



*Flirt*

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## *Dedication*

To Sherri Livingston, mentor, friend and all around sassy Southern Bell,  
and all the wonderful women at the Erotic Romance Crit Corner.

Y'all rock my world!

## Chapter One

Flirt was the trendiest new club in New Orleans and the brainchild of mystery man Noah Lazarus. The outside of the cinder block building was painted a dull, flat black, giving it a nondescript look during the day. The only thing setting it off was the glowing scroll of neon above the door. At night, rows of hidden black lights washed down over the facade, bringing the building to life. The blocks were randomly painted in a variety of neon colors that only showed up under the lights.

Olivia Sheppard walked alongside Ian Lazarus, the club's manager, while he showed her around what might be her new work environment. What prompted her to apply for the position, she couldn't say. She'd read the advertisement, and it had simply felt right. Then there was the air of mystery that hung around the Lazarus brothers—more so around Noah than his brother Ian, who was currently chatting her up with all the enthusiasm the club's name implied. Still, he was serious eye candy—tall with a head of light brown hair cut into the chunky spike style that was the trend for men these days—and if she didn't get the job, at least she knew she wasn't dead. She recognized a good-looking man when she saw one.

"No expense has been spared on the inside. The interior consists of five distinct areas, if you count the bar, and each is soundproofed to prevent one from disturbing the ambience of the other."

He guided her through the door of a sixties inspired dance area, and opened a control panel hidden behind a framed Grateful Dead poster from the Fillmore days in San Francisco.

The poster swung open on invisible hinges. "Clever," she murmured.

Ian flipped several switches, and the multi-colored dance floor lit up, the music throbbed to life, and strobe lights pulsed to the beat. There was a tall dais overlooking the dance floor where a disc jockey would do his thing.

"Go-go cages?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

Chuckling, he shrugged. "What can I say? It's the sixties." He flipped off the lights and music and led her down the next passageway. "The game room. Pretty much self-explanatory."

She nodded, taking in rows of pool tables, an area for darts, and several sitting areas where game boards sat open and ready for players.

The next room was a salon, of sorts, filled with cozy seating areas, conversation pits, and laptop computers. "This is for the folks who just want to come in after work, have a drink, and some quiet conversation, or surf the Internet."

He stepped around her and led her through a connecting passageway. "The media room. We're a licensed theater, too, so we'll be showing everything from artsy foreign films to the latest action-adventure flicks."

"Very cool," Olivia said with a nod.

He turned and led her out the way they'd entered, and turned down a long, lushly carpeted hall. He cleared his throat. "This last room is for the more—ah, adventurous customer. It's membership only, and fully licensed for the more exotic activities."

He opened the door and flipped a light switch to reveal a scene straight out of Arabian Nights. Gauzy silks in rich jewel tones draped from the ceiling in soft waves, making the large space cozy. Tall, thick pillars of candles rose up from the floor on elaborate iron wrought stands. "This week's subject is The Seraglio. Members can participate in weekly themed activities of a more carnal nature. The membership fee is high in order to discourage the less discriminating client, and one of your duties will be to perform the extensive background checks required. Participation in the activities is not mandatory. Members so inclined will be allowed to observe any of the couples or groups who enjoy being watched."

"Wow," Olivia said, checking out the exotic array of pillows, beds, and various objects scattered around the room. Several areas were curtained for a modicum of privacy. From the bright silks and gauzy drapes that hung ceiling to floor to the plush cushions on the floor and Moroccan lamps suspended by a polished silver chain above each lush lounging arrangement, it was everything she imagined a harem might look like.. It could have been a caricature straight out of Hollywood, yet it was so elegantly done, so realistic in style and theme that she could well understand a couple getting carried away with the atmosphere.

Lazarus laughed and pulled the door shut. Olivia met his steady gaze while he gave her the once-over, probably gauging her reaction to all she'd seen. "So, shall we go back to the office and discuss the job description or are you feeling inclined to run screaming from the joint?"

It was Olivia's turn to laugh. "Oh, Mr. Lazarus, don't let my girl-next-door looks confuse you. I did ten years with the military police. I know security like the back of my hand, and there hasn't been a man born yet I can't put on his ass if I've a mind to. Lead the way." *This job is mine.* As soon as the office door closed behind them, the offer was made and accepted. She practically danced a jig on the way out.

\* \* \* \*

"Impressions?" Noah Lazarus asked.

"I like her," Ian responded. "Is she the one you've been looking for? I didn't see even a hint of red emanating from her. Too soon to say, I'd guess."

Noah nodded. The old seer had been specific when referring to his intended. She would surrounded with red. Ian's assessment was true, but the scent of her hung in the air to tantalize him from room to room. That had never happened before. "Point taken, yet I can't help but feel it's her. Her fragrance . . . resonates. And she's more than qualified for the position. Question is, how will she be able to handle the nuances of the job?"

Ian rolled his eyes. "You mean how is she going to handle it when she finds out what you are?"

"Exactly."

“Something tells me the lady can handle anything you throw at her.”

“Including the Sentinel?”

“Why not? They’re human, aren’t they?”

Noah raised an eyebrow. “The jury is still out on that one, brother, but if she is the one, they’ll figure it out soon enough. If she’s not the one, we’ll still have to keep an eye on her until they see she isn’t a threat.” He stood and stretched. “What time will she be back?”

“Nine o’clock.”

He nodded. “Good. I need to feed. Then I’ll get dressed and meet your girl-next-door security expert.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Olivia burst through the door and rushed to pick up the ringing phone. She dumped her purse and keys on the console table and checked the call screener. *Allie, yay!* She snatched up the phone. “I got it! I got the job at Flirt!”

“Oh, my God!” her friend squealed. “How does it feel to beat out all those pumped-up amateurs?”

“Just to the left of fanfuckintastic! And icing on the cake? Richard Bellows applied and got turned away as the manager was walking me out. He was so pissed his ears were red!”

Allie’s laughter lit up the phone line. “Oh, that is too precious! Bet he thinks twice before calling you ‘chickie’ again. You know he didn’t pass the psych profile for the academy, right? So, when do you meet the mysterious Mr. Lazarus?”

“Tonight at nine. I gotta run, sweetie. I need to shower and rummage through my closet for something appropriate to wear.”

“I’ll be waiting on your doorstep when you get back!”

Thank God, she had plenty of time to prepare for the meeting with her new boss. While blow-drying her hair, Olivia realized she had never actually seen a photo of Noah Lazarus. He was a well-known entrepreneur, especially with the glitterati of Europe and New York. He owned nightclubs in Paris, Milan, London, and New York. He’d even opened casinos in Monaco and Vegas. Why the hell would he open a club in New Orleans? And why was he so publicity shy?

Of course, she’d checked him out before applying for the job. She’d Googled him, and when she found no pictures of him, she’d called one of her contacts in the military police and asked him to run the man’s background. He’d checked out. No arrest record, no hint of scandal attached to him. Not even a traffic ticket.

The phone rang—Richard Bellows. She grinned and picked up the phone. “Hello?” she practically sang..

“I guess congratulations are in order,” Bellows said sullenly.

“Thanks, Rich. Sorry you didn’t get the job.”

Bellows snorted. “I’d say thanks if I thought you really meant it.”

Olivia laughed. “Yeah, well, what can I say? I’m not really sorry you didn’t get the job, and I’m deliriously happy that I did.”

“So, what’s he like? The enigmatic Mr. Lazarus?”

“Dunno, he wasn’t there. I’m meeting with him tonight to get his approval, although Ian says it’s just a formality.” She dropped the towel she’d wrapped around her body and opened her closet door. What to wear? “Hey, I’d love to spend the next few minutes chatting about why I’m more qualified for the position, but I’m meeting the big guy in a little over an hour and I need to get ready. Bye now.” He was swearing on the other end of the line when she punched the Off button. She puckered her lips and blew the phone a kiss before stepping into her closet.

*Damn it!* She hated it when she couldn’t make up her mind what to wear. Did she go with the clean-cut look, the club look, or the professional security expert look? Nah, she was done with conservative. A combination would do nicely. She needed to give the appearance of professionalism, yet still be a bit of eye candy for the patrons involved in the club scene. Maybe, just maybe, she’d meet someone to fill the emptiness left behind when her hitch with Uncle Sam had ended. It wasn’t like she needed the job. Her parents had left her quite well off when they’d passed., but something was missing in her life, and if she didn’t go back to work, she’d likely go stark-raving mad. Ah, well, time for the final interview with the mystery man himself.

\* \* \* \*

He didn’t know why, but Noah was nervous about meeting his newest employee face-to-face. Something about her scent aroused him. It was a new feeling for him, this pheromone-based arousal. He detected her presence in every room she’d toured, especially in the fantasy room. Had she been aroused by the idea of what would happen in that room on a weekly basis? And if so, what did that mean?

He tented his fingers and gazed thoughtfully off into space. It had been so long since he’d had any kind of meaningful relationship with a woman. Even those that managed to last a few years invariably ended when the woman realized what living with a vampire meant—that she would continue to age while he was eternally thirty-seven years old.

His mind touched on the women he’d cared for in the past. Several had begged him to turn them, but that was one thing he refused to do. It was a serious business, turning a person, and one he didn’t take lightly. Others of his race did so without regard to the long-range consequences.

Noah believed the act of turning required a lifetime commitment. He would only turn the woman meant for him—that mysterious woman surrounded by red. And then, only at her behest. Anything else was unacceptable. Jilted vampires often turned mean.

Ian knocked on his office door and opened it, exchanging a look with him, then stepped aside so Olivia Sheppard could enter. Noah had seen her on the security screens, of course, but she was even lovelier in person. The power of her scent washed over him. She smelled of magnolias and languorous New Orleans moonlight.

She had chosen a chic suit by his pal, Marc Jacobs, an ensemble of black, silk slacks paired with a long, wide lapelled black velvet vest, beneath which she was obviously braless. She had to be because the damn thing buttoned at the waist. Her breasts were high and firm, neither too big nor too small. He imagined taking them in his hands, molding them to his touch. The tantalizing line of bare skin between each perfect globe practically begged to be licked. His cock stirred while he studied her.

“Good evening, Ms. Sheppard,” Noah said, standing while she walked gracefully across the room. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise, Mr. Lazarus.”

He accepted her proffered hand, then motioned her to a seat across from his desk. “Ian tells me you have quite the impressive resume. We’re lucky to have you, but tell me, why Flirt?”

“Truthfully, it was an impulse. After ten years with the military police, I was ready for a change,” she said, smiling politely. “As you can imagine, the service doesn’t allow for much of a life outside the job, and the politics involved after September eleventh became unbearable. In short, I wanted a life.”

Over tented fingers, Noah studied her. “Did Ian mention I might want you to provide personal security for me when I travel? Would that be something you would be open to doing?”

She shifted in her seat, one eyebrow raised, clearly curious about what he was proposing. “I suppose that would depend on where you were traveling and how long you intended to be gone, sir. If I was unable to provide that service personally, I would certainly be able to find someone more than capable to do so.” She gave him a thoughtful look, glanced at Ian, and back to him again. “I was given to understand I would be head of security for Flirt. No mention was made of obligatory travel.”

He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. He wanted her with him when he traveled. “Actually, Ms. Sheppard, it’s my intention to offer you the position of head of security for all my clubs. Naturally, that will require occasional travel. In fact, once Flirt is open and operating smoothly, I would like you to accompany me to the other locations and assess the security needs at each one. I will also need you to oversee any updates required and see to the hiring of any additional staff. Is that something you feel comfortable doing?”

“Of course, sir.”

She was a true professional. Her eyes didn’t even widen with his proposal, and she answered with a curve to her lips any man would want to see more of.

“And you are comfortable with some of the more . . . atypical aspects of my establishments?”

She laughed. Sweet Lord, it should be a crime for a woman to have a laugh like that, all deep and throaty, like she’d just done something incredibly naughty. “You would be surprised by some of the things I’ve seen in the line of duty, Mr. Lazarus.”

“I very much doubt that, Ms. Sheppard.”

“Then you know it’s impossible to be a shrinking violet in my line of work.”

“Indeed. In fact, I’m counting on it. Oh, by the way, Ian discussed the confidentiality agreement with you?”

\* \* \* \*

The meeting lasted less than an hour, and Olivia headed home. Holy shit, the man was sex on a stick! How in God’s name would she ever manage to maintain her professionalism around him when all she wanted to do was lick him like Popsicle?

True to her word, Allie was waiting on her doorstep.

“So, what’s he like?” she asked excitedly.

Olivia unlocked the door and ushered her friend inside. “I can’t tell you much because I had to sign a confidentiality agreement.”

“Oh, pooh! I wanted details.” Her bottom lip stuck out in a pout.

“Well, I can tell you this . . . he is babeilicious.”

“I knew it! Give . . . what’s he look like?”

Olivia went into the kitchen, Allie right behind. “He’s very tall, probably six-four or five. Long, poker-straight, black hair, and pensive gray eyes with sinfully long lashes. Lips that make you want to suck on them.” She opened the refrigerator and grabbed a couple of beers, handing one to her friend. “Rather pale skinned, like he doesn’t get out in the sun much. Powerfully built.” She caught herself sighing, then laughed. “He’s the whole package, Allie. You know my rule about personal relationships in the workplace, but this guy, all I could think about was falling to my knees and sucking his cock. And his brother, Ian? Oh, my God! There should be a law against two men who look that hot being under the same roof.”

“Married? Either one of them?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Involved?”

“Again, not to my knowledge.”

The other woman shuddered. “Gay?” When Olivia cracked up, Allie came to her own defense. “Well, it just seems like all the really good ones are either married or gay!”

“That’s so not true! Rick Bellows is available. I could probably fix you up if you’re interested.” Olivia grinned. Poor Allie, she desperately wanted a hot boyfriend.

“Eeewww,” Allie moaned. “He probably stands naked in front of the mirror all day, admiring his dick.”

Olivia headed for the living room. “Hey, I’ve heard he’s got a pretty impressive package, even if he does say so himself!”

Allie plopped down on the couch and grabbed the remote. “Yeah, he’s a legend in his own mind.”

Olivia collapsed with laughter. “Okay. Scratch Bellows. I’ll look around once the club opens and see if I can find you a good one.”

Allie giggled. “Scratch Bellows yourself, girlfriend. But definitely do the looking around thing. Although . . . if the brother’s that hot . . .” She flipped through the channels. “Oooh, *Highlander*’s on. Now that Adrian Paul, there’s my kind of guy.”

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Noah stood outside the open French doors leading to Olivia’s bedroom. Getting past the high walls and wrought iron gates had been no problem at all. Although it was good to see the security guards took their work seriously, no lock or mortal man could have kept him out. Should he do this? Should he invade her privacy? Probably not, but restless thoughts of her drew him here. He opened the door and stepped inside. *Holy shit!* The seer had been right. Red surrounded her. He should have known! How had she managed to block her aura from him?

His cock swelled, and his mouth went dry. The room looked to be dedicated for one purpose—sex. Deep red wall, silk saris in jewel tones, and a huge couch scattered with elaborately trimmed pillows, and a massive, hand-carved bed that had to be an antique. The window coverings were heavy red velvet, edged in gold fringe and tied back with exotic, jeweled tiebacks and were topped with red, beaded Torans. Indian art and wall hangings were interspersed with shelves containing exquisitely carved statues and scented oil warmers. Moroccan lamps hung from the ceiling, and scented candles were carefully placed to provide a romantic ambiance.

She moaned in her sleep and rolled onto her back, feet kicking at the blood-red, sateen top sheet. He stifled a groan. Her restlessness caused the sheet to slide to her hips, revealing truly spectacular breasts and a flat, toned belly. He licked his lips, longing for just a taste of her creamy, silken skin. Silently crossing the room, he sank into a dark corner of the couch, put his feet up on a velvet-covered cube, and delicately probed her mind.

Yes. He was there in her thoughts. There had been a conversation with a friend, but she hadn’t revealed anything confidential. Not that she knew much about him at this point. He grinned. She thought he was hot, would do him in a heartbeat. She described him as the whole package to her

friend. She'd like to suck on his lips, would she? Well, he'd like to suck on hers, too, both pair. If only she knew what he could do with his lips—and other parts of his body. She moaned his name in her sleep, and he smiled. Perhaps he should give her a preview of what to expect when he took her. And he would, soon. There could be no other option.

He stood, adjusted his aching cock, and walked to the bed. With a light stroke to her temple and a murmured, "Sleep," she relaxed completely. He raised her hands above her head and curved her fingers around the carved, filigree on her headboard, stretching her out for his casual inspection.

"Beautiful," he said softly, then spread her legs wide. And she was as beautiful at her center as she was everywhere else. Waxed and neatly trimmed, her pussy called to him to pet her. Already she was wet and swollen. He touched her mind again. Her dreams were of him, of touching him, of being touched by him.

Sitting next to her hips, he kicked off his shoes. The bed was soft, a combination of memory foam and goose down. Rich colors, soft fabrics—she was such a sensualist. He made himself comfortable and allowed his eyes to wander over her supple body, a body made for the act of loving, athletic but soft in all the right places. She was the one. A red halo surrounded her, an invitation to him alone. How long had he waited? How long had he wanted?

He reached out, drawing his fingers up her rib cage to the tip of her breast, letting the softness of her skin, the energy of her being, sink in to him. He'd never felt such urgency before—urgency to forge an unbreakable bond between them. He stroked her nipples to attention, fascinated by how they puckered, going from a dusky pink to dark at his touch. He leaned down to suckle. Her head rolled to the side, and her hips flexed. Arching against his mouth, she moaned.

"Yes. Yes, Olivia, feel my mouth on you. Luxuriate in the sensations I wring from your body."

Noah fought to deny his need for a deeper taste. A red haze of hunger fought for control. With his ministrations kicking her heart rate up a notch, he could almost hear the blood singing through her veins. Every fiber of his being demanded he take her, feed from her, turn her, make her his for all eternity. She was his mate. The Yin to his Yang, the light to his dark. The compulsion to take her battered him. He wouldn't take that step unless she knew what he was and gave her consent. But he could, and would fuck her, and soon.

He charted a leisurely course with his hand, across her belly and reached to cup her mound, parting the dark curls, dipping into her center with one finger. She smelled of sweet magnolia and exotic spice, and Jesus, she was hot and wet! He tugged at a nipple with his mouth while he coated his finger with her juices, then tapped her clit. Her hips jerked, and he was lost.

He lifted her hips and placed a pillow under her ass. Wedging his shoulders between her legs, he used his thumbs to open her labia. Dear God, she was so pretty and pink, glistening with proof of her arousal. He lapped at her, savoring the salty-sweet taste of her—like Aphrodite rising from the surf, her scent and taste were fresh, yet earthy. Her clit swelled, begging for attention, and he sucked it between his lips, nursing the little bud as he'd her nipples.

She was moaning, crying out and grinding her pussy against his mouth. "Yes, Noah! Ah, God, I need to come. Make me come!"

Who was he to deny her demands? He gave her two fingers, groaning when she grasped them tightly. He'd make her come all right. He added another and started pumping, gently at first, then with more vigor, she cried out.

Tongue and fingers worked in concert, eliciting a symphony of sexual satisfaction when she went over the edge, she came twitching and shuddering .

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She blushed her way through the entire day. *Oh my God, I can't believe I had an erotic dream about my new boss!* She'd awakened sticky and sated with vivid memories of a voracious tongue sucking her clit while strong fingers fucked her into oblivion. How was she ever going to face him? She fanned her face with her hand.

Now here she was, key in hand, sated from a round with her shower massager, needing to check out the surveillance equipment. She had to make sure the floodlights held back the dark, the cameras were properly placed, and functioning properly. It was state of the art equipment and would probably only require some tweaking. *It's your job, idiot, just do it!* She took a deep breath, plunged the key in the lock, entered the building, and came face-to-face with the man of her dreams.

"Good evening, Ms. Sheppard." Noah's intense gray eyes pinned her to the spot. An amused smile flitted across his face.

"Good evening, Mr. Lazarus." She averted her gaze from his full lips, lips that had devoured her in her dreams last night. Yesterday, she had thought of tasting him, but her dreams had been filled with him tasting her. Normally, she didn't have fantasies about people she worked with. It didn't help that Noah Lazarus was a walking fantasy—or walking romance novel cover model. Everything about him was tasty and delicious, and she hadn't had time to prepare for the impact he would have on her after that dream. Her heart sped up, and her face heated with an irritating embarrassment. *Jeeze, get a freaking grip!*

He cocked an eyebrow. "Is anything the matter, Ms. Sheppard? You seem . . . distressed."

"I'm fine, sir. Just didn't sleep well last night." *Liar, liar, pants on fire. You slept like a rock. It's the waking part that has you distressed.*

"I see, well, perhaps you'll rest better once you're satisfied the security system is up to snuff."

"Says you," she mumbled unintelligibly.

"Sorry? I didn't quite catch that."

Heat suffused her. *Oh, God! I'm turning into a mumbling idiot!* "Nothing, sir. I just said, I hope so."

Lord, there came that devastating smile again. "As do I, Ms. Sheppard." He started to turn away, then paused. "By the way, would you mind if I called you Olivia. I find the formality between us a bit . . . distancing."

“Not at all, sir. Olivia would be fine.” *Especially since last night, in my dreams, you gave me the most intense orgasm I’ve ever experienced.*

“And you will call me Noah, dispensing with the sir, naturally.”

She nodded. “Naturally, si—Noah.” She fidgeted a moment longer, capturing her bottom lip between her teeth. He really did have the most disconcerting eyes, and the look he gave her hinted that he knew full well he was the reason for her unrest. *Oh, God!*

## Chapter Two

Filled by the preparations for the grand opening, the week passed quickly Olivia was exhausted. And now it was finally opening night.

She shivered in her sexy black, silk-cashmere dress. The back was open to just past her waist, with a rhinestone button at the back of her neck to keep the thing from sliding off her shoulders. Three-inch, sling-back pumps would bring her to about nose height with her two employers. A long silver chain, knotted below her clavicle, hid a tiny microphone, and an earpiece curved around her right ear, concealed by her long, dark hair. She nodded at the doorman to begin admitting customers. "It's showtime, folks," she murmured. "Everyone to your stations."

The night wore on, and she had very little time to ponder the whys of her erotic dream about her employer. She'd given up on trying to understand why Noah Lazarus invaded her thoughts. She tucked the dream away like a secret pleasure, and forced herself to be professional whenever dealing with him one-on-one. Now she floated from room to room, chatting with guests, talking with servers and bartenders, and generally making sure people stayed within the limits of the law. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, and she was pleased for Noah. Everything was going perfectly, until Gavin Hargrove IV walked through the door and into the game room.

Loud voices and breaking glass shattered the calm of the evening, and Olivia ran toward the game room on the heels of one of her bouncers. A heated argument was underway. Gavin Hargrove attempted to coerce his former girlfriend from behind the back of her new boyfriend. To the man's credit, he wasn't backing down from Hargrove. He brandished a pool stick as though it were a sword.

"Back off, Gavin," the new boyfriend shouted. "She's with me now!"

"The hell she is," Hargrove slurred, obviously drunk. "Nobody leaves me!"

To her horror, Olivia saw he was wielding a ceramic knife—undetectable to the security equipment each patron had to pass through to gain entry into the club. *Fuck! Just what we need on opening night!* Worse, when he saw the bouncer approaching, Hargrove waved the knife. Time to act. She pasted a smile on her face and stepped into the fray.

"Gentlemen, is there a problem here?" Duh, of course there was. She continued to smile at Hargrove. Time to play on old acquaintances. "Gavin, is that you?"

He blinked, studying her. "Who the fuck are you?"

Olivia gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Nice to know I'm so memorable. I'm Olivia Sheppard. You were at my coming-out, remember? I'm Harlan and Amanda Sheppard's daughter."

Hargrove blinked, swaying on his feet. "Olivia Sheppard?" He grinned, a little puddle of drool forming at the corner of his cruel mouth. "Gangly little thing with braces? You grew up, eh? All soft and curvy. Heard you left town."

A seductive smile curved her lips. "I did, but I'm back now."

The entire room seemed to hold its breath while she approached him, and with a sympathetic tone, she said, "You look tired, sugar." He frowned when she neared. "Why don't you come have a cup of coffee with me. We'll catch up on old times."

She was just about to reach for the knife when his eyes widened. "I heard about you. You were some kind of federal cop!"

He lunged, taking a swipe with his knife, but she sidestepped, grabbed his wrist, and pivoted, swinging him around. When she jammed his arm up between his shoulder blades, he struggled and then yelped against her increased pressure. He dropped the knife.

"Fucking, dike whore!" he howled.

"Get control of yourself, Gavin, before I snap your arm off and beat you with the damned thing." Her soft voice held a menace acquired through years of dealing with recalcitrant soldiers. She used that tone with him now, easing him backward out of the room while her employee secured the knife. "Do you have a driver outside?"

The man groaned. "Yes. Just let me go. I'll leave, I swear it!"

No one missed the deadly smile on her face. "Yes, you will leave, Gavin, and you won't come back here again. And you'll leave that girl alone. Do we understand one another? Because if anything happens to her or her young man, I will certainly call the authorities. And I know people, sugar. Powerful people." She eased him toward the door and, when it opened, shoved him through it. "We also have the assault on tape."

She stood, with arms folded across her chest, and watched his limo drive off, then hurried back inside to discuss the incident with Ian.

She approached Ian, who had posted himself outside the fantasy room. "How's it going? Sorry I haven't been back here to check before now. The sixties room is really hopping. I've already had to confiscate several sets of keys and call cabs for people. Not to mention the incident in the game room."

Ian smiled. "It's all good. You handled it perfectly. Everything is going well, so no sweat. Noah will go through the security tapes with you when we close up, but I think you've done an excellent job making sure everything runs smoothly."

She couldn't help but feel the heat suffusing her cheeks. She'd be alone with her gorgeous boss? "Good. I'll just go do another walk-through."

He lightly grasped her wrist. "It will be all right, Olivia."

Her pulse jumped in her throat. *Where the hell did that come from?* "I beg your pardon?" He stared for a long moment, then shrugged. "Whatever it is that's troubling you. It will be all right."

At first, it occurred to her to protest that nothing was wrong, but why waste her breath. Was her discomfort that obvious? “I’m fine, really. I’ve just had a few restless nights of late.”

Ian nodded. “I’m sure things will get better very soon. Try to get some rest.”

“Yes, I’m sure they will.” She offered him a reassuring smile. “I’ll see you at closing.” She looked at her watch. “Wow, actually, in about twenty minutes. I’d better make sure the bartenders issued last call.”

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The bartenders had, in fact, stopped serving, and Olivia sighed, locking the door after the last customer. She wound her way through the various corridors and entered the control room, smiling at Noah before slumping into a chair in front of the monitors, more aware of being alone with him than she’d ever been with a man. Her thoughts drifted to the erotic dream, a dream in which he had the starring role.

She plucked out her earpiece and dropped it in her purse, then kicked off her shoes. “Ah, that’s better.” She wiggled her toes and chuckled at Noah’s questioning look. “There’s nothing better than kicking out of a pair of fabulous heels after a long night. So, shall we run the tape and see how we did?”

Olivia jotted down some notes while the tapes played and explained several small adjustments she wanted to make with regard to camera positioning and clarity. “We want to make sure we have clear video of what’s happening in every room. If we’re ever robbed, the police will need to be able to identify . . . oh, my.”

She could barely swallow. The video feed from the fantasy room appeared on the bank of monitors. Somehow, despite the low light, the pictures came through crisp and clear. Shivers of electricity shot up Olivia’s spine while she watched. Every sexual activity imaginable, and some she hadn’t thought of, was displayed bright as day on the screens. It was more intimate than any porn movie, more sensually real than she ever could have expected. Mildly uncomfortable, and extremely embarrassed by the way her nipples puckered beneath her form-fitting dress, she licked her lips.

“Does seeing this distress you, Olivia?” Noah asked, his husky voice, full of arousal and need, skated down her already sensitive nerves, and set her on fire.

She met his storm cloud eyes, unable to control her own flare of response to the look of sheer lust on his face. “I . . . of course not. I just wasn’t expecting there would be footage from that particular room.”

“We’ll delete them each week, but we need to be sure everyone abides by the rules. That’s why there are so many different camera angles. I don’t want anyone to be able to come back and say they were unwilling participants. Does it excite you, seeing them this way?”

His voice was almost hypnotic.

“I—”

He got up and stood behind her, leaning over her shoulder to point out one particular woman. His long, black hair tickled the bare skin of her back. “How about this one?”

He indicated a woman straddling a good-looking man, riding him like a rodeo pony while several people stood around encouraging her. Olivia had never entertained that such play could be sensual or exciting, but coupled with Noah’s rich voice in her ear, she had to restrain herself with offering her own ass up for his pleasure. What was it about his voice that had the ability to soothe her? To make her want to do anything he asked?

“Or this one?” He pointed to a woman, hands cuffed above her head. A man knelt between her legs, eating her pussy with gusto while pleasuring her with remarkably lifelike dildo. The size of the thing took Olivia’s breath away, as did the way the woman’s face contorted with pleasure. Suddenly, the woman threw her head back, mouth open in what could only be a scream of release.

“Watch.” Noah drew a chair up next to hers and reached for one of her aching feet, pulled it into his lap, and pressed his long, graceful fingers over her tired muscles, smoothing them. Pressing his fingers into her instep, he did something to her that sent a blaze of sensation straight to her core, followed by sweet waves of bliss . . . massaging it in the most erotic manner. “He’s going to fuck her now, Olivia.”

Her world was reduced to his hands on her feet and his low, velvety voice in her ear. Something soft and feather light brushed the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs, and she could have sworn she felt the hot caress of a tongue curling around her clit. It stroked, a gently probing tickle that had her arching her hips toward the light touch. Oh, God, she was going to come right here!

Dazed and panting, Olivia watched the kneeling man tossed the toy away and shot to his feet. He bent his knees between the woman’s parted legs and lunged upward, ramming his cock into her pussy. The woman immediately climaxed again. So did Olivia.

“See how she loves it, Olivia?”

She moaned. Noah’s fingers slid between her toes, touching sensitive skin, making her jerk again, before he followed with a heated, deep, massaging caress that made her want to offer more of herself to his touch.

“Watch, Olivia. He’s inside of her now, fucking her hard and deep, giving her everything she wants. Imagine how full she must feel. He’s as big as the toy cock he just tossed aside, and she’d taking every inch of him. She loves it, Olivia, wants it. Everything they can give her and more.”

“Oooh.” Olivia moaned. Her eyes were glued to the monitor, watching the woman came yet again. Olivia felt the woman’s spasm deep in her own womb.

She looked over at Noah, bewildered, then at the screen, where he was pointing at an area outside the back of the building. “. . . perhaps another camera covering the dumpster to prevent people from using it, or dumping something . . . unpleasant.”

Olivia gave herself a mental shake. “You mean like a body?”

“Yes, like a body or evidence of some crime. One can never be too careful. This is New Orleans, after all.”

“I-I’ll order another camera tomorrow and make arrangements for it to be installed right away.”

“Thank you, Olivia.” He straightened. “You’d better get home. It’s been a long night, and you need your rest.” He appeared totally unaffected by their mesmerizing encounter.

She stifled a shudder. Why did she get the feeling he was thanking her for something other than doing her job? She reached for her purse and stood up, surprised to find her shoes already on her feet, which were no longer hurting.

Her shiny red Beamer waited in the employees’ parking area, highlighted by the white glow of a floodlight. She pressed the remote to free the lock and slid onto the cool leather seat. Inserting the key into the ignition, she turned it and . . . nothing. What the hell? With a tug, she pulled the lever to release the hood and climbed out to raise it.

“Son of a bitch!” Someone had stolen her battery. But how, with the hood firmly latched and the car locked up tight? Damn, she’d have to call a cab. She was just about to pull out her cell when Noah walked out the back entrance.

“Problem?” he asked.

“Someone stole my battery. I was just getting ready to call a cab.”

“Nonsense.” Noah smiled. “I’ll be happy to give you a lift.”

She held her breath for a long moment, and a shiver of excitement skittered down her spine. God, he was hot.

\* \* \* \*

A lone man stood atop a neighboring building, peering through binoculars when a black Jaguar S-Type sedan pulled up to the building across from him. The woman called Olivia Sheppard waited while the dark figure opened her door. They chatted for a moment, and then she opened the wrought iron gate leading to her courtyard and crossed to her front door before disappearing inside with him. It was Noah Lazarus. Did this mean she was the one? The man had yet to be able to get inside to plant a bug. Her security system was just too good, but he’d find a way. He had to—he was a Sentinel.

\* \* \* \*

Noah accepted Olivia’s offer of a glass of wine. She would be his soon. Her reaction to the fantasy room video indicated as much. Lord, she’d come watching the woman, although he had to admit his words and hands had helped her along. Still, she’d been turned on by what she saw, and if the look she’d given him when he offered to drive her home meant anything, she wanted him as badly as he wanted her.

They settled on the couch, and Noah gave her a seductive smile. "I sense a mutual attraction, Olivia. Am I correct?"

She licked her lips, then nodded. "Yes. It's terribly unprofessional, I know, but I assure you, I'm perfectly capable of restraining myself."

He chuckled. "Must you?"

He watched her violet eyes darken at his response. "I . . . it could complicate our professional relationship."

"Or it could enhance it. Would you like to find out?"

She gave him a startled look.

He laughed softly. "No, I didn't read your mind, just your body language."

"My body language?"

"Yes, and it's telling me you'd very much like me take you into that bedroom and make love to you. I'd like very much to do that, Olivia." He was beside her in a twinkling, plucking the wine glass from her hand. "But first, a kiss."

When her lips parted in a gasp, he swooped in, covering them with his own. Her mouth was soft and warm, and her tongue slid against his with a velvety swirl that set his cock throbbing with need. She moaned, a gentle gust in his mouth tasting of rich merlot and desire. He deepened the kiss, banding his arm around her waist to pull her closer .

Yes, this is what he needed to be certain. The feel of her hand on his neck, her lips parting beneath his, the way her body seemed to fit against his, just so. Like they were two pieces of an intimate puzzle, carved by the gods, that when joined became one.

He kissed the hollow of her neck, feeling the increased pulse, longing for the moment he could taste the rich blood coursing through her veins. He lifted his hand to her breast, caressing and teasing a beaded nipple through the soft material. She fit perfectly in his hand.

She moaned again, and he reached behind her, flicked the button closure on the ultra sexy dress, and peeled it down to her waist. "Mmm, beautiful." He murmured against her breast, then flicked his tongue against her, curling it around her nipple.

"Oh, God."

It was the most erotic moan Noah had heard in centuries of seducing women.

"Shall we retire to your bedroom, kitten?"

Her eyes glazed with desire. "Oh, yeah."

She sighed when he pulled her to her feet, swept her into his arms, and carried her into the bedroom.

A twinge of guilt nipped at his conscience. She had no idea what she was getting into. If the Sentinel found out she was the one, her life would be in jeopardy. And still he could not resist that which she offered so freely. *I'll protect her. No harm will come to her.* Besides, they couldn't really know she was the one until she transformed him, and he could be patient. First, he must win her heart.

He peeled the form-fitting dress from her body until she stood before him in nothing but a lacy black thong. "Take it off, kitten. I want to eat your pretty pussy."

She hooked her fingers into the delicate strings, wriggled out of the panties and kicked them away, then gasped when he picked her up and tossed her on the bed, following her down. "How did you get your clothes off so fast?"

He chuckled. Vampires were capable of exceptional speed. "I feeling very motivated." He lifted her legs and draped them over his shoulder. "Such a beautiful sight." He played around the edges of her pussy, stroking her lightly. Olivia shifted beneath him. "Yes, you like that, don't you?" He leaned down and ran his tongue along her swollen labia, teasing the sensitive flesh. "Such a sweet taste. Like nectar."

She was already wet and swollen, ready for him. He probed the delicate flesh with his tongue, relishing each whimper.

"Yes," she sighed. "Oh, that's good."

"Yes, Olivia, it is good, but it's going to get so much better." He took her clit between his lips and began to suckle in earnest.

Such lustful noises! She practically melted under his tongue, creaming while he lapped at her pussy. Noah smiled when she cried out and ground against him, then flicked his tongue against her engorged clit.

"Yes," she hissed. "That's good. Just like that. Ah, God, please fuck me! I need you to fuck me."

Noah slithered up her body, pressing heated kisses on her aroused flesh, then penetrated her slowly until he filled her completely.

Dear God, the feel of her slippery folds parting, the tight, heated channel gripping him, would hasten his release, and he wanted it to last, for both of them.

Moaning, she arched against him and he began a slow glide, moving his hips in an easy, fluid motion. "So hot and tight, kitten. Your pussy feels so good."

"More," she panted. "Harder, faster."

"Mmm, what ever you want, love. I'm aim to please."

Her hips rose to match his rhythm. How much longer could he wait to sink his fangs into that lovely, long neck? He wanted her so badly the temptation was almost overwhelming. *Patience, you must be patient. You can have eternity with her, if you can make her love you.*

The ecstasy on her face nearly undid him. He pulled out, amid a groaning protest, and flipped her onto her belly. He couldn't watch her face while she came, lest he succumb to his baser needs and take what she must willingly give.

"On your knees," he growled. "You want hard and fast, I'll give you hard and fast."

He shoved her legs apart and entered in a single, rough stroke. Her moans became more demanding, and he powered into her with long, hard strokes, bringing her closer and closer to orgasm.

"Oh, God, I'm going to come! God, Noah, it's too much."

She was panting, pushing back with each of his lunges. The sound of his hips slapping against her bottom along with her crescendoing cries reverberated in his ears. She gripped the soft sheets, and he reached beneath her body to flick her clit. "Come for me, kitten. Let me feel that sweet pussy tighten around my cock."

Christ! He was going to come with her! He roared his release, and came with him, screaming his name. One last plunge drained him, and he curved his body over hers, protectively. She was the one. He knew it now. The connection was firmly established. All that awaited was the final bonding.

Their breathing slowed, he rolled to his side, pulling her against him. "Are you all right? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She flipped on to her back and turned her head to look at him. "God, it was fabulous. I'm . . . speechless, and that almost never happens."

Noah chuckled. "Well, I didn't actually want to strike you dumb. But I'll consider it a compliment."

"Feel free to do that." After a moment, she gave him a sobering look then turned her head away. "I don't usually engage in sexual relations with my employers."

He reached for her chin and made her look at him. "Don't. I wanted this too, and I think I'll want you more in the days to come. Yes, I'm your employer, but I'd also like to be your lover."

She nodded. "Yes. I think I'd like that, too. For a while, anyway. I'm not . . . relationships have never been my thing."

"That's because you've never had one with the right man." He smiled, pulling her into the nook of his shoulder. "Now, get some sleep. I have meetings all day tomorrow, so I have to leave soon, but I'd like to hold you for a while."

She snuggled against him with a sigh. "I'd like that." Finally, she slept. He waited until an hour before dawn to leave her, and did so only with regret.

### Chapter Three

Olivia woke slowly. She might have convinced herself that last night was just another dream if not for the satisfying ache between her legs. Oh, yeah, she'd had sex with the boss, all right. Hot, hard, completely satisfying sex, and he wanted her for his lover. Wow, that was a concept full of interesting possibilities.

He'd been a passionate, considerate lover, providing her with more pleasure than she'd thought possible. Then he'd held her in her arms, soothing her to sleep. She had no idea when he'd left, though she had a vague memory of him kissing her tenderly before leaving. He was the perfect man for a woman like her—one who stayed long enough for some affectionate cuddling but knew the time had come to leave. There'd been no morning breath or awkward sleepover banter.

She rolled out of bed and padded to the bathroom for a quick shower. A run would be just the thing to get her moving this morning. There were errands to do, and she was meeting Allie for lunch at Palace Café and wanted to stop by La Boulangerie for a loaf of olive bread and a couple of baguettes. She'd need a run just to make room for what she intended to eat today. The crabmeat cheesecake alone could dimple her thighs, but add the Pasta St. Charles and she'd be running an extra mile every day for a week. She grinned at herself in the steamy mirror when she stepped out of the shower. What the hell, she'd run the extra mile. She dried quickly, donned her usual running clothes—shorts, T-shirt, and cross-trainers—then headed out the door, house keys jammed between breasts held in check by her sports bra.

After a brisk warm up giving her muscles a good stretch, she headed out at a steady pace down Royal. She loved jogging through the French Quarter. The people who called the quarter home took their decay seriously. Peeling paint and gouged plaster spoke of the generations of lives lived here. Modernization took second place to preservation. Plumbing and electrical might be updated, but by God, if the original paint showed through the cracks in the plaster, it was displayed for all to see.

She tried to run different routes so avoid developing a set pattern anyone could follow, so today she would take Royal to Canal St., then go for a leisurely run by the river, turn up St. Peter, then hang a right at Decatur and stop at Dumonde's for café au lait and a beignet. The return leg would be a jog to the Mint on the corner of Decatur and Barracks, then up Barracks to Royal, and a quick sprint home. She'd make it back in plenty of time to shower again, run her errands, and meet Allie for lunch and delicious gossip. The only predictable aspect of the run was her stop at the café.

The moisture hung thick in the air, and Olivia felt like she'd been jogging through a swamp by the time she reached her destination. She was a regular customer, so the waitstaff knew her, and when she turned up the walk, an apron-clad waiter was already clearing off her favorite table. "Hey, Danny. The usual, please."

"Coming right up, Olivia. Man, how far did you run?"

"Down to Canal and along the river. God, is it me or does it seem more humid than normal today?"

"Storm movin' in. I'd batten down the hatches if you're heading out later. Supposed to blow pretty good." He hurried off to get her coffee and pastry, then came back with a glass of ice water for her.

She grinned. “God, I adore you!”

He gave her a wink. “Hey, I gotta keep my favorite customer hydrated.”

Olivia finished her coffee and beignet and started back home at a slow, cool-down jog. She turned up Barracks, another runner fell in step beside her.

“Olivia Sheppard?”

She frowned. “Yeah?”

“He’s not what you think he is.”

Well, that was cryptic. “Who?”

“Noah Lazarus.”

Surprised, she stopped. “Excuse me?”

“The man you work for, and who likely shared your bed last night. He’s not what you think he is. He’s a dangerous man, Ms. Sheppard. And he’s a marked man. You’d do well to keep your distance. Consider this a warning. It’s the only one you’ll get.” When she reached out to grab him, the man spun away. “You’ve been warned.” With that, the mysterious runner sprinted away.

“What the fuck?” She stood there, hands on her hips and watched the man disappear around the corner. Noah Lazarus had some explaining to do. Later.

She looked up at the sky. Storm clouds gathered over the gulf. A storm was moving in, all right, but she found herself wondering what kind.

\* \* \* \*

“So he says to me—you’ve been warned—and sprints away.” She dug into her crabmeat cheesecake and waited for her friend’s response.

“Wow. Was he armed?”

Good, she was in cop mode. “Not that I could see. I mean, he was in running clothes, so I’d guess, no.”

“Think you could describe him to Gabby?”

The woman Allie mentioned was one of NOPD’s best sketch artists. “Probably, but I’m not sure I want to go there just yet. I mean, Barrett checked Lazarus out for me. He’s clean.”

“So, maybe it’s personal, not professional. Maybe a woman scorned? A business deal that didn’t work out the way someone wanted it to? Could be anything, but you definitely need to discuss it with him. That was a viable threat, sugar. Don’t wait around to see what happens next.”

Olivia took the last bite of her crabmeat cheesecake when the Pasta St. Charles arrived. She murmured her thanks and dug in, spearing a shrimp and two cream-coated pieces of penne pasta. She couldn’t hold back an appreciative moan of delight. “God, I love this dish.”

Allie dug into her Cochon Du Lait Pot Pie. “I tried making this pot pie for David, many moons ago. Something got lost in translation, though. Spent the whole night in the bathroom.”

“Eeewww, TMI, Allie!” A snorting laugh escaped her and she reached for her tea. “God, and you with only one bathroom. What a night that must have been.”

Allie giggled. “All I can say is being sick with someone puts a whole different slant on the relationship.” She gave an exaggerated shudder. “I really don’t recommend sharing a space with someone you’re intimate with—too many bodily functions to become accustomed to.”

Olivia cracked up. “Oh, God! I’m never giving up my condo—not ever!”

“Not even for Noah Lazarus?”

“Not even for him.”

“Smart girl.”

She took another bite. “Hey, I’m heading over to Magazine Street. Wanna come?”

“Trashy Diva?” Olivia nodded. “Hell, yes! I need something sexy for tonight.”

\* \* \* \*

Olivia put the disturbing incident with the runner aside and concentrated on finishing the rest of her errands. It was Friday. The club would be jumping tonight, and she wanted to look her best for her new lover. She pulled the fiery red Beamer, which Noah had thoughtfully returned, into her parking space and hit the trunk latch.

She climbed out of the car and retrieved her shopping bags, pausing when a flower delivery van pulled up behind her. “You Ms. Sheppard?”

“Yes.”

“Flowers for you, ma’am.”

She smiled at the deliveryman handing her a box and murmured her thanks.

The box contained two perfectly formed magnolias, their waxy beauty filling the air with an intoxicating scent. She inhaled and read the card. “*Looking forward to tonight,*” was written in elegant,

old-world script and signed simply, *Noah*. More pleased than she should have been, she rummaged through the sideboard for a deep crystal bowl. Filling it with distilled water and a bit of sugar, she placed a perfect magnolia in the bowl and carried it into the bedroom. The delicate floral scent kept her company while she dressed for the evening.

Olivia was just putting the finishing touches on her Rita Hayworth hairstyle when the gate buzzer sounded. She cinched her silk robe around her waist and hurried to activate the video-intercom system. Noah. She pressed the lock release and opened the front door when he started up the walk.

When he reached her, his arm curved around her waist, pulling her hard against him. She'd never cared for domineering men, but there was something about this one. He swooped down to take her lips in a searing kiss, and she melted against him as helpless as a kitten, arms twined around his neck.

He lifted her off her feet and stepped through the door. "You smell like magnolias," he whispered, breaking the kiss. "And arousal. Do you want me, Olivia?"

His hands wrenched the tie at her waist and the robe fell open. His hands cupped her breasts and pressed her against the door. "Answer me. Do you want me?"

"God, yes!" His mouth was at her breast, drawing strongly on her. His hand slid between her legs, stroking her through the delicate silk and lace. He hooked a finger under the edge to give himself access to her warm cunt. She cried out when he slid his middle finger into her.

"Did you get wet the moment you saw it was me, kitten?" He drove into her slowly.

"Yes . . . ah . . . God, Noah!"

He added another finger and went deep again.

He removed his fingers and shrugged out of his jacket, then slid the robe from her body. "Do you know what I'm going to do to you?"

Those fingers were back, strong and forceful, driving her mad while he whispered in her ear, "I'm going to strip these pretty panties off you, right here, and eat your pussy."

*Oh, God!* His mouth traveled down her body, his lips and mouth scorching hot against her skin. She moaned when his fingers left her once more and curled around the lacy edges of her expensive thong. He eased it down, and she kicked it away.

One big hand lifted her leg to drape it over his shoulder, and his mouth was on her, burrowing into her wet heat to lash, suck, and circle her clit and tormenting the sensitive bud until all she could hear were her own cries of arousal.

Dear God, it was as if he were starving! His ravenous mouth sought her molten core, drawing at her, devouring every sip of cream he coaxed from her. She didn't hear the zipper hiss, never felt her leg slide from his shoulder when he spun her around. Suddenly, he kicked her legs apart with his foot and speared her with his cock, ramming deep.. She screamed and he powered into her, lifting her onto her tiptoes with each jolt, making her come with a violence she'd never experienced.

“Oh my God!” It was almost too much. Almost. And then he was there, ramming into her one last time, bellowing his own release as hot semen jetted into her. She sagged against him, scarcely able to stand.

“Well, hello to you too.” She sighed weakly.

He molded his hands to them. “Sorry, love. I’ve been thinking of you all day, the scent of you, the silk of your skin, the grip of your pussy as I took you. I lost control the moment I saw you.”

When he turned her in his arms, she went to him willingly. She laughed softly. God, he was gorgeous, and he fucked like a man who’d had extensive experience, which he surely possessed.

Men like Noah Lazarus, wealthy and handsome, could have any woman they wanted. Why he wanted her was a mystery, but she intended to enjoy it as long as she could.

“I like the way you lose control, Lazarus. Feel free to do it again, any time.”

“Come, let’s get you dressed before I’m tempted to take you again.” He followed her into the bedroom.

“Thank you for the magnolias. I set one aside to wear in my hair tonight.”

She took the forties-style dress from her closet. The material was a heavyweight silk, crepe de chine, sprigged with a lovely large floral print on a gray background. The voluminous circular skirt draped beautifully, while the structured bodice was made to give the support of a bra. “Zip me?” She turned her back to him.

“My pleasure.” She shivered when his fingers brushed her still sensitive skin. “And may I say, this is a marvelous choice?” He turned her so he could get the full effect of the garment. “Stunning. The magnolia will add just the right touch. I’ll get it for you.”

Olivia sat on the bed and slid her feet into a flashy pair of red patent-leather pumps. She crossed to her dressing table and ran a brush through her hair, smoothing it back into its earlier style. Noah handed her the magnolia, and she attached it to a gold-wire comb with dental floss and slid the comb into her hair above her ear. Then she dabbed a bit of magnolia-scented oil to her pulse points. “That’s as good as it gets.”

Noah held out his hand and assisted her to her feet. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

\* \* \* \*

The line curled all the way around the building. Olivia didn’t know why she was surprised. She’d done her share of clubbing in her younger days. “Looks like another busy night.” Noah braked to allow a customer to cross in front of him, she realized the woman was Allie. “Hang on, that’s my friend. Let’s take her in the back way.”

“Certainly.” He hit the window controller.

“Hey, Al!” Olivia called. Her friend turned, grinning. “Hop in. You can come in with us.”

“Cool,” Allie said, opening the back door. She slid onto the seat and smiled at Noah. “Hi, I’m Allie St. Claire. You must be Noah Lazarus.”

He nodded politely. “Indeed, I am.” “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. St. Claire. Olivia speaks highly of you.”

Allie laughed while he drove around the back of the building. “She’d better, we’ve only been best friends since kindergarten.” He raised an eyebrow, and she chuckled. “It’s a Southern thing.”

“I see.” He parked and got out of the car, walked around to open Olivia’s door, handing her out of the car. He did the same for Allie, then escorted the women inside where Ian stood waiting. “Ms. St. Claire, my bother, Ian. Ian, Allie St. Claire, Olivia’s closest friend. Would you mind escorting her to the bar while Olivia and I discuss business?”

“Not at all.” Ian offered Allie his arm, which she happily took, winking at Olivia.

Their voices drifted off down the hall and she stepped into Noah’s office. “You don’t mind Allie being here, do you?” she asked when the door closed behind them.

“Of course not. Just promise to keep her out of the back room?”

She laughed softly. “No problem there, boss,” she said, turning to leave.

“Olivia.”

When she turned around, he was right behind her. He took her face between his hands and lowered his head to kiss her.

She sighed. His lips slanted over hers, his tongue gently caressing, tasting her. She leaned into him, sliding her arms around his waist, deepening the kiss. There was tenderness and yearning in the kiss, not the hunger kiss of earlier this evening when he’d had to have her or burst. This was a gentle, emotion-filled kiss of a lover. She trembled in his arms and, fearing he would overwhelm her with the sheer depth of feeling conveyed by his kiss, fought the urge to flee.

She’d never been in a relationship before. The best she’d been able to offer any man was a quick-and-dirty fling before she flew off to wherever the army sent her. At the ripe old age of thirty-five, she’d been to more countries than she could count but she’d never been in love. What she was feeling scared the hell out of her. He wanted too much.

She broke the kiss, pressing her palms against his chest to free herself. His hand burrowed in her hair, and he pulled her head back. “I won’t let you run away from me, kitten.”

She shoved at him, fearful of the longing he engendered in her. “Don’t misinterpret what’s between us, Noah. I don’t do permanent.”

“It’s unfortunate you feel that way, pet, because I do, and I make a point of keeping what’s mine.”

Panic colored her cheeks, and she tried to shove him away but he held her tight against him. “Yours?” When he refused to release her from the cage of his arms, she forced her arms up and out, trying to break his hold. “You’re mistaken if you think I’ll ever belong to anyone.”

The look on his face was so primal, so possessive, that her knees almost gave way. “The minute you spread your legs for me, you became mine. Don’t doubt that for a minute.”

“How crude. Then I guess I won’t—”

She never got the opportunity to finish her sentence. He swooped down and covered hers in a kiss so fiercely hot and domineering it took her breath away.

Her head swam. The heat of his kiss swamped her senses. For some reason, she fisted in his shirt, and she heard herself moan while his tongue plundered her mouth. Dear God, he could take her up against the heavy oak door and she would happily let him, would encourage him to do it! So much for her outraged protest.

His erection was hard and heavy against her belly and her fingers ached to curl around it, stroke it, free it from the confines of those expensive slacks and beg him to fill her. He pressed her against the door and, lifting her full skirt, pushing his thigh between her legs. He must have felt her shudder in response, for he sought her out, slipping his fingers under the edge of her silky panties to stroke her slit.

He chuckled, a darkly erotic vibration in his throat, his tongue continued to mate with hers. His fingers went deep, stroking between her trembling legs. He caressed her clit with his thumb, and she cried out, until his mouth swallowed the sound.

Oh, God, she was riding his hand like some brazen hussy in a romance novel, a woman with no control over her body or emotions. She knew if he ordered her to cross the room and bend over his desk, she’d do it, just to feel the thrill of that enormous cock buried to the hilt.

“Tell me you’re not mine and I’ll stop,” he rasped, breaking the kiss. “Tell me we don’t belong to each other, Olivia, and I’ll never touch you again.” His fingers went deeper and she sobbed his name. “That’s what I thought.” And then his fingers were gone, and her dress fluttered around her calves. “Come to me during your dinner break and we’ll finish what we’ve started.”

She gaped at him. “I ... you ... oh, you are a shit, Noah Lazarus.” When he stepped back, she pushed away from the door. “You can just hold your breath and see if I come back here!”

He laughed softly, mocking her. “Don’t pout, kitten. It’s unbecoming.”

“Oh! You are the most . . . smug—” She glared at him. Then she lifted her chin in a haughty gesture and swept out of his office, muttering something about a cold day in hell.

Work kept her busy and she didn't seek Noah out during her dinner break. In fact, she didn't have a dinner break because all hell broke out when a newly minted journalist tried to get past security and into the fantasy room.

Janine Casey hadn't been out of journalism school long, but she was already making a name for herself by becoming an inspired tabloid reporter. There wasn't much she wouldn't do to get a salacious take on a story, and the fantasy room of Flirt was right up her alley.

Olivia stopped her attempt to push past the security detail in the corridor leading to the back room. She almost hoped the little twit would try and get by her. Noah had left her spoiling for a fight.

"Pardon me, Ms. Casey, only members are allowed past this point."

The petite reporter huffed. "Well, I applied for membership, but I haven't received my acceptance letter yet. I was given to understand one could observe the festivities by applying."

Olivia gave her a serene smile. "That's assuming you pass the first round of background checks—which you did not. A letter was sent to you last week, denying your membership."

Janine glared at her. "I most certainly did not receive any such letter."

"Really?" Butter would have melted in Olivia's mouth. "But I sent it certified." She placed a gentle arm on the reporter's shoulder to guide her toward the bar area. "Why don't we step into my office and see if I've received the return receipt." She knew damn well she had.

Janine exhaled a sigh. "All right, so I got it, but the people of New Orleans have a right to know if Noah Lazarus is running a sex club in this city!"

Olivia cocked her head. "Really? And do you actually believe they'd care about what's going on at a nightclub when the city has the highest murder rate in the nation?" She gave her a sad, admonishing look. "The issue of invading peoples' privacy notwithstanding, don't you think the public would be better served if you focused on the issues plaguing this city? Or is this the career you had in mind for yourself when you went to journalism school? Peddling smut is hardly an admirable goal, Ms. Casey."

Janine put her hands on her hips and tossed her head, setting her blond curls to bouncing. "I saw the governor's son come in here!"

Olivia folded her arms over her chest. "And your point would be?"

That flustered the woman. "I . . . he . . . well, he's the governor's son, for Christ's sake!"

"Who is a private citizen with a reasonable expectation of privacy as a member of this club. Who, by the way, has no role in government whatsoever. Now, I'm asking you very nicely to leave, Ms. Casey."

"You can't make me."

Olivia almost laughed. The woman sounded like a spoiled child who'd just been told to clean up her room.

Olivia drew herself up to her full height and leaned menacingly over the petite reporter. "Oh, I can make you leave, Ms. Casey. Question is, how would like me to do it? The easy way or the hard way. I'm ex-military police so I'm amenable to force if you insist."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Keep pissing me off and you'll see what I dare." She spun the writer around and gave her a gentle shove toward the door.

The woman dug in her heels, avoiding the metal detector. Olivia frowned. "Hey, Gabriel, wand Ms. Casey, would you?"

"No!"

The woman whirled away and dove for the door, but Olivia caught her by the scruff of the neck and dragged her back. "Not so fast, cookie." She dragged the strap of Janine's purse off her shoulder and tossed it to Gabriel. Check that for a tape recorder, any kind of electronics."

A quick wandling revealed the presence of a mini-camera and a video-enabled cell phone. Olivia pointed to the sign on the wall informing patrons that neither photo nor videophones were allowed on the premises. She quickly relieved the woman of her contraband and searched the phone for photos and video. She keyed Ian's receiver.

"Yeah, Olivia, what's up?"

"We've got a reporter here who sneaked a videophone into the club. How do you want to handle the situation?" She watched with amusement. Janine's mouth worked like a grounded fish.

Ian practically growled. "Bring her to my office, along with anyone she came in with."

"Will do." She turned to Gabriel. "Escort Ms. Casey to Ian's office, please. Tell him I'll join them in a moment." She hurried to the control room and directed the tech to roll back the footage until she located Janine Casey and her companions. There were three of them. She keyed her radio and instructed three of her men to intercept the intruders and escort them to Ian's office. She bounced on the balls of her feet while the protesting reporters were hauled out of the various rooms and taken to the manager's office. It'd been a while since she'd had this much fun. She grinned at the tech. "Later, dude, gonna go scare the crap out of some reporters."

"Humph," the man growled. "Lucky duck."

She really needn't have bothered going to Ian's office, but she couldn't help herself. His booming voice directed her to enter when she knocked on the door. She raised an eyebrow at the sight of Allie sitting behind Ian's desk. Her friend was having entirely too much fun giving the reporters a dressing-down.

“Any establishment has the right to deny service to any individual,” she informed them. “In addition to that, you violated the club’s policy of no electronic recording devices on the premises.” She folded her arms over her chest and leaned back in the chair, looking at Ian over her shoulder. “You want me to charge them with trespassing? I can do that. I could probably dredge up a few other charges, too, if I try hard enough.”

Ian glared at each reporter in turn. “I want the memory cards from the cameras, and I want those phones wiped clean.”

“Not a problem,” Olivia acknowledged. She took a seat next to one of the male reporters, smiling sweetly. “How you doing? Phone, please.” In a matter of minutes, she’d wiped every phone and camera and had given Ian the thumbs-up.

“All right, get out, all of you, and if I catch you anywhere near this property, I will press charges. Understood?”

Olivia nodded to her security contingent, and the invaders were escorted out. She looked at Allie, an eyebrow cocked in question.

Allie merely shrugged. “What can I say? It was fun.”

Olivia snorted. “Right.” She got smoothly to her feet and gave them a little wave. “You kids have fun. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Allie sighed dramatically and smiled at Ian. “She never lets me have any fun.”

Ian laughed. “Somehow, I think you manage anyway.”

Olivia laughed and opened the door, then pointed at Allie. “Behave yourself. I work here.” Pulling the door shut, she didn’t hear Allie’s rebuttal. She hurried down the hallway, adjusting the volume on her earpiece, and slammed into Noah’s rock hard chest.

She stifled a groan when he pressed her against the paneled wall and kissed her.

“There’s just no place to run, is there, pet?”

## Chapter Four

Noah looked up when Olivia stepped into the control room. He was already in the process of reviewing the security recordings. “Nice job handling those reporters,” he told her, nodding at the monitor. “I don’t understand why people in America insist on referring to my establishments as sex clubs.”

She rolled her eyes. “You can’t possibly be that naive, Noah. You chose to open this club in a country founded by Puritans and currently run by the religious right. What is it you don’t understand?”

He couldn’t help himself and laughed—loud. “You’re really pissed at me, aren’t you?”

Another eye roll. “My emotion, or lack thereof, is neither here nor there. You’re in the middle of the Bible Belt, sugar. If you were anywhere but New Orleans, you’d have fundamentalists up the wazoo out front, every one of them crying for your blood for attempting to corrupt the poor, weak-minded sinners of the world. You cannot afford that kind of publicity in the South.” She pointed at the video monitor. “That cannot be allowed to happen again. Who the hell let her in without checking her for contraband?”

Noah frowned. “That would be Gordon Combs.”

She practically growled. “Then Gordon Combs is out of here. We can’t afford fuck-ups like that. I deleted several photos of the governor’s son humping some debutante on the dance floor. Her skirt was practically to her waist, and he had his hands between her ass cheeks. I swear he was finger fucking her right on the dance floor.” She pulled out a chair and sat down. “That shit ever makes it to the front page, the politicians will eat you alive. They’ve lost control of the city, so they’re chomping at the bit to find something to take people’s minds off of how bad it’s gotten here.”

“Point taken. Fire him.”

She nodded and rolled her shoulders. “Consider it done.”

He rolled his office chair next to hers and lifted her feet onto his lap. When she tried to move, he held on firmly. “I just want to help you out of these shoes, kitten.” He unbuckled the ankle straps and gently massaged her aching feet.

She sighed, then stiffened. The video from the Friday night fantasy came onto the screen. BDSM was apparently the theme for the evening, and the guests were clothed for the occasion in black leather. In the far corner of the room, a masked man restrained a woman spread-eagle to a slanted table. Once she was secure, he gathered the toys of the trade and bent to his task. Clamps were tightened onto her distended nipples, and he began flogging her lightly. Pleased with her reaction, he leaned between her legs and began eating her pussy until she was humping his face. When he decided she was appropriately aroused, he shoved one end of a massive double-headed dildo into her pussy, then squirted lubricant on the other end and slid it into her ass. The woman’s eyes widened, and she screamed.

Noah studied Olivia's reaction to what she was seeing. While she found the practices she was observing somewhat distasteful, she was definitely aroused. He watched her scan the other activity in the room.

Doms petted their submissives—women and men collared and leashed. Women with bound breasts; men with cock and ball restraints. There was the governor's son being spanked by a leather-clad dominatrix. Neither practice seemed to appeal to her, thank God. Then her eyes went to a woman bent over a submission stand, wrists and ankles cuffed wide apart, while a man fucked her from behind, occasionally spanking her bare bottom. The camera angle changed to show the woman's face, her eyes glazed with pleasure, her mouth working in a wordless cry.

"You like that." It wasn't a question, and she didn't insult him by denying it.

She looked at him. "It's . . . erotic. I suppose. To be restrained, taken from behind like that, unable to participate. Dependent on your partner for your pleasure. Would I be interested in pursuing something like that on a regular basis? No."

His hands massaged her calf. "Ian left with your friend. We're alone. Would you like to play?" He watched her eyes skitter from the erotic scene before her, to him, then back. "Nothing rough, pet." His fingers crept higher, teasing her inner thigh. "I could make you come like that, love. Bend you over that stand and fuck you so deep."

When he slipped a finger under the hem of her panties, she gasped. "You're so wet, kitten." His voice was soft, cajoling. A quick swipe through her slit covered his finger with her silky essence. He held it up for her to see, then put it between his lips and sucked the cream away. "If watching her gets you off, imagine how much pleasure you'd get from letting me fuck you like that."

She was going to let him. He watched her swallow, saw her nostrils flare. He placed her feet on the floor, pulled her up and led her from the room. Neither of them spoke while they made their way back to the fantasy room. There were any number of toys available for their use, but he led her straight to the submission stand.

Moving behind her, Noah unzipped the silk dress and carefully draped it over a spreader bar. She hadn't worn a bra, and he slid his hands up and around her ribcage and cupped her breasts. He inhaled the delicate scent of magnolia, fingering her nipples. He gave them a hard pinch, and she rewarded him with a moan. Interesting. "Take off your panties and lean against the bar."

He undressed and stepped up behind her. "Spread your legs." She did, and he leaned down, cuffing each ankle to the base of the stand. "Now bend over." When she hesitated, he gave her bottom a stinging swat. She immediately complied, panting. He walked around in front of her and cuffed her wrists in place.

She lifted her upper body until her mouth was level with his jutting cock and he groaned when her tongue reached out to lick the tip. "You want to suck my cock?"

"Yes. Come closer."

Her mouth closed around him, and he thought he'd died and gone to heaven. She didn't waste time trying to tease him with delicate nibbles or tantalizing licks. Not his Olivia. She took him deep, sucking expertly, drawing on him skillfully. Good Lord, much more of this and he wouldn't last long. "That's enough." He withdrew, caressed her cheek, then walked around behind her.

She had a spectacular bottom. Round and firm. A man could bounce a quarter off that backside. "This ass is a thing of beauty, kitten." He knelt down and took the cheeks in his hands, lifting her onto her toes.

He kissed the pinked flesh where he'd swatted her, then opened her labia with his thumbs. "What's this? Creaming already?" He angled his head and lapped at her opening, making her squirm. "Ask me to eat your pussy."

Again, her stubbornness kept her silent and he treated her to another crack on her ass. She cried out and he watched her pussy clench, filling with cream. "Ask me, Olivia."

"Eat my pussy."

He struggled to withhold a bark of laughter. She hadn't asked, she'd demanded. He swatted her again, then slid a finger into her. She tightened around him and tried to push against him, but he removed his finger and smacked her ass.

"Ah, ah, ah. Be still. Ask me to eat your pussy." Again, she refused, and he shoved two fingers inside her, stroked twice, then removed them.

"Will you please eat my pussy?" she gasped.

Noah chuckled. "Yes, darling, I will," he answered, then leaned in for a long, deep taste of her.

She was very vocal, his kitten. Such noises! When he lapped, she moaned. When he nibbled her outer lips, she groaned. When his tongue teased her clit, she cried out, begging for more.

He'd lived for centuries, had fucked hundreds of women, but none stirred his loins like this one. He wanted to fuck her in every conceivable way possible. Wanted to cover her in silks and furs. Wanted to protect her from danger. Each finger should have a diamond. Precious gems should grace her earlobes and caress the slim column of her graceful neck. Every inch of her body should be pampered and worshiped. But she'd never stand for it. Olivia Sheppard would never stand for being a kept woman. She would be his equal or nothing at all.

Suddenly, he couldn't wait a minute longer. He shot to his feet, parted the cheeks of her ass, and rammed his cock into her weeping pussy. She cried out, and he withdrew most of the way before plunging again. "Yes, you like getting fucked from behind, don't you?"

"God, yes!"

"I love fucking you. Your pussy's so tight and hot. Just knowing I made it that way is such a turn-on. Tell me how you want me to fuck you, kitten."

“Harder, Noah. Faster.” He lunged deeper, and she howled. “Yes! Like that. Oh! God, I’m going to come so hard.”

He slowed his pace. “Not yet, love.”

He fucked her with slow, deep strokes, savoring the feel of her pussy gripping him so tightly. Lord, she felt like she’d been made just for him, like her pussy was the perfect fit for his cock, a puzzle piece fitting exactly right, completing the picture.

So, this is what it felt like, finding your mate. He hadn’t understood until now. He knew now what Ian had felt, and why his brother had mourned the loss of his mate so deeply. If anyone so much as harmed a hair on Olivia’s head, there would be hell to pay.

She was moaning loudly now, begging him to finish her. “I’ll finish you, kitten,” he growled, and lunged. He plunged into her, lunging deep, corkscrewing his hips, and her cries filled the air. She screamed when she came. Her pussy clamped around his cock, drawing his seed from him in jolting spurts that had him jerking against her. He buried himself to the hilt.

“Jesus,” Olivia gasped. “That was . . . intense.”

Curved over her, he placed soft kisses down her back and slid from her to kneel and undo the ankle restraints. “Very intense. You’re the most responsive woman I’ve ever known, kitten. But did you enjoy it?” He ambled around and undid the cuff around her wrists, then helped her to stand.

She thought about it for a moment. “Well, obviously that was me screaming like a banshee. Would I want to do it regularly? I don’t think so. Not my cup of tea.”

He helped her into her dress and zipped it for her. “I must say I’m relieved you didn’t care for some of the other activities, but I do admire your adventurous spirit.”

Olivia laughed, locked the door behind her and followed him out. “Good Lord, did you see the governor’s son, trussed up like a Sunday chicken? Definitely not into all that humiliation crap.”

Catching him by surprise, she snagged his shirt and hurled him against the wall, pressing her body tight against his. “But if you ever try that macho bullshit with me again, I might just truss you up like a chicken and leave you for your employees to find. Are we clear on that?”

It was a struggle not to laugh because she had no idea what she was dealing with. She simply didn’t possess the strength to subdue him, but she didn’t need to know that, yet. He merely leaned forward and kissed her. “Perfectly clear, darling.”

\* \* \* \*

Olivia pretended to doze in the car while Noah drove her home. The man was a conundrum—the perfect gentleman, loving and sweet, one moment, then decadently possessive the next. Which was the real Noah Lazarus? And why had someone felt compelled to warn her about him? What did the runner mean when telling her that Noah was not what she thought he was, that he was dangerous? She was about to open her eyes and ask him when he pulled in front of her condo.

“Did you work it out?” he asked, amusement lighting his eyes.

“Work what out?”

“Whatever it was you were pondering so intensely. I could almost hear the gears turning in your head. What is it, Olivia?”

She gaped at him, then closed her mouth so hard her teeth clacked. “How do you do that? It’s damned creepy.”

Noah laughed. “Easy. You didn’t quite get your breathing right.”

She snorted in disgust. “Guess I’ll have to work on that.”

“In the meantime, care to tell me what’s troubling you?” He got out of the car and came around to her side. Ever the gentleman, he opened the door and handed her out.

“There was a man,” she said, moving to open the gate. He followed her into the courtyard.

“What man?”

“While I was running yesterday. He jogged up next to me by the Mint. Said you weren’t what you appeared to be. That you were dangerous. Then he warned me away from you. Said next time there wouldn’t be a warning.”

The look on his face was one of genuine alarm. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

She glared at him. “Don’t go all macho on me, Lazarus.” She unlocked the front door and flipped on the light. Her hackles rose, alerting her to danger. She put her finger to her lips, directing him to be silent, then reached into her bag for her subcompact Beretta semiautomatic. The bag slid to the carpeted floor and she chambered a round then released the safety. “Stay here.”

She’d slipped into law-enforcement mode automatically, holding her gun double-handed, muzzle pointed down, index finger on the body of the pistol above the trigger guard. With head cocked, she listened. She shook her head. Whoever had been here was long gone, but she wasn’t taking any chances.

Crossing the living room, she peeked into the formal dining room, then pressed herself against the wall and spun low into the kitchen. Clear. The French doors leading from the family room to the deck stood ajar. *Fuckers*. She pulled it closed and thumbed the lock. Through the den, up the hall, a quick peek in the guest bath, all clear.

The door to the guestroom was open. She ducked inside, sweeping her gun in an arc, checked the closet and bathroom. Her computer was on, a message in large font resembling dripping blood scrolled across the screen. One word—ABOMINATION. With a snarl, she spun and reentered the hall.

The master suite was the last room to check, and for some reason, she didn't want to go in there. She took a deep breath and went in low. She swept the bathroom, the walk in closet, and peered under the bed. Clear. But someone had been here, and they'd left her a present. There, in the middle of her bed, was a dead bat.

The hardwood floor creaked and she spun around, leveling her gun. "Jesus Christ, Noah! I nearly shot you!"

"But you didn't."

She sighed and ejected the chambered round. "What the fuck is going on here? Someone went to a lot of trouble to disable my security system, but nothing's been taken. There's a dead bat on my duvet cover and a message on my computer that reads 'abomination.' Why is someone trying to warn me away from you? Do you have enemies that think you're some kind of psychic vampire?"

There was a haunted look in his eyes, eyes that suddenly looked old beyond his years. "No, they think I'm a real vampire. And they're right."

Olivia laughed. "Right." But he was obviously serious and that sobered her. "Noah? Explain, please."

He walked to bed and picked up the bat, then opened her French doors and pitched the offensive thing over the wall. His walk was decidedly predatory when he approached and took her hand. "Come into the living room. We need to talk."

## Chapter Five

Stunned, Olivia stared at him in disbelief. “You don’t really expect me to believe that cock-and-bull story, do you? One true mate, a secret society stalking your women?”

“It’s true.”

“Noah, there’s no such things. Vampires, or werewolves, or witches or fairies, for that matter, they’re just stories invented to scare people. This is more likely about a jilted lover or disgruntled employee. I mean, seriously. It’s just too . . . have you seen a doctor about these . . . fantasies?”

His laughter surprised her. “Don’t you mean delusions?”

She bit her lower lip. “Well, I was trying to be . . . understanding.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Don’t upset the freak?” He gave her an appraising look. “You’ll require proof, I suppose.”

“Uh—yeah.”

This was ridiculous! A vampire? She’d had such high hopes for this budding relationship. He’d seemed so normal, seemed to genuinely care about her, and the sex was phenomenal.

He reached up and stroked her temple. “I’m anything but normal, kitten, but I do care about you. And the sex *is* phenomenal.”

She flinched. “You’re a telepath?”

“I can probe your mind, yes, but I’m not a telepath. Not in the true definition of the word. Vampires are able to tap into people’s minds, delve into their thoughts.”

A mix of disappointment and fear swamped her. The delusion was much stronger than she thought if he believed his sixth sense made him a vampire. Still, his gaze was steady, lacking the feverish fanaticism of someone possessed by magical thinking. And it occurred to her that she’d never seen him in the full light of day. His skin was pale from a lack of sun. She drew away from him. “I’ve never seen you out during the day.”

“No. I burn easily and become dangerously dehydrated. I must be completely covered to walk in the sunlight. That will change as soon as we’re bound to one another.”

She frowned. *Bound together? What the fuck?* “Yeah, what’s that about, exactly?”

“My species carries an abnormal gene in our DNA. No one knows where it came from, but if we meet our true mate, and they agree to bond with us, we take on the ability to walk in the light. We can also reproduce.”

God, she almost believed him. He sounded so reasonable. “You can’t have children?” Now, why did that disappoint her? She’d never thought about having children before.

“Not currently, no.”

“But if—”

“If you transform me, I will be capable of giving you children.”

*Riiight.* “And if I did this, speaking hypothetically, what would be required?”

“You would have to willingly allow me to feed from you.”

“Drink my blood, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“And would that turn me into a vampire?”

His face was carefully neutral, and a sense of alarm skittered up her spine. “Not necessarily. Although, I would hope you would choose to do so, after a time.”

“Why?”

“So you wouldn’t grow old and leave me.”

She blew out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. *Crazy as a bedbug.*

“Wow.”

“Quite so.”

Olivia sighed. His delusion was so firmly entrenched, he almost had her believing. “You can understand why I might be . . . skeptical.”

He laughed at her declaration. “What can I do to prove it to you?”

“Well, you could show me your fangs, I suppose. Although you’ve had your mouth all over my body and I don’t recall feeling any extra-sharp teeth.”

Noah snorted. “I’m not a fledgling, Olivia. I can control my urges. Have you not wondered why I only take you from behind?”

“Because you know I get the most pleasure that way?”

A little growl escaped his throat. “No, but I’ll certainly keep that in mind. It’s so I’m less tempted to feed from you. When my mouth is close to your neck, I can practically hear the blood whispering in your veins. When I’m fucking you, the pleasure is so intense, I fear I’ll lose control if I nestle my face in your neck.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, stretching the word out.

“All right, I can see the only way to convince you is to show you my red eyes and sharp teeth. But I need a little incentive.” When she raised an eyebrow in question, he continued. “A kiss, kitten.”

Dear God, the man could kiss! His mouth took hers, his lips sliding across hers in a slow, sensuous glide. He sucked on her bottom lip, then gave it a tug. With one knee on the couch, he tugged her against him and moved his hands to her ass to raise her up. His tongue plunged into her mouth, and he leaned back, pulling her on top of him to kiss her.

She lay sprawled on top of him, his hands lifting her dress to caress her ass. And his mouth, his mouth was doing the most wonderful things, nibbling her jawline, nuzzling her neck, and then he spoke. “Look at me, Olivia.”

“Shit!” She threw herself to the floor, crab-walking backward. “What the fuck?” He was looking at her, gray eyes glowing red, fangs fully elongated and ready to feed.

“Are you afraid, Olivia? Do you think me a monster?”

Her breath came in gulps and she tried to steady herself. *Jesus Christ!* He was exactly what he claimed to be. Vampires were real? When he made no attempt to approach her, the fear subsided somewhat and she sat tailor-style on the floor, shaky but strangely intrigued. “How long have you been this way?”

“I was turned in eleven hundred ninety-nine, during Richard the Lionheart’s reign.

“Holy shit. The crusades?”

He smiled, exposing his eyes and teeth, which were back to normal. “Yes. I was nearly eviscerated, dying. The vampire who made me gave me a choice of an agonizing death, or life everlasting. I chose life.”

So, you’re over eight hundred years old?”

He nodded. “I am.”

“Wow.” She sat there for a moment, stunned, unconsciously scooting back until she was leaning against the wall. “So, what about garlic and crosses?”

“I like garlic, especially when I’m eating Italian.”

“You can eat regular food?”

He nodded. “And a cross is just a cross.”

“Stake through the heart?”

“Will piss me off, but it won’t kill me.”

She blew out a breath.

“What will kill you?”

“Fire does the job quite nicely. And, of course, there’s beheading.”

“And the person who broke into my house and left those charming messages for me, any ideas?”

“Sentinel.”

She took a deep breath and blew it out. “Sentinel?”

She stood and went to sit on the couch beside him. He wouldn’t harm her. She knew that now. He’d had every opportunity if that was his intent. He held out his hand, and she took it, settling in beside him to hear his story.

“The Sentinel is a secret society dedicated to the destruction of my race, especially my unique species.”

“Because you can reproduce.”

He grimaced. “Yes. They killed Ian’s wife sixty-some years ago. He’d just come home from the war. She was pregnant.”

Her hand covered her mouth. “So that’s the sadness I sometimes see in his eyes. Have you ever been married?”

“No. I only just found my mate.”

“Me.” *Lord love a duck.* Why did those words sound so good to her? She’d never been in a real relationship before, had never really wanted one.

“You, kitten.”

“And this secret society means to kill me?”

“If you transform me they will try, but I won’t let that happen. You must believe me. I won’t let that happen.”

“But why do they go after the women? Why not throw a Molotov cocktail through your bedroom window?”

“As you’ve noticed, vampires are capable of great speed, and we’re very strong. Getting close enough to kill one of us is extremely dangerous. It’s easier to kill the women.”

He stood. “I should leave. They mustn’t be allowed to believe you’re the one.”

In a move that shocked her, she stayed his attempt to get up. “Does it hurt?”

“Does what hurt?”

“When you feed from someone. Does it hurt?”

He pulled her into his embrace. “I’m told it stings. I would do it while making love to you, which intensifies the experience and lessens the discomfort.” He looked into her eyes. “Be certain, Olivia, because it can’t be undone. Once we bond, I will not take that responsibility lightly. When the Sentinel see me walking in the light, they’ll know, and they will not stop trying to take you from me. That’s something I will not allow.”

“So, what, you’ll be even more obnoxious than you were in your office?”

He chuckled. “Count on it. And I’ll feel free to take you any time and any place I want. You might be bending over to clean the tub and feel my cock plunge into you. Then there you’ll be, hanging on to the edge of the tub, howling like a banshee as I fuck you insensible. And now that I know you like to be fucked from behind, I promise you can expect it.”

She swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry.

He stood up. “Now, I should be going. You’re being watched, so I dare not stay any longer.” He pressed a kiss to her lips. “Think about what we’ve discussed, and I’ll see you tonight at the club.”

Olivia blew out a breath. “It’s a lot to take in, that’s for sure.” She followed him out, locking the gate behind him. Think about it? How could she think of anything else? She waited until he pulled away, then turned and went back into the house.

His mate? How was it possible? Could that be the reason she’d never had any strong feelings for the men she’d dated, slept with? Had fate decreed she be with this man, love only this man, spend an eternity with him? As bizarre as it seemed, it certainly went a long way toward explaining her failure to form attachments with the men in her life.

Oh, sure, there’d been one or two she’d felt some genuine affection for, but love? Never. Not even once. She’d thought her lack of feelings had more to do with her relationship with her father—a cold, distant man—than anything else. Didn’t all the psychology books say that a girl learned to love men through the relationship forged between father and daughter?

She reset her alarm system and went into the bedroom, stripping the duvet and sheets from the bed, shivering in disgust. Dead bats and threatening messages on her computer aside, she was damned well pissed off that this Sentinel organization felt free to invade her personal space. So what if Noah was a . . . vampire. *Jeeze. Try wrapping your mind around that.* Did that mean the other monsters from her childhood were real? Werewolves, witches, fairies? Holy crap! Her safe, comfortable life had just been turned upside down. One thing was certain, the likelihood of getting any sleep tonight was nil.

## Chapter Six

Olivia dressed carefully for work. On this particular Saturday night, Flirt was hosting a bachelor auction to benefit breast cancer research. Since she'd lost her mother to the disease, the cause was near and dear to her heart. She and Ian had put in many hours planning the event, and both he and Noah were up for bid. She was selling some unsuspecting woman a date with a vampire. *Unfuckingbelievable.*

She chose a lush, crimson silk dress with a distinctive forties flare. The double-capped sleeves fluttered delicately, and the bodice was cut low in the front and back, with gathered shoulders and upper bust, and button closures at the back of the inverted v-shaped waist. The full skirt fell to just below her knees.

Just for fun, she combined the sexy red dress with a choker of brass chain, red silk cording, antique glass cameos, and a variety of other beads, along with her grandmother's ruby and gold earrings. It was just the touch of funk she was looking for, taking her from serious to flirty. To the overall look, she added a pair of open-sided, ankle-strap pumps. She did a little spin in front of the mirror. Noah apparently had a thing for the forties sex kitten look, and this outfit definitely delivered. She had a feeling he'd love the black thigh-high stockings with the seams in the backs. All in all, she felt very sexy, indeed. She gave herself a little wink, grabbed her black pashmina, and headed for work.

\* \* \* \*

Expensive cars packed the parking lot of Flirt, and several limos idled in line, waiting to pour out their sparkling occupants. Olivia maneuvered her BMW around the crowds and parked in her assigned spot. Gabriel met her at the door before she could even get her key in the lock. "Ian's having a meltdown. When they delivered the catwalk, they forgot to include the skirting."

Olivia snorted. "If that's the least of his worries, things ought to run smoothly." She handed Gabriel her keys. "Go to that Christmas store, the one that's open year-round, buy a dozen boxes of those icicle lights—eight white and four multicolored. Then stop and pick up a couple of spools of thin-gauged wire. We'll wire the lights to the frames. Once they're lit up, nobody will care there's no skirting."

"You got it, boss." He slid behind the wheel and keyed the ignition. "Sweet ride." He gunned the engine and peeled out.

"Boys," she said with an exaggerated sigh and went inside.

She found Ian in Noah's office, raving about the lack of professionalism in business these days. When she closed the door behind her, he took a deep breath, ready to regale her with the horror of no skirting for the catwalk.

She beat him to the punch. "It's being handled, Ian. Relax, you're going to give yourself a heart attack." She looked at Noah, raised a questioning brow. "Can vampires actually have heart attacks?"

“No, darling,” he said, getting up and walking around the desk. The look he gave her said she was in very real danger of being ravished in the most rapacious manner possible. “Red is your color, kitten.”

“You told her?” Ian asked, incredulous.

“After what happened last night, yes, I told her.”

Ian’s eyes narrowed. “What happened last night?”

Olivia and Noah quickly filled him in on the break-in and ugly messages left for her.

“Well, that settles it, you’re moving in with us,” Ian said, hands on his hips.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, not going happen, Ian, but thanks for the offer.”

A meaningful look passed between the brothers. Ian’s haunted eyes pleaded with his brother to do something to save himself from a fate worse than death. He turned to Olivia. “They killed my wife, Olivia. They’ll kill you too.”

She shook her head. “No they won’t. They have no reason to believe there’s anything more between Noah and I than a casual sexual relationship.”

He gave her a confused look. “So, you’re not going to—”

“I don’t know. It’s a huge commitment, Ian, and it would seem I’m relatively safe until that day arrives, if it arrives.”

Noah took her hand, squeezing it in support. “I don’t want her making a hasty decision about something that will have such profound consequences, Ian. We’re taking things slow.”

“I see,” Ian said. He turned a predatory gaze on Olivia. “I thought you cared about him.”

“I do,” she said, her voice soft and soothing. “I care very much, Ian, but we’ve only known one another a short time. This is not a decision I can make lightly, no matter how much you might wish it of me.”

Ian gave a self-deprecating laugh. “Sorry. I guess I expected it to be love at first sight with you two the way it was for Grace and me.”

Noah put an arm around his brother and walked him to the door. “Go tend to business so I can kiss my woman in private.”

Ian snorted. “Well, don’t take too long. We have a ton of things to do and I need her on the floor.”

\* \* \* \*

Noah closed and locked the door, then leaned against it. “So, what are you wearing beneath all that lovely crimson silk, kitten?”

Olivia laughed. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

He folded his arms over his chest, smiling seductively. “Yes, I would. That’s why I asked. Lift your skirt, pet, and let me see.”

“Oooh, feeling bossy tonight.” He narrowed his eyes at the taunt and she laughed softly. She crossed the room to the seating area and placed her foot on the zebra wood table. “Like the stockings?” She lifted her skirt to reveal the sheer, black stocking with the seam up the back. The lacy thigh top peeped out from beneath yards of crimson silk.

“Very nice. More.”

Jesus. The look he gave her ignited an all-too-familiar throb between her legs. Too much more of this and she’d soak her pretty scarlet panties right through. She lifted the skirt the rest of the way to show him a lovely thong of velvet-flocked material with a scalloped front and two tiny jewels in the center.

“Turn around and bend over.”

She took a deep breath, then turned around and bent at the waist. She never heard him cross the room, but his hands were on her, stroking her ass.

“When the club closes tonight, I’m going to bend you over the desk and fuck you.” He eased a finger past the edge of her silky thong and into her dripping pussy. “Think about that while you’re working tonight, kitten. I know I will.” She groaned when he sank deep. “I’d like to eat your pussy right now, but alas, I see on the security monitor that Gabriel has returned with your solution to Ian’s little problem.” He gave her butt a light swat. “Are you going to bid on me tonight?”

She exhaled a shaky breath and straightened. “You bet your ass, I am. And when I win the date with the mysterious Noah Lazarus, I’ll be expecting something terribly grand.”

He laughed. “I promise not to disappoint.”

She gave her hair a toss and swept past him. “See that you don’t.” She smothered a grin, and his laughter followed her out the door.

\* \* \* \*

The problem with the catwalk was resolved quickly, and the lights added plenty of sparkle to the room where the auction would take place. “All right, gentlemen, take your places,” she directed the bachelors. “Let’s get this party started!”

The room filled with women of all shapes and sizes, each decked out in her glittering best. Realtors, bank presidents, and CEOs vied with one another for a chance at a date with the cream of New

Orleans most eligible men. Olivia stood at the entrance of the room, watching while, one by one, the men were auctioned off for hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars.

The mistress of ceremonies, a prominent member of society, vividly described each man's charms. Finally, Ian stepped onto the catwalk, and the crowd went wild. "Here we go, ladies," the auctioneer cried. "We've been saving the Lazarus brothers for last! Meet Ian Lazarus. We're expecting a good chunk of change for this handsome gentleman. Doesn't he look wonderful in a tux?" She gestured for Ian to spin around, which he did, raising the back of his jacket and shaking his truly fine ass.

Women started yelling, and the opening bid was five hundred dollars. He strutted to the end of the catwalk, took off his jacket, and slung it over his shoulder, striking a pose. He grinned at Olivia, who gestured for him to let his hair loose. With a sensuous smile, he tugged the black leather tie from his hair and shook his head until it swirled around his shoulders.

"Fifteen hundred dollars!" a familiar voice shouted from the front row.

Olivia cracked up the minute Allie leapt to her feet, waving her checkbook over her head. Bidding continued briskly, but Allie finally won her date with Ian, at the cost of three thousand dollars.

"Sold, for three thousand dollars, to one of New Orleans finest law enforcement officers. Fill out that check, Allie!"

"On my way!" Allie shouted, then grinned up at Ian. "Come on, honey, I'll buy you a drink."

Ian vaulted off the stage and slung an arm around Allie's waist. "Always happy to cooperate with the law, ma'am."

They sauntered off toward the donations table, and Noah stepped onto the catwalk. Olivia took a deep breath. God, he looked good. He'd gone completely Ralph Lauren Polo, with a pair of black, Carrier Vintage Flight Pants, and a snug, black cashmere sweater. He looked good, and he damn well knew it when he ambled down the runway. His eyes were on her, making promises she knew would leave her gasping and weak-kneed. When he got to the end of the runway, he smiled, and the women lost their minds.

*Bastard's going to cost me more than three thousand bucks, that's for sure.* A horse-faced woman from one of the local casinos immediately bid two thousand dollars. Olivia gritted her teeth and hollered, "Twenty-five hundred!"

The woman glared at her. "Thirty-five!"

*Son of a bitch!* "Four!"

The woman put her hands on her generous hips. "You work with him every day! Give somebody else a chance!"

Olivia grinned. "Not going to happen, honey. I don't share what's mine!" *Oh crap!* Had she just said that aloud? Judging from the look on Noah's face, she had.

Horse-face ran the bidding up to fifty-five hundred before giving up, and the auctioneer hollered, "Sold, to the lovely lady in red! Check or plastic, Livie?"

"I'll get my checkbook," she hollered back and scurried to Noah's office to write the check.

*Fifty-five hundred dollars. Yeesb.* Still, it was a worthy cause and she could afford it. She laughed, thinking about horse face and wondering what Noah would have done if she'd let the casino woman win. She didn't hear him enter the room until he spoke.

"Contemplating how you're going to use your newest purchase, pet?" His voice held a note of teasing, but there was the ever-present hint of smoke to it as well.

She tore the check from the book and turned, smiling. "Oh, absolutely. Fifty-five hundred dollars is a lot of money. I hope you're prepared to put out."

Noah chuckled. "Oh, I'll put out all right. Never fear, you'll get your money's worth." He crossed the room in a blur, pinning her against the desk. "Care for a demonstration?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Before I've paid? Perish the thought." She reached down and stroked the noticeable bulge pressing against his zipper. "Mmm. Is that a rocket in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"

A growl rumbled from his chest. "You tease a vampire at your peril, pet." His nostrils flared, and he leaned down and nuzzled her collarbone. "Lovely choker. Hoping it will protect that delicate neck?"

She fisted her hand in his hair and pulled his head back. "Ah, ah, ah," she scolded. "The only thing long and hard that's going to penetrate me is this wonderful cock." She gave him a squeeze, then shoved at his chest. "Now, unhand me, sir. I have to pay for my purchase and get back to work."

\* \* \* \*

Noah chuckled and sat down behind his desk. Lord, his cock was granite hard and aching. What a little tease! She thought she had him under control, did she? Well, she'd find out differently just as soon as the club cleared out. He'd damn well bend her over the desk and have at her, just like he'd promised. He picked up the phone and dialed his pilot. "Captain Andrews, fuel up the jet and file flight plans for Paris. We'll be leaving soon after the club closes. Call Simonette and let her know we'll be arriving tomorrow."

That bit of business concluded, Noah relaxed in his office, waiting for closing time. He hoped Olivia wouldn't mind the impromptu trip to Paris. He did want her to meet the manager of Club de Flirter and check out the security. Some very high-profile clients belonged to the fantasy club, and he wanted to ensure their safety, as well as their privacy. But more than anything, he wanted to stroll hand in hand with her along the Seine while the City of Lights unfolded before them. One day, he hoped, he would walk the streets of Paris in the sunshine with Olivia at his side.

He had fallen in love with her, and not just because she was destined for him. Many a bonding had taken place without the benefit of love. It was not unheard of for mates to bond, then go their

separate ways. That would not be the case with Olivia. Somehow, he would make her love him. He had to, because he was rapidly reaching the point where he could not live without her.

He was still thinking about Paris, and his plans for the future when she entered his office, hours later.

“My, but that’s a pensive expression,” she said. “Problems?”

“Not at all. If you must know, I was planning our date.”

God, but she had a marvelous smile. “Were you? And what do you have up your sleeve?”

He stood up, extending his hand to her. “A surprise, pet. Now, about what we discussed earlier. Did you lock the door behind you?”

Her violet eyes widened. “No, I didn’t.”

He shrugged. “Too bad. I suppose we’ll just have to take our chances that no one will walk in on us.”

Olivia snorted. “Don’t be silly. We’re not going to make love in your office.”

He stalked her across the room. “No, we’re not. We’re going to fuck. Like a couple of rutting animals. I’ve been thinking of you wearing nothing but those pretty panties and your stockings, all night long. Now, will you remove that lovely dress, or shall I do it for you?”

She licked her lips, backing away. It turned her on, having him stalk her this way. He was behind her in the twinkling of an eye, dragging her against him and locking the door. Her strength was insignificant compared to his, and he took full advantage of the fact. He quickly worked loose the buttons at her waist. Her dress gaped open and slid down her arms, allowing her breasts to sway free.

He tugged it down and tossed it aside. Filling his hands with her breasts, he propelled her forward and pinned her to the desk. “Very nice, indeed, pet. You have marvelous breasts.” He pushed her hair aside and nibbled at her neck, then he molded his hands to her breasts and pinched the nipples.

Her ineffectual struggles only served to enhance his arousal, likely what she intended considering how her ass wriggled so invitingly against his swollen cock. “Go ahead, kitten,” he rasped in her ear. “Fight me. I love it when you go all feisty on me.”

“Bastard,” she gasped, shoving her ass more tightly against him. But her voice was thick with desire, shaking with lust.

He let go of her breasts and pressed her torso to the polished surface of the desk. Using one hand, freed his cock from the confines of his pants. He stroked her ass, then grabbed the string of her thong and gave it a yank. “Now, there’s a sight for sore eyes—your bare ass tipped up, waiting for me to spread those luscious cheeks and fuck that tight pussy.” He tossed her ruined panties aside and kneed her legs apart. “Ready to fuck, pet?”

She moaned. “God, yes.”

“Good.” He shoved deep, groaning when her tight heat enveloped his cock.

“Oooh! Oh, God, Noah!”

He pressed one hand against the small of her back and slammed his hips against her ass, fucking her hard and deep. This was what he’d been waiting for, the feel of her pussy clamped tight around his cock, flooding him with liquid heat while he drove into her from behind.

He lunged, spearing her with his cock. She tried to shift her body, to shove herself against him in an attempt to take him deeper. So, she wanted it deeper, did she? He’d give her deeper. Grasping her leg, he raised it high, resting it on the desk. With a flick of his hips, he drove deeper, impaling her with the hard length of his cock.

She was keening now. “Yes! Ah, God, fuck me! Oh, God, I’m going come!”

“Yes, you are,” he growled. “You’re going to come hard, pet.” He increased his pace, pounding into her balls deep.. “Come for me, Olivia. I want to hear you scream my name.”

She jerked with pleasure at the brush of his thumb across the ring of her anus. He felt his fangs elongate and fought the urge to drink from her. He stroked the delicate opening of her anus and felt her shudder, then press against his thumb. “You like that, hm?” He swiped at her juices. “Well, let’s give you some.” He shoved his thumb deep, and she screamed, her pussy clenching when she came.

“Oh God! Noah!” She cried his name over and over. He continued to pound into her, reaching for his own release. She came twice more, squeezing him in her velvety clutch, and moments later, his voice joined hers as he drove into her one final time, burying himself deep. He could only gasp when his cock leapt, spurting semen that would one day fill her womb with his child.

Spent, he groaned and allowed himself the luxury of curving his body over hers. If sex with her was this intense, how much better would it be when they were bonded? He sighed and kissed the back of her neck. “I love you, Olivia.”

## Chapter Seven

“Where are you taking me?” Olivia asked, peering out the window of the limo.

“On a date.”

“Noah, it’s nearly daylight,” she reminded him. “Don’t you need to sleep?”

The limo turned into the airport and made its way to Noah’s private hanger. The chauffeur exited and hurried to open their door.

Olivia gave Noah an astonished look. “We’re flying somewhere? I don’t have any clothes with me!”

He handed her out of the car and guided her onto the tarmac. “I’ll buy you everything you need.”

“But—”

“Just get on the plane, Olivia.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! Why won’t you tell me where we’re going?”

He nudged her up the stairs. “Ever heard of the concept of a surprise, kitten?”

She gave him an exasperated sigh, hurried ahead of him and took a seat, glaring when he chuckled at her impatience. “Did I mention I’m not a big fan of surprises?”

“Just relax, Olivia. We’ll have a drink as soon as we take off, and then we can rest. We’ll be in Paris by sunset.”

She smiled sheepishly. “I’m sorry to be such a grouch. I’m not unappreciative, really. It’s just that surprises in my line of work are never a good thing. I have to remember I’m not with the service any more.”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “I understand.” He gave her an appraising look. “Paris is all right, isn’t it? I mean, I assume you’ve been there a number of times, so maybe it’s too mundane for a world weary traveler such as yourself.”

Olivia snorted. “Please, I’ve been to Paris a dozen times but never with you. It’ll be a joy to poke around in all those fascinating corners I’ve never seen before.”

“Good, then you’ll be able to keep yourself entertained while I sleep during the day. I have an apartment on Boulevard du Montparnasse, which is close to the metro, in case you’d prefer to use mass transit. You do read and speak French?”

“I do, actually, and I love the idea of using the metro. How long will we be staying?”

“A few days. I thought we’d look in on the club while we’re there. Introduce you to the manager, have you assess the security.”

“Ah, mixing business and pleasure.”

“As long as we’re going to be there. But the first couple of days are just for us. Business after pleasure, pet.”

The jet was cleared for takeoff and they were soon in the air. The steward poured glasses of champagne and served them a fruit and cheese tray. Olivia peered out the window to watch the sun begin to lighten the horizon. She looked at Noah.

“Yes, it’s time for me to retire. There’s a master suite aft. Would you care to sleep with me?”

She took the hand he offered, and he pulled her to her feet. “I meant what I said earlier. I love you, Olivia.”

She squeezed his hand and followed him into the sumptuous stateroom. They undressed and slid beneath sheets fit for royalty, and it occurred to her that she’d never really slept with a man before. Not all night. Her habit, through the years, was sex at her partner’s place, then back to her apartment, no matter the time. It was an odd feeling to know she would be sharing this man’s bed for the next few days, but not entirely unpleasant. She turned on her side to kiss him and found he was already deeply asleep.

The McDonald-Douglas MD-87 jet touched down in Paris shortly after five o’clock in the evening. A limousine was waiting, and they were whisked away to Noah’s apartment in Montparnasse. It was a classic Parisian apartment in the Haussmannian style so popular in the nineteenth century. Opulent was but one word that came to Olivia’s mind when Noah unlocked the heavy, oak doors and ushered her inside.

“Oh, my, it’s lovely,” she said, smiling. “Do you spend much time here?”

“Unfortunately, no, although I am always happy to be here when business arises.”

She looked around at the buttercream walls, the extensive crown molding, and beautiful French doors leading to various rooms, and sighed happily. “If I had a place like this, I’d never leave.”

He cocked his head. “Would you like to live in Paris? We don’t have to stay in New Orleans, you know. Ian can see to our interests there. I can run my business from any number of locations.”

“Someday, maybe. I’m—”

He shrugged negligently. “Food for thought, pet. No pressure.”

Right. He was bringing plenty of pressure to the table and she didn’t know whether to be thrilled by his aggressive pursuit, or whether to run as far and as fast as she could. They’d begun this affair so quickly that her head was still spinning from the effects. How could he possibly love her after such a short period of time? And yet he did. She felt it in every touch, every gesture, every soft word. Even when he was dominating her sexually, taking her to heights she’d never before known, she could sense the intensity of his feelings for her. It was frightening and exhilarating all at once.

“Have a look around while I make a few phone calls,” he said to her. “We need to get you some clothes, and the better shops have closed for the night. My friend Antoine will open his boutique for you, so we can pick up a few things you’ll need.”

“I wouldn’t want to be a bother,” she said, then looked down at her wrinkled silk dress. “But I suppose this thing is looking a bit disreputable.” She wandered off to let him make his calls.

The pale yellow walls carried throughout the apartment and were an elegant contrast to the salmon-pink and crème silk drapes that hung from the ceiling to floor windows that overlooked Boulevard du Montparnasse. The furnishings were stylish, yet simple. There were several fireplaces in the apartment, each with an antique, carved mantelpiece. The library was the only really masculine room, furnished in comfortable leather and wood, with floor-to-ceiling bookcases along one wall. All in all, it was an exquisite apartment and she could see herself living here with Noah, happily exploring every nook and cranny of Paris. Good Lord, he was getting to her!

She had just wandered into the luxurious master suite when Noah appeared beside her. She uttered a startled yelp. “My God, you’re quiet as a church mouse! How do you manage to make no noise when you walk around a nineteenth-century apartment with parquet floors?”

Noah chuckled. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. Antoine is happy to open the shop for us. Come along, let’s get you properly attired, and then we’ll go for a walk along the Seine. We can stop for a glass of wine and some food at one of the cafes.” He draped her pashmina around her shoulders. “The sun is going down and spring evenings can be quite chilly.”

\* \* \* \*

The boutique was simply called Gigi, and carried a variety of designer clothes. Antoine, gracious to a fault, walked around her, studying her for several long moments, then hurried around the store to gather several outfits he thought would suit.

She fell in love with a Gaultier knit dress in a luxurious virgin wool. Antoine declared it brought out the deep purple color of her eyes. Cut on the bias, it boasted a twenty-three-inch side slit trimmed in fringe, with a cowl neck and a long, attached scarf that hung down the side. Because it was long sleeved, she could wear it in the cool Paris evening and be comfortably warm. At a little over seven hundred dollars, Olivia was scandalized at the price, but Noah didn’t bat an eye, insisting they purchase it, along with a pair of lace-up ankle boots in black patent leather, and a black, jersey-crepe wrap mini-dress with a fringed hem, and a pair of black tights.

A Dolce and Gabbana top, two pair of Rich and Skinny jeans, a sexy silk top by Roberto Cavalli completed their purchases. Olivia felt uncomfortable. Not that Noah’s purchases weren’t fabulous, because they were, but she just felt like a high priced mistress accepting them.

She was wearing the purple Gaultier when they left the shop. Antoine would leave the rest of their purchases with Noah’s doorman on his way home. “I’m going to reimburse you for every penny you spent in that store,” she grouched, stepping onto the sidewalk.

Noah laughed and tugged on her hand weaving through the early evening crowd. “You’ll do no such thing, kitten. It was my pleasure to buy those things for you, and in the next day or so, we’ll be going to the heart of the fashion district where I intend to spoil you shamelessly.”

“I . . . you . . . most certainly will not! I am not some . . . some . . . courtesan you can shower with gifts and screw any time you want!”

“That does it,” Noah growled. He dragged her through a crowd of young, hip Parisians and into a cobbled alleyway. “When have I ever treated you like a whore?” He pulled her along the rutted pathway until they rounded the back of a building with a low stone wall that led to a basement of some kind.

She’d never seen him angry before, and his eyes glinted red in the gloom of the alley. He spun her around, and yanked her dress up around her waist, she felt her pussy clench.

“I’ll show you how a man takes a common whore,” he snarled.

\* \* \* \*

Oh, Jesus, he was going to fuck her right here in the open! She should be pissed off at his rough handling of her, but instead, she was intensely aroused at the idea of being taken. He bent her over the wall, yanked her panties down to her ankles, and then freed his cock from the confines of his jeans.

His fingers were rough between her thighs, and she heard him groan. “Jesus, woman, you’re soaking wet.” He entered her with a single deep lunge, burying his cock balls deep. One hand found her breast and squeezed while he rode her hard and fast.

Oh, goddamn, she was going to come! “Yes!” she hissed. “Fuck me. Oh, God, Noah, what you do to me—”

“That’s right,” he said, his voice a deep rumble. “I make you feel this way.” He brushed the hair from her neck, nibbling and licking, scraping his fangs across the delicate flesh. “That’s the difference between you and a whore. Your feelings for me.”

Jesus! Heat poured from her pussy, coating her thighs while he continued to fuck her—hard. She was so close, so close! But she needed more, something else, something deeper and hotter. Something indefinable.

“Please, oh, please,” she begged.

“You have no idea what I could do to you, pet, if I fed from you.” He withdrew, leaving her just the head of his cock. He pressed his mouth to her ear, and he tugged the lobe with his teeth. “You’d come so hard, you’d think your body was about to fly apart. And it would be like that every time I fed.”

Olivia moaned when he sunk his cock into her, slowly and completely, and then pulled out again. “I’d penetrate you with my cock and my teeth, and you’d scream with the intensity of the orgasm I gave you.”

“Oh, God. Do it! Do it now!” she begged.

He drew back and lunged into her once more, then pulled out completely, leaving her panting and wet. “No. Not like this, not in some back alley.” He leaned down and pulled her panties into place, then set her dress to rights.

“What? You’re kidding, right? You’re not going to leave me like this!”

He took her hand and led her back up the alley. “Oh, but I am, pet. And there’ll be no more talk about whoring or paying me back for the gifts I choose to give you.” He laughed seductively. “Now, come along, I find I’m hungry for the rump steak at La Coupole.”

“Rump steak?” she shrieked. “Is that your idea of a joke?”

He laughed aloud and planted a kiss on her cheek. “Hush. We’ll finish what we started later, in my bed, not in some back alley.”

“You’re a shit, you know that, don’t you?”

“I’ve heard it said a time or two.” He found a table on the sidewalk and seated her. “Now, what would you like to eat?”

She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down until they were face to face. “Order me whatever you please,” she said. “I’ll have what I really want to eat when we get back to your place.” She inhaled sharply at his narrowed eyes glowing red in the darkening sky. He wasn’t the only one who knew his way around a sexual taunt.

His lips covered hers in a devouring kiss that left her breathless. “Careful, love. You might wind up with more than you can handle.”

“You don’t scare me, Noah Lazarus,” she said against his kiss-swollen lips. “Not even a little.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “God, I adore you.”

Olivia watched, eyes narrowed, when Noah came back from placing their order with a tall, slender woman draped on him. She couldn’t remember the woman’s name, but she recognized her. Some famous Parisian supermodel, the skinny bitch. Never having experienced jealousy before, she didn’t recognize the emotion at first. She was, by turns, amazed and pissed off. Amazed she was capable of such an emotion, and pissed off that the woman continued to hang on Noah even after he reached the table and began introductions.

“Olivia, meet Marguerite Orfevre.”

He attempted to disentangle himself from the grasping female, but she held on, giving Olivia a smug smile. "Bonjour, Olivia. I am pleased to meet you. Any friend of Noah's is a friend of mine."

Olivia clenched her teeth in a parody of a smile. "How nice."

Marguerite turned to Noah. "Darling, would you please get me a glass of wine?" She glanced at Olivia, then back at him. "You know what I like."

He gave Olivia a helpless look, but took the opportunity to escape the super model. "Of course, my dear." He leaned down and brushed a kiss next to Olivia's ear. "Behave yourself."

She laughed softly. "Don't count on it, darling." She could have sworn she heard him groan when he straightened and hurried away. She gestured to a chair. "Please, have a seat."

The model sank gracefully to the chair beside her. "So how do you know, Noah?"

"I'm head of security for his clubs."

"Ah, so you're here for business, then." It was spoken smugly, with the assurance of a beautiful woman who was certain the man of her choosing would leave with her.

Olivia took a great deal of enjoyment in bursting that bubble. "Actually, this is a pleasure trip, but I do plan to look in on the Paris operation while we're here."

Marguerite frowned. "So, what are you to him, one of his volunteers?"

"Volunteers?"

"One of the women who volunteer to let him feed."

Olivia raised an eyebrow. "No, actually, we're lovers."

The woman gave a delicate snort. "Noah Lazarus doesn't take lovers, darling."

Olivia leaned closer to her and whispered to her. "Oh, but he does, darling. And if you know what's good for you, you'll keep your bony body off my man."

Marguerite gave her a startled look. "Did you just threaten me?"

Olivia gave her an innocent look. "Me? Never!" She looked up, smiling when Noah returned to the table with the supermodel's wine.

He walked around the other side of the table, avoiding Marguerite's grasp, and sat down beside Olivia. "Everything all right, kitten?"

"Couldn't be better. We were just chatting about your volunteers. How many are there, exactly?"

Noah groaned and looked at Marguerite. "Must you always be so spiteful, Marg?"

The French beauty picked up her wine glass and rose to her full height. “I won’t sit here and be scolded by you, Noah. Why wouldn’t I assume she was a volunteer? You usually buy them dinner to replenish them. It’s not as if she’s one the beauties you usually squire about.”

Olivia flinched as though she’d been slapped.

“Oh, I beg to differ, Marguerite. I happen to think she’s very beautiful, and I intend to marry her once I finally convince her she loves me as much as I do her.” He drew Olivia into the curve of his shoulder. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, our dinner will be here any moment.”

Olivia gaped at the gorgeous fashion icon stalking away. “I can’t believe you would choose someone like me over her. She’s gorgeous.”

Noah shook his head. “What part of I love you do you not understand? I don’t want any other woman. And just so you know, you’re gorgeous, too.” He looked up when the waiter approached with their dinner. “Ah, our food is here.” He nodded at the waiter. “*Merci.*”

The man merely looked down his nose at Noah, set their food and wine on the table, and walked away.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Well, I suppose there’s comfort in knowing some things never change. French waiters are still astonishingly rude.”

Noah chuckled. “Yes, they are. Now, stop talking and eat your dinner. I want to walk along the Left Bank with you, holding your hand all the way home.”

## Chapter Eight

During their stroll hand in hand along the Seine, they stopped several times either to chat with acquaintances of Noah's or to enjoy a particularly beautiful view of the river and the number of stone bridges crossing her. For the first time, Olivia actually got to enjoy the ambience of Paris after dark, and she sighed when Noah led her away from the river and back toward his apartment building. "It's so lovely, I hate to leave."

"We can come back tomorrow night if you'd like." He pulled her into his arms under the soft glow of an old street lamp and kissed her. "Right now, I'm of a mind to finish what we started in that alleyway."

Olivia shivered, remembering the power of his body driving into hers and the need she'd felt for something more, something deeper and more satisfying than just his cock. "Yes," she murmured against his lips. "Let's do that."

The urgency she felt overwhelmed her, and she struggled to maintain the romantic atmosphere of the evening. She slid an arm around Noah's waist, snuggling into the nook of his shoulder. Their boot heels rang off centuries-old cobblestones. They ducked into a side street short cut. Her pulse quickened when his building came into sight.

"Hurry," she said, breathlessly, then laughed while he dragged her across the nearly deserted street and into the building's lobby. They paused long enough to retrieve her packages from the doorman, then hurried to the elevator.

"Kiss me," Olivia demanded after the elevator door slid shut behind them.

He pressed the button for the third floor, then pushed her against the wall of the car, kissing her hungrily. The bell sounded and the elevator door slid open. "Prepare to be ravaged," Noah warned her. "I could feel your excitement all the way home. I'm not sure I can hold back."

Olivia laughed and shoved him out the door. "I'd be pissed if you did."

He fumbled with the keys, she pressed herself against his back, allowing her hands to wander at will. Her hands found his cock, stroking it over his stylish wool slacks. Her fingers eagerly worked his zipper down, then dipped inside his boxers to close around his straining cock. "Oh, God, I want you in my mouth."

The apartment door flew open and they all but tumbled inside. He slammed the door and thumbed the lock, and Olivia launched herself at him, shoving him against the door. He kicked off his loafers while she unbuckled his belt and flicked open the button of his trousers. She yanked them down, along with his silk boxers, and he kicked them aside.

On her knees, Olivia guided his cock to her mouth, taking him as deeply as possible. God, she wanted all of him, every inch. But he was too large, so she wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock, stroking him and sucking greedily. At the taste of precome weeping into her mouth, she moaned.

Noah groaned. "Olivia, stop, I can't hold it."

She caressed his balls, squeezing gently with her free hand. "Then don't. Come for me, like I do for you."

He growled, his hips jerking. She took him deeper, somehow managing to swallow more of him than she imagined possible. She sucked harder, and he pulled back and sunk in again, moaning greedily.

"Oh, Jesus, I'm going to come, kitten. Yes, suck it. Make me come!" He cried out when she reached behind him, grabbed his ass, and pulled him against her taking him deep. He roared and came, his semen jetting into her throat while she continued to suckle him.

He tore at his shirt, tossing it aside, then reached down and pulled the soft, knit dress over her head. It joined his clothes in a pile on the floor. Then he reached down, grasped her under her arms, and hauled her to her feet. "Bedroom, now." He spun her around and gave her a shove toward the hall.

Olivia paused to kick off her shoes before she approached the bed.

"Get it off, all of it," Noah demanded. "Or I swear I'll rip it to shreds."

She giggled and unhooked the front closure on her bra. Noah snapped the strings on her thong and tossed the pesky garment aside. His hands closed around her waist, and he tossed her onto the bed, following her down.

Olivia moaned when his mouth crashed down over hers. His tongue delved deep, exploring, tasting, claiming every centimeter of her mouth as his own. He sucked on her tongue, then freed her mouth and took her breasts.

She cried out at his teeth scraping across a distended nipple. She arched against him when he drew her breast deeper into his mouth, pulling deeply on the nipple until she was squirming beneath him.

"So sweet," Noah murmured, releasing her breast. He slid further down her body. "Open you legs, kitten. I'm hungry for a taste of you."

Olivia inhaled sharply when Noah's mouth settled over her clit. There would be no wasting time on preliminaries this night. He intended to make her come, and make her come hard. His tongue worked the sensitive bud until she ground her hips against his voracious mouth. God, she was so close! And then he stopped.

"Noah!" she cried.

He chuckled. "On your knees, woman. I'm going to fuck you good."

Olivia shuddered when he arranged her on her hands and knees, then slowly filled her with his pulsing cock.

“Now,” he directed her, hands on her hips, “fuck yourself on my cock. “He controlled her with his hands. “No, don’t come yet.” He reached under her and pulled her upright until she straddled his thighs and he was buried deeper than he’d ever been before.

Olivia moaned. “Oh, God, Noah. It’s . . . God . . . so deep.”

“Yes.” He lifted her hair and draped it over her right shoulder, and then, beginning with gentle gliding motions, he nuzzled her neck. His hands cupped her breasts, holding her tightly against him. He took her with a deep, lunge. “Can you feel it, Olivia, the need to feed me? Can you feel how my cock swells inside you, waiting for the first taste of you?”

Her hips undulated and his ground his cock into her. She moaned, feeling his hot, nibbling kisses along her neck. One hand left her breast and stroked down the length of her body to palm her mound. She shrieked when his middle finger began to stroke her clit and he drove upward, hard.

“Ooooh! Do it! Feed! Fuck me!” She shrieked again when, firmly caressing her clit, he rammed his cock deep.

\* \* \* \*

Finally, she was ready. Noah pressed his finger harder against her clit, fondling the heated bundle of nerves while he took her. Jesus, the blood was pounding in her veins. She was going to erupt any second now. He pressed his mouth against the side of her neck, felt the pulsing vein, and plunged his fangs deep.

Olivia stiffened in his arms with the dual penetration, then began to scream. She came with each long gulp he took from her. He curved his arms up over her shoulders. Holding her tightly against him, he drove his cock into her again and again.

God, she tasted sweet. Her blood flowed over his tongue with a rich, coppery taste, and her pussy clutched at his swelling and throbbing cock. He’d fucked and fed before, but the experience had never been like this. He could feel their hearts beat in unison, could smell the combined scents of perspiration and arousal on her skin, could feel each slick centimeter of her heated, quaking pussy when she came and came and came. And then his own release was upon him, and he slammed deep one final time, his come gushing deep into her womb. Tomorrow, he would walk with her in the sun. And, maybe, just maybe, a child would come of this frenzied mating. She slumped against him, limp, and whispered sleepily. “I love you, Noah. I do.”

Ever so gently, he licked the dual puncture marks on her neck, closing the wounds. His cock slid out of her. He eased her down and onto her side before spooning her. “Rest, love,” he whispered. “I’m going to get you some juice. I’ll be right back. Don’t try and get up.”

“Mmm,” she murmured. “Not much chance of that happening.”

Noah returned with a tall, cold glass of orange juice, and slid into bed beside her. “Can you sit up?”

She snorted. “Of course.” She sat up and let him draw her against his chest.

“Drink the juice, pet, you’re going to feel a bit hypoglycemic the first few times, but your body will soon adjust.”

He’d expected questions, maybe even recriminations, but she relaxed against him, sipping the replenishing fluid as if nothing unusual had happened. “No questions, no regrets?” he asked, kissing her temple.

She tuned her head and looked at him. “No regrets. It was strange, really. As if something compelled me to feed you. I felt it earlier tonight, in the alleyway. I would have let you do it there, but I see now why you wanted to wait. You would have had to carry me home.” She took another sip of juice. “Is it always like that? The sex—when you feed while making love?”

Noah laughed softly. “Pretty much. We’ll have to take it easy at first. It will be difficult for us both to resist my feeding when we make love, but as often as we want one another, you run the risk of becoming anemic.”

She gave him a startled look. “You’re kidding me!”

“Well, yes and no. I mean, it’s a new relationship for us both and new couples always fuck like bunnies, right?”

She laughed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I know I struggle to keep myself out of your office while I’m working.”

He placed a smacking kiss on her cheek. “Never do that!” She drained her glass and handed it to him, yawning sleepily. “Sleep, love. We’ll get up and have breakfast out in the morning. I want to walk the streets of Paris with you, in the daylight.”

\* \* \* \*

The metro took them to Saint-Germain-des-Prés where they walked to Les Deux Magots for a breakfast of café au lait and a sampling of pastries, which Olivia complained would leave her unable to button her jeans. As luck would have it, they managed to get one of the few sidewalk tables available, and a waiter who knew Noah, elevating the service to slightly above negligent.

“What would you like to do today,” Noah asked, opening his newspaper with a snap of his wrists.

Olivia sipped her coffee and picked an almond off her pastry. “I was going to ask you the same thing. After all, you’re the one who wants to walk around Paris in the sunshine.” She cast a baleful look at the overcast sky. “If it decides to grace us with its presence, that is.”

Noah laughed. “It wouldn’t dare not, not on my first day without dark glasses and full covering. I wanted to take you to the Eighth Arrondissement for a little shopping. Maybe go rummage around the flea markets and bookstalls, then stop at Marche Buci on the way home, pick up something for dinner. You did say you wanted to poke about, right?”

“Yes, but if I want an Hermes scarf, I’d rather find it at the flea market. Really, Noah, designer clothes aren’t my thing. I have a few nice pieces but I’ve gotten them all at consignment shops.”

“Very well, then we’ll catch the metro for Le Puces.”

Le Puces, the most well-known Parisian flea markets, opened at ten-thirty. Arriving early, they found a small café and had a cup of café crème while waiting for Serpette and Paul Burt to open for business. Olivia was practically panting to purchase an ornate Venetian mirror she’d spied. Price was not option, she declared, because it was perfect for her foyer.

Olivia gasped with delight. “Oh! Look at the clocks!”

“They’re huge!” Noah sputtered. “What would you do with a clock this size?”

“Hang it over my couch,” she said, looking at him as if he had two heads. “They’re wonderful!”

By now, he had his part down. He checked the price and snorted. “It’s too expensive, pet, and the cost of shipping it will be astronomical.” He folded his arms over his chest and shook his head negatively. In a trice, the dealer approached and the haggling began.

The deal done, Olivia threw herself into his arms with a shriek of delight. She had her mirror and her clock, along with some lovely vintage clothing.

By the time they were done, Noah decided to call for the car to carry their purchases back to the apartment. Olivia collapsed in the back seat, grateful to be off her feet. After a stop at the farmers market, the scent of rotisserie chicken filled the limousine and her mouth watered in anticipation.

“I’m starving,” she said, reaching for a handful of cherries. She popped a couple in her mouth, chewing the fleshy fruit, then disposing of the pits in a paper napkin.

Noah leaned in for a kiss. “Mmm, you taste sweet and tart, all at once.”

She giggled. “I am sweet and tart, darling.” She laughed when he gave her a wolfish grin.

“Yes, you are, and I intend to spend the rest of the night tasting you.”

“Oooh, I can’t wait.” When the car stopped in front of the lobby, she slid out. “But first, a bath.”

The bathroom was just as lavish as the rest of the apartment, and Olivia filled the tub in anticipation of a luxurious soak. With a grateful sigh, she piled her hair on top of her head and stepped into the tub, sinking into the steaming water.

“Care for some company?” Noah inquired. He held a bottle of Cristal and two champagne flutes in his hand. She nodded, and he set them on the edge of the tub and disrobed. Slipping into the water behind her, he poured them each a glass of bubbly. “To many more beautiful spring days in Paris.”

Olivia relaxed against him and sipped her champagne. “You’re spoiling me rotten, you know that, don’t you?”

His chest vibrated with a wicked chuckle. “That’s my intention, kitten. You deserve nothing less than a generous, attentive lover.”

An arm circled her waist, pulling her closer, and his hand cupped her breast. “Well, I’d say I have that, in spades.” She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. “Did you enjoy yourself today? Was it all you imagined it would be?”

He kissed her temple. “Everything and more. Of course, I don’t think I’ve eaten quite so much French food.”

A soft laugh escaped her. “Yes, those crepes were fantastic, but I could have sworn I heard my left ventricle slamming shut. They use a lot of butter and cream here. I’ll have a layer of fat hanging over those skinny jeans if I’m not careful.”

He nibbled her shoulder. “Never. We’ll be having too much acrobatic sex for that to happen.”

“Ha! I’ll have you know, thirty minutes of vigorous sex only burns fifty-three calories. We’d have to be locked together like dogs to burn off anything significant.”

“Hmm, that sounds . . . well, actually, it sounds painful.” He slid his hand between her legs and cupped her mound. “I wonder how many a plain, old orgasm burns. Shall we experiment?”

“Mmm.” She arched against his seeking finger. “Yes, let’s. Oh, oooh, right there, baby. Yes, just like that.” She moaned when he increased the pressure.

“I do love a vocal woman.” He held her tight, and she writhed against his demanding fingers when she came.

She stirred in the lukewarm water. “Are we safe here, Noah? From the Sentinel?”

“We should be, kitten. I haven’t noticed anyone following us.”

\* \* \* \*

Across from their building, a large man, swathed in a greatcoat, leaned against a lamp post, muttering to himself. “They look so much alike. Which bloody brother is it?” He’d have to get closer to find out. He’d been told Ian Lazarus had tawny eyes, but Noah’s were an eerie, sparkling gray. Neither brother had been to Paris in years, and none of the current Sentinel members had actually seen the vampires up close. The French brotherhood had grown lax, but that was about to change.

## Chapter Nine

Club de Flirter was the mirror image of Flirt, right down to its location in an old, renovated warehouse with a dull black paint job. Noah dressed Olivia for their night on the town in a little Greco-Roman chiffon dress by Alberta Feretti paired with a soft leather sandal. He, as always, dressed in black, leaving his long hair to flow freely in the light spring breeze. Both wore long coats, hers in black cashmere with a green silk lining, his a black canvas duster.

The doorman gaped in surprise.. “Mr. Lazarus! No one told us you were in town.”

“That’s because I didn’t tell anyone, Arnault.” He gestured to Olivia. “This is Olivia Sheppard, our new head of security.”

Olivia nodded politely. “Bonjour.”

The man greeted her politely and rushed to open the door for them. “My pleasure, mademoiselle. Enjoy your evening.”

The club pulsed with the beat of tribal music.. The sixties room was filled to capacity with a Goth crowd. They danced with a sexual abandon rarely seen in the club’s American counterpart.

“It’s members only tonight,” Noah said, his mouth pressed to her ear. “Most are witches and vampires, come to celebrate Ostara.”

“Ostara?”

“The Vernal Equinox. The beginning of spring, fertility and rebirth.”

“Ah, I see. That would explain all the bumping and grinding.”

A soft chuckle sent a shiver down her spine. “Yes, there is that.” He looped her arm through his, and they continued the tour. “Let’s check out the control room, see how the equipment is holding up. Paris is a huge terrorist target; I want to make sure our patrons are safe.”

Olivia checked the equipment, scanning through the various screens for camera placement, startled when she clicked on the fantasy room and discovered audio. Erotic moans and sighs wafted into the control room while Olivia studied the décor of the room. The Roman Orgy appeared to be the theme of the night, with food and drink flowing liberally. “Oh my,” she murmured, watching a man inserted a veritable fruit salad into a woman’s pussy and began to feed from her.

“Now, that’s clever,” Noah whispered, coming to stand beside her. “I’d like to do that to you.”

Her breath hitched. “I’d like you to do that to me.”

He took her hand. “Then by all means, let us join the party.”

She made a halfhearted attempt to pull free of his grasp, but in the end, he led her down the long hallway and into the fantasy room. Her pulse raced when Noah whispered to one of the attendants, then led her toward the back of the room and one of the curtained areas.

The eight-by-eight patch of floor was covered with fluffy, white floccetti rugs. A huge, richly upholstered cushion lay on the floor, covered with silk pillows. Noah pulled the cobalt chiffon drapes around the area, closing them off from public viewing. They would be no more than two shadows. A voice spoke from outside the curtain. "Your fruit and wine, sir."

Olivia kicked off her jeweled sandals and stood in the center of the cushion, watching. Noah put the bowl of oranges, ripe sliced mangos, a variety of berries, and bottle of Riesling on a low table and stood in front of her, his fingers brushing wispy material from her shoulders, baring them for his kiss. He released the scarflike belt around her waist, tugged the shirt over her head, and tossed it on the floor.

"Exquisite," he murmured. He cupped her breasts and leaned down to lavish each one with soft, provocative kisses. When he had her moaning with need, he abandoned her breasts and plucked open the button closure on her skirt. It fell to her feet and she kicked it aside, trembling with anticipation.

He didn't disappoint. Yanking her hard against him, one hand burrowed into her hair, pulling her head back. His lips grazed her neck. "I can't wait for another taste of you," he rasped, then pressed his tongue against her quaking pulse. "I've been mad with the need to take you, to fill that sweet pussy with my cock, to savor the salty tang of your blood on my tongue as I fuck you."

He closed around her thong and yanked, and Olivia cried out. She had a vague thought about leaving the club with no panties, but it disappeared, replaced with thoughts of Noah's fingers gliding through her slit to penetrate her. She closed her eyes, dropped her head back, and widened her stance when his fingers slid deep.

She shrieked with surprise to find herself suddenly on her back, the heat of Noah's bare skin against hers. "God," she gasped. "How do you do that? I've never known anyone who could undress so quickly."

He laughed. "I possess superior speed and strength, love. You'd do well to remember that next time you seek to taunt me with this lovely body." He laughed when she arched her hips against him. "Hmm, the lady likes to live dangerously. Don't say I didn't warn you, pet."

Yes, she'd been warned. He reached into the specially prepared bowl of fruit and withdrew a large, ripe strawberry, pressing it to her lips. She bit into the delectable fruit. When the juice dripped down her chin, she giggled and then moaned when Noah licked it up.

*Dear God!*

He coated each nipple with strawberry juice and leisurely sucked it away, then squeezed half an orange between her breasts. She watched, fascinated, while he sipped at her body. A trickle of orange juice filled her belly button and he dove into it.

“Ah . . . God . . . you’re driving me crazy!” A sweet, citrusy scent filled her nostrils, and she gasped feeling something cool and slippery slid into her vagina. Mango. Oh, Lord, he was fucking her with juicy slices of mango!

He pushed her legs up, opening her wide, and nibbled at the entrance of her pussy, tugging a thick slice of mango from her and chewing it.

“Delicious.” That was all he said before burrowing his face between her legs to dine on the fruit.

Olivia arched her hips and ground her pussy against his voracious mouth. Jesus, this was the most erotic thing she’d ever experienced. The lightly acidic mango tingled, adding to the overwhelming sensations. All around her, the sounds of sexual arousal filled the air, driving her into a frenzied need to fuck. Just fuck.

And then he was above her, driving his cock deep, fucking her as if his life depended on getting as deeply inside her as possible. She wrapped her legs around his waist and held on tight while he pounded his cock into her. Cries of ecstasy filled her ears but she had no conscious realization they were hers. Oh, God, she was going to come like Vesuvius!

“Yes!” she cried. “Yes, baby, oh, God, I’m going to come!”

His hands grasped her waist, and he leaned back onto his haunches, hauling her with him until they were chest to chest. “Ride me, pet,” he growled in her ear. “Ride me while I feed.”

She tossed her head, baring her neck. “Yes, yes, do it!” she cried out.

Finding her frantically beating pulse, he sank his fangs deep into her. He held her tight within the cage of his arms, and she ground her pussy against him. God, he felt so much bigger, so much thicker, and she rode him, sobbing his name while his mouth and cock worked in unison.

Her pussy felt painfully stretched when he drove into her downward stroke, again and again. It had never been like this before—this intense, this consuming, this overwhelming. Then her orgasm took her. She screamed, and then she was bucking against him, keening, digging her nails into his back coming with him and reveling in the roar of his satisfaction in her ear. She collapsed against him, sweaty and limp.

“Marry me, Olivia,” he rasped.

“Yes,” she answered.

\* \* \* \*

Propped against the pillows, Noah held Olivia, feeding her orange slices during her slow recovery from the intensity of what they’d just done together. She hadn’t spoken since agreeing to marry him, and he worried she would change her mind given the opportunity.

“You’re thinking again.”

“Yes,” she said softly.

“Do you want to take it back?” If that was her choice, could he let her?

She turned her head and pressed a kiss to his chest. “No, but you have to understand, I’ve never been good at the whole relationship thing. I’ve never been in love before.”

“Never?”

“Not even once.” She heaved a sigh. “I always thought there was something wrong with me. Like, maybe, something was missing. Now, I think it’s because I wasn’t meant to fall in love with anyone but you. Does that make sense?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Yes, it does. You’re meant for me, kitten. Even if you’d been married, that wouldn’t have changed. Once we met, our fates were sealed. But that doesn’t stop your worrying, does it?”

She shook her head. “Not really.” She chuckled. “You’re so fucking bossy. It’s obvious you were raised during a time when women had no rights. That’s going to be hard for me.”

Noah threw back his head and laughed. “You think I’m bossy now? Sweetheart, I’ve mellowed compared to what I once was. And what about me? I’m not used to women who talk back and tell me no.”

She tipped her head back and snickered. “Really. I can’t believe none of your jet-setting, model lovers talked back to you.”

He shrugged. “Well, sure they did, but I didn’t care one way or the other because none of them was the one I was meant to bond with. So, it didn’t matter. With you, it’s a whole different ball game. I have the feeling you’ll be testing me at every turn.”

She snorted. “I can just about guarantee it.” He gave her a mock shudder and she bit his nipple. “Get used to it, buddy boy. That’s the way your life will be from here on out.”

He reached down and stroked her breast. “Perhaps, perhaps not. I can be quite convincing.” He rolled onto his side and burrowed his hand between her thighs. “I can always fuck you into submission.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “You can try, but that doesn’t mean you’ll succeed.”

“Mmm, hmm.” He slid down and shouldered her legs apart. “I think I’ll start now. You’ll be moving in with me as soon as we get back to New Orleans.”

She attempted a protest, but his mouth nestled into her pussy, lapping and teasing. “No . . . ah! . . . fair, damn it!”

He gave her clit a long, hard suck. “Darling, never expect a vamp to play fair.”

\* \* \* \*

Giving up her condo was a huge bone of contention between Olivia and Noah. Oh, she understood why he wanted her to move in with him. They loved each other, they would eventually get married, and deranged people would probably make attempts on her life. Somehow, none of that proved motivation enough to make her give up her independent lifestyle.

“It’s not like we’re getting married tomorrow! There’s no need for me to give up my condo!”

The argument continued nonstop from Paris to the New Orleans airport, from the limousine to the parking lot of Flirt.

Noah was adamant. “There is a need, and you know damn well what it is! I can’t protect you if you insist on living in that condo!”

“Ooooh, you are the most frustrating man on the face of the Earth!” Olivia dug through her purse for her car keys. “This is not open to debate!” She punched the button on the remote and her doors unlocked. “I’m going home!”

She attempted to open the door, but he braced his knee against it and it wouldn’t budge.

“You aren’t going anywhere, pet.”

God, she hated it when he took that superior tone with her! “If you don’t let me in my car—”

“You’ll do what? What is it you think you can do, Olivia?”

She folded her arms across her chest. “I can dump your ass, that’s what.” He actually had the temerity to laugh! “Bastard,” she snapped, then gave him a hard shove.

His chest rumbled with a growl of frustration. “All right, but I’m going with you, and you will wait outside until I check out your place to make sure it’s safe.”

Her shoulders slumped, and she sighed. “Fine. Christ, you’d think I hadn’t spent the last ten years of my life in the service.”

\* \* \* \*

The Sentinel watched from the rooftop. His fears confirmed, the lookout dialed his cell phone. “She’s back and he’s with her.”

“Is he covered?” his contact asked.

“No, sir. He walks in the light like a normal man.”

The contact sighed. “Kill her.”

“How?”

“Do something dramatic so the others will know and understand.”

“When?”

“As soon as you’re able.”

“Yes, sir.” He smiled. She had it coming, and he’d enjoy giving it to her.

## Chapter Ten

Olivia closed and locked the door when Noah pulled away from the curb. He'd wanted her to come back to the club with him while he checked out the receipts from the time they'd been gone, but she'd politely declined. The same with his request to spend the night.

The issue wasn't whether she wanted him to stay with her. Hell, she'd agreed to marry him. But he needed to get it into his head that he wasn't going to control her every waking moment. She was ex-army, ex-military police, for heaven's sake. It wasn't like she couldn't take care of herself.

But she also needed a little space. They'd just spent four days together. All that togetherness made her crave some alone time. She needed to think about everything that happened in Paris. He'd fed from her. They were bonded now. Soon enough, there would be a wedding to plan.

God! She was getting married. Part of her was overjoyed. The other part was scared shitless. A long run was just what the doctor ordered. She changed into a pair of spandex running shorts, strapped on a web holster, and shoved her little Beretta in place. Armed for any problem, she shrugged into an oversized T-shirt to cover her weapon.

As usual, she headed west on Royal, nodding to locals and tourists, then turned north on Canal Street. She paused for a cool down on North Rampart, then did a slow jog, heading east toward Louis Armstrong Park. If anyone was going to approach her, she figured they'd do so at the park, but she passed by unmolested and headed south down St. Phillip to Royal. She was sweating profusely by the time she got home, so she peeled off her clothes in the utility room and strolled naked to the shower.

The cool water felt wonderful on her heated skin, and she took her time, washing and conditioning her hair. She shaved her legs while the conditioner did its work. When she stepped forward to turn off the water, she stepped on something hard and looked down. Screws? How the hell did they get there? She looked up.

Shit! The water forgotten, she did a rolling dive out of shower and into her bedroom seconds before the shower light fell from the ceiling and crashed onto the tiled floor.

Electricity hissed and sparked from the water spraying on the light fixture, and then the power blinked out. She wrapped a terrycloth robe around her and went to the utility room to flip off the main breaker. Holy crap, she'd nearly been fried!

On trembling legs, she hurried to her bedroom and rummaged in her purse for her cell phone. Her electrician was still on speed dial from when she'd had the kitchen redone, and she left a message for him to call her back immediately.

"Hello?" she answered, when the call came through.

"Ms. Sheppard, it's Terry. What's up, you sounded really freaked."

She let out a shaky laugh. “I’m totally freaked, Terry. The shower light came loose and nearly cooked me. If I hadn’t stepped on the screws, and realized what was happening, I would have been a crispy critter.”

“You turn the main off?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Okay. You caught me between jobs, so I’ll be there in about forty minutes.”

\* \* \* \*

Olivia curled up on the couch while the electrician worked. Talk about close calls. Heaven only knew how long the screws in that old light fixture had been coming loose. They’d all been stripped, Terry told her with disgust. The light was just hanging from the wallboard. The rattling of the old pipes had caused the screws to shake loose. The contractor hadn’t even used materials that met code. Well, at least she felt confident that it had been no more than a case of shoddy workmanship and not an attempt on her life.

“All set, Ms. Sheppard. I called my buddy Todd, and he’ll be over tomorrow to give you an estimate on redoing the master bath. Might be you wanna have him look at the other bathrooms, too.” She followed him into the utility room where he flipped the main breaker, then went around trying all the lights. “You’re up and running.”

“How could that happen, Terry? I mean, the place passed inspection, right?”

“Inspectors don’t make a lot of money, Ms. Sheppard. Don’t forget where you live.”

She sighed with relief. Anything could be bought and paid for in New Orleans. “Thanks, Terry. What’s the damage?”

The young electrician laughed. “Hang on to your checkbook, cher. I’ll just add this to the cost of rewiring the place for you.”

“Cool.” She put her checkbook away and handed him two of her business cards, with a note scribbled on the back of each one. She handed them to the young man. “Free pass for Flirt, no waiting.”

The electrician gaped at her. “No shit? My girl’s gonna faint when she see these. Thanks, Ms. Sheppard.”

“Hey, man, you did me a huge favor getting here so quick. Enjoy yourselves.”

\* \* \* \*

Noah sat in the glider in Olivia’s courtyard, forcing himself to relax. Passing the night without her in his arms had been sheer agony. He’d been calling all morning to no avail. He told himself nothing had happened to her. She’d merely forgotten her cell. She must have gone for a run because her car

was in its space and she hadn't answered the door. She wouldn't have forgotten her cell, would she? Could she be so inconsiderate to have purposely left it behind? He didn't think so, but then she'd been adamant about needing some space.

The slap of runners' shoes on the sidewalk alerted him to her arrival. Relief swamped him when she saw him standing by the gate and smiled. She was all right, and glad to see him.

"I'm all sweaty and stinky," Olivia protested when he drew her into his arms.

"I don't care. I'm happy to see you and relieved you're all right."

She kissed him, then wriggled out of his grasp. "Of course, I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be?"

He looked at his watch and followed her up the walk. "I've been calling you for the last hour."

"Oh, crap, I forgot my phone." She pulled her house key from between her breasts and unlocked the door. "Sorry, I forgot to charge it in all the excitement yesterday."

Noah went on instant alert, his voice sharp, intense. "What excitement?"

Olivia laughed. "Don't get yourself worked up. That old shower light fell out of the ceiling in the master bath. If I hadn't stepped on the screws and taken a rolling dive out of the tub, I would have been fried to a crisp."

Noah stared in horror. "You were in the shower at the time?"

"Oh, no, don't freak out." She tossed her key on the console table. "There was nothing Machiavellian about it, babe. Just cheap construction. It's a miracle the unit passed inspection. My electrician came right over, and he showed me the screws. Not only were they stripped, but the can wasn't even attached to the joist." She went into his arms, hugging him tightly. "I'm fine. I'm getting estimates on getting the place rewired and re-plumbed."

His first instinct was to go all macho on her, but instead, he sighed, and held her tight for another long moment. God, if anything had happened to her . . . it didn't bear thinking about. Losing her would destroy him, plain and simple, and it was difficult to squelch his protective instincts.

"So, the reason I called," he said, "is because there's some kind of problem with our liquor license. My attorney is working on it, but we'll be closed for a couple of days until it's ironed out."

"What kind of problem?"

He shrugged. "Just some technicality, but it has to be reviewed. Anyway, I have a meeting this afternoon, then I thought I'd grab a couple of steaks and we could fire up your grill."

Olivia nodded. "Sounds great. I have some errands myself, so I'll meet you back here later. Why don't you stop by your place and pick up some clean clothes so you can stay the night?"

"Sounds like a plan. I had hoped you weren't so sick of my company you'd send me packing."

She cupped his cheek in her hand. “Never going to happen. I love you, Noah. This is all very new to me, and you’ll need to give me some adjustment time, but I can do the commitment thing.”

It was true, he could see it in her eyes, the way they searched his, asking him to trust her, to believe in her. He leaned down and kissed her, a gentle press of his lips against her. “I know, kitten. I’ll give you all the time you need.” He straightened and shook his finger at her. “But no more leaving your cell phone behind. I was sick with worry when you didn’t answer. Don’t take the Sentinel lightly, love. The threat is very real.

\* \* \* \*

Olivia’s main errand of the day was lunch at Tujague’s with Allie. She dressed casually in a lavender tank top with spaghetti straps, and her favorite low-rise, stretch jeans from Victoria’s Secret. Noah could keep his designer clothes, she was a VS girl all the way. Always punctual to a fault, Allie was waiting for her when she arrived.

“Well, hello stranger. Long time no see.” Allie cocked an eyebrow. “What’s different? You’re different.”

Olivia laughed and took a seat across from her friend. “Well,” she said, drawing the word out. “I did just get back from Paris yesterday.”

Allie’s jaw dropped. “He took you to Paris? Just like that?”

“Just like that.” Olivia sighed. “Oh, Al, it was wonderful. I’ve been there a few times, but never in love.”

“Oh my God. Ohmygod! The indomitable Olivia Sheppard is in love?”

“Truly, deeply, madly.” She leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. “He asked me to marry him, and I said yes.”

Olivia couldn’t remember the last time she’d left her friend speechless. Allie always had something to say about everything. She picked up the glass of sweet tea Allie had ordered and took a drink, waiting.

“Well?”

“I’m flabbergasted,” Allie admitted. “I’d always hoped you’d find someone, but I never really imagined you . . . married. When?”

Olivia snorted. “We haven’t discussed a date. I can barely wrap my mind around it either, so Noah’s giving me some time to get used to the idea.”

Allie frowned, suspicious. “I don’t see no stinking ring on your finger.”

“That’s because I don’t have no stinking ring, yet,” she said, doing her best diva sway. “He just popped the question while we were at the Paris club and I said yes. He wants me to move in with him, but I’m not sure I’m ready to do that just yet.”

She leaned forward, studying Allie. “Looks like I’m not the only one with a secret. Come on, give it up. Ian, right?”

Allie rolled her eyes. “God, I hate that you can read me like a book.”

Tears welled in Olivia’s eyes. “Oh, honey, you’re in love, too.”

“Truly, deeply, madly.”

The two friends were working themselves up for a real sob-fest when their Cajun waiter arrived with their gumbo and crusty French bread.

“Now, why for are my two favorite girls crying. Some man break your hearts? I’ll take care of the bastard, you say so.”

They fanned their faces at the same time.

“Nope,” Olivia said with a smile. “Just two girls who realized they’re in love.”

The waiter laughed. “Ah, I see. How ’bout I bring you a glass of wine to celebrate?”

Allie shook her head. “I’m on duty, Etienne, and she’s driving.”

“Well, you got to celebrate. I bring you some bread pudding, on the house.”

Both women grinned. “Yeah!”

Olivia propped her elbows on the table. “So give. It was hot?”

Allie fanned her face. “Girl, it was positively volcanic. If Noah’s anything like his brother, may I just say congratulations.”

\* \* \* \*

Full of gumbo and bread pudding, the two friends stepped out onto Decatur Street still happily discussing the turn their lives had taken. The sound of bass speakers thumped loud from a nearby corner. They walked toward Olivia’s parking spot, the wild thumping increased, rattling the shop windows. They looked up when a car with dark-tented windows roared down the street, brakes protesting when it screeched to a stop next to them. A masked man leaned out of the passenger window gripping a Micro UZI.

“Down!” Allie shouted, shoving Olivia out of the way.

“S up, bitch,” the gunman growled and unleashed a hail of automatic gunfire.

Olivia heard Allie grunt in pain, saw her spin around, and look at her, wide-eyed. The car sped away, music thumping loudly in her ears. Allie lay sprawled on top of her, covered in blood.

“Allie!” Olivia sobbed, then screamed at the onlookers. “Someone call 911! Tell them there’s an officer down!” When no one responded, she screamed. “Move! Call 911.”

Sobbing, Olivia rolled Allie over and yanked her shirt up. “Oh, Jesus, Allie! Oh, God! Nooo! Oh, nooo!”

Etienne rushed out of the restaurant, arms full of towels. A pool of blood was spreading out from beneath her friend. Sirens shrieked in the distance.

“Hang on, baby. Help’s on the way!” She pressed clean towels to the two exit wounds to staunch the flow of blood. She looked around helplessly. “Did anyone get a license plate?”

No one answered, and she looked on in horror while witnesses began to fade away. What the hell had happened to her city that no one was willing to help?

## Chapter Eleven

"I'm not leaving her, you bastard!" Olivia shrieked at the paramedic who thought to deny her access to the ambulance. Logically, she knew she'd only be in the way, but Allie was her anchor, her rock—the only family she had left—and she'd just be damned if she'd leave her side on the ride to the trauma center.

A gentle hand grasped her shoulder, and she swung around, prepared to fight anyone who dared try and stop her.

"Gator!" she cried, throwing herself into Allie's partner's arms.

Alvin "Gator Bait" Meaux had been Allie's partner for the past five years, and they were as close as any brother and sister. No one could understand what Olivia was going through more than Gator.

"Come ride with me, cher," he said, urging her toward his unmarked car. "We'll follow them. Right on their bumper, little girl." Olivia put up a mild struggle, looking back over her shoulder while Allie was loaded into the ambulance. "There's no room in the bus, Livie. Come on now. Come with me."

She sobbed. "But what if—"

"No," he said, giving her a shake. "She's strong. She'll make it, and she'll wanna see you the minute she wakes up."

She gave up with a sob and slid into the car beside him. They pulled out, racing up the road behind the ambulance.

"What happened?" Gator asked, his expression grim.

"Drive by," Olivia said, forcing herself to be calm. "Black Chrysler 300. Micro UZI. Possibly gang related. The shooter said 'S up, bitch,' and sprayed the area. Nine mil Parabellum rounds. Sixteen rounds a second. Jesus, oh, sweet baby Jesus, she . . . she . . ." Her voice broke. "She jumped in front of me, shoved me down. Oh, God, Gator, she saved my life and now . . ."

"Nuh-uh, little girl," he scolded gently. "Don't go writin' my partner's obituary yet. She's tough as nails. You gotta hold on to that, Livie."

Olivia nodded numbly, praying silently that her friend would survive the trip to the hospital.

\* \* \* \*

Olivia and Gator cursed fluently when they screeched to a stop at the emergency entrance. A news van stood by, cameras ready. The reporter was the one Olivia had tossed out of Flirt.

"Detective Meaux," Janine Casey shouted. "Who's the injured officer? Is it Detective St. Claire? What's Ms. Sheppard doing here?"

The reporter followed close on their heels while they made their way to the entrance. “Why are you here, Ms. Sheppard? Are you a witness to the shooting?”

Janine Casey’s eyes glinted avariciously when the ambulance doors opened and the gurney holding Allie St. Claire was lowered to the ground. “Get a shot of her,” the reporter shouted to her cameraman.

Olivia swung around and shoved the reporter into her coworker. “You fucking bitch!” she screamed at the petite blonde. She pointed her finger at the cameraman. “Take a picture of her, and I swear I’ll shove that camera up your ass, you fucking vulture!”

Janine Casey righted herself. “You all saw that! You saw her assault me!” She glared at Olivia. “Freedom of the press, Ms. Sheppard! First Amendment rights!”

The reporter backed up when Olivia stalked toward her. “Go pedal your misery elsewhere, Ms. Casey. And if you think the little shove I just gave you was assault, you ain’t seen nothing yet. Stay away from my friend or I will kick your ass.”

Having spoken her piece, Olivia hurried back to the emergency entrance. The two officers barring the press from entering the hospital high-fived her when she passed through the sliding doors to begin her agonizing wait.

She couldn’t begin to guess how many miles she’d paced across the tiled emergency waiting room, only half-noticing her ruined clothes or the bloody track she left on the tile floor. Her lavender top, stiff with Allie’s blood and stuck to her body, drew the lurid attention of reporters waiting just outside the glass doors.

The press clamored with excitement and she looked up, sobbing when Noah and Ian dashed through the doors.

“Olivia!”

Olivia threw herself in his arms sobbing. “Oh, Noah! She’s hurt so badly. They just cut her down in the street like a dog.” She shivered in the strong arms held her so tightly.

“I know, love, I know.” He rocked her. “You are unharmed?”

“Physically, yes, but if doesn’t make it—”

“No,” Ian cut in. “She will not die. I won’t allow it.”

Olivia gave him a pained look. “She told me, Ian. She said she loves you.”

Ian nodded. “It was unexpected, having this feeling again.” He looked away. “I don’t know if I can survive this again.”

Olivia held out her hand, and he took it. “She’ll make it.” Her voice was firm, steady now, with Noah’s arms around her. “She will, because she has to. Anything less is unacceptable.”

Olivia turned when her name was called. "Is the family of Ms. St. Claire here?" a harried ER doc called loudly.

"Yes! I mean, she doesn't have any family. We're her family. I'm her in case of emergency person." She hurried to him. "I'm Olivia Sheppard. How is she?"

The doctor sighed wearily and gestured toward the hall. All three followed.

"I'm Doctor Littman, Ms. Sheppard." He scrubbed his hand over his face. "Your friend is in surgery. We got her stabilized a few minutes ago, and they should be putting her under now."

Dr. Littman opened the door to a small waiting area and gestured them inside. "Please, sit. The nurses said you've been pacing nonstop since you got here." Olivia sat so he would continue. "She has two bullet wounds. The one went into her side and lacerated her liver. Fortunately, a section of liver is easily removed without too many problems.

"The second wound is the most serious. The bullet entered through her back and exited through the chest wall. The good news is it didn't hit any bone and ricochet around inside her chest. The bad news is she's going to lose a lung and there was some damage to her heart."

Olivia slapped her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. Dear God, was she going to lose Allie?

The doctor continued with his grim diagnosis. "She's lost a lot of blood, too much, really, but she's a fighter. Frankly, I never expected her to make it to surgery. I have to tell you, her condition is extremely grave and you should prepare yourself for the worst."

Olivia shook her head, unable to speak.

Ian took over. "Ian Lazarus. Doctor Littman, Allie and I are engaged. Tell me, what are her chances?"

Littman looked as if he'd rather be anywhere but there. "In all honesty, sir, I'll be surprised if she makes it through the night." Olivia slumped back in her seat and Littman patted her hand, looking between the two of them. "Miracles happen every day. I urge you to prepare yourself but don't give up hope." He stood up and looked pointedly at Ian and Noah. "I'll have an intern come down to the surgical waiting room and give you an update as the surgery progresses. I'm very sorry I couldn't bring you better news."

Olivia watched Ian walk to the door with the doctor. Her mind shrieked at the unfairness of it all. Allie and Ian had just found one another, and now . . . it didn't bear thinking about. She couldn't lose Allie, she just couldn't. She looked up when Ian closed the door behind the doctor.

"I can save her," he said.

"What? How?"

“Ian,” Noah began, but Olivia cut him off.

“How, Ian? Tell me how!”

“I can turn her.”

Olivia gasped. “Jesus, Ian.” Allie a vampire? Would she consent to conversion if she knew what Ian was? She looked at Noah, who was frowning at his brother. “What? What aren’t you telling me?”

Noah sat down next to her. “It’s true. If he were to turn her, she would be as alive as I am, but she would be bound to him for all eternity. This is no small thing, Olivia. She could never be truly free from Ian. A part of her would always belong to him. No matter where she went, or what she did to hide herself from him, he would eventually find her. This is why consent is such an important factor in turning someone.”

Ian knelt in front of Olivia. “You know her best, Olivia. You said she loved me, and I swear to you, I love her. Do you believe she would eventually accept what I am and consent to be turned?”

Olivia took a deep breath. He was asking her to make the decision for him, and if it turned out to be the wrong one, Allie would hate her forever. She nodded.

“Yes, Ian. I believe she would, eventually. But she’s in surgery right now. How can you do it?”

“I can put the doctors in a thrall and make them think they’ve worked miracles, that they’ve saved her. When they come out of it, she will be safe in a hospital bed and everyone will believe she is making a remarkable recovery. Do I have your permission to do it?”

Olivia looked at Noah, who shook his head. “It is your decision, Olivia. If the situation were reversed, and it was you on the operating table, I would do it without regard to the consequences. But I don’t know Allie, so I can’t predict how she would react. What ever your decision, I will support you.”

Olivia nodded, then looked at Ian. “Do it. Whatever it takes.”

The brothers exchanged a meaningful look, and Noah kissed her. “I must help him, love. We’ll be back soon. Try and get some rest.”

Olivia sighed. Right. There would be no sleep for any of them this night.

\* \* \* \*

Noah followed his brother out the door. “Go. Find her. I’ll take care of the paramedics and ER staff and meet you up there.” Ian nodded and headed down the hall toward the surgical suites while Noah turned to intercept the paramedics.

Outside, Noah placed a hand on the senior rescue worker. “Pardon me, but I believe Ms. St. Claire’s purse may be inside the ambulance.” The man turned, and Noah placed a finger on his temple. “The female officer’s wounds looked worse than they actually were. She was stabilized and is in surgery.”

“Yes,” the paramedic said. “It looked worse than it was.” He reached inside and handed Noah Allie’s purse.

“Thank you,” Noah said. After walking away, he encountered the second man and altered his memory as well.

The nurse at the desk looked up and smiled when Noah approached. “May I help you?”

Noah smiled. “Yes, you may.” He touched her hand. “The young female officer who just went up to surgery.” He brushed his thumb across the nurse’s brow. “You will alter her medical records to indicate less severe injuries and will allow me access to the staff who treated her.”

Her eyes glazed over and she began to type. “Of course.” She tilted her head to indicate the double doors behind her. “The access code is zero-seven-two-nine.”

Noah nodded and stepped behind the desk to complete his task. When he was done, he went in search of Ian. He found him outside the operating room, dealing with several staff members trying to refuse him entry.

One of the surgical scrub nurses, a brawny male, tried to stop him but Noah took the man’s face between his hands. “Stop,” he commanded. “No one will be harmed. You will let us pass and remember nothing. The policewoman’s injuries are not as serious as originally believed.”

The man visibly relaxed, his eyes glazing over. “Not so serious. You can go inside.”

They didn’t bother to scrub up or don protective covering, but merely walked into the operating room and, after placing everyone in a thrall, hurried to Allie’s side.

“She looks so pale,” Ian said to Noah. Tears welled in his eyes.

“We have to hurry or she won’t survive.”

Ian nodded and yanked away the wires and lines attached to Allie so he could begin her conversion.

Noah switched off the machines and his brother took Allie’s wrist in his hand and brought it to his mouth. Razor sharp fangs pierced her wrist, and Ian drank deeply while Noah removed the intubation from Allie’s throat.

At the moment before death, Ian closed the wound in her wrist and opened one in his own, allowing blood to drip into Allie’s mouth. Her eyes flew open, and with a feral growl, she lunged for Ian’s wrist. Newly developed fangs sank into his wrist, and he groaned while she fed from him, taking frantic gulps of his life saving blood.

Ian uttered a strangled sob. “Oh, God, she’s pregnant! Do you hear the heartbeat? The child is weak, Noah, so weak.”

Noah watched while his brother struggled to control his emotions, allowing Allie to take too much from him.

“Enough, Ian!” he commanded. “She’ll drain you. Let me feed her.” He placed a calming hand on Allie’s forehead and she released his brother. “Welcome back, Allie,” he crooned, then opened his own wrist. “You need more. Feed, little one.”

Once Allie had fed enough to be stable, her body began to heal of its own accord. Noah and Ian called upon the various staff to take Allie to a room. She would continue to heal and would be very weak for the next few days. Because their mutated blood now ran through her veins, she would retain the ability to walk in the daylight. Ian would need to stay by her side, allowing her to feed when needed, but she would make a miraculous recovery and never again be vulnerable to the perils of her job. Only fire and beheading could kill Allie St. Claire now. Noah fervently hoped the young woman would forgive them for what they’d done.

Noah gently stroked her hair. “Sleep, Allie. Rest and be strong.” He looked at his brother and shook his head. “I only hope this wasn’t a huge mistake, Ian. The consequences could be catastrophic. Olivia’s waiting.”

Noah made his way back to Olivia, dark thoughts filling his mind. If Allie couldn’t come to terms with what she had become, unimaginable terror would stalk the streets of New Orleans. The child should make a difference in her reaction. That was his hope, anyway. Regardless of Ian’s protests, both men knew the savagery a rogue vampire could inflict on the innocent public. Only time would tell how Allie would react.

## Chapter Twelve

Olivia sat up with a start, worry filling her eyes when a young, female intern entered the surgical waiting room. Somehow, she'd fallen asleep.

The young doctor smiled. "Sorry to disturb you, but I thought you'd like to know. The surgery went very well. The injuries weren't as bad as we suspected, and Ms. St. Claire is on the way to a private room."

Olivia uttered sigh of relief. "Thank God." Noah and Ian had been successful. She smiled at the intern. "Thank you for telling me."

"Always happy to deliver good news." The woman glanced around when Noah and Ian entered. "You can go up in about half an hour, once they have her comfortably settled." She smiled shyly at the two men. "Well, back to work. Good luck."

When the door closed behind the doctor, Olivia leapt at Noah and Ian. "You did it! She's all right!" She hugged them both. "Take me to her."

Noah shook his head. "You need to clean up first. You're covered in blood. Dr. Littman gave his permission for you to use a shower in the on-call room. He left some clean scrubs for you."

She looked down at her blood soaked clothes and nodded. "Good idea. Lead the way."

The on-call room was dark and empty. A fresh set of scrubs and towels sat on the bottom bunk. Noah went into the bathroom and started the shower, adjusting the water to temperature.

"Come, love," he said, holding out his hand for Olivia. "You'll feel better once you've bathed."

Olivia took his hand nodding listlessly. The last few hours had left her feeling numb with horror and disbelief. The thugs with the UZI had screeched to a halt near her car. What if they'd meant to attack her? Had she been responsible for Allie's injuries, for the necessity of her conversion to save her life? Suppose this whole nightmare had been her fault?

A sob escaped her and she fumbled with her clothes.

"Shhh," Noah soothed, pulling the bloody clothes from her body. His arms went around her, holding her tightly for a few moments. "She's all right."

"But what if those bullets were meant for me?"

He released her and began to undress. "Even if they were, it's not your fault, Olivia. You are not responsible for the behavior of others."

"But . . ." When his hand cupped her cheek her cheek, she noticed the twin puncture marks on her wrist. She frowned, noticing the telltale transparency of his skin. "You fed her."

"Yes. She would have drained Ian otherwise."

“You need to feed,” she said, pulling him into the shower with her.

“Yes, but I can wait until later, call a volunteer.”

“No.” She pushed her hair aside and leaned against him. “It should be me.”

“Olivia,” he said gently, turning her toward the water. “Let me take care of you.”

She closed her eyes and let the hot water run over her head, rinsing away the blood. Then his hands were in her hair, his strong fingers massaging her scalp, washing away the evidence of the day’s violence.

“Just relax,” he whispered. He smoothed a citrusy-scented bath gel over her shoulders, his soothing fingers pressing against tight muscles.

She sighed and leaned back against his broad chest while he washed her. His cock twitched against her bottom and she knew, despite his protests, he needed her as much as she did him. Only Noah could make her forget, for a little while, the horror of seeing her friend shot down in the street. He had gone against his belief that converting a human should be a voluntary act and given his life’s blood to save Allie. That act alone meant everything.

It was the most natural thing in the world to reach for his hands and guide them, one to her breast, the other between her legs. “I need you, Noah. Feed.”

His hand closed over her breast, kneading, plucking at the nipple until it stiffened. Yes, yes, this is what she needed—Noah’s strong hands on her body, his mouth against her neck, him marking her as his for all time. He bit, and she moaned. The pad of one finger caressed her clit, slipped inside her pussy, then returned to slather the sensitive bud with liquid heat. She nudged him, restless with need while he fed. “Please, Noah.”

Olivia pressed her hands against the cool tile, bracing herself for his entry. The broad head of his cock parted her heated folds, penetrating slowly. Withdrawing, he sank back into her an inch at a time.

Oooh, God, she loved it when he fucked her like this, like an animal claiming its mate. Taken. That’s what she needed—to be taken, hard and fast, until she couldn’t think. Until the only sensation she could feel was his cock stuffing her, filling her until there was no room for anything else in her body or her mind.

\* \* \* \*

Hard. Her body demanded it and that’s what he would give her. Noah closed the punctures in her throat and drove into her with a jarring thrust. She was hot, and tight, and so wet he nearly came. Her need to be taken called to a wildness in him that struggled to be contained lest he bury his fangs in that delicate throat again and turn her without consent.

And he'd thought the urge to bond had been difficult to fight. It had been child's play compared to the need to turn her, to protect her from the Sentinel scum who sought to take her from him. For he had no doubt those bullets were meant for Olivia.

Her moans spurred him on, and he grasped her hips, ramming his cock into her until the sound of their bodies slamming together echoed off the tiled walls. She met each lunge with one of her own, sobbing while she fucked herself on his hard length. His balls ached to come, but he held back, pressing her against the cool tile with a growl, letting her take what she needed.

"Come, baby." All that he was demanded she obey him.

She sobbed. "I can't!"

He kicked her legs apart. "Oh, yes, you can!" Bending his knees, he withdrew, then straightened to his full height, hammering into her over and over. "God, your pussy's so tight, pet. I love fucking you. I want to fuck you every day for the rest of my life. Just bend you over and ram my cock into you. Make you cry and scream because it's so good."

"Oooh," she howled. "Yes, that's it! Just like that!"

He pressed his finger against her swollen clit, teasing the hard pearl without mercy, and pounded his cock into her. "Now, Olivia, now!"

Her body stiffened and quaked and she came, screaming his name. Still, he drove inside her, quick and hard, until he found his own release with a roar of satisfaction.

With his breathing calming, he rested his chin on the top of her head. "I think we should get you home, love. You're worn out, and Allie will sleep the night away. Ian will be with her, and we can come back first thing in the morning."

"Just a peek at her, please?"

He nodded, knowing she'd never be able to sleep if she didn't assure herself that Allie was all right. "Just a quick one."

They rode the elevator to the surgical floor and stepped out into the dimly lit corridor. The room was across from the nurse's station, and they could see Ian slumped in a chair next to Allie's bed. The charge nurse looked up and raised her finger to indicate they could go in one minute, no longer.

Noah wrapped an arm around Olivia's shoulder and they tiptoed inside.

Ian smiled tiredly. "She's deeply asleep, and the child is getting stronger." He looked at Olivia, then at Noah. "You need to get her home, brother. She's exhausted. I'll call if anything changes."

Noah raised a brow. "She wouldn't leave without assuring herself Allie's okay." He gave Olivia a squeeze. "You see, she's all right. Now, let's get you home."

"Okay." She leaned down and kissed her friend's pale cheek. "I'm ready."

Noah's car was still parked in the emergency lot, so they took the elevator nearest the ER entrance and headed down. He keyed the lock and opened the door, settling her inside. Olivia rolled her head to look at him when he got behind the wheel. "Will she hate us, do you think?"

Noah gave her a reassuring smile. "She loves you. It'll take time, but my guess is she'll adjust as most do. And she'll also have the baby to look after."

"She always wanted a baby." Olivia closed her eyes. "You're right, the child will make all the difference."

Noah maneuvered the car through the narrow streets of the Quarter, glancing at Olivia now and then. Suppose it had been she who had been shot. Would he have done the same? Of course, he would. Letting the women they loved die wouldn't be an option for either of the Lazarus brothers.

He turned up Royal and scanned the nearby buildings. Whoever had attempted to kill Olivia wouldn't stop just because they'd gotten Allie instead. They'd consider her a bonus, because they surely knew the diminutive homicide detective was now Ian's woman.

He pulled to a smooth stop outside Olivia's condo and got out of the car. "We're here, kitten," he said softly, leaning in to brush a kiss to her temple.

She opened her eyes and smiled. "God, I'm tired." She unbuckled her seatbelt and was just about to exit the car when a shot rang out and the windshield shattered. A bullet tore through the headrest where she'd just been dozing. Had she not turned to get out of the car, she'd be dead.

"Get down!" Noah shouted, shoving her to the floorboard. He vaulted, sliding across the hood of the car, and yanked the driver's door open. He jammed the key in the ignition and the engine roared to life. He slammed it into drive, peeling out. "This settles it, kitten, we're getting you out of town, tonight."

Noah drove as though the hounds of hell were chasing them and hit the ramp for the interstate doing eighty-five. He'd considered taking her to his home in the garden district, but decided against it at the last minute, certain the Sentinel would expect him to go there.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Baton Rouge. I have a house there that I purchased for just such an emergency. It's owned by an offshore conglomerate that can't be traced back to me. You should be safe there for the time being."

"How long do you expect me to hide from these people, Noah? I'm not the type to cower. I meet my enemies head on and take them down." She folded her arms across her chest.

Keeping his eyes on the road, he weaved in and out of traffic, which was mercifully light for rush hour.

“Not long, I promise. I’ll call Ian, and he’ll make sure Allie’s safe. Forty-eight hours.” He looked at the stubborn set of her mouth and sighed. “Will you give me that much time to see if I can find out who the assassin is?”

She gave him a terse nod. “Done. Forty-eight hours and not a minute longer.”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “It’ll be all right.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, and eventually, Olivia dozed.

\* \* \* \*

Olivia woke to the sound of Noah’s voice while he spoke with his brother about the latest attempt on her life. With a yawn, she sat up straight in the seat and looked around. They were driving down a well-maintained country lane, deep in the country. *Baton Rouge, my fat Aunt Fanny*. They were entering bayou country, and unless she missed her guest, he was taking her to an old plantation.

He looked over at her, smiling. “Listen, brother, Olivia just woke up and she’s got that look on her face that tells me she’s unhappy about her destination. I’ll talk to you later.” He closed his phone and raised a brow. “Okay, let’s have it.”

“Baton Rouge? I expected to be in the city, not out in the sticks.”

“Actually, we’re not far from the city. I called the caretaker while you were sleeping and told him to open up the house. You’ll be quite comfortable here, pet. The place has all the conveniences of living in the city—minus the assassins breathing down your neck.”

“Ha, ha,” she retorted.

His face was suddenly serious. “This is no joking matter, Olivia. The Sentinel will not stop trying to take you from me.”

She shook her head. “I understand. This kind of fanaticism . . . it’s passed down through generations. Why are they so afraid of you? You don’t harm people. You don’t turn them indiscriminately.”

Noah turned up a paved drive bordered with overhanging oaks. “They fear what they don’t understand, like every other bigot. Perhaps it’s the fact that we go on when they can’t.” He gave her a meaningful look. “We need to discuss whether or not you’re willing to accept conversion. The only way they’ll be able to kill you is by fire or beheading, and as I told you, with our enhanced senses, it’s very hard to get close enough to harm us. I’d like you to think about it while I’m gone.”

“I will. I promise to think about it, but it’s a huge step, Noah. Even bigger than marriage.”

He nodded his understanding. “Indeed. Gives new meaning to the words ‘til death do us part.” He looked up when they approached the house. “Here we are, and there are the Garber’s, standing on the porch, ready and waiting to see to your every need.”

“Oh, my, it’s beautiful.”

Olivia waited for Noah to come around and open her door. “How long have you owned it?”

“I bought it after Ian’s wife was murdered.” He took her hand and helped her from the car.

It was a stunning home, painted a traditional white; a wide, wraparound porch; and thick columns supporting a second-story verandah. Huge double doors, painted a dark green that looked almost black, stood open to welcome them, and baskets of Boston ferns and bright flowers hung beneath the eaves.

She looked down at her hospital scrubs and flip-flops, then back up at the opulent house. “I feel like I should be wearing a hooped skirt and holding a mint julep.”

Noah put his arm around her. “You’d look beautiful in a flour sack, and don’t you forget it. Besides, I can stop and pick up some of your things when I go back to New Orleans.”

“Forty-eight hours, remember?”

He gave her an exaggerated sigh. “Very well. I’m sure Mrs. Garber can find you something to wear.”

The caretaker’s wife took that as her cue to hurry down the steps, arms open wide. “Welcome to The Oaks, Ms. Sheppard,” the woman said, enfolding her in a hug. “We’re so happy Mr. Noah has finally found you. We’re going to take extra special care of you.”

Olivia stepped back when the older woman released her, clearing her throat. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Garber. I’m sure I’ll be just fine. No need to put yourself out.”

“Put myself out? Heavens, child, do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had another woman to talk to out here in bayou country?” She hooked Olivia’s arm in hers and led her up the stairs. “No one here to talk to but the gardener and my old man, and neither one are much on small talk. Now, come on inside, and I’ll pour us a glass of sweet tea and we’ll get acquainted.”

The inside of the house was no less impressive than the outside. A wide hall ran down the center, with large rooms off either side. At the end of the hallway, a grand stairway curved around either side, leading to the private rooms. Beyond the stairs, the formal dining room sparkled with crystal chandeliers, and an antique cherry table spoke of the many meals enjoyed in true Southern style. Speechless, Olivia allowed the woman to lead her into a bright, sunny kitchen.

“Just have a seat at the breakfast nook, dear, and I’ll fix us some tea. Are you hungry? Mr. Noah didn’t say if you’d eaten or not.”

“In fact, we have not, Mrs. Garber,” Noah said, appearing in the doorway. “And I, for one, am starving.” He looked at Olivia. “You?”

She smiled. “I could eat.”

And eat they did. Mrs. Garber filled the table with succulent slices of ham, a plate of deviled eggs, crisp romaine lettuce, and thick slices of juice, ripe tomatoes. “Mr. Noah likes to build himself a sandwich,” she told Olivia, setting a plate of Keiser rolls and Vidalia onions on the table. “I hope you’re an onion eater, Ms. Sheppard.”

Olivia grinned. “Vidalias? I could eat one like an apple and die a happy woman.”

The older woman smiled. “Then dig in, you two. I’m just going to run upstairs and make up your room with fresh linens.”

“Well,” Olivia said, watching the kitchen door swung shut behind the housekeeper. “I’ll bet she keeps you on your toes when you’re here.”

Noah chuckled. “That she does. Do you like her?”

“Hey, anyone who can set up a spread like this on a moment’s notice is okay in my book.” Then she nodded. “Yes, I like her. She’s very sweet.”

After they’d eaten their fill, Olivia loaded the dishwasher while Noah wrapped up the leftovers and put them in the refrigerator.

“Walk with me to the car,” Noah said when she finished up.

With a nod, she took his hand, twining her fingers with his, and followed him out.

“I hate the idea of you leaving me here,” Olivia said.

“I know. I hate the idea of leaving you, but we can’t take the chance that they’re watching my home in the garden district. I mean to keep you safe, kitten. You and Allie. I’ll keep my cell on so you can reach me.”

She knew he had to go, but an overwhelming sense of foreboding urged her to beg him to stay. She stood on the porch, watching while the darkening sky ate up the last of his taillights, then turned and went back inside.

Her cell rang at three in the morning. Olivia jerked awake and reached for her phone. Had something happened to Allie?

“Noah, what’s wrong?”

Cruel laughter greeted her on the other end. “Sorry to disappoint you, bitch, but it’s not your abomination of a boyfriend. However, we do have him. If you’d like the opportunity to say goodbye to him while he’s still alive, you’ll get your ass back to New Orleans.”

“How do I know you’ve got him? Noah wouldn’t allow himself to be taken.”

The Sentinel uttered an evil chuckle. “Stupid bitch. He would if he thought we had you. You have until the sun rises to get here.”

Here, turned out, was in the hurricane devastated ninth ward, the absolutely worst part of town imaginable. Olivia immediately dialed Noah's cell, which went straight to voice mail. *Fuck!* He'd promised to keep his cell on. They could very well have him. She couldn't gamble with his life; she had to go.

Olivia flew from the bed and dressed in her hospital scrubs. Punching the numbers for the caretaker's extension, she awakened the Garbers.

"I need a car, a gun, and a decent pair of shoes, and I need them now!" she barked into the phone. She didn't give them time to ask questions, but ran into the upstairs hall and down the stairs.

Several moments passed before they appeared, alarmed and rumpled with sleep.

"What's happened, Ms. Sheppard?" Mr. Garber demanded to know. "Mr. Lazarus gave express orders that you were not to leave here until he came for you."

"They've got him, Garber, and I'm not going to stand here and argue with you about whether or not I can leave. I'm leaving and you're going to give me what I need."

Mrs. Garber's hand flew to her chest. "The Sentinel? They have him?"

Olivia's jaw dropped. "You know?"

Both Garbers nodded. "Our families have been connected for a very long time. Garbers have always looked after the Lazarus family."

"Then you know I have no choice. I have to go to him."

Mr. Garber headed down the hall into Noah's study. "I'll get your weapon. There are some tennis shoes in the hall closet."

By the time Olivia had laced up the shoes, he'd returned carrying a semi-automatic Glock. "I'll bring the truck around." He handed her the weapon.

While Olivia checked the gun, Mrs. Garber hurried to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. "Leon will be filling the tank and checking the oil. You'll want a thermos of coffee for the drive."

Minutes passed like hours and Olivia paced the front porch waiting for Leon Garber to bring the truck around to the front of the house. The rumble of big V-8 engine and headlights piercing the dark interrupted the serenade of crickets and tree frogs. She jumped when Mrs. Garber touched her shoulder, and she suppressed a near-hysterical laugh.

"You be careful, Olivia Sheppard," she said. "Noah's waited a long, lonely lifetime for you. I expect you both back safe and sound to be married right here in the rose garden."

Olivia gave into impulse and hugged the older woman. "Count on it," she said. Taking the thermos, she hurried down the front steps.

Leon Garber stepped aside so she could get behind the wheel. "I could come with you," he offered.

She shook her head. "I work alone."

He nodded. "Lazarus women always have had an independent nature."

## Chapter Thirteen

Noah closed and locked the door to Olivia's condo and keyed the lock on the trunk of his car. He didn't care what she said, Olivia was staying at the plantation until he and Ian could get a line on the whereabouts of the Sentinel's latest assassin. Her suitcase hit the trunk floor with a thump and he slammed the lid. She'd be pissed when she saw it but that was just too bad. In a situation like this, her life was more important than her independence.

When he slid behind the wheel, his cell rang. He pressed the keypad and brought the phone to his ear.

"What's the matter? Can't sleep without me?"

"Wrong, asshole," a familiar sounding voice answered. "We've got her, and if you want her to live, you'll do exactly as I say."

"You'll die for this," Noah growled.

"Maybe so, but I'll be taking you with me, Lazarus."

Before the caller could disconnect, he heard Olivia screaming in the background that he was not to come anywhere near the ninth ward.

Noah cursed fluently and wheeled the car around and headed for the storm-ravaged neighborhood. He knew exactly where he was going—to one of his own ruined warehouses.

Why couldn't the woman just once do what he asked of her? What had she been thinking? Why had she left the relative safety of the plantation to return to New Orleans? Unless they knew about his safe house. He shook his head. Not possible. Ownership of that place was virtually untraceable. He reached for his cell. There it was, a call from her shortly after three o'clock. He dialed his voice mail and listened. No message, just a horrified moan. They'd lured her out using the oldest trick in the book, threatening the life of a loved one.

"Son of a bitch," he growled, and punched the gas.

The horizon wore a ribbon of gray tinted pink when Noah eased the car to a stop in front of the warehouse. All around him, the silence of an abandoned neighborhood filled the air. He cocked his head, smiling in spite of himself. She was in there, all right, taunting her captor.

"Come on, Bellows," he heard her say. "Untie my hands and fight me like a man."

Richard Bellows. He'd applied for Olivia's job, but something about him had not sit right with Ian. Well, he now knew the name of the Sentinel's newest assassin. And to make matters worse, there was obviously a history between Bellows and Olivia. He approached the door silently, listening.

"I could kick your ass any day of the week and twice on Sunday, you stupid cunt," Bellows roared.

A growl rumbled deep in Noah's chest, but he restrained himself. Their bond was strong enough that Olivia must know he was nearby and she was feeding him information.

"Aw, come on, Richie, put down the big, bad flamethrower and give me back my Glock. We'll draw from the hip; see who's faster—just like the Old West. You always thought you were a cowboy, didn't you?"

Noah put his hand on the doorknob when Bellows shouted at Olivia once more. He stepped through the door just as the bastard grabbed her by the shirt and hauled her up out of a chair.

"I'm here, Richard," Noah said softly, and all hell broke loose.

Olivia let out a rebel yell and launched herself at Bellows, forcing him backward. He stumbled on a piece of debris, righted himself, and slammed the nozzle of the flamethrower against her cheek.

Noah snarled and leapt at Bellows, ripping the weapon from his hands and then tossing it across the room. "Now, you die, motherfucker!"

Bellows yanked his gun from his holster, flicked off the safety, and pointed it at Olivia. "No!" he roared, grinning wildly at Noah. "Now, she dies!"

Olivia rolled once, threw out her legs, and captured his neck in a scissor lock. She flexed and snapped his neck. "Wrong again, asshole." Kicking him away, she sat up. "That's for Allie, you piece of shit, and for all of our people you Sentinel have murdered over the years."

Noah sent up a prayer to the powers that be. She'd said, "Our people," and that could only mean one thing. He went to her and gently lifted her to her feet.

"You got nothing to say to me?" she asked, when he untied her hands.

"Oh, I have several things to say to you, kitten, but first, your place or mine."

She started to grin, then grimaced in pain. "Fucker bruised my cheekbone."

Noah chuckled. "That's all right, kitten, it'll heal as soon as I turn you." He looked down at Richard Bellows. "What shall we do with him?"

Her lip curled in disdain. "He brought his weapon of choice to this party. Burn this place down around him."

"Bloodthirsty little thing, aren't you?"

This time she did grin, despite the pain. "Not yet, but I'm about to be."

Noah smiled and shook his head. "You're incorrigible," he scolded, reaching down to pick up the flamethrower. Olivia stepped outside and he squeezed the trigger, shooting flames into the decrepit warehouse. They stood for a moment, watching the fire climb up the walls, then he tossed the weapon inside, and shut the door.

\* \* \* \*

The sun crested the treetops when Noah parked in front of Olivia's condo. She'd been happy here. It was the first place she'd felt at home for more years than she could count, and she'd loved everything about it, from the clanking pipes to her exotically decorated bedroom. But it didn't feel like home any more. She looked up at Noah when he opened her car door. He was her home, she realized, and suddenly, it didn't seem like such a hard thing, selling the place and moving in with him. She would spend this last day here, with the man she loved, and would leave with no regrets.

"I need a bath," she said, climbing stiffly from the car. "A hot one, with a hot man. Know anybody up for the task?"

Noah laughed and swung her up into his arms. "I just might be up to the task, but it's going to cost you."

"Oh, goody, I like the way you make me pay."

He bent his head and kissed her until she squirmed. "And pay, and pay, and . . ."

He kicked the car door shut and somehow managed to open the courtyard gate with her still in his arms. When they reached the front door, he set her on her feet. "We'll save the threshold for our wedding day, shall we?" he teased, and unlocked the door to usher her inside.

The water was hot, and so was the man. They took turns bathing one another in the large spa tub. Olivia's Kama Sutra soap smelled like cloves and slid across the skin like silk. Noah groaned and hissed when her hands dipped beneath the water to take his cock in one hand, his balls in the other.

"When we're done in here, I'm going to take you in my mouth and suck you until you come. Then, I'm going to tease your lovely cock back to life, slide down over it, and fuck you until you beg for mercy."

Noah groaned, lifting her astride him. "Why wait till we're done. Climb aboard, kitten. You can fuck me till we both beg for mercy."

With his hands at her waist, Noah guided her over his jutting cock, lowering her until he filled her completely.

"Yes," she sighed, grasping the edges of the tub. "Ah, God, you feel good." She ground against him, riding him like a rocking horse. His hands took her breasts, cupping them while his thumbs brushed across her nipples. They pebbled beneath his touch, and he leaned forward taking each by turn into his mouth, sucking hard while she rode his cock.

Water lapped at the edges of the tub. "That's right, kitten, fuck yourself on my cock. Take what you want, baby. I'm yours. I'm yours forever."

The power of his words drove her. She took what he offered, rising, and falling on his meaty cock while the water splashed over the side. What was a little water on the floor compared to a forever in Noah's arms?

"Give me your throat," he demanded.

"Now?" she panted. "You're going to do it now?"

"No, but I'm going to make you come now."

Oh, God, the growly, predator's voice, the one that made her want to offer herself up as a sacrifice every time. "Yes. Yes, make me come." Wrapping her arms around him, she leaned into him. Strong hands gripped her hips, ground against her and sank his fangs deep.

Oh, Jesus, his cock seemed to swell inside her. Her muscles clenched, and she tumbled out of control. "Noaaah!" Her pussy milked him, and her blood nourished him. With an animalistic cry of satisfaction, he came with her. "I love you," she said, sagging against him.

He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her against him. "And I love you. What say we climb out of this tub and call Ian so we can get you converted?"

"Mmm," she sighed. "Nap first."

He rose from the water, taking her with him. "A nap it is."

They slept long and hard, and Olivia woke to the smell of coffee brewing. She inhaled deeply, slipped out of bed, and walked to the kitchen naked. "That smells good."

Noah turned and smiled. "I was going to bring it to you in bed," he said, wagging his brows. He handed her a cup of café au lait.

"I don't want to do it here. I think when you turn me, it should happen in your home." He leaned back against the counter and cocked his head. "I know, I've made all kinds of noise about having my own space, but it hit me this morning, after what happened with Burrows. I don't need this place anymore. You're my home. I want us to start our lives together someplace that hasn't been tainted by Sentinel hatred."

He held out his arms and she walked into them. "I'll call Ian," he said, and then he kissed her. "Have him meet us there."

The house in the garden district had an entirely different feel from the plantation outside Baton Rouge. Where that house had been graceful and stately, this house screamed Victorian excess. It was large, and white, with an overabundance of gingerbread that dazzled the eye. Every wood trim and architectural feature imaginable graced the house. The many-gabled roofs were covered with slate shingles, and a fisheye window looked out onto the street from the attic. Fish-scale trim peeked from under the rafters and balconies, while dental molding trimmed leaded glass windows and doors. There was even a turret and a cupola.

“Well, what do you think?” Noah asked when they pulled in the driveway.

“I’m stunned,” Olivia admitted. Never in a million years would she have pictured Noah Lazarus living in a house like this. “As many times as I’ve been passed this place . . . I just assumed a couple of old spinster ladies lived here.” She looked at him and blinked several times, then turned back to eyeball the house again. Jesus, it looked like a couple of nineteenth-century architects all got together and threw up on it! “You know, dressed in their Victorian clothes, maybe even widow’s weeds. Or a witch’s lair, except the yard’s too nicely kept. Doesn’t exactly scream hot, hetero guy lives here, does it?”

Trying to wrap her mind around the idea of Noah living in such a house, she sat there for another long moment. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed his shoulders shaking while he silently laughed.

“You shit!” she cried, smacking him on the shoulder. “Oh my God. You had me believing I was going to have to live in this monstrosity!”

He was laughing so hard, tears were rolling down his face. “Oh, I wish you could have seen your face! You were trying so hard to find something good to say about the place and . . . and I don’t think I’ve ever seen you at a loss for words!”

“You mean you don’t own this house?”

“Oh, no, I own it. I just don’t live here. I live around back, in the carriage house. Ian lives here.”

Olivia uttered a strangled laugh. “Ian? You mean, Allie’s going to have to live here?” She howled with laughter. “Oh, my Lord. She may forgive him for turning her, but I’m not sure she’ll ever get over this.” She whacked him on the arm again, just because. “Okay, show me where we’re going to live.”

The carriage house was made of brick, with bright white trim, and a beautiful wrought iron fence enclosed the small, perfectly manicured yard.

“Now this,” she told him, “is absolutely perfect.”

He opened her car door and scooped her up into his arms. “In that case, I think it’s time to carry you across the threshold.”

“I second that,” she said, toeing open the gate latch for him.

A smiling Ian met them at the door. “Welcome home, Olivia.” He gave her a peck on the cheek and stood aside to let them enter. “You’ll be happy to know Allie’s home from the hospital. I explained things to her, and she’s a little weirded out about it, but she seems all right. She’s over the moon about the baby and says to tell you all’s forgiven.”

“Oh, thank God, Ian, I was so worried.”

“I think we all were,” Noah said. He clapped Ian on the back. “That’s good news, brother.”

They stood there awkwardly for a moment, until Ian cleared his throat. “I told Allie I’d be back soon, sooo . . .”

Olivia swallowed hard, then nodded. “Where to?”

Noah took her hand. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“All right, top of the stairs to your left. Follow me.”

The master bedroom was a study in jewel tones—deep greens and blues combined with ruby reds and topaz yellows to dazzle the eye. The bed was covered with a deep red duvet embroidered in an emerald and topaz floral motif, and big, European-style pillows covered in bright silks were propped against the ornate headboard of a centuries-old mahogany bed. It was sexy and soothing and altogether her in every way. A stretchy, maroon knit shift lay across the foot of the bed, and Noah picked it up.

“I thought you might want to wear something more comfortable,” he said, gesturing to the bathroom. “Take all the time you need.”

Olivia closed the bathroom door behind her. Leaning against it, she took a deep breath. She was about to step through a door that, once opened, could never be closed again. It was exciting, sobering, and frightening all at once. But it was a step she was ready to take. All her life, she’d wondered what was wrong with her, why she’d been unable to love any of the men who’d offered themselves into her keeping. Knowing that she was incapable of the one feeling that every woman she knew had experienced and gloried in at least once in her life had pained her.

Now, she knew why. None of those men had been Noah Lazarus. She was the woman he’d waited centuries to make his own. She was for him and none other. She undressed, folded her clothes neatly, and pulled the soft, clingy shift over her head.

He was there when she opened the door. “I’ve waited for you all of my life, Olivia. I give you my word, you will never have cause to regret the choice you’re making here today.”

She felt like a giddy bride when he picked her up and carried her to the bed they would share from this day forward. He lay her down, whispered “I love you,” and stretched out beside her.

“Give me your wrist, kitten, and join me in my world.”

His fangs burned when they pierced her wrist and began to drink. It was the oddest sensation. She felt featherlight, as though she was floating on a gentle summer breeze. She looked down to see her mother smiling back at her, encouraging her to come to the light. And there was Kelly Larsen, her friend all throughout her school years, who’d died in a bloody automobile on the night of her senior prom. They were smiling and happy, beckoning to her to join them.

Then Noah's voice urged her to drink something thick and warm. He held it to her mouth and let it flow, sweet and salty across her lips, vowing to love her forever if only she would drink the exotic magic potion.

She drank in great, hungry gulps, drank until she was intoxicated with it, and then Noah left her, replaced by Ian, who offered her more, and so she drank from him. And, oh, it was wonderful!

Olivia opened her eyes to find Noah cradling her against his chest, stroking her hair, soothing her brow.

"It's over, love. You've been converted."

His voice was so weak, it disturbed her. "Are you all right? Did I take too much?"

"No, my pet, we just need to rest now. Ian's called for a couple of volunteers to come over later. We'll feed again, and everything will be fine."

"Where is he? I want to thank him."

Noah chuckled softly. "Always the proper Southern lady. Ian's gone back to Allie's place. Perhaps we'll see them later. Rest now, kitten."

"Yes," she sighed. "I'm so sleepy."

The volunteers arrived early in the evening and Noah instructed Olivia on how to feed without harming the donor. They fed, rested once more, and would have made love if not for the frantic pounding on the front door.

The door opened on a stricken Ian, a piece of paper crumpled in his fist.

"Oh, God!" Olivia cried. "What's happened?" He just stood there, looking dumbstruck, until Noah pulled him inside.

"She's gone," he said numbly. "All her clothes, her cosmetics. She left me."

Noah led Ian into the living room while Olivia closed and locked the door.

"She left a note." He opened his hand and let the paper fall to the floor.

Olivia picked it up and began to read aloud: "Forgive me, I know this is the coward's way out, but I'm afraid if I see either of you I won't have the strength to do what I know I must. I don't know if I'm ready for this new life you've foisted on me. Immortality. A child. A man I'm bound to for eternity. If I am to find a way to live with myself, I need to do that on my own. I wasn't ready for a forever-man when forever only meant a few decades, and I'm not ready now that it means life everlasting. Please don't try to find me. I'll return when I'm able. If I'm able."

Folding the letter neatly, Olivia placed it in Ian's outstretched hand. "What are you going to do?"

He took a deep breath and stood up. "I'm going to find her and bring her home."

Olivia and Noah watched Ian cross the drive and enter his whimsical, Victorian house.

"Will he find her?" she asked, closing and locking the door.

"Of course, he will, love. They're bound together, just as we are."

"But she's a cop. She knows ways to disappear the normal person couldn't begin to think of."

"Ian's not a normal person, darling, he's a vampire. And a bonded vampire, at that. He'll find her. It may take some time, but he'll bring her back."

"Suppose she won't come willingly?"

"It doesn't matter. They're opposite sides of the same coin, now. Her blood will call to him, and his to her."

"And then, there's the baby." For that reason alone, she knew Allie would return to the man she loved, the friend she cherished.

"Yes," he said. "There's the baby." He smiled and patted her bottom. "Tell me, kitten, what's your opinion of babies?"

She pretended to think about it for a long moment. "I'm not sure I ever had an opinion on babies." He looked so crestfallen, she finally let him off the hook. "Other than that they're wonderful, and they smell good, and I'd like to have one of my own as soon as possible."

She screeched when he picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. "You're going to pay for that, pet," he said, climbing the stairs.

"Oh, goody, I like the way you make me pay."

He swatted her ass and tossed her on the bed, following her down. "And pay, and pay, and . . ." he said, and kissed her.

The End

## *About the Author*

India Masters was born and raised in Melbourne, Florida, where she learned to love surf fishing, boating, and anything to do with the outdoors and water. She has been happily single since the mid-'90's with no plans to rectify the situation. She has a twenty-one-year-old daughter whom she refers to as the coolest person currently breathing on Earth, and she worries about her mom remaining single. To this, India says, "I write my own men now, and the fantasy is much better than the reality." You may contact her at [India.Masters@yahoo.com](mailto:India.Masters@yahoo.com), or her Web site at <http://www.geocities.com/indiamasters53>.

*Coming Soon From Amira Press*  
*The Lost Are Never Far*  
*By*  
*Stephanie Barmann*

As Jasmine drove into the town of her birth she felt no special connection, nothing that brought back fond memories of her youth. The only thing that sent the memories swirling through her brain was that damn rusty train bridge. The moment it came into view, the tears built in her eyes and began to fall down her cheeks. For over a decade, she'd done the best she could to push away the memories of the last moments of her brother's life. The bridge was the one thing that pushed them all front and center once again. She wiped away the tears and kept driving toward the destination that had brought her back to North Riverview to begin with.

People always looked at Jasmine funny when she told them she was a ghost hunter. Some thought she was lying, others assumed that she was nuts. In the seven years she'd been doing it, she had seen enough to know there was more than what one could see with a closed mind. She'd seen everything from colored orbs to very clear apparitions. She'd heard sounds that couldn't be explained and helped many people understand what was in their homes. It was helping people understand that had brought her back to begin with. She had agreed to study a building that was thought to have a demon haunting, which had been terrifying a young family.

With a sigh, she pulled her rearview mirror down to study her reflection. As always, her bright green eyes brought her a pang of sadness, they were so much like Jacks. Then again many of her features mirrored those of her brother. Her dark hair which spilled down over her shoulders in waves, her dimples which appeared only with a frown, there was so much of him in her own reflection. So many times over the years she wondered what he would have become. Would he have joined her in her strange profession or went on to the greatness he had been more than capable of achieving.

Jasmine pushed away the nagging thoughts of her brother as she pulled up to the small group of vehicles set up around the property at one twenty-seven Redwich Way. Her heart started racing the way it always did when she had to be around a lot of people she didn't know. She had never completely gotten over those childhood feelings of not fitting in. It was strange that she didn't even blink an eye when it came to facing the dead, but the living terrified her. Everyone judged her it seemed and their opinions were not favorable. It really was stupid because by the time she got to know a person she often found a friend in them.

A large balding man walked toward her car wearing a smile much too broad for his face. He didn't look like a ghost hunter but more like an old detective. He wore a suit with no jacket and a tie he'd unloosened. His wrinkle lined eyes narrowed as his gaze traveled over her when she opened the car door. Instantly, she was met by the smell of stale cigarette smoke and beer that clung to his clothing, which made her wonder if he'd come to work straight from the bar. It seemed rather unprofessional.

She may not have looked the greatest in her simple jeans and t-shirt but she tried her best not to look like a slob either.

“Jasmine Grund?” He asked, knowing that it was her. It wasn’t a hard guess since she was the only one coming from Bakersfield Paranorm that would be helping in the investigation, and the company name was written across the hood of the car.

“That’s me.” She said, pulling a large bag of cameras and files from the passenger seat.

“I’m Harv Miller. I’m the head of this investigation.” He turned to look at the group of men behind him who’d suddenly become loud with laughter. “Those guys are a rowdy bunch, but I am sure you’ll like them.” Harv took Jasmine’s bags from her and led her toward the vans.

She couldn’t take her eyes off the house. It was spooky enough just standing outside looking at it. Large weeping willows lined the pathway to the porch and English ivy hid most of the brick exterior all the way up to the three gables. Even the large arched windows seemed to be looking at her, as if sizing her up. Before long, the strange turning sensation Jasmine got in her gut when she knew there were spirits near began to plague her.

“Jasmine?” A voice she thought she recognized called out from behind her. Ghost and demons had never scared her, but this voice made her want to turn tail and run in fear. She turned and came face to face with Mitch Benning, her only high school boyfriend. He was the first person she’d kissed, the first person to break her heart. Ten years had passed since she’d last seen him, the day she caught him in the arms of one of her best friends.

He looked great, better than she wanted to admit. His strong jaw framed the cute crooked smile that had attracted her to him when they were still just kids. His tight white t-shirt clung to his chiseled abs and muscular arms she knew the feel of wrapped around her all too well. Jasmine’s gaze locked on his nearly clear blue eyes, and she had to force herself to look away.

“Mitch, how are you?” She tried her best to hide the emotions that threatened to spill out. The pain and anger he’d caused her was still exceedingly strong.

“I am doing well.” Mitch’s gaze traveled up and down her body. Jasmine knew he had never seen her dressed in jeans and a tank top before. In high school she always dressed in conservative clothing. Never would she have worn a pair of jeans with a hole on the butt and a tank top that’s neck line dropped so low. “What are you doing here anyway?” he asked, when his gaze finally came back to her face.

“Work, I was called in to help with this investigation.”

“Only because from what I hear you are a ghost magnet.” Harv chimed in as he walked over to hand her a digital voice recorder. “And I hear you are real good at what you do.” He winked.

She couldn’t help laughing to herself remembering when she was given the nickname The Ghost Magnet. Her boss John started calling her that because he said a place would be boringly inactive until she walked in, and then every spirit within fifteen miles would make its appearance.

“That is what they say, but I wouldn’t say that myself. I am just really good at what I do.” She said, with full confidence. Jasmine had studied the paranormal practically her whole life. She was drawn to it like a child to a candy store.

“When do we go in?” She asked, taking another look at the old mansion. The sunset colored sky had begun to cloud up and night was showing signs of its impending arrival. The house seemed to have been designed to look spooky and the evening only brought out that quality even more.

“Oh, I would say about an hour. Here take a look at these while I start getting everyone ready.” Harv handed her a pile of pictures taken inside Lucas Manor, the name given to the house by its original owner. Mitch looked at them over her shoulder just a little too close for her comfort. His breath on her neck brought back the memories of passion she’d blocked out for so long.

“Strange we ended up in the same profession.” He said as she studied a picture with a few orbs hovering around a little red headed girl’s head.

“I guess.” She really wasn’t all that surprised. Their mutual fascination of spirits was one of the things that drew them together. When they had been younger they often talked about the paranormal and how cool it would be to be like the Ghostbusters. Now she absolutely loathed being compared to those fictional characters.

“How long are you staying in town?” Mitch asked.

“About two weeks. Long enough to finish up the investigation and go over the findings. After this, I have to head to a fort in Canada.” Jasmine couldn’t wait for the job in Alberta. It promised to be a very active, exciting exploration.

“Not Fort Carring?” Jealousy was clear in Mitch’s voice. He continued when she nodded. “Damn, I’ve been waiting to investigate that place for years. I was told they don’t allow it.” Mitch pulled his camera strap over his arm and began to play around with his EMF meter.

“I know people.” She didn’t feel the need to explain that the owner’s niece was a good friend of hers. “This place seems like it’s going to be worth the trip here too.” She said, snapping a few pictures of the outside of Lucas Manor.

“We’ll see.” Mitch watched her intently as she worked. “Are you dating anyone?”

She was caught off guard and unsure how to answer. Why did he want to know? Was he looking for a fling or to relive the youthful moments that passed too quickly? What was she suppose to say? That she’d just broke off a two year relationship and that is why she took these out of town jobs to begin with. No, that would make him see an easy way into her pants. Jasmine shook her head and continued working.

“Jasmine.” Harv made her jump when he came up behind her. “I want you to meet the rest of the team. You already know Mitch.”

Harv pointed to a boy who looked no more than seventeen. “That’s Tyler, he will be our video man.” Jasmine was glad to see the excitement in the young mans face. It was encouraging to see no fear in his eyes— there wasn’t any room for that emotion in their line of work.

Next in line was a tall man. His large brown eyes were framed with thick lashes which went well with his jet black hair and olive skin. He was tall, at least six two, and he had the body of a man who took pride in working out. His dark, handsome features captivated her and made her unable to turn her gaze from his spectacular body. She nearly melted when a perfect smile came to his full lips. She couldn’t help but wonder what they would feel like pressed against hers. “This is Bennett, but we call him Ben. He’ll be doing digital voice recordings.”

Harv moved onto the last in line, an overly skinny middle-aged man with a serious expression that said he was all work no play. “This is my right hand man, Tim. He’ll be doing a little bit of everything.” Tim nodded his acknowledgment.

“Guys this is Jasmine, she will handle pictures, EMF and whatever else she wants really.” Harv seemed surer of her capabilities than even she was. She felt very uncomfortable as they all stood there with their eyes on her waiting for her to say something.

“I am glad to be working with all of you.” She mustered up all the confidence she could and was glad when they all began to filter off to prepare their equipment.

“Jasmine is a beautiful name.” Ben’s seductively deep voice purred. She lifted her gaze from her camera to his eyes.

“Thanks.” She hoped she wasn’t blushing. She had never been so physically attracted to a man since—well Mitch.