle made it a point to don easy access clothing.

"Dammit." Her fingers fumbled with the hooks in her haste. "Oh, the hell with it!" Uttering a sound of disgust, Noelle bent to pick up a petticoat, and left the corset only hooked halfway. "If he left me without a goodbye, I will kill him myself."

"I know from personal experience that I have cursed various pieces of female clothing to the devil, but they have never left me frustrated enough for violence against my fellow man." Nicholas' voice sounded nearby with its typical sardonic tone. This time it seemed forced and without the usual verve.

Relief sliced through her. "Where have you been?" Noelle whirled around and fisted a hand in the soft fabric. She squinted in the darkness. Not able to read his expression, she scurried around the bed and flipped the switch on the lamp. The bulb flickered for a few moments then went out altogether. "Damn unreliable electricity." Moving to the dresser, she struck a match and waited impatiently as the flame caught to the wick of an oil lamp. "What happened?"

"If you spend any more time in my company, Miss Radliffe, I believe you might become corrupted." He crossed the room and slipped his arms around her. "Such language. Very unladylike indeed and it makes you very, very desirable."

"Distractions will not make the situation better." For one long moment, she allowed her cheek to rest against his bare chest. The coarse hair tickled her skin, the scent of apples and oak seeped into her consciousness to soothe her frazzled nerves. With a sigh,

she pulled away. "Who was at the door? Was it Samuel?"

"Unfortunately, no." The dim light threw the lines of fatigue crossing his face into sharp relief. His beautiful brandy-hued eyes were shadowed with fear. "It was a messenger with a note." Nicholas withdrew a folded scrap of paper from a pocket of his trousers. "Perhaps you should read it yourself."

She snatched the missive from him then unfolded it with shaking fingers. "Dear Nicholas." She cleared her throat, moistened her lips, and continued.

"I thought you would be interested to learn I have something both you and Miss Radcliffe might want back. At the current time, I am holding your brother and the delightful Miss Hamilton in an undisclosed location, but would be willing to exchange them for your full and willing cooperation with the Board of Science and the university. It is your choice, and I would caution you to make the correct one if you hope to see your loved ones alive again. I will be in touch. Yours, Daniel Firstenour."

The paper fluttered from her fingers as she stared at Nicholas. The confirmation and anger reflected on his face caused her breath to catch. "He took them? How is it possible a man could coerce two adult people from a park full of other adult people?"

"Noelle."

She gasped air into her lungs and ignored him. "Where are they? We need to rescue them, but how?" In a daze as her mind raced over the possibilities, she slipped into the petticoat, glad for a mundane activity she could concentrate on. "The police need to be involved. Ignatius will know what to do."

"Noelle." He spoke her name louder now. She shook her head.

"Kitty must be terrified. I have to go." She darted to the garden door, but Nicholas' fingers on her shoulder halted her momentum. "Unhand me. I need to find Kitty." Hysteria rose in her throat like a tide. "I must rescue my cousin." Her chest ached as if a wardrobe trunk rested on it.

"Noelle, look at me." He shook her slightly until she locked her gaze with his. "He has my brother, too, don't forget. We will find them and bring them home safely, but we will do it together. Together, you and I can be a force to be reckoned with."

She nodded. "We are wasting time." Again, she moved to the door, and again he prevented her flight. "What now?"

"You are not wearing shoes and hardly dressed to traipse about in public." A smile curved his sensuous lips and started a cascade of tingles throughout her body. "Although, I would love to have you tracking the criminal element at my side wearing lacy, frilly, highly erotic undergarments," Nicholas trailed a fingertip along the ruffles at the top of her corset, "somehow I do not think that is the image you wish to project to the city at large."

Finally, his words sank into her overworked brain. "You think I would never blend in a brothel?" She walked her fingers up his chest. "Am I not skilled enough?" She ground her hips against his, and her cheeks warmed when his erection pressed between them.

"Your skills are more than enough, trust me on that, love." Nicholas slid his hands down to grasp her waist. He pressed her fully against him, and placing his lips to the shell of her ear, whispered, "And I would caution you to remember that your ample charms are mine alone. No other man has claim to them. Love will only forgive so much, after that, jealousy and retribution take over." With a quick flip of his wrist, he smacked her backside with his palm. "Now, we have a rescue mission to carry out. Get dressed."

* * * *

Noelle paced the smooth marble floor of the police station. A knot formed and tightened in her stomach. She and Nicholas had arrived a few minutes prior, and now they waited for Captain O'Doud to make an appearance. Every minute that ticked by meant another moment that Samuel and Kitty might be in pain or torment. On her eleventh pass, Nicholas grabbed her hand and pulled her down onto a hard wooden bench beside him.

"Watching you exhausts me."

"I cannot help my frustration." Grateful for his calm presence, she clutched his hand, stroking her thumb over his knuckles. "It is pointless to wait."

"Yes, but it is necessary. Might I remind you that it was your brilliant idea that we stop by and summon O'Doud?" He leaned close and dropped his voice to a whisper. "Not that I protest the re-donning of your evening dress, but I do take exception to the haphazard way you have buttoned it. Your goods are on display and your appearance fairly screams your recent activity. Ordinarily, I would not mind as it is an advertisement of my prowess, but I am now I one-woman man. Put your assets away."

"Must you always be such an ass?"

"Who knows? Give me a few decades and then decide."

The man was insufferable! She glanced sideways, taking in his shining eyes and the tight set to his lips that proclaimed his anxiety. Noelle swallowed a sharp retort. *And I am hopelessly in love with him.* At least reworking the tiny buttons at the front of her gown occupied her attention until the sound of boot heels echoed at the end of the long, empty hall. She glanced up and waves of relief crashed over her. "Ignatius." Beside her, she felt Nicholas stiffen. Noelle stood, pulling him to his feet beside her. "Remember, I chose you, not him and do not regret one minute of that decision. Behave."

"Noelle. Nicholas. The desk clerk attempted to explain your convoluted situation, but I could not make heads or tails from his ramblings." He ran a hand through his short, black hair, upending it in messy waves. "You are fortunate. Normally, I only work the day shift." His gaze slid to Nicholas. "The whole station, it seems, is interested in talking to you."

"Unless you want to openly accuse me of a crime, I do not see the fascination."

"I am very close, Pemberton. If I were you, I wouldn't push your luck any farther." Ignatius took a step toward Nicholas, who shook off her restraining hand and matched the lawman's movement.

Noelle uttered a sound of disgust. "There are lives at stake while you two posture like alley cats." She stepped between the men with a palm against both chests. "Nicholas, go sit down and let me explain the issue to Ignatius."

"But—"

"Go. You may not wish to deport yourself in a decent fashion, but I do." She waited until he slunk away and sat heavily on the recently vacated bench. With a sigh, Noelle turned to Ignatius. "Kitty and Samuel have been kidnapped by Daniel Firstenour, who is apparently Samuel's rather unscrupulous mentor. He had a note couriered to my residence." She procured the document from the ruffled folds of her décolletage. At his raised eyebrow, she shook her head. "Please do not question it. There is no time."

Ignatius accepted the paper with a hint of a smile hovering on his lips. "Fair enough." Shifting her weight from foot to foot, Noelle stole a glance at Nicholas. His glare had

enough force behind it to pierce straight into her brain. *Silly, jealous, adorable man.* She sent him a wink and turned back to Ignatius. "What do you think we should do?"

"Have you checked the Pemberton home? Perhaps Samuel managed to escape and brought Kitty there." He passed the note to a fellow officer waiting discreetly off to one side. "Tell the chief I will require an armed and mounted patrol, ready in fifteen minutes, no later."

The other man acknowledged the request and ran through the hall, disappearing around a corner.

"Does this mean you will investigate?" When he nodded, Noelle expelled a breath she hadn't known she held. "What if they are hurt or worse?" Fear rose in her chest, but she refused to let it show. She needed to remain calm.

"Noelle, you must stay positive and focused." Ignatius captured her hands in his. "I plan to take a unit and scan first the park then swing around to both your residence and Pemberton's. However, once this muddle is finished, I have no choice but to take Nicholas into my custody. I have more than enough circumstantial evidence."

"You have no cause to hold me, O'Doud." Nicholas sprang from the bench, wrenching her away from the lawman. "Unhand her. She belongs to me."

"Perhaps the lady does not wish to be considered little better than a barmaid in your estimation." Ignatius bristled, his fingers curling into fists at his side. "I will treat her with the utmost of respect."

"My consideration for her surpasses anything you have begun to feel." Nicholas dropped an arm around her shoulders. "I would caution you against touching her again, unless you do not value your hands."

"For the love of God, Nicholas, enough." She pushed him a bit away even as her heart raced at his words and her stomach fluttered when she heard his low growl. He was magnificent when jealous. "I refuse to be fought over as if I were property." She turned to Ignatius. "How many times do I need to tell you? Nicholas is innocent." Noelle stared at the captain's impassive face, and for the first time wondered if perhaps she might be wrong, if she'd rushed into the situation without thinking it through enough.

It didn't matter. She'd vowed to accept him and she meant every word.

"I cannot be certain until I complete my investigation." Ignatius frowned. "It would behoove you to ensure your own safety and distance yourself in the event he is guilty."

"No." Noelle rubbed her temples as her head pounded. "If guilt is his destiny, I have pledged to remain by his side and it will become mine as well. I intend to follow through with that promise."

"Thank you." Nicholas grabbed her hand and brought the fingers to his lips. "Once more, I feel compelled to tell you how much you mean to me."

"You are most welcome." She smiled at him, for the moment forgetting the peril their loved ones were in as she drowned in the rich depths of his eyes. When Ignatius cleared his throat, she started.

"Forgive me if I do not share the joy of your fairy tale ending, but my interest lies in finding your relatives." The captain gave her a look of such sorrow that Noelle felt it deep in her gut as if she'd been hit. "I need you and Nicholas to check in at his residence to make sure Samuel is not there. He may have arrived as you came here. He may be hurt. This is something that needs to be ascertained."

She hated the flatness to his lyrical voice and knew she'd put it there. Nicholas

squeezed her hand. "What else?"

"Once you check the apartment and store and declare both safe, stay there. I will send over a patrol as soon as I can and meet you." He turned on the heel of his spit-shined boots. "I bid you good evening."

"O'Doud."

Slowly, and with slumped shoulders, Ignatius swung around. Noelle let go of Nicholas' hand as he stepped forward. "When this is over, you have my word as a gentleman that I will turn myself into your custody. Hell, I even promise to answer any and all questions you have, just don't let harm come to Noelle."

"Done. Now, if you will excuse me, I have arrangements to finish." This time, the lawman strode down the long hall without a backward glance, his shoulders squared, his back ramrod straight.

"What if he decides to jail you for days on end? What will you do?" Noelle kept up a steady stream of questions as Nicholas pulled her out the front door and down a set of flagstone steps. "Nicholas?"

"You will have to trust that each of us will do the best we can at the appropriate time."

Not satisfied with the answer, she dug in her heels, but he didn't slow, merely pulled her along the walkway. The soles of her shoes made scraping noises against the pavement. "So, you intend to declare defeat?"

"No." His strong fingers encircled her wrist while the other he rose to flag a passing cab. As the horse-drawn buggy slowed to a halt at the curb, Nicholas pulled her close. "Even now, I fight the urge to shift into my true self, and bickering with you is not helping me to remain calm. Besides the wish to keep you safe, I want to rescue my brother and your cousin, and then I will dole out the appropriate justice to Daniel."

She stared into his dark eyes and a shiver wracked her body. "Please promise me you will not kill him."

"Unfortunately, dearest, that is one covenant I cannot make."

Noelle's eyes blurred with tears as he assisted her into the buggy. The vehicle bounced as he jumped in next to her and gave the driver directions. "I beg you to reconsider."

"My mind is quite firm in this decision."

"Then my opinion has no bearing?" She clutched her hands in her lap to stop their shaking. "I thought you cared for me."

Frustration echoed in his sigh. "I do indeed, which is why I am trying to shield you from the worst of what I am capable of."

She turned away from him to watch the shadow-shrouded street pass by the window. The ache in her head didn't compare to the ache in her heart. What kind of life did she anticipate if Nicholas was hell-bent on taking lives, no matter if they deserved punishment? What would happen if his thirst for blood carried through his whole life even if he somehow managed to convince Ignatius of his innocence?

She wiped away a few self-pitying tears. Now was not the time for sorrow. She lifted her chin and caught his bright gaze. Noelle bit down hard on her bottom lip to stifle a cry. Why did fate bring him into her life if only to yank him away? "I will accept your alpha status only for so long. After that, you must accept things as they are. I know best and will help you, no matter that you refuse said help."

"I would never want it any other way." Gently, he claimed her lips. "No more tears. You are too much of an obstinate female for such a weakness."

All too soon, the buggy bumped to a stop in front of the Pemberton residence. Nicholas jumped out and offered a hand to her. Noelle accepted his assistance, determined to shove her insecurities regarding Nicholas to the back of her mind. "Once Kitty and Sam are returned, I intend to badger everyone I have ever met about your sickness. Sooner or later, I will encounter someone who has an answer."

"I look forward to it."

No living thing stirred along the street. As he paid the cab driver, Noelle slowly moved up the front walkway, drawn to a faint, orange flickering at the basement windows. Her eyes watered and she assumed it was from an excess of emotion, but when she sneezed and smelled the unmistakable odor of burning wood, alarm bells rang in her head.

Fire.

Now that she identified the danger, it became readily apparent. Thick black smoke poured from the broken windowpanes of the basement, briefly broken by the orange glow.

"Nicholas, your house is on fire." She glanced back at the street, held his gaze. "What if they are inside?" When something within shattered, she emitted a squeak. "Quick, unlock the door to your store. We need to check." She rushed over the pavement, coughing.

"Get back. Let me go first." Nicholas elbowed her away from the door. "The metal hardware is too hot. Stand back while I break it down."

Noelle had barely moved aside when he rushed the door. His shoulder connected with the wood and the doorframe cracked with the sound of splintering. "Hurry!" Tinkling glass followed another small explosion. Nicholas threw his body weight against the door. This time it flew inward to crash against the wall.

As they entered the store, black smoke filled the area like a heavy, ominous veil. Noelle saw a darkened rectangle toward the back, illuminated with the eerie flickering. *Stairs.* "What is in the basement?"

"Sam's lab. I will go first. It's safer."

"I am not the weak miss you apparently think. Keep up if you can, but I intend to rescue my cousin."

"Noelle?" He laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "Stay safe, darling. I am not strong enough to live without you."

"You do the same. See you on the other side." Without a backward glance, she plunged down the smoke-clogged stairs into the unknown.

Chapter Twenty

Nicholas watched Noelle disappear into the gloom. The woman's stubbornness knew no bounds. Still, he felt a sharp stab to his heart as he entered the smoky stairwell after her. He had to protect her at all costs. Despite the odds against them, she had become the single most redeeming force in his life and without her, he had nothing to live for. Not even the blood tie from Samuel held that sort of power. He swallowed down his fear.

No time for that. Survival first, romance later.

The acrid stench of the smoke filled his nostrils. He coughed, trying to expel the murk from his lungs. Orange tongues of flame licked at the back wall, close to a table that formerly contained some of Sam's more volatile experiments. Some had undoubtedly exploded in the face of the fierce heat. No sign of any of the missing people. Fumbling in the gloom, Nicholas moved to the shelves and unearthed the hatbox that contained the Close Range Nocturnal Spectacles then shook them loose from their nest.

"Noelle? Where are you?" He fitted the goggles over his eyes, immediately rewarded as the world came into a blue-hued, albeit nausea-inducing, close focus. Two things became apparent. First, the fire consumed roughly half of the basement laboratory. Second, Samuel and Kitty huddled together on the floor under the broken windows, wrists and ankles bound with thick rope and some sort of fabric stuffed into their mouths. Faces wet from watering eyes, they stared into the smoke, identical looks of hopelessness in their expressions.

Where was Noelle?

Nicholas kept close to the opposite side of the room. He wished he could remember where Samuel stored the Artificial Breathing Apparatus as he choked and gagged on the smoke. "Noelle?" A noise across the room snagged his attention. He froze, twisting around in order to locate the disturbance. He swayed slightly as the goggles brought on a fresh wave of motion sickness.

As if time slowed, he saw Noelle through a swirl of smoke. The trailing skirt of her gown had snagged on a bit of jagged wood from one of the shelves. She tugged on the fabric, but no matter what she did to finagle loose, it held fast. The flames advanced toward her, climbing the wall closest to the shelves. Muttered curses filled the air as thick as the smoke. She ripped at the buttons on the gown and struggled out of the offending piece of clothing.

The extra stress to the structure of the shelves caused the wood to shift inexorably. "Noelle, move!" She jerked her head in the direction of his voice. Nicholas vaulted forward, two seconds late. With a groan and crackle of compromised wood, the shelf crashed down on top of Noelle as glass jars, boxes, and bits of inventions tumbled to the floor around her. "Noelle?" His lungs burned from breathing in the foul smoke. He coughed, which led to more coughing, and soon it hurt to take a new breath.

Muffled sounds from Samuel's direction reminded him of their peril. Nicholas picked his way through the clutter to kneel by Noelle's still form. With shaking fingers, he touched her neck, felt for a pulse. It was weak, but steady. "Sweetness, wake up. We have to get out of here." He stroked his fingertips over her pale cheek, leaving behind a streak of soot. She didn't stir, and he was rapidly running out of time. Nicholas moved to the

shelf, attempted to lift it, but the wood was simply too heavy for him to move more than a couple inches. It was inconceivable to hold up the piece of furniture and extract her at the same time. He decided to free his brother and Kitty then enlist their help with Noelle. At least she wouldn't breathe in the worst of the smoke so close to the floor. He prayed that she couldn't feel any pain.

The snap and pop of the fire claimed his attention. Nicholas scanned the path of the flames. After determining Noelle would be safe for a few moments more, he stood and shuffled through the back half of the lab, once again thankful for the goggle invention. "Sam? Are you alright?" He shoved the goggles up on his forehead. At his brother's grunt and Kitty's muffled wail of relief, Nicholas applied himself to the task of setting them free.

"Noelle's unconscious. Knocked out when the shelf on the far wall fell. If we stay down here too long, we will all be dead." He withdrew the gags from first Sam's mouth then Kitty's. "Where is Daniel?"

Samuel's jaw worked, but no sound issued from him. He cleared his throat, turned slightly so Nicholas could work at the bonds on his wrists. "Not sure. He said he'd leave us here until he got what he wanted. On his way out, he knocked over a few beakers which, when mixed, caused an explosion and subsequent fire." A bout of coughing interrupted the narrative.

"I will fix this." Nicholas let loose a growl when the rope slid from his brother's wrists like a snake. "Work on your ankles while I tend to Kitty." Her bond proved to be more stubborn than Samuel's and Nicholas was hard pressed to undo them. His eyes streamed with tears while his lungs labored in the acrid smoke. *Only a matter of time now.* Finally, the knots released in his hands. "Work the rest on your own. I need to retrieve Noelle."

A whimper was Kitty's only response. Nicholas didn't pause to relieve her fears. Samuel could deal with that later. He fit the goggles over his eyes and moved with determined strides through the murk. Heat from the fire slammed into him with the force of a brick wall. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He could feel it run down his face in tiny streams. His skin itched beneath the goggles. Sheer willpower propelled him forward.

Through the blue lenses, Noelle's form resembled little more than a broken doll. Her hair flowed over the floor and around her shoulders like spilled ink. Blocking out the snatches of hurried conversation between Samuel and Kitty, Nicholas pulled at the shelf. It grudgingly gave an inch, same as last time. As the flames nipped at his heels, he summoned every ounce of available strength he possessed into moving the obstacle that pinned her. With a roar of frustration, he hefted the wood. Noelle needed him and he couldn't help her.

Slowly, it lifted a few inches, then much more when Samuel shored up the bulk with his shoulders. "You'd best snatch her now. I will not be able to hold it for long." A wry smile crossed his lips as he looked at Nicholas. "Fantastic luck with the nocturnal goggles, eh? Came in quite handy."

"Spare me the gloating." He bundled Noelle into his arms and stood, clearing the massive piece of furniture as Samuel let it fall to the floor. Embers swirled in the air around them. "Grab Kitty. Let's go before the whole house comes down." He hefted Noelle's dead weight more comfortably against his chest, hoping they hadn't tarried too

long in the smoke. Already it grew unbearably painful to draw new breath and the need to revive Noelle preyed heavily on his mind.

"Stay with me, love. Be strong." He dropped a kiss on her forehead, gratified when she stirred slightly.

Samuel barreled past trailing a hysterical Kitty in his wake. They hit the stairs at a run with Nicholas bringing up the rear. As soon as they burst into the store, a few loud crashes issued from the basement. Flames erupted from the stairwell to flare behind the counter. Regret for the end of his livelihood gripped him, but Nicholas ignored it. He could rebuild. His friends and family were more important.

Life was precious and the time to experience it too short.

"Let's go, folks." He led the way through the door to the sidewalk beyond. Sam and Kitty stumbled out behind him to collapse into each other's arms nearby. Policemen in their dark uniforms swarmed the property. A row of tethered horses pawed the street nervously. In the distance, the emergency bells clattered, signaling the imminent arrival of the fire department. O'Doud rushed forward and Nicholas dumped Noelle's body into his arms. "I never thought I would be so glad to you."

"Is she alive?"

"Yes, but she might have suffered broken bones. I have no idea. Pulling her to safety was my only objective at the time." Nicholas bent over, resting his hands on his thighs as he took deep gulps of fresh, clean air. Belatedly, he realized he still wore the goggles and yanked them off his head and dumped them on the grass. "Can I trust you to look after her while I take care of unfinished business?"

"Can I trust you?"

He straightened to stare the captain dead in the eye. "I gave you my word." Noelle stirred in O'Doud's arms. Nicholas's heart leapt with joy. "Keep her safe." Giving into the urge regardless of O'Doud's presence, he let his fingertips drift over her cheek. His Noelle. "If I do not return, tell her—" His throat constricted over the very real possibility of his death. "Tell her I perished in the fire, and that I love her beyond life itself."

Another officer approached with a blanket. O'Doud nodded. "Godspeed, Pemberton. I may have underestimated you."

* * * *

Nicholas ran down two alleys before he paused. He crumbled beneath the urge to shift into the lion. The nearly constant need had been with him since he and Noelle had left the police station earlier in the evening, but he had successfully kept it in check by concentrating on more pressing issues. Now that he knew everyone would survive, Nicholas gave himself up to the primal call.

He welcomed the waves of pain that swept over him as his body convulsed and contorted. Each new stab of agony reminded him why he did this: to avenge his brother, defend his own self-worth as a man and protect Noelle. Fingernails became deadly sharp claws, his teeth lengthened and his facial bones reconstructed into that of a big cat. Nicholas dropped to all fours as his clothes fell from his body and fur took their place. A tail sprouted from his backside to unfurl with feline grace, twitching in the night air. Newly formed whiskers quivered. He sniffed the air, seeking direction.

Vengeance will be mine this night.

With heightened senses, Nicholas sprinted through the dark, quiet streets. *If I were a*

man masquerading as a bastard coward, where would I hide? Would he be in his home, safe and secure, tucked away? No. Pompous men like Daniel would want to brag about what they'd done. A brothel, perhaps, or maybe one of the local bars. As he ran over the pavement, his claws clicked against the concrete in a pleasing rhythm. On a whim, he lifted his lips and let loose a powerful roar that echoed off the brick facades of the buildings.

Freedom.

A few lamps flickered on in upper story apartments. Nicholas mentally grinned and wondered how many people would flock to the newspaper office in the morning with stories about hearing a lion in the night. How many people would be brave enough to open their doors and try for a peek?

He felt the roughness of the pavement on the pads of his feet as he ran, swinging his head from side to side in his search for the man who deserved to die. Down another street, he loped, ducking through an alley. Rats scattered before him in apparent terror. He encountered a stray dog, which yelped and shot out of the alley as if the devil himself was close behind.

Another time, perhaps. Tonight's quarry was human.

After several more twists and turns, Nicholas stopped to sniff the air. *Here.* He prowled the alley, keeping close to the shadows. A few men staggered from the bar, their voices loud and harsh in the night. They ambled across the street. He crouched, waiting. The door swung open once more, this time admitting only one man.

Daniel.

Nicholas growled low and it rumbled throughout his feline chest to tingle at the tip of his tail. He twitched that appendage in anticipation. Daniel's uneven footfalls marked him as moderately drunk, and the way he listed as he walked confirmed the fact. *Excellent. His reflexes would be slow.* Nicholas slunk to the opening of the alleyway then touched his tongue to a puddle of water.

The inebriated fellow banged around the alleyway with his walking stick and he looked in Nicholas' direction. "Damn city is being overrun with stray dogs." His muttering slurred into inconsequential words before slacking off altogether.

Nicholas waited until Daniel drew flush with him before striking, his haunches tense beneath him. His muscles screamed from the strain. *Now.* With another fierce growl, he sprang from his hiding place.

The surprised whites in Daniel's eyes were what Nicholas saw first as he knocked the burly man to the ground. He landed heavily on top of his adversary, pinning him to the pavement with his powerful paws and two hundred pounds of muscled fury. A snarl issued from his throat and a thin line of drool glanced off his lolling tongue to splash onto Daniel's striped lapel.

"Get off, mangy mutt." Daniel shoved with a strength that only alcohol could fuel. Nicholas rolled to his side. Daniel struggled to his feet then flattened himself against the brick side of the building. "Ah, I see now. You are not a dog at all, are you, Nicholas, for it is you, I would bet my fortune upon it."

He crouched once more. His tail flicked back and forth with a life of its own. He bared his teeth and let loose a low, rumbling growl that echoed with eerie undulations in the alley. Waiting. Toying with his prey before he brought it down like a recalcitrant water buffalo. *Easy kill.* How to dispatch the bloated beast, he wondered as he kept his

gaze trained on the hateful man.

"I knew it would only be a matter of time before you sought me out." A leer twisted Daniel's thick lips. "I am disappointed you chose to do so in your animal form, although I would love the opportunity to document this event. There is a camera in the bar I could commandeer if you are willing."

Nicholas turned his growl into a roar and pounced. He threw his body against Daniel's pudgy middle, slamming the man into the bricks. As the air whooshed from his lungs, Daniel attempted to defend against the attack, but Nicholas ran by instinct alone. He grabbed the waistband of Daniel's pants in his mouth and pulled. Daniel tumbled to the ground with the grace of a bag of unwanted vegetables. His walking stick clattered in the alleyway. Heart hammering in his feline chest, Nicholas clamped one of Daniel's legs in his jaws and pulled him deeper into the passage, not stopping until they were well into the black shadows, hidden from any curious passerby.

Now for the kill.

Ignoring the frightened, high-pitched squeaks that emanated from his victim, Nicholas pressed his front paws to Daniel's chest and thrust his face close to the fat, sweaty neck. He smelled the man's fear and reveled in it, could almost taste the man's blood on his lips. Nicholas opened his jaws wide. He saw Daniel stare in horror at his fangs and, had he been human, he would have laughed at the comical picture the fat man made. The urge to kill pulsed strong within him. He fit his jaws on the soft flesh, biting down, digging his claws into the heavy material of Daniel's coat.

Now.

"If you have any mercy in you, wait." Fear tinged Daniel's words as he scabbled on the ground like an overturned beetle. "You have always wondered why you are different. Not a day goes by when you do not wish for a different fate. I can give you those answers because I was there when it happened. The day your destiny changed direction."

Curiosity won out over the desire for blood. Nicholas relaxed his jaws and allowed Daniel to crab-crawl further into the alley. He would wait. He could kill the man at any time.

"Yes, that's it. I knew you wanted to know the truth." With a shudder, Daniel stood, albeit unsteadily, snatching up the walking stick as he went. "I know exactly what causes your descent into madness and compels you to turn into the beast." His teeth flashed in the darkness as he grinned. "*I* made you that way. Why do you think I have kept such close tabs on you and your brother over the years? I am protecting my investment."

Nicholas growled, impatient, and flipped his tail.

"You are a result of an experiment in genetics and science." Daniel paused, holding his gaze with mocking eyes. "Which was a direct result of a collection of scientists and scholars like myself, most of which have since died over the years waiting for you to show signs that we were triumphant. I am proud to say, you have exceeded my every expectation and then some. I will promise you this. If you kill me now, you will never know if there is a cure."

Another growl then Nicholas paced the length of the alley. *Did he lie? Did it matter? If he did tell the truth, will I finally know a normal life?* He blew out a sharp exhalation of air through his feline lips. He would shift back, and if Daniel did not offer the answers Nicholas sought, he would kill the man with his bare hands.

A cry of agony tore from his throat as he shifted into his human form from that of the

lion. For whatever reason, the transition from animal to human was much more painful than the other way. In a matter of seconds, he stood before his nemesis, shaking and nearly naked in the cool air of the early morning. His clothing hung in tattered shreds on his body.

"Tell me all you know of my affliction."

"Blunt, as always." Daniel's chuckle seemed to take on a life of its own in the darkness. He inched forward until the moonlight half-shadowed his fleshy face. "You must realize that any advancement in the scientific and academic arenas is very cutthroat and competitive. If any one of us can beat a colleague to publish information, then we will."

"I could care less about your career, Firstenour." Nicholas curled his fingers into fists. "Your point, please."

"Recall, if you will, yourself as a young, awkward boy around twelve or thirteen. Puberty is often not a pleasant time in any boy's life, but yours was exceptionally trying, was it not?"

"That is correct. I contracted a particularly nasty bout of flu that required me to spend weeks in the hospital. By the time they released me, most of the school year had passed, and I could not catch up the work. I was required to take that year again, thus graduated a year behind my contemporaries."

"Think back. I, too, happened to be in that same hospital at the very same time, but for a much different reason." One of Daniel's pudgy fingers caressed the chain of his pocket watch. "My mentor was near death. His heart attacked him. Some of his dying words to me were those of new and thrilling research work he happened to be involved in. He merely needed a test subject."

"And this concerns me how? I grow weary of your aimless drivel." Nicholas crossed his arms over his chest.

"Patience, my boy. The answers you seek hover on the tip of my tongue." Daniel moved more fully into the moonlight. With a flick of his wrist, he yanked a dagger from the top of his walking stick and the jeweled handle glittered in the dim illumination.

Nicholas sucked in a surprised breath. *Noelle was right.* His heart thudded painfully. *I need to get to her.*

Daniel cleared his throat. "A human child during puberty is often unstable, in flux if you will. Lucky for me, your parents were also acquaintances of mine because your father was a teacher. I expressed an interest in visiting your room. When your father obliged and left me alone with you, it was very easy to inject you with a few vials of feline blood and hormones. My colleague assured me both substances would mix with that of a human nicely. Of course, genetic testing of that magnitude had only just gotten started in this country so we had no substantial evidence that the test would work."

"You gambled with my health illegally?" Rage boiled in Nicholas' chest at the thought. "What of my parents? When did they become aware of your treachery?" He circled Daniel with a new wariness as bloodlust once again impressed upon his consciousness. He fought the urge to shift, needed to hear Daniel's confession.

"They were none the wiser and went to their graves thinking you and Samuel were normal young men."

"You infected Sam as well?" The familiar red haze dropped over his gaze as he paced. "Bastard."

"Calm down. Samuel is untouched. I never had the opportunity to experiment on him, but since he is so blasted overprotective of you, I needed to try a different tactic in order to monitor your brother." He brandished the dagger, lunged a few times, grunting when Nicholas backed away. "Offering to be his mentor was the perfect foil. His amazing lack of self-confidence ensured his need for acceptance within the academic community, and I stepped in to buoy him along."

"Why?" Nicholas slowed in his endless circling, perplexed. "What could Sam give you?" He rubbed his temples as a headache loomed. "Right. Stupid me. He trusted you and shared all of his research, which you took and used for your own gains, promotions, and advancements."

"It was quite a lucrative arrangement. Your exploits kept Samuel busy with frantic attempts to reverse your sickness, as if there was a hope in the world." A frown wrinkled his face. "Then Miss Radcliffe and Miss Hamilton entered the picture." Daniel's bushy eyebrows slanted down to emphasize his maniacal air. "Your brother suddenly oozed confidence, and you began the pointless quest to keep your hormones in check and your temper under control."

"Why is it pointless? Samuel assures me the solar eclipse might reverse..." His words trailed off as the meaning of Daniel's words finally sank in. "The affliction has nothing to do with planetary alignment or celestial things."

"Not a bit, but I admire how Samuel's mind works. He could have claimed a nice career if he did not need to worry about you." Daniel cackled with glee. "The trouble is I have no idea how severe your sickness is. The other test subject from the hospital that day died a few years ago in a fight. So you see, I could not tell you if your illness will grow worse with age or wear off entirely. You are an anomaly, one of a kind, and someone my university is very anxious to study further."

"Prepare for disappointment, Firstenour. I am not a lab rat."

"That is where you have miscalculated. I own you, Nicholas. You could say, I created you; therefore, you owe me a lifetime of analysis." His laugh was cold and sterile as he pulled his pocket watch from his vest and glanced at it. "Times flies and I must get home to my waiting bed, but know this. If I do not secure your cooperation in my experiments, I will continue to torment your loved ones." He waved the dagger in front of him. "Who can say if one of them will meet with a horrible accident like the fire this evening? Any possible offspring you might produce in the future belongs to me. I am most interested to see if you have the capability to pass along the infected blood."

"Offspring?" Nicholas snorted and resumed circling his adversary. "I am very careful with any coupling so that occurrence will never happen." He couldn't imagine reproducing and passing the affliction onto an innocent child.

Daniel shrugged. "No matter. Accidents do happen, and you seem rather fond of the females, especially Noelle. Who knows? Even now she could be pregnant."

Cold fear slammed up his spine. "Stay away from her. I will kill you if you even talk to her." Need to seek her out gripped him. The only way she would remain safe is if he hid her. He should spirit her to Europe, out of reach from Daniel's clutches, to a convent perhaps. Sister Agnes could help.

"Ah, she is your Achilles heel. Interesting." The fat man's laugh echoed through the alley. "I can bide my time. I have for this long."

Nicholas gagged on his fear. "I would rather die by my own hand than let you gain a

foothold in my life or anyone else I know."

"Suit yourself. I would hate to see Samuel's career ruined by the selfishness of his brother. Just think of the animosity he will feel for you on top of the resentment he already harbors because you have done just that. And there is always Noelle. Miss Radcliffe commands a tenuous hold in the community. Imagine what could happen to her if her secrets were leaked in certain circles. Who would rally around you then?"

"To hell with it." Nicholas sprang at the heavier man, mindful of the dagger. "I will kill you. My reputation is already in question. Another death will mean nothing." He shoved the other man against the brick wall, his hands tight around the fat neck.

His rage boiled over, took command of his brain in a red tide of hatred and anger. He applied pressure. Pleasure coiled in the pit of his stomach when Daniel dropped his weapon and began to wheeze. "You had no right to play God in my life. In fact, I can easily lay every crime I have ever committed at your doorstep. I was merely a victim." The chords and tendons in Daniel's neck strained against his fingers. Nicholas squeezed harder. He could almost taste the crow of victory.

"Your sickness has no cure, so what choice do you have?" A wet gurgle swallowed the last of the sentence. "Your life is mine."

"No. There is always a choice." Nicholas sucked in a breath as a new realization hit him. He shuddered and dropped his hands. "I *have* a choice." He stepped away from the source of all his problems. "It does not matter what I am. If I chose not to become the monster within me, that is my right, my choice. My sanity depends on me alone." The red haze lifted from his vision and his heart no longer raced.

"You cannot help but become the animal." Daniel coughed. "Face it, Nicholas. You crave blood, the killings. It is a part of you, which cannot be denied. Eventually, the primal instinct within will take over and you will have no more choices or free will."

Nicholas recalled Noelle's pleas for him to remember the man he was inside. Now the words made perfect sense. She believed that he was more than the animal. God, he couldn't live without her.

"No matter what, I always have that." He stared at the man. Daniel cowered against the wall, a fat, quivering bully. "Fear is not my master any longer. I do not dread the beast and will meet the challenges as they come." Even though most of his rage had dissipated, Nicholas couldn't resist one last calling card. Balling his right hand into a fist, he slammed it into Daniel's jaw. A jolt of satisfaction streaked down his spine as if he'd been doused with cold water. Daniel slumped to the ground. "Take care that the bums don't get you, Firstenour, or the patrols, but if you do encounter O'Doud and his men, feel free to send them my way. I plan to expose the whole sordid tale anyway and I am sure he will be interested to learn of your part in this."

Stepping forward, he picked Daniel up by his lapels and punched him again. This time the blow connected with his temple and Daniel went slack in his hands. Nicholas let him fall. The man's heavy breathing was the only indication the rotund man still lived.

Without a backward glance, he left the alley, being sure to stay in the shadows due to his unorthodox dress. He wondered if his apartment still stood, and if it didn't what would he do for clothes? Regardless of what the future held, Nicholas knew he would do whatever he could to fight his sickness and keep it in remission.

The only thing left for him to accomplish was to turn himself into O'Doud and pay penance for his crimes. Whatever was left of his soul after that would belong to Noelle.

Always.

Chapter Twenty-One

Two weeks later

Bright morning sunshine warmed Noelle's face. She came awake to birdsong after what had been her first uninterrupted night of sleep in years. Stretching, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and grinned as a host of butterflies took flight in her stomach. Excitement to see Nicholas later that afternoon motivated her movements, but trepidation tempered the emotion. They still had much to talk about before meeting their future, and she hoped his time away hadn't changed how he felt for her.

The empty space near a window shimmered. Two seconds later, Thalia's ghost materialized. "Why do you doubt the wisdom of the universe?" She drifted across the room until her form hovered near Noelle. "You and Nicholas have been purposefully thrown together. He is your anchor and you are his hope."

"But how will he react to my talking to ghosts or my visions? That hardly constitutes an ordinary life." Noelle padded to the French door. She drew the lacy curtain aside and smiled when she spied the colorful buds of spring flowers in the garden.

"Ordinary is not very inspiring." Thalia grinned. "Tell me this. Do you accept Nicholas and his faults?"

"Of course. That was never in question."

The ghost shrugged then drifted toward the ceiling. "Your worry is groundless. Both of you bring unique problems to the relationship, and it is because of these opportunities that your love will bloom for an eternity."

That struck Noelle as funny. She narrowed her eyes at her visitor. "I thought it was your job to warn me away from Nicholas or protect me from him?"

If a ghost could appear embarrassed then Thalia wore that exact expression. "I have done just that. In retrospect, we in the afterlife have determined Nicholas is the best thing for you. He is a force unto himself and would fight to the death for you."

"Ah, so then I have no more use for these ghostly visits?" Still, doubts regarding him swirled through her mind. How would he react to the news she debated about telling him? Would that change their relationship?

"We have no plans to abandon you. We need you as much as you need us, and it will always be so until you decide otherwise."

Noelle smiled. "Now that my obsession with Nicholas has waned a tiny bit, I am ready to concentrate on helping the lost souls who seek me out."

"I never had any doubts." Thalia winked and began to fade. "Good luck with your love interest. You will be surprised at how fate can manipulate events to your advantage."

"What does that mean?"

"Refrain from over thinking the issue. Life is not this difficult."

Noelle's skin prickled when the apparition shot her a mischievous grin. "Is there something I should know? Thalia? Will I be happy? Will he?" The ghost's form evaporated into the air.

* * * *

Noelle sighed and tears filled her eyes as she watched the scene unfold before her.

She and Kitty had decided to host an afternoon tea for the Pemberton brothers since both men had been absent from their lives, on and off, for a couple of weeks. Samuel had been dealing with legal and financial issues surrounding the fire and the loss of his laboratory, Nicholas's store, and their home. Nicholas spent the bulk of the time as a guest of the police station, attempting to convince Ignatius he was guilty of crimes committed in the area during the last few years.

As of that afternoon, she still waited on word of the outcome. Although Samuel was lately a frequent visitor to the bungalow, Nicholas never accompanied him and she refrained from haunting the police station fearing her presence would only muddle the proceedings, no matter how much she longed to see him.

Still, the enforced time apart undermined her confidence in a future with Nicholas. She hated herself for being weak but needed to think of the future.

"Can you believe it, Noelle? Sam just asked me to marry him. Me, a married woman." Kitty rushed across the lawn to plant herself next to Noelle on the wooden bench in the garden. Her skin glowed and the smile that lit her face illuminated her green eyes as well. "And the ring is so dear. Just look."

"It is lovely." Noelle gave the delicately scrolled silver band what she hoped was a look of genuine interest. "I am very happy for you. Samuel will make a wonderful husband." She was beyond pleased for her cousin, but a tiny part of her protested with jealousy. Kitty would have the perfect life Noelle always wanted, and once again, the sense of looking in on an ideal situation brought a cloud of sadness. "You should not leave your man alone for very long. Already, he gazes at you as if you have been parted for years." Perfection had its place, but she couldn't help but root for the unconventional.

Her time would come.

"I wish you would find the same happiness, Noelle." Kitty stared across the garden with a faraway look in her eyes. "It is beyond anything I have ever dreamed of." A frown marred the perfection of her rosebud mouth. "Are you quite certain you wish to give us the bungalow? What will you do about the ghosts? Where will you go?"

"I will be fine, so, please, set your mind at ease. The ghosts will follow me and I cannot stop them. I have accepted this about myself and will endeavor to live with the abnormality. As long as I can help them, they will surround me." She folded her hands in her lap and pressed them against her stomach in an effort to sooth its rebellion. She allowed herself a small smile. "I have recently purchased a cottage not far from here. The property borders a wooded area on the backside of Brookside Park. It will be quiet and private. After recent events, I need some time away."

"I never knew you had a personal fortune."

"Let's just say I have had a run of good luck and leave it at that."

"Oh, sweetie, what about Nicholas?" Kitty grasped one of Noelle's hands and squeezed. "I had such high hopes for a match between you two. You are both very stubborn, volatile people, and I thought—"

So did I. She cut her cousin off with a shake of her head. "I think Nicholas and I have too many differences to overcome, and besides, his future is still unsettled. I have no right to make demands from him. I must move forward, and in the meantime, I am sure he is doing what he can to do the same. Maybe in time, our paths will cross again if our destinies are still aligned." She gestured in Samuel's direction. "Go. It seems as if your

fiance's patience is wearing thin."

Kitty stood and brought Noelle to her feet as well. "Will you be happy? I feel so selfish at my good fortune if it means you will have less. We have always been together, and now..." Tears swallowed the rest of her statement.

"I will be fine, trust me. In time, joy will come I have no doubt. For the present, I need time to acclimate to the changes." Noelle averted her eyes, fearful that Kitty's inquisitive nature would compel her to reveal too much, too soon. "Now, I intend to refresh the teapot and bring out more sandwiches and cookies. I am confident you can find something to amuse yourself with in the meantime."

As Kitty rushed across the mossy green grass and threw herself into Samuel's waiting arms, Noelle heaved another sigh and gathered the tea tray. She couldn't help but wonder once her cousin was a married woman would their relationship change? How would Kitty react to the many adjustments in both of their new lives?

Not having an answer, she followed the flagstone walkway through the lawn to the kitchen. Frowning, she balanced the tray against her hip and pushed open the door, certain she had left it ajar for the pleasant spring air to circulate. When she stepped through the threshold, the sight that met her gaze rooted her to the floor.

Nicholas.

She lost all feeling in her fingers. The tray wobbled and the blue and white ceramic teapot teetered. Only the fast action from Nicholas prevented the dishes from crashing to the floor. He laid the tray on the table then regarded her with a mixture of mischief and determination in his brandy colored eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Noelle raked her gaze over his body, devoured him, wanting to memorize every sensual detail. "Even Samuel was at a loss to know what occurred with you." Her heart raced when a small smile lifted the corners of his lips. Intense longing heated her from the inside out until she feared she would dissolve into a puddle at his feet.

Clearly, she had yet to overcome the addiction to him. Never wanted to.

"That is not exactly the welcome I expected, but then there are many things between us I have not prepared for." Nicholas advanced toward her a few steps. "I have much to tell you."

"Perhaps we should have a civilized conversation in the living room?" Noelle retreated as misgivings fired within her chest. Would a life with him be feasible or were their differences too much to overcome? Doubt fell away as pangs of need swirled low in her stomach and he inched closer. "I am not sure this is the proper venue—"

Nicholas pulled her into his arms, cutting off her protest as his mouth crashed down on hers. With a sigh of complete surrender, Noelle twined her arms around his neck and returned each kiss until the embrace became so much more than the welcoming of an absent lover. Lips met in velvety heat, tongues mated in a primal battle as soft curves and perfumed skin met muscled planes and lean angles.

His apple and oak scent intoxicated her more quickly than the finest wine, adding fuel to the inferno that threatened to consume her. She wrenched her mouth from his in order to tease a sensitive spot along his jaw with her tongue. His sharp intake of breath spurred her to new heights of boldness and she nipped his neck. Her fingers fumbled at the buttons of his shirt. The touch of his hands on her ribcage as his thumbs teased her nipples through the thin silk of her dress created pleasant warmth that gathered between

her legs.

God help me, I love him and cannot live without him.

"If you are quiet, we can make use of my bedroom, but be aware your brother is just outside in the garden..." Her passion lost some of its steam as he stepped away. "What is it?"

"Why did you not tell me?" His eyes, dark from their recent encounter, now danced with incredulity and a trace of fear. "I deserve an explanation."

"I, uh, I have no idea what you mean." She put a measure of space between them, choosing to fill the teakettle with water as her heart pounded.

"Now is not the time for untruths. I can smell the change in your hormones. Do not forget I retain my animal senses even though I am in my human form." He stepped behind her, laid a hand on her shoulder. "Did you plan to inform *me* you were pregnant?"

"I..." Noelle set the kettle on the stove and whirled around to face him. "I have not confirmed anything yet. Perhaps I am not." She knew the chance of that happening was slim. Her menses were two weeks late and already Noelle could feel a difference within her. Nothing substantial, more like a hunch or a dose of feminine intuition that told her something was different.

"Trust me. I am never wrong."

She shivered as his voice dropped. Anger surged through her in waves. "What does any of it matter to you? Repeatedly you have warned that you cannot commit to a life with me even though you claim to love me. I have arranged to care for this child by myself, and can do so quite comfortably with my small fortune. The child will want for nothing."

Hurt shadowed his face and he retreated to the opposite side of the kitchen. "If the child is mine, I want to do the honorable thing by both of you. My affection for you is real, please believe me. I will care for you and the child, protect you from Daniel and others like him. I can do nothing less."

"Damn you, Nicholas." Noelle shot across the tiled floor and delivered a slap to his cheek. "Of course it's yours. I have always been faithful to you." Annoyed when tears filled her eyes, she turned away, determined not to let him see her emotion. "I love you, but I refuse to be an obligation or something you feel you must take care of out of guilt."

"Noelle, listen to me—"

"No! I grow weary of your empty promises and silky words that end in nothing but coercing me into bed." Her cheeks heated as she acknowledged to herself that she wanted to do just that. Noelle turned to face him. "I won't burden your life with this. What of the eclipse in two days? Samuel believes it can cure you, and if that is true, you will be free. You can forget about the things you said under the duress of high emotion."

"The eclipse has no bearing on my life now."

"Why not? Sam was very adamant that—"

Nicholas held up a hand, palm out. "He is woefully wrong." He held her gaze, his shadowed by pain. "The night of the fire, I hunted down Daniel and demanded an explanation. No amount of astrological charts and weather related phenomena will help me gain a fully human status. He injected me with the blood and hormones of a lion, intending to use me as a life experiment. I will be a shifter for the rest of my life. There is no cure."

"Do you still wish to become something different?"

"I struggle with that very question daily." He pushed the fingers of one hand through his hair, leaving it in disheveled blond waves. "I will never be able to change what I am, so please do not expect me to do so merely because *you* wish it. Perhaps *I* do not."

Her heart lurched at the raw pain in his voice. "I never asked that you become someone else. I am giving you a chance to live your life as a free man, without being tied down to obligations not of your own choosing." She swallowed, wondering if his confessions of love were merely pretty words. If so, could she be happy with that?

Where had her courage of weeks ago gone? Why could she not believe in the surety of love that she had the night of the fire?

"There are different kinds of freedom a man can possess. I have concluded that many things in this life measure a man: wealth, position, intelligence, prowess in the bedroom, bravery. I can go on, but there is no need. Noelle," Nicholas crossed the floor to take her hands in his, "the only thing I can, in all honesty give you and which I truly own, is love. The thought of losing you in the fire was my undoing. I have been obsessed with you since the first time I saw you in the restaurant. I want to keep you safe. I want to provide a home, a life together with you and our child. Nothing else matters."

"You do not mean that." She yanked her hands away in a desperate attempt to disconnect from him. His words tore at her heart, warmed her, and made her believe in him again, but she couldn't shake the niggling worms of fear. "What of your primal instincts? Your urges? You could kill the baby without a second thought, and set your sights on me next." Before the advent of her pregnancy, she would have thrown caution away for the chance to indulge in a lifetime of shared forbidden carnal delights, but now she must think of the child. "I do not have the strength to survive such a thing again. It would break my heart."

"That scenario will never happen." He slipped his arms around her waist and held her in a loose embrace. "During my fight with Daniel, I found I could control the rage, stop the shifting. I had a choice to kill the man, yet I made the conscious decision not to. That very act separates me from a monster. I think with enough effort and incentive, I can control shifting as well." His arms tightened, pulling her closer. "I firmly believe learning to love you taught me to be a better man, and I would do anything, go anywhere for the opportunity to prove myself to you. Please do not deny me the first bright spot of hope I have owned in my life."

"Oh, Nicholas." She relaxed into his hold, glad to lean on his solid strength. "What of your criminal history? You were with Ignatius for two weeks. Does he intend to arrest you?"

"Hardly." His laugh rang with bitterness. "I confessed to O'Doud, told him every black deed I'd ever committed under my lion persona, all that I could remember. He refused to believe me. Claimed I made up stories to waste his time. Said people could not be shape shifters. There was no such thing. Eventually, he grew tired of my insistence and released me. He only has circumstantial evidence which apparently is not strong enough to lead to a conviction."

"I am surprised Ignatius called defeat so easily."

"Well, I do have the tendency to be rather exhausting and a bit of a bully. But there is one good thing to come out of my talk with O'Doud."

"What?"

"I told him of Daniel's treachery. Yesterday, he paid Daniel a visit and brought him

into the station. Let's just say, for the next five years or so, Daniel will have plenty of time to think on his actions. O'Doud plans to file charges of intimidation, theft, coercion, and anything else he can dig up, which means Samuel will be able to apply to the soon-to-be vacant position on the board at the university. Things worked out for the best."

"That is wonderful news."

Nicholas lifted her chin with his forefinger. "Is it too much to hope that you have exhausted your excuses and will let me kiss you?"

Confliction flooded her mind. Should she believe him? Would he control his animal tendencies so they could build a life together? As she gazed into his shadowed eyes, the carefully constructed walls around her heart and soul crumbled. "It terrifies me how much I love you, but what if it's not enough?"

"What else can I give in order to convince you of my sincerity? I do not understand your hesitation. Fate gave you to me. That is all I need to know, but apparently it's not enough for you." He turned away; his once proud shoulders slumped, his strong face lined with worry, and his eyes reflecting defeat. His dejection filled the air as if it were a separate entity. Noelle's breath came in ragged gasps as panic slammed into her chest. *He couldn't leave!* Love was enough. Nothing else mattered, now or ever. She was a fool for allowing doubt to make her think otherwise. "Nicholas, wait."

Slowly, he turned to face her. "Do wish to torment me more?"

"Marry me."

"I beg your pardon?" Confusion crept across his face, quickly followed by hope. He took a few steps toward her. "I believe my hearing is faulty."

"Do not be a bigger ass than you can help." She smiled as she repeated the same words she said to him early in their relationship. "Marry me. My addiction to you will last for the rest of my life, and if you are not by my side, that life will be bleak and pointless. I love you, now, tomorrow and always. If these feelings grow any bigger, I will explode, and that would be a very messy prospect indeed."

For a few terribly long heartbeats, Nicholas remained silent, and then he uttered the one word that reduced Noelle to tears.

"Yes."

"Are you sure? It is quite a different departure from how you have conducted your life in the past." She peered into his face. The triumphant joy that made his eyes twinkle and his lips curl with a grin squeezed her heart. "You will pledge your fidelity to me alone. Are you strong enough?"

"Are you?"

"I look forward to spending the rest of my life trying to answer that question." When his eyes darkened with passion, her breath stalled. She threw herself into his eager arms and kissed him as if she'd never seen him before. Perhaps she hadn't. Now she looked at him through the eyes of never-failing love, and no differences or obstacles would tear them apart.

Several moments later, Nicholas set her an arm's length away. "It would behoove you to move this display of affection into another, more private, room. I can hear Sam and Kitty approach, and I would rather not have my brother witness the evidence of my regard for you."

Heat infused Noelle's cheeks. She glanced between them, and seeing the bulge at the front of his trousers, briefly stroked her fingers over his erection, grinned when he

released a soft moan. "Does this mean you accept my proposal?"

"Obviously. I cannot continue to allow you molest me outside of the bounds of marriage, after all, what will Sister Agnes say? She will be scandalized."

"She will survive."

"Perhaps, but not willingly." Nicholas tweaked her nose. "I hope you are ready to meet the challenge of shackling yourself to me. There are rumors that say I am rather depraved and evil."

"Let the people talk. They are merely jealous." She pressed her lips to his in a gentle kiss. Her heart overflowed with joy as his arms closed possessively around her, filling her with delicious heat. "I must warn you that a life with me may cause your soul to unravel. I am not exactly the most normal person you will meet."

"Then we are perfectly matched." Nicholas pressed his body against hers so she had no doubts regarding his intentions. "Now, do you prefer to be ravished here or behind your closed bedroom door? I have been parted from you for far too long and refuse to extend the torment."

With a happy sigh, Noelle took his hand and guided him down the hall, and in a whisper said, "First one out of their clothes gets to make the rules." As he sprinted into her room, she grinned and pressed her fingers to her stomach as tremors rocked her insides.

Nicholas brought excitement, worry, and acceptance into her life, but she knew together they would bring love—which was the most important thing after all.

The End

About the Author:

Sandra is a writer of romantic fiction. Her portfolio includes historical, contemporary, and paranormal romances and she'll sometimes blend genres.

After catching the writing bug at the young age of ten, she's gone on to grow her unique writing style. She's a regular contributor for the Paranormal Romantic's blog, and is busy with countless projects around the web.

When not immersed in creating new worlds and interesting characters, Sandra likes to read and travel. Her favorite place to spend vacation hours is Walt Disney World. It's where dreams come true, and that suits her just fine.

Writing is her ultimate dream job.

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