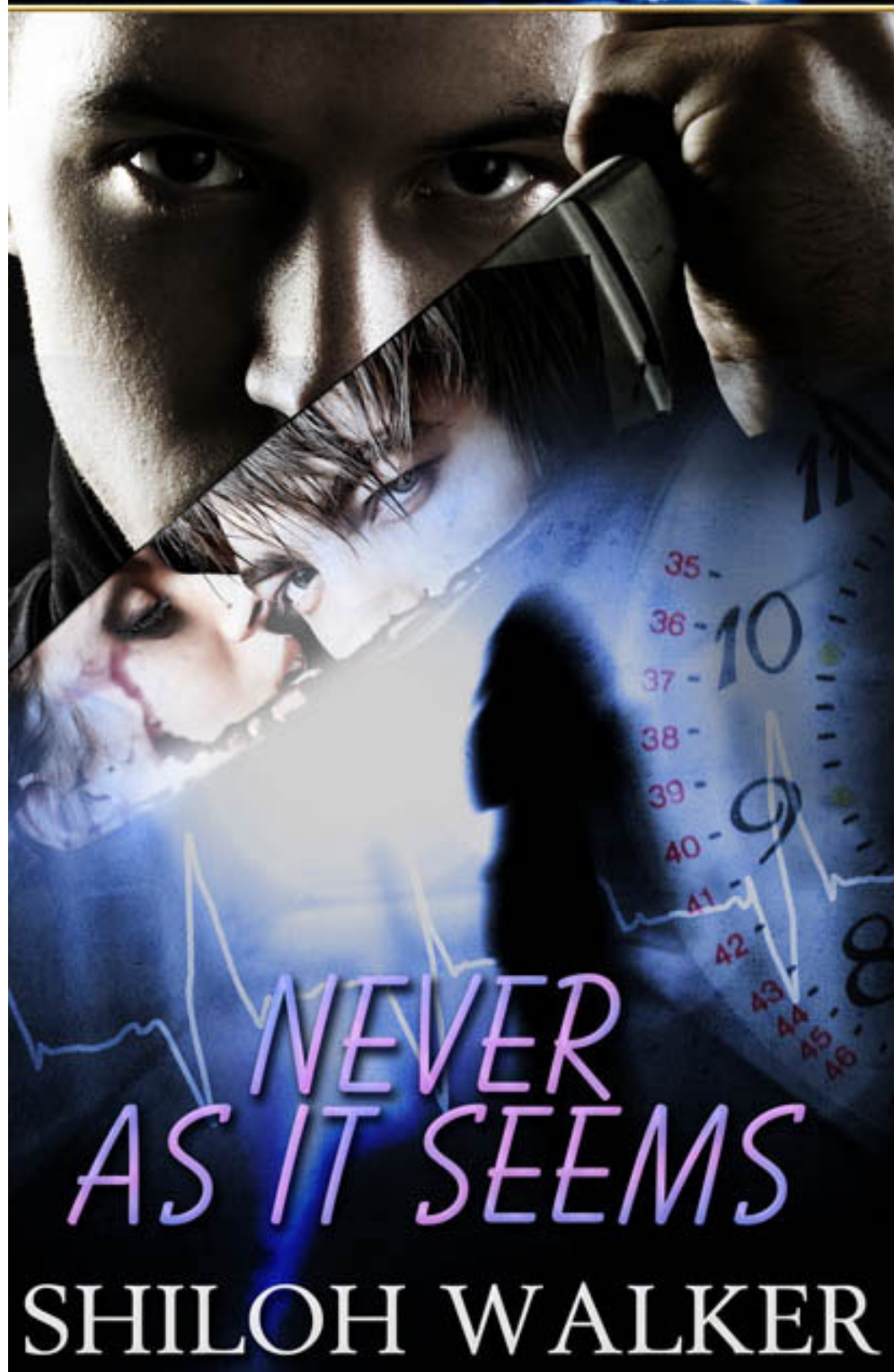


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



## Never As It Seems

Shiloh Walker

Three years after he walked away and broke her heart, Leo is back in Chloe's life and that's the last place she wants him. Not that she has any choice in the matter. She's in big trouble. She needs somebody to watch her back, and he's the "somebody".

Three years ago, Chloe dumped a bombshell in Leo's lap. *I'm psychic*, she told him. As if he was supposed to believe that. His world is black and white, and he doesn't buy into that mumbo-jumbo. Walking away from her damn near killed him, but he couldn't be with somebody he couldn't trust.

His new job? Keep Chloe safe. That's it. He's not supposed to touch her. He's not supposed to make love to her. He's not supposed to want her...need her...love her. But he can't stop thinking about her, can't stop dreaming about her. Now that she's back in his life, he can't keep his hands off her either.

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[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Never As It Seems

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# *NEVER AS IT SEEMS*

Shiloh Walker

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## Chapter One

"No. Absolutely, no," Leo Gray growled, glaring at his boss, soon-to-be partner.

Soon...but not soon enough.

If they were partners, Leo could actually argue this one. But as it was, all he could do was beg. He was just about ready to get down on his knees and do just that too.

*Fuck, not this. Anything but this. I'm just getting to the point to where I can almost think about her and not feel like punching something.*

Staring into Dave's eyes, he decided to throw pride to the wind. "Man, anything else. Please. Anything else, but not that. Do not ask me for this."

"Sorry, man. Beggars can't be choosers." Dave Pascall's amused eyes told Leo he was fully aware just how desperate Leo was to not do this job...and how fully Dave didn't care.

In short, Leo was screwed.

"Client is paying top dollar to see that's she's given round-the-clock protection for the next two weeks and we are going to provide that."

"Fine. We can. Just find another part of 'we'," Leo said.

Dave blinked. A lazy smile curled his lips as he leaned against the wall. "I'm sorry, I said that wrong. By 'we' I meant 'you'. You're the only one I've got available who handle this. You're it, man."

"No."

Anything, anybody but Chloe Perkins. He could handle anybody but her. Conniving, con-artist little grifter. An image of her face flashed through his mind and, despite himself, he felt the same swift punch in his heart that he felt all too often when he thought of her.

Three years. He ought to be over her by now.

*You are*, he reminded himself. *It isn't hurt. Isn't heartache.*

She'd used him, manipulated him. If anything had gotten hurt, it was just his pride. And it wasn't pain he felt when he thought of her, it was anger.

That had nothing to do with why he didn't want to have anything to do with her now. She was bad news.

Chloe had always been bad news. He'd just figured it out too late, and even as he tried to convince himself it wasn't hurt he felt, he knew better. She had hurt him—she'd torn his heart to shreds, the way she'd lied to him, and then the way she'd looked at him, right before he'd walked out the door.

*You're not being fair*, a voice whispered.

Out in the lobby, a door banged shut and a female voice snapped, "If you don't take your hand off of me, right now, you're going to have nothing but a bloody stump in the next thirty seconds. I promise you, it will make jacking off very, very difficult, you fucking pervert."

Chloe.

He knew the sound of her voice, knew it all too well, even raised in anger. Swearing, he dropped his head on the desk. Then he lifted it and slammed it down against the banged-up metal. "This isn't happening," he muttered. "Isn't happening, isn't happening." He banged his head a second time, a third.

"Knocking yourself unconscious won't do any good. I'll just babysit until you wake up and then I'll be pissed off at the delay," Dave said. "Chloe needs to be out of town...as in yesterday."

Looking up, Leo glared at the man he'd always considered his best friend. "Why, damn it? What the hell did I do to deserve this?"

An irritated look crossed Dave's face and he shut the door, muffling the irate sounds of Chloe's voice. "Stop being so dramatic. It's got nothing to do with you and

everything to do with her.” He glanced back over his shoulder, as though he wasn’t certain the closed door was enough. Then he came in closer, leaned over the desk. Quietly, he said, “Chloe’s life may be in danger, but until there’s proof, there’s nothing the DA can do. I’m doing this as a favor to a friend, but if I hadn’t been asked, I’d do it anyway. She’s got some nasty people after her, Leo.”

Something that might have been fear rolled through him, but Leo shoved it aside. Chances were it was nothing more than an overactive imagination on Chloe’s part.

“You lead the kind of life she leads, you’re going to piss people off. I told her that three years ago, remember? She’s a big girl. If she’s in trouble, she needs to clean up her own mess.”

Leo knew his friend well enough to recognize the look in Dave’s dark eyes.

It was disappointment.

“Shit. Are you not hearing what I’m telling you? Her life. In danger. Are you still that pissed off at her?”

Leo scowled and shoved a hand through his hair. “Hell. No. You know me better than that. I’ve never been pissed off at anybody I know so bad that I’d want them dead of it. But this is Chloe. You know Chloe. She’s the queen of dramatics. She’s the queen of con artists and grifters and bullshitters and she...”

His voice trailed off as Dave leaned over his desk, placed his hands flat against it. “I know who she is,” Dave said, his voice low and quiet. “And unlike you, I didn’t write her off three years ago. I actually know her better than you do. Considering the fact that you wrote her off and walked away from her, you really aren’t suited to be making any sort of judgment call. You don’t know her, Leo. Maybe you never did, if you think you can call her a con artist. Or maybe you should listen to your gut instead of that rock-hard head of yours.”

Then he straightened and smoothed his tie. “Look, this isn’t up for discussion. She’s your next case and if you really want to buy into the business, you’ll just suck it up and do your job. She’s the job. Keep her alive.”



Heaving out a sigh, Leo shifted his gaze to the glass windows and Chloe Perkins. Chloe. Shit. Why had fate brought her back into his life...again?

Then he glanced back at Dave.

*Keep her alive.*

Just how serious was this? Was Chloe seriously in danger?

\* \* \* \* \*

She hadn't slept in more thirty-six hours, not since a girl had killed herself, and Chloe had been an unwilling participant—viewing it from the girl's mind and unable to do anything to stop it.

The day was getting worse too.

Her gut roiling with nausea, acid burning a track up her throat, Chloe backpedaled away from the ham-fisted bastard who'd been assigned to escort her to the Bauer Agency.

Make no mistake, if he touched her again, she was going to puke her guts up, all over his seven-hundred-thirty-two-dollars-and-ninety-eight-cent shoes—bought for a steal online, no less.

One more touch, that was all it would take and the precious little food she'd eaten in the past twenty-four hours would come racing up her esophagus.

"If you'd please have a seat," he said, his voice as smooth, as sickening, as poisoned honey. "I'm sure Mr. Bauer will be out to speak with you shortly."

Curling her lip at him, Chloe said, "Yeah, I'm sure." Edging her way around the confined, tight spaces of the waiting room, she kept the doorway in the corner of her eye. She could get away.

Hell, she'd been living on the run for the past month. She'd had to leave her home and crash with a friend and that had her head in a mess. What if something happened to her friend? What if something happened to Nakia because she was helping Chloe? What if...

Her entire life had become a series of “what ifs”.

Ever since she’d run into a slick, nasty piece of work by the name Mike Greely. Literally run into him one day in the park on her daily run. The physical contact hadn’t been planned, but she’d tripped. Normally, she wasn’t a klutz. Normally.

But then again, she normally didn’t get slammed with a vision in the middle of a run.

That day, a dark, black, ugly one had all but grabbed her by the throat and choked her.

The end result had her stumbling into Mr. Mike Greely, and once she had her breath back, she was left staring at the man. The first words out of her mouth hadn’t been wise ones.

*Does your fiancée know how you paid for the ring you bought her?*

Greely was a thug. If they hadn’t been in a very public, very heavily populated park, he would have tried to hurt her. She’d seen it in his mind. The images had almost turned her bowels to water and she really didn’t scare all that easily.

He’d tried to follow her home, but she’d given him the slip. It helped that she’d already been tuned in to his thoughts.

If she could lose that thug, she could lose this one too.

She knew, in her bones, she could.

Goose bumps broke out all over her arms and she chafed them with her hands.

Tolerable wasn’t saying much though, because his very presence was choking the life out of the room.

Shit, where had Dave found him?

For the most part, Dave had reliable instincts with people, but this guy...

From the corner of her eye, she shot him a glance, thankful for the sunglasses that hid her eyes from him. She pushed against his mind and felt no resistance—nothing—as she breached his surface thoughts and then went deeper.

Normally, Chloe didn't go deeper—it was an invasion of privacy. But she wasn't always able to keep from picking up the surface thoughts. For her, it was like hearing random bits of conversation.

That was what had happened here—she'd picked up just enough to realize that this guy had no business working the job he worked.

Security detail.

*My ass.*

That was all she needed to justify looking deeper.

She found the information she needed, buried inside his mind, wrapped up like a tidy little present. An ugly tidy little present.

Oh, he liked security detail.

He'd worked it before. In Toronto, just over four years ago. The final year of his employment, three women had been brutally raped by a man they couldn't identify. In Toronto, he'd gone by the name Stephen Meyers.

Here, he went by the name Steven Trent.

He'd already been here two years, building his reputation and laying the groundwork. He was already starting to troll for his victims.

Nauseated, she took a deep, slow breath and waited for it to pass while she watched him from the corner of her eye.

"Mr. Bauer may be a few moments. Won't you be more comfortable sitting?"

Chloe crossed her arms over her breasts and leaned her head against the door. "No." She gave him a sharp-edged smile and said, "I'm perfectly comfortable standing, thank you." If she sat, she'd have to sit closer to him and she didn't want to do that.

She also didn't want him towering over her.

No way, no how.

Besides, she didn't have long to wait.

The door opened and, without waiting another second, she shoved off the wall and stormed toward it. Steven/Stephen moved to intercept and she edged away, skirting around a desk. He was not touching her.

*Bad idea to run from predatory types*, she told herself, but she couldn't not do it. She had to get away from him. A locked door might help.

Just having Dave around helped, really. She gave him a sassy smile as she reached up to pat his cheek. "Hey there, Dave. Life treating you okay?"

The sassy smile didn't fool him though. He cocked his head and caught her arm before she could saunter away, drawing her back to him. Cupping her chin in his hand, he studied her face. "You're not sleeping well."

*Wrong. I'm not sleeping at all*, she thought bitterly. But it didn't matter. There were worse things in life than missing a few nights of sleep. "You know me—why sleep when I can be having fun?"

"Yes, because those circles under your eyes and that strained smile speak of so much fun," he said wryly, shaking his head.

If she wasn't so damned tired, that might have just stung her vanity a little. But she was tired. So far beyond tired. She could curl up on that harder-than-hell couch over there and sleep for a week.

Not an option though.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept well. When the DA had told her who was going to be "watching" her, she'd almost heaved out a sigh of relief, because she'd thought maybe, just maybe, she could get some sleep. Surely Dave would handle it himself.

They had a good working relationship, she and Dave. For the past couple of years, they'd worked together every few months. Dave never asked her to come to his offices, as though he knew how hard it would be for her to be around Leo. Surely he wouldn't stick her with Leo.

Surely.

But then she'd spoken to him.

He hadn't had to say anything more than, *Hi, Chloe. Don't worry. Everything will be okay.*

Even before the okay had cleared his lips, she had known what he was planning.

Sticking her with Leo.

Leo...

Feeling a pair of angry eyes boring into the back of her head, she carefully blanked her expression, willed her tight muscles to relax. Once she felt she could face him without showing some sign of how awful she felt, she turned around and looked at the one man she'd trusted enough to give her heart.

But he'd broken it. Thrown it at her feet and stomped on it.

And if that wasn't enough, he'd called her a liar, a con artist, a thief.

*It isn't exactly fair that Leo Brant should still look so good*, she thought. Yeah, yeah, it had only been three years, but as cruel as he'd been, as much as he'd hurt her, couldn't fate have been kind and given him a paunch? A bald spot? Turned that long, lean body soft and mushy?

Even a few wrinkles.

But no, he looked as yummy now as he had the first time she'd seen him, nearly four years ago.

Black hair tumbling into his face, eyes almost as green as grass and sharp enough to cut, wide shoulders and narrow hips. He wasn't particularly tall—about five-seven but Chloe was only five-two herself and she kind of liked having a man she didn't have strain to look at. She'd loved resting her head on those shoulders, loved pressing her face against his neck and breathing in the warm, male scent of him. Loved waking in his arms, loved falling asleep next to him. Loved him.

She'd loved him. Plain and simple, and he'd broken her heart.

She wanted to yell at him. Wanted to throw herself at him and wrap her arms around his neck, kiss him until they lost their breath, strip him naked and fuck him senseless. Then she wanted to beat him bloody, yell at him until she was hoarse. Then she wanted to cry.

More than anything, she wanted to cry.

He'd given her a glimpse of happiness and then he'd stolen it away from her. She still felt broken over it and she still wanted to scream and rant.

Because she suspected she might do all of those things, she swallowed the knot in her throat. She could fake it. She'd been faking her way through things for most of her life. She'd pretended to be normal, pretended not to hear voices, pretended that her gift wasn't as strong as it was, pretended it wasn't more of a curse.

She could pretend her heart wasn't turning to stone in her chest.

Sliding her tongue along her lower lip, she looked Leo over, head to toe and then back again. Once their eyes met, she gave him a slow smile and tugged her sunglasses off.

"Well hello, Leo. Long time, no see," she drawled.

"Chloe."

"Wow. You don't sound happy to see me." She gave him a look of mock innocence, though she knew just how not happy he was. He would rather be anywhere but here, assigned to any job but this one.

Not that she could really tell any of that from his mind, but she didn't have to. It was written all over his face.

She'd never been able to read him all that easily, although she could...sometimes.

No, she'd gotten that off Dave. She might not be able to read Leo, but Dave? He was a bit easier to read.

"I've been explaining the basics of the situation to Leo, Chloe. Of course, it would be easier if somebody would explain more details to me." He lifted a brow and said, "Could you maybe shed some light on the subject?"

"Hoffner said he'd already filled you in on the details." She studied her nails, frowning as she realized she'd chipped the polish on just about every one of her nails and two of them were broken. One was broken right down to the quick, but she'd never even noticed.

Unconsciously, she started to twist one of the silver rings she wore, staring out the window.

"Hoffner said he couldn't tell me much. He was still investigating things," Dave said, drawing her attention back to him.

Investigating. Yes, she imagined he was. Trying to track down Mike Greely, trying to figure out everything he was involved in and how he was connected to a dead foster child. How all of that connected to Chloe and how that connected to the fire that had chased Chloe out of her home in the middle of the night a month ago.

Her throat started to burn as the memory of the smoke crept up to taunt her. She pressed her fingers against her tired eyes and tried not to think about what would happen if Hoffner decided it was too chancy to risk taking the word of a psychic.

So far, the police and the arson investigators weren't too impressed with the idea that somebody had set the fire. They were blaming faulty wiring. Greely did know his arsonists.

Blowing out a sigh, she looked at Dave and said, "I'm sorry but I promised the DA I wouldn't discuss this with anybody until he'd done some poking around."

Acid churned in her stomach and she rested a hand on her belly for a moment and then rooted around in the purse she carried. The mangled pack of Tums was almost empty. She'd have to talk her new jailor into stopping for more on the way to wherever he was going to keep her.

Keith Hoffner had warned her it could be a couple of weeks before he had anything concrete.

*Weeks*, she thought glumly.

She might have to spend weeks with Leo.

From the corner of her eye, she could see him watching her. And while she might not be able to read his mind, she could sure as hell feel the general state of it.

And he was pissed.

But there was something under that anger, and it was familiar, even after three years.

Heat.

She shivered and crossed her arms over her breasts, casually hiding her body's reaction. The feel of her arms rubbing over her nipples was torment, but at least it was better than having him notice. And he would. Even as angry as he was, he was all too aware of her, she knew.

Just as she was aware of him.

Man, could she really handle this?

She wished she could get out of it, but she knew it wouldn't happen. She didn't waste the time trying to talk or charm Dave into assigning somebody else.

Absently, she circled around the office, watching as Leo and Dave exchanged several terse sentences. Well, Leo's were terse.

Dave looked unperturbed.

If she didn't know better, she'd think he was up to something. Actually...she narrowed her eyes and studied him, curious. She wouldn't put it past him. He'd been trying to talk her into coming around the office, talking to Leo for the past three years.

He believed her.



Leo didn't know, but Dave had been using her..."services" for a while. It wasn't any sort of regular arrangement but there were times when she had been able to help. Dave had good instincts and sometimes he just knew when to bring her in.

He also knew why Leo and Chloe had broken up and it bugged him. *Under those straight, starched suits, the guy is a romantic sap*, she decided. He wanted them to try to work things out and maybe he saw this as a golden opportunity. It kind of made sense.

And maybe she was just being paranoid.

Maybe he wasn't working on some weird hook-up.

Maybe Leo was just the best guy for the job.

And maybe her hair would fall out tonight and grow in thick, blonde and lusciously curled tomorrow.

Sighing, she skimmed the short, straight, black locks back from her face and slanted a look at Leo from the corner of her eye. He had his back to her, and judging by his posture, he was probably describing her in less than pleasant tones.

What had he called her?

A charlatan.

She smirked and reached down, rested a hand on the keyboard.

A fake.

A tiny little lash of pain tore at her heart and she ignored it as she typed in Stephen Meyers, wanted for rape, assault.

A slew of Google hits came up.

Psychics aren't real.

She found the link she needed—it was the third hit.

Clicking on it, a lovely, detailed mug shot came up on the screen. Yep. It was Steven Trent. He'd lost some weight for this job, a deliberate attempt on his part, she assumed, to change his appearance. The color, the style of his hair was different as well.

But the eyes were the same.

Unsmiling.

Cold.

Full of malice and anger and the desire to hurt.

Leaving it up on Dave's desktop, she grabbed a sticky notepad and jotted down the name, just in case, and a few details.

Stephen Meyers. Rape. Assault. Lovely office personnel, Dave.

She doubted she'd be seeing Stephen Meyers/Steven Trent any time soon. If she knew anything about Dave, the guy's ass would be arrested in under an hour.

Feeling a pair of eyes on her, she looked up.

He was watching her.

Trent. Meyers. Whoever.

Watching her through the window with those dead, dead eyes.

Careful not to let anything show in her eyes, she pushed her sunglasses back into place and averted her gaze.

"Get your ass in gear," Leo snarled.

She looked up and smiled at him. "My ass has been in gear. You're the one who has spent the past ten minutes arguing over...whatever." It wasn't easy to feign nonchalance, but she did it anyway. She lingered by Dave long enough to give him a hug. Pressing her lips to his ear, she murmured, "Check out your computer, slick. You've got a personnel issue."

She was heading out the door when she felt the jolt of his anger ratcheting through the air.

Over her shoulder, she glanced back him, hoping he wouldn't do anything that might tip the guy off.

But he was already sitting down at his desk. Looking like the overworked, overstressed busy, busy guy he was.

## **Chapter Two**

He didn't want to care about her—didn't want to be affected by how tired she looked, though she hid it under a sassy smile.

She had circles under her eyes, Leo noticed.

He didn't like it.

Circles.

And her pretty hands? The nail polish was chipped, two of her nails ragged. He couldn't care less but Chloe was a vain thing, she always had been—fussing with her hair, her nails, that shiny, sleek black cap of hair.

He told himself the reason he stopped at the drugstore when she asked was so he didn't have to listen to her bitch when she didn't get her way. Chloe also enjoyed her sulks and life would be easier for him if he didn't have to deal with them.

But what the hell could it hurt? If picking up some nail polish or whatever she needed made her feel better, fine. Yeah, he felt like a heel. She'd lied to him, misled him...and countless others most likely. But if Dave was being straight with him, then her life was in danger and Chloe, for all of her flaws, didn't have any true malice in her.

Hell, maybe this would even convince her to straighten up her act.

"We're not staying long," he warned her as they parked in front of the Walgreens. "I want to be at my cabin before it gets dark."

"The cabin?" A frown crossed her face. "We're going to the cabin?"

"If I've got to play babysitter, I might as well do it in a place where I can enjoy myself."

"I need to go by the place I'm staying, get some clothes." She plucked at the skirt she wore. "I can't wear this indefinitely."

He grimaced. "Fine. Just make it quick in the store."

"Five minutes."

*Yeah, right.*

He trailed along behind her, resigned to spending the next ten minutes in the makeup section, nagging her to hurry up. But she walked past the makeup. Past the perfumes. Past the shampoo, conditioners, hairsprays and brushes. She walked past nail polish and files — paused.

Figures.

But all she did was grab a nail file and keep walking.

Frowning, he followed as she wound her way through the store. She didn't stop again until she reached the aisles of medicine. She grabbed the biggest bottle of Tums they had and, without sparing him so much as a glance, made her way up to the front of the store.

Tums?

They were out of the store in four minutes and fifty-eight seconds. Yeah, he timed it. As they headed to his car, she stowed the nail file in her purse and opened the Tums, tearing the foil safety seal and shaking four of the big-ass tablets into her hand.

As she popped them all into her mouth, he scowled at her. "You're taking too many."

From the corner of her eye, she glanced at him. "I'm sure I'll survive."

"They got dosage instructions for a reason."

"Well, just think how much fun you'll have laughing at me if you have to take me to the Emergency Department for an overdose of Tums," she said, her voice unconcerned. "I'm staying with a friend over off Glenstone now. We'll have to be quiet though. My friend works nights."

"Your friend," Leo repeated. Hell. Leo could only imagine what kind of friend this friend was.

*A lover?* He couldn't help the hot, quick flash of jealousy that tore through him at the thought. Why should he care if they were lovers? It wasn't as if he and Chloe were still together. It wasn't as if they had ever had a chance to begin with, had they?

Chloe had wiped out their chances the day she'd sat him down and solemnly said, "Leo, I'm psychic." Just like that. And she'd expected him to believe her.

Then she'd told him she could help him with a case he'd been trying to solve—one that came with a two-hundred-fifty-thousand-dollar reward.

Of course, even now, he had a little voice that whispered, *She wasn't doing it for the money. She wanted to help you.*

But the voice of common sense, the voice that knew better than to believe in psychics and scam artists, drowned it out.

They hadn't had a chance because that had been the kind of shit she'd wanted to throw into their relationship.

Still, it made him feel hollow inside, just to think about it. Very hollow.

Damn it, why had he fallen for her so hard?

Why?

Why not somebody a little more...normal? A little more honest? A little less flighty? Somebody who didn't try to pull that I'm-your-psychic-friend shit?

Even as he thought it, though, a part of him said, *I'm not being fair. It's not as if she ever tried to con money out of me. Hell, I never really saw her try to con money out of anybody. For all I know, maybe she really does think she's psychic.*

Hell. That was a comforting thought.

Instead of manipulative, she was delusional.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he shoved the thoughts aside and made himself focus on the here and now. What had happened three years ago no longer mattered.

He and Chloe no longer mattered and once this job was done, they might never even see each other again.

Now that was enough to leave him feeling aching, empty...and angry.

"Turn here," Chloe said.

The house wasn't what he expected. It was small, in a clean, quiet neighborhood.

There was only one car in the driveway, a gleaming red VW Bug. On the back there was a bumper sticker that read "Nurses do it all night long". Leo found himself staring stupidly at that sticker for a few seconds. It wasn't until the car door slammed shut that he realized Chloe was already heading toward the house.

Swearing, he got out of the car and jogged to catch up with her. "You're not supposed to go anywhere without me."

"You were just sitting there. Am I supposed to wait until you're ready to go inside?" She shrugged. "I thought you're in a hurry."

Not much he could argue with there, Leo realized. Instead of answering, he just folded his arms across his chest and waited for her to unlock the door. Once they were inside, she dealt with the security system and dumped her bag on a table just inside the door.

"You can wait here." She gestured to the living room.

"No. I go where you go. That's what the boss wanted."

She made a face at him. "Gee, when I have to pee, are you coming in the bathroom with me?"

"Do you plan on making this as difficult as you can?" He sighed. "Of course you do. You're Chloe. That's what you do, you make things difficult. That's your calling in life." He grimaced and added, "That, and being your psychic friend, of course."

"Go to hell," she said softly. Turning on her heel, she stormed away from him. He followed, but she ignored him.

It was something she did rather well, he had to admit. He stood in the doorway, watching every move she made. Excruciatingly aware of the way her ass moved beneath that long skirt, painfully aware of her small, round breasts.

But he might as well have been invisible for all the attention she paid to him.

Part of him, he realized, had expected she'd try to draw him back inside that sticky, seductive web of hers.

He'd fallen for her so quickly, so hard that last time.

Within thirty-six hours of meeting each other, they'd been in bed. The hunger, the heat between them had been undeniable. Hell, even now, knowing better, he felt drawn toward her.

She wasn't unaware of it and he kept expecting her to try to work that again. Kept expecting her to try to play him again. Try to convince him to believe that impossible con-artist crap people like her handed out. She'd use the same methods as last time—she'd flirt, tease.

Except none of that was happening.

Plus, reality kept sticking it to him and reminding him of the facts. She hadn't ever tried to con him. Nine months together and she'd never once tried to con him. She'd never tried to use her so-called "gift" even once, up until that last time.

Swearing, he stared at her and tried to ignore the burning heat flooding through him.

She was icy, aloof, and she couldn't have made it any clearer that all she wanted to do was stay away from him. And for some reason, it just made him want to get closer, closer.

Off to his left, he heard a door open.

Tensing, he eased inside Chloe's room, reaching for his gun as he heard somebody call out her name.

"Chloe?"

Chloe stopped ignoring him for five seconds, long enough to shoot him a withering look. "It's my friend, Leo. Throttle down your inner Rambo." Then she raised her voice and said, "In here, Kia!"



The woman who appeared in the door was Chloe's exact opposite.

Chloe was slim, pale and delicate, subtly curved, subtly female. Normally, that pale skin had a dusky undertone, but not today. Her roommate was an Amazon—probably close to six feet tall, her skin a gleaming dark brown. The robe and skimpy nightshirt she wore barely managed to cover her rich, ripe curves and it sure as hell didn't conceal them.

"What are you doing, sweetie?" the woman asked Chloe.

Chloe grimaced. "Heading out of town for a few days, it looks like." She bent over and grabbed a pair of tennis shoes from the floor, adding them to the growing pile of clothes in her suitcase.

"Is this about—" The woman's eyes slid toward Leo and then away.

"Yeah." She edged around the woman, giving her a friendly bump with her hip as she made her way to her dresser. Over her shoulder, she tossed a thin-lipped smile in Leo's direction and then looked back at her friend. "This is Leo. He gets to be my babysitter for the next couple of weeks. Poor bastard."

She pulled open a drawer and pulled out scraps of silk and lace, tossing them into the suitcase.

"Is everything okay?" Kia barred her way when she would have tried to edge back around.

Nakia was wide-shouldered and wide-hipped with generous curves that strained the very brief nightshirt. Next to her, Chloe looked...fragile.

Hell. Chloe...fragile?

"Talk to me," Nakia said, squeezing Chloe's shoulder. "Damn it, what is going on? You really think it's that bad? You got to go?"

Chloe sighed. "Kia, I really don't know. But somebody seems to think so. And I guess I'd rather be safe than sorry." She leaned against her friend and as the woman wrapped an arm around Chloe's shoulders, the shorter woman closed her eyes.

The cool, emotionless façade she had worn all day fell away and, for a brief second, Leo saw her without any mask, without any pretense.

She looked frightened. She looked tired.

When the hell was going on?

Swearing, he moved out of the bedroom and stormed into the living room. Dave might not have many details, but whatever he had was a damn sight more than Leo had.

He grabbed his iPhone from his belt.

If there was anything that Leo despised, it was being kept in the dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't like him," Nakia murmured, trailing after Chloe as she made a pit stop at the bathroom.

Chloe grabbed a makeup case from the closet. Looking at Kia over her shoulder, she said, "You don't know him. How can you tell if you like him or not?"

"I don't have to know him to know this—he's going to hurt you." Something dark moved through Kia's eyes. "I can feel it. I can almost see it."

Her friend's empathy had made her one hell of a nurse, and sometimes, it made her one bitch to be around. Chloe couldn't hide anything from her. At all. Absently, she rubbed the heel of her hand over her heart and said, "He already hurt me."

Slowly she lowered her hand and curled it into a fist at her side. He had already broken her heart. What else could he do? It wasn't as if she would trust him with her love again.

"Baby, if he's already hurt you, why are you going with him?"

"Because I don't have much choice." She dumped her toiletries into the bag and zipped it shut. "If I could have found somebody else, trust me, I would have. But this is how it played out."

A headache pounded behind her eyes. Grimly, she opened the medicine cabinet and eyed the amber prescription bottles there. The last thing she wanted to do was take any of the medicines for the migraines, but if she ended up on the ground from the pain, Leo would either leave her there to suffer or, worse, take her to the emergency room.

Neither was a pleasing outcome in her mind.

At least the drugs she had here wouldn't totally throw her off kilter. She'd taken a few that had just about shut her abilities down completely and that was like taking away her ability to see or hear. Worse.

Grabbing the prescription bottle, she dumped it into the bag.

"How long you going to be gone?" Nakia asked.

"I don't know."

A slender, strong hand closed around her shoulder.

Looking up, she met Kia's gaze in the mirror. "You will come back," Nakia said.

It was delivered as a statement, but they both knew what Nakia was saying...asking.

Forcing a smile, Chloe shook her head. "Honey, you know as well I do, I never know what's coming my way."

Then she turned around and wrapped her arms around her friend's waist. "But I'm tough, remember?"

## Chapter Three

"Did you just say her house burned down?" Leo repeated, blood roaring in his ears.

"Yes." Though Dave's voice was flat, Leo knew his friend well enough to hear the fury underlying it. "The reports are putting it down to faulty wiring."

"You're not buying it."

"No."

Leo wanted to hit something. He stared down the hall, watching for some sign of Chloe. Her house had burned down. What the hell! "Why not?"

"She's had a problem with somebody harassing her—a Mike Greely. Conveniently enough, he has an alibi, and of course, he also has an alibi for each time she's reported him to the cops for harassment. It's not adding up."

"Who is he? Ex-boyfriend?" *Somebody I can beat senseless?*

"She's not saying, but no. I don't see him as an ex-boyfriend. Other than you, Chloe's got better taste than that." Paper rustled and in the distance, a phone rang. "I've got to go, Leo. Get her out of town. Now."

"Dave, can't you tell me more?"

"Can't tell you what I don't know. I wasn't given much information and what information I was given was given in confidence," Dave said, his voice distracted.

"Damn it, I'm your fucking partner. Confidence crap doesn't include me." He kept his voice low and his eyes trained on the hallway, watching for a shift in the light, any shadow. He wanted to be off the phone before Chloe turned up.

"Almost my fucking partner," Dave corrected. "And regardless, I can't really tell you what I don't know. Chloe wasn't telling Hoffner a whole lot, and Hoffner told me next to nothing. What little I do know—Chloe knows something she shouldn't know

and somebody's already tried to kill her. Now, get her the hell out of town. Hoffner is looking into things and once he has some answers, he'll put together a more concrete plan of action."

"Exactly what does she know?"

Dave snorted. "As if she told me that. And Hoffner wasn't spilling either."

"You want me to keep her alive but you aren't giving me shit to work with," Leo said.

"That's because I don't have shit to worth it. Look, I'm having a bitch of a day. I'm worried about Chloe, two of my guys are sick, I don't have the staff to cover the jobs we have coming in and I just had Trent hauled off in cuffs—and he won't be coming back. Would you cut me some slack?"

Leo lowered the phone and glanced at it. Then he lifted it back to his ear and said, "Did you just say Trent was hauled off in cuffs?"

"Yes. Long story. Not going into it right now. But it's safe to say I'm now short another body and—"

Hearing the low murmur of Chloe's voice, he swore. "Shit. I've got to go. You had better keep me updated," he snapped. "And email me about the deal with Trent."

Trent. Shit, he hadn't ever liked that guy—something about him just seemed off. Oddly enough, hearing the guy was being hauled off in cuffs wasn't terribly surprising.

He had barely finished tucking the phone away when Chloe appeared in the doorway.

"Chloe." He shoved off the wall. They needed to get out of here. He needed some answers, they needed to get out of town...and shit, he wanted her to look at him as if he weren't part of the scenery for once.

She gave him that distracted, barely aware glance and looked at her friend. Dismissed him.

Curling his hands into fists, he rocked back on the balls of his feet, tempted to storm over there and grab her, make her look at him. Make her see him. Face him.

Seeing the worry in Kia's eyes, Chloe forced a smile. "I'll try to call if I can. I just picked up a new phone this morning. A pay-as-you-go piece of crap. May not even work."

"Hell." Nakia wrapped her arms around Chloe and hugged her. "You be careful, baby, okay?"

Chloe hugged back, breathing in the scent of Kia's hair and the lotion they both loved. Karma Kream by LUSH. "I took the last pot of lotion," she said, swallowing the knot in her throat and forcing a smile. "You need to go buy more."

"Bitch," Nakia muttered.

Her eyes were dark, damp with tears.

"Be careful."

Chloe nodded. "You too, okay?"

With a hint of her normal attitude, the woman smiled. "Hey, I can take care of myself. Anybody tries to mess with me..." She rubbed her hands together.

"Do it." Then Chloe turned around and hiked her bag up on her shoulder. Leo stood clear across the living room and his green eyes snapped, glowed. The anger in them, the heat, the intensity, it scorched her, even from this distance.

She tried to say something. Trying to force the words past the knot in her throat though, proved to be too much work. Trying to force that cocky smile, trying to force that careless, carefree attitude—she couldn't do it.

Instead, she just headed for the door.

It's not as if he really wanted to hear a damn thing from her anyway.

When she did it, again, Leo felt his patience snap.

Without sparing Nakia a glance or greeting, he stalked toward Chloe. Just when she would have opened the door, he reached and closed his hand around her neck.

“Nowhere without me,” he rasped, dipping his head to mutter it against her ear. “Including outside.”

She stared woodenly at the door. “Fine. Stop playing the Hulk and move, then. We’re supposed to be out of town, remember?”

He opened the door and as she started to move past him, he caught the strap of her carryon bag. “Give me your bag.”

“I’ve got it.”

“Give me the fucking bag,” he snarled.

She stopped in her tracks and glared at him. “What the hell is your problem?”

All too aware of the eyes watching them, he kept the words behind his teeth. He wanted to respond—he wanted to tell her in excruciating detail just what his problem was—no, not problem—problems. More than one.

Starting with the fact that she was back in his life again, even if it was just for a couple of weeks.

She was back in his life and it was killing him.

She looked too damn sad and he hated it.

She looked tired and he couldn’t stand it.

She looked scared and it made him want to spit glass.

She looked through him and it had him ready to climb the fucking walls.

She smelled so damn good and he wanted to go to his knees in front of her.

He wanted to lick that smooth white skin and tug on her lip with his teeth and then he wanted to spread her thighs and taste her, see if she tasted the way he remembered.

But nothing had changed.

So he couldn’t do any of that shit.

Abruptly, he frowned. What had Dave said? He had walked away from her. He barely knew her.

Maybe...hell. Maybe she had changed.

*Shit.* He scrubbed a hand over his face, then held it out. "Please let me have the bag. You keep the rolling bag. I need one hand free, but you don't need to haul everything around."

"I'm perfectly —"

"Shit." Nakia started to laugh from across the room. "Chloe, give him the damn bag and get out of here. Okay?"

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't a long drive, but it was a tense one, spent in silence.

Leo drummed his fingers on the console and although she never once saw him look her way, she could feel the weight of his gaze. Watching her.

She could even feel the weight of his thoughts, though she couldn't pick out the individual strands.

He was thinking about her.

Too much. Way too much, because every so often, she caught a brief figment of thought and some of those thoughts were doing bad, bad things to her state of mind.

Trying to distract herself, she shifted in the seat and reached into her purse for a book. Curling up in the seat, she started to read, but found herself reading the same line over and over, and worse...

She was turned on.

Heat spread through her lower belly and she was breathing faster, harder than she should. Carefully keeping her face averted, she silently swore. The atmosphere in the car was too highly charged — not just with her own hunger, but his.



It had been there for the past couple of hours, but they had both been trying not to think about. It wasn't working, and now it was about to choke her.

Forcing hers down, she could handle it, but if he didn't attempt to get a grip on his own hormones...

A low, steady pulse centered between her thighs and involuntarily, she pressed her knees together to try to ease it. It didn't help.

Sinking her teeth into her lower lip, she bit down hard, until the taste of blood flooded her mouth and even that didn't do much to clear her head.

A hand touched her arm and she heard her name. Vaguely, she realized the car had stopped moving and through her lashes, she looked around. They were here. At the cabin.

Good. She could go inside, get away from the overwhelming burn of his hunger. She could handle this. She clambered out of the car, her legs stiff, clumsy, not wanting to work.

Hard to walk, hard to think, hard to even breathe.

She was hovering just this edge of climax and nothing had even happened.

*Just keep walking. Just keep walking.*

Crossing her arms over her chest, she focused on the porch. There were two bedrooms. She remembered that. She'd take one. Close the door and lie down. Hopefully this would subside once she wasn't so close to him and if it didn't...

She was on the porch when he caught up. Just a few feet away from solitude. It might as well have been miles though. After all, he had the key to the cabin.

A hand came up, rested on the back of her neck. Leo squeezed lightly.

"I'm getting damned tired of you ignoring me."

Her heartbeat skittered up into what she was certain was dangerously unstable territory. She swallowed and said, "Leo, it's been a bitch of a day. Can you have your tantrum later?"

Oh...bad choice of words, she realized about two heartbeats later.

He spun her around.

"Tantrum?" One hand braced on the wall just over her shoulder. The other, he rested just below her other shoulder. The warmth of his skin all but scalded her. His thumb stroked back and forth over the hollow of her throat.

Each stroke had the incredible heat inside her belly billowing higher. Higher. Hunger clawed at her, twisting through her. Her nipples ached, stabbing into the satin of her bra. It wouldn't take too much more to send it spiraling out of control. And damn him, he wasn't even aware.

Swallowing a moan, she stared at the center of his chest and tried to think of something else. Anything else.

"I can have my tantrum later," he murmured. "I'm hauled off the job to babysit you, without really being given a reason. You won't tell me jack shit and you've been treating me like a piece of furniture from the get-go. My boss tells me that you're being stalked, tells me that your house was burned down. I want some answers, Chloe...that's all I want, but all you do is ignore me. That's hardly a tantrum.

"Answers, baby." He curled his fingers into the tense muscles of her shoulders, absently massaging them. "I just want answers. And I want you to look at me, instead of through me...Chloe."

She couldn't.

*Her skin is burning hot*, he thought. Silken soft and so hot. She stared straight ahead, as if he had something terribly interesting inscribed on his chest. Cupping her chin in his hand, he angled her face upward until he could see the dark, bottomless depths of her eyes.

Her dusky skin glowed with a faint flush.

Her lashes lay low, all but shielding her gaze, letting just the barest sliver show.

Her mouth was damp and soft and as he stared at her, a shaky sigh escaped her.

The hunger exploded through him, lust hazing his vision. Heat arrowed through him and the anger, the frustration inside him changed, shifted. Refocused.

Swearing, he tried to remind himself where he was. Why he was here.

Who he was with.

But that didn't help.

This was Chloe and she'd always been his weakness.

"Chloe," he muttered.

She dragged her lashes up and the sultry, female hunger he saw there laid him low. Groaning, he dipped his head and slanted his mouth over hers.

Three years. Three long, aching, empty years.

She kept her mouth closed, kept her hands clenched in fists at her sides.

Growling, he licked the seam of her lips, nuzzling them.

She whimpered. Her body swayed against his. Her hands came up, still clenched into tight fists, and rested against his chest. He could feel the heat of them through his shirt and he wanted her to open those hands, smooth them down his chest, all over his body, really. Wanted to feel them unzipping his jeans, slipping inside and closing over his cock.

Just the thought was enough to make his cock jerk in response. Make him grit his teeth and snarl a curse against her lips. Lifting his head, he stared at her through slitted eyes. Fisting a hand in her hair, he tugged on the short, silky strands and muttered, "Open for me, sweet girl. I'm dying to taste you."

Chloe shuddered.

Her lashes lifted and he found himself staring into eyes that burned hot, hungry...and all too clear, despite that hunger. "This isn't smart, Leo. We both know that." Her voice was whiskey rough, shaky with need.

"So the fuck what?" He couldn't care less about being smart. He cared about the fact that she was here. With him again, after three years. He crowded against her until she was against the railing and then he leaned into her, shuddering as her soft, slender body cradled his. Fuck, she felt so right.

So perfect.

She'd *always* felt so fucking right. So how had everything gone so wrong?

He knew how everything had gone wrong though. And he didn't want to think about it. Stroking his hands down, he cupped her hips and drew her closer. "Three years," he murmured, nuzzling her neck. "Three years, Chloe, and I can't stop it with you. I dream about you. I think about you. I see a woman with hair this color and I think, I wonder, part of me hopes...is it her? But it never is."

He raked her neck with his teeth, just the way she liked it and when she gasped and arched her head to the side, he did it again, using the edge of his teeth just a little harder.

"I don't care if this is stupid," he rasped against her ear. "I just care that you're here."

Her hands opened, closed, kneading the front of his shirt. "Is that really enough?"

"For now." He pressed his mouth to hers. "Can it just be enough for now? Open your mouth, Chloe. Let me in."

She sighed, shuddered, and parted her lips.

He groaned as her tongue stroked over hers. The taste of her—the minty toothpaste she liked, vanilla coffee and woman. Sweet, sweet woman. Chloe. It was her taste he'd missed, the same way he'd missed having her pressed against him at night, the same way he'd missed her odd, quirky questions and the way she'd left her silky, slinky lingerie draped over his bed in the morning. There was so much about her that he'd missed, things he hadn't let himself think about.

She squirmed against him and as the remaining blood drained from his head straight down to his cock, he growled and boosted up her so that she was perched on the wide, wooden riding of the balcony. Chloe tore her mouth away, staring at him with wide eyes as he gathered the folds of her skirt in his hands.

"Inside," she whispered, spiky lashes shielding her dark gaze.

Leo went to his knees in front of her. "In a minute," he muttered. This was one thing he'd been craving. The heat of her, watching her come apart as he touched her. Holding her as she came back down. Doing it all over again.

With the material of her skirt bunched over his hands and wrists, he knelt and pressed his mouth to the covered mound of her sex. She was slick, already wet. He used his tongue to stroke her through the material of her panties, caressing the hard nub of her clit with it. She whimpered, wiggled against it. "I'm...shit, Leo. Not up here, I'll fall," she groaned.

"I've got you," he muttered. "I won't let you fall." He crowded closer, guided one leg over his shoulder.

Chloe fisted her hands in his hair and swayed, her body teetering on the balcony railing.

Shifting, he moved until he could hook a finger in the material of her panties and drew it aside, baring the slick, wet slit of her pussy. Her clit was red and swollen. Leaning in, he blew a puff of air on it and grinned in hot, hungry satisfaction as she moaned his name. He bit her lightly and shifted his attention lower, using his tongue to trace her entrance.

Chloe's body tensed. As he slowly pushed his tongue inside her, he heard her breath catch. When he retreated and started to enter her a second time, her breath shuddered out of her in a rough, broken sigh.

The third time had her nails biting into the skin of his scalp and on the fourth, he stopped because he knew if he went any further, she'd come. He didn't want her coming until he had his dick buried inside that snug, sweet pussy.

She cried out, clutching his head, rocking against him.

"Please," she whimpered.

"No." He stood and hauled her against him. "You come when I'm inside you. When I've got my dick inside you." He pressed the heel of his hand against her mound as he stood, massaged her lightly, groaned as she shuddered and rocked against him. "Fuck, I've missed this...missed you. Have you missed me, baby?"

"Yes." Her eyes wide, all but black with hunger, she reached up, touched her fingers to his mouth. "Every single day."

"Good," he grunted. All but ripping the key out of his pocket, he opened the door, stormed inside the house and kicked it shut behind them, pivoting to press her against it.

He slanted his mouth over hers as he fought with the zipper of his jeans. She fumbled with his shirt and he swore, leaning back just long enough to tear it off before he resumed his battle with his zipper. Shit, had his fingers been this clumsy earlier? The zipper—had somebody used glue on it? Finally it gave and he shoved his pants and the boxer briefs he wore out of the way, and lifted Chloe in his arms.

He tucked the head of his cock against her entrance, shuddering at the silky wet feel of her.

And then he stopped, dropped his head forward, slammed it against the wooden wall just next to hers. "You got a condom in your purse?" he rasped.

She shook her head.

"Fuck." Pulling back, he eased his jeans up just enough and forced himself to take two steps back. Lifting a hand, he pointed at her. "Stay there."

She gave him a serious, somber stare, her hands pressed against the wall at her back.

Her skirt had fallen back into place, hiding the sweet, sweet delights of her body.

Tearing his eyes away, he headed for the bathroom. It had been a months since he'd been out here. He hadn't had a woman out here since Chloe, and damn it, he sure as hell hoped the box he had in the bathroom hadn't gone and expired.

Score. He snagged the box from the drawer and huffed out a sigh of relief as he read the date. Another year left. Pulling out the box, he counted. Eight. Shit. A couple of weeks with Chloe—eight rubbers. The math didn't add up, but at least he wouldn't be freezing his dick off in a cold shower tonight.

Tearing two of the rubbers off, he shoved one in his pocket and tore the other open.

Chloe was exactly where he'd left her, her eyes closed, her hands lying loose at her sides.

Her eyes opened as he came to a stop before her and she stared somberly into his eyes.

"Changed your mind?" he asked.

Part of her wanted to say yes. If she were wise...oh, man, if she were wise, Chloe would run away from this man as fast as she could, as far as she could. But this would happen. She knew it would. In her bones, in her gut.

In her heart.

Just as she knew he'd break her heart again before this was over. Chloe didn't believe in fighting the inevitable...at least not all the time. This, she certainly wasn't going to fight.

Holding his gaze, she reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it up, off. As it fell in a puddle by her feet, she reached for the waistband of her skirt and pushed it down. She stepped out of the cloth tangle, kicking it aside. But before she could remove her bra and panties, Leo was there, catching her wrists.

As he eased them to her side, she stared into his green eyes, felt her heart skip a beat.

Here...with him again.

Their gazes held and she felt the ache in her heart start to spread. Certain he'd see it, she looked away, stared at the condom he held. She reached for it, tugged the foil packet out of his hand. He eased his jeans down and this time, her heart didn't skip a beat—it banged against her ribs hard and fast.

The swollen, ruddy head of his cock had a fat, gleaming bead of moisture seeping from the top and unable to stop herself, she bent over, licked it off. "Fuck, Chloe..."

His hand tangled in her hair and he tugged. When she didn't come, he tugged harder, and as she stood, he shoved her up against the door...eyes half wild, his face harsh, stark with hunger.

Her breath froze in her lungs and her knees just about melted.

"Now, damn it," he muttered. He grabbed the rubber out of her hand and while she struggled to stay upright, he put it on.

When he looked back at her, his eyes glittered. The need there, the hunger, it matched her own. And there was...something else. Something she thought went deeper than hunger. Something she wanted to believe was emotion. She wanted to think he still cared, but that wasn't a road she was going to walk with him again.

She started to push her panties down but he fisted his hands in the fragile silk ties that held them at her hips and jerked. A split second later, the ruined silk drifted to her feet. He boosted her up into his arms and automatically, she wrapped her legs around him. The head of his cock slid against the slick flesh of her sex and she groaned, slammed her head back against the door.

He reached between them, adjusted...and a breath later, her eyes flew wide as he breached her entrance. Slowly. If there was any word to describe his possession, it would be...slow.

She was sweating, shaking, trembling, as he withdrew and slowly started to feed his length back into her, stopping just as she started to twist and rock against him.



"Damn it, Leo," she snarled, bracing her hands against his shoulders and using her body weight to ride him, working herself up and down. Hot, blistering satisfaction whipped through her, but then he shifted, caught her hands and slammed them into the wall, pinning them high overhead.

She shuddered and clenched around him. "You're killing me."

"No," he whispered, brushing his lips along the line of her jaw. "I'm loving you and you're trying to rush it."

Then he started that teasing torture all over again.

*Loving you...* Her heart almost broke. If the pleasure clawing through her body wasn't so intense, she just might have torn herself away, run away, and locked herself someplace where he couldn't find her, touch her...hurt her.

*Loving...*

"Chloe." He brushed his lips over her eyes and she realized she was crying. When he kissed her, she tasted the salt of her tears in his kiss. Her arms went around his neck. At some point, he'd released her hands.

She couldn't take this. Couldn't take the gentleness from him when he didn't really mean much of anything by it, but she wasn't strong enough to push him away.

"Stop it," she growled against his mouth. "Either fuck me and be done with it, or just walk away and I'll finish it myself."

But if she'd thought she'd piss him off, she was wrong.

He smiled, his lips curving against hers. "Do you think you can?" He trailed his fingers along the crease of her ass and murmured, "You're burning so hot, baby. When you're this hot, does the solo bit work?"

*Hell, no.*

He started to move, rocking against her with slow, easy grace, angled so the head of his cock rubbed against the nerve bed buried deep inside her sex. Her breath caught

inside her lungs, trapped there. Dark, brilliant bursts of light exploded behind her eyes and she tried to remind herself...*breathe...breathe*.

His teeth nipped her lower lip. "Stay....stay with me," he muttered. "This isn't done," he rasped.

The orgasm pushed closer. Closer.

Leo slowed the rhythm of his thrusts until he barely moved inside her. Slowly, slowly.

Keening out his name, she raked her nails down his shoulders, struggling to breathe.

He pressed the tip of his finger against her anus and pushed. "So fucking hot," he muttered against her neck. "I missed your heat...missed you."

He pushed the tip of his finger inside the snug heat of her ass and said something else, but it was lost as she shuddered and started to come.

Eyes unseeing, she sobbed out his name on a broken sigh and twisted in his arms, riding the thick ridge of his cock and the invasion of his finger as it slowly, skillfully twisted in her bottom.

Leo gritted his teeth, bit the inside of his cheek, even tried mentally reciting the states and their capitals. Halfway through, at North Dakota, his mind went blank and once more, he was lost, mindless, wanted nothing more than to plunge and drive himself into the wet, silken depths of Chloe's pussy.

But not yet. Not yet.

Shoving away from the door, swearing as her weight pressed harder on his aching dick, he strode toward the cabin's master bedroom. She was still shuddering, shaking as he spread her out on the bed, her eyes half-closed, lips parted, a rosy flush tinting her entire, dusky body.

His dick protested as he pulled away. Gritting his teeth, he sucked in a deep breath and focused, then crouched by the bed and rummaged through the drawer in the nightstand.

Somewhere, somehow, without even realizing it, he'd come to a decision.

He wasn't done with Chloe.

He didn't feel complete without her, didn't feel whole.

She was his heart and he'd been incomplete these past three years.

He knew he still mattered to her. He could see it in her eyes, in the careful way she tried to keep him at a distance. So what he was going to do was spend the next couple of weeks convincing her that what they could have together was more important than whatever crazy reasons she had for this psychic bit she had going.

He would remind her how good it had been between them.

Starting now. Tonight.

Buried in the back of the drawer was a bottle of lubricant. He pulled it out and returned to crouch on the bed next to her, easing her over onto her belly. Her body tensed as he trailed a hand down her spine, lingering at the subtle swell of her hips. Stretching his body out on hers, he kept the bulk of his weight on his elbows. Nuzzling the sensitive spot between her shoulder blades, he whispered, "I love touching you. I'd find myself thinking you, about all the little places you liked to be touched...how you liked to be touched."

This was one of those ways. As he stroked his palm down her side, she reached up and closed a hand over his wrist. "Leo..."

Rising just a little, he started to rock, pumping his still-aching cock against the cleft of her ass. "Should I stop?" Everything inside him resisted the thought.

Her body tensed and he closed a hand into a fist, silently screaming. But then she started to move, gliding against him...rocking as much as she could, trapped between his weight and the mattress.

Sweat gleamed on their bodies.

She shifted and wiggled up, managed to maneuver her weight to her knees and cant her hips to an angle. Leo swore and grabbed the bottle of lubricant. He focused on that task, giving it a hell of a lot more attention than it needed, because if he looked at her for another second, he was going to shatter.

After he'd slicked his latex-sheathed cock with the lubricant, he squeezed more into his palm and leaned over her. She tensed as he pressed his finger to the tight, puckered entrance of her ass.

"Shhh," he murmured. As he started to push inside, she pressed down, groaning as he eased in, working more and more of the lubricant inside to ease his way.

"Leo..."

Her voice—so husky, so familiar—danced along his nerves. Part of him had to wonder, for just a second—*am I dreaming?* He'd dreamed this a hundred times, a thousand. Ever since he'd been stupid enough to walk away.

No. Not this time.

Tossing the bottle down, he hunkered over her, one hand steadying his cock, the other braced low on her spine. As he pressed the head of his cock against her, she shuddered and arched her back. The graceful line bowed down to the mattress. Bending over her, he pressed a kiss to her back and then straightened, slowly started to press forward.

Tears burned in her eyes.

The promise of pain danced just beyond reach, lessened only by the pleasure that already swamped her. Groaning, Chloe reached down, stroked her fingers over her clit, circling it with fast, hard strokes.

Leo eased the slow, but thorough invasion of her body and started his retreat...one that was every bit as devastating and slow. Her breath squeezed out of her lungs as he

started the process all over again, this time pushing deeper, past the tight, reluctant tissues of her body.

Too long, too long...

"Fuck, Chloe. You're so tight," Leo muttered. "So tight, so hot."

He pushed deeper, deeper.

She shuddered and twisted, fighting the slow impalement even as she craved more.

"Be still," he pleaded.

"I can't." She arched her back and pushed down, taking him deeper. A pained, hungry cry fell from her mouth.

His fingers tightened on her hips, holding her still. "Damn it, Chloe..."

She flexed the muscles in her ass, gripping him. Milking him.

Leo swore. Two seconds later, she was pressed flat against the mattress, pinned between it and his body as he started to ride her. She had no leverage, and she couldn't take him as deeply, but there was something painfully, unbearably erotic in it...something that stole her breath away, literally. A silent scream ripped out of her and she reached up, closed her hand around his wrist, her nails biting into his skin.

"Mine," he muttered against her neck. "I fucking missed you, Chloe. I swear, seeing you hit like a fist. Mine..."

His other hand caught hers, stretched it over her hand and his body crushed into hers. Skin to skin, they touched, from nearly head to toe. The snug, tight glove of her ass clung to his cock as he rode her. His chest crushed against her back, his legs were between hers, keeping them open for his invasion.

Close...nearly as close as they could be without disappearing inside each other, and yet it wasn't enough. Twisting around, she stared at him from the corner of her eye. "Need to see you," she whispered.

He stilled.

And then pulled away, shifted her around until she lay splayed beneath him. Tucking her hips high against his, he pressed the head of his cock once more into the swollen, sensitive entrance of her ass. And this time, as he took her, pushing deep, deep, deep, their gazes locked and held.

Bright, vivid green on dark, dark brown.

When she tensed, he guided her hand between them. "Touch yourself," he said quietly. "Let me see you play with that pretty little pussy...and gimme a taste."

She blushed pink. And then, as he requested, stroked her fingers in and out of her sex, then lifted them to his mouth. He licked them clean.

Then he dipped his head and kissed her, bringing the taste of her to their kiss.

The change in position drove him deeper, too deep almost and she gasped, tensing. He worked a hand under her ass, lifting her slightly. She shuddered and as he began to stroke in and out, in that slow, lazy rhythm, the pained pleasure began to blur into nothing but pleasure. Pleasure that burned so hot, it quickly stole her breath. She choked out his name in a moan and clenched down on him, involuntarily squeezing and milking the thick pillar of flesh.

Leo snarled her name, drove into her and then froze, swearing. "Fuck...I'm sorry..."

"Don't stop!" she cried. *Please don't!*

It hurt, but the pleasure...fuck, it made her feel alive again. Alive, full of him. Surrounded by him. Whimpering, she clenched down around him a second, third time.

The orgasm tore through her, stealing her breath. Darkness loomed around her, above her. She felt Leo stiffen. Through her lashes, she saw the grimace twist his face, watched his green eyes darken to emerald. A sexy snarl twisted his lips and then, deep inside, she felt his cock jerk, then the heated rush of semen, trapped by the latex condom.

Waves of pleasure swamped her, leveled her. It rolled through her, and as the darkness edged closer and closer, a faint, happy smile curled her lips.

This wouldn't last, but for now, she felt...complete.

## Chapter Four

*Fuck.*

Completely, utterly wiped out, Leo lay sprawled on the bed, his head resting on Chloe's belly.

She was out like a light.

A snort escaped him and he eased away, rolled onto his back.

It wasn't anything new, which was why he hadn't come when they were out there, why he hadn't pushed her as hard until now. During their time together, one thing he had discovered about Chloe—very often, good, hard sex could put her under. It could knock her out like a light, almost unconscious.

Amused despite himself, he pushed up onto his elbow and pressed a kiss to her hip. "Good thing I didn't want to talk about our relationship just yet, baby," he murmured.

He didn't concern himself with waking her. He knew she wouldn't wake. Once she was out, she'd sleep like the dead.

The dead—a chill raced down his spine and he could have kicked himself. No, he wasn't completely convinced there was some huge threat to Chloe's safety and he trusted his instincts. If something was off, he would know.

But still, he was here on assignment. He was supposed to be protecting her and he'd spent the past—he glanced at the clock on the table near the bed. Shit. He'd spent the past hour horizontal—and upright—naked with Chloe.

Swearing, he scrubbed a hand down his face and headed back into the bathroom to dispose of the rubber. He needed to check in, see if Dave was ready to divulge anything yet. Then he needed a shower. Then he was going to see if he couldn't dig around and find out something on his own while Chloe catnapped.



But first things first. Make sure the house was secure, since he'd already screwed up the first bit of this protection job.

He snagged his jeans and shoes, and with his Glock in hand, he did a quick walk around the house, checked the windows, the doors. Everything was nice and secure. Once back inside, he put in a quick call to Dave. That was about as fruitful as banging his head against a brick wall.

"If I didn't tell you anything earlier, what makes you think I'd do it now?" Dave bit off. "Look, I've got my hands full. Try to charm it out of Chloe. You do remember charm, right?"

Then the bastard hung up.

While it pissed Leo off, it didn't surprise him.

Charm. By charm, do you mean fuck senseless?

Swearing, he plugged the iPhone in to charge on his desktop and then he went to the shower. Almost loath to wash the scent of her, the memory of the smell of her skin away, he climbed in and made quick work of it.

If he had the timing down, he should have a good thirty minutes before Chloe woke.

A soft whimper came from the bedroom. Followed by another.

Concerned, he slipped into the room and found Chloe tangled in the sheets, struggling. A frown marred the smooth line of her brow and as he watched, she whispered, "No...Kia. No."

A tear slipped from under her lashes and one hand, clenched into a fist and thrust out to the side. She rolled over, curled into a ball, and started to shake, silent sobs racking her sleeping body.

*Shit.*

Leo moved to the bed, slipped in behind her and wrapped her in his arms. Stroking a hand up her arm, he pressed his lips to her neck. "Chloe. Wake up. It's just a dream."

Vaguely, she heard his voice. But it was distant.

And this was more than a dream.

She had to see it through to the end, otherwise, she had no chance at helping. The tears pricking at her eyes, clogging her throat, couldn't matter and the pain in her heart, that couldn't matter.

Kia's dead body couldn't matter either. Not right now. She had to focus on seeing as much as she could – the where, the who.

The who kept escaping her. Keith Hoffner wanted to listen to her, wanted to believe her, but he needed answers before he could do much more. The corruption problem running through the foster-child system was bad, very bad and they both wanted to fix it, but without names...

She was prattling on, and she knew it, but it kept her focused as she moved through the house. Kia's killer was still there.

Searching. Looking for clues.

Clues that didn't exist – not like that. All the proof was inside her head, for now. She didn't have the proof they needed, not like that.

But she could.

All she needed was a face, a name. Something. Then she could get a deeper connection and figure how to get proof.

There.

There was a shadow ahead.

In Kia's room.

Going through her things.

Bastard.

She wanted to hit him. Attack him.

But she wasn't really there.

Not in dreams, not in reality even, because this hadn't yet happened.

He stood in front of the mirror, and all he had to do was lift his head.

All he had to do...

But he didn't.

In the back of her mind, Leo's voice was getting louder, more persistent, dragging her back to reality.

Chloe tried to cling to the dream. She couldn't wake yet. Needed to stay there, needed to...

She came awake with a shuddering sob, but if he expected her to cling to him, he was dead wrong. With tears still shimmering in her eyes and her voice thick with tears, Chloe shoved at him. "Damn it, what are you doing?"

"Trying to get you to wake up," he said, pulling her back against him. Or trying to—she fought like a pissed-off wildcat. "You've been having a nightmare."

She stiffened her arms and pushed away from him. "It wasn't a nightmare." She rolled out of bed and stood. She swayed on her feet and for a second, he thought she might fall back to the bed.

But she steadied and then headed out of the bedroom, making her way into the living room. He found her rooting through her purse, and after another five seconds, she upended it. She grabbed a small black cell phone and punched in a number.

Scowling, he leaned against the door and folded his arms across his chest.

She glanced at him and frowned.

He heard the tinny sound of another voice on the cell and Chloe said, "It's me. Hold on a minute."

She didn't say anything else as she made her way past him to the bathroom. It only took him a split second to figure out what she was going to do and he slammed the flat

of his hand against the door just before she would have shut it in his face. "Don't even think about it," he warned.

Her eyes narrowed. "This is personal."

"Don't give a damn. I'm supposed to be watching out for that pretty neck of yours."

"I'm not planning to make a run for the border," she snapped.

"Then there's no reason you can't have the discussion out here." He rested a shoulder against the door.

Her face was whiter than death as she stared at him. She edged past him and started to talk into the phone. "Kia, can you take some vacation time?"

Nakia...her friend.

Scowling, he watched as she went back to her bags, opened one of the suitcases and dug around until she had some jeans and a top. Keeping her back to him and her voice low as she spoke quietly, quickly. She got dressed as she talked, pulling jeans up over her narrow hips, then a plain black T-shirt that hung too loosely on her slender frame.

He caught only every few words of her hushed conversation—one that didn't make a whole lot of sense.

"You want me to run," Nakia asked, her voice disgusted.

"I want you safe." Chloe swallowed the knot in her throat and wished she wasn't stuck there, trapped with Leo brooding all over her.

She needed to be home. Kia was in danger now. Her worst nightmare coming true. How had they tracked her back to Kia? She'd been so careful.

"You don't know I'm in any trouble," Nakia said reasonably. "When they come to you in dreams, it's not always as reliable as when you're awake. Your dreams are less than fifty/fifty and you know that. This could just be a nightmare."

"Fifty/fifty is still too high a chance to take with my best friend."

"I'm not running away from my home," Nakia said. "I don't run away, especially when we don't even know if there's a reason to run. Give me a concrete reason and maybe I'll think about it. But right now, you're just scared. You're spooked —"

"And you're being stupid," Chloe snapped.

Nakia huffed out a sigh. "Look, I'll be careful. Maybe I'll call up D'Shaun, see if he wants to hang with me at night for a while. It's not like I'm that easy to take down anyway."

She was arguing with a wall, Chloe decided. An obstinate, unyielding brick wall. Five minutes later, she disconnected but instead of putting the phone away, she called Dave.

Since it was edging up on eight, she didn't bother trying to reach him at the office. She called his cell. It was little surprise that he sounded somewhat aggravated. "I'm not sending somebody else, Chloe. You're stuck with Leo. You two might as well take the time and work your mess out," he warned her.

"Fuck Leo," she snapped. Then she blushed to the roots of her hair. She'd already done that. Shooting a glance at him, she edged as far away from him as she could and said, "Dave, I need a favor."

"Sure. Whatever you want. Just tell me something, anything, that will help me do my job."

She shoved a hand through her hair and spun around, barely resisted the urge to hurl the phone across the room. "Damn it, I gave my word, Dave. I realize you all think I'm a flaky, flighty fraud and that my word isn't worth jackshit, but it means something to me."

She jerked her gaze up and found Leo staring at her, his green eyes glittering, bright.

On the other end of the phone, Dave sighed. "Damn it, Chloe. You know me better than that, but is your word worth more than your life? And what the hell does Hoffner think I'm going to do, sky-write it?"

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

"You have to do something about Kia. I think she's in trouble, but she won't leave her home unless I'm certain. But I can't say I'm certain." She turned away from Leo. She couldn't take looking at him right now—she knew she'd see that disgust, that disappointment in his eyes again. Very shortly, probably.

And she still ached from him, could almost feel his body moving against hers. Tears stung her eyes, clogged her throat. *Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.*

Reaching up, she rubbed the back of her neck. "Just tell me you can do something about Kia, Dave and I'll...I'll tell you something. I don't know just what, but I'll give you something."

"Before you get off the phone."

"Yeah."

Dave sighed. "I'll go talk to her. Maybe I can talk her into coming to my place for a few days. Would that work? She's a nurse, right? She's going to have pretty good security at the hospital, and the few times I met her, she struck me as a pretty self-aware person. If we just change her schedule up some and have her elsewhere at nights..."

The fist around Chloe's heart eased. In her dream, Kia had died because she'd been home when the intruder went looking for some nonexistent proof. If Kia wasn't home, she wouldn't die.

"Yeah." Chloe nodded. "That will work."

"Okay, then. But I can't make her. You understand that."

With a tired laugh, Chloe muttered, "Yeah, I know. Just tell her it's for me. And if she tries to touch you, let her. If she gets any idea how scared I am, how worried I am, she's more likely to be smart."

Then she took a deep breath. "Hoffner's investigating some weird shit going on within the family courts. Involves the judges, the attorneys, some foster families—all of it."

“Foster families?” The skepticism in his voice was thick, heavy.

“Specifically problem children. There’s some sick shit going on, Dave. It has to do with a rehab center and kickbacks. Mostly troubled kids getting sent there and people getting money for it. I don’t think any of them meant for anybody to get hurt, but one of the foster dads was a fucking pervert—raped a girl, abused her. She was fourteen and for two months, he raped her. She kept trying to get somebody to believe her and they wouldn’t. She ran away from home and when they picked her up, she got violent and she was sent to this rehab place, this ‘center for troubled teens’ so she could get help. While she was there, she killed herself. Managed to get hold of a knife. And nobody fucking knows, nobody will know unless—”

She stopped talking, too keenly aware of Leo’s eyes boring a hole in the back of her neck.

“Unless what, Chloe?” Dave prodded.

She bit the inside of her lip. If she told Dave this part, Hoffner would know she’d told. If Dave let it slip, because Hoffner was the only one she’d told.

“There are DVDs,” she said quietly. “He recorded it. He keeps them locked inside a toolbox in his garage. They’re taped to the underside of the tray on the inside. He’s got a classic red Mustang in there. I can’t see the entire plate, but it’s one of the conservation plates—the one with the eagle and the flag.” She closed her eyes and pulled up the mental image of the plates, the one she’d glimpsed in a reflection. Reciting the numbers and letters she’d seen, she opened her eyes and sighed. “That’s all I’ve got. No name for him. I can’t see him very well either. The girl, she only saw him as a monster.”

The air in the room felt cold, tight and harsh. The echo of Leo’s anger. She’d known this would happen, but what could she do?

*Exactly what I did*, she told herself. It would come with costs, but what else was new? Shivering, she focused on the phone, on Dave. He believed her. It wasn’t the same. It wasn’t enough. She wanted Leo to have that kind of faith in her and he never would.

Still, Dave's faith in her, it was something to hold on to. "Will it help?"

"It's enough for me to start poking around," Dave said. Then he sighed. "Leo heard all of this, didn't he?"

"Yes. But it doesn't matter."

"Yeah, it does. Shit, Chloe. I'm sorry."

She swallowed. "Don't be. Nothing's changed."

Sex between them hadn't changed a thing. Neither had the distance between them for the past three years. Nothing had changed...not a single thing.

She still loved him. And he still thought she was a fake.

"Take care of Kia for me," she said quietly.

Then, before he could say anything else, she disconnected. Tucking the phone into the front pocket of her jeans, she turned around and headed toward the kitchen. She was exhausted, but she knew she wouldn't get any more sleep tonight. What she needed more than anything was coffee. Some whiskey would be nice, but she had to have the coffee.

Coffee and a dark, quiet room where she could lick her wounds and try to heal.

Or maybe the ability to rewind time and undo the last four years of her life, undo the day she'd met Leo. Convince her younger self to turn the other way when first she saw him. Save herself the heartache.

As she started the coffee, she heard him come into the kitchen behind her, but she didn't turn around and look at him until she was done with the task. She didn't want to look at him until she had to. Never would be ideal, but that wasn't an option.

Slowly, she turned toward him, an eyebrow lifted in expectation.

He said nothing, watching her. His eyes all but burned. She could feel the heat of his anger and she wanted to cringe away, hide. At the same time, she wanted to haul off and punch him square in the nose.

*The bastard. The damn bastard.*



The pot of coffee was halfway done before he finally spoke.

"You going to tell me what that was about?"

Chloe jerked a shoulder in a restless shrug. "What's the point? It doesn't involve this part of the job. It's not my neck that's in trouble. Dave's going to handle it. All you're supposed to do is babysit my lying, charlatan ass, right?"

She curled her lip and turned away. He came up to stand behind her, rested a hand on her shoulder to try to get her to turn around. She resisted for a few seconds, then finally turned, blanking her expression. She'd be damned if she let him see how much he'd hurt her.

Again. She'd let him do this to her again.

Sighing, he cupped her cheek, rubbing his thumb over her lower lip. "Chloe, you've got to see how much trouble this kind of shit is causing you. You need to stop before it ends up getting you killed."

"I'll keep that in mind." Then she knocked his hand aside and turned back to her coffee. She needed that coffee. Like she needed air. Something to clear the haze from her brain, then she was going to shower and wash the smell of Leo off her body and...

His arms came around her, his hands resting on the counter on either side of her body. "I mean it," he muttered, nuzzling her neck. "I spent the past three years telling myself I didn't give a damn about you, but all it took was one look at you to realize I was fooling myself. I do give a damn. I'm still half in love with you and I'm sick inside thinking about the mess you're in over this crap. You can't keep doing this."

Her heart banged against her ribs. Her hands shook so hard and she stared at the carafe of coffee through tear-drenched eyes. *I'm still half in love with you.*

Keeping her voice flat, she said, "You don't love me. You aren't half in love with me. You weren't in love with me at all. You were in love with the image of the woman you thought I was, but that woman wasn't ever me. You can't love me, because you don't know me."

"Don't I?" He leaned against her, burying his face in her hair.

She shuddered as he curled his hands on her waist, stroking them up until he could cup her breasts through the thin, nubby material of her T-shirt. "I think I used to know you pretty damn well." He pinched her nipples tightly and in reflex, she arched up, shuddering.

Then she jerked away, recoiling. She shoved back against him and said, "Damn it, Leo, let me go."

"Did that once," he murmured. He braced her weight with his arm around her waist. The other, he dipped inside her jeans then pushed two fingers inside her aching pussy, stroking slick, swollen flesh. "I don't want to do that again. We can make this work, Chloe. You just have to stop this crap of yours."

Crap. She had to stop this crap.

Her body all but quaked, all but shuddered from his touch, but her mind took control, and she was able to tear herself away, stumbling over to lean against the counter. Glaring at him, she sucked in a desperate breath and adjusted her clothing. "Knowing what turns me on isn't knowing me," she said, her voice harsh, rough. "You don't know me. You don't trust me. You don't respect me. How the *hell* can you love me?"

His eyes on hers, he came closer, catching her face in his hands. He pressed a soft, gentle kiss to her mouth. "We all get involved in crazy shit, Chloe. You just fell in over your head. How I can I not love you? You've got the softest, sweetest heart of anybody I've ever met."

She couldn't help but notice how he didn't address the issues of trust...respect.

*Bastard.* Incensed, she stood still as he pressed his mouth against her neck. She had rules she followed. Her own personal guidebook.

She wasn't the only psychic in the world, not by far. Psychic skill wasn't much more than refined instinct, as far as she was concerned, and somebody with stronger psychic skills just meant they would be more skilled than others. Not all of them were going to

operate with any sort of moral compass, but despite Leo's bottom-feeder opinion of her, she'd been raised by people who understood right from wrong, and they made sure she did too.

She didn't like to intrude on others, and the few times she had, it had been sheer accident, or she'd felt it was necessary.

She didn't like to use her gift to hurt anybody. And as a rule, she didn't show off. But she'd had it.

Reaching up, she cupped Leo's face in her hands and shoved deep, forcing past the strong natural shields he had.

Many people didn't have natural shields. She kept a barrier up, thick and strong, to block out the outside stimuli that would have driven her insane—the random thoughts that whirled through the air like a thousand radio frequencies blasting on high.

That wasn't the case with Leo. Dave either. People like them were easier for her to be around because they were so self-contained. Those natural barriers kept her from hearing their every last thought.

But they couldn't keep her out if she wanted in. Right now, she wanted in and his natural shields gave under the press of her mind.

And he felt it.

She saw it echoed on his face, felt his instinctive flinch. He started to jerk her hands away, but shock, or something else wouldn't let him.

"Who was your first lover, Leo?" The name leaped into his mind and it flamed through hers like neon. Giving him a cool smile, she said, "Her name was Lisa Baldrick."

The two of them sagged to the floor, but she didn't break the connection with him.

"How old were you...oh, you were a bad boy...fourteen."

"Stop it," he panted, trying to jerk away, but he wasn't able to physically move. It was as if he couldn't. Shock, probably, kept him frozen. She wasn't done with him yet, anyway.

She remembered the pain, the humiliation, the heartbreak as he'd called her a liar, a fraud, a fake, three years ago.

"Other than me, who was the last woman you slept with?"

Another name danced through his mind, but he was fighting her now, and the name wasn't quite so clear. She caught it though. "Andrea Durbin, three months ago, Mardi Gras party." Then she smirked. "And you didn't get off...poor guy. At least you were a gentlemen and made sure she got off. That was nice of you."

Something else started to shimmer through his mind, but before she could grasp it, he tore himself away and shoved to his feet. Glaring at her, his eyes dark and stormy, he stood five feet away. "What the fuck..."

Chloe rose, smoothing her shirt down as she leaned back against the counter. "I was never a fake. I was never a charlatan. I never once lied to you and I'm getting damn sick and tired of you making me feel like shit just because your small mind can't comprehend something it doesn't see in black and white. There are shades of gray in this world, Leo and not everything is as it seems. You need to get that through your thick skull."

She closed her eyes and dragged in a breath of air through her nose. "You can't see air. But we feel it. We know it's there. Psychic ability has been tested, documented, and not all of those tests were done by quacks. Some were done by very well-respected institutions. You don't want to believe in what I can do, that's fine."

Then she opened her eyes and glared at him. "Nobody said you had to believe me. But don't look at me and say you love me, and then call what I do crap, Leo. Don't stand there and claim to want to have some sort of life with me, but insinuate my entire life is built on lies. There is no way in hell I could build a life with a man who doesn't trust me, doesn't respect me."

Unable to look at him another second, she slipped out of the kitchen to the small second bedroom. She locked the door behind her, although she doubted he'd come looking for her.

With her heart shattering inside her chest, she curled up in the middle of the bed. Blindly, she snagged the extra quilt off the bottom and pulled it to her chin.

Then she closed her eyes.

She wouldn't sleep.

But she couldn't stay out there and look at him, either.

## **Chapter Five**

"You've what?"

"I've been using her off and on for nearly three years," Dave repeated.

"And why hadn't I heard of this?"

"Because it didn't concern you?"

Leo swallowed, his throat tight, gritty and dry. His head ached like a bitch and he'd swear he could still feel her, rummaging around in his head the same way she'd rummaged around through her purse earlier. Wiggling her fingers through the gray matter, almost.

He couldn't deny what he'd felt.

Just as he couldn't deny how easily she'd plucked those bits of knowledge out of his head.

It was real. It was for real.

Which meant she was for real.

And fuck, that meant he'd screwed up so very, very royally.

Twice. Three years ago, and today.

Rubbing the heel of his hand over his heart, he shot a look at the closed bedroom door and then focused again on the conversation. "What exactly was she talking to you about? What are you taking care of?"

"Not sure yet. Still looking into it, but it might be the man who is responsible for a missing teen. I'm heading over to his place now. Have an address. Might be practicing my shoddy B&E skills."

Leo grimaced. "Heading where? And why are you breaking and entering? Isn't the DA looking into this?"

"Yes. But I've just got a weird feeling about this mess. I don't like it. Just don't like it."

"And you think breaking some laws is going to improve things how?" Leo leaned against the counter, still staring at the door. He needed to go in there. Talk to Chloe. But what the hell was he supposed to say? He didn't know at all.

*I'm sorry. Didn't quite seem to cut it. I'm sorry, but please don't ever do that again.*

He was more than a little freaked out by the fact that she had been able to pluck personal information out of his mind that easily.

Had she done that often? Even as that thought came, he pushed aside. No. That wasn't like her.

"Earth to Leo."

Swearing, he shoved a hand through his hair and said, "Sorry. Distracted."

"Kicking yourself yet?" Dave asked.

Kicking himself...yeah. "Shut the fuck up. Let me know if you find anything out and if I'm supposed to do much of anything else."

"All you're doing right now is staying put. And if anybody but me tries to find out where Chloe is, don't let her tell them. And I mean anybody." With that, Dave hung up the phone.

Left with nothing else to distract himself, Leo shoved off the counter and went to stand in front of the door to Chloe's room.

*Shit.*

*Shit.*

*Shit.*

He shoved his hands in his pockets and thought back to the day when everything had fallen apart on them. No. Everything hadn't fallen apart—he'd destroyed it. He had to face that, accept it.

He reached to open the door but at the last second, he stopped. He needed to figure out what he was going to say. Needed to plan it out. He needed to apologize. For then and for now. And he needed to figure out how he felt about her. He had feelings for her...but did she still have...

"Oh, fuck this," he muttered, and before he could let himself think about it again, he grasped the doorknob.

It was locked.

Setting his jaw, he knocked.

Nothing.

He knocked again.

When a third knock didn't do any good, he went to his jacket and got a small leather pouch from the inside pocket. Apparently today was a day for jimmying locks, although at least Leo didn't have to worry about getting in trouble in his own home. There were definitely some ethical questions at work, but seeing as how he'd already stomped all over her pride and probably destroyed any chance at rebuilding their relationship, how much more could he damage things with this?

The door was unlocked and open in under thirty seconds.

Standing in the doorway, he stared into the darkened room. A wedge of light fell on Chloe's small form. She lay so still, for a minute, he thought she slept. But then he realized her eyes were wide open.

She stared straight ahead and even when he came around to kneel in front of her, she didn't look up at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice tight, hoarse.

She didn't say anything.

Reaching out, he skimmed the back of his knuckles down her cheek. "Chloe, look at me."

She just closed her eyes.



"Fuck," he muttered. Reaching up, he rubbed the back of his neck, stared at the plain wooden boards beneath him. *Just leave her alone. I've done enough.*

But he'd walked away from her three years ago, and it had damn near killed him. Nobody had come close to replacing her. Shit, the one and only time he'd tried to find another woman, it had been such a sorry, sad joke that he hadn't even wanted to orgasm. He could have, but it...felt empty.

Did she know that? Had she looked that deep? She'd had access to the memory of the time, but had she gone any deeper or just stopped once she had the information she needed? He didn't know.

He couldn't stand the thought of living the rest of his life feeling so damn empty. Didn't want to think about living this half-existence, and that's what it had been.

He'd been trying to convince himself he was still having trust issues, or just wasn't ready to get back in the game again, but that wasn't it.

It was all about Chloe—everything came back to her. He only wanted her. Nobody else was going to work for him. The one woman he wanted, he'd pushed away.

He wanted the life he'd had with Chloe. Before he screwed things up.

He couldn't have that if he walked away. Setting his jaw, he slid into bed next to her.

Her eyes flew open.

Finally, some kind of reaction. Stretching out on the bed next to her, he caught one of her hands.

She jerked away. "Leave me alone," she said, her voice low and cold.

"I can't." Stroking his thumb over the inside of her wrist, he murmured, "I just can't."

"Sure you can. You did a pretty good job of it for three years. Just keep doing it." She tried to pull away, but he wasn't about to let go.

"I was miserable for those three years." Lifting her wrist to his mouth, he pressed a kiss to the soft, delicate skin, then started to work his way up, lightly raking the heel of her palm with his teeth before moving on to stroke his tongue over her fingers. "Miserable, and I even knew why, though I was looking at it wrong. I wanted you back."

"Why? I'm a fake and a liar, remember?"

"I'm sorry," Leo said again. "I can't say it any more clearly than that. I was wrong, and I fucked up. I wasn't fair to you, and I get that."

"Fine." Her voice was hollow, and though the room was dim, he could see the tears in her dark eyes. "You get it. Apology accepted. Now leave me the hell alone."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can." She swallowed and the tears in her eyes spilled free. "It's easy. Just get off the bed, walk out of the room and shut the door."

His heart cracked a little as her voice broke. Wiping the tears away, he said, "I'm not walking away again. I'm not. I was an idiot to do it the first time. I'm not doing it again."

"Fine." She sat up and rolled off the bed. "It should be my turn this time anyway. I'll walk."

He caught up with her before she got to the door. Caging her in, he said, "That easy? You're going to be done with us that easy?"

"Why not? You were." Her brown eyes flashed fire at him.

"Yeah, and I was an idiot. One who made us both miserable." He cupped her cheek in his hand. "And we were, weren't we? Both of us miserable?" Stroking his thumb over her lower lip, he held her gaze.

She didn't answer.

"Talk to me, Chloe."

"Why?" She turned her head to the side and closed her eyes. "What good will it do? You didn't trust me then. I didn't matter enough for you to give me half a chance. You didn't care enough to believe in me. You just walked. I'm not going to go through that again."

"You mattered." Catching her face, he guided her gaze back to his and forced her to look at him. "You have no idea how much you mattered. You just handed me something I wasn't prepared to deal with...and I didn't deal well." Then he forced a smile. "Besides, can't you tell how much you did or didn't matter?"

"No." She folded her arms over her chest, curling in on herself. "I have rules I follow. I don't look. Sometimes stuff just shows up in my head and I can't stop that, but I don't go looking just to satisfy my curiosity. It's not fair."

"Then do it now." He laid her hand against his cheek, nuzzled her palm.

"I don't want to." She pulled her hand away and moved back to the bed, sitting down. "I can't do this, Leo. Not right now. It hurts too much and I need to focus, need to think, need to be ready."

"Ready for what?"

Her only response was silence.

"Chloe..."

"Not right now," she snapped. She drew her knees to her chest and pressed her face against them. "Leave me alone, okay? Just leave me alone."

"I can't." Walking away from her would be like cutting off his arm. He couldn't do it—he couldn't.

She lifted her eyes to his, stared at him. "Damn you," she muttered. She stood and took a step toward the door. On the second step, she swayed, staggered.

He caught her in his arms and when he touched her skin, it was cold. Her gaze met his and her eyes were glassy.

"Chloe."

“No...”

A chill raced down his spine. Without asking, he knew that she wasn't seeing him, wasn't hearing him.

## Chapter Six

The images in her mind weren't entirely clear. The vision had come on hard and fast. Underdeveloped images, they blurred together, surreal and indistinct. Distantly, she knew Leo was there, sitting close, his body warm against the chill of hers. Part of her was even thankful for his warmth, although she wanted desperately to be away from him.

Even now, even here, she ached.

*Don't think about him...you can't think about him...focus...focus... Have to...focus. No choice –*

Abruptly, the picture before her solidified. Cleared. She was jerked inside.

Kia. Her stomach sank to her knees and her heart turned to ice. And Dave.

Everything was clear—almost too clear. Crystalline. She couldn't see Kia, but she felt her. It wasn't until she moved that she realized why she couldn't see her. Chloe was inside Kia, looking out through her eyes.

*Damn it, Kia...*

She felt a rush of reassuring warmth, underscored by Kia's fear. The woman was aware of Chloe's presence—all too aware. And she was afraid, but not blinded by it.

Dave was across the room. In one hand, he held a small stack of discs, rubber-banded together.

That was when Chloe became sickeningly aware of a new sensation. Kia had a gun pressed to her brow.

"You can't kill both of us. Not that many people know about this," Dave said, keeping his voice reasonable. "You'll be one of the first suspects."

Who...?

But even before the man spoke, Chloe knew.

Kia shifted and as she did so, she glanced down, looking at the glass coffee table. Chloe was able to look through Kia's eyes and see the reflection of the man holding a gun on her friend.

It was Keith Hoffner. The man she'd gone to for help.

Hot, burning rage tore through her.

It lasted forever—damn near an hour. Leo timed it. Almost fifty minutes passed before Chloe made another sound, before she moved a muscle.

When she abruptly tore herself away from him with a soft cry, it damn near stopped his heart.

When she turned to face him, tears and rage glowed in her eyes. She swallowed. "He has Dave and Kia. He's holding a gun on them. Right now."

Then she stared at him, naked desperation on her face. "It's the DA. It's Keith Hoffner. What the hell are we supposed to do?"

It never occurred to him to doubt her, never occurred to him to question her.

Plans leaped into his head, and one by one, he discarded most of them, almost right away.

The DA would see through most of them.

But there was one...

Being a skeptical hard-ass was going to play in his favor this time, Leo told himself as he listened to the phone ring.

He told Chloe to stay in her room then walked outside, under the trees. He'd been to his cabin enough to know where the cell reception was shitty, and where it was pretty decent. He was just on the edge of the shitty zone.

The phone rang. And rang.

And rang.

He hung up. Started all over again.

This was the fourth time he'd called in the past five minutes. Finally Dave answered, his voice taut and heavy with tension.

He was also on speaker, Leo recognized that right away. Not even giving his friend a chance to say a damn thing, he said, "Damn it, Dave, there is no way you can expect me to spend two weeks with that quack. I've had it, buddy. I'm done."

For a few seconds, there was no answer.

Then Dave said, "What do you mean you're done, Leo? You're on assignment. You're supposed to be taking care of Chloe Perkins—you don't have to like her to do that."

"She doesn't need a fucking bodyguard, she needs a mental evaluation. The bitch thinks she's psychic. She keeps walking around the house whining and wailing about something being wrong, but she can't see what's wrong. She's driving me nuts, man. I'm done."

"Damn it, Leo, I thought we'd—"

There was a weird, muffled grunt but Leo pretended not to hear. "We didn't agree to anything. You stuck me with a crazy woman. Look, I've got some other contacts. People who owe me a favor. I'll get one of them to watch her. Or hell, you watch her. I've got her up at my cabin. You get your ass up there and you keep an eye on her."

Dave's voice, when he spoke again, had a weird note. "There? Shit. Leo, you left her. How the hell could you do that? Fuck you, Leo. You weren't supposed to leave her alone," he growled.

"Yeah, well, you knew the two of us were bad news and you stuck me with her anyway, so fuck you."

There was another grunt. Followed by the sounds of a struggle—clearer this time. Leo said, "Hey, what's going on?"

"Get your ass back to—" The line went dead.

*God, please let this work.* He tucked the phone in his pocket and jogged back to the cabin. Chloe was waiting on the porch for him.

He met her eyes and nodded.

She pulled out her phone and made her own phone call.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next two hours passed at a miserable, slow crawl. Chloe paced the floor, her head pounding, her stomach churning and her gut a series of tight, nasty knots.

They didn't speak.

There wasn't much to say.

Either this worked...or it wouldn't.

Moving to the window, she rested her head against it and stared outside. Please don't be too late.

From above her, Leo's voice drifted down. "I see headlights moving this way. It's probably Hoffner."

He was up on the recessed balcony, in the shadows where Hoffner couldn't see him unless he actually climbed up there. There was also a camcorder set up. If Hoffner saw that, he would do his damndest to kill them all, Chloe knew.

*Then I'll just have to help make sure he doesn't see it.*

"Chloe." She glanced up and saw Leo staring down at her, his vivid green eyes glinting at her in the dim light. "We're not done," he said softly. "You stay safe."

She would have argued with him, but right then, she didn't need the distraction.

Slowly, she turned and stared out the window as the headlights came closer.

More than an hour earlier, Leo had moved his truck several miles away, tucking it out of sight somewhere. She didn't ask where and he didn't offer the information. She didn't really give a damn, as long as it was out of sight.



*If Hoffner catches one glimpse of Leo's truck* – She shoved that thought of her mind. As she stared through the filmy curtains, car doors opened, slammed closed. Dave was in front—she recognized his walk, his silhouette in the deep, deep night. Hoffner was behind, Kia at his side. He was half dragging her with him.

Chloe reached back and touched the ridge of plastic at the small of her back. She hadn't ever used a weapon on anybody, but if she had the chance, she'd use this tonight, and she'd use it happily. The taser wouldn't do any permanent damage, but she wouldn't mind seeing the man go down. Wouldn't mind seeing him twitch a little.

That bastard.

That son of a bitch.

Her breathing hitched in her chest and she had to work to calm herself. *Can't let him see...can't let him see...*

She went to open the door, but at the very last second, instinct, her gift, something had her backing away. Just in time too, because moments later, the door came crashing in. If she'd still been standing there, she likely would have taken the heavy, wooden door straight in the face. Luckily, it just knocked her down.

She didn't have to fake the fear as she stared at Hoffner. She didn't have to fake the distress either. That made it a little easier to lie there, sprawled on her back, staring up at Hoffner as he hurled Kia to the floor just a few feet away.

"Cuff them. Now," he said, directing the order to Dave.

Dave glared at him, his left eye swollen, his lip lacerated, discolored. "Fuck you."

Hoffner smiled, then he lifted a gun and pointed it at the women. "Now, or you don't get to choose who dies first."

Chloe's voice always shook, trembled when she was angry. As if she were on the verge of tears. She wasn't too far away from tears, but she wasn't about to break down into a bout of hysteria. Of course, Hoffner didn't know that.

She stared at him. "You. Damn it, you were in on it. You son of a bitch. How the hell could you? How long have you been involved in this?"

"Be quiet," he said, his tone bored. He glanced around the cabin. "Where's your boy at, Dave?"

"I told you, he headed out. No-good bastard."

Hoffner tsked. "You just can't hire good help these days," he mused. He glanced up at the recessed balcony.

A few hours ago, even forty-five minutes ago, it had sported a ladder that led up to the rafter-like balcony, the ideal sort of hideaway for a couple of kids. Leo had eased the ladder down and Chloe had dragged it out of sight.

Hoffner's gaze passed harmlessly over the balcony, Leo's hiding spot...and the camera.

Then he flashed a smile at Chloe. "I bet you're wishing you'd found a different DA to talk to."

"You bastard," she muttered.

Hoffner just shrugged. "Dave, the cuffs. Now...if you please. I'm going to have to figure out what to do about your partner, since he knew where they were. I don't have much time to waste."

Dave's shoulders tensed under the sport coat he wore. He turned to her and Chloe tried to project whatever calming, soothing thoughts she could. Then she felt Kia's presence, caught her faltering thoughts and bolstered them.

Minutely, the tension around Dave's eyes faded. Chloe would have glanced toward the balcony, but that would have given Leo away. Instead, she scooted farther into the living room. She needed Dave a little more into the house anyway. Just a few more feet...

"I can't believe you've been involved in all this," she said, her voice trembling with each word. "How many kids have you screwed over? What about Ashton Grainger, Keith? Bastards like you are responsible for what happened to her."

She froze as she found herself gazing down the barrel of a very, very mean-looking gun.

"No," Hoffner said quietly. "The bastard who raped her is responsible. Not me."

"You set kids like her up, you son of a bitch. Put her with people who would make sure she had more problems. So you could get her into White Wood. So you could get your damn money."

"Shut up," Hoffner said, his voice harsh, shaking. His eyes were wide, half-wild. "Just shut the hell up. I'm sorry about the girl. None of that was supposed to happen and the bastard who did it won't ever do that again. But it's not my fault."

In all the time she'd known Keith Hoffner, she'd never been able to get much more than a glimpse, a figment from his mind. But just then, she caught something. Him, standing side by side on a riverbank with a skinny, gangly girl. She hovered on the verge, right before childhood turned into something else — all long legs and long arms, a gamine grin and her father's eyes.

A daughter. Keith Hoffner had a daughter.

Slowly, she rose to her feet.

"What's it doing to you at night to think about Ashton and your daughter?" Chloe asked.

"Shut up," Hoffner snarled. He lifted a hand.

Chloe moved before thinking, instinct translating to action. Hoffner's temper did awful things to his self-control, she realized. Temper, guilt. More and more slipped through as his control faltered. Grabbing another stray thought, she sneered at him.

"You look at her now and think about what you let happen. You're the one who suggested the placement with that family. You thought it would be the mom who

pushed Ashton over the brink. You never thought it would be the dad. You should have looked closer, huh?"

He roared and lunged.

Leo leaped off the balcony.

Behind him, Detective Alan Stapleton swore and tried to figure out just how his long weekend had gone to hell in a handbasket.

The moments during a fight seemed to last forever, but Leo knew they didn't. It was over in seconds, actually.

When Hoffner had gone for Chloe, Dave and Leo had gone Hoffner. They now had him disarmed and on the floor.

The detective was the last one to join the party and he was muttering, swearing and scowling. He shot Leo a dirty look as he pulled out his cuffs. "You realize, I'm going to have one hell of a time trying to figure out how to explain this."

Leo didn't respond. He was too focused on Chloe. She was staring at Hoffner, her eyes dark and huge. Once Hoffner was cuffed, once she was safe, he climbed to his feet and went to her.

"Chloe."

She lifted her gaze and met his eyes. Then, without saying a word, she turned away.

## **Chapter Seven**

"I don't want the flowers," Chloe said, not even looking up from her book.

Nakia stood in the doorway, absently stroking one satiny-soft ivory petal. "White roses, Chloe. You love white roses."

"Not anymore." She could smell them, and her heart wanted to melt but she wouldn't let it. She wasn't getting involved with Leo again. Her heart couldn't take that battering again.

"How much longer are you going to make him crawl?"

Aggravated, Chloe closed her book and glared at her friend. "I'm not making anybody crawl," she snapped. "I don't care if he's crawling or not. I'm done with him. I don't want him in my life. He can take his white roses and shove them up his ass for all I care. As long as he leaves me alone. That's all that matters, but I can't get that through his head. All he needs to do is leave me alone."

"If you didn't care about him, you wouldn't cry over him at night," Nakia said quietly. She came inside and set the vase down on Chloe's dresser, fussing with the blooms. Then she sat down on the foot of the bed and propped an elbow on one knee. With wise eyes, she studied her friend. "Baby, if you didn't care about him, your pain wouldn't be jabbing at me from here. You want to lie to yourself, go ahead. But you can't lie to me, not when I can feel that broken heart of yours. You still love him."

Chloe looked away. "I never said I didn't love him. I just don't want him in my life anymore." Then she shot Kia a dirty look. "You changed your tune pretty damn quick, you know. It wasn't that long ago when you were telling me to stay away from him."

"That was before I saw the way he was looking at you," Nakia murmured. "Damn, girl. Some people go their whole lives without having a man look at them like that, and you're going to walk away?"

"He doesn't trust me. He doesn't respect me. He doesn't know me. He —"

"He fucked up. He made a mistake. He's human, just like you, just like me. Hell, Chloe, it's not like you told him you could crochet. You and me, we know about this stuff—it's real to us and it's something we understand. But it's not real to most people. You handed him something that's so far outside the real world and said, 'Okay, here you go. Believe it.'"

"You're defending him!" Chloe gaped at her.

"No." Nakia shook her head. "I'm not. He was an asshole, a jerk, and at your wedding, I'm going to offer a nice, humiliating little toast just to drive that point home a little farther. But, Chloe...you see the world in shades of gray. That's your world, and you've always lived in it. It's not his world. That guy sees things in black and white. You knew he'd have a hard time accepting your gift, and instead of making allowances for that, instead of trying to convince him, once he just flat-out refused to believe you and walked away, you let him go. You didn't try to fight for him."

"Fight for him? Yeah, right." Sneering, Chloe flopped onto her back. "Yeah, I should have begged him to stay. The bastard doesn't respect me and he doesn't trust me. He thinks I'm a con artist. A grifter."

"No, I don't."

The soft, quiet voice at her door caught them both by surprise, but Nakia recovered a lot quicker than Chloe.

Nakia backed out of the room. "You know what? I think I heard they needed somebody to pick up an extra shift today. I need the cash. I'm out of here."

Leo came into the room and shut the door behind him, staring at Chloe.

She sat up and smoothed her skirt down. The bedroom wasn't what she called spacious, but it wasn't small, either.

At least it hadn't felt that way until now. It was as if he sucked all the air out of the room. With him standing there, it was as if she had her own miniature sun blazing down on her.

She'd been lost in a world of gray for the past few weeks. Ever since she'd walked away from him that night. No matter what she'd told Kia, no matter what she'd told him, walking away hadn't been easy. But it had been necessary.

He was breaking her heart, her soul. Smashing them to thousands of tiny pieces. Bit by bit. He'd done it three years ago, and she'd slowly pieced herself back together. But some of those shards were still missing and she wasn't whole.

Then it happened again.

It would be a long, long time before she could figure out how much of herself was missing from this latest debacle. She couldn't do this again.

Wouldn't.

Staring into his green eyes, she tried to tell herself it wasn't joy she felt dancing in her damaged heart. It couldn't be.

How could she feel so happy with a man who'd hurt her so bad, not once but twice?

"I miss you," he said softly.

Chloe looked away. "I don't see why."

"Don't you?"

She slanted a look at him from the corner of her eye. "What do you want, Leo?"

"You." He shoved off the door and came over to crouch beside the bed. "Just you." He trailed a lone fingertip down her arm and closed his fingers around her hand, brushing his thumb back and forth over the back of it. "I miss you. I go to bed thinking about you. I dream about you. I'm tired of waking up alone and I want the woman I love with me. I wake up empty every day and I wonder if today's the day you're going

to forgive me. If it's going to be tomorrow. Or if I'm going to spend the next fifty years paying for being a stubborn hard-ass."

Something burned her eyes. Not tears. She wouldn't cry over him again. Not now. She'd done that this morning. She'd do it again tonight, she was sure. She sure as hell wouldn't cry over him with him there. Dipping her head, she stared at her lap, focused on the dark, chaotic rainbow pattern of her skirt. The tears she told herself she wouldn't cry were gathering in her eyes, blurring her vision.

Then he reached up and cupped her chin.

"Chloe."

She jerked away from him as if she'd been burned. The wrap skirt she wore tried to tangle around her legs and she fought with it as she clambered to her feet on the other side of the bed. "This won't work, Leo. Just forget about it. Let it go. Go find some nice, normal girl if you're tired of waking up alone. Find somebody —"

He came up behind her. Resting his hands on her waist, he pressed his mouth to her ear. "I don't want somebody else. I want you. I want what we had before I fucked it up and I want you to forgive me. What is it going to take, Chloe? Just tell me, and I'll do it. I'm sorry, baby."

If he hadn't touched her, she would have been okay. He was stressing, though, stressing out big-time, and it had worn down his natural shields and when he touched her, Chloe was bombarded with far too much. The raw, naked need inside him damn near swamped her, flooded her...overwhelmed her.

*Miss you, girl. Fuck, you feel so good... Damn it, I'm so sorry. Just give me a chance, please. But why the hell should you? Shit. I love you so much and I've fucked this up so bad and damn it, I'm sorry...*

His thoughts tangled with hers until she had a hard time telling where hers ended and his began. Under normal circumstances, that hadn't ever been a problem, but she was so tired, so battered and bruised from the past few weeks, and from Leo's presence.



Damn it, how could she handle him right now? She couldn't. *This isn't fair*, she thought bitterly.

Moaning, she leaned forward, resting her head against the window. She braced her hands against the glass. "Leo, you're killing me. You..."

Gentle, strong hands stroked up and down her sides. "Hmmm?" His lips skimmed down along the curve of her neck.

Think. She was supposed to be thinking. No. She was supposed to be pushing him away – kicking him out. Bad for her. He was bad for her, bad for her state of mind.

But then his hands came up and cupped her breasts. As he rolled her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, rational thought drained away. Her head fell back onto his shoulder and Chloe's breath hitched in her throat.

"I miss you," he whispered, his mouth warm, hot against her neck. "Nothing's been right in my life since I walked away from you. Let me make things right, Chloe. Give me another chance. Give us another chance."

His teeth tugged on her earlobe. Chloe could have sworn she could feel brain cells exploding – popping, going up in flames. As he slowly turned her around, her heart did a crazy little rumba while her brain screeched at her, *What are you doing? This is your idea of keeping away?*

Dazed, she lifted her hands and pressed them against his chest, but that dim, half-formed thought of pushing him away never really transformed itself into action.

He caught a handful of her hair and tugged her head back. He stared at her with eyes that all but glowed, all but burned.

It made her ache.

Made her hunger.

Made her long.

"I love you," he whispered, lowering his head to mutter those words against her lips. "And you're wrong. Shit, I was wrong too. I couldn't love you if I didn't respect

you. And I always trusted you. I was confused as hell, but it just didn't seem right that the woman I was so crazy about would do something that seemed so at odds with what I thought I knew about her. I should have listened to my instincts, should have listened to my gut."

He started to kiss his way down her neck. He lingered there. She needed to push him away, she knew she should, but she couldn't. Then he started to go lower, and lower – going to his knees in front of her.

Chloe blinked away the tears stinging her eyes and struggled to catch onto something he'd just said.

She needed...

He pushed her shirt up, pressed his lips to her belly.

"Are you going to forgive me, baby? Give me another chance?"

Her knees tried to buckle as he slid a hand under her skirt and stroked her leg.

*Damn it...focus!*

She gritted her teeth. "Stop," she moaned. She fisted her hands and shoved against his wide shoulders. "Just...damn it, Leo. Stop for a minute."

The hand on her calf stilled.

The mouth on her belly lifted.

Trying to breathe past the knot in her throat, Chloe stared down at him.

He was watching her from beneath his lashes, his green eyes dark, glittering...hungry. Resigned. And sad.

The sadness hit her like a fist.

Trying not to let it show, she folded her arms across her chest. "I can't think when you're touching me right now, Leo." She licked her lips and closed her eyes, resting her head against the window at her back.

He sighed. She felt the caress of his breath against her belly, the roughness of the stubble as he murmured, "I can't *ever* think when I'm touching you." He rose and

moved away. Though her head cleared with the distance, she hated it. She wanted him pressed against her again, wanted his warmth, needed it.

"It's a little more complicated than that," Chloe muttered. She licked her lips and then immediately wished she hadn't because she could taste him. Shooting him a look, she crossed her arms over her chest and sighed. "Under normal circumstances, I usually can't pick much up from you—at least not at random, or even through casual contact. I'd have to actively go look for it."

She felt the blood rush into her cheeks as he looked at her. She refused to look away, though. "Like I did at the cabin. I don't do that. I just don't. It's not my way, but you'd pissed me off." She swallowed and shrugged jerkily. "But right now...well, I don't know if it's because you're stressed out or what, but I'm picking up everything and when you touch me, I'm having a hard time telling where your thoughts end and mine begin."

Leo stopped by her dresser, absently stroking the petals of one rose. Why the sight of a man touching a rose should look so ridiculously sexy, she didn't know, but it did. He had a frown on his face—not that tight, disapproving one she'd seen three years ago, or the one he'd given her when she'd been on the phone to Dave.

No, this was just thoughtful, confused.

He looked up at her and said, "What do you mean, you can't tell where your thoughts end and mine begin?"

"Just that." Chloe rubbed her palms together, staring at the roses on the dresser. "It's not something that's ever been a problem, but...hell. My head's a mess right now. I can't think when you're touching me. I keep hearing everything you're thinking and it...well..."

Leo wasn't psychic. But he read between the lines really well. A shutter fell across his eyes.

"Going to be hard for you to make any sort of clear decision on your own with me being here," he said. He stared at her, his eyes intense, that hunger still burning so

brightly, and that sadness burning a hole inside her. But she no longer felt the intensity of his thoughts pressing in on her.

Long, tense moments of silence passed. Chloe stared at the floor, her mind whirling, trying to process everything she'd picked up since he'd walked into her room.

Hearing the floorboards squeak, she looked up. He stood before her, holding one white rose in his hand. She held still, keeping her hands pressed to the windowsill. He dipped his head and rubbed his lips against hers. This time, she felt only the faintest murmur of his thoughts, muted and quiet. He stroked the rose down her cheek.

"I'm sorry, Chloe. And I'm not giving up. I don't want just any woman in my bed with me. I want you. I want what we had before I messed things up."

Then he pushed the rose into her hand.

She stared at it. Her heart started to pound in her ears. Lifting her head, she stared at his back as he started for the door.

"What are you doing?" she asked quietly.

At the door, he paused, but he didn't look back.

"Leaving," he said, his voice gruff. "I can't be around you and not want you, not want to touch you. Can't be around you and not kick myself, not be willing to go down and grovel if that's what it takes. But if it's...ah...doing whatever to you and your gift, that's not fair to you. You need to make your decision without me interfering and the only way you can do that is if I leave. So I'm leaving." Then he looked back. His green eyes glittered at her. "I'll be back, Chloe. I'm not giving up."

As he disappeared, her heart skipped a beat and then started to slam against her rib cage.

He was walking away...again.

Her heart started to dance, though.

Because all of a sudden, she realized why he was walking.

No, she couldn't think when he was touching her, when his thoughts were raining in on her head. But now, she didn't need to. She knew what she needed to know. Tossing the rose onto her dresser, she took off running.

"Leo..."

He was almost to the front door when she caught up. When she launched herself at him, his arms opened.

"Chloe..."

"Stay," she whispered. "Just stay."

A fist tangled in her hair. "For how long?" he demanded. "A night? For one quick fuck? A few days?"

"Forever. And if you try to leave before that, I'm going to hunt you down." She would have kissed him then, but he wouldn't let her.

With his hand tangled in her hair and his eyes locked on her face, he stared at her. "What are you saying, Chloe?"

Slowly, she smiled. She reached up and touched her hand to his face. The scratchy stubble darkening his jaw abraded her palm. "I'm saying stay. I'm saying I love you and I really don't want to spend the rest of my life without you in it."

The hand in her hair loosened and she pressed her brow to his. "The past three years have really kind of sucked, Leo." Then she kicked him in his shin. "I blame you for that, you know."

His arms came around her waist. The world spun. No...Leo was spinning them around. Then, abruptly, he stopped and she was trapped between him and the door, his hard, heavy body pressing her against the solid oak. "Blame me, definitely. I am." His mouth came crushing down on hers. He pushed his tongue into her mouth and she opened for him with a moan.

His hands tore her T-shirt, her bra away. Her panties fell away in shreds but he didn't do much more than shove the wrap skirt out of the way as he went to his knees in front of her.

"Dying for you," he muttered. "Dying, starving..."

A strangled shriek caught in her throat as he cupped her naked ass in his hands and licked her—one long, slow lick that opened her for him. Then, with hard, stabbing motions, he used his tongue to fuck her, driving it in and out.

Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she struggled to find her balance. He didn't give her the chance. Within seconds, he had her coming, his name a broken, breathy moan on her lips.

Before she had more than a heartbeat or two to recover from that, he was upright, dragging his zipper down. As his cock sprang free, she reached down and wrapped her fingers around him. She wanted to go down to her knees, taste him as he'd tasted her, but she was still trying to breathe, still trying to think and before she could make her body obey, Leo lifted her, pressed her back against the door.

"Leo..."

"Now," he muttered, slanting his mouth over hers. "Right fucking now. I thought I'd lost my chance at ever having this again, at ever having you."

His grip on his control had buckled again and once more, his thoughts were crowding her head. And she loved it. Loved feeling how much he loved her...needed her.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she dipped one hand into his hair. "Have me then." Staring at him, she murmured, "Have me now."

Their gazes locked...held.

The frantic, burning edge of hunger faded as Leo stared into those warm, dark eyes. A small smile tugged up the corners of her mouth and he dipped his head, nipped her lower lip then kissed her.

Damn, he loved her. And he'd almost lost this...almost lost her, all because of his own stupidity. His own arrogance.

"Shhh..." She stroked a hand up his arm, his neck, rested it against his cheek. "Make love to me, Leo."

Tucking the head of his cock against her entrance, he pushed against her. So slick, warm and tight, she rippled around him as he pushed deep, deep, deep inside.

Her breath caught, hitched in her throat as he stopped, withdrew, then started the slow, teasing caress all over again.

Palming the firm, subtle curve of her ass, he arched her more firmly against him. She clenched around him, tightened. "Leo..."

He shifted, started to ride higher on her body, watching her face. Saw it when he hit the spot just right...there.

Her eyes went wide and their dark brown color darkened to near black. A soft, pink flush settled low on her breasts and started to creep upward, along her neck and then stained her cheeks. Her nails sank into his arms, biting through the worn cotton of the T-shirt he hadn't taken off. He distantly wished he'd gotten around to that—he wanted to feel her hands on his skin, feel those nails biting into his flesh, marking him.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, heels digging into his ass as she started to work her hips against him.

"Come for me, Chloe," he muttered against her lips. Desperate to see it, desperate for her.

His balls were tight, aching, his dick throbbing, swathed in the satiny, slick heat of her pussy. "Come for me..."

He tangled his hand in her hair and jerked her head back, covering her mouth with his.

Starving and desperate and so blind with love for her, he took her mouth. "I love you," he whispered. "So much..."

With a whimpered cry, she climaxed.

Leo surrendered to his own with a harsh groan. It ripped through him—almost vicious in its intensity, unending. And through it all, he was acutely aware of Chloe and her sweet, hot body, clenching and shuddering around his. Aware of her broken moans...and her soft, gasping cry as she whispered, "I love you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cuddled against Leo's chest, Chloe traced a pattern on it with the tip of her fingernail.

It was painted with I'm Not Really A Waitress Red...her favorite color. She liked the way the red looked against his tanned chest. Smiling, she scraped her nail across his nipple. It drew tight and she grinned wickedly up at him.

"You're asking for trouble," he muttered, without opening his eyes. "Or you would be, if I had any feeling left below the neck."

Chloe stroked her hand down his chest and said, "No feeling, huh? That mean you don't feel this?"

He was already semi-erect when she closed her hand around his cock.

She was in the middle of sitting up when the door to her room flew open.

Nakia stood there. A wide grin lit her face. "Oops." Then, without any attempt at an apology, she turned on her heel and shut the door.

Chloe, blushing, shot Leo a look. "Sorry. She...ah...probably wanted to check on me. She's kind of protective."



He opened one eye. "I gathered." Then he reached down and tugged her up against him. "I love you." He grimaced and said, "I know your friend and I didn't get off on the best foot. I'll try to fix that."

"I think you already have," she said quietly. Pressing her lips to his chin, she folded her arms on his chest and grinned down at him. "I should warn you. She has this idea in her head that we're going to get married and she's going to do something terrible to embarrass you when she does some sort of toast."

Leo shifted and flipped her onto her back. "I'll live...unless I can talk you into eloping..."

Eloping? Her mouth went dry. Forcing a smile, she said, "I wasn't serious. Just because she thinks we might get married doesn't mean we will."

"And what if I want to get married?" He caught her lower lip between his teeth and nipped her lightly. "I kind of like the idea. If you're completely against it, we don't have to, but..."

Her mind went blank. "You like the idea of getting married?"

A slow smile curled his lips. Then he shifted on the bed and reached over, grabbed his jeans off the floor.

The smile on his lips had something fluttering in her belly. And there was a light in his eyes—one that her heart racing.

But it was nothing compared to what happened to her mind when she saw the small, navy blue box in his hand a few seconds later.

"I've had this for three years," he said quietly. He flipped it open, but held it facing away from her, so she couldn't see what was inside. "I almost threw it away, but for some reason, I never could."

He reached for her hand. As he pushed something onto her ring finger, she stared into his eyes, certain she was dreaming, certain this wasn't happening.

“Marry me, Chloe,” he said, his voice low and intense. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted, even when I was too fucking stupid to realize it. Marry me, baby and I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you for how much I hurt you.”

“Leo...” Her voice broke. She swallowed and then looked down, dazed. The ring wasn’t just the standard diamond engagement ring. It was an emerald—her favorite stone—flanked by two diamonds. Tears blurred her eyes as she looked up at him.

His gaze was shuttered, but he wasn’t guarding his mind quite so well. As she reached up and touched his cheek, his thoughts slammed into her.

Hope. Nervousness.

She crawled across the bed to curl in his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“You don’t need to make anything up to me, Leo. It’s over and done,” she whispered. Then she pressed her lips to his. “Yes.”

His arms came around her, damn near crushing her. “You’ll marry me?”

A giggle escaped her. “Yes.”

“Yeah?”

Tipping her head back, she smiled at him. “Yeah. Absolutely, yeah.”

## About the Author

They always say to tell a little about yourself! I was born in Kentucky and have been reading avidly since I was six. At twelve, I discovered how much fun it was to write when I took a book that didn't end the way it should have ended, and I rewrote it. I've been writing since then.

I've been married since I was nineteen to my high school sweetheart and we live in the Midwest. Recently I made the plunge and turned to writing full-time and am looking for a part-time job so I can devote more time to my family—three adorable children who are growing way too fast, and my husband who doesn't see enough of me.

Shiloh welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

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