



Interdependence

Copyright © June 2010 by Dee Carney

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-808-2

Editor: Jana J. Hanson

Cover Artist: April Martinez

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

Chapter One

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Sunday

“She wants to die... That could be very good for us.”

Jonah glanced up after his brother’s statements drifted into his mind. He followed the direction of Elijah’s gaze across the self-service station. From where he stood, the woman fueling her vehicle a few feet away had nothing in her outward manner to give credence to Elijah’s assessment. She was pretty, he decided after a moment. But yes, sad.

“Is she the one?” he asked his twin with the telepathy they’d honed to a fine art. They were running out of time, and Elijah’s desperation sometimes spilled over to Jonah. He hoped this wasn’t just another futile attempt to find a solution to a problem that was never meant to be resolved. For his brother’s sake, he wanted all of this to end quietly, quickly, and with as little emotional pain as possible. The irony of that hope wasn’t lost on him.

Elijah dipped his chin in a curt nod. *“She could be.”*

“Does it matter? We’re out of time, Brother.” Jonah tried to rein in his despair, but it released into the air surrounding them before he could recall it. Even if Elijah wasn’t an empath, the sting of the emotion would have made the atmosphere crackle.

“I refuse to believe that. We’ll do this again and make it work this time. It has to!”

The fierce determination behind Elijah’s words almost made Jonah smile. For his brother’s sanity, they would try this again. He wouldn’t get his hopes up, but just as Elijah said, it had to work this time or the bond would be severed forever. The madness of the dark would consume him until he went the way of their father.

It had to work this time.

Jonah studied the woman again. She was of medium height and build with enough curves to make him lick his lips. Her long brown hair had been pulled away from her face into a loose ponytail. From what he could see at this distance, tired gray eyes sat above an elegant nose and a generous mouth. Even if she wasn’t the one, proving her capable for the task would be enjoyable.

“She’s living a meager existence. We could offer her...much, Jonah.”

His gaze traveled to her car, and he nodded. The FOR SALE sign on the weathered vehicle, the suitcases piled into the backseat, and the sundry miscellaneous items crammed against the back window were cause for speculation. *“You think she’s living inside that thing?”*

Elijah nodded. *“I can feel her hunger and her loneliness. She’s not yet at desperation, but she’s heading there fast.”* He cocked his head. *“It should be relatively easy to convince her to come to us.”*

“She is satisfactory for you?”

“She is. You?”

Jonah turned away, suddenly washed with something akin to guilt for their exchange. He extinguished the feeling as quickly as it had risen. Sympathy was something he simply could not afford to give right now. Without glancing back at the woman, he sent the thought to his brother.

“Bring her.”

* * *

Laurel Butler walked through the convenience store, running her hand along the shelves, trying to remain inconspicuous as she moved around. Every few minutes she tugged on the tail of her shirt in a desperate attempt to keep the gaping hole in her jeans covered. What a day to have chosen to wear bright pink underwear. If anyone had caught a glimpse of it so far, they were at least polite enough not to ogle.

Her stomach rumbled, a protest perhaps of her perusal of bright boxes whose sides proclaimed *All New!* or *Better!* and sometimes, *Number one!* She didn't much care. Hell, even the tins of mystery meat, precariously close to expiring, were a feast for the eyes. A slug of screw-cap wine, a microwavable burrito, and perhaps a package of mini-powdered doughnuts to top off the meal, and she'd feast like a king.

She thought long and hard about the rotating tubes of meat she'd just seen in the case, glistening with greasy sweat, but damn, smelling like a baseball game. Slather one of those bad boys in some mustard, stuff it in a warm bun... Heavenly.

A sobering calculation of the money in her purse redirected her thoughts. With a sigh, she walked down two aisles and picked up a loaf of bread and a generic brand of peanut butter. She'd just imagine the combination was a steak with a baked potato when she choked it down later. And tomorrow. And the day after.

Whatever. At least she'd eat for almost a week before having to think about groceries again.

What she needed to think about was making the plot rolling around in her mind something worth publishing. With any luck, a manuscript worth turning into a movie. Even better still, something that made her the next household name in the field of romance or maybe even erotica. Fans, fortune, and fame to follow. Not necessarily in that order either. Just something good in her life, for once. That's all she wanted.

Still trying to shake off her disappointment over the hot dogs and other convenience-store culinary delights she had no business fantasizing over, Laurel turned the corner and collided with a chest. A very firm, very masculine chest.

“Oh crap. I’m sorry,” she offered, not really looking up because she’d managed to drop the stupid container of peanut butter. To her relief, it landed with a dull *thump* and rolled almost a foot away until stopped by one of the shelving units.

“My fault, I assure you.”

Something about his apology smacked of propriety. The crisp enunciation. The sincere tone. She looked up and almost staggered back.

The clearest blue eyes she’d ever seen studied her, faint traces of amusement making them crinkle at their corners. Even if for some reason she’d missed the barely there smirk on his lips, she couldn’t have missed the smile in his eyes. Flecks of blue and silver had never before looked so captivating.

On a breath she murmured, “Sorry.”

Except she wasn’t. Holy hell, he was a good-looking man. If getting a bruised ego meant running into someone who awakened her neglected libido, the more the merrier.

He stood there in a perfectly crisp white button-down shirt tucked into a formfitting pair of dark blue jeans. The sleeves were rolled up a few inches, revealing curls of hair along his forearms. Thank heaven for small favors, no rings of any type adorned his fingers. She liked his hands. They were strong, capable. The kind that might know exactly what to do in every situation.

Every *possible* situation.

He took a step, bent, and retrieved the plastic jar. “I believe you dropped this,” he said, handing it to her.

She took it, almost stretching her fingers far enough to graze his but losing her nerve at the last second. “Thanks. My lunch.”

And dinner. And breakfast.

He frowned. “That wouldn’t be right at all. How about lunch on me? My way of apologizing for not paying attention.”

Some reflex made her spine stiffen. As much as it pained her to say it, she replied, “No, thank you.”

He tried again. “I know it’s forward and all, but I hate eating alone.”

Laurel glanced around the dingy gas station-cum-convenience store. She hated that her budget meant she had to eat here at all. “I pretty much ran into you, so, uh... Anyway, thanks, but no. Besides, I’ve already had lunch.” The second the lie slipped out, she grimaced. She’d said only seconds ago that the packages in her hands were lunch. Stupid. As if to add to her humiliation, her stomach chose that precise moment to rumble again. People a few states away probably heard it.

His lips curved into the most delectable smile. “Dessert, then?”

“I’m on a diet, but thanks.”

He shrugged. “Oh...well, maybe next time?”

“Maybe.”

He gave her a curious smile before turning to leave, treating her with a view from the back, which was just as enticing as his approach. Now who was ogling rear ends?

By the time Laurel finished paying for the meager groceries and gasoline, she had begun to seriously regret turning down that meal. She couldn’t believe she’d just said no to a free lunch from an attractive man! Smooth move. Her grandmother’s nagging voice warning her to not trust strangers could be damned. She could have used something that didn’t include polysorbate number eighty for sustenance. Never in her thirty years would she have thought she would *kill* for a simple green salad.

She hated that she’d sunk this low, fantasizing about vegetables of all things. All she’d wanted to do was start over with a brand-new life. Forget the memories of the past and move forward. She’d just never imagined starting over would be this hard. Nothing wanted to go right, and damn if she didn’t bump across every single obstacle that could think to get in the way.

This too shall pass, she reminded herself.

She steeled her resolve and pushed through the door, the smell of gasoline assaulting her senses. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, she moved to her car only to find Mr. Gorgeous studying it. She frowned, picking up her pace to approach him. “May I help you?”

He pivoted to face her, and when he saw who it was, the corner of his mouth turned up into that dazzling half smile. “Hello again.” He glanced at the plastic bag dangling from her hand. “You know, I’ve been replaying it in my mind, and I still think that collision was my fault. You’d really make me feel better if you’d let me at least buy you a cup of coffee or slice of pie or something to make up for it.”

God, she was hungry. Would it *really* be so bad if she took advantage of his offer?

Well...no. It wouldn’t.

She worked hard to stop herself from grinning like an idiot at him. There was nothing wrong with getting a good meal so long as she remained careful about it. Still, she’d give him one last, final chance to back out. “Well, I wouldn’t want to put you out.”

“You wouldn’t.” He inclined his head toward her rust bucket. “Yours?”

She nodded.

“Still for sale?”

Laurel hesitated. She’d kept the sign in the window with the scant hope someone might offer her a few hundred for the old beater on a day she needed money. Kind of like today. Only the plan had been she would have a place to live before she sold it. Reluctantly, she said, “I have an offer for it.”

Damn. Just about every time he asked her a question, a lie popped out of her mouth before she could recall it.

He raised a brow as if he sensed the deception in her voice. “I might want to counter. Could we discuss it while we eat lunch—I mean, dessert?”

She didn't have to glance at the groceries in her hand to know she wasn't going to turn him down a second time. Grandma might have warned against the dangers of talking to strangers, but Grandma also hadn't raised no fool. "Sure."

He held out a hand. "Elijah Ballard."

"Laurel Butler," she said, taking it in hers. There. That took care of the part about being strangers.

A static charge between them jolted her. In his eyes, she thought she caught a glimpse of—she couldn't name what, but it seemed hungry, needy. Elijah didn't seem to notice. "Ms. Butler, if you'll follow me in your car, I know a great little place around the corner. Best pie for miles."

Her heart fluttered. "I look forward to it."

After unlocking the door, she slipped inside. This time, it only took two tries to make the engine catch and rumble to life. Rolled-up windows saved her from most of the cloying, thick billows of smoke that poured from the exhaust. Most of it.

By the time she looked around for Elijah, she couldn't spot him. Then an SUV cruised to a stop next to her. Her new friend gave her a small wave and pulled forward. She maneuvered behind him and swallowed a gasp of surprise. He was driving a luxury vehicle, something worth upward of fifty grand or more than her car had when it was brand-new. Fifteen years ago.

She spent the time it took to get to the restaurant debating if she thought whether it was creepy or sexy that he put so much energy into trying to get her out to lunch. Obviously, he wasn't interested in buying her car. Then again, how did he know which one belonged to her? Had he been watching before she'd gone inside the gas station? Through her musings, her grandmother's voice played the same advice over and over again: "*don't talk to strangers.*"

Normally, I'd say you're right, Grandma, but I can't afford to be picky right now.

Besides, hadn't she taken care of the strangers part? On top of that, he really did seem like a nice guy and with old-fashioned manners to boot. Not many men

these days held open her car door while she got out. Then held open the door to the restaurant. Then, by God, held out her chair when she sat down!

He also waited with infinite patience for her to choose something from the menu. Her decision stalled a few times. The task of choosing something she could afford to pay for—namely, a side salad—versus something that would be filling and that he would pay for was overwhelming. She didn't want to take advantage of him, but her stomach made the most awful rumblings at the enticing scents drifting through the air. He'd implied lunch was on him, but if it wasn't and she ordered the wrong thing, it'd be a month of Sundays before she could afford to eat again.

She ran a finger down the descriptions of food, her mouth watering the entire time. "I really can't decide. I'm starving."

"Peanut butter sandwiches aren't as filling as they used to be."

Her ears burned brightly, but she ignored the subtle jab.

Elijah chuckled and gave her an easy way out when he said, "I'm in the mood for a steak and a baked potato. That goes pretty well with pie, right? Care to join me?"

She recollected wanting the very same thing but settling for cheap eats less than an hour ago. Her mind waffled. What the hell? Might as well go for broke. Literally. "Sounds good."

Conversation with him flowed easily, as natural as if she'd known him all her life. Although she tried to maintain some formality between them, he insisted she called him Elijah, and he slipped in jokes that made her smile often. By the time they finished dessert, he'd managed to sneak in a job offer she couldn't turn down. He met every creeping doubt with reassurances that seemed so well timed he could have been reading her mind.

And that's how she found herself standing before his front door a few hours later.

She fingered the card he'd given her as she stared at the sprawling ranch-style home. The landscaping seemed too perfect. The crisp breeze flowing over a lake she

saw glistening beneath the sun provided even more comfort. The quiet solitude offered by the serene neighborhood was also almost too good to be true.

What was she doing here? And worse, had it really come to this?

One week, he'd said. A trial period for her to see if she could meet their expectations. A pair of brothers in need of someone to look after the inside of their home. In exchange for a few cooked meals and cleaning up behind them, she would be offered a place to live and a small stipend. More than what she needed to live on. If they weren't too demanding, it was a chance to write her book and still manage to exist. Maybe even save up a little bit.

Elijah Ballard managed to ride up on his heroic stallion and offered her salvation in the guise of a job. Warning bells had clamored in her mind at the beginning of their conversation, but she'd stifled them. That just because a man who looked good enough to eat offered to buy her lunch shouldn't have set her off. By the time he paid for their meals, she couldn't figure for the life of her for what reason the hesitation might have been. Grandma would have loved him.

Now, she pressed the doorbell and tried not to appear anxious. He'd given her names of people he said she should call for references for them. They weren't perverts trying to lure single women into their lair. They were well-to-do businessmen too busy to attend to the simple tasks of everyday life. Even if she only lasted the week, it would be seven days she didn't have to look for shelter or food or sleep fitfully, hoping the police or an unscrupulous vagrant wouldn't come knocking on her car window. The thought of taking a real shower under running water almost made her orgasmic.

Seven days didn't have to be just seven days, he'd assured her. This could be home.

* * *

Elijah hadn't been sure she would come. Her mind was such a fog of smothering sadness and hopelessness that it had been difficult to concentrate while talking to her. He had to give it to her. She put up a damned good front.

Laurel looked him directly in the eyes when they spoke. She leaned forward, hackles all but raised as if she felt challenged, ready to take him on. And most important, after the initial false starts, she answered him directly and truthfully.

Nothing in her outward appearance betrayed the inner turmoil, but for someone like him, she might as well have been screaming. So for every time Elijah found a glimmering light within the dark well, he focused on it. Soothing it, coaxing it out until it shone a little brighter. Whatever it took to get her to trust him and come to them. His brother needed her. They were so precariously close to running out of time.

Not that it had been difficult to keep his attention focused on her. Jonah might think she was just pretty, but she was that *and then some* to him. She had this tiny mole just above her lip that he wanted to touch or, better yet, lick. Only having a thought like that made him think even more about licking the mole...and then her full lips...and then her slender neck...down to her breasts...

Half an hour into their conversation, he found himself not only trying to avoid the trap of her mind but fending off an erection that left his groin aching. He and Jonah had spent so much time in the past year looking for just the right woman to complete them that he'd neglected the need to actually be with one. As far as he knew, Jonah fared no better.

The more time he spent in Laurel's presence, the more he allowed hope to seep into his being. She hovered in the just the right emotional place for what they required of her. And that built up a tension inside him that made Elijah want to hold and comfort her. To protect and guide her as best he knew how.

When he opened the door to find her standing there, that same hope welled up inside him again until it made his heart pause for the tiniest moment.

"Ms. Butler," he said, smiling, "welcome to our home."

She stepped through, and a sense of hominess settled into her. It wrapped around her like a second skin, and most of Elijah's lingering doubts eased away. She belonged there. Even her soul felt it.

“Please call me Laurel. And thank...” Her eyes widened as she looked past him. Elijah turned to find Jonah entering the main hall from the study.

“Jonah,” he called. “Come meet Laurel Butler.”

“You didn’t tell me you were twins,” she said with an air of wonder.

“Does it make a difference?”

“No, no, of course not.”

He monitored her face as she watched Jonah approach. Just to be certain, he scanned her aura too. No, it didn’t make a difference to her, but it did fascinate her. Something he’d have to tuck away for later reference.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Laurel,” she said. She proffered her hand when Jonah was within a few paces of her. Most people thought they were identical, but she’d homed in on the one small piece of DNA that defined them as fraternal twins. He watched Jonah’s brown eyes darken and saw the almost imperceptible flare of his nostrils.

When Jonah took her hand, Elijah was sucked into the image Laurel conjured in her mind. Without his bidding, the gateway opened for Jonah to see the same vision so all three of them shared it.

Elijah feasted on her breast, laving her nipple until it darkened to the color of milk chocolate. His fingers dug into the pale flesh surrounding it, the color draining away beneath his grip. Between his legs, his cock hung heavy to the point of bursting, his arousal leaking without restraint. Rubbing himself against the bed provided scant relief to the need building there. Her delicate fingers trailed down his abdomen, so fucking far away from where he longed for her touch. Between her thighs was slick and damp with her moisture. The scent of her drove his mind to distraction. She gave him ready access to the tight, puckered star of her anus, moaning with wild abandon as he probed her entrance.

Jonah was at her mouth, his tongue wrestling against hers. She had her hand wrapped around his cock, sliding over its length with a grip that tightened and loosened alternatively. Jonah’s hand rested on her mound, his fingers sliding over

her lips, which resulted in her hips grinding against him. By the time he pulled his hand away, three of his fingers were saturated. He brought them to her mouth and stopped kissing her long enough to trail the moisture over her lips. She turned to Elijah, who crawled up her body and nibbled at them. The taste of her made him growl his pleasure.

Elijah took a step back when Jonah broke the connection by releasing their handshake. He forced a smile onto his face when he saw the concern in her eyes. Concern, not shock. She had no idea what they'd just shared.

"Come on in, Laurel," Elijah said with a strained voice. "I'll show you where you can put your things."

He waited for her to walk past him before turning to look at Jonah's pale face.

"Did you do that?" Jonah's mental voice sounded shaken.

"No, Brother. That was all her."

Jonah swallowed hard. *"Jesus...then she's perfect."*

"I know, Brother. I know."

Chapter Two

Elijah had already told Laurel that she had the run of the house, including access to the books and computers in the study. She asked him for a tour, and as gracious as ever, he complied.

The only place he'd requested that she not venture unescorted was the men's bedrooms. She almost pointed out the futility of doing things like their laundry and making their beds if they didn't provide her ready access but bit her lip at the last second. If all they asked of her was a little privacy there, the least she could do was provide it. Besides, they were young and attractive. Did she really have to look at the bedposts to see the notches etched into them? If she had to guess, they were trying to spare her some embarrassment from cleaning up after a "friend" spent the night. None of her business.

She paused to finally ask herself something she'd wondered about since Elijah offered her the job. Why did two grown men, two successful bachelors, live together, even if they were brothers?

Never mind. It didn't matter. Do her job. Earn her keep.

But still...

The whole thing baffled her. A job came out of the clear blue after she'd been searching for *months* in this stupid little town. How had she missed their ad in the paper looking for a housekeeper? Then again, that assumed they'd placed one.

For all she knew, she'd applied for it at one point. Nothing had been too big or too small. Housekeeper, bookkeeper, short-order cook. Anything.

Whatever. No need to look this gift horse in the mouth. Now, not only did she have everything she needed, she had more than she could ask for. Somebody somewhere smiled down on her, and for that, she would be eternally grateful.

Elijah hosted the tour of their spacious home, and although it was large, she could feel their presence in every room. At the end of the hallway, the bedroom where she would sleep waited. A king-size bed sat in the middle, almost taking up all the floor space. A dresser and a small nightstand had been shoved where they would fit. The closet, while not a walk-in by any stretch of the imagination, would hold her clothes with plenty of room left over. All in all, it seemed an awkward arrangement, but what did she know about decorating?

The men's bedrooms were at the opposite end of the house. Severely tempted to peek inside for a glimpse of their personal spaces, she held her tongue as they bypassed the rooms instead. All Elijah would tell her was which room belonged to which brother. As for hers, they had chosen that particular spare room for her, Elijah had said, to ensure their comings and goings didn't disturb her. Once again, Laurel's imagination flashed an image of a well-damaged bedpost in front of her, and she had to wrestle it away.

The two of them shared a bathroom in their wing, while she had her own to use. A third guest bathroom was near the study. The furnishings were clean, stark, and wholly masculine. No frills, lace, flowers, or pink to be found anywhere.

They did a lot of work from home, Elijah explained as they continued the tour, so they spent most of their time there. They shared an immense study, what must have been originally designated as the master bedroom, where five computers banked one wall. Like in the movies, clocks with settings to each time zone hung on the wall above them. On the opposite wall, four bookcases had been crammed to the gills with all sorts of books. Fiction, nonfiction, hardbacks, paperbacks, even the cookbooks she would be using—everything she could think of seemed to rest there. Once again, Elijah offered her free rein to anything she set her sights on.

The last room they visited was the kitchen. They owned a freezer as big as the refrigerator, the two rectangular boxes made of stainless steel. Food filled them both to jam-packed—a lot of it prepackaged, processed food most bachelors seemed to thrive on. He gave her brief instructions on how to operate the electrical appliances, showed her where the utensils and other sundry kitchen items were kept, and then pointed to an envelope pinned to a corkboard.

“We’ll keep the petty cash there. Will five hundred be enough for groceries and stuff?” He would trust her with that much *cash*? She must not have done a good job at hiding the shock on her face, because Elijah frowned. “More? How much do you think?”

“You don’t know me,” she said softly.

His frown deepened. “What does that have—”

“I could be here to rob you blind, yet you trust me with your home, your money...” Her throat thickened, making it difficult to go on. It was stupid to feel so overwhelmed by their generosity, but they couldn’t know how much she needed it right now.

Elijah eased his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her face to his. Another bolt of electricity crackled where he touched her. He might have noticed the small shiver that sliced through her but didn’t comment. Instead, he said, “Hey...you don’t know us either. You trust us with your very life by agreeing to take care of us and staying here. Don’t think we don’t know and appreciate that. There’s an equal amount of trust being given and taken here, okay?” He looked around the room before his gaze landed back on her. “On second thought, these are just things that can be replaced. You are a living, breathing person and can never be replaced. If anything, you honor us with your trust.”

She’d read a book once where the men whose acts made them nothing less than role models for the rest of their gender were described as men of worth. Elijah could have been the leader for that group. He was a true man of worth.

“Now, is that amount sufficient?” After she nodded, he added, “If it isn’t, just let me or Jonah know. Not a big deal, okay?”

The stricture in her throat forced her to nod again. She hated when moments of emotion crept on her like this, but the mask she wore cracked on occasion.

He seemed to sense the overwhelming emotions threatening to crush her and gave her a gentle smile. “I have to get back to work, but come find me if you need anything. Something tells me you’ll be fine, though.”

By the time she made it through the doorway, she found her voice again. “Thank you, Elijah.”

He waved an errant hand as he walked away.

Laurel let out a heavy breath and looked around the kitchen again. She made three circuits before shrugging her shoulders back. Time to get to work. She didn’t know what kinds of meals these two preferred, but she would do her damndest to make sure men of worth had something to eat that was worthy of them.

* * *

At times like this, Jonah envied his brother’s ability to feel the emotions of those around them. He had to settle for watching Laurel during dinner while hoping she didn’t catch him at it. He didn’t like the dark circles under her eyes or that she waited for the men to help themselves before taking a small portion for herself. Elijah had to force her to even sit down with them instead of retreating to the kitchen. She acted as if they lived in the 1800s or something. Then to make it worse, the amount she dished out didn’t seem large enough for a bird to live on, much less a human. The woman needed more meat on her bones.

“There’s plenty. Take more.”

She looked over at him, wide-eyed.

“Gentle, Brother.”

Jonah absorbed Elijah’s soft admonition and tried a different tactic. He cleared his throat. “I mean, you don’t have to be polite. If you want more, there’s plenty.”

There was a slight tremor in her hand when she reached for the bowl of mashed potatoes. *Fuck*. He hadn't meant to scare her, of course, but he wasn't like Elijah. Nurturing was just not part of his being. The fact they both came from the same womb within minutes of each other often fascinated him.

Because they needed her, he tried again. "This is good."

"Thank you," she replied, as demure as ever.

Her attention returned to the food on her plate. He stared. Did she know her voice sounded like silk? It stroked over his skin, sensual and comforting. Why didn't Elijah find something to say to her to make her talk? He needed to hear more of the way she sounded now, because if Lady Luck smiled down on him, later he'd get the chance to find out what she sounded like at the peak of arousal. Maybe pluck the silken threads of her voice one by one until she unraveled and released a desperate, wild cry.

For now, he'd settle for some simple conversation. He sent the thought to his brother.

Elijah disapproved of playing intermediary. *"She needs to be as comfortable with you as she is with me, Jonah. Open up to her and give her a reason to like you. This is not about me and Laurel. This is about the three of us."*

Biting back a sharp retort, he exhaled loudly and put down his fork. After tenting his fingers over his plate, he sent a wave of calm down his body. Make her like him. That's what he needed to do.

"So, Laurel, tell us about you." There. It was a start.

He grimaced when he looked at her face. She'd obviously just taken a bite of the food he'd forced her to take more of and couldn't speak at the moment. Not without shattering the illusion of politeness she wore like a cape.

"Elijah..." The growl in his mental voice vibrated the word, his frustration showing through. Everything about this setup went against his nature. Women didn't have to like him. Until now, he'd never harbored the idea of a long-term relationship with any of them. A little bit of fun, maybe even pamper one or two of

them, but always with the intention of eventually leaving them behind. This—what Elijah asked of him—defeated him.

“What would you like to know, Mr. Ballard?”

Christ, she was so fucking formal. He couldn’t help but get flustered. “There are two Mr. Ballards here. I’m just Jonah, the way he’s just Elijah.”

She bowed her head. “Yes, sir.”

Jonah threw his hands in the air and shot a look of annoyance at his brother. What was it about him that made her feel she needed to be so stiff? He gripped the edge of the table and leaned forward. “Look, Laurel—”

“Delicately, Jonah. Don’t let her outward demeanor fool you. Despite what she shows you on the outside, on the inside she is fragile.”

He softened his voice. “I want you to be comfortable here, so let’s agree to drop the formalities. I’m not sir, not Mr. Ballard...just plain old Jonah.”

“Thank you...Jonah.” The smile she gave him made his breath catch. The familiar, dreaded dark within him stirred, and he gritted his teeth to stifle it. “What would you like to know?” she asked.

His heart began to pound, the dark within him becoming more agitated. It was all he could do to concentrate on keeping it caged and maintain a calm expression on his face. “Whatever you want to tell us.”

“Jonah?”

The brief shake of his head was for his benefit as well as Elijah’s. Between trying to talk to Laurel, beating down the dark, and communicating with Elijah, he suddenly felt strained to the point of breaking. Dear Lord, he hoped she didn’t notice the way he gripped the table, his fingers turning white from the force he used to maintain the slim thread of control.

“Well, I was born in Indiana,” she said. “But spent a lot of my childhood moving. My dad used to be military.”

“Any place in particular you liked the best?” Elijah asked.

Because he knew his brother so well, Jonah could hear the concern beneath his words, but to anyone else, he would seem his normal, thoughtful self. Jonah flashed him a look of gratitude, because he just didn't know if he was capable of speaking out loud at the moment.

Later he'd have to ask Elijah for a recap of the conversation. He knew Laurel kept talking, because his dark didn't try to get out any longer. It stirred because it *listened* to her. Once it seemed to realize it would not be allowed to manifest, it calmed, and Jonah's racing heart calmed with it. He wasn't naive enough to believe he wouldn't have hell to pay for battling with his spirit's rebellion later, though.

Seven more days. Beauty managed to pass her first very minor test with his beast, but in seven more days, it wouldn't matter anymore.

* * *

Elijah didn't bother to knock when he entered Jonah's room. He turned the knob and let himself in. The change in energy struck him as he pushed through the invisible wall, so Elijah centered himself and approached Jonah cautiously.

When he reached his side, Elijah dropped beside Jonah, who sat with his legs folded beneath him on a cushioned mat. The rhythm of his breathing was steady, even. Without speaking, Elijah crossed his legs and joined in the meditation.

Another thirty minutes passed before the energy surrounding them dissipated. The change was abrupt enough to pull him from his thoughts, so he opened his eyes.

Jonah rolled his head over his shoulders, then arched his back. He stretched both arms, lengthening his fingers as far as they would go before standing and doing the same with his legs and toes. Elijah followed his example, letting the remnants flow out of his body and join with his brother's now calm energy.

"Better?" Elijah asked.

Jonah shook his head. "I don't know what happened out there, Bro. She triggered something."

“She’s supposed to bring balance,” he replied, frowning, “not ‘trigger’ something.”

“I doubt she has any idea what happened, so it’s certainly not her fault. But I’ll tell you, it’s the first time I thought I would really lose control in front of someone else.”

Elijah shoved his hand through his hair. “This is not what I needed to hear, Jonah. I don’t know that we’ll be able to find someone else in time. She seemed perfect.”

“She might still be perfect. I don’t know. I will just have to be more...careful in the future.”

Elijah glanced at the bed. “So you want me to stay?”

Jonah’s eyes had never looked sadder. “I was kind of hoping that you wouldn’t have to. At least, not until we’d had a chance to explain it to her.” His shoulders sagged. “But yeah, I think it’s best if you stayed.”

“I don’t mind, Jonah. Don’t sound so regretful. There isn’t anything on this earth I wouldn’t do for you, okay?” *“I love you.”*

Jonah’s shoulders slumped even farther. “I know. Thanks.”

Elijah started to head toward the door but said over his shoulder, “I’m gonna go check in on her, make certain she’s comfortable, and then I’ll come back.”

The last thing he heard as he exited was Jonah’s miserable sigh.

He changed into a T-shirt and sweatpants inside his own room. As he started to leave, he thought about it and went over to his bed. He pulled back the sheet, rearranged the pillows, and then mussed the crisp material until the bed looked thoroughly slept in. It had been such a long time since they’d had to pull this act for someone he’d almost forgotten to do it. For a couple of days at least, he’d have to make sure one of them always remembered.

Barefoot, he padded across the house in the dark to what he now considered her side. Accustomed to his night wanderings, his eyes quickly adjusted to the dim

lighting provided by the moon as it sneaked in through a few windows. When he was halfway down the hall, a door opened, and Laurel stepped out of a mist of condensation. Elijah stood stone-still as his gaze traveled over her wrapped in a towel and nothing else.

It couldn't have taken her ten seconds to walk from the bathroom to the bedroom, but they were the longest ten seconds of his life. Droplets of water slid down in between the blades of her shoulders, traveling over the delicate bumps of her spine before disappearing beneath the towel. He thought he saw a hint of where her skin fanned out to the lovely shape of her hips. Or maybe he just imagined it. No matter—his mind had no trouble imagining what happened at the tops of her thighs, the delicate curve of her ass as it swayed when she moved.

He inhaled deeply, and the clean scent of soap just about made him moan. It wasn't only the soap, but the heady combination of femininity and desire that came with it. He might have stayed there the rest of the night enjoying it if the soft *click* of her bedroom door shutting hadn't roused him.

Every part of him screamed at him to knock on her door, to see if maybe she might welcome him into her embrace that night, but reason and prudence won out, and he headed back to Jonah's room. When he slipped inside, Jonah was already in bed, his back to the door. He'd left a lamp on one of the nightstands still burning. Sleepily, he turned when Elijah came inside, however, and his gaze dropped to the tent in Elijah's pants only now starting to deflate.

"Everything okay?" He heard the smirk in Jonah's voice.

Elijah pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. "Shut up."

"Run into Laurel, did you?"

Elijah clenched his jaw. "Move over...and shut up."

Jonah chuckled but made room for his brother to join him.

Chapter Three

Monday

Like every night for the past few months, Laurel only made a pretense of sleeping. She had a reasonable excuse for it now, at least. Every noise made her a little nervous, and she wondered if the flimsy lock on the door would be adequate. Hours of meditating, as well as the passage of time that proved one of her new employers wouldn't try barreling his way into her room, eased some of the fear. A little.

Still, as comfortable as the large bed was, as quiet as the house was, she couldn't stop her mind from whirling with questions and plans. She shouldn't get used to this. She knew she shouldn't, but the arrangement suited her so perfectly. Elijah was so kind, and Jonah was brusque but kind as well. Taking care of them should be a cakewalk compared to the long days and even longer nights spent taking care of her aunt and grandmother before they passed.

She considered getting up to walk outside to watch the sunrise but dismissed it as soon as the thought formed. The last thing she needed to do was alienate herself from her new employers by wandering around like a thief in the dark.

Jonah and Elijah.

Wow.

Other than being reclusive, the two of them should have been snatched up a long time ago. And day after day, she would have to torture herself with looking at them, living with them, completely and hopelessly hands-off.

Small price to pay to leave some of the past behind.

She didn't want to think about it. Not now. Not with a new start in the palms of her hands. Hers for the taking for as long as she wanted.

What she could do with this time, instead of squandering it, was sit down and start outlining the novel she'd been tossing around in her head for a few months now. The brothers said she could use their computers whenever she wanted, and predawn seemed just as good a time as any.

Throwing back the comforter, she scooted across the bed until she could swing her legs onto the floor. She walked to the door but paused when she got there. She'd never stopped to ask the men about their schedules. Would they be up too? When would they want breakfast? Crud. They gave her too much free rein with too little information.

All right, this is how'd she work it. She'd do a little bit of reconnaissance by going down the hall to their rooms and try to figure out if they were still sleeping or if they were up yet. She wouldn't wake them, just adapt to their morning routine once she determined what exactly it was. If they weren't up, she'd work on her book. If they were, she'd start their breakfast. Either way, it gave her something to do other than stare at the four walls of the bedroom.

She headed to their wing, taking time to look out of the windows along the hallway. Maybe one day she'd have enough to afford a laptop and be able to write and enjoy the outdoors at the same time. For now, her fingers could appreciate not having to use pen and paper as had been the custom, if she could gather the courage to utilize their generosity.

As she got closer to Elijah's room, she tilted her head, trying to discern any early-morning sounds. Since the hallway still hadn't been immersed in the sun's light yet, she also looked at the crack of the door frame to see if any light could be seen. She didn't want to have to walk right up to the door if she could avoid it, so peering at the door's border seemed the best way to do it. The soft *click* of a door opening a moment later made her freeze like a deer in headlights. She watched one of her handsome employers exit one room and cross the hall into the other.

But wait a minute.

That really looked like Elijah. Even from this distance, she thought she could tell them apart based on the way they carried themselves. Only thing was, he'd been leaving Jonah's room.

She shrugged. Whatever.

She got what she came for. The men were up, and she would head into the kitchen after a quick change of clothes to see what she could throw together.

Laurel paused again, and her mouth dropped open as she replayed the scene from less than a minute before. Not only had Elijah crossed the hallway, a *bare-chested-oh-my-God-drool-worthy* Elijah crossed the hallway. How could she have not stopped to savor *that* moment? She searched her memory because what she could remember had been long, lean, and well-defined, and she wanted to make certain the image stuck.

The twins were—what?—a few years older than her at most. Wouldn't it be nice if...

She sighed.

Maybe in someone else's life. She had a snowball's chance in hell. What would either of them want with someone with enough baggage to make American Tourister envious?

Some days taking the easy way out like her aunt had appealed to her with a seductiveness that made her blood surge. It would be so convenient to just go to sleep and never wake up again. All struggling for existence, for her flimsy possessions done with. No responsibility to anyone else again.

No. She couldn't think like that. Wouldn't.

There were things in this world worth living for. She just had to find them.

Isn't that why she chose romance as the genre to pursue? The idea of happily ever after, no matter how dire the previous circumstances?

That had to be her—the star of her own novel. Survive against the odds. Find her happily ever after.

Well, she'd take it step-by-step, just as she had been. Right now, that meant putting some food on the table for her employers.

* * *

"I don't see how this is going to work," Jonah whispered severely to Elijah after breakfast. "She's not been here a full day, and I can smell her presence everywhere. It's a distraction to me that we cannot afford."

Elijah turned toward the doorway of the study to make certain Laurel wasn't standing nearby. He whirled back to his brother. "And we cannot afford for her to *not* be here. Whatever the issue is, Jonah, get around it!"

"Do you really think it's so easy for me?"

"Of course not." He immediately regretted his biting tone. "But she is our salvation."

"In an impossible task."

Elijah leaned back against his chair a few feet away in front of another computer. Yes, in an impossible task. One with no guarantees of working.

He exhaled forcibly. "We just have to take it a step at a time."

"Elijah, we brought her here under false pretenses."

"And it's too damned late to regret it now!"

This time Jonah exhaled. He looked away. "I hate this."

"Yeah," Elijah grunted. "Me too."

A soft knock sounded at the door. Elijah lifted his head to look at Laurel standing in the doorway, and a smile automatically curved his lips. He sensed her uncertainty, and for some reason, it endeared her to him that much more. How could this understated beauty carry with her such a denial about her appeal?

"It seems to me that you are falling for her already, Brother."

He furrowed his brow but dipped his chin just enough for Jonah to see. *"I am, and without regret. Even forgetting that she's beautiful, she is also...special. If only you could see into her heart too."*

"Did you need something, Laurel?" Elijah asked.

He had to force himself to lean closer, ignore the flutter of emotions whirling through her, and focus on her words. Her aura intermingled around guilt, arousal, and sadness. They stacked on each other until he thought they would crush her beneath the combined weight.

Arousal. A curious emotion to sense from her. One he'd have to take the time to nurture. The other two he'd find a way to smother. He wanted to hear from her what happened. What made her so melancholic and unable to pull out of it? Sometimes seeing the depths of a person's being made it so easy to judge them. But it took years to recognize that seeing the outward shell did not always give him as much insight as he thought should be available into their inner persona. Whatever happened to Laurel hovered precariously close to her.

And that was the damnable thing about it. She looked just fine. Looked like nothing was wrong, but in a rare moment of weakness, if he studied her just a little too long, the sadness pooled in her eyes.

"I was going to dust in here, if you don't mind. Or should I wait until Saturday? Will you be working then?" Her anxiety lifted the sadness for a moment, until the two blended into each other.

"No, it's fine to do it now. You won't disturb us," Elijah replied.

He glanced at Jonah, but he'd stilled. Without thinking, he tried to read his brother's aura but as with every other time, Elijah was blinded to it. Not that he'd really need to see the emotional state. Most of the time, their mental connection provided enough insight. Except now, when he probed gently with his mind and tried to at least get a sense of what his brother might be feeling, a wall of dark prevented him from moving forward. "Jonah?"

The hand holding the pen began to tremble. Jonah's other hand sat on the desk, curled into a fist. He clenched his eyes shut, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard several times.

"Jonah?"

Laurel's anxiety became palpable, almost enough to draw Elijah in, but he forced it aside to focus on the too-familiar struggle Jonah faced. "Hey, Brother," he said softly, "pull out of it. Let it happen and then let it go. Do not hold on. You hear me?"

"Eli—"

He held his hand up, halting Laurel's question. He didn't like the way Jonah labored this time. Sweat peppered his brow, and an unhealthy flush colored his cheeks and neck. "Jonah, let it go," he repeated.

The hand holding the pen clenched so tightly around it, the plastic implement began a slow bend, twisting upward until the two ends almost met around Jonah's hand. He'd been there once when Jonah had been holding a metal letter opener when the dark rose. By the time the moment passed, blood seeped from where the smooth metal had cut a jagged line into his skin.

The suddenness of this attack baffled Elijah, though. In most cases, Jonah could feel the change coming and could ward it off. He didn't know what the rising darkness felt like, but Jonah described it as a rush of power threading through him, something so sweet and at the same time dangerous, it made him want to give in and let it take over. Only they both knew what would happen in that case. Fighting against the lure weakened Jonah's resolve every time it happened. So far, Elijah's influence kept him from accepting the dark, but in the last several weeks, his brother's balance waned to a fragile hold.

Elijah stood, ignoring the plaintive look on Laurel's face as he walked past her to get to Jonah. When he reached his side, he pulled the pen as best as he could from his grip. Jonah's hand tightened around it, but Elijah unfurled his fingers until he could remove it. "I'm here, Jonah. Open your eyes and look at me."

He tried to slip his hand into his brother's hold, but Jonah's fingers curled into a fist again. Both clenched fists paled and trembled. Jonah gasped, the sweat streaming in rivulets down the sides of his face now.

"Jonah!" he said sharply. "Open your goddamned eyes and look at me." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Laurel inch closer. "Stay back," he ordered.

Just in time.

Jonah's eyes opened, and the rich brown color of his irises had begun to fade. Like too many times to count before, dark began to rise into them, creating an eclipselike effect. "Eli," he croaked in a pleading tone.

Elijah clasped his jaw in one hand and sent out waves of calm through his touch. If it had any effect, he couldn't tell. Jonah's breathing remained just as ragged, his face just as tortured as if Elijah had done nothing. Elijah doubled his efforts, reaching as deeply as he could within himself for the balance he needed to transmit. *For Christ's sake, this should be helping him.*

Jonah reached up and grasped his arm with a viselike grip. His fingers dug into Elijah's arm until he had the brief thought his brother would snap the bone in two if he didn't let up. Not knowing what else to try, Elijah leaned forward and pressed his forehead against Jonah's. They looked into each other's eyes, and Elijah whispered as many soothing phrases as he could think of into Jonah's mind. "*Calm. Peace.*"

The slick surface of Jonah's forehead made staying connected with him a chore, but Elijah held strong. "*Calm. Peace. Light.*"

He matched the rhythm of Jonah's breathing. Inhaling when he did, letting out a breath in time with him. The dark in Jonah's eyes remained.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Jonah heard Elijah's call. Heard the gentle commands to let go of the dark and return to where he belonged. But Elijah didn't know—*couldn't* know—how much he wanted to give in and let it run freely through

him. The allure felt so right with him, so natural. It soothed him in a way his brother's touch couldn't.

The pretty woman, it said, didn't belong. She couldn't help him. Not the way it could.

Elijah's forehead burned against his. He wanted to move, to disconnect the contact, but something deep within him advised against that. If he did, he would be lost. The seductive words of the dark would rise, and for Jonah there would be no turning back. So he had to fight this. He had to win this time, if only to make sure he lasted the next few days and give Laurel a chance at pulling him away from this torment forever.

She can't help you. The dark repeated the same sentence over and over, an insidious attempt at spreading doubt.

He wanted to scream, to fight back, but it was all he could do to remain conscious. To focus on Elijah's whispered words. He didn't want to give in this time, not when he was so close to being freed, but the dark felt so good. It warmed him, caressed and teased him soft enough to rival a woman's kiss. It wasn't sex but very much sexlike. Every time he went through this, he understood his father's decision in the end. So enticing, the dark.

"Calm. Peace. Light, Brother. Come back to me."

What would it be like to give in? Even just a little? Surely, he could let a little of the dark in without facing major consequences. It wasn't like he would die or anything.

"Calm, Brother."

Just a little bit of the dark. Maybe it would stop trying so hard to take over if he let a just a tiny amount in.

"Let it go, Jonah."

Elijah didn't have to know. He could let it touch the very inside of him this one time. Not let it live there but just peek inside.

“Jonah!”

Jonah’s attention snapped to a sharp focus at Elijah’s bark. The tone reminded him of their mother’s after they’d been caught red-handed as children. The roar of his blood rushed through his ears, tightness in his chest intensified as he struggled to breathe, and desperation poured off his brother in cool waves. Elijah’s hand clamped on his face gave him something to concentrate on as dizziness from the dark-induced high began to fade.

“Eli.” His constricted throat threatened to close down completely. Even speaking the simple word took herculean strength, but it helped him find his center.

He worked on slowing his breathing while staring into Elijah’s blue eyes. When they were younger, he’d envied the color until the day Elijah confided he’d wanted brown like Jonah’s. The memory still made him chuckle on occasion.

With a grimace, he loosened his hands on Elijah’s arm and felt a sharp pang of remorse when he saw the grooves he’d dug into the flesh there. The dark provided him with an unnatural strength, and Elijah often bore the brunt of it in some form or fashion.

“Better?” Elijah asked softly.

Jonah nodded. His heart still pounded, but the rush of blood didn’t seem as violent. “That was close, Elijah.” As if he didn’t know.

His twin must have thought so too, because he kept his forehead pressed to Jonah’s. On any other occasion, the shared perspiration might have grossed him out a little, but no one had to remind him of how much he’d needed his brother’s touch. And no matter how he’d tried to convince Elijah to turn him loose, to let go of the responsibility, he came through for Jonah every single time. It would be a lifetime of favors before he could ever come close to repaying him. His brother gave up everything for him and asked for nothing in return. It made him sick.

When he thought he could stand without assistance or throwing up, Jonah leaned back and separated the contact. He stared into Elijah’s eyes, not knowing where to begin. Before this all ended, he needed to tell him so much.

A female cleared her throat, and Jonah's attention swiveled to her direction. God, he'd forgotten Laurel stood there the entire time.

"Are you all right, Jonah?" Did she know her voice held a slight tremor to it? Round-eyed, she searched his face. She looked torn on how to help or if she should even step in. This was *so* not how he wanted to introduce the topic to her.

He stood on shaky legs. "Fine," he said. "I just... I'll be fine."

Elijah gave him an out from explaining any further by standing and wrapping his arm around Jonah's waist. He hadn't realized how depleted he'd been until given the opportunity to rest some of his weight. Elijah propped him up, helping him take a few unsteady steps forward. "I think we're going to take the rest of the morning off for now, Laurel," Elijah said to her as they weaved by. "The room is all yours for whatever you need to do."

Jonah waited until they were almost to his bedroom before letting out the tension still coiling around his spine with an exaggerated sigh. "If that doesn't make her head for the hills, I don't know what will."

Elijah grunted as he struggled with Jonah's weight but didn't say anything. Jonah wanted to help more, but his damned legs refused to obey him at the moment. Everything would return back to normal when he could push the remnants of dark from his system. For now, he couldn't wait to feel the bed beneath him. He was completely drained dry.

As soon as they were close enough to it, Elijah let him collapse onto the soft mattress. It felt like he'd landed on a cloud, and Jonah groaned out loud. Elijah pulled off his shirt and sat next to him, keeping a hand on his arm. "Can you undress, or do you need me to help you?"

Jonah reached down and gripped the bottom of his shirt. He tugged it upward, but making it go past his chest stymied him. Seeing his difficulty, Elijah helped him until he lay bare chested on the bed.

Fuck.

"I hate this, Elijah."

“I know.”

“You can’t know how much. I hate that you have to deal with this, and now we have to bring her into it. What must she think of me right now?”

Elijah waited for Jonah to wriggle beneath the comforter before maneuvering himself beneath it too. “She’s concerned about you. That’s all.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. All I saw in her aura and felt from her was concern for your welfare. Don’t worry about her, or me, for that matter. Let’s focus on keeping you safe.”

He didn’t want to be comforted by his brother’s body next to his, but there it was. Security, goodness, and light. Everything he needed at this moment. Elijah put his hand on Jonah’s shoulder, and the feeling intensified.

He closed his eyes and, if only for the time being, basked in it.

Chapter Four

She hadn't signed up for this. If Jonah was sick, and she really hoped for his sake he wasn't, she couldn't stay. The thought of caring for another person so soon after her grandmother and aunt made her want to retch. It made her a bad person, fine, but she just couldn't do it again.

It made sense now why they offered her such a cushy job. Perhaps they'd planned on transitioning his care to her with time, hoping that by then she wouldn't turn them down. Only they didn't know her. If they had, they would have known she wouldn't give staying to care for Jonah a second thought, no matter how much she liked them.

Laurel felt bad for Elijah, though. It was obvious how much he loved his twin. When they'd had their heads pressed together in the study, the moment seemed so intimate. Everything about the way they'd gazed at each other, with her standing by and forgotten, reminded her of...

Dear God.

It reminded her of lovers.

No way. That couldn't be right. Ick for her mind even going there.

Stupid.

Just because she'd seen Elijah come out of Jonah's room first thing in the morning without his shirt on didn't mean anything. And just because Elijah's first response to Jonah becoming ill was to caress his face and then stare into his eyes...

Oh dear.

The evidence seemed a bit incriminating. Although, it wasn't much to go on. She'd just watch and see if anything else popped up. It *would* explain a lot about their reclusiveness and the request that she not go into their bedrooms unescorted.

She put down the cloth duster and chewed on her lip as she mulled it over.

What had she gotten herself into? If they wanted to be gay, fine. But with each other? Wow. And what a stupid waste.

Laurel shoved aside her guilty thoughts and finished tidying the study, although that didn't take very long. The men were neat—another potential tic supporting their sexuality—and she found they mostly neglected the larger chores like dusting. So far, it seemed her days would be dedicated to making their meals with the occasional cleaning project involved.

They hadn't returned by lunchtime, but Laurel made a few sandwiches, sliced some fruit, and left the items on plates wrapped in cling wrap outside their respective closed bedroom doors. She had a feeling they were in the same room again, but if Jonah really was sick, at least it made sense. Her mind had zero reason for going down weird paths of assumptions, at least this time.

She ate her own sandwich by herself in the kitchen, contemplating the first chapter of her novel. She hadn't decided on a complete plot yet, but she wanted to write something lighthearted. Anything to counter the dread she woke up with every day. It gave her something to focus on besides the fact she'd made it through another night unscathed. That she hadn't succumbed to thoughts of blood and death.

But then these quiet times didn't help keep them at bay. She didn't need a psychiatrist to know it stemmed from missing the two pillars of her life so much. Grandma had raised her from the time she was four. Her parents had died while she was little more than a toddler, and her memories were few and far between. Aunt Vi took over, as usual, when Grandma couldn't fulfill a duty or two. They took care of her so well, she almost didn't have to fend for herself. And then, just like that, they were both gone.

She removed herself from the haunting memories. Now seemed as good a time as any to write about a woman who was self-sufficient. Who had everything she needed in life. Perhaps it would be a comedy or some coming-of-age story where she decides to try out a new venture. Maybe like opening a restaurant or some other type of business.

Or better yet...

She'd write a tale of a woman who takes on two men as lovers. It could be a love triangle, if she didn't mind writing a messy, complicated story.

Or a storyline that seemed much simpler, and perhaps a little closer to home, involved a woman and her two attractive employers who maybe both wanted her and didn't mind sharing. Oh yeah.

She snorted. No—that would be too much. Something historical would give her reason to get back into her old love of reading and researching. Besides, if anyone decided to interview her about where she got her ideas, that genre would also save her from letting them in on her wish-fulfillment fantasies too.

Deciding to utilize one of the computers after she'd pulled together her notes more, Laurel pulled the notepad closer and began to write.

Laura

Laurel scratched that out. Obvious much?

Leeza watched the two men, brothers, walk closer with the elegant grace inherent to the warriors of their tribe. They were tall and well muscled, sunlight reflecting from the sweat-slickened lines of their chiseled chests. She didn't mind the fact each brother had peculiar eyes, one being brown and the other blue, a familial trait that hadn't bypassed them. In any case, the barely there cloths covering their nether regions would distract even the most pious woman from staring too long into their eyes.

Laurel tapped the pen against her teeth, pondering the characters' next actions. The area between her thighs grew moist. Every time she crossed and then

uncrossed her legs, she recognized a subconscious effort to cool down the growing heat.

Evan, the quieter of the two brothers, crossed the room and pulled Leeza into his arms. Her breasts were crushed by his firm muscles, her nipples hardening in response. "Are you prepared to submit to us? Liam and I need satisfaction. Now."

His voice stroked like velvet, a nervous tremor overtaking her body, soothing Leeza until she wanted to melt. Her mouth parted, a protest poised on her trembling lips. As much as she wanted the two men, being with them both scared her. She had agreed, though. Long before they'd left on their dangerous trek from which they'd just now returned, she'd agreed to take them both.

Evan looked into her eyes, saw the fear and hesitation there, and his mouth crashed down, silencing all doubts. Warm hands cupped her breasts, and they were not Evan's. Evan held her aloft, her legs unable to support her weight. The hands belonged to Liam. Liam, the domineering brother. The one whose fierce expression and rumbling tone made her pussy clench.

Evan hoisted her up, and Leeza wrapped her legs around his waist. The thin tunic she wore lifted, exposing her dripping cleft to him. I can do this. I will do this, she thought. But Evan gave her no choice. His cock, hard and thick, probed her entrance, finding her hot and open and ready.

"Yes," she moaned. "Yes, please."

Her mouth parted, allowing Evan's tongue entrance. His taste masculine and arousing. When a warm body pressed against her back and hot breath caressed her neck, she separated from him, turning to find Liam's mouth. To taste the brother. To determine how alike they truly were.

Laurel bit down on her lip, her face growing hotter with each word she penned. She pushed away thoughts that this story hit a little close to home. To a fantasy she dared not linger on for herself.

Evan pushed forward, impaling her on his cock, and Leeza wanted to scream. Liam's fingers plucked her nipples, and his cock rubbed against her ass. Trails of his

precum sticky against her curves. He used one hand to rub down her back, over the tops of her thighs. He spread her cheeks with one hand, exposing the sensitive circle of her anus. Toying with it using a long finger.

“Gods above...” She knew what he’d do next. Both brothers planned on spearing her on their cocks—at the same time—branding her as theirs for now and always.

Movement caught her attention, and she looked up to find Elijah ambling into the room with two empty plates. He raised them in acknowledgment when he approached. “Thanks for thinking of us.”

Blushing furiously, she willed her body to act natural. Heart pounding, she lifted a shoulder and let it fall in a casual motion she didn’t feel. “It’s my job.”

Her stomach rumbled softly, and with something close to horror, she realized hours had passed. She’d been working well on her novel, the words coming fast and furious. Chapter one, while rough, would be complete in no time.

“How’s your brother?” She felt a little guilty about the flash imagery of the two of them holding each other that shot through her mind as she inquired about Jonah.

“He’s fine now. He has, uh, spells that afflict him from time to time.” Elijah placed the plates in the sink and turned to face her. His eyes narrowed as he looked closer. “Are *you* all right? You seem... I don’t know. Something’s off.”

She frowned at him, shaking her head. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

Did something really seem the matter to him? Probably because she had thoughts no one else in their right mind would dare to have about their employers. Between the insanely hot scene she’d just written down and wondering about their sexual habits, there was little wonder he thought something was off about her. “Really, I’m fine. Although, I did just realize how late it’s getting, and dinner has only been prepped.”

Elijah pulled up a stool and sat down at the island where she’d been writing. He’d only given her notepad a cursory glance, and she released a breath she didn’t

realize she'd been holding. Telling him that she'd been writing a novel didn't feel right, letting him in on the actual details unthinkable. She wanted to start with baby steps and just get the words on paper. What if she started it and never finished? What if she finished it but never got it published?

Worse, what if he started reading and discovered that her mind had zero problems conjuring up a relationship between a woman and two very hot men? That just because the heroes of her novels were brothers—not twins, though—and just because the two men gave the same woman some hot and crazy loving might give him the wrong impression.

Then again, maybe *wrong* wasn't the right word...

"I didn't get a chance to tell you that I've enjoyed your cooking." He chuckled. "Up till now, Jonah and I have been feasting like kings on takeout and anything microwavable. An honest-to-goodness home-cooked meal is appreciated by both of us."

She smiled back at him. "I kind of figured you wouldn't throw me out for doing a bad job when you reached for thirds yesterday."

A smile remained on his face, but she could tell he was studying her. A moment of companionable silence passed before he said, "You're starting to feel a little more at ease here with us, aren't you?"

"I like it here."

"And we like having you here."

Her belly fluttered a little at the way he spoke softly to her. The men couldn't have been any more welcoming if they tried, and she knew it.

Not wanting to reflect on irrational feelings, she stood and went to the fridge. After pulling out the chicken she'd already breaded, she placed the plastic container on the counter. She didn't feel self-conscious as Elijah watched her move about the kitchen, even going so far as to lean forward to study her putting a heavy-duty pan on the stove. His scrutiny intensified when she retrieved the bottle of oil from the walk-in pantry. When she glanced at him from time to time, he seemed comforted

by her efficiency, as if watching her gave him a sense of familiarity. It made her wonder about the rest of their family and how things had been growing up for two little boys who had probably given their parents hell.

She flicked a little flour into the waiting oil and nodded her satisfaction at the level of heat wafting from the shimmering amber fluid. With a pair of tongs, she put a few pieces of chicken into the oil and took a step back. The smell of frying chicken immediately filled the air and set her stomach to rumbling again.

“Homemade fried chicken!”

She hadn’t noticed Elijah leave his seat to edge closer but turned at the wonder in his voice. “Yeah. You’ve never had it before?”

Based on the eagerness in his eyes, she didn’t have to hear his response to know it was special for him. “Not in about a million years,” he said. “Oh, man!”

Cute.

He looked at her with more enthusiasm on his face. “Can we have a picnic with it?”

Laurel blinked at him, not quite comprehending at first. “Is Jonah up for it?”

“Forget Jonah,” Elijah scoffed. “I mean just you and me. There’s a lake out back, and he can get me if he starts to feel bad again.”

“Sure,” she said on a breath. A date. He was asking her on something like a date! Wait, no, she needed to slow down. And not forget that he and Jonah might have a *thing* going. This was just a change of scenery. “I’ve already made some potato salad, and sweet rolls are rising—”

“Oh my God. I’ve died and gone to freakin’ heaven. Is an hour long enough for the food to be ready?”

“Yeah. Plenty.”

“I’m going to go clear us a spot and get everything set up, then. I’ll be back in an hour. You be ready, hear?”

She smiled again. “Yes, sir.”

* * *

If he ate just one more bite, he would explode. Just when he thought she'd topped herself, she pulled yet another item out of the wicker basket. With all the food spread in front of them, he hadn't known where to start first. She said she'd left some food on a tray for Jonah, and he knew his brother would be enjoying this slice of heaven too.

Now he felt guilty that he couldn't gather himself enough to help her package up the leftovers. "That was so damned good. If a bear or monster or something starts heading our way, I want you to run away in good conscience, okay?"

Laurel laughed a beautiful sound. "What's that mean?"

"It means I'll serve as an appetizer for it while you get away. About the only way I can move right now is if you rolled me, anyway. I'd just slow you down."

She laughed again.

He watched her as she stared across the lake, a smile still lingering on her lips. In a low voice, she said, "My grandma would have loved it here."

Elijah propped himself on an elbow and looked at the scenery with her. The sun had begun its descent, the rays of light reflecting off the water. Beyond the lake, rows of trees surrounded the glasslike surface, many of them with their roots hidden beneath its depths. A few herons picked their way around the ledge, pulling insects and tadpoles from near the shoreline and feeding their hungry bellies. He couldn't see any now, but every once in a while in the past, a family of deer sauntered from the shelter of the woods to drink from the edge.

The first time they'd seen the lake, he and Jonas had been sold on the property. They couldn't give a damn about the house, which they could always remodel if push came to shove. The view, though, that couldn't be replicated. It was nature at its most wondrous.

"Tell me about her," he said. The aura of sadness had lifted for a brief while during their picnic, but when she mentioned her grandmother, it wrapped around her again. Undoubtedly, she remained at the center of Laurel's mood.

She glanced at him. "She would have liked you."

"Why is that?"

"You're a lot alike in many ways. You're both kind and gentle. And she took care of me the way you take care of Jonah."

"I don't know about that." He shifted his gaze away. "He mostly takes care of me."

Laurel frowned. "Who's older?"

Elijah forced himself to unclench his jaw. She couldn't know. "He is. By about four minutes."

She made a noncommittal sound that made him look up. "I still say you take care of him. I saw the way you handled him today."

There it was again. Her aura of emotions shifted until a cloud of uneasiness circled around her. It had been like that when he'd come into the kitchen earlier. Something made her uncomfortable, but he didn't have a clue what it might be.

"You were telling me about your grandma," he reminded her. Jesus, he hated seeing the sadness come back, but as soon as he mentioned the name, it reared its ugly head again.

"She's the woman who raised me after my parents died."

"I'm sorry," Elijah murmured.

She waved an errant hand. "It's okay. They died when I was young, and I really don't remember them. Every once in a while, if I look at photos, I might have a fleeting memory, but that's rare. Grandma and then, later, my aunt Vi were the ones who got me through childhood which was of course followed by rebellious teen years."

He chuckled. "Somehow I doubt you were ever rebellious."

"Three women of three generations in the same house?" She squinted at him before looking at the lake again. "You have no idea. Anyway, I wouldn't be who I am today without them."

He had a sinking feeling, but he forced himself to ask a probing question regardless. "So where is she now? She sounds like someone I would like to meet."

"She died a few months ago—"

"Aw, Christ, I'm sorry."

"Her and...my aunt Vi."

Her voice thickened at the end of her statement, and Elijah immediately felt like an ass. He knew something bad had made her suffer, but for some reason, he had the impression it had been another cause. Maybe something as simple as a relationship gone south.

Grief. They were using her grief against her, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Laurel sniffled. The sight of a tear streaming down her face made his stomach clench. He didn't want to push, really he didn't, but he had to know what they were working with. The two women who'd raised her had died, but he had to know how much their passing affected her on a daily basis. "What happened?" he asked softly.

Her mouth firmed into a thin line, but she shook her head. Now wasn't the time, then, perhaps. He reached for her, caressing her upper arm. "If you ever need to talk, if you just want an ear to bend, come find me, okay?"

She looked down at the blades of grass surrounding the blanket they lay upon. "You've been too good to me already," she mumbled.

Whatever guilt she felt or whatever gratitude she thought she expressed toward him and Jonah, Elijah didn't want to deal with right now. They were the two most wrong emotions she could latch on to. What they needed from her didn't stem from negativity, and he wouldn't let her try to use them.

His stomach protested, but Elijah pushed himself into sitting upright. With a groan, he stood and held out his hand to her. "Come on. Let's go for a walk. It'll help me digest so I can come back for more later."

She moaned dramatically. “You give me heartburn just thinking about it. You’re going to eat *more*?”

“As soon as I have room.”

She shook her head in amazement before wiping her face with the palm of her hand and reached up. He helped her stand, and together they started walking toward a small copse of trees, leaving the basket and blanket behind. They remained hand in hand, the warmth of her touch spreading through him.

Standing by her side, reveling in the shadow of her aura, he knew she was the right woman. The one who could complete them. Nothing could deter him from that conviction. He couldn’t say for certain if Jonah felt any hesitation that Laurel would be capable of saving them, but he’d do whatever it took to convince his brother. Hopefully, the passage of a little more time would ease Jonah’s mind. In fact, Elijah was certain that was all he needed. Time and getting to know each other a little better.

Laurel was the one. He knew it.

They walked in silence, and he tried not to become too comforted by the fact she held on to him. The evening couldn’t have been any more idyllic if he’d planned it. A setting sun, a shimmering lake, and the lulling call of the wild serenaded them.

He thought briefly of Jonah and mentally reached out to him. The reassurance Jonah sent back eased his mind as they strolled together. Knowing that his brother lay in bed waiting for his death or his salvation set Elijah into motion. Gathering his courage, he asked, “Is there anything you need from me or Jonah, Laurel?”

Her hand tightened around his. “No. Like I said before, you’ve both been very kind to me. I appreciate the job and everything. It’s exactly what I needed, at the exact right time.”

He maneuvered until he stood in front of her, forcing her to halt, so he could look directly into her eyes. The hesitant smile on her face made his heart thump

harder. Her eyes glittered in the twilight, and her hair lifted beneath the small gusts of breeze drifting from the lake before settling around her shoulders again.

“And if you change your mind, you’ll let me know? We want you to be happy here.”

“I *am* happy.” He must have taken too long to respond, or perhaps his poorly disguised longing flittered across his face, because she cocked her head at him. “Elijah?”

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and a flush of heat filled him. When he lifted his gaze to meet hers again, he tried to clear his thoughts with a single shake of his head. Despite the perfect setting, the closeness of her, and the need for her curled within him, Elijah felt awkward. “I don’t know how to do this right,” he muttered.

“Do what?”

In all the years of making love to women, the one time he needed it to matter, for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out how to do something as simple as kiss this woman.

Throwing caution to the wind, he just did.

She didn’t yield to him immediately. Elijah kept his mouth pressed firmly against hers, ready to pull away if she gave him even the slightest sense he wasn’t welcome. He had to have shocked her with his forwardness, and that thought alone kept him from stopping altogether.

She tasted sweet, the lingering traces of fruit salad they’d savored as dessert flavoring her breath. He breathed in her air, his lips caressing gently across hers in sweeping touches. Then her mouth parted, her tongue meeting his halfway. The kiss between them as delicate and fragile as she seemed at times.

When she rested her hands on his arms, Elijah pulled her closer. She made a soft sound in her throat, and for right now, he let himself become lost in her. Their salvation.

Chapter Five

Tuesday

“You have every right to be angry with me, Laurel. I invaded your privacy, and for that I apologize.”

Jonah stood outside her bedroom looking as agitated as she’d ever seen him. Even when he’d fallen ill yesterday, he didn’t seem as worked up as he did right now. “What’s wrong, Jonah?”

She forced herself to clear her mind of lingering memories of Elijah’s kiss last evening. The moment felt so right, so sweet. He didn’t rush, taking his time and lazily appreciating their kiss. His lips molded to hers, his breath mingling with hers. And even in the short amount of time she’d come to know him, he’d made it seem as if she’d known him for years. Certainly, by the time he pulled away, all illicit thoughts about an unnatural relationship between the two brothers had been shoved aside as juvenile and unsubstantiated.

He didn’t try to go farther, and she wasn’t sure if she would have let him anyway. Elijah seemed content with a simple kiss, and once again, for that she was grateful to him. They broke apart to walk in silence, hand in hand, while her mouth burned with the memory of his lips. She thought he might try to kiss her again when they separated for the evening, but Elijah offered a simple “good night”. And it was perfect.

Jonah’s worried look made her focus on the present. He pushed a large hand through his hair and glanced at the bundle she held. “It can wait. Just when you’re done in there, I need to talk to you.”

She reached out to touch him. “Jonah, something’s wrong, and I don’t think we should let it wait. You said something about invading my privacy?”

He glanced down the hall and then past her toward the bedroom. “Yeah. Can we go inside and discuss it? I don’t want Elijah to overhear.”

Laurel’s mind balked at that. They didn’t seem the type to keep anything from each other. In fact, her biggest concern about kissing Elijah was how soon he’d tell Jonah about it. She backed up so that he could walk past her. Holding out her hand, she said, “Of course. Come on in.”

He paced as soon as they were inside, making the room seem even smaller. There wasn’t enough space to stand with him while he walked up and down, so she set down her clothing and sat on the bed, watching him.

“Laurel,” he said after a few minutes had passed, “I’m sorry, but at the same time, I’m glad it’s out in the open.”

She nodded, sensing he didn’t need her verbal reassurances right now.

“I didn’t think. Elijah was in the other bathroom, so I just walked down here to use this one. Like I’ve always done.” He wouldn’t look at her as he burned a trail in the carpet with his persistent pacing. “I didn’t think about the fact that it’s your room until I was already in there. I’m sorry. I should respect your privacy.”

“It’s okay, Jonah. This is your home. I’m just a guest.”

“Yeah, exactly, our guest. And I... Anyway, what was done was done, so I just was going to use the facilities and get the hell out of there. Only when I turned to leave, I knocked over a small bag you had sitting on the commode.”

Laurel’s heart fluttered, and her blood ran cold. She couldn’t have left it out. She couldn’t have been so careless as to leave it sitting where Elijah or Jonah could find it.

“The small leather bag?” he prodded. This time Jonah stopped, searching her face for confirmation.

She nodded because she couldn't speak. She hoped to God she'd left it closed and he hadn't seen what was inside.

"When I picked it up"—he paused to blow out a breath—"when I picked it up, something sharp had poked through the bottom, and I cut myself pretty good." He stopped pacing but kept his gaze on the carpeted floor. "I opened it up, Laurel, to see what had cut me. If I had broken a bottle or something inside, I didn't want you to get cut on the glass too. So I looked. And I didn't get it at first. I didn't get why you would have a bag with razor blades and hydrogen peroxide inside it. All those little cotton swabs. While I was wrapping up my cut, it took me a minute, but I finally got it."

He raised his eyes to meet hers. Then his gaze swept over her forearms and searched any exposed skin on her body. She bared his scrutiny without comment, knowing exactly what he was looking for. When he didn't find it, he said softly, "Where?"

She almost didn't show him; she could have just denied it or made up something. But the tenderness in his eyes, the lack of accusation in them begged her to open up to him. To let him in on a secret he would hold close to his heart and tell no other if that's what she wanted.

This time, she let her gaze drop. He let out a deep sigh as if knowing she didn't want to tell him about it. Laurel pulled on the hem of her nightshirt, which rested on her thighs. She spread her legs apart so that he could see the area she needed to show him.

Not wanting to face his reaction, she concentrated on watching the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. Time slowed to a crawl as more of her thighs were exposed to him. When she lifted the material high enough so that he could see where her panties covered her sex, she heard him choke. Jonah dropped before her on one knee. Despite the intimacy of her pose, his reaction was nonsexual. "Oh, Laurel," he said, shaking his head.

She looked down with him, staring at the tiny, perfect rows of lines resting on her upper thighs. Some were well healed, while most were still a little pink. The newest ones shone bright pink and were puffy too.

“How long have you been doing this?”

She lifted a shoulder and let it fall. “I don’t know. A long time.”

He hesitated but then ran a large finger over some of the healed welts. He then cupped her downcast chin in his hand, tilting her face up to look into his. “Why?”

She sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Laurel...”

“I guess...I guess it gives me a sense of control over things. I don’t seem to have much control over the rest of my life, but this, this I can.” She shrugged again, pulling her face away from his grip so that she could look down. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” she mumbled.

“Do you... Are you planning on doing more than this?”

Her head snapped up in understanding. “No. Never. *Never*. I don’t know how to explain why this is different. It’s reckless, I know, but at the same time, it’s control.”

Jonah rose and sat beside her on the bed. It dipped beneath his weight, rocking her toward him. “This can’t go on, Laurel.”

“If you want me to leave—” She straightened, turning to face him.

“I never said that. I said this can’t go on.”

“Don’t take this away from me, Jonah. I’ll stop eventually. Just for now, I just... It’s something I need to do.”

He searched her eyes. “Is it because you like the pain?”

She thought about it for a minute, because she had once wondered the same thing about herself. Shaking her head, she paused but said, “No. I don’t think that’s

it. Something about just knowing I put them there. That I make them perfect is what makes me keep doing it.”

“How often do you do it?”

“Once a day or so. Two or three lines. Sometimes more often if I’m feeling overwhelmed.”

Jonah stood and turned to face her. “Stay there.” He left the room before she could respond.

What must he think of her now? To know that she had this self-destructive streak within her that she couldn’t let go? It had started as an accident, just a test of her nerves. But she found herself coming back to do it again and again. She liked to think she had control of it, but sometimes she wondered if the compulsion really controlled her.

Jonah came back into the room holding the small leather bag. Laurel still couldn’t believe she’d left it out in plain sight. *God.*

He held it out to her. “Show me.”

She took it from him with trembling hands. Pretending not to feel the weight of his stare, she opened it and pulled out one of the razors, careful to ensure it didn’t cut her. The irony of that wasn’t lost on her. She didn’t think to tell him no, that she didn’t want to do this in front of him. As if under a spell, she reached for the hem of her shirt.

Jonah circled her wrist with his fingers before she could get situated. “No. Show me...*on* me.”

Laurel looked up, stunned. The way he looked back at her was fearless. She wasn’t certain if he understood yet. “It wouldn’t be the same, Jonah. This isn’t about...”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. It’s about me. Not you. Cutting you isn’t the same.”

“Humor me. Show me what you put yourself through.”

She started to shake her head, to tell him that he didn't want this—that *she* didn't want to do this—but the firm set of his jaw halted her argument. She whispered, "Where?"

He sat beside her on the bed. Once again it dipped so that she had to straighten herself or tumble into him. "Any suggestions?"

"Just someplace Elijah won't see. You won't tell him, will you?"

"Not now. Eventually perhaps, but only if it's necessary. That's the best I can offer you, because it's not easy hiding anything from my brother. He'll know sooner or later, even if I don't want him to, okay?"

She nodded.

Jonah pulled off his shirt without hesitation. Laurel frowned at him. "You know, the upper thigh would be a lot less noticeable. Not many people would look there."

"Laurel, sweetheart, as much as I like you, I am not going to let you anywhere *near* my nuts with a razor blade."

It was the first time he'd heard her laugh. A real side-splitter that made him smile in response. Elijah was right. He didn't have to be an empath to know how much sadness she carried in her. Over the course of two days, all he'd usually get from her might be a wan smile. He liked the sound of her laughter and hoped to hear more of it in the very near future.

When her mirth finally subsided, a twinkle remained in her pretty gray eyes. She straightened her mouth and licked her lips. She tilted her head toward him. "Where, then?"

He grimaced but looked at the top of his pectoral. "Here's as good a spot as any, I suppose."

Laurel stood this time, biting her bottom lip as she inspected his chest. "I wouldn't feel right marring you like this."

“Then don’t think of it as marrying me.”

The sadness seeped into her eyes again. “This isn’t a good idea, Jonah.”

He reached for her hand, wrapping his fingers around hers. “If you really have the urge to cut, I want it to be on me. Just show me this one time. We’ll take it one step at a time after that.”

Her shoulders slumped, but she bent at the waist, bringing her head closer to his chest. She had a wide expanse to choose from. The only hair to hinder her formed a narrow strip on his lower abdomen. He inhaled the scent of her hair, recognizing a mixture of flowers and fruit, as she inspected him. Her touch was gentle as she spread one hand over him. She lifted the blade, but he kept his attention fixed on her face, on the concentration there.

Laurel tilted her head again, apparently not satisfied with her current position. She shifted her hands and tried again to bring the blade’s tip against his skin. When nothing touched him for a long time, he looked down at where she held the blade poised before looking into her eyes.

“What’s the matter?”

She pulled the blade away and sighed. “I can’t get a decent angle to work. If I put my hand here”—she touched his stomach—“it’s going to be very uncomfortable for you. The only other place, up high near your neck, is also awkward.”

He could see her dilemma, but he also had a quick solution to the problem. He placed his hands on her hips and scooted backward, bringing her with him. She let out a small squeal when he lifted her and brought her down so that she straddled his waist. When he lay back, he ensured that Laurel fell forward.

An eternity passed while she hovered over him, staring into his eyes. Her breath caressed his face as she remained frozen in place, as if torn on how to proceed. He almost saw her mind racing toward a decision. An urge to cup her face between his hands, pull her down, and kiss her with a passion that built within him grew with every second her legs remained locked around his waist. It didn’t make sense that the position, one that left her very much in control, could arouse him so.

He only knew the ache began to strip away some of his resolve. The slow simmer of blood in his veins reminded him of how much he was attracted to her.

“Laurel.” He almost whimpered in frustration. It wasn’t just how she affected him as a man that made his breath quicken. The dark within him had been aroused too. He felt it stir, awakening a hunger within him that her mere presence could instigate.

He sucked in his breath when she sat up, the heat between her legs grazing against his belly. His gaze traveled past her to watch her twist to locate her bag of tricks. When she held it, she rummaged inside and extracted a cotton swab and the minibottle of peroxide.

Her actions were quick, efficient, and it reminded him that she’d done this dozens, if not hundreds, of times before. She inched forward a little when done soaking the cotton, and he almost groaned out loud. “To help prevent infection,” she murmured as she dragged the sodden material over his skin.

Jonah tried to slow his breathing or at least lie perfectly still when she brought her face closer to his chest. She glanced up at him one last time, as if seeking his permission before the cool tip of the razor touched him. He gave her a curt nod, and his entire body tensed as every nerve ending congregated on where the razor pierced through his flesh.

The dark screamed at him, but for the first time in a long time, he could ignore it. His focus went straight to the sharp drag of metal and then the flash in Laurel’s eyes when she glanced up at him before lowering her gaze again.

She did it twice more, cutting deeply each time. It had to be deep if she was going to leave scars behind. He imagined that she’d split him open from just beneath his clavicle and stopped somewhere midstomach. His intellect reminded him, however, that the cuts on her had been about a quarter-inch long. Despite how it felt, he wouldn’t expect her to stray from her normal pattern. In any event, the pain didn’t stop him from becoming as hard as granite.

Tenderly, Laurel dabbed where he stung with a screaming precision that made his breath catch. She did this to herself every day? *On purpose?*

Silence stretched between them before she seemed satisfied with her handiwork. Trickle of blood no longer tickled him, so she must have stemmed its flow during her ministrations. Her face was flushed, and as he watched the rapid rise and fall of her chest, he had the sudden realization that perhaps she found this as erotic as he did.

He kept his voice just above a whisper, not wanting to break the mood. "The next time you feel the need to do this to yourself, I want you to promise that you'll find me. We'll do this again."

The pulse at the base of her neck quickened. "Jonah, you don't have—"

"I want to do this with you, Laurel. Will you promise me? I'm not asking you to stop on yourself. That's too much, too fast probably. But for every cut you put on yourself, I want you to put one on me." Whether she realized it or not, every time she thought about cutting herself, she might be less likely to do it knowing she would assign the same punishment on him.

"What if I can't stop ever? What if this goes on for years?"

"If that's what it takes to slowly transition the hurting from you to me, then that's what it takes."

"I don't know if I'll be able to stop," she protested again softly.

"You'll stop. I have no doubt. Until then, you and me, okay?"

She bit her lip but nodded. When she sat up, her butt grazed the top of his erection, and she went still again.

"Thank you," she murmured as she peered at him beneath hooded eyes.

He nodded, trying to focus on the simple act of breathing, but Laurel's hips tilted beneath his hands, the motion increasing the friction between her thighs and his clothed cock. And the thing of it was, she moved so slowly, so casually, he almost

wasn't sure if she did it on purpose. If it wasn't an accident, she seemed to revel in teasing him, in arousing him to the point where his dick hardened beyond reason.

He couldn't say why his gaze finally dropped, but it did, just in time to catch the silhouette of her breasts beneath her shirt. To see her hardened nipples pressing against the soft fabric. An ache throbbed in his testicles, both the dark and his body warring in their need to connect with Laurel. To fill her with himself and then his essence. The dark wanted to destroy her, while his body needed to love her.

He hadn't noticed how tight his grip on her hips had become until she winced. He lifted his fingers immediately, and the lovely rocking, teasing of her panties against him stopped. Had she been the one keeping the motion going, or had it been his doing the entire time?

"Can I come back tonight?" Jonah grimaced as soon as the words left his mouth. With her body poised above his, the hardness of his erection trapped beneath her thighs, and the subtle scent of her arousal perfuming the air, she would have been in her right to think he meant otherwise.

"Jonah," she sighed. "I—"

"Not for sex, Laurel. For this." He meant should he come back so she could cut him again? Tracing over the cuts with a finger brought with it an instant reminder of why he shouldn't touch his chest for at least another day.

"Oh. Okay."

He didn't trust himself to believe disappointment clouded her face. Again, he envied Elijah's ability to read into people. Not only did she seem let down, she also appeared torn. He'd have to speak with Elijah about how to proceed with her. Somehow, they had to convince her that she would betray neither brother by choosing one over the other, but if she would accept them both, she would renew a hope that had long since gone dormant.

They needed her to free them from a birthright meant to be their ruinations. They were so close to the final day, the moment when their efforts and prayers no

longer meant anything. Laurel was a final, desperate hope that perhaps the brothers had a snowball's chance in hell of surviving.

He sat up, keeping his hand on her lower back, steadying her as he moved. She used her knees to shimmy backward until she could stand. It wasn't his imagination, however, when she glanced down at the tent in his trousers.

As hard as his heartbeat at the moment, he stood and tried to straighten his clothing. Grabbing his shirt from the bed, he walked to the door. Before he opened it, he addressed her apparent confusion.

"Like I said Laurel, we'll take this—*everything*—one step at a time. And not before you're ready."

He didn't wait for her reply.

Chapter Six

“Are you even paying attention to me?”

Elijah looked up, very much aware that he had no idea what Jonah had been saying for perhaps twenty minutes now. “I’m sorry, what?”

A flicker of annoyance crossed Jonah’s features. He pointed to the bank of computers. “I said, the servers... Oh, forget it. Laurel on your mind, right?”

He flushed. Their kiss. Their simple, almost innocent kiss lingered on his lips to the point of obvious distraction. Did she think about it too? Had she spent the night wondering what might have happened had they gone even farther?

Elijah scratched behind his ear and grinned wide. “Yeah.”

He almost didn’t recognize the faraway look that blazed in Jonah’s eyes for a moment, but he knew his brother too well to let it pass. “You too?”

Jonah’s flush matched his own, of course. “Yeah.”

“I want to... She’s... Do you think it’s too soon?”

Jonah glanced at the clock set to New York time. “We can’t afford to wait much longer. Believe me, I want to give her as much time as possible, but if we’re going to make it work...” He shrugged.

“I suppose we should get ready, then, by figuring each of our roles. I doubt dear old Dad left us step-by-step plans on how to fix this mess.”

“Wait,” Jonah interrupted. “You—Jesus, Elijah! I thought you had this entire thing figured out by now. You mean all this time, searching for just the right woman, all of this could be for nothing?”

Shit. Open mouth, insert foot. There went the original plan of letting Jonah in on his ignorance in bits and pieces.

The pulse at the base of his neck began to beat a steady drum. He let out a slow breath. “Jonah, it’ll work. The details are just a little, uh, fuzzy.”

“Fuzzy?”

“It’ll work.”

Jonah shot out of his seat. “This is my life we’re talking about, Eli. ‘Fuzzy’ at this point in the game means jack shit! What the fuck, Bro?”

“I know it’s your life,” he yelled back. It was his life too. They were two halves of a whole, and if one went down, he took the other with him. Didn’t his brother realize that yet?

Jonah slammed his fists against the desk. He stood poised, his body positively vibrating with energy, his hands clenched. Even if Elijah wasn’t looking at him, he knew the state of his brother. The psychic drain Jonah’s anger pulled from him made him dizzy. It made his stomach roll, and he slammed his eyes shut. If he tried to keep them open a moment longer, the light would blind him and send a migraine shooting straight into his brain.

He didn’t know how much longer he could hide his own struggles from Jonah. If Laurel couldn’t help them, though, it wouldn’t matter. He swallowed down bile. If they didn’t figure out *how* to get Laurel to help them, they could both kiss their asses good-bye. That much he knew for certain.

“Let it go, Jonah,” he said softly.

Jonah’s ragged breathing slowed, the sharp inhalation and exhalation of his breath wheezing loudly enough to rival the worst asthmatic’s. At times like this, Elijah wanted to throw up his hands in defeat and scream. The dark rose within Jonah so often and so swiftly these last few months. If he managed to make it another four days, it would be nothing less than a miracle.

Elijah, on the other hand, waited for the light to subside. Even with his eyes shut, the bright glare made the front of his head throb. He wanted to squint against it or even try to soothe it away by rubbing the spot, but any such action wouldn't get past Jonah. *Please, God*. Whatever happened, he didn't want Jonah to know that he suffered as much and sometimes as often. It didn't happen all the time, but frequently enough these days. Soon, he figured, his suffering would match his brother's count for count.

He blindly reached forward, groping for the desk, shoving things out of his way until he could touch Jonah. When they connected, a bolt of dark energy spiked up his arm. He clenched his teeth to keep a hiss of breath from escaping. Jonah might call the possession sensual, but when the dark reached him, all Elijah felt was malevolent power arcing through his extremities.

Time passed, though he had no idea how long they remained in that position. Minutes. Maybe hours. He used it to force himself to breathe through the dark crawling over his skin, weaving through him, mingling with the light. He waited for the balance to return, for the light to subside from his eyes. For the dark to recede from Jonah.

He thought about Laurel. About her smile. Her sadness and her goodness. Their kiss. All the while, he spoke to his brother, pulling him away from the place that wanted him to assume permanent residence. "Let it go...let it go."

The buzzing in his ears became a mild hum until it disappeared altogether. Hesitantly, he opened his eyes, testing the light still lingering in his system. It didn't flare, though, so he opened them all the way. Jonah swayed next to him, perspiration trickling down his face. His respirations were even, and his palms splayed flat against the desk. If the dark still crept through him, it must have been just a residual amount. It wouldn't take him long to completely pull out of it.

Maintaining contact, he watched patiently for Jonah to open his eyes. When he did after a few minutes, they were bloodshot. The aura of sadness hovering over

him made Elijah's heart sink. Jonah pulled his hand away. The brown of his eyes darkened as he scrutinized Elijah.

"You should prepare yourself for my departure, Eli. Our father's legacy is consuming me, and there's not much either of us can do about it. Look," he said, motioning with his chin.

Elijah followed his gaze to the palm of his outstretched hand. He couldn't tell what he was looking for at first. But then his blood ran cold as his mind comprehended what he didn't want to accept.

Dark shimmered above Jonah's hand, suspended over his skin. It snaked between his fingers, twining around his wrist and covering his forearm like a glove. It throbbed in tune with his heartbeat, ominous and encroaching.

Elijah didn't pause to think when he saw it. By some natural instinct, he called forth balance, willing it into existence to counter what tried to take over Jonah's body, one inch at a time. Elijah placed his hand over his twin's, grimacing without cause when he touched the dark, already tensing for the rush that would travel over him when they connected.

The impact affected him less than he'd thought it would. A delicate spark of electricity that sent a shock into his fingers but left no permanent damage. When it diminished, Jonah raised his eyes to meet his, and he noted the color had at least dimmed to its normal state.

"It comes, Brother," Jonah said. "Whatever magic we can wield, we have little time to master it. If we're not ready, and I'm pretty certain we won't be, it will be the end of me."

"I won't let it come to that," Elijah replied harshly.

Jonah's face saddened as he stood. "I don't think you'll have a choice."

"Where are you going now?"

"I have a date of sorts with Laurel. If I only have a few days left, her company will help me forget that for a little while."

“Jonah...”

Elijah pushed his hands through his hair as he watched Jonah’s retreating back. Damn their father. Only four more days.

* * *

The sting didn’t bother him as much today as earlier. Maybe because he’d spent the time memorizing the fine features of her face while she leaned over him. Thick brown lashes framed her gray eyes. A few faded freckles powdered her nose, their faint outlines visible only at this close proximity. Her hair hung loose, and on occasion she tucked errant strands behind her ear when it fell into her line of vision. Hair cascading down the other side of her face tickled his chest when she moved. The silky caresses contrasted pleasingly against the razor’s burn.

“Tell me about the first time,” he said. Anything to distract himself from the stinging lines.

He trailed his fingers over her back, afraid that if he placed them on her hips again, he’d put both of them in an even more compromising position. God knew much-needed blood for his brain had traveled south at least twenty minutes ago, and self-restraint had left his mind when the oxygen had.

She looked up at him, her eyes bright in the dim lighting of the room. “The first time I did this?”

“Yeah.”

“I really don’t remember the details, Jonah.” She wiped off the blade and dropped it into the waiting bag. Soothing coolness from a cotton ball dampened his skin as she cleaned the new cuts etched into his chest.

He didn’t believe for one second she couldn’t remember the details. Privacy in this matter, to an extent, he would grant, though. “Then tell me about what led you to do it.”

She remained silent for a long time, chewing on her lip. Her face stayed downcast, her attention drifting everywhere but to meet his gaze. He let the pause

stretch without speaking. When she finally spoke, her voice wavered just above a whisper.

“I really don’t know. Grandma and Aunt Vi...” She shook her head slowly. “I suppose I should tell you about them first.”

Laurel snuggled against him, careful to not touch the cuts but still resting her head on his chest. He loved that she would drape herself across him like this. For some strange reason, he didn’t feel the urgency to sleep with her like before. Right now, he reveled in the simple innocence of holding her in his arms.

“My parents died when I was young,” she continued, “and Grandma raised me. You know that. She’s all I knew for a long time. And then out of nowhere, Aunt Vi came to live with us. As harrying as it could be, it was wonderful at the same time. I realize now that we didn’t have a lot of money, but I can’t remember ever wanting for anything.”

She paused, and he felt the deep inhalation she took, as if steeling herself for what she needed to say next.

“Aunt Vi lived up to her name. I’ve never met a more vivacious woman...even right up to the very end. Grandma, on the other hand, had started to slow down. It was like I watched her age right before my eyes, but it all seemed to happen in the course of a single year. And eventually we knew what we needed to do, what we didn’t want to do...” Her voice softened.

“Tell me, Laurel,” he prodded gently.

“We agreed she needed 24-7 care, and God, Jonah, as much as I wanted to, I just didn’t have the energy to work and take care of her with the remaining hours in my day. I would sacrifice anything for Grandma, but Aunt Vi was getting up in age too. We forced it to work for months. Months of caring for Grandma, and for a short while, I eventually cared for them both. Please don’t think I wouldn’t have sacrificed the world for them, because I would have. I was just so tired...”

The urge to comfort her or make her stop this horrible retelling wound tight in Jonah, but he had to know. And perhaps she needed to tell someone.

More than just tell any person. He wanted her to need to tell *him*.

“When we found Grandma on the floor one morning because she couldn’t wait for one of us to help her to the bathroom, we knew. She needed twenty-four-hour care, and the only place to do that was at a nursing home.

“Aunt Vi and I fought vehemently about it. We tried to come up with solutions, how we would squeeze out the money to pay for private care in her home, but no matter how we twisted the budget, we wouldn’t have been able to make ends meet. Aunt Vi and I went at it night and day, always arguing when we thought Grandma couldn’t hear, not speaking to each other for days on end unless necessary. A complete one-eighty to the way things had been for years, but we were just so angry at the injustice of it all. Then all of a sudden, one day, the fighting stopped.”

Jonah quirked an eyebrow. “Just like that?”

Her fingers trailed beneath the rows of simple cuts, sending a shiver shooting down to his groin. The light touch made him ache and almost curse at the same time. She didn’t even seem aware of his reaction and nodded in response to his question.

“That’s what should have been my warning. Aunt Vi was spunky and gave as good as she got. She never backed down from a fight, and by no means did I think I had won. I guess I sort of figured we had come to a truce of sorts. Only...only one day, I came home to an empty house. Aunt Vi was gone, and that’s not so unusual, but Grandma was gone too. And I didn’t think anything of it. I just started dinner and went about my evening chores as normal.” Her cool tears dripped onto his chest, and her entire body tensed on top of him. Her breath came in hitching gasps, but she struggled on, telling him the story she didn’t want to relay. “Oh God,” she moaned, “why did I wait? If I had gotten to them sooner...”

Jonah tightened his arms around her, holding her trembling body against the inner turmoil storming inside. He dropped tender kisses on her forehead, chaste reminders that he held her. That he would get her through this.

“I don’t even remember why I went outside. And worse, I can’t remember if I saw it before I went inside but just didn’t pay attention to the closed garage door.”

Jonah’s stomach clenched in sympathy. He didn’t have to hear her next words to know what she found. He said nothing, though, just continued to stroke her back and hold her tight.

“By the time I got there, by the time I opened the door, the fumes were so thick my head swam. I can hear the sound of the motor to this day, Jonah,” she said between sobs. “I can hear the sound of that motor, feel the air choking me just like I’m standing there in that exact moment. As if no time has passed.”

He didn’t push her to say more, although his mind was a whirl of questions. He didn’t move. She clutched at him like a child, her tears streaming down her face to land in big drops on his chest. They ran down his side, soaking the bed beneath.

All this grief bottled up inside her must have made getting through every day an unbearable task. He was humbled that she would choose to open herself up to him and show him the rawest part of herself.

She used the back of her hand to wipe across her face but then snuggled tight against him again. Several minutes passed before her voice didn’t hitch when she tried to speak. “The police found the letter from Aunt Vi. It was more than a month later before I could bring myself to read it. It said that Aunt Vi had been diagnosed with cancer. That’s why she slowed down. She didn’t want to put me through the burden of seeing her through that time. She also took it upon herself to decide to take away the burden, as she called it, of seeing Grandma unhappy and dying a slow death in a nursing home. So she ended their lives. She had no right, but she took both of them from me.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“And you know what’s the worst part about it, Jonah? I would never leave this earth the way my aunt did, but every day is a struggle not to join them. I mean, how easy would it be to just slip away? To just go to sleep? I don’t have—” She bit off her words abruptly.

He furrowed his brow. "You don't have what?"

She shook her head. "Never mind."

"You don't have what, Laurel?" he asked, his tone sterner. He couldn't shake a premonition building in his spine.

"I don't have anything worth living for anymore," she muttered.

Fuck. That's exactly what he'd feared.

Jonah tipped his body, rolling her in a move that caught her by surprise, based upon her yelp. He made certain when she landed, he rolled far enough onto her that she became trapped beneath his bulk. He gazed down on her tear-streaked face, taking in the sight of her red-rimmed eyes, the clear streams of snot pooling beneath her nose. She must have been biting her lips in between talking, because they seemed pinker now. Definitely more full, as if swollen. Her forehead was damp, the crown of her hair curling around the moisture. Her ruddy face looked tired.

And she never looked more beautiful to him.

"Stop squirming and listen to me. Are you listening?" He jostled her shoulder until her gaze snapped and met his. "One minute, one hour, one day at a time. I can't promise you next week. But I *can* promise you right here, right now. My brother and I can become your reasons for living one minute after another, if you give us that chance."

She searched his face. "What do you—"

He'd always thought Elijah would be the one to bring it up with her. To make her understand what they needed from her. But now, he realized she needed them as much, and he would not let this moment slip away unacknowledged. "Open your heart to us, Laurel. Both of us. And we will gladly become your reasons for living."

"What?" Her narrowed eyes searched his. "I don't know if I understand. *Both* of you?"

"Talk with Elijah in the morning. But I think you know what I'm asking from you."

“Jonah, wait...” Her gaze shifted away but then returned to him again. She asked softly, “Why can’t I talk to you about it?”

His heart lifted. He’d been so deathly afraid that she would run screaming from the idea that it never crossed his mind she might consider it. His entire plan depended on Elijah being able to soothe over his bumbling attempt at seducing her into their bed. Still, he recognized his limitations, and even with this slight bit of headway, he wanted his brother there. This wasn’t a topic he should tackle on his own.

He kissed the tender curve of her cheek. “Not tonight. There’s a lot I want Elijah to explain for you, and I don’t trust myself to get it all right. For now...” He shifted until he spooned her, relishing once again the intimacy of their positions. God help him, he didn’t want this moment to end. “Tell me as much as you’d like about your grandma and your aunt Vi.”

He draped his arm over her side as she nestled against him. When she started speaking, a faint glimmer of hope began to shed its light on his soul.

Chapter Seven

Wednesday

Laurel couldn't remember the last time she'd awoken with someone to snuggle. She barely believed Jonah had spent the entire night in her bed, both of them fully clothed. There had been nothing sexual about the way he'd let her talk late into the night. He'd held her hand, squeezing it and offering comfort, but made no other attempt at advancing what was happening between them.

In the lapses of comfortable silence that stretched out between them, she thought about him and his brother. She knew what it looked like to hold hands with him, to share emotions she'd not had a chance to tell anyone else about, to lie on the large bed together. She wasn't stupid or naive. For as many times as he could have kissed her passionately or aroused her with his touch, Jonah had remained a gentleman. For that, she was grateful.

She'd been so wrapped up in memories of her family that she wouldn't have been able to bring her mind to a place where she could enjoy him. And maybe he wouldn't have been able to enjoy her. In either event, he seemed to have known that and didn't push. Once again he proved to her how he was so much like his brother, yet at the same time, different.

To share both of them would not only be a thrill but also daunting. Was this common for them? Would she become a notch in the bedpost she feared finding the first day she'd come to live here?

As quickly as the thoughts formed, they diminished. She wasn't completely without a past, and it wasn't fair to expect them not to be. Whatever happened

between the three of them should be flagged from the first day she had arrived and not by their pasts. Beyond their current health statuses, she didn't need to know more.

She smiled to herself.

What would her grandmother say if she had an inkling that Laurel found the idea exciting and humbling? One definitely worth considering. Then again, what red-blooded woman would deny herself the opportunity to be seduced and loved by two men at the same time? Jonah had offered her one day at a time, which was how she'd been living for the past few months anyway. At least now she'd have a reason to look forward to each sunrise.

Without opening her eyes, she breathed in the lingering traces of Jonah's cologne and enjoyed the warmth of his body stretched next to hers. He snored lightly, which comforted her as much as his presence did. His face pressed against the curve of her neck; his arm draped across her belly. One of his legs entwined with one of hers, leaving her thigh trapped by his. Her mouth curved into a smile because if she wiggled just so... *Oh yeah*. Nothing like waking up pressed against a man as a reminder that life went on and he was ready and able to keep it going.

She turned so that she could face him, maybe even help him put his morning wood to good use and bumped into something – *someone*—on the other side of her.

What the hell?

Laurel's eyes flew open, and she almost gave herself whiplash in her hurry to see who lay next to her. Elijah opened his own sleepy eyes when she jostled him. They widened large enough for her to note the flecks of gray within them before he slid as far away from her as humanly possible without falling off the bed completely.

"I-I'm sorry," he stammered. "Sorry. I fell asleep and..."

Jonah yawned on the other side of her. "It's cool, Eli. I told her."

"Whoa, fellas." She squirmed away from Jonah, not quite wanting to run into Elijah either. "What's going on? I distinctly remember only *one* man in my bed last

night, despite our very brief conversation, Jonah.” She shot him a slanted look for good measure. “When I woke up, you were... Were you holding hands?”

Suddenly, every ounce of fear about the brothers came roaring back. She’d told herself that they didn’t seem right around each other. The intimate touching was something more than what should have been between brothers. Definitely more than grown men should normally exhibit.

She slid down the bed, moving slowly but deliberately from them both. She didn’t know what kind of mind games they were into, but she would not subject herself to them one minute longer. It was good and all that she could open up to Jonah, and to Elijah if truth be told, but getting caught up in their sexcapades was a different matter altogether.

Jonah trapped her between his thighs before she could move far. His brow furrowed. “Where are you going?”

Pushing at the telephone pole he called a leg, she slipped hers away from him. “I appreciate the offer, Jonah. Really I do. It’s flattering as all hell, but I don’t know if”—she glanced at Elijah while her face heated all over—“I can participate in whatever you two have going on.”

Elijah cocked his head as his brow slanted enough to match his brother’s. “What do you think is going on?”

Jonah reached down until he could grasp her arm. “Laurel?”

“Why do two grown men—brothers—sleep in the same bed... I mean... Oh crap. I have no idea how to talk about this.”

“Laurel?” Jonah repeated. He tugged on her until she had no choice but to inch toward the head of the bed again. “What is it you’re thinking?”

She held out her hand in the universal *stop* gesture. “It wasn’t my imagination. I saw him”—she glanced at Elijah again—“touching you. And the other night, he came out of your room without a shirt on, and... Oh jeez...” The flush on her cheeks and down her neck probably made her glow bright red.

She didn't want to look at either of them in the face, but when she did look up, she couldn't help seeing the twinkle in Elijah's eyes. "Brother," he said, "I think Laurel has a very distinct idea in her mind about the two of us."

Jonah appeared slower to catch on. "What could she possibly—"

"I think she thinks we're too *close* for brothers."

He mulled it over. "Close?"

"Yeah. *Real close*."

Why on earth wouldn't Jonah let her arm go? She wanted to curl into a ball and poof into thin air right now. Anything but listen to this exchange.

She glanced up just in time to catch the look of horror cross Jonah's face.

"You...you think he and I... That we...? Oh my God."

To her complete and utter mortification, Jonah then began to laugh. His mouth fell open, and shocked but jubilant laughter fell out. What made it worse was when Elijah joined in. At least Elijah had the decency to blush while he laughed, but every time he glanced at his brother, he erupted into a fit of amusement that jump-started Jonah all over again.

Between gasping for air, Jonah loosened his grip, but that didn't stop the burn in her face threatening to set her hair aflame. Now she was completely dumbfounded. What could they possibly find amusing about all of this?

"Oh, *Jesus*, that's funny. That is *fun-ny*!"

Her embarrassment got shoved to the side by her rising anger. "Ha-ha, guys. I get it. I'm wrong." Jonah was outright whooping, while at least Elijah's mirth had subsided to chuckling. "But you have to admit, the evidence is stacked against you."

Jonah sat up, his eyes watering, and reached for her in between guffaws. With a strength she would have never guessed he possessed, he pulled her up until she lay parallel to him. Also sandwiched between him and Elijah, she noted.

He wiped the tears from his eyes, but his mouth remained stretched in a huge grin. Taking a deep breath, he physically shook off his merriment. "We fuck *women*,

Laurel.” Her mouth dropped open. “Women. Personally, I have a thing for breasts. God bless ‘em, I like ‘em large, small, droopy, firm, whatever. The one thing they have in common, though, is that they all belong to *women*.” He licked his lips as he openly stared at her chest before dragging his gaze back up to her face. She could have been outraged, but her nipples hardened into tight buds at his wanton expression.

“I, on the other hand, have a thing for women’s natural curves. Like the way a woman’s ass looks in faded jeans.” Elijah moved closer, heat radiating from his body in waves. “In fact, I saw something recently that made me forget myself for a minute. A tiny hole right at the bottom of her back pocket. It gave me just a hint at the bright pink panties she wore, and the way the material stretched over her bottom—it made me want to bite her ass. Just sink my teeth into it. *God*.”

The last word was said with such a lustful reverence, she almost smiled until her memory perked up. The day they’d met, she’d been wearing a pair of jeans exactly as he described, except she thought she’d covered the hole with her shirt. Sweet heaven, those same pink panties lay crumpled at the bottom of a dirty-clothes hamper even now.

Jonah’s hand moved beneath her shirt, resting on her belly, making her suck it in at his touch. “I hope we’re perfectly clear on this subject, Laurel. We fuck women. And most definitely what I said to you last night still stands.” His hand rubbed against her skin, creating a friction hot enough to start a fire. “I want you. He wants you. It’s up to you to decide if we—and I do mean both of us—are what *you* want.”

She exhaled, a slow release of tension that began in her shoulders, traveling down until it knotted in her belly. What was she supposed to say to that? The way he dragged his fingers over her stomach, his touch just skimming the surface of her skin, not quite tickling but definitely arousing her more than she thought possible, made thinking straight almost *impossible*. “What do you want from me?” she asked softly.

“It’s simple, Laurel,” Elijah said, his voice husky. His words seemed to find her center, right where Jonah touched, stoking a need that demanded she yield. “We want you to be with us, become a part of us, by accepting us right here. Right now.”

She stared at him, too stunned to reply. Too shocked to get her mind to wrap around his words.

Jonah’s nimble fingers circled her navel, tracing a path along her overheated skin. The intensity on Elijah’s face made her feel like she had to respond right away, and this was too important, too awe inspiring to rush. She turned to Jonah. “What about you two?”

“Us?”

She dropped her gaze. “You know... About what I thought. I didn’t imagine him touching you.”

Jonah, at least, looked bashful when he replied. “Night terrors.”

“Night terrors?”

He nodded. “Yeah, almost all of my life. It took our mother a while to figure it out, but the only thing that kept them manageable was Elijah. And believe me, she tried everything at first. When we were old enough to live on our own, I tried to live without him, hoping I’d outgrown it, but at night I became dangerous to myself and sometimes others. It’s a small part of the reason we’re looking for someone who is amenable to this...arrangement.”

“I knew he was in here and had planned on leaving before morning. I guess I’d forgotten how comforting it can be to sleep next to a woman,” Elijah said. He reached over with deliberate intent and curled his fingers around hers. “And I didn’t want him to just leave. I guess I wanted us to enjoy this”—he swept his available hand over the bed, indicating all three of them—“for as long as we could.”

“It was presumptuous, Elijah.”

“It was,” he agreed.

Laurel turned away from him and closed her eyes. A companionable silence ensued where Jonah rubbed her stomach and Elijah held her hand. The sexual tension stifling her before seemed to have evaporated. Now, with both men stretched out beside her, a sense of *rightness* took its place.

Butterflies laid claim to her stomach, despite the soothing circles Jonah trailed there. The heat of their stares from either side of her body kept her arousal fanned. Elijah had offered her a home. Jonah offered her a reason for waking up every day. Ultimately, both men offered themselves. And she was humbled.

Jonah's palm flattened. "Is there anything we can do to make this decision easier for you?"

What would it say about her if she agreed? The ache between her thighs said she'd been too long without the touch of a lover. The ache in the middle of her chest, however, said the hole left there by the loss of her family needed to be filled. Could two lovers mend the ragged wound from two lives lost?

Elijah said, "Laurel, look at me. Tell me what you're thinking."

She shook her head. "This isn't right. People don't do this—"

Her protest cut off when a warm mouth captured hers. Shock coursed through her. When her eyes flew open, she stared into the mesmerizing blue of Elijah's. He lowered his lids when she didn't try to escape him. She made a noise, not quite a protest, but it melted into a sigh when his lips moved over hers. As before, his kiss was tender but at the same time full of yearning. He kissed her unhurriedly, as if time stood still.

He cupped her jaw, angling her face at first toward him but then slowly away. His tongue touched the corner of her mouth, soon to move lower to brush his mouth against her chin. Jonah, without hesitation, picked up where Elijah had left off.

Jonah's mouth on hers demanded complete surrender. He nibbled on her lips, pulling them, teasing them into yielding beneath his intensity. She wouldn't have expected less from him. By the time Jonah pulled away, she was breathless.

“Is it safe?” she asked after her fluttering heart and whirling mind would permit her. What she meant was *are you safe?*

Ever-confident, overprotective Jonah caught her meaning. “Never safer. We’ve never done this together before, and I can safely say...well, it’s been a long time for me.”

“It’s been a long time for me too,” Elijah added.

Jonah’s hand traveled up her abdomen, resting just beneath the curve of her breast. With every up-and-down motion of her chest as she breathed, his fingers grazed the sensitive area, stoking the smoldering flame growing in her blood.

She couldn’t think. Every fiber of her being screamed *yes!* Her pussy pulsed with want, and the juncture between her thighs was redolent from her body’s moisture. Even she could scent the arousal wafting from her. A much-ignored and now-famished need roared for recognition...and satiation.

“But—” She bit off another protest, because, for God’s sake, she wanted this. She just didn’t know how to ask for more.

Something in her posture or maybe her expression must have given her away.

Jonah leaned in again, slanting his mouth over hers, bruising her lips in a kiss that made her arch her back, to do whatever necessary to remain connected with him. His mouth traveled over hers, feasting and learning.

Jonah, or maybe Elijah, pushed her shirt up, exposing her belly to the air, but warm hands soothed away goose bumps. She moaned her approval, and Jonah swallowed the sound with a low groan of his own.

Elijah whispered next to her ear, the words just loud enough to be heard over the drumming of her heart. “We don’t carry disease...” Jonah’s mouth kept her from turning, but the shock of his declaration swept over her. “We’ve been tested and know we can’t naturally father children.” She recognized now that Elijah’s hands had distracted her from the sweetness of Jonah’s kiss. Elijah’s fingers traced the curve of her heavy breasts and made her nipples strain for attention. “Let this time be for you with no worries. No fears.”

She broke away from Jonah and looked deep into his eyes. He stared back, his own eyes bright with hope. When she turned to face Elijah, she saw him studying her with the same breathless anticipation. Without a doubt in her mind, she knew how badly they wanted her.

And by far, it paled in comparison to how much she wanted them.

She tilted her chin and straightened her shoulders. Her pulse might be surging and her heart racing at breakneck speed, but the decision had already been spelled out; from the moment she'd begun to really trust these men, she knew.

Her voice unwavering, she said, "Yes...please."

Chapter Eight

The men didn't wait for her to change her mind.

Strong hands pushed her shirt over her head while gentle lips staked a claim on her mouth. As soon as Jonah broke contact to allow removal of the hated material, Elijah leaned in to capture her in a heart-stopping kiss again.

If she didn't know better, she'd say they'd rehearsed this like a well-timed dance. Each man seemed to know when to back away and allow the other in to take his place without a second's hesitation.

Jonah cupped her exposed breast, flicking a thumb over her nipple, which responded to his touch immediately. He made a strangled noise before taking it with his mouth, tonguing it into a heated point. But it was Elijah's tongue teasing between her lips, gliding against hers. His breath fed her hunger yet at the same time increased her appetite.

She curled the fingers of one hand in Elijah's hair, pulling him closer. Encouraging him to work harder, faster against her. Her other hand cupped Jonah's jaw, stroking the prickly rise of stubble on his face.

Rubbing her thighs together staved off some of the ache between them, but the men simultaneously built it back up to screaming proportions. She wanted to feel one of them—both of them—against her body, rubbing against her, touching the sweet spot inside. She wanted them naked, hard, and ready to take her to soaring heights.

When Jonah pulled away, she whimpered, but bless him, Elijah wouldn't leave her abandoned. He claimed her mouth again, pressing against her swollen lips, making her cry out as he nipped them. Where Jonah could be gentle but passionate,

Elijah was ravenous and impatient. He kissed her as if she would disappear at any moment and his kisses were meant to last a lifetime. There was desperation in his actions, a need for her that made her heart break. She didn't want to unearth the hidden meaning behind it now. Couldn't.

A soft rustle of clothing grabbed her attention. She turned from Elijah, who took advantage of her exposure to nibble along the sensitive muscle between her neck and shoulder. Her mind wrenched in two directions: trying to reconcile the zip of sensation that streaked to her pussy as a result of him, while at the same time feasting on the sight of Jonah's nakedness.

The night she'd seen Elijah's bare chest was now a distant memory. How, for heaven's sake, she'd managed to forget the awe-inspiring sight would be a mystery she'd have to solve later. For now, watching Jonah's muscles as they rippled made her mouth go dry.

But then Elijah eased his attack and licked over her peaked nipple in long, broad strokes. The change in sensation brought her mind back to him in a hurry. Jonah was supposed to be the one with the breast fetish, right? Elijah had burrowed into the comfort of the bed, ready to stay there for the long haul based on his concentration and detailed attention to her breast.

Jonah's hand sneaked down her stomach again, and he grinned against her mouth when his hand slipped beneath the waist of her panties. He let out a low, appreciative growl. "Aw, Jesus... She shaves, Eli."

Laurel widened her legs and smiled with him when Elijah's hand snaked down her abdomen to join his brother's. He tested Jonah's declaration, and his groan vibrated against her breast. Who knew the simple act of grooming would bring about such a desired effect?

With a sigh, Elijah scraped his teeth against her skin before removing his mouth altogether. She left the comfort of Jonah nuzzling against her cheek to watch Elijah undress. At the same time she glimpsed the evidence of his arousal, Jonah's

fingers swept over her pussy. Her breath caught, stolen by the sight of Elijah and the sensations Jonah caused.

“My God,” she said when her breathing finally jump-started again. When Jonah undressed also, there would be two of them—*exactly like that*.

Her gaze traveled up Elijah’s body, and she enjoyed the view every inch of the way. The simple vision of his naked feet made her aware of just how masculine he was. By the time she finished taking in the sight of his powerful thighs, she worked harder on not hyperventilating. Simple curls of hair outlined his legs and formed a road map to his pride. His cock hung thick and heavy, a pearl drop of moisture at the tip more evidence of his arousal.

Time crawled to a stop, almost arresting her heartbeat at the same time, as she stared at him wrapping his fingers around its length. Jonah’s slow drag of his mouth over her neck couldn’t distract her from watching Elijah slide his hand up to the head, capture the droplet, and spread it down his thick shaft. Mesmerized, she watched him do it again and again, each time resulting in his cock lengthening a little bit more.

Jonah turned to follow what had caught her attention, and he chuckled lightly. “You like that, baby?”

With her throat too tight to speak, she nodded. Two of them, she reminded herself. It was all she could focus on. The fact she had two men at her pleasure. If she thought too long or hard about what it would be like, how they both would claim her body, she would drown beneath a flood of overwhelming feelings. Instead, she would close her eyes and revel in the men. Her men. Her lovers.

Jonah found her mouth again and kissed her with simple mastery. A contagion of intense shivers rippled through her with every moment that passed. He kissed her lips, her chin, her neck... His attention found every sensitive place, learned the curves of her breasts, traced the curve of her belly.

And still beyond him, she couldn’t prevent herself from watching Elijah as he stroked himself.

Jonah slid his hands between her hips and panties and tugged the material down. She raised her hips from the bed and tore her gaze away from Elijah long enough to watch the rapture on Jonah's face as he revealed her nudity. The cross between heart-pounding excitement and raw, unadulterated anticipation reflecting in his eyes brought with it a moment of joy for her. For as awed as she was by the fact the two men were hers for the taking, his focus all but shouted his longing for her as loudly as any words could have.

She returned his enthusiasm in spades, encouraged by his attention. She was so wet, so ready to feel him inside her. Fulfilling her.

"Oh fuck me, that is...lovely," he declared to no one in particular. He raised his eyes to meet hers. "And you, Laurel, I...thank you."

What did that mean, exactly? She almost asked him, but he did the most unexpected thing next. He lowered his head.

The first contact of Jonah's mouth on her pussy awakened every nerve in her body. They all rushed to that one spot, all clamoring to be the one that would make her toes curl, her limbs stiffen, and her mind shut down all conscious thought. And for every second that passed, she tried to stave off the sensations threatening to overwhelm her body.

He wrapped his arms around her thighs, drawing her closer to him. Never before had she felt more exposed to a man's gaze and lust.

Jonah's clever tongue traced over her slick folds before slipping inside briefly. He moved with agonizing slowness, ignoring the one spot that would make her cry out. If he would just touch there, just once, she'd teeter over the edge and fall to oblivion.

Laurel shifted her hips, trying to tilt him closer to what she needed, but Jonah would not be baited. He chuckled again, and she groaned her frustration. Already her hands were clenched around the bedsheets, her back arched, her breath coming in heaving gasps.

"You okay, Laurel?" he asked between licks.

“Jonah,” she gasped. He traced down one lip before running his nose along the juncture of her thigh.

“Hmm?”

She rolled her hips, again trying to move his focus. His grip tightened, but he continued the torturous trail. “Please, Jonah,” she pleaded.

“What, baby? Tell me what you need.”

Thoughts and ideas tumbled over themselves in her mind. What she wanted, what she needed he knew exactly how to give her but kept just this side of out of reach.

She had no idea when her eyes had slipped closed, but she opened them to find Elijah standing over them both. He watched Jonah’s tease with an appreciative smile curving his lips.

“Show me what you need,” Jonah continued. His tongue dipped inside her cunt, and her stomach clenched. “Is this right? Right here?”

“Yes,” she hissed and held her breath when he explored closer to her clit.

“What about here?”

Elijah crawled onto the bed and bent his head next to hers. She pushed her hands into his hair when his mouth claimed hers. Although she tried to stifle it, she moaned as Jonah circled the hood of her engorged clit.

Between the drugging kiss and Jonah’s attention, she would go stark, raving mad if the men didn’t push her over the edge soon.

She kissed Elijah back with some of the passion racing through her blood. If he would only understand how her body tightened in anticipation, how her heart raced from need, neither brother would torture her so.

She moaned again and reflexively clasped tighter to Elijah, silently begging him for a reprieve. Elijah whispered against her mouth, “Thank you, Laurel.” He then angled his head away from hers to look at Jonah. His lips brushed hers as he said, “Now.”

Her eyebrows drew in, but her eyes went wide with surprise when Jonah—finally, *oh, finally*—wrapped his mouth over her clit and pulled. The delicious shock of it streaked through her limbs, racing over her body in a tumultuous, rolling series of detonations that held her hostage. She could only shudder through the rippling waves, her limbs too taut to move, her throat locked in a noiseless scream.

All doubts, all feelings of being emotionally overwhelmed disappeared beneath the pleasure.

This was her time. She would not dishonor it with second-guessing or worrying about tomorrow. The time to enjoy it was here.

With what could be no less than a practiced precision, the men claimed both sets of her lips with almost the exact same method. Their timing was in sync, the gentle probes of their tongues inserting and retreating with the same fervor, the same rhythm. At last, when she thought she couldn't stand any more, they eased her through the intense orgasm and lightened their attacks until they left her limp and sated.

"That was beautiful," Elijah said, looking into her eyes.

She blushed clear to her toes, horrified that the way he scrutinized her now not only turned her on but made her wonder what was next on the menu. He sat beside her on the bed, his prominent erection a hint of his next move, at least. So it was to her complete surprise when he stood and walked away.

But then Jonah crawled over her, at some point having had discarded the cotton sweatpants. The weight of his cock pressed against her thigh when he lowered himself to kiss her lightly once again. She prolonged the contact, reveling in the heady taste of herself on his lips. "It was most beautiful," he agreed when she finally released him. His brown eyes darkened. "Again, please."

Laurel released a hoarse cry when he surged forward and impaled her with a single thrust. The torrential force of it caught her by surprise, and her cunt spasmed in surrender to him. She slammed her eyes shut and focused on breathing. Nice and slow, in and out.

She looked at him in time to see Jonah reach for the mattress edge with both hands. When he gripped it like his life depended on it, she swallowed hard at the implication. He murmured, “Hold on.”

She did.

He stacked her arousal on top of itself, layer by layer, with each thrust. The smooth glide of his body on hers made her pulse surge faster and harder. Her head swam from the erotic sensations rippling out from where he entered her body and plunged with the skill of a master over and over again. Muffled cries soon found volume. Through it, she inhaled the masculine scent of his cologne and the musky scent of his labor.

Sensations and emotions she’d assumed she’d never recognize again rushed in. The clashing reality of joy both at its simplest innocence and at its most erotic peak flowed through her. Laurel closed her eyes, letting it wash over her. Jonah did this. It was his attention, his body inside hers that aroused and buoyed her.

His mouth landed on hers, his tongue inserting and retreating into her mouth. He captured her gasping breaths, murmured sweet words that meant nothing and everything. Jonah brought her to the brink of bliss before stealing her away from it only a few thudding heartbeats later. Fingers threaded into his hair, she kissed him back.

He surged forward and withdrew, each connection forcing her pulse to surge. Passionate yet tender, Jonah branded himself on her heart as he brought her to highs she’d longed for. His attention and devotion to her in their short days together she would cherish.

Laurel wrapped her legs around his waist, spurring his rush to completion. Longing for his sweet release within her. He rolled his hips, grinding himself against her clit, and a starburst of lights exploded behind her closed lids.

“Jo-nah!” she cried, almost cutting off his name as her breath caught again.

He slipped a hand between their bodies, finding the nub of her pleasure, and began to skate his fingers over it. “Come for me, baby,” he said with a strained voice.

Powerful shudders gripped her body, her mind spiraling out of control from Jonah’s attention. Laurel held on to sanity for a moment longer, but the first surge of his seed spilling inside her hurled her over that ledge. She dug her fingers into his shoulders, crying out in hoarse exaltation. Jonah’s low moans and the harsh, uneven rhythm of his breathing carried her through the waning remnants of orgasm.

He stilled for a moment before landing another toe-curling kiss on her. He slowly withdrew, and her body responded with a few pulses, pulling from him the last of his offering. Jonah rolled to his side, rivulets of perspiration running down his chest and falling to the bed beneath.

And that’s when her mind focused on the fact that Elijah still waited, his stance suggestive of one who tested the limits of patience—and was about to lose.

“Turn over,” he rasped. He stroked his cock, not nearing the head this time. The dusky crimson sheen and deep blue veins running along its length showed her just how long he’d stood restrained. It must have been torturous for him to not release his own pleasure as he watched her with his brother.

Despite the wobbly way her legs responded, she did as requested with a grin on her face. She’d seen the telltale tube in his hand, and it had been a long time since a partner had requested this type of intimacy.

As she moved onto her hands and knees, she realized that the remnants of Jonah’s seed coated the insides of her thighs. She loved knowing that was *his* cream inside her. At the same time, he seemed to have similar thoughts. Jonah propped himself on one arm and, using the other hand, stroked the inside of her thigh with a single finger. He trailed through the moisture and used it to stimulate her clit once again.

In an eerily similar move, Elijah knelt behind her and placed gel-coated fingers against the pink rosette of her anus. The startlingly cool lubricant made her thrust her hips toward Jonah, inadvertently resulting in more pressure against her clit. Elijah cooed soft noises, and she relaxed her back, savoring his gentle exploration as he inserted one finger into her ass. Soon one finger became two.

He moved with the tenderness of an experienced lover, as if time itself held no meaning. But she'd seen his face a few minutes ago. He obviously didn't want to rush her until she was ready and would have taken as long as she asked, but the toll his patience paid must have been killing him. Thing was, she'd been ready for him from the first time he'd kissed her.

Over her shoulder, she said with a throaty voice, "Hey, lover. Anytime you're ready."

She would have paid a precious amount of money for a picture of Elijah's face when he pushed his cock against her opening. What she got instead was the sound of his excited moan and the look of wonder on his brother's face as he watched only inches away. What she felt was pure heaven.

"Don't...move..." Elijah groaned.

He'd sunk all the way inside, his thighs pressing against hers. Knowing that he could lose control of himself at any moment excited her. That his rapid, shuddering breaths fought him for the remaining vestiges of his restraint. His voice couldn't have been sexier with the way he forced the words out between clenched teeth. Even without seeing his face, she recognized his fragile tone.

Jonah removed his hand, but Elijah reached around her waist and resumed what his brother had begun. He began to move, slowly at first. The sensuous circling of his finger on her clit matched his rhythm, building in tempo with his thrusts.

Even though she'd done this before, Laurel had forgotten how the incredible fullness of a cock inside her ass made her feel. For a brief second she wondered what it would be like to feel both of them inside her at the same time. One in her

pussy and one in her ass. She knew women did it; she'd seen an Internet video of it once. Hell, the heroine of her novel in progress was about to go there. *God, imagine if they would be willing...*

She didn't think it possible so soon, but familiar tingling began to arise in the pit of her belly. Elijah must have felt it too. He picked up speed, rocking his hips faster and increasing those delicious circuitous trails on her clit.

"Elijah, please." She whimpered. He pushed harder. Faster.

Her skin lit up in a firestorm of tingling. It spread at an uncontrollable pace, her heartbeat fluttering wildly and trying to match its intensity. Before she could catch it and perhaps try to regulate some of the ecstasy coursing over her, her body went rigid with orgasmic shock. Her pussy pulsed, and it was Elijah's undoing.

He shouted as her body pulled from him, taking in the jets of his spend. She managed to remain upright until his shudders faded, but within moments collapsed against the bed. Elijah fell forward with her, landing on her sweaty back, his body still lodged within her body. He rolled them slightly, and Jonah moved in close, pressing his chest against hers. Elijah peppered warm kisses along her trembling shoulder, but Jonah kissed her mouth.

Laurel thought long and hard about it and tried to remember the last time she'd felt this needed, and couldn't.

Chapter Nine

Thursday

He couldn't speak for Jonah, but Elijah's dick was sore. And poor Laurel... He grimaced to think what she must have felt like today. They'd taken her time and time again. For a full day, really, until neither brother had the strength to stand, much less love her again.

He'd only had to glimpse the glory of her nudity, and despite how his mind might protest, his cock rose to the occasion each and every damned time. It had to be because she'd taken him without hesitation that first time. Sure, he'd glimpsed inside her mind the first day she'd arrived and knew she at least entertained the thought of anal sex. But to actually accept him without the slightest reservation was a gift.

Although the largest hurdle to Jonah's salvation had been traversed without a single problem, they would both have to refocus today. Laurel still needed to be informed of the role they needed her to play and hope against every impossible hope that she would consent. Every hour that passed reminded him of how little time they had left. Yesterday had been a pleasant surprise—not only a blessing, but almost a final hurrah for themselves as well, in case things went awry.

Sitting at one of the computers, he scanned some of the documents they'd amassed over the last year, and hoped he'd figured out the last pieces of the puzzle. He pointed at the screen. "*Look at this one, Jonah.*"

He turned in time to see Jonah wince before he said, “I didn’t think I could ever get this exhausted! How come you look like you’re ready to take on the day? You were there too.”

On a half smile, he shrugged. “Believe me, I’m ready to put this shit down and go crawl in bed next to her. But I figure if I do, I’m not coming back out here again, so better to buckle down now before she does something sexy...like breathe,” he said, laughing.

Jonah chuckled along with him. “Yeah. I suppose she does kind of have that effect on us.”

“Speaking of”—his tone grew serious—“I couldn’t help but notice the scars on her thighs. They kind of match those on your chest, and I know those are new. Care to tell me more about what’s going on?”

“She has a problem that she’s, uh, sharing with me. It’s very big deal that she would. But if you want to know more, let her tell you, okay?” He blew out a breath and then made a show of finding something interesting on the monitor in front of him.

Elijah frowned but said nothing. This was a first. Since when did Jonah keep anything from him? He ignored the slow churning of his stomach. Laurel wouldn’t come between them. Not so soon after they’d all connected. Besides, she couldn’t.

Right?

Shaking off the doubt, he inclined his head again toward his monitor. “Take a look at this. I think it provides the best insight on how to make this work.”

Jonah pushed against the floor with his feet to make his chair roll closer. He leaned toward the monitor and scanned the lines of text for a few minutes. He squinted and turned to Elijah, shaking his head. “This is just like everything else we’ve seen. What makes you think it’s different?”

“Look at this part in particular,” Elijah said, pointing. He read it out loud. “‘Balance is achieved through the equipoise between contracting, opposing,’ and this is the key, ‘interacting parts.’ Get it?”

“That’s probably a pretty standard definition of balance. How does this help?”

Of course. It seemed as clear as glass to him because he knew a few things that Jonah didn’t. What would happen when he told him? If his own reaction to Jonah keeping information about his relationship with Laurel a mystery had been to wonder if she could drive a wedge between them, what would happen when Jonah found out Elijah had been keeping secrets from him all this time? Would he be so stubborn as to take the solace he found in Laurel and turn away from his twin, to the detriment of them both?

He’d never kept the physiological reactions to Jonah’s dark a secret to hurt him. It had been purely a protective measure. He’d do anything for his brother. Jonah only had to examine this past year to see that, surely. Maybe he could lead him to understand that in a different way.

“Think of it like this. The dark is working overtime to claim you. And in three days, it will if we don’t achieve balance. Well, we have to counterweight the dark.”

“Yes, but the counterweight to dark would be, for lack of a better term, light. How does Laurel play into that? We’ve spent this time looking for someone with shades of dark living inside that light. If you put me and Laurel on a scale, a pendulum of darkness and light, the dark will outweigh it every single time. There’s no balance there.”

“You’re right,” Elijah responded slowly.

“We would need a source of light for counterweight. And for Christ’s sake, Brother, if it’s yet *another* woman, consider us screwed.”

“But what if we already have a source?”

“Of light?” Jonah stared at him. “If we already had a source, why did we need Laurel to begin with? Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

Elijah took a deep breath and set the weight of his secret free. “Because the source could no longer contain the dark. Because the dark crept over more of you during the past year. Because dark visions and dreams visited you at nights, and it became more and more difficult for me to keep them away.” Elijah’s voice dropped

into a whisper. Despite telling Laurel Jonah suffered from night terrors, that wasn't the truth. Not all of it, anyway. The battles between light and dark, they were the reasons for the brothers' perpetual need of each other. "Because for every time you suffer beneath the burden of dark, I am overtaken by something so powerful it's now out of control. For every time more of the dark consumes you, the light keeps me away, and I don't know what to do any more. The balance we once shared is slipping away with every hour that passes, and I don't know what to do anymore!" He could hear the hysteria rising in his own voice and fought to rein it in. They'd come so far already, and he couldn't let uncertainty cloud his judgment or thinking.

Jonah looked at him as if he'd just slapped him across the face. The muscles of his jaw rippled as he clenched and released his teeth. "I don't follow you, Elijah."

Elijah's throat stung as he forced the words out. "If this doesn't work... It's not just about you. If it doesn't work, it takes us both down."

He looked away so suddenly, Elijah feared the dark had come to grip him again, but Jonah turned back around just as quickly. "How long?"

"Jo—"

"How long has this been going on? How long have you been keeping this from me?"

Elijah dropped his gaze, unable to look into the burning depths of Jonah's eyes any longer. "Almost as soon as we acquired this additional year to find a release for you. The witch said we had to maintain balance. She just failed to mention that I would be your closest thing to balance until then."

"And I assume you've tried to fix it?"

He gave a curt nod. "I did. I went back, but she said that was the price we chose to pay. We asked for balance, and we received it."

Jonah rubbed his hands over tired eyes. "Make a deal with the devil," he mumbled.

"Yeah."

“So what’s the plan now?”

“It hasn’t changed. We have to convince Laurel that she’s the key to ending this curse. We’ll try that ritual the witch gave us and pray like hell. I mean—” The words had no sooner left his mouth before a chill swept over him in such a rush of utter horror and betrayal that he went stone-still.

The sound of feet slapping against tile as they hurried away confirmed exactly what he’d felt.

Oh Jesus.

“Laurel?” He tried to stand, but his empathetic legs refused to obey him. It wasn’t the first time someone else’s emotions left him temporarily immobilized. It only signaled to him just how deep her feelings ran. “Jesus, Laurel, baby, don’t...”

“Jonah! Go! Go get her. I don’t know what she heard, but she is scared. She is scared of us.”

Jonah shot to his feet, his face knotted with concern. *“What happened?”*

“I didn’t feel her. She was close and heard some part of our conversation, and it’s got her scared to death. Go get her. Calm her down. I’ll be there in a sec. She’s mistrustful, so for the love of God, tread lightly. We need her!”

He watched Jonah rush after her and started saying his prayers now.

* * *

She’d left the door thrown wide open in her haste. Jonah got there in time to watch her slip on a pair of sneakers. Her pathetic luggage sat on the bed, and he recognized the sundry contents from her bathroom sitting on top of clothing in one of them.

“Laurel?” His heart sank when she looked up. Each tear track on her cheeks was like a punch to the gut. He held out his arms. “Laurel...”

She took a step back. “Don’t. Don’t you come near me.”

What in the hell could she have heard? “Baby, talk to me.”

“Jonah,” she cried. “Witches, spells? The way you two... God. I can’t believe I did that. I can’t believe I let you...” She sobbed openly and tried to wipe the tears away with the backs of her hands as quickly as they fell, but failed miserably.

“Baby—”

“Don’t! Don’t you dare!” She took one wild look around the room, her gaze not stopping anywhere.

Jonah couldn’t help but exhale loudly, because, damn it, he wanted to curse with every bad word in his vocabulary. He swallowed hard and forced himself to calm down. “Laurel, stop. Look at me. Tell me what you’re thinking. I swear I’ll answer every question you have and tell you exactly what Elijah and I were talking about.”

She still wouldn’t look at him. “When I woke up this morning, I struggled with the memory of what I’d done. I couldn’t believe I’d let two men... I thought we had something special, but when I woke up this morning, I felt like... I couldn’t believe...”

“What did you think?”

“When I got up this morning and neither of you was there, I felt like a whore.” She raised her eyes long enough to shoot him an accusing look. “But I told myself that I was being ridiculous. I told myself that there was no way on earth you or Elijah would think like that. I told myself that you were better than that.” Her jaw tightened as she reached for her bag. “And then I heard your conversation this morning, and I’m pretty sure now that you *did* use me. Any affection I thought might have existed was just a figment of my own imagination. If that wasn’t enough, to top it all off, you’ve got some sort of devil worship or something going on. And you’re using me for that too.”

Of course, she was right in some respects, but to hear it summed up so succinctly shocked him. Except there had to be more to it. They hadn’t just used her without regard to her feelings, had they?

No. They *did* like her. More than like, in fact.

"I promise you that neither Elijah nor I think that of you. Far from it. Give me a chance to explain, please, honey. We need you, and *that's* what yesterday was about."

"No," she said, backing away. "No, I can't listen to you right now. I can't think straight. I'm trying to understand... No. I need space and time to sort through this."

"Don't run from me, Laurel. Please."

For a space of time—just a blink—he caught a glimpse of the woman he'd come to know. Her look hardened and wiped it clean away. "I'm not running, but I do need some space. I can barely wrap my mind around what we did yesterday, and now you're throwing some very new and very weird shit at me. Stuff I don't even want to hear about right now."

"If you have no intentions of leaving us, those bags will sit right there. Just until you come back and talk to us. Right?"

She quickly pulled her hand away from the handle she gripped like it had come to life and writhed beneath her fingers. After giving it a meager glance, she tilted her chin. "I have no idea what you two are into. Witches? Spells? I know a few Wiccans, but I would have never suspected that you or Elijah... I'll tell you what. You need to back up and give me space, Jonah."

He held up both hands and backed away. She could have whatever space she wanted. So long as she came back and talked to them. They had to explain what seemed like madness to her and get her to understand. Perhaps it was a mistake in seducing her first, but the damage was already done. Besides, he wouldn't have traded yesterday for anything. He'd meant what he said to Elijah. If he only had a few days left on this earth, living them with Laurel would ease the passage like nothing else could.

"Take all the time you need, and when you're ready, we'll talk. Laurel, yesterday was, well, it was beautiful. And I'll—*we'll*—do whatever you need to prove that to you, okay?" He risked a glance at the doorway, hoping Elijah managed to find his way there. "And we'll answer any question you have about anything you

might have heard. We'll talk until you understand everything. You mean a lot to us. You mean a lot to *me*. I'm...I—"

He abruptly stopped, holding back at the last second because the last thing he needed to do was give her another excuse to run scared. Besides, he knew how it would look if he declared his growing feelings. Any woman worth her salt would hear the L word and figure it just another male ploy to keep her near. Yeah, he wanted to keep her near, but nothing about saying those words was a ploy. He was falling hard for her.

Her nod gave him permission to leave. As he walked away, he reached out for Elijah. *"You're right, Eli. She's scared, but I think she's more confused about yesterday than anything else."*

"I'm on my way, but it's slow going. Did you calm her?"

"No." Jonah blew out a breath. *"She asked for space, and I'm granting it for now. I promised that when she's ready, we'll talk about it. All of it."*

"Where is she now?"

"I left her in her room."

Jonah turned a corner to find Elijah braced against the wall as he inched forward with glacial slowness. He rushed to his side and ducked beneath his arm, propping him up while wrapping his own arm around Elijah's waist.

"Thanks," Elijah grunted.

"You're too close to her if she can affect you like this."

Elijah shot him an annoyed glance. "You're a fine one to talk. You love her as much as I do, I bet."

"Shut up."

Jonah turned them around and headed back toward the study. They could stay on one side of the house while she stayed on the other, he decided.

As they walked, his mind whirled with thoughts about how they should approach Laurel.

By the time he lowered Elijah to the desk chair, he hadn't decided a thing. This was Elijah's specialty. His twin knew how to deal with people's emotions. He was the one who could emanate calm and bring to others a sense of peace that left them fulfilled and trusting.

They sat without speaking, watching the doorway as if they expected her to walk through it at any time. Despite the many projects that either could be working on, he knew if he tried to concentrate on any of it, the woman in their lives would consume his thoughts instead.

"You better yet?" he asked after the silence began to grate on his nerves.

Elijah cocked his head. "Yeah, but..." A long moment of silence stretched before Elijah communicated again. *"I can't feel her, Jonah. She's in her room? Are you sure?"*

"It's where I left her. Maybe she went outside." *"Hold on."*

He hurried through the house and went to the French doors leading to the garden in back. They were still locked, so she hadn't used them to go out there, but that still didn't mean she wasn't out for a stroll. He rushed through and trotted along the length of the yard, looking for any sign of her along the tree or lake perimeters. His heart began to hammer when he didn't spy her in either place. Son of a bitch.

"Elijah, check again. Check to see if her stuff is still there."

Jonah darted back to the house and almost collided with Elijah in Laurel's bedroom in his haste. "Anything?"

"Yeah, her stuff's still there, but I have a thought." *"It's not a good one, Jonah. Follow me."*

He thought about the razors. About how Elijah had described her the first time they saw her at the gas station. And he thought about the suicide of her aunt and murder of her grandmother, and fear engulfed Jonah to the point it almost made him stumble.

He couldn't think like that. He refused. Laurel was strong, stronger than she knew, and yesterday he'd thought she began to see some of that strength for herself.

Elijah hobbled into the kitchen, and at first Jonah didn't follow his logic. He stood near the island and scanned the countertops for something. His shoulders fell when he spotted whatever he was looking for. The envelope sitting on the counter meant something to him obviously, but Jonah had no idea what. He reached for it and had it open within seconds. Righting it caused a small slip of paper to fall out. Elijah scanned the loopy writing and handed the note to Jonah.

Stunned, Jonah stared at the note as the significance of it all sank in. The envelope had been a part of the kitchen ambience for so long, he'd forgotten about it. That stupid piece of folded paper usually held a few hundred dollars or so in it. Not now, though.

He read Laurel's note again.

It's all too much for me. I'm sorry.

Chapter Ten

Elijah could have kicked himself. In his gallant haste to allow her freedom from his empathic abilities, he'd deliberately severed his link to Laurel as much as his gift allowed him to. As a result, uncertain emotions had piled up to the point she hadn't known how to handle them. And, for Christ's sake, he couldn't believe they'd thrown in just enough knowledge about the curse for her to get very wrong impressions. They'd brought home a woman whose emotional stability could be crushed beneath the weight of a fly. What did they really expect to happen?

Just to be certain she was gone, Jonah checked for her vehicle. It was no surprise to find the spot she parked in empty. Damned thing might have looked on its last leg, but the engine wasn't much louder than a chipmunk's fart. Elijah's first impulse had been to jump into his car and find her. Jonah held him back, stating that he'd promised her time to think. They owed her that much before dogging her down.

Neither brother took the passing hours well.

Jonah paced the house, his hands curling and uncurling into white-knuckled fists as he walked. Elijah didn't have to be able to read his aura to know how seriously pissed he was with him. He needn't bother. Elijah's thoughts tortured him enough to cover both of their moods.

By nightfall when she hadn't returned, Elijah had worn a hole in the decorative rug just outside the front door. No matter how many times he checked, he was certain he'd pull back the curtain on the window and find her walking up the steps, returning to her home. Every single time he stood at the panes, his heart pumped faster as he searched the driveway and the grassy areas bordering it.

And every single time, his heart cracked when he didn't spy her there.

"I can't take another minute of this." He growled when Jonah rounded the corner for what had to be the three hundredth time.

"Bro, normally I'd agree, but"—he shrugged—"I said we'd give her space."

"Yeah, but how much space? It's been almost ten hours!" He hadn't meant to yell and had to force himself into some semblance of control. "Besides the fact that we can't ignore she took the money."

Jonah rubbed his fists against his red-rimmed eyes. "It's only a few hundred—"

"Hell, do you really think I care that she took it? It's not the amount. It's what she plans on doing with it that concerns me!"

"Yeah." He nodded. "Getaway money."

"At least for a little while," Elijah agreed.

They both stood in silence, lost in their respective thoughts. Elijah searched the foyer, his gaze managing to light upon what had been telltale signs of Laurel's presence. She'd brought in a large bouquet of wildflowers from the forest and gave them center stage in a crystal vase. She'd gone through and straightened picture frames until they aligned perfectly. The scent of her—feminine, wild, and flowery—hung like a mist.

Fuck this. She'd had more than enough time to think. After digging into his pocket, he located his keys, and he headed toward the door. "I'm going to find her," he called to Jonah.

Fortunately, his brother didn't argue. "I'll stay here in case she comes back. Brother..." Elijah looked over his shoulder as he turned the knob. "Find her. Bring her home."

With a curt nod, Elijah stepped through the doorway. He now only had to figure out where she might be.

It took everything within him to drive at a reasonable speed. God, please. *Please*. He needed to find her. If for no other reason than to fully explain, he had to find her. But in a city this size, she could be any number of places. The only thing he had going for him was that she drove a beater that looked about one mile away from giving up the ghost and being delivered into a junk heap.

As he made his way back to the restaurant from the day they met, he searched every car and every pedestrian along both sides of the road. Calling upon the power he'd come to loathe, he amplified his empathic abilities. He shifted through dozens of auras at a time, looking for her very specific signature. He'd never before had to use it like a homing beacon and prayed that it would work.

Pressure built behind his eyes as he used his mind to discern one person from another. So many emotions, so many people with problems of their own or oftentimes, happiness and contentment that left them buoyed. It hurt so much to sift through them. Tightness in his chest made it difficult to breathe, and with his worry over Laurel...over Jonah...

No.

No. He could not afford to let despair in. They were so close.

But that was it, wasn't it? They'd never been allowed the luxury of thinking that just maybe one or both of them might survive this. Not until Laurel had entered their lives just a few short days earlier.

His heart hurt to think about her. Was it possible to fall in love so quickly, so easily with someone? Or was it that their desperation elevated her to a level no other woman could ever hope to reach? She possessed a subtle outward beauty. Beautiful gray eyes had the habit of crinkling at their corners when she smiled. And God, how he loved to see her smile. It made his spirit lift like he'd never known it could.

Now, when he dared delve inside her aura and swim through the cloud of emotions surrounding her, the feeling that shone brightest and beamed like a beacon was the one thing he and Jonah lacked for over a year now. Hope.

As he thought about it, a spark of electricity shocked his mind into awakening. That's when he felt it. A steady thump someplace in the center of his sternum. It contradicted the beat of his heart but drummed as steadily, as insistently.

Eyes still on the road, he concentrated on the rhythmic cadence. With each slow breath he forced through his lungs, Elijah coaxed the shy thumps until they grew in size and intensity. Soon, it became a tug. A directional pointing to where he needed to go.

He didn't dare to dream this had to do with Laurel, but what else could it be? He'd been concentrating so hard on finding her, and this pull could only come from her. His respirations increased along with the thumps while turning the wheel. He forced his racing pulse to slow, less he miss the signal from her, but he had to take this as a sign that the universe, that God, wanted her with them.

He knew that he needed her. That Jonah needed her too. Not just as their savior, but because they loved her. If for some reason only one of the twins survived the next two days, there wasn't another person in the world he wanted to care for her than his brother. He hoped Jonah felt the same when it came to him and was pretty certain he did.

Funny. He'd been concerned that jealousy might prevent him from wanting to share her, but deep within he knew without a doubt how much she belonged with them.

The car sped up as he pressed down on the pedal. He was going to find her. And nothing on this earth was going to stop him.

* * *

Laurel twisted the key in the ignition again and cursed with frustration when her loyal steed refused to turn over. The car choked a horrible dying sound a few times, but that was it. When she glanced in the rearview mirror, a black cloud drifted up from where she figured the tailpipe was located. If she hadn't been parked beneath the sheltering light of a lamppost, she might have missed it.

Not now. Please, not now.

Already tears welled in her eyes as she watched other car headlights whiz past her on the busy highway. She didn't need to get far. Just far enough away to think. If she'd been smart, she wouldn't have spent the afternoon sitting in the lot of a children's park. Watching the little ones running around, their cries of laughter evidence of their glee, pulled at her heartstrings. No matter what she did as she studied them, she couldn't shake the influence of Elijah and Jonah on her. The setting sun set her in motion as the park closed down. Otherwise, she might have sat there all night musing about her relationship with both men.

She loved them.

No one else had to tell her how much she'd come to need them in her life. That's what made what she'd heard so difficult to absorb. Yes, she felt awkward about sleeping with them both, but she'd never deny the rightness of it as it happened. They treated her with the utmost respect as they worshiped her body yesterday. And it had been worship.

Both Jonah and Elijah pleased her with as much reverence and adoration as she'd ever known. What else could explain the way Jonah's arms shook with the effort to keep his bulk from crushing her as they made love? Elijah always made sure that her basic needs for comfort were met. He wrapped his arms around her, providing a sense of security at all times. Jonah bathed her body tenderly each time a brother finished inside her. At no point had any of it been awkward. Even now, the sensitive flesh between her thighs ached with the memory of each man. A good throb of longing and need, despite being thoroughly sated only this morning.

Some stupid recrimination of what her grandmother would have thought had put doubt in her mind. And like an idiot, she'd allowed it to grow and fester until she couldn't stand it anymore.

So now, she sat at the side of the road, alone and without anyone who might be concerned about her welfare because she'd run from the love and acceptance she'd been craving all this time.

Tears streamed down her face, and she hated it. All of this. Why hadn't they left her alone to wallow in grief and despair? Now she'd come to learn what it was to be loved again, and she didn't know what to do with their love. With the emotions they roused in her.

For crying out loud, she'd stolen money from them too. Even if she could turn back around, tail tucked firmly between her legs, how could she face them after betraying their trust?

She used a trembling hand to wipe her cheeks and running nose. No. She couldn't return even if she wanted to. They'd talked about witches and spells as if that kind of stuff was normal. What kind of weirdness were they into?

With a groan, she withdrew the key from the ignition and pushed open the door. No sense in sitting here along the side of the road serving as serial-killer bait. She had nothing but the clothes on her back to worry about, so travel would be light and, hopefully, easygoing.

Head hanging low, she walked along the side of the road, being careful to not wander too far into the way of oncoming traffic or linger in the darkness between lampposts. Funny thing, that. Almost a week ago, she couldn't have cared less if she'd gone to sleep and never woken up. A well-timed accident that took her life as she'd walked wouldn't have been unwelcome.

Now, though...

Now, I want to go home.

That thought startled her. Which home did she mean? She wasn't so sure it meant the one she'd been raised in. Elijah and Jonah had brought her into their lives and made her a part of it. She'd taken to them like a duck to water.

She shouldn't have left. She should have given them the opportunity to explain what little bit she'd overheard. Maybe it wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. Of course, now she'd never know because she'd run.

Any psychologist worth his degree would have said she ran because of her fear of her emotions. Not because of the conversation. How stupid was that anyway? Her

misunderstanding had just been a convenient excuse to leave. Now, she'd pay for her cowardice forever.

What she wouldn't give to see both of them one more time.

Maybe she could return in the morning. Maybe they'd forgive her. If she explained that she'd fallen in love... No. They'd think her just another stupid, emotional woman if she said that. People didn't fall in love like this so quickly. And how many women could say they'd fallen in love with not just one but two men?

Stupid.

The loud blast of a car horn rattled Laurel from her thoughts. Catcalls and lewd whistles blew past her as a car cut a little too close to the side of the road for her comfort. *Stupid teenagers.* Heart racing, she studied the signs for the buildings she walked past.

It was getting late. Perhaps continuing to walk by herself wasn't the smartest idea. She had only a little over three hundred dollars to work with, but she'd have to spend a little of it for some shelter. She had no car. No clothes. No place to live. The secure solitude of a motel room would give her a chance to think about what her next steps would be.

She spied something that would fit the bill. A large billboard towering a hundred feet in the air declared the room could be had for a price she could live with. It also mentioned porn availability, to which she humorlessly chuckled. The outside of the motel had been painted an insane shade of yellow. Based on how well it displayed the swarms of bugs and sundry other creepy-crawlies taking residence there, no one in their right mind would pick the color on purpose. Sparse vegetation, dry and twisted from neglect, did its level best to provide ambience but, if anything, made the place that much sadder.

After registering with a sleepy-looking clerk, she parted from the rental fee with a heavy heart. She'd send the money back to the brothers as soon as she could. It would be first on her list of priorities.

Laurel flicked on the light in the room and went inside. As run-down as the outside had looked, she'd been prepared for the worst and found herself pleasantly surprised instead. The room was no luxury accommodation for sure, but it was clean.

The lamplight cast large shadows over the room, and nothing scurried across the walls or under the hidden comfort of the bed. The spread covering it had a large stain running the length of its edge, but anyone could see it was old and permanent. An old, well-worn desk sat along one wall with a sturdy wooden chair propped in front of it. The TV's rabbit ears promised cable would not be an easy option, but that was okay. She hadn't come here to watch the porn offered by the billboard.

Yes. The place would do.

She'd barely taken a few more steps inside after locking the door before a tentative knock sounded on it.

Laurel swallowed hard and stood immobile. What should she do? A single woman alone in a nearly empty motel didn't bode well. She didn't have a weapon on her unless the inevitable Gideon Bible counted. Maybe she could convince whoever was there that her husband was in the shower or something.

Shit. This is so not good.

More knocking sounded against the metal door. The noise rippled into the room, an ominous echo that made her skin crawl. She took a single step toward it but hesitated again.

Maybe it was only those stupid teenagers looking to scare her, although that didn't make much sense either. They'd driven past her before without stopping. How would they know where she was?

Crap. Whoever was out there obviously knew someone was inside.

That had to be it, then. The motel clerk needed something. It was the only logical explanation.

Pulling her shoulders back, she strode with false confidence to the door and leaned toward it. She had to stand on tiptoe, but if she held steady, she could use the peephole to see who stood there. The image was blurry at first, but then she blinked hard as his face clarified.

How could it be? How had he found her?

“Elijah?” she whispered. He couldn’t hear her through the door, but she couldn’t get her voice to strengthen. The night surrounding him couldn’t disguise the face she’d come to know so well.

Her hands shook as she unlocked the door. Freeing the chain seemed to take an eternity. Even dragging her hand to the knob took more time than necessary.

Her heart fluttered with excitement and dread. With love and hope.

Elijah was here. Elijah stood right here.

Her mind went blank; thoughts of why she’d left, why she was here, why they’d been separated fled. None of that mattered anymore.

A few hours ago she would have given almost anything to see this man again, and now that he stood before her, the emotion hadn’t waned. Having Jonah here with him would have been the only thing to make this moment better.

When the door swung open, she held her breath as they stared at each other. In his eyes she found no recrimination. None of the anger she expected to find there.

Sweet heaven, the only emotion arcing from his baby blues was relief.

The edges of his mouth curved up in a hesitant smile, and before she could help herself, a feeling rose from deep in her chest like a bubble. When it popped in the night air, Laurel’s love for him could only be expressed in one way.

She sobbed.

“Wh-what are you d-doing here?” she choked out at last. It wasn’t what she meant to say, but her throat was so tight. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t get out the so many things she wanted to tell him. Happiness and relief were a potent combination that left her momentarily speechless.

His warm arms pulled her against him and held her tight. “Shh, love. Don’t cry.” Elijah pulled away to kiss her cheeks, his strong hands cupping her face. His gaze traveled over her, searching her. She bore his scrutiny through a watery haze, and he seemed to find the answer he sought. He kissed her one more time, this time on the lips, gentle and full of undisguised meaning. “I’m here to take you home.”

They were the most loving words she’d ever heard.

Chapter Eleven

Friday

Elijah folded closed his phone and set it on the faux-wood table beside the bed. “Jonah’s relieved that I found you. I hope I’m not wrong, but I told him we’d be back in an hour or two. He wants you to come home.” He added almost shyly, “I do too.”

It was sometime past midnight, and although she should have been exhausted, Laurel couldn’t have slept if the world depended on it. Elijah slipped his hand in hers as they lay together, the muted sound of the occasional car as it drove past the motel the only noise in the room now.

Prior to calling his brother, he’d been his usual thoughtful self and ordered pizza for them both. Until she’d taken the first bite, she’d forgotten she’d eaten nothing all day.

She waited for him to express his disappointment as more minutes of silence passed between them. To say something along the lines of her being a thief and a user. But he’d done nothing of the sort. He’d watched her eat without comment, chewing on his slices in awful silence.

Curling up on the bedspread had seemed natural afterward. Even more natural was having him cuddle against her after he’d cut the lamp off.

“You aren’t mad?” she asked. Dealing with disappointment in herself was so much easier in the dark. She didn’t want him to see her embarrassment or evidence of her confused mental state right now.

His chest rose and fell against her back. Across her cheek, his breath drifted in gentle caresses. “No,” he murmured in a soft voice. “I’m very glad to have found you, in fact.”

“How did you?” She was so very grateful that he’d found her too, but she couldn’t ignore that he shouldn’t have been able to. Hell, she hadn’t known where she’d end up, so how could he?

He was slow to respond. “Laurel, my brother and I had an unusual upbringing. I like to think we turned out okay in spite of it, but we were anything but your normal family.”

He paused for such a long time that she felt compelled to say something, although she had no idea where he was taking this. “Okay...”

“How much do you believe in good and evil?”

Her eyebrows arched. “I-I don’t know. I guess I never thought about it. You mean ‘good and evil’ like a ‘heaven and hell’ sort of thing?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose it exists. Like I said, I’ve never thought about it.”

“Think about it now for me.”

She chewed on her bottom lip as she mulled it over. Good and evil were concepts her aunt and grandmother had believed in, but they’d never expected her to go to church or cling to any sort of religion. If anything, she realized, her ideas about the concepts were vague at best. Some people did things out of the goodness of their hearts while others reveled in the bad. Only a select few managed to venture into the realm of evil.

“It definitely exists,” she said after a while. “I mean, how else could you explain the many acts of people over the ages? Something had to have driven Mother Teresa for what she’d done, Hitler and Stalin for their abominations.”

“Good. Keep that in mind for me. And please keep an *open* mind. Ask me whatever you want, but don’t run away from me without hearing everything first, okay?”

A surge of heat washed over her cheeks. “I’m not running away again.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Elijah released a deep breath of air. “Our mother was a good, kind, normal person. Never harmed a soul in her life and didn’t ask for much. Our father, on the other hand, he was, well, he craved power. Not the kind of power that a CEO or some captain of industry has. He’d become obsessed with the occult and wanted the sort of power it offered. He loved the idea of being able to turn people against their will. Of holding someone’s life in his hands. Of playing God.”

“Oh no...”

His fingers tightened around hers. “He spent his life dedicated to the dark arts. And he was good at it, Laurel. Good at twisting innocence and benevolence into something that served him. I’ve never understood what he gained from it. Anyway, he met my mother, and I swear that he bewitched her or something. They were polar opposites. She was beautiful and kind, and he...he wasn’t. But he seduced her and married her, all in under a month. Later, she said she’d never done something so impulsive in her life. It caused a rift between her and her family. Until the day they found out she was pregnant with me and Jonah.

“She told me how much she looked forward to it. Our dad too. But near the end, dear old Dad started to withdraw from her. When she needed him the most, he turned to his tomes and spells. She should have known something was up, she told us later, but she’d been in love with him. Why should she?”

“Elijah.” Laurel said his name again to provide a little comfort and give him a break. His body trembled, and she could hear it travel to his normally steady voice. Whatever he was telling her was something that affected him deeply.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Just, I still don’t understand.”

"The short version of this is that he sacrificed the life of his firstborn in exchange for more power. When his first child reached maturity, somewhere near his eighteenth birthday, he would be given over to the dark, as Jonah and I have termed it. But Mom found out before we were born and had it altered."

"How?"

"Witchcraft, more spells, prayer. Whatever it took."

"But you're in your thirties, so it obviously didn't work."

"Oh, but it did. We've just managed to delay it this long. It comes now. Everything that used to work no longer does, and it comes."

The bitterness in his words made her skin crawl. That, combined with what he was telling her, overtaxed her mind. "Jonah is the firstborn, isn't he?" she asked softly.

"Technically, yes, he is. But it was supposed to be me."

"I don't understand."

"The cord wrapped around his throat during labor, and a C-section was performed. I would have been delivered first had it occurred naturally. Because of his distress, the doctor pulled him out first instead."

"Oh, Elijah..." She didn't know what else to say to him. The guilt he suffered for that must have been crippling. She didn't know what to do with that piece of information, either. He was telling her that Jonah would be sacrificed? Wait—this made no sense. It was too much. "Whatever happened to your father?"

"He got what he wanted from the darkness. It took him in, embraced him like a lover, and for his loyalty, drove him mad. He disappeared less than a week after we were born. Evidence suggests that the darkness took him home, as it were. I got something out of it, though. A little bit of psychic-type ability that allows me to sense the feelings of those around me."

"Like an empath?"

"Exactly."

“And that’s how you found me?” He nodded, and his chin scraped her shoulder. “I’m glad you did,” she said after a moment.

“Me too, baby.”

She used the silence between them to absorb what he’d told her. More questions arose for her troubles. He hadn’t exactly explained the conversation she’d heard this morning, although he could be giving her time to digest everything else first.

For some reason, instead of being shocked or appalled, she accepted what he told her without hesitation. It served him no purpose to tell her in the first place, yet he did. More would be coming, of this much she was sure, but he’d started to let her into their world.

“What’s going to happen now?”

“I don’t know anymore. I thought I knew once, but I don’t. We’re out of time.”

“But out of time for what?”

His voice thickened with emotion. “Everything. We’ve given up so much to get to this point. This damned curse has robbed us of our normal lives, of the ability to even father children. How sick is that?”

“I wanted to ask you about that...”

“Every medical test. Everything you could think of. Anything that might explain why we have the abilities we do and suffer in the unique way we do. We’ve done it all and for nothing. Jonah can’t go through a full night without me to help him keep the darkness away. Goddamn it! We’re out of time for *everything*.”

The anguish in that final word made Laurel release her hand from his and turn until they faced each other. She ran her fingertips along his face, searching for his mouth. In the dark, she could discern the tension and sadness on his features. Keeping her thumb on the corner of his mouth, she leaned forward until she could sweep her lips against his.

“Laurel—”

“Shh,” she soothed.

He sighed and resigned himself to her careful kisses. She brushed her mouth over his, wanting to ease away some of his pain. Needing to let him know that she was so very sorry. Desperate to show him now that she would stand by him and Jonah.

She slid her hands beneath his shirt, exploring the hard lines of his abdomen with the delicacy of a diamond handler. His body still shook, so she rubbed him as they kissed, waiting for the tension to subside.

“I didn’t find you just for this,” he said, his lips traveling over hers.

“I know.” And that’s why she kissed him. Why she pushed his shirt over his head until his bare chest could press against her.

Elijah moaned and curled his tongue in her mouth. His kiss became urgent. Hungry. He kissed her as if for the last time, and he needed the memory to last. What started as gentle and quiet turned into a raging current of desperation.

There was nothing quiet about the way he tore at her clothes, urging her out of them. The more forceful he became, the more she wanted from him. Her arousal grew out of proportion, and his kisses barely fed her hunger.

Her sole focus was how to release his pants. She unfastened the button as quickly as she could and groaned in frustration when she still had to tackle a zipper to free him. Elijah shoved her hands out of the way and pushed Laurel onto her back. When he dipped to take her breast in his mouth, she thought she would scream from the pleasure of it. His teeth nipped at her, sending sparks of delightful pain rippling to her belly.

“Elijah,” she cried when his hand slipped between her thighs. He rolled his thumb over her panty-covered clit, and the sensation almost catapulted her over a ledge. He didn’t relent, though. Her hips rolled of their own accord, chasing his exquisite torturous touch.

She threaded her fingers in his hair and pulled hard. She wanted him inside her now. If Elijah noticed, she couldn't tell. His panting breaths puffed against her breast as he laved over it in long, broad strokes.

He slipped his hand beneath her damp panties and unerringly found her wet core. The scent of her arousal perfumed the air, and this time he moaned again. "Come for me, Laurel."

"Please, Elijah," she gasped out. "Inside me."

His thumb circled her clit harder, faster. "Come first."

Already a wondrous pressure built inside her body. It centered where Elijah manipulated her, but then spread like ripples on a lake. He traced a moist path from one breast to the other, loving each until her nipples stiffened into firm peaks. Between her legs, though, a series of small detonations caused the ripples to cascade until they happened so fast she didn't know when one ended and one began, only that her body trembled from the force of it and Elijah, her beautiful lover Elijah, caused it.

It was all of a sudden too much. Too much pressure that she didn't know how to handle. She shuddered until her back arched, her legs splayed to the side.

"Oh, God... Oh...God." The ripples threatened to carry her away, all at once rising up together until they lifted her sure and headlong into the arms of ecstasy.

"I love you so much, Laurel," he murmured. "Come for me, baby."

His low, husky words were the catalyst she needed.

Laurel's body tightened and then exploded beneath a rush of pleasure. She screamed through the orgasm that held her captive. Before she could climb down, Elijah was there. He jerked her panties to the side and slid inside her, impaling her with a single thrust.

The incredible fullness of him, stretching her, filling her, sending shockwaves through her body. She knew her lover, but her soul ached for him like they'd been

apart for years. No matter how much of himself he gave, she would always crave more.

Heedless to her dulcet cries, he drove his cock into her again and again. Laurel wrapped her legs around his waist, her feet brushing against the thrusting motion of his ass as he pumped inside her. She dug her fingers into his shoulders, spurring him to take her to the reaches of another orgasm. It wasn't long before he did.

Her pussy began to pulse at the same moment he let out a low groan. His entire body stiffened, and his cock surged. Elijah's mouth found hers and feasted upon her lips as his seed spilled. He drank down her whimpers, each pulse of his cock impetus for another husky cry.

They rocked together, his hips rolling in a slow dance against hers, his pelvis gliding against her engorged clit. Each push sent a glorious rush of heat beelining to her heart and closed around it like a fist. She felt the insistent thump of his racing heart against her breast. Through it all, Elijah continued his gentle, drugging kiss. It was only when their breathing eased back to normal and her blood no longer boiled through her veins that he broke away.

"I love you too," she whispered to him.

He responded by making love to her again. This time, slow and sweet.

* * *

"Thank you for coming back," Elijah said as they walked toward the house, hand in hand.

"You and Jonah can thank me by letting me sleep until ten tomorrow. But when I wake up..." She let her seductive tone imply what exactly she hoped would happen in the morning.

Elijah grinned wide. "You don't even have to ask, love."

Despite herself, she studied his face and saw the answer written there. No. She didn't have to ask at all. He loved her. It wasn't just a line to get her into his bed. He truly loved her. For now, he sauntered with the air of a person without a

care in the world. The act might have been for her benefit, for she knew his brother weighed foremost on his mind.

“When we get inside, you, me, and Jonah are going to sit down for a very long talk. I want you to understand all sides of what’s going on. Not just my take on it. It’s important you hear everything.” His face grew stern, but the doubt in his voice gave credence to her earlier suspicion. “I-I just need to check on Jonah first.”

She nodded, but damn, she wanted to crawl into the first bed she saw. She was exhausted, sated, and falling madly in love. When was the last time she’d been this content? Not before meeting the brothers, for sure.

With that thought in mind, she stopped and whirled on her feet until she could grab him by the scruff of his shirt. He blinked in surprise but waited with a half smile on his face. Laurel pulled him down and planted a wet one on his lips.

“Thank you,” she said simply.

Maybe he wouldn’t understand it now, but she had a feeling he might. In the course of less than a week, her life had turned around to a point she’d never thought she’d ever see again. She owed the men so much. Not for the job, not for the comforts of a home, but for their affection. For the love they showed her she still could hold within.

She skipped ahead of him, joy in being back home flowing through her. *Home*. It was her home, as was being with the brothers.

“Laurel, I know it’s late, but the three of us need to sit down and talk. There’s a lot I still haven’t gone over with you.”

She looked over her shoulder at his approach and smiled. “Is this before or after ten a.m.?”

Elijah maneuvered around her and put his hand on the knob. Turning it, he said, “As tempted as I am to say after, I’m really thinking it should be before. I want you to—”

“Elijah?”

He stood before the opened door, his face as white as a sheet. Something flared in his eyes, and he slammed them shut. If she didn't know better, she would have sworn that his body swelled until he seemed almost larger-than-life. When Laurel blinked, however, the sensation went away.

She stepped around him to get a better view. "Elijah?"

"We're too late."

"Too late for what?"

If he heard, she'd never know. Elijah strode into the house, his arms outstretched, his eyes still shut.

What was going on? He held his head at an odd angle, his face fixed into a mask of pain. He kept his eyes closed, and that disturbed her as much as his expression. Was something wrong with him? And what about Jonah? She hadn't thought to ask him more about their connection. Since he had empathic abilities, maybe Jonah was hurt or worse. But why did he continue to stumble through the house like this?

On second thought, he didn't stumble. He walked with purpose to the men's wing. His fingers crawled along the wall as he approached it, clearly marking his way.

She fell back, not wanting to hinder his movement. Standing behind him now instead of at his side gave her an even better view of him. Laurel didn't like what she saw.

A glow emanated along Elijah's outstretched arms. It pulsed like a heartbeat. Then again, while a heartbeat would be comforting, this steady tempo made her skin crawl. It acted as if a thing alive and separate from Elijah. It moved along his body, consuming him inch by inch the closer he made his way toward the bedrooms. It shone bright, illuminating him in an unnatural white light.

With a gasp, she realized this was part of his father's legacy. What he'd passed on to his son in his quest for power. What did it mean, though? Was Elijah even aware of it?

And God, what had happened to Jonah?

Elijah halted in front of the bedroom doors before turning toward the right and Jonah's room. By now, almost his entire body had been washed aglow with the otherworldly light. He tried to turn the knob but dropped to one knee before he could get the door opened.

"Elijah!" Laurel darted to his side, bracing him upright before he could fall forward.

He looked blindly in her direction. "I'm not positive what this might do to you, Laurel. You should leave"—his face twisted in another spasm of pain—"before it's too late."

"No way." She didn't hesitate with her reply. Fat chance that she would give everything with them up as soon as it had been found again. She'd made that mistake once already and had no intention of repeating it.

Using her for support, Elijah slowly rose. This time, Laurel reached for the doorknob. She hesitated just before touching it, unsure as to what it would feel like. When she grasped it, however, she felt only the cool brass knob beneath her hand. With a final glance at Elijah, who looked as if he'd collapse at any moment, she pushed open the door. It swung wide, and with her breath held, she waited to see what they would find inside.

Chapter Twelve

Her gaze swept through the room, and at first she saw nothing amiss. The made bed took up the center of the room, while Jonah's armoire hugged one wall. A flat-screen television decorated another wall. From her vantage point, she could see the remote control sitting next to two stacked books on the nightstand. No...nothing amiss at all.

She made a second sweep, however, just in case she'd missed something. Obviously, Elijah expected to find something in here. She almost turned to ask him about it before a shape in the corner shifted.

Oh my God.

"Jonah?" Elijah's hand tightened around hers, pulling her back and stopping her advance. She had to go to him. He sat curled in the corner, his knees drawn together, and from the way he rocked himself as if trying to find comfort, he'd been hurt.

"I have to go first," he instructed before she could protest.

"He's hurt! Damn it, open your eyes, Eli—"

"I have to go first."

She dropped his hand, since he insisted. "Fine, just hurry."

How could he hurry if he kept his eyes closed as he inched forward, though? His tentative steps almost made her want to rush to his side, if to help him get there faster, but then she recalled their earlier conversation about their father. Elijah had said there was a lot more to the story that she needed to know. His concern for Jonah kept him from giving her much more information. The car ride

home had passed too quickly for him to let her know more than a little bit about their mother about whom she'd been curious.

Using the bed as a support, Elijah lowered himself to the ground when Jonah was a few feet in front of him. "Brother?"

When Jonah spoke, the hair on the back of Laurel's neck stood on end. His voice was raspy and dripped with malice. It was not Jonah's voice at all. "I've waited for you, Elijah."

She tightened her jaw, afraid that if she didn't find some way to keep her mouth closed, a scream would erupt. What had happened to him? Physically he looked like the man she knew and had grown to love, but her crawling skin and nerves that prickled insisted that she didn't know Jonah anymore.

"Let it go, Jonah. It's not too late."

"You should envy me, Brother. You have no idea what it feels like."

Elijah shifted, a small movement that brought him closer. "It's painful."

"No."

"It's unnatural, this split between us. It's not us, and you *can* let it go."

Jonah's eyes lifted for the first time since they'd entered the room, and Laurel let out a startled gasp. His eyes had been a beautiful chocolate color that she could get lost in. Now, they were as black as a sinner's heart.

"We are two halves of a whole, Jonah," Elijah continued. "We always have been. It's why the dark consumes you while the light takes me." He moved closer still. "It's not too late. Balance is within reach, Brother."

His gaze flitted to Laurel for an instant, but Elijah moved into his line of sight. "Not her. With me. We can do this together, Jonah, but you have to let it go."

His hand trembled, but Jonah lifted it toward his twin. "Do you see this?" he hissed. "This is the power our father died waiting for. And you want me to give it up?"

Laurel's eyes widened as she took in the horrific sight. Where Elijah's body had been enveloped in a ghostly glow, Jonah took on a fog of shadows. It hugged him, guarding almost every portion of his visible skin like a jealous lover.

Elijah's arm shot forward, and his hand clamped on to his brother's wrist. Both men cried out as a thunderlike clap echoed into the room. An explosion of light temporarily blinded her, and Laurel took an involuntary step back. By the time the dots dancing around her vision cleared, she opened her eyes to find Elijah holding Jonah, their chests pressed together. The latter man twisted and writhed, but no matter in which direction he moved, Elijah held fast.

Could she help him? Should she?

Even if she wanted to move forward, her feet remained rooted to the ground. Every traitorous part of her body screamed at her to run and get away, but her heart demanded she stand by her men. To help them in whatever way she could.

She couldn't stop staring at the forces of light and dark whipping about the brothers, though. They collided into each other. Jonah's dark engulfed parts of Elijah's light in places, where in others, Elijah seemed to have the upper hand. The illumination lifted and darted, always searching for some new place to take over.

Based on their grimaces, the battle caused at least some sort of pain, but neither man cried out. Noisy static electricity crackled as Elijah kept his grip on his brother. Sparks of light and dark coincided with each crash. Still, Elijah hugged Jonah tight.

What had he said earlier? Something about balance.

Laurel searched her mind, frantically looking for some clue that might have been imparted when she'd overheard their conversation or from when Elijah had explained their predicament. They needed to maintain balance. For every ounce of light, an ounce of dark had to be inserted. From watching them, she saw that Jonah's possession was darker and stronger than Elijah's. Despite the valiant effort he made, Elijah's light was slowly being overtaken. Even a quick glimpse into his face showed a waning energy.

She had to help them, but how? Inching forward, she called, “What do I do, Elijah?”

Her outburst distracted Jonah for a split second. His gaze darted toward her, his black eyes searching her in a way that made her blood run cold. Elijah wrenched his brother away, though, and pulled his attention back to him.

“Stay there,” he ordered. “Please! I don’t know how this will affect you.”

But why? she wanted to cry. His tentative hold on Jonah slipped free with every passing second. Even she could see that.

Elijah opened his eyes.

Laurel brought her arm up and shielded her own vision against light so bright her head surged with an instant ache. Between fingers, she peered at the brothers as the new source of light joined in the struggle. This time Jonah groaned as the light wrapped around him and pushed down the darkness. It slid down his chest and covered his torso. It spread through him and embraced Elijah in its journey.

The surge dulled as it dipped farther, but it served its purpose well. Jonah’s irises lost their devilish gleam, and shifted back to the color she’d come to know. With the bright light waning, Laurel dared to test her vision without a hand shield. When she realized she could see well without it, she moved closer to them. So focused on each other, neither man saw her until she dropped into a crouch next to them.

Jonah’s panicked voice almost made her stop. “No, Laurel...please. If you’re hurt because of this... Don’t!”

She ignored him. Had it been the raspy, malevolent voice from before, she might have thought twice. But this was Jonah. One of the men she’d come to love. And would now do just about anything for.

They needed balance, and she knew what that meant. Studying the way the darkness and the light warred with each other, watching the two men who’d been by themselves for so long, she’d come to understand a little of what was going on. There’d been a reason she fit with them so well. With a heart longing to be loved

and with a soul caught in despair, she possessed within her some of what they needed. The yin and yang of emotions was a constant struggle, but it might be just enough to give their gaping needs some satiation at last.

“I love you, Jonah and Elijah Ballard,” she said with an air of finality.

Elijah turned and must have seen the determination on her face. “Don’t, Laurel...”

“Don’t become a part of this,” Jonah pleaded.

Their protests fell on deaf ears. She wasn’t stupid. Some part deep down knew the men had intended for her to be a solution for them. Calling her their “savior” was her first clue. What else could it have meant? Her heart soared to know they’d changed their minds now, though. If she’d ever needed confirmation of their true feelings—not that she had, but if she did—she had it.

“It’s why I’m here for you. And if you think about it, why the universe brought you to me. We were meant to be together.” She reached for them both, placing a hand on each man’s shoulder. “This interdependence was meant to be.”

Heat cascaded in waves through her hands. It surged forward until her arms were encased in an intermingling of light and dark, swirling shadows and illumination, climbing through her until she became a part of it, this living sculpture of good and malice, this balance too.

It spread through her, the impression as sensual as any lover’s touch, until it warmed her through. Beside her, Jonah gasped in halting breaths. What remained of the darkness within him receded until he glowed, but not with light. If it was anything like what she felt, it was a rush of eroticism. Elijah threw his head back, swallowing hard as the same glow took him over.

He tried one last time. “It’s not too late, Laurel. You can still leave unharmed—”

She brought her mouth against his in a hard, bruising kiss. “Shut up, baby.” Turning to Jonah, she narrowed her eyes, almost daring him to contradict her before she pressed a hard kiss against his lips too.

She turned back to Elijah and moved her hand to his neck. Pulling him closer, she worked her mouth over his, sighing when he finally started to kiss her back. He slipped his tongue past her lips, caressing the inside of her mouth with the tenderness she could always expect from him.

When a fiery trail tracked down the back of her neck, she arched into where Jonah's mouth touched down and made her skin tingle. His warm breath followed the path his tongue made. Already, the area between her thighs began to pulse with anticipation.

Jonah pulled her tight against him, his arms coming around to embrace her belly. He slipped his large hands beneath the hem of her shirt, and bare skin met bare skin. Without looking down, she felt the distinct tug of his darkness against her rapidly warming flesh. She was aware of every place his fingers touched, as if her senses had been heightened because of this new connection between them.

Reluctant, Elijah moved closer until his chest pressed against hers while their mouths still moved against each other. She could kiss him forever. His lips and teeth swept over her, devouring her moans and whimpers. But she needed his brother in this moment, so she pulled away just long enough to brush her mouth against his before returning to Elijah again. He held her jaw in his hand, guiding her away and then back again. Allowing her to share her love between them both.

Elijah broke away to slide her arms into the air. Her shirt soon followed until he freed it over her head. Before he could lean in for another decadent kiss, she tugged his shirt up and over his head too. The clean scent of soap wafting from his body greeted her.

Behind her, Jonah tugged on the waist of her pants until it slipped past her hips, leaving her partially trapped. He didn't allow that she was on her knees to hinder him. She broke apart from Elijah enough to watch him over her shoulder. The sight of his bare chest after he discarded his shirt made her shiver. She'd never get tired of that view.

Laurel swallowed hard when he reached down and unfastened the closures to his pants. A moan broke free when delicate nips of pain concentrated on her breasts. In front of her, Elijah rubbed his thumbs over her nipples, exciting and pinching them into stiff peaks.

Her mind wrenched in two directions as the brothers simultaneously displaced the last of her clothing so they had access to her breasts and pussy. With her panties and jeans puddled around her knees and her bra pushed down until her breasts hung free, the men ran their hands over her bare flesh.

Sparks of electricity still arced between the three of them as darkness and light were absorbed by her body and then released back to the brothers in an intermingling of raw power. It heightened the eroticism of the moment, pushing her love higher until it too seemed a palpable thing. Tamping down her fear, Laurel used the growing emotion. Let it fuel her courage to do this for them all.

She worked fast at freeing Elijah from the clothes still hiding the hard column of flesh she ached to feel inside her. A sudden need to be filled by both men consumed her so swiftly, her movements couldn't keep up with the frenzy building. His erection pressed against his clothing, and with one hand, she stroked him, needing to feel his length in her hands.

Behind her, Jonah cupped her sex, but it was not enough. "Touch me," she called over her shoulder to him. The command came out like a growl. Definitely an order.

"My pleasure."

Her mouth fell open as he stroked her. Her pussy pulsed, her body clenching in anticipation of being filled by him. Somehow, despite the distraction, she released Elijah's erection too.

Lowering her head, she ran her tongue over the soft head of him, savoring the taste of moisture gathered at his tip. His stomach sucked in as she pulled him farther into her mouth, wrapping her lips over his head and sipping his leaking arousal.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck...” Elijah’s soft repetition of words made the area between her thighs ache that much more. And finally, *finally* Jonah inserted one long finger inside her slick folds. Her body drew him in, wrapping tight around him. He inserted a second finger beside the first, and the wet sounds of him plunging and withdrawing from her pussy amplified into the air.

Her hips tilted of their own accord, encouraging his exploration. Needing him.

Jonah seemed to sense her desperation for more.

Laurel screamed around Elijah’s cock when Jonah buried himself inside her with a single thrust. Her breath huffed around his length, as she struggled to breathe through her nose without releasing him. Jonah had stretched her until it felt as if she could take no more of him. He seemed larger than before, and her body struggled to accept what he gave.

One man in front of her. One behind.

Already her jaw ached and her pussy clenched, but she still wanted—*no, needed*—more.

Elijah rubbed her nipples, teasing and swirling his fingers over them as she began a slow rhythm of sucking. He then cradled her head between his hands, guiding her over him, and she pulled with abandon. The beautiful taste of him spurred her to draw him as deep in as she could. Eyes closed, she had the distinct impression that she lapped at not just his precum, but also the light that covered him before. The heady taste of him was different this time, and she couldn’t put her finger on why. It could only be this new emanation that caused it.

Holding her hips, Jonah rocked behind her. His pace was languid. He withdrew far enough back that her pussy spasmed from the emptiness before pushing forward again. No matter how many times he did it, the low moan that rumbled from her lips wouldn’t be stopped.

And still it wasn’t enough.

She released Elijah with a soft *pop*. Beneath hooded eyes, he watched as she knelt before him. His glistening cock had swelled and stood proud against his belly.

Lines of blue veins strained against the pink flesh. His balls hung heavy between his legs.

Quite possibly the hardest act of self-control she'd displayed in a long time, she tilted her hips until freed from Jonah too. She stood, stepping out of the remains of her clothing as she did so. She caught sight of Jonah's equally wet cock and stifled a shiver of pleasure at the knowledge that her body's cream coated it.

"With me, guys," she said huskily.

Their bodies glowed with a new fire. Her previous alarm over whether they could be consumed by raging opposing forces dissipated because the hungry look in their eyes, the possessive stance of their bodies as they crawled onto the bed with her spoke volumes of their control. While their father's legacy might still rage rampant through their veins, no one had to explain to her that she'd become a part of that legacy and helped them keep it in check.

With exaggerated slowness, she crawled to Jonah and trailed her mouth over his pectoral. She stopped long enough to capture a stiff nipple between her teeth before traveling lower. When she hovered above the object of her intent, she briefly closed her eyes and allowed the ecstasy to wash over her. With deliberate purpose, she dipped her head until she could smell the sultry scent of her sex on him. Licking him from balls to tip, she flattened her tongue over him, ensuring that she consumed the tang of herself. Combined with his musky taste, pure, unadulterated sex filled her mouth. Jonah released a low groan when she did it a second and then third time.

He lifted his head and gave Elijah a brief nod over her shoulder. She didn't know what it meant at first, but when he circled cool gel on the rosette of her ass, her mouth edged up in a smile. Jonah massaged her shoulders while Elijah worked the lubricant inside her.

Balance.

The thought came unbidden. It could mean many things, but for these men, the simple indulgence they shared with her provided it. They seemed so at ease only

minutes before when she'd taken them both. If she offered all of herself now, would it provide them a reprieve, if even only temporarily, from what stalked them?

"Ready, baby?" Elijah murmured.

Her mind raced as her heartbeat picked up pace. She could give them all of herself now. She loved these men and knew without a doubt in her mind that they loved her too. For them, all three of them, she could do this.

Without telling him her intention, she turned over. Elijah frowned, but then his eyes widened as she lifted Jonah's cock off his belly. She pressed its head against her anus, closed her eyes, and let her body slide down.

Her head fell back as she took him in, not stopping until she sat fully astride him. It took a few minutes of deep breathing to get used to this new sense of fullness. The intoxicating sparks of pain subsided with time, and her pulse slowed. When she thought she could stand it, she held her arms outstretched to Elijah.

He knew what she wanted instantly. "Are you sure?"

"We have to."

"No, baby." He shook his head. "We don't."

She looked deep into his eyes and nodded. "I do. Please."

Jonah gave his assent when he reached around and began a slow rub of her clit. If she thought she was wet before, his expert touch flooded her pussy.

Elijah shifted and pointed his cock at her entrance. "Laurel..."

She heard the warning note in his voice, the last vestige of self-restraint he possessed as he waited for her permission to complete the circle they'd created. His gaze dropped, and Jonah took advantage at the same time. He spread her lips open in anticipation of him, and Elijah cursed out loud.

He could stand no more.

Slowly, carefully, he impaled her.

She tried to recall her low cry, but she couldn't stop herself from moaning as he stretched her body, forcing it wider, making her take all of him. Her mind

screamed at her as a bubble of panic tried to form during this absolute possession of the brothers, but Elijah kept his gaze locked on hers with each inch he slid inside. The love she saw in them held her sanity intact. Before she knew it, he'd bottomed out, his balls pressing against the backs of her thighs.

Her heart hammered. The rapid staccato of her breathing became uneven.

The circle had been closed. Balance achieved.

Why then did a chill settle over her skin, goose bumps erupting in a wave that started at the crown of her hair and worked its way down through her toes?

"Hold on to her, Jonah," Elijah said between clenched teeth.

The brothers began to move in unison, searching for the rhythm to completion.

But she could feel the difference already. Some warm sensation spread through her, sparking where her body pressed against Jonah until it cascaded out. Elijah's touch crackled. It didn't quite sting, but neither was a pleasant sensation.

She knew it before she looked down. The glow would be taking her over, because the light and the dark spread like wildfire through her veins. Was she a conduit or insulation against the dueling possession?

It was too much to process. Too much for her. She couldn't stop to think about it. Deep within her, she knew this was necessary. Their bonding, *right*. Somehow she would survive this; she must embrace this if they were to survive unscathed.

Laurel cried out, fighting against the arousal the brothers caused, because it shouldn't feel this way. This antithesis of pleasure and pain, this dangerous eroticism would consume her body, and she was helpless against it.

Already, her body began a rapid ascent to pleasure. She knew she should stop it, that the brothers were unaware of what happened to her as they murmured soft words of encouragement, as they rubbed their hands over her, edging her closer to orgasm. She knew the flutter of building passion pushed her into the reaches of danger and corrupt seduction, but she couldn't stop the tightening of her body, the

flood of moisture between her legs as they fucked in unison, and the cries of the men, her husky, throaty moans, the rush of euphoria taking her higher and closer...

Her body clamped down, and Laurel screamed.

Chapter Thirteen

In a single glorious culmination of sensation, Jonah clenched his eyes against the almost painful outpouring of himself. Through gritted teeth, he groaned with each powerful burst. His climax spilled the essence of darkness that had lived with him for so long and what he knew was pure love for her into Laurel.

Above him, both Laurel's and Elijah's soft cries echoed into the air. In some distant part of his mind, he listened to them, and his heart soared in response.

Jonah tightened his fingertips against Laurel's waist, trying to remain gentle but unable to stop the shuddering that demanded he push himself harder, deeper inside her.

Her head rested next to his, and his chest heaved against her back. His head swam, control of his body waning. He had the almost irrational thought that he wouldn't survive. That the very part of him that was his life, his soul, was leaving his body and entering hers. It would explain why the periphery of his vision turned black and closed in fast.

Almost as quickly as it had taken him but before it claimed him entirely, the feeling slowly drifted away. Laurel's tight hole slowed its rhythmic pulsing, and the urge to mark her, to claim her body as his, dissipated alongside it.

Minutes passed. Neither Elijah nor Laurel broke contact, and with his semierect cock still inside her, neither did he.

I can't move, he thought. Their desperate need for one another had been satisfied, but he couldn't find the wherewithal to dislodge himself. Yes, it was selfish, but for a few minutes more, he wanted to remain connected with Laurel. He closed his eyes and basked in the moment.

Elijah made the first move by lowering his head to kiss her before flopping onto his back beside his brother. As much as he hated to do it, Jonah slowly extracted himself and turned on his side. He kept her body tucked tight against his, though. The soft curve of her buttocks tempted him, but she must have been exhausted by now. She'd taken on his darkness and his brother's light without thought for her own safety. She'd accepted their bodies in hers in an ultimate act of selflessness.

Jesus, he loved this woman.

He must have dozed off, because Elijah's voice startled him awake, maybe only minutes later. "Laurel?"

Elijah's one-word question rang with a faint note of concern. Jonah yawned and almost smiled to himself. His brother could never set aside his connection to another's emotions.

"Let her rest, Elijah. I don't know about you, but it's been a long time since I've felt this...freed."

Elijah ignored him. "Laurel?" This time he spoke more forcefully, the previous faint concern now rising in tone. "Laurel, look at me. Talk to me."

She didn't respond, and that made his heart beat a little faster.

"Jonah!"

He couldn't see her face from this position, but Jonah wrenched himself away to look upon her. Elijah called his name over and over in his mind, his mental voice cracking with concern. *"What have we done, Jonah?"*

His heart dropped, pounding with an insistence that his brother's heart mimicked. He recognized Laurel's wide-eyed gaze all too well. Watching her now brought back too many haunting memories of the darkness rising within him.

Not her. Please, God.

Not *her*.

“Hold on to her, Elijah,” Jonah ordered, wrapping his hand around her wrist. “Damn it, find whatever light you have left in you and right the balance. I think there’s too much in her. It’s too much. We need to take it back somehow.” He lowered his head to hers. “Laurel, baby, let it go. Give back to me and Elijah what isn’t yours to have.”

She whimpered a sound so low he wasn’t sure if he hadn’t imagined it. When she did it again, however, he tightened his grip on her. On her other side, Elijah twined his fingers within hers, holding on to her with fierce determination.

Her back arched against the bed. Jonah rested his other hand on her stomach, and a bolt of energy shot through him at the contact. *What the hell?* He drew back in shock, not knowing what it meant. Tightening his jaw, he took a deep breath and splayed his palm over her again.

Elijah chanted. “Let it go. Peace. Light. Let it go...”

This time, soothing warmth spread into Jonah’s fingers, wrapping around him and caressing him in all too familiar a way. A cloud of darkness rose visibly where he touched her and stroked over him. But where Elijah held her, light glowed, brightening in a harsh flare that forced him to look away.

“That’s it, Laurel, release it. Give it back to us.” The words had barely left his mouth before the seductive dark scrambled away from him. It retreated into Laurel’s skin, sinking into her, and spread until it covered her like a blanket.

“Fuck!” he roared. Jonah searched his mind, looking frantically for some residual trace of the darkness within himself. *Come on. Come on!* He wanted to keep his eyes open. Monitoring their progress had never been so vital, but he needed to focus. He released a frustrated sigh and closed his eyes, searching still for even the slightest hint of darkness. Just a tiny amount. *Please...*

He squeezed his eyes tighter and ignored the burn of tears forming in them. He would not give her up. They would right this. Laurel would not be handed over to the darkness without a fight.

“Love her, Brother.”

Jonah opened his eyes again and through blurry vision stared at Elijah. How could he think that he didn't love this woman? For her, he wanted the darkness back. The same darkness that threatened to tear him apart, to separate them, he opened his arms to. *"What?"*

"The darkness never wanted you to find her. She was a threat to its existence when it was within you. Yet now it holds on to her and won't to let go. Don't hate the darkness. Instead, love her. Provide balance. I can feel your mounting anger, your frustration, and I think it's fueling her possession. Look."

Elijah pointed with his chin to where he connected to Laurel. After his gaze traveled to the indicated spot, Jonah's mouth parted on a choking gasp. Darkness and light pulsed over Elijah's hand. It blended and flowed between him and Laurel in a rhythmic wave. Light cascaded through Elijah's touch, and she, whether consciously or not, countered it with dark.

"Jonah, find your love for her. Despite what you believe, there is still some darkness in you. I can feel it. Find your love, find the darkness, and help us."

He nodded shakily and tried again, this time his focus on the woman who'd managed to transform their lives this past week. He drew on the memories that they'd created and the memories he wished to make. The sound of her laughter echoed in his mind, and his heart lifted at the remembrance of it.

"I love you, Laurel," he said softly. "Open yourself to me. Please, baby."

With every breath he drew, Jonah concentrated on her. He let his imagination run with the idea of her giving them children someday. Every passing minute became a tribute to what each future year with her would bring. Sharing his love for her with Elijah over a lifetime would fill him with a kind of joy.

It was a small movement, but soon her hand flexed beneath his. Time passed at a glacial pace in what had to have actually been microseconds that it took him to see if this new focus made a difference.

His heart stuttered, but the grin that curved his lips couldn't be held back.

Darkness hovered over where he held her, and—thank you, God—light from her arm met it. A very familiar sensuality climbed up his forearm, spreading through him in a tight embrace. He couldn't place his finger on it at first, but something about it was different. When he realized that this time, it no longer tried to drown him in darkness, that it did not try to consume him entirely, a weight lifted from his shoulders.

A cold chill swept through him when he realized how close he'd come to losing her. The darkness he fought his entire life against almost took from him two lives and two loves. Always, he thought he would have been the one to perish. The idea that it might have been one of them—That he might have lost Elijah or Laurel. Or worse, *both* of them...

He shuddered.

Laurel's eyelids fluttered, and overwhelming relief made his throat tighten. She looked at him through her beautiful gray eyes. "I love you, Jonah Ballard," she said and turned to his brother. "And you, Elijah Ballard."

He dared to look at Elijah for confirmation. "*Did it...?*"

"*Yeah.*" He nodded. "*Balance.*"

Jonah could have wept with emotion but swallowed down the lump in his throat instead. Looking on her, then on Elijah, certainty about their futures grew.

He couldn't have been more grateful for these two people in his life. They brought him hope when he had none before. They'd given him reason to stay on this side of the darkness. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for either of them. Through the connection the twins shared, his brother knew how much he meant to Jonah. Laurel he'd be sure to tell as many times as she was willing to listen.

His throat tightened again, and he had to force his voice to operate. "You've brought balance to our lives, Laurel, and we're... What was the word you used? We're interdependent on each other. I can't imagine a world without you in it."

Her gaze volleyed between the two men. "I know I've got a lot of baggage to get rid of..." Her hand tightened around Jonah's when he started to protest, and

silenced him. “But I love you both with all my heart. I think I’ve started mending and will eventually be a whole woman again. And if I can help us maintain balance in the meantime”—she broke out in a toothy grin—“well, I kind of feel honor bound to serve.”

He lifted his eyes to meet Elijah’s. “Brother, I think we’ve just been made an offer I have no intention of turning down. You?”

“With as much love as I have for you, Laurel? Not a chance.”

The darkness stirred in Jonah, and he allowed it a small peek at the woman who could and would arouse it into a heated frenzy and then extinguish it like a flame. The reign of darkness would do its malevolent best to claim one of them for itself. Based on what he’d just seen happen to Laurel, he had no illusions about that.

In the end, they would need one another, and by God, he would not allow any of them to perish to preternatural forces. He would not be taken by the darkness, and so long as there was breath in his body, nor would he allow the light to take Elijah either.

And so long as his heart continued to beat, the woman they’d come to love would remain by their sides, their lives in her hands.

Their world in balance.

THE END

Dee Carney

Dee Carney began writing short stories in middle school, but did not attempt completion of a novel until almost ten years later—which despite good intentions was never finished. Almost ten additional years later, she challenged herself to begin writing again and the love for storytelling was rekindled. Now, Dee is a best selling, award winning author of urban fantasy, paranormal and interracial erotic romances and erotica.

Dee lives at home in Georgia with her husband, two dogs and a cat. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology degree, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree and a Master of Science in Public Health degree. When not writing, Dee is usually curled up on the couch with a good book!

Find Dee on the Web at <http://www.deecarney.com>.