

ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



Bound by
Sunlight
KB ALAN

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Kyriana Price has spent nearly a year trapped at her evil day job. And she does mean evil. Her boss is a mage bent on power who lets nothing stand in the way of his quest to gain more. When she sees Connul Graysn wielding a flogger at a BDSM club, she formulates an escape that will require his considerable skills—as a mage and as a Dom. Going to another mage for help might not be the best plan, but it's the only one she's got, and at this point, she's willing to try just about anything.

The last thing Connul expects when he finds an intruder in his house is that he'll soon have her chained in his bedroom, her lovely body marked by his paddle. But she's begging for his help—how can a gentleman refuse? As they learn to trust each other, he begins to realize the only thing he's *not* willing to do for Kyriana is let her go.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

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ISBN 9781419928413

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Edited by Jillian Bell

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book Publication May 2010

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Dedication

To Brian and Lisa, the only people I told about this crazy writing thing before I got that first contract. Thanks for not telling me I was nuts, and for being amazingly supportive and enthusiastic. You helped keep me sane (shut it!) while waiting, then made me shout it out to the world the second I knew I was going to be published. You rock.

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Chapter One

A shiver raced down Kyriana's spine. She wanted to blame it on the cold rather than nerves, but the study she waited in wasn't really chilly. Still, she pulled her feet up to rest in front of her on the chair's wide leather seat, her toes curling over its edge, her arms wrapping around her legs. She studied her bare feet. Damn. *Damn, damn, damn.* What had she been thinking to wear the simple sleep pants and tank top? She had an assortment of seductive outfits to choose from, all of them including four- to five-inch fuck-me heels. But here she sat, feet bare, toes not even painted, sans makeup.

Despite her self-chastisement, she made no move to get up and go change. There was no question in her mind that if she left the room she wouldn't be coming back. Breaking into the study had taken all of her meager skills as a mole and every bit of her courage. It was one thing to spy on a superior mage such as Connul Graysn. It was another thing entirely to break into his private study and wait for him to find her. If he didn't give her a chance to explain, or worse, didn't agree to her plan, she was dead. At least, she hoped he'd kill her. Because there were worse things in life than death, and if he didn't help her, and he didn't kill her, chances were pretty strong she'd be able to catalog those worse things in intimate detail.

Another shiver raced through her. God, she was such a coward. Which was exactly how she'd gotten herself into this mess in the first place. Dropping her forehead to rest on her knees, she swallowed back the tears that threatened. It was good to remember, actually. Good to remember that her cowardice had gotten her into this mess, so playing it safe wasn't always the smart option. Tonight was an excellent night to keep that in mind.

* * * * *

Connul knew the minute he entered his garage that someone was in his house uninvited. Worse, they were in his private study, which nobody had access to while he was away. The live-in staff should have all retired to their separate wing by now, and certainly wouldn't invade his private room without permission.

He cast his senses throughout the house but found only that one anomaly. He detected no traps, physical or magical. A small spell ensured his entry, as well as his slow progress toward the study, were silent. He could tell the presence was a woman and that she wasn't a mage. If she were intending harm, it would be through more mundane means. The idea that anyone would threaten him or his staff in his own home pissed him off, but he stuffed the anger away. He needed to be clear-headed. Control was key. Being a mage was a heavy responsibility. It wouldn't do to let anger get the

better of him and blast an ignorant thief with a spell that would do them lasting damage.

Of course, the chances of an ignorant thief gaining entry into his protected study were just about zero. He would be careful, but he would be ready. He prepared a number of offensive spells as he neared the room's closed door. The obvious first move would be to immobilize the woman so that she couldn't use a weapon against him. She likely had some means to deflect such a spell—a person wouldn't just wait uninvited in a mage's space without expecting the need to defend themselves. Still, he believed in keeping it simple until more complicated means were called for.

Pausing just before the doorway, he closed his eyes and called the room to mind. He wasn't able to project his inner eye just anywhere without serious magical effort, but the room was his private space, where he spent more time than almost any other. He was physically and magically in tune with it, so it took little to no effort to *see* inside, especially since he was so close.

The room appeared empty until he realized that the woman occupied his large reading chair. Turned away from the door, it gave her a view of the fireplace. There was no fire burning and she had her head buried in her arms. She didn't seem familiar to him at all, nor did she appear to be armed. Her hands were wrapped about her legs and clearly empty, so unless she was hiding something in her lap, she was clean. Which made no sense. What the hell was going on?

He wanted to see her face, her reactions, so Connul squared himself in front of the closed door and made a careful noise one instant before he cast the freezing spell. Her head flew up at the sound, but nothing else moved as she was caught by the magic. He'd frozen her vocal cords as a standard precaution, so the only sound in the room was her initial gasp, followed by labored breathing.

The door opened quickly, the locks still disengaged from her entry. He flipped on the lights and hurried to the chair. Once he could see her face-to-face, he let his inner vision go. He hadn't constricted her breathing, but her chest heaved, her lungs working hard. Shit, he hoped she didn't hyperventilate, that would make it harder to get answers. And he *really* wanted answers. She blinked against the light, her face a study in concentration as she clearly tried to bring herself under control. Her vivid green eyes stood out from hair that was a red so soft it was almost gold. It swung in a bob against her chin, inviting fingers to brush it back from her pale skin.

Though he allowed no outward reaction, he mentally chastised himself. What was he doing noticing her quiet beauty at a time like this? He was certain now that he didn't know her. She squeezed her eyes shut and her breath shuddered in and out as his mind whirled, trying to figure out what was going on. While it took some skill to cast the freezing spell as specifically as he had—allowing normal lung function and all facial expressions but no other bodily movement—she should have expected something of the sort. Even if she didn't know his skill level, didn't appreciate the nuances of his spellwork, it was an obvious first move. But she'd simply waited in the chair for him to return to his study? It made no sense.

To make certain she was unarmed, he pulled her hands from around her legs, laying them on top of the chair's wide arms. He stared at her bare feet for a moment. Why did bare feet look so innocent? He grasped her ankles and pulled her legs out, dropping them. Her eyes remained shut as she visibly struggled to bring herself under control. Ignoring the flash of concern that speared through him as her body began to tremble, he took a step back and looked her over. Totally ridiculous. Why in the hell would someone break into his study and wait for him in his own chair, wearing pajamas?

Maybe that was the answer. Maybe she was just crazy. He set his hands at her waist and ran them down her hips and legs, making sure there were no weapons tucked between her body and the chair. At this point, he wasn't really surprised to come up empty. But he was surprised at how tempting her curves were. He was supposed to be focusing on the situation, not the enticing woman. Shaking his head, he brought his hands up to her shoulders. Sometimes, if a spell was subtle enough, he might not detect it on a person without physical touch. He closed his eyes and concentrated hard.

As before, he sensed no spells on her body, nothing that might harm him, nothing she could activate either offensively or defensively. There was...*something* though. He slid his hands up her shoulders to cup her neck, trying to get a better feel for what he was sensing. A slight lessening of her distress distracted him. Opening his eyes, he watched her face. A single tear tracked from beneath her tightly closed lids, but her breathing was calming and her trembling subsiding.

Once again, he concentrated on what was inside her instead of her body's reactions. His thumbs traced up and down her neck. Yes. There it was. A powerful spell, trapped in her mind. It was completely foreign to her, he had no doubt. There was a tiny spark of magic that was hers, something distant that he was sure she wasn't even aware of. Probably at least one mage back in her family tree. Interesting. He laid a spell himself, one that ensured her honesty in whatever she said, as well as compelling her to answer his questions. He didn't even try to be subtle, and though she might not know exactly what he'd done, she was sure to know he'd done something.

Releasing her, he stepped back, leaning against the desk, watching as her fear once again overwhelmed her. He withdrew ninety percent of the immobilizing spell. She could move, but not suddenly and not with any strength. It took her only a second to realize she was free. Her feet came back up to rest on the seat and she buried her face in her hands as she struggled to control her breathing.

He probably should have been irritated but he was too curious. The fact that she was terrified but trying to control it was interesting. If she'd just been a sniveling wreck he might not have been patient enough to stand by and wait. As it was, only a minute passed before she wiped her eyes, scrubbed her face with her hands and looked up at him.

"I'm sorry." She took a deep breath, glancing down at her feet.

He almost laughed out loud at the horrified expression that crossed her face as her legs worked their way down until her ankles were crossed demurely. Could it be that

she was embarrassed to be lounging on his chair? While barefoot? And wearing pajamas? After breaking into his study? Maybe he was asleep and this was all a bizarre dream. Her eyes were wide, her gaze fixed firmly on his knees, so he let the smile out, just for a second. Then he drew in a deep breath of his own. Enough of this nonsense, it was time to figure out what the hell was going on.

"What's your name?"

"Kyr. Kyriana Price. I—"

"How did you get in here?" he interrupted. He was in charge here, and the sooner she figured that out, the better for her.

She frowned and answered slowly. "I was hired by Mrs. Tremky... Yesterday," she added, when he didn't say anything.

"In this room. How did you get into this room?"

She bit her lip, opened her mouth, grimaced and closed it again. Finally, she tried again, "I...had a thingy." It came out in a rush and her eyes darted up to his before settling on a view of his arms, crossed in front of his chest.

He waited, but she didn't look as if she was feeling compelled to say anything more.

"A thingy."

She gave him a jerky nod.

"You had a thingy, which let you into my office."

Another grimace crossed her face. "Look, I—"

"Ah," he cut her off before she could go off on her own tangent. Then he realized he hadn't actually asked her a follow-up question. He'd just made a statement, which she'd been able to ignore. Sometimes magic was annoyingly literal.

"What kind of thingy?"

She fought his compulsion this time. Her stomach clenched and she swallowed hard before gasping out in pain. "It...I...A spell-lock thingy."

She took a shuddering breath and leaned back into the seat, once again daring a brief look at his face. He wasn't sure what she saw there, but he was getting damn curious, as well as concerned. His compulsion spell seemed to be in opposition to the spell already cast on her. And the foreign spell was strong enough to cause physical discomfort.

"Why are you wearing pajamas?"

Her tight features softened.

"I didn't want to wear any of the clothes I had with me."

"Why?"

She squirmed, though he didn't think it was from pain. "They're all...slutty."

Her hands gripped her thighs and he knew she was uncomfortable, wishing she could curl up into the chair. A sitting version of the fetal position. But for now, propriety would keep her sitting erect and he didn't want her too comfortable.

"Why do you only have slutty clothes with you? Surely Mrs. Tremky informed you of the dress code?" He didn't have uniforms for his staff, but there was a certain level of dress expected, and slutty did not qualify.

Another deep breath. "To attract you," she whispered, softly enough that he had to lean forward to hear her.

She was tense, waiting for his next question.

"So that you could...what? Gain my confidence?"

Her stomach muscles contracted as she opened her mouth, but only a soft cry escaped. Sweat broke out on her brow and she began to shudder. This wasn't discomfort, but pain.

He leaned forward and took her wrist in his hand, testing her pulse. It was wild, but her shaking body stilled slightly. He squeezed his fingers around her wrist and she was able to draw in a full breath. She gave the tiniest nod of her head, then collapsed back against the seat, wrapping her free hand tightly around her stomach.

As he watched, her breathing evened out, her eyes remained steady on his chest. Goose bumps pebbled across her skin as the sweat dried, and her heartbeat steadied under his fingers. She twisted her arm, just slightly. He knew that motion. She wasn't trying to pull free of his hand, just testing, feeling the hold he had on her. Well, wasn't that interesting?

"How old are you?" he asked as he reached for her other hand. He wrapped his fingers around the delicate wrist and squeezed ever so gently.

Her shoulders relaxed and her expression softened, just a bit.

"Twenty-eight."

"Pull your legs up."

She startled but complied, pulling her legs up onto the seat, tailor style. He knelt in front of her, his legs flush against the chair's base.

"Look at me."

Her eyes met his for a full minute before blinking rapidly and falling to his chin.

Hope. He'd seen hope in her, as well as fear. His compulsion spell was strictly for words and yet she'd immediately responded to his commands. He almost hated to ask her another question. To bring her pain. But he needed to know what the hell was going on.

"Why are you here?"

Her eyes closed, but not in physical pain. She had an answer ready for this question that wasn't in opposition to the magic that held her captive. But she was still afraid to answer. Afraid of his response?

"I was hoping you could help me."

He rested his arms on her legs, her wrists secured in his grasp. Studied her.

"Do you wish to harm me?"

"No!" Her gaze flew to his, searching his face, desperate for him to believe her. He caressed her arms with his thumbs in an absent, soothing gesture.

"Does someone else mean for you to harm me?"

She looked down, her body tightening, hunching over her arms.

"Stop. Don't answer."

She let out a relieved sigh.

"Can you give me a name?" He hoped that by not being specific she would have some leeway, but her answer was an immediate shake of the head.

"No," she gasped.

"Am I in danger tonight?"

"Not that I know of."

"Will you attempt to harm me, physically or with magic?"

"No." This time her answer was easy and immediate. A spy then, not an assassin. She'd been given some means of entering his study, but had stayed, intending to get caught. Her instructions, her compulsion, obviously hadn't been specific enough to include removing herself before he appeared, and she had taken advantage of that.

He needed to find out what was going on. Whoever was using the girl had strong magic at their disposal and didn't mind hurting others to get to him.

Kyriana opened her mouth but then closed it without speaking. He smiled and transferred her left wrist into his right hand, easily holding both. He brought his free hand up to her neck, testing, feeling, caressing.

Her pulse sped up but then steadied. Her wrists jerked and she gave a tiny sigh when his fingers cupped her slender neck, his thumb resting against the pulse in her throat. Here was someone who needed to give herself into stronger hands. He had one more test to make, one he was second-guessing himself about making. But he needed to be sure he was reading her correctly – that she disliked being immobilized by the spell, but her reaction to being immobilized by him was completely opposite. Determined, he let go of her wrists and re-enacted the immobilization spell.

Her response was immediate and intense. Similar to the pain reaction she'd shown when he'd asked her a question she couldn't answer – her stomach clenched, her eyes closed and her face drew in tight. He removed the spell, freeing her back to almost full movement. Her arms wrapped around her body and she hunched over herself. A tear fell from her eye but she was already setting her jaw, swallowing hard and forcing her eyes to meet his. She very deliberately returned her arms to her lap, where he'd dropped them.

A test. She didn't know if she'd passed or failed, but she knew she'd just been tested. God, it had sucked. Not painful like the questions had been, but somehow worse. Being forced, magically restrained, horrified her on a basic and primitive level. Something she hadn't been aware of until he'd frozen her when he walked into the office. She'd been concentrating so hard on what she might say to him, what words she could use that would get past the damn block in her head but give him the information he needed, that he'd taken her by surprise. She wasn't a total idiot. She'd considered the fact that when he came in she would have to be careful to make no sudden or threatening motions. She just hadn't thought about a spell that would freeze her. Hell, even if she'd thought about it, she wasn't sure she would have realized how terrifying it would be.

Thankfully, he seemed to be catching on quickly. At the very least he'd realized she'd been forced here and was trying to warn him. He was smart and powerful, and she felt hope that he would figure out what she was trying to do. It was probably a stupid plan, but it was the only one she'd been able to come up with after almost a year. And once he knew what it was, if he didn't think it would work, then maybe he would have other ideas.

"Tell me what you were going to say," he said as he picked up both her wrists in his large hand. She swallowed, just to feel his other hand tighten around her throat.

"Magic." It was so hard to say things that were important without triggering the spell. "Loophole."

His thumb tipped her chin up, prompting her to meet his eyes. The fierce look from earlier had thawed considerably. He'd figured out that she herself was not out to harm him. She had no delusions that he would now go easy on her. She was still a danger to him and they both knew it. But he would be more careful. She hoped.

Holding his stare was hard, but since it was what he wanted, she forced herself to do it. His eyes were a rich brown with warm yellow undertones. His hair was brown too, but with so many highlights from the sun it was hard to pinpoint the final color. He must spend a lot of time outdoors, which was probably normal for mages, who depended on the earth for some of their magic. Her breath caught as she considered one of the other major means of replenishing and practicing magic. Sex. Earthy, elemental, sex. He moved his thumb back down, tacitly giving her permission to drop her gaze, which she did immediately. She stared straight ahead at the chest covered in a soft-looking sweater. A sweater molding itself lovingly to his — *Focus!* She needed to focus. Yes, she was hoping that his skills as a mage would help her, and was completely aware of his reputation as a sexual Master, but that didn't mean she was here to stare at his chest.

She started to speak, then thought better of it. Was she still allowed? She dared a quick look up again and he gave her a small nod, his expression serious.

"I saw you." She tried to figure out what else she could say to point him in the right direction.

"You know I'm a mage," he said slowly. "And you know that I visit a sex club." He considered. "Did you see me there?"

"Yes."

Oh had she seen him. She still wasn't sure what force had prompted her to go to the club that night. She'd known exactly what sort of place it was, exactly the clientele it catered to. Her neighbor was a regular. A submissive who had no steady Dom, Danni had told her all about Loophole. Kyriana had feigned disinterest but Danni had known, had seen, and so had continued to invite her despite her repeated refusals. Until last week, when Kyr had said yes.

Mages rarely identified themselves as such and she might not have recognized him for what he was if she hadn't just seen his picture in her boss's files. But she was positive she still would have been mesmerized. Magic was only a part of who he was and wasn't all that made up the power that surrounded him. He'd been flogging a submissive while the lucky woman's Master watched. The sub was strapped to a Saint Andrew's cross, her bare back to the room while Connul worked her over. Nothing remarkable, a scene that probably played out in the club every night of the week. But somehow, he had made it different. *More*. Every eye in the vicinity had been riveted to them. The girl's moans had sent shivers down Kyr's spine and she'd felt every slap of the flogger like a too-distant echo.

For over an hour he'd worked her, bringing her up then back down before escalating even higher. Her Master had stood by, watching. Finally Connul had brought her to what had to have been an exquisite climax based on the bound woman's cries. Kyriana had sighed with her own small release. And she'd wondered.

She'd always secretly had a desire to be bound. It was this forbidden need that had kept her interested whenever Danni had told her about the club. Spankings and whippings, though. She'd heard about them, of course, but never really given it much thought. Pain was pain and didn't have any place with pleasure. Not that she had much experience with pleasure. What she'd seen at the club told her that just because she hadn't understood the pleasure of pain, didn't mean it didn't exist. Didn't mean it didn't work. Didn't mean it couldn't work...on her.

"When?"

She licked her lips. "Last week. Thursday."

"What was I doing?"

"Flogging a girl. On the cross." It came out kind of breathy, so she cleared her throat.

Both of his thumbs started moving, one caressing her wrist, the other her neck. How could she feel so vulnerable and yet so safe at the same time? He leaned in close, rested his forehead against hers. Though he was barely touching her, she felt as if his whole body was covering hers. She grew damp between her legs.

"Did you like what you saw?"

So much for damp, she was full-on wet now. She tried not to squirm and mostly succeeded. "Y-yes."

"What part did you like best?"

"Uh—" she stuttered. Irritated, she closed her eyes briefly. He must think she was such an imbecile. The need to answer him was strong, but she hadn't thought about it before. The whole thing had been so amazing. The woman's cries, his careful precision, the intense orgasm. Oh yes, now she knew.

"The end."

"The orgasm?"

She swallowed hard. "No, after that."

His long fingers around her throat tightened just a tiny bit. Why did that feel so good? It should scare the crap out of her. But it didn't—not by a long shot.

"Is anyone going to come looking for you tonight?"

"No."

He stood up, stepped back, and her body cried out at the loss. What was wrong with her? He'd put a spell on her to make her talk. Had he done something to make her need him too?

"No magic tonight. No more spells."

She blinked up at him. No, he wasn't talking about his spells. He meant the one she wanted him to remove. He wasn't going to help her, he wasn't going to try to remove the spell.

"Not tonight. You have to trust me first."

"I—" She stopped herself. Of course she didn't trust him. She wanted to. She prayed to any god that might listen that he would be able to help her. But she didn't trust him. Hell, she'd just been wondering if he was messing with her.

Since he'd stood, her stare was now directed at his cock, which had made a considerable tent in his pants since he'd first stood before her. Oddly gratified, she relaxed, waited to see what he would do.

"I need you to let me earn your trust."

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. He understood—knew what she needed. She could do this. She *would* do this. Hell, she wanted this.

"Okay."

"You understand, I can't remove the truth spell either. Or the compulsion spell."

She hadn't even considered it, would never have asked it of him. Which didn't mean she didn't hate it immensely, but there were other things at the top of her hate list right now that held much higher priority.

"I understand." She wished he'd come back and hold her again.

"Stand up."

She untucked her legs and rose, irritated at how unsteady she felt.

"What experience do you have?"

Oh crap. She ducked her head and whispered, "Not much."

"Don't hide from me."

Damn. She lifted her head. "Not much."

He began to move. He walked around, pushed the chair back and circled her, but touched her only with his look.

"Not much BDSM? Or not much sex?"

"Not much sex."

"Pain?" He was keeping his voice neutral, not giving her any clues.

"No."

"And no BDSM."

"No." Should she feel embarrassed about that? Probably not, but she did. She wouldn't drop her head again, but she couldn't stop the blush from firing across her face and down her neck.

Finally he touched her, trailing a single finger along her collarbone as he circled her again. How could such a simple touch ignite a fire all the way to her sex?

Chapter Two

Control. Connul very much needed to find his control. He circled again, watching her—Kyriana. Someone had sent her after him, intending to do him harm, but she'd come to him for help. And he was something of a sucker for playing the hero. Besides, how could he resist? He knew what she needed and he was pretty sure he could give it to her, use his skills to free her from the spell imprisoning her. In a way that she would enjoy, despite the pain. How many other mages were skilled enough in both ways to help her? It didn't matter, because he was the one she'd come to.

Which was why he needed control. In a normal situation he would never dream of taking a new partner as far and as fast as he would need to take her. Obviously she had some understanding of her desires, but not much. Exploring them in a leisurely fashion would have been ideal. Would have been extraordinary. Exploring them at lightning speed and while bringing serious magic into the situation was dangerous. Probably foolish. And it was the only plan he could come up with.

Coming to stand in front of her again, he willed his cock to behave. Though it was unnecessary, he brought his hand to her cheek, caressing it as he removed the last of the immobilization spell. She blinked, probably not having realized there had still been some restriction to her movements.

"How did it make you feel, being unable to move like that?" he asked.

"I hated it. A lot."

"Being restrained."

She blinked again and frowned, and he saw her realize the contradiction. "Being restrained, against my will." She shook her head. "That sounds stupid."

His hand shot from her cheek to her hair, fisting into the silky strands to pull her head back. She gasped at the small pain, but her eyes dilated. Yes, he knew what she needed.

"Not stupid. Truthful. You don't get to judge yourself in front of me. That's my job. Understood?"

If this had been a normal seduction she probably would have just nodded, not even realizing that she wasn't being entirely truthful. But with both the compulsion to answer him and the truth spell working on her, she was distressed at her inability to answer. Damn literal magic, people just weren't that black and white.

"Shh." He released his grip on her hair, brushing his fingers through the short length then cupping her nape. The fact that she relaxed against him was an enormous turn-on. "You brought yourself into this room intending to give yourself over into my hands. You wanted me to bind you. You chose it, asked for it, as best you could. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Don't you see the difference between that and a spell that takes away your ability to move? To speak? Takes away your choices?"

"If I'm bound, I have no choice."

"Only if I'm not worthy of your trust."

She thought it through. "If you're not worthy of my trust outside of sex, why should I trust you with sex? With sex that could hurt me?"

He smiled. "Did you ask anyone about me, that night at the club?"

She started to duck her head, then remembered and stopped. But she did blush.

"Um, well. I didn't exactly. My neighbor, who was with me, asked some friends of hers."

"And what did they say?"

"That you had a reputation for being a strong Master and were much sought-after. That it was a privilege to be selected by you for play."

"Did you have reason to trust the judgment of these people?"

"Yes."

"Do you see the difference now?"

Her shoulders relaxed at last. "Yes."

His hand traced down her back before falling to his side. Her hands twisted together nervously.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"I...I don't know what else to do."

"That's for later. Right now. Tonight. Do you understand what needs to happen? And is it what you want?"

She shuddered, but not from pain this time. "Yes."

"Tell me."

"Well, I guess you'll tie me up and maybe w-whip me..."

He stood close behind her but didn't touch her, just let his larger body overwhelm her personal space. He leaned in close enough that his breath stirred the hair around her ear. "I'm going to shackle you. I'm going to bring you pleasure like you've never known before. I'm going to bring you pain that will make you scream in satisfaction."

She hissed in a breath that seemed to get stuck for several seconds before she released it with a long, shuddering sigh.

"If," he continued, moving around so that he could see her face again, "you give me a word."

She blinked in confusion before the answer dawned. "A safe word?"

He let his smile reward her and was delighted to see her flesh pinken again. Redheads, how had he missed out on them for all these years? Or maybe it was just shy redheads.

"Oh. Can't you pick one?"

He shook his head. "You need to pick it. A word with no particular meaning and that you would never say during pleasure. Maybe," he paused and used one finger to tip her chin up until she met his eyes, "maybe a random word you *don't even particularly like*." He tried to convey the importance of what he was saying.

"Guardian!"

"Good girl." He kissed her forehead, then turned, drawing her hand into his and pulling her behind him and through the door.

Kyriana's heart was pounding, but she felt flushed with a tiny sparkle of pride. If nothing else, at least she'd managed to warn Connul of the danger he was in. Now, even if he couldn't free her from the damn spell, maybe he could figure out what Guardian meant, find the bastard who was after him.

He pulled her along behind him. It was real. It was happening. Fear tried to strangle her but she pushed it back. Not all the way—she wasn't a total idiot and this situation was still scary as hell. But it was also, somehow, what she'd wanted. What she'd needed. Which was terrifying in its own way.

If she could get through this, if she could *enjoy* this, then he might be able to help her. To free her from the trap she'd been in for a year. But the farther they got from the study, the less likely it seemed. If she failed, if she couldn't do what he needed her to do, then—

She walked into Connul, who had stopped and was looking back at her. He squeezed her hand.

"Have I lost your attention already?"

Crap, was he mad? "No! Yes. Shit. I—"

He set one large finger against her lips and she exhaled in relief. Being forced to speak the truth sucked when you weren't really sure what the truth was.

"See, there's that trust thing." He swiped the finger across her bottom lip. "I need you to trust that I'm not going to overreact to every little thing."

She forced herself to meet his gaze. "I've had a very bad year." Talk about an understatement. She'd been stupid and naïve, but she'd learned. It took very little to irritate and annoy some men, especially strong and powerful men. A lesson she'd learned quickly, and apparently too broadly.

His expression softened and he cupped her chin in his hand. "We'll fix this."

She gave a tiny nod and offered him as much of a smile as she could manage. He let her go and they continued down the hall. This time she was careful not to let her thoughts wander. He was right. She needed to focus on now, on tonight, on him, and

worry about the rest tomorrow. Knowing that didn't make it easy though. So much depended on this. On him. A stranger.

Before she could freak herself out more, they arrived at his bedroom. He pointed to an area clear of furniture. "Stand there."

The room was lovely, like the rest of the house. Masculine and expensive without being overbearing or pretentious. The huge bed snagged her attention. Its green covers and full pillows matched the low-key window treatments. She imagined him sitting up against the headboard, reading a book. What would he read for pleasure? A spy thriller or a biography?

Warm air caressed her cheek. She jerked, startled.

"Hmm. What do I need to do to keep your attention, I wonder?"

The need to answer pushed more babbling up her throat, but he forestalled it with a whispered "Shhh."

His heavy hands came to rest on her shoulders. She let them relax slowly, hoping he wouldn't move his hands. It was all so much easier when he was touching her. She wasn't doing this right, was already screwing up if he had to work so hard to relax her. How was he going to —

His hands slid down her arms and gripped her wrists, hard. Her wayward thoughts skidded to a halt and she exhaled in a loud whoosh. He pulled her wrists together behind her back and held them with one hand, bringing his other around to her front to rest at the drawstring to her pants. His fingers edged just under the fabric and her thighs clenched. She twisted in his grip, wanting to feel his hold on her. He responded by squeezing harder. How could such a simple thing shoot sensation throughout her entire body?

Connul's thumb traced its way under her top, swiping a path across her stomach, which tightened in reaction. Her nipples pebbled and she wished his hand would move higher.

"If I let go, are you going to start thinking again?"

His whisper was followed by a nibble on her earlobe, which almost distracted her from his question, but the spell compelled her to answer. "I don't know."

The light caress on her stomach stopped and he pulled his hand away. "Let's see how you do with this then."

From out of nowhere, lined cuffs dangled in front of her, sturdy chains extending up to the ceiling. He released one wrist and brought the other around with him to her front. He raised her wrist to his lips and put a small kiss, complete with a tiny lick of tongue, over her pulse before snapping the cuff on. The heavy-sounding latch caused something deep within her to clench in need. He repeated the action on her other wrist, then let go. The chains held her hands steady at waist level. She stared at them, at the dark bindings holding her captive. Her mouth went dry and she licked her lips. This was already so much more than she'd ever imagined. And he was barely getting started. A small sound above was her only warning before the chains began to retract.

In less than a minute her arms were high above her head. Connul tested the pull on her wrists then ran his hands down her arms, her sides and all the way to her ankles.

She looked down. Though he knelt at her feet, his large body was still commanding. The soft light gave his hair a halo effect, which made her smile considering what he was doing. More cuffs were in his hands and he wrapped them around her ankles and attached them to bolts in the floor. Had those been there a minute ago? Didn't matter. What mattered was that she was now immobilized in the center of his room. Unlike when he'd used the spell to freeze her, she wasn't scared. She tried to reason out the difference, but her thoughts faded away. She was too excited and eager, with just an edge of nervous fear.

This time he ran his hands up, along her legs, her hips, to her waist. He held them steady there while he examined her face. His expression was serious, intent. She jerked against her bonds, but there was no give. She didn't really want to get away but was uncomfortable being so exposed to him, so open. She stared at his chin while he watched her. There was nothing she could do, and somehow that made it easier. She relaxed again, letting her fears slip away with the knowledge that she was chained, bound to his will, and that she had chosen him for just this purpose. She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Impressive," Connul murmured, bringing his hand up to caress her cheek. That simple contact was like...everything. She waited, ready for whatever he might do.

He brought his hand down in a tickle along her neck. She shivered.

"You've never been bound?" he asked, picking up the straps of her tank top.

"No." It was more of a breath than a whisper, but he seemed satisfied with her answer. She felt a soft spark against her shoulders and looked down. He'd severed the straps of her top, which were left to dangle above her breasts. Magic. He'd used magic. A tiny niggle of fear tried to work its way through her. He seemed to know and brought his warm hands back to her face, tilting her head up enough that she knew she was supposed to meet his eyes. Why did she find that so difficult? She forced herself to follow his unspoken demand.

"I will not harm you tonight. Not with magic. Not with anything else. I will bring you pain, but only as much as will pleasure you. Do you understand?"

She saw patience and assurance in his eyes, wondered what he saw in hers. Shame washed through her now—that she had come to him so unprepared, unworthy. He shouldn't have to deal with a novice when he was used to those at the club. His fingers on her chin tightened.

"Do you understand?" he asked again.

"Yes."

He knew there was more, she could see it in his face, see him trying to figure it out. As long as he didn't ask, she wouldn't have to admit to her insecurities. He cocked his head as he studied her.

"What distressed you now?"

She wanted to look away. The feeling of easy surrender had vanished. But she had to answer him. Had to keep meeting his eyes. Not just because of the compulsion, but because she had asked for this. Asked him to help her. He deserved to have as much of her courage as she could muster.

"I'm sorry. I'm not very good at this. I don't know what to do."

"You don't have to know what to do. That's what I'm here for. You'll do what I tell you, when I tell you. Won't you?" His voice was hard, uncompromising.

"Yes."

"Then there's nothing for you to fail at. It's my responsibility to make sure this goes right, not yours. Your only responsibility is to tell me if I go too far." He stepped closer, allowing his heat to envelop her. She felt moisture gather in her pussy and it got a little bit harder to draw breath.

"Let's start over." He pulled her chin up higher now that he was closer to her. Her neck ached a little at the strain. It felt...good.

"Do you believe that I won't harm you, even though I have every intention of bringing you pain?"

"Yes." She didn't know why, and it might be foolish, but she believed him. It was the reason she was here.

He rewarded her with a small kiss to her lips. She opened for him but he drew away. She sighed.

"Do you believe that I will bring you pleasure?"

"Yesss."

This time he smiled as he kissed her. She tried to chase his lips, but his hands kept her in position.

"Do you understand what you're supposed to do?"

Uh oh. What was she supposed to do? Hadn't he just told her – oh.

"Yes." Another kiss, she wanted another kiss. A real one this time, damn it.

"Tell me."

"Whatever you tell me to do." She parted her lips in preparation. She would have to be fast this time.

"And?"

No kiss? What was he doing to her?

"And...umm. Oh, and use my safe word if you go too far."

"Good girl." He met her lips with his, but it wasn't gentle this time. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, taking what she had tried to take, giving what she needed. She whimpered when he pulled back.

"Tell me your safe word again."

She didn't want to, didn't want to ever say that word again. He seemed to understand.

"Choose another word. It doesn't need to be that one. Shouldn't be something you don't want to say."

"No, it's all right —"

His fingers tightened against her skin again, reminding her who was in charge. He wasn't asking. He was telling.

"I, maybe...Snowball!" God, all she could come up with was her childhood cat's name. Was he smirking at her? She narrowed her eyes at him but his face had gone expressionless again. He leaned down and gave her another quick kiss. Then he let her go, stepped back, taking his heat with him.

"If you use your safe word, I'll stop what I'm doing so we can talk about it. Don't be afraid to use it, it doesn't mean I'm going to send you away."

She managed to nod her understanding.

"You have a lovely body."

She didn't. Her size eight curves weren't quite proportioned the way she'd like and —

He smacked her ass and she jumped as much as the chains would allow, which wasn't much at all. Why she should be shocked she had no idea, but she looked at him for an explanation.

"You." He put his hands on top of her head then ran them over her face, rubbing her eyebrows, exploring her cheekbones, tickling her ears and caressing her chin.

"Have." Her skin tingled as his hands moved down her neck to her now heaving chest.

"A lovely." His fingers molded to her breasts, giving a sharp, barely painful squeeze before continuing their journey.

"Body." He reversed his hands so that his fingers led the way over the curve of her stomach to the juncture of her thighs. He folded his hands along the curve, careful not to touch the part of her that needed touching the most.

"Oh," she managed to whisper. Her whole body shuddered at his intense look and careful caress. The desire in his words and his eyes did more to relax her than anything else he could have done. She didn't realize how worried she'd been about the fact that by presenting herself to him, rather than having him choose her, she would have a hard time believing he wanted this, even a little bit.

She looked down at her top. He was running a finger down its center, from neck to hem. As his finger slid past, the fabric parted, splitting down the middle. It was almost like a breath of heat, but maybe she was imagining that. It didn't take long for the whole top to fall away.

Her naked breasts were damp with sweat, her nipples somewhat swollen. He ignored them and brought his finger to her pants, performing a similar magic to remove them in less than a minute. He took a step back, observing her dressed only in plain cotton panties. It looked as if he was fighting a smile. She tried not to blush and failed.

Why hadn't she dressed up for him? She had the clothes, had been provided with the types of outfits that were supposed to entice him. Black leather, lace garters and more. Much more. It wasn't that she didn't like them, but she would have felt like a spy wearing them, like a fraud. So she'd come in the most Kyriana-like clothes she had.

He walked behind her, hooked a finger in the waistband and snapped the elastic against her skin. It didn't hurt, but it startled her. She hung her head as she tried to fight off the shame and misery working their way through her.

"Just checking to see if your name was embroidered in the back." His teasing words were spoken against her neck. She choked on her laugh as his lips moved down her neck to the top of her spine, where he bit, hard.

As he licked the spot, she felt something hard and wooden touch her thigh. He brought the thin edge of *something* up the side of her leg and around to the front where she could see it. A paddle. He turned it so she could see the flat of it, about the size of a racquetball racket, but peppered with a dozen holes.

Her breath caught. It didn't look sexy. It looked painful.

Connul's other hand settled briefly on her hip before drifting over to dip below the elastic of her panties. He slid the paddle back down her thigh, letting her see its thin edge as the fingers of his other hand did their magic, her underwear dropping to land between her feet. His hand moved to cup her mound.

The paddle traveled up the inside of her thigh. The hand cupping her tightened, and her insides responded, her stomach muscles clenching as she fought not to move. She could feel his body behind her, standing so close, but not touching her except for that hard edge of wood and the hand between her thighs.

"You're being very good, Kyriana. Not moving. I know it's hard. Can you stay still for me? Even when I'm touching you?" He let one finger dip into her cream and circle her.

She swallowed hard. "Yes, I think so."

He kissed her neck and it felt like a reward. "Good girl."

She took a deep breath and started to let it out. Somehow she heard the smacking sound before it registered that he'd paddled her thigh. The sensation was painful, but not terrible. A quick burn. He thrust one long finger up and into her wetness and she sucked in a breath. His tongue traced a path along her shoulder. The mixed sensations rioted through her. She moaned and had no idea if it was in pleasure or pain.

The tension in her shoulders seeped out and her thighs fell back open. She hadn't even realized she'd squeezed them shut. Did that count as moving? Would he be mad?

Crack. This time her other leg received the paddle's sharp kiss just before his thumb moved up to press against her clit. She let her head fall back on a moan and now there was no question that it was in pleasure. He drew the paddle up her side and stepped around to her front, spanking her twice in quick succession as he pressed harder on her aching clit.

Her focus narrowed. No more questions, no more thinking, only the sensations that he brought to her, that he allowed her. The paddle came up and down, finding targets all across her butt and thighs. His fingers began to pump in and out of her slowly and carefully, in a different rhythm than that of the paddle. She thought she might be getting close to an orgasm. If he would just... She moaned when his hand drew away from her folds. Whimpered as he trailed his wet fingers up her stomach, between her breasts and up her neck to rest against her open, panting mouth.

She couldn't think properly, didn't want to. She focused on his breathing, his heat next to her, the warmth of the paddle strikes tingling her skin.

"Taste," he told her.

She drew his fingers into her mouth, exploring her own flavor against that of his strong fingers. Her tongue curled around and she lost herself in the texture and taste of him, coated with her.

Something soft and light slithered over her shoulder. A distant part of her brain acknowledged it but she didn't give it much thought. He drew his fingers from between her lips and she squelched the insane urge to bite down, to capture the digits. She was glad she hadn't when he replaced his fingers with his tongue, kissing her as if they were lovers long parted. As if he were coming home. She welcomed him, barely noticed when the trails of leather became light slaps of a flogger against her back. He pulled away and she sighed, then gasped as his mouth sought out her breast instead. He took her nipple and sucked hard just as he brought the flogger down in a sharp slap against her ass, then up against her back. Over and over again he gave her that sharp pain, all while giving her intense pleasure. The blur of sensations was nearly overwhelming. She felt the continuous slide of cream on her upper thighs. Her breath was coming in harsh pants and she wanted to beg for more, harder, faster, *something*. But she waited, accepted what he gave her. And loved every second of it. Not for one minute did she forget who was giving her what she wanted, what she'd needed without ever understanding.

"Connul," she whispered. It was both a plea and a thanksgiving.

He growled against her flesh then released the breast he'd been biting with a tiny lick before moving around to her back. The flogger traveled up and down her legs, ass and back.

"Tell me what you want," he demanded.

Talk? He wanted her to speak when she could barely remember her own name. "You."

He moved around again, the flogger working her front, kissing her breasts, her stomach, her thighs.

"Tell me what you want from me."

God, she was so close. Her whole body ached with the need to release the electric energy he was pulling forth. Just a little bit more...

"Kyriana." There was a small bite to the word.

She shook her head, trying to figure out the answer. It wasn't that she hadn't heard him, she'd heard everything he said, heard his breathing, his steps, maybe even his heartbeat, or was that hers? The struggle was in coming back into herself enough to figure out the answer, to figure out speech.

"I—I want you inside me."

He stood close to her now, and she resisted the urge to sway into him, some part of her mind aware enough to remember she was to remain still. Instead she took in a deep breath—sweat and some indefinable flavor that was all him. Sort of like...chocolate. She moaned.

"Do you want to come?" he asked her, striking her left calf with the flogger, a lighter tap, followed by a sharp sting.

That one was easy. She didn't have to think for the answer. "Yes."

"But you won't, will you? Not until I tell you to."

Her brain stuttered. She wanted to say no, but it wasn't entirely the truth. What if she couldn't hold back, what if—

"Stop." His hand came to her face, releasing her from her answer.

She looked at him, still dazed, still aching, but more focused than she had been for a while, pulled from the fog she'd fallen into.

"Shh." The flogger continued to strike arhythmically against her, but his hand came to rest on her throat. He was so close that when she gasped over an especially sharp smack, she brought his breath into herself.

"I can tell you're close. You'll fight it for me, won't you? Can you do that for me?"

"Yes. Connul, please." She focused on his strong jaw, only lightly stubbled at this late hour. The flogger hit low on her ass and its trailing strands just barely licked her pussy. She screamed in surprise and pain and had to fight hard to hold back the release that threatened to overwhelm her. She didn't realize she was crying until he licked along the path of her tears.

"It's good, isn't it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

"Are you ready to go back?" he asked, his hand on her throat firming.

She had to concentrate to stay sharp enough to answer his questions.

"Back?"

"Back under. Where you were before I made you think." He bit her on the chin.

"Oh," she shuddered. "Yeah, that was good."

He kissed her, fucking her with his tongue as the flogger continued to rain down on her. Then he changed the kiss, turning light and sweet. The blows stopped as she melted into the kiss. He caressed her breasts lightly, in tune with his tongue. Then he pinched her nipples, hard. Her head fell back and her mind drifted down, down to that

place she'd been before, where she could feel everything, hear everything, but gave no thought other than the most cursory.

A sharp slap, louder but less painful than the flogger, met her ass. Her insides melted when she realized it was his hand. He peppered her ass and thighs with heavy slaps before moving around to her front. And then he smacked her pussy.

"Connul!"

"Come for me, Kyriana. Come now."

He slapped directly onto her protruding clit and she could do nothing but obey. She gasped, then screamed as the orgasm blew through her.

Her release was magnificent. Connul strung it out for as long as he could before letting her collapse fully into it. He wanted to see it again. *Would* see it again, preferably while she was squeezing his cock inside her. Not only was it beautiful to see, and satisfying to bring about, it refueled his power as sweetly as any release he'd ever drawn in before. He felt strong, energized.

Her arms trembled against him as he used his magic to open her bonds, both wrists and ankles. He scooped her up and strode to the bed.

"That was beautiful, Kyr. Stunning." Laying her on the bed, he leaned in to give her a kiss. He brushed his lips against hers and whispered, "Thank you."

Her parted lips curled up into a weak smile. "Isn't that my line?"

"You can thank me later. I'll be sure to tell you exactly how."

He summoned a warm, wet washcloth. A tiny moan escaped her lips as he wiped her down. He could have used his magic to make her clean and comfortable, but that would have been missing the point.

Gently, he rolled her over, his breath catching at the lovely sight of her reddened ass. He bent down and ran his tongue along one cheek, enjoying the sweat and heat. He continued with the cloth. After the orgasm, she'd said, when he'd asked her about what she'd seen him do the other night. His heart had nearly split. Not the crack of the whip, or the pleasure on Marielle's face. No, it was the aftercare she'd yearned for. The truth was he'd given Marielle the minimum amount of care he considered necessary. Not because he didn't like her, but because it was her Dom she'd wanted, and Len had been waiting to step in. So he'd murmured praise in her ear, holding her steady while Len released the straps holding her to the Saint Andrew's cross. He'd carried her to the couch, holding her until her breathing had evened, checking her eyes, her heart rate, massaging her wrists and shoulders a bit. And then he'd handed her over to Len and they'd all been happy. Minimal.

Done with the cloth, he tossed it aside and conjured some more supplies. Arnica gel and lotion. He didn't keep them in his room because he rarely brought anyone here for these types of pleasures. He didn't see any spots likely to bruise, but he used the gel in a couple of areas, just in case. He spread the lotion onto her back and began massaging

her shoulders, trying to recall her from the club the other night, to place Kyriana in the room. But he hadn't noticed her. His attention had been on the woman in front of him, strapped to the cross, and the Dom standing by, watching.

Len and Marielle had approached him once before, over a year ago. Pain wasn't something Len was into, either giving or receiving. Occasionally Marielle wanted it, needed it. As her Dom, Len had turned it into part of their play, teasing her with the idea, tempting her with the pain to come. When her need became great and he had teased her enough, he brought her to a Dom he trusted to meet those needs. When they'd approached him again, he'd been happy to supply the service they required. He'd enjoyed working with the girl, her tawny skin flushed beautifully under his whip and her cries were sweet music. He hadn't really been in the mood for sex, had been antsy lately whenever he considered finding that release with someone. It was almost, he realized now, as if he'd been waiting for something. As if he'd known that change was coming. At any rate, he'd been focused on what he was doing, and had no recollection of the crowd that had come to watch.

He finished the massage and spelled himself clean, then scooped the now boneless girl into his arms. She curled into him, a perfect fit.

"Still awake?" he asked softly.

"Mmmm."

Barely. He wondered if she was forcing herself awake, unwilling to deny herself this time with him. He shook the thought off. There was a lot that needed to be done, but he wouldn't leave her until she was asleep. He owed her that.

How much more did he owe her? She'd come to him, trusting that he would understand she was trying to warn him. Yes, she must have hoped he would then help her, but she couldn't have known for sure. Had she wondered if he would hurt her? And not in a good way? Mages were notorious for defending themselves and their homes and it was obvious she'd been connected with a bad mage, so chances were she'd considered that possibility. She wasn't stupid, that much was clear.

He needed to find out what Guardian meant. He'd been pleased when she'd understood his subtle push to reveal that secret when giving a safe word. The truth was, this little bit of advance knowledge probably wouldn't amount to anything. The immediate future would be more concerned with removing the spell on her than tracking down the magic abuser. But her triumph at being able to pass on the information had boosted her. He needed to find out who she was, where she'd come from, but mostly he needed to prepare for tomorrow. Most likely the people out to get him weren't ready to make a move. They'd been gathering information, sending her in to spy on him. So the first priority was freeing her from their influences. Then he could concentrate his efforts on finding out what they wanted with him.

Chapter Three

Despite a strong urge to pull the covers up and go to sleep with the warm bundle wrapped in his arms, he laid her on the bed once he was sure she was deeply asleep. He took his time, staying with her until she'd settled again, brushing her hair back from her face, pulling the blankets up. He set a small spell to alert him if she stirred, not wanting her to wake up in the room alone. Or rather, not wanting her to be in his room alone, he told himself.

Back in his study, he considered his options. The spell holding Kyriana hostage was not only disturbingly unethical, it was powerful. As far as he was aware, he and his brother were the only mages of decent power in the area. Magic-kind weren't exactly rare, but neither were they prevalent, especially those with high degrees of power.

He stared out the window at the dawn. It was a bit early to call his brother, but he was pretty sure Dain was in town, so securing his help for later in the day shouldn't be a problem. But it wasn't too early to call his sister, who was three hours ahead of Washington.

"Huh?" his sister answered. Well, okay, maybe it was still a little too early for her.

"Sorry, Sash, it's me."

"Why?"

"I've had an intruder, someone trying to spy on me. I wanted to make sure nothing weird has been happening with you and warn you to keep an eye out."

He heard rustling, followed by a low murmur. Uh oh, he hadn't considered that Sasha might not be alone. She was single right now, so far as he knew, and his brain just hadn't gone there.

"Sorry, hun."

"No, it's okay. I'm awake now. You had an intruder?"

He filled her in on the details. Well, most of the details. "I have no reason to believe the trouble is directed at the family, rather than just me."

"But you don't know one way or the other." She sounded alert now and he heard what he assumed was a soda can popping open. He winced at the nasty idea of soda so early in the morning. "Well, I can't say Guardian means anything to me beyond its basic dictionary definition."

"Right. I'm going to take the woman to Dain's today to remove the spell. Then I'll focus on figuring out what the hell is going on."

"Do you want me to fly out there?"

"No, I don't think it's necessary. I just want you to be aware and alert."

"All right. Promise to call me when you guys are done today. I want to know everyone's safe."

"I promise."

They exchanged goodbyes and Connul did some work on the computer, sending instructions to his staff, letting them know he wouldn't be in today. It was rare for him to take a day off, even more rare to do so without notice, and he spent an amused moment imagining the surprise in the office when they received his messages. As he sent off the last email, his spell activated. He walked quickly, almost jogging, to his room and eased the door open.

The light was too dim to see anything other than her shape under the covers. He moved forward just as she gave a small whimper. Nightmare? He flicked a hand toward the lamp on the far side, turning it on low. Kyriana's eyes were closed, her body racked with shivers, her face in what was becoming a familiar expression of pain. Not the pain he had given her, but the kind caused by the spell on her mind.

He moved closer, his mind racing. Shit. If the mage was activating his link to her, and Connul tried to interfere, they would lose the element of surprise. But he had no idea how skilled the bastard was. Would he be able to see her memories of the evening? If so, he would know she'd managed to betray him.

Taking precious moments, he cloaked his presence and his magic as much as possible, then cupped her face between his hands. She relaxed just the tiniest bit, even though he hadn't done anything but touch her. He wouldn't even have noticed except for the way he was holding her, but somehow it helped to seal his fate. He would fight for her.

Gently, oh so carefully, he sent his presence into her mind. Because he'd been there before, however briefly, he recognized the intruder. It was like a red haze, advancing through her. A slow fog that tainted everything it touched. He found Kyr's presence, a bright, shining gold, crouched in a corner of her mind, as far from the invading mage as she could manage. She was huddled around something, protecting it. He moved in slowly, careful not to alert the other mage, though part of him wanted to see what he could learn from it. No, now was not the time, and this was definitely not the place.

He'd never been so fully ensconced in someone's consciousness before, wouldn't have thought it was even possible. If he hadn't just had the incredibly fulfilling experience with her that evening, he might not have had the strength to do so now. Distantly he felt the strain on his body and wondered if the other mage was that much more powerful than he. Regardless, Kyr needed his help now, and he needed to stay invisible.

The light that was Kyr startled a bit when she became aware of him. The advancing red haze honed in on her, moving slowly but inexorably closer. Connul visualized himself as a black cloud and covered the gold presence, offering his warmth and security. She recognized him and relaxed. He wished there was a way they could communicate, but he was sure the intruder would pick up on it. He felt an odd pushing

sensation and realized she was trying to push free of his presence. He pulled back and was amazed when she placed herself between him and the other mage.

Yes, he'd intended to stay hidden, which would be pretty impossible while surrounding her. And yes, he'd been trying to think of a way to tell her that, but really. She wasn't supposed to be protecting *him*. At any rate, he would have to leave before the entity got much closer, or he would still be detected. He concentrated and sent some of his strength and power into the gold before him. She responded without hesitation, reaching back for him, surrounding him, until she encased him in a cloud of sunshine. Inside her deepest consciousness, he saw what she'd been protecting. Part of her memories from the evening.

Gods! He wouldn't have even thought it was possible, but here she was, doing it. He had more of a sense of her now and realized he'd been cloaking himself from the mage so hard that he'd closed himself off from her too. Now he felt her fear and her determination, as well as a spark of hope. He couldn't see the red fog from inside, but knew when her color darkened that they were surrounded by it. She shuddered and he felt an echo of her pain. The urge to attack was enormous, but he resisted. Instead he passed on as much strength as he could.

It seemed to last for hours but was probably only minutes. There was just no way that the mage could be so powerful as to sustain that kind of magic and mental abilities, from a distance, for very long. At last the presence vanished. He hesitated, and could feel that Kyriana did too, unsure of the sudden departure. When nothing happened for another moment, she moved away from him, her inner consciousness dissolving back into its natural state.

He withdrew as carefully as he could, not wanting to hurt her any more, but so tired he wasn't sure he managed it. He came back to himself, on his knees beside the bed, his hands still holding her, and slick with her tears and their combined sweat. His body ached as if he'd run a marathon. Kyriana was shivering, her arms wrapped around her middle, her eyes screwed shut.

It only took a second to strip down to his boxers and crawl into bed behind her, pulling her curled-up body into his lap. He laid a hand across her brow, not surprised when she tried to flinch away. But sending healing magic into her was different than entering her mind, and she calmed down as soon as he sent the soothing spell into her aching head.

When her physical pain lessened, she reacted by releasing her mental anguish. The shivers became full-body shudders and she tried to curl into an even tighter ball. He didn't let her though, instead pulling her more fully against him. He wrapped his own longer, stronger arms around her, threaded his legs through hers and tucked her head beneath his chin, sharing as much of his body heat and strength with her as he could.

She calmed, and they both gave in to exhaustion and slept.

* * * * *

Kyriana should have felt safe and warm in Connul's embrace, but she woke up still feeling sickened and filthy from the mind rape. She'd known that bastard had put a spell on her of course, but she'd never imagined he could enter her mind so completely. Though it must not be too difficult, since Connul had managed to do it too. Even though she'd given him her trust, given him her body, it had still shocked her, the ease with which he'd invaded her mind. Still, she'd sensed he was there to help, and he had. If he hadn't added his strength to her rapidly waning supply, she was pretty sure Evil Bastard—as she'd come to think of the man who caused pain when she even thought his name—would have had no trouble penetrating her memories and seeing that she had betrayed him. It was the thought of what he might have been able to do then that made her nauseous.

Easing out of the strong arms surrounding her wasn't easy, but the poor man seemed wiped out and only rolled over once she'd managed to extricate herself. She headed straight for the bathroom, hovering close to the toilet until she was sure nothing was about to come up. Avoiding the mirror, she turned to the shower. It was the kind you might see in a fancy home decorating magazine, the kind she associated with the rich and famous. There were two benches and four showerheads. One on the ceiling, two on one wall and one on another. For crying out loud, he had more showerheads than she had rooms in her apartment. She turned the water on and waited for it to heat up before stepping inside.

The hot water eased the last of the ache that Connul hadn't quite managed to eradicate. Thankfully he'd killed her raging headache, but the rest of her body had been so tense during the—

She turned her mind away from what had happened. She didn't want to think about it. It was just too bad she'd lost the effects of the amazing massage he'd given her earlier. She set one of the nozzles to pounding and let it land on her shoulders. *Don't think about it, don't think about it.*

Casting back, she focused instead on the memory of him releasing her from her bonds and carrying her to his bed. He'd been beyond sweet, murmuring ridiculous things about how well she'd done. As if she'd done anything other than give herself to him. Which had worked out quite well for her. She'd never come like that in her life. Of course, she'd only managed to have a few minor orgasms with partners, but even those she'd brought about herself paled in comparison to what he'd given her.

She reached for the shampoo bottle and that little bit of inattention, forgetting to hold her mind in one direction and ignore the big, horrible memory trying to take her over, lost her the battle. Her knees weakened and she collapsed against the floor.

Sleeping, she'd just been sleeping, so damn relaxed after the amazing experience with Connul that she hadn't even noticed the invasion at first. Dirty and slimy, his presence had just suddenly been there, and by the time she'd marshaled her defenses, it had been too late. In her mind, he'd taken on the form of a snake, slithering closer to where she'd pulled herself into a tiny ball, closer and closer. She'd wanted to scream,

but had been afraid of drawing his attention. She'd wanted to fight, but had had nothing with which to do so.

And then Connul had come. His presence had taken on the form of a panther in her mind, a huge black panther that surrounded her tiny form, warming her and protecting her. Like a weakling, she'd let him, until she'd remembered how important it was that Evil Bastard not know they were working together. She'd sensed Connul's desire to fight and his reluctant decision not to, which had spurred her into activity. She wouldn't waste their only advantage. She'd edged out of his hold, trying to figure out how to hide him from the approaching snake. She'd thrown herself around him, trying to tuck him inside as she had the memories that she needed to protect. It had seemed to work and he had helped, pulling in, making his presence smaller so that she could cover him while he fed her power.

There was nothing else she'd been able to think to do, nowhere to hide, no way she knew of attacking the snake. As he'd come closer, his filthy presence had sapped more and more of her strength, taking from her as he pushed his way around, invading her memories, her thoughts, her feelings. She'd felt his amusement at the way she hid, and his satisfaction at seeing Connul spanking her and driving her to orgasm. She sobbed now, as she'd been unable to do when she'd seen him sifting through the most amazing night of her life as if it were entertainment. Only the knowledge that what she was keeping from him was more important had helped her stay still and silent. When he'd finally spotted her in the corner where she'd chosen to hide, he'd seemed satisfied by her fear. He'd reared up, his red scales looking bloody, and disappeared.

Shaking off the horrible memory, she stood. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, then dipped her face into the stream, letting the warm water wash over her face. Was she crying? She didn't want to know—didn't want to know just how weak she was. Better to think the water was simply washing the memories down the drain. She resumed washing her hair. A small noise alerted her that she was no longer alone in the room. She glanced over her shoulder and found Connul watching her through the steamed glass door. He was naked and she stopped what she was doing, arms still raised, fingers still threading conditioner through her hair, arrested at the sight of him.

Did he work out for that body? Use magic? No, somehow she was sure that he did real things to get his muscles that toned. No magic, not even machines. Broad shoulders, perfect arms, muscled but not overdone. Abs wonderfully defined. Oh. Her perusal barely registered yummy hipbones before jumping ahead to the cock his hands were stroking. He stood still, pulling slowly on his erection. She watched for more than a minute before it occurred to her to check his face for his reaction.

Oh. She hadn't known heat had an expression, but now she could see. He licked his lips and her hands finally fell from her head. His lust for her was captivating. Could he hear her whimper? It likely explained the smile flirting about his lips. He continued to watch her so she scanned down again, eager to see the part he'd so far denied her. Longer now, redder, his cock pointed at her. She wanted to suck it deep into her mouth, something she'd never *wanted* to do before. Her mouth watered.

He took a step forward and cream ran down her thigh. She just stood there, watched him come closer, open the door. Steam billowed out, obscuring him for just a second as he stepped into the shower. The stall was big enough that he still had two steps to meet her, steps he took without hesitation until his hands came to her waist and his chest brushed her now-hard nipples. She sucked in a wet breath, which she then released in a rush as he lowered his head to hers.

The kiss was hard and deep and familiar. How could he be so recognizable after only one night with a few kisses? It was all so good, *too* good. What was she going to do once he'd helped her and sent her on her way? Mentally she shook her head. She wouldn't waste her time with him thinking about her time without him. He must have sensed her lack of attention too, because his hands slipped into her wet tangles and pulled tightly.

How had she never known how good this was? Maybe it wasn't the pain, maybe it wasn't even her. Maybe it was him. She melted against him, her arms going around his waist, her hands exploring his back. She hadn't gotten to touch him yet. He was warm and wet and she wanted to explore all of him. When he released her lips she managed not to whimper.

"Stay still," he murmured. He used the hands still holding her hair to ease her head back under the spray, working the conditioner until her hair was smooth.

While he rinsed her hair she decided to explore his butt and was pleased when the muscles flexed under her fingers.

"Hands down," he commanded, then narrowed his eyes at her when she pouted.

Then he started with the soap, his bottle of shower gel giving off a delicious aroma that she recognized as part of his scent. She breathed deep, focused on remaining still as his hands rubbed over her whole body, not missing a single inch. He knelt before her and urged her to lift each foot, making sure she was steady before he washed them. When he reached between her legs and cleaned all the way up to her asshole, she couldn't hold in the squeak. Embarrassed, she ducked her head against his shoulder. He chuckled.

"Good morning, sunshine," he said, his hands continuing their ministrations.

She cleared her throat. "Good morning."

"How are you feeling?"

"Much better. My muscles were sore this morning."

He sobered at the reminder of the attack. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop him."

"You helped. A lot. I don't think I'd have been able to keep the snake from seeing my memories of last night. They were so powerful and I..." She shrugged. "I'm not."

He heaved a deep sigh that sounded disappointed. Her heart stuttered.

"Connul—"

"No, Kyr. If you're going to be speaking nonsense, I don't want to hear from you right now."

He took her by the shoulders and led her to one of the benches. The stone tile was cold but she didn't complain as she sat. It warmed quickly enough. Nonsense?

He knelt in front of her, his face serious, spreading her legs wide so that he could come between them. "I want you to watch me," he told her.

She could tell from his tone that he knew it was hard for her, but he was commanding it anyway and she would do it. For him. She met his eyes, putting her determination into it. He leaned forward, holding her stare for as long as possible before ducking his head and giving her pussy a long swipe with his tongue. When he raised his head, she was careful to keep her eyes steady with his, despite the fact that they wanted to roll back into her head.

He smiled and she was pleased she'd made him happy.

"Now then." He set his hands on her thighs, his thumbs making small circles against her flesh.

"Tell me about last night."

She frowned. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"I want you to tell me what happened after you went to sleep. We'll see if you can manage to do so without pissing me off."

"But I don't know why you're mad."

"No?" He flicked her clit with the point of his tongue. "Well, I'm glad you told me so, but I'm not going to tell you. We'll see if you can figure it out."

She bit her lip and fought the urge to squirm against the bench. He didn't *really* seem mad, but how was she supposed to know? At any rate, she wanted to please him, not to mention earn more of his approving licks.

She reminded herself to keep eye contact as she thought back. "Well. I was pretty deeply asleep. It's been more than a year since I slept that well."

He broke her gaze long enough to suck one of her pussy lips into his mouth before looking back up at her.

"Uh. I—I was asleep." She shook her head. She'd already said that. A quick, sharp pain sent electricity through her sex, his bite to her inner thigh reminding her where her eyes were supposed to be directed.

She swallowed hard. "All of a sudden I felt really, really cold. It was weird." She tried to figure out how to describe it, his warm brown eyes encouraging her. "It's like, I felt this coldness in my mind and when I focused on it, I could sort of see, inside my own mind." Her breath was more of a gasp as he gave his approval with a slow suck on her clit. Then he waited for more.

"Well." Crud, how was she supposed to concentrate? "Then I saw him." This time her shudder was anything but pleasurable and his big hands against her thighs squeezed tight, sharing their warmth. The hot water still streamed on the other side of the shower, its drops occasionally striking Connul's back and head. She followed the path of a particularly large drop that rolled down his shoulder toward his nipple.

Another sharp bite to her thigh had her gasping in both pleasure and pain. She dragged her attention back to his face, flushing at her failure. But she couldn't really regret it. A deep breath almost steadied her.

"I saw him as a snake, but I knew what it was, who it was." Nausea threatened and she concentrated on his eyes, picking out the little yellow flecks in the brown, pushing the acid down.

"He'd never done that before?" he asked.

"No. I didn't even know it was possible, but he just slithered right in, and you were able to come in too."

He knelt all the way up on his knees and cupped her face in his hands, brushing a comforting kiss against her lips. "Shh, I know it was scary. I was scared too. I never thought anyone could do that, never thought I could do that. I'm not sure I would've been able to if I hadn't touched on your mind earlier and had your strength and energy fueling me." He searched her eyes. "Do you understand what I'm telling you? What he did is unusual and must have taken an enormous amount of power. Once we figure out what's going on with him, I *will* stop him, and you won't have to worry about anyone ever doing that to you again. If you had come to me and told me someone had managed to do such a thing, I'm not sure I would've believed you. That's how unlikely and rare this is. Okay?" He gave her one more kiss then resumed his position.

"Okay, Connul. I hated that you were able to come in so easily." He opened his mouth, to object, she was sure, but she continued, "What *seemed* so easily, but I was also glad to see you stalk in."

He leaned in to reward her but paused, causing her pussy to clench in annoyance.

"Stalk?"

"Um. Yeah. You were a panther."

He stared at her. Was he speechless? She blushed but was careful not to look away.

"A panther."

"Yes. With black fur."

"Hmm." He broke her gaze and dived in, his tongue spearing into her as deeply as he could reach. He fucked her for a couple of minutes until she couldn't stop from trying to meet his thrusts. His hands on her thighs held her still. When he moved back, she cried out in denial. He kissed her thigh, right where he'd bitten earlier, and she forced her muscles to relax, somewhat.

"Go on."

She watched him, trying to decide if she wanted to draw the rest out, try to get more action, or rush through it so they could move forward. Apparently she was easy to read because he turned and gave her a small nip in warning.

"So, he came in and I tried to be as invisible as possible. Then I realized our advantage would be gone if he knew what I'd done. He expected me to be with you, so I needed to let him see that I'd met with you. I'm sorry, Connul, I—" She tensed when

he shook his head at her and turned to give her an even sharper bite. This time, she couldn't meet his gaze. She deserved his punishment. He growled and she ducked her head farther, squeezing her eyes shut to keep the tears from falling. She didn't want him to think she was begging for his sympathy.

"I see you're going to need more help following my instructions."

He scooped her up, turned off the water and carried her out of the bathroom. She kept her head tucked into his shoulder, not sure what was coming. He was obviously irritated but what amazed her was that she wasn't scared. There was no worry that he would freak out and hurt her either physically or magically. She trusted him. Completely. Last night he'd not only taken her somewhere she'd never even dreamt of, but he'd come into her nightmare and given her the strength she'd needed to protect their secret.

He tossed her on the bed and when she landed, she was dry. Well, that was handy. She lay back so that she had a legitimate reason to watch the ceiling instead of facing him, worrying her lip between her teeth.

She didn't risk defying him enough to close her eyes, but she didn't look at him either, even when he took her arm and wrapped a sturdy leather cuff around her wrist. Why did that make her feel better? Safer? He repeated the action on her other arm then knelt up onto the bed, straddling her hips. She swallowed hard when he leaned over her, placing himself in her line of sight.

She wasn't scared, exactly, but she was pretty sure her eyes were as big as saucers as she waited to see what he was going to do. He brought her wrists up in front of her and clicked them together, using magic to attach them with a short chain. She had about an inch of separation. He set them down and held up his hands in front of her face so she was forced to watch the next item appear. It looked like a leather strap. He reached down and threaded it under her neck. *Oh god, a collar.* Though she hadn't been moving, somehow she became perfectly still. It hadn't taken her long yesterday to realize how much she liked it when he held her neck.

He pulled the ends together and buckled it snugly. She swallowed and could feel the leather tighten, but didn't feel restricted. He ran a finger underneath it. "Okay?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Tell me your safe word."

"Snowflake," she whispered.

"Now –" He stopped and his brow wrinkled. "Wait. That's not your word."

"It's not? Oh, do you want the other word?" She hated to say it, but if that's what he wanted, she would.

He shook his head. "No. You said Snowball."

"That was my cat."

His mouth was making strange movements. She couldn't figure out if he was biting his cheek or just trying to figure out what to say.

"Shall we just say that any word with 'snow' in it counts as your safe word?"

"Sure."

"You don't exactly have me convinced you'll remember the word if things go too far."

"You won't hurt me."

He just stared at her. "You trust me so much already?"

"Yes."

"Tell me again."

"I trust you."

He closed his eyes and brought a hand up to his forehead. Apparently she'd given him a headache.

"No. Tell me your word again."

"Oh. Snow...stuff."

Finally he seemed to have himself under control. He picked up her bound wrists and held them up to the collar. She heard a click and tugged. He'd attached the chain between her wrists to the collar, leaving her hands tucked under her chin, her arms squishing her breasts in so that the nipples peeked out at him.

"Sit up against the headboard."

She waited a beat but he didn't move out of the way. She used her feet to shove herself back, then sat up, coming nose to chin with Connul. Resisting the strong urge to lick and bite the dimple there, she scooted back more, in tiny increments, until she was against the headboard. He reached behind her and she heard another clink. Now her collar was attached to the headboard as well. No more ducking his gaze, apparently.

It didn't worry her though. She was having a hard time remembering why she hadn't been able to do so in the first place. He would take care of her. All she needed to do was tell him what he wanted to know, do what he told her to do, and everything would be fine. If he wanted her to watch his eyes, then she would watch his eyes. Though her concentration felt a little fuzzy.

He smoothed the hair back from her face and she had a moment of worry about what shape it was in since it had been dried magically, rather than naturally or carefully, with a blow dryer. But she let the thought drift away.

"Now. I believe you were apologizing to me. Why don't you tell me about that?"

"I was?"

"You were."

"Why?"

He stared at her some more, then moved so that he wasn't straddling her any longer. She missed his closeness.

"Spread your legs."

Well, that sounded promising. She spread them, then wider when he motioned for more. He sat between her legs, his own wrapping around behind her, leaving his torso close enough for her to feel his heat, which was good. Except, he was suddenly wearing boxers, which was bad. She only pouted a tiny bit, then remembered to make eye contact. His seemed to be twitching.

Since he was so close, she had to lift her head to keep eye contact, which reinforced the collar's hold. She breathed in his scent with every inhalation. She was finding it harder and harder to think, which he may have already noticed.

"Back to last night."

"That was the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me. Thank you, Connul."

Now it was his lips that were twitching, instead of his eyes.

"You're welcome."

She was content to sit and wait for him to decide what to do next.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Was it what you were expecting?"

"No. Yes. No." He smiled and she laughed and shrugged. "I guess I never really let myself think what it would be like."

He ran a hand down her cheek. "You were beautiful."

Her insides melted and she managed not to contradict him. Even in her own head. He leaned in and kissed her, drawing her tongue into his mouth, letting her explore and play. When he pulled back she tried to follow him but was caught short by her collar.

"Now. We have some things that we have to talk about. And I'm afraid I don't mean the part of last night where you were awake."

"Oh." Oh. He was right though, he needed to know everything in case he could use it later. She was just going to have to suck it up and finish telling him about it. And then she could forget it had ever happened. She took a deep breath and opened her mouth, then closed it and frowned. "Where was I?"

"I have no idea. Let me think. He slithered in as a snake. Just out of curiosity, what color was he?"

"Red."

For some reason this seemed to fascinate him. He watched her but he was clearly thinking, so she stayed quiet.

"What about you? What did you look like?"

She blinked. "Um. I was me."

He cocked his head. "What were you wearing?"

Her eyes jerked up and to the side, trying to remember. "I don't...I didn't really look at myself." Finally she got it, returning to meet his gaze. "Why, what did I look like to you?"

"Sunshine. You looked like a ray of sunshine, glorious and proud."

She stared at him. He stared at her. It was hard to think and she decided to attempt deciphering her apparent sunniness later, when he wasn't watching.

"Right. Okay. Well, he was suddenly there, and I saw him coming closer. I tried to separate the memories of us in your room from those in your office." Her stomach churned. She needed to explain so that he would understand. "I didn't *want* him to see, I swear, but I thought it was more important—" He growled and she stumbled to a stop. She'd irritated him. Again.

He took a deep breath and rotated his shoulders. Then he pinned her with his most serious look yet. "Kyriana. Do you think I'm stupid?"

She was shocked. "Of course not!"

"Do you think I'm incapable of understanding the logic that led you to make the decision you made?"

Oh. "Well, no. I just..."

He waited.

"I just...*I'm* mad I had to let it happen, so it seems reasonable you would be too."

"I am mad. But not at you. And I don't want you to be mad at yourself either. You're not the bad guy. He is. Let's agree to be mad at him, instead."

Oh. He seemed to be waiting for an answer again. "Um. That sounds logical." Maybe he would take that as an agreement.

The sudden and intense sensation of clamps on her nipples suggested otherwise. She gasped, then panted, pulling the pain inside herself, feeling the cream slide from her pussy. But she didn't abandon eye contact.

Without looking, he brushed a finger along the bottom swell of one breast. The light contact in contrast to the firm grip on her nipples was intoxicating.

"Who's in charge here?" he asked, his voice a study in contrasts, both mild and firm.

"You are."

"You said that you trusted me." He cocked an eyebrow at her, which she found incredibly sexy. As if he wasn't already sexy enough.

"I do."

"Then listen carefully. I'm not asking you if you think you did the right thing. I'm telling you that you did. And that if I hear one more disparaging remark from you about that decision, I'm going to spank you, a lot, but I'm not going to let you come."

Oh. "Oh."

"Now. Are we in agreement?"

She had to answer him, and she had to tell him the truth. "Yes, Connul."

"Good girl." He leaned down and kissed her. By the time he was done, she'd pretty much forgotten what they'd been talking about.

“I need to go speak to Mrs. Tremky. I’ll be back with breakfast. In the meantime, you can make sure you understand what each of your punishments was for this morning, so you don’t make the same mistakes. Got it?”

She nodded and sighed when he unfolded himself from around her and got off the bed.

Chapter Four

Half-amused and half-frustrated, Connul pulled on his clothes, observing Kyriana from the corner of his eye. She'd rested her chin on her fists and was watching him dress, a hungry look on her face. He didn't think she wanted breakfast. He hadn't wanted to get up, had wanted to do all sorts of things to her delicious body instead. Speaking of which.

Strolling back to the bed, he crawled onto the foot and made his way to her, enjoying the way her expression became happier and hungrier the closer he got. Her legs were still spread where he'd left them and he moved right between them and pulled her clit between his teeth. She squeaked and he grinned around the careful bite. He reached up to the nipple clamps and gave a small tug and a burst of magic, then backed away. Her nipples were now connected by a chain that was in turn connected to the clamp pinching her clit.

He walked back to the dresser, watching her in the mirror. Her chest was heaving and her frustration was palpable. That should give her plenty to think about while he was busy. When he was dressed in slacks and a lightweight shirt, he returned to the bed. He could tell she was working not to glare at him, so he returned the favor by being careful not to grin too widely.

"How're you doing, sunshine?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, tried again. "Well, I guess you could say I'm..." she squirmed, then whispered, "horny."

He nodded. "That's good. Comfortable though?"

"Yes. But I think I'm making a puddle on your nice comforter." She blushed.

He loved that she was innocent enough to blush at that, but felt it was important to warn him.

"I've laid a little spell in the room. If you get uncomfortable or scared or have any problems, just say my name or," he couldn't keep from rolling his eyes, "any word with snow in it, and I'll be able to hear you. Okay?"

"Okay."

He went into the adjoining room, leaving the door open just enough so that he could see her. He called Mrs. Tremky to join him, and spent his time waiting ordering their breakfast from the kitchen. When his house manager arrived, he nudged her to where he could keep an eye on the bedroom and she couldn't see in. It only took a few minutes to pass along his instructions. When she'd gone, he called his brother.

"What?" His brother didn't sound pleased to be answering the phone. Well, their family sure didn't seem to be fond of mornings. He was disgustingly cheerful, now that he thought about it, especially considering what was happening.

"Is that any way to greet your favorite brother on such a beautiful morning?"

There was a pregnant pause. "Have you been outside? Or even looked out a window?" his brother asked.

Caught. "Well..."

"Mmm hmm. What's got you so cheery this morning? And why did you feel the need to call and inflict it on me?"

"Actually, I have a serious problem and need your help."

"Right, I can see why that would make you disgustingly cheerful."

"I won't tell you why I'm disgustingly cheerful, because I am a gentleman."

Dain snorted into the phone. "Sure. Well then, why don't you tell me what the serious problem is?"

Connul filled him in quickly and they made arrangements to meet in the afternoon. He thanked his brother and hung up. It really was a good thing Dain lived close by, although he supposed he could have taken Kyriana to his brother or sister anywhere if it had been necessary. Mostly he was thankful that he had powerful mages he could trust without question. Magic ran in families, but large families were rare. He couldn't even think of another mage with two siblings. He could have turned to his parents for help, as well, but they were traveling in Europe.

He hung up and returned to the bedroom. Though he'd watched her the whole time, his breath caught when he came nearer. She hadn't moved, but her whole body was flushed and she was panting lightly. Gorgeous. Her body wasn't model thin. No, it was real and called to his hands and mouth. Her hair was a bit wild and untamed, and he thought he might like that better than the sleekly styled look she'd come to him with. Her nipples, peeking out from the clamps, looked like bright raspberries and he made a mental note to try them with ice cream for dessert one of these days. Her sex glistened with her juices and his mouth watered. He hadn't given himself much of a chance to taste her, but there was time. Because he had no intention of letting her slip out of his life once her problem was solved. No, he had too many plans brewing for her to let that happen, and plenty of ways of convincing her that she wanted what he had to offer. Her blend of bravery, strength, innocence and responsiveness was entirely too addicting.

He walked to the side of the bed, running his hand along the inside of her leg until it came to rest against her drenched pussy. He gave it a little squeeze.

"Well. Somehow I don't think you've been spending your time thinking about punishments." Her muscles under his hand clenched and he smiled. "Then again, maybe you have. Are you hungry, Kyr?"

She licked her lips. "Yes."

"Mmm." He sank one finger into her and she tightened around it. "What are you hungry for?"

"You." There was no hesitation in her answer and his cock gave a little jump.

"That's good. I like that. Let's see if you've learned anything while I was gone." He removed his finger from her and looked her up and down, making sure she knew exactly what he was doing.

"You look delicious—good enough to eat. Your hair is all mussed like we've been tangling in the sheets. Your skin is nice and sweaty and makes me want to lick every bit of you. Your pussy is swollen and pink, begging for my attention. Your lips are wet and I want to slide my dick between them and order you to suck me dry. Your eyes are bright and hot and they make me feel powerful. Because I'm the one that's going to satisfy your hungers. You're beautiful." He moved his hand back, laying it between her thighs, barely touching her. "Now. Tell me. Do you believe me?"

It was unfair, testing her like this while she was under his compulsion. But since when was life fair? His mouth went dry when a fall of tears slid down her cheeks, but he forced himself to wait.

"I believe you."

He thrust two fingers into her grasping pussy and kissed her, hard. She couldn't move much because of the collar and he felt her chains rattle as she tried to bring her hands up to hold him. Later. Later he would let her touch him, but not now. He pulled back from the kiss. "Come whenever you want," he told her as he removed the clamp from her clit. She gasped and he bent down to soothe it with his tongue. Her heels dug into the bed as she tried to force more contact. His free hand reached up and opened first one nipple clamp, then the other. He added a third finger to her and she cried out. He gave one last kiss to her clit and moved up to soothe her nipples with his lips and tongue.

He could feel her energy almost ready to burst. He wanted it, needed it, craved it. He knew only he had ever pulled this release from her, given her this pleasure. She screamed and her energy flowed into him like liquid sunbeams. She squeezed his fingers tight and her ass lifted up off the bed before collapsing back down. He kissed her but she was too tired to respond, which made him smile.

"Damn, sunshine. I think I'm getting addicted to you." He smoothed her damp hair back from her forehead, giving her more kisses and a small nibble on her earlobe while he was so close. He wanted to sink himself into her, spend the rest of the day on the bed, learning every part of her, inside and out. But he wouldn't give himself that pleasure, not as long as his spells were on her. They were necessary, but it made him uncomfortable to have that bit of control over her. The priority needed to be ensuring she was free from the other mage's influence. Then he could remove his spells and ravish her until they both passed out.

He reached behind her and used a tiny flare of magic to unhook the collar from the headboard. Taking hold of her wrists, he released the connecting chain, lowering her

arms to the bed. She was completely docile, eyes closed, a small smile curving her pink lips.

He removed the wrist cuffs and set her hands down, then removed the collar. She sighed. Completely adorable. He smiled and conjured a robe for her to wear. Actually, it was his robe, even though he was pretty sure there was a spare one in the guest bedroom he could summon instead. He stood and offered a hand. Kyriana took it, moving slowly, holding her arms out obediently when he placed the robe around her. She stood still, watching him as he folded the sleeves up over and over until her hands were clear of the cuffs. He ducked his head while at the task, afraid he might be blushing. So, some primitive part of him wanted to see her wrapped in his clothing. In his protection. He wasn't an idiot—he knew there were a whole slew of psychological issues going on between them. His desire to protect her wrapped up with his desire to master her was pretty obvious. Examining it in detail would be pointless, because it would change nothing.

He was who he was, and it just so happened that who she was called to him on a very basic level. Only part of that was because of the situation she was in, which he fully acknowledged accentuated the feelings between them. Regardless, the feelings were there, a bright spark in his soul that hadn't been there yesterday morning. Hadn't been there in longer than he cared to think. There were no guarantees that the spark would grow to anything more, anything permanent. But that was no reason to snuff it out.

With the sleeves shortened and the belt secured, he motioned her toward the door leading to the sitting room. She had to pick up the robe to keep from tripping on it. Why such a thing should strike him as impossibly sexy, he had no clue. He picked up his pace so he could open the door for her and she thanked him with a smile.

Not sure what she might like, but determined to give them both fuel for the coming battle, he'd ordered eggs, waffles, sausage, fruit and toast. He was mildly astonished that she polished off all of it except for the toast. She drank two glasses of orange juice but ignored the coffee. He finished only a minute or two before her and sipped his coffee, watching her enjoy a juicy piece of cantaloupe.

"I'm sorry. I should have fed you earlier," he commented, careful not to sound as wry or amused as he felt, in case she took it as censure.

Still, she blushed. "I was so nervous last night. I didn't really eat anything."

"Would you like more? We're going to be expending a lot of energy today."

"No thanks. I'm definitely full."

"How much do you know about magic?" he asked, setting his cup down.

She leaned back in her seat, a little tense. "Not much, but a lot more than last year."

"You know that mages need to draw in energy to replace what we expend with our magic?"

"Yes, from nature, right? But sometimes sex too. I never really understood that."

Of course, the fact that sex might play any part in magic was what was picked up on and bandied about until the rumors and theories completely obliterated the truth. It was human nature, he supposed.

"That's right." He took another sip of coffee, thinking about the best way to explain. It was rare for mages to discuss such things with the non-magical. "Nature is more...diverse than you might be thinking. And mages match that diverseness. We can all draw energy from the earth, but some of us are more in tune with certain energies than others. For example, some mages have an affinity for water, while others gravitate to fire. Some find the energies that people put off distracting and negative, while others of us thrive on it."

She nodded her head, understanding where he was going. "Especially sexual energy."

"Yes, for me, that energy is the easiest to connect with and I draw the most power from it. My sister, Sasha, on the other hand, would get very little result from a one-on-one sexual encounter. What she needs is the completely different buzz generated by crowds. For her, the most amazing high comes from a group of people that are in tune with one another, like a concert. She lives in New York City. Living in the country would be horrible for her. My brother, on the other hand, gets little to no energy from people. His connection is to the elements. For him, the most powerful draw is lying naked in the grass in the rain, or swimming in the ocean on a hot, sunny day."

"Okay. So you're all different. You connect with different energies, like needing different foods."

"Exactly. As we grow up it becomes obvious which direction we lean toward, and we refine those inclinations until we find what works best for each of us. It's hard to say if my being sexually directed, energy-wise, is what resulted in my becoming a sexual Dominant, or if my being a sexual Dominant directed my magic in that direction. It's a chicken and egg thing, and doesn't really matter, because it's all just a natural part of who I am."

"I thought your skills from the club would help me because..." she trailed off, looking frustrated at being unable to tell him what she meant.

"You thought my ability to wring pleasure from pain would help because you figured that removing the spell on your mind was impossible without triggering a significant amount of pain."

She swallowed hard and nodded.

"You were right, but more than you knew. Your pleasure will fuel me, make my magic stronger while I'm fighting the spell."

"Connul, do you think it will work?" The hope was still in her eyes but so was fear. He wanted to know what had happened, how she'd come to this, but all of that needed to wait until she could talk freely.

He reached out and offered his hand. She immediately placed hers in his.

"I think it will work. But we'll be careful, and we'll be smart. Which is why we're going to go to my brother's house. He's a strong mage and if anything goes wrong, he'll be there to help. Plus, our magics don't cancel each other out."

She chewed on her lip. "You mean like if you were most in tune with water and he was most energized by fire?"

"Exactly. As it is, I have no doubt that you and I can generate as much sexual energy as I could possibly handle, anywhere, anytime. So there's no reason we can't do it on his property, outside, where he can pull in his own energies."

A soft red crept into her face and he bit his cheek to keep from smiling.

"Outside? In front of your brother?"

"You'd rather inside, in front of my brother?" he teased.

She rolled her eyes at him, then took a deep breath and set her shoulders.

"Will you need me to do anything?"

He ran his thumb along the back of her hand. "Only what I tell you to do."

Her blush returned, darker than before.

"I know. I mean...other than that."

"Just for you to stay focused on me and when I enter your mind, you try and stay open to me."

She nodded.

"Kyr. I'm sure everything will be fine. But is there anyone you need to call? Anyone you need to check in with?" They were adults, sure, but it worried him that she had nobody looking out for her, wondering where she was and what she was doing.

"No, I told my parents I was starting a new job here, and that I'd need a couple of days to settle in before I would call them." She looked down at the table. "They were so happy for me. They know I've been miserable at my job."

Her body tensed even though she didn't seem to be trying to tell him anything. Just the thought of her job seemed to make her wary and uncomfortable.

He brought her hand to his mouth and bit one of the knuckles. "It's all right, sunshine. We'll fix this."

* * * * *

Kyriana shouldn't have been surprised when Connul handed her the pajamas to wear. It wasn't as though he would have women's clothes hanging around. They'd been cleaned and there was no evidence of how they'd been removed from her body. She stared at them for a second, wondering if he'd used magic to clean as well as repair them, or given them to someone to do laundry.

"Do you want me to go get something from my room?" she asked, waving a hand vaguely in the direction of the staff wing.

"Not necessary, these will be fine."

She took the bundle and walked into the bathroom. It was only as she started to shut the door that it occurred to her there wasn't really any reason she couldn't get dressed in front of him. Force of habit, she supposed. The door was nearly shut so she peeked around it. He was watching her with a grin. She stuck her tongue out at him and closed the door, absurdly pleased to hear him laugh.

She sifted through the clothes and discovered they weren't *exactly* the same as yesterday's. He'd replaced her plain cotton underwear with a white lace thong. One that should be with her slutty costumes, in the room she'd been given in the staff quarters. It only took a second to drop the robe and pull on the thong, pants and tank top, while picturing Connul rustling through her drawers. Had he looked physically, or magically? Run his hands over the stockings and corsets, or used his magic to pluck the item from its drawer?

She reined in her wayward thoughts and looked in the mirror to see what shape she was in. Not too bad, all things considered. No makeup, but for some reason she didn't look as washed out as she normally did. Her hair wasn't as sleek as she generally managed to make it, but neither was it poofy. Of course, her outfit left much to be desired, but in all honesty the tank top framed her small breasts well and she couldn't really blame her nipples for poking out into the thin fabric. And she didn't mind the look, not today, not for Connul.

Shoes could be a problem though. She was still barefoot. Frowning, she opened the door. Connul narrowed his eyes at her and she felt her own go wide. Now what?

"What?" she asked. No use worrying and guessing.

"Why are you frowning?" He asked it as if it was a trick question, but she had no idea what he was getting at.

"All of the shoes I have are heels." She stuck her bare foot out at him.

She was starting to get nervous about what was to come and about meeting his brother. What would the other man think of her? Had Connul told him the whole story? He would be suspicious of her, just as Connul had been, and she'd need to prove herself again. She took a deep breath. That was fine, he had a right to be distrustful. He'd be a fool not to.

By the time she hit the door to the bedroom she was ready to be interrogated again. It took her a second to realize she was alone. She looked back over her shoulder. Connul hadn't moved, was just watching her. Dropping her hand from the knob, she turned to face him.

"What?" she asked, again.

"In a hurry?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm nervous, Connul. I just want to get it over with." She bit her lip, then had to hold back a smile when his gaze narrowed on her mouth.

He shook his head with what she thought might be exasperation, then moved toward her. This time she waited, letting him open the door and usher her out into the hallway. She peeked around the corner to see if anyone was coming, then hurried to

join him. The last thing she wanted was to meet up with any of his staff. They made it to the garage unspotted, though she'd picked up the pace when she heard voices at one point. He escorted her to a black luxury sedan and she sank into its comfortable leather embrace. But she couldn't relax.

When he'd backed out of the garage, Connul reached over and took her hand. She should be strong and resist the need for comfort, but she just didn't have it in her. Right now, taking all the comfort she could get seemed like the best plan. A tight squeeze reassured her that he didn't mind.

"Kyr, how do you feel about doing this in front of my brother?"

"It's a good idea, Connul. I'm glad you have someone who can back you up and help us."

"That's not what I asked."

"Oh." She thought back. Oh. "Well, I guess it makes me uncomfortable, the idea of him watching us...together."

"But you liked watching at the club."

"Yes, but even though I liked the idea of what you were doing, I knew I would hate doing it in front of an audience like that. I didn't want to be her, right there, in that exact situation." She flashed him a nervous look. "Do you like that?"

"It doesn't bother me, but it was for Mariella and Len. It made the experience more for them."

"If it were different, if we weren't doing this because of..." She grimaced and gestured dismissively. "Would you want your brother to watch? Or to be in front of the club crowd?" She wasn't entirely sure how she wanted him to answer.

"No."

She breathed a sigh of relief. Okay, maybe she was more sure than she'd realized how much she hated the idea. Somehow it made it easier knowing that he was doing it out of necessity, not a fondness for sharing. His hand holding hers squeezed, and she relaxed a little bit more.

It didn't take them long to arrive at a driveway marked Graysn. They weren't far out of the city but it felt like a different world. Trees lined the street they'd been on until they turned down the driveway, and then it wasn't so much trees as a small forest. At least to her city eyes. It was a beautiful day and she rolled down her window, lifting her face into the sun, suddenly eager to escape the car she'd been so comfortable in only moments ago. It had been ages since she'd gone to the park or the beach.

She'd been so unhappy since meeting Evil Bastard that she'd let herself wallow in self-pity. Maybe it was time to acknowledge that she'd let herself become depressed, so she could do something about it. Of course, it would be a lot easier to work on if she was free from his influence as well. And if she had something—someone—like Connul in her life, all the better.

No. No, that was being stupid. She needed to focus on making her life her own again. Bringing some happiness and joy into it was her responsibility, not his. Of course, if he wanted to stick around and help a bit, she wasn't going to kick him away. She grinned and looked over at him, only then realizing he'd stopped the car.

He was staring at her and she blinked at his intense look. She wanted to duck her head, but resisted the urge. See, he'd already been a good influence on her.

"What?" She seemed to be saying that a lot around him.

"You looked happy. It looks good on you."

She felt her face grow hot, but she managed to smile at him rather than bite her lip, which is what she wanted to do.

"Thanks. It feels good."

He faced forward and the car moved again, but his thumb had taken up a circular caress against the back of her hand. It made her stomach jumpy, but she liked it. She settled back into the seat, enjoying the way the sunlight flirted with the trees, casting shadows here and there. They rounded a curve and came to a house about the same size as Connul's but with a lot more windows. Not that Connul's house had been closed up, but this was beyond open. And inviting. She didn't wait for him to open her door, but let herself out and rounded the car to join him, enjoying the feel of smooth dirt under her bare feet.

"Don't let me forget and walk into the house with dirty feet," she told him with a smile.

"I promise Dain doesn't mind a bit of dirt. You act as if you've been stuck in a dark dungeon for months."

"I feel like it. I guess I was letting things get to me more than they had to. Making it worse. Stupid."

"Human."

She laughed and looked up at him. "Yes. Thank you."

"I haven't really done anything yet."

Rolling her eyes at the ridiculousness of that statement, she bumped against him, playfully, just to feel his body with hers.

A man called out and she turned to meet Connul's brother, unable to keep from stiffening in abject fear at what she saw. The man coming toward them was not dissimilar to the one at her side. He was obviously Dain. But what held her attention were the two large dogs with him. Her mouth went dry and her legs trembled with the effort of not bolting in the other direction.

One of the beasts barked and she flinched, a squeak making it past her tight throat. Connul turned to look at her but she couldn't tear her gaze from the dogs. They seemed docile enough, but she couldn't be sure, needed to watch, wasn't sure what she'd do if they came any closer. They'd stopped but they were still close enough to get to her if Connul had locked the car door. She tried to remember if she'd heard the locks click —

"Hey." Connul stepped in front of her, breaking her chaotic train of thought. She was glad he was still there, but he was in her way. She took a step back and tried to look around him to make sure the beasts were still unmoving, but he took her face in his hands. She flinched and tried to get away. How close had they gotten? He wasn't letting her go.

"Kyriana." He said it with his strong, hard voice, the one she couldn't ignore even though it was hard to hear over her panting breaths. She forced herself to meet his eyes.

"Nothing is going to hurt you," he said, staring at her, promising her.

Confidence and surety radiated from him and she was able to take in a full, though shuddering, breath.

"Shhh," he murmured. "Keep breathing, it's okay." He let her face go and rubbed his hands up and down her arms. She gulped, trying to bring herself under control. Why did there have to be dogs? She was letting Evil Bastard win again. There was no good reason to let his horrible beast affect her opinion of all dogs. She burst into tears.

Connul picked her up and walked toward the house, and she hid her face in his shoulder rather than check where they might be. So, she was weak. It wasn't like that was news to her and she was just going to go with it for now. Really, she had no idea why she was crying—she was scared, not hurt. Her nose was getting clogged up and she was starting to get embarrassed, but she was pretty sure she wasn't shaking anymore and almost positive she wasn't going to throw up.

He sat them down but made no move to let her go. His hand smoothed down her back, then inched up under her shirt until he was able to splay it against her bare skin. His warmth seeped into her and she finally calmed down.

"I don't suppose you have a spell that could make it so your brother didn't see that."

"I'm afraid not."

She sighed and sat up. A washcloth appeared in his hand and he used it to wipe her face. When he was done he chuckled her under the chin. "Don't be embarrassed. Lots of people are scared of dogs."

A touch of anger started to wash away the mortification burning through her. "He— That— I—" She gave up as tendrils of pain warned her she was getting too close to talking about things she wasn't supposed to talk about. Her throat tightened again in anger and disgust.

"Hey. We'll fix this. Then you can tell me all about it and yell and scream until you feel better. I promise."

She offered him a weak smile. At least now she was too irritated to be embarrassed anymore. A quick glance showed that Dain wasn't in the room.

"He's in the kitchen. Come on, let's go get you something to drink."

He helped her off his lap then led the way to a bright and spacious kitchen. Dain waited for them there, leaning against the counter, his long legs crossed, arms braced

behind him. His brown hair was much lighter than Connul's and she could tell he was a couple years younger, but it was obvious they were related. He gave her a gentle smile when they came in, and despite her best efforts she could feel a blush creeping over her face.

She opened her mouth.

"Don't you dare apologize," Connul warned without even looking back at her.

She shut her mouth and glared at his back before returning her attention to Dain who was grinning widely now.

"He's annoying, but right. No need to apologize."

She tried to respond but literally could not figure out how to start a sentence without the words "I'm sorry".

Dain saved her by stepping forward and offering his hand. "Hi. I'm Dain."

"Hi. I'm Kyr. It's nice to meet you. I—uh, your house is beautiful." She'd better shut up, the apology was trying to work its way out of her throat.

He seemed amused. "Thanks. My sister helped me decorate it. What can I get you to drink? Water? Scotch?"

"Water is fine, thank you." She suddenly remembered how she was dressed and that she was barefoot. She refused to look down, refused to look down...damn it! Her feet were dirty from the driveway. Connul grinned when she glared at him.

"You said you would remind me!" she accused him.

He chuckled. "I did not. I told you it wasn't necessary." Grabbing the glass of water from his brother that she'd been too busy glaring at him to notice, he shoved it at her until she was forced to take it. "He likes nature. That's why the driveway's dirt, not paved."

"Maybe, but he probably expects people visiting him to wear shoes. And it's your fault I'm not wearing shoes."

Now both men laughed out loud. It was a wonderful sound and washed her annoyance right out of her. She blushed, *again*, and drank her water.

Dain gave her a long tour of the house, refusing to let her wipe off her feet first. She relaxed more and more and knew they were putting off the heavy stuff, giving her time to feel more comfortable with him. He saved the backyard for last, and she felt the change in him the minute they stepped out onto the patio. She had a brief moment to wonder where the dogs were, but let the thought go. They were being careful not to scare her, and they wouldn't lead her to where the dogs might be and risk a reenactment of earlier.

It was fascinating to watch the younger mage walk into his element. With Connul, she'd been too wrapped up in what they were doing to be able to observe the power coming into him. Dain raised his face to the sun and kicked off his loafers, stepped onto the grass. A breeze kicked up, swirling the sweet smell of summer around them. She

couldn't help but follow suit, closing her eyes and letting the warm rays soothe her nerves.

She felt hands on her cheeks and knew they weren't Connul's. Though she tried not to, she tensed a little, settling down immediately when other hands, familiar hands, rested on her shoulders. Connul kissed the crown of her head and she smiled into the sunshine.

"The sun likes you," Dain said in a low voice. "But you've been avoiding it. Resisting its cleansing heat." She felt a small tug against her mind and shied away. He backed off. Her eyes opened wide and she stared at him.

"I might be able to feel something about the spell that Connul couldn't. Information that will help him when the time comes." He said it simply, not trying to coerce her, just letting her know. Connul stepped in a little closer, moved his hands up to her neck. She let her head fall back the tiny distance so it rested against his chest, then closed her eyes.

Dain acknowledged her tacit agreement with a quick brush of his thumbs against her cheekbones. Then she felt him ever so gently breach her mind. It wasn't like the nightmare, more like when she'd first met Connul. A whisper of feeling, nothing she could latch on to. She concentrated, trying to recall how she'd tuned in to the snake in her mind last night, and suddenly she was there.

Dain appeared as a very faint wolf, practically see-through. Which was a good thing, because she might have freaked out at a more solid dog-like presence in her mind, even knowing who and what it was. He sniffed his way over to the red spot she'd noticed last night. How had she forgotten that? She tried to focus on it but a shard of pain stabbed through her head.

She cried out and lost her focus, opening her eyes as Dain released her face and Connul wrapped his arms around her, pulling her more tightly to him. God, he felt good.

"What happened?" Connul demanded.

Dain took a step back and gestured to the deck chairs. Connul picked her up and sat down with her in his lap before she had a chance to take a step forward. He seemed to like having her there, which worked out rather well as she liked being there.

"Sunshine?" he prompted.

"Oh. I thought you were asking Dain."

Dain shook his head. "I'm not really sure what happened. I'd just started getting a feel for the spell when I felt you hurting. I pulled out right away."

She nodded. "Last night I was able to sort of focus and *see* what was going on inside my head, so I tried to do that again. I saw you, just barely, and you were looking at..." she shifted uneasily. She wasn't feeling pain, but was uncomfortable. "I saw something, and sort of remembered seeing it last night. I tried to get a better look, and the pain hit." She paused. "Maybe if I go in prepared, we could get a better look."

"No. It's not worth it. I want you good and ready before we attack the spells. Dain, were you able to tell anything?"

"I got a sense of heat. I think maybe it's a fire mage's spell, and that's one reason it's pushed Kyr out of the sun."

She frowned. "I would think that the sun and fire would go well together."

Dain shook his head. "No. Fire isn't as impressive in full daylight, unless it's very powerful. A good fire prefers the dark, so it can shine brighter."

"Oh."

"Kyriana saw the mage in her mind as a snake," Connul told Dain. "Snakes like the sun."

"In nature, yes. But probably not in Kyr's head." He looked at her. "I bet you think of them more as slithering around in the dark."

"Definitely," she agreed.

"This is good. This means you can concentrate on some water magic to have ready, if you need to jump in and help us."

"And the spot I picked for us is next to the river. Perfect."

Her stomach began to churn as she realized the time was getting a lot closer. Connul kissed her temple, whispered in her ear, "You okay, sunshine?"

She was, wasn't she? Well, she would be. She would just have to be. Turning, she managed to snag his lips with hers. Everything was better, easier, when he was kissing her. He growled but kissed her with a sweetness that tore at her heart. He let go all too soon and stood them up. He turned her to face him and held her gaze with his. "Let's get this over with. I want to spend the night doing dirty things to your body that have nothing to do with this piece of shit or his spells." He set his wide hands at her waist, sneaking the fingers up under her shirt. "What do you think about that?"

She cleared her throat with some effort. "I think that's an excellent plan."

"Good." He swooped down and pecked a lightning-quick kiss on her lips. "It's a date."

Chapter Five

He took Kyr's hand and followed Dain off the porch and across the lawn. The property was large, and he trusted his brother to pick a spot that was completely private. When they hit the woods he conjured the pair of flip-flops he'd had at the ready. They fell at Kyr's feet with a small slap and he waited for her reaction. She stared down at the cheap rubber sandals, then back up at him, then back at the sandals. Her eyes narrowed and she shot him a wicked glare. Gods, she was adorable.

Laughing would probably get him smacked. He attempted to turn the chuckle into a throat clearing, but it didn't quite work. And, okay, she was more of a puncher than a smacker. That was good to know. He rubbed his arm so that she would think her punch had affected him. No sense pushing his luck.

She shoved her feet into the bright yellow plastic shoes and stomped ahead of him. He was almost positive she was holding back a grin. He reached forward and grabbed her hand, holding her back until they were walking side by side.

Though his magic wasn't as earth-bound as many, being surrounded by nature's glory filled him with a pleasant hum. It was warm, which was good. He wouldn't have wanted to stake Kyr out naked in cool weather. And it wouldn't be fair to her if he didn't at least take off his shirt. He'd loved the way she'd stared at his body, as if he were every fantasy she'd ever had come true.

He heard the water before they reached the stream. Dain came to a stop and Connul looked around. His brother had chosen a good spot. The grass was wild, but low and soft. A massive tree on the bank of the stream boasted long branches that went out over the water as well as the grass. It was easy to see where he could place Kyriana so that she would be secured, but he would have plenty of room to move around her.

She'd gone tense beside him again. He wished he could make it so she wouldn't be nervous, but she had good reason to be. Hell, he was nervous too. He'd never done anything like this. But he was confident in his power. She had only him to be confident in, and just because he'd shown her he was a good lover didn't mean she should take his word for it that he was a powerful mage. But here she stood, ready to do her part—to place herself in his hands.

He pointed at a sturdy tree branch and they both watched as a rope appeared. Winding several times around the branch, it then dropped straight down, almost reaching the ground. He chose another branch and repeated the magic. Beside him, Kyr's breathing picked up, her eyes watching the ropes sway. He'd considered binding her so that her arms were in tight to her body, giving her that comfort. Or putting her on her knees with her wrists chained to her ankles. But neither option gave him the

access he needed to her body. In the end he'd decided to have her spread-eagled, out in the open, giving him her full and complete vulnerability.

"Take off your clothes." It was time to start. No use dragging this out and letting her get more and more nervous.

She gulped and her hand in his got a little bit sweaty. But she squared her shoulders, pulled her hand free and kicked off the silly little sandals.

From the corner of his eye he saw that his brother had already stripped, unnoticed, and was sitting on the grass, his feet in the water, his back to them.

The tank top came off and the pants came down and both were set neatly on the ground. She stood before him, the sunlight dancing over her pale skin. He cocked an eyebrow at her and she frowned, confused. He dropped his eyes to her panties, then back up in time to catch her blush. His Kyr obviously hadn't spent a great deal of time fully naked in front of other people.

She hurried to add the underwear to her pile of clothes, then stood before him again, her hands fluttering against her thighs.

"Beautiful." He took her wrists and gave them a tight squeeze. Her mouth opened on a soft inhale. He spelled soft but sturdy leather cuffs for her, then leaned in for a quick taste of those lips. Long before he'd had enough, he pulled back and guided her to stand between the waiting ropes.

He held out his left hand and the rope on that side came to him. It was as soft and strong as he'd desired. He wrapped it around her wrist, over the protective leather, and secured it with a careful knot. He used magic to shorten the length, drawing her arm up and out until it was taut. When he'd repeated the action with her other wrist, he stepped back. Her arms made a wide V, leaving her neck available to him. Her eyes were steady on him, but beginning to get that glazed look he so enjoyed.

"Spread your legs. Wider." He knelt and used the ropes directly on her ankles, letting her experience the feel and pull of the coils. He conjured stakes from the ground that he tied the ropes to. Finished, he stayed on his knees, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. She smelled good, a little bit of sweat, his shower gel, a hint of arousal and something uniquely Kyriana. He ran his tongue along her ribs. Her stomach muscles tightened but otherwise she didn't move. Not that she had a lot of room to. He smiled against her skin. With a quick nip, he stood up and stepped back, surveying her once more while he kicked off his shoes.

She stared at his neck, but for today he needed to be sure she was with him as much as possible. He tipped her chin up. She gave an aggrieved sigh but met his gaze.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes. No. Maybe." She scrunched her face up in annoyance.

"It's okay, sunshine. The spells will be gone soon enough." He ran a finger across her brow, urging it to relax.

She nodded. "Connul. I trust you to do your best, but I want you to know that if it doesn't work, that's okay too. There'll be another way."

"And if that's what we need to do, we'll find it together." He gave her a quick kiss then pulled in a long breath, settling himself. It was different now, working with her, playing with her, being with her. Hell, it had only been a day, but he knew her now. Before she'd been a mystery, a stranger, a body. Now, though she was still a mystery and he could hardly claim to know her well, she was much, much more than just a body. He brought his hands to her waist and traced up her sides, enjoying the curves and the way goose bumps ran up her skin, anticipating his touch. She may be more than a body, but that didn't mean he didn't enjoy and appreciate it wholeheartedly.

"Mmmm," he murmured, leaning in to lick her neck up to her ear, nosing her silky hair aside. Her earlobe slipped into his mouth and he gave it a tug, then a sharp bite. He felt her ribs expand under his hands. He rode the movement then brought his hand up to cup her breast. With careful gentleness, he caressed the small handful while he sucked her lobe back into his mouth and brought his other hand down on her sweet ass with a satisfying crack.

She moaned and he soothed his palm across her rear. Releasing her ear, he began peppering her ass with smacks, moving his other hand softly between her breasts, caressing and worshiping. When she was lifting into his strikes, he stopped and moved in front of her. He tore his shirt off and tossed it aside, moving in so that her nipples brushed his chest and his thigh found her wetness. She squirmed, trying to grind against him. He pulled his thigh back in rebuke.

"I want you to stay still, Kyr." He teased her by bringing his thigh close enough for her to feel the heat, but not touching.

"S-Sorry," she panted.

"Tell me what you want. Tell me what you've fantasized about. The flogger, the paddle? Cat-o'-nines? Cane, whip? What did you imagine I would use on you, when you dreamed about us?" He replaced his thigh with his hand, cupping her wet heat. Her muscles drew in tightly, but otherwise she didn't move. His finger slid through her cream and into her.

"Oh, god, Connul. I— I—the cat."

Part of him felt bad. She obviously hadn't wanted to tell him, only his spell had forced the words from her. Normally he would have worked with her to discover her secret desires. But he couldn't be sorry about the outcome. Just imagining bringing the cat down on her sweet skin was making him grow even harder than he already was.

"Do you know how good you taste, sunshine?" he asked, pulling his hand from between her legs and painting a trail up her skin and to her breasts. He slid his finger around and around her breast, then followed it with his tongue before drawing her nipple deeply into his mouth. He gave a gentle bite at the same time he brought his other hand back down on her sweet ass. She cried out and he smiled at the needy sound.

Releasing her with a wet pop, he stepped back, the cat now in his hand. He swiped across her front a couple of times, gentle slaps to show her what it felt like. Down her thighs, up her stomach, around her sides to her back, he developed a rhythm. Then he brought the tails down sharply across her thigh. She cried out and he watched her face carefully. Two more gentle swats and then a stinging strike and there she was, falling down into that place inside herself where she was fully aware of what he did to her and yet completely immersed in the pain and pleasure that overwhelmed her.

He worked her for long minutes, partly because she was beautiful to watch, partly because he just loved doing this, but mostly because she deserved this pleasure before they got down to the business at hand. When her body glowed and her breathing was almost a continuous cry of need, he dropped the cat and moved behind her. With her legs spread out so far, she was low against his body. He dipped his head to whisper in her ear. "Are you ready to come, sunshine?"

"Yesss," she moaned.

"Will you come when I tell you to?" he asked, wrapping one arm under breasts and the other around her waist.

"Oh, god, Connul, please."

"I don't know if I'm ready to let you. You look so beautiful, just like this."

"Please, Connul. I need...you."

"You have me, Kyr. I'm not going anywhere." He let his lower hand slip down while he stepped in closer, his chest hair rubbing against her sensitized back. Her muscles clenched for a moment before going slack as she resisted the urge to lean back into him. He wanted to keep going, but she couldn't hang from the restraints for too long so he had to resist the temptation she presented him with.

He brought one hand between her legs and speared her with two fingers as he gripped a breast with his other hand, giving her an edge of pain. She cried out and he ran his tongue along her ear, waiting, waiting... "Come, now. Show me how lovely you look coming for me."

Her cry echoed through the forest as her cream slid down his wrist. Her whole body shuddered in his arms, her head dropping back against his chest, her knees going weak. He held her up so that she wasn't pulling against the restraints as he drank in the power of her release. It wasn't as intense as the night before since he'd not taken her as high, held her back for as long. But somehow, *because* of last night, and this morning, because it was her—a flavor he now recognized and desired—the power he was able to draw in was just as strong, if not stronger.

Now, he needed to move now, while he had the influx of power and she was still as connected to him as it was possible to be without him being inside her mind. He tightened his physical hold on her and opened his mind to hers, searching for the path that he'd begun to make between them. It was easier this time and he was pretty sure his entry caused her no pain.

The now-familiar sensation of sharing part of her consciousness washed through him. This time things were clearer. The golden fog drifted over most of the area until it spotted his presence. He felt her tense in his arms, but only for a second as she recognized that it was him. Slowly the light shrank in and solidified until she appeared as a sleek mountain lion. Was that form taken from his mind, or hers? Later, he could think about that later. For now he concentrated on viewing himself as the panther she'd described and found it was easy to give himself that shape and move toward her. He nosed her then licked at her muzzle before stalking around the space. At first he didn't see what he'd come to find, but eventually he realized there was a reddish, indistinct area that he kept shying away from. He focused on the spot at the same time he willed his physical body to act.

"Kyr," he whispered, nuzzling her ear as he twisted the fingers still inside her. "Tell me the name of the mage who sent you to my home."

Immediately her body tightened in pain. Though she made no physical sound, the cougar growled in agitation. At the same time, the red intensified.

"I—I—"

His own stomach muscles clenched at causing her the pain. Though he'd been whipping her only moments before, this was different. The red nearly solidified, and pulsed. There. There was the spell.

"La—" She screamed, unable to finish the word. Her knees buckled again, but he held her up, drew her body more tightly against his own while his panther nosed closer to the now brightly glowing red presence in her mind. He gathered himself, pulling his magic to the surface, and pounced. Imagining he was slashing the spell with claws imbued with magic and the spells he had created for this purpose, he attacked.

"Landon Guard!" Her body tightened further and she screamed in pain.

As soon as she spit it out he thumbed her clit and screwed the fingers that were fucking her until he hit her sweet spot. He pinched her nipple and kissed her neck, all while slashing at the spell inside her mind, throwing his own magic at it.

Kyriana cried out again, a sound of both pleasure and pain. The spell under his panther's body heated up. Forcing more power, more energy into the panther's body, he ripped and tore at the semi-physical manifestation of the spell. He could feel the shudders still rippling through Kyr. With a thought, he released her bonds and drew her down to the ground, kneeling behind her and supporting her with his body. The spell was losing its hold. He could feel the heat diminishing as his power overcame what had been left behind in her mind. With a final burst of energy, he destroyed the evil stain, careful to smother the ripples of energy created by both his magic and the spell's so they didn't hurt Kyr.

A sigh of relief was interrupted by a wave of evil so palpable he could almost smell it coming. The red snake slithered into Kyr's mind, and they were so connected that he could feel her desire to back away from it. Instead the cougar turned on the snake and

let loose a warning yowl that had his panther scruff rising. He placed himself at her side but a little in front, edging between her and the snake.

Power shot out at them and Connul answered with his own energy. He was weak from attacking the spell, but the snake was stretched thin, separated so far from Guard's body. Kyr's body was shivering in his arms. He reached deeper, needing to finish this quickly, when, inside Kyr's mind, a cool rain began to fall around them. Dain was lending them strength. Connul shot one last burst of magic at the snake, and it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

He released the two spells he'd set in her mind and took a long, careful look around to make sure there was nothing left inside her that was foreign. No lingering stains, from the spells, the snake or even himself. Withdrawing from her mind, he shoved aside the tiny part of himself that regretted they'd probably never share this level of intimacy again.

He slid his fingers from her pussy and opened his eyes to find Dain cupping Kyr's face in his hands, much as he himself had done the night before. He met his brother's look and saw the same astonished wariness he'd felt at realizing how vulnerable a person's mind was to a mage with evil intentions.

Dain rose and waved a hand, his magic returning Kyr's clothes to her body. Connul smiled his thanks and stood, worried when she laid her head against his shoulder but made no other move. Exhausted himself, he nearly stumbled. Dain put a hand on his arm and he felt the slightest increase in energy. Neither of them were healers like Sasha. While he could manage small physical issues, like bruises, extreme exhaustion was just not something they could easily fix. It was galling not to be able to make Kyr better, but he would get her back to Dain's and into bed. With some rest, both of them would be feeling much better soon.

Kyriana was quite sure that she'd never been so tired in her entire life. It was a bit ridiculous. She hadn't actually done anything, other than be whipped, brought to orgasm, and growl at a snake that was sort of a figment of her imagination. Why all that should drain her of every single ounce of energy, she had no idea. If she were feeling better she'd probably be mortified that Connul was having to carry her back to the house, though he seemed tired himself. But she couldn't quite bring herself around enough to care.

She was glad to be wearing clothes again, though the suddenness had been slightly unnerving. Dain had been so unobtrusive she'd honestly forgotten he was there while Connul had been taking her to that sweet place where thoughts drifted through her mind like a warm summer breeze and pain and pleasure were all she could focus on, besides the man commanding her body's responses. When the snake had disappeared and she'd come out of her head enough to realize that Dain was naked, kneeling in front of her, also naked, with Connul behind her, half-naked, she'd had the urge to laugh at the bizarre turn her life had taken.

Barely aware that they'd reached the house, she frowned when Connul set her down. She'd been comfortable, damn it. He rolled her over and fussed with the sheets, then untied the drawstring on her pants and pulled them off. When he pulled off her panties, too, she was mildly curious, but not enough to rouse herself and question him. He tugged her tank top over her head despite her grumbling, then pulled her close to him. She snuggled against his chest, his arm tight around her, and drifted off to sleep with the sound of his heartbeat a soothing cadence against her ear.

* * * * *

Warm tendrils of pleasure snaked through her as she eased awake. She was still tired but felt a thousand times better than she had when they'd dropped into bed. Though she missed Connul's body underneath hers, she couldn't complain as he'd repositioned himself between her legs. His tongue swirled about her pussy and her muscles all tightened against the need to arch into his touch. He growled, and she felt the vibrations all the way to her toes.

His nose bumped her clit and she gasped.

"Connul!"

He lifted his head long enough to give her a wicked smile and purr "Hello, sunshine," at her before resuming his task. He sucked her clit into his mouth and glorious sensation rocketed through her. A tiny orgasm took her by surprise, and apparently Connul too. He looked up at her with a wide grin. He would be soaking in the small burst of power her release must have given him. Was he disappointed it wasn't more? She hadn't really given much thought to the reality of his being dependent on the sexual pleasure and release of others for his power.

His thumb traced a circle against her thigh and she returned her focus to him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"All right. You?" Why was she suddenly feeling shy? It was ridiculous, but there it was.

He nipped her thigh. "Hungry."

Oh. "I'm sorry, Connul. I wasn't expecting that."

He frowned as if he had no idea what she was talking about. Then frowned harder when he got it.

"Do you think I was doing that just to give myself energy?"

She opened her mouth then realized the compulsion to answer was gone. A feeling of freedom swept through her and her eyes prickled from the emotion. She opened them wide in an attempt to stave off actual tears. Somehow being so wrapped up in what Evil Bastard had done to her had kept her from realizing just how hard Connul's spells had been on her too. She didn't blame him for them, had expected worse, to be honest. She'd broken into his house, into his private study, and instead of attacking her

he'd frozen her and zapped her with a truth spell. But it was over. She was free, of Landon's evil spell and Connul's defensive ones. It was over.

The tears spilled free and she brought her hand up to hide her face, but Connul was too fast. He had her in his arms and curled up against his chest before she could do much more than squeak.

"Sunshine, I swear to you that I have never, will never, bring you pleasure simply for the sake of refueling my energy. I'm sorry that—"

She shook her head and hiccupped. "No, it's not that. I just...it just...I'm so glad it's over. I haven't felt like myself for so long." Trying to bring herself under control, she sniffled and looked up, hoping for a tissue. He seemed to read her mind, because a box was in his hand instantly. She yanked one free and swiped at her nose. "I know it's not really over, that he's still out there and still dangerous, but..." She waved her hand and the tissue around as she dissolved into a fresh flood of mortifying tears.

He tightened his arms around her, which caused her tears to increase. She had no choice but to just let herself go with it. His soothing strokes along her back reminded her that she wasn't alone, but mostly he just let her get it out, which she appreciated. Finally the sobbing stopped and the flood slowed to a trickle before tapering off. Without lifting her head from its resting spot against his chest, she grabbed another tissue. She heaved a huge sigh and looked up at him.

The look of tender concern almost had her crying again, but she managed to hold it back. She opened her mouth to apologize, then thought better of it. It seemed to irritate him a lot. Maybe it was kind of insulting to keep insinuating that he wasn't smart or understanding enough to know that what she was going through was difficult. So instead she leaned up and offered him a kiss. He didn't move, didn't kiss her back, just opened for her and let her give and take at her own pace. It felt good. It felt really good.

Deciding she better take this opportunity to touch him, she slid her hands up his arms and across his broad shoulders. The muscles contracted underneath her touch and she shivered in reaction to all that strength being used to hold her safe and steady. She continued her journey while exploring his mouth and tangling with his tongue. Her thumbs slid over his ears and she moved her hands into his hair, entwining her fingers in the long strands.

She pulled back from the kiss and watched him, trying to gauge his reaction. His eyes were half-closed but studying her, and when she ran her tongue over her lips, loving the taste of him on her, he moved in for more. But he wasn't aggressive as she'd expected. The kiss was thorough but tender, his hands moving up her back in a slow caress. She squirmed against him, hoping his hands would move around to the front, or down to her butt, or...he nipped her bottom lip then pulled back.

"You okay, sunshine?"

"Yes, I'm fine." She managed to stop there, without offering an apology. To keep from saying anything more, she lifted up and kissed him again. This time his hands seemed to remember that she was naked and moved around to her front. She moaned

into his mouth when he gave her breasts a gentle squeeze and his thumbs played with her nipples. She ran her hands up his back and braced them on his shoulders as she tried to climb out of his lap without breaking the kiss.

He tightened his hold on her, refusing to let her up, but she wanted more room to play. Pushing against his shoulders, she nipped his lip. He pulled back and let her escape, but she didn't go far. Pushing harder didn't accomplish anything until he gave her a sinful grin and lay back on his own. Whatever, she'd take it as long as he was letting her have her way. She stopped for a second at the thought. Had she ever taken the initiative like this? Felt comfortable enough to ask for—no, demand—what she wanted? And with a Master, no less. But he seemed good with it so she resumed her actions.

She ran her hands down his chest and stomach, not pausing long before getting to his boxers. Why was he wearing underwear when she wasn't, anyway? Whatever, as long as they were gone, fast. She yanked and he obliged by lifting his hips and letting her slide the shorts down and away. Oh yeah. She'd seen him naked in the shower but hadn't gotten to touch his cock, which was bizarre considering how far she felt they'd come. Well, she'd come a lot, but now that she thought about it, he hadn't, not even once. That was about to change if she had anything to say about it.

She leaned down but then shot right past his groin and kissed his stomach. His abs rippled under her lips and she grinned against the taut skin. Mmm, he smelled good. A quick lick confirmed that he tasted good too. She half expected him to roll her beneath him and take over, but he remained mostly motionless beneath her, just running his hands along whatever part of her was within his reach. Exploring his body, she nibbled and sucked, tasting him everywhere until he'd had enough.

"Sunshine."

"Mmm?"

"If you don't put your mouth on my dick right now, I'm going to bind you to this bed and drive you crazy."

She paused. That was pretty much a win-win situation for her and she couldn't decide which way she wanted to go. He reached for her and she laughed and scooted down, taking him into her hand. She didn't wait, just leaned down and licked him from root to tip, then covered him with her mouth. He tasted good, like magic and man. He bucked up, driving himself farther into her throat. She tried something she never had, attempting to swallow a little around his shaft. It almost made her gag but she willed the impulse away when he cried out, loving that she could wring that sound from him.

Pulling back to a safer depth, she swirled her tongue around him then pressed it hard and flat against the underside. Her hands went around the base of his shaft and she sucked on the tip like a lollipop. With her mouth still busy, she rolled her eyes so that she could watch Connul. He lay back against the headboard, hands fisted into the sheets, watching her, his eyes hot and hungry.

She felt suddenly empty and gave one last long lick before letting him slide free of her mouth. He sat up and reached for her, pulling her over his body, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her as if he'd missed her for days instead of minutes. Sharing his own taste with him felt naughty and decadent. His hands cupped her ass, which was still tender, and she moaned into his mouth. He rolled them over and kissed her neck and that spot just under her ear, nibbled on her collarbone and moved down to her breasts. Without any more teasing he took one nipple into his mouth while rolling the other in his fingers. How could the gentle pulls be just as devastating as the sharp tugs he'd used before?

He moved his mouth over to her other nipple and licked all around it until she broke.

"Please, Connul. I need more."

"My pleasure." He drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked at the same time he ran his hand down her stomach, over her mound and inched two fingers into her. She arched up, trying to get more, harder, faster, but he wouldn't allow that. He kept his hand still, stopped sucking, until she lay back down. Then he resumed his slow, sweet torment.

His thumb rested against her clit, unmoving while his fingers continued to twist in and out of her. Leaving her breasts, he ran his mouth over her chest and collarbone, up her neck and behind her ear. He drew her earlobe between his lips and she trembled, remembering how that surprising act had felt earlier. When he sucked hard on it she cried out, a small orgasm taking her off-guard. He pulled his hand free while her sex was still rippling with release and quickly rolled on a condom. She blinked. Thank God his brain was still working, because hers clearly wasn't. He moved so that her legs were on his shoulders, his cock resting at her opening. He waited until she met his eyes.

"Connul." She hoped he could hear the begging in that one word because she wasn't sure she could manage more.

"Kyriana." Her name had never sounded so sweet to her, like a prayer, a whispered dream.

He drove into her and what little brainpower she had left fled. She was all sensation, his shaft hard within her, his body warm around her, his eyes intent on hers. With her legs over his shoulders she could barely move, could only scream for him. And scream she did as he catapulted her into ecstasy. He roared then, releasing inside her, dropping down on top of her and letting her legs fall to the side. She had just enough energy to wrap her arms around him and lift her lips into what she was sure was a smug smile.

Chapter Six

They woke refreshed and showered together. She watched him shave while she brushed her teeth and combed her hair. The shared rituals seemed intimate somehow. The fact that she'd never done so with her previous lovers was telling. She shook the thought off and led the way down the hall to the kitchen where Dain was cooking breakfast. Connul made calls to his office to deal with security while she set the table.

It wasn't long before they were all well-sated by the steak and eggs. Dain cleared the table and Connul poured them all more orange juice while she gathered herself for the coming conversation. It had been wonderful to have some time free from the complications of what was happening, but Connul needed to know what he was facing, and she had to figure out what she was going to do now that she was free of the Evil Bastard.

"Landon Guard," Connul said when he and his brother had resumed their seats. "I don't even know that name. You?"

Dain shook his head. "Not that I can remember."

"His company is Guardian International. He keeps a very low profile," Kyr told them. "Doesn't want to attract attention, especially from those he's targeting. And he's targeting a lot of people. Powerful people." She took a deep breath. "I work for him. I mean, in his actual office, this was the first time he sent me out to do...stuff."

Connul reached out and took her hand in his. She shouldn't let that simple contact matter so much, needed to be careful not to come to depend on such things. Telling herself so didn't help.

"I was sent to his office as a temp for a one-week assignment. A couple of weeks later, they offered me a job. The agency said it was a great place to work and I'd been lucky to be offered a full-time position. I hadn't really liked it, that one week. I—" She shook her head. "It's hard to look back and know how much I really felt at the time and how much is just hindsight. But I wasn't comfortable, I wanted to go on another assignment. The rep at the temp agency got mad, said this was one of their best clients and if I didn't go back, she wouldn't be able to help place me anymore."

"Do you think she was working for him?" Dain asked.

"Probably. At the time, I didn't even consider that, just got worried I'd be blacklisted by the temp agencies and would have to go running back home until I found a permanent job. So I went back the next day, and the next. And then I met Ev—er, Landon Guard."

Connul gave her a questioning look and she returned it with a sheepish one. "I couldn't say his name, even in my head, so I just started calling him Evil Bastard."

He grinned and lifted her hand to his lips for a little kiss. She felt her face grow warm and cleared her throat.

"Anyway, he called me into his office and offered me a full-time position. I guess. It's all sort of hazy. But the next day I was signing papers in the Human Resources department without even stopping to think about the fact that I didn't want to work there." She swallowed the sour taste in her mouth and took a deep breath. "It was like, things would happen and it wasn't until I looked back that I couldn't figure out how or why I'd done them."

Connul moved his chair closer and reached a hand over to cover hers, which had come to rest on her churning stomach. There was a tiny flare of warmth, and she felt better. She met his eyes and blinked at what she found there. His gentle touch was at odds with the fury written across his face. It should have bothered her—given her pause, at least—but not for one second did she think he was mad at her, so it didn't. Instead, it eased a tiny fear lurking in the back of her mind that other mages wouldn't find what Evil Bastard had done to her as reprehensible as she did. What did she know about magic? Next to nothing, certainly not enough to know what was considered acceptable between its practitioners.

"What he did to you is considered a major crime by our people, Kyr. He'll be stopped and he'll be punished. I promise you."

She nodded, relieved. It made it easier to finish what she needed to tell them. "Part of my job was computerizing his paper files. He'd put off adopting computer files until he figured out a way to make them magically secure. He has *a lot* of paper files, mostly about people. That's where I first saw you."

She raised her eyes to meet Connul's, but he just watched her, waiting. "He has a file on you. It has reports about your company, your house and staff, the places you frequent. That's why I went to Loophole with my friend when she invited me. I'd hoped you might be there." A quick glance at Dain showed her nothing, his face impassive. He'd seen her being whipped into a sexual frenzy, so it shouldn't bother her that he knew she'd gone to a sex club. She squared her shoulders and looked back at him. The little crinkles by his eyes suggested he was trying not to laugh at her discomfort, which she appreciated. Okay, she was being an idiot. She rolled her eyes and smiled, enjoying his answering grin.

Connul cleared his throat and she returned her attention to him. He seemed amused by the exchange. She felt that betraying heat in her cheeks again and looked down at the table, where he still held one of her hands. Focusing on the sight of her hand engulfed in his, she continued.

"He'd had a notation on your file about an artifact he wanted. A plan to get into your house was in the works, which is why your file was near the top of those to be entered into the computer system. The plan involved kidnapping Mrs. Tremky's grandchild, in order to force her to do what he wanted. I, uh, let slip that I'd seen you at the club and sort of encouraged him to come up with this other plan instead."

His hand holding hers tightened to an almost painful degree before he took a deep breath and relaxed his hold. With a last little squeeze, he released her and stood up. She watched him pull out his cell phone and walk into the kitchen. The blood drained from her face so fast she felt dizzy. She should have realized sooner that he'd need to warn his people. If something had happened while she'd slept, while she'd made love with him —

"Stop," Dain said.

She looked at him.

"Don't start blaming yourself for stuff, it will just annoy him. You're doing fine."

"I should have —"

"No," Connul said, coming back into the room. "No 'should have'. You're doing what you're supposed to be doing." He sat back down and took her hand again. "You're doing fine, exactly right. Just keep going."

"Right. Okay. So he gave me a charm to get into your study, and a description of this glass ball thingy he wanted. He told me it would probably either be in your study or in your bedroom, so I needed to be prepared to be invited there. Then he sent me out with his horrible assistant to get clothes that would get me the invitation."

"Why did he expect you to break into my study but be invited into my bedroom? Why not sneak into my bedroom?"

She blinked at him. "Um. I have no idea. He got all kinds of icky whenever he talked about me being in your room, so maybe it was more about watching those things in my mind, rather than retrieving the ball." Her stomach churned at the thought and Connul was quick to notice her grimace and put his free hand on her belly. She was able to swallow down the bile and felt better.

"Anyway, he got me an interview with Mrs. Tremky and I got the job. I —"

"Wait," Connul interrupted. "I don't even know what you were hired for."

Unable to meet his eyes, she looked back down at where their hands were clasped. "The mural."

"What?" he asked, leaning in closer.

She cleared her throat and raised her voice. "The mural you want painted in your sunroom. Mrs. Tremky hired me to paint it. She added room and board if I promised to get it done in a month." Biting her lip, she looked up.

"You're an artist?" he asked, surprise in his voice.

Her eyes dropped back down as she shook her head and felt the blush staining not just her cheeks this time, but her neck and chest too.

"Kyr, look at me." His commanding tone gave her the strength to glance up, though she kept her head down. "Are you embarrassed because you lied on your application?"

He didn't sound mad. In fact, he sounded kind of amused. And was that a twitch in his lips? Was he *laughing* at her?

Her blush disappeared and her head came up fast as she glared at him. "Well, excuse me for being ashamed to lie my way into a job and for deceiving Mrs. Tremky," she huffed.

Now he did laugh, out loud, his brother joining him. "Did you ever plan on picking up a brush? Accost my wall with your pretend ability?"

"Of course not, I planned right from the start to wait for you in your office. For some reason, if you weren't around, I figured I could primer the walls." She gave him a wry grin. It did seem silly now, but she'd hated applying for a job she knew she couldn't do, hated pretending to his house manager that she was eager to take the position.

"Okay. Well. Anyway, he sent me, Mrs. Tremky left me to my room to get settled, and once the house was quiet I went to your study to wait for you."

He brushed his thumb over her knuckles. "That was brave of you. I'm guessing Guard was the only mage you'd had any contact with up to that point?"

She nodded, then shook her head. "It wasn't brave, I was terrified, but I didn't know what else to do."

"Silly, that's what being brave is all about. You didn't know if I would be an evil ass like him, maybe make things worse."

"Well, I did have the reports that showed nothing bad or scary. Everything indicated that you were a pretty good guy. Loyal employees, friends and family." She cleared her throat. "And then there was the club. I had just the vaguest plan, until I saw you that night." Squirming in her chair, she forced herself to continue, wanting him to know what she'd been feeling, thinking, to come to him. "Seeing you with her, I don't know. It should have scared me, I suppose, but it made everything so clear. All I had to do was go to you, get you to understand what was happening, and...well, you could fix it." She shook her head. "Seems stupid and naïve now," she admitted.

"How can it, when it worked?" he asked.

She blinked. Well, that was a good point. "I don't know. I guess I just feel lucky that it did. I didn't really think it would, just hoped. I figured things couldn't really get any worse, although that's so not true. But I needed to do something, take some action, you know?"

He leaned in and kissed her, reminding her that whatever her hopes or fears had been, it had worked out. She could handle whatever came next, because this man had helped free her from Evil Bastard's hold. While a growing part of her hoped there would be more, hoped he would ask her to stay in his life, she knew that she could at least be content that she'd had this much of him.

"I still think it's strange we haven't heard anything from or about him," Dain said.

Kyr nodded. "He puts on a proper public face. His employees know better, but we can't say anything or do anything. It's like he traps us in there and then treats us like his own personal playground." She swallowed hard. "It's the craziest thing. I didn't take a

single sick or vacation day all year. It's like, no matter how miserable it was to be there, I couldn't *not* be there."

Dain nudged her orange juice closer to her and she took a drink. "I'd worked there about two weeks when I knew he was evil. One of my coworkers, a nice, shy guy I'd had lunch with a number of times, raped my officemate." Connul's fingers clenched around hers. "He killed himself the next day. I overheard Guard and his assistant, Tran. Tran was handing Guard some money, saying something about thinking the guy would hold out a bit longer. They'd made a bet on how long it would take him to kill himself. I think Guard somehow made Kyle rape Trish."

"And you've lived through this kind of madness for a year?" Dain asked, shaking his head.

"You can see why I was willing to risk Connul's reaction. Something had to change. It just had to."

Connul got to his feet and gave her a kiss. "You made a brilliant decision. We're going to fix this. I need to call the Society, get some help out here."

"You don't think we can handle this ourselves? It's our property," Dain pointed out.

"It's not so much a matter of being able to handle it, as having witnesses that it needs to be handled. I don't want anyone claiming afterwards that *we* broke the laws by harming Guard."

Dain nodded his understanding.

"What is the Society?" Kyr asked Dain when Connul had left.

"The Society of Mages. The old families banded together to create some form of law. While we try not to be too autocratic, it's important that the many stay together and keep the few bad apples from screwing up our reputation with non-magical humans. We get a bad reputation and things could get sticky for us real quick."

"I had a teacher once who said that mages very nearly became second-class citizens in the nineteen-fifties."

Dain shuddered. "You had a liberal teacher to include that in your studies. Most people don't know how close that came to be. The Society had to get its shit together at that point, to protect our people, both from outsiders and from the bad seeds within. Which is why people like Guard are dealt with harshly and rather quickly."

Connul returned in time to hear his brother speaking. "Yes, which is why Keller will be here tonight and I've been ordered to do nothing offensive until he arrives. Defense only."

Dain scowled but nodded. "Keller is good, we went to summer camp together."

Kyr giggled. The idea of a bunch of mage children in summer camp was just a little too...*Harry Potter* for her. When both men just stared at her she tried to rein it in. "So, um. The Society of Mages? They couldn't come up with something a little more creative than that?"

Connul rolled his eyes. "I don't think being creative is what they were worried about when they formed." He reached out and took her hand, twining his fingers through hers. "We need to do a spell this morning, to make sure that he can't spy on us magically or pinpoint our location. I don't want to be trapped in the house until Keller gets here."

Looking thoughtful, Dain cleared his throat. "Right. And there's one other thing I think we should talk about."

They both turned to look at Kyr, which made her sit up straight. Now what?

"The dogs," Dain said softly. "I think you need to tell us why you're so scared of dogs."

She had to swallow hard to keep the spike of nausea from burning its way up her throat.

"Unless I'm wrong, and it has nothing to do with Guard," Dain added quickly, probably concerned at the way the blood had fled her face.

Of course it had something to do with Guard. Mostly. And they probably did need to know about it. To be prepared. Damn.

She took a deep breath, then blurted, "Guard has a Rottweiler a really well-trained one that he uses to terrorize people when they aren't doing what he wants them to do and he had it sit on me once for half an hour, snarling and snapping at my face and I thought it was going to eat my face."

She got it all out in one breath then jumped from her chair so fast it fell over behind her. She tried to turn and run to the bathroom just in case she humiliated herself by actually throwing up, but Connul still had her hand, damn it, and tugged her back around.

"Let go of me," she demanded, pounding her fist against his chest.

"Kyr, you're safe. Nobody here is going to hurt you, the dogs aren't in the house. You're safe." He put his hands on her head and leaned in so his forehead was touching hers. "Safe, I promise."

She hiccupped, trying to drag in a breath and let it out all at the same time. Finally she was able to take a deep breath and let it out, slowly. "Sorry. It's really scary, the way the dog does whatever he wants. Guard doesn't even have to say anything out loud."

"Some of us have an affinity with animals," Dain said. "I guess it can go bad, just as easily as anything else."

"I'm sorry, Dain, I don't—"

She had to stop when Connul put his finger over her lips. Again. So he didn't like her apologizing. What was new? One quick look at Dain showed that he was amused by their display, so she guessed he wasn't irritated.

"Thank you for telling us. I know it was hard, but it will make it easier to be prepared." Connul turned to Dain. "Will you power the cloaking spell?"

"Yes, that's a good idea. But we'll need to go outside. Let me call the dogs into my room."

He was gone before Kyr could figure out how to apologize for that without actually saying the words "I'm sorry", which was probably for the best. Plus, he didn't really seem as if he needed to hear them. Still, she hated that his beloved animals were getting shunted around their house just because she was there.

Leaning her head against Connul's shoulder, she sighed. "I really need to get over this."

"Apologizing all the time for things that aren't your fault?"

She scoffed. "Being afraid of dogs that haven't specifically threatened me."

He put his arm around her shoulder. "We'll come back here, when this is all over. Dain has an amazing connection with his dogs. I think you'll like the give-and-take that mages and animals can share when they respect and love each other."

Dain appeared on the other side of the glass doors and beckoned for them to join him. They went out on the grass, still slightly damp with dew. It was a cool, crisp morning, the sun seeming to reach toward them as they sat down, Connul across from Dain and Kyr in Connul's lap.

She tilted her head back to rest on his shoulder and closed her eyes, drinking in the rays. The last of her tension melted away and she relaxed into him.

Nobody said anything for a time, and she guessed that Dain was doing much the same thing, soaking in the energy he would receive from the sun, the earth, the breeze tickling across her face, the moisture in the grass. She was nearly dozing when Connul ran his hands down her arms until his fingers twined with hers. Another set joined them and she realized that Dain had taken both their hands in his.

He spoke in a low voice, almost under his breath, but Kyr didn't even try to hear what he was saying. Somehow it didn't really seem to be any of her business, as if he were forced to have a private conversation with nature despite the fact that strangers were there. It should bother her, worry her, that she was letting someone do a spell on her so quickly after being released from the last ones. But the very people who rescued her were the ones performing it and besides, they were putting it on themselves as well. She felt the slight tingle of magic brush over her exposed skin and sink just below the surface. It was especially strong along her fingers and hands, where they were all joined.

Finally Dain pulled his hands loose and she opened her eyes. He looked good soaked in the power of the sun and the earth. And he looked pleased. "The sun was happy to provide power for you. She thinks of you as one of hers."

Kyr blinked at that. "The sun is a she?"

He smiled, a brilliant smile. "Yes. And she doesn't claim just anyone."

"Okay. Um, thanks?"

He laughed and leaned in to give her a quick kiss on the lips, then hopped up and strode away. Connul hadn't moved so she just stayed there, resting in his arms, content.

Eventually he shifted and she knew they needed to get going. She closed her eyes once more and took a deep breath, enjoying the heat on her face. When she opened them, she turned her head so she could see Connul. He met her look and smiled, then gave her a kiss. Not a quick peck as Dain had done, but a claiming kiss, meant to drive away the memory of the last man who'd dared touch her lips. When he broke the kiss she just smiled and rolled her eyes, then stood up.

They went back into the kitchen where Dain had sun tea poured. It tasted like heaven and Kyr asked for a second glass. When she was through, Connul took her empty glass and his to the sink. "We need to get back. Guard will be forming a plan and I'd like to bolster the house's defenses before he manages it. You can tell me what he knows about the Orb on the way." He turned to his brother. "Maybe you should come with us."

"I need to strengthen my own defenses. I'll be here, though, close enough to come if you need help. Whatever happens, we can't let someone like that have the Orb."

They looked deadly serious and Kyr knew her instincts had been right. Keeping the object out of Evil Bastard's hands was very important. Of course, the fact that she'd been able to protect a child from being kidnapped at the same time had made the decision to push forward with her plan almost easy.

They were on the road quickly and Connul resumed their conversation. "What does he know about the Orb?"

"I don't know. Your file only mentioned that you had it, and referenced another file, but didn't give any details. I tried to get that file too, but he's keeping it close."

"Damn," he muttered, taking the turn off the end of the driveway and onto the main road. He glanced at her. "You're not going to ask what it is?"

She shrugged. "It's not really any of my business, and if you tell me it's important to keep it out of his hands, I'll believe you. Just knowing he wants it that badly makes me want to do what I can to keep him from getting it."

"The fact that he was so powerful, even from a distance, has me worried. He has to be doing something to boost his powers, but I'm not sure what. Whatever it is, it's not good, I can tell you that. The Orb would help him do that. It can act like a battery, store a mage's power so that he can draw on it later. It's been in our family for a very long time. It was created for a relative who had a hard time building up his power, due to his particular...*bent*. I don't even know what it was, now that I think about it, but whatever, it made it hard for him to refuel. So they made the Orb, allowing him to double his supply, I guess you could say. Now that he's long gone, we hardly ever use it, because we don't have cause to do things that require more power than we can easily acquire and hold ourselves. My parents left it in my keeping when they went to Europe last year on an extended vacation."

There was no stopping the shiver that coursed through her at the thought of Evil Bastard having even more power than he already had. He'd bowled her over without breaking a sweat. The battle that he and Connul had fought in her mind had been hard, and yet he hadn't even been there in the flesh.

Connul reached over and took her hand, an action that never failed to calm her. "Don't worry, sunshine. He won't win."

She needed to believe in him, otherwise she'd go crazy. Besides, he'd seen Guard at work, knew what he was up against, and was still confident. Putting her trust in him had worked so far, she would continue to do so. At least as far as dealing with Evil Bastard. It was time, though, to start being a little more careful with her heart. It had been so easy, so *necessary*, to give herself to him fully while fighting the spell in her mind. Now, though, she needed to pull back, save herself some heartache. He hadn't said anything to her about sending her home, but neither had he said anything about her staying. He knew she wasn't going to stay on as his employee, his muralist, so what was he thinking? She didn't know, but she couldn't assume it was in her favor. Thank God she had a plan in place. It would be too dangerous to go home until Guard was defeated, but she had a place he would have no reason to know about, a place where she could retreat and figure out what she was going to do next.

"You're awfully quiet over there," he said, pulling into the garage and turning off the car.

She smiled at him and gave a little shrug.

"Come on. We'll get you settled in. You can take a nap, if you like."

He got out of the car before she could question him. She opened her door and he was there, holding out a hand to help her out. "Settled in?" she asked.

The house was quiet though she knew various employees were going about, doing their jobs. "I had your stuff put in the guest room closest to mine. The staff quarters are too far away." He glanced over his shoulder. "Of course, I hope you won't be sleeping in your own bed."

Her thoughts swirled as he pulled her toward his room. He wanted her to stay. And hoped she'd stay in his bed, but had a different room prepared for her. That was good, right? It wasn't as if she'd been hoping he'd ask her to move in with him, as a lover. That would be ridiculous, they'd only been together because of the extraordinary circumstances.

She followed along into the bedroom down the hall from his. Her careful determination to take what he was willing to give and not have unreasonable expectations fled at the sight that greeted her. The bed was made up in a lovely blue and green spread, with soft green pillows against the headboard. At least, she thought it was lovely, which is why she'd purchased it when she'd moved into her apartment. A sense of unreality settled over her as she walked to the closet, opening it to confirm her suspicions. There, hanging more neatly than they had in her apartment, were her

clothes. Her brain had ceased functioning and she simply stood and stared at her belongings in someone else's house.

Warm hands settled on her shoulders and began to knead the now-tense muscles. She jerked and spun around.

As if the suddenly tense muscles weren't enough, the look on Kyr's face when she turned on him told him something was seriously wrong. He'd seen her scared, sad, hopeful, blissful. Now it was obvious he hadn't seen her angry. Not really. He actually took a step back, brows furrowing in confusion.

"Kyr, what's wrong?"

"You had my things brought here?" she asked, almost casually.

He knew it was a trick question, but couldn't quite figure out where the trap lay. So he answered simply. "Yes."

Of course, the real answer was a bit more involved than that. He needed to know she was safe, which meant he needed her to stay in his house, at least until this thing with Guard was over. Which meant he could ignore the biting need in his gut to keep her here, in his house, in his bed, for reasons that had absolutely nothing to do with anyone but her.

She ripped her tank top over her head and began to drag her pants down. Despite the fact that she was baring herself to him, he didn't think it was a good sign.

Turning her back to him, presenting him with her now barely marked ass, which called to him on so many levels, was definitely not a good sign. She confirmed this by tearing a shirt and slacks from the hangers in front of her.

She stomped over to a dresser and began yanking drawers open until she found the one with her underclothes.

"Sweetheart, um, what's wrong?" He tried to stay caring and supportive when what he really wanted to do was rip the clothes out of her hands, put her over his shoulder and take her to his room, his bed. If he had to tie her down to keep her there, well, that wasn't a problem.

"You had my things brought here." She pulled on panties and a bra before continuing. "Did you ask me if I wanted to stay? Did you ask me if I wanted my things? Did you ask me—" She had pulled her pants on but paused to point a finger at him. "If I would like strangers to enter my home and rummage through my belongings?"

Her finger pulled back and he resisted the very strong urge to capture it before it got away. "Kyr, there was no way I was letting you leave this house when that madman is still out there. You do realize he's not just going to let you get away with betraying him?"

The blouse nearly tore as she jerked it on and began working the buttons. She barely spared him a glance, but what she did send his way was full of fury. "Of course I

know that. Despite what you seem to think about me, I'm not a complete moron. Which means I'm perfectly capable of choosing which items to remove from my own home."

"Kyr," he started, but wasn't sure what to say next. She finished buttoning her blouse and returned to the closet, grabbing a pair of sandals and a purse. Just where did she think she was going? She stalked to a chair by the bed and sat down to put the shoes on.

"Kyriana," he said, using his most commanding tone.

She looked up at him, her face draining of all color. Okay, that had been a mistake.

"I'm so sorry I gave you the impression I was looking for someone to run my life for me." Her voice was soft but he was under no delusion that she was calm.

"I don't think that, Kyr, I—"

"Apparently you do. Sorry, my fault. But don't worry, I'll be out of your hair in a few minutes. You can just return my stuff to where it belongs."

She moved to open the door but he got there first. He stepped in front of it and crossed his arms over his chest. No way was he letting her run. Not while thinking something ridiculous like that.

"I don't think you're a moron. But it's not safe for you to go home right now. Besides..." He uncurled his arms and put his hands on her shoulders, moving them in to cup her neck.

Though she'd just been standing there, a carefully blank look on her face, his action froze her. She went absolutely still except for the fluttering at the pulse point in her neck. He caressed it with his thumb and watched her carefully, waiting for her features to soften, for the breath to escape her with a soft puff, for heat and need to fill her eyes. Instead, fear crossed her face, ice filled her eyes and her breathing increased not to a passionate pant but a preparation to do battle.

"Let me go," she said, her voice quiet but firm. Only the tiniest shake betrayed her.

"Kyr, please. We need to talk about this."

"Snowflake."

He went still.

"Snowball."

His hands dropped to his sides in astonished disbelief.

"Snowplow."

A hard swallow tried to dislodge the lump in his throat, but was unsuccessful. He moved to the side, one step, two, until she had a clear path to open the door and walk out of the room.

Nobody had ever had to use their safe word with him. He prided himself on being so attuned to his lovers that he knew exactly what they could take, what they wanted, what they needed.

He shook off his thoughts and followed her into the hall. They passed Mrs. Tremky who looked as though she wanted to speak to him, but stayed silent at whatever she saw between them.

"Kyriana," he said as she made her way to the front door. "Please let me drive you to a hotel. I can book you in under a different name and put up some wards, some defenses."

She paused. "I'm not going home. I'm not an idiot."

He took a deep breath. "Okay." He resisted following that up with a "good". "Can I drive you to where you're going? Please?"

"He might be watching you. Following you. And my car works just fine."

"That's what the cloaking spell was for, he can't follow us. But he may have already put a tracking spell on your car. Or even an electronic tracer."

She narrowed her eyes at him. The fact that he was telling the truth probably helped seal the deal. Without answering, she turned and walked toward the garage door.

Irritation and annoyance battled with concern and guilt as he followed her into the garage. She headed for the car they'd just used. He grabbed the keys from their place on the wall but didn't hit the lock-release button, even when she reached for the handle. It only took him another couple of steps to get to her and when he did, he hit the button and reached around her to open the door for her. He could just make out her reflection in the tinted windows, saw her close her eyes and take a very deep breath. He wanted to move in closer, surround her with his heat and strength, but he'd already pushed things, apparently too far.

Taking the hint, he didn't wait for her to climb in but walked around to his door. By the time he put the key in the ignition, she was settled with her seatbelt on, facing forward, ignoring him.

He backed out of the garage a little more sharply than he should have and forced himself to calm down. So maybe he shouldn't have presumed to have her things brought to the house. But it wasn't as if he was making her sleep with him—he'd given her a room of her own. Although she hadn't complained about that part of it, just seemed a bit annoyed that he hadn't asked. Looking back, he realized it wasn't until she'd seen her belongings that she'd gotten pissed.

"I'm sorry I sent someone to get your things," he offered, hoping he sounded apologetic and not irritated.

"Go left at the end of the driveway," she instructed him, then turned and actually looked at him. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you sorry you sent someone to get my things?"

"Because it upset you."

She shook her head and faced forward again.

A small growl escaped before he could tamp it down. "Fine. I'm sorry because it was rude and an invasion of your privacy. Although I'll remind you that you invaded my privacy first."

Total silence filled the car and he pulled over to the side of the road. Leaning forward, he rested his forehead against the steering wheel and tried to get himself under control. Rather than think about what was going wrong, he focused on a spell to keep the car from prying eyes. It had to be perfect, because if he led anyone to her door and she got hurt...

Shaking his head, he focused. Drew the power around himself and sent it out, surrounding the car, searching beyond for any sign of curious eyes. Nothing, he was positive that there was nobody out there. Still, he let the spell settle onto the car, ensuring that they would remain undetected.

That done, he couldn't put off admitting his mistakes any longer. He was being an asshole and he knew it. The sight of her heading to his front door had apparently killed his common sense. Or maybe it had happened before that, before he'd called Mrs. Tremky with instructions to have one of her people break into Kyr's apartment. His esteemed manager had assumed that he had Kyr's permission in the matter and he hadn't bothered to correct her. If he had, she probably would have refused, smart lady that she was.

He lifted his head just enough to let it bounce back against the leather. No, he knew when he'd lost his mind. Right about the time that he'd decided to keep her, without bothering to ask if Kyr wanted to be kept. He wanted to see how they would be without spells and danger and helping each other. But he hadn't told her that, hadn't given her the option. What if she'd said no? Well, now he wasn't going to find out, was he?

"I'm sorry for being an ass. I'm sorry I violated your home and your belongings and your privacy. I'm sorry I arranged for you to stay with me without asking you if you wanted to." He rolled his head so he could see her, without lifting it up. She was staring at him, but he thought he saw the tiniest bit of softening around her eyes.

"If you wanted me to stay, why didn't you just say so?" she asked.

"Because I didn't want to give you a chance to say no. I—I want more time with you. I thought we had something special going on and I wanted to explore that with you."

Her arms were crossed around her middle, keeping him from reaching out to take her hand.

She shook her head. "You don't know me."

"I want to get to know you."

"Well, I can tell you one thing. Forcing me to stay with you isn't the way for that to happen."

"I know. I'm sorry. I also wanted to be sure you were safe."

She didn't say anything, but her silence seemed less intense. Less hurt. It was probably his imagination. He eased the car back onto the road.

"I didn't think it was special," she said, her voice quiet enough that he doubted what he'd heard. Because she couldn't really have said that. Could she?

His knuckles turned white from his punishing grip. He cleared his throat. "No? Seemed like you enjoyed it quite a bit." He risked glancing over at her and saw her frown.

"To you. I didn't think it was special to you."

Which just went to show that he needed to pull his head out of his ass. He knew she was insecure, knew she was inexperienced. When he had her naked, he knew exactly how to deal with those things. Yesterday, he'd had no trouble picking up on her cues and knowing when she was thinking negatively about herself. Apparently feeling guilty fucked with his ability to read her.

"Turn right," she bit out.

He followed her direction before answering her. "Kyr, I'm sorry for all of the things I mentioned before. I really am. But if you say something like that again, I'm going to have to put you over my knee and spank your ass."

Her gaze flew to his face, her eyes wide. She was trying to stay mad though, he could tell.

"Fuck you, Connul. I have no reason to think that what we did was any different than what you do with all the others. Yes, it was great. Yes, I enjoyed it. No, I don't think that means you're going to treat me any differently than any other woman you've tied up and whipped."

Oh yeah, this heat was a hell of a lot better than the icy distance from before. "So that was all you wanted? I helped you get rid of the spell and you're done? Not interested in anything else?"

"There's a difference between being not interested and not assuming that the other person is interested. Turn right, third driveway on the left."

"Sunshine, tell me you'll be safe here." He said it softly, not wanting to insult her but needing to know.

She sighed. "I'll be safe. Nobody at work knows about this townhouse. It's my hairdresser's. She's on her honeymoon and I promised to check in on it every couple of days and water the plants, take in the mail. I haven't been staying here, but I brought some stuff by last week in case...well, in case it worked and I needed somewhere safe to stay."

He nodded his head. "Thank you." He pulled into the driveway she'd indicated and turned in his seat so he could face her. "About the rest. I'm not ready to give you up. I think I'm a little bit addicted to you." She opened her mouth to protest, but stopped. "You say I don't know you, and you're right to some extent. But I know enough. I know I want more time with you, both naked and clothed. I want to know

your favorite song and I want to watch you come apart in my arms. I want to know who you love and I want to hear you scream my name. I want to know why you don't drink coffee and I want to blindfold you and lick every part of your body so that my tongue knows the nuances and flavors from head to toe."

"You—you could do that with anyone."

"I want to do it with you. Kyr, do you really think that what happened between us was all me? Do you think it just seemed extraordinary to you because you hadn't done that kind of thing before? Because you're wrong. It was out of this world for me too. And I want more. Lots more of the way you react to me, the way you respond to me."

"But anyone would respond to you that way. I didn't do anything!"

He chuckled. "Oh, sunshine, you did plenty. And you're wrong, nobody has ever responded to me as perfectly as you did. Mariella didn't, she couldn't wait to get back to her Dom once she was done with me."

"Well, anyone else, then."

He just laughed and shook his head.

She gave him her wide-eyed stare, then bolted from the car.

Chapter Seven

Her hands were shaking as she fit the key into the lock. She needed to be alone. Needed to be away from him, damn it. At last she was able to push the door open. She stepped in and swung around, tried to slam the door closed. Of course, that would be too easy. Connul reached one hand out and stopped the door.

"Can I cast some protective charms?" he asked, almost, but not quite, sounding as if he was giving her a choice.

She huffed out a breath but stepped back, allowing him in.

He did that power thing that brought goose bumps to her skin. When he was done, he turned back to her. She wanted to ask him to stay, offer him coffee, or lunch, or...something.

"Be ready at five-thirty. I'll be back then." He turned and started out the door.

"What do you mean, you'll be back? What are you talking about?" She had to remind herself not to screech at him.

"I'll pick you up and we'll go on a date. Get to know each other. That's what you want, isn't it? It's a good idea. I'll be back at five-thirty." And he walked away.

Belatedly, she slammed the door shut. "Fine!"

Of all the nerve. She spun around and headed to the bathroom, ripping open the box of supplies she'd left there and pulling out a hairbrush. Brushing her hair, she glared at her reflection. She would go see a movie. No reason she had to be here to listen to him pound on her door. She put the brush down and pulled out a small makeup bag. She rolled her eyes as she used the compact to apply some powder foundation. Even better, she'd go out. A club, maybe. She swiped on some lip gloss and whipped out of the bathroom, grabbing her purse as she passed it.

No, wait. Why should she have to leave the townhouse just because he was going to come marching over? She locked the door and walked briskly down the steps to her hairdresser's car. Liddy had left her that key, too, just in case. There was a shopping mall just a couple miles away. She would have a nice, leisurely lunch then go grocery shopping. And when she got back home, she'd put on her pajamas, get a bowl of ice cream and listen to him rant and rave as she ignored him.

She whipped into the first space she saw available, not caring that it was at the far end of the parking lot. Probably best that she not get too close to pedestrians right now, anyway.

An older woman stepped hastily out of her way as she stormed into the mall, scanning wildly for a dress shop. There. She whirled in and began flipping through the

racks. Too young, too frumpy, too slutty, no, no, no. Damn it! Ignoring the nervous looks she was receiving, she marched out and into the next shop.

Who the hell did he think he was? He hadn't even *asked* her. *Again!* Just demanded she be ready. Which was exactly the kind of shit she wasn't going to put up with. She spied a pretty shade of green and yanked the dress off the rack. Holding it up to her body, she looked around for a mirror. Other side of the store, of course. She made her way to it, grabbing up a sleek-looking bronze number on the way. Neither looked as if they'd clash with her hair so she took them into the dressing room.

Better yet, she *would* go out with him. That would really show him. Instead of being the meek mouse he obviously thought she was, she'd be herself. Yeah. She'd wear comfortable jeans and a baggy sweatshirt. Wow, the bronze dress was pretty fabulous. She checked the price tag. Ouch. The green dress was next. No, the jeans were a bad idea, too much like the pajamas that were pretty much the only thing he'd seen her wearing. Better to show him that she could dress up, if she wanted to, but that it was about her, not him. The green dress was nice, but nothing compared to the bronze. She pulled her clothes back on and headed directly to the cashier, slapping the bronze dress down and bouncing her leg while the cash register made its noises.

She didn't even wince as she handed over her credit card. It would be worth it, to show him that she cleaned up well after all, but this was the last he was going to see of her. Bag in hand, she stormed through the shop and over to the department store. Thank God she spotted the strappy sandals right away, or she wasn't sure what damage she might have done to the simpering salesman who made his way over to her. She pointed, told him a terse "size seven" and collapsed into a chair to wait.

The nerve. The absolute gall of the man. She took her old, perfectly serviceable sandals off as the salesman returned with a little jog. He unwrapped the new, likely torturous sandals and held them up for her approval. She gave a nod and let him slip them on. They seemed to fit, so she stood and took a few steps. Not bad. Checking the mirror, she pulled the dress from the bag and held it in front of her. Perfect.

The relieved salesman bid her a good day but she ignored him and went to stand in line. By the time she'd paid for the shoes, grabbed a pretzel, suffered through a manicure and pedicure and made a quick run through the department store, she was exhausted. As soon as she walked back into the house, she took scissors to the tags on the items she'd picked up at the department store and put them into the washing machine. She hung the dress up, clipped its tags too, dropped the shoes on the bed and headed for a shower. A nice, steamy shower to relax her was just what she needed. She shaved everything that should be shaved and washed her hair.

When she got out, she slathered Liddy's best lotion all over her body, moved the clothes from the washer to the dryer, then blew her hair out straight. She used the straightening iron to make her hair sleek, then added curls. Raiding her hairdresser's extensive makeup collection, she did, then re-did, her face. At five-twenty she put the tweezers down, figuring if she kept at her eyebrows, she wouldn't have any left. She pulled the lacy underclothes from the dryer and put them on. They were black and

completely lacking in support. But they were pretty. She sat down and strapped the sandals on. The doorbell rang just as she was standing to put the dress on. She pulled it on and checked her reflection in the mirror. Perfect. She took a deep breath and walked to the front door.

"Who is it?" she called out.

"Connul." Instead of annoyed, he sounded pleased that she'd asked.

She opened the door and almost swallowed her tongue. He was just wearing slacks and a shirt. Really. So why did they look so much more amazing than the pants he'd worn yesterday? She didn't know, but he did. Look amazing.

"You take my breath away," he said.

The comment made her realize she hadn't managed to look at his face yet, too busy staring at his scrumptious body. Now she did and saw heat and appreciation and desire. For her. Wow.

"Th-thank you." Well, that destroyed her plan to be cool and sleek.

He reached out and caressed her cheek, then dropped his hand to snag hers, giving it a little squeeze. "I missed you."

"I was going to eat ice cream." Had she really just said that?

"They have ice cream where we're going. What's your favorite flavor?" he asked as he escorted her down the steps to his car.

"Depends on my mood."

"Really?" He looked over at her as if gauging whether she was just being coy.

"Sure. There are way too many flavors to have just one favorite. On a hot, sunny day, maybe I want strawberry. If I'm curling up on the couch to watch a horror movie, probably chocolate. When I have the fixings for a sundae, vanilla bean. If I'm walking past an ice-cream shop that has it, pistachio."

"Mmm. Complicated. I like it."

She rolled her eyes but couldn't keep from smiling. "What about you? What's your favorite flavor?"

"Chocolate chip. Sounds boring next to you, doesn't it? But that's what I pick, nine times out of ten."

"Somehow I don't picture you eating ice cream all that often," she challenged as he drove them toward downtown.

"Well, that's true. But when I do, I eat chocolate chip. But you're right. When I feel the urge to indulge myself, I find I have different tastes." The look he sent her left no doubts in her mind about what kind of tastes he liked to satisfy.

"Connul, how long have you been...um, in that lifestyle?" she asked.

"Since I was about twenty. Like I told you, it was obvious early on where my magic came from, so exploring all aspects of sexuality was a given. From the moment I walked into my first BDSM scene, I knew what would work best for me. I tried different things,

like tantric sex, which I sometimes use certain elements of, but this is what speaks to my soul."

She licked her lips. "That's interesting. Do your partners usually know that you're a mage?"

"Hmm. Maybe half the time. More so in the last few years, just because I've found a couple of places I frequent, become a regular. Every situation is different, every person different, but I don't feel the need to have a policy of full disclosure, if that's what you mean. When I draw in energy during sex, it's not taking anything from my partner. Their energy would be expelled whether I'm there to receive it or not."

He pulled up in front of a restaurant that she knew to be well-liked and very expensive. Good thing she'd gone for the new dress. A valet opened her door and offered her a hand, which she was grateful for. By the time she was steady on her feet Connul had come around to offer his arm. She took it and let him lead the way, feeling very girly. Should she be resisting this? It was hard to remember why she should be wary of his charm and attention, not to mention his taste in expensive pleasures.

The hostess showed them to a booth that was situated more for privacy than for being seen. She was good with that. The waiter asked for their drink orders and she asked for sparkling water. Wine was probably the expected drink of the night, but she wasn't going to dull her senses even the smallest bit. She wanted to be on her toes for whatever Connul threw her way. And she wanted to remember and enjoy all the pleasures to their fullest. Even if the most exciting pleasure was feeling pretty in a fancy restaurant and eating good food. Of course, she was starting to admit that she was hoping for more. Much more. He wouldn't have brought her here if he wasn't interested in...something. Right?

Connul followed her lead and ordered water as well. When they were alone again, she set her shoulders and raised her eyes to his. They were not in the bedroom, she wasn't coming to him for help, she would not feel less than his equal. That resolve lasted just long enough for the heat in his eyes to raise her temperature about ten degrees. She blinked and hid behind the menu.

"I don't know you well enough yet to know your likes and dislikes," he commented.

It took her a second to figure out what he meant. "Do people really do that? Order for each other? It seems so...odd."

"It's considered proper in some circumstances."

Fascinated by the very idea, she lowered her menu and met his eyes. There was still heat, but she shoved that aside. "I just don't understand it. I mean, even if you knew I liked steak or creamy fettuccine or lobster or tuna salad, you wouldn't have reason to know which I would prefer *tonight*."

"What if I—"

"There you are!" a lively female voice sounded out.

Kyr looked up to see a beautiful woman, perhaps her age, striking in her casual slacks and blouse, and completely unconcerned that others stared as she marched up to their table. She slapped her purse against Connul's chest and said, "Scoot over."

Frozen, unsure how to react to the stranger, Kyr simply stared at the blonde as she took a seat on the bench next to Connul. Transferring her gaze to her date, she discovered that Connul was giving the woman a bemused though baffled expression. Not sure what that meant, she brought her attention back to the newcomer, who was now watching her.

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but Connul interrupted her. "Kyr, this is my sister, Sasha Graysn. Sasha, Kyriana Price."

Sasha held her hand out and Kyriana took it, not sure what to expect. But the other woman just gave her a polite shake before reclaiming her hand, then ordered a beer when the waiter stopped to ask if she wanted a drink.

"Sasha, what are you doing here?" Connul asked. "Is everything all right?"

"Well, no. I was under the impression that some jerkwad was trying to steal the Orb."

"Yes, but we could discuss that at my home. *After* my date. Preferably in the morning. Are you staying with me?"

"Probably. It's too isolated at Dain's place."

"Great, Mrs. Tremky will get you settled and we'll see you back at the house. Later. Much later."

Kyriana cleared her throat and gave him a look.

Connul sighed. "I mean, I will see you back at the house later. Possibly, if she accepts my invitation, you will see Kyriana as well."

"Is he being a bossy ass?" Sasha asked Kyr, leaning forward on the table.

Kyr cocked her head and gave a questioning look. "Is he ever *not*?"

Sasha threw back her head and laughed wholeheartedly. Some of the nearby diners looked, but most smiled as they did so. Connul's sister was clearly not someone who was overly concerned with the opinions of others.

"You've got him figured out at least that far, I see."

The waiter arrived and Kyr realized she hadn't read the menu. Rather than ask for more time, she looked Connul in the eye and ordered steak and lobster. Not because of the price, though she wouldn't have done it if she'd been even the tiniest bit concerned he would mind, but to remind him of their earlier conversation. He smiled, a full-bodied grin that she had never seen on him, though his sister's had been quite similar.

"That sounds perfect, I'll have the same," Sasha added, probably because she hadn't even had a menu to look at.

"Three, then," Connul said. "Sasha, as happy as I am to see you, what are you doing here? Here, in this restaurant, at this table, at this very moment."

"Finding out what's going on, of course." She pulled the breadbasket closer and picked out a warm roll, setting it on Connul's bread plate, which she then brought in front of herself.

"I'm sure Dain would have been happy to fill you in."

She waved the knife she was using to add butter to her roll. "Not really. He gave me just the bare-bones details. Then I had to bribe Mrs. Tremky to tell me where you were. Everyone seems to be real hush-hush all of a sudden. I can't decide if it's because of what's going on with the Orb, or because of Kyriana." She nodded in Kyr's direction as if to be clear.

"This dinner has nothing to do with the Orb. You can go now."

She scoffed and Kyr had to smile, though she raised her water glass to her lips to try to hide it. Connul was cute when he was irritated with his sister.

"Oh please," Sasha dismissed. "I just ordered steak and lobster. It's not every day I indulge in such yumminess. Especially on someone else's dime."

"It's not as if you can't afford your own meals," Connul pointed out.

Mouth full with roll, Sasha just shook her head and rolled her eyes at Kyr, as if to say, "Men".

Resigned to his sister's presence, at least for the near future, Connul returned his attention to Kyriana. She'd been a little bit tense, but seemed to relax in Sasha's presence. His sister was like that, of course—you either loved her or hated her—but still. He wanted Kyr to be responding to him, not his sister. And he wasn't sure he wanted her relaxed, not right now. He wanted her thinking about him, about them. About them together.

"Will you tell us about your family, sunshine? You've met my brother and sister now, do you have any siblings?"

Kyr had followed Sasha's lead and delved into the breadbasket. She shook her head and lifted her water glass to take a drink. She licked her lips, an action he found utterly compelling.

"No, it was just me. I came a bit late in my parents' lives, so even my cousins were quite a bit older than me."

"I can't imagine being an only child," Sasha put in.

"I can," Connul said, flashing a smile at Kyr so she would know he was teasing.

"Oh please, you were five when Dain was born."

"It was a very important five years for me," he said solemnly. The truth was, he couldn't imagine being an only child. He was very close to his brother and sister, and knew at all times that he had their support. Even if he had to pay for it sometimes with irritating intrusions, like this.

The waiter brought their dinners and topped off their water glasses.

"Mmm, this smells divine," Kyr said.

"Save room for dessert," he reminded her.

She flashed him a grin and tucked into her steak. He followed suit and almost missed the joy of watching her dip a bite of lobster into the butter then bring the fork to her mouth. Almost missed the chance to see her close her eyes and completely lose herself in the pleasure of the succulent morsel. He wanted to kiss her before she even opened her eyes. Forget the steak, next time he was ordering her a whole lobster.

She went to cut another piece of steak and resumed chatting with his sister, oblivious to the fact that he was completely captivated. It was time to admit that he wanted more from her than just to help her deal with the piece of shit who'd threatened her. More than just her body. He wanted to know her, inside and out. Which was why they were on the date, so he needed to get his head out of his ass and pay attention.

"So, how did you end up here? Is this where you grew up?" Sasha asked.

Connul almost nodded. Yes, this was good. Kyr squirmed, just the tiniest bit. He wasn't even sure his sister noticed, but he did.

"I grew up a few hours south of here. It's a small town, so I came here to find a job. Not many jobs back home, but I wanted to stay close, since my parents are getting older."

She quickly took another bite of her food. It was the truth, he thought, but not the whole truth. There was definitely something there. Embarrassed to be so close to home? Or feeling guilty that she wasn't closer?

"Where did you go to college?" he asked.

She swallowed hard, shrugged her shoulders. "UC Berkeley." Bringing her glass to her lips, she seemed to be watching him for a reaction. He just smiled and ate some of his steak. But it was interesting. Very interesting.

Sasha, bless her little heart, asked the perfect follow-up question. "What did you study?"

"Computer science."

"Oh," Sasha said, waving her fork around. "I'm next to useless on a computer. I can get on the internet and check email, that's about it. Dain's a big one for computers. He was always playing some game or another when we were in school."

"That's a good school. I imagine their program is well-respected," Connul said, before Sasha could derail the conversation.

Kyr nodded. "It's pretty good. I was pleased to get in."

She wouldn't meet his eyes. Or maybe she was just really interested in her dinner and he was imagining things. But he didn't think so.

"Was it hard? Going out of state, on your own, for school?"

Again she shrugged her shoulders and reached for her water glass. If he hadn't been watching so closely, he would have missed the tiny tremble in her fingers. Okay,

maybe this was more than a small thing. Which meant this wasn't really the time or the place to get into it.

"Sasha majored in Social Life 101."

It took a couple of seconds, but Kyr finally realized he'd changed directions and flashed a smile. The fact that it was more relieved than genuine reinforced his need to bring the subject up again later.

"Silly," Sasha said, bumping her shoulder into his. "That wasn't my major, just part of my core requirements."

They finished their dinners and ordered ice cream. The restaurant didn't have many choices, just chocolate, vanilla and sorbet. They all ordered chocolate, prompting the waiter to tease that they were making his job too easy.

The dessert portions were small. Connul handed a credit card to the waiter and turned a telling look on his sister. She rolled her eyes at him and picked up her purse.

"Kyr, it was very nice to meet you. Sorry for barging in on your dinner."

She didn't sound sorry, but he refrained from pointing that out. Kyriana slid out of her side of the booth and the two women hugged. He quickly signed the check and followed the women out, his hand coming to rest naturally at the small of Kyr's back.

"Let's take a walk," he suggested to her as Sasha gave her ticket to the valet.

She studied him for a moment, her expression serious, then nodded her head. "Not too far though. Not in these shoes."

He took her hand in his and began walking toward a park. "I can always do a quick switch for you," he suggested. The look of horror she gave him made him laugh. "What, you don't want to be seen wearing that amazing dress with sneakers?"

She didn't bother responding to that. They walked along for a time without speaking, the night air refreshing without being chilly.

"Will you tell me what happened in college?"

She sighed. "I guess it was too much to hope you hadn't picked up on that."

"Sorry, sunshine, but you have my full and complete attention."

"Great," she mumbled, looking down, which didn't hide the blush climbing up her cheeks.

Another deep breath and she pulled her shoulders back and raised her chin. "It's not really any big thing, exactly. My mom had a stroke when I was a senior in high school. I stayed home the next year, helping her and my dad out. By the following year she was a lot better and my dad decided to retire, so he was home. Berkeley had let me defer my acceptance for a year, and my parents encouraged me to go. But I felt...out of step with the others, you know? I was kind of a shy nerd and like you said, it was hard going from being an only child in a house with older parents to a school far away and full of people I didn't know. Near the end of my sophomore year, I ended up tutoring a girl who was a senior. She invited me out a couple of times and I began to relax, to have fun. To party. One night, we were out with a few others. It was late, after midnight. One

of the guys said he knew a house that had a hot tub, and the family was away on vacation. We decided to hop their fence and help ourselves."

She risked a glance at him and he was careful to keep his expression encouraging. "You were kids. Dumb, but that's to be expected."

"We stripped to our underwear and found the controls to turn the bubbles and heat on. We'd brought more beers with us and weren't very quiet after a while. We barely even noticed when a light went on in the yard next to us. And then I heard the barking."

Her fingers clenched in his and he rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand. He looked around and spotted a bench deeper in the park. Her heels would sink in the grass, so without warning he scooped her up into his arms. She didn't even squeal, just rested her head against his shoulder. He sat down on the bench with her in his lap.

"You heard a dog," he prompted.

"No. Dogs. Two. The neighbor opened a gate in the fence and the dogs came charging. Everyone jumped out of the hot tub and started running. One of the guys and I tripped into each other and fell. The dogs didn't bite or anything, but they were on us, snapping and growling. We got to the wall and he helped me up." A hitch in her breath warned him there was more to come. Worse to come. "We were at the top of the wall when we heard the squeal of brakes. The others had dropped to the other side and raced into the street. Two of them were hit, one girl, who died, and a guy, who lost his leg." She stayed quiet a minute and he let her. Fine tremors were running through her and he pulled her in as tightly as he could, sharing his warmth, his comfort.

"I was put on academic probation, almost lost my scholarship." She laughed, but there was no joy in the sound. "Put an end to my partying ways, that's for sure. I buckled down, concentrated on school, didn't do anything but go to class, study and tutor."

When she didn't say anything else, he tried to figure out what he needed to ask. "And when you graduated?"

"I got job offers in California and Texas and Washington. But I came back here. I just...wasn't ready to face the wide world again." She stopped and closed her eyes, then sighed. "Ugh. That's not quite right. I started dating a guy about a month before graduation. He was a teacher." She glanced at him sharply as if waiting for condemnation. "Not in my department, but still, a teacher. We went on a couple of dates and I really liked him. Then he told me what he was into." She bit her lip and glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "He was a Dom and basically wanted to start the way he meant to go on. Said he was sure I was a sub and he could teach me."

He pushed aside the jealousy to focus on the image of the confused, shy young woman she'd been. Squelching his irritation at the unknown man, he reminded himself he didn't have enough information to make judgments.

"I'd been telling myself how it was my fault I'd let my friends get me into a stupid situation, just gone along with it because they were fun and knew what they were doing. I let them be in charge, and it got me into trouble."

"It was too soon," he agreed. "You needed to figure out who you were, how to be in charge of yourself before you could hand someone else even some of those reins."

"Something like that. I accepted a job offer in Seattle and spent three years there being miserable and afraid to do anything. When the company I was working for went bankrupt, I came home. I convinced myself I needed to be closer to my parents. I took the position at the temp agency while I job-hunted. I still don't know why I went back to Guardian, when I shouldn't have had too much trouble landing a real job in my field. I had a good resume, good references. In fact, I did have one offer, right around the same time, but I...uh, turned it down."

He frowned. "Why? What was wrong with the job?"

An absurdly delicate snort escaped her. "Nothing was wrong with the job. It was me."

"That's not how I see you."

"Your perception of me is based on unusual circumstances."

"That doesn't change the fact that you risked a lot waiting for me in my office. You could have just followed through on what he'd told you to do. But you didn't. You waited for me, gave yourself into my hands. That took courage. And lots of it."

She sighed. "Okay, fine. The company was a sex toy manufacturer."

Ah ha. He grinned. "As far as I know, there's only one of those around here. They make good stuff. You didn't want to work there? I don't think they require every employee to—" He stopped when she smacked him in the chest.

"I just...I was embarrassed and my parents would have been embarrassed."

"Mmm hmm." Connul helped her to her feet instead of scooping her back up into his arms as he wanted to do. They walked back to the restaurant and he gave his ticket to the valet.

"Just think," he teased. "If you'd taken that job, imagine the discounts we could have gotten on toys."

She looked up at him with serious, sad eyes. "If I had taken that job, I wouldn't have been working for Guard and we wouldn't have met."

"Oh, sunshine. You're wrong about that. I am absolutely certain that you're wrong about that."

The car arrived and they got in. The drive to where she was staying was easy and over far too quickly. He didn't want to leave her there, didn't want to leave her at all. He pulled up to a stop in front of the townhouse.

"Kyr. I'd like it if you'd come back to the house with me. Not only would I feel more comfortable with your safety, I want more time with you. More time to explore what's between us. I'm sorry I didn't ask you before and invaded your privacy. But I'm

asking now. Will you come back to the house with me? Spend some more time with me?"

She stared through the windshield for a long time, and he had no idea what she might be thinking. Finally she turned to face him, her eyes searching his as if for answers. He wished he knew what questions she was asking. His heart resumed beating when she gave a nod.

"All right, Connul. For tonight, anyway."

He reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear, brushing his thumb across her cheek. She turned into his touch and his heart melted. He was kidding himself with the idea of getting to know her, seeing where things led. His heart had long since passed that point and was galloping headlong toward love. And he couldn't seem to summon any fear of that. Her tongue snaked out and took a tiny lick of his wrist, which she followed with a kiss.

Damn. It was time to get back home. He dropped his hand and gave his full attention to getting them home safely and very, very quickly.

Chapter Eight

As they moved farther away from the townhouse, coming ever closer to Connul's, Kyriana reviewed her decision, looking for a flaw, for a reason to change her mind. When he'd asked her to come home with him, she'd stared at him, trying to see into him the way he seemed to be able to see into her. She didn't think it was magic on his part, just a habit of paying close attention and trusting his perceptions. She had no such trust in herself or her observations. What she knew was that he was demanding, controlling and arrogant. And he was attracted to her. He wasn't pretending or even exaggerating. He really was attracted to her.

That shouldn't be at the top of her list of his positives. It really shouldn't be. It should be below the fact that he was kind, that he found her intelligent and they had a good time together, outside of the sex. Below the fact that she found *him* to be intelligent, enjoyed the way he interacted with his brother and sister, and the way that she felt safe and comfortable in his presence. Except for when he didn't want her to be comfortable. Which brought her to the sex. The fact that her skin tingled in anticipation of being touched by him and rejoiced at his actual contact shouldn't matter so much in making the determination to go home with him. But it did.

When they walked into the house, she again noted the absence of staff. Mrs. Tremky had shown her around that first day, introducing her to four other employees, yet she hadn't seen any since. She supposed that in this type of position that was a good thing, the staff scurrying along behind the master, silently and unobtrusively seeing to his needs. And here she was, seeing to his pleasures. A snort escaped before she could douse it and Connul looked back at her questioningly. She gave a pathetically fake cough but he didn't push her on it.

He led her straight to his bedroom, opening the door and gesturing for her to precede him. She walked to the center of the room, where she'd stood just two nights before, chained for him. She'd been so nervous then, and she was nervous now. But in a completely different way.

"Strip." He didn't say it casually, but used that tone of command that she recognized immediately.

Her hands had moved to the zipper at the back of her dress before she'd had time to process the decision to do as he said. It was an awkward maneuver, made more difficult by the fact that they were a little bit shaky. The butterflies dancing through her stomach weren't quite as pleasurable as they'd been the other night. Mentally squaring her shoulders, she set her abs and pulled the dress up over her head.

The silence seemed to stretch on and on, but it was probably only seconds before she felt his fingers on her lower lip, gently pulling it free of the teeth she'd clamped

down on it. Which was when she realized she'd squeezed her eyes shut. She forced them open, wide and directed at his chin. Her attempt to swallow almost choked her before she managed it.

A fall of soft cotton settled over her shoulders and Connul reached out to help guide her arms into the robe she'd worn that morning. She remained still as he tied the belt around her waist and turned his back on her. He walked to the window on the other side of the room and stared out, without saying a word.

Her heart fell to her toes, causing her knees to give out. She backed up until she was able to sit on the bed. He'd rested his head against the glass and seemed to be taking deep breaths. What the hell did that mean? If he didn't want her here, fine, she'd just go to her own bedroom.

She forced her legs to support her as she stood up and headed for the door. At least there were clothes in the other room. She'd start there.

"Kyriana. Sit down. Please."

She wavered on the "please", which was enough for Connul. He'd turned from the window and now strode over and led her back to the bed. Once again, he reached up and teased free her lower lip from between her teeth. On impulse, she snapped forward and nipped his fingers. Now that she'd managed a bit of anger, she found she could meet his gaze and let him see it.

His smile was sweet and proud and unexpected.

"I'm sorry, sunshine. I screwed up."

Wait. What? "I don't know what—"

He returned his finger to her lips, practically daring her to bite him again. As if she'd be so predictable. She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. Yes, that felt much better than losing her fabulous dinner.

"I was apologizing, if you could just give me a couple more minutes," he admonished.

She subtly adjusted her glare into an "I'm waiting" face.

His lips twitched, which distracted her.

"Will you sit? Please?" he asked, then frowned. "Actually, the sight of you, in my robe, sitting on my bed, is too distracting. Let's go into my study. Where we really should have had this conversation before."

Not sure she liked the sound of that, but unable to come up with a logical protest, she led the way down the hall to his study. The trip seemed to take much longer than it had the other night. She stepped aside at the door, letting him open the locks, both physical and magical.

He gestured for her to take the library chair she'd waited for him in. She sat down primly, feet flat on the floor, hands in her lap. Waiting. For him. Again. The seat across from her seemed awfully close when Connul dropped onto it. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and took her hands into his.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have jumped into it like that. It was one thing, when you first came here, knowing what you were asking for, what you needed, to get straight into that. But now that's over, so we're back to square one. And it was wrong of me to rush into things without talking to you first."

Oh. "Oh."

When he didn't say anything else, she gave him an expectant look. "Well, are you going to talk?"

His lips twitched again and she sighed. She wanted him to kiss her, not talk at her. But he seemed determined. Knowing nothing was going to happen in the next few minutes, at least, she was able to relax. She pulled her feet up so that she was sitting cross-legged on the chair, as she had that first night. A wicked impulse overtook her and she spent a moment fussing with the robe to make sure it covered her breasts while deliberately making no effort to close the gap over her lap.

Connul cleared his throat and she fixed an innocent expression on her face and looked up to meet his eyes.

"Are you trying to drive me insane?" he asked, his voice husky.

Delight that she could do such a thing emboldened her and she allowed a wicked grin.

"Never mind, don't answer that, I know full well that you are. And you're succeeding."

She licked her lips, slower than the action required, but not so slowly that he could call her on it for sure. His answering groan filled her with a sense of power. She'd only had the realization that he really was attracted to her a short while ago. The full implications hadn't sunk in. But now. Now she had a choice. Embrace his interest and see where this might go, or cut and run.

He cocked his head and gave her that look that saw all the way through her. Oops, she'd given something away.

"What's put that look on your face?" he asked.

To tell, or not to tell. Her indecision must have been obvious. How could he read her so well after such a short time? He came off his chair and kneeled in front of hers, just as he had that first night.

"Look at me."

It was a command, not a suggestion, and she forced herself to meet his eyes. The sense of power she'd felt only moments ago was gone.

He reached down and took her wrists in one hand, then slid the other up her arm and along her shoulder until he was cupping her neck. It was almost like a drug, her body relaxed so completely under his touch. Despite being nervous, her muscles went soft while her skin cried out for more contact.

An extra little squeeze on her wrists had her catching her breath.

"Now. What were you thinking a minute ago?"

Keeping her gaze steady was hard. Opening her mouth was harder.

"I was thinking that you really are attracted to me." She paused, hoping he'd jump in, but he remained silent, expectant. "Um. I was thinking it's time to make a decision. Like you said, the reason I was here is gone. I can't fall back on that anymore. I have to decide if I want to stay, for different reasons, or leave."

His thumb began running an idle pattern over her throat, distracting her. It made it hard to remember why there might have been a question about staying or going. She had to force herself to remember that he'd been a heavy-handed ass who'd invaded her privacy.

"Which is why we're here. Talking. I told you I'd made a mistake. I wanted to seduce you into starting something with me tonight, which was wrong when we hadn't discussed expectations, limits, desires. All the things we would have talked about before ever getting together, if things had gone normally."

She nodded her understanding. It wasn't something she'd ever really discussed with a man, but she knew that BDSM relationships often had more formal agreements, even contracts. The potential to harm was greater, so the responsibility was higher.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to get into all that."

Though he hadn't really been moving, he froze. "Because you're not sure you want to stay. To give us a chance."

A sharp twist of anger gave her the strength to move her head back. He could have held on, but he acknowledged her desire to be released, dropping her wrists as well, and sitting back on his heels.

"That's not fair. We've gone on one date, which you didn't even give me time to process and angst over."

"You're right. So, you don't want to commit to a relationship. You want to date some more."

That wasn't really what she'd said, but it would work for now. Because the fact that he still wanted to date her was pretty heady stuff.

"Right."

"And you're not ready to add sex to it. The dating, I mean."

Er. That wasn't quite right either. Although technically he was correct. If they acknowledged that they shouldn't engage in BDSM activities without discussing them, and she didn't want to discuss them...

"It's not that. I mean, I've just never...talked about that kind of thing before." She couldn't keep from squirming in her seat.

"Sunshine, if you're not ready to talk about it, you're not ready to do it."

Well, shit. Her shoulders slumped in defeat and he got up and sat back down in his chair.

"Now then. Let's talk."

* * * * *

It felt like two hours and about two thousand blushes later before Connul agreed they'd reached an understanding and stood to pour them a drink. She watched him go to the sideboard, thinking how very lord of the manor he seemed. He was so comfortable in his skin that it had taken her a while to realize that he could be nervous too. Nervous that she would laugh in his face or just walk away. Which was why he hadn't asked her out on the date. He hadn't wanted to risk her saying no.

Which somehow made the whole exercise more bearable. She'd let him lead the discussion not because she felt as if he didn't value her input, but because he had the experience in knowing what they needed to cover. And wasn't as embarrassed to bring stuff up. Just answering his questions was hard for her, but he was right. If they couldn't talk about it, they probably shouldn't be doing it. Besides, it wasn't fair to expect him to know what she was and wasn't willing to do just by seeing her so well. If he made a mistake, it would ruin everything. And it was just as much her responsibility to make sure that mistakes weren't made as it was his. Somewhere in the course of the conversation, she realized she'd made her decision without quite articulating it, even to herself. She wanted to see where this led. Wanted more time with him. Wanted him.

And now that they'd discussed her birth control implant and the fact that they were both disease-free, next time they could forgo the condom. His hard length, driving inside her with no barrier whatsoever... She shivered and focused on the glass he was holding in front of her face. There wasn't much alcohol in it. Just a taste. She thanked him and took a small sip. The whiskey was fine and sent a trail of warmth through her chest and into her belly.

He was watching her, but that was okay, because she was watching him too. As annoying as the question-and-answer session had been, now that it was over, she felt...calm. The fact was she trusted this man. She thought she had before, but really she'd only trusted him to be a better option than being held a prisoner by Evil Bastard. And while she wasn't sure she could trust him not to be a controlling ass—in the not-so-fun, outside-of-the-bedroom sense—she was sure that she could call him on it. It was harder than she would have thought, the constant need to remind herself that she wasn't here because she needed his help, that she wasn't indebted to him. That she was here because she wanted to be, and because he wanted her to be. It made a huge difference, but for some reason it kept slipping right out of her head.

"Connul."

"Kyr."

"Will you tell me something about you?"

She wasn't sure what gave her the impression, but she thought he was pleased that she'd asked. He took a sip of his drink, then told her all about his own college experiences. Of course, they were vastly different than hers had been, but he was nice enough to include a couple of stories that didn't show his best judgment, letting her know that everybody made mistakes, especially at that age.

While he spoke, she put her empty glass on the side table and snuggled down into the chair. They really were comfortable. He reached forward to pull her feet into his lap, and, without pausing his story, began massaging her feet. It was nice and much more relaxing than the pedicure she'd gotten that afternoon. Which felt like a million hours ago. But she wasn't tired. She was...anticipating. For some reason, this quiet conversation was foreplay and they both knew it. Though his hands on her feet never strayed, his touch heated her skin and made her breath quicken. His low voice caressed her and his confident manner seduced her.

"I can't believe you stole someone's pig," she murmured without any real indignation.

"It was a mascot." He rolled his eyes at his own pitiful excuse. "Besides, we gave him back the next day."

"Painted in your school colors."

He gave her a wide grin, still somewhat unrepentant.

Damn, that grin did things to her insides. She must have given a betraying shiver, because his massage underwent a very subtle change. And then he stopped. But the shift in his demeanor was as clear as if he'd said "Now I'm in charge. Now you have to do what I tell you, or use your safe word."

She would remember the change, remember that choosing to follow his commands right now didn't mean she had to be afraid that he would expect her to do everything he said. Didn't mean she couldn't tell him to shove it when he tried to tell her they were going on a date, instead of asking her. The realization was a release of the last of her worries. Well, at least for now. Her eyes focused on his chin, ready, waiting.

He lowered her feet to the ground and stood, then held a hand out for her. She took it and they walked down the hall to his bedroom. This time when she walked to the middle of the room, she was excited, not nervous. Well, maybe a little nervous.

When he circled behind her, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then promptly tried to open them as silk forced the lids to remain closed. Another deep breath relaxed her, mostly, as he tied the blindfold behind her head.

Once he was done, he rested his hands over the front of her shoulders, caressing her through the softness of his robe.

"How does that feel?" he asked, his voice a whisper against her hair.

"Strange."

"Not too tight?"

"No."

She could feel him moving around her then, so didn't react when his hands pushed inside the robe, along her chest and up to her shoulders, pushing the garment out of his way until it spilled off her back, hanging from the belt at her waist.

One small jerk had the belt untied and she was completely naked before him. And blind. She called to mind the memory of the desire on his face when he'd seen her naked before. Holding onto that image helped her remain still, waiting.

"I'm going to put cuffs on your wrists now. Hold out your right hand."

When she did, instead of wrapping the bond around her, he set it in her hand. She almost dropped it, then gripped it tight. It was sturdy, leather, with some sort of very soft lining. She felt the cold metal of the buckle. When she stopped exploring, he took it back from her and fastened it onto her wrist, quickly doing the same to her other hand.

"And now your ankles. Same thing. All right?"

He was acting as though they hadn't done this before, just the other night and even yesterday, at Dain's. In a way, he was right. It was different now.

"All right."

A quick peck on her nose was over before she even realized what it was. Her nose. She huffed her disappointment and he chuckled as he buckled the cuffs around her ankles.

When he was done, he took her hand and stretched it out to her side and up at an angle, then wrapped it around a cool metal pole that hadn't been there when she'd walked into the room. Magic could be a handy thing. She almost laughed out loud at the thought, but was distracted by the click that indicated he'd attached her cuff to something on the pole. A small tug proved that she was solidly caught. It took him only a minute to repeat the action three more times and she was once again spread before him, naked and at his mercy. A shiver worked its way through her and she felt her nipples tightening.

Then she waited. And waited. He didn't say anything or make any noise to let her know where he was or what he might be doing. Was he standing there, staring at her? Had he gone to get a drink? She should be bored or annoyed. Instead the anticipation became nearly unbearable, her breath coming in pants as she imagined what he would do to her once he was ready. Imagined him watching her, maybe even stroking himself. Hopefully he'd taken off some of his clothing. She might not be able to see him, but she could imagine him just fine and she wanted to feel his skin hot against hers.

The sensation, when it came, was so slight, she wasn't sure she felt anything at all. Until he did it again. A brush of something soft against her cheek, then the cheek of her ass. The next stroke was firmer and she guessed it was a feather of some sort. He ran it up the inside of her arm and her breath caught. The small of her back, the curve of her belly, the back of her knees, all tingled at the soft contact. When he teased her ear, she couldn't hold back a little shriek.

His soft laughter soothed her.

"That's what tickles you, sunshine?"

She rolled her head and tried to rub her ear against her arm. "Apparently."

He brought his hand to her neck, stilling her, then rubbed his thumb over her ear, erasing the tickling sensation that lingered. She sighed and relaxed again.

"Connul?"

"Yes?"

"Does it ever feel..." She hesitated, not sure how to phrase her question. "I guess, one-sided, to you? I mean, you focus all this attention on me, work so hard to pleasure me. It just seems unfair."

He pressed his body up hard against her. He'd taken off his shirt, just as she'd hoped, but what grabbed her attention was the hard length of his cock pressed against her hip.

"I do this because it pleases you, turns you on, makes you wild, true. But also because it does all those things for me too. It's why we make such a good match. I suppose the hard thing would be if we met in some other way and fell in love, then discovered that our wants and needs didn't complement each other. But we didn't, and they do." He placed a hand over her mound, pressing down on her wet curls. "This makes you hot and wet." Circling his hips, he pushed against her, leaving no doubts as to the state of his excitement. "And it makes me ache for you."

Her breath caught at the need in his voice. "Oh. Okay. Just checking," she managed to say.

He stepped away and she wanted to call him back. But she also wanted him to get back to what he'd been doing. To that whole making them both wild thing. Yeah, that was a good thing. She was expecting another caress of a feather so the snap of the flogger against her upper thigh made her cry out. And long for more.

The slaps were light at first, kissing her legs and back, belly and ass. Then he gave her one hard crack across her back and immediately leaned in and licked the fiery welt, his tongue rough against the abused skin.

"Connul!"

He pinched her nipple without warning and she came, a small release that did little to calm her. A cool breeze blew across her sensitized skin and she felt goose bumps flare across her arms and legs. One large finger poked her nipple, pushing it into her breast and circling it around until she gasped with the small pain. Then he backed off, letting it spring toward him. It took her a second to realize he'd had something on his finger, some sort of cream. It heated and tingled and made her ache for him to touch her there with his tongue, but he only repeated the action with her other nipple.

The next touch was nowhere near her breasts. A sharp prick at her belly became a series of sensations as he rolled a pinwheel along her stomach and around her back. Every time he hit a spot still sensitive from the lashing, she gasped. He ran it up over her shoulder and down, toward her nipples that were now hot and aching for a touch, any kind of touch, but surely not...he wouldn't...

But he did—ran the pinwheel directly over her heated tip. Her scream strangled in her throat when he took the nipple into his mouth and sucked. Something hard nudged

between her thighs, not his cock, damn it, she wanted his cock. She opened her mouth to tell him so but he shoved the dildo smoothly into her and it came alive, vibrating her into an orgasm. This time she did scream, screamed his name more than once. He switched his mouth to her other breast then drew back and blew cool air across them both. She shuddered, unable to do anything else.

"Ah, sunshine. You glow for me."

She would have answered him, but her brain, which didn't seem to be working very well, was trying to figure out what he was doing. He'd buckled a strap around her waist, then tugged here and there, all the while his thigh, thick between her legs, kept the vibrator from coming loose. Then he stepped back and she realized he'd harnessed the dildo to her waist so that it would stay in without his holding it.

The vibrations changed tempo, slowed, then became a rolling sensation. The pinwheel started a new course, tracing across her legs and over her ass cheeks. He followed the path of a welt and she felt tears course down her cheeks. Not so much in pain as in the unrelieved sensations coursing through her. He stood behind her and she let her head fall back, begging for the contact. He allowed it, let her rest against his shoulder as his hands went to her hips and slid down to part her curls and find her clit. He pressed down on either side but didn't touch the aching bundle of nerves. Unable to stop herself, she tried to tilt forward, tried to increase the contact. He pulled his hands back and delivered a stinging slap to her cunt.

Sensation exploded and she almost tipped over the edge and into another orgasm. She tilted forward again. If that was his idea of punishment, she needed to misbehave more. His chuckle was soundless, but she felt it against her back. But damn, he moved his hands away and stepped back.

"Was there something you were wanting, sunshine? Not trusting me to give you what you need?"

"Connul, please."

"Am I not pleasing you, Kyr?"

She felt the all-too-brief flick of his tongue against her neck, the play of breath across her cheek, the heavy presence of his body almost touching her, but not quite, and the only answer she could give him was a moan.

The vibrator inside her burst into high gear. At least she hoped it was high gear, because she was positive she couldn't handle anything more. Her inner muscles contracted and she could feel the moisture sliding down her legs. She had no thoughts, only need. Dark, heavy need. And then he was there. Without touching any other part of her body, his lips met hers, his tongue invaded her mouth. A whimper escaped when he tore his mouth free, but his lips only moved as far as her ear to whisper, "Come for me, sunshine," before returning to claim her mouth.

Her whole body clenched and released, her ears rang, flashing lights sparked behind her closed lids and all she could do was cling to the connection she had with him, his lips hard against hers, his tongue tangling with hers. He drank her in until all

she could do was hang against her bonds, too worn out to stand properly. The vibrator turned off and Connul's arm came around her, supporting her collapsing body with his own. The blindfold dropped from her eyes as her arms fell limply to her sides and he picked her up. Cradled into his body, she thought this moment right here might be the best she'd ever felt in her life.

Chapter Nine

Connul loved the feel of Kyr in his arms, motionless except for the tiny tremors, aftereffects of her powerful release. She nuzzled into him, kissing his collarbone. He climbed onto the bed without relaxing his hold on her and sat against the headboard. She fit so easily, so naturally, in his arms and lap. He shifted slightly to ease the pressure against his cock.

He teased a hand through her hair, pulling the pretty strands up and away, then letting them spill back down. With his other hand he rubbed lightly along her back, teasing at the red, sensitized areas, slowly, ever so slowly bringing her back to awareness. Back to need. There was nothing so beautiful as his sunshine in need, he'd discovered. He unbuckled the strap around her waist and eased the vibrator from inside her.

"Kyr," he said quietly.

"Hmmm," she murmured, kissing his chest where she could reach without really moving her head.

"I want more."

"Mmmm," she purred, her hand coming up to caress him lightly.

"No, I mean, I want more from you. More time, more dates, more of this. More. It's probably rude to say so right now, but I don't care. I want you and I want you to know it."

She pulled her head back enough that she could look at him. Searched his face calmly. "Yeah, I kind of got that."

"Did you?"

"Well, the whole ordering me to go out with you thing. Not your best effort, but it was pretty clear what you wanted."

"Hmph."

"And then there was the way you analyzed and questioned every single fantasy, desire and want I have or might someday have. That's a little excessive for a one- or two-night engagement."

He thought about arguing but decided it wasn't worth the effort.

"Also, the giant boner poking at me —"

His sputtering interrupted her. "Did you just call it a boner?"

She blushed. "Well, what do you want me to call it?"

He lifted her up. "Put your legs behind me."

When she'd complied, she was still sitting in his lap but now they were face-to-face, chest-to-chest, her legs curled around him. His eyes strayed to the lovely sight of her breasts. She cleared her throat and he met her amused gaze.

"Well, you could call it a penis. A cock. A dick. A hard-on."

"Sure. Or I could call it a boner."

Laughter escaped him and he tried to remember the last time he'd laughed with someone he was having sex with. Maybe never.

"So?" he asked.

"So, what?"

"Are you going to stay?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What, you're asking this time?"

He scowled and she laughed and traced a finger over the wrinkles in his forehead until he let them relax.

"You need to be a little more clear on what you mean by 'stay'."

"Stay. Here. With me."

"I'm not moving in with you. Not after two days."

"You could have your own room."

"Oh please," she scoffed.

"Mmm, I like it when you beg me." He ignored her sputtering and leaned in to pull one nipple into his mouth, very, very gently.

Her hands came up to rest on his shoulders, her short nails biting into his skin.

Pulling back, he examined her. Her eyelids were at half-mast, her skin flushed with desire, her chest rising and falling quickly. Oh yeah, she was ready for more. And so was he.

"Sit in the middle of the bed, legs crossed," he told her.

Her flush increased at his tone and she licked her lips before carefully climbing out of his lap and scooting back.

He knelt up and removed his pants, then sat in front of her, legs crossed like hers. Gratified though he was that her eyes seemed riveted to his crotch, he held his hand between them until she noticed it, then summoned the stiff feather he'd used earlier. She gave a knowing smile and a delicious shiver. He ran the feather down her forehead, between her eyes, down her nose and over her chin.

Then he placed the feather in her hand and conjured a second one for himself. She gave him a hesitant look, then a huge grin when he nodded his permission. He half believed she'd head straight for his ear, but instead she started the tip of the feather at his shoulder and ran it down his arm, with an extra swirl at his elbow. He followed suit, running the second feather down the same path on her arm and shoulder. She moved to tickle the hollow of his throat, and he did the same.

He mirrored her actions, enjoying the sensation of the feather as it worked its way over his ribs and along his hips. The tightening of her lips indicated she'd discovered the torture of this particular game. Part of her wanted to drive him crazy, prolong his pleasure, as he'd done with her, but the longer she held out flicking that feather over his nipples, or down his cock, the longer it would be before she felt the similar sensations.

Finally she brought the feather to circle widely around his left nipple, around and around, her circles growing steadily smaller as she urged his feather closer and closer to her own puckered tip.

Though he saw it coming, he still drew in a sharp breath when she flicked the point over his nipple. She'd steeled herself and allowed no reaction when he did the same. She repeated the motion on his right side, but her circles were faster and faster. When she'd gotten to the nipple and given it a couple of flicks, she dropped the feather down to his thigh. He knew he was in trouble when she licked her lips. Her movements slowed down again as she drew the feather along his leg and circled his knee. She played with the crease at his thigh for only a second when they discovered that the same place on her was highly ticklish.

"It occurs to me that the feather won't have quite the same effect on my...um...pussy as it will on your cock."

"It's okay, I have a plan for that." Was he imagining it, or was his voice as breathy as hers? Surely not. He cleared his throat and pulled his control around him like a cloak.

"I'm not sure that sounds fair."

"Nobody said anything about this being fair, sunshine."

She narrowed her eyes at him and surprised him by sweeping the feather down his cock, her eyes still steady on his. She was right, running the feather along her cunt lips was probably pleasant, but not quite the same as what he'd just felt. He could swear goose bumps had broken out along his dick.

He let her have a couple more strokes while he flicked the feather over her clit. Then he made both feathers disappear. She gave a squeak of outrage, until he held out his hand again, showing her the two pinwheels. Her lip disappeared between her teeth as she reached for one. Her eyes scanned his body hungrily, deciding where to start. He groaned when she went straight for the inner thigh. The smile flirting about her lips let him know she liked hearing his groans as much as he did hers.

Instead of heading north, she ran the pinwheel carefully over his kneebone and down one of his crossed legs. When he'd done the same, she sat back a tiny bit and dropped the hand with the wheel to rest on her knee. He waited to see what she would do. She studied his body, paying particular interest to his straining penis. Then she looked up at his face and smiled at him. She lifted the pinwheel to his chest and ran it down his center, then angled over to trace his hip bone. Her breathing was heavy again and he could see moisture between her legs. Time to move things along. He made the implements disappear.

Kyr frowned and looked at his hand expectantly, but he had something else in mind. He got off the bed, careful not to smile at her petulant scowl.

"Sit up at the headboard, legs out."

She did as she was told and he piled pillows behind her to angle her body out more. "Put your hands behind your neck," he ordered. "I'm not going to attach the cuffs together, sunshine. This time, you're going to keep your hands there because I told you to, understand?"

Her eyes got a bit wider and she nodded at him, rolling her shoulders and setting them.

"Your skin looks so pretty, flushed and begging for more." He called a candle into his hand and lit it with a look. She gasped as the flame suddenly appeared, flaring bright before settling down to a steady burn. Her eyes were glued to it as he moved the candle around, encouraging the wax to soften.

"Kyriana." His voice was soft but held a command.

Her gaze flew to his.

"No moving."

She pulled her lip between her teeth and nodded.

While her attention was still on his face, he tipped the candle and let go a small drop. It landed on her stomach, an inch above her bellybutton. She gasped and her eyes dilated. He looked down and watched as another drop landed to the left of the first, right where he'd aimed. He moved lower, catching her thigh, her knee, her anklebone. Though he knew exactly how hot the wax was, he kept a close eye on her. When he'd reached her foot he paused and looked up at her.

Her eyes were closed and her breathing even, not as heavy as before. He switched to the other leg and let wax drop onto the inside of her thigh. She moaned. Next he dropped two, in quick succession on the crease of her thigh and the side of her pelvis, at the same time conjuring an ice cube into his other hand. He sucked it into his mouth, working it around and around to make sure it was smooth, with no rough edges. Her curls were shiny with her cream and her stomach muscles clenched rhythmically.

A path of tiny wax dots rimmed in red skin marked his trail up to her breasts, then circling them, until at last he let one drop land on her upstretched nipple, at the same time he took the ice cube from his mouth and pushed it deep into her cunt. She screamed and came around his fingers, squeezing him tightly. He blew out the candle and let go of one last drop on her other nipple, then lowered his mouth to the first.

"Inside. Inside me, please, Connul."

He was over her, inside her, in only a second. She welcomed him, her wet pussy pulling him in. It took every bit of his strength and determination to keep from coming the second he entered her. He reached down and circled the base of his cock with his fingers, squeezing tight, until the need to let go eased just slightly. Then he moved, in and out of her, angling just right to make her breath catch. When her heels were digging

into the mattress and her arms shaking with the need to stay put, he let go. He pounded into her harder, the bed jerking beneath them, and came with a release so strong he thought he might just go blind. Kyr's orgasm seemed to stretch on and on before she went limp beneath him. He rolled to the side and gathered her close, closer than he'd ever wanted another human being.

Once he was breathing normally and had full feeling back in all of his muscles, he moved to put her down. She protested but didn't have the energy to fight him. When he began running a warm cloth down her arm, she subsided and opened her eyes.

"You don't have to do that," she murmured.

"I like taking care of you. Touching you." He slid the soft cloth over her breasts, softening the wax so he could peel it off. Her breath caught at the sensation and he smiled.

"Drink your tea."

She blinked at him. "What?"

He nodded to the bedside table. "Tea, you should drink some."

Taking the cup, she took a drink. "Sweet."

He licked her stomach before following the path with the cloth. "So are you."

"I figured I'd be more salty," she said, wryly.

"Both."

It didn't take him long to clean up the wax that was designed for use on the skin. He was pleased to see Kyr had finished the tea and though her eyes were showing interest, they were also drooping. The jar of arnica was still on the bedside table, and he applied it to the few areas that looked as though they might bruise, telling her to turn over when he was ready for her back. By the time he was done, she was asleep.

Checking the clock, he found that it was barely midnight. He could get up and go find Keller, but the mage was coming from a Midwestern time zone and was probably already in bed. Besides, he was comfortable and really didn't want to leave. And he didn't want to leave Kyriana out of the discussions. She wouldn't complain if he did, though, wouldn't expect to have any say in what was to happen with the evil bastard who'd held her hostage for so long. He needed to work on her sense of self-worth.

As if aware of his thoughts, she murmured in her sleep and snuggled up even closer to him. He smiled and closed his eyes. Right now he had her right where he wanted her, with a promise of more to come. He'd worry about the bad stuff later.

Chapter Ten

Kyriana woke up hungry. Starving. Which was ridiculous considering the amount of food she'd eaten at dinner, but there you go. When the grumbling of her stomach made her worry she'd wake Connul up, she decided to risk a trip to the kitchen. The possibility was good she'd run into one of the staff, but she was just going to have to take the chance. It was only six, so hopefully she'd at least miss the other guests—Sasha and the guy from the Society.

She found the robe on the floor by the bed and put it on, giggling as she tried to think up a better name for the magical group. Taking care to be silent, she closed the bedroom door and turned around. A stranger was standing in the hallway wearing only running shorts and shoes. She was positive this was the mage from the Society, so there was no reason to be scared. Connul would never have allowed anyone he wasn't sure about to stay in the house. But she was nervous. Though if that was because he was a mage, or because he was half-naked, she wasn't sure. Sweat trickled down his chest as he watched her, and she had no desire to lick it from his amazingly gorgeous body. How strange. Apparently that whole falling for Connul thing was happening at supersonic speeds, despite her attempts to slow it down.

She tried a smile but was fairly sure it was a pathetic effort. Still, she cleared her throat and tried to be polite.

"Hello. I'm Kyr."

He nodded his head. "Keller."

That was all he said, but he was watching her. And then she felt the tiniest of tickles against her mind. Fear slammed into her so hard she didn't take a second to consider her actions. She screamed, "Connul!" and kicked the man between his legs. Which probably would have been more effective if she hadn't been barefoot.

He didn't react other than to hunch over enough to brace his hands on his knees. The door behind her tore open and Connul shoved her to the side so he could step in front of her.

"What the fuck did you do to her, Keller?"

The other man held up one hand in a conciliatory gesture as he got his breath back. Kyr was pleased she'd managed to hurt him, though she was beginning to wonder if she'd made a bad move, politically. This guy had come to help them, after all.

Keller straightened and nodded at her. "My bad. I brushed her mind to make sure there was no hint of Guard on her."

Connul took a step forward, his hands tightly fisted. Kyr grabbed his arm.

"I'm sorry," Keller continued, though he didn't look worried about getting in a fight. "Most non-mages wouldn't have had the slightest clue what I was doing. Besides, she took care of it herself, so you can stand down." He turned to look at her. "I am sorry."

Turning his back on his visitor, Connul faced her. "You okay, sunshine?"

Now that things were under control, she was rather pleased with herself. She hadn't hesitated, but had attacked the man while calling for backup. Of course, if he'd been bent on hurting her she probably wouldn't have accomplished much, but it was better than freezing into a terrified statue and letting him do whatever he might have wanted. All in all, she was satisfied with how she'd handled it, how he'd reacted and apologized, and even with how Connul had come running.

"I'm good. And hungry. Excuse me." She nodded and smiled at them both and resumed her trip to the kitchen.

Sasha had beaten her to it, and she finally remembered that both of the other guests had come from different time zones. Now she was glad she'd woken up so hungry or she would have felt like a sloth, sleeping in while they were up and ready to get started tackling the problem of Evil Bastard.

She heard footsteps behind her as she smiled at Sasha and the cook she'd met the other day. Connul grabbed her hand and dragged her to the kitchen table. By the time she'd sat down, Keller was joining them, wearing jeans and a t-shirt. She had a moment to wonder why he didn't smell like sweat before she remembered that he could magic himself clean if he didn't want to take the time to shower. Handy.

"Poached eggs," Connul murmured to her, a teasing glint in his eyes.

"Fried."

"With toast."

"Wheat."

"And strawberry jam."

"Just butter."

He laughed and ordered for both of them.

She caught identical incredulous looks on the faces of Keller and Sasha, but didn't care. For the first time in a very long time, she didn't care what most of the people in the room thought of her. Somehow her observant man knew just what she was thinking, she was sure. He raised her hand to his lips and nibbled on the knuckles.

Sasha made a gagging sound. "Please, I'm trying to eat here."

"Don't let us stop you," Connul murmured around Kyr's fingers. Then he grunted as Sasha kicked him under the table.

"So," Kyr said loudly, attempting to head off a sibling battle. "What's the plan? Is there a plan?"

"Of course not," Connul answered. "If there was a plan, you would know about it. And have helped come up with it. And we need Dain."

She just blinked at him.

"When is Dain getting here?" Sasha asked. "Did someone tell him he couldn't be his usual lazy self this morning? We've got things to do."

Connul cocked his eyebrow at her. "It's not even six-thirty. Aren't you the one who bit my head off for calling at eight the other morning?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "That was eight my time. Now it's nine my time, and we have things to do, which are completely different than the things I was planning to do that morning."

Keller snorted. "Not going to let a little thing like the rotation of the earth interrupt your plans?"

Sasha nodded, picking up her coffee. "Exactly."

The doorbell rang as the cook brought Kyr and Connul their plates. She tucked into the eggs with relish, then frowned when she realized Connul wasn't paying attention to his food. He was glaring at Keller. She looked to the other man and found that he was watching her. She blushed, hoping she hadn't looked too much like a pig. And then she froze. Because she was suddenly wearing bulky clothes under her robe. Looking down, she found that Connul had dressed her in—she wiggled her toes to confirm her suspicions—yes, footie pajamas, that zipped all the way up to her neck. Maybe it hadn't been her appetite that had captured Keller's attention. And Connul was objecting.

Her fork landed on her plate with an impolite clatter but she was too busy glaring at him in exasperation to be worried about etiquette.

"Connul," she ground out between clenched teeth.

"Yes?" he asked, as if he had no clue what she might be upset about.

"If I wanted to be wearing something other than this robe, I would have gone and changed."

"You looked a bit chilly," he offered.

Keller was laughing out loud and Sasha was watching them as if they'd replaced the television as her morning entertainment. Dain walked in and took a seat beside his sister, leaning over to snatch up a piece of bacon from Connul's plate.

A dozen responses flicked through her brain. She could shame him by telling him she wasn't chilly, but she was hungry, so abandoning her meal to go change would really be unfortunate. She could embarrass him by grabbing his balls and holding on tight until he fixed the outfit. She could treat him like a child and start counting from one to three, giving him the opportunity to fix it before she had to decide what the consequences of hitting three might be. She could pick up her plate and take it to her room to eat in peace.

"How nice that I'm in a room with three other mages, any one of whom I could ask to fix my clothing situation. It would be an interesting experiment to see what each person chooses for me, don't you think?"

Connul scowled, but the heavy fabric disappeared. She looked down and adjusted the robe a bit until she was covered to her satisfaction, then returned to her breakfast. His big shoulder bumped into hers and she looked up at him. He gave her a sheepish grin of apology. Her answering smile was accompanied by a roll of the eyes. As if Keller was the least bit interested in her. She glanced at the man in question and found that he was staring at her chest. Huh. Clearing her throat, she waited until he raised his eyes to her face. "I could ask Connul to give me some shoes. Steel-toed boots, maybe?"

He laughed, but his eyes stayed focused on their faces as they discussed what was to happen next.

"The accusations are serious enough to warrant a tribunal." Keller turned to Kyr to explain. "When a mage is accused of doing something the Society considers dangerous to the non-magical, we have a tribunal. A trial made up of four Society members, as well as two peers selected by the accusers and two peers selected by the accused. Both sides will be able to present their case and can ask others to speak on their behalf or give testimony on what they've witnessed."

"Interesting," was the only opinion she was willing to offer up at this stage.

Keller grinned and resumed speaking to the whole group.

"I'll go to Guard and inform him that he's been called for tribunal. If he accepts, things happen quickly. You and the peers you select must be ready to appear tomorrow. We don't want accused mages to be held in suspicion unfairly."

Kyr's heart sped up. She didn't know Keller, but she wouldn't want anyone going to meet Guard unprepared. "Isn't that very dangerous for you? He's not going to react well, I can tell you that much."

"Attacking me would pretty much seal his fate. And I'll be prepared. The Society has some magical items for just this purpose. Items that mages were, uh, discouraged from keeping for their personal use. However, as much as it pains me to admit it, most likely if Guard attacks I'll use my least favorite option, which is disappearing. Getting into a fight is not the point of the meeting, and if he attacks, I'll leave and summon a containment team."

"I would suggest strongly that you be prepared for that," Connul said. "In the meantime, we'll keep working to strengthen the protection around this house, Dain's and my office. Those are the places he'll want to attack if he decides subtlety and spying are no longer options for him. I have protection on my employee's families, but obviously that's stretching me pretty thin. Eventually he'll find someone he can use as a hostage."

Kyr finished eating while Keller and Dain were still working on their breakfasts, so she excused herself to go change. Connul didn't even bother to excuse himself, just rose from the table and followed her out.

"I'm going to take a shower and get dressed. If you come with me, chances are that won't happen very efficiently."

"And that would be bad?"

"I'm not letting you distract me with mind-blowing sex while three people are sitting around waiting for us."

"Hmm. What if I promised something less than mind-blowing?"

She smirked as she stopped in front of her door. "Somehow I don't think you'd live up to that promise."

He sighed. "You're probably right. I'll go shower in my own room. But first..." He backed her up against the wall and kissed her, long and hard. Then he pinched her butt and strode off down the hall.

Horrible, mean, sexy bastard. Her legs felt like Jell-O but she ignored that and went in to get ready.

Twenty minutes later she was wondering where to find everyone. They wouldn't still be in the kitchen, would they? The house was large, but not that large, so she headed in the general vicinity of the living room. And nearly ran over Mrs. Tremky as she turned a corner in the hallway.

"Oh. Mrs. Tremky, I'm sorry." She wiped sweaty palms down her jeans

"Ms. Price. Are you all right? Connul said that you were in some trouble that he was helping you with, but I hadn't seen you in days. I was worried."

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Or I will be, soon, I think. I'm sorry..." She trailed off, not sure how to apologize without getting into a huge story.

"You just can't keep those two words quiet, can you?" Warm hands slid onto her shoulders.

"Connul." She squirmed, heat filling her cheeks as he touched her in front of Mrs. Tremky.

"You behave yourself, Connul Graysn. Don't be embarrassing her in this house," the house manager admonished her boss, though she was smiling.

Connul dropped a kiss on the top of Kyr's head. "Yes ma'am. I'll be sure to embarrass her only outside of this house."

Mrs. Tremky laughed and walked away, leaving Kyr standing with Connul's arousal pressed against the top of her ass. She thought about yelling at him, just for fun, but decided revenge was better. She tilted her hips just so, rubbing against him until his breathing picked up speed. Then she twisted her shoulders out of his grasp and walked on down the hall.

It took a good ten seconds for him to catch up with her and take her hand in his.

"Brat," he muttered, but there was no heat in it.

She winked at him. As far as she could remember, she'd never winked at anyone in her life before. He smiled and tugged her into the sunroom that she'd been hired to decorate with a mural. The others were waiting and Kyr was glad she'd hurried, though she'd been so damn tempted to call Connul back after that kiss.

"Connul," Keller began. "The item I use for immediate transportation needs a home base. If I can set a spell in this room, it's where I'll return if I need to use the staff. If it

makes you uncomfortable to have a beacon spell here with everything that's going on, that's fine, I'll just need to find someplace else to set the spell."

"The Staff of Ronald?" Dain asked. "Is that where it got to?"

"The Staff of Ronald?" Kyr asked, fighting not to laugh. "You called a magical item the Staff of Ronald?"

They looked at her as though she were nuts. "Well," Sasha explained slowly, "it was created by a mage named Ronald. And it's a very rare and difficult ability, so of course they would call it after him."

"Ah. Right. Got it." It took every bit of her willpower not to burst into laughter. She felt as if she was trapped in a role-playing game with a bunch of teenagers. Although teenage gamers probably would have come up with a much better name for a staff that allowed someone to instantly transport themselves to another location.

"As I recall from my history lessons, it takes a fair amount of magic to set the beacon spell?" Connul asked.

"That's right. I can replenish fairly easily, though, if you don't mind the expense." He took pity on Kyr's curiosity and explained, "I draw power from electricity. I'm like a human lightning rod. I can also pull from electricity stored by man, but it can be a bit hard on the electric bill."

Connul gave his agreement and the other man turned and grabbed a staff from where it was leaning against the wall behind his back. He concentrated and she felt the air thicken around them as the magic built. Then it slowly settled and faded away.

She shivered a little, shaking off the feeling. Keller looked a bit pale and weak. He reached behind him to the wall outlet and cupped his hand around it. Tiny sparks flickered around his hand for a full five minutes before he moved away. His color had returned and he looked perfectly healthy.

Glancing at Connul, she found him watching her with amusement. "It may be faster and easier than my way of recharging, but it's not nearly as much fun."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He licked his lips.

Dain cleared his throat and she snapped her awareness back to the others in the room. Oops, she'd sort of forgotten they were there.

Keller stood. "I'll head out to Guard's. You all need to discuss the presentation of your side of things and let Kyr know how the questioning will be."

When he'd left, Kyr turned to Connul and asked, "Is he driving, or using magic?"

"Driving. Transporting a flogger or a pair of flip-flops isn't too difficult. Transporting a living, breathing person over a great distance is very, very difficult. And taxing. Even with the Staff of Ronald, as Sasha mentioned, it's difficult and can be disastrous if the person isn't skilled at that particular magic."

She nodded and sat back, listening as the others discussed their tribunal strategy. It unnerved her to think about having to give testimony, especially with Guard sitting in

the same room. It would make her happy to never have to share a room with him again. At the same time, though, she was glad there was something she could do to make sure he never hurt anyone again. So far, all she'd done was get Connul to free her and let him know there was someone stalking him. It would be hard, but satisfying, to be part of taking Guard down by telling the tribunal what he'd done to her.

Connul cocked his head as if he was listening to something. "Someone's coming up the drive," he said after a moment.

They all left the room and headed toward the front door. For no reason that she could figure, Kyr's heart was pounding hard. Connul stayed by the door but the rest of them followed Dain to a window in the sitting room where they could observe the person who had parked and was heading up the walkway.

When she saw the car and then the woman who'd almost reached the door, Kyr was so stunned she didn't react at first. Then she bolted toward Connul who looked up sharply as she approached, blocking her access to the door.

"It's my mother!" she cried.

Connul frowned and looked over her shoulder. He nodded, then reached out to open the door. Kyr would have moved forward but strong arms wrapped around her, holding her still.

"What the hell are you doing, Dain? Let me go!" She fought him, but he didn't react at all.

"She's probably bespelled, Kyr. Hang on, let Connul check her out."

Forcing her body to go still, she waited until Dain relaxed his hold slightly, then picked up her feet and tried to drop down through his arms. He just squeezed tighter, holding all of her weight.

Kyr's mother tried to come to her, but Connul stepped between them, blocking her path.

"Kyr, I need you. Your father needs you." The fear in her voice was like a knife to Kyr's heart, but she couldn't move.

"Mom, what happened? Where's Dad?"

"Mr. Guard said you were in trouble. He said we needed to come right away. When we got to his office he...he..." She was crying now, staring past Connul's body to meet Kyr's eyes. "He hurt your father. Then he put his hands on my head, and it was awful. He said I needed to find you and tell you to bring the Orb to him." She rubbed her hand over her forehead, wincing, but didn't look away from Kyr. "He said if I didn't, he would kill your father. But I didn't want to, wasn't going to. I was going to call the police, call you and warn you. But I got in the car, and here I am." She tried to move forward but Connul held her back.

"Mom!" Dain's arms were painfully tight around her now. She tried kicking him but the damn man wouldn't move. Sasha came to her and put a hand on her arm.

"Kyr, you need to calm down so we can figure this out. You can't help your parents by just doing what he wants." She looked to her brother. "We need to get over there—Keller could probably use our help. I think it's pretty clear now the guy isn't going to just accept being called to tribunal."

"Sunshine, your mom is obviously under Guard's influence. Can you keep her here, while we go get your dad?"

"What? No, I need to go with you!"

Apparently deciding her mother wasn't a danger, he let the woman go at the same time Dain released his hold. Kyr took her mother into her arms and the woman began to sob. "Kyr, don't go there, I don't want you to get hurt. Your father wouldn't want you to get hurt. Oh honey, what if he hurts your father?" She collapsed to the floor and Kyr went with her.

Connul bent down, taking Kyr's chin in his hand. "Sweetheart, you need to stay here with her. We know what we're doing, and I need to know you're safe." He kissed her forehead and stood. "We'll call as soon as we have everything under control." They headed for the garage, Connul calling over his shoulder, "Stay inside the house."

She knew he was right. You didn't run into a gunfight when you didn't even own a gun, let alone have the slightest idea how to use one. Her mother's quiet sobs grabbed her attention.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

"I'm just so worried. That man—" she broke off as a ringing sound came from her jacket pocket.

Kyriana watched warily as her mother pulled the cell phone out. It seemed very unlikely the call would be from a random friend. She reached out and took it from her mother's trembling hands.

"Hello." Her voice sounded flat, even to her own ears. Well, at least that was better than the terror she was feeling.

"Kyriana. I'm very disappointed in you. Forcing me to resort to such means."

Her stomach heaved at the sound of Landon Guard's oily voice.

"Let my father go. He doesn't have what you want."

"Of course he doesn't. But you do. I want you to get the Orb and bring it outside the house, or I'll kill your father. You have three minutes."

The click told her she had no chance to argue. "Mrs. Tremky!" she shouted as she dropped the phone and took her mother by the shoulders. "Mom, when Mrs. Tremky gets here, you have to tell her to call Connul immediately. I don't trust your phone. She has to call Connul right away and tell him Guard is here. Do you understand?"

"Your father?"

"I think he's here, and we need help. I have to go." She gave her mother a quick hug and turned to race down the hall. In her room, she opened the drawer where she'd seen all the items she'd brought to the house with her stored. Wrapped in a scrap of

velvet that was meant to be a skirt was a glass sphere. Evil Bastard had given it to her to switch with Connul's Orb, but she hadn't even bothered to unpack it, since she'd had no intention of even looking for the magical item.

Running, she passed her mother and Mrs. Tremky, who was holding a phone and called out for her. She didn't pause, didn't try to answer. The front door opened to a wide lawn. She looked around but couldn't see any sign of the mage. Moving down the driveway, she tried to look everywhere, afraid of missing him, afraid of being too late. And then he was there – across the street, her father in a crumpled heap at his feet.

She bit back a cry, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of her distress. Whether her father was alive at the moment or not, there wasn't much she could do for him except stall. She needed to give Connul and the others time to return. She slowly walked forward.

"Ah, sweet Kyriana. There you are. I was getting worried I might have to take my annoyances out on your poor, innocent father."

"So...what? Now you can take them out on me instead?" She tried to sound brave but was sure she'd failed when he gave her a big grin.

"Precisely. I'm very annoyed with you. You were supposed to let that perverted asshole into your body, not into your mind. That was mine."

She came to a stop at the edge of the driveway. She could feel something in front of her, like a wall of heavier air. Given the way Guard was staying just beyond Connul's property line, she guessed she was feeling the edges of a protection spell. "No, that was mine. How dare you invade my mind like that? It's unconscionable."

He laughed. "Damn, you're cute. I'm going to enjoy making you mine."

Somehow that statement allowed anger to pulse through her, pushing out some of the fear. "Like hell. I'd die before I let you touch me. It's bad enough you've been in my mind, I don't think I'd ever be able to scrub your slime off me if you actually touched me."

His face mottled with rage and he raised his arms and sent a blast of fire toward her. She hit the ground, her arms going over her head, a pathetic shield but the only thing she had. Nothing happened. She risked a glance up and saw sparks spitting against an invisible barrier in front of her. Connul's protection. She heard running behind her but was afraid to look back. Please, don't let it be her mother or Mrs. Tremky or –

"Ah, Mr. Guard. Just the mage I was searching for. How kind of you to come to me when I couldn't find you at your house."

Keller's voice brought a ray of hope. She dared a quick glance at him as he strode to her side.

Evil Bastard sent him a charming smile. "You must not have gotten too close, as you look to be in one piece."

Keller cocked his head. "You think not?"

That unsettled the other mage, Kyr could see.

"At any rate," Keller continued, "I'm here to issue you a summons to a tribunal. Your presence is required, tomorrow, to answer charges brought by the Graysns and Miss Price. The Society is very interested to hear both sides of the story and get to the truth of the matter, as I'm sure you can understand."

"I don't give a fuck what the Society wants. They don't matter to me. Kyriana, give me the Orb or I will kill your father." Instead of grabbing the still figure at his feet, though, he kept his hands free. Kyriana realized he needed them empty to direct his magic.

She shivered, though whether in response to the hate in Guard's voice or the breeze picking up, she wasn't sure. But she was suddenly wearing a sweatshirt. She blinked and glanced at Keller, but his attention was on the mage in front of them. The breeze was cool and wet and she flicked her eyes up, not surprised to see bulging, dark gray clouds advancing on their position, though it had been a clear and sunny day just moments before.

A ball of flame appeared in the bastard's hand, which he then held over her father's head. Her heart beat triple time and she took a step forward. "Let him go and I'll throw you the Orb." She held it out, and Keller jerked beside her but didn't try to stop her.

"No. I want you to bring it to me." Guard moved the flames closer to her father, who groaned and tried to roll away, even in his unconsciousness. *Alive, he was still alive.*

She glanced at Keller and he shook his head. Then he took his own step forward, beyond the perimeter of Connul's property and protection. She wanted to ask him what he was doing. What she should do. But she kept her mouth closed. Trusted.

Guard shouted for Keller to stay back, but Kyr's focus was on the man in front of her. He shimmered a bit, visibly pulling power around himself. A great deal of power. And then, in a blink, her father was in his arms.

Holy shit. "Dad!" She raced forward, trying to help brace both men as Keller staggered. An arc of flame shot toward them as they stumbled back onto the property. Keller went to his knees, his face gray as he lowered the other man to the grass.

"No!" Guard shouted, and strode closer, the flames intensifying into a steady stream. His face was mottled with rage, and Kyr wondered how long the shield would hold against him.

Rain began to fall, a small sprinkle at first, and then heavy sheets as the clouds gathered overhead rolled and billowed, multiplying before her eyes. The spray of fire stopped as Guard realized there were more players on the field.

Connul stepped out into view, commanding Guard's attention as Kyr saw Dain move into place behind him. Dain looked skyward, his arms stretched to the clouds, calling lightning down from the pouring rain. Sasha darted across the street and onto the lawn, dropping to her knees and placing her hands on Kyriana's father.

Kyriana swallowed hard at the fury written across Connul's face. She had no idea if he had any magical weapons or could even defend himself. Why hadn't she asked him

that? She blinked and tried to wipe the water from her face, not sure if she was seeing what she thought she was amidst the downpour. It looked as if chains had sprouted out of the ground and circled Guard's ankles. The mage realized it at the same time and threw a shield up around himself. It was apparently too late to stop the chains Connul had already conjured, but it seemed to protect Guard from further magic.

Tearing her gaze away, Kyr looked down at her father. Sasha had her hands on his head, her eyes closed, her face drawn. Kyriana knew enough to realize that wasn't a good sign. She dropped to her knees but had no idea what to do, how to help.

"Sasha?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"He'll be all right, Kyr. I'm just trying to make sure all of the bad magic is removed."

Electricity crackled in the air and she flinched as a streak of lightning shot from the sky, a line of pure energy meeting Dain's upstretched arms. Guard turned, lobbing a ball of fire. Dain lowered one arm, the line of lightning meeting the fire in a clash so bright, she had to look away.

Keller staggered away from their small group and again stepped outside the bounds of the protection spell. He looked ready to collapse and Kyr had to force herself not to call him back, to trust that he knew what he was doing. Almost instantly, Dain changed the direction of his lightning stream and aimed it straight for Keller.

The mage spread his arms wide, soaking in the electricity Dain provided. Kyr looked back at Connul. He'd had to make his own shield against the fire that Guard was trying to direct at him. Was she imagining it, or were the fire balls getting weaker? The rain fell so heavily she couldn't be sure.

"Give it up, Guard. There's no way you can stand against all of us." Connul's voice rang out strong and sure.

"Fuck you, Graysn. You have no idea what I'm capable of." He didn't sound worried, but he was no longer lobbing fire balls. All his energy seemed to be directed toward keeping his shield up.

"I know you surround yourselves with humans you can overpower, so you can feel superior. That doesn't make you strong, it makes you a bully." Connul's voice held laughter now.

Kyr expected Guard to be smart enough to ignore the taunting, but she gave him too much credit. The enraged mage went back to hurling fire, all directed at Connul, who spread his arms out, offering a wide target. She held her breath, but Connul's shield remained strong.

Keller directed a stream of lightning at Guard's shield. It sparked but didn't penetrate.

"It's over, Guard. I've already alerted the Council to what I found in your house," Keller called.

Guard's head snapped around at that, focusing again on Keller. Kyr could only watch as Connul took the opportunity to move closer.

Wind whipped Guard's hair and Kyr realized the shield wasn't a full bubble any more, it had shrunk in size, covering him from each of the mages, but no more. She glanced at Dain, but he was still concentrating on the skies, fueling Keller's energy. A wild look around showed her Sasha was hovering over her father, protecting his face from the falling rain. But his eyes were open. That gave her courage, but she wasn't sure what to do. She spotted the sphere on the grass where she'd dropped it when she'd run to help Keller with her father.

Running to the Orb, she felt a slight brushing at her mind. The dread that caused gave her the impetus to grab the Orb and swing back toward Guard. But then she froze. Just like in Connul's study. Her heart stopped, though not from the magic that was keeping her immobile. She didn't know if Guard had frozen her, or Connul. She only knew she was stuck, in the middle of a battle, with no way to move or even see what was happening.

Bile churned and tears she couldn't blink back slid down her cheeks, mixing with the rain. Someone cried out behind her, but with the sounds of the rain and fire and lightning, she couldn't even make out who it was. And then she heard the barking. She had no idea why Guard had kept the beast back for so long, but he was here now, and it sounded as though he was headed directly for her. She couldn't move. A scream clawed at her throat but even that was stuck. And then it wasn't. The scream released and she stumbled as her previously halted movement carried through.

Not thinking twice, not looking back to check how close the charging dog was, she followed through with her movements, using every ounce of pitching skill that she'd carefully concealed from every physical education coach she'd had as a shy teen, and sent the sphere flying through the air. Guard sensed it, turning toward her, toward the section of shield he'd let fall because she wasn't dangerous. He was too late. The heavy glass struck his temple with a meaty sound that she somehow heard over the pounding rain and shouts of the others. His head snapped back and he fell to the mud. The shield gone, chains immediately wrapped themselves around his body, anchoring him to the ground. A snap of electricity and a dull thud behind her told her the dog was out of commission.

Kyriana leaned over and threw up into the soggy grass.

Chapter Eleven

Connul closed the door to the guest bedroom, giving the Price family some time together. Sasha had cleared Mr. Price as fully healed and Connul had escorted them to Kyr's room and left. They didn't need him hanging around to remind them how close they'd come to losing everything. To losing each other. How close he'd come to killing Kyriana.

He made his way to his study and let himself in. On the bookcase was a glass paperweight in the shape of an apple. He picked it up and released the small disguise spell. The Orb was cool and clear, heavy in his hands. So much trouble for something that appeared so simple. Due to this one object, he'd found love, and nearly killed it. He'd failed Kyriana in every way possible, leaving her exposed to danger, not trusting her, taking charge of her body against her will, and letting a vicious dog bent on her death attack her. He'd let the freezing spell on her go as soon as he'd seen the dog, transferring it to the animal who was held motionless until Keller zapped it. Kyr hadn't even turned toward the beast, too intent on her attack.

He sat in what he now thought of as Kyr's chair and took a deep breath. It was time to be brave. Isn't that what he'd told Kyr? That being brave was doing something hard, even though it terrified you? Well, he wasn't exactly terrified, but he thought his heart might be shattering in his chest. But he would do it anyway, because he loved her.

The knock on the door shook him from his self-pity. The state of his heart wasn't what was important right now.

"Come in."

Sasha poked her head around the door. "Keller's finally off the phone. We're meeting in the sunroom."

He stood and followed her to the room where they'd met just that morning. Sasha took a seat on the couch and motioned for him to join her. She looked as haggard as he felt, while Dain and Keller bloomed with power and energy.

Keller opened his mouth to speak but Connul interrupted him. "Where's Kyriana?"

"I figured she was with you, or if you wanted her here, you would have told her," Keller answered.

"Of course she should be here, if she wants to be. If she's not sick of the whole lot of us and anything to do with magic." He started to lever himself from the couch, but Dain stopped him.

"I'll let her know. Be right back." He jogged from the room.

They sat in silence, Connul closing his eyes and resting against the couch. He couldn't remember ever being this tired before. It wasn't long before Dain returned with a subdued Kyriana in tow.

Keller didn't wait to get started. "He's dead."

Connul was sure he'd either heard incorrectly or jumped to the wrong conclusion, but Keller nodded his head. "Guard. He died while being transported to a secure location."

Stunned, Connul couldn't formulate any questions, let alone speak. Dain managed it for him. "How?"

"Let me back up and tell you what I found when I went to Guard's house. His shields were strong, but I was prepared for that. Again, it's handy having objects that the Society trusts you to use when they can do so much harm against others. I had a key that let me through the shield. It was obvious that Guard wasn't there. There was a magical presence, but it was weak and...strained."

He stood, rubbing a hand through his hair, clearly distressed by what he'd seen.

"It was easy enough to get past the servant who answered the door. I followed the feel of magic into the basement. I found Guard's sister and her son. He had them imprisoned, had figured out some way to keep them both secured so that he could siphon off their magic."

Sasha gasped and Dain paled. Connul sat back against the couch, horrified. It shouldn't surprise him. It wasn't really any worse than what the evil bastard had done to Kyriana. But his own sister and nephew.

"Both mother and son are fire mages."

Connul frowned. "That's strange. All three of them?"

"It is strange, and I'm going to have a researcher at the Society look into it. I don't think I've ever heard of so many members of one family sharing the same trait. At any rate, I think once he had control of them, it made it nearly impossible for them to fight back. They couldn't just fling fire at him, obviously."

"But how was he able to take their magic? Bring it into himself? I would have said that was impossible without some serious spell work." Sasha shuddered.

Keller shook his head. "I'm not sure, but it can't have been easy and probably explains why he wanted your Orb so badly. I released the sister and nephew and called for healers to come help them. Then I used the Staff of Ronald to get back here as quickly as possible. What I just found out is that when the healers arrived, they worked on breaking the links that allowed Landon to siphon the power. They had tattoos on both their bodies that matched up to several on Guard's. The healers said the rate he was draining them kept increasing, I'm assuming the harder he tried to fight us off. I think we'll find that his death coincides with the timing of when they managed to break the link. To have his influx of power cut off so abruptly, when he was already weakened and hurt, was probably too much."

"I wonder what he was planning on doing with all that power," Dain said. "If he'd gotten the Orb, the ability to hold even more..."

"So much fucking power, and most of it stolen." Keller stood. "The Society will send another investigator out to ask questions, make sure your statements match up to my reports and the evidence they find. I'll let you know what I find out about the Guards once I know something."

Connul stood. "You're welcome to stay the night, of course."

Keller shook his head. "I've got a reservation for a flight that leaves in two hours. I need to get moving."

Sasha jumped up. "I'll give you a ride."

"No need, I'll—"

She held up a hand. "Airports. There are lots of people at airports, and they're all intent on one thing. Getting to where they're going. It's not the best, but it's better than anything else I can think of on short notice."

Keller grinned and motioned her to the door. "Power up."

She gave Connul a big hug. "I like your girl. Bring her to New York for a visit."

He managed a small smile, but she didn't look convinced. She moved to give hugs to Kyriana while Dain offered a hand. "I'll get out of here too."

And then they were alone. He stared at her, ready to be yelled at. She stared at him, as if waiting. Finally, she turned on her heel and left the room.

* * * * *

The ride to the Price home seemed too quick. Kyriana kept up a quiet conversation with her parents and he just sat and watched her. She was so beautiful, and watching her with her parents, watching her with those she loved...well, he needed to not think about that, or he was going to chicken out. And he couldn't do that, for her sake.

The limousine made good time and long before he was ready, the car came to a stop on a quiet residential street. Mr. Price, Jerry, as he'd insisted Connul call him, had agreed to let him place some protective spells around the house. He declined their invitation for coffee and went about setting the spells. Kyriana watched everything he did, so it was hard to concentrate, but he forced himself to focus. He wouldn't fail her in this, wouldn't see them less protected than he was capable of providing.

When he was done, he was exhausted. He hadn't refueled, had only managed to draw some power from his land in the early morning hours. The idea of finding someone to share their release with him, someone other than Kyriana, made him physically ill. He'd deal with that later.

He turned to face her. "You should go inside. They need you."

"They have each other. I need you."

Her eyes were afraid as she searched his face. She wasn't stupid, she knew something was wrong.

"You should go inside," he repeated.

"Connul. What's wrong? Why won't you touch me?" She wrapped her arms around her waist and he had to stop himself from drawing her in and holding her tight.

"It's over, Kyr."

"I know it's over. That's supposed to make us happy, not..." She shook her head. "Not whatever this is."

"No, I mean...I mean we're over."

"We're over. How can we be over? I haven't even had a chance to yell at you yet for what you did to me during the fight."

She started to get angry and Connul was glad. He'd much rather see her pissed at him than sad and unsure.

"I still can't believe you froze me during the fight, what the fuck was that? How could you?"

"I screwed up. That's obvious, and it's part of why we can't be together. I did something that I knew you would hate and I almost got you killed in the process." He shook his head, unsure of how to explain it all to her without breaking down and begging her to let him stay.

"So that's your apology?" she whispered. He wished she'd yell. "You're sorry, and oh, by the way, because you made a mistake, we're through?"

"Yes," he agreed. "I'm sorry. Goodbye, sunshine."

"No! No, you don't get to call me sunshine when you're throwing me away!"

The pain on her face was more than he could stand. "I have to go. I'm sorry for what happened." He no longer knew if it was bravery or cowardice that helped him turn and walk away, when all he wanted to do was hold her in his arms and never let go. Whatever it was, it was over in minutes, and he was back in the limo, heading away from the only woman he'd ever loved. Would ever love.

Kyriana watched the car pull away in total disbelief. Not only was the jerk breaking up with her, he was stranding her at her parents' house. She loved her parents and all, but she had no intention of staying with them for more than a day. And now she had no way of getting home. Jerk.

How could he apologize and break up with her when he was the one who'd fucked up? Or was he just using that as an excuse? After all, now that Guard was dead, they didn't need each other. Except they did. They did need each other, had come to need each other in ways that had nothing to do with Evil Bastard. That hadn't just been her, had it? No, he'd been right there with her, hell, he'd been the one forcing her to move into his house and go on dates with him. That was all him.

She sat on the front porch and tried to figure out what was happening. How could a guy break up with you when you'd done nothing wrong? Granted she wasn't the most experienced at relationships, but that seemed awfully backwards. And he'd seemed so sad. And tired. As far as she knew, he hadn't replenished any of the considerable power he'd expended. Her stomach clenched at the very idea. Who was he going to get to give him that? Some skank at the club?

Ugh. Now she was being unfair. She made her way into the house and spent some time explaining the past year to her parents. They were upset that she hadn't told them what was going on, but understood that she really hadn't had any choice in the matter. They were all tired and turned in early.

Her old bed was small but felt huge and empty to her. She'd only slept three nights with Connul and already she was unable to sleep alone. Pathetic. He deserved better than her, someone who wouldn't be so clingy. She tossed and turned, all the fantasies he'd wrung from her the previous night marching through her head, taunting her with the fact that they would never be. Because she couldn't imagine ever giving anyone else that kind of trust. She'd given Connul her trust and he'd frozen her. In the middle of a fight, for crying out loud. And then that jerk had apologized and left without really giving her a chance to yell at him for it. Of all the fucking nerve.

When dawn arrived she hadn't managed any sleep at all, but she had a plan.

Her father seemed completely fine after a good night's sleep. When they sat down to breakfast, he watched her, but she tucked her head down as if her eggs were the most fascinating thing ever.

"Kyr, I hope you know how proud your mother and I are of you."

That brought her head up. "Proud? For almost getting you killed?"

"Don't be silly. We've taught you to take responsibility for your actions, that doesn't mean you should take on responsibility for the actions of those around you."

"Oh. Right."

"You're a good, responsible girl and we love you. Maybe we don't tell you that often enough, and for that I'm sorry."

She had to blink a couple of times. A long swallow of orange juice and she finally forced herself to meet his eyes. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting—fear, hurt, anxiety, maybe. But all she saw was love. Her throat closed up and she did some more blinking.

"Now," her mother said briskly. "Tell us about this Connul. He's not just your new boss, is he?"

So she told them the story. Well, parts of the story. Very basic parts of the story. But enough to admit that Connul had never really been her boss, he was just trying to help her, but yes, things had gotten romantic.

"I don't know though. When he dropped me off, it was weird. Something's wrong there."

Her mother nodded. "Men are funny after a dangerous situation. Who knows what's going through his head? You aren't going to let a little thing like that stop you from getting what you want, are you?"

Her father snorted and Kyr laughed. "No. I have a plan. I need to get back there though. Would one of you drive me to the rental car place?"

They argued about whether or not she should just take their car, and who should take her. In the end, both insisted on going, even though it was only a fifteen-minute drive.

They chatted easily until they'd almost reached their destination, when her father cleared his throat. "You know, my mother had some magic. Not a lot, but her father was supposedly a full-blown mage. Back in Ireland."

Kyr was speechless. No, she'd never been told anything of the kind.

"Remember, that was a tough generation for mages. The family kept it to themselves."

"What, I'm not family?"

He sighed. "By the time you came around, she was long gone and I'd never had even a smidgen of magic, so it wasn't something we thought about much. It's not like the topic really ever came up before. And now it has, so I thought you'd like to know. To know that we don't care *what* this man is, only how he treats you."

She nodded, her damn throat doing that closed-up thing again. "Okay, Dad."

They arrived at the rental agency, and both her parents got out of the car to give her big hugs.

"I'll call you tomorrow, let you know how things are going."

The ride back gave her time to get nervous about her plan, but she set her second, third and fourth thoughts aside and headed straight for Connul's house.

When she knocked on the door, she wasn't the least bit surprised that Connul answered it himself. After all, she'd called Mrs. Tremky ten minutes before and asked her to make herself scarce for just this purpose. Connul looked irritated, but whether it was because he'd had to open the door himself, or because he'd found her on the other side of it, she couldn't tell.

"Kyriana."

"Connul. I've come to get some of my things." She pulled on her anger, using it to overshadow her nerves. "I'm assuming everything is still in the room you loaned me. I swear, Connul Graysn, if you had my things packed up again and moved without my —" She stopped herself when he held his hand up.

"Of course not. Your things are where you left them. I just assumed you would be spending more time with your family before you returned."

"Well, you shouldn't make assumptions. If you had just asked me what my plans were, I would have told you I had no intention of staying with them. Speaking of

which." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a large piece of paper. She handed it to him and swept past him.

A spurt of relief hit her as he fell into step beside her. "What's this?"

"The receipt for the rental car. Since you stranded me without access to a vehicle. That was pretty fucking rude, Connul."

"I apologize."

"Oh, for that you apologize? Wonderful." She dared a quick glance at him and wasn't sure if the thin line of his lips was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Kyriana—"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." She waved her hand dismissively. "You'll have to let me know when you want to talk about that some other time, it's not why I'm here and I don't think I have time to deal with it right now."

She opened the door and strode to the dresser. "Maybe you could help me out with something, real quick though. If you don't mind."

He stayed in the doorway but didn't answer as she opened the drawer where the glass sphere had been. Pulling out one of the corsets that she'd first brought with her to his house, she held it up in front of her body and turned to him.

"Since Guard's idiot lackey helped pick this stuff out, I just wanted to make sure, from someone who knows, that it really is appropriate for a club like Loophole. I would be so embarrassed to show up in the wrong thing." Her heart was beating a million miles a minute, but she tried to keep her face to a simple questioning expression. It was hard, but it got a little bit easier when she noticed how his jaw was clenched, and the little vein in his forehead that seemed to have popped out a bit.

"Kyriana."

Unable to keep up the façade for too long, she turned back to the drawer. "I know there was a skirt in here somewhere that was at least a tiny bit longer than my ass." She rummaged through, to give herself more time.

"What game are you trying to play, Kyriana?"

That made her mad. Mad enough to face him again. As long as she was mad, she wouldn't start wondering if he was throwing her away because he didn't want her. As long as she was mad, she would remember that he loved her. Just like she loved him. As long as she was mad, she wouldn't doubt. Which probably said a lot about her level of intelligence, but there you go.

"Oh I think you know, Connul. I think you know exactly what game I'm playing. I'm playing the 'Who's going to play with me, now that Connul's thrown me away' game."

"Stop saying that," he ground out.

"What? That you're throwing me away? Sorry, how would you like me to characterize the fact that one minute you're chasing me down and making every nerve

in my body sing in joy, and the next you're dropping me off at my parents' and telling me not to come back?"

She held up the garment she'd grabbed from the drawer and tried to make sense of the straps and buckles. Connul took two long strides into the room and tore the whatever-the-hell-it-was out of her hands.

"You're not going to Loophole. Not in this dress, not in your pajamas, not at all."

"Really? And why would that be any of your concern?"

"Because you're mine, damn it! And nobody else gets to touch you."

"Sorry, Connul, but it doesn't work that way. If you aren't going to touch me, then you don't get to have a say in who else does or doesn't."

Apparently, she'd pushed him too far. Finally. In her imagination he'd snapped a lot sooner. He threw the bundle of straps that he seemed to think was a dress to the side and snatched her up by the arms.

"Is this what you wanted, Kyr? You want me to touch you, to take you, to make you mine?"

"Yes, that's what I want. But if you don't want me, then fine. I'll just be on my way, as soon as I find the right outfit."

"My wanting you has never been the question, and you know it!"

"Oh, well, excuse me. So what the hell is the question then?"

"How can you ask me that? How can you bring yourself to me, put yourself in my hands, after what I did to you?"

She stared at him. Was he really that stupid? "You made a mistake, Connul. If you would just fucking apologize for it, I could yell at you and we could get past it. If one mistake means the end of the relationship, then you're right, we might as well be done with it, because I'm sure I'll make plenty."

"I violated your trust and put a spell on you that nearly got you killed!"

"And you *still* haven't apologized for it!"

His fingers tightened on her shoulders. "Fine. I'm sorry I immobilized you during the fight." He let his hands drop and stood there, as if waiting for her to attack him.

As if she'd be so predictable. "Why?"

He blinked. "What?"

"Why? Why did you freeze me?"

He shook his head and sighed, the anger leaking out of him. "I saw the sphere you were reaching for. I thought Guard had entered your mind again, was making you bring it to him."

"Oh." Oh. She hadn't thought of that.

"I didn't want you any closer to him, and I knew you would hate being forced to do anything to help him."

"Okay. Well, I forgive you."

He stared at her. "You forgive me."

"That's right."

"I abused your trust."

She frowned. "Not really. And it was a fight. Things happen during a fight. Bad things. Also, let's not forget whose fault all this really was. You know, taking responsibility for your actions is one thing. Taking on responsibility for those around you is another thing entirely. Especially, you know, when they're all evil and stuff."

He blinked at her for a minute then went over to the bed and sat down. He looked so sad and tired, she couldn't keep her anger up anymore. Which meant it was time for the doubts to creep in. Was she being an idiot, pushing herself on him?

Ignoring the doubts—because really, would it hurt that much worse if he rejected her again?—she walked to the bed and nudged his knees apart so she could stand between his legs. He looked up at her, letting her see the exhaustion, the despair and the tiny bit of hope. His hand reached for her, then dropped back to his side.

She took his face between her palms and let her carefully constructed mask fall away. "I love you."

His mouth fell open with a gasp. And then he was standing, crushing her to him. His arms around her were tight but his lips were gentle. Though she wanted more, craved more, she let him work at his own pace until he finally relaxed his hold on her and began to move his hands. Then she pulled back. He started to chase her down, but stopped and studied her face. He brought his hands up to trace her eyebrows, her nose, her lips. Then he threaded his fingers through her hair and held her still for more kisses. Which she gladly accepted. But she also took the opportunity to start unbuttoning his shirt. The stupid buttons seemed tiny as she kept losing her concentration in the kiss, but eventually she managed the last one. His flesh was hot under her fingers and she smoothed her palms up and down, exploring every ridge and whorl. When she found his nipples, she tweaked them both at the same time. Hard.

He pulled back from the kiss and looked at her. "I missed you."

"What? For a day?"

"It seemed like a lifetime."

She swallowed hard. "Because you gave up on me."

"No, sunshine. I gave up on me. I'm sorry."

She sniffed. "Just don't let it happen again."

"Yes ma'am."

He shrugged his shirt off while she worked the buckle of his belt. She got a bit distracted again, this time by the bulge tenting his pants. The man sure did know how to fill out a pair of jeans. She left him to the belt and cupped him. He groaned and ripped the belt from the loops. Her eyes followed the intriguing piece of leather, but he tossed it aside. She dropped to her knees and settled her mouth around him, the denim protecting him from her teeth.

"Arghhh."

He hauled her up by her armpits and set about getting her naked. She helped, then reached for his pants again. His look stopped her and she waited patiently for him to tear them off. Well, not patiently, exactly. Her fingers moved between her legs, trying to ease the ache there.

"Sunshine," he groaned, and scooped her up and set her on the bed. "Let me help you with that."

She let her legs fall open for him, without hesitation. He blew a cool stream of air over her hot clit, then sucked it between his teeth. She bit her lip to keep from crying out, but that lasted only until he thrust two fingers deep inside her as he continued to suck. She came with a short scream.

His fingers stayed where they were, twisting and exploring, pumping and fucking, while his mouth started a journey north. He bit her hipbone, then kissed a path to her breastbone. All the while, his fingers continued their relentless but varied motions. She squirmed under him, her hands grasping the sheets at her sides, before she realized she could reach him now.

She put her fingers in his hair and moved his attentions from between her breasts to one of her nipples. He took the hint and drew the hard peak into his mouth, sucking gently until she raked her nails down his back.

"More!"

He brought his free hand up to her neglected nipple and plucked it while sucking and biting at the other. His thumb circled her clit, then pressed down. She came with another scream, but she needed more, damn it. She needed him.

"Connul."

He lifted his mouth from her breast and watched her face. Whatever he saw apparently convinced him she was ready for more, because he pulled his hand free from her and brought his body over hers. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he slid into her with one long, easy push.

His elbows rested beside her head, holding his weight as he moved within her, slowly at first, building and building until she was keening for him, his name falling from her lips with every thrust, until he tilted his head back and shouted his release. She came then, harder than before, holding him to her as he collapsed on top of her, placing tiny kisses on his neck where she could reach.

Finally he rolled over and propped himself up on his elbow next to her. He rested his hand over her heart. "I love you."

"That's good. Connul?"

"Yes?"

"That was really sweet."

He leaned down and kissed her nose.

"Connul?"

"Yes?"

"Will you take me to your room and fuck me now?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Are you going to move in with me? And no, I don't mean into this room. I mean with me. Our room."

"Are there still going to be chains?"

He stilled. "Kyr, I know I violated your trust, but I promise —"

"If there aren't any chains, I'm not moving in. I've discovered a fondness for them."

He frowned, then his mouth twitched. "You're getting awfully demanding."

"Aren't I though? It's kind of fun, I have to say."

"And cheeky."

She wiggled her ass against the bed. "I thought you liked that about me. But I guess I could go on a diet, if you —"

His hand came up to grip her chin and force her to meet his eyes. "Don't. You. Dare."

"I don't know, Connul, you need to work on this threatening thing. It used to work, I'll grant you, but lately it's a bit —" She ended on a short scream as he rolled off the bed, hauled her over his shoulder, gave her one sharp slap to the butt and marched her down the hall. A furtive glance showed her that if any of the staff were around, they were making themselves too scarce to notice their boss walking naked down the hall with a naked woman who was grinning like a fool, despite her glowing red ass.

About the Author

KB Alan lives the single life in Southern California. She acknowledges that she should probably turn off the computer and leave the house once in a while in order to find her own happily ever after, but for now she's content to delude herself with the theory that Mr. Right is bound to come knocking on her door through no real effort on her own. Please refrain from pointing out the many flaws in this system. Other comments, however, are happily received through her email or website.

KB welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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