

THE BACK STAIRS

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"You're awfully sure of yourself, aren't you? I don't need pseudointimate conversation any more than I need to flirt."

He shook his head. "You didn't listen very well, Fallon."

"Listen to what? I've a mind to haul your scrawny carcass down to the precinct house, and let someone else pick your brain for answers, but I don't have a legitimate reason to have you interrogated. Yet."

"Tough talk, but you don't mean any of it. Please, Fallon. Come. Sit at my table and think of nothing but my very good coffee."

Would it be so bad to spend half an hour talking with this attractive young man? Heaven help me, he drew me, a tired moth to his steady flame. And he had my favorite coffee, already hot.

Words echoed in my memory. I tried to pull them in so I could hear them again. What had Muffin said? More importantly, it was what she hadn't said. She didn't actually say anyone here knew Michael Carlton.

"I'll sit at your table on one condition."

He tilted his head, a smile teasing his full lips. "Oh? What is that?" "You tell me your name."

Was it victory I saw in his green eyes, or desire? I needed to know if they were the same. His chin lifted as his gaze locked to mine.

"You can call me Sundown."

I trembled as the girl's words resonated within me.

Take the back stairs. You'll find what you need there...

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THE BACK STAIRS

BY

KC KENDRICKS

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THE BACK STAIRS AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 1

The lapful of lukewarm coffee I treated myself to first thing this morning looked to be the high point of my day. When the call about a dead body came across the radio, I sighed and switched on my car's running lights. I'd already ruined this pair of slacks, so mucking through the garbage-filled alleys between Selby Street and the docks would lighten my dry cleaning bill. The pants could go straight into the trash tonight.

When did I get so jaded that instead of feeling sorry for the death of someone's son or daughter, I groused about my laundry?

Maybe it was the cumulative effect of being on the police force for thirteen years, and working this side of town as an investigator for the last six. Would I know myself at the end of the next seven years, when I retired? It wasn't difficult to spot the alley as I drove east on Selby. A large crowd gathered behind the yellow police tape. Hookers, hustlers, and assorted street people all gawked in avid curiosity at the remains of what was probably one of their brethren. I parked the car and slipped my digital camera into my pocket. Forensics took pictures, but I liked to have some of my own. I motioned to a teenage girl who looked a little better off than the others, and hit the door lock button. She approached with swagger full of false bravado and less sex appeal than she might think, at least to me.

"Here's the deal, muffin. Keep my ride free of graffiti, and there's a sawbuck in it for you. Can you do that?"

She looked me up and down with wise green eyes. "You good for it?"

I took a ten-dollar bill out of my pocket, showed it to her, then ripped it down the middle. *Sorry Mr. Hamilton*.

"Half now, half when I come out of the alley and my car is free of spray paint."

She snatched the one out of my left hand and shoved it down the front of her top. Poor kid wasn't old enough to have any cleavage at all. I grasped both her elbows and lifted her onto the car hood.

"Sit there and look pretty." I didn't wait for her to sass me back. I ducked under the tape and took in the gruesome scene in front of me. I tried not to, but my hand slipped into my pocket to make sure all my boy bits were still there. Juny Mack, my best friend and partner on the police force, offered me a stick of spearmint chewing gum.

"Male prostitute. Total castration."

My cock shrank so far I wondered if I'd be able to find it again. "Gee, Juny, I'd have never guessed." He snorted and examined the bottom of his shoe. "I hate working this street. Every damn day, I'm knee deep in shit."

I understood. In this instance, it was dog crap, and he was only sole deep in it. I looked around and spotted a nondescript tan mutt with a white blaze between his alert brown eyes. In this neighborhood, he was lucky someone hadn't targeted him for the stewpot. He didn't look like a biter, which likely had saved him so far. I followed Juny into the shadows for a closer look at the vic.

The bloody body of a young boy lay across a pile of rubble in a grotesque sprawl. His pants were missing, as were his genitals. My balls joined my dick, shrinking to the size of peas in the vain attempt to gain the safety of my abdomen. I pulled the camera out of my pocket and snapped a few frames.

"Has anyone identified the body? What's the timeframe on forensics getting here?"

Juny shook his head. "Apparently, he wasn't local. No one admits to knowing him, and all the denials ring true to me. I got no idea when the hot shots will get here. This case won't bring 'em any glory."

I took a few more snapshots of the sad tableau. The hair on my arms rose in a tingling wave. "This was someone's son, Junior. Take a look. Tell me what you see, and make it quick before anyone else walks over any evidence."

Junior Mack had a gift that never failed to astound me. I'd watched him tap into it time and again over the past six years we'd worked together since he got busted back to sergeant for calling the mayor stupid. The mayor remains stupid to this day, but one's rank and take-home pay is safer for not saying so aloud.

Juny turned and looked out at the street, took a deep breath, then closed his eyes and faced the body. His eyes opened for a scant second, maybe two, then blinked closed. He scowled as his eyes reopened.

"Damn, Fallon. The body is posed. Kid's not more than sixteen." He pointed directional to the body. "Two o'clock. Could be his pants."

I aimed the camera and pressed the shutter. "What else, Juny?"

He took a breath, inhaling the foul alley air, then blew it out. "I got nothing else but a lot of questions."

And I knew what they were. Who was the boy? Why pose the body? How did the killer do it? Lure him into the alley for a trick, or just dump the body here? What, and where, was the murder weapon? Did his family miss him? Would they care their son was dead?

I had a lot of questions, too, but only one mattered. Could we catch the perp?

I heard sirens, off in the distance. I needed a lot more pictures and quickly took them, holding the button down and letting the shutter go as fast as possible as I panned around the alley. I dropped the camera in my pocket as the forensics van rolled to a stop. I'd share my pictures after I'd had a chance to view them, which might be more of a courtesy than they'd give me.

The crime scene investigators, accompanied by the coroner, swarmed the scene. Juny and I stepped back, out of their way, but we weren't leaving anytime soon. We liked to keep the crews honest. They wouldn't skim over anything with witnesses. A movement in the corner of my field of vision caught my attention. The mutt had crept closer. Being a sucker when it came to dogs, I tapped Juny's elbow.

"Give me a cracker."

"I've only got one pack, bucko, and you're not giving it to the

mutt."

Damned smart man. That's what happened when you worked with someone for a long time. It got harder to outsmart them. The dog sat on his haunches and licked his lips.

"C'mon, Juny. I'll replenish your stockpile tomorrow. The poor, dumb thing looks hungry."

Juny reached into his jacket pocket and handed over a pack of peanut butter crackers. I ripped it open. The dog licked his chops again. Using caution, I approached him, holding my offering at arm's length. Those liquid brown eyes stared me down. His nose twitched, and with amazing delicacy, he plucked the cracker from my grasp, never touching my fingertips. I grinned at his attempts to get the sticky peanut butter off the roof of his mouth.

"You're a good boy. Want another one?"

He offered me his paw.

"And you're friendly, too. Well, we'll just ignore your dirty foot. Here."

He accepted the second cracker with equal aplomb. Juny called to me.

"Gotta go, pooch." I dropped the remaining two tidbits in front of the dog and hastened back to the crime scene. Juny pointed at one of the forensic techs.

"She found a knife and bagged it." Even as he spoke, the forensic tech walked toward us, holding the bag. I knew her and whistled softly.

The knife was a custom job, with an eight-inch Damascus blade and a maple handle with green turquoise inlay. And it was bloody, right down to the clearly defined fingerprints. I motioned for Barbie to hold up the bag while I snapped a photo. She shook her head.

"This won't be hard to track. Criminals get dumber every day."

I pointed my camera at her. She stuck out her tongue as I took her picture, then accepted the bag.

"This will pop as stolen. No one who paid the thousands of dollars this cost would toss it away." As for the prints, I had a hunch they belonged to the victim, but I kept it to myself. I'd let the techs do their jobs and see if they proved my gut feeling as fact.

Why use a collector's piece like this knife to slice up a hustler? I didn't know yet, but I would find out. I'd seen all there was to see for now, so I headed back to the street.

The little muffin had performed her duty admirably. Spray paint hadn't touched my car and it even retained all four tires, although I'd not specifically instructed her on the treads. I gave her the other half of the ten-dollar bill, and an extra fiver because I'm a sucker.

And having that big red "S" on my forehead, I asked her about the dog. She claimed she'd never seen him before and was sure he was a stray. I looked over at the mutt, sitting there so still, politely watching me. The girl pulled on my sleeve.

"Mister, don't call the pound on him. I'll find something for him to eat."

I looked down into her earnest emerald eyes. With eyes like those, she might just make it.

"I'm more worried about *you* getting something decent to eat, muffin, but I can't take you home with me and feed you fruits and vegetables. I'd have to take you to child protection services, and we both know you'd run away and end up God knows where. It's easy to see you have a warm flop somewhere, and you manage to feed yourself, most days. You're too clean to be living on the street."

She looked me up and down, her forehead wrinkled as she studied me. "Are you a good cop, mister?"

"I try to be."

"Come back later, and maybe I can tell you something." With that little tease, she hopped off my car and sprinted away. To my surprise, the dog trotted after her.

So she didn't know to whom the mutt belonged, eh?

I sighed, climbed in my car, and drove to headquarters. Juny and two uniforms would hang out on the street and ask questions. I had some research to do at the stationhouse.

Back in the days following my academy training, I used to think being an investigator would be glamorous. I quickly learned the true meaning of the old saying, "the grass is always greener on the other side." The nuts and bolts of my job could be tedious. Nonetheless, I excelled at it. I had a passion for catching the bad guys and getting them off the streets.

By the time Juny strolled into our shared cubicle, I'd found the smith who'd forged the blade and the original owner of the knife. As suspected, it had been part of a private collection reported stolen approximately five years ago. I put out a bulletin to those pawnshops I trusted not to forward my request for information to the bad guys. A few uniforms would go to the rest and shake the trees. Maybe more pieces of the collection had started to surface.

Juny set a cup of fresh coffee in front of me.

"Cause of death was blood loss from, um, the obvious. He was alive, and probably awake, when his assailant used the knife."

My stomach roiled, sending acid up to burn the back of my throat. My poor balls shriveled to the size of peas again. What sort of sick motherfucker would do that to another human being? It was my job to find out.

"Fingerprints? Anything pop from the missing children's network?"

"Not yet, but-" Juny's cell phone beeped. He looked at the

display, then at me. "Kid's name was Michael Carlton. Sixteen. Reported missing from his home in Seattle fifteen months ago after an 'altercation' with his stepfather."

"Well, we found him, I'm sorry to say. Seattle is a long way from here. I'll call the mother. See if she wants to come claim the body."

Juny stood and squeezed my shoulder. "After you make the call, you go home and get some rest. You haven't caught up from last week."

"Maybe not, but we nailed the last bad guy. I'm good."

"Yeah, you are, but you still need sleep to stay sharp." His phone beeped again. Juny grinned. "Forensics wants to see us."

Not one to waste free java, I grabbed my coffee and followed him out the door. Once we were in the elevator, I sipped and slurped as fast as I could. I'd have to dump the cup before entering any of the trace labs.

* * *

Barbie grinned at me as we entered her domain. "You're gonna love this, Roxy."

"Don't call me that. Why am I going to love it?"

"It's a mystery." She handed me a high-resolution photo showing the cross section of a hair. I flipped it the other way, then flipped it back.

"What the hell is it? Rat? I know it's not dog, even though I saw one in the area."

"Nope." She plucked it from my fingers and handed it to Juny.

His eyes lit up and glowed like Christmas lights. "This ain't human. What is it?"

Barbie glanced at me and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. We both knew where Juny was headed, and there was no way to stop him.

Bigfoot. His favorite obsession.

"We don't know what it is, Junior. It's a natural hair, not a synthetic." She paused a beat for effect. "It's something we can't identify, and I personally ran it through every database I could find."

I knew better than to ask, but the words fell out of my mouth. "What about the blood samples?"

She shrugged. "It's mostly the vic's, but we have one sample that's weird. The lab is going over it again to see if they can find what contaminated it."

Juny all but quivered as he shoved his coffee cup into my hand. "I gotta go check something out. I have an idea!" I watched him jog down the hall and disappear around the corner.

Great. Just fucking great. All I needed was Juny off on a tangent, or worse, for him to be correct.

Sasquatch *was* alive and well, living in our district, and it knew how to use a knife.

Just fuck me.

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 2

Juny was right about one thing—I needed some sleep. We'd caught a hot case last week and worked it straight through for fiftysix hours. I'd snatched naps, but it wasn't the same as eight hours flat on my face. I should have gone home and popped a sleep aid, but something in the alley drew me to return to the crime scene.

The police tape was still in place, and, instead of a crowd, only a few onlookers remained. They spotted me, pegged me for the fuzz, and scattered, which was fine with me. I didn't want to talk to them any more than they wanted to talk to me. I wanted to talk to that one person who would amble up to me when no one else was around and start a conversation. To my surprise, it was the young girl, with the tan dog at her heel. An even bigger surprise was how well dressed she was this evening. "Need another tip, muffin?"

"Sure. Gimme a twenty, and don't rip it this time."

I snorted. "I'm not made of money. The department doesn't reimburse me when I hand out cash."

"Too bad. You know, we could work out a deal. I'd like a taste of you."

I rolled my eyes. "You're never going to make money off me with a trick, muffin. You're not at all my type."

She cocked her head. "So you like men, do you?"

That was astute of her. I was gay, but few people ever picked up on it if I didn't want them to. Usually, when I told someone she wasn't my type, she thought I was talking about hair color. As for liking men in my bed, I wasn't going to deny or confirm because it wasn't any of her business.

"Never you mind what I like. I didn't come here to get laid."

"Guess you want to know what happened to Mikey."

"So, you knew him?"

"Not really, but I know who did."

I looked her up and down. She didn't look like a hooker tonight. Anyone noticing her would think she was just a young schoolgirl out to meet her mates and ride the trains around town all evening for fun.

"Okay, I'll bite. Who do you know who knew Michael Carlton?"

Her green eyes sparked with amusement, making her appear much older. "You're a cool one, aren't you? I know your act, Officer."

"That's Lieutenant, if you please."

"Whatever." She looked up and down the street.

So did I, and I didn't see anyone in any direction, which was

rather odd. People should be about this time of day. I jumped when she laid her hand on my arm. She pursed her lips to keep from laughing at me.

"Listen closely, Lieutenant, because this information will only be given once. You'll never find *me* again, so don't waste your time trying."

My conscience tugged at me. If she knew something, I had to order her to stay in town. But if she had to leave to stay safe, I'd keep my mouth shut and to hell with procedure. Besides, my instincts said what she knew would prove out and I wouldn't need her to appear in court.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere. You just won't be able to find me." She snapped her fingers in front of my nose. "Pay attention. You need to go to Montgomery Circle, behind the old boarding house. Take the back stairs. You'll find what you need there."

I grabbed her hand, then let go, recoiling at the sensation of tendrils snaking up my arm, under my skin. *What the hell?*

"You snap your fingers in front of my face again and I'll give you some attention over my knee. Don't be a brat."

Muffin smiled sweetly. "Ah, silly man, I told you. This is the last time you'll see me." She turned and walked away, the dog on her heels as she called to me over her thin shoulder. "Don't wait too long."

I watched her leave, dismayed I'd allowed her to annoy me, and beyond that, to worry me. Montgomery Circle was a den of iniquity, and I hoped to hell she didn't live there. If it was immoral, illegal, or just ill advised, you could shoot it, smoke it, or screw it on the MC. Maybe she could take care of herself, but a long life wasn't a byproduct of that neighborhood. My fingers tingled oddly, and I rubbed them while I waited for the sun to sink a little lower in the sky. When it did, it would illuminate the alley for a few precious minutes, and I could take a look at what the crime scene crew had left for me to discover. Ducking under the tape, I took another set of pictures.

God, I wished I still smoked. I could use a cigarette. The desire for one was so strong I could taste it, feel the warmth spread through my lungs. I coughed.

Yeah, I needed one, all right, just like I needed a bullet in my brain.

Suddenly, the light shifted, bathing the alley brickwork blood red. I shivered in the eerie glow, the memory of Michael Carlton's horribly maimed body rising up in my mind's eye. What was here to make the perpetrator of such an act of violence consider it the perfect place to display his kill?

I snapped off another round of photographs, hoping I'd see something, but there was nothing. Except... My blood ran cold.

Spinning around I looked out toward the street. Framed by the alley entrance, the steeple of St. Anne's cast its cross-topped shadow at my feet. *Shit*.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

I did not want to deal with some religious fanatic determined to save souls the most expedient way available to him, or her. Not to mention the media frenzy a theory like that would create. I snapped a few photos of the shadow as it lengthened, finally reaching the end wall and creeping up the red bricks until it suddenly vanished. This I would keep to myself for a few days while Juny and I dug around. We tended to go in separate directions at the start of an investigation. If we ended up going to the same place, we knew we were on to something. I wanted a mother-fucking cigarette, but instead, I had to go around to Montgomery Circle and play games with some teenage brat. Yeah, it was a glamorous life—if you were a television cop.

My destination was only two blocks over, and with the surprising lack of traffic, I pulled onto the parking lot of Murphy's Market in less than five minutes. The market had originally been a small textile warehouse back in the nineteenth century. Beside it stood the four-story Montgomery Boarding House, which, over time, had lent its name to the surrounding community.

It had been a grand establishment one hundred years ago and still had the sad, faded air of a once-elegant beauty. These days, it was low-income, one-room apartments, some of which rented by the hour. I checked my surroundings, slipped through the alley between the boarding house and the market, then stopped and sighed.

Why couldn't it be something easy? The back stairs of the boarding house went all the way to the top of the building, with a landing on each floor. Constructed of iron, I assumed they'd been added for compliance to modern day safety codes that called for fire escapes. So which floor would it be? Since nothing was going my way today, it had to be the top one. I started to climb.

I stopped on each landing to look down each hallway—and catch my breath—before continuing. I thought I was in better shape than this. I did workout when I could, but my recent caseload had been brutal. Today had been a long day, and I was tired. I reached the last landing, and the door was locked. My temper spiked.

"Open up, muffin, damn it."

From the other side of the door, a dog whined, then the door swung inward. Instead of a long, dark hallway, it opened into a private apartment. I froze, mouth open, as a young man stepped from the behind the door.

"Lieutenant Roxbury. Please, come in."

I couldn't move. In front of me stood six feet of black-haired, bare-chested, scruffy-cheeked, gorgeous male animal. Above bare feet, tight jeans showcased his long legs and trim hips, and it took every ounce of self-control I had to keep from staring at the generous, rounded bump, dressed to the left, at the base of his zipper. Under straight, dark brows, his green eyes viewed me with unconcealed amusement. I estimated he was about ten years my junior, and his easy tenor hit every musical note my soul ever knew.

"You like what you see, Lieutenant?"

I liked it so much I feared he'd notice the growing bulge in my pants. What I didn't see was the dog. Had it obediently gone to its corner? I hoped so.

"I didn't come here to flirt." I pulled a calling card from my pocket and handed it to him. "What's your name?"

"Anything you want it to be."

I took a deep breath, battling back the surge of arousal his words evoked. I had to keep my mind on business. Somehow.

The swept-back shiny hair, the little six-pack abs under the smooth, flat stomach, the twin thatches of silky-looking dark fur in each arm pit—I could easily fall to my knees and do something exceedingly stupid. I reined in the thought, but I couldn't banish it.

"A mutual friend suggested I ask if you know Michael Carlton." He shook his head. "I didn't know him."

"But you know he's dead."

"Everyone knows that, darling."

"How did you find out?"

He smiled, and I melted inside, but I kept my best officer-ofthe-law face sternly in place. "I heard it on the grapevine, Lieutenant. The fire marshal made us stop using smoke signals because it sent the boys in the station house into a tizzy."

I knew the man he spoke of, and my cop composure cracked as I grinned at him.

"That would do it. Listen, whatever your name is, someone's son is dead, and I need to find out who killed him and why. If you don't have any pertinent information, I'm sorry to have bothered you."

He regarded me coolly, his green gaze strangely familiar. I'd seen him somewhere before, and it would bug the hell out of me until I remembered where.

Why had Muffin told me to come here? My cop instincts, which were pretty good, said this fellow had told me the truth when he said he didn't know Carlton. Those same instincts whispered the man was hiding something, though. But who didn't have secrets?

"Come in and have a seat, Fallon. I happen to have some very good Kona coffee beans. I'll grind up a few and put on a pot to brew."

The hair on my arms prickled with unease. "How do you know my name? I didn't give it to you."

My business card simply said, F. Roxbury. I didn't give my name to Muffin, either. As for the coffee, Kona was difficult for me to turn down.

"Word travels around here." He took a step backward and motioned for me to take a seat at his table.

I took a breath to tell him I was leaving and caught the aroma of fresh-brewed java beneath the scents of sandalwood and patchouli. I was tired of being jerked around, even by a man so incredibly sexy. *Put it on to brew, my ass.*

"You're awfully sure of yourself, aren't you? I don't need pseudo-intimate conversation any more than I need to flirt."

He shook his head. "You didn't listen very well, Fallon."

"Listen to what? I've a mind to haul your scrawny carcass down to the precinct house, and let someone else pick your brain for answers, but I don't have a legitimate reason to have you interrogated. Yet."

"Tough talk, but you don't mean any of it. Please, Fallon. Come. Sit at my table and think of nothing but my very good coffee."

Would it be so bad to spend half an hour talking with this attractive young man? Heaven help me, he drew me, a tired moth to his steady flame. And he had my favorite coffee, already hot.

Words echoed in my memory. I tried to pull them in so I could hear them again. What had Muffin said? More importantly, it was what she hadn't said. She didn't actually say anyone here knew Michael Carlton.

"I'll sit at your table on one condition."

He tilted his head, a smile teasing his full lips. "Oh? What is that?"

"You tell me your name."

Was it victory I saw in his green eyes, or desire? I needed to know if they were the same. His chin lifted as his gaze locked to mine.

"You can call me Sundown."

I trembled as the girl's words resonated within me.

Take the back stairs. You'll find what you need there.

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 3

A heavy sadness closed around my heart. With a moniker like Sundown, he was a male prostitute. Imagines of him beneath some faceless man, being used, flashed through my mind. I shoved them away, repulsed, not by him, but with those men who paid him.

"It is not what you think, Fallon. I swear."

"You have no idea what I think." I couldn't force "Sundown" past my lips yet.

He looked away, then turned and walked to the table, drawing my gaze to the controlled flexing of his body as he moved. I bet he made a lot of money on his back, and even more with those full, berry-colored lips. I needed to remember I was a cop and stop thinking about sex before I couldn't think of anything else. I made a conscious effort to catalogue my surroundings, looking around as I stepped inside. The world spun around me, fueled by the strongest sense of déjà vu I'd ever experienced.

I'd been in this room before, but that was impossible. This was the first time I'd ever been beyond the lobby of the boarding house. I knew it for a fact. So how could this gypsy room, with its bead curtains, red and gold brocade fabrics, fringes, heady scents and candlelight, be so familiar? Surely I couldn't have dreamed something like this, could I?

"Fallon? What's wrong?"

I'm standing here with a male hooker and my cock's hard. I'm no better than anyone else who comes up those stairs. Beyond that, nothing I'm going to admit to.

"I'm tired." Why was it so easy to admit that to him? "I accept the offer of a cup of your very good Kona, but I want some straight answers from you."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Everything in life comes in shades of gray, Lieutenant. Don't you know that?"

I shrugged out of my sports coat and draped it over the nearest chair. I didn't expect any trouble from him, and I wanted to put him at ease so he'd talk freely with me. I hesitated, then slipped off my shoulder holster and put it and my.38 caliber on the table before I sat.

"Cops have to deal in black and white, legal and illegal."

He set a filled mug in front of me, then sat across from me. "You like cream and sugar sometimes, don't you?"

I wrapped my hand around the hot cup. "Black is fine, too, when the good stuff is available." I sipped the dark, bitter liquid. Had I been a cat, I'd have purred. It was wonderful.

"So what's the deal with this room? It blocks the fire escape. Did you make a deal with the aforementioned fire marshal?" Sundown smiled at me from under his long, black lashes. "No, I did not. Making deals is so…"

"Bourgeois?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I would not even elevate it to such high status."

I laughed softly and said his name. "Alright, *Sundown*. I'd rather talk about Michael Carlton than how you scammed your way into these digs. I'm at your table, so tell me what you think I should believe."

"I didn't know him, personally, or any other way. I don't have anything for your investigation." He toyed with the edge of a placemat, not looking at me. My host wasn't joining me for refreshment.

"You're not having coffee?"

"Perhaps later."

I tried a different approach. "A skinny little girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, told me to come here. Are you working a scam with her?"

He leaned forward, startling me with the clipped intensity of his voice. "No. She is gone, I assure you."

Maybe he protected her, and if he did, I'd back off and allow it, unless the case led back to her. It was all I could do for her.

"Then just tell me what you've heard. I don't care if you think it's admissible or not because I have to corroborate all of it. What I find is what the court will use. Understand?"

"I had not thought in those terms." Sundown cocked his head to the side. "Very well. The young man dealt in rough trade. It was said he liked it. How does one 'corroborate' such a rumor as he is dead?"

The coffee churned in my stomach, sending an acidic burn up

into my throat. Different strokes for different folks and all that...didn't matter to me. I had no comprehension of why some people liked to be hurt during sexual activity.

"Did he like it, or did it just pay better?"

He shrugged and fixed me with a ruttish stare. "Who can know for sure? I do not like rough sex."

I forced air into my lungs and stepped over the line. Way over. I met his gaze with one of my own, gratified to see his gorgeous eyes widen.

"What do you like...Sundown?"

Sundown slid off the chair, going to his knees in front of me. His warm hands caressed their way up my thighs, up to where his strong fingers grasped my hips. I forgot to breathe as he buried his face in the lap of my tented, coffee-stained slacks and inhaled deeply. His dark head lifted and he looked at me, his eyes full of knowing insolence.

"I can ease you, Fallon. I want to."

It took me three attempts to clear my throat enough to speak. "Why should I allow you to 'ease me'? Will you tell me the truth if I do?"

"I have told you the truth."

There was the truth we tell the world, and then there was the truth we hide from ourselves. That hidden truth seized me in a relentless, sharp-edged vise. I was as big a whore as he was; only my coin was information.

But I wanted his mouth on me more than I wanted to find out what else he knew.

"So far, you may have told me the truth. There's more, and I'll do whatever it takes to learn it."

Sundown blinked up at me. "Will you, Fallon? Veritas. Truth.

Do you know your limits?"

I shook my head, my gaze transfixed on his hands. I watched as he unsnapped my pants and slowly eased down the zipper and lay open the edges of the fabric to reveal my white cotton briefs. My cock lifted as he drew his middle finger along the hard ridge, barely touching my underwear, from the tip to the base. Sweat broke out in my armpits and over my back. His fingers hooked over my waistband and tugged at my garments. I lifted my butt, and he shucked everything down around my ankles. I looked down at my cock, full to bursting, and rosy red against my paler abdomen. Panic slammed my system.

What the hell was I doing? What if he were Internal Affairs working an undercover sting? Juny and I were not department favorites. We were more concerned with catching the bad guys than playing office politics. Sundown's spooky green eyes sparkled with desire—and amusement.

"You're very well hung, Lieutenant Roxbury."

I snorted. "I thank my parents, every day, for such good genes."

He stretched his hand over my full length, thumb at the base of my penis, his little finger extending past the tip. The little rip was measuring me. I wished he'd hurry up before I couldn't wait any longer and took things into my own hands. Uneasy, I needed to get off and get out of here. Sundown batted his eyelashes at me.

"I like eight-inch cocks. They're perfect."

"That's eight and three-eighths inches, if you please. It might even be all the way to eight-and-a-half right now, so don't shortchange me. And stop acting all coy and shy."

"Please, Fallon, let down your guard. What happens between us goes no farther than these walls."

I heard the honesty in his voice, and my unease bled away. I slid

down on the chair as far as I could, my ass perched near the edge. Heart pounding, dick throbbing, I closed my eyes and let my head fall back. I didn't want to watch, only feel his touch in the darkness. The seconds ticked away. Warm air —his breath—caressed my damp skin.

I flexed my pelvis up, silently pleading for him to take me in his mouth. He didn't, stroking the inside of my thighs instead. My nerves grew taut as I waited, my mind willing to jump into past memories. I fought to stay in the here and now, listening for some small sound to tell me he would begin.

Take the back stairs. You'll find what you need there.

I needed what he would do for me. I'd never begged, until now.

"Sundown. Please."

I cried out, some incoherent sound, as his wet tongue licked the end of my cock in a broad stroke. More focused, the tip of his tongue teased the slit. My balls drew up as warmth encircled my glans, spreading the moist heat down and down, only to slide away. I moaned as air swirled around my hard shaft.

His hands found their way under my shirt, caressing my chest and pinching my nipples. Without opening my eyes, I straightened and yanked T-shirt and all over my head, shivering as my skin suddenly cooled. Warm lips sucked on my nipple. I opened my eyes, saw his were closed, and I retreated back into the darkness, taking the image of his blissful, dreamy face with me. A breeze blew across my belly.

"Don't open your eyes again, Fallon. Not until after."

My hands found his head, and I stroked his silky hair. "Okay." "Promise me."

It seemed a small thing to do to make him happy. "I promise. Just don't think I've given you permission to handcuff me." "I promise not to until you ask me."

Good luck with that, Sundown. You'll have to find someone else to play those games with.

He chuckled softly and settled into his work, rolling the outer skin of my dick over the hard inner core as his lips teased around the rim. The breath caught in my throat as he tickled beneath my balls, his fingers questing to find even more sensitive skin. I spread my thighs wider to give him better access.

Strange golden warmth surrounded me, infusing me with a heavy inertia as it claimed me. I didn't question how I could feel a color, chalking it up to exhaustion and nerves. I didn't care. No one had touched me in so long, nothing but his hands and lips on me mattered. It was new, and yet familiar, as it cradled me, confusing me as it fisted around my cock.

If I hadn't known better, I'd believe Sundown had straddled me and impaled himself on my rod, but his knees still rested on the floor between my feet, and his head still bobbed beneath my hand.

Whatever he was doing, it sent me soaring. Little white lights sparkled in the darkness behind my closed eyelids as the heat built in my groin. Male musk wafted up to me as he sucked me. I reached for the orgasm, but it hovered just out of reach. I lifted my ass, coaxing him to breach my opening. Something blunt pressed against me, then into me. Its size startled me, filling me without stretching me. I didn't have time to be confused how he managed to get a butt plug into me. The climax I struggled to reach raced to meet me, and I fell over the edge, erupting into his mouth.

The pleasure ripped through me, intensifying every time I shot. He took all the hot life I gave him, swallowing rapidly and treating me to the peculiar tugging sensation it created. A soft moaning filled my head, and I realized I made the sound. I floated back down to earth, borne on his soothing hands. The blissful warmth that held me vanished, caressing my skin like velvet as it dissipated. Sundown rested his head against my right thigh. I opened my eyes into his bright green gaze.

I was about to tell him to get the butt plug when I realized it wasn't there. I moved a few internal muscles. Nothing had ever been there.

Okay, this is weird.

My imagination had never been that good before. Maybe I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Mouth. I had the sudden urge to kiss him. I leaned forward to get my arms beneath his and pull him up to my lap, but he slithered away, shaking his head.

"You have to earn my kiss, Fallon."

I took a deep breath, too loose and relaxed to argue with him. "I'll work on that. Maybe I'll surprise you."

His chin lifted, and I chuckled. Telling him I was willing to earn his kiss *had* surprised him. I held my hand out to him. Sundown stared at it for the space of several heartbeats, then took it. I closed my fingers around his and drew him up to my lap. He sat stiffly, his back rigid, as if he didn't get this close to his tricks very often.

"Relax. Everyone needs a little tenderness, Sundown."

"Be careful what you give away, Fallon. It might never come back to you."

No, I didn't expect it would, not from him. I hugged him, a quick tightening of my arms around him, then I released him.

"This was grand, but I need to get home. I'll catch a few hours of sleep, then I'll see what I can find out about Michael Carlton's clientele. Have you told me all you know?"

Sundown took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's all

business with you, isn't it? Well, that's good, I suppose." He laid his palm along my check, surprising me this time. "As you said, he was someone's offspring. They deserve justice."

"So does he, Sundown. No one should die the way he did. What else can you tell me?"

He looked at me, his eyes earnest, and worried. "Will you trust me again, Fallon? Just until tomorrow?"

The hair on my arms prickled with unease. "You need to talk to someone first?"

Sundown nodded. "I want to be truthful with you. Whoever did this killing must be found and stopped. I will help however I can." He slid from my lap, picked up my shirt and T-shirt, and handed them to me.

I fought back the wave of disappointment that swept me. He hadn't asked me to spend the night, not that I could. I'd already lingered too long. I slipped my undershirt over my head, strapped on my shoulder holster, and balled up my dress shirt and stuffed it into the pocket of my sports coat. I pulled up my pants, tucked everything safely inside, and zipped.

I opened the door, then paused and turned back to him. It hurt to be curt with him, but I had no choice.

"You need to trust me, too, Sundown, because if my investigation proves you're protecting someone criminally involved, I'll have to charge you to the level of your involvement."

He didn't reply as I stepped out into the night and closed the door behind myself.

Behind the door, I heard a dog whine.

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 4

My car was where I left it, miraculously intact. Shaking with exhaustion and reaction from my encounter with Sundown, I slid behind the wheel and locked the doors. I'd never done anything this stupid before in my life. He was a hooker, and I'd permitted him give me a blowjob in the middle of his kitchen. He could have a hundred photos to download off a hidden camera, and if he did, my career was toast.

I fumbled with my keys, but finally managed to drive the right one into the slot and hit the ignition. I arrived home with no clear recollection of the route I'd taken. I'd told Juny I was fine, but I was in bad shape. Inside my apartment, I kicked off my shoes and peeled out of my clothes on the way to my bed, letting everything lay where it fell except my gun, which I laid on the special shelf I'd screwed onto the side of my nightstand.

I'd sleep with the gun under my pillow, but I feared shooting my ear off. Or something worse.

My head ached dully, and my stomach growled for food, but I ignored everything. It was even too much effort to stand to piss, so I sat. Pride be hanged; it probably saved me from wiping up a sticky, smelly puddle in the morning.

The next thing I knew, it was morning, and Juny perched on the edge of my bed, shaking me awake. I blinked his worried face into focus, while I questioned the wisdom of giving him a key to my door.

"You look like hell, boy, but your eyes are sure patriotic."

"Yeah, yeah. Red, white and blue. Funny." Damn, my throat was scratchy. "What time is it?"

"After nine, bucko. I pleaded your case to the captain. Told him you're still running on short sleep from last week. He'll let you slide."

"That's decent of him. Stop looking at my dick and let me up."

Juny snickered. "You call that nubbin a dick? Really?" He stood, then picked up my strewn clothes and flipped them over the foot of the bed. "Who was he?"

My heart lurched, but I remained outwardly calm. "You're such a mother hen. Who was who?"

"Christ, Fallon, we've worked together for almost six years. You reek. I know you got fucked last night."

I sniffed an armpit. He was right, but I wasn't going to admit a thing. Juny never made any nasty comments about my being gay, and I wanted to keep it that way. He was straight as an arrow, and his quiet acceptance meant a lot to me. Yeah, we ragged on each other, the queer and the redneck, but woe to anyone else who did likewise. We didn't stand for it.

"Sorry to offend your delicate sensibilities, Sergeant Mack. Why don't you take pity on me and put on coffee while I get a shower?"

He grunted, but he ambled out of my bedroom, which is all I currently cared about. I closed the door behind him. We did know each other, and he'd respect my need for privacy. My clothes needed to go in the hamper. I picked them up and inhaled the lingering traces of patchouli and sandalwood. Disjointed imagines of dreams flashed through my mind, so strong and vibrant, they rendered me unable to move, save for one of my organs. My penis took a great delight at the thought of having Sundown in my bed.

Had I really dreamed of him last night, or was it wishful thinking? It didn't matter. I pushed all thoughts of him aside. While I sat here allowing my prick to dictate to me, a killer was out there. I tossed my ruined slacks in the trashcan and everything else in the hamper, noting with great dismay I needed to find time to do my laundry.

I looked in the bathroom mirror, and a pair of bloodshot blue orbs stared back. Juny was right. My eyes did proudly display the national colors.

The steam of the shower was heavenly. I lifted my chin to the hot water and let it beat me in the face while the ball of my left foot plugged the drain so the water could pool around my feet. I stepped back into the bedroom and noted the door remained closed, although a cup of coffee sat on the dresser. I didn't have to meet with any brass today, so I got a pair of jeans and a polo shirt out of the closet. Dressed, I took my half-full cup of coffee back to the kitchen. Juny topped it off for me.

"While you were in there primping in the mirror, I handled

some business."

"Primping? Ha. Ha. I didn't even shave. What business?"

"Michael Carlton's parents are coming to identify and claim the body. The captain spoke with them last night." He paused and sipped his brew. "You got bread?"

I nodded and got up to put four slices in the toaster. I set the peanut butter and jelly on the table in front of Juny. "What other business do you have?"

"The owner of the stolen knife collection is coming down to headquarters around eleven-thirty this morning to look at the murder weapon. I need you to meet him. I have a lead I want to follow."

The toaster popped. I gave him two slices and kept two for myself, slathering on the gooey stuff before handing him the knife.

"What lead? And don't talk to me about Bigfoot."

Juny batted long black eyelashes wasted on a straight man at me. "As soon as you find a better explanation for the hair and blood samples, I'll listen."

"I'll remember that because, sooner or later, the lab will place it."

"Sure they will." He shoved the last of his toast into his mouth and washed it down with a big gulp of coffee. I did likewise, placing the cups and knife in the sink. They'd keep until this evening.

"Where'd you go last night, anyway?"

"Up a dead end street, for the most part, but I do have something to show you, and here is better than at the office. C'mon." I motioned for him to follow me to my computer. I slipped the memory card from my camera into the slot and let the photos load. "Okay, Junior, what do you see?" "Poor composition. Frames out of focus. Whoever took these pictures isn't in the running for a Pulitzer, is he?"

"You always have my back, Juny." I smacked his hand as he reached for the mouse. He knew better than to touch my equipment. "Which one do you want to see?"

Juny pointed to the thumbnail, and I clicked on it, enlarging the photo. He cocked his head.

"I don't think I like this, Fallon. Is the shadow the cross on top of St. Anne's steeple?"

"Yep."

"Shit."

"Yep." I transferred the photos I'd taken in the alley yesterday evening to my hard drive, then wiped them off the memory card and reinstalled it in the camera.

"I don't think we need to share the shadow tidbit just yet."

Juny put his hand on my shoulder. "You got that right. Show me this one, too."

I complied and glanced up at him. He shook his head. "Trick of the light. I thought I saw someone standing there, but it's just the way the bricks are laid."

I squinted at the picture. It did look like some ghostly form standing there, but that was impossible. Juny was correct, and it was a trick of the light.

A trick of the light.

"Shit, Juny. I should've been in the alley at dawn this morning, taking pictures."

His fingers tightened on my shoulder. "Yeah, we need to stand at the back wall and look out toward the street. We've got time."

I pushed my chair back. "Let's roll."

* * *

I shivered in the cold, damp air in the alley. The bricks retained none of the heat from yesterday's sunshine. I plastered my butt to the back wall and took a round of photos while Juny lurked unhappily along the street. I didn't see anything new. It wouldn't be the first time we'd been wrong, but my gut said we weren't. We just hadn't seen whatever we needed to see yet. It would come. I exited the alley.

"I'm stumped for now, Juny. Are you going to tell me where you're going this morning?"

"To see Father Mack."

I responded with the wisdom of the ages. I said nothing. Juny and his brother rarely spoke to each other.

"I'll be at headquarters. Later." My partner was on his own when it came to family, but at least he had some.

I watched Juny make the turn onto McKee Street before I started my car. I ached to sneak over to the boarding house and climb the back stairs. Would Sundown welcome me? Would it piss him off? I didn't know. It was a good thing I didn't have time to indulge such stupidity. I put the car in gear and looked in the rearview mirror. A black dog sat on the sidewalk behind my car. The big red "S" popped out on my forehead, and I had to go see if the beastie had a collar and might be lost.

I switched off the engine and got back out of the car. Approaching the dog with caution, I made a mental note to get a bag of biscuits, or something, if I ended up spending a lot of time in this neighborhood. I held my hand out to him. He backed away.

"What? You won't be my friend if I don't have treats?"

He woofed at me, still backing away.

"I don't have time to play, but I'll have a treat for you the next time I come around." I started to walk away, but he barked again, louder this time. I stopped.

"Look, fella, I don't have time to play. Sorry."

The dog yelped and trotted to the corner. Once there, he turned back to me and barked again. Curious to see what he'd do, I remained motionless. He ran back to me, nudged my hand, and trotted back to the corner.

I'd watched *Lassie* as a kid, but that was all training, wasn't it? What did I really know about dogs? I loved them, but had never had one, although I planned to get one when I retired. Maybe the follow-me trick built on some natural dog tendency. I took three steps in his direction, and the mutt vanished around the corner. I threw my hands up in the air and got back in my car. I had work to do back at headquarters.

The owner of the murder weapon was pleased enough we'd recovered his property, but unhappy it to learn it had killed. When I told him we had to keep it until we'd solved the case, he shrugged. He planned to sell it whenever he got it back, and reimburse his insurance company. I didn't much blame him. I wouldn't want it now, either.

I filed the paperwork on the knife and made my way to the forensics lab. Luck was with me and I found an empty workroom where I could display the official crime scene photos on a large surface. One by one, I went through the pictures, but nothing new grabbed me until I spotted Muffin in the crowd. I zoomed in on her.

Damn.

Rapidly, I went back and pulled all the shots she was in and used the zoom. How had I missed it before? She looked enough like Sundown to be his sister. I'd missed the similarities because I'd been thinking with my penis, not my brain.

Same black hair, same cheekbones, same easy stance, and, in my mind's eye, I saw the same green eyes. How could I have missed those eyes?

She'd said I'd never see her again. What had my little interlude with Sundown really been? Nothing more than a diversion to keep me occupied while she got safely out of town?

God, I was twelve kinds of a fool. They'd executed a perfect end-run around me. Muffin knew a lot more than she'd told me, and now I'd have to win Sundown's cooperation to get to her. I'd have to take Juny with me because if I saw Sundown alone, it would be a repeat of last night. I knew it. I wanted it. I had to find Juny and confess, and then we'd go find Sundown. My phone rang, startling me. I could start to eat crow right now.

"Hey, Junior, what's up?"

"I know that voice. You've done something dumb, but you'll get away with it this time. Father Mack was actually helpful, so I'm gonna run down a lead. Call me if you need me. If not, I'll see you in the morning."

He must have a great lead, but I didn't question him. He had terrific instincts.

"I spotted someone in a bunch of the photos and I'm going to go see if I can track her down. I'm going to request a patrol car to help me look for her."

"Sounds good. I'll be at your place tomorrow morning, six o'clock. I'll bring the coffee."

That was our code he didn't want to share too much information over the phone. We figured out a lot of cases sitting at my quiet table, away from the never-ceasing noise of headquarters.

"Okay, Juny, see you then."

THE BACK STAIRS

I snapped my phone closed and tried to deny the foolish excitement rising inside me at the prospect of seeing Sundown again, knowing full well where it might lead.

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 5

I parked my car in the market lot again. If someone inside made me as a cop, so be it. I didn't much care if the neighborhood went on alert. If my presence, and that of the patrol car cruising a tenblock grid, sent a few drug dealers back to their rat holes for the night, I could live with it.

As I walked across the parking area, a movement in the right corner of my vision caught my attention. It was the black dog I'd seen earlier today. I turned and walked toward him. The mutt scurried away. That was fine because I didn't have anything for him. I slipped between the buildings and parked my ass on the hot metal treads of the back stairs of the boarding house. It wasn't long before the dog trotted around the corner and stopped in his tracks.

I swear he looked surprised. For a dog, that is. I waved to him.

"Hi, dog."

He promptly sat back on his haunches and stared at me with curious brown eyes. "If you recall, you snubbed me a few minutes ago. Cat got your tongue?"

He blinked.

"That's what I thought." I pointed up the steps. "Well, I'm going up to the top to visit a friend. Are you tagging along?"

The dog whined and crept closer, stopping just out of reach. I put my elbows on my knees, rested my chin in my hands and studied him. I'd bet my paycheck he was one intelligent animal. I definitely had the sense someone was home behind that interested stare. Maybe he was homeless, and I could help with that.

"There's something really strange about you. I think my partner is wearing off on me. So what's it gonna be, dog?"

He looked up at me, then, with a sigh, lay down on the concrete, with his chin on his paws. I rolled to my feet and started the climb to the fourth floor. At the first landing, I looked back and he was gone. *Well, damn*. I guess I wasn't taking him home with me.

I was two steps beyond the third landing when a male voice called to me from below. My heart slammed against my ribs.

"Lieutenant Roxbury, wait up."

I paused and looked over my shoulder as Sundown took the steps, two at a time, to catch up. He stopped on the landing below me and met my gaze, his green eyes alight with amusement.

"I did not expect you to return so soon, Fallon."

I wasn't in the mood to waste time in small talk. He'd deliberately sidetracked me the other night and, as wonderful as the diversion had been, he needed to know I was aware of his tactics.

"The girl I spoke with at the crime scene is your sister, and you didn't tell me. Why?"

"Because she is not my sister. I wouldn't lie to you."

I hopped down the two steps to the landing. "Listen, Sundown, or whatever your name really is, I have photos of her, part of the formal record of the crime scene. She looks enough like you to be your twin. If I hadn't let my dick control me, I'd have put it together last night."

He glanced away, a quick darting of his gorgeous eyes, then he looked back.

"She is not my sister, but we share a bloodline. She is gone, Fallon."

"You're hindering my investigation by hiding her."

Sundown shook his head. "She didn't see Michael Carlton, dead or alive, or anyone go in or out of the alley until your people showed up."

I clamped down on my anger. "That's good to know, but I need to hear it from her."

"Do you?" He cocked his head to the side. "You're out of luck, Fallon. She is gone from here, and it is beyond my ability to bring her back."

"Why'd she send me here, then?"

His green eyes flashed with his inner fire, anchoring me where I stood. "So I could give you want you needed, Fallon. What you need me to give you again."

"Don't be so damn sure of yourself. I don't need you." I lied, and he knew it, the knowledge reflected back at me in his level gaze.

"Come inside and tell me you do not need what I offer you."

I didn't think I could. My resolve to bully him into giving up Muffin's whereabouts waned with every pheromone-laden breath I took. I stood inside the ring of warmth and scent that surrounded him. My erection relentlessly swelled toward completion, and I couldn't stop it.

"I can't compromise my investigation further, Sundown. Carlton's parents are flying in to claim the body. I *need* to have answers for them."

His fingers grazed mine, the gentle touch heating my blood.

"I knew you were a good man. I trust you, Fallon. Will you trust me?"

"I trust you to be nothing but trouble."

A wide grin split his face. "You'll see how right you are, but not today. Today is for you to climb the last steps and come inside." The smile faded. "I have things to share with you, if you will trust me."

I had to give it one last-ditch effort to move away from him. "That's very cryptic. I don't enjoy playing games, Sundown."

"Nor do I. Perhaps my truth is best kept silent."

Damn him. He played me perfectly, knowing my curiosity wouldn't allow me to walk away. I went up a step and stood aside so he could get past me on the narrow metal stairs.

"You win."

He shook his head as he squeezed by. "I don't think so, but we will see."

I followed him, my gaze on his ass. It was dark and cool inside his apartment, the shades and drapes drawn against the afternoon heat. I'd never be able to smell sandalwood and patchouli again without seeing this room. My mouth went dry as I watched him pull his T-shirt over his head.

I was a good cop, for the most part, but my fall from grace stood in front of me. God help me because I went to him with my eyes open, knowing what I was about to do damned my career. I moved to stand in front of him and put my hands on his golden skin.

Sundown slipped his arms around my waist, and we stood there, leaning on each other, barely breathing, while the room grew unbearably hot, and my jeans painfully tight. I ran my hands over his smooth back, trailing my fingertips through the beads of sweat that popped up beneath my caress.

I stopped him when he started to unbuckle my belt. I wasn't so far gone I forgot he shouldn't touch my holster and leave fingerprints on it. I pulled the gun free of its black leather sheath and laid it on his kitchen table, ready. It was only two steps away from the bed. I deemed it close enough, and he seemed to understand, although we didn't speak. I put my cell phone on the table, too, in case I got a page, but I prayed I wouldn't.

He understood even better when I pulled the one condom I always carried out of my wallet. Sundown took a deep breath and nodded. I tossed the packet on the bed. Amid fumbling hands and grunts that passed for communication, the rest of our clothes came off. He reached for me as my jeans pooled around my ankles. I feared I was too keyed up to accept his touch, and stopped his hand. I didn't want to blow my load all over his floor. His feral grin reminded me of the dog.

I'd gone over the edge, no doubt about it.

Sinking to my knees, I eased his briefs off his hips, the last piece of clothing to go. His beautiful cock pointed straight at my mouth, so I did the only natural thing and slid my lips down over it. He buried his fingers in my hair and thrust his pelvis against my face.

Did any of his tricks give him tenderness? I would be the one who did because of what he'd already given to me. Something about him drew me like a magnet, and I didn't want to break his pull.

His cock seemed large for his slender frame, full and thick, the ideal of what I liked. Sundown was cut, which I greatly preferred when giving head, and I gave the rim some special attention. I ran my hands up the back of his thighs to cup his buttocks, holding him as his knees shook against my torso. Had I been standing, mine would shake as badly. He moaned when I released him and tried to draw my mouth back to his dick. I struggled to my feet and propelled him toward the bed.

Sundown yanked the covers to the foot of the mattress and threw himself down on the maroon sheets. I let my eyes feast on the twin white globes of his ass as his hand searched for something just under the bed. He finally pulled out a shoebox with an assortment of sex supplies and selected a lubricant. I took it from him and drizzled a steady stream of thick liquid over his buttocks, letting it run down into dark, hidden places.

I couldn't find the foil packet and surmised he must be lying on it. I slipped my questing hand beneath him, and a round of giggling ensued. The heavy, silent vibe between us shattered. I fell to the bed beside him, grabbed him, and rolled us over.

"This is not to your advantage, Fallon!" With a powerful twist of his lithe body, he rolled me beneath him. I locked my heels around the back of his knees and flipped him.

"Who has the advantage now? Where's the damn rubber, Sundown?"

"Is that what you're looking for?"

"Give it to me, boy, or I'll cuff ya!" I wheezed as his strong legs squeezed my sides. "Let me breathe." We rolled again, perilously close to the edge of the mattress.

"Ha! I'll cuff— Ouch!"

My hand had connected with his right butt cheek.

"Not fair, Lieutenant. You tease me with the prospect of handcuffs, then you spank me instead."

I growled at him as I spied the condom. I pushed away from him and snatched it off the rumpled sheet.

"Next time, I'll use the handcuffs. I left them in the car today." I ripped open the foil square and dumped the round disc into my palm. As Sundown picked it up, his gaze drilled into mine.

"You don't want me to touch you today, but allow me this much."

Taken aback, I stared at him for a moment. "I gave you the wrong impression, then. Hurry up, will ya?"

His brows knit together. "So do you plan to fuck me, then run home?"

Shit. Would I ever learn to say the right things? I touched his face. "No, and yes. I'll have to go home sometime, but maybe not right away."

I motioned for him to get on about his business. With a light, practiced touch, he sheathed me in latex, then looked at me, questioning. I offered him a little more reassurance. I did want his touch. I already craved it in ways that had me unsettled.

"If you'd touched me like that earlier, I'd have embarrassed myself all over your rug."

Sundown almost managed not to laugh, but it was okay. I didn't care. I put my hands on his sides and urged him to roll over. He resisted and argued. "No. I want to see your face, Fallon."

I gripped his hips a little tighter. "And I want to make sure I don't hurt you. Now roll over on your belly."

"You won't hurt me. I trust you."

"You don't fucking know me. Now move it!"

THE BACK STAIRS

He wasn't having any of it and cut me with his words.

"You're not a paying customer, so you don't get to have it all your way."

I released him. "You know, for a few minutes there, I forgot you're a hustler."

Could I be more stupid?

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 6

I regretted the words the moment they fell out of my mouth and reached for him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

The look on his face brought me up short. Instead of displaying anger or hurt, he struggled to hide his amusement. I narrowed my eyes. He licked his lips.

"Fallon, you do *not* know me at all. But someday, perhaps you will."

There I was, straddling him, my dick in my hand, and he wanted to play cryptic word games. What was the price of getting him on his belly with his ass in the air for me?

"What the hell does that mean? Never mind. Just roll over. I promise to cuff you to the bed *and* spank you next time."

He snickered and pulled his knees up to his chest, thighs spread

to show me everything he had. The rosy, full cock on his pale belly, the lobed sac with its smattering of hairs, the round tight rosebud good grief, what a tempting display, and he knew it. Sundown smiled, his full lips bowed beneath a green gaze full of challenge.

"Take what I offer while you can."

I conceded and agreed to momentary defeat. I wanted him, and he could have me any way he wanted to take me. My palm connected with his left buttock, hard. Sundown yelped, sounding for all the world just like a dog. I smacked him again, and he growled.

"You will cease that, Fallon, if you wish to continue."

"Right. I know better. Put your feet on my shoulders and take a deep breath."

With a smile on his lips, he did as I'd asked without protest, or comment.

Amazing.

I feared we'd rubbed too much of the lube off on the sheets, so I grabbed the tube and squirted a generous amount over him, refreshing what was already there. Tossing it aside, I teased his puckered flesh. Sundown squirmed under my touch, eagerly pressing against my fingers as they massaged and prepared him. I shifted my body forward and eased my cock that first bit into him. He started to shake.

"Easy, easy. I won't go faster than you want. I swear."

His eyelashes fluttered on his flushed cheeks, and I flexed my pelvis, slipping another inch through his twitching sphincter. I eased forward with a slow, careful push, and his body yielded to my invading shaft. I slid into him, fully seated. The heat of him stole my breath, and his gleaming green gaze drew me down to him. Sundown flattened his palms against my chest, preventing me from kissing him.

"No, Fallon."

His refusal to kiss me stung, but I didn't dwell on it. I eased out, just a bit, then pressed my advantage again. Deep in his throat, he sighed, and the sound sent a new burst of selfish need through me. I wanted to see his face as he climaxed. I guided his hand to his cock and got down to business. I didn't expect to last long. His body fisted around mine was just too damn perfect.

Awareness of the room around me ceased as I rocked into him. His knees gripped my sides, anchoring me in some private realm where only sensation existed. It rolled through me, lapping at my nerve endings, as Sundown writhed, restless beneath me. Every time I thrust into him, he sighed, a breathy sound of pleasure that held me captive with the need to hear him make it again. And between us, his hand pumped his cock in a steady rhythm.

A new sound teased my sweaty skin as he started to pant. I drove into him, piston-like, as his shoulders bowed off the bed. Sundown cried out, a sharp sound that ended in a long, drawn out moan as his body shook, racked by orgasmic spasms. I closed my eyes and fell into the velvety darkness, emptying myself into him in heated waves. His legs eased their hold on my ribs, and I collapsed on top of him.

Too hot to tolerate so much skin contact, I had no choice but to give him up. Carefully, I withdrew, and the gentle tug as I slipped out pulled a last groan from his lips. I flopped on my back at his side, but not before I noticed something very important, at least to me.

"Why did you fake it, Sundown?"

He went very still. I worked the condom off and waited for him to lie to me. It shouldn't matter to me he'd faked orgasm. Chalk it up to having what you already know slap you in the face. I had no business fucking a hooker. This insane attraction to him put my career at risk.

"I didn't fake it." Sundown rolled to me, draping his arm across my chest. His thigh covered my groin and stopped my progress getting the rubber off without spilling the contents. His fingertips stroked my face.

"Please don't think you didn't give me pleasure. You did." He drew a deep, ragged breath. "I am not like you, Fallon, and you are not ready to learn the truth."

"Christ, you're annoying."

He drew back as if I'd struck him. "Then why do you bother with me? For information? For release?"

Me and my big mouth. Would I ever learn to think before I opened it? I had a string of failed "relationships" behind me because I blurted out too much stuff after sex.

"I'm sorry, Sundown. That didn't come out right. It's annoying I have to extract information from you, fuck by fuck, which, by the way, isn't any hardship on me. *You* are not annoying. It's the way you dole out the info that bugs me."

His somber gaze regarded me quietly.

"Okay, so you didn't fake it, but you didn't shoot either. I guess in your line of work, it can happen. I never have much of a load if I go a second round, and who the hell knows about the third, because I'd be dead if I tried it."

One dark eyebrow rose. He blinked and his chest expanded as he drew a slow breath. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to fidget under his cool green perusal. Maybe I'd get lucky and the bed would swallow me up and hide me—and my stupidity.

"Okay, Sundown, so you have to make a living. I get that, too.

Say something!"

"You do not understand, Fallon, not yet. I see I must tell you more, or not see you again." He leaned in and stroked his knuckles softly over my cheek. "Truth, Fallon. Being with you was quite pleasurable for me."

I tried to think of something pithy to say, and failed, as I suddenly realized I didn't need both of my feet in my mouth. The cop part of me wanted to question him and find out just what more he had to tell me, but the part of me that was a simple, lonely, tired man won the moment.

"I'm glad I managed to do one thing properly today." I closed my eyes and wished I dared take a nap, but I knew I didn't dare. He must have read my mind.

"Sleep for a few minutes. I'll watch over you."

I tried to refuse, to fight off the blackness sucking at my mind, but I couldn't speak. My limbs were too heavy to move, and his hand stroking my face brought back faded memories of an earlier, peaceful life. I hoped he knew...something...

* * *

"Fallon! Wake up!"

I woke with a start, arms and legs flailing. Heart hammering in my chest, I groped for my ringing cell phone. Sundown slapped it into the palm of my hand, his face blurred on the fringes of my vision as I struggled to prop up on my elbow. I flipped the phone open and prayed my voice would work.

"Yeah. What?"

"Where the fuck are you? We got another body, same as Carlton. I need you to get your whoring ass to McGregor Park." The connection broke.

Junior was pissed, and I didn't blame him. I managed to push myself into a sitting position as the world spun around me in dizzy loops and circles. What the hell was going on? I'd never felt this disoriented before in my life. Never. Gentle fingers stroked the back of my neck, growing firmer as they pushed my head down between my knees.

"I'm sorry, Fallon. I should have asked you before I burned herbs to help you sleep. I didn't think ahead that you might get a call. I only thought you needed rest."

I had no clue what he blathered about, and I didn't care. I waved him away from me. "I've got to go. There's been another killing."

Sundown drew back as if I'd struck him. "Where?"

I told him as I snatched my socks off the floor. He hopped off the bed and tossed my underwear and pants to me.

"Can I help you in any way, Fallon?"

I shook my head. "No. I don't want you anywhere near McGregor Park." *Shit!*

I hadn't meant to tell him the location. What was it about him that I couldn't keep my mouth shut and my pants on? I murmured my thanks as he handed me my shirt and sat beside me on the edge of the bed.

"Look, Sundown. Whoever this is may be gearing up for a long spree. I'd prefer he not get a look at you. If he divines something between you and me, you may become a target."

Those beautiful eyes blinked. "You're serious."

"As a heart attack. Sometimes serial killers fade into the background; find a secure place to observe the police. They want to see who gathers to admire their work." I turned and grasped his arms. "I want you to stay here and be safe."

I rolled to my feet and strapped on my weapon under his worried gaze. I hoped he'd be smart and do what I asked, so I made a promise I knew I couldn't keep.

"Listen, Sundown. I'll tell you everything I can in a day or two."

He pressed his lips together. "You think I'll allow you to come back here?"

I ran my thumb over his lips. He couldn't keep the smile off his face.

"Yeah, you'll let me come back. Now, stay out of trouble, will ya?"

"I will do my best."

Sure he would. I believed him—for about a second. "Okay. Later."

I bolted for the door and didn't look back. Going down the back stairs was a lot easier than going up. I swung over the railings to lower treads and made it the ground in record time. It would take me about ten minutes to get to the crime scene from here. I was actually closer than I would have been had I been home alone in my cozy apartment. I threw myself into my car and flipped on the flashing red lights and siren to scatter traffic out of my way.

* * *

Juny scowled at me when I ducked under the yellow police tape, camera in hand.

"I should be upset with you, and I would be, except I don't remember you ever throwing me over for another man two days in a row."

"Stow it, Junior. I'm entitled to a private life, with my privates."

"Yeah, yeah. Be glad you still have yours, unlike yonder poor fellow."

My cock and balls retracted, pulling up as tightly to my body as possible. "If this keeps up, I'm going to learn how to tuck."

Juny frowned. "What the hell are you muttering about now?"

"Never mind, Sergeant Mack." I took a deep breath. "I need a closer look."

Being a cop was full of surreal moments, and this was one of them. The naked body of a young man—maybe sixteen, maybe younger—lay propped against an outcropping of local limestone, genitals missing. It bothered me I could look at what remained of a handsome young man...and feel nothing. I suppose being able to maintain emotional distance kept me sane, but that remoteness had damaged me. I couldn't connect with people on a personal level, couldn't open myself up to them fully, even when I wanted to.

I hoped Sundown had obeyed me and remained inside his apartment. I turned to Juny.

"It doesn't take any special talent to see this body was posed, too. Our perp's moving fast, and we're falling behind even faster."

Juny scratched his chin as he systematically swept the area around the body with his flashlight, looking for clues. "Yeah, the bastard. What's that?"

I saw the glint of a silver blade at the same moment as Juny. "I got a weapon over here!"

One of the uniforms walked over and handed me an evidence bag. I thanked him as Juny handed me a pair of latex gloves, then held the flashlight with the beam steady on the knife. I knelt, snapped four or five pictures, then gingerly lifted it out of the grass.

"This is from the same stolen collection as the other one, Juny. I guess Bigfoot can't get a good deal at the local pawn shops."

"Fuck you, Roxy. What are you going to say if they lift matching hair and blood samples at this crime scene?"

I turned the knife over, took a few more photos, then bagged it. "Nothing. I'll concede defeat." I'd do nothing of the sort, and he knew it.

I sealed the bag before I handed it to Juny. He whistled appreciatively.

"Six-inch stainless steel blade. What's this one worth?"

"I'm pretty sure this is the four-thousand-dollar knife. I remember the distinctive shading on the stag handle." I blew out a tired breath and accepted the bag back. The bladesmith who forged this knife didn't make it with mutilation and murder in mind.

So why steal a very expensive art knife collection, keep it for a couple of years, then suddenly start throwing the knives away? The only answer I had chilled me to the bone. Whoever had committed these two murders was creating his own art, ergo, only the finest blades would do to touch his creations.

That assumption wasn't something I wanted to share with the Carltons, or the family of this unfortunate boy, when their grieffilled eyes asked me for answers. I clicked off a few shots of the body. In a flash burst, a pair of reflective eyes glowed out of the darkness.

I grabbed Juny's wrist and aimed the flashlight beam into the shadow. The black dog sat on his haunches, watching. Juny jerked his arm away.

"Leave the fucking dog alone, will ya, Fallon?"

Quick as any practiced street snatch, I lifted a pack of crackers from Juny's coat pocket, and acted as though nothing had happened.

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 7

I would have listened to Juny and ignored the mutt, but the dog crept closer. Every few minutes, I glanced in his direction to discover he'd come a body length, or maybe two, nearer. I wondered what he was doing six blocks from where I guessed was his home turf, but I'd figure that out later. I had to finish working the scene before I could give the dog a cracker and admit to myself that I wanted to take him home.

A dog would be good company in the evenings. Yeah, sure, I'd have to make arrangements with a dog sitter, but that was a small annoyance. I was forty. I needed companionship; hence my fascination with a hooker. The dog was a much better idea.

Sundown liked dogs. I'd heard one whine the first night I was there. I hadn't seen it, but it probably had a dark spot in which to hide when the master's tricks came calling. None of this speculation was getting the necessary work done.

I needed away from this job that put dead bodies in front of me all the time. I'd never last another six years investigating crimes like this one. I'd grown too jaded, become too out of touch with myself, too emotionally removed from the man I used to be.

I stepped away from the throng of officers and other personnel, into a dark shadow, and drew in a deep, clean breath, one free of the smell of blood and death. A cold nose nudged my hand.

"Okay, okay. One cracker now and the rest when we have some privacy." I pulled the stolen crackers from my pocket, unwrapped them, and gave the dog my offering. He snapped it out of my fingers.

I couldn't hold back on him when he was obviously hungry. He was only a bit more careful gobbling up the second cracker. When I held out the third, he refused it, whining instead. I tried again, and he backed away.

"And here I felt sorry for you." I re-wrapped the remaining crackers as best I could in the mangled cellophane, and put them back in my pocket. I knelt and stretched out my hand to him, hoping he'd allow me to touch him.

The dog came to me, sat, and held up a front paw. I moved to take it, and he bounded away.

"Tease. I've got to get back to work. Stick around, and we'll talk more."

I stood and turned with all intention of going back to work, but when I took the first step, the mutt came out of the darkness and tripped me. I hit the ground, hard. The dog licked my face, being friendly, but I shoved him away.

"Not funny, ya smart ass." I checked my stinging palms for

blood, but found only dirt and grass. The beast licked me again, then grabbed my sleeve and tugged. I swatted at him.

"This is not the time to play." To my vast and unpleasant surprise, he growled at me. I wasn't amused. I started to roll to my knees, then froze, as my blood turned to ice.

The black dog sat in the light thrown by one of the large halogen globes used to light the crime scene, and stared into my eyes. His eyes were as green as Sundown's.

I jerked away and fell back on my ass as he looked at me with uncanny intelligence. *What the fuck?*

He whined and dropped to his belly, creeping closer until he lay plastered against me. I turned his head and forced him to look at me. Bright green eyes met my gaze. *What the fuck?*

This wasn't my imagination. I was awake. I heard the police sounds behind me, smelled the blood. The ground was hard beneath my bony ass, and the dog's fur was soft under my fingertips. My brain refused to speculate on what had just happened in front of me. The dog seemed to have it more together. He tugged on my sleeve again. I yanked away.

"I'm not doing the Lassie thing and following you."

Christ! I talked to him like he could understand me or something! Before I could stop him, the mutt darted into the shadows and disappeared. I shivered as the cold ground sent icy tendrils around my tailbone, but I was too exhausted to care. I drew my knees up, preparing to stand, then I rested my forehead against them.

First thing in the morning, I planned to have a long talk with my partner, then with the captain. I needed a break. Maybe I could wrangle a week off to rest and regroup, and get my head screwed back on. I was going to fuck up this investigation because I was too tired to focus. But for right now, I had to look alive and keep Juny from seeing something was wrong. I took a deep breath. A strong hand squeezed my shoulder.

"Do you need help getting up?"

I raised my head at the familiar voice, and the hand swam into focus in front of my face. I accepted his offer and he hauled me to my feet. Sundown was strong for such a slender man.

"What the hell are you doing here, Sundown? I told you to stay put." I searched his face for some clue of why he'd followed me. The urgency in him was palpable as he gripped my wrist.

"I can help, but you must trust me."

"How can you help? You weren't here. You couldn't have witnessed anything." My heart dropped to my feet. "Do you know this victim, too?"

"I've seen him around. He was a runaway, like Michael, only this boy was troubled. I think he did not care for his life and probably welcomed death."

My stomach churned. "Not like this he wouldn't, Sundown. No one would."

"No, you're right. Time is precious." He tugged on my sleeve. "Fallon, will you trust me?"

I frowned at him. He kept asking me to trust him, and I didn't know how to do it yet. "What are you going to do?"

Sundown looked worried. "You've got to pay attention to the dog. He's got something to show you."

What the fuck? "The dog has to show me something? Why the dog?"

"He has to show you because no one can question him." His scent and heat washed over me as he stepped closer and lowered his voice. "I beg you, Fallon. Do this." Sundown released my wrist and backed into the shadows before I could draw a breath to argue. Behind me, Juny yelled for me, calling me to come see something he'd found. I rolled my shoulders and tried to get my mind back on my work, but my brain refused. I yelled at Juny to take a chill pill. He shouted a few obscenities at me, but I didn't hear all of it. The dog was back, his green eyes glowing at me.

No way. No fucking way.

The strangest notion I ever had in my life teased the fringes of my sanity.

Think, asshole. When have you ever seen a dog with green eyes?

No, I hadn't, ever. Dogs don't have green eyes.

Sundown does.

The world took a nasty dip in front of me, tilting me sideways before it suddenly righted itself. The dog whined. I hunkered down, but my shaking thighs betrayed me and I ended up with my knees on the ground to maintain my balance. I held out my hand to him and whispered what should have been complete and utter nonsense.

"Sundown?"

The dog rushed me. I grabbed at him to keep from falling over. His tail wagged furiously as he licked my face while I held on to his wiggling body in a vain attempt to get him to calm down. My vision hazed around the edges, and for a split second I feared I was about to black out. What had Sundown done to me at his apartment? He spoke of burning herbs. Had it been something with properties similar to marijuana? Was I fucking high?

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and turned my focus inward. I experienced no dizziness, no urge for sleep. My heart pounded abnormally fast—and hard—but that was all. No strange aftertaste when I blew my breath out. No munchies, either. I was much too sober to believe what I did. I opened my eyes and stared at the dog. With great care, he grasped my wrist with a mouth full of very sharp teeth and tugged.

Heaven help me.

"Okay. Let go of me, and I'll follow you."

He released me and raced away. I stared into the blackness, unable to fully comprehend what I knew was true.

How could I possibly believe Sundown could change... I needed help. Too many crime scenes. Too many mutilated bodies. Years of being on the front line and seeing the carnage that mankind inflicted upon itself had won. I'd snapped. No vacation could fix me now.

I'd lingered too long, and the dog was back, creeping on his belly, whining. Behind me, Juny was hollering profanities again. I continued to ignore Junior as my brain started functioning again.

Sundown said it. He knew something, and the dog couldn't testify. If he showed me while he was in the shape of a dog, it would appear I'd discovered it on my own. I had to follow him and find out what was going on.

Christ Jesus, I believed it possible for him to become a dog.

When all the logical possibilities have been exhausted, what remains, however unlikely, must be the truth. Or some such crap. The dog whined, louder this time. I bent over, hanging my head lower than my heart.

"I'm coming. I just need a second so I don't pass out."

I leaped to my feet as the mutt growled at me, his eyes flashing red. The world spun again, although it wasn't as nasty as before. I shook my finger as I glared at Sundown, angry I couldn't control this situation. "Don't do that eye thing again!" I waved my arm at the dark underbrush. "Lead on."

Sundown watched me as he took several hesitant backward steps. As I followed, he turned and trotted away, fast enough I had to hustle to keep up. I drew my gun, making sure all the chambers were loaded. He knew what was in the woods ahead, but I didn't.

Once we were in the trees, hidden from view, I realized his course would circle us around to the other side of the street, across from the crime scene.

Adrenaline flooded my bloodstream. The night was uncomfortably humid, and no air moved amid the trees. Sensing a meal, flying insects swarmed around my sweating face, and no amount of arm waving deterred them, so I gave up.

"Sundown. Stop." I hunkered down as he turned and came back to me. I felt a little silly, asking a dog questions, but he wasn't really a dog, was he?

"Do you know who did this?"

He woofed, once, as his silky head nodded, or at least did the dog imitation of nodding.

"You want to show me who it is?"

Another woof. This just got worse and worse.

"I need backup, and I don't mean you. I need to call Juny while I'm over here and no one can overhear me. Do you understand?"

He did. I whipped out my cell phone and called my partner. Junior Mack wasn't pleased. I took the tongue-lashing for twenty seconds before I told him to shut the fuck up.

"I know, Juny. I know. Now calm down and listen to me. I think the perp is in the crowd across the street. I'll explain later. No time now. I'm circling around behind him. Watch for me and a dog."

Junior howled. "What is with you and fucking dogs? You get

your fag ass back here-now!"

No, Juny, he wasn't a dog when I fucked him.

I kept walking, and not back to my partner. We'd made it through the woods and were exiting the park. I kept my weapon against my side, out of open sight.

"Let's keep it politically correct, Sergeant Redneck. You know how tender my queer boy feelings are. We're crossing Carroll Street. Do you see me?"

"I see you. You'd better be right. If we take this guy in, and he doesn't have any forensic evidence on his clothes or body, we're fucked."

We were behind the group of gawkers, and Sundown suddenly sat behind a twenty-something man with a long blond ponytail flowing from under a ball cap.

"Juny, trust me on this. I'm begging ya." The connection went dead. I pocketed my cell phone and kept to the shadows as I motioned Sundown to come to me. I grabbed his head, just behind his ears.

"Listen to me, Muttly. This is important. We've got to be able to collect hairs, fibers, all the nice, necessary legal shit, off his person. Are you sure? Because if we pop him and don't get it, we have to turn him loose. And if he walks away from us, he'll disappear and kill again. You got it?"

Sundown licked my wrists, so I took that to be a yes. I took a deep breath.

"If you're sure... Fuck me, I'm asking a dog." I wiped the sweat off my face with my shirttail. I was burning up, feverish.

I'd come this far. Juny had changed position, ready to cross the street if I made a move. It was too late for prudence. I stroked my thumbs over Sundown's eyes in a gentle caress.

"If you know we can get what we need, go sit behind him again." The dog licked my mouth and darted away while I sputtered and spit.

I sucked in deep breath as Sundown sneaked up behind the blond, sat on his haunches, and waited.

How the hell could I ever explain this?

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 8

I eased my way behind Sundown, staying in the shadows. I didn't dare try to take any photos—the flash would alert the man in the hat. As stealthily as I knew how to do it, I found the speed dial button for Juny on my phone and pressed it. Within seconds, he lifted his phone to his ear. I hung up and watched my partner have a make-believe conversation. When he started walking toward the police tape, I slid into the crowd at the suspect's shoulder. He stared at the crime scene, transfixed, not taking notice of me at all.

Then it happened. The blond got spooked by something I didn't see. He started to shuffle away from me. I wrapped my fingers around his arm.

"Stop right there." I moved so he could see I had a gun.

A movement on the edge of my vision came into focus and

resolved itself into a uniform cop. That's what he'd seen. The patrolman quickened his pace. From below and behind, the dog growled. Blondie yanked out of my grip and bolted, with me hot on his heels.

The uniform was in good shape and speedy. Unfortunately, he wasn't nimble. He tripped over some unseen rock, root or rut, and went down, face first, into the grass. I whizzed past him without stopping, knowing my suspect—and running definitely made him a suspect—outclassed me. The bastard was fast, but not fast enough to elude my four-footed friend.

A black blur streaked past me and went airborne. I stumbled on legs gone weak with fear. Did Blondie have a weapon? I watched in horror as man and dog slammed into the ground. A surprised yelp put wings on my feet. I flung my body down on top of the writhing mass of arms, legs, paws, and tail.

"Freeze, asshole! You're under arrest!"

Suspects only listen to the cops in the movies. In real life, they don't give up. This fellow was strong and determined. His elbow connected with my mid-section and knocked the air out of me. My hold on him slipped. He scrambled away, with Sundown nipping at his heels. I staggered to my feet and followed them. Behind me, I heard the uniform yelling at him the expected, "stop-or-I'll-shoot" warning.

What if he fired and hit the dog? I only thought I'd ran fast before as I sucked it up and pulled on reserves I didn't know I had. My lungs burned with the effort, but I didn't quit. From the shouting behind me, the cavalry was coming in earnest. *Enough of this*.

"Get him, Sundown!"

The words were barely out of my mouth before the dog sank his

fangs in Blondie's left buttock. The man shrieked like the hounds of hell had him as he crashed to the pavement. Little did he know what actually had him by the ass. Fuck, I didn't know for sure what had him, but I planned to bluff my way through it.

I yanked the handcuffs off my belt and slapped one around his wrist while he was busy trying to save some skin. The palm of his hand connected with the side of my head. A sharp pain shot through my right ear and quickly became an unbearable agony. Lucky for me the uniform had reached us and, between the two of us, I managed to cuff Blondie's other wrist. A second uniform arrived to help, so I backed away from the fray. I'd had enough, and they had Blondie trussed-up and subdued.

"Read him his rights, Officer." Surprised I'd managed to say that much, I sank to the ground and pressed my palm to my ear. I'd never been in such pain in my life.

Sundown was suddenly beside me, plastered to my side. He whined while he licked my hand and face. I grabbed him with my free hand.

"You did good, but you've got to get out of here."

My pulse spiked at the hollow sound of my voice. I took my hand away from my right ear and fought down the panic that threatened to overtake me. I couldn't hear. Sundown licked my neck and I realized I was bleeding from the ear. I grabbed his muzzle.

"I mean it. You've got to go. I'll come to you as soon as I can. Now, get home, and be careful. Scram!"

He let out a sound halfway between a moan and a howl, so low and mournful it surely gave everyone who heard it the distinct impression the beast was in agony. Hearing it, the hair on my arms stood on end. I hugged him as I whispered in his ear, not caring he really did smell like a dog.

"I'm as okay as I can be for right now. Please, puppy, you've got to go before they try and net you for the dog pound. I can't guarantee the ASPCA would give you back to me."

That got his attention. He whimpered again and pressed closer. It hurt me, but I pushed him away. Juny was twelve feet away and running fast.

"Go!"

Sundown tore out from my arms and disappeared into the night. I pressed my palm to my aching ear, fell over, and curled up into a fetal ball. Juny dropped to his knees beside me.

"Fallon! Fallon! Are you hurt?" His big hands pulled at me, trying to get me to uncover my ear. "Are you hurt, man?"

"Shit, Juny, I think he ruptured my eardrum. I can't hear in this ear." A fresh wave of panic crashed through my system. I didn't want to be partially deaf. I couldn't be and still do my job. Juny squeezed my arm.

"The cocksucker. We'll add assaulting a police officer to the list of whatever else we can pin on him." Juny rolled me into a sitting position. "What the hell tipped you off to him?"

I put my forehead against my knees. I didn't want to do this here. I wanted to get to the emergency room and see if I had any hope of hearing in my right ear again. I started to shake. Juny draped an arm around me as he barked out orders to the uniforms.

"Get forensics over here. I want him processed. I want him booked for assaulting Lieutenant Roxbury. I want to know everything there is to know about that asshole. Don't—and I mean don't—fuck this up, or I'll have your badges. You understand me?"

I didn't hear their replies. Maybe I *couldn't* hear them. I grabbed at Juny. "Emergency room."

"Yeah, yeah. I've got you. Can you stand?" His strong arms lifted me, and I stayed on my feet.

I turned to the uniforms. "Thanks, men."

"We got your back, Roxy. Do you want an ambulance?"

Juny—being Juny—chimed in. "No, he don't want no stinkin' ambulance. While you have his back and book this wannabe rabbit, I'll take care of his ass." He applied subtle pressure to my back to get me walking. "My car is right over there, Fallon. See it?"

"Yep. Let's go." I staggered, suddenly dizzy.

Juny held on, supporting me, and we made it to his car. He tucked me safely inside before he jumped into the driver's seat and started the engine. As soon as the car was moving, with lights flashing, he started asking questions.

"How bad is the ear, really?"

I didn't mince words, not with him. "It hurts worse than a toothache, but being scared I'll have to jockey a desk scares me worse than the pain."

"Shit, Fallon. Shit! Fuck! Damn!"

"Yeah, really." I braced myself for his next volley. Would I have to lie to my best friend?

"Answer my question now—what the hell tipped you off?" The tires squealed as he took a turn too fast. I grabbed the grip bar on the dash and held on for my life.

"Slow down, Juny! I'm not going to die, so don't kill me!"

The car didn't slow. If anything, Juny gave it more throttle. Maybe dying would be okay. Anything would be okay as long as it made my ear stop throbbing with every beat of my heart. I had to answer his question, as truthfully as I could.

"I spotted Blondie in the crowd, and I thought I'd seen him at the Carlton murder scene. I circled around to get a better look." *You'd better be safe at home by now, Sundown.* "You thought I was off playing with the dog, didn't you, Junior Mack?"

He snorted as he wheeled the car around another corner, onehanded. "Pissed me off, too. No, you know we've worked together long enough for me to know when you've picked up on something hinky. The ear doing any better?"

Junior Mack, you have no idea just how hinky this night is, and it ain't over yet. "No. I can't hear in it."

"Oh, man, that's not good. Did it bleed?"

"Yes."

"Oh, man. That's not good."

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the headrest, too tired to hold it up any longer. "You said that once, and once was enough. Just drive."

The thoughts whirled around inside my skull like swirling sands. How could I possibly believe my lover... *Whoa*. He wasn't my lover. He was a male prostitute I'd been stupid enough to fuck. So what if he was attractive—and appealing. I couldn't afford to get involved with him. I was a cop.

I was a cop who had probably just lost fifty percent of his hearing. That changed things in a major way, if it was permanent. For my safety, and the safety of fellow officers, I couldn't work on the streets with impaired hearing. How would I handle a desk job? How did I explain what had happened with the dog tonight? What had I seen?

I knew. I'd been there. I wasn't surprised my brain refused to process it all. I didn't have a logical explanation to the contrary, so what had happened was real, right?

What was the name of that little facility out in the mountains of Maryland? Oh, yeah. Brook Lane. A quiet, green place for a long

vacation under the supervision of trained medical professionals who understood the delusional mind. Juny squeezed my knee.

"Still with me, partner?"

I didn't open my eyes. "Yep. I'm trying not to throw up in your car."

"You'd better fucking holler if I need to stop!" Juny started yelling profanities at every driver in his way.

I hated to think of not working with him. He wasn't just my trusted partner; he was my best friend. I grabbed the dash grip with both hands as he skidded to a stop at the entrance to the hospital's emergency room. Juny leaped from his seat and shouted for a wheelchair. I didn't think he needed to hijack resources for me. I wasn't dying. Nonetheless, an orderly appeared and whisked me away to a grim-faced woman half-hidden behind a computer monitor. And she wanted information. I could only think of one thing to tell her.

"There's a skinny guy with black hair and green eyes gonna show up here looking for me. Send him to me, will ya? He's my lov— witness."

She looked at me over the eyeglasses perched on the end of her nose. I wasn't kidding either of us.

"His name?"

Just fuck me. I had to lie fast, and I didn't do that well.

"I only know him as Sundown. He's a police informant, and we need to keep his identity secure for his protection. Humor me, ma'am. Please."

She stared at me for an eternity. "Okay, Lieutenant. We need to keep our boys in blue happy, don't we?"

I thanked her with genuine gratitude, and not a moment too soon. Sundown dropped to his knees beside my wheelchair.

His anxious green eyes peered at me from out of his ashen face. Exhaustion had drawn his skin taut across his cheekbones and his shoulders slumped with weariness. To get here this quickly, he must have run, flat out on all four paws, and it was almost ten city blocks. White knuckles clutched the side of the wheelchair.

I almost reached for him. Almost. I would have pulled him into my lap, but I remembered where we were and the number of witnesses. I covered his cold hand with mine, glad beyond words he'd disobeyed and followed me to the hospital. I sighed, suddenly worn out, and said the first thing that came into my mind.

"You smell like a dog."

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 9

An unfortunate fact of the age we live in is that medical science doesn't have all the answers. By the time the specialist had given me the gloomy news, I had my good ear buried in a pillow to avoid listening to Sundown and Juny snipe at each other.

They hadn't hit it off very well. Juny knew Sundown was a hooker, and Sundown pegged Juny as a redneck asshole. Okay, so they were both perceptive.

At first, it was funny, but after half an hour, it was finally too much. I flung the pillow at my lover and glared at my partner.

"Juny, he'll stay with me tonight. Honest, he will. You need to go ride herd on our suspect."

He shook his head. "No, I don't. Captain Cline can smell a political victory three states away. I spoke with him, and he advised me he will *personally* oversee the handling of the suspect and all

related forensics evidence."

"Just fucking great, but who's gonna 'oversee' him? Would you just get back to work, please? I want to make sure this guy doesn't get loose on a technicality. You think I want to be deaf in one ear for nothing?"

Sundown sank into the one chair in the room, anguish on his pale face as he pulled his knees to his chest and curled into a tight, miserable-looking ball. "This is all my fault."

"You're right, you little shithead," Juny said.

"No, it's not your fault," I said at the same time. I closed my eyes. "Juny, go to work. I need to talk with...Sunny, alone."

Junior pressed his lips together, unhappy, but he nodded. "Yeah, you're right. Keep your phone on. You're a freakin' cop, so don't let them take it away from you. I'll call ya as soon as I know something."

I held out my hand to my best friend. He squeezed it, glared at Sundown one last time, and stalked out the door. I sighed again, this time with relief I'd not have to referee the two of them again tonight. I motioned at the open door and the busy hospital hallway beyond.

"Go lock the door. We need to talk."

Sundown uncurled from the ball and did my bidding without comment. Amazing. I held my hand out, palm up, and wiggled my fingers. "Come here."

Again, he obeyed, wrapping his fingers around mine.

"I'm so sorry, Fallon. Is what that ill-bred man said true? If your hearing isn't restored, you won't be able to do your job?"

I squeezed his hand, then let it go. "Pull the chair over here so we can keep our voices down."

I waited until he had moved the chair and lowered the rail on

the hospital bed to continue our conversation. I rolled to my side, and we were eye-to-eye.

"Yeah, baby, if I can't hear out of both ears, for everyone's safety, I shouldn't be on the streets. I'll have to work inside at a desk. Juny will get a new partner. None of it is your fault."

"It is. I should have told you we suspected the blond man before tonight. Maybe I could have saved this boy, but instead I was too busy with my own wants."

The hair all over my body prickled. "Who's 'we'?"

I stroked his damp hair, scared of the questions roiling inside me. I risked my sanity, but I had to know.

"Sundown, did you...can you... did I? I have this really weird idea I can't shake. I mean, shape shifters don't really exist, so how can I...you? You smell like this dog I saw tonight."

God and Jesus, that was lame. Only he wasn't laughing. His beautiful eyes were bright and wary. I barely heard him speak.

"And if I were to tell you what you suspect is true, what will you do?"

Something cold bloomed in my belly, coiling around itself into a tight fist of fear. Was I insane, or was he? I had to know, and to satisfy the need, I had to ask some strange questions.

"Is it true? Are you, and the dog, the same per—being?"

Sundown looked at me for several seconds, his gaze dimming with sadness. "Will you listen as I tell you a story, Fallon Roxbury?"

What choice did I have? Something strange had happened to me tonight. I wanted answers and I needed to know the truth. I nodded. He put his hand on the bed between us.

"You did not imagine it. Those of my kind possess certain...abilities, which humans do not. We can alter our

appearance to move among you, or for our own safety. It's not something we do on a whim."

My heart clenched on the first thought that popped into my head. *Did what we did together really give you pleasure*? I laid my hand over his. "Does it hurt you to do it?"

Surprise flickered in his eyes, and he rubbed his smooth cheek across my bruised knuckles. "No, not at all. But we must be careful. Many years ago, someone witnessed a member of the clan take on new skin. The story was told and retold, and eventually enough have come to believe, and now we are hunted."

How many were there like him? "Was Michael Carlton one of you?"

He shook his head. "No, he was not. He died because Timothy Petrie mistook him for one of us who sometimes appears similar. We mourn for his family."

"Timothy Petrie?"

"The blond man you...took down tonight. Is that the correct phrase?"

I snorted softly. "Yes, and, baby, you took him down. I was too slow." I wondered if Juny had identified Petrie yet. More and more, I saw the necessity of putting some distance between the investigation and myself because where I was, Sundown was, too.

"What the hell is your real name?"

He smiled. "Czun Dun Nhunfi. I tell most people it's Richie Smith."

It almost sounded like "sun down," so I could understand why he used that moniker. Heck, I sorta liked it now, too. "Why tell me the truth?"

The smile faded from his face. "I want you to know everything about me, Fallon. It's the only way."

The only way for what? I couldn't ask him for fear of his answer. Did he want to be with me? How could we ever work it out to be together?

"Has this clan always been here? I mean, are your kind everywhere?" Am I even awake?

He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he didn't look at me.

"Long ago, my kind was brought here by spacefarers, who had command of all the stars. We were slaves. Our abilities to shift outward form made us valuable as a workforce. My ancestors who came here first loved the wide plains and rugged mountains found on this planet. A group of them managed to escape and prosper here."

Space travelers? Ancient astronauts? This had to be a dream, and yet this story fascinated me. I didn't want to wake up and be back in my boring life. "How many of you are there?"

The wary look returned to his face, but he didn't hesitate. "No one knows for sure. My clan, the Nhunfi, is a small family of perhaps two hundred." Sundown cocked his head and stared at me. "You don't believe me."

I grabbed his hand before he could pull it away. "That's the problem, Sundown. I think I do. I was there, with the dog. You know the dog. The one with *your* green eyes."

A wave of exhaustion hit me. I slid over on the narrow bed and tugged on his wrist. "Come here beside me tonight. Please." Maybe, if he didn't want to stay, he'd at least find my pants so I could sneak out of here. He looked unsure.

"Fallon, you were correct when you said I smell like a dog. I should go bathe so you can sleep soundly."

Allowing him to leave was beyond unacceptable. I squeezed his

wrist, hard.

"Must you argue with everything? You're just like Junior. No wonder you and he don't like each other. Two peas in a pod."

His nostrils flared. One dark eyebrow slid up toward his hairline. "Must you be insulting?"

I grinned at him. Sundown sighed and stood, waving his free hand at me. I slid over as far as I could as he stretched out on the narrow bed beside me. We wiggled and squirmed until he finally flipped over and spooned back into the curve of my body.

"Perhaps I should take the form of a cat for this."

I pulled him closer. "This is fine. I may even be able to nap."

He responded by grinding his ass against my groin. I smacked his hip, but the blow lacked any real force. Running my hand down his arm, I linked my fingers through his.

Nice of him to form fingers for me to be able to hold. Now that the man who threatened his clan had been apprehended, would he maintain this appearance? Would he disappear into some anonymous countenance, hidden from me? How had he become so important to me? I knew better than to let anyone get under my skin like this.

Relationships, especially those that lived only in your head, reaped a harvest of heartache and faded dreams.

Listen to yourself, Fallon Roxbury. You've fucking lost your mind.

I shivered, my skin prickling in uneasy waves. I dreaded his answer, but I had to know. My lips at his ear, I whispered the question I couldn't banish from my heart. I doubt I could have spoken it aloud.

"Sundown, the sex... Did you really enjoy it?"

His fingers tightened on mine as he whispered his reply. "Yes,

Fallon. Very much."

"How...I mean, how does it work?" I really wanted to know, or at least I thought I did. I needed something to make sense, to make tonight seem less surreal. If anything could.

Sundown was silent for so long, I thought he'd decided not to answer. Then he sighed, a low, barely audible release of breath. Had I not been holding him, I might have missed it. I surely would not have been able to gauge its depth. My eyes burned as he gave me more of his secrets.

"It is a simple matter of placing those receptors capable of giving us sexual pleasure where we need them to be. Most of my clan take the form of females." He snorted softly. "We all seem to like congress with the human penis."

"I like it, too." I started, surprised at my own stupidity. *The girl!* Why hadn't I connected the dots before? I was getting slow in my old age, but who could ever imagine a being like Sundown?

"You were, or are, the girl I met. I called you Muffin. You sent me to the boarding house because you needed time to change into a man."

"I was drawn to you. When I realized you felt no attraction to me as a female, I couldn't believe my good fortune. I enjoy taking the form of a human man. My kind does not often think of ourselves in terms of gender, but I know I am male." He squirmed and maneuvered his way around to face me, his beautiful eyes swimming in the dim hospital lighting. "Does knowing this repulse you?"

It had taken a lot of courage for him to ask the question.

If only I had an answer. I took the coward's way out.

"Whatever drug they gave me is working. I can barely keep my eyes open. We'll talk in the morning, Sundown."

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 10

Timothy Petrie spun his fanatical tale about shape shifters to anyone and everyone who would listen. He insisted he'd seen a man become a dog, and he'd followed the dog long enough for it to change into a girl. He admitted to killing Michael Carlton and Allen Young to save humanity from aliens bent on taking over the planet. Petrie was headed for a long stay in a padded room, and after that, an even longer stay safely tucked away behind bars. My blood ran cold as I listened to the tape of his confession.

One piece of information Petrie wouldn't divulge was where had he witnessed Sundown make the change—and I was sure it was Sundown he'd seen. He spoke of others who knew "the devils" walked among us. It made my stomach clench with fear for Sundown and his kind. When I wasn't in a cold sweat with the knowledge he had seen the transformation take place, I almost envied him. I was intensely curious about how it happened. Unfortunately, Sundown had disappeared right after my release from the hospital, so I couldn't ask him to show me.

Juny listened to Petrie's tale of the paranormal with avid interest. Forensics found Petrie had the victim's blood under his fingernails, and unknown hairs on his clothing and person. Those hairs linked him to both crime scenes. Those same hairs were on my clothes, in a greater quantity than simple transfer during our scuffle could explain, which didn't help our case. My partner eyed me with suspicion, like I knew something he didn't.

Which, of course, I did.

I shrugged and brushed it off, saying the mutt must have some sort of mutant gene that gave his fur weird characteristics. Forensics bought the idea and classified the hairs as most probably canine. I breathed a very un-cop-like private sigh of relief and signed the papers for early retirement, an on-the-job permanent injury payout, and partial disability.

The deal left me with an income comparable to my salary, thanks to a six-year consultant clause good for about another twelve grand a year that fed my pension fund to the full twenty-year benefit level. I was satisfied with it and more than a little relieved I wouldn't have to find a part-time job to survive financially.

Petrie confessed, and the evidence supported his admission of guilt. If it had not, it would have forced me to stay on the force and keep the Carlton and Allen cases open. I couldn't walk away and leave those two young boys without justice. Juny would have hung with me on that, doing the outside work while I covered the inside work from behind a desk. All things considered, though, it was time I found something to give me some peace. I'd seen too much blood and death during my career.

But the main thing I wanted to find was Sundown. I would, too, just as soon as Juny and I tied up some loose ends.

"Well, I guess my visit with Father Mack wasn't all for naught." Juny tossed his pen on the desk and stretched, arms lifted high over his head.

"Nice of Petrie to confess to the one priest you know." I got up and poured another cup of coffee, my third of the morning.

"I suppose you think it was the hand of Fate working." He held his mug out for a refill, and I obliged. "The good father was pretty cryptic, sanctity of the confessional and all that, but he confirmed our problem contained 'elements of a religious fanatic in nature."

I snorted, but I worried Juny would let the chance to totally reconcile with his brother slide away.

"That's quite a catch-all phrase. Are you going to go back and tell him Petrie purposefully killed Carlton where the shadow of the cross would fall on him?"

Juny shook his head. "No. No, I don't think I will. We, um, almost had a normal conversation, you know, the way brothers should. I don't want to rock the boat." He peered at me over the rim of his cup. "What are you doing about that Sundown person?"

Ha. Person. If he only knew. Maybe "that Sundown person" could turn into a mini-Sasquatch and surprise the shit out of Juny.

Nah. Bad idea. "I don't know. He's making himself scarce these days. He blames himself for my hearing loss. I told him it wasn't his fault."

Juny studied me for several moments. "You're awfully calm about it. Wanna talk?"

I busied my hands with a file folder. "No, I don't want to

fucking talk about it. I'm not calm, okay? I'm just smart enough to know it's done, and getting drunk or bawling or beating someone up won't bring my hearing back. I'm trying to act *mature*."

Doing all three simultaneously appealed to me in a big way, but I meant what I said. None of it could restore my hearing. I considered it healthier to let it go and let time heal my anger and grief. My life had changed, and it was up to me to make the best of it.

"Shit. That's it. We're getting drunk tonight."

I flashed him my best tough-guy look, which didn't intimidate Frederick Walter Mack, Jr., at all. "Don't take this wrong, Junior, but I'd rather go get fucked."

Juny leaned back in his chair. "I am not going to help you with that."

"You got that right, no offense."

"None taken." My best friend sighed. "You want some advice?"

"No." You're wasting your breath, Roxbury. He'll never keep quiet.

He set his mug down and motioned at the pile of papers on the desk.

"I'll finish up here. You've got a month of sick leave coming to you before you get to sit on your ass and 'consult.' Go find whatzhis-name. Fuck him blind and get him out of your system. Then move on. And use a rubber, for God's sake."

Suddenly exhausted, I plopped down in my chair. "I'm always safe, Juny." I made a mental note to ask Sundown, when I found him, if human diseases were a threat to him, and vice versa. I gulped the rest of my coffee, which burned my throat and made me cough. Juny rolled his eyes, but miraculously didn't speak. I shuffled through the forms and found the two I couldn't ignore. "Don't fall off your chair, but I'm gonna take your advice as soon as I finish these. You can sign everything else. And thanks, Juny. I owe you."

"Aw, no you don't, ya big lug. I'll come by with coffee on Monday morning, so if you find your fuck buddy and drag him home for the weekend, make sure he's gone by six o'clock."

I paused and gave him my best cold stare, which didn't impress him at all. "You call first, just in case he's there." I hoped Sundown would be, but he'd been missing for two days, and I worried, imagining all sorts of things, but mainly I feared he didn't want to see me.

Juny held up his hands in defeat. "Okay, okay. I'll call first." He pointed at the papers in front of me. "Write faster, then get the hell out of here."

I nodded and did as ordered. When I finished, I slid the forms at Juny, dumped the dregs of my coffee, and fled into the sunshine. Around me, the noise of the city was oddly muted. I wondered if I'd ever get used to not hearing the way I used to. I flagged down a cab and gave the address of a garage I rented for my personal vehicle. No way would I spend the next month sitting home, moping for what I'd lost.

My old car started like the champ it was, and I didn't hesitate in my decision of where to go. I parked in the grocery store lot and slipped between the buildings to the back stairs. I took the treads to the top landing two at a time. Insides quivering, I knocked on the door. Would he finally be home today? The door opened. Surprised green eyes stared at me.

"Fallon. You're not working?"

I shook my head. "Do you have time to talk, or do you have a client inside?"

He drew a deep breath. "You've got it wrong. I'm not a hooker, Fallon. It just helps to look the part in this neighborhood. It's not like I can explain what I am to strangers, you know."

I believed him—now. "I'm sorry. You know, for thinking you were one."

Sundown moved aside and motioned me inside. I stepped into the golden room, made so by the shades pulled against the bright morning sun, and breathed in the rich, spicy fragrances blended in the air. I waited in silence as he closed the door and threw the deadbolt home. He stood, his back to me, shoulders slumped. I pressed my hand to his back.

What I really wanted to do was throw my arms around him, but I sensed he wasn't ready to be that close to me. Were he ready, he'd not have avoided me for the last two days.

"It's not your fault, Sundown. Every cop knows the risks. I'm alive, thanks to you."

He turned, his beautiful eyes full of sadness. "It *is* my fault. I should have been honest with you the first time you came here. Maybe the second boy would not have died, and you would not have been injured."

"Maybe' is a trap, baby. All the second-guessing in the world can't change what is. Let it go and get on with your life."

"Fallon, the First among us have instructed me to leave the city and my clan, and to go to where most of my kind live. I have drawn attention to us in this place, and this is not acceptable. They do not approve of my involvement with you."

A cold fist hammered my guts, sending a chill through my whole being. I was not about to let him just pack up and go, unless he wanted to.

"Do you want to go?"

Sundown shook his head. "I like the city. There is always something to see or do."

Was I one of the things he liked to do? I wondered just how their hierarchy worked, but I had more important questions for him. "What happens to you if you disobey?"

He shrugged. "Not much, which annoys them. The Nhunfi elders have said I did not disgrace or endanger them in any way, and they want me to stay. They have given assurances my involvement with you was only to give aid. As I am Nhunfi, and needed here, the elders have the final say."

I held my hand out to him palm up, willing him to take it. Whether he did or not, I had to know. "And us, Sundown? What do we do now?"

He stared at my hand, the lines of his body tense, his green eyes hopeful. "Is this why you came, Fallon?"

I nodded. "I came to find out what 'this' is, and what it means between us."

His head lowered, and his chin tilted to one side. Those black eyelashes fluttered. "I do like sex with you, Fallon. I am capable of giving you whatever you desire."

My heart rate soared, and I started to sweat. My cock started to swell. "You don't mince words, do you?"

"Did you not come for sex?"

I'd come for more than that, but if he needed to start there, it wasn't a problem. I let my hand fall to my side. He looked alarmed, and his hand shot out, extended to me, palm up, mirroring what I'd offered him. I reached out and wrapped my fingers around his, surprised at the relief that swept his features. He stepped closer to me.

"Now I am unsure, Fallon."

He was unsure? *Right*. I needed to kiss him and find out a few things about myself, and him.

"Why? You've known about humans for a long time. I just found out about... What is your species called, anyway?"

"Who we once were has been forgotten. Now we call ourselves by the world we came from, so that is not also forgotten. We are the Chal."

How long had they been here? Probably a long time if their distant verbal history had been lost. It cast all the mythology I'd ever heard, or read, about shape shifters into a different light. I squeezed his hand.

"I think it's sad your people have lost part of their history."

Sundown slid into my arms, pressing his slender body to mine. His forehead rested on my shoulder. "I knew you were a kind, caring man, Fallon Roxbury."

I held him tighter. "Let's not get carried away with compliments. I'm glad you invited me inside."

He was quiet for a few moments. "I'm sorry I avoided you since you left the hospital. I don't like that place."

"No one does, and now you're avoiding serious conversation."

Sundown leaned into me, forcing me to back up a step in the direction of the bed. I shuffled another twelve inches in that direction, and he applied a little more push. I spun us around and propelled us to the bed. We sprawled across the mattress, losing our grip on each other as we bounced. He tried to slither away, but I grabbed him and pulled him to me. When he resisted, I rolled him beneath me.

"Why are you afraid, Sundown?"

He swallowed, hard. When he spoke, his voice was so low I strained to hear it.

THE BACK STAIRS

"If I let myself look into the future, I see two paths. You are only in one."

THE BACK STAIRS

CHAPTER 11

Despite the cozy warmth of the room, I shivered. We both needed to be brutally honest with the other before we went all stupid and got naked. I dipped my head and trailed slow kisses along his jaw line to his ear, then down his neck. A sharp breath caught in his throat. I rolled us to our sides.

"Sundown, here it is for me. Yeah, I came up here the first time to get information. I didn't expect what happened, but there's something about you that got to me. Who the hell knows what to label it? I don't have one for it. All I know is, I want to know you better, even though I don't know what it means either. What I do know for sure is this—I will never divulge what I know about you and your people. The Chal have nothing to fear from me."

His lashes swept down. I sensed him relax, and it occurred to

me I might have been in danger from his people had I not freely given my word. The corner of his mouth quirked into a little smile.

"I know, Fallon, and I thank you for your assurances." Sundown wiggled closer, his thighs warm against mine. "I wish to know you better, too. I'm not sure I understand how I can feel attracted to you. The emotion confuses me. Such pairings as humans make are not common among my kind. Our procreation is not sexual in nature."

Oh, sweet Lord. Now I had to know, or the curiosity would kill me. "So what do you do to make little Chal?" I blinked at him. "Have you..."

The smug look on his face said it all. "I am a catalyst and rare among my people. I am much sought after by others when it's their time to..." He blinked at me and stopped.

I was glad because making babies wasn't my thing.

"It's a simple matter to give them what's necessary, Fallon. There is a quick merging of molecules, and my part is finished. It is not pleasant, or unpleasant, but a simple biological function. The...reproduction and rearing happens through the other. This makes me male, as you would understand it."

He didn't have the market on confusion cornered, not by a long shot, but now I could guess why his clan didn't want to lose him. The being in my arms wasn't even human, and I didn't care, not one iota. I hugged him.

"But our sex is simple, isn't it, Sundown?" The crooked smile morphed into a wide grin. I grinned back at him. "That's what I think, too, so maybe we should start there."

His reply was to slant his lips across mine. It took every ounce of self-control I had to hold back and let *him* give *me* the sweetest, most tentative first kiss I could ever imagine.

I followed where his soft lips led me, never pressing him for more. I savored the taste of his mouth, such a heated mix of spice and orange and mint it sent my world spinning. He grew bolder, laving my lips with his until I opened to him. His tongue licked into mine. Little bright lights danced in the darkness behind my closed eyelids. The blood pooled in my groin, a pounding fullness I ignored in favor of enjoying his kiss and the surprising truth arcing between us.

Back and forth we teased in a mock battle. His tongue swept into my mouth. I pressed against it, following him into the heat of his mouth when he retreated, seizing the advantage as he grew restless in my arms.

He mumbled he wanted to get his shirt off, so I rolled away from him, stripping off my own as I went. Sundown paused in his race to get his clothes off.

"I've never kissed anyone before, you know."

He *had* licked my mouth in his dog form, but I agreed that didn't count. "You do it quite well. Get your pants off."

His T-shirt hit me in the face, so I threw mine at him, then laughed at his lack of underwear. In moments, we were naked, and he was in my arms again. There was something else I needed to know. I squeezed his firm ass.

"Sundown, do we need condoms? I mean, I know I'm clean on STDs, but can human diseases and germs hurt you?"

He shook his head. "No, nor can those things that afflict us transfer to you. Protection is not necessary, although..."

I watched a flush stain his skin, starting at his nipples and working upward. I thought I understood. How I kept from laughing, I'll never know.

"Ah. You prefer it. I'm good with that."

"It's just..." He wiggled his butt. Trapped between our bodies, our cocks rubbed.

I remembered his climax and the lack of ejaculate. Did I want to know what the sharing of molecules entailed?

Better I keep my mind on the here and now, and leave the scientific questions for another time. He could weird me out next month, after our horniness for each other leveled off some. I slipped my hand between us and stroked his shaft.

"Uh-huh. Congress with the human penis leaves you sticky."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "I see I must be careful what I confess to you."

I tipped my head toward the bed. "So, do you ever top?"

For a minute, I thought he would choke, but he finally got the words out. "With you?"

"Yes, Sundown. With me."

He laid his palms against my chest. "I'll have to think about that, Fallon. I had not imagined it."

"What happened to 'I am capable of giving you whatever you desire,' eh?"

Sundown's chin lifted as his sparkling gaze drilled into mine. "Do you challenge me?"

"Oh, fuck, no. I might end up sleeping with a dog, and I wouldn't like *that* at all."

His arms snaked up around my neck as he pushed me back to stretch out on the bed. I rolled us, settling him on top of me. He slid down my torso, trailing wet kisses over my nipples. The little nubs puckered, aching for him to lick them with his soft tongue. Sundown didn't disappoint me, waiting until I sighed with pleasure before blowing his warm breath over the wet trail he created over my chest. I begged him to suck me, and he went lower to nuzzle my belly button before using his talented tongue to lick the very tip of my cock. My hips lifted off the bed, silently coaxing for more, but he refused to rush. He shifted position, his skin cool and dewy against mine. His lips found mine, hot with promise. I buried my fingers in his damp hair and thrust my tongue into his mouth, whimpering as he ended the kiss far too soon.

"Do you trust me, Fallon?"

My blood quickened. What would he do? It didn't matter, not really. I wanted, *I needed*, for him to do those things natural to him.

"Yes. I trust you. What-"

Sundown pressed his fingertips to my lips. "Close your eyes. No peeking."

I obeyed him without question. A warm, wet heat enveloped my cock. I sucked in a deep breath, moaning as I let it out. I couldn't move or think, as his tongue and lips swirled over me and around me. Sundown released me with a little pop. The bed dipped as he moved, his knees planted on either side of my hips. He grasped my dick with his fingertips and brought the tip against his body. I opened my eyes. Sundown grinned and slowly sank down over me, taking me deep.

My shoulders arched off the bed as I reached to steady him. He shook his head as his internal muscles suddenly relaxed. I knew then his shape shifting abilities went beyond dogs, and were quite refined. I'd worry about how strange it all was later, when I could think past the end of my leaking cock. He locked his heels under my thighs and started to move, slowly at first, then he found a rhythm that gathered speed and force as his flesh molded to mine.

I watched him, intent to know the moment he went over the edge, when the pleasure built to whatever peak he experienced. I

knew something had to happen for him. Why else would he seek our union as eagerly as I did? All of this I was determined to learn, when I could think—and breathe—again. I reached for him, wanting to pull his mouth down to mine and taste his rising passion.

"Sundown."

His hands met mine, our fingers interlaced. "Tell me what you need, Fallon."

"This!"

I couldn't hold back any longer. I drove up into him. The orgasm seized me, tensing my muscles to the point of cramping before throwing me into velvety blackness. Heat swept through me, then out of me and into him, as I came. The need to breathe yanked me back into the moment as Sundown guided my hand to his cock.

I looked up into his face, took in his closed eyes, the blissful half-smile on his lips. I let him guide my hand, then took over when he came forward, his palms on my chest. Deep in his throat, he moaned. His breath caught in his throat as his skin flushed rosy pink, from his forehead to at least his knees. The dreamy look on his face told me all I needed to know.

With a sigh, he gave up my body and came down into my arms, nestling in at my side with his cheek on my shoulder. I brushed a kiss to the top of his head.

"I'm sorry I got you sticky, Sundown."

"I don't believe you, Fallon. But perhaps it is not such a strange thing, after all, and I will grow to like it."

We both laughed, totally relaxed with each other. I finally understood what it meant to bask in the afterglow. I hugged him.

"You know, I don't have anything to do for the next month but talk to a department specialist about losing my hearing. Maybe we can hang together." "I would like that."

I took a quick breath. No time like the present to make a fool out of myself. "I want to get to know you better, Sundown."

He stuck his middle finger in my belly button and wiggled it around. It tickled a bit, but I let him amuse himself. After a few minutes, he levered up on his elbow and peered at me.

"Fallon, are you thinking it is possible for us to have some sort of relationship?"

I heard the hope in his voice, hidden as it was beneath layers of caution and careful neutrality. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint him, but I had reason for caution, too. I stroked his face, then cupped his cheek. He turned his head and kissed my palm.

It was a human gesture. Could I learn equal gestures of his culture? I'd certainly try.

"Well, I guess I'm saying let's spend some time together, Sundown. We stay honest with each other and see if we can stand each other's company out of bed as well as in bed."

He shook his head. "You will find me difficult, Fallon. The need to shift shape is deep. There will be times I grow tired in this form and will change to rejuvenate. Can you handle that?"

"It doesn't seem too much to ask."

"Close your eyes, Fallon."

I did as he asked and an incredible, quivering warmth flowed over all my skin from my neck to my toes. I knew it was him and opened myself to the experience. It was an odd sensation, but since it didn't hurt, I went with it. The feeling ebbed, and he was once again beside me on the bed. I opened my eyes and smiled at him.

"That was pretty nice."

"Okay."

I looked at him questioningly. He licked his lips.

"Okay, Fallon. We can spend some time together and see how we get along."

I pulled his mouth down to mine. For a shape shifter who'd never kissed before, he was a fast learner. His tongue teased mine as his hand cupped my balls. I was fast getting ready for round two when my cell phone rang. I broke off the kiss.

"That's Juny's ringtone. Let me up."

"I thought you were on medical leave."

I rolled off the bed. "I am. He knows that, and he wouldn't call me unless there was a major problem." I snatched up the phone, putting it on speaker. "What's wrong, Junior?"

"I need your consultant expertise. Now. You've got to see this footprint I found in McGregor Park."

Sundown's face went suspiciously blank. I stared at him while Juny blathered on about the mysterious man-like footprint. I finally got Junior to stop talking. I'd rather take Sundown back to bed and spank him, but that needed to be postponed until I got to the bottom of things.

"I'll be there in a few minutes, Juny. Hang tight, okay?"

"Bring your camera. Thanks." The connection broke.

My lover took a step back. I did my damnedest to look stern. I had to impress upon my lover just how gullible my best friend could be about his favorite obsession.

Oh, hell. Was Bigfoot really a shape shifter? I didn't want to know, not today. First, I had to get Junior and Sundown under control.

"Tell me you did not plant a Bigfoot print down there just for fun and games."

"Very well. I will not tell you."

He bowed his head, but I didn't buy the act. Such meekness did

not become him.

"Sundown! Juny believes this shit."

His eyebrow lifted as an amused smile bowed his lips. "Maybe he is on to something. Let's go look."

Of all the tricks I'd ever played on Juny, this one trumped them all. I didn't want to laugh, but I couldn't hold it in. Sundown came closer and slipped his arms around my waist.

"Am I forgiven? May I come along? It is my prank, after all."

"Yeah, you can come along. Get dressed. We'll settle him down, then go to my place. I can grab something to eat before I grab you again."

He nodded his agreement. I kissed him, then held my index finger up in front of his nose.

"One last thing before we meet Juny. We need to treat this like evidence so we don't hurt his feelings. If I tell you to sit and stay put, you listen. Got it."

Sundown's green eyes sparkled with mischief. He looked down, tipped his head sideways, then gazed at me with eyes gone brown under his long lashes. His smile showed off long canine teeth.

"Woof."

My new life was going to be a lot of fun.

KC KENDRICKS

Best-selling author KC Kendricks makes her home in Maryland. A 2008 Amber Heat Wave Winner, and a 2008 CAPA nominee, KC writes contemporary gay romances that while are adult in nature, celebrate love and hope for mature readers.

Writing more traditional romance under a pseudonym, the author is a two-time EPPIE Finalist, and a 2005 CAPA nominee. With one contemporary title a #1 bestseller, several other top-ten list titles, and a few more recommended reads, the author has established herself as a storyteller that delivers rich, satisfying romantic stories that feature strong themes of love, hope, and redemption with positive, upbeat endings.

* * *

Don't miss *Shine A Light* by KC Kendricks, available at AmberAllure.com!

After being viciously outed by his spiteful ex-lover, Donovan "Van" MacKenzie, fallen Hollywood and Broadway star, lands on stage in a small town community theatre—and in the arms of set designer Shane Hollister. Van knows his attraction to the talented young man could seal the fate of his career, but he can't resist having a "summer thing" while performing at The Globe. When an act of violence catches the men unaware, Van recognizes the message was really meant for him. Walking away from Shane might be the smart thing to do to keep him safe.

Shane Hollister had established himself as a Broadway set designer before his father's accident forced him to move home to St. Charles. Needing work, Shane accepts a job at The Globe. To his surprise, the small operation equals any big city production. When Van MacKenzie signs on for the new show, Shane grabs the chance to have a summer fling with his big-screen idol, refusing to allow Van's past to intrude.

Shane knows he has only one chance to catch a fallen star, and keep him for his own...

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