

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



EMOTION IN  
*Motion*  
LYNNE CONNOLLY

## **Emotion in Motion**

*Lynne Connolly*

Before he became a jaguar shape-shifter and STORM agent, Jack Hargreaves was a librarian and archivist. Almost a geek. Working undercover in Oxford, England, Jack can almost believe he dreamed the last few years when his life turned around.

Except for sexy shape-shifter Shere, an Egyptian goddess with eyes of melting seduction and a body built for sin. And old friends who turn out not so friendly after all.

Shere already has a colleague—and lover—in Oliver, English lord, STORM agent and vampire. But when she sees Jack, all bets are off. She wants him badly, but she wants Oliver too. Can she have both?

What should be a routine operation rapidly goes bad, and Jack, Shere and Oliver, together with Chase Maynard, face danger that threatens them all and could blow the operation wide open. Along with their bodies, hearts and minds. Could Jack's first field operation become his last?

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Emotion in Motion

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## Chapter One

Jack gazed up at the building where he'd spent ten years of his life studying and then working. He felt a sense of homecoming. Time rolled past in his mind's eye, the ivy-covered stone holding its secrets under bright spring sunshine. St. Thomas' College was as close to a home as he'd ever had. He'd never expected to visit it again, but here he was, back at the doors of his alma mater. But he'd become a completely different person now.

Even his DNA had changed.

So much had happened to him while this building remained, its appearance exactly the same as ever.

He'd gone from archivist to shape-shifting secret agent, a being known by the world at large as a Talent. The people here knew him as Jack Hargreaves, archivist and mild-mannered librarian, not the super-being he had become. Nobody knew, except the people he worked with in STORM. The others, the ones who had known, were dead. He'd helped to kill them. He couldn't be sorry about that, because without his intervention, more people would have died. Innocent people. But it was as his colleagues had warned him—every kill stained the soul.

Jack hoped nobody would die on this job, his first solo assignment for STORM. Nobody needed to. A simple matter of studying the accounts of someone he thought he'd known well, but who held more secrets than he'd realized.

He smiled at the vision of the beautiful woman floating in his imagination, obscuring the sight of his old college. He'd loved Diana and now she was married to his erstwhile rival, Mickey, so for him this assignment was a way to lay the ghosts of his past to rest, make sure he'd closed the door on his desperate passion for Diana. Mickey's name appearing in the dossiers he'd studied after Bennett's death had shocked him rigid. At first he'd thought it couldn't be the same Mickey Hightower. But it was. If Mickey had conspired with STORM's old enemy, Jack was here to make sure his involvement had died with Bennett. God, he hoped so.

Easy to apply to Mickey for help, to say he wanted to leave the States and return to England, to accept the temporary job Mickey offered him. Easy to seem helpless and needy, to feed Mickey's ego. Not so easy to come here and face his own personal demons. Being a despised geek, falling in love with a woman who'd rejected him, and losing a Fellowship to someone less deserving.

Now he was here he felt unaccountably nervous.

And he was late for work.

Jack walked to the end of the road, absorbing the air that seemed unique to Oxford. He used to tell his best friend Megan that he could live on the scent of the old books and the learning, and sometimes he'd make her try to smell it too.

At the end of the road, concealed by a mask of beech trees, stood the modern buildings usually referred to by the dons in a sneering tone as "the pods". At least, they'd been modern when built back in the eighties, but they were old enough now to look old-fashioned. They did appear like space-pods, the original crisp white of the concrete now a bit more weathered and stained with rain and bird droppings. In another fifty years, they'd blend in nicely, if they hadn't disintegrated completely. It was likely that Jack would be there to see it, but while they'd age even more, he'd look much the same as he did now.

He didn't check the paper in his pocket. He knew precisely which of the pods held the office he needed. He swiped the card they'd sent him and the door clicked open to his touch.

Inside, the futuristic design abruptly turned utilitarian. After the failure to sell the pods to the prestige customers they'd had in mind, the designers had fitted them out in a more economical fashion. Concrete stairs and bare metal handrails stretched before him. The vivid blue walls saved the interior from total institutionalism, but Jack found the color oppressive in the limited space. He climbed the stairs and found the office he was looking for.

He tapped on the door and opened it without waiting for a reply, mildly surprised to find it unlocked. He paused until the sole occupant looked up from her computer screen. Her eyes widened at the sight of him, and her surprise seemed real, although she must have been expecting him.

Jack closed the door and leaned against it. "Hello, Diana."

He enjoyed the way her eyes dilated and then returned to normal in a swift response of shock. When she smiled, he saw the lines at the corner of her mouth that indicated tension she was trying to hide. He opened his telepathy to read the outer part of her mind, the part everyone left open whether they were aware of it or not. He read turmoil, disturbance mingled with excitement. Nice that he could still excite somebody.

"Hello, Jack. Mickey told me you were coming, but I didn't think you'd arrive so early." Her voice, breathless and girly, sounded the same. It didn't affect him as once it might have done, with a desire to hold her close and protect her. Jack breathed a sigh of relief. One hurdle overcome. He no longer had the hots for Diana. Not the desperate hots, anyway. She'd been everything he wanted—once. Now, not so much. The knowledge gave him some relief as he watched her, examining his feelings. He didn't want to hold her, or kiss her, he didn't have that overwhelming desire to take care of her. It felt good.

Jack glanced down and checked his watch. "It's just before nine. I thought I'd give you time to open the office first." He grinned. "Hey, it's my first day in my new job. It's never a good idea to be late." He wondered if he'd have been happy staying in Oxford

with Diana. Probably. At the time, he'd known where his life was taking him and Diana had fit in with his plans really well.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, stifling his wince at the feel of the cheap fabric. Part of his disguise, something the old Jack would have worn. He'd gone soft with his recently discovered addiction to expensive, well-cut garments. "How have you been?"

"Good, I've been good."

She looked good, but Diana had always excelled at appearances. With her upper-middle-class background, she knew how to look good and show nothing. Her fair hair brushed her shoulders, her blue eyes were limpid and innocent. "Me too."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out in America," she said, giving him a sympathetic grimace.

It had worked out, but not in a way he'd ever imagined. He shrugged. "It was an interesting experience. One I enjoyed."

She smiled tentatively, dropping her gaze in a shy gesture so typical of her, and pushed a strand of pale blonde hair away from her face. "You sound American, more than when you were here."

"They think I sound British over there. It comes from my transatlantic childhood." Not fitting in anywhere, one place or the other.

"Did you see much of your mother over there?"

"No more than I saw my father while I lived over here." It no longer bothered him that first boarding school and then university had been more like home to him than either his American mother or his British father's homes. "So I have another new start today." He kicked away from the wall and strolled toward her desk. It took only three paces. "How's everything been?"

He felt strange, as if he'd never been away. So much had happened, most of it in the last year or so. Most of all, he could hardly believe that he'd been so in love with this woman that he'd have done anything for her. Anything. Now she looked like a pretty woman trying a little too hard. He could see the shadows under her eyes now, inadequately covered with makeup, and the deeper lines between her nose and mouth. And yet she remained polished, with freshly manicured nails, perfect pantsuit in a cool blue and a crisp white blouse without a spot on it.

Unlike her character, though even now Jack wasn't completely sure of her motives. She married Mickey Hightower, so she could be in the whole mess up to her pretty neck. Or she could be completely innocent of the way Mickey had worked with Bennett. Hence, here he was, leaning over to see what she had on her computer screen. Only difference was, he wasn't trying to peer down her cleavage any longer. Not that she was showing much. Not that he noticed. Much.

He glanced at her and smiled before returning his attention to the computer screen. He touched her shoulder. "Is this what you want me working on?"



"That, old sport," came another voice from the door, "is my decision, not hers. Unhand my wife this instant!"

Jack straightened, grinning broadly. "Hello, Mickey, it's good to see you."

Mickey strode across the room and grabbed Jack's hand, hauling him into an embrace and slapping his back with a hearty gesture of camaraderie Jack was far from sharing. Still, he responded in kind, then drew back as soon as he could.

"So how the fuck have you been?" Typical of Mickey to overdo the welcome.

"Fine, Mickey, fine. You look good." And he did. He wore a well-made suit, if not custom-made, then altered to fit. Mickey always had a taste for the flamboyant, though, and his garish tie reflected that in spades. Blue and yellow, with a splotched pattern that looked like he'd been messy with his breakfast egg. Through eyes opened by the knowledge he'd gained, he could see the British flyboy, the spiv, hiding under the skin of the highly educated Mickey Hightower.

Mickey gave him an easy smile. "I'm glad to have you back. Even if it is only until you find your feet again." His smile turned superior. Jack didn't need to read his mind to know what he was thinking, but he did, just in case.

Cautiously, Jack slipped into the outer layer of Mickey's mind. If Mickey had contact with Talents, however peripheral, he'd know when someone probed his mind. But he showed no reaction to Jack's tentative intrusion, so Jack went ahead and read the outer layer.

Supercilious gloating filled it. Mickey had won the girl and the business, Jack giving way on both. Now Jack just had to grit his teeth and play his old role as unworldly academic until he had the information he needed, which hopefully wouldn't take that long.

"You're doing well then, Mickey?"

"Oh yes, can't complain. You should have stayed, Jack. You could have had some of this."

Jack glanced around the small office, noting the two extra desks crammed into the limited space, both with computers set up on them. *Two desks?* He hadn't realized Mickey employed anyone other than Diana. "I did get some great experience."

"At McIver University?"

Jack shrugged. "It gave me something for my résumé – my CV."

"It's okay, Jack, we speak American here."

Jack wasn't aware he sounded particularly American, but Mickey was the second person to comment today. Already it was getting old. He shrugged. "It was interesting."

"Megan Armstrong not with you?" Mickey smirked.

"She found somebody else. We were never serious about each other." Well, she wasn't about him, that was for sure. He and Megan made great friends, but lousy lovers. It had only taken one night to realize that. "She needed a change of scene and

McIver did it for her." Another dilemma. Should he talk about Megan's husband, Sandro? Did they know? As the first-elected Talented Senator, Sandro had made headlines. Let them make the connection if they wanted to. He'd cope with it if it happened.

On second thought, he could do better than that. Jack entered Mickey's mind again and felt the restless intelligence, letting his mind slip unnoticed into the turmoil. One thing Mickey didn't have was an organized mind. *Interesting*. So when Mickey said, "That reminds me, you must have been there when all that fuss happened. You know, the sleep clinic." He'd worked out what to say.

Jack smiled. "Oh yes. Another part of the university to ours, but yeah, people came in the library and talked about it. I got pretty sick of it when the press came in and I banned them."

"So you didn't see any of it?"

They'd covered up Megan's part in the affair, so it was unlikely Mickey had heard about that. Bennett, who'd been responsible for the mess, tended not to confide in his minions. "Not much. I knew the doctor involved, Johnson, but only because he used the library frequently."

Mickey frowned. "I thought it was a Dr. Bennett?"

"It was, but I didn't know him at all." Jack shrugged. "I saw on the news that he died recently. He must have been sick back then." Or shortly after, which was the truth. That bastard Bennett had wreaked death and injury on too many people. Jack couldn't feel sorry that particular scourge had left the earth.

In case Mickey had learned something from the people he'd apparently mixed with, Jack kept his emotions clean, shoving his anger deep down where Mickey couldn't reach them, even if he had learned any psi skills. Instead, he gave a smile. "Eventually I found myself in a rut. So I came home."

He didn't miss Diana's scornful glance at him, nor did he respond to it. She'd dropped him for Mickey, the man with the better prospects as a meal ticket. Maybe she had loved Mickey best, Jack didn't know, but when he'd asked her to take a chance with him, she'd said no. Turned him down flat.

"We're glad to have you back," Mickey said.

Yeah, so long as he kept to his rightful place. An assistant, "right-hand man" as Mickey described him in tooth-gratingly tedious terms. He'd volunteered for this assignment as soon as he'd seen Mickey's name, hoping to lay some old ghosts to rest, but he was beginning to realize there might not be any ghosts to lay.

A new consciousness swept across them in a devastating tide of cool observance, and Jack recognized the sense as another Talent. Too late to hide. He'd hidden his sigil, the identifying sign burned into his mind, but the very orderliness and the way he'd stratified his mind into various layers would give him away. So he sent a welcoming signal and lifted his head.

And froze. Standing in the doorway was a statuesque beauty with olive skin and dark brown eyes he could drown in. Her sinuous pose suggested a woman in control of her sexuality, but the clothes said otherwise. She wore a cheap black skirt, the fibers glistening in the office light. Her equally nasty black blouse did her no favors. Jack's senses went on alert. The same disguise he'd used when taking this badly paying job – the cheap clothes, the slight air of apologetic existence. A flicker of a smile crossed her lips before Mickey pushed past him, his hand outstretched. "Emuishéré, welcome. I didn't expect you so early. You must have come straight off the plane."

Much as he had, Jack recalled, but he hadn't received a welcome like that. But he could understand why. The woman smoldered where she stood. "Actually, I drove down. I'm based in London these days," she said in a husky voice that made his cock stir.

He could almost see the smoke. He contacted her telepathically. *Hi.*

*Who are you? Why is your sigil hidden?* Her contact was firm and sure, easy.

*Why is yours hidden?* he countered, not willing to give an inch. Not all Talents were on the same side.

*Okay, we'll talk later. But I take it they don't know you're a Talent?*

*You take it right.* At least she wasn't about to expose him. Jack understood the unspoken agreement. She wouldn't tell if he didn't. Fair enough. So he stared, and let himself enjoy her.

Mickey shook her hand, retaining it for a moment before tugging her around to face his wife and Jack. "This is Emuishéré Baymoui. She's planning to enroll in the doctoral program next term, but she needs a job until then. So I offered her one." His smile broadened. "She'll work alongside you, Jack. I don't care how you two arrange it, just so I get results."

Jack leaned against the empty desk behind him. "So what do you want, exactly?"

"More clients." Mickey grinned. "I'll take care of the ones we have already. You need to get more business. It takes research and an academic approach, but I want you to go to other colleges and get us more business. It's time we expanded, and right now we're dependent on St. Thomas'. If things work out, there'll be permanent jobs up for grabs."

At the salary he was paying Jack, there'd better be more money to go with it. Advanced cold calling, that was all this job was. Helping students and professors with their projects, doing the legwork and applying for all the grants available. For a fee. Jack wondered if Mickey was taking money from both ends, students and funding, but he guessed he'd find out. He offered his hand to the woman. "Jack Hargreaves. Just back from the States, in case you were wondering about the accent."

"I wasn't. Call me Shere."

Mickey replied with a smooth smile. "It'd be a pleasure. It suits you."

Shere concealed her exasperation, but the emotion shimmered through her mind. Jack sent her a note of sympathy, but she didn't respond. He'd slipped into some of the courtesies Talents used so easily that sometimes it scared him. He touched her hand when she took his, but he didn't linger as Mickey had, although he wanted to. She exuded warmth and he'd been so cold recently. "With your name, it's just as well you're not from New Orleans," he remarked with a smile.

She responded with one, but it didn't reach her eyes. They held wariness. "I know. I'm Egyptian, and it doesn't have the same meaning there."

"I always wanted to go to Egypt. Maybe I will one day."

She raised a slim, dark brow. "Maybe you will at that."

He forced his attention away from Shere and toward Mickey. "So do you want us to get to work right away?"

"Might as well. I've arranged for you to have rooms at the Barbican Hotel for the first month. After that, you're on your own, I'm afraid." He gave Jack a grin more reminiscent of undergraduate Mickey than the man he'd turned into. Jack remembered the reckless, exciting companion with a pang. Before everything had gone to shit. "But you know your way around Oxford, after all."

"I do. I'm sure we'll both find something before the month's up. But it's nice of you to give us rooms in the best hotel in the city."

Mickey waved his thanks aside. "No worries. They've given it a complete makeover in the last year, although not all the rooms are done yet. You should be comfortable there."

"Yes, thank you." Shere sounded suitably grateful. Jack was grateful, but for different reasons. If Mickey hadn't given him the Barbican, or as it was now known, the Barbican Timothy, he'd have done it himself. If he hadn't known Mickey well, he'd have found a way of pushing him in that direction, but he'd guessed Mickey's penchant for flash would drive him to a gesture like that. Mickey was doing well by all accounts, his business prospering even better than it should. Which was why he was here.

The small room had three desks shoved against the wall with monitors, phones and little else on them. Everything stylish, black ash with chairs to match, everything fucking uncomfortable and difficult. But Jack took a seat and got to work.

Sitting next to this woman—this Talent—made him uncomfortable. Her barriers held too strongly and when he tried to communicate with her, she replied with a brief, *Later*.

He'd forgotten quite how tedious sitting at a desk could be. Which was strange, because he often acted as a researcher for STORM. But somehow this was different. Maybe because Mickey was paying peanuts. Maybe because Mickey would take the credit, as he'd always done. No, that was unfair. Mickey had shared at first, but he'd used the key accounts to get ahead. Jack didn't blame him. He'd had his head up his ass in those days, set on a university career. Undergraduate, graduate, doctorate, Fellow,

Professor, Chair. Then, presumably, coffin. Not that he'd made it more than halfway. And the coffin wouldn't come as soon as he'd supposed.

He didn't know if he was glad about that or not.

After making a list of possible clients that he had no intention of seriously following up on, he leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms above his head. The clock on the wall said four fifteen. *Enough.*

He got to his feet. "I'm turning in. I've had a long flight to get here and I don't think I'll get anything more done today."

Shere looked up, frowning. "You came straight here off the plane?"

He shrugged. "I had a room booked at the airport, but I didn't feel like sleeping then. I sure feel like sleeping now."

*Liar.*

Repressing a smile, he turned to her, the corner of his mouth quirked in query. That was the first time she'd contacted him telepathically instead of the other way about. "Are you staying?"

"Don't I have to stay until five?" Her demure smile didn't fool him for a minute.

He grinned. "I don't think Mickey will insist on your first day. Where are you parked?"

"Pretty close," she said.

He got to his feet. "Then you'd better come and get your car out of hock. If you're where I think, you don't have long before they close the place for the night. The hotel has a car park."

"And there's a public one nearby," Diana put in.

He started. Fuck, he'd forgotten she was there. The woman who'd once engrossed him to the point that he'd nearly lost his place on his doctoral course could now go almost unnoticed. He'd imagined himself so in love with her that nothing else mattered.

He really had to stop falling in love with every woman he met. That might have stopped with Carilla. It hadn't happened since, that was for sure.

"Yeah."

He glanced at Diana, remembering to smile. He shoved the heavy fall of hair back from his forehead and gave her a softer look. "Thanks." Might as well let her think he was still the sweet man she'd fallen for. Or he thought she'd fallen for. She smiled back, her expression and her senses shutting out the other woman. "Is Mickey still in his office?" He wanted to know if there was another exit.

"He's still there. Shall I call him?"

"Don't bother." He crossed the room to Mickey's office and tapped on the door, receiving an imperious "Come!" He opened the door and leaned against the doorjamb. "I'm calling it a day."

Mickey made a point of consulting his watch, when he could have easily glanced at the time on the screen of his open laptop. "Sure. You need your sleep. Eight thirty tomorrow?"

"Sure." Jack smiled. "See you."

"Yeah. Take Shere with you, would you? Then you can check in at the hotel together."

"No problem."

## Chapter Two

"Shit."

After rescuing her car from the car lot, which had decided to close early and required special persuasion to remain open long enough for her to collect her car and pay the exorbitant parking charge, Shere wanted nothing more than a hot shower and a good meal before slipping between crisp, white sheets. She hadn't wanted to spend it in a room tinier than the study in her London apartment, a glorified broom cupboard. She wheeled her case in and dumped it just behind the door.

Jack gave her a wry grin. "That's Mickey all over. Flash on the surface, cheapskate underneath. We get the worst rooms in the best hotel in Oxford."

"Shabby too."

After the glories of the antique-laden lobby and the carved wooden staircase, she'd expected a little better than this. She hadn't realized the Barbican had such unsatisfactory rooms. "And I have to spend a month in this hole?"

"My thoughts exactly. Look, Shere, we need to talk. Privately. Now or later?"

"I really want a shower. Can we say half an hour?"

"That works for me. I'll call on you."

She closed the door on him with a strange reluctance. She enjoyed looking at him and had sneaked a few glances during the course of the day. That was so wrong. But his tall, lean figure and that beautifully chiseled face, enhanced rather than hidden by the black-framed spectacles he wore when he worked at the computer, appealed to her with a pull she'd rarely experienced before. His cheap clothes didn't disguise the fit body underneath, at least they didn't to her. Although Mickey and Diana seemed oblivious to it.

But she had to suspect him. She didn't believe in coincidences and another Talent turning up on her watch made her edgy. More than edgy. She'd refused all attempts he'd made to contact her because she wanted to think and she wanted to contact her boss before she told him anything. So she locked the door to this cupboard the hotel laughingly called a room and pulled her cell phone from her purse. And God, she needed to get this polyester torture skirt off. She had the feeling that if she took it off now it would follow her around the room until it found another victim to cling to. But she unzipped it and dragged it off anyway, leaving it where it fell, where, thankfully, it stayed, probably attracted to the brown nylon carpet. Disguise or not, she wasn't wearing that thing again.

Finding the kettle, she went to the tiny ensuite to fill it. It took maybe two steps there and two back again. The ensuite had a shower, toilet and a sink that looked as if it

could substitute for a soup bowl, it was so small. She jerked when a shadow crossed her vision and water splashed on the floor, but it was only her reflection in a full-length mirror tacked on to the back of the door. Maybe this room was meant for emergencies, or maybe Jack had been right, and Mickey had got it for a bargain price.

She hit speed dial and G picked up on the second ring. "Hi, Shere. Everything okay?"

Before she answered, she checked that the red encryption light had come on. "Sure. If you like hotel rooms the size of a postage stamp and the presence of another Talent."

Instead of the alarmed curse she was expecting, the line went silent for a couple of seconds before he spoke again. "Ah. I was meaning to contact you about that, but I needed the secure line."

"About what? You mean you let me walk in there and find another Talent, one I didn't know about? So who is he?"

"STORM USA."

"I noticed the accent."

"He can vary it if he wants to. His father's British. They call him 'limey' in the States." G sounded amused, something Shere was far from feeling.

"G, with all respect, I don't give a shit about the accent. Just that you let me go in without warning me."

G sighed. "I only learned about it this afternoon. Too late to stop you." That explained why he hadn't said anything when she'd called last night. "It seems that New York has a line on Mickey Hightower too. Have you heard of a Dr. Bennett?"

"Some." She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "But Bennett's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, he died recently while STORM was holding him pending his trial. No, not what you might be thinking, he died of cancer. Leukemia. That was why he went rogue, to try to get a cure. He nearly did it too. But he left a mess behind him and Ann Reynolds of STORM NY decided to follow the money trails. One of them led to Hightower. Since Jack Hargreaves went to St Thomas' College, it was a no-brainer for her to send him in."

Shere wanted her shower. "So what do you want me to do? Liaise with him?"

"That might be tricky. Jack has history with the Hightowers. He used to work with them before and he fell for Diana. We don't know if he's still stuck on her or not, so take care. Ann Reynolds knows about you, so you'll have to tell Jack. Just don't tell him what you're there for until you've sussed him out. Clear?"

"Crystal. Fuck, G, you don't make it easy, do you? I thought the whole reason you sent me in was because I could work fast and move out." The last thing she wanted was complications. She wanted out of this place as soon as possible. She'd only agreed to work in the field this time because it could prove useful in the future.



"Yeah, well, that's changed a tad. Hold off on the job, just work with Hargreaves. Be nice to him. No doubt Ann Reynolds is talking to Jack now."

"Great," she said without enthusiasm. "Can't I just do the job and disappear?"

"Not now."

"Oh shit. I don't like this, G."

"You can do it, Shere. I trust you."

"Yeah, right." After G had worked on her so hard to do this job, he sprang this on her? She'd wanted to retire, do something else now that Talents were out in the open and the public knew all about their existence, not carry on with STORM. She needed to take stock and decide what to do with her life. G always knew how to pull her strings though. Fuck him. Fuck her for listening. This could be a shitstorm in the making and there she was, in the eye of the storm.

"Let me know if you need any help. But you might get more agents soon."

"What? Who?"

"Jack has backup, just as you do. We're not sure who STORM NY will send yet, or how many, so ask Jack. He should know by now."

She hung up, grumbling at the complications a so-called simple assignment was turning up.

The gentle tap on the door wasn't really needed, since Jack touched her mind with a gentleness she had to admit that she liked. But there was nothing gentle about her response, as she jerked open the door and dragged him in. She took a step back and the backs of her knees hit the bed before she landed on it. Jack landed over her, but he put his hands down on either side of her head to keep his weight off her. She allowed herself a moment to relish his heat. It had been so long since she'd felt a man's hot body poised above hers.

He gave her a wicked grin. "Well now, I didn't realize you'd be so glad to see me."

"Get over yourself." She placed her hands flat on his chest and shoved. He resisted, his grin broadening, his muscles flexing. Under his thin, white T-shirt, his heat warmed her hands. Before she could prevent herself from doing something else, she curled her fingers, bunching them in his shirt. But recalling where she was and who he was, she used the grip to shove him away rather than drag him closer. She ignored her pang of disappointment.

Jack leaned against the wall behind him, crossing his arms over his chest. "You didn't have that shower yet. And yeah, I like this outfit better."

Shere grabbed up the clean towel from the bed and wrapped herself in it. "You're a Talent, you shouldn't be leering."

"I'm a recently converted shape-shifter. I'm still getting used to it." He leaned against the wall behind him and folded his arms. "Don't mind me, I'll just pretend I'm not looking." He opened his mind enough for her to see his sigil, which he'd kept concealed, as a good agent should. So she opened hers. They were both cats. *Interesting.*

He probably assumed she was some kind of panther, as her sigil showed a sleek, black cat. Her kind of shape-shifter was a bit rarer than that.

"You have problems telling the difference between nakedness and nudity?" Nudity implied a personal element, contact and other things she was trying not to think about right now. But it was getting increasingly difficult. After sitting near him all day trying to ignore him, she'd instead sensitized herself to his presence, it seemed. She felt his interest. It filled the air around them, pulsing with unspoken desire. Shit, she should have done something about this before she went undercover. Got laid, fast and hard. She eyed Jack again. Or maybe not. Possibilities occurred to her. But not yet. Besides, she was hungry.

She swallowed. "You mind moving a little? The shower's right behind you."

He obligingly moved a foot. To do him justice, it would have been hard for him to move any more. "I'd offer to share it with you, but we both know how impossible that would be."

"Yeah." Normally she'd consider leaving the door open and chatting with him while she showered, but he roused feelings in her she really shouldn't have when she was working. The operation had just moved from a simple in-and-out to a longer-term one. Maybe she could find what she needed in Jack. Not that she usually bothered about her sex drive. She could turn it on and off as required, usually. Usually. What was it about this man that was bringing her libido out to play before she'd given it permission?

So she closed the door. But that only blocked his vision, because the door was a concertina panel of stiffened fabric. Hardly worth having. And the water came through lukewarm, even with the dial pushed all the way to hot. So she was out in five minutes. She put on her underwear in the bathroom, walked through the bedroom and headed straight for her case.

"I'm not looking. I thought you should know." He was staring at the wall.

"Why not?"

"Because you're right. I can't separate nakedness and nudity. Not where you're concerned, anyway, though I usually don't have that problem. Maybe it's because most shape-shifters I know are male."

She pulled a T-shirt over her head. "You're straight?" She realized she wanted him to be straight. Rather a lot.

"Yeah."

*Wow.* "You said you hadn't been a shape-shifter long." She dragged out her jeans, then put them aside and reached for a pair of black slacks. Too easy to forget that this was supposed to be the best hotel in Oxford in this room. She'd stayed at better motels.

"I haven't. My girlfriend converted me." He voice sounded strained, but she couldn't read much in his mind. That he chose to guard this carefully said something.

"So where is she now?"

"Dead."

As dead as his mind on this topic. That told her that he didn't want to share this. She guessed he'd locked it away and didn't access it. That could be a problem for him in the future if he didn't relent and explore his emotions.

"Sorry. We're not immortal, though sometimes the people we call mortal think so." She slipped on a pair of sandals, although she'd have preferred her running shoes. After a day in heels, her calves ached. She picked up the brush from her case and ran it through her hair, which was drying fast. That was why she'd had it cut short, and she'd never regretted it. Glancing at her makeup case, she decided against it. She turned around to face him. "I'm dressed now. Will I do?"

"Gorgeous." His eyes reflected the warmth in his voice, warm amber heating to a slow burn.

"Don't even think it." She made to walk past him but he caught her arm. She stared down at where his fingers splayed over her skin, feeling his touch like a brand.

"Why not?" He released his hold, but she didn't move. Her arm still tingled from the contact. "We're both working for the same people. That means your boss and mine want us to coordinate or work together. So if we appear as lovers, it won't be suspicious."

She stared up at him. She'd taken lovers, but not in the course of an operation. That wasn't her job. But everything was changing here and she wasn't sure she liked it. "Can I think about it?"

"Okay. But I'm going to try and seduce you over dinner. All in the cause of the operation, naturally."

"Naturally."

But his eyes didn't agree, and when she ventured into his mind, she caught the heat of his arousal.

Fortunately, at this early hour the dining room was almost deserted. Only a family with young children to one side and an elderly couple by a window occupied the large space. A waiter took them past the linen-clad tables glistening with silver flatware and crystal glasses to one near the kitchen door. "No," said Jack.

"The other tables are reserved," the waiter said, without a "sir". Cheap rooms got cheap tables. So Shere pressured the waiter mentally, told him that they might be worth a good tip. Cut straight to the chase.

The waiter's face relaxed a smidgeon. "Actually, we have a table for two that is reserved for eight thirty. If you can vacate by then, I don't see why you shouldn't use that."

"Thank you." Jack slipped him a five-pound note and the waiter did a disappearing act on the money before he took them to a better table. This one stood well away from the noisy family and a few tables away from the old couple.

They ordered. Jack had the fresh bass and Shere the monkfish. They exchanged a glance. *Cats like fish*, Jack commented. Shere suppressed a giggle and watched the waiter leave them before she fuzzed the table. Jack shook his head. "What was that?"

"I fuzzed. Can't you do that?"

He smiled. "I tend not to use it. That's a skill we don't need as much anymore."

Not since Talents came out into the open. She shrugged. "Sometimes it's useful. Like now."

The wine waiter arrived, and after a brief glance at the wine list, Jack chose a chablis and asked her opinion. She liked that. She liked it even better when he accepted her choice of a white burgundy. The waiter gave them a disbelieving glance, since the white burgundy was one of the pricier wines on the list, but he didn't argue. He brought the wine, and when he tried to pour a drop into Jack's glass, he waved the waiter aside and took the bottle. "I'm sure it'll be fine, but the lady chose the wine so she should taste it."

She liked that, too, and yes, she liked the wine.

Confident they wouldn't be overheard, she started the conversation. "You're STORM."

He rested his arm on the table. "So are you." His voice sounded low and intimate, sending shivers through her body.

"What's your mission?"

"Probably similar to yours." He picked up his glass and regarded her, his dark eyes somber. "When I was in my room, I called my boss. I guess you called yours too. She told me to tell you my objective and work with you. Did you get the same orders?"

"Something like that. My boss is Gideon White, head of the London STORM office. I've known G a long time, but I usually work as a free agent. Whoever needs me, asks for me."

He frowned. "Where do you live?"

She shrugged. "All over. I have a house in Cairo, and places in London and San Francisco. These days, mostly London."

He grimaced, but she couldn't tell what that meant without plunging deep into his mind. Unless invited, that wouldn't be wise at this point. She didn't want to antagonize him. "What are you thinking?"

"About you wealthy shape-shifters with houses hither and yon. One day, I guess, I might have the same. I did inherit property from the woman who converted me, but I gave it back. Gave it away."

"Why would you do that?" she asked, startled. Converted shape-shifters usually became the heirs of whoever converted them.

He glanced at her and drained his glass before he answered. "A certain Dr. Bennett killed her, we assumed in the line of duty. But recently we discovered we were wrong. She was selling secrets to the bastard. We don't know why he killed her, but probably because she decided not to do it anymore. Her name was Carilla Vargas. Heard of her?"

The waiter arrived with their meals, so Shere had time to recover from her shock. She'd heard about Vargas all right. A trusted agent with STORM, she'd betrayed them big-time. They still weren't sure what secrets had gotten out. And Vargas had converted Jack? Shape-shifters only had one opportunity to convert another, and Vargas had chosen Jack. They must have been lovers.

She watched him as he flicked his napkin out and laid it on his lap. Then he turned his attention back to her, his eyes hard. "I know what you're thinking. Because I lived with her, you think I'm suspect." He picked up his fork and turned his attention to his food. "I didn't want anyone to look at me and think, 'traitor', so I let one of STORM's best Sorcerers take me apart. They're happy with the result."

She winced. That would have hurt big-time, but no other solution would have done. And how much it must have damaged him, to have the woman he'd fallen for convert and then betray him. She took a mouthful of perfectly cooked monkfish and savored it before she asked, "Why would she convert you?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know, I have no idea. I thought we'd fallen in love. She said shape-shifters fell in love fast, and I felt that way about her. Maybe she wanted to pass on her gift before she turned on Bennett. Maybe she never turned on him." He paused, tracing a line with his fork on his beautifully sculpted creamed potatoes. "Knowing what we do now, I think she wanted to screw him over. I'm betting he wanted her to convert him and he'd made it impossible for her to refuse. Maybe that's why she converted me before she went to meet him. He might have killed her because she wasn't any use to him anymore. We didn't know then that Bennett had leukemia."

He glanced at her and she nodded. "I knew about the leukemia. I read it in the papers. Ann Reynolds made the most of the case, didn't she?"

Jack nodded grimly. "I'm just glad she kept my name out of it. She pointed out that a mortal corrupted Carilla, not the other way about. Spun it. Sandro is putting a bill forward in Senate. It gives the Talents some ammunition against the anti-Talent lobby."

"We have them in Europe, you know. Politicians working against us, calling us animals instead of human." This food was good. She glanced at Jack's plate. "Eat."

He grinned. "You sound like my mother. When I saw you earlier, that wasn't what I had in mind." His expression changed from contemplative and shielded to devilish and seductive. She repressed her shudder and felt herself dampen in automatic response. Oh shit, she was in deep here. Far too dangerously deep.

She guessed he wanted to change the subject, but she wasn't done yet. "So why are you here?"

He sighed and put his fork on the side of his plate, tines down. "Because Ann Reynolds got us to follow the money. We found a network of contacts and one of them led back here. To old friends of mine. Now I don't know about you, but I don't believe in coincidences. Not that kind, anyway."

"What kind do you believe in?"

"The kind of coincidence that throws a beautiful woman in my path."

"Don't."

"What if I mean it?"

"Shut the fuck up and eat."

He picked up his fork again and sent her a dark look. "Your turn. Tell me what you're doing here."

"Investigating Hightower International, the same as you. We broke a rogue IRDC cell in London recently and the trail led here." She took a drink of wine and leaned back in her chair, cradling the glass, her plate all but empty. "Bennett wasn't the only person benefitting from Hightower's expertise. Mickey had some members of the IRDC on his contact list too. Or, at least, they have his contacts and a few records of transactions. Unfortunately, we couldn't find any details of what form the transactions took."

Jack swallowed his food and reached for the water pitcher. He poured them a glass each. "Do you have any other evidence?"

"Some. We rescued a vampire who they'd treated much better than they usually did. He said they'd told him he was expected to convert someone. As you know, that means the sire's death, so he wasn't happy."

"I can imagine. But Bennett wanted a vampire to convert him. He held out for one, then his leukemia got worse very fast, faster than he'd expected, we think. He had to find a bone marrow donor to give him enough strength to withstand the conversion. Luckily, he never got that far."

"Very lucky." They'd gotten to his headquarters just in time, she'd heard. But that didn't stop his acolytes from trying to succeed on their own. He'd seeded the world with his disciples, and as fast as they found them, more emerged. Worse, the IRDC was getting its act together. Its members and employees wanted to experiment on Talents and distill the essence that made them long-lived, faster-healing, more resistant to disease. Bottle it and sell it. She sipped her wine, ignoring the water.

"You're on your own?"

"For now." That was true as far as it went. She nodded to the waiter, who came over to take their plates. "I work best alone." She did now, anyway.

The waiter left after giving them a huge dessert menu. Jack flicked back his hair and turned the paper over. A sign of quality, that they didn't get a huge laminated sheet with the standard desserts. "I might have the lemon sorbet. How about you?"

"Chocolate." Chocolate anything. She needed to soothe her hormones, and chocolate might do the job. Half an hour of sitting opposite this man, watching the way he moved, the way his throat moved when he swallowed, that heavy lock of hair that fell forward over his eyes, and she knew she wanted him. Under the cover of the tablecloth she shifted, realizing how wet she was. But she couldn't trust him. Couldn't trust anyone while she was working. That had kept her alive in the past, and hopefully would in the future. It said a lot about how much she desired Jack that she had to remind herself of the fact. She couldn't trust this instant attraction, the connection that her instincts told her to go with.

Jack called the waiter over and gave the order.

"I read that Bennett was dead. Is that true?" It wouldn't be the first time news had gone around that someone was dead, only to find whoever it was living as someone else, someplace else. In their world, it was normal.

"Yes. Dead as dead. The leukemia got him in the end. He died in bed, something some of us didn't feel happy about."

"One less bastard in the world." She wouldn't even pretend to feel sorry. In her experience, the English were supreme at expressing feelings they didn't believe in. A survival technique on an overcrowded island and one she didn't want to learn.

But Jack, at least half-English, didn't show any false remorse either. "Too right. He caused more destruction than anyone else I've ever met. A pity we didn't get to him earlier."

Of course, Bennett had killed the woman Jack loved. Regret, an emotion strange to Shere these days, shot through her before she could deny it. Regret that he'd loved somebody who didn't deserve him. Regret that it hadn't been her.

That was fucking ridiculous. She hardly knew this man.

He was keeping the private parts of his mind double-locked, probably taught by an excellent Sorcerer, so she couldn't read him clearly. But his face appealed to her in a way she found new. She studied the blunt chin and the hint of a dimple, the hazel eyes that reflected the light in the room but little else. Annoying that she couldn't put her finger on just what was different about him.

The waiter delivered their food—sorbet, barely yellow, that frosted its glass, and a plate of something gooey, messy and chocolate, topped with a whirl of fresh cream. Not, she discovered as she dug into it, cream from a can, more air than anything else. She closed her eyes on the first tiny taste and moved the mixture around her mouth, savoring it with the different clusters of taste buds. She sensed a hint of raspberry in the chocolate, and the crunch of meringue when she crushed it against the roof of her mouth. *Lovely*. When she opened her eyes, it was to the glint of amber light and a smile.

"That looks almost orgasmic," he said.

She scooped up another forkful and gave it a proprietary glance. It glistened under the soft lights. "No almost about it."

This time she saw a glow in his eyes, one she recognized. Desire. "It makes me wonder what else you can do with that gorgeous mouth."

"Hey. We're supposed to be all business."

He laughed. He'd finished his sorbet and she was only on her third mouthful. "Who said?"

She eyed her plate and took another forkful, a little more than before. He reached out and touched her wrist. "Don't rush. I'm enjoying the view."

That made her self-conscious, embarrassed. Jack leaned back, wineglass in hand, watching her. "I don't want to put you off."

He hadn't, but her mind moved from chocolate to other messy, delicious things. "Want to taste?"

He opened his mouth and her mind rioted. Great teeth for an Englishman, but he'd spent time in New York. Probably got them done there.

"No, they've always been like that. Come on." And he opened his mouth again. She fed him the mouthful. His lips closed on the fork. He watched her as she pulled it free, pouting slightly when she removed the tip. He watched her as he savored and swallowed. She watched his throat, the way his Adam's apple bobbed. What the fuck was wrong with her that she found an Adam's apple sexy? "Mmm. Good. Very good."

Hastily she looked away to her plate. Okay, maybe because of the assignment, adrenaline had caught up with her. Or endorphins. Or whatever the fuck made her feel like this. Heat tingled at the top of her thighs and she felt her pussy dampen and engorge further. Maybe they could indulge. After all, they'd be hurting nobody.

Her appetite faded and she eyed her plate with a sense of "been there, done that". "I've had enough. Shall we go?"

She wasn't sure which of them stood up faster.

They got to the stairs, but he shook his head and led her to the elevators. He hit the button and stepped aside so she could enter the small space first. These elevators had the air of age, with dull gold paint and mahogany fittings, but the smooth action of the doors and the modern bank of buttons put the lie to that. Only five buttons though. Five floors total.

As soon as the doors closed, he gripped her arms and drew her close. "Watching you eat that dessert made me so hard I thought I'd embarrass myself." He swallowed. "But I'm still this side of civilization. Barely." He bent his head.

Their lips met with an almost audible sizzle. He went straight from caress to deep, soul-searching, open-mouthed embrace. When he gave her his tongue, she took it, sucked on it, relishing the taste of cool, acidic sorbet. One of his hands went into her hair, cupping the back of her head, the other around her waist, pulling her firmly against him. She felt his erection, a ridge against her softer flesh, and she was lost.

He felt somehow larger than she'd imagined, his muscles firm under his shirt and jacket.

With a *ping*, the doors slid open. He glanced out, stuck his foot in the opening and grinned at her. "Come on, before we hold anyone up."

She took his hand and sprinted along the hallway with him until they came to the two doors at the end. She laughed. "Yours or mine?"

Impatiently, he grabbed his keycard from his pocket and swiped it through. Together they managed to fall through the door and he grabbed her before she lost her balance, dragging her close. The door banged shut behind them.

Neither noticed. They were too busy devouring each other to care about anything else.



When he pulled back, he gazed at her, his eyes even more intense. Or maybe that was because they were standing so close. So close she could see the shadows under his eyes and the lines of weariness fanning out from the corners. She touched them, smoothing them with one finger. "You're tired."

He gave a one-sided grin. "I didn't get a wink travelling cattle class on the red-eye. Now I'm wired. So help me to relax enough to sleep."

She smiled. "I have some massage oil in my room. Maybe you could do with your shoulders untensed." She reached up and put her hands on his shoulders and he flexed them under her hands and winced.

"There's more than one way to unwind," he growled, dragging her close.

But she pulled away. "You get your clothes off and lie down. I'll be back in a minute."

He kissed her hard before he let her go. "Five minutes," he said.

Five minutes proved too many. She stripped and donned the dressing gown from her case, an ivory silk number she was sure he'd like and grabbed the oil. He lay on the bed facedown, head turned to one side, dark hair falling sexily over his features. Naked. *Oh man*. The sight of his bare butt urged her to touch and taste, to experience him with every one of her senses.

Shere stared at him with open hunger. His pale skin looked delicious, with just a hint of a tan line. She wondered where he'd picked that up. New York in the spring tended not to do tan, and it looked too natural for a sunbed. His shoulder blades stood out a little with his arm lifted to lie along the pillow by his side. He took up all the small bed. She'd hoped to help him with that, but with his body rising and falling in sleep, she knew she wouldn't get her wish tonight. Jet lag was a real bitch sometimes.

She put the oil down on the dressing table and left him to it.

An hour later, Shere punched her pillow—the only one the hotel had given her—and turned over, hearing the bed creak under her. If she'd done the job and gotten out, as planned, she'd be in her own comfortable house by now, on her nice, big bed, probably sleeping peacefully. Probably alone.

She switched on the bedside light and climbed out of bed, wondering if she'd brought her toy with her. Oh yes. She'd packed in a hurry and left it in the back pocket of her case. And thank God, the batteries still worked, otherwise she'd have raided her camera for them.

She clicked off the top and bared the shiny pink of the tiny lipstick vibrator. Discreet and effective. Not that she gave a fuck about the discreet part. But this little beauty reached the parts other vibrators missed. There was nothing like a man for filling you up, but she had to have something or she wouldn't sleep.

She reached out to him. She knew the pattern of his mind, it should be easy just to make contact, not to disturb him. Too easy. Startled, she found him half-awake, dozing.

Before she could leave, embarrassed at the psi equivalent of eavesdropping, he cried out to her, mind to mind. *Don't go!*

Turmoil roiled around him, confused images, people she didn't know, had never met, all laughing. Then she saw Diana and Mickey, like the others, laughing. Startled, she threw up her shields, but a moment later, she realized all the images came from him. Nobody else was sharing their minds. And he couldn't wake up. Too tired from the red-eye flight, preceded by sleepless night after sleepless night. Jack had a lot on his mind. None of it good, from what she was seeing. Not much made sense, but she had to get him out of this dream. Soon.

One quick way of doing it. She sent him an image of her in one of her favorite corsets and panty sets. She loved the feel of the bones and silk next to her skin, the cinched-in sensation. Normally she didn't carry any with her when she was working, but she had a great wardrobe of them at home. She picked out a red one with black ribbon threaded through and lace trim, the top ruffle only just hiding her nipples. Then she sauntered toward him, and remembered the black stilettos that looked so good with that corset.

That got his attention. She wasn't sure if he'd remember her now he was sleeping, but the warmth that surrounded her told her he'd noticed. The presences around her, the sounds of firing guns and echoes of screams, faded, although they hadn't gone yet.

She lifted the large T-shirt she was wearing in reality, maintaining the image of the corset and panties. Then she let the self she was projecting turn from the waist up, enabling him to glimpse her nipples nestling in the black lace. She wasn't sure if his groan was real or mental, but it didn't matter. She had his attention.

One twist and the gentle buzz told her the vibrator was working. She let him see it before she turned her back to him and slipped off her panties. She drew them all the way down her legs before kicking them off. That left her ass in clear view. As she bent, she opened her legs to offer him a flash of cunt and ass.

Oh yes, he liked that. He sent her warmth and approval. Her thighs dampened with arousal. She glided the vibrator over the soft, sensitive skin before she slid it up to tickle her outer lips and farther, to her crease. She let the self she sent to Jack mirror the action and opened her mind to let him feel the way the slanted head slid over her skin. The sharp edge nudged at her clit, moving closer with each purring stroke. She loved to tease herself like that, but to have someone experience it with her made it ten times better.

Her juices flowed and she scented the sweet aroma of her own arousal. With her free finger, she felt her clit, circled it. Nice and plump and so sensitive. *Here. You do it.*

In her mind, she gave the vibrator to him. He took control. It took a moment to realize he was doing it for real. Fuck, his telekinesis must be pretty sharp for him to do that. A new Talent felt his way, didn't know what he had until he needed it. Jack's shard of shock told her he'd just discovered something for himself. He replaced the shock with amusement and curiosity, letting her share his feelings as he experienced

them. She felt privileged that she'd been in on the beginning of his awareness. He was still asleep, probably imagining this as a great dream.

He moved the little vibrator. She let her hands hold it, but he guided it. With devilish precision, he drew a circle around her clit and she moaned. She wanted it dead center, not teasing.

His voice sounded deeper than she remembered. *Touch your pussy, slide one finger inside.*

She wanted to shove her whole damn hand in now, but she let him lead and did as he told her. One finger. Not enough. Then he took control again. He urged her to slide another finger inside and push deep while he controlled the vibrator, still circling her clit, tracing the channels of her pussy, down and up and back and around.

Fucking amazing. She could concentrate on her body. Her hands might be working, but she'd ceded control to him. His will moved them, slid them over her, into her. Without warning, he shoved the two fingers deep, pulled them straight out and added another before he pushed them right back in. She fluted her fingers and explored, letting the tips stroke and search, finding the most sensitive spots inside her. He made her crook two fingers and rub.

Shere nearly shot off the bed. *How come he could do that so effectively?*

Immediately his answer came. *Librarians do research.*

Jesus, she should have dated more librarians. That movement was driving her up slowly but surely, sending splinters of sensation to pierce every part of her body with hypersensitivity. And he kept her on the edge, stroking carefully, running that fucking vibrator around and around until he moved it up.

Right on to her clit.

She arched up as if electrocuted, not sure if she screamed his name aloud or in her mind, if she was awake or asleep. And at the same time she felt his arousal rocket through him and he came.

He released her and she fell, panting, onto the bed. It groaned in protest. One more experience like that and she'd break it for sure.

*No more nightmares,* she told him before she slipped into sleep.

## Chapter Three

At breakfast, Shere felt his presence before she saw him. Panic arced through her when she remembered what she'd done the night before. Would he remember? Jack leaned over to kiss her cheek before he took his place opposite her at the small table she'd chosen. He appeared tranquil and smiling. She couldn't tell a thing from his face, body language or the outer part of his mind. Fuck, he was either too good at this or he didn't remember. She prayed for the latter, not sure if she wanted him to remember her so vulnerable, so needy for him.

He eyed the plate before her and put his own down in the empty place. He'd helped himself from the buffet and he hadn't stinted. "I've missed a good English breakfast."

"You have hash browns on your plate. They're not British."

He grinned. "We've assimilated them in Britain."

She raised a brow. "We?"

"I'm British when I'm here and American when I'm over there. It works for me. The fact that neither society totally accepts me is something I can have fun with." He picked up his knife and fork and then glanced at her again. "See? I even eat the English way when I'm here." He gave her a glowing look. "Besides, after the workout you gave me last night, I need sustenance."

*Fuck.* Shere lost her appetite. She put her fork down and picked up her coffee. She didn't want that either, but at least it helped to keep part of her face hidden. Her cheeks burned. He did remember and the controlled warmth he was sending her spiked her own temperature to uncomfortably hot.

The bastard grinned. He helped himself to a healthy forkful of eggs and bacon and chewed happily. He swallowed before he spoke again. "I didn't realize my Talent for telekinesis was so good." She recognized the fuzzing he employed when he used the word and admired his skill.

"How long have you been – shit, I don't even know what you are."

"You show me yours, I'll show you mine." The heat in his mind tempered to warmth and friendliness. That she could cope with.

His teasing brought a reluctant smile. She couldn't stay mad at him if they were to work together, or constantly turned-on, either. She knew he was a cat shifter, yeah, but not the particular kind. She uncovered her sigil and entered his mind to read his.

His glowing regard bathed her in heat. "A jaguar-god and a black panther?"

"A bastet. I'm descended from the attendants of the goddess Bast."

"Wow." He leaned back and studied her more closely, his eyes narrowing. "That is amazing. You're amazing."

He covered his sigil again and she did the same. She'd loved the animal she'd seen. Perfectly limned in his mind, a jaguar slinking through his terrain. She wanted to see the creature, wanted to know Jack in his other form. She'd never seen a jaguar before, or more specifically, a jaguar-god. Every shape-shifter was a mythical creature of some kind, but some were rarer than others.

She took a sip of her coffee. "Can we forget last night?"

"Not in a million years." He resumed eating, his appetite healthy. "I can't remember when I last slept so well. After our little welcome diversion, I slept the night through, when I usually wake up at least twice. Wait until we get back here tonight. I'm calling that rain check in."

"What rain check?"

"The one I took when I crashed on you." He put down his knife and fork, resting them on the side of the plate, and reached for her free hand. "Listen, Shere, I'm sorry about that. It's not you, you know that don't you?"

"Sure. I recognize jet lag when I see it. I've had it too many times myself."

He grimaced. "Yeah. I didn't feel tired when I got off the plane. I found a hire car at the airport. Which I have to return in a few days." He smiled. "Maybe I'll buy a professor's car. An old VW or something like that. Something suitably battered." He snorted. "Like fuck I will. I can manage without while I'm here."

"We need transport. I'll give you the keys to my car."

"Yeah, thanks." The corner of his mouth quirked in a half-smile. "I'll probably get something. I might not have the fabulous wealth some of you Talents do, but I earn a pretty good salary."

"Better than the one Mickey's giving us."

He paused in the act of taking his fork to his mouth. "For sure. That wouldn't take much, would it? Oxford's an expensive place. If we were dependent on that money we'd end up in a cramped studio."

She finished her coffee and reached for the pot. "So how do you want to play this?" She poured another cup and at his nod, poured one for him too.

He ate a couple more forkfuls before he answered her. "You mean do you want Mickey and Diana to know that we're having an affair? Or do you want us to be separate?"

"What do you think works best?"

"I think we should be separate. Even put out that we don't like each other. It means they can play any little games they want to without thinking we're together." He grimaced. "Mickey's good at the divide and rule game."

"You know them best."

He sighed and put his cutlery on his now empty plate, knife and fork neatly together. But he hadn't finished yet. He reached for the toast in the rack and the butter and marmalade, resplendent in silver holders in the center of the table. "I do. I imagined myself in love with Diana once, but she chose Mickey. After that, I moved to the States. I got over her. I have to be honest and say that these days I prefer a woman a little more—I don't know, responsive, I suppose. But at the time, I wanted her. Mickey likes to play games and he used Diana as a pawn. That's basically how he gets off. So he might set Diana to flirt with me, then he might try for you, if he can see an advantage in it. See what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean. In that case, yes, let them think we don't like each other. That we're in adjoining tiny rooms will amuse him, make him feel superior."

"Exactly." His eyes narrowed. "You catch on fast."

She gave him a bland smile. "I do, don't I?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Mickey strolled into the office, a broad grin adorning his features. "Fancy some lunch?"

Jack pushed back his chair and stretched, almost hitting Shere in the process. She jerked back and felt the breeze of his expansive gesture against her cheek. *Maybe we should give this up and take to the stage*, he heard deep in his mind. If she hadn't sent him that dream she wouldn't be so deep in his head, but he couldn't regret it. Ever. In the throes of a nightmare he could no longer remember, a woman in a red basque had walked straight in and taken over. He suppressed his laugh at her comment and flattened his mouth instead. "You think you could move a bit farther away?"

"Nah. I love to snuggle," she answered, equally dryly.

Mickey rewarded them with a grin. "Hey, you two should try to get on better. Or I'll have to let one of you go."

Oh, very good, a nice dig at them and the beginnings of setting up rivalry. Mickey would have them competing for the same job soon.

Diana glanced at them and tried a tentative smile. She had worked almost without cease since they'd arrived that morning, hardly exchanging a word. Jack had caught her watching him once or twice, her blue eyes sad pools of regret. Or maybe he was just imagining that. He didn't want to enter her mind to find out. He didn't imagine the dark shadows under her eyes, though, or the way her mouth turned down at the corners when she concentrated, as if it were her natural expression these days.

Sad. He'd have made her much happier, or at least, he'd have tried to. On the other hand, Mickey seemed bouncy and irrepressible, annoyingly so to Jack's jaundiced eyes. Mickey's navy chalk-striped suit dazzled him but not in a good way. It made Jack feel mildly nauseous.

He got to his feet and grabbed his jacket, a threadbare sports coat he'd had to scour the used-clothes stores to find before he left New York. His wardrobe here consisted of a few garments from the cheaper stores, with some of his usual clothes for relief. Wearing these things gave him a jolt, perversely reminding him of just how far he'd come in such a short space of time. He hadn't had much time to think before, involving himself in the search for Dr. Bennett. Now he was back to what he'd been before, living off his salary instead of the fortune he'd inherited from Carilla. Back in his old stamping grounds, but this time he was the predator, not the innocent gazelle.

Diana could be the gazelle. The poor thing could do nothing but run, entice and look pretty. Maybe another gazelle was what she needed, which was why he might have been right for her then, but not now. As a jaguar, he'd devour her.

Shoving his glasses up his nose and pushing back his hair, he followed Mickey out of the room. He took one last glance back at Diana, who was watching them with wide-eyed speculation. He sent a quick message to Shere. *I'm not sure Diana knows about the business with Bennett. Befriend her.*

To which he got the response, *Duh. You think I can't work that one out for myself?*

He suppressed the laugh rising in his throat. *Just making sure. Talk to you later.*

Shere's warmth took him out of the office and down the stairs before he'd realized Mickey was leading him to a side street where he'd parked a flashy sports car. Yellow. He'd have bet on red. The yellow he thought repulsive, made the car look like a low-slung banana.

Mickey smoothed an appreciative palm over the hood. "Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Um, yes. Gorgeous." And wrong for Oxford. He glanced at the badge. A Porsche. Dear God, could the man get any worse? Porsches were great cars, but totally inappropriate here, in the city of dreaming spires, bicycles and narrow streets. Sitting in congested traffic on the city's outer ring road would ruin the engine. He'd be better with a top-of-the-range sedan.

Mickey clicked the doors open and Jack got in, sliding his long legs into the snug space. The car had confining bucket seats. Jack had never particularly enjoyed closed-in spaces. He'd even found his hotel room a little uncomfortable to sleep in, and that wasn't taking the lumpy mattress into account.

Starting the car, Mickey drove out of the side street. "I take this baby out into the country sometimes," he said casually. "I could take you one weekend. Do you think you'd like that?"

"Where do you go?"

Mickey shrugged, but Jack sensed a word floating in his mind. *Sandford.* "Anywhere, really. Get a bit of green, visit a pub, you know."

Mickey didn't speak much until they arrived at the restaurant, which turned out to be a pub about five miles outside the city. Jack remembered it from his student days.

There wasn't much left of the slightly run-down, half-timbered Victorian pub. The present owners had turned it into a restaurant with an attached bar. The tables outside were clean, and a huge conservatory extended the back of the building.

Climbing out of the car, Jack grudgingly admitted that the changes worked. The conservatory gleamed in the thin sunshine and didn't overpower the original structure. The original tables had been rotting away in his day and had probably needed repairing. A shame ordinary students couldn't afford this place anymore though.

Mickey led him into the main building and tossed his name at the maitre d', who took them straight to a table by the window. Jack shook out his napkin and took the proffered menu. No prices.

Mickey turned to the back page and glanced up at the waiter who'd just arrived to take their order. "We'll have the set lunch," he said. Jack grinned and gave up the idea of deciding which of the items would be the most costly. He handed the waiter the menu, which, sadly, was one of the huge kind bound in plastic.

Jack set out to slip into Mickey's mind. He still found telepathy by stealth difficult, but his friend Chase Maynord had spent a lot of time coaching him in readiness for this operation, and he found it easier than he used to. Chase could slip in and out of a mind and nobody would know he'd been there. Apart from another Sorcerer, that race of people whose psi gifts outdid everyone else's.

He glanced up at Mickey, who was ordering wine, again without consulting him. He grinned at Jack. "Bet it's good to get back to French and Italian wines, eh? Although Californian ones can be great too."

"I just drink what's on offer unless it's dishwater." Not precisely true, but it sounded right. Jack tended to trust the wine waiter, if he knew the restaurant. He wondered if the sommelier at the Barbican knew his wines. He guessed he'd have to make sure he did or the new owner would have him out the door before his feet touched the ground.

Mickey had ordered them mussels in white wine for starters. Tasty, Jack had to admit. He enjoyed the first course chatting to Mickey about old times. He'd done well and worked hard, before he'd met Mickey and his hard-drinking compatriots. After a term wasted, Jack had gone back to his work, where he'd met Diana. And fallen, like Hoffnug's bricks.

Then Diana had met Mickey and it became a two-horse race. Recognizing traits in the old Jack, the fatalism he still felt in his weaker moments, he knew he hadn't tried hard enough. Now he couldn't help but wonder if he'd really wanted Diana, or just the image he'd created of her in his mind. Jack finished his meal, listening to Mickey talk about his business, his career, his life. He vouchsafed little of his own experience. Until he heard Mickey mention McIver University. He put down his fork and shrugged. "I left because my contract came to an end. They wanted to cut staff and as the senior member, I was expensive." Not as expensive as he was now.

"Was this after the murders?"



He grimaced. "Yes. Terrible thing to happen." Their enemies had killed Megan's bodyguard and a woman who'd happened on them at the wrong time. It had been reported in the press as campus madness, someone from the sleep clinic going insane with a pack full of weapons. Not the truth—that the victims, including himself, had been carefully targeted by Bennett.

"I thought you didn't have much to do with it? That's what you said, isn't it?" Mickey leaned back, cradling his wineglass.

Jack had to take care. "I didn't. I didn't have much to do with the sleep department, they didn't exactly use the library much. But it did the university's reputation a lot of harm." He hoped Mickey didn't know the murders had happened in the small courtyard most of the library staff used as a recreational area. "Then Dr. Johnson got killed, Bennett went on the run, and the university picked itself up after the mess."

"Didn't it have something to do with Talents and that other outfit, the International Research and Development Clinics?"

Jack sighed. He couldn't pretend complete ignorance if Mickey knew that much. "Bennett was an IRDC member. He went to them, and then, according to the reports after his death, went rogue."

"About that..." Mickey paused while the waiter removed their plates and replaced them with steak platters. Jack's mouth watered in anticipation. His appreciation for good red meat had increased tenfold since he'd joined with his cat. The jaguar had taught him the pleasures of bloody meat.

As he'd hoped, Mickey had ordered the steaks rare. They arrived sizzling and the tantalizing fragrance wove around his nostrils. He found it hard not to pick up the slab of meat and tuck in. He'd certainly have done so in private. In the old days, he'd hardly ever thought of food, but befriending one of New York's premier hoteliers and making the acquaintance of predatory animals, not to mention the occasional vampire, had given him a new appetite. Reluctantly, he turned his attention away from the meat. "The whole fiasco?" He tried to sound bored, uninterested. The opposite of his real reaction, in fact. The way they'd taken him apart, destroyed one woman and nearly killed another had made Jack take a long, hard look at his life. Even without Carilla he'd have made changes.

"Yeah, that." Mickey picked up his knife and fork. With an inner sigh of relief, Jack did the same. "Was that anything to do with you leaving?"

He shrugged. "Indirectly. Without the sleep clinic, the university lost a lot of its funding. So it looked for cuts. By then I'd realized I wouldn't go any further there. I ran the university library. I needed a new challenge. A bigger library or some interesting research."

"And you lost Megan."

He'd wondered when Mickey would touch on that. Now he'd have to be careful. "Yeah. But she was never mine. We went to the States together because we both wanted a change. Friends rather than lovers." He frowned, trying not to make it too obvious.

"We'd just started something interesting, but then this big guy came into the library. He was from STORM, working on the Bennett investigation. Megan fell for him hard and fast. So when he moved on, she moved with him."

"And that was Alessandro Gianetti."

Jack suppressed a smile. "Yes. Now a United States senator. How 'bout that?"

Mickey grunted. "Some men just get everything. The rest of us have to make our own luck. So, did you have much to do with the IRDC?"

As little as possible. Since the International Research and Development Clinic wanted to capture Talents, experiment on them, discover what made them different, then bottle and sell it, he positively avoided them. He raised a brow. "Why?"

"Well, a Talent took your girl, caused so much trouble at your place of work that you lost your job... I'd have thought you might have listened if they talked to you."

Jack took his second bite of steak. Oh God, he'd missed this. He let his cat free a little, let him enjoy the food. It had taken him some work to master partial shape-shifting, so that he didn't reveal the animal, but it could breathe and feel. In fact, he felt the creature strain at the leash and had to retract a claw he felt ready to punch out of his skin. "Yes, I listened. They came around, claimed they had nothing to do with the sleep clinic at first. Came to the library, said how sorry they were. They seemed okay."

"So what do you think of the organization?"

They were evil bastards trying to destroy his kind, but he could hardly say that now. He wanted to draw Mickey out, not antagonize him. "Like I said. I didn't join, but I can see their point. They just want everybody to share the gifts Talents have. And Talents don't want us to have it."

"Precisely." Mickey pushed away his plate, his steak half-eaten, and picked up his wineglass. His second. Jack was still on his first. But he'd have finished that meat in a heartbeat. Blood oozed from it, beading on the grain. He swallowed and turned his attention away, continuing with his aim of drawing Mickey out. "Don't you think we should all have a chance at those things? Longevity, super strength, telepathy?"

Ah. Hovering on the edge of Mickey's consciousness, Jack felt it give. Mickey wanted telepathy. Maybe he could influence more people, get more money, make more deals. Oh yeah, that sounded like Mickey. Always hungry, always eager to prove himself the best in the class. His competitiveness overpowered his intelligence at times, and Jack didn't discount Mickey's intelligence. His weak point—when he wanted something badly, he'd forget caution and risk in pursuit of it.

He slipped in a bit more. Hungry Mickey. "Telepathy sounds nice."

"Doesn't it?" Mickey leaned forward. "Can I trust you, Jack?"

Waves of heavy cologne hit Jack, his cat's supersensitivity a drawback in this situation. He choked back his gag reaction and forced a smile. "You know you can." He projected idol-worshiping admiration. Mortals were often more empathetic than they thought, and most could pick up on a mood.

Mickey's dark eyes met his and held them. "Good. I've done some work for the IRDC recently. They seem like a first-class lot, Jack. They work hard, and all they want is the chance to share the gifts."

By cutting Talents apart alive, because dead, they couldn't give up their secrets. "For a price." He couldn't appear totally stupid.

"Oh yes, and there we have it. There's money to be made here, Jack. Lots and lots of it. Think of it. You could own a library full of the finest manuscripts ever. You could travel to do more research. Help other people do it. And read their minds, help them to improve their chances in exams."

Someone else had already thought of that and employed Talents to invigilate important exams. That was how they *should* do it. Cooperation, not taking by force or pricing everything. "You don't seem short of money."

Mickey grinned. "I'm not. But I want to grow the company. If I can produce something good for them, I could get more contracts from the IRDC. They're looking for viable research projects here in the university, and they're interested in using my contacts. They want in to the best colleges. And St. Thomas' is one of the best."

With a great reputation for biological research. *Shit*. Jack had a picture of it now. Not enough. He needed to know more. Now he finished his steak and stared at the plate, as if he could conjure up another. *Shit, his cat needed a run*. That airplane journey had driven him demented. Maybe he could risk it. He knew how to shrink small, to the size of a large domestic animal. He could do that.

Tonight. But tonight he had other things planned too. Maybe Shere would want to share his run. The thought made his cock stir, and the thought of what might come afterward. Or rather, who might come. Hopefully, they both would.

Mickey lost his smile and topped up their glasses. "So we're agreed that the IRDC could be good for Hightower International."

Jack kept his grimace to himself. "As a source of income, yes."

"And a stepping stone to something better. I still want to use the business as a facilitator between professors and the commercial market. You know, put them in touch with sources of funding, find the best place for their articles, that kind of thing."

"Act like an agent, in other words."

Mickey shrugged. "That's how all this started. But I want to buy their services and sell them on. Take more of an active role in what they do."

"And take more of the profits."

Mickey grinned. "Of course. That's the point. I want to create an image for the company, one the academics can appreciate. I've come into a bit of money recently and I want to use it developing the company. I've taken on a few IRDC contracts. They're specific in what they want, and they're easy to deal with. If I deliver, they pay up."

And he bet he could guess, but he might as well make sure. "What do they want?"

Mickey picked up his glass and drank without taking his attention from Jack. Inside, Jack felt Mickey's attention sharpen, waiting for his reaction. "They want the very best scientists, people who can deliver what they promise. Up until now, the quality of the scientists has been their weak point, or so they claim. I told them they didn't pay enough to attract the best, said fewer and better might be the way to go. They said yes. So that's what I want to concentrate on. And there's something else."

A peak in Mickey's mind made Jack want to follow it, find out what it meant, but he didn't think he could do it without arousing suspicion. So he sipped his own wine and asked, as casually as he could manage, "What?" He felt like a comedian's feed, a straight man delivering the lines so that Mickey could impress him. Bastard.

"Do you know why I put you in the Barbican?"

The change of subject surprised him, but after a moment's reflection, he moved on and saw what Mickey was getting at. "No. I thought you might have wanted to welcome me home."

Mickey's smile broadened, verging on the unctuous. "That of course, but I did think of just finding you a bedsit or a flat somewhere. After all, we're friends, aren't we? We go back a long way. But then I heard some news." He didn't wait for Jack's question so he must be getting impatient to tell him. "You know the Barbican was sold recently?"

Jack began to nod, then changed his mind and shook his head. He knew, of course, but maybe feigning ignorance would get him more information.

"Well it has. There was a bit of fuss about it in the papers, you know, local treasure going overseas, that kind of shit. But it sold anyway. Underfunded, and although the public rooms are still presentable, it's a bit worn in places. The new owner's doing the renovations that should have been done years ago. The company's tarted up the suites and conference rooms, and they're moving on to the guest bedrooms. Are you in one of the new ones?"

Jack laughed and shook his head. "I don't think so." But he didn't add that he'd have done better with a broom cupboard.

"Pity. I just booked two singles. Maybe if you and Shere wanted to share, you could get something else."

Jack grimaced. "You'd have to pay me to share with her."

Although nothing showed on Mickey's face, Jack felt his satisfaction. A kind of mental rubbing of hands together. "Pity." Like fuck he meant that. Jack could almost see the waves of happiness. Mickey liked nothing better than to play one person off against another. "But it's nice to spend a few weeks in the lap of luxury before you move on, isn't it? Much though I like you, my old mate, that isn't the only reason I put you there. Have you ever heard of Chase Maynord?"

*Oh yes. Most definitely.* "No."

Mickey chuckled. "You should keep your eyes open a bit more, Jack. If it's not centuries old, you're not interested. Watch the news more. Maynord owns the Timothy Hotels Group. Owns, mind you, not a shareholder."

Jack looked suitably impressed, widening his eyes and letting his jaw drop. "You don't say!"

"Oh yes. He was one of the first ones to come out of the closet, so to speak. He's what they call a Sorcerer. Know what one of them is?"

"Tell me," said Jack the librarian, the man who spent most of his days with his nose stuck in a book. "Seen the name, but I can't recall the specifics."

"Great, huge psi gifts. The man can make people do anything he wants them to, although he denies it. He's wealthy because of his parents, who were probably the same. Anyway, he came out and he has to take the consequences, don't you think?"

Jack shrugged but his blood ran cold. "In what way? I'm hardly an assassin, am I?" He spread his hands in a self-deprecatory gesture, hoping Mickey wouldn't see past the baggy shirt and jacket to the honed muscles beneath.

To his relief, Mickey sniggered. "No, nothing like that. Actually, I was hoping you'd have met him. He lives in New York, at his principal hotel. You know the Timothy?"

"Who doesn't?" A huge temple to luxury overlooking Central Park, it would be hard to miss it. "But New York's a big place, and in any case the McIver wasn't in the center of Manhattan." But STORM was. And so was the team Jack belonged to, together with Chase Maynard. If Mickey hadn't put him in the Timothy, he'd have found a way to stay there, or close.

Mickey grunted. "Shame. I hoped you'd met him."

"What made you think that?"

"Nothing really." Jack found the confirmation in Mickey's mind. Ever hopeful, nothing else. He breathed more easily. The fact that he and the team put together by Ann Reynolds had spent the last eighteen months or so chasing after Dr. Bennett might have reached Mickey's ears, even though Jack had kept a low profile.

Mickey grinned. You could never keep him down for long. "I thought you could help. He's coming to inspect his new acquisition soon."

"How do you know that?" Fuck, he shouldn't have asked so sharply.

"It's all over the press. Just hints, but yes, he's coming over. And soon, in the next few days. Don't ask me how I know."

Jack could guess. Spies at the airport, watching the VIP lounges. Exactly why he'd come across cattle class. A librarian short of money would hardly travel club class.

Chase had no reason to hide. He'd bought a new, prestigious hotel and he wanted to inspect it. Walking into the trap, if one was already set.

And now they had Shere and the London branch of STORM coming from a different avenue. He leaned back in his chair. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

Mickey regarded him while he finished his wine. "I want you to come over all American. Oh I know you're half English, but you can do the American thing, can't you? Being in the same hotel, you should find a way to get to him. In the dining room,

maybe. Or lie in wait in the entrance hall. If you want an introduction I might be able to finagle one for you, but casual is a better way."

Did this idiot know Sorcerers at all? Descended from the same Hungarian family, they'd populated the world after the 1956 rebellion sent Hungarians far and wide. The minute he approached Chase, the Sorcerer would read him, if he suspected anything. "And you think this Chase Maynord belongs to STORM?"

"Oh yes. I know for sure. If he doesn't belong to STORM, he knows people who do. He's friendly with several agents and ex-agents." Mickey laughed when he saw Jack's expression of amazement. "No, I'm not a superspy or anything like that. Though I did consider it once. Did you know MI5 came to recruit and interviewed me?" Jack shook his head. "I turned them down. The money wasn't good enough."

"Wow," Jack said obligingly. He didn't believe that story for a minute.

Mickey gave a short laugh. "Yeah. I always fancied the James Bond stuff, and they did say I could come back at any time."

Big organizations always needed filing clerks, Jack thought acidly.

"But there you go. I moved on, and no doubt so have they. Anyway, we're talking about Chase Maynord. Who is also no James Bond." He grinned at Jack, who returned the smile. Chase could probably kick Bond's ass. "He's a man-about-town, recently married, wealthy as Croesus, and a Talent. How lucky can you get? So he's powerful and trained. If you can persuade him to come in for an interview, then there's a big bonus in it for you." Mickey picked up his butter knife and toyed with it. "You could almost say that your job here depends on it."

Jack blinked. "You mean that?"

Mickey laughed. "No, of course I don't. Say, why don't you come over for dinner one night? Let us know how you're doing? If you can persuade Maynord to join us, so much the better."

"Sure." Jack needed to talk to Chase first. He might have guessed. An operation to dig into Mickey's finances was fast turning into something else and leading somewhere else. He hoped Shere had found something in the files, but he was beginning to think they'd find nothing in the office. "So all you want me to do is befriend a millionaire who is no doubt surrounded by bodyguards, and bring him in to HI for an interview? What's his incentive?"

"Ah." The waiter removed their empty plates and hovered with the dessert menu. Without consulting Jack, Mickey waved the waiter away. "Just coffee, please." He waited until the man had moved out of earshot. "Friendship, maybe. We can't offer him money, he has enough of that. But he gives generously to charities, so maybe we can persuade him by telling him he's doing it for the greater good. Sorcerers are more human than most Talents. I do have other plans." He lowered his voice. "I've heard that Chase Maynord has some interesting sexual habits."

"You want to blackmail him."

Mickey leaned back with a chortle of amusement. "No, dear boy, nothing so crude. As it happens, Diana and I are pretty adventurous. We could make friends that way. I can offer them what they want while they're in Oxford. I'm in touch with a fuck of a lot of interesting clubs. The IRDC is only one of them and the others take no interest in things outside the bedroom. Or the kitchen table. Or the stage."

*The stage?* Jack frowned. The others he could follow, but the stage?

"So offer him that. Tell him you know how he spends his spare time and you know where he can get some action. If that doesn't work, we'll think of something else."

Sure he would.

## Chapter Four

Jack strolled into Shere's room and closed the door behind him. "So how did you get on?"

Shere made a disgusted snort and strode toward her case, resting on the single chair by the window. Two strides and she was there. Jack sat on the bed, since there was nowhere else to sit. "I can't find anything except what's supposed to be there," she told him.

"Do you know your way around computers?"

She sorted through her clothes and found her jeans before she turned around to face him. "Enough. I found the passwords."

He tilted his head to one side, smiling at her. Fuck but he was cute. She'd fought her attraction to him for long enough. Two whole days, and she'd never been good at waiting. "How did you get those?"

She smirked. "He doesn't change them very often. The London office gave them to me and they still work. Very simple ones too. One of them, believe it or not, is Diana's birthday." She flung the jeans over the top of her case. The hotel wouldn't want jeans in their swanky dining room but she wasn't sure she had a pair of pants with her. Comfortable ones, not the evil pair she'd worn for most of the day.

"So how's it going with Diana?"

"What? You think we're bosom buddies?"

His gaze dropped to her chest. "No, but I wondered if you had a sympathy talk about men."

Her nipples crinkled, but she had on a lightly padded T-shirt bra. He wouldn't see her reaction to him. *But fuck, he could feel it because they remained linked.* The warmth in her mind increased. She'd let him in and he was taking advantage. And she didn't care.

*Oh yes, Diana.* "No, but that's not a bad idea. She didn't speak much while you were out. Just got on with whatever she does. I don't have the least idea. She answered the phone a few times, to Professor this and Doctor that—and yes, I memorized the names, so don't even ask. She seems uncomfortable around women, or maybe it's just me." She should try to become less irritable, but the way he spiked all her senses bothered her, made her uncomfortable.

"She was always a bit on the shy side." She watched him frown, fascinated to see him in different moods. "But she's worse now. Withdrawn. Mickey told me something today that concerned me, made me wonder." Without her having to ask, he carried on. "He said that he and Diana had an unusual sex life." He bit his lip. "Look, when I told you about me, I didn't tell you everything. STORM agents rarely travel alone."



"So you have a partner?" A thought struck her. "Or more?"

He smiled. "Not that kind of partner. We'll meet him when he arrives, but if you really want to know, it's Chase Maynord."

She gave a low whistle. "*The Chase Maynord?*"

He nodded. "I've been working with him for a while, but not openly. I did surveillance, research, that kind of thing. It seems my cover's holding."

"Posing as yourself."

"Exactly. And since this was supposed to be a straightforward operation, they thought it was time I went into the field."

She sensed his thoughts—he didn't hide them from her. He was thinking of her whistle, the way she pursed her lips. *A sexy pout.* "Not as straightforward as you thought. Mickey Hightower's been playing us, 'working all the angles' as he'd no doubt say."

"Oh yeah." He relaxed, leaned back. "Come here."

"What?" The abrupt change of subject unnerved her.

He grinned. "I thought of asking you if you wanted a run before dinner. As cats. We might still have time, but I want to do something else first. After last night, I'm finding it hard to think of anything else." He rested on his elbows and her eyes went to the bulge in his pants. The large bulge. As she watched, it grew larger. She could almost feel the heat.

"Don't lick your lips like that." His voice deepened, laced with hunger.

Not a hope in hell of her holding out any longer. She dropped the pants she was holding and went to him, bending over him and leaning down. He went back, lying against the cover. Wrapping his arms around her, he cupped the back of her head to urge her down. She went, and met his lips.

*Oh lovely.* His mouth opened under hers, immediately plunging her into a world of want and need. Need he promised to satisfy. He took her mouth ravenously and she gave as good as she got, exploring his mouth with her tongue, tasting and inciting. His smooth teeth, the slight roughness of his tongue and the sweet depths drew her in, enticed her to taste more.

He ended the kiss and she drew away just enough to let her eyes focus when she opened them and stared into his. Gorgeous eyes, the color of leaf-scattered earth in an English wood in autumn, glints of gold promising a sunny afternoon. And that smile, the way it tilted one corner of his mouth first, before the other joined it. It posed a challenge—could she get both corners to tilt?

"What are you thinking?" His voice sounded huskier than usual. "Your mind's so well-organized I can't always tell."

She had to give him something. "I'm a private person. I know most Talents are okay with sharing every passing thought, but I bury them. I don't want everyone to know. Maybe I'm more mortal than I thought." Babbling. Nervous. How could she feel

nervous? It wasn't as if she were a virgin, about to make love for the first time. It just felt like it, that was all. Without him asking for it, she opened her mind to him. She'd added an extra layer a long time ago, when she'd started working for STORM. She maintained it even when she wasn't working. It meant she could set up a superficial layer of thoughts that weren't necessarily hers, that didn't always reflect the truth. A way of lying. Not to experienced telepaths, but Jack, new to the world of Talents, still fumbled sometimes. She read that in his mind while she opened hers for him to read. "You can always reach me from now on. That outer layer won't exist for you."

He took in a sharp breath. He must know how much she wanted him. "Your honesty is breathtaking. If that's the real you," he finished with a quirk of his lips.

"Oh yes, that's the real me. So get on with it, Jack Hargreaves – fuck me blind."

"My lady, I can do naught but honor such a courteous request."

She was still laughing when he dragged her blouse off. Now she wore only underwear, while he remained fully clothed. She had to stop that. With that purpose firmly in mind, she started on his buttons.

When she opened the material, she gazed in wonder at the toned, lightly tanned body underneath. "Wow." She ran her hands, fingers splayed wide, over his firm, well-defined muscles. "You work out."

"My cat does. I just go along for the ride." He grinned down at her. "I always worked out. I got my black belt when I was seventeen."

"Mmm." She smoothed her hand over the planes in his chest, savoring the heated skin under her palms. "So all this geek stuff is a disguise?"

He stole a swift, hard kiss before he answered. "Not entirely. I came to Oxford and studied librarianship, archive research and preservation. I loved it. So yeah, the geek's in there somewhere." He moved against her, grinding his iron-hard shaft against her belly. "So which do you want, the geek or the sex god?" He laughed as if he'd made a joke.

She bit her lip and moaned. "I want that cock inside my cunt now. That clear enough for you?"

"I think I can handle that."

Against her silk-covered pussy that bulge felt divine, but she wanted more and fast. A quick, violent coupling would suit her fine and he seemed up for it. More than up for it. Her panties clung to her cleft with the dampness she'd caused, or rather he had. But he stopped her reaching up to tear off her bra, putting his hand over hers where it lay poised over the front clasp. "I want anticipation," he murmured. "I want to guess, to stroke, to feel. Now I know you want it too, let's make this a three-course meal rather than a quick snack."

A snack sounded great to her, but she'd let him set the pace, just this once. He cupped one breast, her left one. She met his gaze as he explored her through her bra. And frowned. "Padded?"

"Keeps me warm," she suggested, but smiled. "Honestly, Mickey has a look I don't trust. In the old days he'd have been a bottom-pincher."

Laughing, he reached around and tweaked her barely covered backside. "Sorry, couldn't resist." But he lingered to open his hand and smooth it over her flesh. "Delicious." With one hand on her butt and the other on her breast, he made her feel possessed. To her surprise, she loved it. His hands were surprisingly big. Watching them on the keyboard or picking up a mug of coffee earlier that day, she hadn't noticed. "Artistic," he suggested as he picked up on her thought. "Although I don't think I have an artistic bone in my body."

She wriggled on his erect cock, not enough to dislodge his hands. He slipped his hand to the top and between her thighs, and his resulting moan sounded heartfelt. "So wet. We'd better not keep you waiting. Do you want to use a condom?"

"Why should I?" Having two creatures, the cat and the human, meant few shape-shifters carried a disease through a change of form. The cat rejected the diseases the human contracted, and vice versa. But Jack was new, she recalled. "You're not used to doing it bareback, are you?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. But it's still polite to ask."

"God, you're so British!"

Now he laughed. "Part of me is. But thanks. And sorry." He gave her a contrite look, his expressive eyes begging her pardon.

Propping herself on her elbows, she gazed at his face. "No. I liked it. I don't know what it is about you, but you're different somehow."

"Close to human."

"I've slept with enough of those." She bit her lip. "Oh God, I'm sorry. Bad etiquette to mention previous experiences."

He didn't seem to mind. He laughed. "Now all we need is for me to ask how old you are. No, don't even *think* about answering me. I know it doesn't matter to shape-shifters." He stared at her and his hand, the one over her breast, moved to the clasp. "I can't feel much under this. Let me see. Let me feel. Let me touch."

The way he said it sounded like a litany, something poetic. It drove her desire even further. Her body tingled where he touched it. When he finally pinched the clasp open, her sigh of relief came harder than she'd meant it. When his hand touched her breast, it felt even better. Warm and caressing, gently touching, exploring with his fingers first before he nudged her bra cup aside and looked. She leaned on first one elbow, then the other, as she freed the straps and let the garment fall aside, slipping down her back before it fell, disregarded, onto the bed beside them. He looked, touched, and finally took her nipple between finger and thumb and pinched, though not hard. She wanted hard. She wanted it now. His gaze locked with hers until, at the last possible moment, he leaned forward and licked the very tip.

"Oh!"

His tongue wove a pattern over her nipple, tantalizing it with touches to different nerve endings, making her feel every single one. It sparked a line through her breasts, to the very center of her being. As if he were playing an instrument, only the instrument was her.

She thrust her breasts toward him in offering. He accepted, releasing her nipple with his fingers so he could suck it into the hot, wet depths of his mouth. Finding it harder to maintain her balance, she shifted a little. He lifted his free arm around her waist and swung them around so she lay under him.

Shere didn't enjoy the vanilla, missionary position. Too subservient, she considered it. But right now she'd stopped caring, only glad she had her arms free to hold him. Now she could pull his shirt off completely and run her hands up and down his back. She reveled in the way his muscles flexed and contracted as he moved. Jack sucked until he released her nipple with a slight pop, and then kissed his way across to her other nipple where he settled in to enjoy. He sent her a constant stream of warmth and pleasure, nothing deeper, nothing to disturb the messages of happiness and enjoyment feeding her senses.

His hands roved over her, but he hadn't yet removed her panties or ventured underneath them. Once or twice he skimmed over her mound and she tensed, but he moved on without pausing.

Feverishly, Shere groped for the front button and the zip on his fly. She lifted her legs, positioned herself under him so she could use her toes to urge his pants off. His lusty chuckle drove her on to try harder, and she managed to hook his underwear too. He raised up a little to make it easier for her, but didn't stop sucking and licking. He made her cry out when he added a nip, the small shot of pain pushing her to new heights.

She shoved his pants down, enough to feel his smooth, hot flank under her toes, and then brought her hand around to take his cock.

Thicker than she'd imagined, longer, enough to make her mouth water. Maybe he'd let his cat out to play. He released her breast and lifted his chin to stare at her. "Not likely. Did you know that normal cats have a barb in their dicks? They sting the female at the point of ejaculation to stimulate the release of the egg. A bit redundant, since your egg won't be ready for another couple of weeks, but ouch! Unless you're into pain?" His mind and his gaze held only query, not condemnation.

She could reassure him on that score. "No more than usual."

"Neither am I. It comes anyway." She sensed a touch of darkness in his last response. Shere hastily pushed her mind away from it. She didn't want anything to spoil this and she wanted to bring nothing but pleasure to him now.

He came up to kiss her, lavishly and with a delight she could gladly reciprocate. Then he went back to one breast, then the other, reacquainting himself with them and her with his touch. Down to her navel, tracing its shape with the tip of his tongue, then farther.

She tensed. She wanted to touch his cock again. She could scent his arousal and hers, mouthwateringly tempting. This was why she disliked the missionary position. The man could pin her down and do what he wanted. But since Jack was reading her, reacting when another shot of pleasure arced through her by doing it more, she didn't mind too much. Yet.

He licked across her belly, made her squirm, and still he hadn't taken her panties off. He rectified that, stripping the garment off her soaking pussy and murmuring in appreciation. "Like unpeeling ripe fruit. Oh baby, that looks so good!"

She didn't like anyone calling her "baby" either, but in his American-accented English it sounded like a verbal caress. He touched her labia and she squeaked and flinched, so sensitive. Then he put one hand on her stomach to hold her steady while he separated the lips and stroked down the center with one finger.

"Ah, fuck, that feels great!" So did his finger on her clit. Just one finger. She didn't need any more. Oh but she did, she did.

That diabolical squeeze again, a pinch from his thumb and forefinger. "You should see this, Shere. The hood rolls back for me, exposing everything so I can do this..." Suck it into his mouth, that was what he meant.

Her cries echoed around the room. As her body convulsed in an explosive orgasm, she forgot where she was or to keep her voice down. She whimpered, her body one organ of release. He stayed with her, sucked until her quivers subsided, pushed a finger inside her pussy while her muscles clamped around him.

When she felt cold air, she opened her eyes, but he'd only paused so he could kick off the rest of his clothes. He came down on her, his cock finding its way home like a magnet to iron filings. They couldn't have kept apart any longer.

She moaned as he filled her, knowing she needed it more than anything else right at this moment. The walls of her vagina softened, widened to accept him. He opened his mind more and she let go of another layer. Memories flooded in but she discarded them in favor of the overwhelming sensations of heat and passion and sheer delight. *That's it*, he urged her. *Only now, there's only now*.

And fulfillment.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, squeezing him with her thighs, urging him deeper, harder. But Jack withdrew, held off and entered her at a different angle, lifting higher to keep his balance. He gave a series of hard, shallow thrusts that touched her sweet spot with every stroke. He must have read her responses, discovered it that way. *Clever Jack*, she thought as she went mindless and cried his name, clutching his biceps to anchor herself. She heard his cry and opened her eyes to meet his gaze. It seemed somehow deeper than the mind contact. She watched him come and felt it inside, her body and her mind. He closed his eyes, but forced them open again to stare at her, and his body convulsed. His head went back and he cried out in time with the jets spurting inside her body. He stayed where he was and took a few deep breaths.

Locking his elbows so his upper body remained above her, he smiled, slowly, sensuously. "We're going to have to do that some more, don't you think?"

She found her voice. "Oh yes. Definitely."

"And the bareback sex? Never felt so good before. Not that I've done it much, but it never felt this fine."

She laughed at his stumble. But that reminded her of something she wanted to say.

"I'm not jealous, you know, but I do demand honesty."

He raised a brow. "Serious, much?"

When he tried to withdraw, she held him back by tightening her heels against his ass. "Sorry. It's a thing with me. Just—never lie to me, okay?" She heard the lilt in her voice and closed her eyes. "Sorry."

"Don't worry. I'm not offended. But it goes both ways."

He sounded as serious as she felt. She opened her eyes and stared into his. "Tell me. Or not, as you want. We're not talking relationship here, are we?"

"Of course not." He avoided her gaze and when she loosed her hold on him, he withdrew. She felt it like a real loss. He didn't hold her. Being a cat, she enjoyed physical contact, especially after sex, but he didn't seem to feel that way. She wondered if jaguars were solitary. Of course, he was a jaguar-god, rather than the animal, but they shared similar characteristics. Instead, he picked up his pants and stood with them in his hand. "How about this run?"

"How do we do that?"

"Go in and out as cats and leave a keycard somewhere handy. I bet we can find a loose bit of carpet." His eyes flashed when he turned and the setting sun caught them. At least she'd thought it was the sun. "I can go down to cat size. Not much farther. How about you?"

"I can do it, sure. My natural size is a bit bigger than a panther so cat is fine. Why do you want to do this? It's two weeks before the full moon." The time when all shape-shifters felt the compulsion to change.

"I'm told I need the practice." He gave her a wry smile. "Honestly, I enjoy it. I find a freedom in it that I never knew before." He huffed a laugh. "Except for what we've just done. But I feel the need. If you don't, that's okay."

He turned his head and watched as claws shot out of the ends of his fingers. "I never stop watching it and being amazed. I love it. Can you imagine the freedom it gives me?"

She shook her head. Shape-shifting was natural to her, she'd known it all her life. But the joy he felt and transmitted to her via their shared mental link enchanted her. Laughing, she got up from the bed and located her keycard. "I'm sure we can find a piece of loose carpet outside."

His delight transmitted to her once they'd shape-shifted and sneaked out of the hotel via a service stairwell and a fire door someone had propped open. They ran along

the street and watched the passersby. Jack even let one pet him while he exclaimed at the kitty's unusual markings. Jaguar markings couldn't be a frequent sight on Oxford's streets.

Everything looked so different from a cat's-eye view, colors muted but details sharper. Jack challenged her to a race up Broad Street, past the Sheldonian Theater, where people were going in for the early show. The spectators stopped and stared as the gold cat with the stunning markings and the sleek, all-black cat raced past. Some murmured, some laughed. Shere took advantage of Jack's distraction when he paused and raced past him to arrive at the end of the street first. If cats could laugh, she was laughing. She couldn't remember when she'd had such plain, simple fun in cat form.

For that matter, the sex earlier had been delightfully uncomplicated. Shere had the distinct suspicion that Jack was bringing something back to her, something she'd forgotten a long time ago. Simple, uncomplicated fun.

## Chapter Five

Luckily, nobody had closed the fire door back at the hotel. Otherwise they'd have had to sneak in another way. Jack didn't balk when, back in her room, she gave him a halfhearted scolding at the risks they'd taken. "How could we have got in if someone had closed the door?"

Jack shrugged. "A little persuasion, a little begging. If people don't love cats, they hate them and avoid them. Works for us either way." He chortled with laughter. "Did you see that old woman outside the theater? She bent down to entice us. I thought she'd split her skirt!"

She smiled but kept her distance. In this mood, Jack felt too tempting to her. She wanted him again, but something else stirred deep within, more than physical desire. Knowing that shape-shifters could get deeply involved very fast and experiencing it for herself turned out to be two very different things. She couldn't let that feeling take over, not this soon. She needed space.

He swung around, smiling broadly. "You want to skip dinner? Do it some more?" He cast a glance at the disordered bed. "We should get an upgrade. Then we could sleep in the same place. I know I'm skinny, but the only way we'd both fit in that is if we lie on top of each other." He gave her one of his one-sided smiles. "If you're game, I am."

Skinny? Him? Not the first adjective that came to her mind. Athletic, muscular but not muscle-bound, a runner's physique. Suppressing her responsive shiver, she smiled back. "We have two usable beds and we need our rest."

He sighed. "I guess you're right. There's not even room in the shower for us to share. We are so going to upgrade."

"We're supposed to be short of money. Everything we've done, from the clothes we wear to the way we behave, is telling Mickey and Diana that we're easily used. Tools."

He grimaced. "Yeah, I guess. So what if I hired a room someplace else and we pretended to live here? Would that work?" He grunted. "No, don't tell me. It wouldn't. I'll keep thinking about it. I'll go grab a shower and pick you up in ten minutes for dinner. Unless you'd prefer sandwiches or a Big Mac?"

"We can risk dinner." She didn't touch him as he picked up his pants and bent to put them on. She didn't dare. If she did, they might end up on the bed again. God knew she wanted to. But her stomach needed sustenance. Afterward, oh yes, afterward she wouldn't let him leave alone. Once was most definitely not enough. She eyed his body greedily, wondering where to start next time.



To her delight, his cock stirred. Previously semi-dormant, it definitely took an upward movement. But he laughed and straightened, dragging his jeans up his legs before pulling up the zip. Carefully. "Do you need longer?"

"Give me twenty," she said. Men always underestimated the time it took to get showered and ready. He laughed and left.

Half an hour later, they stepped into a dining room considerably fuller than the night before. That might be because they were later coming down, but someone had gussied up the place in anticipation of prestigious guests. Jack glanced at her and then to the maitre d'. "Expecting someone important?"

The man gave them an icy stare. "We have standards to maintain, sir."

Jack raised a brow, but tonight he didn't demur when the man showed them to a small table close to a wall with no view. The tables by the windows were already occupied and they weren't sitting too close to either the kitchen or the toilets. They ordered and waited to watch the show.

"Chase is here," Jack said quietly to her just after the waiter deposited their plates and left. He glanced down. "I see we're all having the special plates."

Shere laughed when she saw her plate. A highly fashionable white plate on a black under plate held her food tonight. The meal itself looked like a work of art. They ordered fish again. Her monkfish gleamed in its glacé sauce, the delicate fragrance of the herbs blending with the mouthwatering flesh.

Just in case the lord of the hotel came in while they were eating and chanced to glance at their meals.

She heard a stir from outside the dining room, then the maitre d' himself led the newcomers to their seats. Nose in the air, bearing proud, he ushered the person she assumed was Chase Maynard to his place, together with a lovely woman, her dark brown hair sheened into a sophisticated twist behind her head. She wore a magnificent necklace of silver and some blue stones Shere recognized as lapis lazuli, because the best examples came from Egypt. She had some herself, sadly locked away in a vault in London for the duration of this assignment. Shere the cash-strapped office assistant would hardly own chains of lapis and sapphire.

She registered Jack's surprise. *That's Jillian, Chase's wife. I didn't expect her to come. I thought she had business in New York this month.*

Then another voice, deep and powerful, which she heard because her mind was linked to Jack's. *Who's your lady friend, Jack?*

*Emuishéré Baymoui. Shere. She's STORM UK. They're on to Hightower too.*

*Shit. I'll talk to you later.*

The presence left them with a finality like the severing of a telephone connection.

Chase Maynard was simply breathtaking. With true American pizzazz and none of the vulgarity the ill-informed here in Europe often assigned to the American, he wore a

navy suit with a plain white shirt and pale blue tie. His lady wore a dress of a blue a shade darker than the stones in her necklace. But his suit was tailor-made, Italian by the cut, and her dress was so simple it had to be expensive.

Shere fidgeted, pulling up the cuffs on her too-long blouse. Jack covered her hand with his. "Don't. You look gorgeous."

"Thanks." She smiled, sweeter than usual, losing her edge a little bit. Then she put her chin up and twirled her knife in one hand before she began her meal.

Jack sat with his back to the Maynords, but she could watch them. First, Chase changed his seat at the table so he sat next to his wife instead of opposite her, hardly able to see her for the lavish table arrangement.

Where Jack was dark and lean, Chase was golden and powerful. His broad shoulders framed a tall, strong figure, and from his pose, he was entirely at ease with that. His hair, worn in a short style Shere knew had to be a five-hundred-dollar cut, complemented an aristocratically handsome face with high cheekbones. When he glanced in their direction she thought she'd never seen eyes so blue before.

And Chase was a Sorcerer. Since he'd brought his wife, Shere could be reasonably certain he wasn't one of those terrifying beings, a virgin Sorcerer, most of whom could ice a whole room with their detached presences. She felt his power and knew that what he'd lost when he'd lost his cherry, he'd regained by work and willpower. The man took her breath away, but only as a man. She felt no draw to him as she did to the man sitting with her. Who now pulled a face at her. "He's looking at us, isn't he?"

"He was."

"Just as well you didn't see him first. Chase dazzles. He can't help it, his charisma does it for him."

She laughed, surprising herself. He shocked her into laughter sometimes, his dry remarks not all they appeared initially. It was as if her mind did a double take.

Chase's voice came through again. *Room number?*

Jack gave it.

*I'll come to you after dinner.*

*Sure.*

They finished their meal, and Shere took some amusement from the floor show. The staff fawned over Chase and Jillian. Their plates were removed the minute they finished with them, and that they had the drinks they wanted without fuss. Intrigued, Shere noticed they waved away the wine and took water. The waiter brought it with two cut crystal glasses she'd bet didn't form part of the hotel's usual glassware. And a plate with a choice of citrus slices. Surely they'd overdone it with that one? But Chase accepted the homage as his due, which it probably was.

Jack and Shere had dessert and coffee, more to watch the display than for a real desire for it. And because they knew they couldn't do as they had the night before, not if they wanted to answer the door in a decent state of dress.

As they sipped the last of their coffee, Shere glanced up and saw someone she knew enter the room, led by the maitre d'. She managed to get her cup back in the saucer without dropping it. Jack looked up at the clang and then followed her gaze.

Shere looked down. *They've sent backup from the London office. I didn't expect him to come here.*

At the same time, she received a message, and since she was linked with Jack, he heard it too. A crisp, English accent that purred its greeting. *Good evening, darling. Since we have complications, I'm here to help, out of hiding and into your life. Though I sense you have help already.*

From Jack she only heard the one word, deep down. *Darling?*

Oops.

Back in her room, Jack paced, not that he could do much of it. He spun around, hands gesticulating. "Don't tell me about 'darling' being a common English endearment, because I know it isn't. That's what he meant, wasn't it? Are you his regular lover? Am I the bad guy in this?" His brows snapped together, his eyes gleamed, more green than amber.

She caught his arms but he shook her free. "No, no, it's not like that. We do a lot of work together for STORM and sometimes we pose as man and wife, or boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Are you telling me it's all pretend? That you don't sleep together?" He met her gaze, wouldn't let her look away and he grasped her, his hands digging painfully into her upper arms. "Think carefully, Shere. The one thing I won't take in my life is lies."

"You'd blow the operation? You don't lie about that?"

"I'd blow it in a heartbeat if I thought I was the one being deceived. Sure I would. I promised myself, and it's a promise I don't intend to break. In my heart I'll be true, and I won't let anyone in there who isn't."

She faltered, stared at him, didn't dare open her mind. "In your heart? We've made love once, and you're talking about hearts?"

He shook his head. "No, not yet. But it's there between us, isn't it? The possibility, the seeds of something much greater. Are you trying to tell me there isn't?"

She owed him the truth, she knew that. "Oliver and I sleep together. Have slept together. Would probably sleep together if you weren't on the scene." She swallowed, not used to revealing this much of herself. "But we've made no promises." She met his gaze with a sincere one of her own. "Yes Jack, I feel it too. In my heart, like you say."

His mouth tightened. "All I ask for is honesty. If you want to have him, too, tell me and I'll deal with it. One way or another. But thanks. Thanks for telling me."

She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, an imperious knock sounded on the door. After pressing one swift kiss to her startled lips, Jack moved to let Chase in.

The new owner of the Barbican stepped inside and his mouth pursed in a soundless whistle. "This is a shithole, Jack. You can't stay here."

"We're managing."

"Not fucking likely." Chase ducked his head into the bathroom. "Fuck. This isn't just below the standard of what I expect in my hotels, it's a toilet. I'll sort this out." He glanced around, taking in the state of the place in one comprehensive sweep. Satisfaction filled his gaze as his attention stilled. "There's a damp stain on the wall. That gives me an idea." He glanced back at them. "I'm going now. I'll see you in an hour or so. Call reception when it happens, and I'll get you upgraded. Do me a favor. Time how long it takes and how they treat you. Glad to see you haven't unpacked. I'd close that case if I were you."

"Wha—" The slamming door drowned Jack's question and then came a loud bang from the bathroom.

Jack opened the door only to meet a shower of cold water from a burst pipe in the wall. He closed the door hurriedly, but since it was a soft concertinaed door, that didn't help much. Water seeped under the door, into the sludge-colored carpet. Jack picked up the phone. "Better do what he says."

She grabbed the clothes she'd discarded ready for the laundry and threw them in her open case. Lucky she'd put it on the chair. Risking opening the bathroom door, she stood to one side and reached for her sponge bag. She abandoned her toothpaste and brush to the downpour. Jack was already on the phone. "We can't stay here, we're drowning."

Only just suppressing her laugh, in case the person at the other end should hear, she nudged him toward the door. "Go pack."

"Oh God, I bet he's ruptured the pipe in my room as well." He shot out of the room and she heard his door open and slam shut before his voice came through the thin walls. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, Chase Maynard, you bastard!"

Ten minutes later, someone arrived, but by then Shere had vacated her room, leaving the door propped open with a chair. Already the carpet outside the room was soggy and the manager's feet squelched as he stepped inside. "Oh Lord, I'm so sorry. If you'll come with me, I'll show you to your new rooms."

Despite the destruction of two pairs of pants and a shirt, the incident amused Jack more than annoyed him. After his first explosion of wrath, he realized the clothes were the cheap ones he'd bought for this assignment. He'd wear something more comfortable now, because he had no intention of replacing the cheap stuff with more of the same.

He changed into a dry T-shirt and jeans, and met Shere outside her room. She also wore clothes similar to his, but they fit her in a deliciously different way.

On the way upstairs, the manager apologized and explained. "Mr. Maynard, the new owner, is pleased to assign you a suite close to his. It's a two-bedroom suite, but we have another available if you wish to remain completely separate."

"No, that's fine," Jack said calmly. "We must thank Mr. Maynard."

They entered the lift. "If I might advise you, sir," said the man, shorter than Jack but rounder and full of the dignity of a hotel manager, "I'd wait for a little while before you approach Mr. Maynard."

"Has a temper, does he?" Jack recalled Chase's temper—terrifying in its coldness. Chase had the icy demeanor taught to most Sorcerers since childhood, part of the way they controlled their amazing Talent. It took iron will to tame what they had from birth. He'd felt the controlled surge that had pierced the water pipe and was glad he hadn't stood in the way. That single hard jolt demonstrated Chase's fury. Someone's head would roll, maybe several someones'.

The manager merely shook his head. "We're delighted to become part of the Timothy group, sir. We're confident that Mr. Maynard will find everything as he expects it."

*I bet*, he thought, his mouth giving a cynical twist. With typical British snobbery, they probably hadn't realized just how patrician Chase Maynard was and what he expected of his hotels. The best. Nothing else worked for him.

When the manager showed them into a well-appointed suite, Jack knew Chase would find fault with this, too, and wondered if he'd seen it. For himself, he'd find it perfect. But the suite's bedrooms were too small for the luxury customer and the living room had one sofa and a slightly frayed chair. He stopped the manager on his way out. "Excuse me but could you show us the other suite, please?" He'd had enough of small rooms for quite some time. The manager glanced at Shere, who nodded and led the way to the other suite.

Jack found the second example with its single double room charming. If Shere decided she wanted the bed to herself, he could sleep on the wide sofa, obviously intended as an extra bed. "Thank you." He glanced at Shere, who nodded. "We'd prefer this one."

It said a great deal that the manager hadn't demurred about complimentary rooms or given them any kind of disparaging comment or look, despite their unkempt appearances. Not that Jack cared if he billed Mickey for the suite. Serve the bastard right.

He watched Shere flop on the bed. "Do you want to rest?"

"Your friend will be here soon."

"And yours." He hadn't forgotten the dark-haired devil who'd entered the dining room just before they left.

Her eyes widened when he dropped his case and walked to the bed, putting one knee on the mattress. "You want us to rest together, or am I on the sofa?"

"Christ, no. This bed is huge."

He wouldn't let her get away with that. "You want me to keep to my side?"

She shook her head and, chuckling, he swung up and over her to give her a deep, satisfying kiss. Their bodies pressed close and his cock found some relief nestled against her firm, warm body but he wanted more. She did that to him, filled him with hunger and a yearning to push deep inside her, to join them. He settled in for a luscious kiss.

But he rolled off her after that, before he could get carried away and maybe put her in a situation she'd find uncomfortable when Chase arrived. Instead, he drew her into his arms to nestle close. He guessed she didn't cuddle too often, because she lifted her leg to stretch it over his, then withdrew it until he tugged it back. Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he settled her head on his shoulder. "Rest. As soon as Chase has dealt with his new staff, he'll be up to deal with us."

"Does he ever rest?"

Jack huffed a laugh. "Not often. He used to be Sandro Gianetti's second-in-command, but he's more of a maverick these days. Works on projects that he wants. This assignment suited him because he bought this place last year but hadn't found the time to come over. He inspects all new purchases himself. Or so he says."

She sighed and he enjoyed her warm breath fanning through the thin cotton of his T-shirt. He just had her breathing easily when the knock sounded on the door. Unfortunately she woke too, and sat up, glaring at him indignantly. "I don't need anyone to take care of me."

He spread his hands. "Did I say you did? I like doing it, that's all. And I'm not apologizing for it, either." He swung off the bed and headed for the outer door to let Chase in.

And Jillian, as it happened. Jack gave her a hug and swept his arm wide. "Room to swing several cats in here. I like it."

Chase scanned the area critically. "The drapes look musty." He took a step, but Jack stopped him with one hand on his forearm. Chase glared at him, but Jack ignored the vibes he felt emanating from Chase. "Don't shake them, please. Let the maid do it tomorrow. Don't you ever get tired?"

Chase gave a short laugh. "Sometimes. You should try flying by private jet."

"Yeah, and the rest. I don't think Ann Reynolds would take kindly to a chartered jet appearing on my expenses."

Creases appeared on Chase's brow. "I thought you inherited a fortune from Carilla."

Jack turned away, shrugging. "I didn't keep it. What's left is moldering in a bank while I decide what to do with it. I'll probably give it to charity. I won't touch any of it. I sold the apartment and put that money into it too."

"When did this happen?"

"In the last month. Look, Chase, it's not like I'm dirt-poor. And I'm not about to change my mind."

Shere stood in the doorway to the bedroom, arms folded over her chest.

"Why did you do that?" Chase demanded.

A taut silence filled the room until he sighed. "Because I don't know how much of her money she got from selling secrets and betraying Talents."

Chase grunted, but Jack felt Jillian's shock.

Jillian spoke first. "Did she ever say why?"

Another pause before Jack answered her. He half turned, so he could see everyone in the room. "No, but I have my ideas." He cut through the air with the flat of his hand. "Enough. That's not what we're here for."

"No." Chase moved into the room and motioned Jillian to the sofa. "You should sit, sweetheart."

She laughed, the sound a relief after the tension of a moment ago. "It's not as if I'm ill, Chase. Stop treating me like an invalid." Her rich tones, filled with amusement, made Jack wonder yet again, that this open, beautiful woman should be the one to tame a cold fish like Chase Maynard. But she had and she was the love of his life. With the way he cared for her every need and watched her with such loving warmth in his eyes, nobody could doubt his feelings for her.

She smiled up at Jack. "I'm pregnant."

"Oh fuck, oh Jillian, congratulations!" Risking her husband's displeasure, he swooped down to envelop her in a giant hug. "Do you need anything? Food, drink, juice?" Delighted for his friends, he felt only joy fill the room and his mood shot higher.

Jillian laughed. "Shut up, Jack. I get enough of that from my husband. We'll be fine and I'm betting the baby will have the most formidable set of godparents in the world. And no, I haven't decided yet."

Jack laughed as he straightened and strolled across the room to take Shere's elbow. "And this is Shere. Emuishéré Baymoui, to be precise. She's Egyptian, but she works for STORM UK."

He took her to a cream upholstered chair and she glanced doubtfully at the pristine surface before she sat. "Don't worry about the furniture," Jack said. "Chase will probably have it all stripped out and redone, anyway."

Chase snorted. "Probably. Those broom cupboards they gave you shocked me absolutely. This is supposed to be the best fucking hotel in Oxford, and they have rooms like that? Veneered furniture and tiny beds? No way. You're the last guests in those rooms. And the staff won't get them, either."

"Won't that put up the price of a room?"

"I had a good look at the accounts on the way over. There are bunches of economies we can make from the kitchens up. Plus they'll get the advantage of bulk buying on

things like sheets and towels if they order with the rest of the Timothy hotels. I can turn this place around."

Jack chuckled as he took a seat opposite Shere. "They won't know what's hit them."

Chase steepled his fingers, but then someone knocked at the door. Jack sent out his senses and discovered the dark presence of Shere's fellow agent, so he crossed the room to open the door. At the moment, telekinesis tired him out more than taking the physical alternative, but he should have practiced. Just too tired tonight.

Lights from the street outside made the two mirrors set opposite the windows glitter as he moved. Catching sight of the other room reminded him where he wanted to be. In bed, with Shere, sleeping the sleep of the—well, if not just, then at least of the exhausted. He had great hopes of a decent night's sleep tonight. After an interval for playtime.

He confronted the Englishman. Undoubtedly good-looking, tall and well-built, the man swung into the room as if he owned it. But Chase, now standing with one hand held out in greeting, was more than a match for him. Both wore expensive casuals, both occupied their space to the manner born, and neither gave up an inch as they shook hands with icy politeness.

The Englishman took a seat next to Chase, and unfortunately, nearest to the chair where Shere sat. He reached out a hand and touched hers. "Okay?" As dark as Chase was fair, they looked striking together. Perhaps the newcomer had an inch on Chase, but aristocratic assurance and handsome good looks gave them similarities that went far beyond coloring. Their presences filled the room.

"I don't know," she said. "We're about to have a frank exchange of views, I suspect."

The man chuckled. "Then introductions are probably in order. I'm a Talent, but I don't work for STORM full-time. Oliver Cranfield, Earl of Derrington, at your service. Yes, I know it's a little outré to have a title in this egalitarian age, but I can't help it. I was born to it, though I only use the title when it suits me. Call me Oliver. Never Ollie, never Cranfield. I answer to Oliver or Derrington." While Jack knew the aristocracy used titles as surnames, he did wonder why Oliver preferred to keep his surname out of the picture. His voice had hardened when he told them his last name, his body losing his air of easy assurance for a fraction of a second. Oh, what the fuck. "Why not Cranfield?"

The earl gave him a look like he'd give something he'd trodden in. "G told me that your father is a diplomat?"

"So he is. You mean that it's not done?"

"Precisely."



That was probably all there was to it. He didn't take offense, having dealt with British aristocracy before, and knowing they had ways all their own, and dared to offer his hand to be shaken. Oliver took it.

When they'd settled again, Chase took control, as Oliver showed no desire to, and began the conversation they needed to have. "Are we working on the same side here?"

"We're all STORM," Shere said. She tucked her feet up under her in the large chair. Jack thought she looked small and vulnerable but he suspected that was an illusion. Perhaps one she liked to project, just as he pushed his geekiness on people at times. When it suited him.

"The only way we'll find out is by giving it up. Our bosses seem to work independently."

"No," said Chase. "Ann contacted me, said she'd informed London of our presence as a courtesy. That was when she found out STORM UK had an interest. I'll say now that Jack and I are following one of the threads left by Dr. Bennett. The mess that man left, he should have been put down at birth."

Only a Sorcerer could say that and mean it. Sorcerers had culled their kind in days gone by, ruthlessly retaining the stronger traits that made their psi senses so awesome. The Soviets had instigated a program to breed the traits, but that had ended with Communist Russia. Jack remembered a long conversation with Chase that he'd found a complete eye-opener. As a return for subjecting him to his interrogations. Chase often gave a lot of himself in return.

"We came at it from the IRDC side," Shere said. "We found paperwork that said 'Hightower International' in a couple of IRDC places that we raided. Not the only lead we got, but I was supposed to check it out and report before I completed my mission."

"Orders have changed, darling," her colleague drawled.

Jack wanted to hit him but a sharp glance from Shere made him guess that was why Oliver had said "darling". So he forced himself to relax and forget it. God, he should know when someone was trying to rile him, but this guy rubbed him up the wrong way. Or something.

His senses spiked. He really couldn't make up his mind. He'd never felt attracted to a man before, and while he didn't want to leap into bed with this one, he recognized the lethal grace and the ruthlessness of a stone-cold killer. And yes, that attracted him. "So what kind of Talent are you? I'm a jaguar shape-shifter," he offered, knowing his manners around Talents by now.

"Vampire," said Derrington. He glanced at Chase. "And you don't have to tell me you're a Sorcerer." He grinned and his face transformed from brooding sensuality to open enjoyment. "Glad to have you with us. You came out."

"Didn't you?" Chase raised a brow. "I got involved in the original coming-out mess, so I couldn't hide. Or rather I could, but I'd have had to deny my friends. I found it strangely easy. I fired a few staff who couldn't cope, hired new and reconnected with

Jillian. It worked for me." He reached out a hand and covered his wife's where it lay on the sofa between them.

"I haven't yet. STORM prefers it that way, though I daresay it will happen soon. But the British aristocracy doesn't know what to do about it. We have not a few Talents. Hardly surprising if you look at our coats of arms."

Jack grinned, recalling the griffins, unicorns and other fantastic creatures that decorated many a stately home. He'd enjoy watching the previously deadly dull TV programs from Parliament from now on.

"I'm a cat," said Shere quietly. "A bastet."

Silence while Chase turned his attention to her. "Wow." She smiled and Chase gave her a salute, touching two fingers to his forehead. "You're the first I've ever met."

"There aren't many of us," she admitted and moved her feet back down to the soft rug under her feet. Jack had no idea her kind were rare, or respected, or whatever Chase was getting at.

"Okay," Chase said, "then we're probably after the same thing. To take Mickey Hightower and Hightower International out of the game and to dig through the records to see what we see. Clear?"

Jack didn't miss the glance that passed between Derrington and Shere. Neither, he'd bet, did Chase. Okay so they had something else on the agenda. He'd had enough of games and counter games. "So what? What else is there?"

Derrington gave him a hard stare. "Nothing that can't wait."

Chase didn't move, but he released Jillian's hand and stared at the earl. Derrington showed no sign of Chase's concentration on him except he winced and closed his eyes on one slow blink. Then he smiled. "Sorry. It's locked. You destroy my mind or you let me be." He'd dropped the information into a mental vault. Chase would have to do the mental equivalent of blowing it apart to get into it.

Instead, Jack took a deep breath. "Either we work together or we don't. Either we trust each other or we don't. Your choice."

Nobody spoke for a full minute.

Then Shere opened her mouth. "I'm an assassin. I'm here to take out Mickey Hightower."

Jack's world took a sideways jolt. Every time he thought he'd got a handle on his life, something turned up to kick him upside his head. An assassin. He'd slept with an assassin and he couldn't deny it, he wanted to sleep with her again. How did her profession compare to the sexy, sweet woman he thought he was getting to know?

It didn't. This woman had killed. For her job, not because of an excess of passion or because of the predatory nature of what she was. He'd felt the urge himself, in his jaguar form. He was built to kill, but his human side controlled the natural urge.

Again, he'd done it again. He fucked women, and he fell in love with them. Always. He'd been told that women did that, but he wouldn't know. He'd loved Diana, slept with her, fell for her, then Mickey had arrived and taken her away from him. Then Megan, and after their first and only night together she'd told him gently that she'd hate to destroy their friendship. She'd destroyed him and for a year he stayed celibate, preferring not to risk it again. Then Carilla. Passionate, decisive, the woman who'd converted him had told him that Talents fell in love quickly. He believed her, only too glad to have someone who had initiated the passion between them, feeling safe to return her love. Her death had nearly killed him. He'd decided to live his life for her, since she'd given him her most precious gift. Felt good for a while. Until he'd discovered that Carilla had betrayed him and numberless other Talents.

He'd lain awake nights wondering if she'd really loved him. If not, why had she given him her most precious gift, the conversion that she could only bestow on one person? Only recently had he worked out an answer. Carilla wanted to give her gift to someone else, anyone other than Bennett. Jack had just happened to be handy. It made his heart ache. He'd loved her, fallen for her and accepted everything she told him. He liked to think he knew better now, but did he?

Now Shere. He'd done it again. Or maybe not, if he remained aware, refused to get more involved than a good fuck. Shere seemed to be fuck buddies with Derrington, so why couldn't he do the same with her?

He would try. He refused to spend the next year pining for someone who was largely a figment of his own imagination. He'd work it from the start this time, work to keep it right. Fuck, you'd think that by his early thirties he'd have learned. But his romantic nature didn't make it easy. And now he had a few hundred more years to get it right. Shit, that he didn't want to think about. He'd only get old in the last year or so of his life. He'd be like this, thirty-two, forever, or as forever as mattered.

So now he sat perfectly still and took it all in. He should have realized. He'd gone in because of his expertise with the computer. The other candidate available, Andros Zelinski, had a trauma of his own to overcome. And of course Jack shared a past with Mickey that gave him an edge. Now he and Mickey found themselves on opposite sides. Tragic or funny. Jack wasn't sure which applied here.

"Do you still intend to take out Mickey Hightower?" Chase sounded far calmer than Jack felt.

Shere paused, and Jack felt the first break in her composure. He'd save his questions, maybe wouldn't ask them at all, but that falter surprised him. "If it becomes necessary. You have to understand, Hightower has caused us some serious problems. As far as we know, he does it for money. He recruits Talents for the laboratories and recruits high-functioning Talents to work within the IRDC. We can't allow him to continue any longer. Until recently we didn't know his identity. Now we do, one way or another, we have to take him out."

"And you came here on your own," Jack said, suddenly struck by that fact. Assassins went in, struck and left, usually before anyone knew of their presence. Field

agents arrived, laid the groundwork if necessary and got the assassin out afterward. So that meant Oliver Derrington was a field agent. The one most used to working with Shere. And her lover. He couldn't forget that. "You came to do a clean job and found me here."

"Yes I did." She stared straight ahead at him. He read a message in her eyes but he daredn't try to read her beyond the level they all used. He wasn't experienced enough, especially with Chase in the room. He couldn't send her a private message, even if he wanted to. And at the moment he wasn't sure he wanted to. "I don't obey orders without question, what Talent does? But in this case I'd known people he'd sold to the IRDC and I knew the kind of devastation he caused. I didn't know him. Now I do, it doesn't make much difference because the evidence is clear."

"What evidence?" Jack asked. He had to know what would drive the command to kill.

"Pages and pages of it," Derrington put in. "At least twenty Talents and a few people who got in the way. You know the IRDC won't stop until they have their magic elixir, then they'll sell it to the highest bidder. We want to give it away." He made a sound of derision. "Not that our scientists are anywhere near that stage yet, so theirs won't be."

"Which is why the IRDC takes shortcuts," Chase put in. "They torture and kill and dissect, all in the name of progress. Sentient human beings. The case against Hightower is looking damning, but you have to show Jack and me the evidence or we can't commit. We can't sanction killing if we don't have clear cause."

Derrington heaved a sigh. "That seems reasonable. Shere?"

She swallowed and glanced at her partner. "Yes, I agree."

Derrington nodded. "We'll have the evidence ready for you. Affidavits, photographs, written statements." He paused. "It'll take a day or so to get it together. I'll contact our controller and he'll load it up to a secure source, or courier it in. Until then I guess we can keep a holding pattern."

At least that gave Jack time to think. He'd need it after the punch to the gut he'd received tonight. Fucking somebody was one thing, falling in love with a killer was another. He wouldn't fall in love with Derrington.

"Except for one thing, Jack, and I think you can help me with this." Jack nodded to Oliver, but said nothing. "St. Thomas' has a folder I want to see, and it's concerning Dr. Bennett. Since you're an alumnus, I'd like you to come with me."

"Where did you go?"

Derrington raised a brow. "What makes you think I went anywhere?" He laughed. "Actually, I went a few times. My family tends to send its sons to Christ Church."

He might have guessed. One of the best, of course. Not that he minded Derrington going there, but sometimes the way the professors and fellows made a student feel inferior had led him to doubt himself. Well he wasn't inferior now.

## Chapter Six

They left, and Shere found herself alone with Jack for the first time since he'd heard her true profession. She sat in her chair on alert, warily waiting for his first salvo.

He closed the door behind Derrington and leaned against it, folding his arms over his chest. His sexy, broad chest, she recalled, wondering if she'd have another chance to see it. "Why did you decide on that?"

"What?" She wanted him to say it, even though she knew it would hurt her to the quick.

"To be an assassin."

She was right. It hurt. Pain lanced through to her core because of the sadness she read in his eyes. Sorrow, not anger. And she dared not try to enter his mind. He might despise her and she couldn't bear that. The thought shocked her because she'd never cared what people thought of her before. Why should she when she knew she was taking the right course for her?

Only now she cared. "We have to sometimes, and somebody has to do it. I'm good at it." Discovering a skill could be exciting, and she'd done her job with pride for a while. Before she started thinking too closely about survivors. Now she had to remind herself of the justification for the kill. "We don't take that course often, don't think that. But sometimes, with a recidivist, with someone who causes so much death and destruction and won't reform, it's the only course left to take." She paused. "We sent someone to talk to Mickey, but we never heard from our man again. G called in the kill."

Jack forked his fingers into the heavy fall of hair over his forehead, sweeping it back with a gesture of impatience. "So it's easier. That's it, isn't it? Easier to just clear the problem out of the way. Easier than arresting and investigating. You met Chase tonight, the real Chase. He's been inside so many filthy heads that it's a wonder he hasn't broken from it. But we found out far more than if we'd just killed our prisoners. Is assassination all that you do?"

She bit her lip, cringing inwardly at his disparagement. "I'm good at it. I do the job and get out."

"Do you usually know the target?"

His dark eyes bored into her but she didn't look away. "Not always. I get a dossier and G lets me decide for myself. I'm not the only assassin he has on the payroll."

He uncrossed his arms. "Ann Reynolds has some, I believe. Yes, I understand the necessity. And I know that every death marks a person. I don't want it to mark you."

"Too late." She uncurled her legs and got to her feet careful to maintain an appearance of cool. Killer cool. Though she was far from feeling that way. "Marked."

"How did it start?"

She wasn't sure she wanted to answer him, but he'd made her promise. Honesty, he said. She walked over to the window and thrust her hands in the pockets of her jeans. "When my husband died." She felt a shock in the air.

"You can tell me telepathically if you want." His voice sounded closer but she didn't turn around.

"No. It stopped hurting so much a while back. I got married in 1960 to a vampire, an English vampire. He brought me joy. An earlier version of the IRDC took him ten years later. Just when the IRDC was forming, as the separate cells were joining together. When the world was full of so-called vampire slayers and hunters. They found him, tortured him and killed him. I found them and killed them and on the last kill, the police caught me and arrested me. I'd kept the weapon, you see, and while DNA testing was unheard of, they were good at ballistics."

She remembered her fear, not that they'd convict her, but that they'd discover what she was. For the rest, she didn't care. She'd killed her husband's murderers, worked out her revenge, and as far as she was concerned, her life ended there. "But G stepped in. He got me off the charge and forced me to work for him."

Jack's hands landed on her shoulders. "The bastard."

She shook her head and let her tears scatter – unnoticed, she hoped. "He brought me back. He may have done it for his own ends, but he gave me a purpose. You know, wearing the white hat, working for the good guys. I owe G."

"So you continue to work for him and you corrupt your soul."

"No. I can walk away if I want to." She leaned into his heat, taking comfort from his proximity.

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know."

Eyes dry, she turned into his arms, feeling them close around her with a sensation of – what, coming home? No. Something she hadn't felt for years, that was for sure, but something her mind shied away from analyzing. "I'm good at it. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't do this."

"I can think of a few things." When she lifted her head, her gaze locked with his. Warm, protective, understanding, his mouth quirked in that sudden smile of his before he lowered his head to kiss her.

His hair fell over them, veiling them in their own world as he took her mouth and gave her his tongue. She tasted it and knew him, opened her mind for him. He withdrew enough to remind her, "Chase is only across the hall. Are you sure you want to be so open?"

"Will he intrude?"

Jack paused before his answer. "No."

She pulled back. "So why the hesitation?"

He met her gaze. "Not my secret to tell, but Chase is into some interesting stuff, sexually. I only found out by accident. He respects my privacy."

She nodded. "So you respect his."

"That's about it."

She opened her mind a little more and he sucked in a sharp breath. "You know that turns me on."

Her slight smile broadened. "I do now." She grasped a handful of hair and dragged him close for another kiss. This time she led and it turned wild when he tried to take control. She opened her legs and he jammed one of his between them, lifting her off the ground with the force of it. She loved it, squirmed on his thigh to increase the contact, try to get some action to her clit, which already throbbed with want.

He grasped her around the waist and headed for the bedroom, kicking the door open. She rode him, kissed him, suckling and biting her way down his throat until he pushed her away to get at her T-shirt and drag it over her head. She laughed and did the same to him, and without stopping went for his fly. "Careful, sweetheart," he managed. "You drive me crazy and I'm already hard for you. Straight up and straight in."

That made her laugh more. She wanted Jack like she wanted chocolate. Here, now, and lots of it, until she felt too full to move.

Too full to think.

Jack did that to her, brought her into the moment, stopped her turning things over and over in her mind. She loved it. And he made her so hungry for him.

Here they had a big bed and she'd bet a decent ensuite lay through some doors somewhere. Not that she cared right now, but she'd sure like to try shower sex with Jack.

He raised his head and laughed. "Come on then, what are we waiting for?" He lifted her and carried her through to the bathroom. "Oh yeah," he breathed. "This'll do nicely."

Behind a tiled wall was a wet room. On the other side of the room she saw a corner bath big enough for two. Three, for that matter. All in cream with gold fittings to match the cream, ivory and brown color scheme of this suite. Dark red towels covered a wall-mounted rack of wide pipes. Heated, probably. And a glass shelf held a variety of toiletries. In their little room they'd had a small basket of one-application shampoo, conditioner and soap that hadn't been replenished on the second day. Here, big bottles of creamy liquid promised scents and experiences aplenty.

She kissed him before she pulled away, heading for the shelf, undoing her pants as she went. The rain of water against tile told her Jack had found the shower controls. She

didn't waste any time making her selection, and stripped quickly. With bottles in hand, she headed for where Jack stood waiting for her, naked and ready. So ready her mouth watered.

She put the bottles on the tiled, breast-high wall separating the shower from the rest of the room and followed him under the water. He grasped her upper arms but she slid out of his hold. She'd seen what she wanted and she couldn't wait. With hot water pouring down on her, she wrapped her hand around his cock and knelt, in one continuous movement. She watched the smooth head of his cock, damp with more than water, get within sucking distance. A meal on a stick.

She kissed down it first, tasting earthy, musky male, and continued to his balls, sucking first one, then the other into her mouth. Jack groaned and put his hands on her shoulders, widening his legs. She glanced up to meet his fierce stare. He was watching her with an avidity that turned her pussy liquid, his bent head protecting her face from the downpour. His scent wreathed around her and, drawn to the pulsing rod in her hand, she opened her mouth and took him in.

He groaned and she made a sound deep in her throat, sensing his pleasure as he sent it to her. "Oh God, that feels so good!"

She brought her tongue into play, flicking it over the opening at the tip, tasting his essence and inserting it a tiny bit, to widen and tease. Withdrawing a little, she licked around the flange that separated the head from the shaft. She kept her mind tuned in to his so she could discover what he liked. But his mind had turned into a haze of delight and she couldn't tell, except for the occasional shot of extra pleasure. It skittered through her, urging her to touch and taste. She obliged, loving the way he responded, opening to her with no reservations, sharing his delight in what she was doing. Shit, he was driving her up to her own orgasm. He did nothing other than hold her shoulders and share his psi responses.

She began to work him, giving up subtle tongue play in favor of licking along the length of his cock as far as she could without choking. Bringing one hand up, she cradled his balls. She curled the other arm around his back to his ass and gently stroked the top where the cheeks separated. He liked that, so she ventured lower. While she fucked him with her mouth, sucking with every downstroke, releasing when she slid it nearly out of her mouth, she played with the cleft between his buttocks until she reached his hole.

Then she circled it. The water from the shower dampened the area enough to make it slick, not enough to plunge but enough to insert the tip of her finger and tease.

*Give it up, Jack. Give it to me.*

*No, I want to give it to you another way. Oh fuck, what are you doing to me?*

Then his cries reverberated around the room. They echoed off the tiled walls. She matched his fever with her own, working him harder, faster, driving her finger into him as much as she dared without lube. A jolt of surprise reached her when she felt him acknowledge that he liked anal play. *Nobody had done that with him before?* The notion



delighted her. He lifted one hand off her shoulders to push her hair back from her face. She wore it short, but long enough to sweep over her cheeks. He didn't want anything getting in the way of his view of her. She read it in his mind, felt the thought caress her. Heat poured through her, raked her body. As she felt the first spurt of heat shoot into her mouth, her pussy contracted with a hard, fast, orgasm.

She drank him down, every drop, memorizing his taste, loving it. When he had no more to give, she released him reluctantly. She sat on the tiles, tipping her head back to let the hot water wash over her face, beat on her breasts and over her tightly furled, sensitive nipples.

He leaned against the wall behind him, his chest rising and falling as he sucked in deep breaths. That smile curved his lips, a full, both-corners smile, and he bent to help her up.

"Wow. Just wow." His voice rumbled through her and she snuggled close, lifting her head as his mouth came down on hers. His gave her a tender, careful kiss, his tongue caressing her, his hunger temporarily abated, but not gone. She felt the pull at the back of his mind, felt it gain ground as he lifted her and she pressed her body to his.

He reached behind her for one of the bottles, releasing the scent of coconut into the air as he uncapped it. He didn't use a rag or a sponge, but washed her with his hands. He caressed every inch of her body, cupping her breasts and squeezing the liquid over them, his palms pressing against her nipples. "You are so good, and so beautiful." She would have scoffed, but he stopped her with a kiss and a fierce, "Never, ever think you're anything less than beautiful."

She'd have described herself as elegant rather than beautiful, but if he thought so, she'd go along with it. So she smiled at him and took the bottle, smoothing her hands over his with the creamy white liquid. The only thing she regretted about her greediness was that she hadn't seen his cum, but she would, she promised herself that. His muscles rippled under her hands, moving easily as he shifted position so she could wash his chest. She liked hairless chests, and apart from a few sparse, dark hairs, Jack's was bare. She remembered her husband's chest so well.

No, no she didn't. Jack's skin was paler, and— But with a shock she realized she couldn't remember precisely how Mark's chest felt. This experience with Jack was overwhelming. The way he brought her into living in the moment was unlike anything she'd ever known before. "Mark? Was that his name?" Jack's soft query reminded her they were still linked. Usually she never forgot when another Talent linked his or her mind to hers. This time it felt so natural.

Wordlessly she nodded, ashamed that she'd thought of him even for a moment when she should be concentrating on her lover. "I'm sorry." She dropped her forehead against his chest. They'd agreed that what came before didn't matter, but with Jack it was different. Everything mattered.

Most men would be angry or offended that she'd thought of another man while she was with them. She felt none of that in Jack. Instead, his fingers gently tilted up her

chin. "Hey, you were married to him. I can't expect to replace him or mean what he did to you." He touched his lips to her forehead, the water washing away the touch but she felt it deep inside. She'd never forget it. "If you give him honor, then I can expect it too. I'd like to think you won't forget me."

"I won't." The simple truth. Jack would remain in her mind, in her heart, for a long time to come. Perhaps – no, not yet, she wouldn't think that yet.

"Hey, don't stress. Let's just take this as it happens, enjoy each other while we're here. Think of your husband all you like. I told you about Carilla. It seems only fair."

He leaned away to rinse the last of the gel off, turning her to rinse her before he leaned across to turn off the water. He wouldn't let her move but snagged a towel, wrapping it around her as if she were a delicate flower rather than a strong, independent woman. And she loved it. "I must be getting soft in my old age."

"That'll be it." He took another towel for himself, rubbing it vigorously over his body, not sparing his balls and the creases around them. By the time she freed her arms to help, he'd done and was scrubbing the towel over his hair. She touched his cock anyway and felt it twitch under her palm.

Laughing, he took her hand. "It might take just a little longer, though with you I can't be sure. But I'm a Talent, not a super-being."

She copied his action and towel dried her hair as she followed him back into the bedroom. Drawing the sheets back, he gave a happy sigh. "This is more like it. Better than those nightmare rooms."

Shere had no hesitation in joining him, dropping the towel by the side of the bed. She slid into his faintly coconut-scented arms and he pulled the covers over them. This room was nicely warm, so they might not need them, but it felt comfortable, cozy. And since she felt relaxed enough, she said, "I'm sorry about Carilla."

His body stiffened before he took a breath and relaxed. "Sorry, it's still new to me."

"What? Carilla died a year ago." She turned her head to gaze at him and caught the trouble in his eyes and in his mind. Disturbance swirled. Some Talents with a lot of empathy saw moods as colors. If she had that ability, the color would have been dark purple, storm-tinted.

"And I forced myself to be honest about it, but the latest revelations put me in a spin." He stroked her arm. She loved the way he touched her, as if he cherished her. "Carilla said she loved me and she wanted to convert me. Me, I always fell in love with every woman I went to bed with. Now I'm different, Talented, it doesn't happen like that. At least, not since my conversion." Shere wondered about that last comment, but he carried on. "I learned, or I thought I did, with Megan. We slept together once, but it wasn't all that for her, so we decided to stay friends. I loved her in that way. Still do. So I thought I'd gotten over my habit. And thinking about it, I probably have, but I'd never met anyone like Carilla before. She was alive, daring, and she seduced me." He flashed a grin. "I shouldn't be talking about this with you."

"Yes you should." She felt no jealousy, nothing. Why should she, when he hadn't met her yet? She had him now and she was beginning to think that she didn't want to let him go. Already the thought of what they'd do when this operation ended needled at her mind, making it hard for her to do her job.

"Okay." He sighed and stroked her again, his hand nudging the side of her breast. He paused and covered it, caressing almost absentmindedly as he talked. "When she said she loved me I was flattered. And I thought I loved her back. Now I'm not so sure. I mean, I think she railroaded me into the conversion fast, perhaps because she knew her days with STORM were numbered. Maybe she wanted someone around when she ran. Because I think that's what she planned to do. The whole experience cured me of love, that's for sure."

He sighed and drew her closer. "Bennett wanted her to convert him, so she converted me first. Her one and only."

Jack took a few seconds and she didn't break his silence. "I joined STORM after that. Never came out as a Talent formally, just let people take me as I was. If they wanted to read me, they could find out." He circled her nipple with a touch so gentle she could hardly feel it. "I trained. It saved me, that training, and I worked with Team Red as a researcher. I spent all my spare time training with Chase for the psi Talents, with other shape-shifters for the other skills. They say I'm good, but for most of last year I've been driven. That's why they sent me here, I think. To get back in touch with what I was. And maybe something else." He sighed.

"What else?"

He glanced at her. "When we discovered the connection between Bennett and Hightower International, I did some hard thinking. Bennett spent a year here on a sabbatical, doing research. And no, I didn't know that when I studied here. St. Thomas' is a big college and the students here cover a wide range of subjects. I studied librarianship and archive research, as did Megan. Bennett was a scientist. Megan had some latent Talent abilities. They call that kind of person a 'sensitive' in New York."

Shere nodded. "They call them that here too."

"So Bennett saw the possibilities and had her recruited for the library at McIver. I suspect other things, too, but you mustn't tell Megan, if you meet her."

His tension rose and she knew he was about to trust her with a secret. "You know I won't. There's something else, isn't there? Tell me."

Two tense lines bracketed his mouth. "I think Bennett might have had something to do with Charles' death. Might have had him killed. Charles was Megan's professor. They fell in love, but they agreed to do nothing until she'd graduated because it would have cost him his job. She got her degree and that same day Charles died in a car accident. I don't know, but it seems a bit coincidental that the thing keeping her in the UK went away just when Bennett was taking an interest in her. But I have no proof, and it's done now. And Bennett is dead. So there's no point dragging all that up, is there?"

Sadness filled her but she recognized the truth of what Jack was asking her to do, to keep his suspicions about Charles' death to herself. She could understand why. It would bring painful memories back to Megan, resurrect the agony of the past. They had enough against Bennett already to condemn him. "I won't tell anyone. Unless it becomes vital for the operation, I don't think anybody needs to know." She paused. "Why did you tell me?"

"I don't know, really." Then he glanced down at her and his expression turned heated. "Though I'm glad I did. That suspicion has nagged at me for years. It's good to share."

And as she met his gaze, she knew she could so easily fall for this man, this damaged individual who'd learned to survive by living in the moment. "So now we're here."

"Yep." He laughed. "Don't look so stricken. It happened, and I'm dealing with it. Learning all the time."

She smoothed her hand over his stomach and, heading lower, found his cock stirring into life. It hardened under her hand and she purred low in her throat, letting her cat out to play. He gasped and pushed into her hand in an instinctive gesture that she loved. His caresses on her breast became more purposeful, and he tweaked her nipple to draw it out, harden the tip. "Beautiful."

She laughed. "You keep calling me that. Elegant I'll accept, but not beautiful."

"Idiot." He swung himself up to lean over her. "You're beautiful. Is that why you wear a padded bra?" He cupped her breast. "No need, my lovely. You have a precious handful. Two precious handfuls."

"Thank you." She flushed, not used to such compliments. She tended to discourage them and she wasn't sure why she hadn't stopped the conversation, or at least diverted it. "I wore the bra initially because of the research I did on Mickey Hightower. He likes a well-endowed woman." Then she wore it for protection because she hated the way he ogled her.

He lifted his gaze, met her eyes. "You would have seduced him?"

She tried to shrug. "I've done it before." But a lump settled in her throat. She didn't want him to think about her like that. Before she met Jack, she'd cultivated the image of the cool spy who'd do what was needed to get the job done. Now she wondered if she hadn't merely tried to cut her emotions off completely. She didn't know what to say so she hooked her arm around his neck and brought him down for a kiss. "I probably won't do that now."

"No probably about it," he growled into her mouth before he took her in one of his careful but passionate kisses.

And the magic of a few moments ago returned. Just like that, tingles spreading through her body, her need for him growing with them.

She pressed against him and he gave way until she pushed herself up on her elbows and farther. She pursued him to deliver a series of hot, wet kisses. His cock

burgeoned between them, long and hard and hot. She followed him until they were both on their knees, arms around each other, kissing and caressing with a feverish intensity.

Lifting her head to catch her breath, she caught sight of a movement behind him and automatically flung herself aside, pulling him with her. At his gasped, laughing protests, she demanded, "Quiet!"

Then she saw the mirror and realized she'd glimpsed their reflections, not intruders.

Placed opposite the bed, the large, full-length mirror was set on the back of one of the wardrobe doors. It could be slid aside, if a guest didn't want to use it. Seemingly innocuous, it provided a perfect view of the bed and its occupants.

"Oho!" Jack lay on his back, watching their reflections as she made to swing away to adjust it. "Don't you like to watch?" He seized her wrist, not hard, but enough to make her pause.

"I know what I look like," she snapped. "Like most other bastards. Tall, slim, narrow-hipped, dark hair, black eyes. I don't need to see it."

"And you've never seen yourself making love?"

"No!" The thought of watching herself shocked her and thrilled her in equal measure. Making love, fucking, having sex, she'd done all three, all of them natural functions, nothing more. Except that it had taken on a new significance since Jack had appeared in her life, one it hadn't had since Mark died. And Mark had been a modest man, not adventurous in bed.

"Then come here. Sex should be fun, don't you think?"

For her, sex had been firmly recreational, something to relieve a primal urge, or to rest after a stressful job. So yes it should. She smiled at him and dropped to all fours, but before she could lie down beside him, he knelt up and drew her up in front of him, his knees between hers, forcing her legs apart. His long sigh of pleasure heated her shoulder. "Look at you." He rested his hands on her hips, sliding them up the curve of her waist and back again. "So lovely. Your skin reminds me of those chocolates you bite into and find sticky smooth caramel inside. It flows over your fingers and you have to lick them clean. He bent his head and kissed her shoulder, his hair falling over his face and tickling her skin. He straightened and shook back the heavy fall. "Not just the color, but the taste and the silkiness. Delectable. Delicious." She concentrated on his voice and the way his hands moved almost reverently over her body. "And these." He cupped her breasts, pushed them up to swell over his hands. It was almost sinful the way she arched into him, loving the sensation. "Gorgeous. A handful, a mouthful, a reminder of everything that you are. You want more? Why? These are perfect."

"So no augmentations?" she asked, one brow arched in a daring tease.

"Only if you really want them. It won't put me off and it won't turn me on any more than I am already. Because it'll still be you. Besides, I've always wondered, what happens to all those fake bits when we shape-shift? Has anyone tried it? That's why I

won't have laser surgery. I only need glasses when my eyes are tired anyway, but I've known other Talents who need lenses or glasses all the time."

She laughed. "I never thought of that. No augmentation, then."

He rubbed his thumbs over her nipples and she gasped, letting her head fall back against his shoulder. His cock nestled into her back, hard and ready. When he moved slightly, she felt the dampness as a pearl of his essence escaped and smeared across her skin. "Such a shame to spoil perfection." Her laugh then was more self-derisory and his hands tightened on her for a second.

"I won't have it. You know you're beautiful. You must. From that soft hair to the toes I am going to lick and suck one day, you're gorgeous." He released one breast and brought his hand across to take them both in a gentle hold that left her spilling over his palm. He spread the free hand and drew it down her body to span it from hip to hip. The tips of his fingers barely skimmed her pubic hair. With her legs spread like this, her clit peeked through the neatly trimmed nest of curls, a pink invitation glistening with her juices. "You have no idea how much I want you," he said, "but anticipation is so exquisite. I won't tell you to relax, I don't want you to. Forget everything else but us, here, now and this." He pushed one hand down to touch her clitoris.

The contact felt like a shot of electricity straightening her spine and she opened her arms, seeking something to hold on to. "Hold on to me," he told her. She curled her arms behind her and grabbed his waist. "That's the way. Now watch."

He circled her clit, teasing it before he pinched it, not hard but enough to pull back the protective hood and get to the most sensitive part underneath. "Revenge?" she asked, wondering if he wanted to drive her as crazy as she'd done to him in the shower.

"Not precisely. But sweet, for all that." He growled, and she knew his cat had come out to play too. She saw it in her mind, golden fur dappled with dark rings, eyes gleaming with predatory desire.

Then it disappeared as he fought it back. "No. Don't do that. Let it out."

His movement stilled. "I thought—"

"It's not wrong, not for us. The cat will never take you over. The human is your base form, the one you return to when you're ill or unconscious or sleeping. Your cat will never take over. Try it."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." She didn't feel bad about not telling him the other part—that when the other form came out to play it was a sign that they wanted to get acquainted, because the whole person, human and cat, was going in deep. At the thought, she shuddered and released her own cat. Let it free to roam her body and feel, as she did, the pleasure of his hands on her.

She felt his release, like a tight garment suddenly undone. The reaction rippled through his body. She saw the ghost of golden fur on his skin before he stretched and resumed the relentless circling of her clitoris. Then he pinched, tugged and let it go, slide his fingers down her crease and deep inside her, almost without pause. He drew

out of her and held his fingers up to show her. "See? Beautiful." Then he put his fingers in his mouth and sucked. She watched him in the mirror, watched him lick and suck, and she moaned, leaning back and tilting her face up to watch him more.

Without warning, he pulled his fingers away and turned to her instead. He joined their mouths in a deep, fierce kiss that took her breath away. His hands held her steady or she might have fallen. She felt him draw away to rub his cock head down her body. He finished the kiss and regarded her, his eyes heavy-lidded. "You want it? You want me?"

"What do you think? Fuck me, Jack."

He grinned, nice and slow. "Oh yes. Long, hard and deep. Lean forward."

He helped her tip forward so he could reach her. She placed her palms on the bed in front of her but kept her arms straight. He stroked down her spine, sending shudders right up to her head. He continued down and gave a low moan. "Sweetheart, you're dripping."

She laughed, feeling her essence trickle down the inside of her thighs. "You think I need you to tell me that?"

"Fuck, oh Shere, you're wholly gorgeous." He kept his mind linked with hers so she saw him take his straining cock in hand. He glided it down her back before delving between her buttocks. She gasped but he moved away and repositioned it at the entrance to her pussy. "I can smell you. Fresh desire. It's driving me crazy, baby." The tip of his cock entered her and she tried to bear back, to push him in farther, but he held her off.

Then he drove in, right in and she cried out. Cried his name as his cock breached her, pushed in deep, nudging past her G-spot. He moved again to work himself in. It felt harder, somehow, or maybe it was the angle, but she'd never felt so filled.

One arm came around her waist and he pulled her up against him. "Did you forget the mirror?"

She had. Or at least, it wasn't in the forefront of her mind right now.

She looked up. Under a tousled mop of hair, Shere saw a wild woman. Her eyes were bright with life and love, her mouth partly open, her nipples taut. Her flanks quivered with reaction as he drove in and out of her and she watched as her climax built. She cried out and tried to turn to claim a kiss but Jack gritted his teeth and threw his head back, working her hard. "I can't. You *will* come before I do, but oh, sweetheart, seeing you like that..." He growled again, a warning sound before he paused and changed his rhythm.

In this position, she could do little but bear back against him. Her buttocks crushed against his hard abdomen while he pounded into her in a rhythm she couldn't deny. It became part of her and the sensation spread. It filled her body with tingles and sparks, emanating from where his cock rubbed against her sweet spot. The sounds of their fucking gave accompanying music, the soft wet sounds of his body in hers, the slap of

flesh on flesh and his moans, sounds of encouragement, interspersed with words. "That's it...oh yes, that feels so good, don't stop doing that... God, you should see yourself. Look, Shere, look at you, look at us."

Him behind her in the mirror, his paler skin behind hers, broad shoulders surrounding her slender form. His hands held her steady, one pressed against her abdomen, the other under her breasts, holding her close, firm. Safe.

She cried his name, sobbed it over and over as her senses went into overdrive, her cat purring, her body holding his, gripping, milking until he cried out, too, a wordless yell of fulfillment.

Then nothing but the sounds of their ragged breathing. She fell forward, cushioning her fall with her elbows and the soft covers under them. He followed her, bracketing her with his body, his heat. They looked like cats rutting on a rooftop, but they felt more. Felt it through everything they were, the fulfillment of every need, in each other.

Oh no, oh shit, she was falling for him, hard and fast. She had to make a decision. To stay or go, to let this go forward or drop a barrier to stop it going any further?

She left the barrier up.

He pulled her upright again, his cock still embedded in her pussy, and made a sound low in his throat that sounded like a cross between a purr and a growl. "Now look. Just look at us."

She lifted her head, opened her eyes and looked. He was right. They looked beautiful, their bodies flushed with heat. Between her legs she saw him, saw his balls just under her, his hands on her body, spread out as if he wanted to encompass as much of her as he could.

"Thank you. I'll never forget this sight."

"Neither will I." Their gazes met in the mirror. "I want to do this again. All night." He clamped his mouth shut as if he wanted to say something else but thought better of it at the last minute. But she caught his thought before he locked it away, the words unsaid, but the knowledge there.

*This could be love.*

And neither of them wanted that.



## Chapter Seven

Walking together through the entrance of St. Thomas' College, Jack and Derrington must appear an incongruous pair, thought Jack. He wore his work outfit of cheap pants and polyester shirt. Derrington was in custom-made navy blue wool.

Jack nodded to the porter sitting in the box by the door, flashing his alumnus card. Derrington had to show his appointment letter. He should hate Oliver because of his previous connection with Shere, but Jack sensed something inside him, something he couldn't quite reach. Derrington kept his mind as tight as a drum.

The man at the gate was new. In his time it had been old Collier, almost as famous as the star lecturers and alumni of the college, or the cat that prowled the quad. This man was smarter, he sat up straight and Jack couldn't see a stained white pottery tea mug anywhere. This man probably drank coffee. And he took Jack's ID card and studied it before giving it back to him with a smooth smile. Collier would have exchanged the time of day and maybe glanced at the photograph and made a joke. When the porter began to give directions, Jack shook his head. "I think we can find our way there."

Despite appearances, times had changed.

In some ways it felt like yesterday, and in others a lifetime. Trying not to let his melancholy mood affect his purpose, Jack walked briskly through the gate.

They strolled around the quadrangle and Derrington took his time admiring the buildings. They were worth admiring. Dating mainly from a rebuild in the seventeenth century, St. Thomas had it all—looks, age and wealth. But the two-story buildings surrounding the quadrangle, the gentle honey-colored stone, worn with age, masked a hive of activity. This part was a showpiece, often shown in documentaries. The college got a lot of useful extra cash by renting it out to film companies. Very little real work got done here, in the old part of the college. Still, he had to admit, the cloister-like arches on the open passages and the rough, weathered stone made it a pretty sight. He walked through, and only when he passed through a low archway to the outer path did he see people.

The students' accommodation lay to their right. They turned left, although Jack was strongly tempted to pay a sentimental visit to his old room later. Derrington followed his gaze. "You were there?"

Jack nodded. "With the hoi polloi. I guess you were in the Staircases at Christ Church?" The historic, comfortable and expensive accommodation was in the historical buildings, but the poorer students lived in less picturesque places.

Derrington nodded. "I did live in the student halls for a term. I wanted to know what it was like." He pulled a face. "Squalid. I moved back to the Staircases." He stopped and turned to face Jack. "Are you saying you'd have done anything different?"

Jack met his gaze and flashed a grin. "Maybe. My parents had money, but I decided to do this on my own. I took the minimum I could from them and moved into the student halls. You're right about the squalid. When I did my post-grad, I found a shared house and we got almost civilized."

They began to walk again. "The Staircases weren't all fun. There were rules, archaic ones, stupid ones, and I'm not talking about the ones the dons set."

"Were you a blue?" Derrington certainly looked big and strong enough to row. Oxford blues often went on to row for England in international competitions. So did Cambridge blues, although most Oxfordians didn't like to admit that.

"Yes, but a long time ago. Before they filmed it. You must know I've passed on the title to myself a few times. I have an imaginary cousin somewhere in Australia." That was the way Talents used to pass on their fortunes in the old days. Invent imaginary people to inherit it and then turn up to claim it. Once the paper chases started in earnest, it became harder to accomplish and then they had to enlist the help of various governments. In return for favors, of course. At least they didn't have to do that anymore.

"Do you plan to remain undercover?"

Derrington nodded. "For now at least. If I'm outed I'll take it, but being undercover works for me and it works for STORM. And yes, before you ask, I've partnered Shere for some time now."

"I know you slept together. Sleep together." He couldn't keep the jealousy out of his voice and it tinged his mind before he shoved it away.

Derrington glanced at him, gray eyes shrewdly assessing. "Yes. Sometimes it was handy to pose as man and wife. And Shere, as I know you've noticed, is one beautiful woman. But you should also know that I'm not the jealous type. And if Shere becomes – unavailable to me, I'll wish her happy. And keep an eye on her."

Well that was clear enough. Not that Jack planned anything permanent right now. "Yes, she's gorgeous. But my life's in New York these days and I don't think she's too keen on moving. So it has to be a for-now affair."

Derrington's full mouth curved in a smile. "As long as she's okay with that." He paused. "I like your sigil. That little cat is cute." Jack wasn't sure what to make of that. Derrington must have seen his sigil the night before, because he'd hidden it today.

"I didn't see yours, though I know you're a vampire." He laughed. "Although that sun beating down on you right now should by rights be frying you to a crisp."

Derrington burst into laughter and Jack found the sound oddly compelling. A twinge of attraction surprised him. Up to now he'd assumed he was straight. He still thought so, but he could imagine if he wanted any man, it would be someone like this tall, handsome, powerful male.

Derrington clapped him on the shoulder. "Some bigots still think vampires only go out at night." His expression sobered. "A shame they had to find out that we're vulnerable by day. You know some British vampires are deciding to become creatures of the night for real."

"Aren't you worried?"

"That's one reason I'm staying undercover. But no, I'm not too worried. I've trained to make up for my relative weakness by day."

Studying the muscular body under the beautifully tailored navy suit, Jack didn't doubt it. "I was a karate black belt. Still am, come to that, even though I can just about partially shift now to add to my strength." Which meant he could call on his cat to help. Still, his reactions and the way he moved all owed something to his longtime hobby.

Derrington nodded. They walked past some modern buildings and through an old archway, back to a cluster of old buildings. Jack had taken Derrington around the fastest way. Most visitors would have followed the quad around and passed through to the next quad, which was the pretty way, but much longer. And Jack wanted Derrington to know the fast way out. Just in case. Vampires could flash from place to place when in their full form, after sundown. Jack would put good money that Derrington had a state-of-the-art smartphone with a connection to a camera in a strategic place. Not that it would help him right now, in broad daylight.

A smartly dressed woman waited for them just inside the doors. Their appearance seemed to startle her, probably because she was staring in the other direction, no doubt expecting them to arrive that way.

She flushed and glanced at them, and Jack knew what she was staring at. Even he had to admit that Derrington looked spectacularly good, and the easy way he held his body made him more desirable. To women, of course. Jack prided himself that he could look good if he wanted to, but he'd made efforts not to today. At least she wasn't Mrs. Kidlington, his old nemesis. She'd been the gateway to the professor who'd made his undergraduate years miserable, Professor Campbell.

She frowned, looking from one to the other of them. "Lord Derrington?" These days, Jack thought with unholy glee, you could never tell. Derrington could be a self-made millionaire, Jack an impoverished earl. Oliver glanced at Jack, giving him a grin. "I'm Derrington. This is Jack Hargreaves, the alumnus who kindly helped to arrange the meeting today." Since he was only asked to tag along at the last minute, Jack thought that was pushing it a bit.

The woman spared him a glance over the top of her brown-framed spectacles. "Good morning, your lordship, Mr. Hargreaves. Would you follow me, please?"

Jack had hoped she'd ask him to "walk this way," but no such luck. They followed her up a flight of old oak stairs to a broad door, also oak. After a double knock, they heard the imperious "Come!" and despite the knowledge of all he'd done, all he'd been, his stomach plunged into his feet. Taking a couple of deep breaths, he followed the assistant and Oliver into the book-lined room.

The smell hit him first. Pipe smoke and leather, old books and floor polish, all tumbled into an aroma that turned his stomach. These days the Prof probably shouldn't smoke in his chambers, but he'd likely ignore that as some kind of draconian edict. So long as he didn't do it in front of others, they'd probably let him get away with it. Thirty years ago, Professor Campbell wrote the definitive book about an obscure author, Laura Singleton. It rocketed both himself and the dead author into stardom. The college gained a lot of kudos and extra research money from that and Campbell had milked it ever since. Never wrote anything else of serious academic note.

Every essay Jack wrote for him had been dissected, destroyed and thrown back at him, eventually receiving a mediocre mark. Since his other assignments regularly gained straight A's, it hadn't proved too much of an impediment to his degree. But Jack had wondered what Campbell had against him. Until he realized the man was an unutterable snob, and only granted A's to the people living on the Staircases. Oxford being Oxford, nobody had called him on it, at least, nobody who mattered. Jack hadn't bothered to protest, but found another tutor as soon as he could, changing his subject to do so. And avoided him during his doctorate course too. The professor had been one important reason Jack had decided not to apply for a Fellowship when it became available. He'd never regretted that decision. Much.

And the old bastard still had the same effect on him. Jack hated his reaction as much as he hated the man. He shouldn't give anyone that much power. Today, the professor wasn't alone. Accompanying him was someone Jack didn't recognize, a younger man with an open expression. Also an open mind, Jack discovered when he ventured to test it. A naïve academic. He smiled and stepped forward, hand outstretched. He turned to Jack first. "Don Stratton. I'm a Fellow here. Pleased to meet you."

Jack shook his hand, murmuring his name, then turned to Professor Campbell. "How are you, sir?"

The professor frowned. "Do I know you?"

But this time Jack had the advantage. He picked up the swirling sense of glee in the man's mind. "I think you know you do, Professor. You did your best to fail me a few years back."

"Did I succeed?"

"In no way at all," Jack purred. All these years he'd built this man up to a bastard of the first order. Now he could see the man was an embittered academic with an oversensitive snobbery gland. "I got a reasonable degree and went on to my doctorate. I'm an archivist now. With STORM."

The man's eyes widened. "You're a – what do they call themselves – Talent?"

"Not everyone working for STORM is a Talent," said Jack, deliberately evading the question. He wouldn't trust the old bastard not to go and shout it in the common room. Then it would come to the attention of Mickey. And they didn't want that, not yet.

"I see. What can they want with you?"

"He's a valued member of STORM," said Oliver, as he briefly touched the professor's hand in greeting.

Before Jack's fascinated gaze, the professor turned into a sycophant. He gave a broad smile and would, Jack was sure, have bowed deeply had he been able. "My lord, I'm delighted to meet you. I'm just sorry you didn't grace St. Thomas' with your presence."

Jack heard it clearly, a voice in his mind. *Fuck, this man is sickening.*

*He was my tutor,* he answered. He didn't need to say any more. He felt Oliver's disgust.

"I can't say my degree is as distinguished as Dr. Hargreaves'," Oliver said. "I asked him to come because I respect his opinion." Jack rarely used his proper title these days. For the most part, he ignored it.

A muffled sound from one side of him told Jack the professor's colleague had just suppressed a laugh. Turning it into a cough never worked. Professor Campbell cleared his throat. "So would you like to see the file now?"

"Or have a coffee?" Stratton prompted, a grin on his face.

Oliver shook his head, smiling. Not until they'd done the job they came here for. Then he'd put the professor through the wringer, ask him about his achievements since Jack's trip to the USA. "We'd love coffee – afterward. May we see the documents first?"

The professor led them to his desk, a heavy piece of dark wood, the epitome of a professorial desk. On it lay piles of thick books, some open, the pages marked with various objects, and a pad of paper with a mug full of pens. Jack noticed the film of dust over the top of some of them and wondered where the professor had hidden his laptop. These days, nobody was as devoid of electronics as that. The prof was full of bullshit. Absolutely packed with it.

He pulled open a drawer and drew out a slim file, making a point of handing it to Oliver. Oliver exchanged a glance with Jack. That file was disappointingly thin. "This is all you have? All Dr. Bennett left you with? We understood he conducted a number of transactions through the college."

"That's all," Stratton said. "Bennett was looking for a specific document. We located it just before he was killed. We're not sure why he wanted it."

Oliver opened the folder to reveal a tissue-wrapped object. Silently he handed the folder to Jack. "You're the expert with old stuff."

Jack wished he had white cotton gloves, but he would have to risk it, this one time. He moved a couple of tomes aside, ignoring Professor Campbell's protests, and laid the folder flat. If the professor couldn't see which item had priority here, he certainly could. Carefully, he unfolded the tissue and revealed the document.

A list. The creases and breaks in the surface told Jack it had once been stored as a scroll, but now it lay flat. He felt, as he always did when faced with old documents, a connection with people long dead, forgotten except for what he looked at now.

"Middle English was never my strong suit," said the professor. "And the document appeared so dull."

"My specialties, on the other hand, include Middle English," Jack murmured, "and the script that most literate people used."

This wasn't an illuminated manuscript, one of those carefully written, gorgeously illustrated documents that collectors and museums vied to own. This would be described as "of academic interest only". Jack found it hard to justify the "only".

He dragged a loupe, the accurate magnifying glass used by jewelers, out of his pocket and held it over the document. A plain document, the parchment weathered and darkened with age. But it showed signs of careful stewardship, the edges buffered but not torn, little sign of careless treatment.

"Interesting," Oliver murmured.

Until then, Jack wasn't aware he'd been talking out loud. But now he continued. "I'd like to take a sample of the ink. We can often discover where the document was made by examining the chemical components of the ink. Parchment could theoretically come from anywhere, brought in and stored for use. However ink had to be made fresh and the slight differences in the mix can tell us the region. Pen strokes give clues to the identity of the author. Not who, you understand, but where and how they were trained. Certain schools used different methods." He paused, sweeping his glass over the list. "This is a secular document, a list of names. At the top, the superscription is a little more obscured. It must have rested on the outside of the scroll because the names later in the document are clearer. He moved his eyeglass down to the bottom of the list, looking for a subscript. But halfway down, he stopped. "Oliver, there's a Derrington here."

"Any other names you can decipher?"

Jack wondered at the new sharpness in Oliver's tone but, absorbed in the document, he didn't read any mental communication from the earl. "Stephen, Lord Warrington, John, Lord Telford –"

"No more," Oliver snapped. "Not here. And yes, STORM is interested in this document."

Jack thought it strange that Oliver didn't say "we" before he recalled that Oliver worked undercover. So this was probably a list of Talents. He moved the glass aside and stared at the paper, for the first time beginning to read the superscript. "By the order of our sovereign lord, King Henry, this list is to remain privy to him and his trusted servants," he read out. "The medieval equivalent of 'For Your Eyes Only' or 'Top Secret'."

"Friend or foe?" Oliver wondered.

"Medieval is such a distasteful term," the professor put in.

A crash outside the door made them all start and exclaim.

Oliver's "What the fuck?" still echoed through the room when the door burst open with enough force to bounce it off the wall, sending it hurtling back to whoever wanted to come in so urgently. A large hand took the brunt of the recoil and shoved the door aside. The hand's owner leaped forward, allowing the two men behind him to spring into action.

Jack heard a shot and went down, grabbing the man nearest him to get him out of the way of the shooter. "Shit!"

No time for conscious reaction, only reflex as Jack felt his cat burst through and wisely gave way to the shape-shift. Claws sprang from his fingertips and he felt the familiar shimmering as the cat took hold. Ripping sounds heralded the loss of another set of clothes. He hardly registered where the rags fell, concentrating instead in working the jaguar that was his other self.

He'd never heard the professor swear before, but he certainly had a good way with curse words. Jack glanced at Oliver, the only unfazed person in the room, relieved to see him untouched, not bleeding. Oliver couldn't access his Talent until after sunset. He was as human as every other non-Talent in the room, except, Jack hoped, he'd had some training in combat techniques.

The smell of a freshly discharged weapon filled the air, acrid and smoky. Jack knew just where to leap. At the man holding the gun. Jack's shape-shift had momentarily stunned the bastard, so the jaguar sprang, mouth open, teeth bared in a snarling display of fury.

He sank his fangs into the man's arm, soft flesh giving, bright blood spurting. With a sharp cry, the man dropped the weapon but another shot hammered through the alarmed yells filling the room. Jack turned around, gore dripping from his jaws, and saw another attacker aiming at him. The weapon shook.

Jack moved fast. The gun went off, the sound reverberating around the paneled walls.

Oliver kicked up and caught his assailant on his wrist, following up with a punch to the gut that sent the man gasping to the floor. The weapon spun through the room. The other man had turned and fled, or gone for reinforcements.

Hearing the clatter as the gun hit the polished floorboards, Jack turned again to face the first man. He lay on one of Professor Campbell's precious Oriental rugs, bleeding all over it. His loud groans told Jack he wasn't dead, although if he didn't get a medic soon, he'd bleed out. Just as well Oliver couldn't take his vampire form, because that scent would probably drive the vampire insane with hunger.

Oliver stood over his captive and straightened his tie with a practiced motion. "They sent three men against two Talents? What were they thinking?"

Jack glanced at the professor, currently sitting on the floor staring at them, eyes wider than he'd ever seen them before. He let the jaguar growl low in his throat, the sound guaranteed to curdle the blood. Maybe he should howl too. But he desisted.

Time to discuss the problem. He shape-shifted, saying a reluctant farewell to his cat for now, but kept his animal close to the surface.

"Do you think they'll send reinforcements?" He spread his mind, scanning.

"No," Oliver said. "I'll keep watch, you contact Chase. He can at least bring you a change of clothes."

Jack glanced down at his naked body. "You get embarrassed?"

Oliver gave a short laugh. "I might get turned-on. You're a good-looking man, Jack."

Jack raised a brow and smiled. "Sorry, but it's not my thing. Not that I wouldn't fancy the pants off you if I was that way inclined."

"Hmmm. You might like to let me change your mind."

He knew Oliver was joking, but the fine edge he sensed in the other man's mind told him there might be an edge of truth to the earl's words. Jack's cock had never responded to a man before, though he'd sometimes felt curious. Now he felt the familiar tension that told him it had come to life. Shit, he couldn't do this.

He glanced around the room but couldn't see anything convenient to wear. He spread his senses and called for Chase, receiving a response almost as fast as he'd sent it. *Stay put. I'll bring clothes and make sure nobody surprises you.* He glanced at Oliver. "Chase is putting us into lockdown."

Oliver nodded toward the professor. "Too late."

The bastard had his cell phone out and held to his ear. "Police?"

And then Jack crossed the room to the table and saw that the document had gone.

"Jack?" He spun around, alerted by the way Oliver said his name. Quiet, puzzled.

Only then did he realize that not all the blood on his colleague's body came from the man he'd attacked. Fresh blood poured from a wound on Oliver's shoulder, a through and through if he wasn't mistaken. Then pain hit in a delayed reaction, transmitted to him through the body of Lord Derrington as he slumped to the floor.



## Chapter Eight

Chase arrived faster than the police and brought a couple of paramedics with him. After Jack's frantic telepathic message, he told him to stay put and do what he could. Jack looked up from pressing both hands to the wound, which was pouring blood fast. He sighed with relief when he saw the green-suited men with Chase. They took over, one lifting Oliver and the other beginning to form a tourniquet from a strip of white fabric.

Jack stood up and stretched. Only when he heard the slight movement from the corner did he recall the professor. His gaze met that of his old tutor and he smiled, showing a little teeth. A panther smile, or more appropriately, a jaguar smile. "How is he?" he asked the medics.

"He'll live." One man gave him a nod. "You did the right thing. We'll stop the bleeding and wait until nightfall. Then he'll heal himself."

"You know he's a vampire?" Jack touched Oliver's mind. Now his colleague was unconscious, he saw his sigil, a family sign that said to another Talent, "Vampire". The swiftly muffled squeak from behind him drew his attention again.

He turned slowly on one heel to face the professor, savoring the dramatic moment.

The professor met his steady gaze. Despite the circumstances, a pulse of triumph surged through Jack. Sometimes retribution came in the strangest forms.

Professor Campbell was terrified, close to pissing himself. Despite his desire to shout, "See? Even the humble American can amount to something sometimes," Jack only forced a reassuring smile to his lips and said, "It's okay. A few things happened on my visit to the States and joining STORM was only one of them. But we're on the side of the good guys. I'm sorry about Mr. Stratton, though. They'll pay for that."

Chase tossed him a pair of jeans and Jack stepped into them. Perhaps his nakedness had disconcerted the professor as much as his new status. Who was he kidding? The professor couldn't spend much time watching one of his ex-pupils morph into a larger-than-life jaguar.

Setting his jaw, the professor got to his feet using the side of his desk for support. He gripped the edge as if it were a lifeline, his knuckles turning white. "His lordship?"

Jack zipped the jeans and cinched the belt. "You heard us. He's a vampire."

A rustling of fabric indicated the presence of Chase behind him. "Can we trust this man?"

Slowly, Jack shook his head. "He'll tell. If put under duress he won't last five minutes."

Chase sighed. "Then we'll take him with us for safekeeping." *And I'll wipe his memory.*

*Can you do it without destroying his intellect?*

A mental shrug. *Probably. Why, would the loss of his intelligence be a problem for humankind?*

Jack didn't need to think about that one. *No.*

*No problem then. I'll do my best.*

The professor stared at them much as a rabbit regarded a snake. Fascinated, unable to look away. Jack met his gaze but watched the professor's attention flick to one side, where Chase stood. "Very good," Chase murmured. "You need to come with us to get that nasty cut attended." Finally the man's gaze left theirs to glance at the back of his hand. His eyes widened, his mouth opened. "I didn't even notice I was hurt," he said. He wasn't. His hand looked perfectly unmarked to Jack. Mind-hexing, he presumed.

A new voice came from behind them. "Could someone tell me what happened here?"

Shit. Jack turned to confront a policeman. The man's silver badge gleamed with near-military perfection and he held a walkie-talkie. Jack should have closed the professor down before he'd called the cops, but the injury to Oliver had frozen him for a crucial couple of seconds. Inexperienced, stupid.

Chase refused to let him wallow in self-recrimination. *No. we all feel that sometimes. I'd still want you at my back, Jack.*

*Thanks.* Nice to know, but it didn't make him feel any better. Now they had this person to deal with. No doubt he'd tell them he was only doing his job.

Should they involve STORM? They had to. Jack crossed the room under the eye of the policemen. Behind the one who'd spoken another stood, obviously guarding the door.

One of the paramedics looked up. "He's ready. We'll take him and the professor to the unit." Jack heard the warning from Chase not to mention Oliver's Talent now. Oliver's undercover status still held, or would, once Chase had wiped Campbell's mind.

The first policeman crossed the room and stared down at Stratton's lifeless body. "Is he dead?"

Self-evident to any Talent who connected with him, Jack thought, so this man was either a mortal or undercover. He didn't care to stretch his mind to find out. He'd let enough nastiness into his soul for one day. "He's dead," Chase said.

The professor hurried to join the paramedics with a flurry of old tweed and confusion. They had finished stabilizing Oliver and laid him out on a stretcher, ready to transport to the hospital. They'd bound his wound, but not pushed fluids or explored the injury, as mortal paramedics might have done. The police officer guarding the door eyed them suspiciously, but the first one, who wore sergeant's stripes on his arm,

waved them through. The second one followed, no doubt to make sure they didn't get away and Jack heard Chase's sigh. He'd have to wipe some of the police officer's memories, too, or at least adjust them, unless the paramedics managed to lose him. But they'd go to the hospital equipped to deal with Talents, so the man would deduce Oliver's status. It just got worse.

The professor scuttled after the paramedics after a terse nod from the policeman. "We'll take his statement later." He turned back to Chase and Jack. "SOCOs will arrive soon. Until then it would be good if you touched as little as possible. Is there somewhere else we can go?"

*SOCO – scene of crime officer*, he translated for Chase.

*I'll make sure they find what they're expecting.* Jack stared at the claw trails on the floor, where he'd pierced the old wood and wondered how. *You'll have to come out, Jack. For them, anyway.*

Jack recalled his days standing inside the cheerless, tiny anteroom where the professor's secretary held sway and glanced at the officers. "This way."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So we told them I was a Talent and the others weren't." Jack sighed and reached for her hand. "And I'm sure they suspect me."

"What, a man with incredible strength and the power to change into a cat, in a room with a two dead mortals? No." She wanted to make him smile, and he rewarded her with the faint ghost of one. She let her hand rest in his, marveling at the pleasure she gained from such simple contact. Sure, she found Jack good-looking, sexy, ripped even, but nobody had the right to affect her so profoundly on such short acquaintance. It just didn't seem fair. And she had no idea if he felt the same way about her. Not deep down, in the heart, the private part of himself that Jack had never let her into. Not that it mattered, she assured herself hastily.

When she first heard the simple investigation that afternoon had gone sour and someone had been shot, she'd pushed everything away to touch Jack's mind. Dropped her defenses, everything. She'd withdrawn as soon as she discovered he was okay. But if he'd picked up her hook, held it and followed her back, he'd have found out everything about her. How she felt about him... She would have shuddered now, but he'd feel it, so she suppressed her reaction.

Jack looked up at her through the heavy fall of his hair, his eyes gleaming behind the dark mass. "It's all new to me and I'm smarting from the experience. The cop knew what a Sorcerer was, even before Chase told him. Some people think it's something like a stage magician. But if we hadn't hustled the professor out so fast, the cop would have spotted that he wasn't injured."

"Chase will be exhausted when he's done," she said. "We can't expect anything more from him today."

"I know. I've seen him like that before. He's one of the best, but even Sorcerers get tired."

She stared at their conjoined hands. "Even before Talents came out, Chase Maynard was a legend. He's said to have the powers of a virgin Sorcerer—without being a virgin."

Shere had enough secrets of her own, so she understood Chase's desire not to let the world know, but something very personal and powerful must have driven Chase to develop his powers. "It'll take Oliver all night to recover from a shot to the shoulder. And he'll have to feed."

"Yeah. They said they'd find a donor for him, then send him home." He squeezed her hand. She felt a flash of gratitude that Jack had come to her after his ordeal, that he'd chosen her. She felt off balance, uncertain, but already she knew Jack had reached the level only Mark had reached before.

*Let it happen, her inner self urged. Don't push it.*

He leaned forward, flicking his hair back with a quick toss of his head, and took a kiss from her. She responded eagerly, but before they could take it further the door opened. They felt a presence they were only too glad to welcome.

Shere leaped across the room and grabbed Oliver. She only remembered at the last minute not to throw herself at him as she usually did. He held his barriers high in an automatic defensive action. The way he stood reminded her of an aristocrat, not his usual suppleness. Because he still hurt, she guessed. And from the red glints in his eyes, she guessed he was at least part vampire.

He smiled, holding her close for a hug then immediately releasing her. Neither remarked on the decided weakness on his left side. He couldn't have held a baby with that arm right now.

Jack wasn't far behind, grasping Oliver's hand briefly, a full smile on his face. "How're you feeling?"

Oliver shrugged, then winced. "I'll be fine by morning."

"Have you fed?" Shere hadn't expected Jack to ask that, not so quickly. She'd underestimated him.

"Yes, at the hospital, but only enough to satisfy them that I had the right nourishment. I might go out later. I prefer to hunt for myself."

Jack turned away, leading Oliver into the living space. He couldn't have done that in either of their tiny rooms downstairs. "At least I know not to offer you a drink—other than blood, that is."

Jack turned around so that Oliver nearly collided with him, his reactions not nearly as sharp as usual. Shere guessed how much he must be hurting. "Did they hit anything vital?" she asked.

"Missed the artery, went through muscle and broke my collarbone," he said. "It's mended, but not completely healed. They let me go because I couldn't stand it anymore."

Never liked hospitals much. I'm old enough to remember when they were little better than charnel houses."

"Man, are we going back two hundred years?" Jack asked. Shere loved the input of new Talents. They forced her to look anew at things she took for granted. Without them, Talents could become atrophied relics and lose their focus on the now.

Oliver grinned. "Nearly. Before the regular use of anesthetics anyway. Talents did their best to avoid any kind of hospital, but they weren't alone in that. Mortals did too."

He sank into one of the plush sofas in the room and Jack sat next to him. "Seriously. If you want Talented blood, take some."

Oliver raised a brow. "Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't say it if I weren't. Talented blood helps recovery better and it's in all our interests if you do that." He bit his lip. "And it's my first time."

"Nobody's taken your blood before?"

Jack laughed. "Well I used to be a blood donor but no, I've never donated to a vampire before. Not knowingly, anyway." He knew, as they all did, of the vampires who took for one reason or another, either because they were starving or just because they could. The grateful ones gave a surge of endorphins back, but others merely fuzzed the minds of their prey and moved on.

"I can tell if anyone has, if I take your blood. Does the thought bother you?"

"It should, I know it. But I don't remember it and I've always believed in giving when I can. Yes, I'd like to know."

Oliver stared at him for half a minute without speaking and Shere couldn't sense his mind working. She guessed he'd be too weary to push his telepathy too much. Of all Talents, vampires seemed to find telepathy the most difficult to master. Some remained at a weak level, only able to communicate when someone else opened a path for them. She guessed it was because vampires could speak in either of their states, unlike shape-shifters, and it was their very strength in psi that made Sorcerers Talents in the first place.

But eventually Oliver said, "Take off your shirt."

Shere moved forward to join them, her protective instincts to the fore. Oliver was weak and Jack inexperienced. Jack laid a hand on her arm. "Hey, we'll be okay. Relax."

She forced a smile and went to sit at Oliver's other side. "Don't take it all from him. Take from me too." She pulled her T-shirt off over her head, only belatedly remembering that she hadn't put a bra on under it. Shit, it didn't matter, surely. But the way Jack's eyes widened and warmed told her he enjoyed the view and then she felt a touch of bewilderment when he realized he didn't feel jealous. She sent him reassurance. *I won't do anything that disturbs you.*

*It doesn't. Why doesn't it?*

*Explore it. Try to understand it. You might be making another discovery about yourself.*

*I might.* He sounded pleased. *I have a few hundred years to explore and discover new things. So yeah, count me in for the long haul. You look gorgeous, by the way.* Shockingly, he turned to speech. He must have done it for Oliver's benefit. "Do you know how sexy you look when your nipples tighten?"

Oliver glanced at Jack, then swiveled around to stare at Shere. "Absolutely." He paused. "She always has."

"Yeah, she told me you had a thing."

"Sometimes," Oliver admitted. "Sexy Egyptian cat goddesses turn me on like few other beings, Talented or otherwise." He glanced at Jack. "It appears I can add hot Anglo-American archivists to the mix too." He shrugged and winced. "Remind me not to do that. Hey, I can look, can't I? And you'll tell me if you change your mind?"

"You'll be the first to know," Jack promised him. "Meantime, can you take your pullover off? Baby blue is a good color for you, but I want to see what's underneath. And no, not for that reason. Well, not entirely. Even a straight guy can appreciate male beauty when he sees it."

Oliver needed Jack's help to get the soft pullover off. Shere watched, enjoying the show. Two naked male chests now, Jack's athletically honed like a runner's, Oliver's broader in the shoulder and more powerful, like a swimmer's, like a merman's—not that she'd seen one of those in a while.

She wanted to touch, feel their hearts beating against her hands, but she took a mental step back. She wanted to give Oliver a chance to gentle Jack into having a man touch him, maybe caress him. Because she knew Oliver wouldn't take from the wrist or someplace he could keep his distance. Oliver wanted close. He always did. Perhaps the distance he had to keep in his public life meant that he craved personal contact in private. She wasn't sure.

Oliver reached for Jack and he went.

Seeing Oliver's strong hand gripping Jack's well-honed biceps gave her thoughts she knew she couldn't share right now. She buried them deep and enjoyed the show. Her panties dampened and she opened her legs a little to ease the pressure on her suddenly sensitive vulva.

"I have to touch you and raise the vein," Oliver murmured.

"Won't you take arterial blood?" Jack asked.

Oliver chuckled, the sound low and throaty. "It's a manner of speaking, I guess. You can't raise an artery but you can raise the heat and make it easier for both of us. Relax, let it happen."

Jack licked his lips and Shere's libido went wild, losing the battle of trying to keep her cool. Then Oliver drew Jack closer, bent his head and flicked his tongue along the sensitive part of Jack's throat, where neck met torso. He continued the trail along to the place where neck met shoulder and licked up a little. "Good. Let me into your mind, Jack. I need to know when you've had enough and I want to help you along. If you want me to fuzz your mind, let me know."

"That's the last thing I want you to do. I want to know what this is like. The chances are good that I'll do it more than this once."

"Some Talents prefer not to." She wished she hadn't said anything when the men paused to give her their attention. She forced herself to do the right thing. "Do you want me to leave?"

"Only if you want to," Jack said. "Oliver should take from you, too, if you're willing."

"Of course." She'd always been there for Oliver and she couldn't see that changing.

When Oliver turned to look at her, she got her first good sight of his shoulder. The mark was red, angry, the center covered by a thick, crusty scab. She touched his good shoulder, made him turn so she could see the other part.

What a mess. A cleaner hole here, but still scabbed over, and the flesh around it was swollen. If they'd treated him as they treated a mortal, they'd be pumping antibiotics into him by now. "Go to it," she said softly, and he smiled and touched her hand. His flesh felt cold. He needed that blood.

"Hey, I'll be fine. Give me tonight and you'll never know. I've been hurt worse."

Shere grimaced. "Not while you've been with me." She let him feel her vulnerability, but not too much—she didn't want to impair his abilities in the field. He squeezed her hand and gave his attention solely to her for a few seconds. Oliver's ability to cut everyone else out except the one he was concentrating on was one of his greatest gifts. She appreciated it now, as she did his sincerity. He really did reassure her. If Oliver said he would be okay, then he would be okay.

Jack had waited and she touched his mind, feeling his concentration. *You can't relax by concentrating on it. Let me help.*

*Sure.*

*You want me here?*

*Yeah. I won't wimp out. It's interesting.*

She smiled. He'd let his intelligence kick in, the curiosity that had made him a superb archivist. He must have been, for both McIver and STORM to take him on. She could tell from the way his mind worked around a problem, seeking a way in. This time he'd found it. *But stay*, he added. *Please.*

*My pleasure*, she answered, and she meant it.

Oliver caught Jack's gaze and she saw it directly, through Jack's eyes. That was weird. In order to do that she usually had to work hard at blocking everything else out, putting all her concentration to it. With Jack she found it easy. She heard his voice in her head. *Read me. Stay here and experience it with me. Please.*

Being Oliver, he recognized her presence in Jack's eyes and smiled his acknowledgement before he moved closer, as if to kiss Jack. She felt Jack's tension and reassured him. This act was unavoidably personal. Even if Oliver had grabbed Jack's wrist and sunk his fangs deep without preamble, there'd still have been a personal

connection. Oliver would gain deeper access to Jack's mind, going through a couple of layers unless Jack deliberately blocked him out. But Jack didn't. Instead, he leaned back against the sofa, turned his head and gave Oliver unimpeded access to his throat. A symbol of trust in any situation, even more so when he knew he was baring his throat to a vampire.

Oliver's fangs shot out from the buds just above his eyeteeth, and his mind revealed his hunger fully. He was starving. His eyes changed, the whites turning red and the dark brown of his irises turning black. Jack stared back, unfazed, and Shere read his thoughts as he sent them to her. So deep, so trusting he took her breath away. He'd seen more than one vampire in full mode before.

Belying his nature, Oliver moved slowly, took things gently. He grazed his teeth against Jack's throat just above the carotid and Shere felt Jack's blood throb in response. His erection grew and pressed against the zipper of his jeans. He didn't hide it. Oliver's movements were seductive. She loved the way he grazed Jack's throat with his razor-sharp teeth when he could have just plunged and taken, the way he held Jack, his muscles bunching as he forced himself to ease his grip. Fuck, this was one hungry vampire. She turned Jack on. As it did Oliver, who sent warmth and desire to her. Honesty went all ways, but only so deep. They all kept the heart of their essence hidden. Only life partners, people deeply in love, opened everything to another person.

Oliver grazed his throat again and Shere felt Jack wishing he'd just get on with it. Then he did. Twin pricks, like tiny injections, and then a feeling of warmth, of pleasure as Oliver sank deep.

Vampires fed neatly. Blood spurted, but the way vampires fed meant that nothing escaped if they didn't want it to. And Oliver kept his feeding clean. His throat worked in a reflex action, even though the blood went up the hollow centers of the teeth, not into his mouth. The blood vessel closed around the teeth. But she'd seen messy feeding, when a vampire didn't care about his victim or did it for effect, so she appreciated how much care Oliver took now. He needed the blood. He hadn't hidden that from them once they offered to help. Knowing how private Oliver preferred to remain, she appreciated that too.

As Oliver had pierced an artery, the feeding didn't take long. He withdrew slowly, carefully, allowing the artery to close as he went, finishing the process by a healing touch of his tongue to the red marks on Jack's neck.

Jack opened his eyes and gazed sleepily at Oliver. "Wow. Remind me to offer that to you again." He rolled his head on the cushion to watch as Oliver adjusted his position and turned to Shere, a question in his eyes.

She smiled and lifted her chin to bare her neck. "Take me, big boy," she said in an attempt to lighten the mood. But the tension she could feel in the air only thickened as Oliver gave her a perfunctory smile and bent his head.

She enjoyed the twinge of pain when he sank in. Even better were the endorphins that flowed from him into her when he began the process of drawing her blood. If she



concentrated, she could recognize the cold sensation when the warm blood left her body, but the pleasure masked it, made it not only bearable but welcome.

Concentrating on the way he made her feel, she hadn't been aware of closing her eyes until she opened them and met Jack's gaze. He was watching them with fascination, the way Oliver held her firmly but tenderly, his hands on either side of her waist. Jack saw the way Oliver's throat worked as he fed, the way her throat pulsed as her blood left her and entered him. Smiling, she reached out and he took her hand immediately.

Drifting in a world of gentle pleasure, endorphins circulating in her bloodstream, Shere imagined spending a long time like this. But she knew Oliver would stop in a minute. A man of principle and rigid self-control, Oliver would not take more than he needed, however good it made him feel. She'd sometimes wondered about that. Shere watched, dreamed and enjoyed. All too soon Oliver drew back and she felt the touch of his tongue that signified the end of this experience.

She opened her eyes fully, released Jack's hand and studied her partner.

Still too pale, but his color definitely better, Oliver stared back, his air of control with him again. His wound had lost its worrying red swelling, but it would be a few hours before the scabs fell off. Another few hours before his strength returned. Shere didn't want him to spend the time alone. She'd shared time with a wounded Oliver before, just once. She'd experienced with him the melancholy mood he endured when his body was weak.

But she had someone else to think about first. She sent a swift message to Jack and received his assent almost immediately. He hadn't stopped to think over what she asked and she appreciated him all the more for that. "Come to bed," she said. "Sleep with us tonight, Oliver."

His startled stare told her he hadn't expected the offer. "Are you sure?"

"We're sure," Jack said. "How will you watch our backs in the daytime if you're not fully healed? Even more at night. I have a vampire friend, Johann. He taught me a lot about how it works for you guys. We need you, Oliver. Come to bed." His voice rumbled, and when he paused and the echoes left the room only concern and friendship remained.

## Chapter Nine

Jack blinked and woke. Sunshine streamed through the crack between the drapes at the window. He stared at them, noting the pristine appearance of the dark brown brocade, and took a moment to let his memory return.

He turned on to his back. Shere lay next to him, her short hair fetchingly tousled, her face half-buried in the sheet she'd pulled over her shoulders. But her leg hooked over his and the lower half of her body, pressed against his side, hinted deliciously of her nakedness.

A grunt reminded him that they weren't alone. Cautiously, Jack raised his head and saw Oliver. His black hair clung to his pillow and his mouth had fallen part-open, revealing two rows of clean, white teeth. No fangs, no indication of them. Oliver had turned human. But also no sign of a wound. It looked as if he'd never been hurt, whereas the day before he'd come close to death. As easily as that, death came to Talents as well as mortals. And they'd come so close.

Every Talent was precious. Their lower fertility rates hadn't bothered him until now. Jack hadn't had much time to reflect about what becoming a Talent meant. So far he'd only seen benefits—super strength, keen sight and hearing, longer life—but now he began to understand the downside. Being hated and despised by certain people in society came as a new experience for him. Someone had punched him once, just because he was a Talent. That had amazed him, his astonishment almost drowning out the pain because a complete stranger hated him.

It would happen more often as Talents revealed themselves. Once Professor Campbell had known Jack's Talent, his attitude had changed completely. Respectful, almost, and certainly terrified. Jack didn't like that. He preferred to fit in, to belong, but now he didn't belong anymore, except with people like this.

And he'd see mortal friends age and die. He'd known it, but not understood it before yesterday, when Oliver had seen that list of his ancestors. It wasn't impossible that some of them were still alive. Talents generally lived for around five hundred years, but freaks existed, much older Talents who had somehow not died. He couldn't imagine what that would feel like. He didn't want to. To watch all friends die, to watch their children grow and die, and to stay the same...he turned his mind away from the thought with a shudder.

And to keep his mind private. He found that hard, too, but Chase had helped him hugely. Now he could lock his private thoughts away and stratify his mind into layers, necessary with other Talents and with sensitives too. Perhaps he needed a break. He'd thought of taking one after the last operation, once Dr. Bennett was dead, but he'd left a fuck of a mess behind him. Somebody had to clear it up.

The rustle of sheets and a soft male sigh alerted Jack to Oliver's awakening. A few seconds later, he sensed another awareness in the atmosphere. He loved it when he felt that from Shere.

Jack hadn't slept until sure that Oliver's body had begun the repairing it needed. "Feeling better?" he murmured.

"Much better."

Shere shifted against him and he reached for her. He came into contact with Oliver's hand and pulled back, startled. "Sorry."

"No, it was me," Oliver said.

Jack chuckled. "Very British."

Oliver grunted. "Maybe. Taking the blame for something. It makes for a quieter life."

Jack checked the clock. "It's still early. Six a.m."

"You're going in to work?"

"Sure, why shouldn't I? I'll check with Chase first, see if he had any trouble with the police, but I'd take odds that he didn't."

Oliver laughed. "Fucking Sorcerers. Always get their own way."

Jack laughed too. "Not if they're married to Jillian. And now she's pregnant he'll become her willing slave."

Oliver growled low. "Sounds good to me. I like a little Master/slave play."

"And you're the Master?"

He paused. "Usually."

Before Shere opened her eyes, her mind slipped into his, a bright spark to disturb his melancholy reflections of a few moments before. He reached for her, realizing how easy it had become to hold her, to *expect* her there. That troubled him. He couldn't see a future for them. Shere didn't want it and he still had to accustom himself to his Talent. Besides, his life was in New York now, with STORM, so he couldn't get involved with her. Unthinkable.

Perhaps allowing Oliver into their games would help him maintain his distance.

But now, with her warm, silky body turning to him, he found it hard to think about. Hard to think about anything, really.

"I should leave you two alone." Oliver sounded amused and Jack realized they must be leaving traces of warm arousal in the atmosphere.

He felt bad. "No, it's okay."

Oliver leaned up on one elbow. "Are you asking me to stay?"

Jack knew what he meant. The intense glow in the vampire's eyes told him all he needed to know, even without the added sense of excitement.

Shere moved against him and he glanced down to see the welcome in her face. "If it's okay with Shere, that is."

"Mmm. Oh yes," she said. "But what about you?"

"Don't ask. I'll let you know if I want to chicken out. In fact you'll probably know without me telling you." Without using telepathy too. The empathy the three shared, the ability to sense each other's moods, struck him as unusual. He hadn't engaged in many *ménages*, and certainly none involving Talents. So far. His stomach churned and tension pounded at the back of his skull.

No. Never again would he back away because of that reaction. Shit, he could cope with almost anything these days. Not just because of his new status, either, but because of what he'd seen and done over the last twelve months.

So when Shere lifted her head and gave him a sleepy smile, he dipped his head to touch his lips to hers. She responded to his kiss beautifully. Her lips moved and then opened. When Jack felt Oliver's fingers touch his, he didn't flinch away. Oliver spread his fingers over Shere's skin and Jack waited for a pang of jealousy, ready to suppress it.

It never came. Instead he felt anticipatory excitement. A sense of exploration. And a desire to make Shere happy.

Shere let Jack decide, deliberately kept out of his mind while he made his decision, but once he agreed, she opened again. Her two men entered, Jack tentatively, Oliver boldly. They blended to give her a feeling of warmth and safety. Even an independent-minded woman had to love that. So she did.

She opened her mouth under Jack's, inviting him in. He didn't hesitate but plunged deep, tasting her desire, sweeping his tongue around to take possession. His arm tightened, pulling her close, on to her side. He turned, pressing her against his cock, already hard for her. She sighed, loving the kiss. Oliver touched her back and spread his hand wide to traverse her flesh in a delicious journey of exploration.

She felt the difference between them. Jack's hand, firm, possessive, and Oliver's transmitting sensual pleasure, an invitation rather than a taking. Both, she wanted both and she was about to get them.

Oliver slid his hand down her backbone, making her arch her back and purr. Jack drew away, gazing into her eyes while Oliver cupped her bottom, taking his time caressing her. "So lovely," he murmured, and Jack gave a soft growl of agreement. His cock leaked a bead of essence and she squirmed against it to spread it over her belly.

Then she felt another against her back, pressing in, an echo of the one adorning her stomach. Oliver knew, of course, she could feel his bright intelligence reading and reacting. Jack released her mouth. "A sandwich," she said. "Such a perfect one too."

"Maybe you should kiss our—Oliver now." She liked Jack's hesitation. He didn't know what to call Oliver. Friend, guest, lover—all three? Shere didn't know either, but she didn't care right this minute. She gave Jack a mischievous smile and turned on her back, almost reluctantly. Both men moved close, their erections nudging her sides. Jack cupped one breast and Oliver placed his hand over the other before he bent his head to her. His kiss whispered against her skin, moving to each corner of her mouth. He

touched her with the tip of his tongue, tracing the shape before he crushed her lips against his and took her in a full-bodied kiss. His fingers tweaked her nipple, pinched it, and then she felt hot, wet lips caress the other. Jack took her breast in deeply, pressed her nipple against the roof of his mouth while he sucked and worked her. He drove her into need. She moaned into Oliver's mouth. He deepened the kiss, giving her an instant of intense connection before he withdrew, slowly, sensuously. He licked her lips and drew back to gaze at her.

"You look incredibly sexy, you know." His voice deepened and roughened. She thrilled to it. "How do you want us? One at a time, both at the same time, one after the other until we're exhausted?"

She laughed up at him. "Any way you like. Just make me scream." She lifted her hand and rested it on Jack's head, curving her fingers to massage his scalp. His thick hair tickled her skin. He moved, sucking hard, and she closed her eyes briefly to enjoy the sensation. He nipped her and sent her soaring.

She arched her back and at last Oliver spread his hand over her stomach and headed lower. He took her clit delicately between thumb and forefinger. When he pinched, she came off the bed, or would have done if Jack hadn't pushed her back down. He pulled away from her nipple, releasing it with a last bit of suction that made him seem reluctant to leave it, and leaned across to lick the other one. He teased it up, encouraging it to peak harder.

Frissons of sensation cascaded through her breasts like a carillon of bells, down her spine and up from her tortured clit to meet in the center of her body, where they detonated and spread. No part of her remained at rest. Between them the men aroused every nerve, every cell. She could only wait and experience what they did to her.

And their minds echoed what they were doing. They urged her higher, driving her higher until everything stilled and her body poised on the edge of orgasm.

Then they pulled away, both at the same time, taking their hands and mouths off her. When she opened her eyes, she saw them leaning on their elbows, gazing at what they'd created. They sent her a vision. She lay on her back, her nipples darkened and hard, her mouth slightly open, her breath uneven. She saw her wet and swollen pussy begging for their touch, and she shifted, opening her legs farther, to display, to invite.

Jack glanced at Oliver, who nodded. The bastards were communicating and not letting her in. She used her mind to push, to demand and she heard Oliver's chuckle and saw Jack's smile.

She scented the men's arousal, Jack's slightly lighter, Oliver's earthier. Jack's had an edge of citrus that drew her. She wanted to taste, to work him as he'd worked her, drive him to desperation. Her body throbbed, it soaked the sheet under her. If they kept this up, this greedy staring, she'd come just from that.

"Oh no. You're not coming without me inside you." Jack pushed her thighs farther apart with his knee and mounted her, not taking his gaze away from her face. His cock teased her, lending its own moisture to her soaking pussy.

"Stop it, Jack. Fuck me hard. Please."

He took his cock in hand, glancing at Oliver, whose eyes were dilated with desire. "What do you think?"

"I think if you don't have her and then let me take a turn, I'm going to come from watching you."

Without warning, they opened their minds to her and their need reflected and amplified hers. She moaned, arching up, taking his cock head into her crease. Jack held off until her opening touched him before he surrendered and plunged deep.

"Oh God, oh Jack!"

"Oh yes, oh that looks so good!" Oliver sent her an image of Jack pounding into her body. He moved down the bed and watched. They saw it, her pussy opening, accepting Jack's thick, hard length, her cinching him, his balls pummeling her ass.

She'd never seen it so close, never seen anything so sexy. Her previous ménages had been fast and furious. Nobody had ever done this for her before, watched and sent the images, opening his mind. She felt Jack there, too, and the three-way link enhanced their closeness. She wanted to curl up to Jack, let him do whatever he wanted to her. The thought shocked her because she'd always preferred to take control before, to give orders and be obeyed. Now she wanted to be done to. To be done.

When Oliver closed his eyes they both moaned, but when he opened them again they got a brief, improbably close view of deep pink flesh and violent action before they felt the touch. Oliver touched them, took some liquid on one finger and tasted it, and an unbelievable thrill coursed through her. Then he made a sound, an appreciation as if he were tasting the finest gourmet food. *It's delicious. Thank you.*

It sent them over. Her pussy contracted and Shere felt the hard pulses of her orgasm. At the same time, Jack's cock swelled and wetness spurted inside her. He cried out as if in pain, but she felt the waves of his reaction as it mingled with hers.

*I've never seen anything so beautiful, never tasted anything so fine.* Oliver lapped up the liquid they gave him. He licked around her pussy and Jack's cock, waited until Jack withdrew, and then sucked the essence that flowed out of her. His tongue felt smooth as he eagerly took what they gave him.

Jack rolled away to lie by her side, his arm loosely around her waist, and she readily gave him the kiss he sought. While Jack kissed her, satiation in every languorous sweep of his tongue, Oliver drank. And Shere knew she could take more.

Oliver meant to give thanks this morning but he found himself drawn into the beautiful sight of Jack fucking Shere. He didn't think she realized how different her reaction was with Jack to how it was with him. His relaxed and fun-loving sex kitten had turned into a full-grown, demanding cat. Perhaps she was like that with all the men she loved. Because he knew that she loved Jack.

Jack he found more circumspect, his emotions locked away from Oliver, anyway. Or maybe he didn't know them himself. Oliver thought that highly likely.

Not that it was any of his business, but he didn't want to queer anyone's pitch. The word made him smile under the circumstances. Jack had a beautiful cock, long and thick, and one that his mouth watered for. But he had to make do with Jack's spunk mixed with Shere's cum and it turned out a very good second best. Maybe he'd get the prize later.

He kept at his task until he felt Shere's libido start to rise again. Women were so fucking lucky. They could come and come until they couldn't move, but a man, even a vampire, needed a break before he was ready to go again.

Oliver moved up a little and lapped at her clit. He tickled it, loving the way it swelled under his tongue and came back to life. He heard the sound of long, slow kissing and left them to it, enjoying the scent of sex and the dreamy sweetness of the atmosphere, sparked by his own arousal, straining and eager. But when he had her thinking again, he pressed a kiss to the soft skin of her inner thigh. Then he moved away, replacing his tongue with his hand, to maintain her arousal.

He saw them. Jack, that adorable front lock shoved roughly back from his forehead, smiling at Shere and Shere smiling back. Smiling. Shit, he'd never seen her more contented, happier, and he wanted that for his partner. Looking at her now, he doubted she'd remain his partner for much longer.

He couldn't do it. If he took her now he'd only break their connection. If he wanted her happy, he needed to encourage her. Christ knew how they'd work it out, but he'd help them if he could. And not get in their way. They'd given him so much, let him share some of their relationship. Time to leave.

But when he withdrew from their minds, putting his barriers back and rolling over to leave the bed, he felt her touch on his back. Her fingers stroked his spine in a way she knew he liked.

"No, Oliver. Don't go. Come back."

"Your turn now, buddy."

Oliver forced a smile to his lips before he turned around to face them. "It's okay. You've brought me back to life and let me see something beautiful. Fuck, you let me taste it too. I'll remember that. Consider it small thanks."

A shadow passed over Shere's face, dimming her happiness. "Don't you want me?"

Jack gazed at him, brown eyes soft as melted chocolate. "Go for it. My turn to watch. Come back. Open your mind and find out for yourself."

Oliver caught his breath. He wanted both of them, that was his trouble. But Jack was right. Oliver felt no stirring in Jack's mind, only an appreciation of his body and yes, a desire to watch. It was a start.

He recognized the pattern of want in Shere's mind. More impersonal than her desperate need for Jack earlier. He felt a tinge of something else. Something he didn't recognize for a moment until it slotted into his mind with the inevitability of Christmas.

She wanted to please Jack and he wanted to watch. His desire sparked hers, sent it in a different direction. A good one, one Oliver responded to with an extra surge of blood to his cock. Shit, he'd drunk from these two and he wanted more.

Bloodlust came to him strongly at night, echoed during the day. Right now he could taste it on his tongue, together with the delectable flavor of sex. Intoxicating, addicting. He wanted.

When Shere opened her thighs and showed him that gorgeous cunt, glistening with fresh desire and the remnants of his feast, he gave in. He didn't want to fight his need anymore, didn't want to stand in a shower jerking off.

He climbed over her, but she sat up instead and urged him to sit, thighs closed, waiting for her. His cock jutted up like a sacrificial offering. "Okay, your turn to torture me."

She laughed. "If I do that, I'll be torturing myself. Just you stay there, bonny lad, and I'll come to you."

"Bonny lad?"

"You don't remember that month I spent in Newcastle? That accent is addictive."

"I like it," Jack murmured. "Save that one for me."

Shere tossed her head. "Oh you're both my bonny lads."

She opened her legs to straddle Oliver and pushed her ass back so Jack could see everything. Oliver moaned when he glanced at her through Jack's eyes and saw that tight ass, tiny puckered opening and sweet round buttocks. Oh fuck, yes. If they let him back, they'd be doing that soon enough too.

He grasped his cock and watched her straddle him, her wet pussy hovering above him. Oliver could never decide what he liked best about sex, but the anticipatory moment, when he knew they'd committed but he could feel it, her heat nearer to him with every breath he took, definitely made his top ten.

She enveloped the top of his cock and his head went back while he put one hand on her waist to steady her. She sank down, glorious wet woman encasing him, sending his hunger into overdrive.

"Ah God, woman, you're killing me here."

He watched her breasts, small but exquisitely perfect, just enough flesh to quiver, as her nipples came closer to his mouth. Lowering his head, Oliver sucked hard.

She moved up and down and sent him into sexual delight. His hands slipped lower, over her ass and inevitably between her ass cheeks to caress the sensitive skin inside. She shuddered and her movement paused. He took over, thrusting up into her sweet pussy while he circled her ass with one finger.



Then another hand grazed his finger and he knew Jack's spectator status had ended, at least for now. He let his hand linger, took the high road, stroking the upper cleft and let Jack touch her now. And all the time he was working her, she responded, holding her body rigid for him to pound. He swiveled his hips and heard her moan of pleasure, felt her arousal jolt up.

Jack had left them. He heard the scrape of the drawer in the bedside table and hoped Jack found what he needed in there. *Oh yeah.* The heavy slide of body lotion eased against his fingers. It slithered down Shere's ass crack and he heard the unmistakable sound of a finger breaching a wet opening. He managed to say what he needed to. "She doesn't like that, Jack."

Shere's finger touched his lips. "You don't know that. I don't know that. Let's go with it. Ah!" The last as he jerked up, forced her down onto him.

Someone straddled his legs. Someone, fuck. Jack. "Oh yes, do it."

Jack's voice came strained but eager. "Slowly. Easy, sweetheart. Bear back a little." Shere leaned forward, resting her hands on Oliver's shoulders, and pressed her breasts against his upper chest. He leaned back, let his elbows support him so Shere could push that pretty ass back. He stopped moving and let Jack do what he needed. He inserted another finger, slid both around and then opened a little more to let a third finger in.

Jack let them see. His cock slid up and down the lubricated crease, slathered with lotion. It smelled of almonds, and Oliver knew he'd never smell that again without remembering this moment. Anticipation again.

He pulled nearly out, keeping the tip of his cock just inside her, leaving her open and willing.

Shere couldn't believe what she'd allowed, but Jack fed her desire, eased her concerns. Two cocks breached her now, Oliver still and only just embedded in her pussy, Jack slipping inside her ass like butter on waffles. Only the tip, just a little. Easing her, getting her used to the feel of him, allowing her to stretch for him. Oliver lay still, barely penetrating her, letting Jack do it to her.

He soothed her, held her steady and spoke aloud. "Do you know how beautiful you look now? So good, Shere, so good. Take me, sweetheart. Feel it slide inside you, so hard, wanting you so much." He touched her, stroked her spine. *How did he know she loved that? Oh right, Oliver.* Or Jack had discovered it for himself. Her mind splintered into pure sensation and she felt him glide into her a bit more. *Easy, so easy. So good.*

Time passed, she wasn't sure how much because Jack's touch consumed her. He wanted this, so she wanted it too. He slipped in and out, gently, but a bit farther each time, soothing her. She wasn't sure she'd have trusted anyone else to do this but Jack made it good for her. More lotion fell over them, lubricating his way.

Moving more freely now, Jack eased in and out, and then said, "Push in, Oliver. Slowly."

Oliver slid inside while Jack held still. Shere held her breath, but then realized how good it felt. Both men held her in their minds, ready to stop if she wanted. She didn't even have to say it. They paused, both inside, both still.

Beneath her, Oliver groaned. "I can feel your cock, Jack. You are one skilled fucker."

Jack laughed, but cut it short when his cock quivered. "I never thought I could do this, but when she shoved her ass at me I couldn't resist. I only meant to touch—oh Christ, oh that feels so great. Don't move, Shere. Let us do the work. Just hold yourself right—there."

And he moved and he blew her mind. Why had she always refused this before? She'd avoided this, not wanting to give anyone this kind of intimacy. But she'd give Jack anything he wanted and right now, he wanted to do her like this. But she hadn't thought she'd feel so great, that this would actually turn her on like crazy.

But it did. And then Oliver moved, timing his movements so he was withdrawing when Jack moved in and he plunged when Jack pulled back. Their cocks must be sliding either side of that thin membrane separating them. And that membrane was her. While Oliver moved so he could touch her sweet spot with every stroke, Jack leaned back, watching. She knew he was watching because she could see what he saw. His cock moved in and out of her ass, touching a pleasure spot she hadn't known about before.

The twin stimulation drove her crazy. She held on tight to Oliver's shoulders and felt her body shake as she began to come. But this orgasm felt different. *These orgasms?* She didn't know, or care. A fire built deep inside her, a fire without heat, only burning, touching her soul, touching every part of her. Doing as they'd told her, she opened her heart to both men and found one of them already there. The men's cries mingled with her own as she lost control. They could do this, they could do anything so long as they made her feel this way.

Volcanoes exploded, fires raged, stars burst. Every part of her body came to one concerted peak and she screamed, not knowing what she was crying.

Sobbing, she collapsed onto a broad chest slick with sweat. She slipped out of consciousness, not knowing if she fainted or if sleep merely came up and swallowed her.

## Chapter Ten

"Hey." Jack nodded to Diana at her desk as he strolled into the office. He'd rarely felt so good. He tried to put his mind to his job, afraid the combustion he'd shared earlier with Oliver and Shere would show. Afraid he wouldn't last until next time. He and Oliver had taken a barely conscious Shere into the bathtub and washed her tenderly. They'd made sure she was okay after they'd taken her so thoroughly, then Oliver had left after a brief discussion of their plans for later that day.

They had to move on the Hightowers now. The theft of the document brought everything forward. Chase approved and stayed in the background. They had to reel Mickey in.

But Jack still felt good. So good. Nothing could ruin his mood. Diana responded to his sunny smile with a startled but pleased smile of her own. "You seem in a good mood, Jack. Can it be you're glad to see me?"

"Thrilled." He meant to say it sarcastically but in his present mood he failed to achieve it and he felt Diana's surge of pleasure. Shit, he had to get a grip. "Shere's been delayed. She'll be here soon." He took his place at his desk but the door to the inner office opened and Mickey said, "Hi, Jack. Can you spare me some time?"

Jack pasted on his best ingratiating smile. "Sure, boss." Mickey should like that. From the broad grin he gave Jack, he did.

Jack followed Mickey into the more lavishly appointed inner office with its leather sofas and huge mahogany desk. A top-of-the-range computer screen and slim, flat keyboard adorned the gleaming surface. Unlike Jack's standard computer outside, of course, with its old-fashioned keyboard and underpowered CPU. He wanted to get into that computer and retrieve the hard drive. It had become standard practice for STORM agents to grab the hard drives before the owner could wipe or destroy them. They didn't always succeed.

"Sit." He took his place on the chair in front of Mickey's desk, its seat slightly below Mickey's. Not enough to be obvious, but still useful for intimidation purposes. Jack set his mind to letting Mickey intimidate him if that was what he wanted. Their assignment was far more important than any petty revenge. Though he'd like, just once, for Mickey to see his true colors. To see the jaguar that lurked deep inside Jack's slender form.

He shrugged his shoulders inside the brown jacket that didn't quite match the pants he wore. And both fit loosely and badly, making him appear skinnier than he was. To think he'd worn this stuff all the time once, when he hadn't thought he cared about his appearance. He'd been kidding himself.

He liked the tailored suits he now owned, the carefully fitted tux and the tailored shirts currently resting in his New York wardrobe. While he'd given up the fortune

Carilla had left him, he'd kept the clothes. They wouldn't be much use to anyone else and it would have been merely donning a hair shirt for its own sake.

*Shit, Carilla.* He hadn't thought of her for more than a day. The first time he'd gone that long without even a twinge of her betrayal hurting him. Something was happening to him, but he didn't have time to work it out. Not now.

He gave Mickey an obliging smile. "What can I help you with, Mickey?"

"Fuck, I love your accent," Mickey said. Sure he did. He'd sent him up enough in the past about it. But Jack merely let his smile linger and waited for Mickey to continue. "You sound so easy. Listen, Jack, something...came my way. Sheer luck. But it could really help us."

Jack opened his mind and tentatively reached for Mickey's. Mickey opened the drawer of his desk and grabbed a large folder, not the standard size. He drew out a piece of paper, old paper. Parchment?

Jack froze. The document, but he'd folded it. The bastard, to fold something like that. Jack wanted to kill him for that alone. Parchment was fragile, easily turned to powder.

Mickey unfolded the document and Jack breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that it was just a very good photographic copy. He fumbled in his pocket for his glasses case.

Mickey glanced at him, gave a knowing smile and pushed the document across the desk. Jack tried not to grab. He drew the paper to him and propped his glasses on his nose with his other hand. He stared down at the print. "When did you get this?"

A pause. "Yesterday. It came through the post."

A jagged bolt of lightning flashed through Mickey's brain, but he quickly repressed it. *Shit, Mickey was good at lying.* Not good enough to fool a Talent who had opened his psi, but that flash, gone almost as soon as it appeared, remained the only sign. Mickey's eyes were clear and direct, his body language, with his hands lying on the desk, open and honest. Honest seeming, anyway.

Why was he lying and when did he get this paper? Because without a doubt this was a copy of the parchment he'd seen yesterday. He recognized the names, and some of the flaws and damage to the paper. He stared at it, unseeing now, but he pushed his psi as far as he could to reach inside Mickey. Who had closed his mind completely. That in itself interested Jack, because mortals rarely had the ability to do that. He couldn't have done it before his conversion and it had taken many hours of concentration before he cracked it. Some mortals had the ability naturally, some were sensitives, not even knowing what they had. Some, the ones who knew Talents, had worked to develop it.

Jack had no idea which of those groups Mickey belonged to and no way of discovering. Chase might, if he probed Mickey's mind and broke through, but Jack couldn't do that. When he tried the private channel between him and Chase, he couldn't locate the Sorcerer.

"Keep going," Mickey said.

"You can read this?" Most people couldn't read script from that long ago. Between roughly the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, English syntax, spelling and words bore little resemblance to modern English. Added to that, the script could be very difficult to decipher. But these were names. Mickey didn't have to be an expert in Middle English to recognize a name or two.

"Yes, I can read it. More or less."

Jack had to go along with Mickey to try to discover what he knew. "Derrington." He glanced up. "The guest at the Barbican Timothy? What's this about?"

"It's a list of Talents. I have no idea why it's there, why anyone would draw it up, but it's a list of Talents from 1431."

"Henry VI. The Wars of the Roses," Jack murmured. So how come Mickey could date this when it had no date on it?

"I've been looking for this document for a while now." Mickey leaned back, smiling broadly. "I got a sight of it a few years ago but then it disappeared. At the time, it was up for auction, very private, but nobody knew about Talents then. Only a few believed in them. You remember Dr. Bennett? We talked about him the other day." Jack nodded. "He persecuted Talents, they said. Fucking idiot if you ask me. He should have forced one of them to change him and give him the cure. Anyway, he's dead now." Mickey picked up a pencil and twirled it between his fingers. "A few years ago he turned up here. He did a sabbatical at St. Thomas' and he wanted the paper. He said he'd learned about it from a Talent he'd had control of when he was in the IRDC. Another bunch of idiots, but they're useful."

"Useful?" *Jesus, they must be standing in line for a chance at a pop at Mickey Hightower.* The officials at the IRDC weren't as stupid as Mickey seemed to think they were.

Mickey shrugged. "I take their money and drop them a few morsels every now and again. They're going to grow powerful and it could prove useful to belong on their side. But I don't take orders from anybody, Jack. I play my own game."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "Why are you telling me this?"

Mickey laughed and pointed the pencil at him. "Because if I'm investigating this thing, geek boy, I need you. Bennett discovered that the document existed and that it was somewhere in Oxford. I learned it from him. This Talent, presumably now dead, told him that. Or had it pulled out of him, I don't know which. It doesn't matter anyway. They're both dead now, Bennett and his victim, so they won't care who gets hold of this thing. But I wanted the names."

"Why?"

Mickey leaned back and crowed with laughter. "For a clever bastard, you are so stupid sometimes, Jack." He leaned forward again, his pose indicating trust and secrets. Jack would bet big-time on Mickey pulling people in that way. "Because these people have descendants, who we can trace as easily as going on the Internet and searching for them. Because if their ancestors were Talents, then they are too. And as far as I know, no peer of the realm has come forward yet and admitted it. I don't know if I'll offer to

work with them and make it hard for them to refuse, or just take cash from them. Or whatever they have. But right now, I'm thinking that they'll do a lot to bury this list. What do you think?"

"This is a copy. How many of these exist?" Maybe he shouldn't have asked but he couldn't think of a better way of finding out. Of course, he'd bring in Chase, who could do what he couldn't. He should probably be doing that now. He opened his mind and tried to find him again. Tracing Talents was like finding Wi-Fi hotspots. He found more than he'd thought he would, but mentally scrolling down, he couldn't see Chase.

"I have no idea." Mickey dropped the pencil on the floor and it fell with a dull clatter on the hardwood.

Mickey kept Jack's gaze, his stare compelling, and Jack remembered why he'd gone along with him in the first place. Dull, shy student with charismatic friend. What a fucking idiot he'd been. Now Mickey must think he had Jack all over again.

He wasn't such a fucking idiot now, and he listened to Mickey dispassionately, all the time searching for Chase in his mind. "I've been looking for that list since Bennett told me it existed. So hard, I was beginning to think it didn't exist. But I tracked it down to St. Thomas' and so I set up the business near here. You can imagine how pissed I was to discover it was here all the time. Locked up. Then I found out that the professor wanted to sell it."

Jack wondered how many people the professor had shown it to. He guessed Chase would find that out.

Realization dawned on him. That was why he couldn't contact Chase. The Sorcerer had probably found an isolation room, or created one somehow so he could strip the professor's mind. Hard work, and leakages could hurt any Talent in the vicinity.

"Somebody stole the document yesterday."

"Yes, I heard. Or at least I heard that a valuable document had gone missing." Jack hadn't heard more than the news headlines on the radio this morning. He'd been busy. Not that he could regret that particular diversion, even now.

"Yeah. I heard that too. And the murder."

Jack had known the straightforward approach to work before. "Did you do it?"

Mickey grinned, not in the least put out. "What kind of idiot do you take me for? Nah, not me, but I did put a bid in for the document. You should have seen the professor's face when he realized I knew he had it. Bastard nearly shat himself. But he took my bid and he wouldn't tell me if I was anywhere near the amount. I figured it would work for me. Then today I get here and find a copy of the thing in the mail. Delivered by hand, no less. Just when I thought I'd lost any chance at it."

Jack returned his attention to the document, trying to memorize as many names as he could. "You'd better give this in before they come for you. It could be a trap."

"I thought of that, though I have no idea who'd try to trap me. But you can't be too safe, can you? So I made another copy. I'll take this one down to the police station and

tell them I found it outside the main gateway. That'll get rid of it." Mickey grinned. "You're thinking smart, Jack. You never would have done that years ago."

"You learn things in New York, even when you live pretty quietly. And cheaply. Although New York's not as expensive as London." Jack returned to the document, or its copy. "Can I keep this?"

"No you fucking can't, even though I backed it up when I scanned it. It stays here."

Jack quirked a brow. "Don't trust me, Mickey?"

Mickey's slow grin told Jack he was up to something, thinking up another scheme. Mickey was so busy with his get-rich-quick schemes that he never actually stopped to work out a plan. Not that Jack had any plans other than to stay alive and get to know his cat.

Mickey glanced at him and quirked a brow. "Let's celebrate." He got up from behind the desk and strode to open the door. "Diana!" His bark would have made his wife jump. Jack could see her in his mind's eye, as he'd seen her in reality so much before. She'd jump out of her skin and then glance around, scared. At one time, he'd wanted to protect her. Now her behavior just irritated him.

But what he read in her mind when she entered the room startled him into thinking like a gazelle. *Run away, run away!* For an instant sheer malice penetrated his mind. Then it went, and Jack thought he'd probably imagined it. After all, he was still new to this kind of thing.

Another mental voice entered the conversation. *What?*

He hurried to reassure Shere. *It's okay. I'll tell you later.*

"You wanted to kiss him?" Mickey said. "Here he is, baby. Go for it, Diana. Let's see you do something for yourself for a change."

Diana's wide, blue eyes reflected the shock Jack felt. Her gaze went from her husband to Jack and back again. "Don't I get a say in this?" he protested.

Mickey turned a cynical glance on to him. "You've always wanted her. Don't deny it, Jack, because I don't believe you. When I won, you actually crossed an ocean so you didn't have to see our happy ever after." He shoved his hands in his trouser pockets, the jacket bunching over his wrists. "What you didn't know was that our happy home life tends to include a few other people." He paused. "Ever heard of swinging, Jack?"

*Shit, fuck and damn.* Jack reached for her mind, wishing he'd practiced his telepathy a bit more. Being in Chase's team had spoiled him since the Sorcerer could usually make up any deficit he had. But Chase was otherwise engaged. Diana's mind was closed, but this didn't surprise Jack as she'd always been a shy little thing. He could only read confusion and desire. Hot, pulsing desire, and it wasn't his.

He could bring Shere into this, but he'd seen the way Mickey eyed her every time he came into the office. It could turn even more messy. He needed to close this down without hurting their feelings, at least for now. A lance of something else surprised him. Hatred, dislike? Something like that. Diana to Mickey. Okay, he could kiss and then

run. That would probably work for now. He was glad they'd decided to accelerate the operation here, but that document complicated matters. They couldn't leave until they had it and the copies, and he needed to maintain his cover until then. So yeah, it wouldn't be a hardship to kiss the pretty Diana. She'd always been a good kisser. So he reached for her and pulled her into his arms. "It's been a long time, Diana," he murmured as he lowered his head to touch his lips to hers.

Shere knocked and went straight in, a hastily printed-out paper in her hand. This was to tell Mickey about Oliver, to prepare the way for later on. She hoped Jack had taken the opportunity to prepare Mickey for him because she wanted this operation done and out. Wanted her life back, wanted to think about what she could do and what she should do. She could step back from Jack, turn her affair with him into the kind of comfortable friends-with-benefits thing she had with Oliver. Couldn't she? At least that was what she thought before she saw the blonde princess locked in Jack's arms.

Jealousy, inappropriate and stupid, overwhelmed her for a brief second before she regained control and locked it away. Fuck, this was bad. Not Jack kissing Diana, but the way she felt about it. Okay, Jack kissing Diana. She wanted to claw the other woman's eyes out. Literally. Her claws came to attention just under her skin, ready to emerge, and she took a moment to force them back. "Erm—this email came for you, Jack, and I thought you'd better see it." She ignored Mickey's knowing smile, his gloating enjoyment of her discomfiture. "You should lock the door."

She held out the paper and Mickey snatched it from her. Privacy didn't count for much here, then.

He read it and his brows went up. "Derrington? Fuck, Jack, that's one of the names on the—" He bit off what he was going to say. "You know him?"

Jack lifted his head, but kept Diana in his arms. His face was flushed, though whether with desire or embarrassment Shere didn't know. She kept out of his mind, not wanting to know. But she couldn't stop the quiet, *Sorry*, creeping through her defenses. She ignored it.

Then she latched on to what Mickey had just said. She had to let Jack back in, but she closed everything beneath the top, superficial layer of her mind. *One of the names?*

*Yeah. He has the list. You think I'm doing this for fun?*

*Why not?* She tried to keep it light, stop her heart hurting so much. The feeling bewildered her. She'd spent the night before in two men's arms and it wasn't the first threesome she'd taken part in. Why should she feel so fucking possessive? The shock, maybe that was it. The essential fairness of the situation hit her with the force of a tidal wave. If Jack could share her, she should sure as hell be able to share him. Especially in the name of work.

But she felt a pang of hurt that didn't come from her, gone so fast that she couldn't identify it. Jack released Diana fast, as if she were a hot potato, but Mickey's wife stayed



where she was, close enough for another kiss. She put up her chin and met Shere's gaze with a "So what?" query in her own eyes. *Ice blue, cold*, Shere thought.

Mickey glanced up. "Out." A curt dismissal, but Jack kept his mind open. She could eavesdrop. She returned to her desk and brought up a window on her computer.

"Lunch," Mickey said abruptly. "Let's get out of here."

"I'm meeting Derrington for lunch."

A pause and she closed her eyes so she could see too. Shit, her connection to Jack was good, one of the closest she'd ever experienced. It was as if she was standing in the room with him. Like a pro, Jack closed all his personal stuff away and just opened the channel.

Mickey looked delighted, his dark eyes almost dancing in glee. "It's like we planned it. Jack, I want him in here. Why did you meet him?"

"You wanted me to contact people who could drive business Hightower's way, didn't you? Derrington was first on my list when I heard he was coming here. So staying at the Barbican did help some. I hung about the lobby until he arrived and bumped into him. Told him what I was doing and we fixed up a lunch today."

Mickey grinned. "Would I be in the way if I came?"

"No. It might help. Derrington knows I work with Hightower International and he's interested. You can reel him in."

"Brilliant."

Throughout this exchange, Shere felt Diana's silent presence. She couldn't read her because she was channeling through Jack and *he* couldn't read her properly. Mickey jerked his head. Diana didn't even merit an "out", it seemed.

The door to the inner office opened and Diana came out, wearing a fucking serene smile that Shere wanted to slap off her face. *Was that bad?* Probably, but right now she didn't much care. She wanted out of this. Targets had become subjects to her, and she didn't like it. Her main job involved getting in and getting out fast and Oliver expedited that for her. He was the field agent, but now she had some inkling of the job he did and she wasn't sure she liked it. But it was better than her usual job. Assassin. It sounded good but the reality was far too often terrifying and boring in equal measure, though not usually at the same time.

Now all they needed was to get Diana out of the office and Shere could do her job. She needed to get away, to think, to work out what she wanted to do with her life. Or the next part of it at any rate. Whether she wanted this complication that had broadsided her, the loss of her precious impartiality. She'd let too much time pass and she needed to move on.

She returned Diana's smile and turned her concentration back to the screen. "I know it's your turn to go first, but do you mind if I take the early lunch today?" Diana asked her.

*Perfect.* “No, go ahead. Take your time, I’m going nowhere.” Big fat lie, because as soon as she’d finished, she was out of there. She’d leave a note, say she was taken ill or something, but once G had confirmed job done, she had to get away. For her own sake.

Because the thought of Jack having a threesome with Mickey and Diana hurt her big-time. Way, way more than it should. Even if it was only to get the information they needed.

She’d never allowed her private life to impinge on her work before. For an assassin, whose very survival depended on keeping her cool, that it was doing so now worried her. No more ties. Since Mark’s death she’d avoided them, and hooking up with Jack could be disastrous. He lived in New York, she didn’t. Couldn’t. Family ties would keep her in Britain for a while to come, and commuting wouldn’t work. It never did. She recognized her panic, knew she was getting in deep. She’d suffer for letting her guard down, giving Jack everything he wanted, but she had to stop it now. Before it got a whole lot worse.

A presence filled her mind and an instant later Oliver opened the door to the office. Shere wasn’t surprised when Diana gasped because Oliver looked devastating. His navy blue suit and white shirt were tailored and the red silk tie added a splash of color. Gold gleamed discreetly from his tie-pin and his cufflinks, and he wore highly polished Italian shoes. He’d brushed his dark hair back, which emphasized the breadth of his forehead and his strong jaw. His gray eyes flashed mischief. This was Oliver in his bad boy mode, the one the world followed and photographed. Like a magician, he made them look in the wrong direction while he worked for STORM. “Hello, ladies,” he purred. “I believe you have one Jack Hargreaves working here?”

“Oh—um—yes,” Diana managed. She cleared her throat. “He’s in with my—with Mr. Hightower.”

Oliver grinned and leaned against the door, blatantly eyeing her. “We’ve arranged to have lunch. Should I come back later?”

“N-no, I’m sure he’ll be out in a minute. Let me ring through for you.” Diana regained some of her sangfroid and Shere watched, amused, as she regained her poise. Straight back, chin tucked in so she could look at him through her long lashes. For a blonde, she had great lashes, brown. Maybe she’d done more than brighten her shade. Not that Shere blamed her for that, just for her obnoxious shy-maiden act. Over the last few days, Diana had really gotten to Shere, and she’d be happy never to see her again. Now she watched Diana smile shyly at Oliver.

*Did it work?* Oliver asked her.

*Yeah. Mickey’s joining you and Diana’s going for an early lunch.*

*Great.*

Diana picked up the phone, held it to her ear, but didn’t take her attention away from Oliver as she hit the button to the inner office. “Yes, it’s me. Mr. Hargreaves’ lunch appointment has arrived.” She replaced the phone. “Mr. Hargreaves will be with you in

a moment." She crossed her legs, drawing Oliver's attention. He stared and allowed his lips to relax into a half-smile.

"If he's any longer, I'll withdraw the invitation and ask you instead." Oliver moved away from the wall to cross the room and hold his hand out to Diana. "Oliver Cranfield. Also known as Derrington."

*Smooth bastard.*

*That's me. Oliver Smooth Bastard Derrington.*

Her eyes widened as Oliver shook her hand. At least he didn't kiss it. That might have made Shere gag. "You're Lord Derrington?" Diana asked.

"For my sins." Oliver grimaced, but he made it sexy. "Call me Oliver or Derrington. I don't go in for formality. So when do you get off work?"

Diana hesitated. Shere realized this might be how Mickey drew in new customers. Diana could flirt with them, snare them, maybe even sleep with them, leaving them owing her and Hightower International a favor. An old trick but it often worked. If you had the stomach for it.

The door to the inner office opened and Jack stepped out, grinning when he saw Oliver. "Good to see you. Let me get my jacket and I'll be right with you."

Right on cue, Mickey walked into the room and quirked a brow at his wife. She smiled, her lips trembling a little. "Lord Derrington—Oliver—was saying that he wanted to make our acquaintance."

"Were you really?" Mickey smiled affably. "Well Diana is my wife, but we don't always let that get in the way of a new friendship." He gave the message so clearly nobody in the room could doubt his meaning.

"I say, do you mind if Mickey joins us?" Jack asked.

Oliver's grin broadened and he shook hands with Mickey. "Glad to meet you."

"Mickey Hightower. Good to meet you too. Jack says you've shown an interest in Hightower's services." He glanced at Diana, his meaning clear. "Services" was such a useful word.

Oliver followed his gaze and deliberately licked his lower lip. "Sure. My pleasure. We'll be at the Timothy."

"So where did you and Jack meet?" Mickey asked. "He's a dark horse, I never realized he was moving in Christ Church circles."

"They have their ordinary students too," Jack pointed out. "I went to school with one of them and he introduced me to Oliver. We've kept in touch." They had to make some kind of connection, one that would have happened before Jack met Mickey. School would work.

Mickey gave him a quizzical glance. "I bet. Even when you went to the States?"

Jack shrugged. "Yes." He slung his jacket over his shoulder. "Shall we go?" He turned to Mickey. "Are you coming?"

"Sure." Mickey disappeared into his office, reappearing a second or two later with his jacket.

Oliver gave Diana the once-over then turned his attention to Shere. "And how about you, lovely lady?"

*Do you know how sickening you are like this?* "I'm taking a late lunch, thanks. But it's nice of you to ask."

Oliver waved a dismissive hand. "Another time, then." He turned his back on her to walk out the door. *Sickening works for me right now. I have to keep your boss busy for hours. I think you have the better job.*

*So do I.*

Oliver slung his arm around Jack's shoulder as they left. Halfway down the stairs, in a voice loud enough for them to hear, Oliver said, "The blonde is a stunner, but the little dark one isn't really my style. You should try her out, Jack. You tend to go for the small, dark types."

He'd pay for that.

Jack wasn't surprised when Oliver steered them to the elevators at the Timothy instead of taking them up the broad, imposing flight of stairs that led to the dining room. "I don't always want to eat in public, and we have things to discuss, don't we?" he said breezily. "I've ordered a table set in my suite."

Mickey stopped staring toward the dining room wistfully and back to Oliver. Even better, from his point of view, Jack read in him. "Excellent."

Jack shrugged. "It won't do my reputation any good if I'm not seen with you in public." He did his best to pout.

*Any more of that and I'll shock Mickey's socks off by kissing you.*

Jack turned his laugh into a cough. It sounded unconvincing, even to him. They were in the elevator now, going up to the suites, and he had to school his features into eager anticipation. That didn't prove difficult. Soon this hellish operation would end and he could get on with his life. Although the thought of that made him unaccountably depressed and he didn't have to search far to find the reason.

"By the way, Chase Maynord is joining us."

Mickey gasped and then smiled. "Great."

Jack's sentiments exactly, but for entirely different reasons. Chase could strip Mickey's mind more efficiently than anyone he knew, and leave Mickey thinking nothing had happened.

The doors slid open on the floor containing the suites and he turned in the direction of the one assigned to Oliver, but he touched Jack's shoulder and steered him in the direction of his own. *Yours is easier to secure*, he said.

*Then I hope housekeeping has been, because it's obvious who's using the suite.*

He heard nothing from Chase except a sound of exasperated disgust. Smiling to himself, he slid his cardkey down the slot and then pressed his thumb against the tiny screen above it. The slight sound from behind him reminded him that Mickey hadn't known about this. "Hey, you get a good budget room here, don't you?" Mickey said. "I'll have to send more of my customers."

So he *had* gotten them rooms on the cheap. "We had an upgrade after an accident." He pushed open the door and motioned for them to go ahead. "A burst pipe."

Mickey stopped inside the spacious living area and looked around before giving a low whistle. "Lucky you. So how did you manage this?"

"I couldn't accept that any guests should have such rooms in any of my hotels."

Mickey spun around to confront Chase, a smile fixing a smile across his features. "Why, Mr. Maynard, what a pleasure to meet you!"

Chase stepped forward, in no hurry to shake the proffered hand. He didn't return the compliment. "Chase, please. Shall we sit down?"

A table was laid by the windows and a trolley stood close by. "I thought we'd serve ourselves," Chase said. "I spend most of my life in hotels, and informality is a pleasant change for me." Jack resolutely put his mind away from the comfortable apartment Chase now occupied with his wife in New York. If Mickey had known Chase better, he might have sussed that this wasn't intended as a social occasion. Jillian would have been here, and for all Chase's comments, there'd have been waiters.

Jack went to the trolley and lifted the top. On a heated bar lay a variety of dishes. He grabbed the padded gloves and unloaded them onto the table. Chase helped and Oliver, still playing the arrogant fool, didn't. Neither did Mickey.

Oliver tucked in. Mostly Chinese food, but that was fine by Jack. He'd eaten so much French cuisine and English food recently it made a pleasant change.

"So," Mickey said after his first bite of noodles, "have you known Jack long, your lordship?"

Oliver made a face. "Derrington will do. 'Your lordship' reminds me of my father."

Jack choked on a relatively small mouthful of spicy beef. When he'd cleared his mouth and taken a deep draft of water, he managed, "I never met your father, did I?"

Oliver's mouth set in a straight line. "Count yourself lucky." But he turned to Mickey with a smile. "So tell me how you come to know Jack, Mickey. He says you're old friends."

Mickey launched into an account of how he'd met Jack that quickly morphed into a version of "my brilliant career". Before too long, Jack felt the tingle in the air that signified Chase going to work. He took ten minutes before he withdrew, by which time Oliver had made good friends with Mickey, and Mickey was "Derrington'ing" him as if he'd known him for years.

A charmer, was Mickey. He told Derrington funny stories that put Jack in the wrong, then more that put himself in the wrong. A good way to relax the potential

client. And by the time he'd got to his company, he'd hooked Oliver in. Or would have done, if Oliver had wanted to do business with him and didn't know any more. "So I set up Hightower International to help the professors find a wider audience. I arrange for publication and set up a promotional program for them."

Chase leaned back with a sigh. "So how does that factor in with you wanting to meet Derrington here?"

Mickey shot him a smile. "Very perceptive, Mr. Maynard." Notably, Chase didn't ask Mickey to call him Chase. "I'm expanding the organization to include anyone in Oxford who needs my help. There are so many people who need high quality, specialist services. For instance, I have great contacts in the print industry around here. I could produce your menus, something small like that. Being around the corner, it might be easier for a local to help you with the smaller things. And once I'd proved myself there, you might allow me to pitch for other items. It would give us a chance to get to know each other and to see if I could provide what you needed." Like provide menus for the whole of the Timothy group? Somehow Jack didn't think that would happen.

Jack got tired of all that dancing around the subject. "And the IRDC?"

Mickey shot him a dirty look, but it melted away when he gave his attention to Chase. "I can't imagine you're interested in that side of the business."

Chase leaned back, giving up any pretense of eating. Jack's mind tingled as he made contact. *The idiot hasn't done his homework. He doesn't know I'm a Talent.*

Oliver's voice came into their minds. *All mouth and no trousers, my granny would have said.*

"On the contrary, I'm intrigued. The first Talent came out when he flew over Central Park. My flagship hotel is situated just yards away from where he did it. So what do you have to do with the IRDC?"

Mickey took another meditative forkful, taking his time before he replied. He must think he had them at his mercy now. He played the moment for all it was worth. "I have a relationship with the organization. Merely to help them identify Talents in Oxford. We do have more than the average town. Perhaps the university draws them." Like moths to a flame? Jack doubted it. "The IRDC is a charitable organization. Its aims are to share the incredible gifts these people have with the rest of mankind. So-called Talents seem to want to keep the gifts for themselves."

The only person still eating was Oliver, but he paused now and put his chopsticks gently next to his plate. "Are you sure about that?" he asked, his deep voice resonating around the quiet room.

"Perfectly." Mickey gave Oliver his full attention. Jack reluctantly admired his ability to do that. It went a great way to explain some of Mickey's charm. "The IRDC has made numerous requests to STORM, the organization that represents the interests of Talents. Every request has met with a refusal. Why would they do that, if not to safeguard their gifts? Who wouldn't like to live forever, or to stay young? Imagine the income from a discovery like that!"

Chase got to his feet and paused at the trolley. He carefully closed the lid, his long fingers meditatively caressing the dull black handle.

But Oliver gave the reply. "Don't you think it's because the IRDC uses inhumane methods to extract the information they want? Except that they've been doing it for years and they haven't got any further than the Talented medics."

Mickey gave him a pitying smile. "I've seen the evidence. STORM is deliberately withholding information from the IRDC."

"Maybe they don't want to share with sleazebags," Oliver said. He muffled the sound of Chase snicking the lock on the outer door. There was another outer door from the bedroom, Jack recalled, but he sat between Mickey and that exit.

Mickey's head went up, his attention entirely on Oliver. "I respectfully disagree."

"How do you want to do this, Chase?" Oliver didn't turn his head to address Chase, currently standing behind Oliver.

"I think we ask him nicely to start with." He placed his hands gently on Mickey's shoulders.

After his first start Mickey controlled his reaction, but not before Jack saw alarm flash across his eyes. "We won't hurt you, Mickey."

"Why would you want to?" Mickey gave a sharp, uneasy laugh. "After all, opinions are free. Okay, I get it, you don't agree with the IRDC's point of view. Fair enough. But isn't this a bit dramatic?"

"Not one bit." Chase kept his hands on Mickey's shoulders. "Tell us about the document, Mickey. How did you get a copy?"

Mickey's accusatory stare went to Jack. "You told them?"

Jack shrugged. "That's why I came. We knew Bennett had a connection here, but we didn't know why. And we suspect that someone was taking a lot of cash from him. That was you, wasn't it, Mickey?"

Mickey blinked. Jack could almost see the cogs whirring in his mind. "From what you're saying you should congratulate me."

"Except you were siphoning the money off and taking it from the IRDC too."

Mickey's eyes narrowed. "What is this? Who are you?"

For answer, Jack reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out his STORM ID card. He flipped open the wallet and dropped it on the table in front of Mickey.

Mickey gave a hollow laugh. "All the time you were sucking me in, weren't you? Why?"

Jack didn't flinch when he met Mickey's accusatory stare. "I told you. We need that document."

"Did you read it?" Oliver said, no trace of the drawl left in his voice.

"I saw your name, or rather, your ancestor's."

"My grandfather," Oliver told him. "Our generations are somewhat attenuated compared to yours."

Mickey wasn't long in making the connection. "So you're..."

"A Talent," Oliver said. "A vampire, to be precise. Pure-bred vampire-born. But I work undercover. Many of the people on that list are still hidden, and we want to preserve their privacy. You had a document worth a fortune in blackmail fees. But of course, you wouldn't have used it for that, would you?"

Mickey sighed and rolled his eyes. "I wanted to sell it to the IRDC. They could probably use it more effectively. But I was still negotiating the price."

Jack glanced up at Chase who watched him, blue eyes steady. "Are you doing anything, Chase?"

"No."

Mickey leaned forward, tried to shake off his captor. Chase merely lifted his hand and placed it on Mickey's neck, just above his collar. His grip on Mickey's shoulder firmed, his fingers digging in.

"Don't," said Jack. "Just stay nice and relaxed and we'll make sure you're back in your office before you're missed. All you'll remember is a pleasant though unproductive meal. Chase will take care of that."

"How? What?"

Chase stroked his neck. "The skin to skin contact helps sometimes, and it certainly makes it easier for you. I'm a Sorcerer. You've heard of those?"

Mickey choked. "Yes."

"Of course you have."

"So what are you, Jack? You turned traitor?"

"I turned something else." For answer, Jack lifted his hand and let his claws come. They shot out of the end of his fingers, black, curved and lethal. "Into a cat, to be precise."

Mickey closed his eyes and sighed. "You've been playing me all along."

"Sorry," Jack said. "But cats do that, you know. I came here to track some money. Bennett left a copious money trail, but there was more to this one. He spent a year over here on sabbatical. There's a chance he recruited Megan and me for McIver, where he could keep an eye on her. I got the McIver job, and he needed me to persuade her. He also needed her boyfriend out of the way. I have no doubt he organized that too."

Chase met his gaze for a fraught moment. He hadn't worked back that far. Jack didn't need to resort to telepathy to ask Chase not to tell Megan. There was no point. Bennett was dead now, and past revenge.

"So don't talk to me about playing people, Mickey. You've done it all your life, except for Bennett, who played you. The master manipulator. At least he thought so. People like you always consider themselves so fucking superior, and that's their



weakness. Yours too. It'll probably be your weakness for the rest of your life, but you'll get along."

"We won't hurt you," Oliver said.

"Not much, anyway," added Chase. *This isn't an iso room. Everybody block. Now.* If they didn't, they'd catch some of the fallout from Chase's examination of Mickey. They pushed their chairs back and left the room, going out by the bedroom to visit Jillian, to protect her while Chase did his job.

They heard one cry when they left, of a man in pain. Chase would make this as painless as he could, but some discomfort was inevitable. He'd have to go deep and Mickey would resist him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana delayed leaving for lunch, then came back for something before she finally left. Anyone would think she was nervous. Or suspicious, Shere thought. She turned the key in the door after Mrs. Hightower.

After that, she made the most of her time. She hooked up a small hard drive to her computer, another one to Diana's, then went through to Mickey's office to boot up his machine and download the data. She wouldn't even attempt to analyze it. That could come later, at their leisure and with Jack's help. Shit, this operation had gone nuts.

Then she searched for the document. She wasn't a safecracker, and for that matter she didn't usually mess with computers or stay in the field for very long. Before this, she'd considered her job clean. Her bosses gave her a target, and gave her the reasons for killing them—that was unusual, but Shere insisted on it. She wouldn't become a pure killing machine, not even for people she knew and trusted. But she never got to know the targets and she never spent long away from home.

She'd called her father yesterday. Completely forbidden when she was on a job for STORM normally, but she needed to know how he was. He'd laughed at her, told her he was fine, would be fine for a couple of months yet. But she knew he was getting more frail with every day that passed and she knew she wouldn't have much longer with him. A year, tops. Before that, he'd gradually weaken. Shape-shifters rarely showed signs of aging, but when they did, they deteriorated quickly. She'd seen her father's first gray hair last year, and knew it wouldn't have been the first he'd seen. After this operation, she'd planned to take nothing else on for a while. She wanted to spend all the time she could with him.

Last night Chase had shown her how to open a safe with psi. A nifty trick, and just as well not many people knew it. Mickey's safe was underneath his desk, bolted to the floor. If she couldn't get it open, she'd drag it out of its moorings and take it with her. Fuck stealth, she could stage a burglary. Take the fucking computers too.

But maybe it would be better to try the subtle approach first. Gritting her teeth, she blocked everything else out of her mind and concentrated on numbers. She got in tune

with them, feeling them. Mickey would have used the numbers frequently. Their echoes would remain in the room, ready for a sensitive to pick them up.

Here they came. Nice that Mickey hadn't updated his safe, and nice that he kept the door unlocked. All she had to do was to tap in the numbers on the keypad. Fuck, it worked. She dragged the door open and grabbed the contents, sifting through them while she sat in Mickey's big-ass leather chair. She tucked some aside to copy and add to the downloads and then she found a folded paper. The list, or at least the copy.

She used the scanner in the outer office and made quick copies on to a memory stick. Then she checked how the downloads were going. Almost done. Then she replaced everything except the copy of the list in the safe and slammed the door on it. Mickey had a little network of information going, most of it centered on St. Thomas'. But the list wasn't here, not the original.

A thorough search of Mickey's office turned up nothing. She thought she might find at least a safety deposit box key. Maybe he had one at home. If he did, Chase would find the knowledge in his mind and they could act on that. But she was sure she'd covered all the bases. After unhooking all the hard drives, she put them in her bag and sat at her desk again.

Half an hour passed and Diana didn't return. Still she sat, stupidly thinking about Jack, and what she was going to do next before she shook herself back to reality. Maybe Diana didn't intend on coming back today.

In any case, she was done. Absolutely done. She packed up and left, securing the office door behind her and posting the key back through the letterbox. She wouldn't need it again.

She felt the weight lift away from her as she walked down the street toward the hotel before she remembered that Chase would be working on Mickey. Hopefully finishing up by now. Rather than walk in on a Sorcerer doing his thing, she'd go for a walk. After all, the sun was shining, she was in one of the most beautiful cities in the world and she'd hardly seen anything of it yet.

Happiness flooded her and she let it happen. Jack had taught her that, how to let go. He'd gone through so much and yet he retained an inner joy, untouched by any of the things that had damaged him over the years. Deep down she knew Jack had shown her something valuable—how to live for the moment and retain an inner integrity. As a Talent, she'd need that even more in the years to come.

Walking past a side street, something snagged Shere's attention. The sun glanced off something on the ground that shouldn't be there. A huddle of clothes, but clothes that looked too good to belong to a beggar, too clean. Then her cat came to the surface, unbidden, and she went on full alert. That was blood she scented in the air. Lots of it.

Shere ran toward the body on the ground.

## Chapter Eleven

The policeman showed a bland face to them, but Jack didn't need Chase's superior psi sense to know that he was gloating inside. "She obtained employment with Hightower International under false pretenses, she was discovered bending over the recently deceased body of her boss, and she had stolen information in her bag, in the form of three hard drives and a memory device."

Jack snorted. "I obtained employment the same way. Will you arrest me too?"

"If necessary." Jack immediately christened him Plod. The man didn't need a uniform to proclaim his profession.

"Detective Pl—Stimson," Chase said, shooting a frowning glance at Jack, "we are members of STORM. You must have found the lady's ID card in her possession."

"No," said Pl—Stimson. "We found nothing of the kind. Even if we had, we would require verification. And if the prisoner had killed Mr. Hightower illegally, it would still be a crime, regardless of her affiliations."

Jack wondered if he'd eaten a dictionary for breakfast. The man's attitude only added to his growing irritation, fueled by worry when he'd heard that they'd detained Shere. Cats hated imprisonment even more than most other Talents. Confinement would hurt her and it ate him up that he couldn't tear the place apart until he found her. "Would it help if I went back to our rooms and retrieved her card?"

"No."

Jack made a move to get his card but the fucking detective shook his head. "You're both members of STORM US. It has no jurisdiction here, or only the kind any foreign agency has. Everything has to be done through intermediaries."

Shit. Jack ran his hand through his hair, raking the short strands to a tousled mess. "And I guess you'll keep her here until we comply?" Chase had advised Oliver to stay at the hotel. He'd complained, but gone back to watch over Jillian. Chase was extra jumpy about his wife now she was pregnant. Jack hoped Oliver saw the sense of keeping his cover. "So how about bail?"

"We haven't charged her yet. Our officers are processing the scene of the crime, and after that we'll know more." The plod seemed to lose interest in them, shuffling his papers and then putting them in order. He'd already done that twice.

"So how about if I read her?" Chase offered. "I can see all her secrets, by force or by her permission. Will you release her then?"

Detective Stimson looked up with an, "are you still here?" expression on his face. "Such examinations aren't acceptable in law," he said patiently, as if talking to idiots.

"We have no proof that such a procedure means anything other than the result of a vivid imagination. Even if you were not affiliated to her."

Chase raised a brow and Jack let him do what he did best. "Then you should guard your thoughts better. Can you feel me there?" Jack knew from his carefully controlled tones that Chase verged on the edge of losing his temper. Stimson really shouldn't have said that. "You dread the coming weekend, because it's your wedding anniversary – your twelfth – and you're tired of your wife. Your girlfriend is waiting for you, equally demanding, and you're thinking about running from both." He raised a brow. "Really, Officer, you should choose one and stick with her. If either finds out about the other, you'll lose both. And in case you were wondering, your wife is Marion and your girlfriend is Vicky White."

The officer's chest rose and fell as he took a couple of quick, deep breaths. "A cheap parlor trick."

"No. I really can read your mind, partly because it's so badly organized. So can Jack, but not as well as I can. It's my expertise. I don't propose to present you with any more tricks, parlor or otherwise, but I will read you deeper if you want more proof." Jack heard the telepathic projection because Chase didn't shield it. *You need to protect your mind a bit more carefully.*

At last, a result. Stimson turned crimson and shoved back his chair, staring at them incredulously. "I thought it was a trick," he said. "I still think it. You can't fool everybody, you know."

Jack watched him, fascinated. He'd never met a real live skeptic before, although he'd heard about them. Talents only had themselves to blame. They'd spent so many years denying their own existence they could hardly condemn anyone for taking them at their word. The man's disbelief filled the room with negativity. Negativity felt cold.

"Do you have any evidence against Shere? Any actual proof?"

"The evidence we do have is fairly damning," the man said. Jack wanted to hit him. The urge soaked through to his cat and he had to force his hands to remain lax, his claws hidden.

"You have no evidence. She has to walk past that alley to get to the hotel. Any blood on her or her garments she got when she bent down to see if Mickey was still alive." He would defend her to the death, but at the back of his mind a worm of doubt niggled at him. The recent revelation that Shere was a killer – a licensed killer, sure, but an assassin, nevertheless – remained with him, made him pause. And he knew that doubt lay in Chase's mind too.

A disturbance sounded outside and Jack felt the unmistakable presence of another Talent, one he'd never met before. Which didn't mean a great deal, considering the brevity of his time here. But Chase didn't recognize him either. Jack and Chase remained psychically linked so that Chase could transmit discoveries and thoughts to Jack and vice versa.

They didn't have long to wait. The door burst open to the sound of voluble protests from someone outside and the other presence. Jack turned his head.

A man stood in the doorway, filling most of it. Tall, powerfully built, like a boxer, with a head of dark hair and dark, fathomless eyes. At least they appeared dark in the bright overhead lighting in this windowless room, which cast as many shadows as illumination. The newcomer took a step into the room. He firmly detached himself from the officer pulling at his shirt and closed the door, leaning against it. A black leather document case hung from one hand and he was dressed casually, in black slacks and a navy pullover with a leather jacket.

He took his time perusing first Chase, then Jack, who got to their feet. Jack watched while Chase extended his hand in a friendly gesture. "Chase Maynard, STORM US," he said. "And you are...?"

The man grinned and a ray of sunshine seemed to enter the room. "Gordon White, STORM UK."

"G," Jack said, and gave an apologetic grin when the man turned his attention his way. He shook hands with G as Chase had done and a bolt of awareness shot through him.

"Interesting," G murmured. "We don't have many British jaguars."

"I'm half-American," Jack corrected before he had time to reconsider. "I spent my childhood shuttling between both countries."

G's grin widened. "I'm a bit of a hybrid myself." He sounded wholly English to Jack. "Our mutual friend called me and I drove down right away." He lifted the case and plunked it on the table. The metal legs rattled against the concrete floor. G quirked a heavy black brow. "And you are...?"

"Detective Stimson, CID," said the man who, unlike Jack and Chase, hadn't gotten to his feet.

G snapped the case open and drew out a few papers. "Here's all the authorization you need to let my operative go. I run STORM in the UK, and I resent the fact that you've effectively outed one of my best agents. You didn't accede to her request that she go quietly with you before a crowd gathered. Nor did you let her make the phone call she's entitled to for some time after you had her here. Not that she needed it, but if you want to rely purely on the law, I can use that too."

He loomed over Stimson, who stared up at him, his blue eyes wide. As if in a trance, he reached out and took the documents. He blinked a couple of times as he read them and the edges of the papers shook until he put them on the table.

He took his time. In his position, Jack would have done the same, if only to gain some breathing space. Because G in the flesh was overpowering. His presence filled the room, a deliberate decision he suspected, but it also felt natural. As if reining in his presence would be hard for him. G glanced at them and his gaze lingered on Jack. "I need to speak with you later. In private."

Jack nodded. He had no idea why, or why G would want to speak to him without Chase and the others in their makeshift team. Considering how makeshift it was, they'd worked very well together. Especially with Shere. The shot of arousal he felt when he recalled just how well he worked with Shere shocked him with its intensity. He kept it well below the surface, in a part of his mind nobody breached. Ever. He already knew how he felt about her even if he didn't know for sure how she'd take it. But he wouldn't lose another woman, not this time. Not without a fight.

Stimson sighed and put his hand on the heap of papers on the table. "We can release her into your custody, but she can't leave the country. We'd rather she didn't leave Oxford until we've investigated the case. If she does, then we'll need notice of her precise whereabouts."

G nodded. "Of course."

"Come with me." They all went to follow but G held up his hand. "I'm guessing that he just means me. I'll sign whatever I have to and I'll be right with you. With Shere, hopefully."

Jack didn't know how he managed to move events so quickly but G returned inside fifteen minutes. He wasn't alone.

Shere looked so weary that Jack wanted to pull her into his arms and take care of her to the exclusion of everything else. She needed care, whether she agreed or not he'd give it to her. She wore scrubs. They'd probably taken her clothes from her, as they'd be marked with blood. But before she reached him, she turned to face her boss. "G, I need my bag and those hard drives. You know why."

G's mouth flattened and he looked over the top of her head to Stimson, standing just outside the room. "It's evidence," the man said.

G stepped back after a short nod. "But give her the rest of her possessions. The personal ones."

"I don't have personal possessions. You know that, G."

"Then it's about time you did," he murmured, his voice softer. And Jack felt that pang of jealousy that was getting familiar the longer he stayed around Shere. But as far as he was concerned, that was only a symptom of something else. Something deeper.

Shit, he'd done it again. Except this time it felt different. While G argued with Stimson, he took a moment to work out why until the realization came to him. She was more important than he was, her feelings far more vital. If she truly wanted him gone, he'd go. But while he felt she needed him, or at least someone to care for her, he'd stay. This time it wasn't about him, how he felt, what he wanted. It was all about her.

The thought made him dizzy until Chase, standing close to him, mainly because there was little space left in the room, said, "Now you get it. This is it, isn't it?"

He swallowed. "Yes, I rather think it is."

Outside the police station, Shere remained with G, but she'd met Jack's gaze just once before she looked away. They got into G's car, a black minivan, and he drove them

back to the hotel. They didn't speak much until they gained the safety of the suite Jack shared with Shere. Then he wanted them all gone. Her weariness beat at him. Why couldn't anyone else feel it?

She told them in detail of the discovery she'd made, the way the body lay and everything else she'd observed. Which was plenty. "He was still warm, but rigor hadn't set in. I think he was headed for his car when someone killed him." She sighed and he felt a tremor of unease. She hadn't liked this. Seeing the body of Mickey had unnerved her and he wanted to know why, because he wanted to help her make it better. But she firmed her jaw and he knew no one else, not even Chase, had detected what he'd felt. Although they shared the same sofa, they didn't touch. He respected her wish not to but if she didn't let him touch her soon he'd drag her close anyway. He couldn't hold out much longer. Loving a strong woman had to be the craziest thing he'd ever done. Although this was the third time a strong woman had drawn him to her, but never with such devastating effect.

"Mickey's car was still locked," she said. "He had the key in his hand but he hadn't opened the door."

"Did you read anything?" Chase demanded. "Any trace, something I can work with? I'm going along later, but after the cops have contaminated the scene I don't think I'll pick up much."

"Nothing," she said, "I felt nothing."

Chase leaned forward in his chair, his hands clasped together. "That's interesting. You'd think that you'd have picked up on some strong emotions. Nothing at all would indicate that he was taken by surprise."

She shook her head. "No, there was something, but it was what you might expect. Mingled feelings, and slight disquiet."

"So he could have argued with someone—" Jack began, but she interrupted him.

"Someone hit him on the back of the head with something heavy. So he turned his back on whoever it was."

Jack finished the thought. "He didn't think he was a threat."

Oliver sat in a chair slightly apart from the others, his hands steepled and touching his lips. He drew his hands away now and said what they were all beginning to think. "Diana."

Shere heard the name with dull recognition. She'd thought as much, but she'd wanted confirmation from someone else. Her imprisonment had infuriated, then wearied her. She couldn't do anything about it, but her cat raged in confinement and she was finding it hard to subdue her. She felt wrung out, exhausted. And something else, something her mind shied away from thinking about. But keeping her attention off it was proving as difficult as dealing with it. It would pass, in time. Except she felt G's perspicacious gaze on her, and someone else—Jack. He soothed her, entered as far as

she'd allow and sent a mass of tranquility around her. As close as if he'd cuddled her in the finest merino blanket.

Diana. Yes, it made sense. But what they didn't know was why. Speculation began with her. "Maybe the worm turned."

"Maybe it did. Or maybe she got a better offer."

"For what?"

G sighed. "For that document. The police have cordoned off the Hightower offices, but you searched it pretty thoroughly. We found no evidence of a safety deposit box." He paused. "And I've had their home searched too. Mickey and Diana use a cleaning service, so I changed the detail this week. They might be disappointed with the cleaning, but the operatives found nothing of note there, either. So either it's hidden somewhere we don't know, or the Hightowers have a better hiding place, or Diana has it." He paused. "Let's not take our eye off the ball, please. We want the document. The police can take care of the murder and at this stage I'd rather we left it up to them."

Chase nodded. "I agree. It could just be a domestic disagreement. Mickey made Diana sleep with potential clients." He cleared his throat. "He liked to watch, it seems."

G glanced at him. "You condemn the practice?"

Chase gave a harsh laugh. "Hardly. But she was unwilling, and that I do oppose."

Shere couldn't sense anything in his mind, but Chase was powerful and he'd hide anything he wanted to. Still, it made her wonder. To see a man so stunningly handsome having sex with his lovely wife—she shoved her spark of desire away, hardly believing she had the energy to think it. But that spark reminded her of Jack, sitting by her side but apart, so they didn't touch. Strange she didn't think of Oliver, a thoughtful lover with whom she'd dissipated many of the adrenaline rushes after a successful operation. But Jack came to her mind unbidden as the man of choice. Shit, as if she wasn't in enough trouble already.

With a rush of energy so typical of him, Jack got to his feet. "I think Shere's had enough for one day. She needs to rest and if she doesn't, she'll drain us all."

G gave her a discerning glance. He delved into her mind, just once, deep and sure, with the accuracy of a needle. "Shere, when you're ready, I want to talk to you. Chase, I want to talk with you now, if you can."

Chase got to his feet. "Delighted. Come to our suite now, and we can order something to eat." He ushered G out of the room but glanced back at them before he left. She felt a moment's tension between him and Jack before the door closed behind them.

Oliver's heaved sigh sounded like tension released. Unfortunately, it didn't help to ease Shere's. Jack got to his feet. "I'm going to run a bath for Shere. Don't argue," he added, giving her a sharp glance.

"I wasn't about to. It sounds heavenly."



Jack left and they heard the sound of running water. Oliver moved to stand in front of her. "Do you want me to carry you? You have nobody to impress here. We know how you're feeling – fuck, everybody in the room probably knows. Poor baby."

Thankfully, she went into his arms and let him hold her. He didn't try to do anything else and she found the embrace so comfortable she could have slipped into sleep right there. But the thought of a bath kept her awake. To scrub the filth of that cell away sounded like the best thing in the world. Then she could sleep. "Can we have the window open tonight?" Christ, she sounded needy, but she couldn't do anything about it now.

"Anything you want, sweetheart." He kissed the top of her head. "Come on now, let's get you in that tub."

Shere couldn't remember when she'd last had a bath before arriving at the Barbican. Usually she showered and walked, but she seemed to be changing in more ways than one. Oliver undressed her, not allowing her to do anything. Apart from stealing a gentle kiss or two, he behaved more like a nurse than a lover. Like a maid undressing her mistress, he took her clothes, turned her this way and that, and folded the garments over a chair. Most unlike Oliver, who usually stripped and dropped everything on the floor, presumably for the help to clear up later. As he did now. He'd undressed her carefully, but Oliver stripped himself quickly, efficiently until he was as naked as she. She wasn't even sure if he was naked or nude, but as a vampire, he might not have that distinction. He put his arm around her waist and guided her to the bathroom.

Jack waited for her in a deep tub filled two-thirds of the way up. Only the upper part of his chest showed, and water lapped at his nipples until he sat up and stretched his arms wide. Oliver helped her in and she slid into Jack's arms. He felt so good, and she had the disconcerting feeling that she was coming home. She never felt like that with Oliver.

"What's that scent?"

Jack laughed softly. "You don't know lavender? Shame on you. It's to help you relax. I asked Jillian a day or two ago and she gave me this earlier today." He reached for a glass jar full of powder and read from the back. "It says here it's lavender with a touch of basil and orange oil, a relaxing blend to ease headaches and muscle tension." He put the jar down. "Is it working?"

"Not with you here." Jack frowned, but she laughed instead. "You should know the effect you have on me."

"I'm hurt," Oliver drawled from her other side.

She turned to face him. "But you have the same effect."

Oliver's easy smile disappeared. "No, I don't. Do I?"

She swallowed, and any effect the herbs were supposed to have was nullified as the tension ratcheted up. Her tension. Time to 'fess up. "I don't know. Each man has a different effect."

"Darling, we've used each other to our mutual satisfaction for years." Oliver stretched his arm out behind her head, nudging Jack's arm farther around her. "I go in, clear the way, you do the job and then we leave. And maybe have adrenaline-fueled sex. It's not like that with Jack, is it? I saw it for myself, so don't deny it." She stared straight ahead but he crooked his finger under her chin and guided her back to meet his perceptive gaze.

"I think we need to talk. For your own sake, baby girl."

She had no idea how old Oliver was, except he'd passed at least one triple digit birthday. But he'd always called her "baby", at first as a joke and then it became habit. She'd miss that. Because yes, she knew this operation had changed her. She dropped her gaze. Jack picked up a sponge and poured some gel onto it. The sharp scent of oranges mingled with the lavender enhanced the touch of orange oil in the bath mixture. "Yes, we do."

Jack urged her forward and circled the sponge over her back, dipping below the water to cover the whole of the area. "So tell us. Or if you want one of us to go—"

"No, no I don't. I owe it to Oliver, and you...well, it's different."

His movements paused briefly. "Different. Yeah, well, it's different for me, too, and it's confusing the fuck out of me."

"Maybe we can sort that out."

"Maybe." He continued to wash her, sweeping over her shoulders, her back and her arms. He continued in movements that soothed her.

"Today I saw a dead man. It's not the first time." Oliver grunted but he didn't interrupt her. "I've seen plenty of dead people. Some of them were people I cared for who died of old age. It's one of the worst things Talents have to deal with, but we have other Talents to console us and teach us how to cope. It's part of what we are, what we do. But more recently, I've seen people dead from violence. Sometimes I caused it." She drew a breath. "My conscience is clear about everyone. They had all killed others, committed crimes which would have put them in jail if we could have tried them in court. But who'd believe that someone could die from thought? Only people who knew Sorcerers existed. And unsolved murders, people drained of blood, and people who tortured and used Talents. All of them had killed, most had killed more than one person." She lifted her head and stared at Jack. He met her gaze, his brown eyes clear of anything except concern. He made to remove the sponge, but she put her hand on his arm. "No, please, I like it. It helps."

Jack continued to wash her front. Now that she was sitting forward in the tub, Oliver could smooth her back, give her a gentle massage. The pampering helped her to think, and to explain what she'd dimly realized earlier, then come to understand in the jail cell. "Mickey Hightower was a sleaze, but as far as I know, he didn't kill anybody. And I knew him. I got to know him. He blustered, he thought a lot of himself, he bullied his wife. Yes, he tried to cop a feel with me, but when I objected, he stopped. He apologized and didn't touch me after that."

"I didn't know that." Jack's voice held a hint of menace.

"The point is that he's dead now. I knew him, then I found him dead. I didn't kill him."

"If you had, you'd have done it with a little more finesse," Oliver pointed out. "You're good at your job, Shere, whether it's sniper rifle or close-up work. It's always clean and you never leave a trail."

"Thanks. I think." She wasn't sure that would get her many other jobs. "I saw the blood, got it on my clothes, and in that cell I began to think. Diana loved him – no doubt his parents did too. He had a life and then it went, gone. Those people I killed had lives, people who loved them." She stopped.

"So did the people they killed." Oliver didn't allow her any space on that. She'd never discussed this with him and now it felt odd somehow.

But she continued, after she'd mastered her emotions once more. "I know that. But I never felt it before. Mickey was still warm when I found him. It was a messy job, several strikes to the back of the head. I bet they'll find something nearby, a rock, maybe a tire iron, something like that. The back of his skull was completely crushed. But when I saw him, I panicked, just as anyone would. I even felt his pulse." She gave a bitter laugh. "As if anyone could have survived that." She couldn't say any more, not yet, but Oliver took over.

"I've worked with assassins before, Shere. You're one of the best. But they all reach a stage when if they carried on, it would damage them. You're at that stage now. You could continue to do your job. Some bosses would insist on it. After all, you're very good at what you do and you could continue to be so for some time. But it would hurt you and you'd become depressed, suicidal, cynical, and eventually you wouldn't come back from a job."

She listened and understood. As an assassin, she was done.

Instead of sadness, relief flooded her and she lifted her head, breathing in the softly scented, steamy air. "You're right. But what can I do now?"

Jack laughed. "Are you kidding? Any STORM agent would kill – gives his eyeteeth to have you in their team."

"Would you?" She turned to face him in the bath water. Jack let the sponge fall and met her gaze.

"Anytime."

They continued to stare, neither opening their minds any more than they had already, but fully conscious of this moment. A turning point for them both. The swirl and swish of water passed them by, as did the change in the water level. Then a gust above their heads made them look up, the spell temporarily broken. Oliver stood by the tub, a towel wrapped around his waist and a smile on his lips. "I'll leave you to it. Shere, rest. And you too, Jack. Look after each other."

Both stretched out their hands, but Oliver laughed and evaded them, stepping out of reach. "Not tonight, *mes amis*. Another time, if you ask, and if I'm available, I'd be delighted to join you. You need to be together right now, with no outside interference." He touched his fingers to his forehead in a mock salute and strode out of the room.

"Now I feel bad," Jack said. "I didn't mean to drive him away."

Shere frowned. "He's right. We need to talk, but we could have done it any time."

"Except that I want this." Jack reached out and took her shoulders, urging her toward him so he could enclose her in his arms. "I don't feel protective normally, I really don't. But you seem to bring all that out in me. Which is ridiculous, considering your profession and training. I feel your pain at the same time you do, Shere."

She leaned back but didn't try to break his hold and gazed up at his face. "When you were hurt in Professor Campbell's office I felt it, but I didn't feel Oliver's until later."

"So what do you think is happening? No, don't say anything, not yet. Let me show you."

He released her to get out of the bath and grab one of the towels off the heated rail. Instead of wrapping it around himself, he held it out, inviting her to climb up. He watched her with blatant desire, the heat banked in his eyes as she rose and climbed out. He cuddled her in the soft, warm towel before he grabbed another for himself. He scrubbed his body dry in efficient sweeps, not lingering, and turned to her. This time he took great care in smoothing and patting. He coaxed her body to dry instead of treating her the same way he had himself. It made her feel gloriously pampered. When she thought back, nobody had treated her like that in a long, long time. She'd forgotten how much she enjoyed it.

So used to cutting herself off from any emotional reaction other than sexual passion, Shere had treated her body as something she needed to look after in order for it to function properly. A high-powered vehicle rather than a precious piece of porcelain. Something to tune up and run frequently.

She felt like crying but she swallowed the tears back. So often she'd done that, choked on it rather than let it show, give in to it.

Jack didn't say anything, but drew the towel off her and dropped it to the floor to join the one he'd discarded. He smiled. "Let's go to bed."

They walked together into the bedroom and he drew the sheet down himself since the maid hadn't been in. They'd been there instead.

Jack touched his lips to hers but drew away when she would have pressed closer and deepened the kiss. "I'm terrible about expressing my emotions. I guess it's because I spent years repressing how I felt, first at home, then at uni."

"Why? Didn't your parents love you?" She could imagine a loveless household, but didn't like to. Jack deserved better.

His lips curved up in a one-sided wry smile. "Too much. They passed me between them all my life. They worked so hard at making the division of child-rearing equitable they forgot about me, I think. It was a relief to get a scholarship to Oxford. I could have avoided it, but by then I was desperate to do things my way, put down roots. My mother gushes, my dad slaps me on the back and says how proud he is of me."

She cringed for him. "My parents were scholars, and my father is in charge of one of the departments of Egyptology at the British Museum." She grinned. "No, not the mummies."

"What then?"

"Hieroglyphics, ancient languages."

He took a deep breath, his chest grazing her breast. "You'll give up your job anyway?"

She shrugged as well as she could being held so close. "I'd thought of taking a break rather than giving it up. But now I'm not sure." She met his gaze, although the perception she saw there was painful, stripping her to her soul. "But if I'm not good at my job, that puts other people in danger too."

He nodded. "Yeah, it does. I've ridden shotgun for an assassin. Only once, and I didn't like it. He was a cold bastard. Not like you." He dipped his head and kissed her again, and this time he didn't stop. She hooked her arms around his neck and drew him closer until he lay on top of her. Only then did she feel safe.

He lifted his head. "Hey, are you okay for this? Fuck, I'm so selfish, you should rest." He would have rolled off her but she kept hold of him. She pulled back, not enough to stop him if he really wanted to, but enough to tell him she wanted him just where he was.

Her seductive smile completed the job. His cock, already hard, pressed into her stomach. When he tried to draw away, she felt the chill of the drop of fluid seeping from the tip. His slow smile melted her.

"I won't fuck you, Shere, not this time."

The statement, with his smile, made her wonder. But not for long. He kissed her again. Then he took her chin in his hand and then gave her a long, lingering caress, his tongue rimming the inside of her lips then delving inside to explore. He stroked her and she could have kissed him forever. All she could read in his mind was happiness and contentment, and she'd caused it.

Despite his shaft, poking insistently against her belly, he seemed content to take his time. He ended the kiss, only to tilt his head and slant his mouth across hers again. After one more long, languorous kiss, he lifted up a little and smiled. She'd never seen a smile quite so warm, so encompassing. She could bathe in it, better than the lavender-scented water he'd just treated her to. Except it had the opposite effect, far from relaxing.

He kissed down her neck, lingered at the pulse point at the base, his tongue teasing. She squirmed under him, wanting more, wanting it now, but also wanting him to do anything. She laughed. "This is where two men come in handy."

*Idiot.* She'd let herself relax so much in his embrace she'd blurted the first thing that came into her head. She thought she'd cured herself of that a long time ago. But he looked up, leaning on his elbows, and smiled. "You want me to give Oliver a call?"

Nothing but care lingered in his thoughts. How could that be, how could he not feel hurt? As if she'd spoken it aloud, he answered. "Because tonight it's all about you, what you want and what you need."

She curved her hand around the back of his head, spreading it to let the dark brown hair sift through her fingers. "So another night it might be you who needs it?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again. Then tried again. "Yes. It might be. Would you object to that?"

She shook her head. "I'd be honored to do it."

"Then you know how I feel. Do you want Oliver?"

She didn't have to think about that. "No. I want you. Only you, Jack."

His smile encompassed her, the room and their situation. "Then think about this and only this. Right here, right now. All that matters." His English accent was tinged with American, making it sound sexy, slightly exotic, and Shere knew this was his natural intonation. With her, at any rate.

He bent his head and kissed the upper slope of her left breast, his kiss barely a whisper over her sensitive skin. His lips traveled over her, barely skimming, raising her awareness to a high point. But he wasn't done. He traveled down her body, kissing, stroking, but all of it gentle, none of it hard or impassioned. As if he worshipped her, could hardly bear to touch her. But his briefest caress left her trembling, her flesh yearning for him. This was true addiction.

He found her most sensitive spots and played with them. The soft spot inside each hipbone, the upper part of her thighs, especially between her legs, the backs of her knees and the skin surrounding her ankle. She had no idea that a mere stroke on her calves could arouse her that much. To a point where she couldn't bear him not to touch her. All the time he murmured to her, how lovely she was, how much he wanted to love her. "Slide inside you, feel you welcome me into that hot, wet sheath. Do you want me there?"

"Yes, oh yes..."

Finally, oh finally, he touched his tongue to her clit. She could feel it straining up to him, begging him to lick, to savor. "You taste so good, Shere. So fucking good. You could feed me forever." He licked around it, slurping, and then sucked it into his mouth. His hands were already on her hips, holding her, when she jerked off the bed in instinctive reaction. Her body came alive and she shouted his name, her head went back, pushing against the soft pillow. Her shoulders bore down into the mattress, but he wouldn't let her move up to push her pussy into his mouth. He kept control. After

that first jolt, she leaned back again, panting, knowing she was in for the journey of her life.

He took her there in incremental stages. First he sucked her clit, pausing to lick down to her opening, lapping up what she gave him. *Feel it, sweetheart, put everything else out of your mind. Just know I'm here and nothing bad will happen to you. I won't let it.*

She believed him. With all her years of experience, this man seemed wiser than her, better than her. Then she remembered. Right here, right now, he was.

He kissed her, teased her, tasted every part of her pussy until she wished she'd shaved for him. She kept her pussy neatly trimmed but didn't bother with anything else. Keeping her job and her father going had taken all her energy recently. Now, for the first time, she realized how much she'd neglected herself.

Sounds, delicious ones of gentle lapping, delighted her. She recalled his cat, at the same time seeing the soft fur of the jaguar and those deep, dangerous, amber eyes in her mind. Never dangerous to her though. He drank her as if she were a saucer of milk, and as fast as he lapped, she gave him more.

Then he opened his mouth wide, put it over her pussy and sucked, gave her the stimulation she needed to come.

Stars exploded, waves crashed, fireworks went off with a bang. Every fucking thing she'd ever thought of came together and created something new. Her skin responded where he'd kissed it, where he'd caressed it, and she was barely aware of crying his name.

When she came to herself once more, seconds, minutes, hours later, he was gazing down at her, smiling. "So good," he murmured. She had the vague feeling that she should be thinking that. "Turn over, honey."

*Honey.* She liked that. He helped her to turn, his hands gentle on her waist. She felt the slight tremble in his fingers as he took them away from her and reached for the pillows at her head. They'd left all the pillows stacked up instead of discarding the ones they didn't want, so there were plenty to stuff underneath her. When he pushed on her shoulders, she obligingly sank down. She rested her head on the mattress, leaving her ass high in the air.

He pushed her legs wider, arranged her for his pleasure and she reveled in his hot desire. He remained deep in her mind and she didn't close it after her orgasm as she usually did. She wanted that delicious pleasure in every part of her, every untouched dark corner, flooding her with his sunshine. Honey seemed appropriate right now.

When his cock touched her pussy, she shuddered with the knowledge that she would soon feel him deep. It was all she wanted at this moment, and she realized she'd achieved it. Only him, only her, only now.

He pushed inside until his balls grazed her labia. He nearly touched her clit, which felt hotter and harder than she could ever remember, even with her recent climax.

Jack smoothed his hands over her back, curved them around her waist and touched her ass. He cupped her bottom to urge the cheeks apart. Then he moved. Hard, swift, he sliced in and out of her with a precision that took her breath away.

She had no way of moaning his name except in her head, and he picked it up, took it and cherished it. He showed her, giving her images of soft, amber skin, gleaming under the low lights in the bedroom. She looked good. She'd never seen herself from this angle before, she realized. Jack adored his new telepathy, she read. He chose methods that she'd never known before in any of the older, more experienced Talents she generally mixed with. It was wonderful. It was new.

Then she lost all power of thought. Jack slammed in and out of her again, leaving his cock head poised at her entrance. She felt his regard as slow heat burning in his mind, working toward the inevitable climax. But not yet. Not yet.

She gasped, drawing air in like a diver hitting the surface, one of those divers for pearls who could go for half an hour between breaths. Or a merman closing his gills and using his lungs. Suddenly she knew how to breathe again.

"Sweetheart, are you with me?"

"Yes, oh yes," she managed. Her voice came out in a breathy gasp so unlike her usual measured tones that she hardly recognized it.

"Beautiful. You're beautiful." He sounded low, quavering, and she loved that she could make him sound like that. *So fucking sexy.* "Concentrate on that spot inside you. Tell me when I touch it just right. Feel it. Feel me."

"Yes." As if she didn't know any more words.

He moved back a little, pushed in again and a thrill shivered through her. "There. Just there."

"I felt it. Ready?"

"Ready."

At least she thought so, but she found she was wrong, so wrong. He drove inside her, forcing the flange at the base of his cock head against her G-spot. Concentrating, she could feel it, feel the difference in texture between the smooth, silky, impossibly fine head and skin below. So subtle she'd never noticed it before, but it made all the difference now. He didn't stop. With every stroke his balls hit her clit, swinging against her body. Then he slid his thumb down the crease between her buttocks and found her ass.

Oh God. As the tip of his thumb breached the opening, twin shocks rocketed through her, sent her body into orbit. Or no, it didn't. She became aware of every nerve, every tiny blood vessel, everything yearning for his touch. And he gave it, driving hard all the time. He touched her, his mind entering hers so she felt his body's reactions as well as her own.



Was she crying out, or just crying? She didn't know. As his orgasm built, so did hers, the sensations feeding off each other until neither knew the difference between them. There was none, at least nothing that mattered.

Howling now, she left everything behind as a climax washed through her. His and hers, the pulses as essential as a heartbeat. It fed her body, giving it what it needed. It went on and on, circling when it reached its peak, a living entity in them both.

Heat gushed between her legs, their essences mixed. She cried his name and then gave him wordless shouts of completion as she slumped forward onto the pillows.

"When do you go back?"

Jack turned his head and smiled. "Go back where?"

"To New York." She'd asked too abruptly, but she needed to know and now. She didn't have the patience to wait and see.

"You could come with me." He curved his arm around her, sifted his fingers through her hair in a lazy, proprietorial gesture that she loved.

"No. I'm sorry, but I can't."

Drowsy contentment filled his mind and affected her reasoning. She should sink into sleep with him and enjoy tonight, as he'd taught her, but the thought niggled at her. How long did she have with him, should she put the boundaries in her head, so as not to let him devastate her when he left? She couldn't blame him, they had parameters to their arrangement, parameters they both understood, and so she couldn't complain. Shouldn't. Even if everything had changed for her.

"Why can't you come?"

Typical of Jack to ask so plainly. And he expected an honest answer. It was all he'd ever asked of her. So she had to tell him the truth. "My father is dying." She paused, giving herself a chance to control her emotions. Every time she said it, a tide of grief swept over her as if it were the first time. Finally in control, she told him, "It's natural. Do you know how shape-shifters die?"

Because he remained open to her, she saw what he did — the vision of a man, strong and powerful but with gray hairs at his temples. Shape-shifters aged fast and then they died, not showing any signs of natural aging until their last year or two. So he didn't need to reply to her, but he did. "I've seen it," he said. "Sandro Gianetti. Before Megan took the chance to bond with him, he was dying. But bonded couples take on one life, and luckily for them they took hers." He paused and she felt the glow of happiness that suffused him now. "Megan would have done it anyway. So that's how it is with your father?"

"Yes. He got his first gray hair six months ago and already he looks older."

Jack didn't say anything for a minute or two, then he drew her close to lay her head on his shoulder. "Then I'll move to London."

"Jack, you can't!" She sat up, leaning on one elbow, staring at him. His gaze darkened and he touched her breast, cupped it.

"For this, for you, I can." He smiled and leaned up to steal a gentle kiss. "I'd be a complete idiot to move away. I'll apply for a transfer to STORM UK. It might take a month, but not much longer. The only thing that will stop me is if you don't want me."

His fingers on her nipple made it difficult for her to concentrate, but she tried. "You'd do that? Leave your life?"

He laughed. "It's only been two years since I moved to New York. I can move back." He paused, watching his fingers at work, gently manipulating her nipple into hardness again, tugging it and teasing it. "I think they'll insist that you take a vacation after this is over. Oliver's right, your role has to change. You can't be an assassin anymore. And I also know that you'll need somebody."

"Who did you have after Carilla died?"

His gaze jerked up to her face and his eyes widened. "I had friends. Johann especially. He's a vampire, but we got on real well. And Chase, partly because that's his job, but also because he understands. He thought Jillian was dead for three years, so he knew how I felt."

He sighed. "We'd only just met. Shere, listen to me. My affairs tend to last around three weeks. I'm passionately in love and then it fades into nothing. I know it and I deal with it. No."

He wouldn't let her pull away, held her tight. "Hear me out. This is different. Read me, sweetheart. I won't change, not this time. But in any case, what I'm about to ask you will see us right, I swear it will. When I heard Carilla had betrayed us, had held me, loved me, converted me, it tore my heart out. Chase thinks she was trying to pass on her Talent because she knew she would die. But she was passing documents to Bennett, names, dates. It could be that she refused to do it anymore. I could have been anybody. But I was convenient, and I wanted to convert, so she gave it to me. It hurts, it always will, but only that she betrayed so many people."

He curved his arm around her waist, held her tight. "Read me, Shere. I love you. It's love this time, different to anything I've felt before. But even if it isn't, moving to STORM UK won't ruin my life. I inherited Carilla's fortune, you know, but I'm giving it away. I'll come to you with my salary and little else. Sorry."

"What for?" She felt him, knew what he felt, knew it was sincere and gave back to him what he'd given to her. "Perhaps for now we should live for the moment. Take it a day at a time. And yes, I love you."

He put his free hand on the back of her head and drew her down for a long, lingering kiss. When they parted, he smiled up at her and urged her on top of him. "Then that's agreed. We're in love, for today, and tomorrow will take care of itself."

"That sounds good. That sounds wonderful."

## Chapter Twelve

Jack wasn't best pleased with whoever was calling him. "What?" Despite his covering Shere with the duvet to muffle the sound, the phone had still disturbed her.

"Get your ass out of bed. We're talking about Diana and I need your brain." Chase sounded in control but Jack didn't want to hear him right now. Sleep and lovemaking seemed the right thing to do today. But, he guessed, they still had to find the woman.

"Yeah." Jack disentangled himself from Shere, difficult since their limbs were twined together and she half lay over him, but he managed it. She grumbled and then grabbed his cock, giving his morning erection a loving squeeze. That tempted Jack to stay and tell Chase to fuck off. But he couldn't.

He hung up and swept the covers aside. To the wonderful sight of Shere kissing his navel, on her way down to his cock, which strained up to meet her. He tangled his fingers in her hair, loving the soft texture, loving what she was doing to him. Loving her.

Admitting his feelings had gone a long way toward acceptance of himself and of her, and this morning he felt free, fantastic. Or had until five minutes ago. He couldn't let her. Once her lips reached his cock he'd be a goner and Chase would know what they were doing. Although he kept out of people's private lives, he might not this time. He didn't sound happy.

"Oh God, it's killing me to say this, but I have to go."

She kissed his stomach and turned her head to face him instead of his now wet cock. Weeping with loss. Maybe he could do something about it after all.

"How about a shower? Together?" Chase could hardly complain at that.

Clean, well-loved and content, Jack and Shere walked into Chase's suite hand in hand. It was almost like the thirteenth floor in the New York Timothy, completely given over to Talents and their business. Oliver waited for them and so did G. So maybe all four suites were occupied by Talents now and the floor was in lockdown. Jack tried not to look too happy, but he could see that Chase picked up on his mood as soon as he walked in. He could feel it, to be more accurate. A gentle touch in his mind conveyed Chase's congratulations and he acknowledged with a simple, *Thanks*.

Jack nodded and took a seat on one of the long sofas in the room. Shere sat next to him, their hands still linked.

Then Chase got down to business. "We need you, Jack. You had a thing with Diana once, correct?"

His hand tightened on Shere's and then loosened so she could pull away if she wanted to. She didn't. "Yes, before I went to the States, but I've been thinking. Bennett knew the Hightowers, something I didn't know before, and he recruited Megan through me. So Mickey took Diana to give me some incentive. He killed Megan's boyfriend at the time. I don't think the jobs at McIver University came to us by accident. Then he had Megan to experiment on, and me as reserve. Or for collateral. Megan and I were briefly a couple, then friends. After Megan's boyfriend died, she turned to me for a while, so we looked like a couple. We've always been best friends."

Chase nodded and Jack realized something else.

"You don't look surprised."

"I worked it out last night. I doubt we'll find proof, but yes, I think you're right. And no, I don't intend to tell Megan, or at least not to seek her out purposely to tell her."

Jack breathed out a sigh of relief.

When Jillian entered the room balancing a tray of coffees, Chase rushed to help her. Jack recognized the same love and care that he was feeling right now. He knew how Chase had realized that this was it for him. Their emotions harmonized. *Weird*. Jack shook his head and tried to concentrate.

G entered the conversation. "Since you dated Diana at some point, perhaps you know somewhere she'd hide out." Jack nodded.

Chase brought their coffees to them and took the opportunity to study Shere at close quarters. "Okay?"

She smiled. "Raring to go. I'm fine now. A temporary glitch, that's all."

"Not so temporary," G put in. "We need to reassess."

"Glad to hear it," Jack said. "We're reassessing too."

"Shut up, Jack. Concentrate."

He glanced at Chase and grinned. "Yes, boss."

Chase found Jillian a seat and stood behind her chair. When agitated, Chase paced, and Jack knew he was barely holding off. Standing and gripping the back of the chair seemed to be his default position right now. Jillian reached a hand back and touched him. He turned his hand and gripped hers, daring anyone to say anything.

Jack stared into space, remembering. "Do you have pen and paper?" Oliver found him some on the desk. He handed them over, giving Jack and Shere a smile when he crossed the room to them but saying nothing. He didn't have to. Jack owed him a favor for the way he'd forced the issue. Otherwise he and Shere might not have gotten to their current state of blissful agreement so fast.

Reluctantly, Jack released Shere's hand so he could jot down a few locations. "Oxford has a lot of country pubs nearby, and students like to use them if they can. See a bit of green, they say. I've made a note of the ones we used."

"Do any of them provide accommodation?"

Jack shrugged. "Some." He looked up. "Why?"

Chase raised a brow. "The police have alerts out for her. They went to their house and found signs of speedy packing. She fled. That's why they're not around us today, because of her flight. But what would you do if you were Diana? You can't use your passport without setting off alarms, and every airport, every ferry terminal has her photo."

Jack understood. "Hide somewhere locally, get a fake passport, wait for the heat to die down. Contact my IRDC friends."

"Yes, that." G got to his feet and walked to the window where he stared out, hands in his pockets. "She must have known about the IRDC, so we'll find her first. We need to find her first, especially if she knows where the document is."

"Wait," Jack said. "I know. I fucking know where she is."

He wasn't supposed to know about the cottage in the country but Mickey had told him about it once. A two-room cottage, inherited from a relative, the place was falling down. Mickey had put it under wraps until he could afford to do it up and either sell it on or let it. Jack would bet the document that he'd done it and Diana was there. There was no paper trail, nothing to connect them to it after the original will, and that had been a long time ago. But Jack knew that had to be the place. He'd picked it up once, and Mickey had suppressed it hastily. They wanted to keep it secret, or private, or something.

He sprang to his feet. "Shit, that's it. That must be the link. Where they meet the IRDC, where they keep the sensitive stuff."

G wasn't far behind him. "We'll take my car. It can handle rough terrain and it's as fast as shit off a shovel."

So it was. Oliver, Jack, G and Chase took the car and Shere refused to be left behind. When Chase handed her a firearm, she handled it like a pro. Which she was. Jack realized he was so used to thinking of the UK as a gun-free country he'd forgotten it held highly trained experts. He'd been away too long.

He refused a sidearm of his own since he didn't have a license for the UK, but Chase took one and G and Oliver had their own. "What?" asked Oliver from the backseat when Jack saw him running a quick check on his weapon. "I'm an earl, I shoot on occasion. Yes, I'm legal, in case you wondered."

"Fuck, this earl thing gives you a lot of leeway." As half British, Jack was familiar with the esoteric class system, despite the recent drastic changes. The British loved a title.

Oliver gave him a cocky smile. "Doesn't it?"

G took control. "There's a lock on the river nearby. It's a beauty spot, good cover for us. We'll park in the tourist place or a pub and split up."

"I'm going in," Jack said. "She doesn't know I'm a shape-shifter, unless she found out in the last twenty-four hours. She thinks I'm easygoing Jack, the man who loved her once."

"I knew I should have called in more shape-shifters." G shifted in his seat. "Shere, I don't want you going in, and in any case, you can't shrink that small."

"Yes, boss."

Jack didn't trust that docile tone. He was right not to. *If you come close, keep hidden.*

*It'll be good for me to spend some time as a cat. Who'll notice a cute little black kitty cat in a country cottage garden?*

*Don't.*

Though he knew she'd do exactly as she pleased. If she could persuade G.

He remembered Sandford-on-Thames from previous visits, but he'd never been there with Mickey. Or Diana for that matter. She'd have escaped here to mourn. She'd adored Mickey, despite his despicable treatment of her. He only knew the cottage from the map he'd hurriedly consulted before they left, but he remembered the terrain. It stood a short distance away from the main tourist area. They found a parking space in a pub car park. G and Shere would wander around the river and lock area. Even at this time of year there were a number of tourists around. He glanced back and saw G with his arm around Shere's shoulders. Jealousy seared through him but he suppressed it. *It was only for cover, so no one would recognize Shere*, he told himself, but he hated it. Too fucking primal, but he couldn't help it. They both wore casual clothes, jeans, shirts, and Shere wore a jacket over her shoulder holster. G had a thick sweater. They looked good together, but he should be there, not G. He knew they'd never come back here, whatever the outcome of the day. It had certainly cleared Oxford out of his system. He couldn't wait to leave.

Jack made his way along the road to the cottage. He couldn't take time to study it, for all he knew it could spook Diana if she were there. But despite not being able to detect her, and despite Chase's lack of success, he knew she'd be here. *Knew it*. So like Diana to bolt, but he'd bet she didn't have a plan. He could help her, and if she helped them, G would take care of her.

Walking up the short path to the front door, the scent of flowers invaded his nostrils. He didn't know which ones. Flowers had never really formed a part of Jack's life, but they reminded him that spring was definitely on the way. He knocked on the door, a deliberately rustic creation with faded blue paint and black iron letterbox and knocker. The sound echoed in the relative silence. If he listened he could hear cars on the main road. Apart from that, this could be any time, a still moment in the English countryside. He'd missed that.

Slate-roofed, the cottage appeared timeless. Since Mickey had described it to him as a two-room shack, Jack knew they must have renovated it and probably extended it too. Very skillfully, which also meant very expensively. So some of the money had gone on

this place, but where was the rest? Hightower International wasn't exactly the most successful business going, more likely a front for whatever else Mickey did. Selling out Talents to the highest bidder. The bastard. Well, he'd paid.

Jack lifted the knocker to rap again but the door moved under his hand and there she stood.

Lovely, blonde hair brushed to hang free, heavenly blue eyes gazing into his. She wore a pale pink top and darker pink skirt, her appearance immaculate. So she'd had the sense to dress properly. "Jack," she breathed and her face crumpled. "Oh Jack!" She threw herself at him.

He urged her inside and followed her. He banded his arms around her, holding her while she sobbed, deliberately not pushing the door completely closed. It would open at a touch. It gave him a moment to look around.

The living room-cum-kitchen had been extended at the back. He could see the place where they'd put in the supporting joist, painted to match the cream paint that decorated the ceiling between the beams. Christ, this place was old. It thrummed with history. Jack had felt these vibrations before he'd turned Talent, but he'd never felt it so strongly before.

And now Diana's emotions seeped through to him, distress and confusion uppermost. But not strong. Maybe she didn't have strong psi. Some people didn't. He still wondered why a Sorcerer as strong as Chase couldn't find her psyche imprinted anywhere, not even in the office.

"Come on, sit down," he murmured. "I'll make you some tea." Tea, the British universal panacea. He got up and headed for the kitchen area.

But Diana wouldn't let him go until he eased her down onto a sofa. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "I couldn't help it, I didn't know what I was doing. Help me, Jack!"

"Of course I will." He crossed the room to the small stove.

"Will you come away with me?"

He turned around, kettle in hand. "Where?"

"I'm waiting for a passport. You know, a fake one. I could get one for you too. I can't bear the thought of being alone, Jack."

"Did you do it? Did you kill Mickey?"

She stared at her hands, neatly folded in her lap. "Yes. I-I think. But I can't really remember." Jack filled the kettle and went over to the socket on the wall to plug it in. He could see in both directions now, Diana on the sofa and the black shape slinking through the overgrown grass in the garden. She'd persuaded G, then, or got away from him. He jerked his head toward the direction of the front door. *I got it*, he heard.

"He's been having an affair, you know." She wrung her hands together, distress in every movement. "And when I caught up with him yesterday, I asked him to come with me to this place. We used to come here a lot when we first married. I thought he'd gone off the place, but really, he'd gone off bringing me here. He brought other women

instead." She wanted him to think she had no part in Mickey's racket. Jack would reserve his judgment but he couldn't read any false notes in her mind. That was the trouble, he realized with a jolt of recognition that he sent to Chase. He never had. Nothing untoward, nothing that shouldn't be there ever crossed her mind.

*She's hidden deep. Keep your mind open and I'll do what I can.*

It also struck Jack how easily he'd adapted to having someone else in his mind. Shocking to remember that before last year, he'd been totally alone in his mind. Now he could imagine going mad from the solitude mortals customarily endured. Perhaps some people were naturally inclined to become Talents. It would explain why he took to the conversion so easily. But it felt natural to have people in his mind, to share his outer thoughts with them and open his mind further to a select few. "So you confronted him," he suggested now, to prompt her a little.

"I asked him to give them up." Her lip trembled, the very picture of dejection. The picture of it. "He said no, he called me cold. Me! I loved him so much, I gave you up for him. I was wrong, Jack, I know that now. Please, help me. If you ever loved me, love me now."

Shit, he'd had enough of this. Jack felt impatience, and anger with himself for feeling so in the face of such helplessness. He was supposed to say that he loved her, that he'd help her. Well he could do that, to a certain extent. "I might be able to help you, Diana, but you have to help me too."

"Yes, of course. I'll get in touch with the man who does passports —"

"No, Diana. Running isn't the answer. Not now, anyway. People are after you, but not for Mickey's —" he didn't want to drop the emotive word "murder" and paused for a moment before he compromised on, "death."

She turned to him, eyes suddenly sharp with speculation. "Who? Why?"

"Mickey was in business with some dangerous people." Oh shit, he had to tell her now. Everything or nearly everything. "The IRDC. Heard of them?"

"Of course. Good customers."

He turned to attend to the tea, finding it easier to talk to her when he wasn't looking at her. "And dangerous people. Mickey got hold of a list, one he shouldn't have, and now he has two groups of people after it. One group would have helped him, the other would've killed him and taken it."

"Not if they were clever."

"Pardon me?" He nearly spilled the boiling water on his hand, she startled him so much with the last remark.

"Well I'm not entirely stupid, Jack." She sounded crisper now, harder, and Jack went on alert. Soft, mushy, pushover Diana didn't sound like this. "Mickey told me about the paper. He had to, he paid those bozos good money to get hold of it. And he didn't have the least idea what to do with it. Just thought he'd sell it on."



"How did he hear about it?" Because God knew STORM hadn't known until recently.

"Oh, networking, that kind of thing. He had a lunch with Professor Campbell. The professor wanted to join the lecture circuit, and he sounded out Mickey about making a plan for him. He mentioned the list as a prime example of medieval pen work. Just a list of aristocrats and knights, as well as ordinary people. He thought it was some kind of tax roll. But he must have talked to more people than us, because next thing he put up the price. Mickey said he collected pen work of the fourteenth and fifteenth century." She made a disparaging sound. "Only in Oxford would people think that a normal thing to talk about over lunch. It's driven me crazy, living here. So Mickey decided to spend the money another way."

Not the IRDC then. It explained why the thugs hadn't expected to confront Talents. The IRDC would have come prepared with telepathy jammers. Maybe a syringe or two of Cephalox to stop shape-shifters changing into their more dangerous forms. He felt relieved. It meant the situation was contained. They could retrieve the document and go.

*Move it along, Jack. I sense activity.*

Which meant that Chase had tracked somebody heading for the cottage. He felt Shere tense, although she said nothing and the other presences in his mind sparked up, all watching. He risked a jump. "Can I see it?"

She gave him a sly smile. "Oh yes. It's in the bedroom. Come upstairs."

Shit, oh shit. She wanted sex in payment. He read the heat in her mind, her vision of him kissing her, fondling her. He didn't want this. And Shere remained ominously silent. He had no choice. Perhaps he could grab the paper and run. He'd worn disposable clothing, slacks that weren't as tough as jeans and a T-shirt. He could shape-shift without much trouble.

G spoke to him for the first time. *If you need to, destroy it.*

A prime example of medieval penmanship, and they wanted it gone. All the evidence it contained, for Talents as well as mortals, disappeared, and he'd have to do it. He'd do his best not to.

He followed Diana up the narrow stairs, set behind a door set in the wall opposite the fireplace. In other circumstances, this would have fascinated him, but he had only one thing on his mind now. Getting that document and getting out of there, most likely with Diana in tow.

Upstairs, the bedroom was half the size of the room downstairs, probably the original size of the house. Presumably a bathroom lay beyond, but Jack didn't plan to stay long enough to find out. Diana stopped abruptly a few steps into the room and Jack had to hold her shoulders or collide with her. By the way her face turned up to his, he knew she wanted a kiss. He had little choice, so he pressed his lips to hers, tasting lipstick and mint. She'd prepared for him, the bitch. Cleaned her teeth, washed out her

mouth. He didn't offer his tongue but drew back and forced a smile. "So why did you choose Mickey all those years ago?"

She gave a tinkly laugh, so artificial it put his teeth on edge. "It's not so long ago. He was tall, dark and handsome, silly."

"And I wasn't?"

"Not then." She stepped back and gave him a comprehensive up-and-down gaze. "You've filled out nicely. And I like your new hairstyle. You never bothered with five-hundred-dollar haircuts before."

More like a thousand, Jack recalled ruefully. In his brief days of extreme wealth. Now he was merely well-off. He used the local barber to trim the style, but trust Diana to notice the cut and price it. "New York," he said with a shrug. "People don't notice appearance so much in Oxford."

"Except for Town and Gown." She grimaced. "Mickey was Gown and Town, one of the few." Her eyes filled with tears. "And now he's gone. Oh Jack—" She turned away abruptly, heading for one of the bedside cabinets and opening the drawer.

If the plea was supposed to elicit his sympathy, she failed, but Jack did his best to look sympathetic. Appealing to her desire for protection would probably be the best way to go. "You should come with me, Diana. There are some seriously evil people after that paper. They won't hesitate in killing to get hold of it."

A gleam in her eye surprised him. "As I did."

He stared at her, shocked. No sign of grief marred her perfect features now. A small smile curved her pink mouth and her clear eyes met his without a qualm.

Chase's voice came through, the note of urgency shocking him. *Don't appeal to her better nature. Get out of there, Jack. She's a psychopath.*

*You're sure?*

*It's taken me this long to break through her barrier, which, I should tell you, is artificially erected. I've analyzed her mind and she's a psychopath. She knows what she's doing and she learned to put a barrier up and order her mind. Doesn't that tell you anything, Jack? It's a trap. Get out, now. Fuck the paper, we'll deal with that later.*

Too late. She didn't hold a paper in her hand, she held a gun. "Fuck, and I thought this country was gun free," was his first comment. "What are you doing, Diana?"

"I never liked cats."

She fired. But at his feet, and the small bundle of fur that had crept into the room.

By the time Jack made it over to her, Shere had shape-shifted to her basic form, the human. A gaping hole marked her shoulder, blood pouring from the wound, staining the ancient floorboards that supported her body. If he could only shape-shift her, she'd start to heal, but like this, she'd die in minutes. Jesus, nothing mattered more than this, nothing. Fuck the paper, fuck the operation. Shere couldn't die.

Diana screeched, screeched again, and then she stopped abruptly as if someone had silenced her. *We're coming in*, he heard from G. He'd never been so glad to hear that

before in his life. Heedless of the blood, he lifted Shere onto his lap, hoping that elevating her might help to stem the flow. He couldn't tell if it did. It seemed just as bad.

"Leave her." He glanced up to see Diana standing over him brandishing her gun and a tide of fury swept through him. "I said leave her," she repeated. "You're with me now." She held something in her other hand, a roll. As he watched, she let the end of the roll fall and he saw, before his eyes, the document. Already it showed signs of neglect and ill-treatment. But then he seemed to be the only person interested in it as an artifact. Just not right now.

"Do what you want with it." He shielded Shere with his body, trying to remember how to enter someone's mind and shape-shift them. If he couldn't do it soon, she'd die.

Grief and despair echoed around his mind until he couldn't think for it, and then the answer came to him. He slipped into her mind so easily, just like that, found her center and the corresponding place in him. He linked them, concentrating, praying Diana wouldn't do anything else.

But of course she did. The last thought he had as he heard the gunshot and the blow hit the back of his head was, *At least we'll die together.*

## Chapter Thirteen

"I'm weak now."

Jack curved an arm around Shere as they lay in bed. "Weak how?" he scoffed. "I've never known a woman as strong as you."

She smiled at him and turned her head on the pillow, wincing when she caught her freshly healed wound. It still had a sore spot, reddened and tender, the most dangerous she'd ever had. Jack winced in sympathy but he had no wound left. He'd healed in one shape-shift. "You're my weakness. And God help me, I can't be sorry for it."

He chuckled and raised himself on one elbow over her. "How are you feeling now?"

"After the 'I swear, I'll be gentle' pounding you just gave me?" Her smile broadened and she slid her hand around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss. He gave her what she wanted, long and leisurely, tasting her, exploring her mouth. She responded, loving the closeness. When Jack pulled away slightly, she gazed into his eyes, wondering who had ever dared to call brown eyes boring. It wasn't her, that was for sure. Golden glints deep in the velvety depths betrayed his cat nature, never completely hidden now. As it should be. He bent his head to kiss her again, but just as his lips touched hers the phone rang. He drew away. "That'd better be room service saying our steaks are on their way."

But it wasn't. He leaned against the padded headboard and she drew closer. She didn't eavesdrop, something her kind considered rude unless asked. But he invited her to with a gentle touch to her mind.

"How are you today?" G asked.

"We're fine. Shere will be better in a day or so. She's still sore."

"I'm not surprised. If you hadn't changed her, she'd have died."

Jack glanced at Shere and she put her hand on his chest, caressing him in what she hoped was a soothing gesture. She hadn't had much practice at soothing. "Thanks for asking after us. Chase is giving us the royal treatment."

"Good. But I didn't call just for that."

Jack pulled a face and Shere suppressed a giggle. "You don't care how we are?"

G's exasperation came clearly down the line. "And that's why I didn't come back to London until last night. Despite constant pressure from the Government to tell them what happened here?"

"So what did happen?" Jack demanded. He placed his hand over Shere's, holding it still. So she used her mouth instead, leaning closer to kiss him just over his ribs.

"We've sorted out a version that works. You realized where Diana was and rushed off to see her. Shere followed you and called me in. We got there just in time and Diana, who was holding you at gunpoint, shot Shere. We don't mention the document, that's all."

Shere was surprised when Jack hadn't asked about the document, but he hadn't seemed to care. He asked now for the first time. "What did happen to it?"

"It's safe. Locked up."

"Why not burn it?"

G chuckled. "I never thought I'd hear an archivist say that. Because, dear boy, we're trying to collect an archive for Talents. We know little about our pasts, about our collective history, only our family's history. It's always been like that with Talents. Well, now it's time to change. We don't know how we originated, we only have vague theories and the little our scientists have discovered. When Talents went underground, they destroyed a lot of their history to cover their tracks. But some of it remains. Paintings, mentions in other places that seem to mean nothing until they're collected together."

Shere had reached his navel by now. She lingered, teasing him with accidental brushes against his cock. It worked. "Another time I'd be delighted to discuss this with you, but—" He stopped talking with a gasp as she licked his cock head, reacquainting herself with the salty taste, and a touch of something else—her.

"I'll be quick then." Shere was losing interest in everything except her gorgeous lover. "We're looking for archivists we can trust, people and Talents who can record without making everything public. Someone who knows his way around old documents. Would you like the job?"

Shere paused, hardly able to believe what she was hearing until she processed the information properly. Then she knew what was coming. "And Shere has some experience too. She's worked with her father. You know her father is ill?"

"Yes. We planned to come to London tomorrow to see him."

"Great." G sounded happy, or as happy as he ever got. "I'll see you when you're free. Call in. Shere knows the way. I'm taking her off active duty for now, so the job's on offer for her too." Jack opened his mouth but G hadn't finished. "No, don't say anything now. Think about it. I'll see you when you come to the office. Take care."

Jack stared at the phone after G had hung up as if he'd find answers there. "If we want it?" He glanced down at her. "Do we want it?"

For answer, she engulfed his hard cock in her mouth, sucking as she closed her lips around him. *Yes.*

"Do you think, years ago, that shape-shifters ever lived in harmony with mortals?"

"As someone with a foot in both camps, I can say categorically that I haven't the faintest idea." He touched his lips to her nose, then to her mouth, flicking out his

tongue to tease her. "But I bet most of them did. The trouble comes from on high, or from a small group of individuals. The law-abiders are always in the majority."

"Then they hid."

"The way I heard it, it happened because mortals turned on shape-shifters. But it could have been the other way around."

"We'll live in harmony, won't we?"

He smiled at her question. "That I can be sure about. Definitely."

## About the Author

Lynne Connolly has been published for five years and in that time has won two Eppies and a number of other awards, Recommended Reads and other acknowledgements for her paranormal romances and historicals.

While these are very gratifying, that isn't why she writes. She wants to bring the stories in her head to life and share them with others, in the hope she might then get some peace.

Writing is what she was doing while she was working, bearing children and doing the other boring things that constitute living. Her favorite writer's motto is "I can use that." She lives in the UK with her husband, children and cats, and her doll houses. Creating worlds, miniature or otherwise, seems to be Lynne's specialty!

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

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