

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Red Inferno

[Lynne Connolly](#)

Book 4 in the Ecstasy in Red series.

One kiss was all he wanted. And one kiss was the only thing she denied him.

Dragon shape-shifter Ricardo wakes in a sweat, knowing he has telepathically contacted a woman in trouble. The same trouble he got into a year ago. With the help of STORM, he tracks her, the latest victim of the evil Dr. Bennett.

But Kristen is no pushover. A bodyguard for the first openly Talented senator, Ricardo's brother Sandro, she's used to looking after herself and doesn't wait for someone else to rescue her. She escapes, and Ricardo finds her naked and shivering on a crowded New York street.

Need sparks between them; they can't resist each other. They set the night on fire and Kristen loves Ricardo's sizzling passion, even as she resists loving *him*. But Bennett wants her back...which means the lovers could lose everything.

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RED INFERNO

Lynne Connolly

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Chapter One

When I get out of here, I'll kill every last one of the bastards.

Ricardo Gianetti woke up gasping for breath, his psi barriers slamming down in an automatic response to the nightmare. The sheets clung, sticking to his sweaty body.

No, not a dream, it wasn't a dream. He'd connected telepathically with someone in trouble. The kind of trouble he knew about, because he'd been through it too.

He grabbed the cell phone next to the bed, hit Sandro's speed dial number and only then thought to check the time. Five a.m. Fuck. He'd have to risk annoying his brother.

Sandro picked up after the third ring. "Yeah?" He sounded pissed.

The female voice murmuring plaintively in the background at the other end of the line told Ricardo he might have interrupted at an inappropriate time. "Sorry, bro. Shall I call back?"

He got a heavy sigh in response. "No, spill. Why are you awake at this time?" A pause as the woman spoke. "Megan says hi."

"That's good of her, considering you were —"

Sandro interrupted with a quick, "Don't even go there. Talk to me, Ricardo."

Ricardo wondered at his impulse to call his big brother. He thought he'd grown out of that a long time ago. Maybe not. But the experience was so similar to what happened last year he'd wanted to contact Sandro to check his instincts. Sandro had been involved in his rescue and rehab. That must be it, he needed to check with someone else. *Yeah right.* "I had a dream, only I don't think it was a dream now. I saw the room where they held me captive last year. Remember it?"

"Hold on. I'm putting this on speaker."

Remembering that Megan had shared some of his agony, Ricardo winced. "Are you sure that's wise?"

Megan's voice came loud and clear. "Ricardo, you suffered it, I only tapped into it. I'm glad to help if I can."

Thank Christ for brotherly love. Ricardo had obviously interrupted something hot between his brother and sister-in-law, and here she was offering to help. In the same situation, he'd have told a caller to fuck off.

He'd do his best to make it fast. The vivid horrors brought back were fading in his mind. He felt like an idiot for calling Sandro at this hour, but he couldn't go back now, mumble an excuse and hang up. "I saw the room where they kept me. Megan saw it too."

"I remember." Megan's voice sounded somber.

"I shouldn't have called you."

"It doesn't matter, it's over now," she said. Her cool English tones calmed him as they had before. They'd persuaded him he wasn't dreaming at the time because why would he, an Italian American, dream an English accent?

He'd suffered and she'd watched, unable to do anything to help him. He wasn't sure which was worse—having his veins ripped open and unknown substances dripped into them, or watching it happen.

Who was he kidding? He could still feel the burn. It had taken the scars months to fade, something almost unheard of in a Talent. "It's not over. There's someone else in that room. Either that or it's a nightmare. And now I feel totally fucking stupid." He saw it now, the steel hospital bed, the plain gray walls, the trays of surgical instruments...

He wrenched his mind away from the recollection and back to the vision he'd suffered tonight. "There's a woman there. At least there is in my dream. She's not strapped to a bed like I was. There's no bed there now, but when I fought them one time, I put a dent in the wall. It's still there. And on the floor I saw a light shadow on the wood in the shape of the bed. If I dreamed it, wouldn't I see the room as it was?"

"I don't know, Ric." Only Sandro called him Ric, and then not always. It took him back to his childhood when they were safe and happy.

Ricardo ran his hand through his hair. Once he'd worn it long, but recently he'd had a buzz cut to signify his change in mind, in life, in attitude. It was growing long again. Too fucking long. Maybe he'd get the razor out and shave it off completely. Artists had long hair and he wasn't one of those anymore.

"I saw the room and the woman. Tall, slender and muscular, a dragon shape-shifter. I saw the mark on her thigh." Every shape-shifter bore the mark of their other form. To inexperienced eyes it could pass as a tattoo. This one was very beautiful, with details even the finest ink artist would find hard to achieve. "The mark was blue-green and it shimmered silver when she turned into the light. She had short dark hair and green eyes. Emerald eyes, an unusual shade. She was pacing, walking around the room."

Sandro interrupted him, his voice sharper. "How did you see the mark?"

"She was naked." That part shamed Ricardo. His cock had risen when she'd turned around and he'd seen her. Small, firm breasts, slender hips that made her appear almost boyish, but the patch of dark hair between her thighs belied that notion. Her smooth skin, although grubby and marked by bruises and scratches, urged him to touch. She was helpless and all he'd thought about for the split second when their eyes met was fucking her. He must be some kind of bastard.

She'd seen him. Her amazing eyes were dilated, but the gleam of emerald told him their color.

Sandro caught his breath. "Can you describe her more? Distinguishing marks?"

"No. She seemed Caucasian despite the hair, so dark it was almost black and cut short. But her skin was very pale, like moonlight." He snorted. That sounded too poetic for him these days, reminded him of the romantic sucker he used to be. "She called to me. 'Help me, help me please. I don't know how long I've been here, or where I am.' Then I woke up."

"Kristen," Megan said.

"Yeah," Sandro agreed. "Listen, Ricardo. That sounds like one of my bodyguards who just disappeared a couple of months ago. Those eyes, that cap of dark hair and the mark on her leg make it sound like her. Kristen Turner's a dragon shape-shifter, good at her job. Calm, quiet, efficient, never lost her cool and worked smoothly with everyone. Then she just disappeared.

"I had a letter from her. It said her mother was ill and she'd gone home to see her. I traced the story and it seemed true, but the whole incident didn't make sense. Kristen might have gone, but she'd have kept in touch to tell us if she was coming back or not. I should have tracked it better, but I've been so fucking busy. Can you draw her and her sigil and send it to me? Fax, email or something. Get it here fast."

Ricardo's body stiffened. "I don't think so." He hadn't picked up a pencil in well over a year and never intended to do so again. The price of his captivity had been the loss of his artistry, previously the driving force of his life. No more. It had gone. He accepted it and moved on, but he hated the reminder.

"It would help identify her. Help us discover if you're in touch with Kristen, or if it's a dream, or maybe you contacted some other Talent in trouble. Don't you want to find out?"

"Of course I fucking do." He sighed. "Yeah, I'll do it."

"If it's her, we'll go from there. If it's not, you should tell Ann Reynolds anyway. She has lists of all reported missing Talents. I believe you, Ric, so does Megan. We have to get this thing moving. Believe in yourself. Believe in her."

"Sure." He believed in nothing these days, but he wouldn't tell his brother that. He'd told Sandro he'd decided to change direction with his life, not that the horrors haunting him had stopped him putting pencil to paper or paint to canvas.

After hanging up, Ricardo flung back the covers and climbed out of bed. He'd get no more sleep tonight. He opened his closet and grabbed a pair of jeans, but then dropped them. Perhaps a flight would help, get some cool night air under his wings. There wasn't any need to hide anymore. Not like the old days. He grimaced. The old days being last year.

Sandro had bought this apartment because it contained a living space large enough to fly in, once he'd reduced his size to that of a bird rather than a dragon. It was for the same reason that Ricardo had bought his apartment in TriBeCa. But he'd left TriBeCa behind, abandoned it and his life as a poet and artist. That had died the day he'd watched someone dig a scalpel into his arm and reveal all the sinews, veins and muscles. Without anesthetic. After all, they said, animals didn't feel pain, did they?

It took him some time to track down drawing materials. He'd left his canvases, his charcoal sticks, his paints, every fucking reminder of his previous life, in his TriBeCa apartment for the next lucky occupant to deal with. He made do with all he could find, a fine-tipped pen and a pad of yellow legal paper.

For the first time since his captivity, Ricardo Gianetti began to draw.

Chapter Two

Kristen paced around her cell one more time, then changed direction just for the change of view. It didn't look very different. The little red eye in the corner followed her every move, and when she moved into its blind spot, the one in the opposite corner took over.

Not knowing who watched her was probably the worst. As far as she could tell, she'd been here two months. Since then, they'd injected her every day with Cephalox to stop her shape-shifting, and forced her to eat their terrible food. Oh yes and they'd stripped her naked and treated her like an animal. She mustn't forget that. Nobody spoke to her, nobody met her gaze. She'd never felt so alone in her life.

She rubbed her arms, trying to force some extra warmth into them. They kept her somewhere cold or they put the AC too high. Probably on purpose.

She winced when her palm coasted the surface of her latest bruise. That wouldn't stop her fighting back, even though she couldn't shape-shift to heal her many superficial hurts. When she stopped fighting, then she'd know she was ready to die.

The door opened silently and four white-coated men walked in. Three to hold her, and one to inject her. If she could isolate the one with the needle, she might have a chance. But where would that leave her? She'd be addicted to Cephalox by now, so she'd need that dose. If Cephalox was all they put in the syringes.

She knew they'd put her to sleep a time or two and the thought of what they did to her while she was under, how helpless that made her, haunted her fevered dreams.

A big strong bruiser headed confidently across the room to her. She wouldn't back off or cringe, not for that bastard, so she pulled her shoulders back and lifted her chin. Even if it did push her breasts up too. His gaze went to them and she wanted to die.

A sneer curled his thick upper lip, and he copped a feel before he grabbed her arm. Kristen twisted it out of his grip, but it did her little good. He already had her other arm in a hold she found harder to break.

The fucker was skilled. If they broke her arm, they'd have to let her shape-shift if they wanted her to heal. Everyone who'd held her for the jabs had given her plenty of collateral damage, but nothing serious.

She felt bereft without her dragon. Her other half. While she went through the struggles that would lead to that sharp prick in her arm, she mourned her dragon. She might leave her. The thought kept her awake nights and terrified her more than anything these bastards could ever do to her.

She kicked out, a sense of achievement filling her when her heel made contact with something soft. The second man's upper thigh. Pity. She'd aimed higher. Without

pausing in her kick, she swung her leg back toward the man holding both her upper arms.

Bingo. That was definitely a nut under her foot. She managed a couple of grinds against it before the son of a bitch smacked the side of her head and made her see stars.

When she'd recovered her senses, she was alone again. The fresh sore spot in her arm told her they'd jabbed her and gone.

She didn't know their names or what language they spoke. Apart from a few cries of pain when she hit her mark, they'd said nothing. For all she knew, she could be in Timbuktu.

Lying on her back on the cold, hard floor, Kristen closed her eyes, willing back the vision of two nights ago. The face she'd seen swimming in her imagination had to be just that. Imagination. He was far too gorgeous to exist.

His hair was near black, short, but unkempt, as if he'd just run his hands through it, and his jaw was firm and square. He even had a trace of a dimple in his chin. She loved that in a man, loved to lick the indentation, shock him, make him laugh. This man had dark, dark eyes, with red glints in their depths that betrayed his dragon nature.

She'd seen the sigil in his mind, a dragon in flight, the shape that must be limned somewhere on his body. Although she'd only seen his head and shoulders, those shoulders were broad and muscular. Just the kind she liked, so long as a decent human being came with it.

Thinking of him made her forget her new bruises, the sore spot on her arm and the painful lump on the side of her head.

Her captors could have raped her while she was under. They could have done anything. But her pussy didn't feel wet or used, and she smelled nothing that indicated sex, so she'd have to assume they hadn't, even though they'd done it a time or two before.

They thought of her as just a dumb animal. Some men enjoyed fucking dumb animals. Oh Christ, she'd go mad before they let her go. Or killed her, and right now she didn't much care which option they chose.

She went back to her beautiful man. Please God, let him be real. Before she'd landed in this hole, she had known she could transmit limited psi signals at an unusual level. It would equate to using ultra-high-frequency radio waves. The dog whistle of telepathy. Two days ago, desperate to make contact, she'd tried it, and she'd seen him then. Since then, nothing.

She let her mind float free, waiting for the clear streak of fresh air. It helped her to picture the sight of clear blue sky between tall buildings. Her captors used sonic jamming to close telepathic communication, the hum she felt in the air nearly drove her mad some days. She hadn't found a way of communicating other than that clear break, a narrow streak of white in a dark field. That meant that either they kept no other Talents here, or each cell had its own electronic field.

There it was. She concentrated, imagining herself flying through the fissure to freedom. And found him.

Don't you do anything else?

His voice, soft and seductive, answered her immediately. *I'm waiting for you, my sweet. Do you think anyone is overhearing us?*

I'm sure they aren't, otherwise they'd close us down.

Do you know where you are?

She bit her lip. No. *There are no windows here and I have no clue. But I have to be close to you, don't I? Telepathy didn't work long distance. He could be a Sorcerer, which would mean a bigger radius, but still that would only be around fifty miles. So where am I?*

Somewhere in New York. I'm on the Upper East Side. I have a Sorcerer friend here, and he's going to try to get to you through me. How long can you keep talking to us?

Not long. It – it hurts. It hurt her head and drained her energy to communicate like this.

I know.

That meant it hurt him too. She hated that. *I don't want you hurt.*

That's nice of you, tesoro mio, but I can take it. We want to get you out of there.

You're Italian?

I was born there, a long time ago. I'm American now.

She grimaced, remembering the struggle that Senator Gianetti and his allies were having in Congress. Their enemies had resurfaced and wanted to repatriate Talents or deny them full citizenship. Problems were growing day by day. That was why the senator had needed protection. *I'm American too, but I was born British.* She wouldn't tell him her age, not yet. *How do you plan to get me out of here?*

His voice changed to a grim tone. *Any way we can. If we charge in, we could push them into killing you, so we're planning something a tad more subtle. I know you can fight, Kristen.*

What? Their last communication had been fast and dreamlike and she hadn't believed it. *You know my name? You're real?*

You'd better believe it. That's the answer to both.

Who is 'we'?

STORM.

The organization her boss, Sandro Gianetti, had belonged to before he'd become a senator. With a shock, she realized who the face she'd briefly seen reminded her of. Him. That image looked like Sandro. The same strong jawline, the shape of the eyes, the thick dark lashes.

And who are you?

Ricardo Gianetti.

Sandro's brother?

The same.

That was incredible. Could she have built up a pattern, something that connected her to the Gianettis? *How can that be? I work for your brother.*

I know you do. It's a coincidence maybe. We'll work it out after we get you out of there. But at least you know I exist.

Yes. She recalled the few pictures of Ricardo that she'd seen. She'd never met him, but Sandro had photos of him. Not that Sandro had talked about him too much. Bodyguards didn't encourage too close a connection with the boss, at least the company she worked for didn't.

Ricardo was a stunningly handsome man, hard jawed, dark eyed, but with a harshness about him that attracted and repelled her at the same time. *I'm going mad here*, she told him.

How long have you been there?

Since they took me, I think. It's always been cold.

They've kept you alone?

Always.

Silence. She thought he'd gone and she panicked. *Are you still there?*

Yes, *tesorino mio, I'm here.* She could listen to that soft, deep voice all day. *Listen, we need to keep you talking, so keep your presence in my mind. Our Sorcerer is trying to track your location. Tell me what you're doing.*

I'm lonely and bored. It might not sound like much to you, but the boredom is killing me. I fight when they bring my Cephalox and make things hard for them. She stopped. He couldn't help her with that. Time to think practically. *This room is featureless, without furniture.*

I know. I saw it briefly. Like a hospital room?

Without the bed. Without the sink. She stared around her. *Ricardo, do you like women?*

Assuredly I do.

I like men.

Amusement laced his tone. *That's good to hear. Do you have large breasts?*

Shock sent her rigid. *Why do you want to know?*

To keep you thinking, to keep you with us. Chase says the stronger the emotion, the more likely you'll be able to keep going at a strong enough level for him to track you. Ask me something about my body. About myself. Anything. His voice softened to a caressing tone. *You have beautiful breasts.*

Shock, then amusement lanced through her. *Don't you like large breasts?*

Not always. I like breasts. Soft like a pillow after I've made love to a woman.

You always make love?

Sometimes I fuck them. Sometimes they fuck me. It depends on what we both want.

Warmth spread through her, the first touch of heat she'd felt in months. *I fuck.* She didn't make love. Just took her pleasure and helped her partner take his. She never

allowed her bed partners closer than that, never dared. She had too many secrets she wanted to keep.

Maybe we'll fuck one day. Would you like that? He must know that her arousal warmed her thoughts now and softened her tissues. To her amazement, she felt moisture gather between her thighs. She thought of that sharp-boned face, those seductive eyes, and the moisture flowed.

A chuckle. *I think you would. We could do that if you wanted. I'd take you back to my place or stop at yours. We'd share a bottle of wine.* She hadn't had wine for a long time. She could taste the tart fruitiness on her tongue. Was he doing that for her or were her memories enough?

But he didn't stop. She loved this. Like phone sex, only more intimate because he could sense her responses.

She rolled to her side, as far away from the cameras as she could get, and tucked her hand between her thighs. She often slept that way, so maybe the guards wouldn't notice. Right now, she didn't care. They'd gotten off on her naked body before, jerked their cocks above her and daubed her with their cum. She'd love to see that look in their eyes just before she killed them.

Hey. Just think about me and our date. It'll happen. We'll go somewhere intimate for dinner, to the kind of place that doesn't play canned music and serves good food, then we'll go home. Maybe we'll walk hand in hand and stop in shop doorways to kiss.

She wanted more. She pushed one finger into her cleft and felt her labia cling to the digit. It felt good. *So skip a half hour. I'm in your bedroom. You're undressing me.*

What happened to seduction?

She made a rude noise, but only in her head, for him. *That's for the shy and the uncertain. I usually know what I want and right now I want us both naked. I hope you don't mind small breasts.*

Tasty. He went right along with her fantasy. *Sweet little nipples. I'll suck them, bite them. Put my hands around your waist, touch your ass, nice and round.* She started to protest, but he continued right on. *I'll push into your pussy with my finger – two fingers. It feels good. Hot and wet.* She suppressed a moan. *When I slide my cock into you, you're more than ready. You're hot for me, but not as hot as I am for you.* He was losing his American accent now, his words gaining a foreign lilt she liked.

Are you feeling this too? What are you doing?

I have my cock in my hand. I'm pumping it, pretending it's buried inside your hot, sweet body. I want to know what you taste like, but I'd have to pull out if I wanted to drink from you, so I won't do it. I have to push to get inside, and then the tension releases and I'm sinking deep into you. So deep. It feels so good. Every inch of my cock is inside you. Your juices are soaking my balls and I just want to keep pushing. I pull out nearly all the way and push back in. Then I do it again.

She suppressed a moan. She had two soaked fingers inside her pussy, her juices abundant and flowing. Twisting carefully, she found her clit with her thumb.

Come for me, sweetheart. Do it quietly, but think of me in your body, pushing you higher with every stroke.

The walls of her vagina contracted fiercely around her fingers. She pressed her face against the unyielding floor to stop herself from making any noise above the small whimper she couldn't suppress. Three sharp contractions wrung her out. She lay still, letting the warmth and the intimate connection wash over her.

Ricardo?

Silence. Nothing.

Jolted cruelly back to her situation, Kristen forced herself to concentrate, but the rift had gone as if it had never existed. She kept her eyes closed and mentally scanned the area. All blank, all nothing, the block to her psi sense like going blind.

They'd deprived her of part of her nature. She had no idea why they'd taken her because they'd asked nothing, taken nothing, and if she didn't get out of here soon she'd go stark crazy.

Had he cut off from her or had her concentration gone? Or something else? She had no idea. The channel had been cut as quickly as a phone line sliced with a pair of clippers. Gone. It just wasn't there anymore.

Her bad, probably. After all this time, maybe her abilities were waning along with her shape-shifting ability. The thought of never shape-shifting again terrified Kristen until sweat broke out on her body, cold though it was in this room.

She tried to block it out, but she was tired. As a bodyguard, she'd slept in some weird places, but this situation, being watched all day, not knowing where she was or who else was here, freaked her out big time. Everything she knew had gone.

Shit, she hadn't even cleaned her teeth for two months, much less washed. She probably stank like a sewer, or like the animal they called her. It was lucky she hadn't had a period in that time. Either her limited diet or the Cephalox had stopped menstruation, she wasn't sure which. She'd be lucky if Ricardo came within three feet of her.

And oh yes, using the bucket in the corner as a toilet. That didn't help. It wasn't fair that she could still smell. She should have been able to block it out by now. Tears stung her eyes, but she kept her hand tucked between her thighs, the residual warmth bringing her some comfort.

Nothing else she could do now. Kristen curled up and slept.

Chapter Three

"We've cut it down to here and here." Andros circled two areas on the map with his electronic pen. The clear screen before them obligingly changed color, the highlighted parts into red.

Chase groaned. "That's the Village, Chinatown and Little Italy, plus most of Harlem. What's wrong with the part in between?"

Andros shrugged. "I took Ricardo's biorhythms and the known parameters of his telepathic abilities and created a 3-D representation—"

"Okay, kid, we know you're bright. No need to prove it." Ricardo's head throbbed. He'd allowed Chase into his skull to map his telepathy until he couldn't give any more. He'd shut down now, but it hadn't stopped the headache trying to pound its way out of his forehead. Right now he didn't need all that mathematical crap. Andros was a clever kid, anxious to prove his worth in STORM.

An ex-film student and musician, Andros had graduated and then let his inner mathematician emerge. No longer able to play any instrument except the computer keyboard, he assured them he was fine with that. His short spiky hair, now back to its original silver-blond, gleamed in the bright overhead lights.

He glanced at the vampire member of their team. Johann also happened to be Andros' brother-in-law. Johann grimaced. "Andros took an interest in this case. It's a good exercise for him, he says. But you're sleeping after this, kid, if I have to push you into it."

The kid gave him a wry smile. "Isn't that compulsion? Don't you people call that illegal?" No, not a kid. He was twenty-five, but next to a Talent, he looked so frail, they tended to think of him that way. Andros' muscular dystrophy had progressed rapidly recently, and he'd lost weight and muscle tone.

"Not when it takes just a little persuasion. Clear?"

Andros shrugged and then winced. Everyone pretended not to notice. "Okay. Deal. But Kristen needs our help."

The door opened, but Ricardo didn't need to turn his head to know who it was. He rose from his chair and pivoted, opening his arms to give his brother a hug. "Sandro!"

Sandro embraced him and they slapped each other's backs, man-style. Ricardo held him at arms' length and looked him over. "The senator look makes you killer chick-bait, man."

Sandro gave a shout of laughter, recognizing the joke in the outdated slang. "I thought Studio 54 closed a long time ago. Good to see you, Ricardo."

But he didn't say as he usually did that Ricardo looked good. Too many sleepless nights had ringed his eyes. Two nights had passed since his last contact with Kirsten, but he kept trying.

Then Ricardo turned his attention to the elegant woman standing just behind her husband. He swept her into his arms and gave her a smacking kiss. "Megan, you're looking lovely!"

And she did. As the wife of a senator and an archivist, Megan had a style all her own. She gave her suits and simple dresses a twist, adding a splash of bright clashing color or a string of oversized pearls, Chanel style. But underneath she was the same feisty woman he'd contacted during his captivity.

She smiled, her softly glossed lips pure temptation. If Sandro had been into sharing, Ricardo would have been first in line, but sadly, that didn't happen. Sandro could be a selfish bastard. "I wish I could do more. I knew Kristen wouldn't have walked away like that."

"Are you sure you can do this?"

"I have to," she said. "You and I are the only people we know with the ultra-high-frequency telepathy, so we have to try. Perhaps together we can do more than we can separately."

"And we might get Bennett this time."

The atmosphere in the room dropped with the mention of the name, but they had to consider it. Dr. Bennett had been responsible for Ricardo's capture, and if Ricardo was right and they had Kristen in the same room, it was likely that Bennett was involved again.

A mortal, moreover a mortal with leukemia, had eluded them all. Every one of the powerful beings in this room had connected with him and lost. Not this time. If Bennett was behind this kidnapping, they'd find him. Nobody here would stop until they did.

"We'll get him," Ricardo said, speaking for them all.

"Or you'll die doing it?" The crisp tones of Ann Reynolds broke the sudden silence. Sandro stepped aside to let her enter the narrow room and he exchanged a smile with her. Before he'd become a senator, Sandro had led Team Red. Ann was one of his closest friends, and Sandro didn't let many people into that protected circle, even these days.

Her short trim figure dominated the room. While Ann wasn't a Talent, her charisma was almost otherworldly, drawing people to look and listen, and Ann used that with great skill and precision. Everyone stopped what they were doing and waited for her.

She surveyed the room, showing no expression other than exasperation. "One mortal has kept all of you hopping for the last year. After you've rescued this woman, I'm closing the operation down. I won't have some of my best operatives chasing a dying man around the globe for the sake of revenge."

Sandro opened his mouth and then closed it. Nobody else moved, but they didn't have to. Bennett had damaged everyone here in some way. Jack, jaguar shape-shifter, had lost his love, the woman who'd converted him. Johann's wife, Ania, had all her belongings destroyed in a firebombing attempt and Johann had nearly lost his life rescuing Ania and her brother, Andros. Chase's wife had been captured and brainwashed. Sandro, Megan and Ricardo had their scars. Revenge sounded good.

Ann surveyed them. "But don't think you're going off on some extracurricular hunt either. I have plenty of other things for you to do. After this assignment, we're following the money. Bennett won't have the resources to get his cure for leukemia. You might not want him to end his life in a hospital bed, but it's going to happen that way. Our medical experts give him around six months. He's finished, too weak to undergo conversion and unable to find a bone-marrow donor. We have everyone who might be a match. They're all protected. All three of them."

"So he's a dead man walking?" Ricardo didn't believe it. That little shit had more will to live than ten other men. Having an ego to match must help him with that. Ricardo wouldn't be happy until Bennett was dead and he'd seen the body. Preferably helped to burn it.

"Very amusing." But Ann wasn't smiling. "I mean it. We're shutting Bennett down the most efficient way."

"Pity." That came from Sandro. When Ann turned her flinty gaze on to him, he spread his hands in a gesture of conciliation. "I can't deny I'd like to administer more primitive justice."

"And you one of our representatives. I can't think how you attained such a high position." Then they did see a glimmer of a smile. Since she had been instrumental in recommending him and provided a lot of help in the election campaign, she probably knew more than most. She gave a sharp nod and went toward the door, which Ricardo opened for her. "This is your last chance. If you don't get him this time, forget it. Or forget STORM."

That was the trouble. In this time of transition, from living hidden to coming out into the open, Talented society needed all the help it could get from its trained agents, politicians and educators. Ann wanted to keep STORM squeaky clean and give the authorities no chance to shut them down. And she'd follow through.

Which meant they had to get Bennett this time. *Had* to.

A small stone dropped into the pool of silence that followed Ann's exit. "We'd better get moving then," Megan said. "You need to find out what you need to know in the fastest way possible, so let's do this thing."

Chase walked down the narrow room to her. Johann moved his feet off the desk in front of him to let him pass. "We'll find her if we have to tear down every building in our way," Ricardo said.

Sandro shoved his hands in his pockets and perched his ass on the side of the long desk that lined one long side of the room, next to one of the monitors Andros had installed there. "Go to it, guys. Just make sure Megan isn't tired out." He gave his wife an intimate smile, then turned his attention to his brother. "*In bocca al lupo.*"

"*Crepi,*" Ricardo said, an automatic reply to Sandro, wishing him luck in a particularly Italian way. He followed Chase and Megan out of the room into one of the isolation cells.

In this small, white eight-by-six space, Chase and his fellow Sorcerers performed delicate mind-surgeries on people unwilling to let their secrets go. The rooms were the opposite of the cells the IRDC and Bennett used to shut psi down. They amplified psi Talents, allowing the Talent to concentrate on that and nothing else.

"Have you ever thought that these are like medieval monks' cells in a monastery?" Ricardo said as Chase closed the door behind them.

"They served a similar purpose. Concentrated the mind wonderfully." Chase moved across the room. A strange collection of people to anyone watching—Chase in his dark blue designer business suit, completely immaculate from gleaming golden hair to the tips of his spotless Italian loafers, Megan tousled from her journey but in a charcoal-gray suit that said "power" without effort, and him wearing worn jeans and a washed-out t-shirt, the first clean things he could find. He hadn't even brushed his hair and since it now touched his collar, he'd bet it wasn't the tidiest mane in the place.

And yet they were completely united. Ricardo would do whatever it cost to get Kristen out of that cell. Even if it meant subjugating his mind to Chase's, something he wouldn't normally consider. This had to work.

"You go in," Chase told him. "Call me if you need me. I'm here to get you out if I think you're getting close to danger. You too, Megan. Work with Ricardo."

She stared around the room, taking in the lack of features, the sheer whiteness of the place. "Don't we have to touch or hold hands or something?"

Chase pulled out one of the hard chairs for her. "We're not conducting a séance, Megan. This is perfectly normal for a Talent. If you tire, pull out. We might not succeed this time."

Ricardo's hand tightened on the back of the chair he'd just pulled out from the small white metal table. The table bore a small chip near one corner—the only color in the room apart from what they'd brought with them. He closed his eyes, then opened them and stared at a blank wall, imagining Kristen, bringing her closer. He felt Chase in his mind, supporting him, strengthening his psi.

The fissure opened very slowly, very reluctantly, and Ricardo knew the window wouldn't last much longer.

Kristen lay on her back with two men straddling her, one over her thighs and another at her head. The men were dressed in the kind of navy blue suits he'd become familiar with in his own captivity. He only ever saw them in that or scrubs. A chill went through him when he recognized what he was watching. They meant to rape her.

Kristen was naked, the bruises on her body testament to her refusal to submit. He hoped to God she didn't fight them this time, because they might kill her. He could feel the sex in the room and he knew they wouldn't leave the room without fucking her.

He took a good look at them. He'd know them now and they would die for this.

One man with muscles bulging in a way that screamed "steroids" pulled a filled syringe out of his pocket. Cephalox, without a doubt. God knew what else was in there.

Kristen awoke with Ricardo in her head. She couldn't see his face this time, only hear his voice, but it was loud enough to rouse her from what she suspected had been a drug-induced sleep. She shouldn't have eaten the swill they pushed through the door, but she'd been so hungry, she couldn't help herself.

Wake up!

The weight on her thighs was a man. The pressure on her shoulders came from another man holding her down. Her weary thought of *bastards* sharpened when she saw the familiar syringe in the man's hand. Her mind immediately worked out that if it was time for her Cephalox injection, she might be nearer to her psi abilities. She could always use telepathy, but that was a gift common to all of humankind. The rest had gone with the injections.

She'd tried to connect with her other psi abilities many times, but this time she felt stronger. Something inside her stirred and then she heard an unfamiliar male voice in her mind. *Let me in. I'm a Sorcerer.*

With no choice left to her, she dropped her barriers. They could see what they wanted, do what they wanted.

And the Sorcerer rewarded her with a jolt of sensation deep inside, opening up the barriers that Cephalox had so frustratingly denied her. The Sorcerer was doing her proud. She'd worry about letting him in so deeply when she got out of here. *If* she got out of here.

Her sudden burst into action took her guards by surprise. She jerked her body out of the hold of the man behind her, shook his filthy hands away and lifted her knees to dislodge the man straddling her thighs. He landed with an "Oof" so she took that oof and upped the ante with a kick to his belly. Then she drew on her renewed powers and used telekinesis to break the needle.

The man behind her moved swiftly around to her front, standing between Kristen and the door. That would give his compatriots time to get here and she'd lose what might be her only chance of freedom.

With a swift kick, she aimed for his balls, knowing he'd move to protect them. Praying he didn't know all the tricks she did, as soon as his head went down in reflexive reaction, she brought her right hand down on the back of his neck in a chop that aimed to stun.

He went down with a soft grunt, but she knew that hadn't finished him. She stomped on the side of his thigh, giving him some pain to blind his reactions before reaching for the suddenly unprotected carotid. She hardly ever used that as a pressure point because it could result in death, but this time she didn't give a fuck if he lived or died. That door was far more important.

He slipped into unconsciousness, but she wasn't there to check if he was dead or alive because she'd used his body as a stepping stone to get to the door.

Outside was a long featureless corridor with doors at both ends. Checking quickly, she saw light filtering through the window at the top of one and decided on that way. As she sprinted toward it, shouting guards spilled through the door at the other end and the alarms went on.

The electronic shriek should have deafened her, but she'd been ready for it. As it was, she used the ear-splitting scream as an incentive to keep powering toward that door. If it was locked, she'd have to try telekinesis again.

Except it wasn't there anymore. For the first time her steps faltered as she realized that the Sorcerer and the power he was giving her had gone. Perhaps that cell was the only place it worked. Oh well, fuck that, she'd try anyway. She lengthened her stride, feeling the floor shake as her pursuers tried to gain on her.

She turned the steel knob and thank God, the door was open. The key remained in the lock, so she grabbed it and when she reached the other side, managed to thrust it in the lock before the first of the guards reached it. She registered his face, mouth open in an angry yell, exposing yellowed, broken teeth, but she slammed the door in his face and turned the key.

She'd reached another hallway but at one end she could see what looked like an office beyond the glassed upper part. She couldn't saunter along and pretend to be a member of staff for the simple reason that she was naked.

So she ran away from the office door, sheer will keeping her on her feet. As part of her training, she knew how to control and use adrenaline instead of letting it control her. Her mind was sharper but also more paranoid than usual, which was actually an aid in these circumstances, and the tingling coursing through her body was nothing short of miraculous. But she'd collapse soon if she didn't get out of here. She had no energy resources left in reserve.

All this streaked through her mind while she raced toward the door, the barrier between her and freedom. She pelting down the hallway, her bare feet slapping on the unforgiving concrete, stinging with every step. The slight pain kept her going, pushed her to reach the next door and slip through it, giving thanks to whoever might be listening.

She felt the chill of fresh air and knew she was near the street. It must be fall by now; her cold room was testament to that. The thought of that soulless chamber gave her the impetus she needed to push on.

Turning a corner, she ran into someone. A man dressed in surgical scrubs. He sprang back, startled but then reached for her. Her foot reached him first and she ground her heel against his groin, leaving him sprawled on the floor. The shrieking of the siren muffled his cries.

She stared down at his face. Dark, handsome, with black hair brushed straight back off a high forehead. Well, he wasn't so handsome now.

She leapt over him and raced to the exit.

A steel door. Panicking, she couldn't see how it opened. It must be a fire door. This side it was flat, no handle or bar to push. Maybe it only opened from the outside.

No. Next to the double doors was a red button behind glass with the legend "In case of emergency" emblazoned above it. If this wasn't an emergency, she didn't know what was. She drove her palm right through it. The sting of glass slicing her hand went almost unnoticed, because it worked.

The doors swung open and she pelted through. They closed with a clang behind her. She didn't look back.

She'd exited below ground level, with a narrow metal staircase between her and the street. She had to climb over the gate at the top but it wasn't even as high as her. Easy.

Except her energy was waning, the adrenaline rush leaving her. She planted her foot on the pavement and forced herself to set off at a run.

Chase broke the silence with a triumphant cry. "She's out!"

The same blinding awareness he knew Chase felt broke over Ricardo. Kristen must be past the sonic fields. She must be free.

How long she'd stay that way was doubtful. If she hadn't grabbed anything to wear, she was naked, exhausted and outrunning fit, rested men.

Ricardo raced out of the room, already undoing the buttons on his shirt as he headed for the roof. Chase's voice echoed in his head as if he ran next to him. *I'll follow you. I'll bring an ambulance.*

Yeah okay.

Ricardo had no intention of letting anyone else get to her first.

By the time he reached the roof, he was naked, and without pausing, he launched into the air, shape-shifting as he did so. He left the roof a man but within two seconds he'd changed into the full-sized golden dragon that was his other self.

The flashes from the ground didn't disturb him anymore—people often hung around outside the building, hoping for such an event. Once upon a time, there would have been all kinds of squirrely stories to explain the appearance of dragons in New York, but no more. They tried to be discreet. As discreet as someone with a twelve-foot wingspan could be.

He felt the joyous sensation of wings beating through the air and gave himself a few seconds before sorrow lanced through him when he recalled that Kristen wouldn't have had this joy for far too long.

Opening all his senses, he reached for her. He knew her pattern now, the way her presence parted the atmosphere, colored the air around her.

And found her. Exhausted, nearly done. *I'm coming. Just keep awake. Just a little longer, tesoruccio.*

Is that Italian?

He heard the interest in her tone and felt her consciousness rack up a little. Si, donna. *I left Italy a long time ago but I go back regularly.*

Where do you come from?

A village near to Florence. Firenze. Have you been there?

No.

I will take you. If you will promise to stay awake until I get there.

That's a deal.

He flew past the Empire State Building, glancing up at the tourists gathered on the top gallery. Some waved, some had their mouths open, but he was flying lower and he couldn't hear them.

Closer now, but not close enough. *I'll consider it a privilege to show you my homeland.*

That is so nice.

Where are you from?

A pause, one that seemed to last forever but he could still sense her. If he didn't find her soon she could die. Terror gripped him when he realized they'd come this far and he still could lose her.

Talk to me. Tell me where you come from.

I was brought up in Iowa.

A farm girl?

He felt her amusement. *Why does everybody think that? We have cities too.*

So you do. Where in Iowa?

Des Moines.

Okay, a city girl. Did you enjoy it?

I guess. I turned dragon when I was fourteen. Her psi voice wavered, and he felt her desperation to remain conscious, to stay with him.

A late developer. Where was she? He was circling the densely populated area around the Village, getting closer with every sweep of his wings.

Yeah. She paused again and he felt tragedy and unhappiness. Something had happened. *I don't remember my parents very well.*

I'm sorry.

I decided I wasn't going to become a victim. Her mental voice firmed, then faded a little. He'd flown over her.

Chapter Four

He circled the area once more. Then he saw a small crowd, not unusual for this district but the people seemed to have a focus for their avid attention. A few glanced up, then stopped to point and stare at him. As he drifted down toward the street, more looked and stared.

He shape-shifted as he hit the street, mentally relaying the address to Chase, now racing down Park in an ambulance. With sirens, so it wouldn't take him long.

This area contained a lot of tourist places selling souvenirs, lying cheek by jowl with Italian coffee shops and restaurants. Ricardo had lived in a tiny apartment not far from here when he first came to New York. *Mulberry*, he sent and glanced up at a nearby restaurant. *Close to 129.*

Gotcha. ETA around ten minutes max. Sirens on.

Kristen sat on the pavement near the entrance to a back alley. She'd drawn her legs up close to her body and she hugged them, her arms banded tightly around her shins. The clever girl had found an audience, stopping her captors from taking her. If they tried, they'd find it much more difficult than if she'd skulked in an alley, trying to hide herself.

Ricardo shoved his way through, not bothering with the excuse-mes. That earned him a few curses but his attention remained riveted on one person. Bruises covered her, some old, some new, and her arms were bloody.

"Kristen!" She twitched when she heard his voice. "Kristen, it's me, Ricardo."

Then she lifted her head. The matted curtain of dark hair that hung to her jaw swung back as her nose, then her chin came into view. Green eyes mesmerized him, so green they could substitute as emeralds.

Sounds of "He's naked", "So is she" and "What's the world coming to?" echoed around them but he ignored them all. He lifted her, so light, far lighter than she should be, and pulled her close into his body. She was filthy and she stank, but he didn't care. He had her now, his mind firmly melded with hers. "*Sono ora qui il, mio piccolo tesoro.*" He was here and he was going nowhere until he knew she'd be okay.

She whimpered and stirred in his arms. "Don't leave me."

"Never." And right then, he meant it.

With a blast of sirens, the ambulance careened around the corner and headed for them. Both back doors were flung open from the inside, landing with a bang on the side of the vehicle. Before they could wheel out the gurney, Ricardo leapt inside, Kristen still in his arms. He passed Chase, leaping out.

Ricardo concentrated on Kristen and keeping that spark inside her alive. Blood smeared him from multiple small cuts on her feet from pounding along the street. She was filthy and bruised all over.

In his time in captivity, they hadn't kept him in solitary confinement. He'd seen and known people worse off than him. Watched them die. They'd tortured him with that sight once they realized how distressed it made him, brought Talents in so he could see them suffer. So he knew what death looked like, and thank God, Kristen didn't look or feel dead. Blood pulsed through her veins, some of it spilling on him when he sat down, keeping her on his lap.

Someone tried to move her. Ricardo growled.

"I need to get a line into her." He glanced up to see a medic, who waited with a syringe and a bag of clear fluid that glinted in the sunlight.

"You want to push saline before you've examined her?"

The woman frowned. "I can see she's dehydrated. I won't do anything else until I've examined her but she needs this. She could be in shock too, and this will help."

Grudgingly, he allowed her to take Kristen's arm. He watched carefully as she inserted the needle in the back of Kristen's hand and attached the tube. Nobody would touch Kristen without his permission. He was her guardian now, her protector.

He couldn't explain the visceral shudder that had shot through him when he'd picked her up. God knows he'd felt protective enough before but it was multiplied tenfold now. Somewhere deep inside he felt that if he released her she'd die. That was complete garbage, it had to be, but he couldn't shake the feeling.

Then she opened her eyes, blinking the matted lashes rapidly. He forced a smile and then didn't have to force it anymore.

That gorgeous green, bright and sparkling. So they were bloodshot. That was only to be expected but Ricardo hadn't seen anything so lovely for a long time. To his disbelief, her mouth twitched as if she was trying to smile and then she spoke, her voice hoarse and unpracticed. "I knew you'd come. I didn't expect it so soon though."

He cupped the back of her head with his hand. It fit. "You got out on your own. Do you remember?"

"Some."

Chase jumped back into the vehicle and took the seat opposite them, next to the paramedic. "How is she?"

The professional answered. "Weak but functional." The ambulance started with a jolt, moving slowly at first and then picking up speed. She rose to her feet and reached for Kristen's wrist. Ricardo gave it up as reluctantly as he had let her insert the cannula.

After a swift appraisal of Kristen's vital signs, the paramedic found some gauze and examined her wounds. "I'll dress them lightly but she needs a bath and a shape-shift. Most of these will disappear with the first shift." She turned her attention to Kristen,

who hadn't taken her gaze from Ricardo. "How long has it been since you had your last dose of Cephalox?"

At the word, Kristen winced. He felt her but she didn't show it outwardly. Only a slight twitch where her skin connected intimately with his. He ached for her, that she kept such rigid control, her training so rigorous that she could exercise it even now. He wanted her to relax, to let him care for her. "I broke the needle today, so yesterday, I guess."

"I want to do your bloods and find out if you can shape-shift yet."

"No need." Chase hadn't been idle. "I can help her do a quick shape-shift and maintain it for a while. Probably twenty minutes. Will that help?"

"Can you keep her size down?"

"I can." Ricardo drew her closer but she didn't nestle against him. Instead, she resisted. Independent witch.

Her examination complete, the paramedic threw a space blanket over them before she regained her seat. "Go for it. Keep her shifted until we get to Sion."

"No!" Now she did move, jerking away in an instinctive escape attempt. Ricardo controlled her, held her firmly but without bruising. He had to call on his dragon strength to help him, because although she couldn't yet shape-shift, she had human resources in a well-honed, leanly muscular body.

"No hospitals, no!"

He lifted his gaze to the paramedic, taking his attention from Kristen for the first time since he'd found her. "You heard her. Is there anything she needs medical attention for that a shape-shift won't help?"

Chase had read her distress too. He sent Ricardo a private message. *I'll support you. Her mind isn't ready to face anything like the place she's just left.* He carried on aloud for the benefit of the paramedic, who wasn't privy to their communication channel. The woman was a vampire with weak telepathic abilities; he saw her sigil in her mind, wavering with her concentrated effort to maintain it.

"I'll need to examine her before she sleeps," Chase said, sounding as if he was speaking through gritted teeth. "I need those memories while they're still fresh in her short-term memory. She could lose them too easily."

Ricardo closed his eyes, finding a brief respite in the darkness. "So do it while we're holding her in the shift."

"Can I really shape-shift?" Kristen sounded so desperate that Ricardo's heart bled for her.

"No, sweetheart, not yet, not without our help, and we can't do it for long. Soon you'll be able to do it on your own."

"How do you know that?"

"I've been there too."

She caught his gaze again, her own wide and wondering before her attention wandered over his body. The external scars left by his captivity had gone, but the harsher lines on his face and his hands, no longer sensitive conveyors of expression and artistry, remained as mute reminders of his ordeal. Every time he shaved, every time he touched his body, he felt the difference, knew what they had taken from him.

But now he smiled and forced himself to appear tranquil for her. "I came out of it and here I am as living proof. Please let us look after you now. Give yourself up to us. I'll take care of you and make sure nobody hurts you. I promise."

"No hospital?"

"No. I'll take you to my home, where we can make you comfortable."

He glanced up at the paramedic. "Take us to my place. I live on Seventy-Third East. If I think she needs medical attention, I'll bring her right in, but she's been kept in a hospital-like place for the past two months. The last thing we should do is take her back."

The paramedic's mouth settled into a grim line. "If you allow me to send a doctor around to complete the examination, I might agree to it. She's my responsibility until then."

"You're wrong. She's mine." But he agreed to the doctor. It would put their minds at rest.

The paramedic went to tell the driver of the change in plans, returning quickly.

The ambulance slowed and stopped, idling in a line of traffic. Now that he was sure she wasn't in immediate danger, he wanted to get her home. But at this rate, it could take half an hour.

More time for her to heal. He watched her, felt Chase move his consciousness, his power sending a tingling awareness through the vehicle. Sorcerers like Chase had a higher degree of psi powers than anyone in existence and Chase's specialty was telepathy and interrogation.

When Chase slid inside Kristen's mind, sinking deeper with every breath, Ricardo felt her try to close her barriers. But that would hurt, and Chase would get inside anyway. He needed to do this. There might be more people in that laboratory.

Knowing she was past reason, too tired to think straight, he sent her reassurance and peace, trying to find the tranquility for her that he'd lost a long time ago. He found something deep inside him and conveyed it to her, the recollection of the Pacific living up to its name, calm and blue. It worked. She relaxed and let Chase in.

Her skin shimmered, a bluish-green tone spreading over her face and neck, the only parts of her visible above the blanket. The paramedic whisked it away and they watched her shape-shift.

Ricardo's sense of wonder at the sight never abated. His time in captivity without a shape-shift, without seeing it or experiencing it, had shown him how essential it was to

all of his kind. The deprivation had come close to driving him crazy. She'd gone through that.

He concentrated on keeping her mind focused, although all he wanted to do was watch the miraculous transformation. He touched her eyelids before they became dragon. "Close your eyes, sweetheart. Let the dragon in."

She watched him until the lids closed over her eyes and the scales took over her body, gleaming in the light. The ambulance took off again at last and took a couple of sharp turns. Ricardo guessed the driver knew a shortcut.

The jolting moved her warm scales against his body, abrading it with a sweet friction that he welcomed. The extra weight anchored him deliciously. She was a gorgeous blue-green, her emerald eyes only a hint of the glorious color that swept over her body now. He could lose himself in the sight, but he forced himself to concentrate.

He had to keep her small, something it took extra effort to do. Despite their efforts to help her to relax, she'd have to put some effort into maintaining the dragon for now. She hadn't done it for two months. Usually slipping into dragon form came effortlessly to a shape-shifter but it would be like walking after a broken leg had healed. And she was still addicted to Cephalox. She wouldn't be able to do this on her own for some time.

He felt her strain and did his best to ameliorate it. Chase moved quickly and efficiently, eventually signaling to Ricardo that he'd discovered what he needed to know. Then he took over much of the support. Chase might not have the ability to shape-shift, but he knew the mechanics of the process and this wouldn't be the first time he'd helped an injured Talent with their natural gifts.

Keeping her human-sized grew easier after a while, although he couldn't go smaller. Ricardo linked his mind with hers as if they were holding hands. The drip still delivered saline to her, the taped-in needle holding firm. He lifted his gaze to the attendant, her frowning gaze watching the form, waiting for any sign of weakness. She wouldn't find any.

Then he turned his attention to Chase. "Well?"

Chase gave him a nod. "She's too well trained not to take note of landmarks. Even when she was under the worst kind of mental strain. She used the power we sent her to break the hypodermic when they brought her injection and then she ran. God knows why they didn't have her on a drip. Maybe they wanted the daily contact, or maybe they didn't want her locked down on a bed. She got out and I can track where the lab is on the satellite map when we get back to STORM." He paused and forced a tight grin. "When I get back to STORM, that is."

He was glad Chase understood that at least. He held the living, breathing dragon for another ten minutes until the bag of saline had gone into her and they'd reached his apartment building.

Ricardo had bought Sandro's old apartment when his brother moved to Washington, DC, although Sandro had lived here incognito as a wealthy Italian, which was true as far as it went.

The residents knew Ricardo was a shape-shifting dragon. He could hardly hide it now, even though they weren't too happy about it. Not that he cared. As long as the Residents' Association didn't team up to get rid of him. He took care to charm the old ladies on the first floor. He came to care about them and made sure they were okay. Old ladies shouldn't live alone in New York. And in any case, he probably had a few decades on them.

He smiled when he imagined the old ladies seeing him naked and carrying a naked woman. They'd love it.

His attention returned to Kristen when he felt the tingling warmth that meant she was changing back. He watched the blue scales melt away to reveal the soft skin of the woman.

Something stirred in his groin, but he didn't take his attention away from her. Sure, he wanted her. Talents considered it the ultimate in bad manners to have an erection when naked rather than nude, a distinction all shape-shifters understood. Naked was getting ready for a shape-shift, nude was intimately personal. So he'd moved from naked to nude because he sure as hell wanted her.

When he'd comforted her in her cell, he'd done it to keep her alive, to keep her wanting, but now it meant more. He knew what she felt like, what she looked like. What turned her on. That intimate encounter in her prison when he'd been desperate for something to keep her attention had turned into pure lust. At least it had on his part.

She completed the transformation as Chase withdrew from her mind. Kristen lay in his arms, now fully human. Still filthy, but he could see that some of her bruises had gone completely and others were fading. The cuts on her arms and feet were almost healed, pink patches showing where the open sores had been, the small cuts completely gone. Her dark hair clung in clumps, making him want to see the mass as it should be, shiny and clean.

And she was far too thin. Even allowing for the lean athletic build, ribs pushed against her skin and her collar bones stuck out too much. Like most men, Ricardo wasn't a fan of the skinny model look and he wanted to take her somewhere and cosset her. But the woman he'd met in his telepathic contact probably wouldn't take to that. Too feisty even in this state.

His heart ached for her.

He carried her, accompanied by the paramedic, who had a stand and another bag of saline. The woman was starting to irritate him although he knew she was only doing her job. He wanted Kristen to himself, where he could care for her.

The paramedic broke the awkward silence. "I'll send a doctor to her in the morning. She needs sleep more than anything else. I take it you can help her with that?"

He nodded. He'd use some mental persuasion, although there were much more interesting methods he'd prefer to use. Her body covered his erection and he willed it to subside. Inconvenient and irritating that he couldn't control his body better, but the desire it so obviously displayed was only a shadowy reflection of the way he was burning up inside. Their first touch had completed the circuit that linked them. Or at least linked him to her.

Ricardo walked past the concierge into the elevator, the paramedic following. Recognizing the gentle fuzz, he smiled his thanks. The concierge would see him clothed, carrying a woman with a cast on her leg, which would help him with the residents' committee. Had his saucy old ladies been about, they might have preferred to see the real vision.

He used telekinesis to push the button for the penthouse. Being in the open had its advantages sometimes. The elevator rose quietly, its smoky mirrored surfaces giving him infinite visions of the naked man and woman and the green-suited paramedic.

The elevator opened onto a short hallway and then they were home.

Still she slept. He wanted to see her eyes, look into them, know she was all right. He carried Kristen up the open plan stairs, past the broad area Sandro used to use as a sleeping platform and hesitated outside his bedroom before he took her to the guest room. The hesitation was only a reflex action, a need to have her close, to ensure her safety. He hadn't left her mind since she'd called for help and he didn't intend to until she asked him to leave.

The paramedic followed, bringing her stand. The catheter remained in Kristen's hand, so he laid her on the bed and waited, arms folded while the woman hooked up a fresh bag of saline. She gave Ricardo a weary smile. "That will take about twenty minutes. Here." She handed him another pack. "Push this one when that one has done and then we'll see how she goes. Her worst hurts are healing fast now that she's made contact with her dragon again. She won't be able to shape-shift on her own until the Cephalox has gone."

He remembered his own addiction and the agony of stopping cold. He didn't want that for her. Maybe he should have taken her to the hospital after all. "What will we do about the addiction?"

"By the morning she'll be craving the stuff. The doctor will probably advise weaning her off it, giving her smaller and smaller doses. The full process will take around seven to ten days but it won't be easy. For either of you."

Unable to tolerate the loss of contact with his dragon any longer, Ricardo had gone cold turkey. It had nearly killed him, though it had taken less than a day instead of the ten days that the gradual process took. So yes, he guessed he knew about that.

He got rid of the paramedic as fast as he could. By the time he returned to the guest room, Kristen was already stirring, calling out his name in her mind. He touched her hand and she curled her fingers around his with a whimper. "Hey, *mi tesorino*, it's me. Will you trust me and let me make you more comfortable?"

But she clung when he tried to pull away. In her mind he read a turmoil, that if he left her he wouldn't come back. So he hooked up the second bag of saline and waited until it had emptied, then he gently removed the catheter from the back of her hand, taping the small wound with a small bandage. Then he gathered her up and took her into his room, laying her on the covers.

His gamble worked. He hadn't changed his sheets for a couple of days and his scent must be all over them. She turned over, buried her face in one of the pillows and relaxed.

That left Ricardo anything but relaxed. He'd finally controlled his erection, the head that thought for itself, and now she had him going again. He crossed to the bathroom and turned on the faucets. He wanted to get her clean so that when she awoke, she wouldn't have any reminders of that shitty place on her. He could do that best in the tub.

He'd installed a deep tub set on a platform in the large ensuite where Sandro had only bothered with a shower. Artists loved bathtubs, or at least that was his excuse, even if he wasn't an artist anymore. But he still loved a good deep bath.

When he returned to his bedroom, she was stirring once more. When he scooped her up, she relaxed into his arms, and for the first time in years, Ricardo Gianetti felt profound satisfaction.

Chapter Five

The scent reached into her dreams first. Lavender and roses teased her senses when she'd only had her own stink to keep her company recently. It had to be an illusion.

Then she became aware of the strong arms around her, the legs on either side of her body holding her steady and the powerful chest supporting her.

Kristen opened her eyes. Steam wreathed around them. They sat in a large ivory tub in the center of an equally large bathroom, and she stared out of a window that appeared to have an unimpeded view over the city. New York, if she wasn't mistaken. Just like he'd said. Darkness had fallen and lights twinkled in a man-made galaxy.

"Hi."

The deep voice jolted her back to the bath. And the fact that they were both naked. No, nude. More intimate than mere nakedness. She felt intimate with this man and she'd never seen his face except in her mind, or heard his voice. Now that she'd heard him for real, she knew he'd been holding back, because with one word he reached to the depths of her being.

"Ricardo."

"That's me. I thought you'd sleep some more."

She stared at the mark on her hand. "What's this?"

Immediately he understood her concern. "We just pushed some saline and nutrients to rehydrate you. We shape-shifted you on the way here but you can't hold the shift yourself yet."

She sighed. "I've missed my dragon. Now she's there in the background. Through a mist."

He shifted as if uncomfortable. "Look at me, *mi tesorino*."

For the first time in months, pure fear touched her. In her prison, she'd brought her professional training to the fore to put fear aside. But nothing prepared her for this, the fear of opening herself to too much scrutiny. Too personal, too close to what she preferred to keep to herself.

"Turn around. We're shape-shifters, so this shouldn't be uncomfortable for you."

He was right, it shouldn't. But it was. Even before she'd heard him or felt him, he'd gotten under her skin. So she forced her breathing back to normal, took a deep breath and, with her shields up, turned her head to face him.

Their gazes met and she froze. That dark gaze seared a path straight to her soul. When she lifted her hand, it seemed natural to place it on his chest, splaying her fingers wide.

Warmth spread through her, from her fingers, up her arm to suffuse her with more heat than mere hot water could provide. He remained completely still, his arms loosely around her, his legs supporting her.

Kristen smiled, a mere quirk of her lips but it was the best she could do. "Hi."

He bent and touched his lips to her forehead and then her mouth. Just a touch, a breath to share, then he drew away. "We got you."

"Yeah." Though it was self-evident, she needed to say it. "I can't thank you enough."

"You already have. You managed to remember sufficient landmarks for us to pinpoint the location of the lab where they kept you. A team is on its way. It might have completed its mission by now."

She moved her hand but he pulled her closer so she couldn't move away. Did he love the connection as much as she did? "Would you have gone?"

"Yes but I have my mission right here. You need taking care of."

Pain twisted her mouth. "I'll be fine now that I'm out."

"No, *mi tesorino*, you won't. I've been in your situation, remember? You're addicted to Cephalox, you're weak and, like it or not, you need someone right now. I want it to be me."

"Why?"

He pulled her closer and her upper thigh encountered his cock, a hard, pulsating column that spoke more eloquently than anything he'd said. She chuckled. "You don't get that kind of attention from a nurse."

To her amused surprise, his cheekbones flushed with heat and it wasn't from the bath. "Ignore it. I find you immensely desirable but I'm a man, not an animal, despite what some members of Congress say. I can control myself."

"Oh but I like it."

He raised a brow but it was too late to try for cool now and both of them knew it. "That sounds good. But not tonight."

"Why not?"

"You're weak, you need rest and you also need food. The medic told me to take it easy feeding you. So I thought I'd bathe you and put you to bed." His voice softened with amusement, self-deprecating perhaps. "I didn't think you'd come around, you were so sound asleep."

She dragged her fascinated gaze from his barely submerged erection to the pale blue colored bathwater. "Shouldn't this be dirtier?"

"I've filled and emptied the tub twice. This is the third rinse. I added a little fou-fou this time."

She didn't want to look at him right at this moment, so she directed her gaze to the fogged mirror situated just above his head. "I stank, didn't I?"

"No more than I did when they released me. I sat in the bathtub for hours getting clean. Scrubbed myself raw."

Maybe there were advantages in a fellow sufferer caring for her, especially a warrior as this man obviously was. At least he wouldn't gossip. She dared a glance at his face and his eyes snared her. Dark with a hint of the fire he'd have as a dragon. Most dragons had fire in their eyes, red or gold glints. His were red and very deep, so she had to look hard to see them. But when he turned his head and his eyes caught the light, they glinted like hidden jewels.

Without meaning to, she moved closer and his arms tightened around her. It seemed instinctive on both their parts, something that came so naturally they didn't have to think about it. That worried her. She drew back, giving him a jaunty smile. "So do I get a test run with that fine cock of yours?"

His rich laugh echoed around the tiled room. "When we're both ready. Don't you believe in romancing?"

"Nope." She lifted on to her knees and then opened her legs, wincing at the way the hair on her pussy caught and then separated. She preferred to keep it trimmed or shaved but she hadn't attended to it in the last two months. Together with the hair under her arms and on her legs.

She submerged herself into the bath, suddenly ashamed. He was still in her mind, so he must have caught the emotion. He leaned forward and caught her under the arms. "I'm old enough to remember when women didn't shave, and it didn't turn me off then, so it doesn't now. We'll deal with it if you feel uncomfortable but it doesn't bother me."

She laughed humorlessly. "It's just what I'm used to. I feel awful like this. Being a brunette makes it worse."

"Being a brunette makes you more beautiful. You have that creamy skin that I love." He lifted his hand, the water pouring back into the tub in a crystal stream, and touched her wet hair, slicking a stray lock back into the mass clinging to her head. "And I think your skull has a beautiful shape."

"What kind of compliment is that?"

"An artist's compliment." His eyes widened and he stared at her as if he hadn't meant to say it. He laughed but it sounded artificial. "I used to be an artist before I entered my current profession."

"From artist to spy?" She didn't want to know, she told herself. It was none of her business.

"Not a spy. An agent. I said I wouldn't go back until we'd caught Bennett. Now I don't want to go back at all."

"Bennett?"

"The man we think is behind your capture. He used to own that lab." He paused. "He did to me what he did to you."

He seemed eager to let her move away from the subject of his artistry and she let him do it. No longer feeling sexy or wanted, and knowing she had to get hold of a razor sometime soon, she tried to ignore the feelings she had for him. "Tell me about Bennett."

Annoyingly, he clammed up. "Not yet. Enough for now. You're clean, so let's get you out of here and into bed."

"Sounds good to me." She dropped her gaze to his groin. He had pubic hair, black and thick, and she wanted to feel its texture. Was it wiry or silky?

Silky, she decided a moment later. Ricardo took a deep shuddering breath when she caressed his balls. Maybe she was wrong about the wanting part. "I missed this."

"You couldn't have missed me."

She wasn't so sure. Something about him screamed at her not to get close or she'd find herself tangled up in something she didn't want to cope with right now. If ever. But she could have sex. That didn't have to lead to real intimacy.

"I missed this, missed fucking a man blind. I can do it, you know." She drew her hand over his balls, stroking so gently he'd hardly be able to feel it, then up and around his thick cock. A very generous cock. Uncut if the furl of skin around the straining head was anything to go by. That intrigued her. More to play with.

Exhaustion still crept along her bones but she put it aside, her training coming to her aid. She wanted him. The moisture gathering at her crotch wasn't just water—its slickness told her that. His cock lay about four inches under the water in the deep tub. She straddled his legs and widened her knees so he could look his fill.

He did more than that. At last. His hand, until now curled around her waist, slid down to her thigh, the fingers curving over her buttocks and then across her stomach, trailing slowly toward her cleft.

His gaze met hers. She read desperation there and wondered at it. "I feel all kinds of shit for doing this. You should stop me."

She laughed, genuine pleasure filling her. It felt like a long time since that had happened, long before her captivity. Perhaps she'd been working too hard for some time. "Why should I stop you when I started it?"

Oh she wanted this, wanted him in her, filling her. She slid closer, the silkiness of the fragrant bathwater making it easier for her, and reached out to grip his shoulders. He looked up at her, then down at her breasts, now at his eye-level. "You have lovely breasts."

"Small but exquisitely formed?"

"Something like that. They make my mouth water." He groaned. "Oh fuck."

"That's the general idea."

She sank down, savoring every moment. When his lips touched her nipple, her body went into spasms of pleasure, and when he took one into his mouth and sucked, she hissed between her teeth and then moaned. He knew how to do it right. Perfect. For

her at any rate. He alternated licking with sucking. She hovered, waiting, his cock close but not touching.

Christ, Kristen, you're so hot!

"Oh Ricardo, you too, you too, baby." Unable to wait any longer for her reward, she sank down and felt his cock head touch her clit. She nearly shot back up with the reaction but she clutched his shoulders and held on, gritting her teeth as she let his cock, now slick with her juices, slide toward her pussy.

He touched it, filled it. Despite her arousal she had to push, his cock too big to slip inside her without help. She sank down far enough to lodge his cock head inside her body.

She wanted to enjoy every moment of this, feel every inch. She wasn't into measuring, figuring it only took a few inches to reach her sweet spot, but Ricardo was a tight fit and he seemed to go on forever. She bore down, pushing her knees forward, bringing them closer but holding him off enough so he could carry on tormenting her breasts. He nipped a little harder this time and she brought herself farther down. And down and down until he was fully seated inside her.

Only then did she look. He let her nipple go with a soft pop and leaned back, his arms sliding up and around her waist to rest on her ass. "You're so pretty."

"Tits like apples," she commented.

"Always my favorite fruit."

Looking at the expression on his face, she didn't doubt it. Fear clutched at her, as it sometimes did during sex when she felt herself getting too emotionally close to her partner. She needed to lighten the mood. "So do you only fuck women with small tits?"

His smile broadened and a knowing look entered his eyes, as if he recognized her attempt. "No. I appreciate beauty." Again she thought he was about to say something else but he didn't. He bit his lip, letting the subject go, and bringing her attention to it. "So what do your lips taste like?"

She never kissed anyone except small children and in greeting, small childish pecks. No soul kisses for her, an intimacy she refused from everyone.

So she avoided it now, laughing and lifting up so he couldn't reach her lips, and slid down again. "You have a beautiful cock and it works so well. Have you been practicing?"

"Would it matter to you if I said yes?"

"No."

A shade of sadness crossed his expressive eyes. She felt it in his mind, then it was gone. "Pity."

She didn't want to wonder why. Instead, she concentrated on the fucking. Which was fine. Except he kept missing the best spot inside her.

Then he caught it. Fucking a Talent was always better than fucking a mortal because they picked up what you wanted. She didn't have to say a thing.

She grinned and tried to regain the position where he'd caught her sweet spot. But he shifted again, and when she glared at him, he raised a brow and smiled. So cool, as if he were sitting opposite her having a conversation instead of lying beneath her with his cock embedded deep inside her. "You want something?"

"Yes, damn you!"

His smile broadened, then disappeared. "I'm afraid somebody else has already done that. You seem to have no problem expressing yourself. What exactly did you want?"

She tried to push an image into his mind of the direction she wanted him to take, but he blocked it effortlessly.

"Tell me." His voice deepened. "Maybe I like it when my partners talk dirty to me."

A suspicion crossed her mind—that he recognized something in her she wasn't aware of herself. No, it couldn't be that. He just liked dirty talk. Well, sometimes so did she. And this was most definitely one of those times.

So she said as calmly as she could manage, "I want your cock touching my G-spot with every stroke. I want to give you a good hard fucking."

"Why didn't you say so?"

He shifted under her very slightly but it did the trick. Because his next stroke touched the spot that made her want to whimper and curl up just to keep the feeling there, *just there*.

Instead, she stretched up and leaned back, before she lifted her body to stroke down on him. Shivers spread from that magic spot just inside her, up her spine to shimmer in her mind. Oh yes, perfect. She gave a heartfelt moan.

Strong hands gripped her hips, seating her firmly onto him, and he thrust into her. But she wouldn't let him take control—she knew exactly what she wanted and where. More of that exquisite sensation making her body come alive, making her forget.

Half a dozen strokes completed what she needed and she came apart above him. He held her steady, and when she opened her eyes, she saw him watching her, his teeth bared in a feral grin. She smiled weakly and felt her exhaustion sweep over her like a great backwash after the first orgasm she'd had in nearly a year.

Chapter Six

Ricardo cradled Kristen in his arms. She was breathing steadily, peaceful in sleep. He'd enjoyed the sex very much but something was missing from this whole experience, especially considering the ferocity with which he'd wanted her in the first place.

Intimacy. That was it. Not surprising that she'd want to remain aloof after two months with no privacy at all. But he wished she'd trust him more. While he remained in her mind, she'd only let him into the outer layer, the one Talents kept open for everyone who used telepathy, and he only did that to keep her safe. He'd have done it as her bodyguard. She probably used it in her work.

Nothing special, no real connection. He remembered what it was like to keep his mind closed. It had hurt but after a while, it became habit. But she'd deliberately closed her mind to him.

He wanted her trust. He wanted more than sex. He was an idiot.

Don't ask for what you want because you might get it. Every woman he'd slept with before had brought something else with her. Friendship, laughter, a deeper connection. Something.

But Kristen had wanted pure sex, and she'd taken it. Much, he'd thought at the time, to his delight. But he'd needed to concentrate on coming. It hadn't happened naturally, despite her sexy body and the fact that he hadn't had sex in a while.

So he'd have to remember his position in all this. A protector with benefits. He wouldn't push into her mind, as he knew he could, and he wouldn't give her more than she asked for. She needed protection and she needed rest.

He nuzzled her hair. "Hey. Are you okay?"

All he got was a gentle purr. Not only okay but asleep. Her exhaustion had finally gained the upper hand.

He slept with her, held her close, and when he awoke, she still slept. He vaguely remembered her visiting the bathroom a few hours earlier, but apart from that, they'd held each other and slept.

He showered, dressed, cooked something to eat and reported in. Ann told him to stay with her. That was his assignment from now on. Great. He checked with Sandro and found him ensconced with his wife in the Presidential Suite at Chase's hotel, the Timothy, across the park on the West Side.

The doctor arrived at around eleven a.m. A female because, she explained, Kristen might be sensitive to men. Ricardo could have reassured her on that point.

He took her upstairs, interested to discover from her mental sigil that she was a virgin Sorcerer. Some would consider that a challenge. Not Ricardo. Each to her own. Even if she had the type of body calculated to drive him wild – buxom, wide-hipped, plenty to get hold of. Unlike the svelte, not to say skinny, Kristen. Who he now wanted more than any Venus. Go figure, because he didn't have a clue why she called to his libido so strongly.

The doctor pulled down the sheet he'd used to cover Kristen. Her breasts, sweet little curves, tempted him to suck and tweak them into hard points. He had an irrational urge to lift the sheet, cover them up, keep them for his greedy self. A ridiculous way for a shape-shifter to think. They spent half their lives naked.

He stood at the end of the bed while the doctor, one Angela Kouriakis, put down her black bag and crossed the room to lay her fingers gently on Kristen's pulse. "I'll do a physical check-up and then scan her mentally. I won't go deep. I understand you have someone from your own unit who'll do that later."

Ricardo jerked a nod. "Can you do it without waking her?"

"Probably."

Dr. Kouriakis treated Kristen with care and spoke softly. In other circumstances, Ricardo would be on alert now, wondering if the good doctor was single, but today he didn't even bother to ask. He wasn't interested.

The doctor took Kristen's wrist in her hand and turned it palm up to study the bruises that still marked her and the pink lines from newly healed cuts. Then she looked at the empty saline bag and stand that he'd trundled into his room earlier in the day and the place on the back of her hand that should have held the end of the catheter. And sighed. "I'm sorry you removed the catheter."

He wasn't sorry. He couldn't have bathed her and she wouldn't have slept well if he hadn't removed it. "She'd had enough."

Dr. Kouriakis pursed her lips. "I want to wean her off Cephalox. We could have used the cannula to push the drug. If we wean her off it instead of forcing her to go cold turkey, it will be better for her system and she shouldn't remain an addict. So if she needs it for a medical or surgical procedure in the future, she won't have a problem. Whereas if she stops cold, the minute it hits her system again she'll be addicted."

"I know. It happened to me. It's like being an alcoholic. Sometimes I still crave it." It was more than he usually told people.

She turned her head to watch him. He spread his hands. "Read me," he suggested.

He felt the cool intrusion into his mind and he brought forward the information she needed – usually hid under layers of work, sex, anything to keep busy. But he let her see.

She flinched. The ice-cold Sorcerer actually flinched. He bared his teeth in a grin and packed the memories back where they belonged.

"You'll look after her." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes." He made that a firm commitment. He wouldn't give her up to anyone else now unless she asked him to.

"You'll give her a shot every day."

"Yes."

"And take none for yourself."

He gave her an incredulous stare. "Why would I want to? To get addicted all over again?"

She took a deep breath. "Which is why I want to wean her off it. And it's less of a stress on the system. If she decides to go for the cutoff, there's not a lot I can do about it, but in the worst case she could die."

His heart sank. He'd have to administer the fucking stuff to her, make her take it if necessary, be the bad guy. But he knew what he had to do. "I'll make sure she gets it. How long will it take?"

She crossed the room to where she'd left her bag and opened it. Ricardo couldn't remember when he'd last seen a doctor with a bag. He guessed the battered black leather item was a souvenir, since Sorcerers had a mortal lifespan and that bag looked like an antique.

Now she clicked it open and reached inside, bringing out a gleaming metal case. She held it out to him. "There are seven disposable syringes in here with graduated doses in them, labeled. One is for day one, two is for day two and so on. One a day at the same time."

"Thanks."

"Keep them in the refrigerator. I'll check her in a week and see if she's ready to come off the drug. If not, I'll give you another week's supply."

He nodded and turned to leave the room with the case, leaving the doctor to finish her examination.

Going down the stairs, it occurred to him that he'd never had a sex partner sleep over at this place before. He used to enjoy life, had several women in his TriBeCa loft but since his captivity he'd lost the taste for relationships and sex had become more of a physical exercise.

These days he didn't usually sleep with a woman, just fucked her and came home afterward. It gave him something else to keep his mind busy; away from the topics he didn't want to think about. Eventually the thoughts would die of starvation, if he refused to feed them. At least, he hoped so.

He got to the fridge in the kitchen and set the case on the top shelf. It rested there in solitary splendor. He glanced at the other contents of the refrigerator and sighed. The sum total was the case, half a dozen eggs, a loaf of pre-sliced white bread, some butter and a carton of milk that had to be two days past its expiration date. He really should go food shopping. He'd find out what she liked and go buy it or order it in. Maybe better to order in. He didn't want to leave her alone.

He stopped thinking, not wanting to know what that meant. Not wanting to explore it. She wasn't demented, she didn't need constant care, so that left his need, not hers.

His mind rejected that option. *No. Impossible.* He didn't need anyone.

He closed the door. Glancing around, he caught sight of the coffee machine. Good idea. He lifted the glass jug and carried it over to the sink.

A piercing scream came from above and one in his mind, even worse. Panic, fury and terror, all mixed, lacerated his senses.

The jug lay in splinters on the floor and he hadn't heard it fall. Ricardo pelted toward the stairs and took them three at a time. By the time he reached the bedroom, he could hear nothing but gasps and chokes. But the screams in his mind prevailed, ringing around his mind.

He arrived just in time. The doctor's tongue protruded from her wide-open mouth. She must have gasped for breath when Kristen grabbed her. She wasn't breathing now, she was barely alive. Behind her, Kristen knelt up on the bed, her arm locked around the doctor's neck.

"No! Kristen, no, leave her alone, she's here to help you!" He strode forward and grabbed her arm, trying to force the lock.

He had to bring his dragon into play before she'd let go. The doctor slumped down and then slid completely onto the floor. Ricardo entered her mind. She was alive, breathing in small helpless gasps.

He held Kristen's arm in a grip that would leave finger marks. Now that he'd broken her hold, he released her and pushed her back so she fell on the bed. "Kristen, it's your doctor. She's a Sorcerer, she doesn't have our Talents."

Because he remained in her mind, he felt the moment she came to and realized where she was, what she had done. She slumped back on the bed, her face a picture of horror. "Oh God, I'm not safe!"

"Yes you are." He bent to attend to the doctor, lifting her easily and settling her in the upholstered chair that stood close to the bed. Dr. Kouriakis stared at him, her hand to her throat.

Gently he pulled her hand down. No mark. Someone had trained Kristen well. She could have killed and not left any external sign. The doctor nudged him away, batting at his hands. "I'm fine," she rasped. "If I'd been quicker, I'd have caught her thought and stopped her. I was concentrating on entering her mind with the minimum of pain and she came to and had me before I could respond."

Ricardo groaned. He thought something like that must have happened. The doctor might be a Sorcerer but she had no combat training and no specialty in war zone injuries. Kristen had just come out of what effectively was a war zone. "You should leave if you're okay."

"Yes." Dr. Kouriakis got to her feet, her hand on the arm of the chair. "You got here very fast."

"If she'd wanted to, Kristen could have killed you inside a second," Ricardo said, moving to cup the doctor's elbow. He wanted her out of here. Out of this room anyway. He could feel the thrumming tension emanating from the bed and he wanted to take care of Kristen, ease her fears before they took too firm a hold.

"She had you in a restraint hold, her default position if threatened. If you'd continued to threaten her, she'd have killed you. Snapped your neck." He grinned without humor. "Even without her dragon."

He grabbed the black bag on their way out and guided Dr. Kouriakis downstairs to the long sofa between the windows. "Rest and then I'll send for a driver to take you home."

"I have my car." Already she was recovering the ice-control most Sorcerers wore around them like a cloak. "Thank you."

"The kitchen's over there. Please help yourself to coffee. No—" he remembered just in time. "On second thought, don't. I dropped the glass jug, so the pieces are still on the floor. But I have tea or water if you'd like it." The doctor shook her head. Ricardo sighed. "Your presence was disturbing Kristen, so I needed you out of the room. You understand?"

Tight-lipped, she nodded. "I did what I could for her. Please contact me if you need anything." She got to her feet, steady now. She was probably as eager to get out of here as he was to see her gone. She smoothed her hands down her sides and pulled her jacket around her body.

A knock at the door made him whip his head around before he realized who it was. A presence stood there waiting for him. The imp in him that he'd never completely suppressed in adulthood decided he'd open the door without warning the good doctor.

Her gasp echoed around the quiet room. Sandro stood in the opening with Chase by his side. Except that Sandro was buck-naked.

Ricardo stood aside to let them enter. "You flew, I take it?"

Sandro grinned. "No, we took a stroll across Central Park."

Chase grunted and handed a pair of jeans to Sandro. "You started all this last year when you flew. Now get dressed and apologize to the lady. I'm going to see Kristen." He waved a tote bag. "I have some clothes for her too. Basics, but I guess she won't be wanting much more for a while."

He took off across the room and Sandro climbed into the jeans, glancing at the doctor who stood stock still, her cheeks flaming red. "You've seen a naked dragon before, I'm sure."

"Not—not for a while." Ricardo was almost sure she had, but Sandro's face was well-known now. Seeing a man usually only seen on TV in a business suit standing before her stark naked must have given her a moment. Now she headed through the

small lobby for the outer door as soon as Sandro stood clear of it. "Contact me if you need anything."

"Thank you." Ricardo could have done without her, except for the syringes currently resting in his refrigerator. But he wouldn't sound ungrateful, although he was glad she'd decided to leave. "We will."

As soon as the door closed, he confronted his brother. "Did you get all that?"

"Most of it. Chase picked up her distress and we came right over." Sandro grimaced. "We left a good meal going cold in the restaurant. Lobster tails. I'm very fond of lobster tails."

"I'll make it up to you." Ricardo remembered the state of his food stores too late. "Just as soon as I get to the shops."

"I'll make sure Chase sends something over for you to eat. What's wrong with you, boy? Are you starving yourself?"

Sandro had always picked up his thoughts almost before Ricardo had thought them. Older than Ricardo, he'd guided him through young adulthood after their parents' deaths. Almost a father rather than a brother, with a parent's instinct to keep the child safe and properly fed.

Ricardo sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. Sometimes the short-for-him cut surprised him. For almost all his life he'd worn his hair long, and yet again, it took him unaware. He had the same hairstyle now as he'd had in World War II. He'd almost exchange fighting in Spitfires to this—at least the enemy had remained in clear sight. "I've eaten out, grabbed food as I needed it." Fuck, this whole situation had him jumpy.

He kept in Kristen's mind but he felt no panic. In any case, Chase knew what he was doing. Unlike the good doctor, Chase knew how to deal with combat-ready Talents.

"Best to leave them for a while," Sandro said. "Let Chase introduce himself properly. He has to read her and soon."

Ricardo sighed. "I know." He headed for the kitchen and crunched across the glass to get to the cupboard where he kept the brush and pan. Clearing up the mess would give him something to do and he knew his brother wanted to talk to him.

"What the fuck happened in here?"

He glanced up with a wry grin. "I was making coffee when she screamed. I was resting in her mind and I felt it like a lightning bolt."

Sandro huffed a laugh. "Better than a mental bomb."

Ricardo stopped sweeping and looked up. "Do you think she has one?" A recent development by their enemies, a mental bomb could explode and the psychic waves take out many people in the immediate vicinity.

"We'll know soon enough. Chase has come across them a lot recently, especially in connection with Bennett." His voice hardened and Ricardo knew why. Anyone who threatened Sandro's beloved Megan should keep clear of him. Bennett had tried to kill

her. "Chase knows what they feel like now and how to defuse them. But he'll want us and any other Talent clear of this building if he finds one, or he'll want her in one of STORM's isolation rooms."

"And he's sure he can do it?" Ricardo attacked the glass shards.

"Yes. He's teaching other Sorcerers now."

"See one, do one, teach one."

"Exactly."

Ricardo got to his feet and dumped the contents of the pan in the trash. "I need a new coffeemaker."

Sandro crossed the room to the refrigerator and opened it. He stared at the contents before slamming the door shut. "Two questions. First, do you think you can handle this amount of Cephalox?"

Ricardo shrugged. "Sure. The addiction is purely physical. If I have it again, I'll need it. But there's no appeal. No highs, no dream worlds."

"Not for us. For mortals it's different. They get a high. Did you know there's a new black market for it?"

"Fuck, is there? No, I didn't know. But you get all the information first in DC."

Sandro grimaced. "That's not always true. I sometimes wonder if I made the right choice. We're surrounded by fucking paperwork and sycophants. You never hear anything you don't want to. If I didn't know Ann and I hadn't any outside sources, I wouldn't know what was happening outside. It's like a world of its own."

"You're the first elected Talented Senator."

"Thank God we have others who were elected before we came out. You know some people want to nullify all of us?"

"I had heard, yes."

"They want to pass laws classifying shape-shifters as animals and take away our rights. Do you know what that means?"

Perhaps Sandro, for all his age, had more ideals than Ricardo. "Yeah. After all, I had a taste of that." Tied to a table, experimented on, despite his screams and pleading for them to stop. At least Kristen hadn't gone through that. "You have to keep fighting, Sandro."

"I know." Sandro gave a sudden grin. "But it's good to have someone to talk to about it. To be perfectly honest."

Ricardo hadn't realized how much he missed the talks he had with his brother. They talked on the phone, sure, but not face-to-face for a while. And telepathy didn't work outside around ten miles, maybe twenty. DC was a lot farther off than that. "Yeah. I miss that too."

"Something else you're missing, my man," Sandro glanced at the refrigerator and Ricardo knew what was coming. "Food. Forgetting to feed the inner dragon?"

Ricardo shook his head. "I eat. Look at me, do I look starved?"

"You used to enjoy cooking. Out of the two of us, you were the one who spent the most time in the kitchen."

He didn't want to think about that. That was BB. Before Bennett. "People change, Sandro. I just lost the urge."

His brother stared at him. "Well you'd better get supplies for Kristen. If she's as skinny as you were when you came out, she'll need feeding up. Tell you what, I'll get Chase to send you something over."

"Hotel food?"

"Timothy food. You might have to tempt her with something special."

Ricardo turned away, reminded of exactly how he'd tempted her. But not before Sandro caught the flare of heat.

He caught his brother's arm and Ricardo rounded on him with a snarl. "What? She needed reassurance and someone to hold her." He lied about the last part. He'd wanted to hold her, not the other way around. The whole situation unnerved him. Fuck, they hadn't even kissed. "Don't say a word, okay?" He led the way to the stairs. "Just don't. And thanks for the food. I was going to phone stuff in."

"I don't know a grocery around here that delivers."

Ricardo passed a likely looking deli every day. That showed how much attention Sandro usually paid to good food. "I'll manage. I don't want to leave her alone for a while. She might freak."

They climbed the stairs and hesitated outside the first door leading off the broad area at the top. Unlike his brother, who'd slept on the platform above the large living area, Ricardo preferred the traditional way of sleeping. In a bedroom. Sandro would know this was his room and not the guest room. What the fuck, his brother had already worked out they'd spent the night together.

He tapped on the door to warn Chase. Stupid, because the Sorcerer would know they were outside. Very few things escaped Chase Maynard.

When they went in, they saw Chase sitting on the bedside chair. Kristen sat up in bed, the sheet tucked under her armpits, wearing a white t-shirt. One of his.

Her gaze sought out Ricardo, paused and passed on to Sandro. "Anyone can tell you're brothers," she said, calmer now.

Sandro smiled. "Good to see you, Kristen," he said, but Ricardo felt his involuntary reaction. Kristen's appearance shocked him. *Too thin. On edge.*

Sandro's attention passed to Chase but he said nothing. He used to lead Team Red, with Chase as his second in command. Now the team didn't have a leader but rotated the leadership according to the task assigned. It suited Ricardo better. He'd never enjoyed taking orders.

"No bomb," Chase said. "But lots of blocked-off areas. Normal for two months in captivity. It'll come back." Privately in the channel used only by the team, he added

more information. *She's as tight as a drum. They've left her weak and her mind needs building up as well as her body. She's confused, she doesn't know what she wants yet.*

"I don't think Kristen is ready to go back to work if that's what you've come for," he told Sandro with a grin. He'd know Sandro was aware of that.

"You really think I'm a shitty boss, don't you? Take as much time as you want, Kristen."

She cleared her throat as if choking back tears but Ricardo doubted that. She'd lost touch with her emotions. Right now all she could feel was the physical. All she allowed herself to feel. "I want to help find the bastard who did this to me."

Sandro nodded. "But don't overdo it. It'll take you a week or more to detox."

She gasped. Her startled eyes met Ricardo's. "Detox?"

Later.

She ignored the intimate contact, the soothing touch to her mind. "No, now. What detox?"

"Cephalox," Sandro said before Ricardo could. "It'll take you at least a week to wean off it."

She folded her arms. "No."

"Yes."

Sandro held up a hand. "Enough, children." Ricardo hated it when Sandro reminded him of their three hundred years plus age difference. It didn't mean much to shape-shifters in the normal course of events and Sandro used it as a tease rather than any demonstration of superiority. Ricardo still hated it.

"We'll talk," Ricardo promised. If Sandro decided to make the request an order, she'd never take the stuff willingly. Sandro glanced at him, shrugged and dropped the subject, much to Ricardo's relief.

Chase broke into the uncomfortable silence. "I want to scan you fully, Kristen. I'm fairly sure you're not unconsciously carrying bugs or a mental bomb, but I need to do a complete scan in one of STORM's iso rooms. I'd like to see you in the STORM building tomorrow at eleven."

She showed no change in her face, but Ricardo felt her tension and he'd bet that Chase did too. But Chase appeared every bit the ice-cold Sorcerer. Ricardo wondered if he did it on purpose because it was the best way to get to her. "If you want us to close on Bennett, you'll help us any way you can."

She stared at Chase for half a minute before she gave a sharp nod.

Chase and Sandro left after Chase had promised to send what he facetiously called a "care package" over in an hour together with a new coffee machine.

Chapter Seven

Ricardo returned to the bedroom ready for the battle he knew lay ahead of him.

She began the hostilities. "I won't do it."

He deliberately misunderstood. "Have the scan?"

She made a noise of disgust. "Fuck, no. Take the Cephalox."

"You won't make the scan tomorrow if you don't take it." Strike one.

She eyed him doubtfully. "I will. I can do it in twelve hours." She glanced at the digital alarm clock he kept on the nightstand. "A bit more actually. I need one dose every twenty-four hours."

"You won't be able to stand up straight." He dug his fingers into his hair. "Cold turkey will cripple you, strangle your brain, make you wish you'd never been born."

She raised a brow. "It can't be that bad."

"It is."

She stared at him, her cynical expression gone. "You've done it, haven't you?"

"Yeah." The word came out like a sigh. "I was stupid and I refused to detox gradually. It nearly killed me. Addiction to Cephalox in shape-shifters is strange. A week's graduated withdrawal and you're off the stuff. You can still use it if you need to. I can't ever touch it again, because I'd be back up there."

"I'm listening."

It was a start. "I went cold turkey. It nearly killed me and then it took months to recover properly. If you do it this way, take progressively smaller doses every day for a week, you'll feel uncomfortable, especially now with the moon at its height. But by next month's full moon you'll be ready for the compulsory shape-shift."

All shape-shifters had to change their form for the three days the moon was at its height. She couldn't do it this time around, but he looked forward to seeing her next month in all her glory.

Kristen drew up her knees and let her head drop on to them. When she looked up again, her jaw was firm and her eyes dry. "Okay. One more week of losing my dragon. I can do that."

"I'll help you get her back," Ricardo told her. "I swear it."

Her smile took his breath away. Brief but so sweet. Like most of life's pleasures. He'd rank this one in his ten best list.

He was hers as long as she wanted him. Which he feared wouldn't be long enough, but he'd take it. After years of avoiding intimate contact, he'd finally met his match in

someone harder, bleaker and more lost than him. Someone who didn't want what he had to offer.

So what? He was a big boy. He'd suck it up. If he sent her out into the world whole and strong, that would content him.

Would it, fuck. Who was he trying to kid?

She lifted her head and flung back the covers. Underneath, she wore his white t-shirt and a pair of white cotton panties. Never had white cotton panties looked so alluring.

Until she opened her legs and he caught a glimpse of neatly trimmed mound. When had she done that? When she'd gotten up in the night, he realized. Cunning vixen. Her legs were hair-free too, although he hadn't noticed at first.

She smiled when he finally lifted his gaze to her face. "Made you look." Her sultry purr brought his cock to full alert, completing the job started by her enticing pussy. Jesus, she could work him like a puppet. Already he felt his temperature rise, his mind filled with images of her.

"Show me how much you want me to have that injection. You give me what I want and I'll take the jabs."

"Sounds good to me." He took two strides, and by that time he had his pants button undone and the zip down. He shed the jeans in record time, and since he hadn't bothered with underwear, he came down on her aroused and ready.

He helped her off with the t-shirt and took a moment to admire her pert, tempting breasts. "I love your figure. You're slender but the curves are all there, in the right places." He tried to behave like a gentleman and take his time. Even in this state, with wounds still healing and bruises yellow against her skin, she was worth every minute.

He reminded himself how good she tasted, dipping his head to drop tiny kisses down her throat. He lingered in the hollow at the base, flicking his tongue out with every kiss to enjoy her unique flavor.

Her soft moans vibrated against his lips but when he lifted and tried to steal a taste from her lips, she moved her head to one side and his kiss landed on her cheek. Ostensibly, her movement invited him to lick and kiss her throat, so he obliged, enjoying the exploration.

A tinge of melancholy touched him when he knew she wouldn't kiss him. She'd do it before they finished, if not today, then another time. He made it his ambition to get that kiss, but already he knew better than to ask. She could refuse utterly or she could make it hard for him. Let her think he didn't care.

Instead, he took what she offered, lifting his hand and caressing her breast, rubbing it until it peaked hard for him, a little nub against his palm. Tempting, delicious. "So pretty," he told her before he took it into his mouth.

He caressed her stomach and slipped his hand down over her soft cotton panties. He felt the texture of the soft underwear against his hand, an intriguing contrast to her

silky skin. He cruised down, taking his time, until his hand covered her mound. Dampness seeped through the panties. She wanted him.

Triumph soared through him. Already he knew she'd laugh at him, but he showed it to her, opening his mind and inviting her to do the same.

She only opened the top layer, the one anyone could see. He tried not to care, but he couldn't help it. In a normal Talent that meant they only wanted superficial contact, that they weren't interested in anyone going deeper. But in Kristen he knew she probably didn't trust anyone yet, two months of instinct reinforced by years of protecting important people from harm. Before last year, she'd have done it trying to conceal her Talent.

Hard for anyone to do. He reminded himself of all that, but he wanted more. And before they'd finished, he'd get it.

He massaged her through her panties with the palm of his hand until she squirmed. "How about we get rid of the underwear now?" she said, her words punctuated by little gasps.

"Sure." But he took his time. He leaned up and watched, dropping a kiss onto her belly, circling her navel with his tongue, then moving away to watch the damp path he'd made dry as her body heated. He tucked his thumb under the elastic at the top of her panties. Sweet the way they enhanced the creamy, peachy skin. Enticing.

He slid the garment down, teasing himself as much as her. She swore. "Get them off, damn you! Fuck it, Ricardo, are you trying to kill me?"

"I'm trying to bring you back to life." He shouldn't have said it. She tensed and he saw her stomach muscles tighten into painful ropes. He kissed them. "Forget it. I don't want to push you."

"No, you're right. I need this. Do me, Ricardo. Does anyone ever call you Ricky?"

He laughed. "Not if they want to live."

"Ricky."

He saw her smile and knew she was teasing him. He recognized it, as she didn't. An intimacy between them.

"It sounds different when you say it. Kristen, Kris, Kay..." he regained the ground he'd lost and pushed down her panties. He drew them right off, moving down her body, noting that her legs were now silky and shiny from the lotion she must have put on after shaving.

He loved the gentle scent of almonds, the way it mingled with the more potent, muskier perfume of aroused woman. He didn't even mind that she'd borrowed his razor. Since he didn't carry ladies' razors in his bathroom, she must have done so, and Ricardo was usually fanatical about his razors. Even though they weren't the cutthroat ones of yesteryear.

He kissed the delicate skin inside her thighs, licked and heard her muffled laugh, felt her twitch as she tried to move away. So he raised his body and straddled her,

sitting up to enjoy the sight of her body laid out on his sheets. "Mine," he said with great satisfaction.

"Do all men resort to caveman speech when they're about to fuck?" Luckily, she sounded amused rather than annoyed.

"I don't know. Do they?"

"Have you ever slept with a man?"

"Literally?" *Oh yeah.* Ricardo enjoyed both sexes. He didn't have the hang-ups modern mortals seemed to have and their passion for compartmentalizing everything in their lives.

"Okay, fucked a man or been fucked by one."

"Would that turn you on?"

She bit her lip. "It might."

But he read her doubt and another surge of triumph hit him. She didn't want to share him. Some women loved it. He had an ongoing relationship with Johann and his pretty wife, Ania. They'd married recently, and after a more traditional wedding night, he'd helped them celebrate in a more unconventional way. He'd enjoyed it, but they hadn't presented the challenge that lay before him now.

If Kristen wanted a fight, then bring it on. He'd win.

Now he swept his hands down her sweet curves from breast to ass and around the front to her thighs again so he could stare down at her glistening clit, pleading for his attention.

"Should I make you beg?"

"I can stand it."

He doubted it but he also doubted that he could stand it for much longer. He longed for a taste and he wouldn't deny himself the indulgence one more minute. He bent and greedily sucked the hard nub into his mouth.

Her long drawn-out groan told him she wanted this too. He sucked hard three times, letting her think he was settling in before he released her clit and licked her crease, flattening his tongue to get the most of her taste. He'd never forget it, not if he lived for another half millennium, and considering his species, he could well do that.

She yelled long and loud, not high enough for a scream but loud enough to shatter unsuspecting china ornaments. Good job he didn't go in for bric-a-brac.

A sense of warmth spread through him, success that he'd got her to unbend that far. And with her euphoria, she relaxed her shields. They softened.

He wouldn't sneak in. He let her know he was coming and he continued to lap at her, taste her essence. She let him in.

The next layer. She made him ridiculously happy by giving him that. He could enter that layer whenever he wanted now, access her immediate responses, her instant emotions. Not the long-lasting, deep ones but it was a start.

And he could sense her as Talents did when they made love, give her more of what she liked best. She liked this fine.

He drew a deep breath of her, taking her in, touching her clit with the tip of his tongue in temporary farewell. He'd be back for more.

But now his cock ached and so did he. His balls were drawn up close to his body and he took a moment to gain some calm. She had him burning up. He had no idea what about her lithe sexy body drove him so crazy but it felt like nothing else.

He slid his cock, wet with his own essence, up her body, between her legs and let it nestle in the warmth just below her pussy. The sensitive head drank up the sensation but like a diviner, it wanted more moisture. So he gave it, pushing into her crease, smiling when he felt the peak of sensation in her mind as he nudged her clit. Unable to hold out any longer, he pushed in.

Her pussy was so wet, he slid inside with barely any resistance. She laughed as he entered her and tightened her inner muscles, gripping him so hard he threw back his head and gasped like a dying man.

But he'd never felt further from death than right now. Inside her body, looking down at her gorgeous curves, he knew he was exactly where he wanted to be and he told her, mind to mind.

Then he caressed her. He knew how to stroke her mind with the most delicate touch, keeping it velvet even as he raised his cock almost out of her body and then back in, sliding slowly and surely. She rose up to meet him and he noticed her shocked expression, matching the one in her mind when he drove back into her delicious depths.

"Wh-what?"

"Lie back, sweetheart. This is how Talents do it. Good, hmmm?" How had she never done this before? Had she really kept herself locked away from the Talented world for so long? Hard to believe but he had to know. *Had* to.

But not right now. Fuck, she felt hot and wet. Every dream he'd had of perfection in sex came back to him now. This was the nearest he'd ever had.

Not perfect, because when he dipped his head to kiss her, she moved her head away. He nibbled on her earlobe instead. He'd expected it. He didn't just want to take a kiss, he wanted her to give it.

His strokes escalated. She pushed against him, wanting, he guessed, to roll on top, but he wouldn't let her. Couldn't. Everything in his nature told him to keep driving hard, keep going.

Past thinking now, he hammered into her, watching her face, caressing her mind with every deep stroke, keeping his touches gentle as his cock drove in harder each time.

She froze, cried out, and he shared her orgasm, felt the high rocket through her body and mind. Then he shared his with her, opening up as far as she wanted to go. He showed her what she did to him, his muscles straining, his mind exploding in bliss.

Chapter Eight

"So this is STORM."

Kristen and Ricardo stood outside the headquarters of the organization that had previously been covert but, like the British MI5, everyone knew about it now. And the letters emblazoned in brass inside the main hall on display through the heavily glazed entrance lobby made sure of it.

Despite her experience with the great buildings in DC, Kristen was impressed. The clean lines appealed to her. Unlike the way Ricardo grabbed her hand and tugged her through the gaggle of paparazzi gathered outside. "You're Senator Gianetti's brother, aren't you?" someone called out.

He grunted in affirmation but kept moving. Kristen had no choice but to go with him. She could only hope she'd remain invisible, that they wouldn't recognize her as one of Sandro's bodyguards, the black-suited posse that accompanied him everywhere. Unless he gave them the slip, which he did more times than she cared to think about.

Once through the huge glass doors, in the safety of the marble-flagged lobby, she turned on him. "What the fuck was that about?" So angry she only remembered to mask her words at the last minute, she forced herself not to clench her fists in case an intrusive camera caught them. "Some kind of statement of possession?"

"No, I just wanted us through the bastards. I should have guessed that with Sandro in town they'd be there." He put his hand to his head and scrubbed at his hair. "Sorry."

She had no option but to let it pass.

She let him put his hand on the small of her back as they entered the elevator. His macho side was beginning to irk her. Italian, that was it. The ancestry told. Sandro was one of the oldest shape-shifters alive, so he probably reared his brother in the old ways.

But Ricardo was a fucking animal in bed, something she greatly appreciated.

They exited on the eleventh floor and Ricardo led her down a hallway to a room on the right, close to the end. Kristen could have told him how many doors they passed, how many cameras she saw and where the sprinklers were situated. Old habits died hard. That reassurance bolstered the nerves she wanted to deny. She wasn't completely defenseless, her old instincts remained.

They entered a white room. White table, three white plastic chairs. Even the cameras in each corner of the room were sprayed white, only the lenses showing dark and the small red lights above were the only spots of color in the room. She wore black and now she was glad of it, if only to provide contrast.

Chase, wearing a gray business suit, smiled at them from one side of the table. "Shall we get on with it?" He glanced at Ricardo who shook his head. Chase shrugged.

"I'll need you to leave when I scan her but you can watch on the monitors. This room is completely isolated."

"Why?" She felt the rising tension, knew he wasn't telling her something. Chase exchanged a glance with Ricardo, irritating Kristen.

"Don't look at him, he's not my keeper."

Ricardo cleared his throat. "Actually —"

Chase stopped him from putting his foot deep into the shit. "After today you won't need a keeper, Kristen. Recently our enemies have begun infecting captives with a kind of psychic bomb. If it's touched wrong, it explodes, destroying every Talent in the vicinity. The blast wipes their minds completely."

Her body went cold. "I've heard about those."

"Luckily, they're hard to set and only the Talented can do it, so they have to get rogue Talents or undercover agents on their side. I've made it my business to learn as much as I can about these things, and if you have one, I'm the best bet you have. We also need to scan you for bugs, psychic trackers. I scanned you yesterday but I didn't go deep. I want to rectify that today."

She grunted and drew back one of the chairs. "I can see why you need to scan. Don't worry, I'll do what you want." Even though letting someone into her mind went against her very nature.

Chase eyed her warily. "You'll have to open your mind completely to me and drop all your barriers. Be assured that I'm in the situation of a doctor here. Nothing that isn't relevant to our operation will ever leave this room. I can make myself forget if you want me to."

Terror seized her. She hated with a passion anyone breaching her precious psychic barriers. She had more layers than most, had built them herself once she'd learned how. But without this examination, she couldn't proceed. She wanted to find and eliminate the bastards who had done this to her. So she forced the terror down, counted to ten and then counted again. "Okay."

The corner of Chase's mouth quirked in a brief smile. If her mind and body weren't so obsessed with Ricardo right now, she'd certainly find him attractive in a blond, arrogant kind of way. In the past, she'd have done him and moved on. No doubt he'd have done the same to her. Now he bore a gold ring and the invisible "taken" stamp with great pleasure. She read that in him as she began to drop her barriers. Only to the level she'd granted Ricardo.

She waited. Chase glanced up at Ricardo, who sighed but left the room. The door clicked softly behind them, but she heard the telltale snick of the lock.

Then she felt the barriers go up around them. They didn't call this place an isolation room for nothing. She doubted anything could penetrate the shields, certainly not her psi senses. "I've felt this before."

Chase nodded. "In your cell. Does it bother you?"

She started to deny it, but what was the point since he'd have her completely open in a minute? "Yes."

"I knew you'd feel better with Ricardo in here, but we can't risk him, can we?"

She met his eyes. So blue. "No." If she were a ticking bomb, she could go off. "Can you get out of here fast?"

"Yes." He didn't elaborate but she guessed he'd linked with a vampire who could flash him out. But not her. The ripple of fear surprised her, since she'd long accepted death as an occupational hazard. She thought she'd come to terms with it but now she had something to live for. Revenge. She wanted Bennett and the bastards who worked for him to die before she did.

"Relax and concentrate on me. Try not to have strong emotions." Chase grinned at her. "Though with you, that seems particularly difficult. You don't do gray, do you?"

"Nope." Like a switch, she was either off or on.

An image of Ricardo flashed into her mind, naked and with that look on his face. *That* look. Her libido rose. She pushed it away, but not soon enough.

Chase raised a brow but said nothing. He didn't have to. His mind felt impersonal, gliding over her senses like a cool breeze. "You must do this a lot," she said, more to get past the awkward moment than anything else.

"You could say that." Chase paused as he negotiated a bunch of emotions connected with her capture. All normal as far as she could tell. Confusion, anger, determination, she could name them all. She'd had plenty of time to think about it. "Someone has to take charge of the scanning. So far we've done it haphazardly depending on each Sorcerer's abilities but we should set standards."

"With the paperwork to go with it? Ticking the boxes?"

He gave a mock shudder. "God forbid. But it might come to that."

"The people I work for, Protection International, are considering letting their Talents go if the government passes some of the laws they plan to. It'll be too problematic with all the paperwork and licenses."

Chase snorted. "Fucking idiots. Government too. Ann's fighting all that. In any case, I'm sure STORM will have you. We have our own bodyguard division."

She gave a doubtful smile. "I'm experienced enough to find another job, but thanks. A lot of Talents will go undercover. They're trying to force us to reveal our Talents, make it compulsory."

"More paperwork and more work for the lawyers."

She knew he was trying to help her to relax, chatting as a doctor might about external issues.

Then he stopped, just stopped and pulled out of her. He glanced at the door, then back at her. Kristen swallowed. She hated the isolation. While Chase remained in her mind, she could forget that, but once he withdrew, the walls closed in on her and her emotions shot back to that small gray room.

She hardly heard Chase take the couple of steps to the door and fling it open but she felt the blessed communication surge back in, the link to other Talents that they felt from birth. Mortals blocked it but Talents embraced it.

The world restored and her equilibrium back with it, she cocked a brow at Chase. He didn't smile as she expected. "I have to go. An emergency, it seems. Come with me and I'll take you to a safe area."

"We're under attack?"

"Not exactly." Chase motioned with his hand and she got to her feet. "I'm needed, that's all. And in case you wondered, I'm linked to Johann Kozac, a vampire, so he can contact me if I'm needed. Sometimes I'm called in to the hospital to help with emergencies and this is one of those times. Someone's going apeshit."

"Anyone I know?"

He shook his head. "Nobody I know either, for that matter." He opened the door wider, inviting her to exit. "I'll finish the scan when I return. But I've scanned thoroughly for bugs and bombs. Nothing there, I'm sure of it. You're safe."

She allowed a smile to quirk the corners of her mouth. "I'm glad to hear it."

"I want to find out more about the place where you were held. The next stage is to scan for residual memories, things you might not realize you know. That's entirely voluntary."

Interesting. She nodded. "Okay. How long will you be?"

"I don't know. Sorry. But I'll let you know if it goes on for a while." He paused. "I'd better go. I'm travelling by dragon, it seems, so Ricardo'll be busy for a while."

Immediately she felt him in her mind, warming her senses. *Are you okay?*

I'm fine. It didn't hurt one bit.

A chuckle. *Told you it wouldn't. Do you mind waiting here for me or do you want to go home?*

She wanted to stay in contact with the Talents here, find solace in being one in a crowd. *Not at all. I'll stay here. Go and be a Good Samaritan.*

I just like shocking the shit out of the tourists in Central Park. It should have been me, not Sandro that day.

The day everything changed for Talents. Not that it hadn't happened before, just that this time they admitted to existing and proved it beyond doubt. She could see why Ricardo gloried in it. He'd create a living work of art, something that changed the world as people saw it.

Chase cut in. *We're fuzzing. I don't want the scuzzballs of the press getting the idea something is wrong.*

A heavy sigh. *Okay for today.*

Chase touched her mind, checking she told the truth about the way she felt and then left once more. "Tell you what, I'll take you to Andros and you can get on with something else while you wait."

She couldn't get out of this room fast enough, but she tried to take her time as she walked past him and through the open door. Fuck, it felt good to get out of there. "So who's Andros?"

"One of our researchers, a mortal. He's Johann Kozac's brother-in-law, great with techie stuff. Maybe if you and he go over the area where we found you, you can pick something up, maybe recognize some landmarks."

She saw the sense in that. "Good idea. Lead on."

He took her along the hallway where an agent waited for her, a short woman with long braided hair. She returned Kristen's polite greeting with a sharp nod. Chase's steps quickened when he left them, heading toward the elevator that opened onto the roof, where no doubt Ricardo's dragon awaited him.

The woman took her up a couple of floors in another elevator, then down another hallway that had the appearance of an ordinary set of offices. At a room halfway along, she opened the door.

Inside lay geek paradise. A narrow room with two long tables on either side, screens lining each. Various input devices, mice, keyboards and a long glass area she recognized as a Microsoft Surface. Most of the screens were lit, and in the middle, scooting between them on an armless, wheeled office chair, she saw a man.

He turned around to face them. She saw a young man with a pointed, piquant face, his short blond hair worn in a style that left some of it straggling untidily about his face and the rest gelled up in spikes. But his eyes captivated her. She'd rarely seen such clear blue eyes.

Overhead lights glared down, joining the light cast by several directional lamps, chosen for functionality rather than looks. At least she hoped so, otherwise the youth had appalling taste. But from his black tee and jeans, both good makes from what she could tell, she wondered. Despite his extreme skinniness and his straggly hair, he had an appeal she could appreciate, if not desire.

"Kristen Turner?" His voice sounded surprisingly deep. She nodded. "They told me to expect you. Come in and shut the door."

Her guide had already gone. So she did as he asked and walked between the banks of equipment to stand behind him. There was only just room. He scooted to a pair of screens near the door. "Here. I put up a couple of satellite pictures for you. Not the standard ones but ones of our own, and I can get others for you if you want. You were found here." He reached out to a mouse and tracked it to the doorway. "Do you know how to use this?"

"Sure."

He nodded to a folding chair leaning against the table. "Feel free. Coffee?"

"Thank you, I'd love some."

He scooted to the end where a coffee machine rested between one keyboard and the next. Not that she wanted the coffee, which had probably been brewing all morning, but she wanted to break the ice. She felt the tension when she'd entered the room, drawn taut and aching.

She opened the chair and sat in front of one of the machines. She'd seen something like this in Washington, even used some, although she was more accustomed to GPS tracking systems and graphical representation of the terrain.

She saw the doorway where they'd found her. She recognized the color but little else. Not the cracked paint or the notices stuck to the wall by its side. She opened up the scene. "I know of Mulberry Street but I don't remember being there before."

He placed a brimming mug of black coffee by her side, just where a jog from her elbow could dislodge it. "Cream?"

"No thanks." She doubted there was any room in the mug left for cream.

"It's good," he said. "That you've never been before, I mean. You won't have any residual memories of it. Anything you see we can connect with that —"

"Visit?" she suggested. She picked up the mug, cradled it between her hands and took a sip. Hot. Surprisingly good. She took another. "Thanks."

Andros laughed. "You thought it'd be repulsive, didn't you? I make good coffee. I had to. I lived with my sister for years and she doesn't have a clue about the kitchen. I learned for self-preservation."

He'd surprised her. "Yeah? So who do you live with now?"

"Just me. I have rooms here for now, until I find somewhere I like."

Maybe that was the reason for the heavy atmosphere she sensed as soon as she entered the room. A disappointment in love maybe, or the loss of companionship when his sister moved out. "Have you lived in New York long?"

"No. I did my degree in LA. I miss the sun sometimes."

She glanced at the tall window at the end of the room. It looked out onto the street and the buildings opposite, the dullness of a sky threatening rain reflecting back at them. "Why did you come?"

He shrugged and the tension returned, almost palpable. Kristen wished she had a knife to cut it. "I like this job and it pays well."

That wasn't it. "Hey, it's nothing to do with me. I don't even work for STORM."

He gave a grin that lit up his face. "No you don't, do you? So are you feeling better now?"

She stared at the pale skin and wondered how much of it was natural, how much from the lack of sun and how much from ill health. The minute she'd entered the room she felt a sense of oppression mixed with an urgency she couldn't define, but it made her edgy and uncomfortable. This guy needed fresh air. A lot more than she guessed he was getting now.

If he lived in this building, he'd get up and come straight to work. He likely never saw any more of the outside than what he could see through that window. The pressure in the room eased as she made her decision. Yes, this guy just needed a break.

Just to show she was willing, she scrolled through some more streets and scanned the ones nearest to the doorway, but she recognized nothing. She hadn't thought she would. It would take another session with Chase to draw the memories out of her. It was as if she'd never been there at all.

She checked her watch. "Are you hungry? The coffee's good but I don't see any food here."

Andros shrugged. "Sometimes I don't notice."

"Wanna go out for a bite?"

Now the tension came directly from him. He stared at her. She let him stare but kept her face relaxed a slight smile on her lips. "It's okay. I'm here because I want to be and I can come and go as I want."

"I know."

His reassurance came so fast, she knew he'd been briefed about her. But she really did want some fresh air, even if it was only the city air of New York. Usually she thrived in the city but she felt stifled here. Maybe the walls were too narrow, too confining. That had never bothered her before her captivity and once she got over it, it wouldn't bother her anymore. Another wound she'd heal.

"I know somewhere we can get a bite. I'm not supposed to leave the building unaccompanied, but I've been to this place before with Ania and Johann."

She pointed to herself. "Hello, bodyguard. I think I can handle it." To the sound of Andros' delighted laughter, she pushed back from the chair. "I'll buy."

Since Ricardo had shoved a few notes in her pocket that morning, she could. And she could visit a bank and get her plastic reinstated. Start to live as herself again. It would help her lose the sense of worthlessness that hung around her now.

But Andros didn't get to his feet and when she looked at the corner of the room, the one hidden by the door when it opened, she saw why.

A pair of crutches were propped against the wall, silent witnesses to why Andros scooted around instead of getting up. He couldn't.

She picked up the crutches and brought them across to him. They must have been standard gray hospital issue once but now they were sprayed matte black, the surface decorated with wild swirls of color winding up to the elbow supports. The occasional gleam showed where a single sparkle was laid carefully in the color. "Gorgeous," she remarked.

"Yeah. It gave me something to do."

She held the crutches steady while he heaved up onto them, then stepped back with the innate empathy of the misfit. He must feel trapped in this building with these beings. Higher, faster, stronger. Except for him.

Andros was taller than she'd thought and she guessed he should have been bigger but whatever his condition was had held him back. His bones protruded at his wrists and neck. Although she didn't ask, was careful not to query in her mind or verbally, he told her anyway. "I have Becker's Syndrome. It's a form of muscular dystrophy. I'm waiting for a donor."

She knew what that meant. A Talent might donate his gift. Maybe a shape-shifter didn't need it, having found a partner in another Talent, or a Talent sometimes donated their gift when they neared the end of his or her life. There was a list but just like transplant lists, there were far more people waiting than donors.

Vampires couldn't donate their Talent and live, shape-shifters could only convert a mortal once and Sorcerers couldn't do it at all. Andros needed the strength of a Talent to heal; the changed DNA would eliminate the illness. And muscular dystrophy was an incurable condition any other way.

"Don't hold your breath," she warned him. "Did they promise you anything?"

"No." His grin relieved her. "I know the odds aren't with me but it makes my sister feel better. She's converted, you know, and I think she feels guilty it wasn't me. Not that she had a choice."

"Oh, that sounds interesting."

"It is. You buy lunch and I'll tell you the story. We'll need my chair. I can't support myself far with these." He grimaced and lifted a crutch.

"Is the chair decorated like those?"

"Wait and see." He motioned to the door. "I keep it in the cloakroom by the lobby. Let's go."

They went down to the lobby in the elevators. When the doors opened on the second floor, Andros stiffened as if waiting for some comment. But the Talent who entered—a griffin, she noted from his mental sigil—only smiled easily at them.

Every day Andros would have to face these people, every day pretend he didn't care. But Kristen knew. He'd care. Because he was the oddball in this place, the person who didn't fit. Like her but for different reasons. If she worked here, in the fullness of time she'd fit in and so did the mortals who worked here but not a —

Cripple.

She turned her head to stare at him. *Sorry. I didn't know you had telepathy. I should have shielded myself better.*

That's okay. And I don't, not much. Ania helped me to open my barriers but I can only do it when the person is real close to me. Like you are.

She wasn't sure what to make of that but when she glanced at him and felt his emotions, she felt only friendship and mild interest. The same as she had in him.

Kristen knew better than to help Andros over the gap between the elevator and the floor and across the beautiful but slippery marble floor of the entrance lobby. She peered outside. The paparazzi had thinned out but they were still there.

The perfectly polished receptionist shrugged. "It's Sandro Gianetti. He brought them. We get a few but not like that. They drop around when they're not doing anything else, usually."

"Then they won't be interested in us." When Andros headed for a door at the far corner of the cavernous area, she followed, and found a simple folding wheelchair behind it, leaning against a wall that held hooks for coats and hats. She lifted it out and opened it for him. It was decorated like the crutches, matte black with rainbows, and she found a flat black pillow to make the seat more comfortable. Andros handed her the crutches and heaved into the chair. "Sorry," he said.

"Fuck that. You need it, you use it," she answered and put the crutches in the cupboard before she took the wheelchair handles. The chair glided over the marble and all the time she felt the pitying gaze of the receptionist. A mortal who didn't realize Kristen could read her so easily. She paused by the desk. "You like working here?"

The woman lifted her chin. "Sure. A lot of eye candy passes through those doors every day."

"Then keep your thoughts shielded." Another nod and she wheeled Andros out, thanking the powers-that-be for doors that opened automatically. Although they might not open from the outside. She'd have to take care on the way back in.

The paparazzi glanced at them, took a couple of photos but didn't seem too interested. Hopefully that meant they hadn't recognized her from when she'd arrived with Ricardo.

Andros directed her to a small bistro not far away from STORM headquarters. When she wheeled him in, she became instantly aware that nobody paid them much attention and the hum of everyday activity she felt in her head rose slightly, then dropped again. And Andros felt comfortable here, she read it in his mind.

He glanced around as she parked his wheelchair by the table. "I know you're there, you know. In my head."

She didn't apologize. "It's normal for us. Do you want to sit in a chair?"

Andros nodded. She didn't have to help him move from the wheelchair to a chair. He could stand, just not for long. So she contented herself with folding the wheelchair and handing it to the waiter, giving him no choice but to find someplace to put it.

She took her place opposite Andros, noting how clear his complexion was, how pale. "You didn't see much of the sun in LA," she remarked when he glanced up and their eyes met. She caught her breath. His eyes were a clear, pure shade of blue.

"I did, but Ania and I have skin that burns and then goes back to pale. We don't tan, so we didn't try. I miss the sun sometimes though." He grimaced. "And my steady footing."

"That's recent?" She asked it before she could censor herself.

He jerked a grim-faced nod. "A couple of months. I'd been having trouble before, but around the time of my final exams, I started using a cane. It won't get better. Unless the miracle happens."

"It will."

He slanted her a skeptical look. "I doubt it. I just enjoy every day to the fucking max. Never put anything off."

They paused to place their orders with the waitress and she went off to comply with the order. Andros grinned. "And I want a glass of wine. I made sure the drugs I take don't preclude that. Otherwise I'd stop taking the drugs."

She lifted her finger to signal the waiter, and ordered a half bottle. If he wanted the other half, he'd have it, she'd make sure of that. Somehow she felt more in common with this man than the all-powerful Talents. But still something niggled at the back of her mind. When she tried to concentrate, it disappeared.

She enjoyed this man's company and determined to stay friends with him if she could. Kristen had become used to making friends with men. She spent most of her working life with them in her previous existence, when life was normal. It seemed a very long time ago now. She wondered if anything would be normal again.

They took an hour to eat, interspersed with chatting about music, the news, anything except Talents and STORM. And for the first time since her captivity, Kristen found herself enjoying an everyday meal with an interesting person. She'd missed that, but she hadn't realized it until now.

After an hour, they left. She'd learned more about Andros and his life with his sister and hardly anything about the illness that was slowly killing him. Not that they consciously avoided the subject, but there were so many more interesting things they could talk about.

So Kristen felt much more relaxed when she wheeled Andros out of the bistro. Far more than when they'd come in. They were still laughing over one of his irreverent remarks about Talents when she looked up and saw a man blocking their way, staring at her intently.

"You can't move now," he said.

And she couldn't.

Chapter Nine

Ricardo stiffened at the same time as Chase. A shock, sharp and panicked, arced through him with the immediacy of a sword slash.

He didn't realize he was moving until he'd reached the door. Chase ran behind him, his mind locked onto Kristen's. Ricardo ripped at his shirt, ready to shape-shift, but Chase stopped him with a hard mental command. *No. She's not far from here. We'll get there in five if we run.*

Glad they were only two floors up, Ricardo changed direction. He raced past white-coated medical staff and nurses in burgundy scrubs, barely registering their shocked faces. He let Chase lead the way, knowing the Sorcerer's instincts would lead him to her faster than his could. All the way, Kristen's cold, dark despair drew him closer. She'd had a relapse, a breakdown, because he couldn't calm her down until he delved deep, or as deep as she allowed him.

Only he found Chase there, trying to do the same thing. They raced through the crowded streets, down Madison to a small bistro close to the STORM building.

Kristen stood outside, totally still, her face pale, her hands clenched into fists. Ricardo overtook Chase and dragged her into his arms. "What is it, sweetheart? What happened? I'm here, don't!" He pressed her face into his chest to muffle her mental screams but she remained stiff and resistant to his touch.

Then he saw the wheelchair and recognized it as the distinctive one belonging to Andros. Without its occupant.

Jesus.

A car screeched to a halt, and two two men hurtled out of it, ignoring the road signs and the honking of irritated motorists. Two vampires to be precise, Johann Kovacs and his wife, Ania, Andros' sister. Fury filled the atmosphere and Chase clapped his hands over his ears in instinctive response. "Shit! Close it down, guys, let's find out what happened here first."

Ania rounded on Kristen, her blonde hair whipping around her face, her eyes red with fury. "Where is he? What have you done with him?"

Ricardo felt Kristen swallow against his thinly clad chest before she lifted her face and looked up at him. Her eyes swam with unshed tears and Ricardo knew, just knew she'd done something terrible. The worst thing was that he didn't care. He'd support her, whatever she'd done.

He was going fucking insane here. But he kept his voice down and kept his tones gentle. "Tell me, Kristen."

She dragged in air as if she hadn't breathed for hours. Then another deep breath. "They took him."

Before he could say anything Johann rasped, "Who did?"

Ricardo felt her flinch. "The people who took me."

"What the fuck was he doing outside the STORM building?" Ania said now, her voice sharper than usual. What the fuck was *she* doing outside the STORM building? She knew not to take risks like that. What was she thinking?

Chase broke in. "We need to carry on this discussion somewhere else."

Ricardo felt the crowds, felt the pressure of curious humanity on his mind. Anybody could be listening. The agent in him finally kicked in. "Back to the office."

"I'm going after the trail," Chase said. "It's faint but I'm there." He shot a glance at Johann. "We can't flash, it's daytime, but I need one of you with me." He nodded at Ricardo. "Take her back to STORM and wait for me. There's something wrong with her."

"You're fucking telling me!" Ania didn't seem to notice the tears streaming down her face. "They got him and this bitch helped them take her. I want her dead, detained, anything to hold her until we find him."

Johann tried to pull his wife into his arms but she shook him off. "Go with Chase. You have Andros' mental signature. Apart from me, you're the only person I'd trust to find him. Don't come back without him."

Johann gave Ania a hard hug, then turned away to pursue Chase as he followed Andros' trail down the street. Although telepathy had no directionality, other psi senses did, so it seemed that Chase had found something to follow.

Ania glared at the few people standing a little apart, staring at them. "If you can't help us, fuck off."

Ricardo hardly recognized the fun-loving woman in the virago who faced them now, but she had every reason to behave like this. Even if he wouldn't trust her anywhere near Kristen at this point, especially after dark, when she'd turn full vampire, he could appreciate her furious, desperate concern.

The crowd began to drift away but a waitress from the bistro behind them took a step forward, rubbing the palms of her hands on her pristine white apron. "I saw it."

Ricardo lifted his head. "What did you see?"

The waitress met his gaze then her eyelids dropped. "One man stood outside, waiting for them. He talked to the woman," she jerked a nod at Kristen, "and I think she knew him. She stood real still and the man grabbed the guy up from the chair and threw him into the back of a car."

It didn't take much psi to read the license plate the waitress didn't know she'd seen. He reeled off the number, pushed it into Ania's mind, then sought Chase and told him too.

"She didn't do anything," the waitress said. "Just stood there staring at the man."

"Did Andros fight or struggle?"

The woman stared at him, warmth he didn't want to acknowledge in her eyes. But he had to. He was reading her and she didn't even try to hide her lust. "Sure he did but he's skinny, right, and he didn't stand a chance. It still took two of them to hold him."

"So what were you doing?"

She glanced over his shoulder and a burst of sound told him exactly what she'd been doing. Being a good citizen. "Can't move a step without one of you people gettin' into some kind of trouble," a man drawled.

Ricardo knew without turning around that the man was a uniformed cop. He didn't even need his psi senses to know it. The atmosphere of world-weary arrogance preceded this guy.

"STORM business."

"Not if it happened here, it isn't."

Slowly, Ricardo turned to face the officer. He must be at least fifty, his craggy face immobile from his bushy gray brows to his pitted chin.

"I'm taking this woman back to STORM headquarters. Someone was taken against his will. And right now we have more of a chance of taking them down than you do."

The guy tipped back his head and lifted a brow. "You don't say. Forgive me for breathing, but I'd like to verify that at the station. If you don't mind."

Ricardo thought about defiance, thought about the woman in his arms, now with her mental barriers up, so he couldn't tell what the fuck was going on with her.

He belatedly remembered his obligations and sighed. "Okay. I'll give a statement." Ann wanted harmony between the various forces. Fuck, this could take hours but perhaps it would give Kristen time to come out of her shock. She needed time.

"Don't let her leave your sight," Ania said. "She's involved up to her scrawny neck and I want justice." She glared at Ricardo. "And don't expect a welcome in my house or anywhere else until you get the truth."

The reality of her words filtered through to him, and by the way Kristen stiffened in his arms, he knew she'd picked it up too. He'd formed a happy third to Johann and Kristen, and he'd intended to introduce Kristen to them. Iron gates slammed down between them, isolating the two of them from every other agent in their team. Team Red would shatter under this. If they didn't work together now, they'd fall apart and take others with them.

Ania was a new Talent, until recently mortal. She didn't have the ingrained code the others had and he worried that she'd crack. Johann would have to keep her safe and under his jurisdiction. He'd insist on it. Nobody broke rank now.

He wanted this scene broken, especially since people were already taking photographs with their phones. The ever-present press wouldn't be far behind. "I'm going with this officer and Kristen is coming with me. You go back to STORM and tell Ann what's happened here."

He set his jaw. Ann wasn't going to like this. Not one bit.

Keeping Kristen with him and answering the questions the police wanted to ask proved tricky. Ricardo didn't intend to give anything away about Bennett. He belonged to STORM. So far, they'd kept his activities under wraps. It might give more people ideas, Ann said, and he agreed.

He stared at the officer facing him and refused to release Kristen's hand. "If you find something to charge us with, feel free to arrest us and separate us. But you know and I know that we're in the clear. We've given you the details of the missing man, and your time might be better spent looking for him." If he repeated that enough, they might finally get the message. But it wasn't until he asked for a lawyer in his best bored tones that they decided to release him.

Kristen had said very little, other than to confirm her name and his description of the events. Like him, she refused to name her Talent. It was becoming a point of principle with Talents, and until someone forced them to do it by law, they'd continue to refuse. Perhaps afterward too.

The craggy-faced officer with the remarkably soft eyes did his job and they did theirs. Out of the building, Ricardo lost no time and flagged down a taxi to take them back to STORM.

Still Kristen said nothing and Ricardo didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure what she'd done and how, outside the barebones account she'd given them. So he pulled her into his arms and just held her. She didn't resist but he wasn't sure who was more in need of comfort – him or her.

Back at STORM, he took her straight to the iso rooms. He knew Chase would be waiting. He received the order to bring her upstairs as soon as he reported in.

Numb, Ricardo waited for Kristen. Sitting in the faceless hallway outside the room, on one of the chairs from an unoccupied iso room, he saw Ann Reynolds approaching, her stride as brisk as always. In this building hundreds of agents jumped at her command, but despite the steel-gray trouser suit and the short, crisp cut of her pearl-gray hair, she still had the deceptive presence of someone's favorite grandmother. She used her appearance as a weapon without compunction when she needed to.

He rose at her approach and appreciated her faint smile. "You're showing your age. I love that you never forget your manners."

The motion had come instinctively to him. It still surprised Ricardo when he saw men sitting in the subway when women were standing, but he didn't insist anymore. It was as likely to gain him curses as thanks, from the women as well as the men.

Now he smiled in return but only as another polite response. He'd never felt less like smiling. "So what now?"

"Kristen was a plant, sent to entice Andros to a place where they could take him," she said. "It only remains to discover whether she knew it or not. That's Chase's primary objective. He's to open her completely and discover what she knows. I won't tolerate anything else."

She watched Ricardo closely but as far as he was aware he didn't give anything away. "Why would they want Andros?"

She made a sound of exasperation. "Think, Gianetti!"

The realization hit him with the force of a steam train. "Oh Christ! Bennett thinks Andros is a bone marrow match to him?"

Ann gave him a look that clearly said "duh".

"I thought Andros was screened out?"

"No. Because both Andros and Ania have the same first initial, their bone marrow screening results were mixed up. Bennett took samples from each."

Last year Bennett had tried to take Ania and Andros and had lost both. But Ricardo had privately considered Bennett a spent force, his efforts to capture a Talent to convert him doomed from the start because his leukemia had made him too ill to undertake the procedure.

So had Ann. It seemed she'd changed her mind. "Why do you think I gave Andros rooms here and asked him not to leave without telling someone?"

Ricardo lifted his hand to his head then dropped it again. "She's a bodyguard. They probably thought it was okay. How's Ania?"

"Distraught."

"She would be." His heart ached when he thought of her. So lovely, so giving in bed and so in love with Johann. As he was with her.

"Chase will be some time. Come and see Ania and Johann. You have to face them sometime. They're in Conference Room Three."

Although couched as a suggestion, Ricardo recognized an order when he heard it. So he went upstairs and headed toward the conference suite.

They used the rooms for everyday meetings but after Talents had come out last year, Ann had ordered them refurbished. Now they were used for press conferences and inter-agency meetings, so solid wood tables now replaced the more utilitarian furniture and the chairs all matched.

Not that it meant his brother intended to take his feet off the table. Mahogany, plastic or glass, Sandro's feet usually ended up propped up on it. This was no exception. He glanced up when Ricardo entered but Ricardo didn't need his brother's warning glance to read the tension thickening the atmosphere.

He nodded to Jack Hargreaves, nominally the researcher for Team Red but increasingly more badass than Johann in a bad mood. Jack was a converted Talent, a jaguar, and Dr. Bennett had murdered the woman he'd loved. That meant everyone had a personal stake in taking the bastard down.

Some of the most dangerous Talents in the world sat in this room and still the ordinary-looking, once-overweight, middle-aged doctor had evaded them all. Ricardo's mouth thinned. Not for much longer, that was for damn sure.

The last thing any of them wanted was to see Bennett die quietly in his bed of the disease he was fighting.

"So you brought your girlfriend in." Johann's voice was devoid of expression. He was at his most dangerous when he appeared at his coolest. He had the vampire's legendary fiery temperament and this threatened his new family, the brother of the woman he loved.

Who was sitting in the chair next to him, hard blue eyes fixed on Ricardo's face. He read nothing in her. She'd learned how to control her mental barriers fucking quickly and he hated it. She'd never closed him out before.

"If Kristen Turner dragged him into a trap, I'll kill her myself," she said. After years of struggling with Andros' condition, finding a threat from another direction almost drove her to the breaking point. He knew because she'd told him, showed him. In bed and out of it.

That little pastime was at a close. Ricardo hadn't realized how closed before now and felt a touch of regret at its passing, even more the friendship he'd enjoyed with the couple. "You think that will bring Andros back?"

"If he doesn't get his medication soon, he'll die anyway." Ania's lack of inflection was killing him. He knew she must be dying inside. Her husband's body formed an unconscious shield, turning to face Ricardo where he stood just inside the doorway.

"What do you mean?" he asked, though he feared he knew. But it needed saying to get everything out in the open.

"He needs his meds. He didn't take any of them with him."

Jack opened the laptop resting on the table before him. "The techs are doing a scan. We should have given him that GPS implant, but he asked us not to. We should have done it anyway." His crisp English accent rang across the room but everyone heard the edge of anger. "How many people is Bennett going to kill before we finally track him down?"

"Nobody. If we have to rip New York apart, we'll find him."

"And kill how many others in the process?" Sandro asked, his voice the most casual. Sandro had always remained in control of his emotions, or almost always, but when he struck, he went for the jugular. His unpredictability and his ability to remain cool in a crisis made him one of the most dangerous Talents Ricardo knew. "You think the cops will stand aside and let us wreck the relations they've spent so many years setting up? You think they'll let us go in there armed and in our other forms without consequences? Congress will have our guts. Literally and figuratively. No, we go about it as we've always done. Pinpoint the target, then go in and clean the place out with the minimum of fuss."

Ricardo remembered a dragon roaring his way through John McIver University and it hadn't been him. By Sandro's warning glance, he knew he wasn't the only one to remember.

"So we get clever," he said. He'd always stood shoulder to shoulder with Sandro, always supported him. Family first, even now.

Jack put up a site, the electronic sounds the only noise in the suddenly silent room.

"So how?" said Ricardo. Toss around a few ideas, get some kind of plan sorted out, then take action. It always worked before.

It didn't work now. And they wouldn't work as a team until they evaluated Bennett's plan of attack this time. Through Kristen.

So they talked about her instead. "Rock solid," Sandro said. "Always reliable. One of the best. She wasn't afraid of taking the initiative if necessary. She worked for her company since her adulthood."

"A long established company?"

Sandro shrugged. "Not really. They've been around for the last fifteen years."

"So what did she do before that?"

"She grew up." Sandro's dark eyes narrowed into glittering strips of comprehension. "Didn't she tell you how old she is?"

Ricardo shrugged. "It never came up."

"I bet something else did," drawled Johann.

He was right about that. Ricardo knew he shouldn't have done it but he couldn't resist her. Even now, thinking about that muscular body covered with soft, silky skin, the softest parts of her yielding to his touch, he felt his cock harden, readying itself for her.

Shame filled him that he'd let his cock dictate how he thought, how he felt. He looked away, his lips firming, blocking off his lustful thoughts.

The door opened. He hadn't even realized she was on the way but he knew without turning that she'd entered the room. He moved aside and Kristen and Chase came in. The door closed with a quiet click.

"She didn't know," said Chase. "They captured her and planted a compulsion while she was unconscious."

Silence fell as they absorbed the information but Ricardo knew, by Johann's short nod, that they accepted Chase's word. Kristen was as much a victim of Bennett as anyone else in the room.

"Why keep her for two months?" Ricardo wanted to know. "Bennett's ill, he needs that bone marrow as soon as possible."

Chase shrugged. "He took some from Ania. That might have kept him going. Sometimes they have to wait awhile to see if it's taken. And he might have wanted

more than that. Kristen worked for Sandro and Bennett has a grudge against everyone here."

"That goes both fucking ways," Johann growled.

"Yeah." And now Ricardo had two. His capture and Kristen's. Two grudges too many.

Chase shoved a hand in his pocket. "They planted the compulsion about a month before they released her. I could tell because they implanted it deep but they didn't cover their tracks."

"Why didn't you find it earlier?" Ricardo demanded. He longed to go to her just to hold her, but the way Kristen held her chin up and the fierce expression in her eyes warned him not to.

"I wasn't looking for it. I started by searching for bugs and bombs and then that false alarm took us away. I'd have found it on a deeper scan."

"Which is why we were called away." The hospital officials claimed they didn't know anything about any emergency call. They'd begun to assume the media had somehow done it to get a dragon picture or two when they'd heard about Andros' kidnapping.

Chase shook his head. "I thought she'd be safe here. But once she connected with Andros, the compulsion went into action. It ordered her to take Andros out of the building and to somewhere they could take him."

"Andros said he'd been to the bistro before," Kristen said, the first time she'd said anything since she'd stepped into the room. The scent of freshly laid carpet wafted up to Ricardo's nostrils and he knew he'd always associate that smell with this time and this place.

For the rest of his long life, he'd remember the devastation, that he'd let someone down so badly. Because he knew he had to take some of the blame. For not reading her more thoroughly, for not remaining on his guard. For fucking her senseless when he should have been keeping his head and making plans.

And he wanted to do it again, God help him.

"If the bistro hadn't proved suitable, you would have suggested somewhere else," Chase said. "It was all in the compulsion."

"How could I not have noticed?"

If she'd been older, more experienced, she might have known but Ricardo explained it to her. "There'd also be the command to ignore the compulsion. You wouldn't have noticed the intrusion into your mind. We know Bennett's had rogue Talents working for him before. It seems he has a good one."

"A very good one," Chase said. "Perhaps even a Sorcerer. I couldn't get a signature or any kind of a clue who did it, not even the sex of the person who planted the compulsion. It was supposed to disappear after execution, so it had almost gone by the time I found it but I read enough to be sure about what I was seeing."

He put a hand on Kristen's shoulder but she moved a pace farther away. "I also found the compulsion to walk away from the scene. Just keep walking. I get the feeling she'd have been assassinated or retaken. She didn't do that, she remained there until we arrived there. That must have cost her something."

"There's nothing left?" Ricardo wanted to know, needed to know.

"Nothing. I took my time and cleaned it all away. Kristen is entirely under her own control now. I'm sure of it." Chase never made mistakes. They could trust his word on that.

"I want to help you find him. Anything," she said. "I'm sorry, so sorry." She directed her appeal to Johann and Ania. Johann nodded and Ania shrugged. They'd understand, especially if they could get Andros back.

"We scan the area first," Jack said. He didn't take his gaze away from the laptop screen. "If we can find where they've taken him, we can raid it and catch him. We don't need to put anyone in danger."

He felt her exhaustion and his protective instincts kicked in to high gear. "So right now does anybody need us? Kristen needs to get home."

The sharp, unguarded glance she shot him before the shutters went down again gave him a small sense of triumph because they'd connected, however briefly.

Ania's face, always pale, went paler. "You won't leave New York."

Kristen met her gaze with a direct one of her own. "No I won't." Not a hope. "And I'll keep my phone on and my barriers down, so if you call me in, I'll be there."

"I don't care." Ania's fingers resting on Johann's forearms curved into claws. As well it was daytime and she wasn't fully vampire. "I just want Andros back." She shot Kristen a look of pure hate, her blue eyes icy. "It's her fault. She's not even a STORM agent. How do we know this isn't an act, that she's not well trained? She could have fooled you."

Kristen turned away but Ricardo caught her hand in his and tugged her back. She shook off his hand but didn't move any more, just stood with her back to the wall next to the door and stared at them. "It was my fault. I'll do anything to get him back."

Johann's voice sounded as cold as his wife's when he finally spoke. "It's too coincidental. They pick her up, she gets into Ricardo, then he and Chase are called away when they're close to discovering the compulsion."

"How did they do that?" Sandro demanded. "Time it so well?"

Ricardo sighed heavily as the extent of the plan swept through his mind and he realized how they knew. "The paparazzi were perfect cover to observe the comings and goings. They're here for you, Sandro, but maybe one of them is just there to note when we arrive and when we leave."

"So why?" Ania said it but Ricardo knew a couple of the others were working it out for themselves. He told them anyway.

"Bennett planned it from the start. He discovered that Kristen could transmit at the same level as me and he knew she was connected with us through Sandro, so he took her. Then he planted the compulsion in her head. That's why he didn't experiment on her, why he didn't use her the way he usually did with Talents."

He heard Chase's sharp intake of breath. He'd got it too. "He knew Kristen would come here when she escaped and he knew that we had Andros. He wanted Andros for the bone marrow match. Ania lost her use for him since she's turned vampire, but Andros is still a viable donor. Kristen was primed to get Andros away. If we hadn't shown her to him, she would have found him. The compulsion saw to that. If not today, then tomorrow. Kristen was only part of the plan. Now that she's fulfilled her purpose, he'll lose interest in her."

"Or try to get rid of her," Sandro pointed out.

"One more thing." Ann Reynolds' voice, clear and distinctive, came from the doorway. "We have, or had in the past, at least one spy in this building. When we find them, we tend to leave them in place and pass false information but we haven't discovered his or her identity yet. And whoever it was had access to information about the teams, especially this one. We're investigating. It could be any of the admin staff or one of you."

"Fucking perfect." Chase's disgusted remark said it all.

Chapter Ten

Ricardo took Kristen home and refused to let her out of his sight. Chase said he'd removed the compulsion, and although she'd kept her barriers rigidly up, Chase hadn't. Ricardo picked up his hesitation, the way he held back. If he didn't know Chase so well, he'd have missed it.

He'd hurt her. They'd implanted the compulsion with barbs and Chase had dug it out regardless. And then gone hunting for more.

"You need rest," he told her. They stopped at a grocery store for supplies. It galled him that Sandro had discovered just how basic he'd been living. When Sandro moved to Washington, he'd taken most of the furniture with him. Ricardo had replaced it with impersonal, expensive things that made the most of the apartment's minimalism, but nothing of his own personality. A far cry from the TriBeCa apartment that he'd crammed with items that took his fancy, or appealed to his artistic side. The side Bennett had killed stone dead.

He tried not to mourn the sensitive man Bennett had destroyed but sometimes he caught Sandro watching him with a wariness he'd never known in his brother before.

On the whole, his new life made him content, and when he saw justice done, more than content, but sometimes he'd wake up in the middle of the night reaching for the paper and pencil he used to keep next to his bed, only to find they weren't there. Old habits, he assured himself. But they hadn't died yet.

Now he let them into the apartment and strode into the kitchen to stow the food away. The refrigerator definitely looked better for a head of lettuce, tomatoes, eggs and the stuff that should have been there all along. Maybe he'd cook something instead of just knocking a salad together and slapping a steak on the grill. Tomorrow.

He shoved the container with the Cephalox to the back of the shelf. She wouldn't need a dose until the morning, so they could forget that, at least for tonight.

When he slammed the door closed and turned, she was waiting for him. "I should have known." With her arms folded across her body in the classic defense pose, he didn't have to read her mind to know her uncertainty. And to know that she hated uncertainties.

"I should have realized something was wrong. When Andros told me he had to stay in the building, I ignored it. I knew he was anxious to leave for a while and I thought it was because he was bored or he wanted a chance to be more normal."

Ricardo grimaced. "The compulsion planted that. Someone good set it, someone who knew what they were doing. And they knew you too. For two months they'd watched you, understood you."

She glanced away and he knew she'd blinked a tear away. His heart ached. She refused to show any weakness, even to him. He had to admit that hurt. He was doing his best to trust her but she only let him in as far as she had to. "It was stupid. I shouldn't have done it."

He took a step toward her, heartened when she didn't back away. "In your right mind you wouldn't have done it, you know that. We should have watched you better, Chase should have scanned you more thoroughly and I shouldn't have left you. We're all to blame. Right now, Ania isn't thinking straight and because she isn't, neither is Johann. They're a bonded pair."

She glanced up at him, startled.

He gave a wry smile. "It's recent, so they're still getting used to it."

"If I were them, I'd say the same things. I let them down. I let myself down."

He reached out and, despite her resistance, dragged her close. "Is this the first time this kind of thing has happened to you?"

She shrugged. Under his hands, she felt suddenly frail and thin. A few days out of captivity and she had to face this. She should be resting, eating and building up her strength. When she tried to pull away, he wouldn't let her. "How old are you, Kristen?"

She lifted her chin and stared at his face, her eyes meeting his in a startled jolt. "Why?"

"Does Sandro know your age?"

"Only the one on my passport." Before Talents came out into the open, the government agencies helped them to build new identities when they aged too much to pass as a mortal. So it could have been her third passport, her fifth birth certificate. Only Ricardo knew deep down that it wasn't. "How old does that say you are?"

She swallowed. "Thirty-four."

"And you've never had to move on to a new life, have you?"

He saw her surrender and triumph surged through his veins. At last something personal, something *more*. She lowered her gaze. He'd never seen her abashed before and it stroked something inside him. If he were a cat shifter like Jack, he'd have purred to gain even this little bit of her trust.

So young. So inexperienced. So dear.

Too dear. "We all have to start somewhere." He stroked her cheek. "Look at me, honey."

He startled her with the endearment and felt her flinch. Good. He was getting somewhere. She lifted her gaze to meet his eyes again and he smiled. "You'll never know what it's like to tear up your roots, to begin again somewhere you've never been before. Homesickness is an illness, so eventually you learn not to let the roots go too deep, then it doesn't hurt as much next time. I'm older than you, you know that. Sandro is much older still. He'd have died of natural causes if he hadn't bonded with Megan.

Thanks to him and the people who tired of denying what we were, what we are, you never have to know that."

"Did you ever have a wife?" Her voice sounded different, smoky.

Smiling, he shook his head. "No. Sandro had a wife, but it ended badly. Then she died. Now he has Megan." He'd tell her just how badly another time. Sandro's mortal wife had been unable to accept his other form. When their daughter had shown signs of changing after puberty, his wife had killed her, then committed suicide.

That was why he'd never gotten involved again until Megan burst into his life and why Ricardo had decided it wasn't worth the agony. Sandro had tried to be half the being he was for Jane's sake and she'd hurt him more than he let Ricardo know.

Now they could start again. Never have to hide anything. He stared at the woman in his arms. She'd never have to move on if she didn't want to. And suddenly it made sense, this coming out, revealing who they were and what they could do.

When she pulled back, she stared at him, her lovely eyes full of pain. "So I start my one and only life by making a mistake I might never forgive myself for. I have to find him."

"We have to find him."

She shook her head. "I want in on it."

He paused, and that was all it took. Her lip curled. "You don't trust me, do you? I don't blame you. I don't trust myself. Who knows what they put in there? Great." She sank her forehead onto his chest. Ricardo felt absurdly protective, considering that in her dragon form she'd be as powerful as he was. Then she looked up again, an appeal he couldn't resist in her eyes. "Make me forget, Ricardo. Just for an hour. Fuck my brains out."

He hated that phrase but not the sentiment behind it. "I'll fuck you exhausted. How about that?"

At last, a smile broke out, but it was of the calculated kind. She'd locked herself away again. Shit, he should have persisted but he felt her barriers weaken with weariness. She needed sleep.

And he needed to fuck her. She brought him a kind of satisfaction, made it possible for him to sleep. After years of broken nights, already he felt some of the tension that habitually racked his body easing.

So he went with it and lifted her onto the nearest surface, which happened to be the counter between the kitchen and the main living area. It had a shutter he could lower if he wanted to but he rarely bothered. He could see past her into the extravagantly large space he'd never made his own and for the first time he could see color there. Future color from items he hadn't yet bought.

She'd brought that to him. Now he concentrated on her. He leaned forward to kiss her mouth but she moved back and leaned her hands on the counter so his lips hovered over her breasts. Okay, as a substitute, they were pretty much acceptable for now. He

curved his hands around her waist, savored the curves, smoothed her skin before pushing the t-shirt up to bare her breasts, nestled in a small white lace bra.

She sat up and lifted her arms so he could take it off her. He unclipped her bra on the way back down, drawing her close, but she moved back again, leaning on her hands, and she smiled at him.

A seductive smile, nothing else, but for now it would do. But he decided he wanted more from her smiles. Warmth, friendship, understanding. A novel experience, doing the chasing, wanting more intimacy.

The scent of aroused woman rose to tease him when he let a little of his dragon free. His mouth watered when he thought of her taste and the way she felt under his tongue. The enhanced senses made him appreciate her more. He rarely brought his dragon out when he fucked a woman. It made the experience too intense. But now he wanted it. Wanted it badly.

Kristen stared down at him through half-closed eyes. Ricardo was entirely absorbed in studying her breasts, his dark eyes caressing them hotly. He brought his hand up to cover one, palm it, then take her nipple between one long thumb and forefinger to twist and tease.

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, sucking in a breath. He did that so well. He said he'd been an artist once, but to her mind, he still was working her as if he was shaping a lump of lifeless clay.

It felt so good. His fingers warmed her right to the chill in the depth of her being, never before touched by anyone. She kept her barriers up but he came the nearest to tempting her. After spending so long in captivity, she wasn't sure she could do it.

He opened one large hand, spreading it over her stomach before he undid the button at the top of her pants and slid the zipper down. She felt his warmth seep right through her and she sighed in sheer pleasure.

Ricardo could make her forget everything. Almost everything. She concentrated on the moment, keeping it close, blocking out everything else.

He curved one hand around her hip and lowered his head to kiss around her navel, flicking out his tongue to touch her skin, making her quiver. Her world shrank to anticipation, wondering where he'd kiss her next, what part of her he'd lick or if he'd touch her other breast.

She hardly noticed when he dragged her pants down, taking her panties with them. She'd tied the laces of her sneakers loosely, so they came off too. When he returned to touch and lick, she grabbed his t-shirt and pulled, not caring if she tore it off him or he pulled it off. She enjoyed the view when he reared back to tug at the offending garment, his biceps flexing nicely as he took the t-shirt off and tossed it away.

He rose and rubbed his cheek against her stomach, the stubble from half a day's growth scratching her skin, providing another texture to torture her with.

She wriggled and he laughed. She loved his laugh, deep and full-bodied as if he hadn't a care in the world. She envied his ability to live in the moment. She wanted it so badly but she'd never managed to achieve it. Perhaps she could learn from him. God knew she'd learned everything else for herself.

He released her breast and stood, stroking her like she was a cat, over her breast, her stomach, down to her pussy and then did it again, always from the top as if she had fur that needed stroking in only one direction. She reached for him, settled her hands on his broad shoulders and he leaned over her, his eyes intent, willing her to stay still so he could kiss her.

At the last moment, she moved her face to one side and he kissed her cheek. She couldn't give in to that, not his kiss. The ultimate surrender. Without kissing, she could kid herself that this was just sex, just two adults amusing themselves with a fuck.

Except she feared it might be too late already. That had always saved her before, the refusal to kiss on the mouth. That way it was two bodies taking their amusement from each other and nothing more.

But she'd know Ricardo's touch in the dark. She'd know him anywhere. It was probably too late to withhold her kiss.

Right now he was nibbling his way down her neck, licking the pulse point at the base, sending her squirming against him, desperate to feel his body against hers, inside hers. But he took his own sweet time.

Then he entered her mind sweetly, gently but with a finality that she had to accept. He wanted and he took. His charm usually hid his ruthlessness, but not this time. Now he wanted and her refusal to kiss him had driven him higher. She read his determination to punish her for that and she smiled. He made her smile.

She felt his triumph but she sensed he'd muted it. Didn't want to make her feel useless or subdued. He just wanted her surrender. Total surrender. But if she did that, what would he do? Take her, make her *his woman*? She'd always fought against that, feared that for so long she could hardly remember why.

She was herself and despite the wicked way he teased her, she'd remain so.

When she squirmed, eager to feel his skin against hers, the moisture gathering in her pussy wet the top of her thighs. It slid against her, her clit nudging her labia with each move, sending thrills through her body.

She moved some more but he laughed and gripped her wrists in his, not hard enough to bruise but enough to attract her attention. Especially since that meant an end to the delicious stroking.

"Don't move," he breathed, and for a second she thought he'd try for another kiss. But he didn't. He knew when to push and he must know she didn't want to feel defeated right now. Only dominated, something else entirely because that implied that she was allowing it. As she was.

His jeans rubbed against her legs and she flinched, but he drew back and tugged at them. She watched as he shucked his jeans and underwear, the soft black fabric looking good against his tanned skin. He paused and smiled at her. "Like what you see?"

"Oh yeah. I'd like it better if you came back." She leaned back and slowly but deliberately opened her legs wide.

His gaze turned hungry and he leaned over her again but didn't touch her, instead planting his palms on either side of her body, caging her in.

"So what do you plan to do now?" she drawled.

"What do you think?"

His cock nudged her clit and she gasped. His smile broadened. "You feel wet."

"Very."

His fingers pushed past his cock, ran the length of her slit and he brought his hand up to his nose, where he inhaled luxuriously, then licked his fingers slowly. "I could pick you out by the scent and taste of you. Blindfolded."

In the dark.

He bent to kiss her, caught her cheek, lingered to lick and nibble at her ear. His cock moved slowly down her crease toward her opening. Too slow. Impatience seized her. She wanted him in her now, deep, hard, fucking her senseless.

His warmth drove the nightmares away but when he took his time, she started to wander again, her mind leading her down paths she didn't want to take.

She hooked her legs around his thighs, opening herself up farther, dragging him closer. She snagged his gaze when he pulled back to stare at her. "I want you. Now. Fuck me, Ricardo."

"Best thing I've heard all year," he murmured as he finally gave in and took her.

He didn't stop. His cock breached her body and kept going, driving in hard until his balls hit her ass and he was fully embedded inside her.

She felt full. She felt wanted. Both were exactly what she needed right now, so she curled her arms around his neck and reeled him in.

"Like that?" He pulled out and drove in, taking his time, sliding in hard. He kept moving like a dance, where to stop is to die, moving out and in with smooth, defined movements. He watched her, made no attempt to kiss her and she let her head fall back.

He urged her farther back so she rested on the countertop, the polished granite surface chill and smooth against her back. He'd sensitized her so thoroughly he made her feel every touch as a revelation, made it add to what he was giving her.

She clenched her buttocks and pushed up, opening so he could drive in completely. At this angle, he hit her sweet spot every time, pulling nearly out and then thrusting back in, grazing her G-spot with every stroke.

Everything drove her higher, the fast-warming smooth granite under her back, his hands, one supporting his weight but touching her waist, the other cupping her breast and tugging at her nipple.

She wanted a kiss. She wanted to kiss him. But he gazed at her as if he couldn't read the mental message she sent him. She sent again. He smiled. "No, precious, not now. You've made it a prize. I want to earn it. Really — earn — it." With each word, he stroked her until she arched her back and moaned his name.

That was where Talents gained when they fucked. They could feel the other's reactions and they could respond accordingly. Or not, she thought when she remembered the kiss that wasn't. A moment of madness.

Just like this one.

Her whole body sensitized like a pot on the stove coming to the boil, he pushed, watched, tweaked, and she surged up and over.

Crying his name, she ground her pussy against him, "Ricardo, please, please, fuck me rigid, fuck me limp, just fucking fuck me."

He laughed but she heard and felt no schadenfreude there, no enjoyment of her suffering. Nothing but pleasure.

And then he stilled deep within her and pulsed, shooting his semen deep inside her. She felt the spurts, felt the wetness seep between them and trickle down her legs. Her own juices had made her so wet she couldn't contain all he gave her.

When she half opened her eyes, her body still fluttering in reaction to her one powerful orgasm, she saw his dragon.

He hadn't shape-shifted but she saw the red flames in his eyes flickering in triumph and felt the beast within him, saw it stir like a figure, blurring the aura purple and blue.

The corner of his mouth quirked in a smile and the aura faded, leaving red embers glowing in his eyes, the only external reminder of what he was and what he could do.

She sagged against the counter, all her resistance and her energy gone. Surrender.

But he didn't crow, he didn't show any triumph of the victor over his spoils. Tenderness entered his gaze and he drew closer to touch his lips to her forehead and press his hot body against hers. Her breasts mashed against his chest and his rough body hair grazed her skin.

He lifted her. She loved the way his muscles rippled. She enjoyed the sight of his upper arms tensing and bulging, his taut stomach tightening.

She let him take her upstairs. It was either that or sleep on the counter.

He took her to the bathroom, his steps smooth and easy as if she weighed nothing. She loved the feeling of helplessness because she knew it was temporary and she could trust him to take care of her. Trust him.

A strange concept for someone who'd never trusted anyone since she'd hit puberty. And she'd hit it running.

He thumped a button on the panel just inside the bathroom door and the tub began to fill. "Nice to be rich," she said.

He turned a bland smile on to her. "It is, isn't it? If you live for over a hundred years without amassing a fair amount of money, you're either past caring about material possessions or you're doing it wrong."

"And I'm thirty-four."

"You don't have any family money?"

"I don't have any family."

He walked over to the tub and rested his foot on the broad step. The bath was half-sunken and surrounded by a foot-wide platform. More conspicuous waste of space in this expensive real estate area.

"Nice place you have here, Mr. Gianetti."

"Isn't it?" His bland smile didn't fool her. "I bought it off Sandro when he moved to Washington." He stepped into the tub, which had filled with a rapidity she could only wish for in her pleasant but modest apartment in Washington. "I wanted a change."

His captivity. She wasn't an idiot. She knew that Ann Reynolds hoped that their shared experience would get more out of her. The reason for that had died when they'd taken Andros. She had no place anymore.

He sat down, settling them in the hot water, placing her across his lap. She leaned her head on his shoulder. The best pillow ever. But when he turned his head and his lips moved too close to hers, she moved away. And then half wished she hadn't.

Irritation washed through Ricardo, killing his mood. "It isn't as if we haven't done a lot more than kiss. What can it hurt?"

"I—I just avoid it."

He ignored her uncharacteristic hesitation and lifted her off his lap to get to his feet and step out of the water. He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist, striding away to enter his bedroom.

When he heard the whoosh of water, he knew she'd climbed out of the bath but he refused to close the door on her, thus revealing how annoyed she made him. And frustrated too. He concentrated on drying himself.

He felt her enter, so attuned to her by now that he could tell where she was without conscious contact. He took his time turning to face her, holding the towel in his hand and letting it fall over his semi-erect penis.

The sight of her brought him to full attention. Her nudity, smooth, pale skin with that patch of neatly trimmed hair over her pussy, revealing glimpses of the glories behind it, made his mouth go dry. Even now.

She put up her chin. "I let you in as far as I want to. If I want to fuck and you're willing, then that's what we do. Nothing else. Clear?"

"As much as it is from my side too. And if I want to kiss you, I'll keep trying. What are you afraid of, Kristen? Why won't you let me in?"

There it was, out in the open. His frustration with her and his annoyance. At totally the wrong time. He'd didn't care to change his mind now.

"What, I'm captured, forced to keep everything blocked, mind-raped and you want me to open up?" She moved forward until she stood a few inches away from him and then she poked his chest. "You want everything your way, Ricardo Gianetti, and you can't bear a woman who stands up to you."

He stared at her finger. Below that, his cock reared, straining to reach her. "Don't do that."

"Why not?" She shoved her finger at him again, then lifted it to wave in front of his face.

He hated that. Hated the sensation, hated the schoolmarm-y action. "Do you know how—how *pinched* you look?" Words failed him, and he feared that if he lapsed into Italian the words would come too freely, so he opened his mind and released a torrent of frustrated annoyance. He grabbed her upper arms, his fingers digging in to the pale skin.

Instead of backing off, she met him with a furious response of her own. Still keeping most of her mind closed, she sent him a stream. *You don't dictate to me how I feel, what I want! Back off, Ricardo!*

Like fuck he would. He wanted this too much. She'd reached deep inside him and he wanted more, wanted to know if they had anything more than this temporary situation, forced under the same roof, being casual fuck buddies.

Nobody had touched him like this but somehow she'd slipped effortlessly through all his defenses. And if she walked away without giving them a chance, neither of them would ever know if they could enhance each other's life just by being part of it. A waste, and Ricardo abhorred waste.

So when she tried to pull away, he refused to let her, drawing her closer instead until his cock kissed her stomach. He tried to ignore his arousal, this wasn't about that, he told himself, but it heated him to hold her like this, made him burn for her. So soon after having her, he wanted her again.

He shoved back his fear. Since his captivity, he'd been aware of a dark side to his nature, one he didn't want to release. He'd kept it back at the expense of a few other parts of his nature, mostly the creativity part because it seemed to feed off it. Now he stared at this woman who'd roused him, awoken the part he wanted to deny, and he saw pure sex.

She stared at him through narrowed eyes. "Let me go."

"Why?"

He smelled her arousal, fresh and spicy after their short bath, and he sensed the excitement in her mind behind the anger that blended with it.

"Because I say so." She gave him a shove and he let himself fall, knowing that sometimes in combat the most unexpected move won. He fell back onto the bed that he knew lay just behind him but he didn't let go of her. She fell on top of him.

Now her stomach curved around his cock, tempting rather than soothing. When he moved, he felt the bead of liquid seeping from the opening slide between them. He moved some more, savoring the sensation.

Her nipples budded, the darker skin around them still velvet soft. He pulled her down and took one into his mouth.

"Stop that!" She jerked back but although he lost her breast, he gained when his penis jutted farther into her skin. He groaned.

"You're not supposed to be getting turned-on!" She dragged her arm free—that must have hurt her. A spike of regret colored the red passion sparking through him but she didn't let him apologize. "Fight, damn you!"

When he surged up, intent on capturing her again, she eluded him, ducking under his reaching arms and pulling to one side.

Then it hit him. Or rather she did. He didn't have to be gentle with this woman. She was highly trained in combat, her job made sure of it, and as long as he didn't let his dragon out, she could give him as good as she got. Especially if he riled her. So when he swung at her he knew she'd elude him, didn't know she'd get a jab into his stomach.

He rolled over her and she continued the momentum so they ended up on the other side of the bed, him under her. She hit out at him while he held her waist, his fingers almost meeting. But she didn't hit like a heavyweight.

He recognized the professional beneath the pure fury that consumed her, the way she kept her body balanced, the way she struck and then shielded herself, waiting for payback.

She'd get none from him.

She struck him, punched, hit out and then leaned back. His cock slid down between her thighs, nestling intimately just below her pussy.

Agony. So close. Anyone would think he'd not had sex for six months, he yearned for it so much. But only from this woman.

He slid his cock up, so easy because of the juices pouring from her and his response, the fluid seeping from his cock desperately trying to ease his way.

And still she hit him, striking out blindly, her skill still evident but only because of the innate training she'd absorbed. The fury took her, forcing her to defend and strike, destroy what ached inside.

He wanted in. Whatever she did to him, even if she killed him, he wanted her. Wanted to take his last breath with his body inside hers, wanted to be a part of her.

Ignoring the blows she rained on him, he slid down until his cock slipped between her legs into the haven of dampness and heat that awaited him.

A pause. He opened his eyes and stared up at her, letting his gaze show what he wanted, what he needed. As far as he was concerned, all that mattered lay in this bed right here, right now. He'd run too long. Time for him to face whatever this was and take it in.

"So kill me," he said. "C'mon, baby, you can do better than that. Dragon, bodyguard? More like butterfly flirt."

He watched fury light her eyes into blue fire, loving her response but externally showing her nothing except raw sex. She needed it but right now, he needed it more. He smiled, letting the expression come out, long and lazy. "You backing out? You think I won't hold you, tell everyone what scares you, what you need to get off?"

She hit him again and he groaned, the dull pain adding to his arousal. Why had he denied this for so long? Torture but so good.

Her next blow hurt, sharp pain radiating through him. He was sure she'd cracked a rib. He reveled in the pain, refusing to let his mind control him, to tell him what he already knew – this was wrong, it was perverted, twisted. All that, but he couldn't stop the wild excitement ripping through him, working him so hard.

The pain made him feel alive, not a number, not a thing, but a person with his own needs and desires.

Right now, he craved this.

Her hands hooked into claws and she went for him, eyes wild, not sentient any longer, but he saw the same excitement he felt, sensed it coursing through her. She raked down his side, her nails gouging trails, leaving bloody proof of their presence. The stinging trail sent rejoicing through his mind. He was alive. He could feel. He *mattered*.

She struck at his face and he held his hands up in token resistance but he kept his mind open, showing her what she did to him if she chose to read it. She did. He felt the warmth of her mind sweeping his, feeling him, and his rising exhilaration drove her to hit out more, attack him, going for his skin, marking, scratching, bruising.

He let it happen, let her anger drive his arousal thrusting up into her, making them as close as two people could be, taking care to touch every part of her inside. Therefore he'd give her this and, in giving, let his own dark nature take over and show him what he needed, what he wanted so badly.

Although he'd never known it before. Every scratch, every blow drove him higher. With every shot of pain came a shot of arousal pushing him higher. The woman riding him was so alive, her eyes blue flames, her body writhing, working his cock to a level he hadn't known existed, even for Talents.

He came in a long, explosive blast of emotion and pure sensation. Now it meant everything. Tomorrow, yesterday, the assignment meant nothing compared to this. Nothing had meaning.

He thought he'd never stop coming, his essence the meaning of what he was, jetting in convulsive spurts deep inside his lover's body. And she came, her cunt spasming around him, soft, wet, muscular. Irresistible.

Ricardo dragged her into his arms, felt her tears damp on his chest and decided he'd never let go. Ever. She'd shown him something he'd locked away almost without realizing it, made him face his fears and go right through them. Ignoring the pain from his cracked rib, he held her close, felt her sobs, stroked her hair. And fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, the first for years.

Chapter Eleven

What had happened here? Total bewilderment fuddled Kristen's mind when she awoke. Ricardo lay next to her, his face almost buried in the pillow, his hair gleaming in the faint light of the stars glimmering through the window. Starlight against the night sky. She'd like to see his hair longer but she wouldn't be around long enough.

Sorrow speared through her. Then the light brightened or her eyes grew used to the dimness and she saw other things. The bruises on his skin, the long scored scratches on his back and his arms and the line of blood at the corner of his mouth.

She'd done that, hurt him, maybe broke a bone or at least cracked a rib.

Holding her breath, she slid out of bed and waited for a moment to see if the change in weight disturbed him at all. She dared to open her mind and touch his to ensure he remained asleep. As soon as she assured herself of that, she withdrew, because she sensed him stirring, responding to her.

She found clothes in the guest room and dressed hurriedly in jeans and a shirt she recognized from her Washington days. Sandro must have had someone pack for her. Did he think she'd be staying here for a while?

Maybe he didn't want her back. She'd formed a solid part of his team for the last year but all the recent attention she'd garnered could make her ineligible. Fuck. As if she didn't have enough to worry about.

Anxiety snapped at her heels, an emotion she didn't find familiar or easy to cope with. She'd struck out, hit Ricardo, smacked and punched him. She remembered going at him with her fists, punishing him for something he wasn't responsible for.

She couldn't stay here. *Couldn't*. Now that she'd fulfilled the function Bennett had intended for her and lured Andros into their hands, they wouldn't want her anymore. She wouldn't care if they did. It could even be a blessing in disguise. At least Ricardo wouldn't feel responsible for her anymore. Despair made her desperate, colored her thoughts, made her wild.

Grabbing a dark hooded jacket, she headed down the stairs, blessing the newness of the fittings in this apartment so they didn't creak or make a sound when she crept down them. Getting out of this place was easy—she just opened the door, slipped out and pulled it carefully closed behind her. It was getting in that was hard.

Just like that. She'd go somewhere else, put some distance between herself and Ricardo.

Outside she was glad of the jacket. The fall day showed all the crispness of early morning. Dawn was breaking over the city postmen, delivery trucks and the inevitable men with vans passing to and fro on their early morning routines.

She jogged down the street and found herself facing Central Park. She stood about halfway between two entrances. Making a snap decision, she jogged toward the one in the center of the Park, breathing deeply of the best fresh air she'd get in New York. She wished she could shape-shift and fly away, leave everything behind her, become a dragon for a week, two, a month. Anything.

As far as she knew, she'd never lost it like that. Never. And it scared her. She remembered the days when she had to hide her Talent and keep control over her wayward nature and her other form. She thought she'd had enough discipline to retain control over her violence. Her trainers had ensured she had a cap on her temper at all times. So why did she lose it with Ricardo Gianetti? What had he uncovered in her? Or maybe her recent trauma had shifted something deep inside.

She could be going insane.

At one point she'd felt sure of that but life had settled in around her and she'd thought herself well past that. At thirty-four, she had another four hundred and fifty years to look forward to, maybe more, so getting her head in the right mindset was essential.

Maybe she was just stir crazy. At home, she went for a jog every morning before working out in the gym made available to her and her fellow bodyguards. In captivity, she'd kept up her exercises as much as she could. Apart from anything else, it helped pass the time but however much she jogged around that tiny cell, she couldn't get the sight of the dark, dingy walls out of her head.

Now she passed other joggers and people performing tai chi, a few runners and skaters. And felt the freedom, the ability to go where she wanted. Exhilaration filled her momentarily and then a picture flashed in her mind's eye. The sight of Ricardo marked and cut, his body covered with bruises and scratches. He'd only wanted to help her and she'd done that to him.

Raped him. Fought him. She knew male rape was possible, knew an erection could be a physical reaction unwanted by the man sporting it. She'd beaten him, she'd hurt him. Despite his muscular frame, Ricardo had been an artist. Perhaps he couldn't fight effectively. She knew how to make a man's weight count against him.

A shudder passed through her. He'd treated her with respect, fucked her at her request and she'd done that to him. Hadn't even let him kiss her.

She had to get out of here. Away to a place where nobody knew her. How she could do that without money or ID she wasn't sure but STORM was better off without her. Who knew what else she had embedded in her mind? Christ, she didn't know the half of it.

Ricardo's first instinct was to go after her. When she opened the door of the apartment, the silent alarm flashed by his bed. Three times. She went straight out of the building.

Fuck it. Let her go. He couldn't do any more than he'd done already. Tried everything he could and she did this to him. Left without a word, wouldn't trust him, wouldn't even let him kiss her.

He lay in bed for an hour, maybe more, savoring the solitude of his apartment, the peace and taking inventory of his wounds. The cracked rib hurt like a bitch but he pushed the pain away.

After an hour, he shape-shifted and rose to his feet, stretching his wings. He kept his size a little smaller than normal. He'd never mastered the knack of making himself much smaller anyway. It hurt and he had difficulty maintaining it. But he didn't want to fly. He only changed to give his wounds time to heal.

Maybe she'd go to Bennett or maybe she'd just take off. It seemed she'd done all she was meant to. Looking back, he saw how she'd wormed her way into his life, into STORM, just to get close to Andros. And he, poor fool, had let her.

The world's worst idiot. He'd found himself falling for her and he'd let it happen. Right now, he didn't care where she was or what she planned so long as she let him alone.

At eight, the phone rang and Ricardo changed back to human form so he could answer it. He lay back on the bed, feeling strangely dull without the sting and ache of the wounds she'd given him, and picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"It's Sandro. Is Kristen there? I want her to come in to STORM today. I need to know what she's planning to do now."

No sense hiding her absence. "She's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"Why should I fucking care?"

"Wait. I'm coming over."

Sandro arrived in twenty minutes. Ricardo heard the squeal of brakes and allowed himself a small smile. Driving had never been his brother's strongest suit and he always drove cars he couldn't quite handle properly.

Ricardo avoided the high-performance models. Sandro had more than once accused him of missing some of his male chromosomes because he didn't appreciate sports cars. Maybe he was right. He certainly appreciated the occasional male in his bed as well as his more usual female companions.

So he'd just lost one. Perhaps he'd go for the male version next time or approach Johann and Ania again. With Kristen out of his life, they'd listen to him.

Sandro still had a key. Ricardo had never removed his brother's ID from the fingerprint and iris locks outside, so when the outer door opened, he knew who it was.

He'd pulled on jeans and a purple tie-dyed t-shirt with a few paint splatters. Quite surprised to find one of his old ones, he donned it for old time's sake. He thought he'd purged his wardrobe of any reminders. He generally wore more conservative clothes these days.

Sandro smiled up at him as he descended the stairs. "You look almost like your old self."

Ricardo ran his hand over his hair. "Hardly."

"I liked it longer. But that suits you too, in a brutal kind of way."

He shrugged and headed for the kitchen, finding the glass coffee jug. The memory of standing here before, holding another one, came back to him but he suppressed it and filled the jug. It took him a moment to work out the new, snazzier coffeemaker. He hated that. He liked his appliances familiar so he didn't have to think about how to use them.

It had taken him a while to use the stove. He'd planned to use it today to concoct something tasty for himself and Kristen but when he'd lived alone, he hadn't bothered. It seemed too much, just for himself. He'd rather eat out.

With the coffee hissing its way through the filter, he turned back to his brother who was examining the apartment, standing in the middle of the room and turning around slowly. "You don't want to make this place yours? Anyone could live here. My suite at the Timothy has more character than this."

Ricardo shrugged. "It's just a place to sleep."

"One that many people would die to own. In a prestigious part of New York, with museums, shops and the park almost on your doorstep..." He turned and faced Ricardo as he came around the kitchen counter. "Ricardo, I've given you time. But you have to get over this."

"I thought you came to see Kristen. She's not here, by the way."

"I know. I scanned when I came in here. I'm not surprised. She must have been going nuts confined like this. When do you expect her back?"

"I don't."

He confronted Sandro, hands shoved in his pockets, daring him to say something.

Being his brother, Sandro dared, his brows drawn low over his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"She left this morning. She didn't say when or if she'd be back."

"What happened? I felt such a surge from you yesterday, I thought you were moving forward at last and letting someone else into your life. You think I don't know you shut half of yourself off after your captivity?"

Sandro ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture Ricardo knew well, because he used it himself. "I thought you should have time to heal. In any case, at the time I had my own problems."

"Like dying?"

Sandro gave a wry grin. "Yeah. Something like that. But I didn't. I went to Washington instead. Look, I care about all my staff but Kristen was always special. So good at her job, so detached. I know things about her that you don't. I guess I was

waiting for her to tell you. I saw that connection between you, I wasn't imagining anything. So what happened, bro?"

"I gave up. She wouldn't let me in even a little bit. When I penetrated under that fucking outer shield, I thought I was getting somewhere. Then she did what she came to do and now she's gone. Where's the panic?"

"Christ." Sandro raked through his hair again, working it up into a tousled mess. "She didn't do it deliberately, man. Think." He lapsed into Italian, something Sandro did much more easily than Ricardo. But Sandro had spent most of his life elsewhere, in Italy and Scotland, and Italian was always his base language. "*Che cosa state facendo?* You have to get her back, brother mine."

"*Perché?* She's best gone. She can start again, go back to work for you, why should I fucking care?"

"Because you do. Because you want her to fall in love with you as you have with her."

"No!" He spun around, and back to English. Because that was the language he'd used for most of *his* life, and he didn't want Sandro to have any advantage. His brother had a silver tongue when he wanted it. "I don't need this, Sandro."

"But you need her. What did she do to drive you away like this?"

"She hurt me. Okay?"

Sandro's eyes narrowed to glittering slits and Ricardo knew he'd recognized the weakness he'd worked so hard to conceal. "That's it? She forced you to confront something you're ashamed of and you'll let her leave rather than face that. Don't you think that makes you a coward, Ricardo?"

Ricardo leapt across the room, hands up, ready to pummel Sandro into the floor. He'd learned a lot since the old days and he had no doubt he could do it.

But Sandro avoided confrontation, backing off with his hands up and palms open, facing him in the age-old gesture of peace. "Hey, it's not me you want to face, is it? You need to tell her. Accept it as part of what you are and be brave enough to tell her. I only said what I did to make you face it. You love her or you're on the way to it and you know if you do, you'll have to share everything. *Everything.*"

Ricardo lowered his hands, his unthinking fury ebbing away. The truth seared through him and now he felt truly ashamed. He'd let her walk away, knowing he couldn't share, afraid she was getting too close. Fear had let her walk. "I have to find her."

The coffeemaker bubbled, its job done, and more for something to do than for a real desire for coffee, he went to the refrigerator to locate the fresh milk. The light blinked on and glinted off a metal container at the back of the top shelf.

He grabbed it and dragged it out, opening it to reveal six filled syringes. Oh fuck, she hadn't taken her Cephalox. That meant he only had a short time to find her before

she started to detox. Sandro came up behind him and saw what he had in his hand. He reached out and took the box. "This puts you on the clock. When was she due?"

"In about three hours."

"Then you don't have much time."

Chapter Twelve

Ricardo sensed her presence and followed her as far as Central Park before he lost her. She must have closed her mind. The rest of the team was working on locating Andros. Certain that Bennett had closed the lab in the Village as soon as he'd let it fulfill its purpose—to hold Kristen—they concentrated on psychic traces, electronic scanning and sheer logic.

Ricardo sent his regrets but he kept the communication channel open so they could call him if they needed him. He only wished Kristen had done the same but when he reached for her, he felt nothing. A blank where he expected her to be. Telepathy only worked for him at short range but he refused to believe she'd left the area. Not until he'd scanned and scanned again.

Once detox set in, her system would go haywire. He wanted to find her before that. But he'd scoured the park, walked up and down the Upper West Side, done a complete circuit and worn himself down to a stub.

It hurt to keep his senses open. He picked up everything, all mental communications, and the park today was filled with people with problems. A man running the circuit whose doctor had just diagnosed cancer—how would he tell his wife and children? The anguish of a young woman unceremoniously dumped by the man who had said he loved her—should she tell his wife? Did she care? A child desperately searching for a lost dog. Their concerns touched him, and as fast as he blocked them to concentrate on finding Kristen, more came.

It made him understand how terrible it could be to be a Sorcerer. They were born without the natural barrier other Talents and mortals built shortly after birth and they had to learn to erect artificial shields against the world that battered them from all sides with unwanted hopes and dreams. That was why Sorcerer children were usually brought up in isolation, until they had learned to control their Talents.

To feel this every day, to know and not have the ability to help or ignore, would drive Ricardo insane. He knew the madness that came from isolation, the fear Kristen would feel but not its opposite, feeling too much. He wasn't sure which was worse but knew both could drive a Talent to utter despair.

He stretched his senses, walked the perimeter of the park once more trying to pick something up but he got nothing. He'd have to widen his circle. Go back to his apartment for the car he kept in the underground garage.

He decided to cross the park instead of going around it. Taking to wings would only incite excitement and disturb the atmosphere. He could fuzz, he supposed, but if he found her he'd have to shape-shift and he'd be naked. He pinched the bridge of his

nose, close to exhaustion. God, he had no idea what to do. Operation or not, he'd have to call on Chase.

He passed Strawberry Fields, the area dedicated to John Lennon, and spared him a thought, as he always did. He'd loved the music, loved the man and every time he passed the memorial, it reminded him of what mortals could do.

To conserve his psi senses, he took out his cell phone, pausing by one of the wooden chairs that dotted the area. He stood near the center of the park now.

As he hit speed dial, he felt something. Faint but unmistakable. It chimed with the psi signature he was looking for like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle slotting into place.

She *was* here. Somewhere.

Dropping his phone back in his pocket, he locked on to the trace, anchoring it in his memory before he stepped over the grass, taking a direct line to the trace. It cut off abruptly, but he had the direction now. She couldn't hide much longer. Dusk was misting the park in soft dimness by now and he needed to find her. She must be desperate. He certainly felt that way.

But he wouldn't give up now. His feet ached, his heart hurt and he wanted her. The trail led him toward the Jacqueline Kennedy reservoir. But before he reached it, he stopped and lifted his head, sensing the air.

He let out his dragon. Not enough to effect a shape-shift, but enough to let the enhanced senses, the night vision and his better sense of smell break free. And he scented her. That mixture of spices and apples that was uniquely Kristen. His cock twitched in automatic reaction. He'd found her.

Unfortunately so had a couple of cops. They stood under the little bridge, stooping over a huddled bundle. "We'll have to take you in," one said.

The tall one turned as Ricardo approached. Shit, he didn't have his credentials as a STORM agent. He could have taken her from them. He'd have to use good old-fashioned persuasion. While compulsion was illegal in Talented society, persuasion wasn't. He could do that. When he smelled vomit, his heart sank. She'd started cold turkey.

The last time he'd worn these jeans he'd visited the library, researching old newspapers for a project long fallen by the wayside. Long time. But his laminated library card was still there and he retrieved it and prepared to bluff and fuzz.

The tall one turned out to be an African-American female, her eyes gleaming with intelligence. Shame. He'd have preferred a stupid cop but there weren't too many of those around these days. Many of them had college degrees. The other shorter one was a stocky man, standing foursquare in front of his quarry.

Ricardo gave them an easy smile. "Female, early thirties, Caucasian?" he said and flashed his card. "Ricardo Gianetti from STORM. I've been looking for this one."

The woman tilted her chin up. "How do you know what this is?"

He raised a brow and met her stare directly. "I can sense her."

The male cop curled his lip. "Like a dog?"

He met the gaze and waited a beat before he replied. "Or a dragon."

The man's eyes widened and he used the opportunity to step forward. He could see her now. Kristen lay on the ground curled up into a ball, shivering uncontrollably. She wore a hooded top but he didn't need to see her face to know her. He bent and picked her up. "She had a traumatic experience, that's why she's in that state."

Kristen whimpered and huddled into him. His heart ached to see her in such a state. The cold had seeped through all her clothes. She needed a hot bath and then bed before the chill made her withdrawal worse. And he had to get these bozos off the case but they could cause trouble if he didn't take it carefully. They had enough to cope with without New York's finest on his back.

He cradled her closely but he could tell the instant she realized he had her. She stiffened and then he felt her hands against his chest, pushing. He hated to do it but he crushed her close, killing her protest.

"She's not on drugs and she's not doing anything illegal." Yet anyway. With all his psi senses, he pushed the persuasion on the cops, together with a reminder that they had a busy night ahead of them. They'd only just come on duty, he learned from the woman.

The man pushed aside his cap and scratched his head. "Yeah well, if you're from STORM, I guess it's okay."

The woman sighed. "Don't let her out in this state again. Is it something to do with—what she is?"

Ricardo glanced down at the small pinched face. "Her Talent. Yes it is. And what someone did to her once."

He took off before they could ask anything else. Now that he'd found her, weariness beat at him but the cops weren't the only ones with a long night ahead of them. He'd lived a thousand nightmares while he'd searched for her. Never ever again. If she wanted to leave him, he'd have to let her go, but not like this.

He ignored the curious passersby on his way to his apartment, no longer concerned what they thought. Only concerned with the woman shivering in his arms. He kept in the part of the mind she'd already allowed, monitoring her progress. A small hand grabbed the front of his t-shirt and he stopped to stare down at her. "No more," she said and projected to him.

A picture of the syringe he had in the refrigerator. "Baby, you need it." He couldn't bear for her to suffer like this. Like he'd suffered.

"No." The firm denial tore him apart.

"Let me get you home."

Another word left her lips. "Home." Warmth spread through him, warmth from her.

He'd never let her down again, never drive her away. He owed her the truth about himself so she could make her own decision. If she rejected him, then so be it.

If he could get her through the next twenty-four hours.

Back at the apartment, he ran her a hot bath and climbed in with her to hold her. By now, her shivering had grown uncontrollable and he feared they'd send her into convulsions. He needed help but he didn't want to call on his colleagues. Since Ann's announcement about the spy, the only person he trusted completely was Sandro and he didn't want to risk all by showing them Kristen at her most vulnerable.

But withdrawal could kill her. So after he lifted her out of the bath, patted her dry, and tucked her between the sheets of his bed, he gave Dr. Kouriakis a call. She answered on the third ring. "It's about Kristen Turner. She's gone into withdrawal," he said. "She doesn't want to take any more Cephalox."

The doctor sighed. "It's probably too late anyway. A normal dose or one of the reduced ones I gave you won't make much difference to her now and her body would probably reject it. This is dangerous, Ricardo. How did you let this happen?"

"Does it matter?" He was still coming to terms with what he did to her, how he'd pushed her away and made her ashamed of what she'd done.

"I guess not. As long as it's her choice and not something you've forced on her."

"I didn't want this," he said. "I wanted her to finish the course."

"Has she vomited?"

"Copiously. An hour ago, maybe two." He'd smelled fresh vomit under that bridge, so it couldn't be that much older.

"Then she's reached the rejection stage. It's definitely too late. Destroy the syringes I left for you."

He didn't like that response. "She'll crave them?"

"No, but if she's confused, she might take them and that could be dangerous. Smash them. And stay with her. Give her water, nothing else for at least twenty-four hours. She might bring that up too. Her body is busy rejecting everything that it's offered, except for water. So if you want her to become allergic to any foodstuff, now's the time."

"I'll take care. When can I feed her again?"

"When she says she's ready."

That made sense. He couldn't remember that part from his own experience, only suffering and then the weakness that followed. That didn't last long, thank God, because he might have to mobilize and move her somewhere safer.

He took nothing for granted. After he hung up the phone, he packed a bag in case they had to leave at a moment's notice. Then he called Sandro and told him what happened after making him swear silence. "You can trust your team," Sandro told him.

"I'd rather not. Johann and Ania don't like or trust Kristen and I don't want her bothered right now."

Sandro sighed. "They'll cope. They have to know Kristen didn't do it deliberately."

"I don't know. Ania will do anything for her brother. I don't doubt she'd kill for him." He ran his hand through his hair, or rather over it.

"Okay." Sandro sounded reluctant but he gave his promise anyway.

"Keep me in the loop about Bennett as far as you can."

"I'm telling Ann Reynolds." It had been too much to hope for that Sandro wouldn't tell Ann. They had a friendship that went back many years. But Ann knew how to keep her own counsel if it didn't harm STORM. And this wouldn't.

"I know. I thought you might. So is there any progress in locating Andros?"

A pause. "No."

The thought that his brother was keeping something from him gave Ricardo a second of concern but he knew better than that. Sandro never kept the truth from Ricardo, brutal or otherwise. "Nothing?"

"They're taking a methodical approach, scanning the city and then moving outside. They are formulating a plan."

That was the reason for the pause. "And that includes Kristen, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"She'll do anything, you know that, but I don't want her to do it if it hurts her." If necessary, Ricardo would fight for Kristen. He knew that without doubt.

A soft chuckle. "You sound like a man in love. Trust me on that as one who knows."

"I'm just feeling guilty." Sandro probably knew that for a lie but Ricardo needed to think. Sandro's assertion came as a shock, but one that chimed with something deep inside him. Ricardo cut the connection, still thinking about his brother's last words. He had no idea if he loved her or what it should feel like. He'd never considered it and had decided a long time ago that a long-term relationship wasn't for him.

Now he found himself making a space for Kristen next to him. He couldn't have imagined it before but now it seemed like the only course. It wasn't guilt or concern that moved him. It was need.

Chapter Thirteen

Kristen struggled into full consciousness, aware of the cool sheet under her body, the light covering over her and the sense of Ricardo nearby. At first it felt soothing and right but as intelligence returned, she sat bolt upright, aware she had fucked up royally.

She remembered him holding her while she threw up, bathing her when she shivered. He let her howl in pain when convulsions racked her, holding his mind in hers, supporting her, sharing as much of her pain as he could. He'd never left her for however long it had taken.

"Hey." He stood clear across the room, cradling a steaming cup of coffee. The scent made her mouth water.

She opened her mouth. "Hi. Ricardo, I don't know what to say..."

"Try nothing." He strolled across the room and sat on the edge of the wide bed. "I didn't exactly make things easy for you, did I? If we start apologizing to each other, we'll never stop."

She gave a shaky laugh. "What time is it? What *day* is it?"

"Saturday. You missed yesterday and the day before. That was when you left."

She licked her dry lips. "It feels like months."

"Only days. Would you like a drink?"

She eyed the coffee avariciously but he laughed and placed the cup down on the bedside table, picking up a jug of iced water. The ice clinked as he poured some into a tall glass. He turned to her and she lifted herself up on one elbow, horrified to discover she could hardly move. Everything ached.

He put the glass down and moved to the head of the bed so he could hold her against him while she drank. He would have held the glass for her but she took it from him, wanting to do something for herself. She'd never tasted water so delicious before. He took it away before she had finished. "Take it easy, *tesoro mio*."

Leaning against him, savoring his warmth and strength, Kristen had never felt so damn feminine. Oh yes, she was female and straight but that felt different, that was just fact. Strange she could never remember feeling this way before. But she'd never been as weak as this, even after the punishing training sessions she forced herself to go through. "So that's detox."

"It is. Now you know why I wanted you to do it gradually."

Something stirred inside her. "My dragon is back. I can sense her."

"So can I. I can't wait to see her again."

To her shame, tears pricked her eyes. A result of her weakness, no doubt, but she felt stupid. She never cried. And it wasn't her ordeal, it was Ricardo saying he wanted to see her dragon. Even worse. So she said nothing.

He touched her under her chin and lifted her face so she had to look at him. She'd never seen a man smile at her like that before, soft and caring. "I've decided not to let you go," he said.

The assumption drove some steel into her spine. "And you'll stop me how?"

"Like this." And before she could draw back, he kissed her.

Gentle, closed-mouthed but it shattered her. Somehow more intimate than they'd been before because she could do no other than accept his kiss and try to respond. Kristen didn't have much experience in kissing but as kisses went, she couldn't remember having a better one. She remembered mouth kissing as sloppy, wet and unpleasant but this was none of those things. It merely reflected a closeness she felt too weary to deny.

With her defenses down, she should be angry but he held her loosely, so even in her current state she could withdraw and refuse him. She didn't.

When he touched her lips with his tongue a tremor went through her and before she realized what she was doing, she opened her mouth for him.

Just a little and he didn't push, didn't force his way in, but traced the inside with his tongue, feathery touches that she couldn't get enough of. She opened further and he groaned a little and touched her teeth, then her tongue with his.

She felt an electric touch, like the touch God gave to Adam on the Sistine ceiling. His other arm went around her, and while she could still break away, he held her more securely, her breasts touching his chest while he took her in a long, languorous journey of exploration. He stroked her tongue, then the roof of her mouth, slanting his lips over hers, tilting his head to ensure a better fit.

She didn't want him to stop. His fingers drove into her hair, cupping her head, holding her for his pleasure, which she was only too happy to give him. Too tired to use much psi, she didn't respond to his velvet touches in her mind, just relaxed under his ministrations.

In time her dragon would meet his but for now he kept his other form locked away and banked down. She understood, as she hadn't before, that some part of Ricardo was always the dragon. He never shut his other form completely down as she did. Captivity must have hurt him so badly.

He soothed her concerns with tongue and mind, taking her with a gentle thoroughness she feared she could come to love, if she didn't already. He didn't draw away from her mouth until he'd explored it, thoroughly touched and stroked and caressed while his hands remained still, holding her close and safe.

When he finally drew back, all she could hear was their mingled pants and ragged gasps, showing how that one kiss had affected them. He kissed her again, gently, and when he pulled away she followed, eager for more. He acquiesced, giving her one more

kiss before he sat up and reached for the glass on the nightstand. "Here. Drink some more."

She took the glass, eager for something to do while she sorted out her wayward thoughts. He'd made her think of the impossible things she hadn't planned on for another hundred years or so. Now the thought of her independence didn't seem quite so attractive.

She gave him the empty glass and he put it down without taking his dark, slumberous gaze off her face. "We are together, Kristen. For as much of the future as we care to see. I want to see where this goes. Don't tell me you don't want that as well."

If she did tell him that, she'd be lying, so she prevaricated. "I don't know what to think. You held me while I retched, bathed me, warmed me, made me rinse my mouth. I remember flashes rather than the whole thing. And you still want me?"

"More than ever." His mind said it, as did his eyes and his touch on her body. Still he didn't move. She wanted him but when she put her hands on him, he wouldn't let her go below his belt.

"Not yet, sweetheart. You're too weak."

She could manage this though. "You can do all the work."

"I should make you rest."

But she couldn't bear the distance between them. She had a lot to make up to him. She tugged at his t-shirt. "Take it off. Please. I feel great, just tired. I want to feel your skin against mine. Do that at least."

He gazed at her, a smile quirking the corners of his mouth. "I didn't mean to do this, not with our first kiss. I wanted something lovely."

"It could be lovelier."

He gave a short laugh but pulled the garment over his head. She reveled in the sight of his muscular body and reached for him, spreading her hands over the heated expanse. He moaned. "How do you do this to me?"

"Make me feel good, Ric."

He stilled in the act of undoing his fly. "Only my brother calls me that."

"Sorry," she said, scared she'd ruined the mood.

"No. I like it." His gaze warmed. "I love it."

She drew the sheet down to expose her breasts and cupped them for him. At least she had enough for that.

"Sweet little morsels," he murmured. "I want to taste and lick."

"What's stopping you?"

He stumbled as he stepped out of his jeans, so unlike the usually graceful man she knew, demonstrating how keyed-up he felt. She felt the same excitement rising from her crotch to the rest of her body, warming it more than any bath. From the inside out.

He flung back the covers and joined her, pulling them over afterward. "Can't have you getting cold." He encased her in his arms, making her feel deliciously small and protected. A novel feeling for Kristen. As far as she knew, nobody had done that for her before, and although she wouldn't have admitted it, she loved it.

"I want you to open for me," he said. "In your own time and not today but I want you to know I want it. Will you try?"

She swallowed and kissed his chest to give herself time to think. And to feel the texture of hair-roughened skin under her lips. "I'll try." She'd never done that before, had spent all her life buttoned up and battened down. This time she wanted to do it, wanted to become part of someone else. Ricardo to be precise.

He kissed the top of her head. "That's all I ask. I'll wait for you and I'll never close down to you. I swear it."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that."

He pressed a finger under her chin, urging her to look up at him. "We'll take it a day at a time. Just as addicts the world over do."

She gave a shaky laugh. "We're addicts?"

"If you have to take Cephalox again, it'll hook you. A shame we don't get the hallucinations it gives to mortals. Then there'd be a point."

She shuddered. "I can't bear being out of control."

He gazed into her eyes. "We'll have to rectify that. Not today. Today we take it easy. Maybe tomorrow too. As many days as we can steal before we have to go back to work."

Memory surged through her. Andros, STORM, her captivity, everything. She gripped his lower arm. "Is there news?"

"Nothing. They're formulating a scheme and searching New York. Every agent in the city is working on this one right now. Andros isn't Talented but a few people have his psi signature and they're as sure as they can be that he's within fifteen miles of Central Park and he's alive. Chase is trying to track him and Ann has called in a virgin Sorcerer." He caught a breath. "She's stunningly beautiful and as cold as ice. I've met her before. Kiss me, *tesoro mio*, take the chill away."

So she shifted to give her lips to him once more. He surged in, kissed her thoroughly and then returned for more while urging her onto her back. She rolled over and felt his cock hard against the giving flesh of her stomach, felt the drop of liquid he bestowed on her. She wanted to taste but she didn't think she had the energy to bring him off. Weakness invaded her limbs, made her feeble like a newborn baby. She hated it but she wanted him, wanted his strength.

He caged her in, lifting his strong arms to either side of her body, making her feel protected and wanted. The gleam in his eyes, the flicker of red she caught sight of when he moved, were uniquely Ricardo, the man and the dragon.

"I want to learn how to keep partially shifted all the time."

He smiled. "I'll show you. You have to concentrate at first but it comes naturally after a while. I'll help you do it for a time. If you'll let me."

She lifted her hand to cup his cheek. "Please."

They stared at each other for a full minute. That one word signified a huge change in their relationship and they both took time to acknowledge it. She had asked, he gave.

Then he smiled. She loved his smile, the way it dissipated the brooding look he habitually wore and replaced it with pure sunshine. She couldn't help but smile back.

He lifted and his cock slid between her legs to nestle in the folds of her pussy. So good. She sighed and stretched, more to savor the sensation than to hurry things along.

He moved up and down, gently rubbing her folds, catching her clit and sending sparks of arousal shooting through her. "Ah!"

"Like that?" He rubbed her some more and watched her face. She squirmed to try to bring him closer, get more of the action on her clit but he moved away, slid down and then pushed so the tip of his cock slipped inside.

Kristen opened her legs wider and pulled up her knees to hug his waist and hips. She slid her hands down his body, loving the leashed power under them, and let her palms come to rest on his ass.

Now he sighed and smiled down at her, dipping his head to take her mouth in a luscious kiss. He drew back and pushed inside her. She felt the slight resistance as her pussy opened to accommodate him, settling in snugly around him. Gloving him.

This felt different, profound somehow. Such simple fucking to feel so special.

"That's because we're making love," he said. She should have known he'd pick up her thought. She hadn't tried to hide it.

Now she concentrated on opening her mind as she'd opened her body. To him, for him. With him.

Not to the base level. Not right down. She had to talk to him first. He might not want her once he knew her secret. The one she'd spent most of her life running away from.

"Are you okay?" His rough whisper told her he was still thinking of her, of her well-being.

"More than okay," she answered him. She arched her back, pushing her body farther up to his. "Move, Gianetti. We might be making love but we're—also—fucking. Do I have to do all the work?"

He laughed and she reached up to grip his biceps and give herself some purchase. If he wouldn't, she would and she couldn't wait a minute longer.

His body in hers felt like bliss. "Concentrate," he told her. "Feel me in you, tell me where it feels best for you." He lifted up a little, changing his angle of entry. Enough to make her hiss a breath out between her teeth as the enhanced sensation shot up her backbone right into her head and spread to enfold her body.

He did it again and again and then she had only one thing she wanted to concentrate on. Him in her. She tightened her inner muscles every time he thrust, forcing him to push harder.

"Oh yes, oh God!" So good.

His balls hit her ass with every stroke. He set his palms on either side of her body and straightened his arms. His mind remained in hers and she opened another layer.

Her hands curled into claws on his back and his hiss reminded her not to dig in.

"Please, Kristen, *tesoro mio*, don't stop!"

She stilled, staring up at him. "You *want* me to hurt you?"

He stared back, his gaze fraught with tension. "Yes." He lay above her, his cock deep in her body, excitement thrumming through them. "Do it."

Then she felt it, deep in his mind. A forbidden desire, an area completely in shadow, one he kept hidden but it opened now.

The desire came from there. He wanted her to hurt him.

Her nails dug into his back and she dragged them down a short way.

He stiffened and groaned loudly, cried out her name. "Do it. Oh God, Kristen!"

She dug in again, scored his back, lifted her hands and did it again. Her fingers grew wet but this wasn't sweat. It was blood.

He drove in, hard, out and in, pounding into her, his mind ablaze with furious ecstasy.

She felt his triumph and his invitation and she entered his mind. He enfolded her, embraced her with his mind and his body worked her until he drove her up higher so she was hardly aware of the damage she was inflicting on him.

Dragons had an intensely violent nature but their human side usually tamed them. Kristen didn't know if she could shape-shift yet but she felt her dragon stir inside her.

For the first time her dragon met his. They kissed, a chaste caress, unlike the raw hammering he was giving her, and she felt the two creatures, human and dragon, meet. She was about to explode. Desire, raw and open, was the only thing that lay between them now. They shared it and he worked her so she wasn't sure of anything outside this room, outside this bed.

Fuck the high Cephalox was supposed to deliver to mortals. *This* was the real high. She could get addicted to this for sure and never regret it.

She gasped, caught her breath and only then realized she'd been screaming his name. He stared down at her, muscles taut, teeth bared with a wildness in his eyes she loved because she'd caused it.

"Ricardo! Ric, oh God!" And she went up again, higher than before, unafraid now, only anxious for him that he should feel the same. Liquid dripped on her breasts. His fresh sweat, each touch a drop of coolness sliding down her skin to join her own perspiration.

She cried his name, the only word she could remember right now. Not blood, she was relieved to discover when she glanced down at herself but she knew she'd hurt him and tracked her claws all over his back in deep scratches.

He came, pulsing deep inside her in hard, throbbing jets. Her vaginal walls convulsed around him as she lost control of her actions. She flung her arms wide, scrabbling for purchase as her orgasm reached impossible heights.

He slumped over her body, almost immediately rolling over but taking her with him. Their bodies slid together, fluids making them slippery, and Kristen laughed from sheer joy. She only realized he had joined her when she felt the way his body shook. They didn't find anything funny, the laughter came from relief.

She accepted him. She felt his relief and his joy. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how anxious he'd been.

Until her hands passed across his back and she felt what she'd done, the scored lines tearing ridges from the smooth muscle, his back slippery with more than sweat.

"Ricardo! Oh I'm so sorry, you shouldn't have let me do it." She tried to turn him but he refused to move, his bulk too much even for her best moves in this weakened state.

"Yes I should. Kristen, stay still. Read me. See what you've done."

Tentatively she entered his mind. The shadows had gone, nothing remaining and it looked different, felt different. "What is it?"

He rolled over her, pinning her to the mattress, and smiled down at her face, a new serenity she'd never seen before softening his harsh features. "You helped me. I never allowed it to take over." He propped his elbows on either side of her, caging her in warmth.

"You've suffered, as I did. When I lay on that bed in that room, they fastened me down. I couldn't move unless they let me up to visit the bathroom or eat. Often they'd just pump fluids into me and later on, after one too many escape attempts, they catheterized me and gave me a stomach tube. And they hurt me. You know that, right?"

She nodded. "The only thing that scared me was that they'd hurt me too much and I wouldn't have a chance to escape."

He gave a sharp laugh. "I passed that in the first week. They took stuff from me, blood, bone, marrow, tissue. Then they'd leave me to heal so they could do it again. They'd leave me for weeks sometimes, abandon me if a new project—they called us projects—arrived. I dreaded those times, hated them. Because I grew bored. Can you understand that?"

She shook her head, then nodded. Yes she could. They gave her nothing to stimulate her mind and treated her like an animal. They'd treated Ricardo the same way. But they'd never hurt her. "Yes, I grew bored but coping with it is part of my training. I stand for hours watching for anyone to attack whoever I'm working for. It's hard, standing around for hour after hour and staying alert but I got good at it. I used it when I was in that room."

"I had nothing like that. I used to picture works of art but eventually the creativity died. It just went. Then I had nothing but hatred and revenge." He took a breath. "And the pain. Eventually I lived for the pain, so much better than the boredom. It's hard for people who haven't been in that situation to imagine it. Maybe that's why I can talk to you about it. I've never told anyone else."

He bit his lip hard enough to draw blood but she stroked the small wound with her finger. "No, don't. It's just something you need. And you need to shape-shift now to fix the wounds, otherwise you'll make me feel guilty. Or do you need to bear the marks for a while?"

He bared his teeth in something that looked almost like a smile. "No. I just needed to feel it. I can't pretend I haven't thought about it, fantasized about it. We're dragons; we get off on violence sometimes but most of us subsume it in a career. Boxing, karate, combat, kendo, anything that works. I bet we had as many St. Georges as we did beasts."

His voice softened, tension gone. She'd known him protective, gentle, but not this relaxed. Never.

She had never felt so free. "I kind of enjoyed it. It added to the experience." She shook her head. "How could that be?"

"Because, my sweet, you helped me and you could feel it. I've let you all the way in, Kristen."

He gave her a long sweet kiss. Any more of those and she'd let him in as deep.

Chapter Fourteen

After a foray into the bathroom, where he performed a quick shape-shift to heal the marks on his back, Ricardo took her into the shower, then made her eat. He cooked them bacon with scrambled eggs, grilled tomatoes, hash browns and mushrooms. Kristen had never tasted anything so wonderful in her life.

Ricardo refused to let her help with the clearing up, so she wandered around the large living area, two stories in height and relentlessly modern and minimalistic. Seeing a paper sticking out of a desk drawer, she crossed the room to get to it, and opened the drawer to put it back in properly. That was the trouble with minimalism. One item out of place stuck out woefully. She couldn't live like that. If Ricardo meant what he said about a relationship between the two of them, that would have to change.

But she still didn't quite believe what he told her he wanted. Euphoria and guilt could combine to make him say things he didn't truly desire.

She paused, her hand hovering over the paper. Then she turned it the right way and stared.

He came up behind her. She didn't have to turn, she felt his presence. "What's this, Ric?"

"It's you." Putting his hands on her shoulders, he turned her around and reached past her to pick up the paper. He glanced at it before she took it away from him. "I did it for Sandro and Ann Reynolds, to show them what the woman haunting my dreams looked like."

"It's amazing." She stared down at the sketch. It showed more than a likeness. It showed her despair, the emotion she'd tried to hide from everyone but couldn't hide from him. He'd seen it even from miles away, although they'd never met.

A shudder went through her and he caught her around her waist. If she hadn't moved it aside, he would have crushed the drawing when he drew her against him. "Are you tired? Want to go back to bed?"

"I'm fine." She pulled back and stared up at his face. "It's that—I've always protected my privacy and you saw straight through it as if it didn't exist. I don't know how you do it."

"Neither do I." His hands tightened around her waist. "And I prefer to keep my emotions private too, but this thing goes both ways. You know my secrets too."

She turned her head to the side and studied the drawing. "This really is amazing. Why don't you do it anymore?"

He released her and reached out a hand to trace over the lines. "Before this I couldn't. I lost it after my captivity. For a while I couldn't find anything to live for but I joined STORM full-time when Sandro left and I found something else to do."

She lifted her other hand and spread it over his chest, loving the solidity under her hand.

He laughed. "I used to be a skinny runt compared to Sandro. I painted, did abstracts, loved color. All that went. I could appreciate it but my mind didn't connect enough for me to do it myself. So I gave it up."

"They fed you Cephalox and they mistreated you. Tortured you. They cut off your communication with other Talents."

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "They did. I'm a different person."

"Have you ever wanted to paint or draw since?"

Laughing, he indicated the paper with a brief nod of his head. "Only once. I couldn't think of another way of showing what I saw. I could have sent a telepathic image but somehow it wasn't enough. I needed to do something else." He glanced at the sketch again, then at her. "Would you do me a favor?"

She felt his tension, but she'd do as he said, whatever it was. "Yes. Anything."

"Be careful, sweetheart. You don't know what it is yet."

"I don't care."

"You should." When she lifted her head to him, he kissed her lips, deep and sweet. The kiss lasted for some time, as he licked, tasted and enjoyed her. She must have been an idiot to deny that to both of them. She reveled in his kiss. More intimate than a mere merging of bodies, so much more.

"So that's what you want me to do?" She slid her hand down his body and cupped the hard shape of his cock, rigid beneath his black pants.

He sucked in a breath. "Yes but not right now." He shuddered. "Fuck, that feels good."

She laughed and smoothed her hand up to the tip, then down again. His slacks must be old favorites because the soft fabric molded him beautifully. She was reminded all over again of how amazing he felt when he eased into her body and her arousal went up a few notches right there.

She stroked him, nice and easy but when she reached for the button on his pants, he put his hand over hers. "I want something else."

"Hmmm?" She bent, ready to unzip him and take him into her mouth, but he stepped back.

"I must be mad. But no, not yet, sweetheart. I want to draw you."

"What?" It took her a moment to remember what he meant, but she still held the sketch of her.

"Will you pose for me?"

"What?" Startled, she stared up at his face. "Me? Why would you want to do that?"

"Will you do it nude?"

She swallowed, lost for words. "You want to paint me nude?"

He shook his head. "I want to try something else. I love your curves, your smoothness, all the textures of your body. I want to sculpt you."

"You're serious?"

He nodded, smiling. She stepped back so her back hit the desk behind her but she reached out and he took her hands. "You're lovely, but it's not even that. It's a feeling I have and I don't want to try it with anyone but you. I don't trust anyone else, not even Sandro. And I really don't want to sculpt him naked!"

She smiled shakily. Not that she minded displaying her body to him. His heated response made her feel like nobody else had done before. "You want me to pose for you."

"I never had that urge before I met you but I want to try now. I thought I'd lost any artistic impulse I ever had, but not so. I drew you when I saw you with my psi senses."

She glanced down. "When they were priming me to betray you."

He squeezed her hands. "It could have been any of us."

"But it was me."

"Yes." At least he didn't deny that. "So come over here and take your clothes off."

She laughed, but let him lead her to the sofa in the center of the room. It stood in front of the windows in full view of the buildings opposite. But if he wanted her to pose there, she'd do it. She felt no qualms.

As a shape-shifter, she often stripped before other people but her kind had the knack of making the difference between nude and merely naked. Now her lover wanted her nude. Displaying herself. Before a set of large, open windows.

He followed her gaze and grinned, releasing her hands before walking over to the windows. She'd noted the switch but assumed it let the Roman blinds down. Not so, it seemed. He flicked it and although she saw nothing different, he explained to her, "It's one-way glass. Up it reveals all, down and we can see out but nobody can see in. Only I get to see you nude."

"If you sculpt me, it'll be everyone."

He shook his head. "Not precisely. I won't use your face, except maybe in private. I don't know where this is coming from. My art used to be completely abstract with no references to natural life or representational art. I was moving toward video art just before they took me. But now I want to depict texture and shape, I want to work with light and shadow. I want to work with nature. It might not work. You have no idea how terrified this makes me."

"You're doing well at hiding it," she said. She pulled her top off over her head and tossed it on a nearby chair.

He watched her undress and she enjoyed putting on a show although she didn't turn it into a striptease. When he ordered it, she stopped, once in the act of unhooking her bra, her breasts thrust out, her hands behind her back.

He walked around her until she complained. "Okay, maybe not that. It has interesting connotations. Bondage mainly. I think I'd like to explore the themes of control and restraint and the dichotomies contained there. Sometimes the restrained is the one in control."

"You want to tie me up?"

His eyes sparked fire. "Maybe. One day. Today I just want to draw you. I bought a sketchpad and I wasn't sure why at the time. And some charcoal. I won't do anything finished, just get familiar with your body."

She paused in the act of unbuttoning her jeans. "Don't you know it already?"

"To touch, to kiss, to love, oh yeah. But not to draw. I want to see what light does to your skin. I don't know if I can. This might not lead to anything."

She sensed his withdrawal but he remained in her mind, reassuring her that he hadn't left her. Shame filled her when she realized how dependant she felt on him right now. *Hey, take it easy on yourself. You're only just past detox.*

True, she still felt weak but she should have bounced back a bit faster. It was her training, after all. To recover fast and return to duty. She needed her dragon.

"That's later. We'll fly after you've rested. And this is part of your rest." All the time he spoke, his gaze roved over her body. She turned around to strip off her jeans and underwear, standing on one leg to shake the garments off, and knew what kind of a show she was giving him. His slight moan didn't escape her ears.

"The man's still there then."

"He always is for you, *tesoro mio*. Jesus, you're hot!"

She turned around, caught his hungry gaze and rejoiced. And stumbled when her foot caught on the clothes tumbled around her feet.

He was there faster than she could have imagined, catching her in his arms. He laid her gently down on the black sofa. The soft leather felt chill against her body, but soft and comforting.

Ricardo left her there, returning with a silk wrap, a large sketchbook and a brand new box of charcoal sticks. He dragged a chair over, one that matched the sofa, the chrome trim glinting in the sunlight. Without taking his gaze off her, he sat and flipped the cover over the pad, crossing his ankle over his knee and balancing the pad on that.

Kristen hadn't imagined concentration so visceral, so enervating. Despite her feeling like a wrung-out dishcloth, his dark gaze sparked desire. She lay on her side, her head propped on her hand, her legs neatly laid together in the classic Venus pose.

The charcoal moved across the pad in sure, swift strokes. He glanced at her, glanced down again and the connection between his eyes and his hands slowly formed. She felt it in his mind. Although she could never emulate his skill, she thrilled as she felt the

doors in his mind open, doors that had always been there for him to open but he hadn't noticed before. Or been too wary of opening.

He worked steadily until, with a sudden movement, he tore off the top sheet and dropped it to the floor. "I want another pose."

Kristen wondered at the conversion of lover to artist. So calculating next to his usual virile tenderness. She loved watching this, loved that he wanted to share it with her.

That last bout of sex when she'd hurt him, she couldn't believe she'd done it. But somehow, she'd helped to open that last door, the one where he'd hidden his artistry. Then fronted it with the pain he didn't want to face, the pain that gave him a perverse excitement.

While she hated the idea of hurting him, she couldn't deny that having that kind of power over him had excited her beyond bearing.

As did this. She rose, stretched her limbs and enjoyed his frank appreciative stare. "Can I see?"

"Not much to see. These are working sketches." But picked up his sketch and held it up for her to look at.

"Not much" amounted to a masterful series of strokes and lines that somehow depicted a woman sure of her own sexuality but not aware of the sensuality she held. She saw the quivering tension in her body, and he'd shown how the light from the windows caressed her skin.

He'd shaded her body, indicated rather than drawn it in any detail but the play of light he'd depicted with a few swift strokes was exquisite. Kristen caught her breath. "How do you do that?"

He laughed. "I'm glad you like it. But it's a working drawing. I want to sculpt this in clay, or part of it, with a view to doing it in bronze. Maybe a series, piled up in the wrong order or just the parts that intrigue me most. Take another pose."

"What do you want?"

He glanced up. "The sun's going down. I want to capture that light on your skin." He reached for another box that lay by his side and when he opened it, she saw colored pastels waiting for use. Brand new, like the charcoal sticks. "Take any pose you please. Just make sure you can hold it comfortably."

She felt suddenly cold and abandoned. His head went up. "Sorry. This is the first time I've done this. I'm tense and I don't think I've captured what I want yet."

Reassured, she sat on the sofa with her legs crossed, one arm lying over the padded arm as if she were fully dressed. The strange thing was that it didn't feel in the least strange. It should because she was most definitely nude, not simply naked.

That all changed when he flicked another glance at her and she felt the heat in his scorching gaze. "So sexy," he murmured.

And she fired up. Just like that she felt the wetness seep between her legs. And a stirring in her soul, deep inside where she hadn't felt it for months.

His gaze remained alert. "The full moon." He picked up a pastel. "Let me get this down and by then you'll be ready."

"You knew." She'd forgotten, a source of shame to her. How could she have forgotten the monthly cycle that informed all her life? Shape-shifters had to change into their other form at least once every day when the moon was at its fullest. The three-day cycle when they moved into fertility and reconnected with their other selves.

And tonight heralded the third of those nights. She'd never in her life before forgotten that cycle, emblazoned in her self since puberty when she'd first seen her dragon and realized how different she really was. "Of course you knew."

"Hey, it happened to me too. My first moon after I recovered from my addiction took me by surprise. I felt out of touch but it didn't take long before I settled in again."

And after the full moon, she'd have her period, if her cycle returned. She hadn't had one of those for a while either. The Cephalox had suppressed all the functions of her natural cycle. She hoped he had the supplies she needed, otherwise she'd have to send out for some.

"Bathroom cabinet," he said, anticipating her question. Something else that had become natural, accepting his mind in hers as if he'd always been there. But she knew that if she asked him to leave, he'd go. That gave her the courage to allow him to stay. Deeper than anyone had ever gone before, even Chase when he'd scanned her, and it felt right.

"What's happening, Ric?"

He glanced up and then concentrated on his work, but he was smiling. "Whatever we want to happen, *tesoro mio*."

His words relaxed her. He didn't want a commitment, didn't want her to make promises. She could go with that. See what comes next. It suited her and the way she conducted her private life.

That stirring again, deep inside in a place she recognized. She should rejoice that her dragon was returning but she felt apprehensive.

Ricardo put down the pastel he had in his hand and dragged off his t-shirt. "It's happening to me too. We can stay here."

He jerked his head, indicating the height of the room. "Why do you think Sandro bought this place? It was so he could shrink a little and fly free in here whenever he wanted to. I can't reduce as well as he can. He says it comes with age and experience but we can keep small enough here to make it work. Unless you'd like to fly free?"

He surprised a laugh out of her. "Not right now, thanks. I've had enough of paparazzi for now."

"We can always fuzz." They could blur the air around them and make people see what they expected to see. That was how they'd remained hidden for centuries after they'd taken to living covertly.

"No. I don't want to go far. It'll tire me, won't it?"

"Not necessarily. It might give you extra energy. Connecting with your dragon could help."

It might. But the only way of knowing was to do it. If she still could.

He carried on sketching her until the sun had dipped below the horizon. While shape-shifters weren't as bound by the sun as vampires, the impulse to shape-shift often became stronger after sundown.

The gleam of streetlights filtered through the windows but he sketched still. Set against what light there was, all she could see was his dimly shadowed silhouette and the scratching sound of the pastels against the paper sounded louder in the quiet room.

This apartment must be double or triple glazed but she could still hear the sound of traffic outside, a constant in this city. Much like the one she'd made her home for the last ten years. And yet she didn't miss Washington, just some of the comforts she had there. Like her iPod, filled with her own choice of music, and her laptop with snippets, bookmarks, everything that made it personal to her.

A Ferrari zipped up the avenue at the end of the street. Lucky vehicle. Traffic in New York usually moved much slower than that. She paused. She shouldn't be able to hear the sound of separate vehicles so clearly. Not unless the change had started.

Glancing down at her leg, she saw a blue-green gleam, gone as quickly as it appeared. But she knew for sure now. Her dragon didn't intend to let her ignore her anymore. She was coming out to play.

Ricardo dropped his pad on the floor and rose to his feet to strip out of his jeans and underwear. Although she couldn't see it, she knew he was watching her, his gaze intent. She felt it. It warmed her.

She stood up and held out her hand. He touched it. "Do you need any help keeping small?"

"How small?"

"Human size." Her immediate instinct was to refuse all help but she knew she might need it.

"I might. I haven't shape-shifted for two months." She forced a laugh that sounded artificial, even to her own ears.

"I'm here." He said no more but she saw the gleam of gold as his arm shimmered with the scales of his dragon.

He let it happen instead of helping it along and stayed with her all the way. At some point, he dropped the Roman blinds and put on the lights set into the ceiling high above.

Now she realized why the Gianetti brothers hadn't gone in for chandeliers or something more spectacular to set off this amazing room. They would get in the way while flying. So instead, they had a ceiling full of set-in lights that they could dim. Ricardo dimmed them to a gentle glow, enough that they could see each other, not enough to cast them under spotlights.

A chill passed down the center of her body, one she recognized. It was like getting reacquainted with an old friend. The pleasure increased as the changes occurred and she watched her body transform.

A jolt sent her onto all fours, her natural position in her other form. Claws shot out of the ends of her fingers and she felt the scales shimmer, then position themselves on her body. She stretched her backbone, felt it expand, then felt another force urging her to stay her human size.

Ricardo. He was right, she couldn't have managed it on her own. Too caught up with her transformation, she'd forgotten to regulate her size. While she could have stood in this room easily, she couldn't have flown. And she found she wanted to fly. Badly.

Her wings spread as she thought that and she heard him in her mind, speaking to her as easily as he had in human form a moment earlier. *You're so beautiful. A blue dragon. So lovely.*

She turned, placing her feet carefully on the polished wooden floor, careful not to score the surface. *Oh!*

She couldn't manage any more right now. Because Ricardo gleamed pure gold. From the paler gleam on his wings to the bronze on his belly, every part of him, even his eyes, shimmered with something much more precious than the metal. Like molten gold poured over his body. He lifted his proud head and looked at her. *This is it. You'll have to put up with me like this in my dragon form.*

I don't think I'll ever tire of looking at you. She'd never seen a dragon so beautiful in her life. True, she hadn't seen many but even the sight of Sandro's huge form flying over Central Park, the image beamed over all the media last year, didn't appear as beautiful as this one. Her dragon. As she belonged to him, he belonged to her. For now.

As far as I'm concerned, Kristen, that's forever.

He'd said it. His dragon form had given him extra courage to say what he wanted. But already he felt her shying away from him, backing off. *I'm not expecting anything, not asking for anything. Remember that.*

She relaxed again. *Okay.*

Wanna fly?

He swept his wings up and rose on the downsweep, the current he created enough to take him up. He'd kept a little larger than she had so he could help her with the added air currents.

She spread her wings, taking advantage and rising a little. She laughed, her dragon roar muted at the last moment. He wanted to hear it all, full-throated but perhaps not here and now. He just hoped she could restrain her fire. Dragons had fire to some extent, and while some, like Sandro, hardly ever used it, others, like himself, took pleasure in frazzling the odd tree.

She took a circuit of the big room. Ricardo remained under her in case she lost her nerve or concentration, ready to catch her if she fell.

But she didn't. Underneath her color remained vivid, turquoise shading into true blue. Stunning. He loved the way she cornered, sweeping her wings wide, regulating her movements. Now he could admit, if only to himself, that he'd worried that she wouldn't remember. She was a young dragon, after all, and she might not have spent as much time in the air as he had.

She responded to his thoughts. *I always loved this. It was my relaxation after work, even when we were hidden. I wanted to be the best dragon I could be.*

He recognized that ambition. Not because he had it, but because she had and he'd stayed in her mind since her escape. She had a desire to be the best at everything she did. The best bodyguard, the best dragon. He decided he wouldn't accept her efforts to be the best lover. He wanted that to develop naturally between them. So far so good.

You are the best. You're enjoying this?

Yes, oh yes!

He let her fly until he sensed an edge of weariness in her mind, then he flew up to her and touched her wing with the tip of his. She felt good. His thick-skinned dragon didn't have the sense of touch that Ricardo the man owned but he felt her scales rub against his. *Time to stop. We can do this again tomorrow. Or later tonight if you want.*

Although she couldn't laugh, he felt her joy. And rejoiced himself.

Chapter Fifteen

The ringing phone jolted them from a dreamless sleep. Ricardo picked it up and mumbled, "Yes," into it. Kristen decided she wanted to explore the warmth of him in the morning but when she slid down the bed, he put his hand on her shoulder, halting her.

He listened, said, "Okay," and hung up. She hadn't bothered listening in, not being particularly interested in who was calling, but when he halted her, she looked up, a question in her eyes.

"They want us to come in. Bennett has been in touch in response to Ann's contact."

Immediately she plunged back into reality. The sensual web Ricardo had woven around her since they'd made love yesterday retreated to the back of her mind. Never forgotten, just put aside for the moment.

Getting her dragon back, plus Ricardo's lovemaking, had given her a sense of otherworldliness. She'd never been so happy, never. Not that she could remember anyway.

But now she had to remember who she was and what that meant.

"No." Ricardo stood foursquare, trying to block Kristen from the other people in the room. Ann's office this time. They'd been sitting in the lounge area before Ricardo had got to his feet.

"Yes," Ann said calmly, obviously used to riding roughshod over Talents. She barely looked up from the papers she held and then her eyes met his, both cold and unwavering.

"Yes," Kristen said from behind Ricardo's body. "I'll do it."

With a cry of frustrated anger, Ricardo strode away toward the windows at the other end of the office, behind Ann's desk. Sandro stood and took a step toward his brother, leaving Chase, Johann and Jack sitting on the leather sofas that ranged the large coffee table. They said nothing, but watched the confrontation. Kristen felt the tension and her dragon stirred. "We have one thing working for us."

Ann raised a brow. "Do tell."

"I detoxed."

The still life reacted. All the men turned toward her, except Ricardo, who stared at Ann. But she heard him in her mind, anxious and waiting. She appreciated him holding back.

"I brought out my dragon with the moon yesterday," she said. "They probably think I'm withdrawing the accepted way, detoxing gradually, so I won't be in touch with my dragon for nearly a week."

"They'd think you were taking reduced doses," Chase drawled. A faint whisper of expensive fabric marked the moment he uncrossed his legs and planted both feet firmly on the ground. "That you're a mere mortal." His lips quirked in a self-deprecatory smile.

"We can send you in with syringes filled with glucose," Johann said as Ann picked up her phone and asked for the medical department. His eyes gleamed. "Ania is distraught. She wants in on the takedown but I don't want that. She's too emotional." He growled. "God knows I am but I can handle it. She's a new vampire and the emotions can be hard to deal with at first I'm told." Sandro picked up the printout of the email that had started the discussion. "But why would they want her? Why would they even accept the exchange?"

"And why offer it?" Ricardo said, his eyes gleaming pure fire.

"I didn't," Ann said, putting her hand over the phone for a moment. "I asked what he'd take in exchange for Andros and he said he'd take Kristen."

"He's taken Andros' bone marrow and brought himself up to a level that means he can take conversion." Ricardo turned around and visually searched for Kristen. She felt unaccustomed warmth when she knew she was the person he would always look for first. She'd never felt like this before, never expected to.

Neither did I.

He spoke intimately to her in a place that they alone shared. But he wouldn't seduce her out of her purpose. He wouldn't change her mind.

"He chose Kristen to convert him before," Sandro said. "Perhaps he has a fancy to become a dragon."

Jack gave a harsh laugh. "More likely he knows she's a Cephalox addict. That gives him time to react to the transplant and ready himself for conversion. As a mortal, she's far more controllable."

"Fuck!" Ricardo ran his hand over his head in his customary gesture of agitation.

Jack gave a mirthless smile. "He'll think she's a helpless mortal."

Ann put down the phone. "Since when have mortals been helpless?"

Jack raised his hands in a gesture of submission. "Yeah, sorry. I was a black belt when I was mortal. I still am, but it's easier to draw on my cat. Sometimes, when I just want to kick the shit out of someone, I let the cat stay dormant."

Kristen hadn't seen Jack in a mood that dark, but she hadn't known him long. Sometimes she wasn't sure if he spoke in truth or used the black humor that characterized him. She suspected he meant it this time.

"I'm not helpless as a mortal," Kristen said. "He'll know that. I've trained, because in the old days, we had to stay covert, but occasionally I'd be looking after someone in the public eye. I couldn't shape-shift then."

"He might decide to switch your syringes out with his own drugs," Sandro pointed out. "And that would include Cephalox, not a placebo."

She'd already worked that one out but she wished Sandro hadn't brought it to Ricardo's attention. "It's a risk. But I can keep in touch telepathically."

Ann shook her head. "No you can't, they have jamming technology. We can't depend on your ability to contact at high frequencies. Bennett knows that and he's prepared to use that too. He can probably jam it. Don't you think?"

Yes, she thought. It seemed highly likely, because she'd only been able to contact Ricardo at certain times and later in her captivity. And at the time, Bennett wanted Andros more than he wanted her. Now he wanted her back. "He won't exchange Andros."

"He might." Ann pursed her lips. "In any case, it doesn't matter. We'll get him out."

"I don't want this," Ricardo said. "I have a bad feeling about it."

"Only because you love her." Ann didn't look at him when she said that. She didn't need to.

A sudden silence fell, the kind of silence nobody wanted to break. But Sandro, the politician, broke it. "So what if he does? It makes their link stronger." His head jerked around as he confronted Ricardo. "Have you bonded?"

Ricardo shook his head. "But I will if she agrees."

Kristen caught her breath. Bonding meant binding their lives together so they became one. When one died, so would the other. She wasn't sure she was ready for that kind of commitment. She might never be ready. Some partners went a lifetime without bonding, more so in recent centuries. She shook her head. "Not now."

Ricardo nodded but she saw a new hardness in his eyes. What could she say? That she'd do it, drag him into death if this mission failed? No. "Ricardo, we need time. I want to do it for the best reasons, not the worst."

His tension eased fractionally. "Then send someone else, Ann. Surely there's another Talent who can go in?"

"He won't take anyone else," Sandro reminded him. "He wants Kristen, and that's probably because he thinks she's still addicted. I'll go with her, shrunk down. I won't leave her alone."

"Can he tell with a blood test?" Kristen wondered. "Or a urine test?"

"Yes, if he has the right equipment." Ann turned over a paper in the copious dossier she had before her. "And here I thought computerization would reduce the paper trail," she added with a wry smile.

She leafed through a few sheets. "Ah, here it is. We think he's spent all his money on the specialized equipment and the drugs he needs to keep himself alive. Leukemia is

expensive to treat, especially when you're out of the healthcare loop. He needs to preserve Andros as well. He says he knows about his Becker's and he'll do what is necessary to keep the boy alive until he doesn't need him anymore. That means he'll dispose of him once Kristen has converted him."

"Or exchange him," Johann said.

Ann nodded. "That's what I was working toward. Persuading him that it would retain more of our goodwill if he didn't renege on his bargain. But I don't hold out any hope. I think Bennett will keep Andros as insurance. Andros is the only bone marrow match he's managed to find. Except for Ania, and she's converted now. No good to him."

Her expression changed subtly, grew harder and more detached. "And we found the identity of one of the plants in STORM."

"Go on," Sandro spoke and caught her gaze, his expression as hard as hers. "I think you know that I've already guessed."

Ann nodded and turned her attention back to the others in the room. To Jack. "Carilla Vargas."

Jack leaped to his feet. "No!"

Ann kept his gaze as Chase and Sandro stepped forward to bracket Jack in muscle. "Yes. I'm sorry, Jack, it's beyond doubt. We found the trail and everything leads to her. So carefully covered up too. If it's any consolation, I think that's why she converted you."

Jack's hands curled into fists but he said nothing. Kristen's heart bled for him. He hadn't known Carilla long, just long enough to fall in love with her, long enough for her to convert him. "Why, exactly?"

"She went to the airport that day to tell Bennett she didn't want to do it anymore. She must have known he'd kill her, or try to. So she converted you before she went, to leave her legacy behind."

She probably hadn't loved him, in that case. She just wanted to donate her Talent. Kristen watched that realization seethe over Jack, watched his expression harden and his humanity recede. Flashes of gold glowed on his exposed skin, the jaguar making his appearance. Another strike for Bennett.

"I'm going," said Kristen.

"No," said Ricardo.

She didn't say anything but met his gaze with a steely one of her own. She didn't even speak to him telepathically, something that grew frighteningly easier all the time.

Ann got to her feet and put the file on her desk in a drawer. "Out. All of you except Ricardo and Kristen. Jack, I want you with me." She strode to the door and turned. "You have ten minutes. Then I'll expect your decision and we'll work from there."

The others walked out after her, Sandro last. He paused to clap his brother on the shoulder. "Megan has brought me the greatest happiness I've ever known. I'll never

regret what I did for her. Even if it had turned out differently, I'd have known I was doing the right thing."

Without waiting for an answer, he left.

The door swung closed behind him with a click that sounded loud in the suddenly quiet room. Ricardo watched it as if he expected his brother to return at any minute. When he finally swung his attention to Kristen, she felt so keyed-up that a cold sweat broke out on her body. And the look in his eyes heated her even more.

She couldn't move as he strode toward her and when he took her in his arms, she knew where she wanted to be for the foreseeable future. She rested her forehead on his chest, feeling the warmth of him under his dress shirt. Then she lifted her chin and confronted him. "I have to go."

He swallowed. "I can't bear the thought of you going in on your own. Anything could happen. He could kill you."

"It's going to happen, Ricardo. I have to do it. With or without you."

"Sandro will go with you. Without that, I wouldn't be here. I'd have locked you away."

She knew what a sacrifice that would be, to let his brother do the job he felt he should do. But he couldn't shrink small enough. To admit that meant he hurt.

He said he loved her. "Did Sandro tell the truth?"

He kept her gaze and nodded. "I love you, Kristen."

She had to honor him. "I love you too, Ricardo."

"It means a lot to hear you say it. But I'm not asking for it. It just is." He touched his lips to hers and slowly deepened the kiss until she opened her lips to take him in. He didn't surge inside, didn't overwhelm her with passion but slowly tasted her, licked her and caressed the roof of her mouth, touched his tongue to hers and stroked it.

He withdrew just as slowly and held her tight. She smiled shakily. "It is, isn't it? But I have to do this, Ric. I have to go. It's my fault Andros was taken and I have to put it right. Can you understand?"

He took his arms away but only to clasp her hands between his. "Only too well. Sandro blamed himself when Bennett took me but it wasn't his fault. Let's put the fault where it lies, with Bennett."

She nodded. "Yes, all right. But I want to put it right. I need to, Ricardo."

A shadow passed across his features. "I wasn't lying when I said I had a bad feeling about this operation. We've underestimated Bennett before. He'll have something planned, something we haven't thought of."

"We're ready for that. Ann said she had several contingency plans."

"Dragon squadron?" He gave a wry grin. "I don't think so."

"You'll know where I am. I'm having that electronic bug implanted later on. And now I can shape-shift to get rid of any marks. He'll never know."

Ricardo frowned. "No, don't. If you shape-shift to get rid of marks, Bennett will know you can. Leave the mark, just have it in a less obvious place."

She nodded, seeing his point, then her gaze flicked up to his face again, her eyes widening. "Does that mean you won't object?"

He drew her close for another kiss. "It means I understand. If we can find another way, any other way, I'll vote to take it. But if we have to go this way, I won't fight you anymore. As long as you come back to me and make one more promise."

"What?" She'd promise him anything right now.

"When you come back, marry me."

She caught her breath. "You can't mean that."

"Why not?"

And she knew she had to tell him her shameful secret. "Because I don't know who I am. Not really."

He frowned but didn't release her hands. "What do you mean?" His grip remained firm, his gaze steadfast and his mind strong in hers.

That might change with what she had to tell him next. "I'm an orphan. Do you know what that means?"

He shook his head. "I've heard more than one explanation. Tell me your reality."

"Sandro knows but he respected my request to keep the information secret." She bit her lip. In the world of Talents, family was vital. Support, strength and respect came from the family unit. Every Talent had a sigil in their minds with their family symbol depicted on it. Some preferred to conceal it, which was why she could keep her secret. That she didn't have one.

"Tell me, sweetheart."

"I was found wandering in London. My earliest memory is of living on the street. I was thirteen, or that was what the medical team who examined me thought." She recalled her bewilderment as if it had happened yesterday.

"I thought I was the only freak of nature out there. The monthly shape-shift scared me but I hid it from everyone. The drunks who saw by accident, the ones I didn't see first, thought I was a result of the DTs. But the talk of a dragon in London must have made someone look for me." She stared down, seeing nothing but the dark bridge she'd slept under, the flashing torches and her terror that the lynch mob she feared had finally found her. "I thought they'd kill me, but they took me in instead and told me what had happened. I learned other creatures like me existed and I learned how to use my Talent. They sent me to the States when I asked them to put me somewhere else. I didn't want any reminders of what I was. I wanted to start again."

She looked up again and met his soft gaze. "I have no memories of what I did or who I was before that time. Before I turned dragon. I decided to remain independent. It was the safest way. Until I met you."

She saw soft understanding in his gaze. "You know there are more Talents like you, don't you?"

"Yes. I met some. They don't think we're from the same place. It takes a Talent, probably a Sorcerer, to remove personal memories so effectively. But it could be that my parents wanted a mortal and grew scared when I showed what I was at puberty. I might have been the result of a lab test."

"You had your DNA taken?"

She nodded. "They didn't find anything. They rarely do. The DNA alters at puberty, when we change. Talented society preferred to destroy their DNA and not make records. Too dangerous in the old days because of our significant differences. Or that's what they told me."

He released her hands and stroked up her forearms. "And this is what you're afraid of me discovering? This is why you've never opened your mind completely to me?"

She swallowed but jerked a nod. Any more kindness and she might break.

"You haven't answered my question, my love. Will you marry me?"

Shock widened her eyes. "You can't want me now."

"Why not? Why does your past make any difference to what you are now?"

She'd never thought of it like that before, concentrating all her efforts on concealing it. Before Ricardo, exactly three people knew of her background – the man who acted as her guardian, providing the funds and the education she needed, the man who employed her and Sandro. She'd told Sandro because he deserved to know who was watching his back.

And maybe Bennett knew. He'd brutalized her, insinuated compulsions she hadn't known about, distorted her mind to embed his own filthy compulsions. She wanted to kill him for that alone.

Ricardo didn't allow her to think anymore. He swept his arms around her and brought his mouth down on hers, opening her mouth with a swipe of his tongue on her lower lip. She didn't think to keep him out. He took her with a ruthlessness he'd restrained before, plunging deep, sucking at her tongue, persuading her to explore his mouth as he was exploring hers.

Arousal between them roared into life and she forgot everything except this man. She spread her hand over his chest and tugged at his shirt buttons, but he pulled away. She stared up at him, dazed by their sudden passion.

"Answer. No more until you tell me." His eyes gleamed and try as she might she couldn't see any doubt there. Nor could she read any in his mind.

"I don't know if I can ever open up to you completely."

"It doesn't matter. Marry me."

She couldn't resist him any longer. "Yes, Ricardo, I'll marry you."

He caught her up in a brief kiss. "Perhaps Ann can arrange it for us."

"Why should we want that?"

"I want it before you go on assignment. I want to know you're mine."

Although she couldn't imagine why he'd want to commit to her so completely, she couldn't deny him. If she died in the course of duty, the fact that she'd given herself to him so completely might bring him some comfort. And she wouldn't reject the possibility. Only an idiot would do that.

She did her best not to transmit that to Ricardo. When the door opened, neither of them looked around. Ann's acid tones filled the room. "Are we done here?"

"Yes, and thanks for the privacy." Ricardo glanced around at her. Ann Reynolds stood just inside the room on her own. "We came to an agreement. I'll support Kristen's so-called exchange for Andros as long as we can marry before she goes."

Ann showed no signs of surprise, but very few people ever saw anything except calm acceptance, irritation or decisiveness from her. "You'll have to be quick. We're going in tomorrow."

She crossed the room to her desk, passing them on the way, but Ricardo didn't release Kristen, just pulled her closer so Ann could go by them easily. "I think I can arrange it if you don't want anything fancy. Might take a bit of string pulling."

"I can imagine," Ricardo said. "But I want this. And we even get a wedding night."

"This is crazy," Kristen wavered. Since Ricardo had declared his intent, Ann had pulled a number of strings. The statutory twenty-four-hour waiting period was bypassed by backdating the request, and she had copies of the necessary documentation on file. Handy.

So that same evening they stood before a judge, Sandro and Megan acting as witnesses, the rest of the team watching. They had no time to decorate the room, and the judge had been decidedly doubtful until someone had informed him that he had no choice. Kristen had no idea who but she guessed Ann had something to do with it.

She gave her responses by rote, answered the questions hardly believing this could happen to her. Talents sometimes fell in love quickly, especially if they gave each other access to the depths of their minds.

But knowing that, and experiencing it for herself, proved entirely different experiences.

Ricardo hadn't let go of her hand since they entered the offices but when the judge asked for the exchange of rings, he had them ready. Since he hadn't let her out of his sight since she'd made her promise, she was at a loss to know how he'd done that until she saw the slight nod he gave Chase.

Married to Ricardo with gold bands from the Timothy's gift shop.

She wore that morning's t-shirt and jeans. Ricardo was similarly dressed in an open-necked dress shirt and worn denims but it didn't matter. Nor did the plain office or the tight-lipped judge currently taking their vows.

We'll do this again later, he said to her.

I don't mind.

I want to be sure.

His thought warmed her. He wanted to be sure. And, she realized with a shock, so did she.

Ricardo didn't wait for too many congratulations and backslaps before he hustled her into a taxicab and back to his apartment.

He paused inside the door. "When you get back we'll do all the romance—you can have a white dress wedding in a church if you want but whatever else, I want us to do it again. I want everything right. I want to be sure of you."

"I don't need any of that," she protested, twining her fingers between his.

"Maybe I do."

She stretched up for his kiss. He responded, taking her mouth sweetly, releasing her hands to enfold her closely, his body pressed against hers. His erection juttied into her stomach, and she could picture it now, knew exactly what it looked like, felt like. Tasted like.

It gave her an idea. Drawing away from the kiss, she took a step back and pulled her t-shirt over her head, discarding it somewhere behind her.

She unhooked her bra and let her breasts loose, cupping them in her hands, reveling in his heated gaze. Then she dropped to her knees and unzipped him before he could catch her in his arms again. His low groan told her he knew where she was headed. Good, because she needed to take his taste with her tomorrow.

She pushed down his jeans and boxers and took his cock in her hand. The hard rod heated her already hot palms, and the reddened tip with the small opening enticed her to taste. She swept her tongue across it, gathering the drop of liquid that seeped from the tip, a gift for her.

Salty, with an edge of musk. Completely delicious. She opened her mouth and sucked him in, or as much as she could take. Opening her mind, she invited him in and let him experience her joy along with her.

"Oh God, Kristen, you're killing me here. I can't come thirty seconds after you go down on me."

He sounded anguished. She would have laughed had her mouth not been full. As it was, she savored the feel of him against his tongue and sent him a brief message. *We have all night. Go for it.*

She sucked hard and cradled his balls in her hand.

That did it. He gripped her shoulders and came. Jets of hot liquid spurted into her mouth and she drank it down greedily. Every drop.

She eased off him and sank back on her heels, smiling up at his face. "We're not sleeping tonight."

“Yes we are.” He shuddered and bent to her, raising her up and then lifting her into his arms. “Eventually.”

Chapter Sixteen

Sore and happy, Kristen woke up next to Ricardo. Her husband. As she watched his face, relaxed in sleep, she had a glimpse of what he must have been like before Bennett had him and tortured him. More innocent, more content. She made it her life's ambition to get him looking that way all the time, awake or asleep.

His eyes flicked open and he stared at her, his mouth curving into a smile. But the signs of wariness and strain returned with consciousness. Not much, but she saw them. They added to him, made him more male, harder but she also wanted the poet buried deep inside the mind of the man she loved. Her dragon.

Admitting her love came as a relief. She hadn't realized it before she'd said it but it had come as an outpouring from her soul. Life would be somewhat complicated for a few months until they decided what they'd do with their life together but it would be together, she was determined on that. Marriage meant commitment.

He didn't speak but pulled her close to kiss him then she felt his hands on her body, caressing her back, smoothing in long strokes down to her ass. He rolled so she lay over him and felt the bliss of his cock hardening against her soft flesh in a morning welcome.

She couldn't resist, wouldn't have known where to begin, so she sat up and watched him curve his hands around her waist and up to her breasts. His hands were large, her breast small. But so desired.

He took her nipples between thumb and forefinger and tugged gently until they tingled then covered her breasts completely, sighing when he felt the hard points against his palms. She could feel his desire as clearly as if it were hers, felt his pleasure because he transmitted it to her as he experienced it.

She had to reciprocate and let him know the joy he brought her when his body pierced hers. Opening her mind, she concentrated on it. *I'm out of practice.*

It's beautiful.

His instant response gave her the confidence she needed, and she let out such a flood of joy that he groaned and released her breasts in order to grip her hips and grind his cock deep into her. So deeply that her clit touched his pubic hair and a thrill coursed through her from the contact. "Lean forward a little," he said. She did it and her clit crushed against him.

"Oh!"

"Aha. I like that 'Oh'." Keeping hold of her hips, he changed his direct thrusts to a swiveling motion and she gasped as twin thrills shot through her, galvanizing her. "Keep your mind open, *tesoro mio*, and let me feel what I'm doing to you."

She found it easier than shutting him out. Not that she intended to do that, not when his cock and his body were delivering such glorious delights.

He showed her the rhythm and helped her to maintain it, keeping her hip in one hand and sliding the other hand around to her ass. He touched her opening there, gathered moisture from their bodies and returned to press against the tender skin.

She opened her eyes to meet his, blazing into hers. She leaned forward, planting her hands on either side of his head to give him better access and maintain her balance. Met her husband's eyes and gave him everything she had.

With a "God! Fuck!" he exploded into her, his body jerking with the impact of his release. His finger penetrated her, sending her into a twisting, writhing orgasm. Only his hand held her secure and her arms gave way as she tumbled on to his chest.

The phone rang. Her cell phone, which she laid on the bedside table. "Can't they leave us alone for a minute?" Ricardo grumbled, but it was no use, since they both knew what it meant.

She reached out and grabbed the phone, glancing at the caller's name. "Hi," said Chase. "Time to go, princess."

Tension of a different kind gripped her. In a way she was glad she had to hurry now. No time to repine, to regret, to wish for what she couldn't have.

Because she was going to die. Deep down, she felt it.

Chase was waiting for them in the iso room. But this visit didn't hurt, much. Chase implanted a fake compulsion in her mind in case they explored to check if it was still in place and helped her to create a strong barrier to block off her dragon. Nobody would know it existed, unless by some miracle Bennett had his virgin Sorcerer handy. Then they'd have to fight their way out.

Chase took an instrument that looked like a large syringe and Kristen braced herself for the sting when he injected the electronic bug under the skin of her scalp. He picked up a tissue and dabbed the spot, then grunted. "Clean. You can't see the mark. Are you okay?"

She nodded, resisting the impulse to touch the spot. She'd have a bump there, like a cyst. It was a sophisticated bug and shielding technology and it would take state-of-the-art equipment to find it. Hopefully Bennett hadn't updated his scanners recently.

"How's Jack?" When she hadn't been thinking of making love with Ricardo, or doing it, she'd thought of Jack. Betrayed by the woman he loved, his very nature changed.

"He's on the team, but we're watching him. I believe in him but we won't let him compromise the operation. It just seemed an injustice to keep him off this and he's shown enough strength and stability to take part." Chase grimaced. "I don't know how he's doing it and I think he'll fall apart once this is done. I'll be there to put him together again."

She nodded and squeezed his hand in sympathy.

They left the room and Ricardo kicked away from the wall and came to take her hand. Together they went to another room where this time Sandro stood, clad only in a navy toweling robe. He undid the belt and let the garment fall to the ground but here Kristen knew the difference between nudity and nakedness. Sandro was naked.

He swiftly transformed into a dragon. Not as beautiful as Ricardo's to her prejudiced eyes but he shrank and continued to shrink. Her mentor in Des Moines had explained it to Kristen once. He compared the ability of shape-shifters to vary their sizes to water in its various forms. Ice took up more space than water, steam took up even more.

Not every shape-shifter could vary their forms as much as Sandro, or Ricardo would be the Talent going to the meeting with her. Kristen suspected Ann would have sent Sandro anyway. It wouldn't be wise to have two people as closely connected working this kind of op together. They'd be too intent on protecting each other to complete the mission, which in this instance was to get Andros out and to preserve the hard drives of any computers they found. Oh yes, and to capture or kill Dr. Bennett. She'd enjoy that part the most.

Ricardo bent down and picked Sandro up. He was now the size of a small bird, easily able to fit into one of the pockets of the baggy cargo pants she wore. *Okay?*

Fine, Sandro responded.

She felt the others lock into her. Chase had opened a communication channel in her, and they linked to it now. She took off her wedding ring and handed it to her husband. Ricardo kept to their private channel. He cupped her chin, lifting her face to his, and kissed her, sweet and long.

It could be their final kiss.

Except it wasn't because he kissed her again in the elevator going down to the lobby where they walked out to the car waiting for them. No paparazzi today. Ann had had the area cleared.

They hardly spoke. They didn't need to because they were linked now. From here on, they would undoubtedly be watched, so once Kristen was safely inside the car, he stepped back, allowing anyone observing them to see his face and recognize him.

She hated to see his face so drawn and taut. That morning when they'd made love he'd looked so different, open, loving and irresistible.

The driver took her to the agreed location and she exited the car on Mulberry.

It was as if the preceding time hadn't happened and she stood there, disoriented, with no idea what to do. Except for the dragon in her pocket and the new configuration in her head.

People stared at her and she tried to appear nonchalant. In her black cargo pants and lemon top, she blended in well enough with the tourists passing by.

Twenty minutes passed and she began to think they wouldn't show. Bennett was dicking them around. Some people took pictures of her, probably thinking she'd perform or become a living statue or something.

Then a car drew up at the curb. Sleek, dark blue, very executive. A Lexus. She'd seen plenty of those in DC. It seemed inappropriate here, somehow, shattering the tourist dream with its don't-look smoked glass windows and gleaming straight-out-of-the-showroom perfection.

The door opened and someone got out. A man dressed in an immaculate business suit. A large business suit. It had to be, to fit his massive frame. He glanced at her, gave her the once-over. "Strip."

"What?"

"Strip."

"They'll arrest me for public indecency."

He shrugged. "They won't have the time."

"I need this." She drew out the metal container with her "Cephalox" syringes in it. When he held out his beefy hand, she gave it to him. He opened it, glanced inside and tossed the container into the car.

"Now strip."

She unbuttoned her blouse, trying desperately to work out a way to get Sandro out of her pocket and on to her person. But she couldn't think of any way.

People stopped to watch, standing at a distance. The show had started.

She dropped the cargo pants on the floor, letting them fall close to the car. Maybe Sandro could get out and climb underneath or something. *Sandro?*

Shut up.

Jesus, someone could be listening. How did she do this, with her boss bodyguard over her? It should be the other way around. Fuck, he was a United States senator and he was doing this?

Quickly, she controlled her thoughts. He was right, if Bennett had a virgin Sorcerer in his pay, he could read her without her knowing. Scary what those dudes could do.

She just had to pray that Sandro would follow her. Otherwise, she could well be fucked. Trying to remember the difference between naked and nude, she stripped completely, dropping all her clothes in the street. The guy indicated the car with a jerk of his head and she got in.

Another similarly garbed man sat inside. He glanced at her and then took another look, taking his time giving her the once-over, a slight smile on his regrettably handsome face. She didn't know him either.

Other than having her body forced against him he didn't touch her or try to. The other guy got in and compressed her even more. She didn't try to cover herself up, it would make her look unsure and scared.

Her training kicked in and she avoided eye contact, staring in front of her until the big guy leaned forward and slid the privacy screen across. She couldn't see anything now as they'd pulled down the window blinds too.

Maybe she could contact—no, she had to wait for the team to contact her. They had the experience. In any case, that dull buzzing she sensed signified some kind of jamming device.

Which meant only Ricardo had a hope in hell of contacting her. Only he was deep enough.

They drove for half an hour in silence. She imagined if they were any good at their job they'd twist and turn for a while or double back a few times. They had to know she was trained in defensive techniques, that she'd know how to track a car, count the times they turned left and right and time the journey.

She did it anyway to keep her mind on something else. Other than wondering if they'd rape her before they killed her.

When the smaller guy—though that wasn't saying much—put his hand on her knee she repressed her shudder of revulsion. But he didn't do more than that as they came to a stop.

The smaller guy exited and held the door open for her. In other circumstances, she'd think him polite. But since he grabbed her butt on the way out she'd pass on that.

They were in a small private garage. The guys walked her to an elevator, pressed the button and posted her into it. The big guy managed to tweak her nipple and he winked at her. "See you later, sugar."

Not if she saw him first.

The elevator, a plain aluminum model, had a panel behind which she guessed the buttons lay but she had nothing to prise it open with. One glance told her her fingernails wouldn't do the job. And the small red light at one corner told her she was being observed. So she waited.

The door slid open with a creak and the smell washed over her. Antiseptic, with a faint smell of decay and death. The stink of a hospital.

Mottled salmon-colored paper covered the walls, hideous but expensive, and the floor was carpeted to match. So a private hospital. Not the place they'd kept her before, she was sure of that. It didn't feel right and she'd ridden in an elevator. They'd kept her below ground level before.

A white-coated man waited for her. He gave her the once-over too, and lingered at her crotch. She began to regret her neat bikini line and trimmed pubic hair. Longer, unkempt hair would have given her more cover.

Heat washed over her, the heat of embarrassment and shame, the first time she'd ever felt that way and she hated these people who made her feel it. They'd fucking pay.

That resentment that had filled her when she'd left captivity swamped her, the negative emotions Ricardo had helped her to dissipate. Despair edged in but she

refused to allow it. She had him in her heart now and nobody could remove him, short of death.

She allowed the man to rest his hand on her butt and squeeze before he pushed her toward a door a short way up the hallway.

Into a clean and tidy modern office with a glass-topped desk and a large white cabinet. She took note. And behind the desk, someone she'd seen before. Dr. Bennett.

He looked better, more alive somehow, and fury rocketed through her when she realized how he'd achieved that. Through Andros' bone marrow, his life force.

She opened her legs enough to stand firmly, feet apart, no longer caring who saw her. Too late for that. They could publish pictures all over the Internet for all she cared.

Still, Bennett gave her the shivers. Knowing he'd planned all this made her want to leap across the room and throttle him and were it not for the two black-suited musclemen standing behind him she'd have risked it.

She knew how fast she could move and she could have snapped his neck before her guards could get to her but the ones behind Bennett would get to her first. And she wouldn't have Andros. For all she knew he could be in another building.

Fuck.

So she faced him, chin up, legs apart, hands clasped behind her back. Naked.

He took his time looking her over, his sharp eyes gleaming in the bright overhead light. "Welcome home," he said eventually.

He wore a white medical coat over his blue dress shirt. A travesty of what he should stand for but he held his doctor's degree still, she presumed.

She said nothing. The man beside her lifted the metal case she'd brought.

"What's that?" Bennett asked sharply.

"Cephalox. I'm addicted. They contain decreasing doses and they're numbered in order." She prayed Bennett wouldn't have them tested.

"And today's is there?"

"Yes."

Bennett met her gaze. "Then take it. Inject yourself. I don't want you turning dragon." His thin lip curled. "Not yet at any rate."

Only when she converted him, she guessed, and they'd take steps to control the dragon. They'd have to detox her first but that would take twelve hours if they withdrew her drugs. She could convert him after Andros' bone marrow had given him the strength to survive the conversion. If she refused, he'd just have her killed and then take another Talent.

She stopped her own lip from curling and forced fear into the upper layer of her mind. She could sense a faint presence there so Bennett probably had a Sorcerer, or more likely from the nebulous nature of the presence, a sensitive. Someone who had

untrained senses or partially blocked ones and no idea how to unblock. Thank God his Sorcerer didn't seem to be present.

One of the men behind Bennett bent and spoke to him. The doctor smiled faintly and nodded in response. She'd found her sensitive in the tall, red-haired man.

Cautiously, she extended her senses and locked on to him, looking for a pattern to help her ID him again. Or to pass on to Chase, who would grind him into pieces from the inside out. She had it. No sigil, nothing to tell her who he was, where he belonged, but she had his name and his mental pattern, at least the one from his external layer. And a mind that disorganized couldn't be anything but self-taught.

"Take it," Bennett rasped out.

Startled, she turned to see the man pushing the steel case at her. She glanced down. As far as she could tell, nobody had tampered with the syringes. One empty slot where the one jab she had used had been and six filled syringes, numbered. She picked up number two. "Nearly full strength."

"It will make a change to see you voluntarily take one of those things," Bennett observed.

She glanced up. "Fighting them used to be the height of my day."

He flickered a smile. "It made the guards' day watching you. I'll take the case when you're done and we'll give you our own special mixture after that."

"You want me to turn dragon, you'll have to wean me off Cephalox." And they might investigate and discover the real contents. The clear liquid could be anything, and she knew Bennett had doctored her daily dose of Cephalox with other drugs. Mostly tranquilizers and narcotics, she suspected, to keep her docile.

She uncapped the syringe and placed the needle against the vein at the inner crook of her elbow. Shit, she hated this. Cephalox worked better in a vein, but she wouldn't even try. She'd pop it. "This isn't where you held me before, is it?"

"No." Bennett didn't sound surprised that she'd noticed that. "It's still there. Closer to Mulberry than you'd imagine but there's nothing now. Only a homing device that looks and feels like you and a small explosive. Enough to take out anyone who opens the door without disarming it."

Alarm spiked her and she felt the tip of the needle slip into her skin. Ah, shit. So she pushed it in a little more and depressed the plunger, feeling the coolness of the solution as it hit her. She yanked it out and watched the bead of blood, which turned into a small trickle.

Nobody handed her anything to blot it so she pressed her thumb against the wound. Bastards. But she felt no bloodlust in the air, as she might if a vampire lurked in the vicinity. Another possibility gone. Not all Talents were on their side, and Bennett had to have some Talented help to have eluded them for so long.

They must have used a Talent to set a trap at the old place. She hoped they weren't skilled enough to draw the rescue team from their search.

She stared at him, her hand pressing her arm and grazing her breasts, making her more aware of her nudity. No, nakedness. She was bare naked, that was all. Not nude. Not a sexual object, however much the four men in the room stared at her with lust in their eyes. Bennett observed her like a specimen. Having worked for the IRDC, he was probably used to thinking of Talents in that way. Bastard.

Before she could lash out with the empty syringe someone took it off her then strode forward to place the steel case on Bennett's large wood-topped desk.

"Go with your keepers. They'll take you to a cell."

One man cleared his throat and Bennett took his weasel eyes off her long enough to glance over her head and nod.

The man behind her cupped her ass and used his hold to turn her around and steer her out the door. His fingers spread and probed and she wanted to kill him but she didn't even break stride, deciding that dignified silence would probably be her best course of action right now.

They pushed her out of the hallway and down another to a solid gray door, probably made of steel lined in silver. Talent proof. They still assumed that all Talents had the silver allergy but although many did, some didn't. They still held that secret. So far anyway.

The guard that didn't have his fingers in her ass tapped in a combination. They'd change it as soon as she was inside, she guessed, but her dragon could cope with that door in less than half a minute so she wasn't concerned.

She stumbled inside, feeling violated and slightly sick.

A bed covered in clean white sheets dominated the windowless room. A TV played on one of the main channels, a cop show she recognized from the actors, the sound down low. The patient in the bed lay watching listlessly, his arm strapped down and a drip leading into it. He didn't look as bad as she'd expected.

"Hi, Andros," she said as he turned and his eyes widened when he saw her. "I've come to get you out of here."

Ricardo watched the TV security monitors as Sandro swelled his form to a more comfortable size. As far as the tourists watching the scene were concerned, this meant a golden dragon appeared from nowhere.

He saw mouths open in silent screams and heard a grunt from Jack, who sat next to him watching. Chase stood behind them, cursing in a rich, fluent stream. If he hadn't Ricardo would have done but he seemed to have lost his voice, a lump of fear choking him.

She'll cope, he told himself. Have faith.

But he couldn't. Every protective instinct he possessed rose up to fight this operation. Fury replaced fear. They'd made her strip in the street, had taken her to God knew where with nothing.

"I have her." The woman sitting at Andros' computer spoke unemotionally and Ricardo glanced across to see the electronic bug doing its work, tracking them down Mulberry and around the corner, down and around to hit Mulberry again. They'd expected that. Also, the time when the jamming devices kicked in and they couldn't see it anymore. "Fuck."

Ricardo exchanged a glance with Chase. "Geeks have no patience," Chase said.

Jack shrugged and turned back to his own screen. "He'll put in a different frequency. That bug is the shit." His voice sounded unemotional, the way he'd chosen to deal with his particular dilemma, at least for now. He'd refused all sympathy, all offers to talk, any suggestion that he might want off the operation.

Nothing mattered except keeping Kristen safe. He shouldn't have let her go. He should have tied her to the bed, chained her to the wall, anything to stop her going.

The only reason he'd supported her in this was that he knew she had to do it for her own peace of mind. Otherwise, he'd have suggested they go in with brute force and pulverize the bastards, something Ann didn't want because she wanted the information. The hard drives, the files, the computers. Kill this threat stone dead.

Like he hoped Bennett would be before too long. Stone dead.

"What's to stop Bennett getting everything he wants? The bone marrow to make him strong enough and a dragon to convert him and pulverize the leukemia?"

Chase's voice sounded from behind him. "Two women. Kristen Turner and Ann Reynolds. Between them he stands no chance." He touched Ricardo's shoulder briefly but his comfort came as infinitely welcome. Not that Ricardo would have shown it right now. "Sandro's on his way back. He wants to see you."

"I want to see him." Ricardo shook his head. "No, I don't blame him. Not totally. But we need to know what he picked up."

"He kept every psi channel open. He hasn't been away from STORM for that long." A trained agent before he went to DC, Sandro would have found a way to go with her if there'd been one. Ricardo could trust him on that.

But right now, his baser instincts wanted him to tear his brother apart with his bare hands. He'd left Kristen alone and unprotected. Sure, she knew how to look after herself, but he wanted to be the one to care for her. Allowing himself to love her had released a host of emotions he didn't even know he possessed.

They had no idea where Kristen had gone, but they gave her an hour. One that proved to be the longest of his life.

One of the geeks spoke. "We're starting the countdown. They took away her watch so I hope she can count. Okay, ten seconds on my mark."

Ricardo felt sick. Make or break. But if this didn't work he'd spend the rest of his life looking for her, if that was the way it had to be. Or he'd go with her. He wished he'd offered to bond with her before she went. That way they would have gone

together. As it was, he'd be left to avenge her. If it went wrong. But it wouldn't. It couldn't.

"Three, two, one..."

Chapter Seventeen

The lights went out. Right on cue. At least nakedness meant she wouldn't have to strip.

Kristen put her mind into shape-shifting mode.

Thank Christ and all the saints. She felt the scales pop out on her limbs and then concentrated on keeping her size to human-sized. The room wouldn't take much more.

The door to their cell wasn't soundproofed and she heard yells and feet thundering down the hallway, some stopping outside. The door opened and harsh pants reverberated in the air, followed by a deep male voice she didn't recognize. "Don't even think about escaping. We have the door covered. We'll kill you if you try. The generators will kick in any minute."

Ah shit and fuck.

The door slammed and she felt Andros' hand flat on her chest. *Don't waste time, kid. Grab something.* And pray it turned out to be the right one.

She felt a sharp pain when Andros obeyed her and relief surged through her body when she realized it had to be right. Losing a scale only hurt when it was the right one.

He had it. She only just had time to change back and when she felt her feet again, climbed onto the bed to sit next to Andros.

The lights came back on, dimly flickering, and two men leered at them through the open doorway. "That's right, get comfortable," one said, and leaned in to pull the door closed. The triple click told her the locks had engaged.

Ready?

I'll have to be, his grim voice came back.

Andros, you're very weak. This could kill you.

I'm dead either way. He took too much for me to survive much longer like this. Sweat broke out on his brow, and when she touched it, it felt chill against her fingertips. "He's given me some cheap substitute for my heart medicine just to keep me going. I can't breathe well and I certainly can't move much anymore."

His courage caught at Kristen's throat. She didn't know if she could face the prospect of her system shutting down in such a way. All at once, in battle, yes without a doubt but then the adrenaline would be flowing. Not waiting for something else to go wrong or going to sleep at night not knowing what would be gone the next day.

Even if she hadn't gotten Andros into this mess, she'd have offered him the only gift she had that could help. And still he was so weak he could die. He'd accepted that in their first telepathic conversation.

"Move up." She tried to make it jokey, but she needed to get close to him. She could almost hear the guards snorting their amusement. They'd find out. She applied her favorite epithet to them with great relish. Bastards.

Andros shifted enough to allow her to get in the narrow bed with him. At once, she shoved down the loose pants he wore and clasped his hand, transferring the precious scale to it. *Try not to show anything. Give us time. When the scale melts, we're done. After that, I'll help you shape-shift and we get the fuck out of here.*

His laconic *I can't wait* made her smile, something she'd have thought impossible half an hour ago. She leaned up on one elbow, settling herself as firmly as she could. This would hurt.

She pressed the scale over Andros' thigh, feeling the wasted muscle under her hand with a sense of tragedy. She could help this one but thousands of other people suffered from the same condition and they had no way out.

Andros slid his hand down to where she held the scale and he took over. He had to press his hand over it, then hers over his, signifying consent. Not necessary but it seemed to speed the process and make it easier, at least according to the people she'd spoken to who had gone through it.

She felt the warmth. It swiftly escalated into heat and grew almost unbearable in the space of five minutes. She couldn't partially shift, she hadn't regained that much control over her dragon yet but she wanted to endure the process and share it with Andros.

He didn't even bite his lip but smiled up at her, his lips more of a rictus than anything else. Fighting hard not to show the pain as she'd asked him. He must have had a lot of practice at that. His sister had cared for him on her own and he'd fought for as normal a life as he could get. Agony.

"I used to have black hair. The whole emo thing," he said.

She smiled at him, trying to be as courageous as he was. He wore his hair short, its silver-blond color enhancing his natural features. "With those blue eyes and your fair skin, that must have been d-dramatic." She stuttered as the pain increased so much she thought her arm must be on fire.

He smiled back. "Yeah. I liked it but it grew a bit too much to do recently." He sighed. "I get a lot of fatigue with the Becker's. Bed rest is probably all I can manage right now."

He'd given her an opening for a smart response but she couldn't take it. Couldn't do anything except bite her lower lip until the blood ran to stop herself screaming in agony.

Only then did she realize how much pain Andros must have survived, what he'd been through to withstand this. She'd never given birth but if it were anything like this, she'd pass.

Kristen had no idea how much time passed before the pain lessened but it couldn't have been long. When her mind stopped whirling, she blinked back her tears and licked at her lower lip to clear up the slow trickle of blood.

But when she checked Andros' mind, she saw the new sigil, branded on his mind. The little dragon looked a bit like hers. Not surprising since she'd made him.

He gave her a slow smile. "We did it."

"Sure we did. Did you doubt it?"

His mind hazed with confusion, only they had no time for the natural course of events. Usually she'd shape-shift him and let him get used to his new form but the cameras had blinked back on and the minute that happened they'd know for sure and she'd lose the advantage of surprise.

She wanted Bennett now but she had to stay with Andros. As a new dragon, he'd hardly have control over himself. A new form took some getting used to.

Andros. Can you keep a psi barrier up, even over the sigil?

You thought I learned nothing in STORM?

He dropped the barrier he had over his thoughts and she caught a glimpse of the man beneath. Terror and anger swirled together, responses to his illness and a broad streak of practicality that, she guessed, had helped to keep him going.

It made her admire him more. The slight form covered a giant intellect and someone far braver than she could ever hope to be.

The barrier went up again, stronger this time. She closed her eyes and saw the sigil waver, then apparently disappear. Only someone who knew how to break through would see it now.

Then the door opened. She turned around to face it, and glanced up. A man stood in the opening, almost blocking the light. "Get up, we're moving you." He glared at them as if it was their fault the power had gone off.

As a matter of fact it was, but they weren't to know that. STORM had cut off the whole of New York. They'd scheduled a ten-minute cut, about the time it would take the authorities to get their emergency energy online and start to trace where the cut had originated.

Over the next few days the red herrings spread over the city would ferment and give them a good run before the trail went cold.

All for her and Andros. So she'd better not fail them.

The lights flicked on and brightness dazzled them. Kristen heard a shout from outside and recognized the voice.

She opened her mind and sent him an image of a dragon, one very like hers, since she guessed he'd come out that way. *Hold that image behind your barrier, Andros. Remember it.*

Andros wouldn't have to worry about muscular dystrophy anymore.

Ricardo screamed through the sky with Chase clinging to his neck. Others followed in vehicles or in the air. Two dragons followed, the geeks who'd controlled the power

cut. Jack remained at his desk, monitoring and deflecting efforts to discover the source of the cut, the only way Ann would agree to his continued participation in the op.

Below them, Ricardo saw panic in action, from the crashed cars at some of the crossroads to businesspeople in shirtsleeves on the street, gesticulating when they saw the dragon squadron. Some looked up and he caught a few flashes that meant they'd taken pictures.

They headed toward Harlem, over Central Park and beyond. Typical of Bennett to hide caches in different parts of town. His previous headquarters at the John McIver University, where Jack and Sandro's wife Megan had worked, had been in the 'burbs. He must have scattered cells all over the city.

But when they cut off the head, the body would die. It had better. Or he'd leave STORM and hunt the cunt down.

Chase guided them. He'd managed to lock down a precise hit in the ten minutes of power downtime. With Chase's mind firmly locked with his, Ricardo swooped down over West 141st and landed at the corner of Hamilton Place. A low wall painted dark red edged a playground and people wandered along the road, their cars at a standstill.

Of course they all turned to stare at Ricardo and the two other dragons as they landed and shape-shifted. Chase tossed them the bundles of clothes he'd carried and Ricardo stepped into the jeans and pulled the t-shirt over his head before he slipped on his sneakers.

Ricardo also carried weapons now. Glancing at Chase, he nodded to indicate they were ready. They'd landed less than thirty seconds before. Not bad but he desperately needed to get on. Spreading his senses, he discovered nothing, but the electronic barriers must have snapped up the minute the power went back on. Still, they'd gambled on that minute or two when Bennett would be unguarded and they'd won.

Several people headed toward them but halted when they saw the weapons. Ricardo tucked his Glock in the back of his jeans and when Chase nodded up the street, followed him at a flat-out run. They had to push their way past one or two folks, but fortunately they saw no cops. That might have complicated matters.

Chase stopped abruptly outside a block that looked like most of the others in this street—a tall old building with fire escapes zigzagging up the front of it. "This is the place."

They didn't doubt Chase. He'd remain outside for a minute or two, transmitting precise pictures to the vampires who'd flash in as soon as the sun dipped below the horizon in about ten minutes. They should have waited but once Chase had the coordinates, nothing would have kept Ricardo away.

Ricardo headed for the door, the other two dragons on his tail. He kept partially shifted but for all that, the door took three good blows before it yielded. He'd considered trying the windows but the shutters had a dull metallic gleam that indicated they'd be reinforced.

Already Talents were homing in on the place; he felt their approaching presences before he stepped inside the building. Then the hum of Talents, the chorus he wasn't even aware of normally, stopped as the jamming devices clicked in. Recollection jolted back into him like losing a sense. Like going blind.

His skin broke out in a cold sweat and he remembered as if it had happened yesterday how it felt to lose control. They'd catheterized him, fed him through a tube, kept him tied down on the flat hospital bed for days, his body cut open to expose veins, no chance of shape-shifting to heal.

As if in a dream, he saw his body when he'd been here, or in a place so similar, it brought back the terror, the one thing he'd hated more than life. Everything else he'd borne but the fear had been so shaming, so unbearable, he'd just wanted to die. His emaciated body covered in bedsores and scars had been nothing next to that.

"Are you okay?"

He forced a smile for Gunnar's benefit. "Yeah. I just hate these fucking places. Can you sense anything?"

When his panic receded he felt Gunnar and the other dragon, Fitz, in his mind, steady where they should have been. His momentary emotion had blocked them out. Now anger replaced the terror, the infinitesimal turn making all the difference to his mood.

"I can only sense you guys," he said. "Nobody else."

"Me too," Gunnar replied. His broad-shouldered frame nearly filled the width of the narrow hallway. But they heard something now. A steady thumping and, if he wasn't mistaken, a cry.

Taking off at a fast lick, he headed upstairs, following the sound to its source, the other two hard on his heels.

Inside, this building bore no resemblance to a turn-of-the-century tenement. The walls were painted white, the stairs open-meshed metal. The doors he saw were all metal, so like the ones he remembered he knew this had to be part of the same setup.

Chase was with them now. Ricardo felt his presence spreading over the building and then his voice sounded in the eerie stillness. "Shit, they have the whole block. All the buildings are connected. It'll take us forever to find them."

"Can't you follow them through the link?" Ricardo asked him through gritted teeth, though he'd guessed the answer. He wanted confirmation.

"The circuits here are sophisticated. Each cell, each section. We need the center of ops, which I'm guessing isn't situated here." He felt Chase's power surge, then draw back. "I can do something though. That power cut caught them out."

Ricardo bared his teeth in a feral grin. "Good. So let's get going. Do we split up?"

Chase touched his ear and only then did Ricardo remember to insert the communication device they'd given him. So used to communicating telepathically he'd forgotten it.

Chase sighed. "Multiple circuits. This is the center of operations for Dr. Bennett. I'm guessing it was once an IRDC-funded lab but they've cut back. Probably only too glad to sell to the good doctor. There are multi circuits here, isolating rooms where Talents are or were. No telling what we'll find inside them and no way of pinpointing Andros and Kristen. Sorry."

"So we do it the hard way. But we find them."

"They have the whole block," Fitz pointed out and switched to psi.

I'll find a space for the vampires, Chase said. The rest of you spread out and start opening doors. We need the center so we can shut the power down. That's priority.

Not for Ricardo, though he didn't articulate his urgent need to find Kristen and Andros. He didn't need to.

"Isn't this where you say, 'So, Mr. Bond'?" Kristen said.

Dr. Bennett stood and, pushed his fists against the desk before him. "You think you're going to get explanations while I tie you up to some convenient table and prepare the laser beam?" A smile curved his thin mouth. "You can forget that. I had planned another bone marrow transplant, but I've changed my mind. I feel great."

Not as great as he pretended. Kristen saw the slight tremor in his hands as he gripped the edge of the desk.

They had to hold out here or die trying. Bennett had caused too many people too many problems to get away this time.

Bennett glanced down, then up again, his eyes flicking to Andros, then back to Kristen with lascivious intent. "A shame we don't have more time."

She understood his meaning but she chose to let it alone. Surprisingly she found it didn't bother her. Where the muscle had some success in breaking through her protective shields, Bennett had not. Perhaps it was because he was such slime. His body showed signs of rapid weight loss, folds of loose skin decorating his throat and chin, blotched with discolorations and dull with ill health. His totally bald head shone in the glare of the overhead lights and the black-suited bodyguards on either side of the desk towered over him.

He put his hands to his shirt and unbuttoned it, staring at her. She let him see some shock but kept her mind closed down. For all she knew one of the stony-faced guards could be Talents or sensitives.

For a bare instant, she let her senses touch Andros, checking his barrier was in place. Firm, just as she'd left it, maybe a touch stronger. Then she retreated behind her barrier and watched Bennett as he stripped.

His naked body looked better than she'd imagined. He must have kept himself fit, a sensible thing to do in the face of severe illness but one she never thought Bennett would take. Too arrogant to face the possibility of weakness. But of course he was a

doctor and he'd do everything to keep himself alive. His cock reared out of a nest of grizzled pubic hair.

More to delay him than really wanting an answer, she asked, "Why did you never do this before?"

His lip curled in a sneer. "What does it matter to you? I guess the answer to that is mind your own fucking business. Now shape-shift."

"I can't. You made me use the dose."

"I also had the other syringes checked. Glucose won't stop you shape-shifting." But it had kept him at bay for a while.

She let herself smile, watched as he jerked his head at a guard who stepped forward and backhanded her across her face. Knocked sideways, she recovered and stood foursquare, balanced on her heels, her hands up, ready to defend herself from the next blow.

It never came. She licked away the trickle of blood from her split lip and glared at them.

"Let me spell this out for you." Bennett took a step toward her. She didn't back off. He smiled. "If you don't convert me, I'll kill Andros. Then I'll kill him."

A screen flicked on above his head and she saw Ricardo in the act of bursting into a room. It looked like the one she'd just left but it could have been any room. Except that a barrier clanged down behind him.

Bennett laughed and glanced up at the screen. "Thought that might help you to change your mind. He has horrors, you know, of when he was here before."

Ricardo was hammering against the door. She couldn't hear anything. Perhaps they'd hit another building. The thought made her blood run cold.

Bennett's face lost all trace of humor. "Now shape-shift and don't do anything I might not like. You're converting me and then I'll consider releasing you. After all, why not? I'll be a Talent then."

"We're like any other society. We don't work together toward the same ends any more than mortals do."

"Shut up and shape-shift."

She'd run out of small talk. She glanced back up at the screen and noticed something that had escaped her before. Ricardo's hair, it was longer than she knew it. She hadn't noticed at first because he wore it tied back but when he turned, she saw the stream of black hair, trailing down his back.

A recording from his previous time here. Bennett didn't have the control he wanted her to believe. That didn't stop Andros from being in danger. He couldn't keep partially shifted, that skill came with practice and it would probably take him a little time to shape-shift. More than he had with a gun held against his head, that was for sure.

So she shape-shifted. She could do it in an instant but she chose to make it last to buy more time. Surely the team should be here by now.

Bennett watched avidly as she shape-shifted, unable to hide his hunger. It filled his eyes and she didn't think he realized when his mouth dropped open a little. She'd even managed to make the men in black a bit apprehensive. Unfortunately, not enough to make the guy holding Andros hostage drop his weapon.

Okay, she could do this. She opened her mind and projected to Bennett. No sense hiding now. *Run your hand over me until you feel the scale. Only you can identify it.* Except someone else already had and she'd ensured he'd taken the right one by giving her permission, free and open.

Bennett did as she'd told him, smoothed her scales until he paused just under her wing. Oh yeah, the fucker would take one right from one of her most sensitive spots. But it wouldn't hurt. Dragons shed their scales as a matter of course but only the one taken by someone they were converting hurt when they took it. Because the shape-shifter was giving something up, part of their essence.

A slight tweak was all she felt but she made the most of it, letting her skin twitch as he took it and sending a shot to Bennett's mind as if he'd hurt her. She felt his satisfaction in return. She couldn't get below his outer mind, not without pushing. So she pushed.

He resisted but even with all the techniques he'd learned, all the years of study, she was stronger, so she prevailed. *You have to drop everything if you want this. We have to merge for the time it takes.*

I know.

He dropped all his barriers. She nearly recoiled in disgust. His mind roiled with one thing—*me, me, me!* Everything he'd ever done had that one end in sight. He'd always meant to convert but he'd wanted the vampire form. He'd take dragon by default. But in the seven years he'd worked for the IRDC they'd sent him shape-shifters, so imagining he had plenty of time, he'd waited.

Second best was she? Wry humor spread through the part of her she kept secret, the part she'd had little difficulty concealing. Since she wouldn't—couldn't—convert Bennett, she didn't have to obey any of the rules. She spread her senses but they didn't go out of this room. The electronic barrier held firm. Fucking jamming equipment.

Playing along with the charade, she shape-shifted back to human. "Now you hold the scale against your leg, or anywhere else you want the external sigil to appear and I cover your hand with mine. It burns, Bennett. It's not my doing, it's what happens."

He smiled and put the hand over his penis. She smiled back. "If you do that you'll never fuck a woman again. Or a man if that's your preference." He grimaced and moved the scale to his upper thigh. She hadn't lied that time.

She took the step that took her next to him. "You might want to sit down."

He shrugged. "Get on with it."

Touching him sent shudders through her that she didn't even attempt to hide. "Fuck you, Bennett. This won't save you."

"Sure it will." His breath stank when he turned his head to face her. Illness did that to a person. As well as rotting the teeth. Funny she hadn't noticed halitosis in Andros, and it wouldn't have made any difference if she had. Bennett was rotting from the inside in more than body.

She pressed where their hands joined. "This can take up to twenty minutes." If she told him any longer, he'd get suspicious. "Then we have to wait until the burning stops."

Pray they found her by then. She'd lost track of time and she couldn't see a clock in this room but surely sunset wasn't far away now and reinforcements would arrive. Already more shape-shifters would be on their way, but it would take time for Ann Reynolds to call them in and send them here.

As usual, she could rely on nobody but herself. But even as she thought it, she knew it wasn't true. If nobody else came, Ricardo would always be there for her.

Chapter Eighteen

Ricardo burst open room after room, knowing better than to step across the threshold and trigger any of the steel shutters in the walls. He'd seen the way they operated on a daily basis. Not something he was ever likely to forget.

All the time he fought to remain calm, think clearly when inside his mind screamed, lost in the appalling silence of isolation, desperate to find the woman he loved.

He found no one and nothing. Just bare rooms and no trace of occupation. Had they somehow been led to the wrong place, somewhere Bennett had abandoned when he'd dropped his program to study Talents in favor of saving his own life?

I've found it. Chase's voice came as a welcome entrance in the cone of silence that surrounded Ricardo. He answered immediately with a wordless surge of encouragement and pleasure.

Okay, folks, this is definitely a working center. There are four – no, five people working. They haven't seen me yet.

We're here. Ricardo heard and felt the surge as the vamps arrived. Five of them, but now that the sun had dipped below the horizon there'd be more. Among them Johann Kovacs.

Telepathy wasn't a directional aid but he knew by now he'd somehow entered a dead end so he didn't bother opening any more cells, just headed for the end of the long corridor. He had to blast through the door at the end but he found it a pleasure to release a little of the furious energy that consumed him in dragon fire.

And the psi contacts flooded in. He'd left an isolation area and the team must have overpowered the people in the comm center. Some of the tension left him but only a little. He still hadn't found her. Them.

This is a big fucking complex, Chase informed him.

You don't say.

Chase's dry chuckle echoed in his mind before he heard his voice again. *Okay, Johann's on his way to your location. We have a map here with some areas marked. Better than that, your electronics are working again and we can find you. Johann's about five minutes away as far as we can tell. He can't flash to you, there's not enough to identify the place for sure and he could kill himself trying.*

If a vampire didn't have a clear location and picture of where he wanted to go, he could materialize in a joist or halfway between floors. That would kill him. Ricardo wasn't sure if he could have lived with an ability like that, but it took all kinds of Talents to make the world go around.

Johann and he had a lot of complex history. As Ricardo charged through doors, finding more evidence of recent activity but no actual people, pictures of their time together flashed through his mind like a movie. Maybe his mind accepted that he was moving on before his intellect had caught up with it. Because he wouldn't share Kristen with anyone and if she died before he found her he had every intention of following her, bonded or not.

Johann had comforted him when he'd returned from captivity, sharing his bed and eventually his body when Ricardo couldn't bear to be alone. Ricardo had returned the favor when Johann wanted to give his new lover, now his wife, more than he could bestow on his own. Although he enjoyed the experience, Kristen had driven any desire for any other woman out of his mind.

Talents fell fast and hard, it seemed. Johann had warned him, so had Sandro but he hadn't quite believed it until it happened to him.

The sound of feet thundering on a metal staircase alerted Ricardo to someone's approach and he waited at the top, gun at the ready until he saw Johann's features. "Do you know where they are?" he asked.

"Probably. Chase is getting a cross match now, between our traces of Kristen and the map he found in the comms room. They've dropped the security shields so any passersby are probably getting headaches now."

When Talents concentrated their activity, mortals, whether sensitive or not, tended to get migraines and headaches. Couldn't be helped, but they could expect the regular cops to turn up anytime around now. The New York cops had seen it all, but their blundering in could turn a volatile situation critical.

Time most definitely wasn't on their side.

Johann took off at a run and Ricardo raced after him, heading for an area that, when he spread his psi around instead of concentrating on Talents, teemed with activity. Evidence of mortal activity.

They ran through what appeared to be an operating theater, scattering trays of instruments from a trolley that got in their way and past a group of scrubs-shrouded individuals standing outside.

The team after them could clear up but since none of them offered any violence or tried to prevent their passage, they charged through, ignoring the crashes and the cries of alarm that followed them.

And then a brightly lit, better decorated and cleaner hallway than the ones they'd seen so far heralded the presence of more people. Now they faced opposition in the form of would-be ninjas who opposed them in classic stances.

Johann exchanged a glance with Ricardo. While it would be nice to blow them off and show them exactly what a bust a ninja versus dragon video game would be, they had no time. These people were meant to delay them, fall guys sent by Bennett to stop them arriving in time to save Kristen and Andros.

So they combined psi and sent a paralyzing blast that froze the four men where they stood. All their opponents could do was watch as the dragon and the vampire breezed past. They'd find themselves free soon enough but not in time to stop them racing past.

Another door and another set of people Ricardo could hardly recall, and then the last door. The throb of recognition told Ricardo they'd reached their goal before Johann, who Chase had guided in the direction they took, vocalized what he already knew. "Bennett, Kristen and Andros."

Johann gave Ricardo the honor of kicking down the door, which took a little more of the dragon than he'd expected.

He hadn't expected to see Kristen naked, her hand covering the hand of an equally naked Bennett. A more repulsive sight he never wanted to see again. But when she saw them, an expression of profound relief crossed her face and she stepped away. "I already converted Andros, Bennett. His DNA is no use to you anymore, and I can't convert anyone else." He'd remember her smile of triumph to his dying day.

The shot took them by surprise. They spun around and saw Andros collapsed on the ground. Another shot rang out and Kristen slumped to the floor.

Bennett held a smoking gun, passed to him by someone standing just behind him.

Kristen lay in a spreading pool of blood.

And a dragon scale dropped to the floor.

Bennett didn't stand a chance. His expression of triumph glazed over when Johann leapt across the distance between them and knocked the weapon out of his hand.

Don't kill him! Chase's urgent tones stopped Johann, who took Bennett's wrists in one of his hands and wrenched.

Ricardo heard his bones grind and snap, but Bennett's howl of pain only registered dimly in his mind because all his thoughts, all his hopes lay with the crumpled and naked woman on the floor. He touched her, felt no sign of life, and with no regrets except that he'd failed to save her, prepared to die.

Chapter Nineteen

Kristen awoke to the sight of Ricardo lying beside her, naked and as still as death. “No!” She sat up and reached for him, only then realizing she wasn’t where she’d fallen, on the floor in that incongruously luxurious office. She lay in bed. Their bed.

Ricardo groaned, stirred, and came to, staring straight into her eyes. A smile curled his lips. “Welcome home,” he said, the deep tones stirring her heart.

She smiled back. “Wherever you are.”

“Yes.” He reached out and she sank down into his arms. It was true. They could be anywhere and they’d be at home. Together.

“I passed out. I don’t pass out.” She moved to get more comfortable and found a sore spot on her head, wincing when it rubbed against his shoulder.

“You didn’t pass out. Bennett shot you. I woke up your dragon, and you started to heal. Otherwise—” he bit his lip.

“Otherwise what?” Still coming to terms with the fact that she hadn’t simply fainted, Kristen snuggled into his warmth.

“I’d have followed you.”

It took her a second or two to process what he’d said. Then she lifted up on to one elbow so she could stare at his face. Sincerity met her, inside and out.

Ricardo smiled easily. “So you see, it doesn’t matter if we bond or not. I won’t live without you. I’ve been through too much, seen too much to want to survive if my reason for living leaves.”

“A tad melodramatic?”

“Truth.”

Yes it was the truth, for both of them. She nodded. “So what happened after?”

“I helped you to shape-shift, then I did the same for Andros. You did amazingly well, converting him and keeping it secret from Bennett. If I didn’t love you already I’d have fallen for you then.”

Startled, she stared into his eyes and saw no doubt there. When she’d told him she loved him before she left for the operation, it was with the probability that she could die. She’d have told him even if it hadn’t been true and she suspected it might have been the same for him.

He lifted his hand and cradled her face. She barely resisted her urge to nestle into it. “Open your mind and heart to someone and there’s no hiding anything. Read me. It’s all there for you.”

She ventured to spread her senses and found him waiting. He let her read him, but it was more like sinking into a deep feather comforter that surrounded and welcomed her, making a place for her alone, molding around her. She'd never felt like that before and she knew the truth of his words. "I love you." *Forever.*

"I know. We're there, Kristen."

She swallowed, finding it too much to take all at once. "Tell me about Andros."

"He's recovering in hospital. His sister is with him. The Becker's is receding rapidly and his head wound wasn't as severe as yours was, so he's recovering well. If you hadn't shape-shifted fast, you'd have died, but the accelerated healing, plus what I sent you, helped you until the medics arrived. You didn't need a hospital. Bennett could hardly believe it."

Tension arrived. She knew it would. It followed her around, waiting for her, but with her newfound self-awareness, she also knew she wouldn't have it any other way. She needed that belt of adrenaline from time to time. "So tell me about Bennett now."

"He's alive, barely. In the hospital too, but without Andros' bone marrow, he's dying and it won't take long. The transplant wasn't enough to keep him, and the chemicals he used to keep himself fit and alive until he was well enough for a conversion have made him worse. He can't believe it's all over, keeps ranting for his minions. They're in custody. A lot of them had deserted him and gone back to the IRDC. Something else STORM will have to cope with eventually. But without me, I think."

"What?"

Ricardo shook his head. "I'm not what they need. Oh, I can cope, but that kind of activity would destroy what I am. Something I haven't faced for a while."

"So what are you?" She saw a gorgeous male in his prime but maybe he saw something different.

"An artist. I create, I don't destroy. I've changed direction, that's all, moved from abstracts to natural forms and maybe I'll change media. I'm more drawn to sculpture and video these days. I can't explain why."

She saw the urge in his mind, the spark, and she smiled. "You don't have to. Not to me anyway."

He smiled back and she moved her head to kiss his palm. He was right. Fighting wasn't his game, not in that arena anyway. But she feared it was hers.

As if he read her mind – of course he did – he said, "But you could take my place."

"What?"

"If you joined STORM you could stay in New York." He paused. "But you can go back to Washington if you want. I'll come with you. I've never liked the place too much, but where you are, I am." He smiled. "Just in case you thought you could get rid of me."

"No." She thought about his suggestion. She couldn't take up bodyguard work again, not with her cover blown. She wouldn't be the anonymous person-in-black that her clients needed. But she could be effective in other fields. "I like it and I admire Ann Reynolds. Yes, I'll ask her if there's a place for me."

"She's disbanding the teams except for special assignments. Every job will get a tailor-made team, she says."

"Talents are too individual to work in teams."

He nodded. "You know it, I know it but I guess Ann had to learn that for herself. Now a lot of the public class us as one autonomous group. We're about as autonomous as the rest of the human race."

"Philosophy, is it?" Teasing him, she slid her leg over his then moved to lie over him. His cock jutted hard into her flesh. She hadn't needed the physical reminder to know that he wanted her, but was holding back for her sake. Well he could stop that right now. "I think we can find something better to do."

He moved to grip her hips as if he'd lift her off him but she pressed down further and moaned when she felt him harden more. "You need to rest," he insisted.

"So I'll rest, but you need to give me a reason to stay in bed. Such as staying with me."

She lifted up enough to let his cock rise and slide between her legs. Nearly home now. Sitting up, she grasped it firmly and worked it, giving it a few encouraging squeezes.

"Stop that." He stared up at her, desperation clear in his features. But it was a desperation she couldn't get enough of, wanted to see as long as she lived. He wanted her and teasing only made it worse. Or better.

Kristen didn't feel like prolonging the tension. She wanted him so badly she couldn't wait anymore. When she rose up to take him in, liquid seeped between her legs and dripped onto his waiting penis. He flinched as if she'd burned him. "Do it, Kristen, *mi amore*. Now, for the love of God."

She watched as she held his cock steady and guided it to her entrance, sighed when she felt the thick head breach her. It mingled with his exhalation, a soft groan heralding his pleasure.

His luscious entry made her squirm. She wanted him in every part of her, and when she wriggled, his cock head touched her, circled and came back.

His laugh reverberated through them both. "Do you know just how gorgeous you look now?" He grasped her waist and rotated his hips.

She sighed and leaned back. "Come down here so I can suck your nipples. They're too tempting and too far away."

They tightened in response and she gladly leaned down to let him pay homage to them. Which he did, lavishly, licking around them as if they were a sweet treat he

wanted to savor. Then he took the whole nipple into his mouth, sucking the dusky tips one after the other like a starving man.

She lifted up, set her hands either side of his head and worked him.

Nobody else felt like Ricardo and nobody else ever would. For her, this was it. So fucking it.

Stop thinking. Feel.

She needed him to tell her that, someone closer to his instincts. She spent too much time thinking. So she followed his lead and concentrated on what they were doing, how it felt rather than what she was doing tomorrow or the day after.

And it felt good. More than good. She felt the tingle inside her intensify, followed the urge as it spread through her lower body, heating her, pushing her until she gasped and cried his name. She felt the pulses as her body responded to his, tightening around him. His cock responded, growing even harder for a brief moment before erupting into her body, gifting her with pulse after pulse of his seed.

He released her nipples and dragged her down into his arms, his lips meeting hers in a deep, loving kiss. He swung her around to lie next to him, but kept his cock embedded in her body, still kissing her, exploring her mouth with a leisurely thoroughness that melted her completely.

When he withdrew, he kept her close, her breasts crushed against his chest. "Now do you know the difference between fucking and making love?"

She couldn't stop smiling. "That was the best demonstration any woman could ever wish for."

About the Author

Lynne Connolly has been published for five years and in that time has won two Eppies and a number of other awards, Recommended Reads and other acknowledgements for her paranormal romances and historicals.

While these are very gratifying, that isn't why she writes. She wants to bring the stories in her head to life and share them with others, in the hope she might then get some peace.

Writing is what she was doing while she was working, bearing children and doing the other boring things that constitute living. Her favorite writer's motto is "I can use that." She lives in the UK with her husband, children and cats, and her doll houses. Creating worlds, miniature or otherwise, seems to be Lynne's specialty!

Lynne 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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