

If she's a tree fairy, how come he's the one with the wood?

Afterglow, Book 2

Detective Cheney Fisher is used to the back-of-the-neck feeling that tells him he's being watched. When attorney Pandora Jackson strides into the precinct, he's the one doing the watching—and drooling. Her mile-long legs and fiery hair encase a sharp legal mind and a body he'd like to de-brief.

Despite his effort to keep his powers on the down-low, Pandora knows that Cheney is uniquely qualified to solve her problem—evaluating a strangely unfriendly bit of evidence from a court case. But it's her instant attraction to the detective that scares her. Any loss of control and her powerful Fae ability could consume her, body and soul.

A suspicious fire in Pandora's apartment drives Cheney's suspicion that she's being stalked by a very real threat. Bringing her under protection is the only option, even though proximity means there's no way to fight the searing passion erupting between them.

Cheney's instincts are spot-on, though. A madman with a taste for unnatural selection has a plan for Pandora. The only way to fight it is trust themselves, their powers...and each other.

Warning: Refrigerate after opening. This book contains scenes of magic, illusion and scorching hot fairy sex. There are also a few murders, a super sexy cop, a giggle or two, and a tip of the hat to Mother Nature. It is, of course, fiction, but was written using 100% organically grown words.

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# Demons are a Ghoul's Best Friend

Wynne Hayworth

# Dedication

To all those fascinated by the thought of what our future may hold...my thanks. I am one of you and I too spend more time than I should wondering what lies ahead for the human race...

May it be as much fun for our heirs as it is for my characters...

#### Prologue

Desire ripped through her, a fiery chill that took the breath from her lungs and had her gasping with the force of it.

Lust, sharp and clawing at her guts, a fierce and hungry need to taste this man, to have the tang of him on her tongue, the scent of him in her nose and the feel of him beneath her.

She watched as he walked through the darkness to his car, long legs eating up the pavement with an easy stride. He was tall, very tall. She liked that, knowing his height made him just a little bit more special than he already was. At least to her.

She envisioned tearing off his shirt and touching his body—running her hands over his smooth skin, tracing his muscles, maybe teasing his nipples with her nails and her mouth. Was he sensitive there? Would he quiver or moan at such a caress?

Would he respond in kind? Would he reach for her breasts even as she fondled him, and would his hands be firm, knowing where to touch, how to arouse? She knew they would be. This was a man born with knowledge enough to stimulate a woman to insanity.

She pulled deeper into the shadows, tucked into the black impenetrable angles of a building, hidden from sight. Her wings trembled as she let the hotly erotic images spill out into her mind, all brought on by the mere sight of him.

He'd slowed his pace, glancing around. It was almost as if he was aware of her gaze. Perhaps, on some level, he was. He had a talent that she'd yet to identify. She knew what he wasn't, not what he was.

The tiny blue spot on his earlobe marked him as an AG—she'd seen it the first time she'd watched him. He was a human with mutated DNA, known now as an Afterglow—homage to the astronomical event that created them. But he wasn't a vampire or a fairy. Perhaps a shape shifter, but he'd never seemed to need any of the associated trappings. Ditto werewolf. He liked animals, but didn't change into one at the full moon.

She knew all this with certainty. She'd filed away her observations, watching when the opportunity presented itself. And her fascination with this man had grown along with her desire to possess him.

To have him naked and aroused on top of her, or to ride him as he bucked and thrust into her. She wanted to hold his cock, to stroke it until he sobbed with pleasure, to suck it, bring him to the very brink—and then impale herself on it, sending them both spinning into an orgasmic vortex.

The images made her realize she was wet and aching. With caution, she turned slightly away from the man and slipped her hand beneath her full black skirt. Finding the right place, damp and slick, she rubbed—careful to ensure that her movements were silent, her panting breaths no more than a whisper lost in the night.

He was in his car now, starting the engine. Her personal motor was already running, purring along, increasing in intensity with the touch of her own hand. She closed her eyes as he drove away, past the spot where she stood, body shaking, rising to the edge of an orgasm.

It would be him, she knew. It would be him, his mouth, his tongue on her, his hands digging into her buttocks as he made her come. His hair against her thighs. He'd fuck her with those beautiful lips tight against her pussy, then after she'd exploded the first time, he'd fuck her once more. This time with his cock, thrusting deep and fast, and forcing her to that magnificent peak over and over again.

She could see it, feel it, experience it in her mind. He'd groan, his face contorted as he stared at their bodies.

Her thighs shook as she let the climax free and bit back a cry of completion. Her fingers were soaked, her mind a blank—and then it was gone. A tiny slice of time that was pure pleasure and just for her.

Sated, she leaned into the cold concrete wall and withdrew her hand. A smile curved her lips. This was how it would be with him. Incredible, erotic and satisfying.

Even more so when he lay next to her and she could lick the sweat from his skin. Nibble her way down his chest and back up—and then climb onto his body and rip into the firm muscle revealing the flesh and blood beneath.

Oh yes. That would be the best moment of all. The moment when the awareness of his fate would dawn in those lovely eyes of his.

It was a moment she knew would come.

When she would, perhaps, hold his still beating heart in her hand, the hot blood flowing copiously between her fingers as she raised it to her lips.

Or would she just take his essence, steal what it was that made him special? Use it as she had used others, and just discard the empty vessel that had housed it? She didn't know yet. But the anticipation tore through her like a lightning bolt from hell and made her want to shriek with impatience.

The slender figure dressed in black staggered and raised a hand to her head. She was dizzy, disoriented, her body lax, her skirt mussed.

What the fuck?

The little Fae lifted a hand to her forehead and grimaced. She should've had something to eat instead of skipping dinner and agreeing to meet her friends at the bar an hour early. And she'd sure as shit better go easy on the Moonbeam Martinis.

Her wings felt raw, as if they'd been manhandled. She winced and looked around, realizing she was less than a block from her destination. Something unsettling gnawed at her brain, something directly related to her uncomfortably damp panties.

Jesus H. This was frickin' absurd, and the girls would give her hell if she was late, since Jen had promised mega-office-gossip along with the first round of drinks.

Straightening, she stepped out of the shadows and headed for her night of fun. With a stern reminder to herself to watch her sugar levels in the future and eat something before going out, she walked rapidly down the street, without realizing she'd just lost a short period of time.

Or that, for those brief moments, her mind had not belonged to her.

## Chapter One

Cheney Fisher was tired.

He hadn't slept very well, he'd woken up too early and had a rougher-than-usual commute to his desk at the precinct, thanks to a unicorn that had managed to nail itself to a tree and block the road.

He sighed and pulled a little of his magic around him, creating the illusion of normalcy and tightening the bags he knew were sagging beneath his eyes. He'd let it wane during the day, but right now he didn't need any questions from his eagle-eyed peers in the detective pool. Especially his partner, Buck Shand.

Although since Buck had found himself a real, honest-to-God woman and they'd established themselves as a couple, Buck's attention to such details had slid considerably. He had worse bags under his eyes than Cheney did.

Lots of great sex did that to a guy.

Or so he'd heard. He could have sex anytime he wanted it, but in spite of the charm he radiated, he chose not to fuck around. If others imagined him with a different babe every night, that was their problem. He wasn't a sharing kind of guy about his personal life.

And even though everyone recognized the tiny dot on his earlobe that marked him as an AG, he'd told very few people what he actually *was*.

As a matter of fact, even he wasn't sure what he was. But he'd found the one word that seemed to cover his skills. He thought of himself as an *illusionist*.

Not for him the fairy wings, the vampire fangs or the shape-shifting abilities. Those creatures of legend were now plentiful thanks to Afterglow. There were nightclubs and fashions designed for fairies, diet blood substitutes for vampires trying to drop a few pounds, and various drop-off points for werewolves about to shed their clothes and get furry.

Embarrassed, naked, middle-aged men trying to hide their paunch after a night howling at the moon in their lupine forms—well, accommodations had to be made. It was all part and parcel of his world, and he pretty much took it for granted like the rest of Earth's inhabitants.

The mutations were accepted and variations were logged, filed and entered into the databases of scientific institutions around the world. But science aside, there were still humans at the core of these creatures, humans with their own foibles, issues and personalities. Thus pixies could be as nice or as annoying as their intrinsic natures, fairies needed to learn how to use their wings if they wanted to flutter—

it didn't always come naturally—and elves were green. Not chartreuse, or emerald, just flat-out green. They weren't always happy about it, either, but it was what it was.

Vampires bought the latest designs in sunglasses and were into hats big-time. Even when not dentally challenged, they were sun-sensitive. They dealt with it, as did everyone, by adapting—the species as a whole was pretty well-adjusted, realized Cheney as he strolled into the precinct and nodded at a couple of guys from the night shift who were logging out.

One still had pointy ears—he'd probably spent the night picking up street gossip down in Woodville where fairies and elves hung out in bars with inventive names like "The Green Glade" or "Mushroom Dell".

The blands, folks who didn't have any special mutations, took it all in stride. After all, when your kid becomes something magical, you couldn't *not* love them just because you had both feet firmly on the ground and didn't shift into anything other than an overbearing parent demanding they brush their fangs before they go to bed.

"Hey, dude. How's it hangin'?" Buck offered his customary morning salute.

"Bigger, longer and harder 'n yours, dude."

Having dispensed with the daily pissing contest, Cheney sat behind his desk, frowning at the paperwork that seemed to magically appear overnight. "What the hell's all this crap? I thought we took care of the basilisk killer stuff."

"We did." Buck leaned a hip on a bare spot and looked down at the folders. "This is the latest from the DMD."

Cheney grimaced. "Ah. Them." The Department of Metaphysical Developments kept track of human DNA mutations and alerted the authorities to any new wrinkles in the growing complexity of the human crossbreeds. They accomplished this mammoth task in the most boring way possible, so it was with a great deal of sarcasm that he posed a question to his partner. "Anything interesting?" He scanned the pages idly.

"Check page four." Buck's voice was quiet. "Something there I can't say I'm thrilled about."

"Shit." Cheney found it immediately. "A ghoul?"

"Yep."

"Not much on it. Just a note that they've identified the ghoul gene. Someplace in Europe, apparently, but not here yet."

"Good thing too," said Buck. "From what Lian told me, ghouls aren't the nicest of beings. They'll eat you as soon as look at you."

Cheney shrugged. "They'll adjust, I guess. Or get wiped out." He closed the folder and leaned back in his chair. "Anything else new I should know about?"

"Routine stuff. I guess you heard about the unicorn stuck in the tree."

"Yep. Got hung up in the traffic mess."

"There were a couple of domestic disturbances last night. The usual things. Some werewolf forgot himself and pissed on a neighbor's lawn, leaving brown spots. A fairy said she was assaulted, but it turned out to be some tourist who'd never seen one before and wanted to know if her wings were real."

"Christ. Are there still places where there aren't any AGs?"

"Apparently. This guy was from out of town. Waaaaay out of town." Buck chuckled. "Sounded like he was right off the farm. A bland with no real exposure to much of anything but cow shit."

Cheney grinned. "If it wasn't for the stink, I'd almost envy him."

"Some days, I would too."

The two men were silent for a moment or two, then Buck leaned a little closer. "It's bugging you, isn't it?"

They'd been partners long enough for Cheney to know exactly what Buck was talking about. "Yep. Bugging the shit out of me if you want the truth."

Two lines appeared between Buck's eyebrows as he stared at his friend. "Don't let it get to you. We took a serial killer down. The Pleasure Pets can go screw their customers without worrying they'll end up as mincemeat. Business is up, everyone's back to fucking their brains out, coming like gangbusters and life is good."

"I know, but still." He ran his hand through his hair. "I can't get rid of it, Buck. That knowledge. The idea that there's someone out there who is trying to control AGs. Make them do things they don't want to do. Turn them into killers." He paused. "And there's something else."

"What?"

"Call me crazy, but I've had the strangest feeling since we closed that case. The feeling I'm being watched."

Buck lifted one eyebrow. "By someone other than the usual gaggle of women, I'm assuming?"

Cheney snorted. "Fuck you."

"No thanks. I've got a headache."

"Seriously, Buck." He rested his arms on his desk. "It's nothing I can put a finger on. Nobody I see more than once or a car that looks familiar. Just an itch on the back of my neck now and again." He looked up. "You know what I'm talking about?"

Buck nodded. "Yeah. Instincts, I guess. You want me to look into it?"

"How?" Cheney shrugged. "There's no one there. Nobody I can point to, no description—nothing. Hard to investigate an itch, and you know it."

"Keep your eyes open, bud." Buck straightened. "Just because we've taken care of one case and killed one crazy, doesn't mean there aren't others out there."

"Yeah." His lips curved into a grin. "You aren't paranoid if they really are out to get you."

"You got that right." Buck grunted in agreement. "What's on the schedule today?" He glanced at the paperwork. "Anything interesting?"

Cheney was about to reply when the distinctive sound of a woman's heels clicked into his consciousness along with an increasing silence pervading the detectives' usually noisy lair.

Along with everybody else, they looked up to see her walking toward them.

"Holy Mother..." Buck's soft oath echoed Cheney's thoughts exactly, right down to the little dots at the end of the trailed-off whisper.

She was tall, strikingly tall, and she walked with the confidence and purpose that came with money and success. Lots of both, probably. Blazing red hair was tightly knotted at the back of her head, throwing perfectly sculptured features into prominence. Full lips were curved beneath a strong nose, and dark eyebrows topped eyes that just had to be green, although from this distance he couldn't be sure.

She wore a dark grey suit, snugly tailored to fit abundant curves, the waist of her jacket nipped in and her skirt smoothed over rounded hips that swayed as she walked. Every piece of her clothing was calculated to imply rather than reveal—the tiny little white lace collar of her demure shirt drawing attention to a flawless neck and merely hinting at the lush breasts beneath. The hem of her skirt fell discreetly to her knees but did nothing to obscure the obvious length of sleek leg, ending in a pair of killer-sharp spiked heels. Black of course.

Cheney swallowed roughly, responding like everyone else in the room to a stunningly sexy female. His loins twisted, and as she approached his desk, they did even more. Before she'd had a chance to open her mouth and say hello, he was hard.

When she stopped in front of his desk and smiled, he had to put a lot of effort into controlling an involuntary erection that would have embarrassed the hell out of him.

"Hi." Buck's voice was just the tiniest bit strained. "Can we help you?"

Those few seconds gave Cheney a chance to gather his errant thoughts, mentally stuff his cock back into his briefs and at least try to be professional. "Mornin', ma'am. Something we can do for you?" He stood slowly, grateful his control was holding.

It took every ounce of strength he possessed to counter the effect as her gaze drifted to his face and slammed into his brain.

Her eyes were the most unusual teal blue he'd ever seen.

"Detective Fisher?"

Bells were ringing in Cheney's ears and he almost shook his head to clear it. Drowning in her eyes, he could barely swallow, let alone nod.

Buck cleared his throat. "That would be my partner. The one staring at you and trying not to drool."

Cheney found relief in Buck's humor and clung to it as the world snapped back into place. "Excuse Detective Shand. He's not himself this early in the morning. I'm not sure *who* he is, but he's auditioning for a standup routine in the Catskills." He paused. "And failing."

The woman laughed, a rippling sound that brought a sigh of delight to his throat and most of the rest of the room as well, to judge by the indrawn breaths clearly audible around him.

"Perhaps you'd better sit down before this crew of cartoon characters trips over their collective tongues." He motioned to a chair, and Buck slid it in front of Cheney's desk.

She nodded her thanks to Buck. "Sorry. It happens a lot. You get to ignore it after a while." She sat, crossing those mile-long legs modestly. "Although it's useful in court sometimes."

"You're a lawyer?" Buck looked surprised.

"Yes."

"See you later, dude." Buck tipped his head toward Cheney, winked at him and left.

"Something I said?" A perfect eyebrow quirked upward.

"Don't take it personally. Buck doesn't do well with members of the legal profession." Which translated into he's got more lawyer jokes than you've had hot breakfasts and thinks every lawyer on the planet should be taken out and shot.

"It happens." She shrugged. "Anyway, I should introduce myself. My name's Pandora Jackson and I'm here to ask for your help in a delicate matter."

He couldn't stop himself from extending his hand. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Jackson. I'm Detective Fisher. How can I help?"

She took his hand and shook it, the most casual and professional of touches, but it was enough to nearly stop his heart in its tracks. Goddammit, this woman was stirring things best left unstirred. Like his lust, his dick and his AG talent that was busily creating a mental illusion containing X-rated sexual high jinks and nudity.

He turned away from her intense tropical-blue gaze under the pretext of finding a pad of paper and a pencil. He liked to do some things the old-fashioned way, and taking notes was one of them.

Having fidgeted his way to some semblance of normalcy, he relaxed and watched Ms. Pandora Jackson gather her thoughts. "What makes you think you need a detective?" He paused. "Not that I'm complaining, of course."

She lowered her eyelids and flashed a glance around the room. "I need help with a rather personal thing."

He frowned. "You're a lawyer. Don't you have resources for this kind of thing? Well-paid and discreet employees? A couple of private investigators?"

Pandora blinked. "I'm not talking about a divorce case, Detective."

His gaze took in her ringless hands. "Oh." He moved an arm in a gesture of enquiry. "Then what do you need?"

Stupid question. Because she's not about to answer that she needs hours in bed with a certain detective who's hard enough to hammer nails right about now.

"I need—" She swallowed, a rippling movement of that silken throat.

No, Cheney. Keep your mind on your job. Forget about wondering what her skin would taste like.

"I need help with an abandoned puppy."

"A puppy." His brain turned the word over, making sure he'd understood it correctly. "A puppy as in four legs, a tail and puddles all over the place? Squeaky toys? That kind of puppy?"

"Yes."

He blinked. "You want recommendations for a vet? A shelter?"

The muscles in her cheeks moved a little as she clenched her teeth. "No, Detective. I need your help."

"My help."

"Yes."

"With an abandoned puppy."

"Yes."

"I'm not going to adopt it, you know."

"I know." Her teeth clenched harder. "This is a special puppy."

"A special puppy?"

"Yes."

"How special? Three ears or something?"

She glared at him. "Very special."

"So you said."

She bit her lip, white teeth against pink flesh, looking about ready to leap out of her chair and sink those selfsame teeth into his shins. "Would it help if I mentioned that Roz Hammond's husband is a client of mine?"

Cheney's head snapped up. Yes, it helped. And it scared the crap out of him. He stood abruptly. "Let's take a walk."

She rose at once. "Okay."

Ignoring the soft mutters and a tiny wolf whistle, he took Ms. Jackson's arm in a firm grasp and led her out of the precinct into the sunshine of what was turning out to be a distinctly challenging day.

#### Chapter Two

Pandora matched her stride to that of the tall detective, a pleasant change since she was unused to walking next to men who surpassed her in height, especially when she was in heels. For a few moments she indulged herself by enjoying the sensation, then sighed and surrendered to business. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere I know we won't be overheard."

His voice was sharp, edgy, and she knew she'd hit the right button by mentioning Roz. She needed this man's help with her current problem since there was no one else she could turn to. Although the first time she'd seen him from a distance, she'd wondered if he was the right person. Up close, face-to-face, she'd been even less sure since every single female hormone in her body had woken up and started singing girl songs.

It had taken quite a bit of strength to overcome the gleeful hallelujah chorus going on in her panties, but she'd managed it. For now, she needed Detective Fisher's talent, *not* his penis, magnificent though it assuredly would be.

He stopped next to a car in the parking lot, surprising Pandora, as her thoughts had been far away from mundane things. Like where they were going.

"Get in." He held the door, his tone commanding and abrupt.

"Well, since you're being so charming about it..." She slid into the passenger seat and waited for him to join her behind the wheel.

He did, but not to start the engine. He turned to her with an expressionless face. "Now tell me what the hell this is about."

She took a breath. "I met Roz when her husband had some dealings with our firm. It was a social occasion. We chatted and she told me about her job with you. She was very discreet and spoke highly of you. But I'm not an idiot. I put two and two together—and came up with considerably more than four. You baby-sit what are, for lack of a better phrase, *challenged* AGs."

He inclined his head slightly. "And if I do?"

She pursed her lips, seeking the right words. "If you do, if my assumption is correct, then you are one of the few people who can help with my little—er—problem."

"You think you have a challenged AG?"

She snorted. "There's no think about it. I *know* I do. And I'm not sure where to turn, who to ask for help. Since it's a puppy, you came to mind." She straightened her shoulders. "I don't quite know how to explain this. First off, I'm not into putting down animals like they were useless bugs. Everything gets a chance, as far as I'm concerned."

Cheney nodded. "Agreed."

"So what I would like..." Pandora paused, uncertain of what it was she really wanted. "Look, I don't have that much experience with young AGs, or puppies for that matter. But you don't have to be a psychiatrist or a vet to look at this thing and know there's an issue of some sort." She turned to him, trying to keep the pain out of her voice. "I think it's in trouble, Detective. I don't know why, but there's something about it that's disturbing me."

"That sounds like an emotional response to a stray, not anything I'd expect from a lawyer."

She curled her lip. "I'm a lawyer in court and it's what I do for a living. I like the law. Always have. But that doesn't mean I snack on warm furry things and drown kittens in my off hours, for Chrissake." She sighed. "This puppy ended up with me as the result of a court case. Nobody else would touch it." She swallowed. "I'm not sure why I did. I had the same reaction. It doesn't...feel right."

"Feel right?"

"I know. Stupid thing to say and a completely unreliable statement I'd tear apart in the courtroom. But it's true. Maybe it was the environment it was born into." Staring absently out of the car window, she tried to shed the unpleasant memories. "The case sucked. It was about animal abuse and an unscrupulous, money-grubbing leech." She grinned suddenly. "I won. He won't be abusing anything else for quite some time. In fact, he's got five to ten years of finding out what it's like on the *other* side of punishment. Not to mention I took him for every filthy penny he'd ever filtered into an offshore bank account."

She flashed a quick glance at Cheney. "Global internet finance laws are quite restrictive these days."

"So I've heard." His voice was still cool.

"After the case, the evidence, as in the poor creatures involved, went to adoption agencies or homes. No worries about them. It was just this one...nobody wanted him. Honestly? I didn't either."

"Why?"

"Again, I don't really know. Call it gut instinct. But as I said, turning him over to some euthanasia company...well, I couldn't quite bring myself to do it."

"And..." prompted Cheney.

"Well, I remembered my conversation with Roz. I decided to speak with you and ask if there was any way you could—*evaluate* this creature? Use whatever skills you have to tell me what the hell's going on with it?"

"This isn't a police matter."

"No, it's not."

"And it wouldn't go any further than the two of us?"

"Are you *nuts*? You think I want every associate in the firm thinking I'm a pushover for a pair of floppy ears and a wagging tail?"

His face relaxed into a grin at her outrage. "I guess that wouldn't do the image any good, would it?"

"Damn straight." Pandora shuddered. "No matter how civilized we get, it's still tough for a woman to get past the breasts thing and be accepted for her brains not her bra size."

Annoyed at herself, she realized she was watching his gaze drift to her breasts. And rather enjoying it.

"We're getting off topic." Or at least I am. She shifted in the seat. "Will you help me?"

Silence fell for a few moments as he took a turn staring out of the window, thinking. She mentally crossed her fingers and waited patiently, saying nothing, just hoping he'd be curious enough to do as she asked.

Then he made a slight sound and reached for the ignition. "Fasten your seat belt."

Doing as she was told, Pandora glanced at him. "Where are we going?"

"I guess I'm going to have to show you what I do. Then, if you think it will work on your pup, we'll go from there." He backed out of the lot and turned west. "Needless to say, Counselor, what happens from here on is going to be covered by lawyer-client privilege, okay?"

"You're not my client."

"I don't care. I want your word that this will be confidential or I turn this car around right now and you can find yourself another resource."

"There aren't any."

"I know."

"Got me by the short hairs, huh?" She growled at him, irritated at his high-handed assumptions.

"Not yet." He chuckled. "You'll know when that happens, trust me."

"Yeah. Right." Scoffing, Pandora leaned back. "Dream on."

"Oh I do. So will you."

Ignoring his cryptic comment, she turned her head and blinked as she recognized where they were headed. "You live up here?" The quiet street was flanked with smaller homes, not flashy but not inexpensive, either.

"Yes."

"Don't take this wrong, but I'm surprised."

He smiled. "Yeah. Detectives shouldn't be able to afford a house here. Of course, if the politicos would vote us a decent pay raise, maybe that myth could die a natural death." He shrugged. "My family left me the house. It's paid for, so I can afford it."

"Lucky you." She suppressed a dart of envy. She liked her condo in the city, but would have loved to live in one of these properties. However, given the way things were, it was an unlikely occurrence, since cohabitation with nature wasn't a wise idea. Not for her, anyway. She contented herself with looking at the neat and abundant gardens, which cleverly screened most of the actual residences from prying eyes.

She swallowed as he turned the car into a driveway leading beneath softly waving willow branches. Her skin itched lightly as the sunlight dappled the car, fractured by leaves and branches and blurred by their movement in the morning breeze.

"Home sweet home." He killed the engine and got out of the car.

Pandora followed, breathing deeply, inhaling the wonderful scents of green growing things and the dusky undertone of soil and mulch. Her senses tingled, her arms ached to stretch out and embrace it all and her face turned upward to the sky.

"You like the country, huh?"

Instantly she pulled herself together. "Very much." It was short, pithy and as much as he was going to get until her mind reassembled itself. *This* was why she remained permanently ensconced in a world of concrete and steel.

He hadn't asked her what kind of AG she was, even though he had to have noticed the little blue mark on her ear. She had her story ready, of course. She was a fairy. And it was close enough to the truth that she could say it with assertive confidence. She was a Fae. Sort of. She'd grown up knowing it and accepting her Fae ability.

She just wasn't a very *good* one, but then again one couldn't be perfect at everything. No feathery wings or desire to flutter in the moonlight, just an incredible connection with living, growing things. She'd put it down to some offbeat variety of Fae empathic talent and left it at that, preferring to focus on the cut-and-dried business of law.

Until the night she'd turned into a tree and realized the awful truth.

Pandora Jackson wasn't just a lawyer and a Fae, she was a *dryad*.

Cheney hadn't missed the blissful expression that had crossed Pandora's lovely face as she emerged into his front garden. For a few seconds the light had seemed brighter around her, almost like a delicate shimmering aura, tiny leaves of brilliance trembling from her skin.

Beautiful to begin with, she was almost ethereal in the sunlight. And even more sexually desirable. What she'd look like without the concealing suit and with her fiery hair down—well, mortal men probably would have gone to war just for the chance to look at her, and Helen of Troy would've ordered up a batch of the latest beauty products.

He yanked his brain from his crotch and nodded at the door. "Come on. Let's go meet the family."

She walked silently beside him into the house, making no comment—for which he was grateful. He hadn't brought her here to admire his lack of taste in furniture or his eclectic assortment of art, ranging

from a rock band poster to an antique velvet painting of Elvis he'd scrounged from a yard sale one weekend when he'd had a serious hangover that had clearly affected his thought processes.

"Roz?" His voice elicited a clatter from the kitchen. "It's me."

"Good Lord, Cheney, you startled me." Roz emerged with a cloth in her hands, only to stop short at the sight of his companion. "Ms. *Jackson*?"

"Hello, Mrs. Hammond. Good to see you again."

Roz glanced uncertainly from Pandora to Cheney. "Is everything okay?"

"Of course." He reached out and patted Roz's shoulder. "Ms. Jackson and I have some business to discuss, and I thought I'd bring her over here so she can meet the family." He grinned. "She likes dogs."

"Oh good." The older woman's face creased into a smile. "They're out in the garden. They've had breakfast so I figured it was time for a romp in the sunshine." She shifted her attention to Pandora. "Nothing like some outdoors time, no matter whether it's dogs or kids."

Pandora nodded back. "I couldn't agree more. How's Mr. Hammond?"

The two women exchanged civil pleasantries while following Cheney down the tiled passageway to the rear of the house. "Any chance of some iced tea, Roz?" He opened the door for Pandora.

"Of course, dear. Fresh brewed, just the way you like it."

"You spoil me." He winked at her and she chuckled back, taking the door handle from him and making sure it was closed behind them as she stayed inside.

"That woman is an absolute joy." Cheney looked around. "I didn't need to tell her we needed privacy or explain why you're here. She's a rare bird."

Pandora opened her mouth to answer, but the words were drowned out by a rush of yapping and barking fur that resolved itself into two puppies frolicking around his ankles.

He squatted down. "Hey, guys." Two heads butted his hands, and he laughed as he tugged ears, rubbed noses and generally said hello to the bundles of multicolored fluff jumping up and down for his attention.

Beside him, he could *almost* hear the "Awww" sound that women tend to make when confronted with warm cute fuzzy things. Although Pandora managed to restrain herself, she couldn't help squatting next to him and chuckling as one pup eagerly nudged her hand with its nose.

"They're adorable. And they probably know it."

He glanced at her as she spoke, getting a first glimpse of the woman beneath the businesslike legal façade.

There was light shimmering behind her breathtaking blue irises, laughter bringing character and charm to her perfect face. She was almost surreally beautiful at this moment—and totally unaware of the effect she was having on him. A strand of hair blew free from her tight knot, tumbling around one ear in a slash of flame-colored heat.

She took his breath away each time he looked at her and saw something new. Which seemed to happen each time he looked at her. If he wasn't so fascinated by her, it could get to be frickin' annoying.

"What do you do? How do you care for them?" She turned inquisitive eyes to his face.

"Would you like to see?"

He knew she didn't realize the magnitude of his offer. He'd never shared this experience with anyone, preferring to keep his talents under wraps for the most part. Excluding those moments when an illusion was called for, of course. Like during a seduction. It worked *really* well at times like those. Especially the pirate captain one...

Her eager assent drew him back from those ever-present lustful images and he extended a hand. "Hold on and relax."

She settled onto the grass, heedless of her suit, watching him intently.

"Close your eyes."

"Okay." She followed his instructions.

Cheney made himself comfortable and closed his eyes too. Within seconds a door in his brain opened and the illusion he created just for his pups took shape. Only this time, he wasn't alone.

A gasp from beside him let him know that Pandora was there too, seeing what he was seeing.

They were still in his garden, but the house had vanished. It was now more of a woodland glade, fresh and full of the sounds of nature. He turned his head and smiled.

Through no conscious effort on his part, she'd undergone a wardrobe change. She was now clad in a soft white low-cut gown of some sheer floaty stuff which clung to her generous curves. Her hair fell in great waves of fire down to her waist.

She glanced down at herself and then back up at Cheney, a look of astonishment on her face.

He grinned, enjoying himself enormously. It was warm and sunny where they sat, yet her nipples were hard, budding sharply through the white silky fabric that covered them.

Dude. You so rock.

#### Chapter Three

Pandora's senses were reeling as her brain attempted to process the impossible. "What is this? Where are we?"

"Still in the garden." Cheney sat comfortably, looking at her.

"I don't understand..."

"I'm an illusionist, Ms. Jackson. That's my AG talent. I can take what's in people's dreams, thoughts, sometimes their subconscious feelings, and create a pseudo-reality from it."

"You mean this isn't real?"

"It's real enough. You can do pretty much everything here you'd do anywhere. The flowers smell good, the earth is hard. It's kind of an alternate reality, I suppose. I don't know how else to explain it."

She shook her head, forgetting her hair was loose, and then tucked a lock behind one ear with a mutter of annoyance. "I've never heard of anything like this before."

"What can I say?" He spread his hands. "I'm one of a kind."

"Yeah." She snorted. "Right down to the choice of clothing." She had noticed that he'd managed to keep his outfit intact.

"Forgive me." He grinned unrepentantly. "I couldn't resist seeing you like this. Indulge me, okay?"

"Hmph." She snorted. Okay, it was a nice dress, but she really wasn't accustomed to wearing anything resembling a fairy-tale princess gown. "You didn't pull this from my head."

"No." He looked away. "This is one of mine. A simple readjustment of our surroundings that makes them feel more at home."

Pandora followed his gaze and another gasp choked in her throat.

Walking toward them were two young children. At least they were close to being young children. The taller one, a boy, was grinning, moving quickly to Cheney through the grass.

The smaller child approached on all fours.

Pandora swallowed. She'd formed a vague image of what Cheney did and how he did it, but this surpassed anything she could have imagined. The boy sported a lush wagging tail and the little girl—well, the face was there but the rest of the body was still a puppy.

"Hey you two. Come and say hello to my friend Pandora." He held out his hand to the boy. "Pandora, this is Rusty."

"Hi, Rusty." Pandora smiled at him. "Nice to meet you."

"You're pretty." The boy tipped his head to one side. "Wanna see me throw the ball?" He looked longingly at a well-used ball on the grass.

"In a minute, Rusty." Cheney ruffled his hair. "Lucy, don't be shy. Come and give me a hug."

Pandora's heart clogged her throat as she watched the little creature creep hesitantly to him. "Hi, Cheney." She snuggled against his knee and looked shyly at Pandora.

"Lucy's doing great, Pandora. She's almost managed to change by herself." He stroked the little girl's soft blonde hair.

"I can. I can, Cheney. Watch." Tiny features wrinkled into a grimace as she groaned and grunted. Before Pandora's astounded gaze, shoulders and arms emerged, replacing the front paws of the puppy.

"Attagirl. That's fantastic." Cheney applauded.

Pandora found herself following suit. "Gosh, that's amazing, Lucy."

A smile crept over the tiny face and Pandora fought back tears. This was—heartrending.

"I like your hair."

Rusty was about to tug a handful, but Cheney managed to grasp his arm gently and disentangle him. "Pandora is pretty, isn't she?" Emergency averted, he nudged Rusty. "Go play with your ball, buddy. I can't stay too long right now, but I'd love to see that famous Rusty pitch of yours."

"'Kay, Cheney. We gonna play tonight?"

"If I get home before you're both in bed, sure." He laughed. "No promises though."

"I hope you do, Cheney." Lucy stood awkwardly, balancing herself on her back legs and hugging his neck with her chubby arms.

"I'll try, sweetheart."

Pandora's mind seethed with questions, but something about the idyllic surroundings stilled her tongue and she watched, simply enjoying the sight of youngsters at play.

It didn't seem odd when Cheney's hand grasped hers and held it for a few moments. "Thank you."

She didn't know what he was thanking her for. She felt she should thank him for this brief glimpse into a world where all was light and happiness. So strange, so unique—and, sadly, so short lived.

"We have to go now." He squeezed her fingers.

"Okay." She wanted to say no. To beg for a few more minutes. To stay and play with Rusty and Lucy, to throw the ball, to leave everything and everyone behind. It was a seductively simple scene, yet she knew she'd never forget it.

Doing none of the things she wanted, she did what she had to. She closed her eyes and let the illusion disappear.

"Well, what do you think?"

His voice was calm and businesslike, and she opened her eyes to find herself back in her own clothes, still sitting on his back lawn watching two puppies in the sunshine.

"I think I have a helluva lot of questions." She organized her thoughts, frowning as she tried to figure out what to ask him first.

He beat her to it. "I meant do you think something like this will help your problem pup?"

She blinked. "Uh—I suppose so." It was a difficult question to answer. "I take it you created that illusion for them. It wouldn't be something they came up with on their own, right?"

"Correct." He nodded. "Come on, let's get a glass of iced tea and discuss our options."

She accepted the hand he held out as he stood and let him pull her to her feet. There was strength in his grip, not totally unexpected but enough to tell her there were muscles under the casual jacket even though Cheney appeared tall and lean.

"By the way." She brushed grass from her skirt as he glanced at her. "I liked the dress."

"Me too." He chuckled and led her into the house.

With two glasses of Roz's perfect iced tea in front of them, Cheney faced Pandora across his kitchen table. They were alone and he could see the curiosity bubbling up behind her gaze.

"Fill me in." Her tone was peremptory, allowing no room for debate. "Everything. What you do, how you do it and why."

He lifted one eyebrow lazily. "I don't think so."

"Well give me the condensed version then." Her fingertips drummed on the table. "Give me something. Some clue about this—this stuff."

"This stuff, as you so succinctly call it, is my AG talent. What more is there to know?" He knew he was being evasive, but now that they were back in the real world, he was reticent to let her probe his mind. Of course, if she wanted to probe other things... He still had the image of her in that transparent dress locked in his head. Ruefully, he admitted to himself he might have made a mistake putting her in it. She looked too damn good.

"Those—those children. How do you help them?"

He thought about the question. "I give them a safe environment. I allow them to develop at their own speed. I let things happen the way they're supposed to."

"And their parents don't?"

"Look, Pandora. I don't have to tell you this isn't a perfect world. It's better, but it's still not perfect. Children are born with AG talents. Parents don't always know how to handle them. Some don't want them. Some births result in an AG baby who comes into the world fully developed."

"God." She swallowed. "You mean some women have puppies?"

He shrugged. "It happens. Usually the mom understands and within a few days she has her baby. There are counseling services, doctors and therapists. We know a lot about AG mutations now. A loving parent pretty much takes care of any little childhood glitches." He paused and frowned. "Sadly, there isn't always a loving parent around."

"And that's where you come in?"

"Sometimes, yes. These two, for example. Lucy and Rusty." He glanced through the window into the garden. "Rusty changed very soon after his birth. His mother couldn't handle it. She was in her late teens, I believe. She left. Rusty was too young to figure out how to relax into his AG talent and stayed a puppy."

"And Lucy?"

"Her mother died giving birth. There was no father present. He was in the wind long before that."

"Oh God." Pandora's eyes swam with tears for a few seconds before she blinked them away. "And so they ended up with you."

"I have a few friends here and there. I foster these kids, if you want to call it that. I just make sure they're safe, happy and free to develop at their own pace. I help them physically. Once they're on their own, or with new families, they'll get counseling."

"They get adopted?"

Cheney chuckled. "One good thing about werewolf AGs. They love big families. Thriving packs. There's always one out there looking for kids to adopt."

"But the others..."

"I can't go there." He straightened his shoulders. "I simply can't think about it. I do what I can with these kids and pray to God somebody else is helping other kinds of AGs. Focusing on my family is the best way to deal with that lurking knowledge, believe me."

"Yeah." She nodded soberly.

"I see a lot of shit, Pandora. I'm a detective. It's my job." He grimaced. "A lot of it's unpleasant. Coming home, doing this..." He waved a hand at the window. "Well, it makes life better. Not just for them, but for me too."

"I can understand that."

"So." He gazed at her. "About your problem."

She lifted her face and met his eyes, her own clear and blue as a tropical ocean. "I know now I need you more than ever. This creature isn't like Rusty or Lucy. Only you can tell me what it is, what it needs and how to help it. Or him. Or whatever."

"You think it's a werewolf?"

"At this point, I'm not sure of anything except that my gut churns when I'm around it. And there's something in its eyes..."

"Good enough for me." He stood and drained his glass. "Got time now to go check him out?"

Pandora glanced at her watch. "I'll make time." She reached into her pocket and withdrew her tiny phone. Turning away, she spoke into it and within a few moments was reorganizing her schedule for the day.

Cheney took their glasses to the sink and rinsed them, noting that the pups were now lazily stretched out in the sunshine. Would he be adding a third? It was possible. She couldn't help it, but at least she'd been smart enough to come to him for advice.

And he'd actually let her in to the private side of his life. A woman he'd not met before that morning. That was something indeed. Buck would give him a hard time, Cheney knew. But he'd always been one who followed his instincts.

And his instincts told him he was doing the right thing about Pandora.

However, when she turned and smiled at him, it wasn't exactly his gut instincts that responded. It was about a foot or so lower. "Ready?" He ignored the curl of lust warming his crotch.

"Let's go." Her heels clicked on the floor as she strode from the house.

A thought drifted through his mind. In his opinion, most lawyers were asses. This was one who had an ass. A really fabulous tight and shapely ass. With a sigh, he shoved away the urge to grab it and followed it as it swayed rhythmically out the door.

### Chapter Four

"Why so reticent about your talent?" Pandora spoke from the passenger seat as they drove back toward the city. "You seem to go to great lengths to keep it quiet."

Cheney pondered the question for a few moments. "Probably because it's not common. Or of much use." He shrugged. "Growing up was hard sometimes. Not being able to fit in to the usual cliques—vampire, werewolf, elf—you know how it works. I had the mark but I couldn't do the deed. And yet I wasn't a bland either..."

She nodded. Everyone wanted to fit in, it seemed. "Yes, I can see you'd have some issues." She frowned a little. "But now you're an adult..."

"And a cop." He turned the wheel as they exited the highway. "I finally found a place where a talent like mine can come in handy now and again."

"Really?" She blinked. "You use it on the job?"

"Sure. Makes undercover work a helluva lot easier sometimes. I can't hold it for hours on end, but there've been a few cases where minutes count. If I can persuade a perp he's someplace else seeing something else? Hey, whatever gets the job done."

"Is that legal?"

He lifted an eyebrow briefly. "There speaks the lawyer."

"Of course."

"Never had a case thrown out because of it." He braked for a stoplight. "We know our job, Pandora. The DA doesn't accept magical manifestations when it comes to prosecution. Hard evidence and facts. That's what he wants."

"Um." She digested his comment, wondering if any of the cases she'd dealt with had involved some sort of AG event prior to arriving on her desk. The thought made her shudder at the potential implications and she turned her attention to the road. "Turn right at the next intersection."

He did so, then glanced at her. "To turn that question to you—what's a Fae doing becoming a lawyer?"

She tensed. "I don't see the two as mutually exclusive."

He grinned. "Touchy, are we?"

"Certainly not." The pause that followed could best be described as pregnant. "Well, not very much." "Aha."

"There's no aha about it. I like the law." Pandora lifted her chin defiantly. "It's essential, clear cut and interesting. It's a part of our society that's pretty much always been there and always will."

"True. And I could probably count on one hand the number of its members who are Fae. Most are blands or vamps who don't mind burning the midnight oil in some musty library, poring over data that's a gazillion years old."

"But don't you see? That's the point." She twisted in her seat and spread her hands for emphasis. "The law is a gazillion years old. It's one of the few things that transcends the passage of time and the changes in our culture. It's been a constant from the earliest recorded history. Before there were AGs, there was the law. Before there was hideous weaponry, there was the law. Before there was—well, before there were a whole lot of humans, there was probably a law or two."

Cheney huffed out a soft laugh. "It's illegal to kill more than one woolly mammoth a week?"

"Probably. You may make a joke out of it, but I regard the law as part of the glue that's held humanity together for eons. I find that thought...comforting, in an odd way. And fascinating too. How the intricacies of it still make sense. How the necessity of it is still very much an integral part of our foundation as civilized beings."

The car slid to a stop at the end of a cul-de-sac, in front of a small group of contemporary townhouses. She pointed. "That one's mine."

Cheney killed the motor and withdrew the keys, unfastening his seat belt as he surveyed the area. "You know, Pandora, if I was a shrink, I'd say you were looking for some major stability in your choice of a career. And that would be an interesting premise for therapy." He opened his door and got out of the car.

She snorted and did the same, straightening her skirt automatically as she slammed her door closed behind her. "In that case, it's probably a good thing you're a cop."

Cheney found himself once again contemplating Pandora's very fine ass as it swayed up the short driveway to her front door. There was a garage next to it, so he assumed her living quarters were up a flight. They'd probably be rigidly structured, like her, all black and white and chrome or something.

She might be a buttoned-up lawyer type on the surface, and maybe even in her choice of fashion and decorating styles, but he'd bet his last dollar there was a whole lotta woman buried in there someplace. Nobody with an ass that fine could be as rigid as she'd like him to believe. Perhaps she even believed it herself...he didn't know. But he'd seen her in a flowing gown with her hair loose.

He'd seen her laugh as she played with his kids, and her smile was seared into more than a few of his neural pathways.

Oh yes, Ms. Jackson had depths to her that he'd be quite interested in exploring.

"Come on up. I've got it penned in the kitchen." Pandora's voice recalled his wandering thoughts.

If only we'd met at a bar and not professionally.

He took the last step into her living room. And stopped dead.

"Uh..." He stared at the warm glowing wood surfaces that surrounded him. From floor to ceiling there was the richness of a forest reflecting and absorbing the light from the tall windows.

Against soft green walls stood carvings, some useful—like tables—others beautiful creations lifted from the natural shape of the wood itself.

Her coffee table was a slab of something rich and weathered, polished to a mirror-like smoothness. Her cabinetry looked custom designed, also buffed to shining perfection. Here and there were growing things, their pots shaped from branches or small tree trunks.

He breathed in, detecting a hint of the elemental fragrance emanating from finely worked wood.

"Wow." It was all he could say.

Pandora flashed him an irritated glance. "I didn't bring you here to criticize my taste in furniture."

He held up his hands defensively. "Don't jump to conclusions, Counselor. I wouldn't dream of criticizing. This stuff's magnificent."

Her hand went absently to the grooves in a tall piece—a woman's body sinuously emerging from a large branch, hands raised above her and cupping a fat creamy candle. "I like it."

"I can see why." He nodded approvingly. "Some of these pieces look like heirlooms." He crossed the room to examine the one dominant feature—a massive hewn trunk, halved down the center and standing flush against the wall. It was taller than he was and probably three feet across.

But it wasn't the size that was so eye-catching—it was the wood itself. Softly undulating, the whorls and irregularities combined to reveal something almost alive about the piece. A face, perhaps. No, several faces. Or an arm?

What was it? Cheney closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again, trying hard to see what the artist had tried to emphasize.

"Hey." Pandora snapped her fingers at him. "Any chance we could get on with this? Or do you just want to stand there and stare for an hour or two? Because if so, let me know and I'll get some work done while you take a vacation in your head."

He opened his mouth to respond, then noticed something. She's uncomfortable. Embarrassed. She's not happy that I'm liking this stuff. His cop instincts helped him read her body language as clearly as if she'd been holding up a sign.

Her arms were crossed tightly over her body, her face was devoid of expression and one foot was tapping a little, just enough to betray her nervousness. He filed it all away in the "interesting things I'm learning about Pandora Jackson" file and nodded. "Show me where this pup is."

With a muttered "About time", Pandora led him through the living room and into the dining area. The opening into the kitchen was blocked with a jumble of chairs and an ottoman thrown in for good measure. "Here." She pointed. "There he is."

A rough growl followed her words and he moved to her side, looking in the direction of her pointing finger.

For a second or two he had a hard time finding the animal, but then it moved and he saw it clearly for the first time. Amidst the usual puppy items—blanket, water bowl, food dish and the obligatory squeaky toy—lay a dark brown creature of indeterminate origin.

And the hairs rose on the back of Cheney's neck as he got his first good look at it.

No playful or sad puppy here. The face was blunt, the nose short and the ears unremarkable. The hair was tufted in places, especially around its neck, but not the soft feathery fronds that some pups carry as youngsters. This looked rough and brittle.

The growling continued and he watched as one lip peeled away from sharp fangs that were way too large to classify as baby teeth, and with a snarl the creature moved to stand, its body ungainly, its legs short and thick.

It was no breed he could even guess at. He'd never seen anything like it. And when it looked at him—

"Jesus Christ." Cheney took an involuntary step backward. The fierce black stare seared into his mind, sending unpleasant, almost painful chills down his spine.

"See?" Pandora's voice was low. "I've done my best with him, honestly I have. He eats, he'll poop when I take him out, but there's something about him that scares me. He doesn't like me petting him, but he'll tolerate me putting his collar on. Still, that's as far as it goes." She continued to stare at the animal as she put a hand on Cheney's arm. "It's not me, is it? This is one weird dog."

"It's not you." He moved closer once more, his gaze glued to that strange snarl and the fangs protruding from it. "This is abnormal for any dog. Any guesses as to how old he is?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly. He's been here for nearly a week. The case closed a week before that. Best educated guess I could make would put him at between eight and fourteen weeks maybe?"

The dog bared more fangs, and Cheney found himself halfway to reaching for his service weapon. The sense of a threat was overwhelming, an onrush of fear that he could feel stimulating a flood of adrenaline through his muscles.

"I don't like this. I don't like this at all."

"Me neither. Which is why I got in touch with you in the first place." There was a touch of asperity in her tone. "So could you do your thing, find out what the hell it is and then let me get on with the rest of my life while I still have a few years left?"

He broke eye contact with it and gave her a look. "Not big on patience, are you?"

She snorted. "Not while this thing is in my kitchen, no." She lifted one shoulder. "I'll admit I'm not sleeping well knowing it's in the house. I thought I'd feel safer with a dog. Now—I'm not sure if it's going to protect me or eat me."

Under normal circumstances, he would probably have made an inappropriate comment. But these were far from normal circumstances. Something was definitely off about this creature, and some sort of instinct was driving him down a road lined with extreme caution.

"Okay." He took a breath. "I'm going to do my thing, as you so aptly put it."

"I'm ready." Pandora squared her shoulders.

"Not this time. Let me do this alone to start with. I'm not sure what I'm going to find. I won't risk you."

"Good God, Detective. You create illusions. They're not real." Her eyes widened.

"Doesn't matter. I don't need the distraction."

"Urgh." She waved a hand. "Go ahead then. Just do it, damn it."

Cheney did.

Closing his eyes, he opened the part of his mind that created something...he never could figure out how it happened, it just was. This time, he'd keep it as close to reality as possible, hazarding a guess that the animal wouldn't respond well to a complete change of environment.

He opened his eyes and looked at it.

And froze.

Something was looking back at him from Pandora's kitchen floor. But it wasn't a dog, or a human or any mixture of either. It was something he'd never seen before, nor could have dreamed of in his worst nightmare.

The fangs were prominent, bared and sharp, dripping with saliva. The face? It defied description. Hollowed depressions on either side of the almost nonexistent nose, it was skeletal but for the eyes.

Those were almost completely round, sunk deeply into their sockets, bloodshot and glaring at him. Around its neck was a tiny frill, not unlike a lizard's scales, each segment tipped with a sharp talon. It quivered, as if eager to rip into something.

Aghast, Cheney watched as the creature staggered to its feet with a low throaty growl that was more primeval than canine. The forelegs were short and scaly, claws scrabbling on the smooth wooden floor.

The body was elongated and smooth, the rear legs seemingly an afterthought as the long tail unfurled. It was a jigsaw puzzle of unpleasantness, a mixed-up combination of creatures that would have been better off left alone to become extinct.

And it was pissed off.

All he was doing was looking at it, and anger and hunger radiated from it. A primitive fury that rocked him back on his heels even as the thing rose up, balancing on tail and hind legs, staggering and clawing at the air in front of it as it continued to howl out ugly sounds which set Cheney's teeth on edge and made him wince.

They increased in volume, building to a crescendo that had him covering his ears and slowly stepping backward.

Then it stopped suddenly, its jaws opening wider than should've been possible. It gasped, choked—and exploded.

Cheney leaped backward, his illusion snapping off harshly, his balance gone. He stumbled, falling into something soft and toppling to the floor. His world went black, then he regained some sort of consciousness to find himself lying almost on top of Pandora.

"Jesus H. Move." She was pushing at him. "Are you all right? What happened?" She pushed again. "Get the fuck off me, you're crushing me."

He was indeed crushing her, but he allowed himself the heady pleasure of enjoying it. Her blouse buttons had given way, revealing white skin and a cleavage he'd like to investigate further, without its covering of lace. He was dizzy, disoriented and cushioned by a really fine set of breasts. If a man couldn't take a minute to appreciate the sensation—well, hell.

Then the portion of his mind that resided between his ears shifted back into place and he rolled away from her, standing up and catching the edge of her countertop to steady himself. Apprehensively he looked over the surface and into the kitchen.

All that remained of the creature was a pile of dirty grey-brown dust.

His brain slammed into gear. "I need a plastic bag. Two of 'em. Where?" His gaze landed on Pandora. "Quickly."

"Second drawer down, left-hand side of the fridge." She straightened her clothing as she stood. "What for?"

Cautiously picking his way around the mess, he found the bags. He put one over his right hand and bent to the floor, making sure to avoid any contact between the stuff he wanted to sample and his own skin.

With the ease of practice he gathered a good-sized handful and carefully shoveled it into the empty bag, removing the one he'd used as an impromptu glove and sealing that inside for good measure.

When it was shut tight, he stood. "That should do it. Got something I can clean this up with?"

She looked at him blankly. "What the hell just happened?" She shivered. "My pup's gone, hasn't he?"

"Yes." Cheney wondered if there was an easy way to explain any of it and decided there wasn't. "I didn't do it, if you're thinking that. It wasn't...stable. The AG mutation just sort of collapsed instead of freeing itself."

"So it was inevitable?"

"I think so, yes." He picked up the bag. "I need to get this analyzed."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you on the way back to the precinct. You want to leave the mess for a bit, or what?" He glanced down at the remains of what had once been alive.

"I'll take care of it. You should go sit for a minute. You look as white as a sheet." Walking past him, she opened a door and pulled out a cleaner.

"Okay." The world wavered a little as he nodded. "Probably a good idea." He moved toward the living room. "By the way?"

"What?" She was squatting carefully in the kitchen.

"You have fabulous breasts."

A snort greeted his words. "I know. What I don't know is what the fuck this is all about. And don't think you're going to avoid telling me by discussing my breasts."

## Chapter Five

Pandora exercised every bit of control she possessed and then some, holding back her questions until her kitchen was clean and the strain on Cheney's face had eased. She was experiencing a measure of guilt over the demise of the whatever-it-was, but she just couldn't find any lingering sadness since there didn't seem to be anything she could have done differently. She hadn't bonded with the pup, and it certainly hadn't bonded with her.

It had made her skin crawl, if she was brutally honest with herself. The overwhelming sense of relief that it was gone lay at the bottom of her guilt, not the fact that she'd caused its death in the first place. Or Cheney had. But same difference, because she'd asked him to evaluate it...

Shit. This wasn't getting her anywhere. She was simply putting off the questions, and she wouldn't be able to contain them much longer.

She waited until they were in the car before the dam burst. "Okay, Fisher, spill it. Tell me what that was all about."

He took one hand off the steering wheel and rubbed it over his face. "I wish the hell I knew." He frowned. "Tell me what you saw and maybe that'll help me sort it out."

She thought for a moment. "You closed your eyes, then opened them again. The...the thing—whatever it was—stood up and growled at you. Then it stayed still, staring." She swallowed. "Then...poof. It sort of disintegrated into that icky pile of dust."

His lips curved slightly. "Succinct and lawyerly. Except for icky. Don't think I've heard anyone in the legal profession use that in court."

"Stop beating around the bush. What the fuck did you see?" She was ready to hit him. Hard.

"It was alive. And it shouldn't have been."

She noticed his fingers tightening on the steering wheel until the knuckles were white.

"It was some kind of genetic mistake, Pandora. A combination of things I've never seen. Some of it was reptilian, some looked like leftovers from the Jurassic period and the face—" He stopped and took a breath. "That face will haunt my nightmares."

She gulped. "So this wasn't any kind of challenged AG you've seen before?"

"God no."

"A defect, perhaps? Birth defects do still happen..."

"Not like this." He shook his head. "It wasn't just the really scary look of the thing." The knuckles got a little whiter. "There was an-an *aura*, for lack of a better word. A sense of wrongness. I hate to use the word evil, but one look at that thing in its natural state and you just knew it would kill you if it could. And enjoy the process."

"Shit." Pandora leaned back, her skin goose-pimply from the quiet horror lurking behind Cheney's words. "Well, you've got a sample of that dust stuff. What do we do with it? What should we do now?"

He flashed her a quick glance as he turned into the precinct parking lot. "We? We do nothing. Your problem is solved as far as the critter is concerned."

She opened her mouth to protest but he forestalled her, turning off the engine and gazing at her with one eyebrow raised quizzically. "Any further developments will come from my end. This is clearly an unknown mutation. I'll make sure the information gets to the relevant authorities. It stops there."

"But..." She paused. It was the right course of action, said the legal part of her brain. But she wanted to know, acknowledged the emotional side of her brain. "You're probably right."

"No probably about it. I am right."

That set off a few red lights. "Let me point out that technically I own that sample you've tucked away in those plastic bags. You need my permission to do anything with them, up to and including analysis, during which time some might be destroyed. You can't do anything along those lines without my say so."

"Then give me your say so."

"No."

Cheney sighed deeply and got out of the car, waiting for her to follow suit. "It's the red hair, isn't it? I've always had trouble with redheads."

She narrowed her eyes at him across the roof as she slammed her door shut with a tad more force than necessary. "My hair color is irrelevant. I'm simply protecting my interests. If you want to do anything whatsoever with that sample, I will need to know about it. You will keep me apprised of any and all developments and forward copies of resulting reports directly to me. Otherwise, no deal, Detective." She reached into her purse for her car keys. "I mean it."

"It might be a while. There'll be a shitload of folks interested in what the hell this stuff is. Extracting DNA alone could take some time..."

"I don't care." She snapped her purse shut emphatically. "I shall expect a call from you on a regular basis."

"Day or night?"

Too irate to consider the implications, Pandora simply nodded. "Whenever the information comes in. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

He wasn't exactly smiling, but his face looked...pleased.

"I'll get the appropriate permissions forms over to you in a couple of hours." She turned for her car. "I'll expect to hear from you, Detective. No excuses."

"Cross my heart."

It wasn't until she was in her own vehicle and buckling herself in that Pandora realized she'd just given a very attractive man carte blanche to call her any time. Her reflection in the rearview mirror smiled sleekly back at her.

Well, that might not be such a bad thing, girl. He's a hottie. Who knows where it might lead?

Driving away, she completely missed the similar expression of satisfaction that crossed Cheney's face. His thoughts, however, were much simpler.

Gotcha.

In spite of being plagued by unsettling images and thoughts about his experience with Pandora's critter, it wasn't until the following day that Cheney actually had a chance to do anything constructive about it.

He'd locked the sample away in his desk drawer, figuring he needed some time to consider how it could best be handled. Sure, the lab boys would probably have a field day analyzing it, but for some reason he felt it shouldn't be made public. He didn't want Pandora discussed any more than she had been when she'd cut a swath through the precinct. And this wasn't a formal investigation but a private one.

He'd fielded the lewd comments, ignored Buck's curiously raised eyebrows and gone on with the routine paperwork which always seemed to pile up on his desk, regardless of the fact that everyone knew they were now living in a paperless society.

Yeah. Like *that* would ever happen.

Another restless night passed, another morning of mundane chores dragged on. He wasn't complaining, of course. Since the Afterglow and the consequent generations of improved DNA collection and tagging, the murder rate had declined and there was a helluva lot less for trained detectives to do than there had been back in the day. Perps stood two chances of evading arrest—slim and none.

But the essentials of human nature hadn't changed. Every now and again somebody went off the deep end and regressed into violence. Oddly enough they were almost always in their human selves when they did.

One might expect vampires to account for corpses on a regular basis. Or werewolves to gnaw on a body part now and again. But it didn't happen. Apparently humans were the prime candidates for losing it, for picking up a convenient weapon and beating another human over the head with it.

There was a moral in there someplace, Cheney knew. Some day perhaps he'd figure out what it was. But until then, he just did the paperwork.

By the time midday rolled around, he knew he couldn't put it off any longer. A decision on what to do with that little pile of bagged muck in his drawer simply had to be made. And, as he'd done on so many occasions before, he accepted that there was really only one person he trusted with the details, one person whose advice would do anything other than muddy up the waters.

"Hey, Buck. Lunch? I'm buying."

"Dude. You got it." His partner pushed back from his desk with a big grin. "What's the occasion? And how much are you gonna shell out on my behalf? I'm feeling a real need for something expensive."

"I need to run something by you."

"Aha. Woman trouble. I knew it. You've been looking frazzled the last couple of days. Come to think of it—" Buck stroked his chin thoughtfully. "It's that redhead, isn't it? The lawyer?"

Cheney rolled his eyes. "Sort of. But not really."

He endured the five-minute walk to their favorite sandwich shop, riddled as it was with jibing comments, ribald suppositions about his sex life and more than a couple of remarks about redheads.

It wasn't until they were tucked into a back booth with food in front of them that he finally held up a hand and cut Buck off. "Enough already. Time to get serious here."

With that, he gave his partner a brief rundown of events and an inadequate description of the thing he'd seen. Buck sobered rapidly.

"Jesus. What the fuck was it?"

"I have no damn clue, Buck. Never in my life seen anything like it."

"I wish I'd been there."

"So do I. Maybe you could've picked up something I missed." He thought for a moment. "I'm going to try something here." He took a half-eaten pickle off a small plate and pushed it across the table. "Look."

With a brief instant of focus, Cheney opened his mind and recalled the thing he'd discovered in the illusion. It didn't take a great deal of effort to recreate the brutally ugly image—in the center of the empty plate.

"Fuck me sideways." Buck's voice was hushed, his eyes wide. "God in heaven. What *is* that thing?" He looked up. "And how the hell are you doing that?"

"Don't ask me. And that applies to both questions. At least it worked. Now you know what it looked like." He grimaced. "I can't recreate that godawful sense of wrongness, though. That creepy *bad* feeling that surrounded it."

"And you say it disintegrated?"

Cheney nodded. "Poof. It was gone into a pile of dust. Like my seeing it for what it really was kind of killed it. Or something." He ran a hand through his hair. "I really can't tell you any more, Buck. It was mega-weird. And that's saying something for us."

"Yeah." Buck hissed through his front teeth. "Pandora didn't see it?"

"No. She sensed something was off about it. To her it was a butt-ugly dog with a bad attitude. She came to me since she knows a couple of friends of mine. She'd heard what I do—the foster thing—and figured I might be able to help. Or at least point her in the right direction to someone who could."

"So...what you gonna do?"

"Haven't a clue." Cheney frowned at his food. "I suppose I should pass it along to the lab. They've got the equipment to analyze it. But I'm thinking since this is more of a private deal, not a formal police investigation, that's probably not the best idea. Some case will come up and this'll get pushed to the bottom of the pile. Or worse, forgotten, until some twinky little tech gets bored."

"That's one option."

"The other side of that is that this'll cause a ruckus because it's unique. And scientists love unique. Papers will appear and before we can zip our flies we'll be crawling with international experts, all hungry for a piece of the action." He shuddered. "That's even worse."

"Hmm." Buck munched a French fry thoughtfully. "Maybe there's a third option."

"If there is, spill it. I'm at a dead end."

"I'll have to talk to Lian."

Cheney's head jerked up. "I don't want her involved in this. She's busy enough. And if she isn't, you're not the man I thought you were."

Buck grinned. "She's busy." Another fry disappeared. "But she's got contacts. You ever consider a private lab?"

"No." He paused. "No. I hadn't considered that."

"Maybe you should."

"I doubt if there are too many around these days that can do anything more than our boys. Let's face it, Buck. Just about everyone's state-of-the-art."

"You'd be surprised." Buck wiped his mouth. "I'll call her. See if I can get a green light to take your sample someplace special. To someone special." He chuckled. "If she says yes, you're in for a little treat."

"Okay." Cheney nodded. "At this point I'm ready to try looking outside the box. And it would be nice to have something concrete to tell Pandora when she calls. Which I know she will."

"Smug bastard."

He smirked. "Not really. She's the kind of woman who gets her teeth into something and won't give up, I reckon."

"And you're planning on finding out, I take it."

"Hell yeah. She's a tough cookie on the outside, all lawyer and business. But beneath that..."

"Beneath that?"

Cheney glanced at Buck. "I'll let you know. Or not, as the case may be."

"You're cooked, dude. Battered and fried and served up with a side of neatly chopped masculinity."

"Bullshit."

Buck shrugged. "I know the signs. Been there, struggled against that and lost the battle. And the T-shirt too, come to think of it." He smiled. "That, of course, was the good part."

Cheney rolled his eyes. "I ain't going there."

"Good thing, because neither am I." Buck shifted in his seat. "However, to get back to the packet of Mr. Nasty—I'm getting a strong vibe that you're thinking dark thoughts."

"You picking around in my brains?"

"Nope. It was the frown that gave you away. That and the fact that you haven't finished your fries. Which is a first, by the way."

Cheney passed off the comment on his eating habits and merely pushed some ketchup around on his plate with a bit of pickle. Buck was, in essence, right on the nose. He was having some real dark thoughts that he didn't like at all. "It's crazy."

"What?"

"I'm feeling a real strong urge to make some wild-ass connections here. And they're probably off the wall, so feel free to tell me I'm being an asshole."

"Okay, you're being an asshole. What connections?"

Taking a moment or two to find the right words, Cheney finally glanced at his partner. "What if this thing I saw is connected to our basilisk killer?"

Both Buck's eyebrows rose. "That's one helluva leap."

"I know." He nodded. "But hear me out. This thing, this creature—it wasn't any kind of natural deformation I've seen or read about. And we're pretty much at the top of the heap when it comes to notification of new mutations, Buck."

"Agreed. Go on."

"So what if it was—manufactured? An artificial, man-made mess of DNA?"

"Jesus."

"Yeah."

"And you're thinking the creator might have had something to do with controlling the basilisk killings?"

Cheney blinked away some real bad images. "I'm thinking that anyone trying to establish control over AGs and turn them into serial killers wouldn't be above trying to create his own special brand of mutation. One that would automatically kill on command. It's a natural progression." He leaned back. "It skips a whole bunch of steps, Buck. No finding someone who's got the right kind of DNA for killing. Fairies wouldn't be a good choice, for example. Poking someone to death with their wings isn't exactly effective. So he goes for creatures equipped to do the most damage in the least time. The basilisk."

"Okay, I'm with you so far."

"But those creatures, those mutations, have to be..." Cheney paused, looking for the right way to explain something that had been, up until this moment, a nebulous concept in his mind. "Trained, I guess is the best way to put it. That basilisk AG had to be made susceptible to external control. I really can't believe it just happened. Boom. I'm having sex. Oh wait, I hear a voice and it's telling me to rip her to shreds." He shook his head. "I can't buy that."

"It's bothered me some."

"So, not being that strong a believer in coincidences—I'm wondering if that same hand is behind both these things. A controlled killer and a new kind of mutation."

"Like I said, it's a big leap." Buck gazed steadily at Cheney.

"Yes, it is. And I'm probably certifiable for even thinking along these lines. But I can't help it. Like you said the other day, unfinished business. It bugs the shit out of me." He shifted in his seat and pushed his plate to one side. "I don't like unfinished business."

"Nothing's set off any alarm bells officially."

"I know."

"So you're on your own, pretty much."

"I know that too."

"I'll help."

Cheney flashed a weak grin across the table. "Another thing I knew. But I don't want to drag you into what may well be one helluva wild-goose chase."

"Hey, that's what partners are for, dude." Buck stood. "Now pay for lunch, will ya? I gotta go talk to my woman and see what I can set up."

"Your woman?" Cheney snorted. "She'd castrate you if she heard that." He shoved money under his water glass. "And I wouldn't blame her."

"Wait and see, my friend. Wait until your redheaded lawyer's got you by the balls. Then come make snarky comments. We'll see who's right about the intricacies of the female gender."

"Yeah. Like that's gonna happen."

Buck merely smiled, leaving Cheney with a rather discomforting suspicion that his partner might be a little close to the mark. He knew he was looking forward to talking to Pandora again and that given an inch, he'd take her the full mile. She'd gotten under his skin for some reason, and he wasn't sure he was okay with that or not.

She was undoubtedly attractive and knew it. She used it to mask a steel spine and the persistence of a bull terrier. Yet somewhere, someplace under all the other stuff, was a woman Cheney wanted to know better.

In so many different and erotic ways.

#### Wynne Hayworth

He followed Buck out of the restaurant, contemplating how many of those ways involved getting Pandora naked.

The result was unsurprising. All of 'em.

### Chapter Six

Pandora had not spent a whole lot of time wondering about Detective Cheney Fisher. At least that's what she told herself.

She'd refused to fall asleep at night thinking about him, or dreaming of his long body plastered up against hers. She'd ignored the memory of his faint scent—something masculine and arousing—and absolutely hadn't imagined any erotic interludes that included him.

Nope. She wasn't going there.

Much.

Her schedule was full to the brim and she'd already had to rearrange meetings to steal away with him and deal with her critter problem. She wasn't sorry *that* was over, since her home felt a lot better without that presence lurking in her kitchen.

Of course, not that she spent a whole lot of time there, given the long hours and after-work engagements that figured large in the life of a successful lawyer. Before she knew it, two days had passed without a word from Detective Yummy.

She'd gotten home, exhausted from an afternoon in court followed by a business dinner with a new client who wanted her to represent his corporation during some upcoming litigation. It was big money and she'd landed the account while managing to avoid being landed herself.

Business and pleasure didn't mix, in Pandora's opinion. Sleeping with clients was a bad idea, no matter how many overnight trips to Paris or Rome they dangled in front of her. She'd been hard pressed to refrain from pointing out to this overeager executive that he could hire other women to fulfill that function in his life.

Hiring her firm to represent him didn't get him a pass into her bedroom nor did it get him a naked traveling companion.

She sighed, kicked off her shoes and rested her hip against the huge wood sculpture, feeling the warmth and vibrations soothe her tense muscles.

It was always like this—a sense of well-being, a calmness that she could draw from such an essential element of life on earth. For a few seconds she contemplated letting go, changing into what she had buried so deeply within her.

But then a wave of tiredness made her yawn and she moved into her bedroom. Sleep was a top priority. Tomorrow would be as busy as today. Once again she firmly closed the mental door on *that* side of her nature.

She absently checked her messages in between her routine of preparing for bed. Nothing from Cheney. Which didn't matter of course. Not in the least. It merely meant he had no news, no information about anything pertaining to that *thing*.

Turning the lights out and slipping tiredly between the sheets, she sighed. He'd probably forgotten all about it. And her. Maybe he'd gotten a big case and shoved her little problem to the back of his drawer.

Maybe he'd been lured into some disgustingly sexual relationship with a loose and immoral woman who would cater to his every whim.

Maybe he just didn't like redheads.

And maybe she needed her brain examined for dwelling on this man, for letting him invade those deliciously relaxing moments when she could let go of the day and close her eyes. Christ above, she was worse than some drooling schoolgirl with a first crush.

Resolutely, she snuggled into her pillow and pushed Detective Cheney Fisher out of her thoughts, sliding into a vision of a moonlit forest, where there were no problems, no meetings, no phones—just the hushed and comforting sound of the wind soughing through leaves glistening in the night.

Sleep came quickly, and with it a dream.

She was drifting, her feet barely touching the soft moss of the forest path. All was warmth and pleasure, the trees around her gently nodding in approval as she moved beneath their welcoming branches.

She was going somewhere, that she knew. And it wasn't far now, a destination ahead toward which she eagerly hurried. There was no sense of anxiety, just an overwhelming urgency to get there, to stand—to breathe—to accept who and what she was.

And share it. With him.

There—a few more steps and she was there, a clearing dappled with moonbeams, surrounded by ancient oaks and massive firs that enclosed her as securely as any walls could have done. Almost circular, with more soft moss beneath her bare feet, it stretched for several yards in every direction.

And it felt—*right*.

Pandora smiled to herself. This was the place. Her place.

She lifted her arms wide, embracing the essence of nature, opening her heart and her mind to the spirits around her. She felt the warmth of their welcome, their delight in sharing this moment with her.

She dropped her controls and felt the stirrings of wings emerging from her back. It was a joyous release, this growing of branches, this leafing in of her special gifts. Her bare toes lengthened into roots, burying themselves in the moss and through to the rich loam beneath, drawing soul-deep nourishment and bringing a tiny sound of pleasure to her lips.

She rested, lost in her ecstasy, free at last to explore all that she'd kept so well hidden while awake. She knew she dreamed, with that peculiar ability of the mind to accept what was real and what wasn't. But asleep, she was unfettered by controls, naked in her bliss, liberated in a place where nobody could follow.

However, on this particular night, in this particular dream, Pandora had made an erroneous assumption. She was not alone.

"My God you're beautiful."

He was there. All long legs and blond hair and those blue eyes gazing at her, roaming over her naked body even as she remained rooted to the earth.

"I am?"

"Yes." He neared her. "More beautiful than anything I've ever seen." Dressed in some kind of robe that reminded Pandora of a Druid painting she'd seen once, he drifted close—closer—until she could clearly see the tiny flecks of gold that dappled his irises.

"I need to touch you."

She was caught, locked into the earth, immobile. "I—"

"Sshh. Let me touch you." He reached for her, gently running his hand from her neck down over her shoulder to her arm and then back again. "So smooth. So warm."

She trembled, feeling the leaves of her wings shake gently behind her. "You can see me?"

"I see you. I see you as you should always be. Something amazing, something magnificent." His hand drifted lower now, softly stroking her breast. "Something *elemental*."

Arousal slid through Pandora, a hot trickle of excitement. She was surprised to feel her toes retracting from the moss, freeing her to take a step—not away from him but toward him, into his hand, his heat, his eyes.

It was as if the earth, which comforted and sustained her, had released her to find comfort elsewhere. She'd been granted permission to be with this man, to accept his touches even as he seemed to accept what she was.

A blessing had been given. Now it remained to be seen where that blessing would lead.

"Pandora."

He spoke her name as he closed the distance between them and lowered his lips to hers, bending his head just a little. She felt the brush of his breath on her cheek an instant before he kissed her.

Then she forgot everything else, including her own name and where she was.

It's only a dream. It's only a dream.

The thought was there, but it made no sense to her muddled brain. The only thing that she knew was the taste of his mouth, the feel of his tongue as he slid past her lips, the urge to open herself and explore him fully.

Her arms locked around his neck as he pulled their bodies together, his hands running over her branched wings and down to her bare buttocks. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, her heart thundering as his mouth took and took again. It was an endless kiss that stirred fires to life inside her, stoking a furnace deep in her belly.

He squeezed her, caressed her, toyed with her, while barely giving her chance to catch her breath between kisses. His tongue learned her, tenderly then urgently, the stiff length between his thighs clashing against her mound, making her want to leap on him and impale herself, to move and ride him, to fill her emptiness with that hardness.

She hungered, panted, struggled to get closer—and when he began to rub himself against the perfect spot, she held her breath, feeling the moisture between her legs, knowing she was so damn near erupting her ears were throbbing with it.

His clothing disappeared and suddenly she was hot, on fire as their naked skin clashed once more. This time she felt the silky steel of his erection, just at the perfect height for her to—

She lifted herself onto tiptoe, raising one leg, opening the way for him to take her higher, offering him what they both wanted so much. She cried out when the head of his cock began to nudge its way past swollen folds, easily sliding into her on tears of her own hot honey.

Her pulse thundered, her eyes closed and she held her breath, waiting—waiting—"Shit."

The exclamation jerked her out of her sexual daze and she realized a car alarm was going off somewhere. In an instant, he was gone, along with the forest, her wings and the chance to explode with passion.

She was in her own bed, thighs wide apart and her sheets kicked away. No forest, no moon, no Cheney, no more screaming alarm—which somebody must have turned off—nothing but for the sound of her panting breaths.

"Fuck." She groaned and reached downward, unable to prevent herself from finishing what the dream had begun. Two gentle strokes and she came, shuddering through the orgasm, letting her body release its pent-up energies in a massive climax that left her limp, her back aching where her wings had begun to take shape. She moved, turning onto her side and letting the world slide back into place.

And then her temper awoke as her thoughts connected to the only person she knew who could be responsible for her bedraggled state of mind.

It was a little past midnight, but even so she didn't stop to think. Without hesitation, she reached for her phone and found Cheney's number, punching the buttons with an anger born of equal parts frustration, embarrassment and a sneaking sense of unfinished business. None of which she liked.

"Yeah." The sleepy voice answered on the first ring.

"Stay the *fuck* out of my dreams, you jerk." She snapped off the connection and lay back down. That'll teach him to mess with my head.

Across town, Cheney Fisher stared at his cell phone. He'd been sound asleep in the middle of one hellaciously fine dream featuring Pandora and hot sex. It had been most enjoyable, and he was having a hard time pulling his head out of it, not to mention a squirm or two caused by the hardness tenting his sweatpants.

That'll teach me to fall asleep on the couch. I should've put the kids into their baskets an hour earlier.

The phone rang again. He hit the answer button immediately. "For your information, I'm not in your goddamned dreams."

"Good to know, buddy." It was Buck. "I really don't want you there. Did I wake you?"

"Yes. No. She did."

"Want to take a minute or two there, pal?"

"Oh fuck it." Cheney rolled his eyes. "What's up?"

"Got us an appointment with a private lab. Eight a.m. tomorrow. Pick me up. Bring your bag of junk."

"Cool." Cheney struggled to absorb the information.

"You can make it, yes? Your lady friend can come too. The one whose head you're messing with, apparently."

"I'm not—" He realized the futility of trying to explain things when he was half asleep. "Never mind. I'll tell you in the morning. Roz'll be in at seven so I'm good to go. Thanks, Buck. And kiss Lian for me. I figure it was her who set this up."

"That's one thing I can do. See ya."

The phone went dead once more, leaving Cheney almost awake and dragging his brain cells into some kind of order.

After a moment, he dialed her number.

"What?"

"For the record, Counselor, I did not mess with your head, nor am I in it. I will confess to an erotic dream in which you played a large role. Now if you had that same dream, we're gonna have to talk about it."

"I—"

"Be quiet and listen for once." Cheney's frustration flared. "We have an appointment with a private forensics lab in the morning. Buck and I will pick you up at around a quarter to eight or so."

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"But it's Saturday. I usually—"
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"Fine. Don't come."

"Wait. Okay. I'll be ready."

"Good."

This time *he* ended the call, snapping the phone shut with every bit as much pleasure as she'd probably felt when she'd hung up on him.

Vaguely troubled, he wandered into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. His erection had subsided at the sound of Buck's voice, and the lingering pain of need had become a dull ache.

He needed to consider the implications of what had just happened. It had gone beyond a mere erotic dream featuring a lovely woman to whom Cheney was seriously attracted. From what she'd said, Pandora had experienced a similar dream.

He leaned on the sink and closed his eyes, recapturing the image of her, nude and glowing in moonlight, softly waving branches emerging from her spine, the smoothly unusual feel of her body, the tautness of her tightly ruched nipples as they abraded his chest...

He stopped before his cock remembered what it was desperately seeking in those last few dream moments. He didn't need to go jerk off like some kid simply because he'd had one of *those* dreams. He was a grown man. And in control of himself.

Most of the time.

The unwelcome thought that there was some kind of link between him and Pandora crashed into his head and sobered him quicker than a cold shower. She'd said she was a Fae and she'd certainly manifested something like wings, albeit branched and leafy ones.

He was what he called an illusionist. Nothing remotely Fae about his AG talent.

So why were they sharing dreams? If that's what they'd done?

Maybe it was just coincidence. Cheney snapped off the bathroom light and, after checking briefly on Rusty and Lucy, went to where he should've been in the first place, his bed. But even the familiar comfort of his own linens didn't quell the thoughts that ran rampant across his mind.

What lab had Buck and Lian dealt with that he didn't know about? Was it the one that'd given Lian something techno-shiny a while ago? Something that had saved her life and given her a chance to destroy a monster?

They'd both been pretty quiet about it, that was a fact. And Cheney hadn't pried. He hadn't needed to ask questions...he simply trusted Buck. Would he be able to get some answers tomorrow?

Shit. He'd left the sample in his office drawer. They'd have to swing by the precinct and collect it before they picked up Pandora.

Which circuitous thought process brought him tidily back to the one thing he'd hoped to be able to push away for the rest of the night.

Pandora.

When he'd confessed to himself that she'd gotten under his skin, he'd innocently assumed it was a simple and straightforward case of lust. Man wanting woman. That sort of thing. But this little dream event of tonight? Well, that put a slightly different slant on matters.

It was a sad truth of life that the more science discovered about the AG mutations and the effects on human DNA, the less they knew.

Cheney'd never heard of a Fae manifesting branches, for example. But as he turned the thoughts around in his mind, a few things fell into place. Pandora's apartment—the glorious wood sculptures and furniture.

If she had some kind of AG affinity for wood, it would explain it. Not an obsession for the stuff, as he'd originally thought, but a genuine need to be surrounded by that which gave her *other* senses pleasure. Much like werewolf shifters liked warm fuzzy blankets on their beds, or elves tended to decorate their homes with a shitload of plants. There was so much to be learned, he realized. So much yet to be understood by not just professionals, but by the very people whose lives had altered to include the myths and legends that were now reality.

He knew that Buck and Lian shared a link of some kind. He guessed it might be sexual, a meeting of minds that occurred when the planets were in perfect alignment and cock found pussy at the same instant.

Or something like that. He hadn't given it much thought other than enjoying watching his partner find happiness. He'd stupidly assumed it wouldn't happen to him, and that he was immune from taking that risky gamble.

Frowning, Cheney punched his pillow and closed his eyes. This whole deal was probably some kind of cosmic retribution for daring to taunt fate. And wouldn't Buck laugh his ass off about that?

Across the street from Cheney's home, shaded from the streetlights by the bough of a tree, a woman sat in her car, her head turned toward the neat house tucked behind a pretty garden. She'd watched it, sat there sensing the currents surrounding it, for almost half an hour. The fact that she'd taken a detour on her way back from a late shift didn't register at this moment.

Because she wasn't, to use the vernacular, in her right mind.

Somebody else was.

And that somebody else was angry, hotly furious that the subject of her surveillance was distracted, focusing on somebody in a sexual way. Making plans, thinking around problems—the entire area seethed with a mixture of erotic and quantitative elements, thought patterns that could barely be glimpsed, but were of an unsettling nature.

Something was afoot. Something she should know about. Something that could prove risky and distracting. Definitely something that could lure Detective Cheney Fisher onto a path she didn't want.

That path should lead to her. Not another woman.

With a spark of fury, the presence fled, leaving the woman behind the wheel blinking and staring around her.

"Sheesh. I took a wrong turn someplace." She glanced at her GPS system and tapped it. "Okay. Get me home, Maude. Before I do something stupid and fall asleep at the wheel."

"In five hundred yards, turn right."

The car pulled away from the curb, a low hum that didn't disturb the sleeping residents of the quiet street.

### Chapter Seven

Pandora was barely ready when the beep of a car horn outside her townhouse summoned her into the presence of the two detectives waiting with the engine running.

She shot a wistful glance at her little balcony where she routinely enjoyed a few stolen hours on Saturday mornings with a pot of coffee, her latest novel, and her phone turned off. It had become a habit she hated to miss, since it was the only time she ever really had to completely relax. After a chapter or two, she'd clean up the apartment, throw in a couple of loads of laundry and then—and only then—would she consider getting herself together for the rest of the day.

It had seemed like a guilty pleasure when she'd started the drill a few years ago. But now it was a welcome respite for her body and her mind. And yeah, she was a bit pissed that she'd miss it this morning, even though the reason was sound.

Grabbing her purse, she left her personal sanctuary, her sneakers squeaking on the floor as she walked out and locked the door. She might have to break her routine, but she was damn well going to do it in jeans and a T-shirt. No high heels on weekends if at all possible.

If the two guys in the car expected to see Ms. Jackson the attorney, they were in for a disappointment. Today she was Ms. Everywoman. Jeans, comfortable shoes, hair tied back into a ponytail and a shirt that read "The Sarcasm Society. Like we need *your* support."

It sort of reflected Pandora's state of mind, since she was still irked at the memories of that damn dream and the man she held responsible for it, even though the morning light had brought a certain amount of reflection on that topic.

As she reached for the car door, she wondered if she'd been a bit hasty with her accusations last night.

Then she got a look at Cheney's interested grin and decided she didn't care.

"Nice shirt."

"Mornin', Ms. Jackson." Detective Shand nodded politely.

She slid into the backseat behind the two men. "Morning." She ignored Cheney completely and addressed Buck. "You're late."

"I had to pick up the sample from the precinct. It won't take us long to get there," Cheney responded casually.

"Hmpf."

"I can stop for coffee if it'll improve your mood, sunshine."

"The only thing that'll improve my mood is getting this show on the road. You're taking up valuable Saturday morning time. Let's get on with it."

He chuckled as he shifted the car into gear and slid onto the road, heading toward town. "Sorry we had to interrupt your weekend. I'm sure there were a whole bunch of legal documents you planned on completing."

"Yes."

So what if it was a romance novel she'd planned on completing. No reason to tell Cheney that. In fact, she'd much prefer he shut up and drove.

Deliberately, she turned her attention to Buck again. "I'm guessing you set up this appointment, Detective Shand. Thank you. I appreciate the help."

"Don't thank me." He leaned back comfortably. "My wife has the contacts. She pulled a few strings and called in a few favors."

"That's very nice of her." Pandora smiled politely. "Please pass my thanks along to her, then." She glanced out the window. "Where are we going?" She realized they'd passed through the business district and were heading to one of the smaller and more ethnic parts of town.

"The lab is in Chinatown."

"Really?" She blinked at Buck's answer. "I had no idea there were labs in that area."

Cheney snorted. "That's the whole idea. Private lab means just that. *Private*. As in nobody knows about it."

She narrowed her eyes. "Thank you for the clarification. I might have missed it."

"You're welcome. Like I said. Nice shirt. Fits you to a tee."

Fighting down the urge to grind her teeth or lean over and whack him upside the head, Pandora merely clamped her lips together. There was no point in engaging in a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent. Her father had taught her that years ago.

She watched the buildings change from solidly practical to decoratively ornamental, admiring the delicate carvings which began to appear around doorways. The colors seemed vibrant in the morning sun, and soon she was surrounded by a world that celebrated all things oriental.

They pulled to a stop in front of a massive pair of Chinese Foo dog statues, sitting sedately on either side of a large doorway.

She blinked as she got out of the car. "Wow. These look really old."

"I'm reassured they don't bite." Buck chuckled and patted one affectionately between its stone ears as he pushed the door open politely for Pandora and Cheney. "I think you'll enjoy this." He led them into the dark interior and then stood back so they could see what was there.

"Oh." She couldn't stop the exclamation.

It was a shop, of sorts, full of amazing things, statues, fans, jade pieces and jade jewelry, glittering stuff that caught the eye next to what might well have been a Ming dynasty vase. The air was rich with the fragrance of delicate incense, and Pandora would have given a lot to be left alone in it for a day or two just so that she could take a long look at everything.

On one shelf, right about eye level, was a carving. A lovingly executed, smooth and glowing piece of wood shaped into a sleeping dragon.

No gnarled beast here, but a gently whimsical portrayal of the mighty beast at rest, scales settled softly against its skin, eyelids closed, nostrils flared as if it snored where it rested on its front claws. The wings were furled down a portion of its back—Pandora held her breath, wondering for an instant if she might hear a tiny snuffling sound.

Tentatively she reached out to stroke the noble head.

"Aha. You find something."

She jumped. An elderly Chinese woman was observing her from a rocking chair deep in the shadows with what appeared to be a giant cat on her lap.

"Go ahead. Touch. He is for all the senses, not just the eyes."

"Er, that's okay. Thank you anyway. He's very beautiful."

Buck stood from where he'd been leaning over the woman's chair. "Old mother, this is my partner Cheney Fisher. And his—er—our friend, Pandora Jackson. We're here to visit Karl."

The old woman nodded and Pandora caught a glimpse of her eyes. Pure white orbs stared out from beneath the almond-shaped lids. Not sure if she was blind or not, Pandora opted for courtesy. "It's a pleasure to meet you. There are some wonderful treasures here."

"Fire head."

"Pardon?"

"You have head like fire." The old woman cackled. "Long man wants to warm himself. Burn his cock in your flames."

"Uh..." Pandora's mouth dropped and she risked a glance at Cheney, who was carefully putting down a fan and trying to hide the fact he was blushing. Good. He was as discomfited by that pronouncement as she was. Or perhaps it was the fact that he was surrounded by a plethora of extremely delicate bric-a-brac. For someone with his height, it was probably close to a nightmare.

"Behave, old mother." Buck scolded gently. "They're not used to your blunt speaking yet."

The woman snorted. "And you. You like to talk big man talk. Where my grandbabies? You marry Lian and it good thing. Now you need to do real man work, not just man talk."

"I'm workin' on it."

"Work harder."

"Yes, ma'am." Buck chuckled. "I'll tell Lian you told me to." He glanced at the other two. "If you guys are done playing, we need to find Karl."

Biting back a swift and irritated response, and praying the old woman's words hadn't made *her* blush as well, Pandora nodded. "I'm ready."

"Lead on." Cheney carefully wove a path between some sort of small coffee table and a large statue. "I'm kinda big for this place anyway."

"You big for anyplace, long man. You just big." The old woman favored him with a comprehensive gaze that lingered on his crotch. "But fire head can handle you, no worry."

Lifting his face to the ceiling, Buck heaved out a dramatic sigh. "Enough already. I won't bring my friends here if you keep this up."

She chuckled. "You lie good, Buck. I say what you can't. I say what Lian can't. I good for both of you."

"Yes you are, old devil." Buck leaned back down and kissed her on the cheek. "Now leave these two alone and behave yourself."

He beckoned to Pandora and Cheney, reaching to pull aside a tall piece of gloriously embroidered silk. "C'mon. This way."

Pandora walked behind Cheney, only to have her wrist caught by the old woman as she passed her chair. "When you leave, dragon will go with you."

"Oh—but I don't know if I have enough..."

"He gift. You have something special he need. Passion for him. You different than all others. He will be yours and make you happy."

Pandora paused and for a second wasn't sure if she was hearing about the dragon—or Cheney.

"You take dragon with you. He will help you. Soon you need him. Very soon."

The white gaze was fixed on Pandora's face intently. So she went with her intuition. "Okay. Thank you very much. I'll take good care of him, always."

"I know. Go now."

Tempted to curtsey or bow or something, Pandora simply dipped her head and then followed the men around the curtain and into a long passageway. The old woman could easily have been a flaky senior. But something about her brought the hairs on the back of Pandora's neck to attention. There was power there, if she wasn't mistaken.

But what sort of power it was she had no clue. Other than the power to mightily embarrass people. That one she'd got down to a fine art.

Mr. Big Man, indeed. Like a guy needed any more compliments on his masculine equipment. Especially *that* guy.

For a brief moment, Pandora remembered how it felt to have Cheney's *equipment* poised at the threshold of her body. She shivered and firmly pushed it away. This was reality, not a dream.

No matter how enticing that dream might have been.

Cheney quickly found his momentary embarrassment dissipating in favor of curiosity. Buck was leading them along a narrow passageway, then down a winding staircase, ending up in front of a door that would have looked more at home in a government-secured facility than the basement of an oriental art shop.

"Uh, Buck?" He gazed at the flickering high-tech locking mechanism, the likes of which he couldn't remember seeing outside a sci-fi video.

Buck turned, a sober look on his face. "Lian's given me permission to share this. I trust you to keep it to yourself, partner. And Ms. Jackson—I know this isn't covered by attorney-client privilege, but I'd ask you to consider it as such. Please."

She nodded. "I'm grateful for all your help, Detective. This will remain between us." She smiled a little. "Perhaps you should call me Pandora at this point. We've sort of gone beyond the formalities here."

He nodded back. "Done." Then he turned, pushed buttons and rested his palm on the appropriately shaped screen. One more scan, this time of Buck's retina, and the door swung inward without a sound.

Cheney bit back a whistle as they walked through. He was inside a gleaming modern lab, complete with the prerequisite flashing lights, mysterious units that hummed and a floor clean enough to dine from if one were so inclined. He figured he could probably launch a spaceship or two from here, at least.

Or destroy Mars. He wasn't sure. But it beat the hell out of the precinct forensics setup.

"Hey, Karl. It's Buck. You here?"

"Yep." A voice came from the far end of the room. "Down here by the electron analyzer."

"Where's that?"

"The tall silver cylinder with the box next to it and three red lights on top. No wait—make that three *green* lights. Gotcha, you bastard."

Cheney, his height an advantage over the other two, pointed. "I think he means that thing?"

They headed toward the whatever-it-was, and he looked for whoever-it-was as they stepped over the occasional cable and connector. A couple of massive screens flickered quietly over workstations, and there was even a hologram cube—empty at this moment—hovering above a square table in the center of the room. And wasn't that something? He didn't know it had been perfected yet.

This, mused Cheney, was exactly what a state-of-the-art lab should be. Totally incomprehensible to a layman. He was eager to meet the tech in charge.

"Hey, Buck. Good to see you. Taking a break from screwing my favorite gal silly, huh?"

Cheney looked around. Where the hell was that voice coming from?

"You're talking about my wife, Karl. Some respect here, huh?"

Cheney looked at Buck. Then looked down to where Buck had bent over and was slapping someone on the shoulder. A small someone.

Karl was a little person. But not just any little person. He was as handsome as any cover model, hair softly tousled, a bit of stubble and twinkling brown eyes presently grinning up at Buck.

Then his gaze fell on Pandora and he licked his lips. "Shit, Buck. You've tapped into my fantasies. A six-foot redhead." He toddled over to stand in front of her, staring up her body with evident appreciation. "Marry me. Be my plaything for the rest of my life. I'll promise you multiple orgasms and a fortune to spend. Just fuck me three times a day, maybe four on Sundays, and it can all be yours."

Obviously at a loss, Pandora blinked. "Um—hi."

"God she even *sounds* delicious." Karl moved nearer and reached around to cup her jean-clad ass, his nose scant inches from her crotch. "I give the best oral sex ever. Wanna see?"

"Thanks, but not right now." Politely, Pandora shifted away. "I appreciate the thought, though. You must be very popular."

"Not as much as I'd hoped." Karl's gaze fell on Cheney. "Well hot damn. You brought me some real special goodies, Buck." He grinned wickedly. "This one swing my way maybe? I'm not fussy about who gets the tongue treatment."

Cheney resisted the urge to cover his genitals and back up about a mile or two. "Buck?" It wasn't a squawk, but it came damn close.

"Karl, quit putting the moves on my friends. We've got some serious stuff to run by you." Buck's tone was brisk, and he glanced at Cheney. "Ignore him. He only does it to get attention."

Karl sighed and shrugged his little shoulders. "What can I say? All work and no play makes me horny. But I guess I can just go jerk off after you've gone. Waste though." He moved to a low chair, plopped down into it then hit a button, bringing himself up to the level of the desk. "Whatcha got for me, dudes and gorgeous dudette?"

"This." Cheney reached into his pocket and produced the plastic bag containing the mucky dirt he'd scooped off Pandora's kitchen floor.

"Hmm." Karl prodded it. "You snort it, slurp it or mainline it?"

"It's not a drug." In terse sentences, Cheney filled him in on exactly what had happened, what he'd seen and the messy ending to the whole thing.

Karl listened intently while snapping on latex gloves and removing small amounts to put in various glass vials. "And this was in your kitchen?" He flicked a look at Pandora.

She nodded. "Yes, just as he said. Only I never saw the thing as other than a puppy. An ugly puppy and not a very even-tempered one, but that was it."

"Describe it again." Karl bent to his work.

"I can go one step better, I think." Cheney wondered if he could recreate his trick with Buck and the plate. He tipped his head to a clean bare spot on Karl's desk. "Look there."

With a little focus and some intense concentration, he managed to reproduce a pretty good likeness of the creature in its native state.

Beside him, Pandora gasped. "Jesus. No wonder it felt wrong."

Cheney cursed himself. He'd forgotten she hadn't seen the real AG version. It wasn't something he'd intended she know about, but it was too late now.

"Hey. Neat trick." It was a passing comment from Karl, who was staring fixedly at the image, his mind clearly on what lay in front of him. "This is wrong." He frowned.

"Tell me about it." Cheney shuddered. "It was even worse when it exploded."

"Whaddya think, Karl? Is there enough there to find out anything about it?"

There was silence as Karl put a couple of vials into a small slot and pushed buttons. The screen at the back of the table flickered to life with incomprehensible symbols, charts and figures.

Well, they were incomprehensible to Cheney, anyway. He did allow that they were impressive. But what they meant...

"I got DNA." Karl sounded satisfied. "That's a start. I can identify it for you, given a couple of hours." He looked up. "You gonna wait?"

"Lian's meeting me here, so yeah, I'll wait." Buck nodded. "These two don't have to, though. No reason to stay unless they really want to watch you do your mad-scientist stuff."

Cheney laughed. "I think we'll let the genius here do his thing."

"I'll be in touch." Karl was already bending over a microscope, lost in his work.

"He'll be like that until he's figured it out." Buck walked to Cheney and Pandora. "Go home. Go do whatever. I'll call you if and when we know anything more."

Pandora touched Buck's arm. "You think he can do it? Find out something?"

"If anyone can, he can. The man's a genius when it comes to this stuff, he's got resources we can't even begin to fathom and he saved Lian's life. There's nobody else better qualified to work on this mystery, Pandora. Believe me."

"Hey. Don't forget I like to suck pussy, babe." Karl's voice echoed across his equipment.

Cheney rolled his eyes. "We're gone."

"Thank you, Karl," Pandora called over her shoulder as Cheney urged her to the door. With a little more enthusiasm than he probably needed, but under the circumstances he was ready to get the hell out of there.

"You're welcome, gorgeous."

Buck escorted them back out of the lab and into the shop where they were spared any more outrageous comments since the rocking chair was empty of everything but a sleeping cat. There was a neatly wrapped parcel on the counter, however, with a large note leaning against it.

"For Fire Head woman." Cheney read it aloud. "I guess this is for you, Pandora." He lifted it and handed it to her.

"Wow. Yes, she said she'd give it to me." Cradling the package in her arms, Pandora smiled. "I'm so grateful. Buck, will you tell her how happy I am?"

"You betcha." He opened the front door. "I meant it. I'll call you as soon as Karl's got anything definitive. He can do stuff in two hours that our boys would take a week and a half to complete and even then they'd only have a fraction of Karl's information."

Cheney nodded his approval. "Can't argue with that."

The sun was still shining as they stepped out between the Foo Dogs.

And Buck suddenly froze. "Wait. Stop."

Cheney saw his partner's eyes drift out of focus. He knew what was happening—Buck's cognitive senses had just clicked in. He did as he was told and found himself holding Pandora's arm to keep her still.

"There's something out here. Something—watching."

"Where?" Cheney breathed the word, hoping they looked like friends saying goodbye to each other, not statues as still as the Foo Dogs.

"Across the street. In a car. A red car."

Casually, Cheney glanced around. Sure enough there was a small red car parked in a space not far from where they stood. There was quite a bit of foot traffic now, pedestrians walking up and down, people shopping and doing ordinary Saturday things.

"I see it." A parked car would normally attract little or no attention, slotted in as it was amongst all the other parked cars.

But Cheney knew his partner's talent very well indeed.

Buck was never wrong.

## Chapter Eight

"Pandora, here's what I want you to do." Cheney spoke softly but with such emphasis she knew it was serious. "Walk to the car, open the door and get in to the passenger seat. Make a big deal out of your package. I want everyone to think we've been shopping, okay?"

"Got it." This was one occasion where doing what she was told seemed like the best idea in the world. If Buck had spotted someone watching them, it was time to let the men take over and do their jobs. They were cops, after all.

She slid into the seat, making sure her parcel was perched clearly on her knees as she did so, and slammed the door.

Just as casually, Buck and Cheney punched each other's shoulders on the top step of the shop, grinned and parted, Buck going back inside. An observer wouldn't think a damn thing about it.

Except that Cheney didn't stop at their car, he kept going across the street, dodging traffic and ending up bending to the driver's window of a small red sedan.

She could see a woman's head, but couldn't hope to hear the conversation.

A few long minutes passed, during which she watched his back. Literally. She couldn't explain it, even to herself, but she could clearly tell that he wasn't at ease, that this wasn't a simple ordinary conversation.

Heaven knew how, but she seemed to be able to get a read on this man, something she'd never experienced before with any of her dates.

Not that she was *dating* Cheney—far from it. One erotic dream did not a boyfriend make. Not in a million years. Even if they'd shared it, which she doubted. Things like that just didn't happen, even in a world peopled with AGs.

Eventually he straightened away from the red car and retraced his steps, getting in beside Pandora with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"So?" The questions trembled on her lips.

"Wait." He steered the vehicle through the Saturday crowds, no mean feat given the narrow streets through which they drove. It wasn't until they hit a wider road that he relaxed. "That was an exercise in futility."

"Tell me." She barked out the order, feeling she'd earned an explanation for actually managing to keep her mouth shut all this time.

"Let's grab some coffee. This place makes the best." He slipped into a spot in front of a modest shop advertising pastries and a variety of caffeine-enhanced beverages.

Gritting her teeth, she followed him, still clutching the dragon in its cheerful red and gold tissue wrapping paper. For some reason she was not about to leave it anywhere. It was hers now, and that was that.

It was a full five minutes later that she found herself across a small table with a cup of fragrant coffee in front of her. "I can't stand this. Tell me what the hell's going on before I explode like that damn critter."

"Sorry." He didn't look apologetic, just thoughtful. "I'm trying to figure a bunch of shit out." He glanced up. "Sorry again."

"Cut that out. Just spill it."

"Okay." He took a sip of coffee. "The woman in the car wasn't watching me."

"But—"

He raised his hand. "Wait. Let me tell it my way."

She subsided, biting her lip in frustration. "Then just do it, damn it."

"When I got there, she was confused and worried about her baby in the car seat behind her. Apparently she'd dozed off. At least that's what she thought. A perfectly normal person."

"Okay. So nothing worth worrying about, right?"

"Wrong." He frowned. "Buck's talents are cognitive. He senses things, and he does it very well indeed. I've never seen him open those doors in his head and make a mistake. He sensed someone or something watching us. And I think whatever it was used that woman without her knowing about it."

Pandora's mouth opened but nothing came out. She was completely taken aback.

"I know. It sounds nuts. But here's something else. For the past couple of weeks, I've had this itch on the back of my neck that tells me I'm being watched. I haven't been able to pin anyone down, and believe me I know what to look for."

"Shit."

"Yes." He lifted his gaze, his eyes direct and intense. "There's something else you should know."

"Okay."

"Buck said he felt a sense of cold coming from the car."

She tilted her head to one side, thinking about that statement. "Is that how his cognitive abilities manifest? A physical reaction or response?"

Cheney flashed her a quick smile. "I do love an intelligent woman." Then he shook his head. "No, the temperature doesn't usually change." He shifted in his seat, moving a little closer. "I'm not sure if you remember that case that was in the news recently? The murdered Pleasure Pets?"

"Of course I do. We haven't had a serial killer around in quite some time. Apparently the man was caught and killed right in the act. A man who thought he was some sort of dinosaur and high on chemicals at the same time."

Cheney nodded. "That was the official story."

Her eyebrow lifted. "Oh?" She managed to infuse the syllable with a wealth of expression.

"Unofficially, it was an AG. But he wasn't exactly himself when he killed. And believe me, those killings set the benchmark for gruesome horror. I've never seen worse and with God's help I'll never see their like again."

"That bad?" Pandora stilled, seeing the leftover scars from that case briefly flash across his expression.

"All that and more." He shook it off. "However, that's done with. The only reason I brought it up was because of Buck's comment about cold. That was the very first thing he picked up at those crime scenes."

Pandora sucked in a breath. "Wait a minute here. You're telling me you and Buck brought down that killer? *You* were the cops who took him out?"

"In a way."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"I can't respond to that, Counselor. Stop interrogating me. You know as well as I do that some things are best left in the shadows. I'm trusting you with a lot of privileged information as it is."

"Okay." She nodded. "I understand. And I'll respect your confidence. You have my word on that." Something made her reach across the table and rest her hand on his. "My word's good, Cheney."

He twisted his palm and linked their fingers together, a tight grip that she found oddly comforting. "I know." For a second or two they remained silent, hands clasped. Then he sighed. "So when Buck mentioned the cold, we both leaped to a conclusion." His gaze clashed into hers. "That killer was being controlled. We never found out by who or by what. I think he's still out there. And wherever he pops up, there's a chill that Buck can sense."

"Fuck." Pandora swallowed. "You think that thing in my house was connected in some way?"

"I don't know. It's probably nothing."

"We wouldn't be having this conversation if you thought it was nothing."

He released her fingers. "Let me ask you something. You ever run into mention of the Svengali Project?"

Pandora searched her memory. "Wait...yes. I remember that. Required reading in law school. First year. That project got shut down in a hurry and within a year the AG amendment to the constitution was enacted. Something to do with experimentation, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "It was bad, Pandora. Not many details were released, but some brilliantly warped eggheads decided that AGs could probably be used for a variety of things. They were doing experiments that would have put the Spanish Inquisition and the Nazis to shame."

She shuddered. "God. And here I thought we were far beyond stuff like that."

"Sadly, no. It was generally believed that Afterglow had released psychological forces, as well as the other stuff. There were rumors of Black Projects and so on. But Svengali was the worst. I can't say I shed a tear when I found out the leaders were taken out and executed."

"Without a trial?" The lawyer in her was horrified.

"If you'd seen some of those photos, you'd have pressed the switch yourself."

She swallowed. "Okay. But that's history. Taking a leap myself here, I'm going to guess that you and Buck think there's somebody out there still doing that kind of thing. That he or it was behind the Pleasure Pet killings, and you've stumbled over something that makes you think he's got you under surveillance and possibly me because of that damn puppy incident. Connection to the puppy yet to be established, and maybe dependent upon what Karl's lab reveals."

"Concise summation, Counselor."

A little stung, Pandora leaned back, putting some space between them. She wanted Cheney to see her as a woman right now, not a lawyer. God knew she had to remind herself he was a cop and keep on reminding herself. Otherwise she drifted into her vision of him as a very desirable man and that wasn't good. But it didn't mean she wanted him all professional and thinking of her as some kind of victim or something. Christ. She was getting super confused about this man. Her words summed up both the situation and her state of mind.

"Well, this is a nice fucking mess."

"Ain't it, though." He pushed away his coffee cup just as his phone rang. "Maybe this is Karl now."

Pandora watched as his expression changed and his gaze darted to her face. Then he turned away so she couldn't catch much of his conversation. But suddenly he was standing up and urgently reaching for her hand, the phone snapping shut with a loud clack.

"Come on. We have to go. Now."

"What? Where?" She stumbled to her feet and grabbed her dragon. "What's going on?"

"Your condo's on fire."

Cheney squealed the tires as they pulled out of the coffee shop parking lot, his pulse rate leaping, all his senses on full alert. Thoughts darted through his brain, making connections, assumptions, asking unanswerable questions—running faster than the howling engine beneath the hood.

"Hit that red button on the dashboard." He barked the command, barely seeing Pandora's shaking hand do as he said. The digital array of lights built into the roof of his vehicle flashed to life and sirens screamed, clearing the way for him to roar through traffic.

Even so he felt they were doing little more than crawl. The fear and tension from the woman beside him radiated off her in waves so thick they stifled him, but he could say nothing since he was in pretty much the same condition.

"Oh God."

It was a whisper, but he still heard it over the racket, and it echoed his own thoughts as they pulled in to her road and found it blocked by fire department vehicles. She was out of the car almost before he'd come to a stop.

"Pandora—wait..."

Useless. She was gone, running through the lines, pushing past firemen who tried to grab her.

Cheney ran after her, flashing his badge when he remembered, his long legs finally catching up with her at the end of the pavement, seizing her arms and holding her back as she gasped, making unintelligible choking sounds at the scene in front of them.

It was definitely *her* home, great billows of smoke and red flames crackling upward, windows shattering from a combination of heat and the efforts of the firefighters who were already pouring water and a variety of chemical foams into the building.

"Christ. Oh fucking Christ..."

He could feel great shudders rippling through her as he held her tightly, both for comfort and to prevent her from running headlong into the fire. They could do nothing but watch—and listen, which was even worse.

Things inside crackled and popped, hissed beneath streams of water—the sound was as unnerving as the scene itself. Cheney's eyes watered and he tried to pull Pandora backward, but she was rigid.

"Pandora." He shook her. "We have to move back. Give the guys a chance to do their job."

"You gotta move, bud," a helmeted firefighter yelled at them over the chaos.

"It's her place," Cheney shouted back. "She lives there."

"Damn good thing she wasn't home. The sprinklers helped, but not enough." The brief reply was snapped out as the man pulled another hose toward the flames.

Pandora's chest heaved, a coughing sob erupting from her throat. "God, oh God, oh God."

"Come on. Now. *Move*." Cheney had to drag her back, lifting her a little, physically moving her out of the way. "You can't do anything."

The shaking was getting worse and he tugged at her, forcing her head around, making her look at him. Her eyes were glazed, dull, wide with shock. "Hey." He shook her again. "Stop it. Look at me, Pandora."

"I—" Her mouth worked, her fingers flexed on his arms where he held her, but she couldn't speak.

"It's okay. It'll be okay. They know their job. You're okay. You're not inside."

She coughed and swallowed again, her eyes focusing at last. "Yes."

"That's it. Good girl." He pulled her into his arms and held her tight against his chest. "Yes. You're okay. It's going to be okay."

The words were meaningless, but they seemed to get through, and he felt the stark rigidity and the terrible shudders ease.

"The others. Anyone else there? Has it spread?"

He took a hard look at the scene. "No. It's just your place. They've knocked the worst of it down—caught it before it had a chance to spread too far."

"Hey, buddy." Another firefighter came up to them, this one clearly in charge. "That the homeowner?"

"Yeah."

"She doesn't need to be here." His words were abrupt but his eyes sympathetic. "Neither do you. Do yourself a favor. Get your girlfriend outta here."

Cheney dropped an arm from around Pandora and found his badge. He showed it, then put it away.

The fireman frowned. "You on the clock?"

"No." Cheney shook his head. "We were together when we got the call."

Pandora was recovering, slowly pulling herself together. He could sense the exact moment when her self-control forced itself through the panic. "Can you tell me anything at all?" She peered around Cheney's shoulder to look at the fireman.

"Not much, ma'am." He shrugged. "It was going gangbusters when we got here. Looks like the point of origin was your back porch. You got any kind of outdoor grill there? Anything flammable?"

"No. Absolutely not. It's against condo rules. I had a couple of chairs, a table and some plants. That was it."

"You leave anything on? Coffee pot? TV?"

She darted him a glance then frowned. "No. I'm compulsive about that. Never left anything running in my life."

"Okay." He nodded. "There'll be an investigation. If you didn't have anything that could've served as an origin, then arson will look into it." He glanced at Cheney and lowered his voice. "Mind you, they all say that. Then there's the damn hair dryer on the bathroom towels or something stupid."

"I can assure you that I left nothing running this morning." Her focus returned full force. "I know better." She straightened and glared at the fireman.

Cheney hugged her, just for reassurance. "They know, honey." He raised an eyebrow at the fireman. "This is Pandora Jackson. She's an attorney."

"Shit. I knew I recognized you. Saw you in court on an arson case a few years back. Real sorry about this, Ms. Jackson." The firefighter looked at her with sympathy.

"Thanks." She squared her shoulders and pulled back from Cheney a little. "How long, do you think? How long before it's out?"

"I dunno at this point. Something in there's burning real strong. Like wood floors or whatever." He saw her expression. "You got wood floors, right? Lemme guess. The good stuff."

She sagged into Cheney's hold. "Oh God."

"We'll do what we can, ma'am. You can't help by being here right now. Take my advice. Go with your boyfriend. He'll know how to handle it."

And with that the fireman saluted them briefly and went back to his duties. From what Cheney could see, there was little more to do but wait. The fire itself had been contained. It was no longer a hungry devouring monster, but a slowly simmering glow.

In his embrace, Pandora sobbed harshly, once again surrendering to the agony.

"Honey, it's only stuff. You're safe. You're okay." He stroked his hands up and down her spine.

"You don't understand." She coughed and slumped miserably against his chest as a gust of wind blew smoke around them in a miniature tornado.

"Sure I do. This is a terrible thing. But you're okay. That's what's important."

"Cheney, it's not my stuff." She lifted her face, streaked and blotched with dark smears. "It's my wood."

Cheney stared at her.

The tears trickling from her eyes were stained with blood.

There was something soft under her head and she was warm. It was strange for a moment or two, then the memory flooded back into Pandora's mind and she sat up with a gasp.

"Easy, sweetheart." Cheney was there next to her, a glass of water in his hand. "Drink this."

Thirstily, she did so, then passed it back. "Where am I?"

He smiled. "The classic question. You're at my place."

"I am? Rusty and Lucy...are they...?"

"With Roz. I asked her to take them for a day or so."

She swallowed, her throat still raw from the tears and smoke. "My home?"

He took her hand comfortingly. "Sorry. It's a total loss."

"Oh Christ." She lay back and closed her eyes. "It's a blur, the whole thing is a blur. I saw the fire, we talked to the firemen. It hurt, Cheney. God, it hurt to see it all burn."

"I know. I could see it in your face. You kind of blanked out on me, so I did the only thing I could think of. I bundled you into my car and brought you here."

"I can't remember that at all."

"Probably a good thing." He put the glass on the table. "How're you feeling?"

She opened her eyes again, realizing she was wearing a long sweatshirt—and little else. "I have a bit of a headache. And not many clothes, only a few of which are mine."

"The smell of a fire is pretty invasive." He sat back. "I didn't want you sleeping with that stink in your nose. I showered and changed. Figured the least I could do was get you comfortable."

"Er—thanks." She glanced beneath the blanket and checked her panties. They were the ones she'd started the day with, thank heavens.

His lips curled into a wry smile. "Honey, I'm a lot of things, but I don't get frisky with an unconscious woman. That absolutely isn't my way of doing it."

Her cheeks heated with a blush. "Look, I'm sorry. No offense. And I owe you a lot, Cheney. I'm so sorry you got caught up in all this."

He laid a finger on her lips. "Shut up. I'm here. You're okay and wearing your underwear. Everything's pretty much fine." He paused, eyes twinkling. "Well, except for the underwear, but I'll work on that."

To her astonishment, she felt herself return his smile. God knew there was little to smile about right at this point, but she couldn't stop herself. "Oh yeah?"

"Yep." He stood. "But not just now. First we have to get you sorted out and then we have to take a look at where things stand."

Pandora sighed. "Shit. I'm going to have a helluva lot of calls to make. Insurance, all that sort of thing. And I'll have to shop too. Everything I own went up in that fireball."

"Don't go crazy on my account. I've got more sweatshirts and you can always go commando while that pair of panties is in the wash." He waggled his eyebrows.

She lifted one of hers scornfully. "Har har." She swung her bare legs over the edge of Cheney's couch and stood, staggering a little. "God. How long was I asleep?"

"A few hours."

"Hours?" She was scandalized. "I never sleep during the day."

He looked a bit shamefaced. "Well, I kinda helped that along. I gave you water when we got here. You were thirsty and crying. So I popped a good dose of valerian in it."

"What the hell's that?"

"A natural sleep aid. It relaxed you enough to fall asleep."

"You drugged me?"

He looked appalled. "I most certainly did not. You needed rest. Time to get past the shock." He walked close to her and put a finger beneath her chin, tilting her face upward. "Honestly? You scared me."

"I did?" She stayed where she was, lost in those wonderful eyes of his, held captive more by his gaze than his finger.

"Your tears, Pandora. You cried tears of blood."

"Oh hell." She gulped. "Sorry you had to see that."

"I'm not." His gaze drifted to her lips. "And you're going to have to tell me about it. But not right this minute—"

She knew he was going to kiss her. And every single fiber of her being welcomed it. He'd held her, protected her and comforted her on what was probably the worst day of her life. She couldn't think of a better way to thank him than with the exchange of a kiss. Her arms slid around his neck in readiness.

He'd be gentle, warm, everything a caring man should be...

And she nearly rose six inches off the floor as his mouth claimed hers with all the force and explosive power of a stick of dynamite.

# Chapter Nine

This is one big frickin' mistake.

The thought darted through Cheney's mind as he cast common sense to the winds and kissed Pandora Jackson. Then the remnants of any kind of intelligence walked off in a huff and slammed the door behind them, leaving him with a screaming load of male hormones urging him to take her, right then and there.

It was one thing to tease her, watch her, enjoy her company and deal with the occasional hard-on when he was around her.

It was another to hold that long length of shapely womanhood tight to his body and do his very best to suck her tonsils out over her tongue.

She tasted sweet and tangy, an intriguing sharpness melding with the warmth of woman. And she was responding, her arms snaking around his neck, purring sounds of pleasure vibrating deep in her throat.

He didn't need to wait for her lips to part, they did so at the first touch of skin to skin. Her tongue learned his with every bit as much fervor as he could have wished, a mutual exchange of sensual curiosity, awareness and an increasing arousal he could feel in every cell of his body.

She trembled a little in his arms, locking his head tightly to hers, awash with some sort of eagerness that was an odd mix of explosive sexuality and innocence. It was intriguing, arousing and amazing. Very much a reflection of who she was.

Pandora kissed honestly. There was no hiding when she threw herself into an embrace—she let loose, revealing that fire he'd guessed lurked inside her.

He could only imagine what would happen when he stripped her bare and claimed her. He would, there was no doubt in his mind. Maybe not right at this moment, but soon.

He satisfied his howling lust by slipping his hands beneath the long shirt and cupping the rounded and full globes of her bottom, squeezing them gently—just enough to make her sigh and wriggle to get even closer.

His cock thrust painfully against the fly of his pants, and he moved, cradling his length in the valley at the base of her belly, aware of the way she shifted to accommodate him.

His fingers slipped beneath the lace of her panties, exploring, seeking—finding the moisture as she panted into his mouth and let one hand drift to his head. He realized they were entwined about as closely as it was possible for two people to be. If they got any closer, he'd be standing behind her.

Damn. This was one of those times he could have used some octopus DNA as an AG mutation. Why God had only given him two hands he didn't know, because right now he could have used at least four.

He wanted to plunge his fingers inside her and explore her inner secrets. He wanted to cup her breasts and play with her nipples, those hard buds he could feel through the soft shirt she wore. He wanted to do a whole bunch of really fun things, which included continuing the kiss that was coming close to frying his nerve endings. When she lifted one leg and slid her inner thigh up the outside of his, he nearly came in his jeans as the heat from her pussy radiated through the thin layers of fabric separating him from heaven.

"Cheney..." She tore her mouth free and gasped his name on an indrawn breath, clutching handfuls of hair.

"Yeah." He groaned, ignoring the flash of stinging pain to his scalp and wondering how to get that damn shirt off her.

"Touch me, Cheney." She moaned and went back to kissing him frantically, her body moving against his in an unmistakable wave of desire.

"Christ. Okay. How? *Where*?" He mumbled the words, untangling their tongues, barely able to extract one of his hands from her panties. Coordination wasn't his strong point at this particular moment, but he managed to move it upward, finding her breast, lush and full and squashed against him.

"Oh *yeah*." Forcefully he wrenched himself away from her lips, separating them enough for him to grasp the warm and round weight in his hand, his thumb seeking and finding the sensitive peak.

She cried out when he rubbed it, a shudder rippling over her body. "Fucking hell. God, that's—"

He watched, wondering if she had come just from their foreplay. Her eyes were glazed and unfocused, her lips shining and swollen from his kisses. She was magnificent, a sight that was worthy of a painting by a master. Woman on the Edge of Orgasm...

Then, to his utter astonishment, she froze.

And slowly, oh so slowly, disengaged herself from his hands. "No. I can't." She backed away, her body stiff, her steps awkward, totally unlike her usual grace. "I can't do it. I can't let that happen."

Biting down on a serious, possibly terminal case of raging lust, Cheney managed to get his voice working. "Why not?" He didn't die from the effort of talking, which was a good thing.

"I—" She straightened her clothing. "I'm not very good at sex."

"Fucking hell." He ran a hand savagely through his hair and glanced down at the impressive bulge in his pants. "Could've fooled me."

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." Her brilliant eyes glistened. "I shouldn't have let things go that far. I'm sorry."

He noticed her hands shaking as she attempted to tidy herself, and cursed beneath his breath. "I should be the one apologizing. Given what you've been through that was probably the stupidest thing to have done." He sighed. "I kinda lost it there." She echoed his sigh. "I did too. I'm not a tease, Cheney. Please don't think that. But there are reasons why—"

And at that exact moment, her cell phone rang.

"Shit." She turned away to answer it. "Yes, this is Pandora Jackson. Oh, hi, Selena. You heard already?" Mouthing the word *insurance* to him, she walked to his table and sat down, continuing her conversation.

Cheney passed her a pad and pencil, getting a silent nod of thanks in return. He then considered his options. Cold shower, jerk off or death by hard-on. None of them appealed to him. He barely managed to resist an urge to check and see if his ears were still there or if they'd blown off somewhere in the last few minutes.

The chime of his own phone was a welcome distraction.

"Hey." It was Buck. "I just heard what happened. You two okay?"

Cheney sucked in air, fought down his frustration and filled him in rapidly, wasting no time on details since Buck would figure them out anyway.

He did. "Look, I did a favor for one of those guys. I'm gonna give him a call. If he's still on scene, I'll ask him to see if there's anything worth salvaging and if so whether he can get it over to you. If he can't, I'll do it myself."

"I owe you. That would be a real nice surprise for her. She's handling it, but I reckon it's taking every ounce of strength she's got right now." Cheney paused. "Early, I know, but I wonder if there's any word on the cause of the fire yet?"

"I'll see what I can find out."

"You're a pal. Like I said, I owe you."

"You'll pay. In the meantime—" Buck paused. "I had a thought."

"Ordinarily I'd comment on that, but since you've just been so nice I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Always knew you had more than one brain cell." Buck chuckled. "And it might help to take Pandora's mind off her troubles."

"Okay. I'm listening."

"Do some digging. See if you can get more background on that thing you saw. We don't have a clue where it originated right now, and it looks like the obvious lead's a real dead end unless Karl can pull a miracle out of his little hat."

"No pun intended."

"Yeah."

Cheney considered that. "I could get the details of Pandora's court case, get some names. Talk to people if I have to."

"There you go, pal. Nothing you can do about the fire, but you can research the other thing. Better to be doing busy work than worrying about acts of fate."

"Buck." Cheney's brain finally let go of sexual matters and snapped back into full work mode. "I just had a thought as well."

"Well, damn. Must be something in the air."

Cheney ignored that. "What if the fire wasn't an act of fate? What if the two things are connected?"

Silence greeted that question. Buck's brain was probably shooting off neurons or something while he considered the possibilities. It didn't take long. Chency heard a low whistle.

"Somebody wanted evidence completely destroyed."

"They couldn't know the critter was dead, could they?"

"Doubt it." Buck's voice was quiet. "But if they'd taken out Pandora too, it would've been even better. Any evidence at all that the creature ever existed would have gone up in smoke."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Where are the kids?"

"With Roz. They'll be staying there now, no question about it."

"Yeah. Good."

"You getting that nasty gut feeling?" Cheney glanced at Pandora, who was busily taking notes and speaking quietly into her phone.

"We're way out on a limb with this, partner. We don't even know if it's arson yet."

"I know. But we've been out there before. That limb hasn't broken underneath us up to now."

"I wouldn't tell her," cautioned Buck. "She's got enough on her plate."

"I won't. But she's not going anywhere without me from now on. Not until we've got something more substantial to work with that eliminates the nasty gut feeling."

"Good idea." Buck's snicker was wickedness personified. "Very good idea."

"Hey. I'm working here. This is business." His cock had softened but the memory lingered on, making him an outright liar. Which, of course, his partner knew only too well.

"Riiiiight."

"Fuck off."

"I should hear from Karl soon. When I do I'll let you know. In the meantime, maybe you should offer a comforting shoulder or other body part to your new roomie." Unaware of how close he was to the truth, Buck chuckled casually. "You might get lucky. Or at least get a pity fuck if you tell her how long it's been. If you don't remember how to do it, there's manuals online."

"At the risk of repeating myself, fuck off, dude." He had to be talking to the one person on earth who knew he'd been going through a self-imposed sexual drought lately.

"Okay. Keep in touch."

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The call ended on the sound of Buck's laughter. Closing the phone, he turned to see Pandora watching him, her own call finished and a sheaf of notes spread out in front of her on the table. "Everything okay?" She sounded—normal. "Relatively speaking?"

He wasn't sure if he was pleased about her self-composure, given that barely five minutes ago they'd been all over each other like white on rice and two seconds away from mutual ecstasy. But he pushed that thought aside for the time being and nodded. "Yeah, it was Buck." He moved across the room. "He had a good idea for once. C'mon. We've got some research to do."

She hesitated. "Look, I should make some arrangements for a place to stay. Clothes. Stuff like that. The insurance company is on it and they're up and running as far as that kind of thing goes..."

"Forget it. You're staying here. Subject closed. Move on." He grabbed her wrist and tugged her into his office. "I need to pick your brains right now."

She opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again. The bright blue gaze glared. "Tabled for later discussion." Her tone was as firm as his.

"Damn lawyer."

"Damn right."

Pandora followed Cheney into a small room, which might have been a guest bedroom at one point in time. Now? Now it was a combination library and high-tech playroom. One wall was covered with books, and although she'd have loved the opportunity to browse the titles, he led her directly to a large desk, surmounted by a massive free-hanging screen.

She watched as he absently touched a panel and the keyboard appeared, lights reflected on the smooth surface of his desk. It was obvious he was quite at home with it, since the keyboard exactly matched the clear space. The rest of it had some files scattered around, a few loose sheets of paper, a cute little dog holding pens and pencils and a couple of used coffee mugs.

"Hello, Cheney." A smooth voice purred from the screen, and she blinked at the large, voluptuous image of an old-time movie star.

"Hey, Marilyn."

The image blew him a kiss from pouty red lips and shook masses of platinum blonde hair. "Tell me, lover. What can I do for *you* today?"

It sounded like an invitation to something decadently sexual. Pandora rolled her eyes. Boys and their toys. Although, in all fairness, it was a pretty fantastic rendering. Since her computer greeted her with nothing more than an annoying talking paper clip, she probably shouldn't mention Cheney's Marilyn.

"I need to do some research. Can you Google some stuff for me?"

The image laughed. "I can do so much more than that, and you know it."

Pandora cleared her throat. "I'm sure this is fun, but could we get on with it?"

"Oooh. Brought the girlfriend today, have we?" Marilyn looked interested. "This could be exciting." "Quit it, Marilyn. I need info. Let's get on that, shall we?"

Yes, the back of his neck was definitely turning red. Good thing too, the pervert. Pandora huffed and strolled away to the bookshelf.

He looked away from the screen over his shoulder at her. "You remember the case number of that animal abuse trial by any chance? The name of the judge? Anything we can do to access the records?"

"Sure." She began to see where he was headed. "Got it filed in here somewhere." She pulled out her phone and accessed her database, bringing up all the data she had.

"Good. That gives us someplace to start."

As he worked, she let her gaze drift over the eclectic assortment of reading material crowding the shelves. Apparently Detective Fisher didn't restrict his literary interests to job-related works or murder mysteries, although there was a smattering of both.

A shelf of romance novels surprised her, some of which she'd enjoyed herself. There was a solid section devoted to the ancient classics, starting with Oedipus and ending with Byron. Shakespeare was well represented as were works by some of the more recent poets and writers, like Anaïs Nin, Edward Lear and Franchot Bisquel, whose work had won more than a few awards the year before.

It was an eccentric and wide-ranging library, and she realized she might have put something like it together for her own pleasure, given the room and the budget. There were, perhaps, some hidden facets to Cheney's personality that went beyond the politely charming image he presented to the world. The fact that she was looking at real books with paper pages instead of the more commonly accepted electronic files told her something right from the start.

She smiled at the assortment of fairy tales, recognizing so many familiar titles. A large glossy volume caught her eye, since it featured none other than the delicious Marilyn he'd chosen for his computer's personalization program.

She pulled it down. No, she didn't want Marilyn, but there had to be a guy in that book of equal fame. Somebody she would enjoy looking at first thing in the morning. Of course, she'd have to get a bigger screen...

Lost in the glamorous black-and-white world of generations ago, she didn't realize Cheney was speaking. "Hey. Wake up." He was staring. "What are you doing?"

"Looking at pictures of old movie stars. I like your computer's image."

"Yeah, me too." He quirked an eyebrow. "There are a whole bunch of choices with this system."

Pandora barely heard him. She'd found a face that seriously snagged her attention. "Oh. Oh my."

"Who?"

"Um...Clark Gable."

He snorted. "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn."

"What?"

"Never mind." Cheney shrugged the comment aside. "Come look at this."

She closed the book and crossed to stand behind his chair, absently putting a hand on his shoulder and leaning forward a little. "You found something?"

"Maybe."

His scent, that unique blend of man and something in the way of a clean citrusy soap, swirled around her, distracting her. She had to blink twice to focus on the data in front of them.

"Hmm." He scrolled through pages. "Here's the basic overview of the trial. You said this guy's in for a few years, right?" An official, and poor, image flashed up—an ungainly man with thinning hair.

"That's him."

"Okay." Cheney scrolled on. "Doesn't say much about where he got the unfortunate animals. He didn't breed them himself, that's for sure."

No surprises there. Pandora had never believed that particular defendant capable of much else other than trying to make money any way he could. No matter who had to suffer for it. "Agreed."

"Ah. This is more useful." Pages flashed past, almost too fast for her to absorb. "Here." He paused on one. "A brief list of sources." There was silence for a moment as they both scanned the data. "Looks like he turned this over in an attempt to cut some sort of deal."

"Yep." She curled her lip. "I didn't buy it for a minute."

Cheney reached up and patted her hand. "The scales of justice were weighed against that dude when you walked into court. I'm so proud my tax dollars are hard at work."

"You being snarky?"

"No. That was the truth. Vermin like this deserve whatever they get, as far as I'm concerned." He pointed at the screen. "Here. One place that doesn't fall into the breeder category. Just an address."

She frowned. "That's odd."

"Yeah."

"Is there any information about it?"

"Gimme a sec..." He hit a few buttons. "Hmm."

"Hmm what?" She leaned closer, her breasts grazing his shoulder. By sheer accident, of course. She wasn't going to risk opening that door again, but what the hell. If a tiny moment of pleasure should come her way, well—she was a woman. And not a stupid one.

These might be the only pleasures she'd know, she thought sadly. A momentary brush of bodies, perhaps a smile or two. There could be nothing more. Already she'd gone too far down that road.

With a sigh, she forced her wayward thoughts back in line. "Do you know where this place is?"

"Yes. It's in one of the older sections of town. And on the outskirts too. See?" Cheney pointed at a spot on a map window he'd opened. "The owner is listed as Victoria Larson. Sheesh."

"What?"

"She's eighty-five years old, according to the title. Lived there for nearly all of 'em."

"Doesn't sound like the type to mess around with some strange DNA mutation." Pandora frowned.

"Nope. I'd have pegged her for a dozen cats, blue hair and a bunch of antique teapots or something."

"That's stereotyping. She might be one of those incredibly spry senior citizens who serves on a dozen committees and is writing her memoirs, which—when published—will seriously impact about ten political figures and do damage to a lot of reputations."

Cheney laughed and turned his head, bringing their faces to within inches of each other.

They both stilled, Pandora aware that there was suddenly a lot less oxygen in the room than there had been a moment before. She was having trouble breathing, especially when she saw his eyelids flicker and his gaze fall to her lips.

Oh God. She wanted this man. And the knowledge that she mustn't have him was a knife turning in her heart.

"You and I have some unfinished business, Pandora." His breath dusted her face.

"I can't— I don't—"

"So you've said." He straightened. "Very soon you're going to tell me why."

She shook her head, but he ignored it. "In the meantime, let's get you something to cover those luscious legs of yours and take a field trip."

She swallowed. "Where?"

"Out to see if it's cats or teapots or memoirs." He lifted an eyebrow. "I'm putting my money on cats. Time to go check out Victoria Larson."

## Chapter Ten

It came as a surprise to both of them to find that the sky was darkening as they drove to their destination. Cheney glanced at Pandora. "You doing okay?"

She nodded, her hair damp and loose after the quick shower she'd insisted on taking before they left. "Yes. I have to admit I'm feeling a bit awkward though." She lifted a hand and pushed a red lock behind her ear. "I rarely go out like this."

"No kidding. But I like the look. It suits you."

Her snort was the only answer, but he'd meant it. Soft curls were beginning to emerge, tiny whorls of fire around her face. Devoid of makeup, she was still gorgeous any way you looked at her, even swathed in another of his sweatshirts and an old pair of jeans he knew she'd lashed tight around her waist with one of his belts. The cuffs were rolled up above her own sneakers and socks. At this moment she was all woman, without a trace of the neatly conservative and professionally sleek lawyer he'd met such a short time ago.

And she was even more appealing like this. To him, anyway. He clenched his hands on the wheel a little tighter, reminding himself that he was *driving*, not about to indulge in a session of heavy petting. "I meant are you *feeling* okay?"

"I'm not sure to be honest. This whole day's been...surreal."

"Can't argue with that." He checked his location. "Nearly there."

He glanced around him, noticing the older and well-established neighborhood, houses that had been built several generations ago. He rather liked the styles—individual, each one unique. There was a big chunk of change invested in each one, he guessed. A remnant of the days when cash reserves translated into massive estates.

A lot of them had been broken up, of course, to make way for newer homes. But here, and in a few other almost suburban areas, big homes on big acreage still stood.

"This one." He pulled up outside a fancy gate and looked at the tall hedges. "Can't see much, but this is the right number."

Pandora glanced at him uncertainly. "What's the plan here? Are we going to snoop?"

"Nope." He turned off the engine. "We're going to go up and knock on the front door."

"And then what?" She opened her door and got out, facing him across the roof. "Ask her if she's missing a strange pet?"

He grinned. "Trust me."

"Uh—" Her sigh was a masterful blend of impatience and frustration. "I really hate it when someone says that." But she followed him through the gate and up the long walkway to the front door.

Cheney took a quick survey of the building. There was a turret on one end, several gables and a lot of fancy wooden scrollwork. The lower portion was brick and the upper floors were clapboards he'd swear were wood. In the twilight it looked fascinating, but he'd bet anything that by night it looked more menacing. Sort of gothic crossed with fairytale.

The bell was a melodious chime and they waited patiently for the door to open after Cheney pushed the appropriate button.

"I'm not really ready for this. I look like a bag lady, for God's sake."

"Hush. I told you to trust me. She'll see what I want her to see."

Pandora glanced at him sharply. "An illusion?"

"Sort of."

Footsteps sounded and the door swung inward, revealing an elderly lady. Her hair wasn't blue but grey, pulled up onto the top of her head in an untidy knot. Overall, thought Cheney, she was unremarkable.

"Yes?" Okay, the voice was remarkable. Deep and vibrant. If this had been a phone conversation, he'd never have pegged her for her age group.

"Hi. I'm real sorry to bother you, but my honey and I couldn't help ourselves." He slid a hand around Pandora's waist and hugged her tightly. "We've driven past here several times and we just adore this house. Right, sweetheart?"

Pandora nodded. "Um, yes. It's lovely."

"See, we're getting married soon and looking for a place to live that'll work for the kids we're planning. This looks like such a great place to raise a family, doesn't it, darlin'?"

Another nod, this time with a raised eyebrow.

"So we figured we'd got nothing to lose by just stopping by and asking if by any chance you're going to be putting it on the market anytime soon?" He smiled, knowing that the old woman was seeing a couple in love, surrounded by the glow of anticipation, lost in the delights of planning a future together. He knew this because it was the illusion created by that unique part of his mind.

Projecting it was second nature to him—he didn't need to spare it much thought. "It's not that we're in the family way, you understand. But Tiffany here is insisting we get started right away. Can't wait for the patter of tiny feet, you know? She wants a lot of kids." He laughed good-naturedly. "I figure one at a time and we'll see how it goes."

He squeezed Pandora. Getting into the spirit of things, she turned and gazed adoringly at him. "As long as the boys look like you, darling."

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"That's my girl."
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"Well, I—"

"And this has such a great spot, good-sized lot. Plenty of room for kids and their friends. Even their pets. Hard to find that much land these days. I'll just bet your family gets a kick out of it. Trees for the grandkids to climb...whatever."

He got a squeeze back from Pandora. Okay, he might be overdoing it a bit, but there was nothing like immersing himself in the role. One course in Theater during his sophomore year in college had honed his dramatic instincts. Just went to show you never knew when those useless classes might come in handy.

"Young man." Ms. Larson held up a hand. "This house is not for sale. Nor will it be. I do not have a family nor do I have grandchildren. I have no pets. When I pass on, my estate will go to the local historical society, since it has a long and distinguished association with events in this area." She made to close the door. "You've wasted your time."

"Well damn." Cheney sighed loudly. "I'm sorry to hear that, aren't you, precious?"

Pandora tilted her head to one side and smiled apologetically. "I hope we didn't disturb you too much. I'm sorry."

The woman's expression softened slightly as her gaze drifted over Pandora's face. "Not at all. But it was a fool's errand. I hope you live a long and happy life together. Good day."

The door closed firmly.

Cheney grabbed his erstwhile fiancée's hand and led her back to the car, gently releasing the illusion as they approached the gate and passed through, closing it securely behind them.

When they were safe inside she released a pent-up breath of frustration. "Well, that accomplished absolutely nothing."

"I wouldn't say that." He started the engine then reached for his phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Ordering pizza. I'm hungry. What do you like on yours?"

"I—uh—mushrooms."

"Good. Me too." He placed the order for pick up. He knew his pizza shop and that it would be ready when they got there.

"Hey." She poked him in the shoulder. "What about that little episode back there?" She smiled, showing teeth. "Darling?"

He grinned back. "You want our boys to look like me, huh, Tiffany?"

"Oh for Chrissake..."

He could almost hear her teeth clenching. "Patience. Let's get the food and discuss it over dinner. I need to organize my thoughts."

"Yeah, right," she subsided with a mutter.

It was the truth, even though Pandora might not realize it. Cheney had found out a few things. He wanted to sort them out before he tossed them on the table along with the pizza and the last couple of beers he hoped he had in his fridge.

Another call to Roz took care of the pups and made him real happy. The family looking to adopt them had been in touch and wanted to see them tomorrow. Roz was very thrilled to be a part of it and told him not to worry, she'd handle everything for as long as he needed.

He shared that news, knowing Pandora would be as pleased as he was. And he was right.

"Oh that's fabulous." She smiled happily. "I love thinking they'll grow up at ease with themselves. With who and what they are. And in a loving environment."

The tiny little wistful note in there someplace didn't escape him, but he filed it for future reference. Which was a good thing, since his phone rang at that moment. A glance at the dashboard caller ID told him it was Buck. Instead of reaching for it, he punched the car's answer button.

"I'm in the car with Pandora. What's up?"

"Karl's got something for us. You got some time in the morning to stop by his place? Maybe around ten?"

Cheney looked at her with a raised eyebrow. She nodded back.

"Yep. We'll be there. What's he found?"

"He didn't say, the annoying little runt. But he likes to keep these things dramatic, so we play along." An affectionate chuckle followed the words. "And whatever he's got will beat the hell out of anything we'd have gotten from any other lab, so no complaints, okay?"

"Gotcha. See you tomorrow." Cheney disconnected the call.

"That was really fast." Pandora stared at the darkening streets. "Turnaround on forensics is usually counted in weeks not hours."

"Told you. Buck's a firm fan of Karl's. And from what he's said, there aren't many who even know about Karl's lab, let alone have access to it."

She leaned back and closed her eyes. "I really hate to say it, but my mind's beginning to shut down on me. Too much to handle."

"Relax. I'll grab the pizza. Right now you have absolutely nothing to do except eat and then get some sleep, okay?"

"At your house." She didn't open her eyes.

"Yes. At my house."

"Not in your bed."

"Your choice. No pressure, Pandora. Would I *like* to have you in my bed? Of course. I have a pulse and I'm male and I'm crazy-wild attracted to you. However, given what's happened today, I'd be three kinds of a jerk if I pressured you at all in that way." He tried to infuse his words with a reassuring calmness

he was far from feeling. The image of her in his bed, her fiery hair spread over his pillow or his body—think pizza. "I'm not a jerk." Much.

Pandora pushed the plate away from her. "No more. I'm done."

Cheney grinned. "Glad I got two."

"You calling me a pig?"

"No. I'm saying I'm glad I got two pizzas since we were both ravenous, apparently." He stared pointedly at the almost empty boxes.

"So it seems." She reached for her beer. "Thanks. For everything."

"Don't mention it."

That got a wry chuckle out of her. "Oh sure. I'll just skip over the bit where you agreed to take a look at an odd puppy and now you've suddenly found yourself with an unexpected houseguest, and a weekend that seems full of everything from mysterious private forensics labs to old women to fires." She sipped. "Not what you expected, I'm thinking."

He shrugged. "I roll with the flow. And I kinda like it when life's interesting. Otherwise, what would I be doing? Mowing the lawn? Surfing the net for porn? Wasting all my downtime on pursuits that really don't *suit* me. If that makes sense."

"Well, anyway, thanks." She saluted him with her beer bottle. "So tell me what you got from our little jaunt this afternoon. Before I finish this damn beer and nod off over your table."

"Here's the deal. You stay awake and listen to what I have to say and then you answer a couple of questions."

She paused. Thoughts juggled themselves haphazardly in her mind. But she knew, beneath her confusion, that she owed him. Big time. Her native sense of what was right won out and she acquiesced, since more kissing was not an option. "Okay. But I reserve the option to defer any questions I think inappropriate."

His lips curved into a wry grin. "Agreed, Counselor."

She smiled too. "Sorry. Some things go deep."

"Well, here's something for you to chew over while I tidy up. I think your pup and your fire may be connected."

Pandora's jaw dropped as he crushed empty pizza boxes, put them into the trash and wiped off the table. She watched him fetch two more beers from the fridge, knowing it was all an attempt to distract her. She didn't really need distracting, though, since her brain had screamed to a halt and backtracked up a new road paved with the proposition he'd just calmly thrown out.

"Shit." She sucked in air. "Of course."

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "You think it's possible?"

"It makes sense. A fire would destroy any evidence. DNA can't survive high temperatures. And if whoever set it didn't know the creature was dead..."

"Yep. That's pretty much where Buck and I ended up when we discussed it."

"Logical."

"We are, sometimes."

Another thought popped into her head. "You know, Saturdays I usually spend a few hours in the morning on my deck."

"Always?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Even if the weather's bad I go out there and shelter under the awning. I like the air."

"So if it was arson, the point of origin will tell us a lot. Whether you were intended to be part of the crispy-critter scenario or whether it was just an attempt to get rid of something someone didn't want revealed."

She glanced at him. "And that's why you were so adamant I stay here. And why you made sure Rusty and Lucy were tucked away with Roz."

He met her look squarely. "Yes."

She ran her finger up and down the frosty glass of the beer bottle, turning the possibilities over in her mind. "But why? Why go to all this trouble? If whoever it was had just left it all alone, the whole thing probably would have died a natural death."

"That, my dear Pandora, is the big question." He tugged her up from the table and led her into his living room, settling beside her on the couch and sticking his feet up on the coffee table. "It's up to us to find the answer."

Idly she stroked her fingers over the wooden dragon she'd unwrapped and set on the table beside her. The touch of the smooth surface helped her organize her thoughts. It was comforting. "And you think that woman, Victoria Larson, may be a part of it?"

"That I can't say yet." He took a drink from his beer and looked at her. "What did you get from our brief visit?"

"She's not your typical little old lady. The grey hair's there, the general appearance of a senior citizen. But..." Pandora focused on her memory and pulled Victoria's image back into her head. "She's a great deal more vibrant, if that's the right word. Her voice is strong. No quaver at all. She stands pretty straight for someone her age. Her clothing was clean and looked tailored to me. Definitely not off the rack. There's money there and she's not afraid to use it to keep herself up. And I wouldn't underestimate her for a second." One eyebrow lifted in amusement. "I wouldn't play poker with her either. She could well be a damned shark."

He was nodding. "Pretty much matches with my impressions too."

"I didn't sense anything—off, if you know what I mean?"

"Me neither." He looked thoughtful. "One time I wish Buck had been with us. He's the one who can pick up on that stuff."

She sighed. "Maybe your little scientist friend at that lab can shed a bit of light on this. At least tell us what we're dealing with."

"I hope so. And I'm thinking I might do a bit more digging into Ms. Larson's past. She's showing on the regular information sources as clean as a whistle. Not even a parking ticket in her entire life." He frowned. "And that, in and of itself, is unusual. Nobody lives that long without a slip here or there."

"Except, apparently, her."

"Exactly."

Pandora shrugged, rotating her shoulders to ease some of the tension. "I guess you have some better sources?"

His smile was delightfully innocent. "Of course. None that I'm planning on telling you about, but if there's anything out there, I'll find it."

"I don't want to know." She laughed and held up a hand. "Some things are better left to the imagination."

"Speaking of imagination..." He turned toward her a little and stretched a long arm along the back of the couch. "My turn to ask questions."

She gritted her teeth. "Okay. A deal's a deal. Ask away."

"What is it with you and sex?"

"What?" The direct question took her by surprise. "There's nothing with me and sex."

"Bullshit. We were milliseconds away from getting naked and happy. Then you froze up on me."

"The phone rang."

"That's crap and you know it." He tugged an errant lock of her hair. "It's honesty time here. Spill it. Is it me?"

"Hell no." The answer tumbled out far too quickly for her liking, but apparently Cheney didn't mind since it brought a wicked smile to his lips.

"Good. So what is it then?"

She caught her lower lip between her teeth as she considered how best to answer his question. She didn't discuss this matter—with anyone. And hadn't for more years than she could remember. But she knew there was a really strong attraction between them, and if anyone might be able to understand some of it, it would be the man sprawling next to her, looking at her with warmth in his eyes and toying with her hair.

He deserved the truth before it went any further than a hotly passionate kiss. If indeed it was destined to go any further.

He might simply turn tail and run when she told him the truth. A part of her wished that might be the case. That she could continue to live her relatively uncomplicated life and devote herself to law.

But another part, a place he'd awakened with his sensual skills, that part wanted him so very badly she ached with it.

She took a breath and turned toward him, folding one leg beneath the other on the couch and glancing briefly at the wooden dragon, the only piece of wood she had left of her own right now. It seemed to smile encouragingly at her.

"Have you ever heard of a dryad?"

### Chapter Eleven

Cheney was held fast in his position, the strands of fiery softness twined around his fingers and the look in her eyes doing the job better than any physical restraints.

"Aren't they tree fairies or something? Nymphs?" He dredged through his memory to find some reference to dryads, wishing he'd paid more attention to his classical mythology lectures.

"Close." Pandora swallowed. "Turns out that's what I am. A dryad."

"Ah. Okay..."

She shifted her position a little, resting a hand on her thigh. "I suppose I should start at the beginning, then you'll understand." She looked away. "I was an only child and the first AG in the family."

"Your parents were blands?"

"Yes. And I think I was rather a surprise to them." She grinned. "They weren't expecting to have a Fae, just a kid. It's a small family too. No big groups of people at the holidays, only one aunt on my mother's side."

"So it might be safe to infer they didn't quite know what to do with you?"

"I guess." A wry smile crossed her lips. "They loved me, without a doubt. But once I hit puberty and the whole Fae thing started to manifest—well, they were at a bit of a loss." She closed her eyes for a second or two. "I never fit in with the school Fae. You know the types...all about the wings and the dresses. That wasn't me. I was—odd Fae out, if that makes sense. At that time, I didn't know why."

"When did you realize you were a dryad?"

She opened her eyes and thought for a moment. "I guess it was sophomore year. I'd been to a party and there'd been some drinking."

"My goodness." He looked astounded.

"Yeah. Terrible, huh?"

"The sad state of the morals of our youth." He chuckled. "Sorry. Go on."

"I got home, a bit buzzed, and I didn't want to go indoors. It was one of those perfect nights, warm air, moonlight—I'd danced with a boy I had a serious crush on and he'd kissed me. First real kiss. I was a couple of feet off the ground for a variety of reasons. Girl stuff." She threw him an apologetic glance. "You probably don't get all this, but you did ask."

"I may not have the same equipment, but I get the general idea."

"Well, anyway..." she continued, "I walked into our back garden. I could sense something special, something different. I just stood there, and it was like a door opened in my head. The trees were talking to me, saying wonderful things, encouraging me to throw my arms wide open, to let them into my soul." She winced. "This sounds a bit dramatic, doesn't it?"

He shook his head but remained silent.

"Long story short, my wings manifested. But they weren't Fae wings. They were branches, living branches, heavy with leaves. I felt rooted, felt my toes digging into the earth. I wasn't flying like a Fae, I was growing like a tree." She chuckled ruefully. "It was quite a shock. Not just to me, but to Mom and Dad who happened to look out the window at that moment."

"I can see their faces now." He grinned. "You probably still can."

She couldn't help smiling at him. This was easier than she'd imagined it would be. "You have no idea."

"So what then?"

"Then? I sort of suppressed it, I guess. Mom and Dad never told me to, it's just that they were at a loss, you know? They bought the books, read all the right literature—they were both teachers, so they knew the resources. But there was hardly anything on dryads. And none of us were interested in going through test after test. It was easier to just not mention it, pretend it didn't really exist."

"Easier for them. But not for you."

"Probably. It didn't seem too hard though. And God knows I'd have really hated being poked and prodded by those DNA registrars."

Cheney shifted closer, letting his hand drift to the hair tumbling over her ears. She rather liked it.

"That I can believe. Any new mutation gets put through a wringer, no question about it."

"Yeah. I probably wasn't *that* new, but I didn't want the notoriety either. I was a teenager. That's bad enough. Plus I was taller than everyone else—God, I so hated sticking out. Always standing in the back row, red hair blazing..." She shuddered. "Wouldn't go back to that for any amount of money."

"Been there, tried to slump through that."

"Yes, I guess you would have." She laughed. "Moving on...I dealt with it. Kept it all under wraps. Stayed away from moonlight gardens. Didn't drink very much at all. I guess I was pretty dull, all things considered, but I sure got good grades, graduating top of the class, acing pre-law in college."

"And headed for law school?"

"Yes."

"You dated, I take it?" A casually simple question.

"Yes." No simple answer though. "I dated. I even had sex. It was okay, nothing to write home about." She paused. "I suppose I never really got into it very much. Then I made the mistake of falling real hard for a guy. Senior year. I was convinced he was *the one*."

"Ah."

"We dated for a few weeks, then we got to finals. He was pre-med and I was pre-law. Heavy duty studying. When we were done, we planned a night of riotous celebration."

"Ending up in bed, I assume."

"I hoped so. We hadn't had time to go there, so this was going to be a major thing. Especially for me. I was crazy about him in one of those horribly sheltered-life, almost-obsessive kind of ways. I was already seeing wedding gowns and hearing church bells."

"And?"

"It was a total disaster." As if distancing herself from her past, Pandora got up from the couch and walked across the room, staring out the window into the darkness. "I let the passion take over. I lost any and all control of myself. We were actually doing it when I started to change." Even now, years after it happened, she could still experience a pang of emotional agony. "The wing branches emerged. My toes grew. God knows what else..."

"I'm guessing the guy freaked on you."

"Freaked being the operative word. Not only did he grab his pants and put 'em on running, he kept running. Only stopped to pass the word that I was abnormal. I think he actually used the word *freak*, now I come to think about it." She rotated her shoulders, trying to ease the tension that had crept through her spine. "Fortunately we were days away from the end of the semester and right on top of graduation. I was able to walk away from there with most of my reputation intact. And when I hit law school, I found I could drown myself in law and enjoy every minute of it."

"You telling me you haven't had sex since then?" Cheney's eyes were wide.

"Not at all." She turned back to him, keeping her expression blank. "I've had some quite nice sexual experiences."

"That sounds appallingly frightening."

"It's not. I don't mind having sex. I've learned to manage it. I just keep it under control."

"You mean you've managed to repress damn near half of who you really are."

She blinked. "Probably. But it works fine and I'm content with it."

"Oh, Pandora." Cheney shook his head slowly. "You are so wrong about that."

"I don't think so." She returned to the couch. "Let's face it, Cheney. Sex is a simple physical expression of affection between two people. No more, no less. As long as I keep it to that, I'm fine. I enjoy the closeness, the touching. I..." she cleared her throat, "...I get aroused sometimes."

For a moment she closed her eyes. God, this was the weirdest conversation she'd ever had with a man. "All I have to do is remember to relax and just enjoy as much of it as I can. Most times, my dates haven't even realized..." She trailed off, realizing what she was implying.

"They never know you don't come."

At a loss as how to avoid answering that, Pandora simply kept her mouth shut and looked away from him.

"They're idiots."

"That's harsh. And some were quite nice."

"Okay. Nice idiots."

"There really haven't been too many. I have a busy schedule. My work doesn't allow me time to go out and party up a storm every damn Saturday night, Cheney. I'm not out cruising for hot sex on a regular basis, so it really doesn't matter much in the overall scheme of my life."

He tilted his head and stared at her thoughtfully. "Pandora, you've suppressed a huge part of your life. And I'm not just talking about orgasms. This goes deeper. It goes to who you are, a part of you that shouldn't be kept under wraps."

"Really?" She flicked a glance back at him. "And haven't you done the same thing?"

"Me?" He looked surprised. "Hell no. I come. I've never faked an orgasm in my life."

A laugh bubbled up in her throat, catching her off guard. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Oh." He grinned unrepentantly.

"You don't tell many people about your AG talent. Your gift for illusions. I wouldn't have known to come talk to you at all if I hadn't met Roz and had the wits to put two and two together about your project. Rusty and Lucy."

"That's a personal choice."

"As is mine."

"Not the same," Cheney disagreed. "I simply don't make my talent public. Doesn't mean I don't use it or enjoy it from time to time. I don't push it out of my life. It's part of me. I'm tall, I don't like olives and I can create illusions. That's it. No big secret."

He was wrong about that, thought Pandora. It might not be secret, but Cheney was anything but a straightforward person. He showed what he wanted the world to see, and that didn't necessarily correlate to who he was or what he happened to be thinking at the time. However, she had no right to argue the point, since she'd probably lose that one. "Well, say what you will, I guess we've both come to terms with who and what we are, just in different ways."

"A nice summation encompassing neutral ground." He crossed his legs at the ankles. "Well done. One thing though..."

"What?"

"Your tears. You cried blood at the fire."

She nodded. "I have what could best be called an empathy, I guess. I can sense when a tree is in trouble. If it needs pruning or it's rotting or dying. I suppose I could have turned that into a pretty successful job as an arborist, but it's draining, both physically and emotionally." She slumped back onto the

couch, her hand drifting once again to the carved dragon. "Most times I can deal with it when it happens. And that's not often. But today?" She gulped down a lump of bitterness. "Today was the screaming death of the wooden pieces I'd come to know and love. They weren't alive, not like a forest fire burning living trees. But they were part of me. I'd touched them so many times, learned the feel of their surfaces, taken something from them that made my life better, just like I hope they took something from me." She stared down at the figurine beside her. "When they burned I felt it like a physical pain. Like my insides were being torn apart. I guess that caused the bloody tears…I don't know for sure. It's only happened once before."

"When was that?"

"A big bonfire one year in college. Dead wood used for logs doesn't bother me. It's as if the spirit of the tree is lost once it's chopped up. But some of the students brought newly cut still-living wood and threw it on the blaze." She recalled the pain, her skin dappling with goose bumps at the memory. "It was terrible. I realized I was crying and saw the blood when I wiped my face. I got the hell out of there and haven't been to a bonfire since."

"You're weird all right."

Stunned, she blinked at him, then noticed his grin. "Uhh..."

"C'mon, kid. You're smart enough to know that AG mutations take all kinds of forms. Nothing's standard, nothing is quote normal unquote." He made the appropriate gesture with his fingers. "It's all natural, part of our world nowadays."

She blew out a breath from between pursed lips. "Sure. You know that. I know that. But somewhere along the line people didn't manage to adjust to stuff that's out of the ordinary. Okay, so the *ordinary* has changed in its definition from what it was a few generations ago. But there's still that...that..." She searched for the word.

"Stigma?"

"I suppose that's as good a way of any to describe it. Fae are accepted. Differently talented Fae are still looked at askance."

"Askance. Lovely word."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Forgive me for enjoying the English language."

"Don't get snotty. That was a genuine compliment. You don't speak in shorthand. I like that."

"Sorry. My mistake. I get a bit touchy now and again when my linguistic skills are..." she smiled at him, "...impugned."

"Oooh. A twofer. Let me get my notebook." He chuckled and rubbed a finger down her cheek. "You need rest, crazy tree lady. Been a rough day."

"Yeah." Pandora stifled another yawn. "That's an understatement."

"So go get some sleep. But maybe you should think about this." He leaned forward and barely brushed her lips with his mouth. "We're going to end up naked and in bed together."

Amazed by the frisson of arousal his kiss had sent chasing down her spine, she simply stared at him.

"And when we do, there'll be no faking. No pretending. No hiding. Is that clear?"

She nodded. What else could she do? Lying wasn't an option. She'd bared her innermost soul to this man. He knew what she was, now. There was no need for pretense. It was a strangely liberating moment, one in which her life shifted a little and she acknowledged to herself that having him make love to her might be pretty damn fantastic.

And it scared the crap out of her.

"Go to bed and think about it, okay?" He pulled back with a rueful sigh. "I know I will."

She stood and almost ran to his guestroom, not looking over her shoulder. Whether it was because she was afraid he would follow her or that he *wouldn't*—well, that was something she'd postpone thinking about until she could get her head straight and her mind organized.

Oddly enough, those were two things that she was finding increasingly difficult when she was around Cheney Fisher.

He hadn't lied. He was thinking about getting Pandora naked, hot and sweaty. He was thinking about how he'd arouse her and push her past her self-imposed limits. What she'd like, where he'd touch her and taste her—and what to do about the seriously solid erection that all these thoughts had quite naturally produced.

"Fuck." He shifted in his chair. Sleep definitely wasn't an option right now so he'd opted for his office and Marilyn, intending to dig around a little in some official files and see if there was anything out there on Victoria Larson he might have overlooked, missed or just not found first time around.

"Cheney?" Marilyn's face peeked at him from the side of his screen. "Anything I can do for you, darling?"

"Sadly no." He moved again, easing the throbbing weight between his legs.

"I have a few ideas, baby..." Red lips pouted at him as the speakers whispered in husky and seductive tones.

"You're not helping, Marilyn." He frowned. "On the other hand, maybe there is something you can do. Can you access the department database from—let's say fifty years ago? Give me the ten years prior too."

"Of course, honey." The dulcet voice sounded a little disappointed, but within moments the official logo appeared on the screen and he entered his password. Back files began to appear. "Is there any particular area you'd like displayed, handsome?"

He thought about how best to approach his research. "Yeah. Give me anything referencing Larson, first name Victoria. Give me her background files if there are any. Parents, birth certificate, whatever. Even if it's not necessarily directly related to her."

"Sure, sugar. Here it comes."

It was little enough. Victoria Larson had been Victoria Prendergast prior to her marriage, which occurred when she was twenty-seven. Albert Larson, the lucky groom, had been five years younger, but apparently the match was deemed quite acceptable. Albert possessed a tidy fortune which was enlarged by the addition of money from the Prendergast vaults. There were a few photos of the wedding in the file. Both bride and groom had looked suitably enthusiastic.

"Marilyn...keep searching back from here. Give me Victoria Prendergast's info." He tapped his fingertips on his desk. Something about the name *Prendergast* was tickling at his subconscious.

"Here you go, sweetheart. Anything you want, you know I can provide."

Focused on his research, he managed to ignore the sexual overtones of that statement. And there it was. Prendergast Industries.

The Svengali Project.

*Shit.* Cheney's brain made the connections, but came up short. The Svengali Project had been a massive stain on humanity and the top men had been quietly taken out and executed.

He knew he'd have willingly pulled the switch himself, and he still had the occasional nightmare filled with memories of what he and Buck had seen in those classified files. Fortunately, AGs were now mainstream and no longer a source of experimental fodder for twisted geniuses who viewed them as nothing more than disposable lab rats.

Apparently some of the major offenders had alleged ties to Prendergast's multibillion dollar research facilities. Close enough ties that the lab itself had been cited and prosecuted as an accessory to the fact. And paid a hefty fine by the looks of it, even though he couldn't find a notation of any Prendergast employees actually doing time for the crime.

*But...* 

That creature he and Buck had destroyed—with Lian's help. It was marked case closed, but both detectives knew there was unfinished business. They'd discussed the similarities to a Svengali-like manipulator but never found any proof. Could it be linked to Pandora's strange pup? Was it another facet of whatever or whoever was doing something weird with AGs and their DNA?

It was a damn long stretch, making that association. He leaned back in his chair and ran his hands tiredly over his face. Too many unanswered questions, and yet too much that was unexplained to be ignored. He enjoyed puzzles—part of the reason he liked his job. But this one had struck close to home. Home, in this case, being represented by Pandora, a woman who'd walked into his life such a short time ago, yet had overwhelmed his common sense and, possibly, taken over something more than his guestroom.

He rotated his shoulders and let his mind wander a bit. He understood her, more than she could know. He'd never really come to terms with his own talent. Sure, it was fun. A neat party trick and a wow with women. But other than that, what the hell use was it?

Vampires had enhanced senses and loved the night. There were so many places where their skills were invaluable.

Buck was a cognitive. He could sense emotions, pick up details left hanging in the air of a crime scene and Lian was—well, Cheney wasn't quite sure exactly what she was, but apparently it was something that Buck appreciated. Fae flittered a lot, but they were extraordinarily good at picking up on minute details that others might have missed.

Werewolves were solid citizens, community-oriented, family-oriented, dependable and always there when you needed them. They tended to be found heading up committees, charities and running for office now and again.

Every variety of AG, it seemed to Cheney, was settling into a place where their talents and skills were most useful. Except him.

And Pandora.

He sighed. What a freakin' pair of crazies. A tree fairy and an illusionist. At least she'd gone her own road and become a successful lawyer. And he'd become a cop because he loved the work. Their *human* lives hadn't been wasted. But he could certainly understand her need to bury her AG abilities. Because he'd done pretty much the same thing.

She'd nailed him on that and she was absolutely right.

But there was one thing that popped back into his mind like a flash of lightning. They'd shared a dream.

And as he turned that memory over and examined it, he heard her crying.

# Chapter Twelve

The tears came fast and harsh, great sobs choking from Pandora's throat as she huddled herself beneath the quilt in Cheney's guestroom.

She'd slept a little, but her subconscious mind had yet to deal with the fire and the loss she'd taken today. It was a hard hit, she knew. Just *how* hard came as a shock, as did the savage emotion bubbling up from someplace deep inside and turning her into a whimpering idiot.

Smart enough to know it was the best way to deal with the whole thing, she didn't try to hold back, letting the crying jag come in full force. Part of her knew it would be cleansing even as another part of her desperately wanted to stifle such a wantonly weak display. She—who had kept a tight rein on anything approaching this kind of outburst—was having a problem dealing with it.

Thank God she was alone and spared the embarrassment of having anyone else watch as she fell apart.

A sound in the room told her even that solace was to be denied her.

"Aww, sweetheart. Come here."

Without waiting for her to respond, Cheney was there, pulling her against his bare chest. She vaguely realized he'd changed into a pair of loose pajama pants, but then all she knew was the comfort of being held and gentled, his hands stroking her hair away from her face and soothing her tensed shoulders.

"This is so stupid." She muttered the words against his warmth.

"It's natural. Let it out." He passed her another handful of tissues.

"I freakin' hate this." Hiccupping, she blew her nose. "It's really idiotic."

"Cut yourself some slack. It's been a helluva day."

"This is *not* me. I do not fall apart and weep like some weak twit who hasn't got enough strength in her spine to stand upright."

His chest rose and fell with his chuckle. "You're not at the office now. You're not in court now. And I'm starting to think you've spent so much time telling yourself who you're *not*, you've lost touch with who you are."

"Gee, thanks. What are you, my psychiatrist now?" Pandora winced. "Sorry. That was rude and I apologize. You've done so much for me I shouldn't be snapping at you."

He reached down and put a finger beneath her chin, turning her head upward to face him. His gaze crashed into hers and his eyes heated with something she couldn't quite put a name to. "We're past the apologizing stage, Pandora. Way past." He brushed his thumb over her lips. "We shared a dream, remember? That puts us into a unique category."

She swallowed awkwardly. "I remember."

"Come with me. Let's go there. Now."

The warmth of his skin was a comforting seduction, his touch kindling her slowly blooming desire. He smelled of man and something faintly spicy, and without thinking about the consequences of her actions, Pandora leaned toward him, closing the distance between them.

"Okay." There was only one thing she wanted to do at that moment. One thing that would ease her pain, take her away from the chaos that threatened to drown her. One thing she wanted to touch, to savor.

And it was inches away from her face.

She lifted her lips to his, feeling his body grow taut as he slipped both arms around her and pulled her to the hard planes of his chest. He kissed her back, gently, a mere brush of his mouth. Her breasts ached as he crushed them, her nipples responding to the firm pressure and the slight abrasion as he tumbled her down to lie next to him on the bed.

And then...and then...there was no more bed, just soft moss cushioning her as Cheney slid his hands around and over her naked body.

She looked around, awed by the moonlight that had replaced the low light from her bedside lamp. There were thickly leafed trees moving to and fro in a delicate breeze—stars above peeking down on the tiny glade he'd created for them.

Choking a gasp, she realized they lay in the same place she'd seen in the dream, skin to skin, body to body. "You're doing this."

"A gift. Something to enjoy. A little escape. God knows we both need it." He kissed her again, a touch of his lips, still restrained. Until her own moved beneath his and his body shuddered as he released his passion and began to devour her.

His tongue licked along the seam of her mouth and she willingly opened for him, letting it inside, dueling with it, daringly learning the contours of his mouth even as he learned hers.

He held her tightly against him, and without breaking the kiss he rolled, pulling her astride his body. She lay on him, mouth to mouth, breast to chest, aware of his erection hardening between them.

It felt right, liberating, and oh so arousing. The air swept between her thighs as her knees slid to either side of his hips, and she dimly realized she was growing damp, her own desire beginning to prepare her body for what it sensed was to come.

His hands found her shoulders and pushed, separating their lips and urging her upward to sit on him. "Let go, Pandora. You're safe here with me. Be the part of you that wants to be free right now. It's all an illusion and just the two of us. I know who you are—it's time for you to find out as well."

His hands cupped her breasts, toying with the peaked nipples, teasing them and sending bolts of tingling electricity down through her body to her pussy. She ached, both between her legs and up her spine—her branched wings were forcing their way out of her back.

"I can feel my wings..." She tensed.

"They're beautiful. Let them out. I want to see you in just those wings and your skin. Your incredible skin..."

His hands wandered over her, finding sensitive places, stroking them and then moving on to another place that caught his fancy. And all the while her wings grew, opening a part of her that had been shuttered for so very long.

When his fingers dipped to her mound and began to toy with her moist folds, she gasped.

"Don't hold back." He gazed at her body. "This is for you. Stop trying to prevent this, Pandora. Accept it. Enjoy it."

Since his thumb had found her clitoris at that precise moment she was pretty much helpless to do anything else *but* enjoy it. Her head fell back and her hair flew wildly around, sliding over her wings in a movement that was a sensual caress all by itself.

The trees shushed softly and she waited for her toes to lengthen. But strangely, that didn't happen. Perhaps it was because Cheney continued to tease her pussy and encourage her with murmured words she could barely hear.

Perhaps it was because she'd found herself drifting in the delight of his touch, or the fact that she was now caressing her own breasts, pinching the nipples slightly, augmenting every single thing he was doing to her.

And when his hands gripped her buttocks and tugged her toward his mouth, she forgot she even *had* toes.

When his tongue began to play within her swollen folds, Pandora forgot every single thing up to and including her own name.

She simply let go.

With slow strokes, he brought her to the edge, kept her trembling there until she dug her fingernails into his shoulders and sobbed, this time with need not sadness. "God, oh God…"

"I know." He mumbled the words, giving her a second to catch her breath. "There's more."

And back he went, nuzzling her, thrusting his tongue deeply, squeezing and pulling a little on her buttocks, adding a frisson of wild pleasure to the madness possessing her.

She shuddered, her wings shook in the night air, and she tumbled loosely into a void, spinning with the waves of orgasm sweeping her toward the crest. Her head lolled limply, her body began to spasm and for a few seconds a strangely wonderful energy flooded through her, an indescribable sensation of fulfillment that was partly due to Cheney and his mouth and partly from something else.

Closing her eyes, she rode it out, as a small whimper escaped her lips.

Before the last tiny ripple had ceased, he moved. Sitting up, he slid her down to rest between his open legs, her thighs clasping his hips, her ankles behind him. His cock thrust against her softness and she blinked as he settled her.

"Put me inside you, Pandora. Trust me. Take me, all of me. I need this as much as you do."

In this position, her wings were free to move—and so was she. Tentatively she reached between them and positioned the swollen head at the entrance to her body. Then watched as he inched inward.

He was watching too, and that knowledge—the sheer erotic pleasure of sharing this moment—blew her mind to smithereens.

Cheney was having a hard time holding the illusion together. His body was screaming loud and clear with a frantic urge to bury himself to the hilt inside Pandora. Stunned by the ferocity of his need, he struggled to maintain the simplest of surroundings—something which had never happened to him before.

He'd created scenarios for lovemaking many times and in many different ways, all of which had held up nicely until both parties were limp and sated.

This? This was so completely different, so overwhelming, he was damn near beside himself as he fought to hold everything together in that particular part of his brain while the rest of his focus fled south and landed squarely in his cock.

Which even then was slipping slowly into Pandora.

A groan escaped him as she welcomed him into the fiery heat of her body, a slick progress both of them watched. He wasn't sure either of them were breathing—he certainly wasn't, unwilling to break the magic with anything as mundane as a gasp for air.

The sound of the trees around them was the only noise—a warm susurration of leaves and branches shedding tiny rays of green light in an aura around Pandora. He didn't know if she felt it—if she was aware that she drew something unique from them.

Like him, she seemed oblivious to everything except their joining. And when it was complete, when their bodies met and Cheney was all the way inside her—well, there was no need for words.

Their heads rose in tandem, their gazes met and he wouldn't have been surprised if a chorus of angels had burst into song. It was *that* good.

Experimentally, he began to move, a slight shift of his hips. Within the blink of an eye she picked up the rhythm of it, aligning herself to meet his thrusts and withdrawing as he slid backward only to return again, pulling him deeply with her still trembling inner muscles.

Her sheath was slippery, coated with hot juices, snug and—he thought fancifully—designed specifically for him. Rocking this way he could watch her face, see her expressions as her arousal grew once more.

He knew when she began to rise again, not only by the tiny quivers of her body, but by the hushed gasps of her breath. He held her close, loving how her nipples brushed his chest, enjoying the sensation every bit as much as she did.

His hands stroked her spine, toyed with her hair and gently caressed the base of her wings, something she responded to with sighs of pleasure.

As the pace of their loving increased, Cheney noticed a faint aura shimmering around her. Tiny rays of light, twinkling green and silver, began to encompass her as she drifted into a sensual haze, her body as intent as his on reaching the ultimate goal.

He realized she was taking something—or being given something—from the trees he'd created for their illusion. Spider-web strands of energy were flowing into Pandora's body, and as they did so, her wings softened and shrank.

He couldn't tell if she was aware of what was happening, since her eyes were dark and vague as she tumbled into the sexual storm. She was doing what he'd told her to—letting go of everything that had held this side of her back for too long.

All these thoughts scrambled for a foothold in his brain, but he didn't have the time or the energy to examine them closely. What they were doing—the way their bodies meshed, separated then joined again—it was just too much for him to deal with.

And when Pandora began to choke back sobs, when her body started to clench at his cock, to ripple around him in ever-quickening spasms—he lost it.

The illusion winked out and they were back on her bed, naked and locked in the onrush of orgasm.

Without a second thought, Cheney pushed her down onto her back and thrust hard, pounding his body deeply into her, vaguely aware that her legs had clasped him, her ankles locked behind him as she pulled him even farther inside.

It was fierce, wonderful and blindingly overwhelming.

And it was way beyond anything he could ever have imagined or created in an illusion. This was real and he could do nothing but surrender to it. The magic he'd used vanished in an instant, leaving him mortal, tingling with a burst of electric sparks creeping around the base of his spine, balls that were tight and hard as they slapped against Pandora's softness and a need to orgasm that had his back teeth clenched so hard his jaw hurt.

As the woman beneath him began to come, to tense and shiver and grip his cock with urgent spasms, he let go, ramming into her and letting all that he was pour freely from his cock in an eruption of sensation that had his breath stopping in his lungs.

It seemed like eons before they expanded again, and during those incredible moments when his world flashed white and silver and turned upside down, Cheney felt her *with* him, felt the energy vibrating

between them, sensed so much more than just her body. For those seconds, he became part of her even as she became part of him.

This simple act of mating, of loving, of joining in the most basic way, had united more than their bodies. The door in his mind opened to her, offering her his illusions. He felt her enter as he slid into a place where nature spoke in a language he suddenly knew. Where the forests talked to each other and he could listen, drawing knowledge and comfort from their soft whispers.

Something somewhere was telling him that this was how lovemaking should be. A complete and total sharing of mind, body and spirit.

And something else was telling him he probably ought to be scared out of his skin. But at that instant he felt Pandora's flash of wonder as she became one with his illusions. And everything suddenly clicked into place, astounding him with how *right* it felt.

The shudders wracked them both as they orgasmed, physically releasing desires long suppressed. And it wracked them mentally as well, uniting them on a plane neither knew existed.

All too soon, it was over and he felt her legs slide away from his hips as she softened beneath him. His cock, exhausted and limp, slipped from her pussy lips as he moved. He wanted to sob as her heat released him, but he knew he was probably crushing her.

He tumbled to her side and drew her against him, making a halfhearted effort to straighten the covers. He failed miserably, but was so content he really didn't care if his ass was sticking out into the cool air of the room. It could freeze solid and drop off for all he cared.

Right now, all was good in his world.

Of course, given that he was holding a woman tightly in his arms, he knew there would have to be some sort of after-bliss conversation.

"My wings." She shifted slightly. "They're gone."

He shrugged. "I don't understand what the hell happened. And, being a man, I have absolutely no brains at the moment, since I just shot them all into you."

"Understood." She yawned. "When you get them back, we'll figure out what that just was." Her hand moved to settle comfortably on his chest. "I'm glad I didn't turn into a tree." And with that, she was asleep.

Cheney moved his head a little on the pillow and looked down at the tangled mass of red hair covering his arms. She had worried about turning into a tree? That sex would bring out some kind of evergreen transformation during orgasm or something? That he'd have spurted his come into a tree trunk? Fucking shit. That would have been an incredibly bad thing for both of them, knotholes notwithstanding. No wonder she'd put a lock on her AG side and controlled her sexual impulses around anything with...er...wood.

He sighed. There were so many jokes about "wood" and "wood". And so little time to come up with just the right one.

#### Wynne Hayworth

He'd just have to give it his best shot. And then stand back in case that redheaded temper of hers didn't appreciate the humor.

Smiling at the image, Cheney's eyes drifted closed and he slept—like a log.

### Chapter Thirteen

Sunlight danced across her eyelids and woke Pandora from one of the best night's sleep she'd had in a long time. Lazily, she uncurled herself and stretched cat-like, simply enjoying the warmth on her naked limbs.

God. I'm naked.

The memories of the night flooded back, along with an odd assortment of aches and stiffness. She wasn't sure whether to be enraptured by the sensations or crawl back under the covers and pretend it never happened.

She decadently indulged in the former since the latter wouldn't solve anything. It certainly wouldn't give her the right words to use when facing someone who had completely shattered her preconceived notions about sex, intimacy and being a dryad.

The place next to her was empty, she discovered. Relieved that the inevitable morning-after-sex confrontation was to be postponed, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, staggered a little when trying to stand and eventually stumbled to the bathroom where a hot shower did a lot to restore her equanimity and ease the slight soreness between her legs.

She found her underwear and jeans neatly folded on a shelf, obviously washed since they were both clean and neither smelled smoky. There was another of his sweatshirts ready for her as well. She chuckled to herself as she slipped it on over her bare skin. The idea of washing a bra had defeated him, it would seem.

Feeling a little underdressed but at least semi-human, she followed the scent of coffee and bacon to the kitchen, pulling her hair back into a makeshift ponytail.

Cheney was there, spatula in hand, looking very much at home as he did things with eggs and bacon, and toast popped up, golden brown and fragrant. Pandora's mouth watered, but it was arguable that Cheney, bare-chested, bare-footed and clad only in snug jeans, was every bit as delectable as the food.

He looked up and smiled, starting a furnace simmering low in her belly. Shit. I'm in big trouble now.

"Coffee?" He nodded at the pot. "Breakfast'll be ready in a minute."

She shook her head. "You made coffee. You cooked breakfast." She looked down at her jeans. "I can't believe you even washed my clothes." She dropped down onto one knee on the kitchen floor and grinned up at him. "Cheney Fisher, will you be my wife?"

"Hmmm." His expression swept her with a wave of heat.

She stood. "I understand. You need some time to think about it."

"This is so sudden." He batted his eyelashes at her, then pointed the spatula at a cupboard. "Grab a couple of mugs, would you? Time to eat."

She did so, glancing at the clock on the wall. "We're meeting Buck at ten, I think you said?"

He nodded and carried two plates to the table. "We'll drive over to Karl's and meet him there."

"Okay." She poured cream into her coffee, sipped and sighed in deep appreciation. "Okaaaaay. *Now* I'm human again."

Cheney lifted an eyebrow at her and munched his toast.

She blushed. "Relatively speaking."

"I guess this means the marriage proposal is withdrawn."

"Yeah, sorry. It was a momentary weakness induced by a severe attack of domesticity and caffeine deprivation." She attacked the food with a strong appetite for someone who usually grabbed something on the run for breakfast.

"Used and abused." Cheney slumped dramatically. "Story of my life."

She chuckled. "Give it a rest, Fisher."

"So..." He paused and buttered a piece of toast. "Since I've got an expert at my table, maybe you can help me out."

She looked at him curiously, anticipating some legal question.

"It's this terrible case of morning wood." He glanced down at his crotch. "I'm wondering if you can suggest something I can do about it, seeing as how you're uniquely equipped to understand the problem."

She shook her head and smiled wryly. "Been working on that one for a while?"

"As a matter of fact, I had several others. But that one seemed to fit with breakfast."

"Remind me not to be here for dinner."

"Ouch. Funny girl."

They were sparring, she realized, verbally dueling with each other, a battle of wits softened by the knowledge of how well their bodies fit together. And she relished every minute of it.

"You give great eggs." She finished her plate and leaned back with a contented smile.

"Re-thinking making an honest woman out of me?" His lips curved in amusement.

"I'll get back to you on that. I have to see how well you clean house first." One thought led to another. "Which reminds me...what's happening with Roz and the kids?"

"They're staying with Roz today and with any luck going from there to their new home. I'm going to grab an hour later on to see them."

She nodded. "Cool. I'm so happy that's working out."

He stood and collected the plates. "Here's how I see the schedule. Meet Buck over at Karl's. I'm thinking Lian will be with him. Probably the best thing is to send you girls off shopping after that."

He rinsed the plates and stacked them in the dishwasher, oblivious of the frown Pandora was shooting at his back. "Girls" indeed. *Hmph*.

"That'll give you a chance to pick up what you need for the upcoming week, and Buck and I can go over some of this whole madness and see if anything shakes out when we put our heads together." He straightened. "I'll drop by Roz's and take care of things there, then we can all meet for dinner someplace. Whaddya think?"

Munching the last piece of bacon she'd swiped, Pandora nodded. "Sounds good to me."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Counselor."

"Pound sand, Detective."

"We've got to work on your witty repartee."

It was a promise he kept in the car, teasing her, correcting her acerbic comments and making her laugh. Then he glanced at her, his face momentarily sober. "Speaking of eggs..."

"We are?"

"One thing I forgot to ask. In the heat of the moment it slipped my mind."

She grinned. "Don't wanna be a daddy, huh?" It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what he'd forgotten, since she'd never even thought about it, let alone wondered if she should do the asking.

"Not right now."

"No problem. I've had my shots. I don't want to be a mommy right now either. My eggs are napping."

He released a pent-up breath. "Whew. Good to know. I've had mine too, but I worry about my extra energetic little swimmers—they're champions, you know..."

He was joking around, but Pandora felt pretty much the same way. She wasn't ready to have a child, hence the NB protection. No baby for her. When both partners had contraceptive shots, the road was clear. If only one was up to date, there was always a risk. A small one, but a risk that could turn into a tax deduction in nine months.

She didn't need another tax deduction. Her losses in the fire would take care of that.

"Here we are. And Buck's beaten us to it by the looks of it." He parked next to a large truck she recognized as his partner's.

Lian opened the door before Cheney could knock, introductions were performed and they all walked quietly through the dark store, past the variety of antiques and not-so-antiques, giving Pandora a chance to assess Buck's wife.

Her Oriental blood showed in the beautifully slanted black eyes, the slender figure and the air of inscrutability she probably didn't even know she had. The rest of her blood clearly came from the Swedish supermodel line—shining blonde hair falling down her spine and legs that seemed to go on for miles even though she was shorter than Pandora. Who sighed and envied her the ability to look up at Buck. Who

looked back with such an expression of besottedness it made Pandora smile. Yeah, they were perfectly matched. The fair-haired beauty and the sharply dark detective.

Then Cheney took her hand and smiled at her—with a look that heated her blood. It might not have merited the description of besotted, but it warmed her to her toes. Right now, she could live with that.

The lab purred with activity, machines softly beeping and flashing lights every now and again in a dazzling display of technological fireworks.

"Wow." Cheney looked around. "This place is humming."

"Literally," Buck agreed. "Hey, Karl?"

"Here." Karl's handsome head popped up from behind something large, shiny and metallic which might have been a filing cabinet crossed with the guts of a starship. "Got a few things for you guys." He leered at Pandora. "Hi, beautiful. Wanna play around later?"

"Give it up, Karl." Lian sighed. "Ignore him, Pandora. He likes to think ultra-horny is part of his charm."

"Someday I'll show you ladies what you're missing." Karl snickered unrepentantly. "It'll spoil you for other men."

"Yeah yeah. Bigger and longer than everyone else." Buck snorted. "What you got, Einstein?"

"Einstein was an amateur hacker compared to me." Karl seated himself comfortably on a complex chair and hit buttons, rising to the height of a workstation equipped with state-of-the-art gizmos. His fingers adeptly moved over the infrared keyboard, and the large screen on the wall sprang to life.

Cheney suppressed a pang of envy. When it came to monitors, size mattered, in his opinion. Karl had them all beat with this one, which was now flickering with an assortment of files, numbers and equations.

Karl touched one or two and pulled them to the center. "Here are the DNA results of that sample. Some of it was degraded, some of it was useless. But being the genius I am, I still managed to pull some usable data."

"I'll suspend my comments on your modesty until a later time." Lian frowned at the images. "What does it mean?"

Karl ran his hand through his thick sandy-blond hair. "It means that your sample came from some kind of chimera."

Cheney thought about that. "Like a compound creature or something? Bits and pieces of other creatures?"

"Succinctly put, tall one." Karl nodded. "Genetically speaking, a chimera is a critter with more than one population of cells. Those cells originate in different zygotes, two early embryos fused together, for example. The populations keep their own characteristics and the resulting critter is a mixture of both sets of tissues. In humans, it's very rare but has an inherited component—a genetic trait, if you will. Sometimes

it's caused by a transfusion during pregnancy and in the past, in vitro fertilization resulted in a few cases." He paused. "There'll be a quiz later. Why aren't you taking notes?" He blinked at Pandora. "I'll give you the answers if you take your clothes off."

Cheney sighed. "Moving on..."

"Yeah." Karl turned back to the screen and pulled up a simpler file. "Good news is that I was able to identify most of the stuff. Now for the bad news." He expanded the file's contents to fill the screen. "Your critter had more than two parts. It was a super-chimera, if you will. I identified vampire DNA, along with some shifter, a dash of Fae and a strain of wolf I haven't run into for a while. Very wild." He spun on his chair to face them, his face devoid of humor for once. "The thing that I found most disturbing was a trace of DNA I had to hunt for." He paused. "It turned out to be something I thought long gone. It was *ghoul*."

"Fuck." The oath flew from Buck's lips even as Cheney was thinking it.

"What? Fuck what?" Pandora's eyes were wide.

Neither man needed to be a mind reader at this particular instant. Cheney knew that Buck's protective instincts were as strong as his own.

"Ghouls are nasty buggers. Fortunately, on the rare occasions they crop up, they don't survive for long. Something about a genetic weakness." Buck stared at Karl. "Right, Karl?"

The small man's gaze darted from Buck to Cheney and back again. "Right, Detective Smarty Pants. Somebody's been reading science manuals again." He laughed. "Lian, you need to take this man to bed more often and screw his brains out. Otherwise he'll start thinking he's actually got some and try giving me a run for my money."

Lian shrugged. "I do my best. But what about this thing of Pandora's? I still don't understand..."

"Me neither." Pandora shook her head.

Cheney cursed under his breath. He needed time with Buck, he had a dozen questions for Karl and he didn't want the women anywhere near that conversation. Sure it was archaic. Sure both of 'em could hold their own, in the brains department *and* in the courage department. But he was still old-fashioned enough to want to protect what was his. Testosterone was one thing that time and the Afterglow hadn't changed.

And at that precise moment, Cheney Fisher had a flash of insight that rocked him psychologically and dried the spit in his mouth.

Pandora was his.

Seconds later, the world now settled back to where it was supposed to be, he turned to listen to Karl, leaning against the edge of a desk and standing close to the woman who was going to be beside him for the rest of his life, whether she knew it or not.

Oblivious to Cheney's mental lifestyle readjustment, Karl continued his lecture on the structure of a chimera.

"So, in essence, this creature was assembled, for lack of a better word. Built from a variety of components that do not coexist well in a single entity. Hence the disintegration when it tried to assume its real appearance."

"The pieces flew apart?"

"That's one way to put it, yes." Karl nodded approvingly at Pandora's comment. "And thank God for that. It wouldn't have been a lap dog, that's for sure. Unless you're into having your lap eaten by your pet." His eyes turned to Pandora's crotch.

"Moving *on*..." Buck interrupted that line of thought.

"Spoilsport." Karl sighed. "Anyway, girls and boys, that's the bottom line. There are still a few angles I'm working on, pulling as much as I can out of what I've got and theorizing the rest. But you have the general idea."

"Yeah." Cheney nodded. "Thanks, Karl." He turned to Buck, who could always read his intentions if not his thoughts. "I guess that wraps it up."

"I have a couple of other things for Karl. Some official business. You wanna hang here with me for a bit while these two go wreak havoc in the stores?"

Seeing Pandora open her mouth to protest and Lian's eyebrows curving into a frown, Cheney nodded.

"Go for it ladies. Max out the cards." He waved a hand at the equipment. "This'll be boring as hell anyway." He glanced pointedly at the sweatshirt Pandora was wearing. "And I'll be needing *that* back soon. I'm low on casual wear."

Lian wrinkled her nose at Buck. "I can tell when we're not wanted." She chuckled. "It's sports, isn't it? Mega screen, probably something masquerading as a fridge with some beer in it. Typical Sunday. Typical guys. Wanna go for it, Pandora?"

Outnumbered, Pandora shrugged. "Okay. I guess so."

"Here." Buck tossed keys at Lian. "Take the truck. Just don't fill it. I didn't get a raise this year."

"Caveman mentality, honey. What's yours is mine, remember?"

The lighthearted chatter continued until the women had left the lab and Cheney looked pointedly at Buck. "She's good."

"That's why I married her."

"I didn't mean that."

"I know." Buck smiled. "She sensed we needed to get some more details. And she'll pump me for 'em later, let me tell you."

"Lucky you."

"Hey. You're not doing bad in that department either, pal."

"Shut the fuck up."

"Okay."

"Time to get to the real dirt?"

"Oh yeah." Buck nodded. "Gimme, Karl."

"Ghouls." Karl, who had patiently waited out the byplay, spoke the word with a measure of disgust. "You may have seen the report that one cropped up recently."

"We got it," confirmed Buck.

"This thing wasn't an accident of nature, guys. Ghoul DNA doesn't just crop up. It's rare and the timing makes me think somebody went to great lengths to get some of it." He grimaced. "All the evidence I have suggests that this was deliberately created. And that's not something I'd want my women to know either."

"Shit." Cheney paced, thoughts rampaging through his mind. "I found a link between the place that thing came from and the Svengali Project."

"Fuckin' hell." Buck froze. "That's not anything I wanted to hear."

"I know." Turning to Karl, Cheney gave him a few links and within moments all three heads were focused on the screen, reading the basics—and more—of Svengali and its aftermath.

Finally, Karl leaned back. "Well, that's it. Prendergast's research areas could easily overlap with DNA manipulation. But how that woman could be doing it, I have no freakin' clue. No matter how smart she is, she's still eighty-five years old."

"It's circumstantial at best." The cop in Cheney wriggled with discomfort. "We've got no grounds at all for a search warrant."

"But there's nothing to stop us taking an evening stroll." Buck touched the map file and brought it up on the screen. "Behind the Larson estate is public land."

"Oh, and look here." Karl's fingers flew. "A solar power unit."

"What's so strange about that?"

"Ordinarily, nothing. But this is a big one, all the bells and whistles. I doubt one old lady is using that kind of power on a daily basis, no matter how big her house is."

"Hmm." Buck tilted his head and studied the screen. "Any way to find out how much power she's drawing from that thing?"

"Sure." Karl fiddled with a few things. "Oh wow. Lookee here. She's pulling around ten times what she should be. She's running that unit at full capacity. That, my friends, might well be what you smart detective types call a *clue*." He lifted his eyebrows at them as he turned in his chair.

Since private individual power figures weren't public information or accessible without some kind of official warrant, Cheney overlooked the smart-mouthed comment. They'd have missed this if it wasn't for Karl.

"I'm thinking all of this is suggesting a field trip, partner."

Buck nodded. "Yep. Thinking the same thing myself."

Karl sighed. "Love it when you lusty lads talk cop." He switched to a topological map. "My suggestion? Look for anything indicating an underground facility. I'm not seeing any hints of it from this perspective, but it's the only logical assumption." He leaned back. "Oh, and don't get yourselves shot or anything. Wear boots and take a sweater."

"Yes, Mom." Buck grinned.

"Weeelll." Karl's mobile face turned wicked. "I'd be willing to bet my best spectrum analyzer that neither of you cowboys is gonna tell the little women what you're going to do. So I figured I'd be the voice of reason."

"Smart man." Cheney nodded at him. "So the only question is when?"

Sadly, the answer came more quickly than either man had anticipated.

Not soon enough.

## Chapter Fourteen

The news broke in the media first thing Monday morning. It wasn't news to Pandora, however. Her shopping trip had screamed to a halt when both women's cell phones rang and they hurried back to the truck with a modest amount of packages.

Lian gunned it and got them back to Cheney's, where Buck whisked her off with barely a goodbye, leaving Pandora alone, since her "landlord" was already at the station.

Buck's face said it all. It was bad.

Asking no questions, Pandora waved them off. A couple of hours later, when she'd unpacked and tried not to think too much about what might be happening, she got a quick call.

"Sorry, Pandora." He sounded harassed and edgy. "This one's a bitch and a half. I'll be late."

"Don't worry about me." She cradled the phone next to her ear. "You okay?"

There was a pause. "Right now? No. This one's pretty bad. I thought I'd had enough of 'em with that basilisk killer. Seems Buck and I get cursed with FIS duty all too often."

FIS. First Investigator on Scene. "Do your thing. Don't worry about me, I'm fine."

"Thanks. I'll be late, I expect."

"I'll leave the porch light on."

A click signaled the end of the conversation and Pandora swore at herself. "Leave the porch light on? What the hell am I, some kind of ancient housewife? Sheesh." She shook her head.

True to his word, Cheney was late. Midnight had already passed when she heard him pull into the driveway, and within minutes he was sliding naked into bed with her.

"You okay?" She shivered a little at the cool touch of his skin.

"I am now. Why aren't you in my bed?" He yawned. "Never mind. You're here. That's all that matters."

She turned in his arms, letting the heat from her body seep into his. Spooned together, she could almost sense the exact moment he tumbled into sleep.

So much for hot sex.

That night set the rhythm for the rest of the week, and when Pandora saw the headlines she realized why. It was a horrific killing, the details of which were gruesomely spread across the front pages of every news outlet around.

Her legal experience told her that only the information released by the authorities was making it out into the public domain. In reality, the crime was probably ten times *worse*.

It was touted as a savage and brutal killing, a young man dismembered in a stall located in the men's room of a transit station. That was enough to frustrate the cops, she knew. DNA would be all over the place, no matter how rigorously or regularly it was cleaned. Bleach was bleach. What hadn't been destroyed would be overshadowed by multiple donors. It would take a helluva lot of time to sort out the perp's from everyone else's.

The victim had been identified as a person with no known address, a euphemism for a transient or perhaps an ex-con. Who knew? It was still possible for people to vanish from the system, although much harder since Afterglow. However, the station was on the fringes of the Bogs, a part of town where things like criminal records were largely ignored and life tended toward the self-contained. The Bogs took care of its own, and everybody understood that and left it alone most of the time.

Pandora sighed, understanding why Cheney would be working long shifts and coming home grey with exhaustion. She filled the time by focusing on her own job, settling the aftermath of the fire and dealing with the routine of legal matters. She was back at work, avoiding any cases which might overlap with Cheney—there was that whole conflict-of-interest thing to consider—and waiting for him to climb into bed next to her whenever he finally called it quits for the day.

She asked no questions and made no demands. She was simply there, knowing instinctively that he needed her beside him as he slept.

A place she was content to occupy.

The evening solitude gave her a chance to reexamine her newly discovered self, the dryad part of her. No longer afraid of it, she found a fresh pleasure in being outside in Cheney's back garden at sunset, opening her mind fully—for the first time—to what and who she really was.

Her wings emerged comfortably now, and she'd learned that she could absorb all that the trees were sending to her without putting down roots. Now that these skills were becoming more efficient, there was no need for such direct contact, no need to plunge into the earth to learn what she needed to know.

All she had to do was open that door in her mind—and listen.

It was liberating and wonderful, and it became one of the favorite parts of her day, right behind the one where strong arms encircled her and soft snores tickled the nape of her neck.

Yeah, she was falling more deeply into a relationship with Cheney Fisher every day. But oddly enough, she had absolutely no inclination to pull back. Was this love? She didn't know. It wasn't anything like she'd imagined, and given that her only experience had been years ago when she was still young and emotional, she had no guidelines or measuring system for this stuff.

She liked to think she was achieving a new kind of balance within her mind. The fierce drive to succeed as a lawyer was now tempered with the magic of her AG talent. Her job was still as important as

ever...but she could step away from it, leave it behind her. Something she'd not been able to do until she'd come to terms with the rest of her abilities. It was oddly refreshing and in some ways made her better at what she did.

It took a little time for Pandora to allow herself the luxury of those stolen moments in the garden, but once she did—well, it was liberating.

She knew she'd have to find a new place to live sometime soon. There were so many things she should have been doing, like making lists, viewing apartments, organizing her own life. But she was reluctant to do any of them at this particular time. She felt she was giving something back to Cheney by being there for him, returning in a small way the favors and help she'd received.

She was a firm believer in reciprocity.

Which had a lot to do with her brazen actions late in the week when he tossed and turned beside her, deep asleep and yet still troubled.

A groan awoke her, the sheets were tangled around his limbs and his mouth was open, sounds of pain whooshing out with each breath.

Rising onto her elbow, she looked at him, noting the rapid rise and fall of his chest and the flicker of his eyes as they shifted behind closed lids.

He was dreaming. And having a doozy of a nightmare, too, by the looks of it.

They'd shared a dream before...perhaps they could do it again.

Not really sure how to do it, Pandora rested a hand on his heart and settled beside him, opening herself to his thoughts, much as she opened her mind to the trees in his garden.

She closed her eyes and relaxed, waiting to see if he would let her in or if there was some kind of link she could tap into. She drifted, floated in those idyllic but brief eons between sleep and wakefulness, keeping Cheney uppermost in her mind as her body eased.

And then she was there. With him.

And her breath stopped for long seconds as she saw what he was seeing.

Carnage. Utter and total carnage.

Blood was everywhere, pools and gobs of it. She'd seen enough crime-scene photos to recognize arterial splatter. She wasn't expecting the lumps of still-raw flesh or the bile that rose in her throat when she realized the lumps had been a human being.

Nor was she expecting the frustrated agony radiating from Cheney as she moved behind him to view the scene. He was way past horrified. And losing himself in anger at whatever did this obscene thing. She touched him absently as her mind struggled to comprehend.

Cheney whipped around. "No. Not this. You can't see this."

She woke to find him shaking her.

"I will not share this with you. Nobody should be here who doesn't have to be. Get out. Please. Now."

Blinking, she stared at him, reaching for his arms and gripping them. "I'm sorry. It's okay. You were having a nightmare."

"Oh Jesus." He fell back onto the pillows beside her. "I never thought...never even considered..."

"Stop it." Crossly, she poked him with a finger. "I'm an adult. A lawyer. I've seen photos, even been to a crime scene or two. Sure, it's bad. Real bad. But stop protecting me. Whatever we've got going here lets us share on a unique level." She lay back. "Stop trying to be a Neanderthal male and just suck it up, will you?"

He choked back a weak chuckle. "That's nice. Now why don't you tell me what you really mean?"

"Damn it, Cheney, I'm serious." Up on the elbow again. "Do I know why we've got this weird dream thing going? No. Did I deliberately set out to invade your privacy? No. Did I want to stop you from hurting? To help you the way you've helped me? Bet your ass." Her fingers touched him, reassuring herself he was there, he was awake.

"You do help me." His muscles loosened a little as she stroked him. "You help by being here. By sharing these nights with me. I thought I was doing okay alone." He sighed as her hand drifted to his stomach. "I was wrong. God, I'm tired. Tired of this case and all the questions it raises that none of us can answer."

"You're frustrated."

"You have no idea."

"You need to relax."

A different kind of tension rose around them as Pandora's wandering hand moved even farther down and investigated the terrain south of Cheney's border.

"I..." He gulped as she circled his cock gently, then sighed again as the soft strokes aroused him. "I guess I do, come to think of it."

"Then let me help you."

His body eased into a comfortable position as she moved to take him fully into her hand and bent her head over the hardening length of him.

"Okay."

Cheney fought a brief battle with himself—and lost. He knew he'd been a freakin' bear over the last few days. He'd been swallowed up by the frustrations and futility of the investigation, worked too much and drowned himself in way too much caffeine at the same time.

He also knew Pandora didn't expect him to wait on her, hand and foot, but was about as independent as a woman could be while sharing a guy's house.

That was all good and probably one of the reasons he was so crazy about her. She asked for nothing and accepted what he could and could not give. Ditto on his part. It worked and if it could work during a time like this...well, hell.

He had suffered guilt pangs, mostly when he slid into bed beside her and took her into his arms, only to fall asleep within minutes of her scent drifting into his nostrils. He wanted her fiercely. She lurked at the back of his mind during his every waking hour.

But he was driving himself to exhaustion. Sometimes maybe the magazines were right. A cuddle was as good as hot sex.

At this particular moment, however, with a part of his body rigid and erect and held in Pandora's hand—fuck it. He was only a guy after all.

The drift of her breath across the swollen head sent shivers of pleasure up Cheney's spine. He closed his eyes, sensing the brush of her hair on his naked skin as she bent to his cock. There was a swift heat from her mouth and her hand slid down to squeeze the base while—oh thank you *God*—she took him between her lips.

All thoughts of the case he was investigating vanished with the slick warmth of her tongue as she roamed up and down his sensitive cock. Her hands wandered, one squeezing him gently while the other caressed the sac beneath and teased the fragile contents with easy rolling motions.

She was attentive and he sensed a little hesitancy in her movements, as if this wasn't something she was used to doing. Which went straight to his male ego and brought a smile to his face as she tentatively sucked as much of him as she could. The smile froze as the pressure from her mouth increased, tugging strings connected to just about every cell in his body as his balls tightened in response.

Opening his eyes, he looked down at her, the red hair glinting in the low light of the bedroom, her expression intense, her eyelids almost closed as she explored him. It was an image he knew would stay in his brain forever.

And it was absolute confirmation of his earlier epiphany, if he'd needed any. Pandora would be the only woman for him. The final page had been written, the book of his life now given a heroine and a potential last chapter filled with that happily-ever-after stuff he'd never completely believed. He wasn't sure he believed it now, but with her...all things seemed possible.

Sure, he knew getting some really sweet oral sex made a guy emotional, and most often got him thinking with his dick instead of his rational mind. But this went beyond. Way beyond. She was *loving* him with her mouth, giving him a pleasure he'd neither expected nor demanded.

It was an act of genuine unselfishness, a delight that told him he wasn't the only one falling deeper into whatever it was that held them together as a couple. The bliss she was creating relaxed him, and he slowly allowed that door in his mind to open. The one leading down the path to the inexplicable place where illusions became real.

This time, there was no illusion. There was only Pandora. And he hoped she'd accept his invitation.

As he drifted, torn between the physical plane of sex and the intense psychic pleasure, he felt her tense, then relax, her mouth still touching his cock, her tongue now running up and down the ridges and teasing the sweet spot beneath the flared head.

He sighed and shivered at the sensation—just as his essence felt hers join him in the heart of his Afterglow illusions.

She was there, not a spirit, not an image, but a warmth, a light—tangled with him in ways that defied explanation.

"Christ, Pandora." He ground out the words as she took him closer to the edge. "I'm gonna lose it..."

She didn't stop, didn't pause, did nothing but continue the hot slick strokes with her tongue and mingled the light of her magic with his, an arousal he was at a loss to describe. With the twin assaults reducing him to a quivering jelly, he surrendered.

And let the orgasm sweep through him, his balls pumping jets of come through his cock and into her eagerly sucking mouth. It was an explosion that racked his body with lightning bolts of pleasure and even as he shuddered his mind was erupting into a chaos of lights and stars, a maelstrom he shared with the brilliance that was Pandora.

They peaked together, he riding the crest of physical release, she a part of the fireworks dazzling his brain. Somehow he could sense her presence, indistinguishable from his own talent, merging with it and soaring in tandem, inextricably linked on a different level of existence even while her mouth sucked him dry and she swallowed hungrily.

The link—if that's what it was—opened a new dimension for Cheney. Sharing a sexual experience in such a unique way, with such a unique woman...there were no words.

And he still couldn't find any when he collapsed and fell from the peak, the otherworldly sensations receding into the heart-pounding aftermath of release.

"Oh wow." Pandora broke the silence as she moved back up the bed to lie beside him and cover them both with the sheets. "So that's what it feels like when a guy comes."

"Huh?" He stirred a little, pleased to find most of his body worked, even though his conversation skills were a bit lacking. Perhaps when his heart slowed down he'd do better.

"I felt it. I felt you come."

"You didn't have much choice." Good. He'd managed an entire sentence, complete with a verb and everything.

"I'm not talking about the physical thing, although that was a lot of fun."

"No kidding."

"I'm talking about the—the *other*." She paused. "The other thing. It was like something drew a part of me out of myself and into you. All of a sudden I could feel *my* mouth. I could feel what I was doing to you from your perspective."

"Pretty damn fantastic, huh?" He summoned the strength to turn his head and grin at her.

She thought about that for a moment or two. "It was...strange."

"Not from where I'm sitting." He yawned. "Or sprawling, to be more precise."

"I suppose we should talk about it." She yawned too.

"There's time yet." He let his mind drift pleasurably. "No hurry."

She obviously agreed, since the only answer was a soft snore.

### Chapter Fifteen

Pandora hadn't realized how much her life had changed in the short space of a week until Friday afternoon rolled around and she began packing up her paperwork.

"You done?" Samantha, her longtime assistant, poked her head in the door and blinked at the sight of her boss tidying up her desk.

"Yes, I think so. Unless you've got something else on the schedule for me I don't know about."

"It's only two thirty."

Pandora glanced at her watch. It was indeed two thirty. "Okay. It's two thirty."

"So how come you aren't asking me for next week's files to review?"

"Um..."

"If you're finished up on a Friday afternoon, you always ask me for next week's files." Sam looked at her steadily.

"Jesus. I'm that predictable?"

"Yep." Sam walked into the office and leaned a hip on the desk. "It's a man, isn't it?"

That comment surprised a sputter out of Pandora. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Completely at ease, Sam ticked off points on her fingers. "One, you've moved in with a *friend* since the fire and you haven't moved out to a new place on your own yet. Two..." another finger bent down, "...you've been wearing your hair differently. Looser. Sexier."

"Oh come on..."

"I haven't finished yet." Sam cut off her protestations. "Three, you smile when you think nobody's watching you. And it's *that* kind of smile."

"What kind of smile? Smiles come in kinds now?"

"Sure do." Sam nodded. "You've got that I'm-getting-laid-and-it's-the-best-sex-I-ever-had smile."

"Good grief."

"And four, I caught you humming in the ladies' room the other day."

"I did not hum."

"You did too. A happy hum. Couldn't mistake it." Sam grinned. "I know that hum. Hummed it myself a time or two."

"Oh Lord." Pandora crossed her hands on her desk and lowered her head with a groan. "You see too damn much."

"That's me." Sam chuckled. "However, the good thing is that I say nothing. Confidentiality is my middle name."

"No it's not. Your middle name is Almeria. I saw it on your personnel file."

"That's neither here nor there. Stop deflecting, Counselor." Sam waved away the objection. "You've got a man in your life and he's good for you. I just wanted you to know that I'm happy for you and I hope it works out." She shrugged. "And if you want to cut me loose early now and again so you can go play with him, I'm all for it."

Pandora laughed. She couldn't help it. "I should've known there was a personal angle in all this deep girl-insight stuff."

Sam smirked. "Damn straight."

"Okay." She closed her case on the few papers she might need over the weekend with a bit of a guilty snap. It probably wouldn't be touched until Monday morning, but some habits died a slow and lingering death. "You can go home early, Sam. Thank you. I'm not going to review a damn thing today. But—just so you know—I'm not going home to play with a man, as you so elegantly phrased it. I'm going home to relax and then figure out some of the insurance paperwork."

"Cool." Sam eased off the desk. "But, in my girl-insight mode, I believe it's incumbent upon me to point out that you just used an interesting expression."

"I did?"

"Yes. You said you were going *home*." She flicked a quick knowing grin at Pandora and turned to leave. "Oh, one other thing." She reached into one of the folders she held and pulled out an envelope. "This came in this morning. Perry wanted you to review the request when you have a chance."

"All right. I'll take it with me." Pandora took the letter and stuffed it into her purse. "Enjoy your weekend, Sam."

"I will. But probably not as much as you." She snickered as she left the room.

"You can be replaced, you know," Pandora yelled after her, smiling at the rude noise emanating from the outer office.

Sam had a point, though. Driving back to Cheney's, Pandora thought about the conversation and realized she was indeed driving to a place where she felt completely at home. She had none of her *stuff*, no furniture, books or even towels that belonged to her. And yet there was a rightness about it, a sense of welcome and comfort that enveloped her the minute she pulled into Cheney's driveway.

It was weird now that she was thinking about it, but weird in a good way.

She was smiling to herself as she opened the door and still smiling as she changed into jeans and a loose shirt, ready to kick back and relax.

Her briefcase sat smugly where she'd tossed it, and it could damn well stay there for all she cared. A cool soda and an absence of shoes—she was good to go. Nothing like getting a head start on the weekend. For her at least. God only knew when Cheney would be able to shake loose or even if he wanted to.

It didn't seem that they were getting any breaks on the case and she had clearly felt the frustration seeping out of his pores all week. They were both dedicated to their professions. But she was learning to leave hers behind. He was able to do that more easily, but there were still times she sensed he was haunted by what he perceived as his failures.

This whole thing was a real eye-opening experience. For both of them.

She reached for her purse and pulled out that letter Sam had given her. Perry, one of the senior partners, didn't pass stuff along idly, so he must have had a good reason to ask that Pandora review it.

She unfolded the paper and froze when she saw the signature.

Victoria P. Larson.

It couldn't be a coincidence. Could it? She sat down at the kitchen table, pushing her drink to one side, checking the name scrawled on the bottom of the page. She hadn't misread it. It was definitely from Mrs. Larson, a bold scrawl of old-fashioned script that was dark and clear.

With a tingle of apprehension she began to read the letter, which had been addressed to the law firm, not her in particular, thank God.

I am interested in reviewing and possibly altering the conditions of my estate and would appreciate assistance from a member of your staff, since your company has been highly recommended.

Well, nothing out of the ordinary there. Pandora wondered why she'd gotten this from Perry, instead of one of the estate specialists. The next paragraph answered her question.

Since I am now alone, and am dissatisfied with my previous legal counsel, I would appreciate someone from your firm contacting me to arrange for preliminary discussions. I would prefer a woman, since some things are more easily discussed when one is comfortable with one's lawyer. I shall take the liberty of assuming you have a competent female on your staff. I expect you can understand my concerns, since my estate is considerable and I will not place it in the hands of anyone less than your best.

Pandora read it again, considering the implications. Obviously the Larson estate was huge, and something her firm would be very happy to handle. And it was a compliment that she'd been given the assignment—she didn't specialize in estate law, but she could hold her own. At least long enough to get the legal end of things into the right hands at the office.

It was the timing that gnawed at her. On the surface, this was a simple request for legal assistance and representation, the sort of thing that arrived on a daily basis. But from Victoria Larson? Someone she felt—along with Cheney—might be a *person of interest*, as they liked to say in law enforcement.

Glancing at the clock, she realized it was still the afternoon. There was nothing to be risked by calling and setting up an appointment. Whether Mrs. Larson would recognize her or not was immaterial. She

would trust in Cheney's illusion talents. She hoped it would be unlikely an elderly woman could make the connection between young lovers house-shopping and an attorney in a law office.

Her curiosity now thoroughly roused, she picked up her phone and dialed.

"Larson residence." The voice was noncommittal. A maid? A housekeeper? It wasn't the lady herself. Pandora would've recognized that deep voice in an instant.

"Mrs. Larson please. I'm calling on behalf of Clark, Felix and Merryweather. Our firm received a communication from Mrs. Larson on a legal matter."

"Yes. Please hold."

Drumming her fingers on the kitchen table, a minute or so passed until there was a click next to her ear. "This is Victoria Larson."

"Good afternoon, ma'am. My name is Pandora Jackson and I'm with Clark, Felix and Merryweather. I understand we might be able to assist you with some estate matters? Your letter of inquiry was referred to me."

"Very good." She sounded almost cheerful. "I'm pleased they found a competent female to handle this matter."

"Your confidence is very gratifying. We'll do our best to meet your needs. Now, if you'd care to give me an idea of your schedule for next week, I'd be happy to set up a preliminary consultation appointment for you? How does Tuesday look?"

There was a brief pause. "That long? I really would like to get this business out of the way as soon as possible..."

Pandora thumbed through her schedule. "I can free up some time on Monday if that's better for you."

"Hmm."

Jeez, thought Pandora. Obviously used to getting her own way.

"Why not today?"

"Uhh..." The question caught Pandora off-guard.

"My housekeeper brings me tea every afternoon around four. I'd be most pleased if you could join me. Much more comfortable, don't you think? Could you work that into your schedule?"

She glanced at the clock once more, rapidly calculating the time it would take to change and drive out to the Larson place. "Well...I think I could make it..."

"After all, this is only a preliminary consultation. But I'll feel much better knowing the process has begun and that my legal affairs will be in capable hands. And you'll know what paperwork I should forward to your firm. There seems so much of it, I find it most confusing." There was a chuckle, a rough sound that wasn't very humorous. "Probably to be expected when you reach my age."

Pandora shrugged. She wasn't really being given much choice in the matter, but then again it was only a cup of tea and some initial consultation questions. How hard could that be? Plus it would give her another

chance to check out Mrs. Larson and see if it really was a pure coincidence that all this was happening right *now*, right when there were a lot of unanswered questions revolving around this particular name.

"Well, if you're sure it won't be an inconvenience..."

"Not at all, dear. I'll look forward to seeing you. Oh...how do you take your tea? Milk or lemon?"

"Milk please." She smiled at the old-fashioned question.

"Good. Me too. See you around four then. Goodbye." A click signaled the end of the conversation.

At least they shared something, even if it was only how they drank their tea.

Cheney stretched, a bone-cracking, muscle-tightening stretch that felt good but did little to ease his frustration. "I don't like it."

"Me neither."

The two detectives stood behind the one-way glass and watched the interrogation of the suspect they'd delivered an hour before. He was furtively glancing around, his fingers locked tightly together until the knuckles showed white.

Cheney hit the speaker button and they listened carefully to the dialogue.

"Honest, man. I don't remember."

"C'mon, Jantzen." The officer questioning him was a pro, Cheney knew. Give the perp time and he'd end up hanging himself if he was guilty. "We have your DNA. The clothes from your place were covered in the vic's blood. Got an explanation for that?"

"No." Jantzen looked frantic now. "No, I don't. I told ya before. I went out that night, had some drinks—the rest is a blank. I woke up miles away from that place where that dude got offed. Dunno how his blood got on me. I didn't even know it was his, for Chrissake. You think I'd have kept those clothes? I ain't stupid enough to hold onto somethin' that would make me look like a killer."

The questions went on as Cheney and Buck watched, both less than happy with the answers.

"My best guess?" Buck glanced at his partner. "He's telling the truth."

"I know." Cheney ran a hand through his hair. "Mind you, he's no saint. Dodged a couple of murder raps a while ago for lack of evidence and got a sheet a mile long for aggravated everything, assault on a couple of women, armed robbery and so on. He's done time for some of it, but not enough if you ask me. If he goes down for this it'll be no great loss."

"Agreed." Buck nodded. "But if you're thinking what I'm thinking..."

"He was controlled? He'd be a real good choice. Yeah. I'm getting that itch that tells me we caught ourselves a perp, all right. Neatly packaged too. I just don't know if he was at home in his head for this particular killing."

"So what do we do?"

Cheney was silent for a few moments, considering the options. "It'll take a while to get anything formalized. They'll hold him for the standard seventy-two, get him a lawyer, whatever." He turned to Buck. "I think it's time for a field trip out to the Larson place. I really don't give a shit if Jantzen takes the fall. He's dirt that should've been swept off the streets long ago. But if he can't remember—if he was controlled—"

"Yeah." Buck shrugged and turned to the door. "Your car or mine?"

"Come in, dear."

Pandora tucked her briefcase under her arm and walked inside the Larson mansion, following a charmingly friendly Victoria Larson. It was a hundred-eighty degree change in attitude since the last time they'd met, without a doubt. Although with luck Ms. Larson wasn't aware of it.

"Thank you for your interest in our firm." Politely, Pandora referred to the reason for her visit. Her skin was a little clammy—there was something about the house that made her uncomfortable, no matter how luxurious the surroundings.

She dismissed it as she was led into an airy room ringed with bookshelves and containing an elegant antique desk in front of a window. It was lush, obviously expensive, and the addition of a very modern computer system didn't detract from the overall impression of elegance. The carpet was thick and rich with bold colors against a highly polished wood floor.

"What a lovely room."

"I like it." Victoria gestured to a small table containing a silver tea tray and bracketed by two comfortable chairs. "I work in here quite a bit. And read too, of course. Still a great pleasure in spite of all the technological advancements." She stroked a book as she walked past to settle herself. "There's nothing like the feel of a book in one's hands. Never will be as far as I'm concerned."

They spent a few moments observing the customary pleasantries and the tea ritual, pouring, adding milk, stirring—all in a manner not unlike an old-time video. Pandora was still on edge, but kept the cup from clattering against the saucer as she lifted it to her lips. "Mmm. Very good. Thank you."

She sipped, observed Victoria's satisfied smile, then returned the cup to her table and reached for her briefcase. "I'd like to take a few notes, if I may. Some preparatory information to set up your account with us and make sure the right people are assigned."

"Of course." Victoria watched her, back straight, legs crossed at the ankles. Her face was expressionless, but her eyes—well, the word *menacing* came to Pandora's mind.

For some reason, she felt rather like a small mouse facing a snake. There was definitely something going on—some aura that was affecting her on a variety of different levels. Which was totally absurd. This woman was over eighty. What could she possibly do to Pandora?

Inside her case, her phone was flashing. Damn. It was Cheney.

Guiltily, she ignored it. She'd left him a message before she headed out, written on a large sheet of paper and positioned prominently on the kitchen counter. Okay, she probably should have called him, but deep inside she knew he'd forbid her to go. Or at least try and talk her out of coming here for this meeting.

She wasn't sure if she was ready to give him that much power over her actions. Doing someone else's bidding ran counter to her inclinations. Even if that someone was Cheney. The fact that she felt guilty about it said a lot about where they stood in relation to each other. And perhaps he was right, but what the hell. It was a chance to gather information and one she just couldn't turn down.

"Did you notice the portrait?" Victoria's voice recalled her from her wayward thoughts.

"Pardon?"

"The portrait." The older woman nodded to the wall just behind Pandora.

She turned to see a large oil painting of a formidable-looking man, seated in the traditional pose, with papers and a pen on a table next to him. "Very impressive. Who is he? A relative?"

Victoria's lips curved into a faint smile. "My grandfather. Laurence Prendergast."

"Ah."

"He was a great man, you know. Before your time, of course. But his ideas were revolutionary, and his corporation laid the foundation for so many technical advances."

"I see." Pandora blinked as a little ripple of dizziness blurred her vision for a second. She should have eaten something more substantial for lunch.

"I doubt that you do."

"Do what?"

"See, girl. See clearly."

Victoria's face was wavering now, and Pandora found herself gripping the arms of her chair. "I don't understand."

"You will." There was nothing polite or gentle about that tone of voice. "My grandfather was the greatest man who ever lived. Few recognized it, and those who did were put to death because of it."

"Uh..."

"His work. His work with DNA mutations. Brilliant, groundbreaking. The stuff of scientific miracles. But was he revered for the genius he was?" She bared her teeth and answered her own question. "No. Of course not. He was ruined."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Pandora fought for clarity. "I can't say as I recall the matter."

"You wouldn't." Victoria sighed. "But all that's about to change, you know."

"It is?"

"Oh yes." The woman placed her cup on the tray and leaned back to stare at Pandora. "I imagine your wings are starting to ache, aren't they, dear?"

Blurrily, she became aware of the distinctive sensation. A nagging urge to release her hold on her Fae talent. "Mmm."

"Good." Victoria nodded and stood. "Just a mild stimulant, one that will encourage your abilities to manifest themselves. I find Fae so much easier to deal with when they're fully engaged. Weak creatures, Fae." She leaned down. "You are a Fae, of course. I sensed that when you and that detective of yours paid me a little visit. Trying to put one over on *me*? Really. It was quite insulting. He barely displayed any of his talent at all." She chuckled, a harsh sound, oddly vibrant considering the age of the throat it came from. "Come with me, dear. I have lots of things to show you."

#### Chapter Sixteen

The two men were silent as they rolled away from the precinct and onto the road that would take them out to the Larson estate, both busy with their thoughts. Finally, Buck spoke.

"You got any ideas of how we're going to handle this?"

Cheney shook his head. "Nope. Figured we'd wing it. First thing is to check out the lay of the land." He frowned. "Can't figure out why I haven't been able to reach Pandora." He glanced at the screen on his phone.

Buck snickered. "Pussy-whipped and you're not even married."

"Yeah. Like you can talk."

"Hey, I made it legal for her to pussy-whip me."

"Give the man a gold star." Cheney turned the wheel.

"So you think you're gonna get that far with Pandora?"

"It's a done deal, as far as I'm concerned."

"Whoooeee." Buck whistled. "Dayum. Well congratulations, my friend."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, and for God's sake keep it under your hat." Cheney slowed down as they neared their destination. "I haven't discussed it with the lady in question yet."

A chuckle greeted his words. "I don't envy you. That red hair and legal background...if she takes offense, you'll find yourself up to your balls in contempt of court suits instead of your future wife."

Cheney grinned. "I'm not worried." He put his foot on the brake and eased to a halt. "Think this would work? We're still a block away by road, but I figure through those trees and we'll be at the back end of the Larson place."

"Works for me."

With the car tucked beneath a hedge, both men walked away and into the small forest that covered a low hill. It was quiet here, far enough away from the traffic to class as definitely suburban with a heavy dash of country.

Five minutes later, they both stopped and surveyed the terrain. From this perspective, they could clearly see the back of the Larson mansion, the separate garage, a greenhouse affair and some landscaping.

"Not much cover." Buck narrowed his gaze at the sparse shrubbery.

"Yeah. That's a pain. I was hoping for bushes or something, preferably right up to the back of the house."

"There's a door." Buck pointed. "Looks like it might lead down into the basement."

The house itself was several floors high, each delineated by a slightly different arrangement of siding. The lowest level was stone, something both men knew was typical of older foundations.

"Okay. I can try that." He glanced at Buck. "I hate to ask, but can you give it the once-over?" His request had nothing to do with vision and everything to do with Buck's AG talent for sensing emotions, events and leftover impressions. Being a cognitive, Buck's skills were often called upon at crime scenes, and Cheney knew it wasn't the easiest thing in the world for his friend.

Buck nodded. "Gimme a minute."

There were birds singing above them, the sounds of the trees surrounding them—Cheney wished Pandora could be there and share it. She'd appreciate and understand the tranquil beauty of the moment, no matter how brief it was.

Then Buck shifted. "Fuck."

"What?"

"It's there. That *cold* feeling. All over the damn place." He darted a quick look at Cheney, all humor gone from his face. "This is it. Whatever it was I picked up way back at the beginning of the basilisk killings—it's here. No mistake about it."

"Shit."

"Bone-chilling cold. The kind of cold that goes past winter and into your soul. Bad, dark cold. Like a fog over the ground." He blinked, his eyes unfocused. "It's thickest around the house and—and—" He frowned. "There's a shitload around that old fountain, but I don't know why. It's like dust hovering over a crossroads right there."

Cheney was already speaking into his phone, giving the address. "Officers investigating potential murder suspect. Request backup in the area, Code Two no lights."

Buck heaved in a breath and waited, knowing the request would bring a car, but silently.

"That's right. Just backup for now." Cheney was talking rapidly. "Make sure they don't come in like cowboys." He listened. "Got it."

"No gunfight?"

"Not if I can help it." Cheney closed his phone and tucked it back into his pocket. "Don't wanna spook our old lady. Or whoever's with her in that place."

"Good thinking."

"We need good planning too. You take the exterior."

"Uh..." Buck gazed across the grass. "Okay, but where?"

"The fountain. If you head that way, I'll make sure nobody sees you. And when you get there—how do you feel about wisteria?"

"The purple stuff?"

Cheney nodded. "Yep. I think I can hold the illusion while I check stuff out. At least long enough for you to tuck yourself into those bushes."

"'Kay. Say when."

"Now."

Cheney watched and concentrated, twisting his mental abilities as his partner walked rapidly over the grass. Buck shimmered out of sight, only re-emerging for a few seconds when he reached the back of the fountain.

Once again, he focused and locked on Buck, creating the illusion of more tangled vines. It was working.

Now it was his turn. He headed for the door in the side of the house, noticing that everything seemed pretty deserted and still. Perhaps his illusions weren't necessary, or perhaps they were. Who could say?

He believed firmly in the better-safe-than-sorry philosophy. This task wasn't too complex and the illusion was solid within his mind. As long as it stayed there, he'd be free to wander through the house even as Buck kept an eye on the outside. He could disguise his own presence if he had to.

And no one would know about either of 'em, God willing.

He reached for the door and found it unlocked. Slowly he pushed it open and slipped silently inside.

Helplessly, Pandora rose, asking herself when and where she'd lost control of her faculties. Her mind was still working, albeit fuzzily, but she seemed unable to resist Victoria's direction. Her back ached fiercely now, and she found herself wondering if her wings would tear her blouse if they emerged at this moment.

"This way." Victoria touched something and a bookshelf swung wide, revealing a corridor. "We'll go downstairs. That's where all the interesting things are. And that's what you want to see, don't you? After all, you did take care of my little pet for me. I'm sure you're curious where he came from." She sounded almost sad. "Pity you discovered his real nature before I could retrieve him. I'd never gone quite that far before. But it still wouldn't hold together."

"Uhh..."

"And I do apologize for the fire, but something had to be done to remove the evidence. I *felt* it when he disintegrated, you know. Some sort of bond, I suppose. Just like I felt that wonderful sense of power when my other creation obeyed my command." She shivered and licked her lips. "Now *that* was exciting. All that sexual passion, all that warmth and then—poof."

Pandora struggled with this. "The killings..."

Victoria nodded. "Oh yes. Such fun. I think the basilisk mutation was quite inspired."

This was bad. Very bad, and she didn't seem to be able to put two coherent words together. She'd been drugged. Like some stupid idiot, she'd walked into the spider's web and was suffering the consequences.

Cheney was going to be really pissed off at her.

The thought of him comforted her for a second or two. Cheney. He'd know, wouldn't he? Could he sense any of what she was experiencing? As she followed Victoria down the passageway, she held fast to that notion.

It was the only thing that kept the screams at bay as they emerged into what seemed like a chamber of horrors.

A large cavernous room stretched out before Pandora's eyes. The ceiling was wood, beamed and strung with ancient cobwebs. All around her were tables with glass jars of varying sizes, containing...what?

"I see you're admiring my samples. Amazing, aren't they?" Victoria caressed one of the vessels lovingly. "This was an early test."

It was—well, once it had been an animal of some sort perhaps. Now it was a terrible jumble of limbs floating in liquid. And it wasn't alone. Each of the jars held some monstrosity, worse than the last, and as they walked down the aisle between the tables, Pandora felt nausea rise in her throat. The larger containers toward the end held things that had clearly once been human. It was the most terrible sight, something out of a horror movie she would never have gone to see.

But this was real.

"Now you just sit here, dear." Victoria pushed her down onto a seat with arms but no backrest. "You can release your wings quite safely." Two straps clicked tight around Pandora's wrists. "I had this made just for creatures like you."

Fighting to resist, she found herself sitting as directed, her will gone, her ability to run from this nightmare nonexistent.

She managed to look at Victoria. "Why me? What are you?" Her tongue was thick and awkward in her mouth.

"What am I?" Victoria stepped back and nodded, satisfied that her *guest* was completely restrained. "Ah yes, that is the question, isn't it?" She smiled. "Yes, I think I'll let you see. It's been quite some time since I shared my special talents with anyone. And I'm sure you'll appreciate them, my dear. You seem like an intelligent person. For a Fae, anyway." She made an attempt at a laugh, but it came out all wrong.

"I had hoped to have that detective of yours here. He has power, you know. A strong power. Something I could really use. I've been watching him for a while now, in my own unique way." The smile accompanying this chilling statement was anything but comforting. "I would have tried for the other one, but it seems he's too involved with some other strong AGs. It might've tipped my hand a little too soon."

Pandora blinked, trying to focus on the old woman's face. It seemed to be changing. Contorting. *Shifting*.

"You—shift—" It was the best her vocal cords could do.

There was no answer. Nor did there need to be, since the proof was emerging right before her horrified eyes.

No longer was there an elderly woman standing in front of her. Now it was someone else—*something* else. The neat hair shriveled and vanished as if it had never existed, leaving a pale bald scalp. The softly wrinkled face moved, like nasty things crawling beneath the skin. Flesh shrank, contours disappeared, the structure of the head itself changed into something almost impossible to describe.

Large eyeballs emerged from skinless sockets. Lacking lids, they seemed unreal, but when they moved to stare at Pandora she shivered. It was all too real, this thing, this shifting mess of ghastly images.

Lips peeled away, leaving teeth and gums to complete the skeletal appearance. There was still some semblance of a human, but not enough to describe this thing as such. Long past fear, Pandora was frozen, locked onto the chair, forced to watch this...this *monster*...

"There we are." It croaked raw sounds. "Much better."

Was that an attempt at a smile? It might have been, but since the flesh of the mouth had vanished, it was hard to tell.

The body had shifted too. It now seemed male, although not all the bits were where they should be. There was still some softness around the breasts and one shoulder was much broader than the other. Mismatched pieces, assembled haphazardly into a frightening semblance of life.

Dear God above. Pandora could only stare and shake within her bonds. What the hell was it?

"I expect you're curious." The thing began pacing a little, almost like it was learning to walk again. Its voice was raw, harsh, inhuman, jarring on Pandora's ears. The ache in her back was increasing, growing stronger, and it took all the strength she had to *not* release her wings in front of this horror.

"Anyone would be, under the circumstances. Since you're looking at a miracle of science, I think it's only right to explain."

It preened. There was no other word to describe the smug way it crossed its ungainly arms and stared at her.

"I am Laurence Prendergast. And all of his accumulated knowledge." It tapped its skull-like head. "Up here. Implanted when I was simply the child Victoria."

Pandora sucked in a breath that the creature mistook for awe.

"Yes, you're right to be impressed. Grandfather Prendergast and I shared a very distinct strand of DNA that made it possible. Far too complicated for you to understand, of course, since it's so advanced not even the top scientists would be able to grasp the significance."

Arrogance. Sheer arrogance. It came through loud and clear.

"I was a shape shifter, which helped. With a few additions, I became even more powerful. And when my grandfather found the ghoul gene—well, as you can see, I am now more powerful than ever. A true chimera, Pandora. A *chimera*. Incredible, isn't it? Something the world has never seen, not in your lifetime, anyway."

Pandora tried to shake her head violently.

"Oh don't be stupid. Such things must be done to advance science." The thing paused in front of her. "And I'm continuing my grandfather's work. Advancing science. Making discoveries every day. Exciting discoveries. Discoveries that will—" It paused, then straightened. "Discoveries that will right the wrong done to my family's name and reputation. And perhaps erase some of the scars left behind."

It leaned forward, those terrible grinning teeth inches from Pandora's nose.

"Did you know they shot them? Those brilliant minds that had forged ahead into unknown realms? Took them out and shot them in the head. One by one." It shuddered theatrically. "All because some weak people in positions of power were squeamish about the experiments."

Thankfully it moved back, giving her chance to breathe, to force herself to think, to battle the urge to release her AG talent. To try desperately to retain some iota of sanity. For surely one couldn't go through this and still stay sane.

"And now you're here." It strolled to a table with a variety of equipment on it. "My control experiments have done quite nicely. But I realized I had been making one very stupid error. I used vassals who were not as intelligent as they should have been. I can control them well, of course. That was never in doubt. But I underestimated the fact that a good physical specimen might not perform as successfully as one with an excellent mind as well."

Pandora moaned, the only sound she could produce.

"Physically fit, attractive and well above average in the brains department. Quite a compelling combination and one that works perfectly for the next phase of my experiments. Which is where you come in. Yes, I'd have preferred your young man, but you're an adequate substitute. And there's always a risk when dealing with law enforcement. So I will make do with what I have."

It sighed, a peculiarly feminine sound emanating from that skeletal mouth. "If it succeeds, then I shall definitely move on to the detective. Perhaps you'll bring him to me. He's common, of course, and sometimes quite disgusting, but very intelligent. Plus I want to know about his AG talent. There's no end of things to explore…"

The claw-like fingers worked deftly over the equipment, connecting things, arranging things, scaring the crap out of the woman secured to her seat opposite the table.

"I shall so much enjoy controlling you. No more mundane activities. This time—we shall go much further together, my dear." It turned, two blinking discs in its hands. "Now, if you'll just obey me and release your AG talent, we'll begin."

The hands neared her temples and paused, waiting for Pandora to change.

Her mind ricocheted around, desperate, frantic, finally doing the only thing it could. She let out a mental scream of terror, releasing some of her AG energies onto that *other* plane, hoping that someone somewhere could hear it.

And for a brief instant she felt a touch, a light brush of something heated, darting into that place where she hid her AG secrets. It was gone too soon. Perhaps she'd imagined it. But as the monster drew closer, she allowed herself a brief prayer.

Dear God, please—please let it be real—

Cheney's body stilled, his quiet steps frozen as he felt something, some sensation of pain and terror flitter across his senses.

He'd investigated a few rooms so far, finding nothing that would be of any interest to anyone except possibly an antique collector. But when he walked into what looked like a library, all that changed.

There was a briefcase on the floor. It was Pandora's. He recognized it immediately and a chill spread down his spine.

Damn the woman. What the hell was she doing here?

A tiny sound attracted his attention and he noticed a bookshelf out of alignment. With a wry grimace, he pushed it, unsurprised at the corridor it revealed. And to think he'd imagined secret passageways had gone out of style. More fool he. If anywhere had 'em, the Larson mansion was as good a candidate as any.

Convinced that he was on the right track, he pushed his fears for Pandora aside. He *had* to focus, not get distracted. Buck was depending on it, and it could well mean the difference between good things and bad things for Pandora too. He'd seen no servants or guards, but that didn't mean they weren't there.

Cautiously he crept along the corridor, slowing to a halt as he saw the opening to a large cellar. This must be the underground laboratory. Musty and unpleasant smells made him wrinkle his nose, and he dropped into a crouch as he eased his way between tables and shelving units.

Now he could hear a murmur of voices. Or one voice, maybe. Try as he might he couldn't hear Pandora.

He unclipped his weapon, holding it low, almost crawling now as he neared some bright lights where the sounds were coming from.

There. A soft moan. God, what was going on? And how best to approach without being seen? The element of surprise was on his side, and he desperately wanted to keep it that way. A few feet more and he found a patch of shadows—slowly and silently he rose to his feet.

And barely stopped himself from gasping in horror.

Pandora was strapped to some kind of chair, her eyes vague and unfocused, her wings beginning to emerge behind her, delicate traceries of branches and leaves.

But it was the thing in front of her that took the breath from his lungs. Ghoul-like, the bony head moved this way and that, its hands hovering around her face and clasping small metallic discs.

"Stay still now. This won't hurt. You'll be amazed at the power, dear. You'll thank me."

Whatever it was, Cheney knew it was bad. He could damn near smell the evil oozing off its grey skin.

Pandora's twitching grew frantic and he saw her chest rise as she sucked in air and managed a muted scream. "Nooooo—"

The sound shattered Cheney's need for stealth. He rushed from his hiding place, gun held steady and aimed at the creature. "Police officer. Freeze. Stop what you're doing and get away from her."

It muttered an oath and turned, shocking Cheney to his core as he got a good look at the face for the first time. "Damn you to hell. I'm so close. Do you really think you can stop me now?"

"Stop you or kill you. Either way I don't care. Just leave her alone."

"Too late, stupid beast. You're too late." It reached behind itself and grabbed something from a table. Its arm flung wide and there was a brilliant searing flash of light, almost blinding Cheney. Fortunately, he was focused on the creature not the flare. He shot, missing it as it tumbled away from Pandora.

"Too bad." The creature sneered from behind a large cabinet. "And too late. I told you. My work will go on. You won't find me so easily next time."

The cellar began to shake and dust cascaded down from the ceiling, drawing Cheney's attention.

"It's all going away." A high-pitched giggle followed the words. "But I have other places. Other labs. Too bad you won't be around to see them." It vanished as the entire room rattled.

Cracks appeared in the concrete floor, large bangs and clatters echoed from beams stressed beyond their endurance—that flash had detonated something in this place that threatened to bring the entire mansion down around their ears.

He rushed to Pandora. "Hey. I'm here."

She could only nod, tears spilling down over her cheeks. "Drug..." She moaned the word.

"Okay. Gonna get you out." He fumbled with the wristbands and finally sprung the latches, but not before several beams crashed onto the surrounding equipment, sending shards of glass through the air like savage missiles.

One clipped his cheek but he ignored it. "We have to get out of here." He grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet.

"Can't..." She stared at the entrance. It was blocked by debris and the air was getting thicker all the time. "Cheney." Her hand clawed at his arm. "Tree. Can save us. Hold on..."

He hadn't a clue what she meant, but in that instant he stared into her eyes and heard her silent plea for his trust and his faith. And what he saw there reassured him. He put his arms around her and held on.

Pandora released her talent.

#### Chapter Seventeen

Finally, *finally* she could do what she'd been holding back. Pandora released her AG skills with more urgency than ever before, feeling the relief of setting the dryad free. Her emotions were chaotic, the transition was uncontrolled and fueled only by terror and a need to escape with Cheney. To save him if she could.

It took mere seconds for her feet to root through the crumbling cement and only a few more moments for her to become the tree she'd envisioned. Sturdy limbs sprang loose as her trunk thickened. She was vaguely aware that Cheney was clinging to her, but it was all in the abstract. For her there was nothing but the unspeakable thrill of filling herself with her essence, and surprisingly finding other essences there as well.

She grew, thrusting skyward, breaking past the wooden structure above with the ease of a volcano erupting into the empty air. All around her was destruction, the mansion subsiding in a mess of lumber and ruins, but none of it stayed her motion.

She felt no pity, no pain. She simply grew, forcing her topmost branches out into the daylight, rejoicing as the setting sun first kissed the leaves, spreading new ones to grasp every iota of warmth.

There was a wind, a stiff wind, blowing from other trees that had heard her call for help. Willingly they sent her their own special energies, the flexibility of a willow, the strength of an oak, the thick protection of a maple tree's bark. All merged into the natural wonder that was Pandora, all accepted and used with joy and with pleasure.

She soared into the sky, appreciating for the first time what it meant to be a dryad, to feel this incredible euphoria, this sensation of being part of the earth and the sky above. To live within the cells of such an amazing creation. To be the essence of something so special, so unique.

It was breathtaking, and the part that was Pandora gasped with astounded pleasure. Now she fully understood—and would never be the same again.

From somewhere in her branches came a sound—her name.

Cheney.

He was still holding fast to her trunk, his legs wrapped around a thick limb. And they both were well above the chaos that was the collapsing mansion.

She stilled her motion, letting her newly formed body settle into place, a massive tree firmly rooted, a safe haven for the man who had saved her. It was a fair exchange.

Except for the fact that he seemed a bit distressed that he was quite some distance from the ground.

Silly man. It was nothing to be concerned about. She held him safely away from danger. Couldn't he realize that?

More shouting followed and Pandora-the-tree sighed, her branches swaying in response. Time to let go of the dear thing. Slowly she tilted to one side, letting the warm weight slip downward over her trunk and through the thickest of her lower limbs.

As soon as she felt it leave her body, she straightened again. This was amazing. Letting the breeze riffle her leaves, sensing new growth, old growth, arranging the tiny branches so that they could receive maximum sunlight—truly being a tree was a challenge and an intriguing puzzle.

She could have spent years exploring it. She was entranced, willingly going deeper into the mysteries and delights offered by this new form.

But then she felt something. And heard something. A name—her name.

Pandora.

And the voice was familiar. It was Cheney, shouting to her, tugging on her branches to get her attention.

"Come back to me, Pandora. Please. Listen to my voice. I need you to come back to me."

Come back? Leave this wonderland of sensation? Leave the exciting feeling of touching the sky?

"Pandora, I love you. I can't do a damn thing without you. Come back, honey. I need you..." There was desperation in his cry.

*Love*? She stilled her branches. That was new. Something very new and exciting. Something that touched the human part of her thoughts and warmed them. Love was—unexpected. Love was—good. And love was—*Cheney*.

His name in her mind, his voice beneath her branches—something re-awoke within her.

And finally brought her back.

Cheney was desperate, trying to find any way he could to connect with Pandora on whatever level was open to him. He let his thoughts free into his AG levels, hoping she'd hear them. He beat his fists against the massive trunk that emerged from what was left of the mansion. He wondered if she was hurt, how she'd get back to him.

And all the while his heart was thudding frantically at the knowledge she might be gone from him forever.

Then there was a shudder, powerful enough to shake the ground.

"Jesus." He stepped back, unwilling to let her go, but knowing if he stayed where he was it might not be good.

The air around the tree shimmered and shivered and there was a sound like a sigh on the wind as the leaves began to twinkle and disappear.

The huge creation vanished before his eyes, leaving Pandora lying on the ground, filthy and still.

"God." He ran to her, nearly tripping over some bricks and falling to his knees as he reached for her neck to find her pulse. He damn near cried when he felt it, thumping strongly beneath his fingertips.

He gathered her in his arms, cradling her, wrapping her in what was left of her clothing, encouraging her to wake up. "Honey, it's okay. Pandora. Open your eyes, love." He brushed hair away from her face in time to see her eyelids flicker and finally part, revealing those teal blue eyes of hers. "That's my girl."

"Cheney. Hi." She coughed and cleared her throat. "Wow. Helluva ride, huh?"

"You remember?" He wanted to squeeze her to bits but restrained himself to a gentle hug.

"Most of it." She fidgeted. "Ow. I hurt."

"Where? Is it the drug?" Hurriedly he ran his hands over her, looking for injuries. Although her arms and legs seemed fine, there might be internal damage or something... He looked up and yelled. "Medic."

"No, no." She reached out and touched his cheek. "I'm fine. The drug's gone. Don't know why but I'm okay. Just give me a minute to catch my breath." She blinked. "You've got *medics* here? How long—?" She coughed again.

"We called for backup when we got here. Alerted everybody. Didn't know you were inside." He touched her again, reassuring himself she was there. "We'll talk about *that* later, young lady." He tried for a paternal frown but couldn't quite manage it over the relief that was currently turning his knees to jelly. Overwhelmed by that relief he surrendered and tugged her to his chest. "I love you. When I thought I'd lost you, well—damn. Don't ever do that to me again, okay?"

She nodded against him and chuckled weakly. "Okay. It wasn't fun anyway." She lifted her face. "By the way, same goes, Detective."

Well that just screamed out for a smacking great kiss, but—as was always the case—privacy was hard to come by when surrounded by half the police force, med techs, forensics investigators and one very nosy partner.

Cheney sighed and simply held her tighter.

She wriggled. "I need to breathe here, Mr. Muscleman. And I could use a coat or something..."

"Sorry." He loosened his grip a little and shrugged out of his jacket, helping her tuck herself inside it.

"Buck? Is he here too?" She twisted her head. "What happened, Cheney? Did you see...?" She struggled more, ready to stand on her own two feet if at all possible.

Yeah, like he was gonna let that happen.

However, he did allow her to rise and steadied her with his arm as she managed to remain upright. And he barely repressed a chuckle as she gasped at the damage surrounding them, a catastrophe for which she'd been largely responsible.

"Good God." She looked at the debris-filled crater where the Larson mansion used to be.

"How's she doing?" Buck walked up to them and glanced at Cheney.

"We're in for some hellacious lawsuits if we're not careful." She was still surveying the wreckage.

"She's fine." Cheney grinned, knowing his joy was written all over his face and not caring one iota if his partner noticed it or not. "Don't even say it. Save it for later. We've got a shitload of details to clear up here and she needs a pair of pants before she gets arrested for public nudity."

Buck deliberately looked skyward. "I'll have the medic bring something over. He's on his way to check her out anyway. The paperwork on this one's gonna be a bitch and a half, you know that, right?"

Pandora turned. "Did you—? Is it—?" She tried again. "The thing that was Victoria. Did you get it?"

"It's dead." Buck dropped any efforts at humor. "Its escape route was through the sculpture around an old fountain in the back. Which used to be right about...there." He pointed to a messed-up clump of earth with some shards of granite poking out. "I was hiding behind the sculpture. The thing came out just as my hiding place shattered, but it wasn't expecting me so the timing worked great." He looked down in embarrassment. "I hate to say it, but it scared me so much I shot it on sight."

Pandora surprised them all with a spontaneous giggle. "You shot it?"

"Crude, but true. Right between its big googly eyes." He winced. "It kinda fell apart on me. Very messy, but effective. If you look over there—" He lifted his chin toward several people in white overalls. "Those are forensic techs. I think they're gathering up bits of what's left."

A medic came up, took a look at them all, shrugged when they waved him off, then passed Pandora a small plastic package before leaving. She gratefully slipped into the protective pants.

"Karl?" Cheney glanced at his partner.

Buck tapped his pocket. "Already got some samples for him."

"Hell. I've said it before and I'll say it again. We make a damn fine team, partner." Cheney thumped Buck's arm.

"No shit." Buck thumped him back with a grin. He glanced at Pandora. "And for the record, Ms. Jackson, your arboreal skills are without equal."

"Shoot, dude. You use big words like that and I'm gonna get a headache." Cheney laughed, then looked at Pandora. "Mind you, he's right. You saved my life, you know."

She dismissed it. "Whatever. I'm just so grateful you two did what you do best. I wouldn't be standing here if you guys hadn't come galloping to the rescue."

"We're going to discuss that, you know. Running off and not telling me where you're going..." Cheney's brows drew together.

"Hey. Cut that out. Just because I love you doesn't mean you get to call the shots about everything I do."

Buck cleared his throat. "Guys, perhaps there's a better place for this discussion?" It was a gentle but firm reminder that standing in the middle of total chaos wasn't a good idea.

"He's right. Let's get out of here." Cheney seconded the vote.

Outnumbered—and not really upset by it—Pandora permitted Cheney to lead her to the car without further protest. Something that pleased him enormously. Until he realized that she was probably saving it all up until later.

He sighed and hugged her. She was there beside him, her arm around his back. They'd probably fight like hell now and again, but it would all be worth it.

Yep, life was good.

Much later that night, they gathered around Cheney's table. Buck, Lian, Cheney, Pandora and Karl, who they all felt needed to be included.

Pandora related everything she could remember, every detail, no matter how blurred. Sometime during her talk, her hand crept into Cheney's, and she drew strength from the warmth of his clasp.

"So there it is. Victoria Larson was some kind of hybrid thing, a chimera, a mixture of ghoul, shape shifter, her grandfather's brains—don't ask me how that was done—and the woman who was outraged by the loss of so many scientists she considered brilliant." She paused. "There was no conscience there at all. Not even a tiny bit of remorse for what they'd done. Just an overwhelming admiration for them." She shuddered. "It was pretty foul. She was completely nuts."

"That's an understatement." Cheney lifted an eyebrow. "I didn't get a good look at what was in those jars, but from what I did see—well, no human being could have created those things. Not one with a soul, anyway."

Karl sipped his beer. "Things like the Svengali Project take on a life of their own." He sighed. "There will always be those who think it's all about research for research's sake and be damned to those who pay the price."

They all absorbed the wisdom of that comment. Then Buck shrugged. "That sucks."

"A surprisingly succinct comment, my friend." Karl chuckled. "It does indeed suck."

"So what happens now?" Lian leaned forward. "Can you establish a cross link to the basilisk killer based on what it told Pandora? Is there enough evidence left to tell us any more about the Larson creature?"

Buck blinked at his wife. "You want to know more?"

"Sure. It's a fascinating case study. Something we've never run across before." Lian met his look squarely. "Of course I'm interested."

"You rock, babe." Karl grinned at her. "How much evidence we'll have, I don't know. Your guys..."
He waved his bottle at Buck and Cheney. "The forensics dudes...well, they'll have plenty to play with for

some time to come. I gotta thank you both for what you brought me, since I reckon I'll have some playtime too. On a different level, of course." He looked smug.

Pandora smiled at him. "And you'll keep us informed of what you find, won't you?"

"Sheesh. You have to ask?"

"I'm a lawyer, Karl. I know when someone's lying."

"I object." Karl opened his eyes wide.

"Overruled." She flashed back. "You promise to let us know what you find, okay?"

"Inasmuch as I think you'll be able to understand, yeah." He smirked. "Not that I want to imply you're all dumb, but when it comes to recombinant genetic models, DNA mutation characteristics as referenced by single strand manipulations...well, hands up all those who'd know one if they found it in their breakfast cereal?"

There was laughter and not a single raised hand.

"Okay, dude. You made your point." Cheney's chuckle spoke for all of them.

Pandora yawned. "It's hard to believe it's done. And that it links back to a previous case involving the two of you. Odd kind of karmic circle."

Lian nudged Buck and looked pointedly at Karl. "Time we got out of here, guys. These folks need some serious down time. And I want a word or two with you..." she nudged Buck, "...about this bad habit of yours. The one where I don't get filled in on all the pertinent details."

Buck stood and slipped on his jacket. "Yes, dear."

Pandora wondered why Cheney made a whip-like noise and Buck flipped him the finger. Men. Strange creatures.

But at least Cheney was her strange creature. As he proved when the door closed behind their guests.

"Come here. There's something I really need to do."

She walked to him, only to find herself grabbed and pulled hard against his chest. She lifted her face, seeing his serious expression staring down at her. "I meant it, you know. I love you."

He kissed her then, a long slow meeting of their lips and their tongues. She lifted her arms to tangle them around his neck, tugging him closer, moaning a little in the back of her throat as he sucked the breath from her body. Finally she peeled their mouths apart.

"I meant it too. I love you, Cheney Fisher." She rested her head on his chest, listening to the regular thud of his heartbeat. "You heard me, didn't you? Heard me scream in that place?"

"Yes." He nodded, brushing the top of her head with his chin. "It wasn't like hearing a noise. More like feeling the terror inside me. Inside that special AG spot, you know?"

"Strange stuff." She snuggled closer.

"No kidding." He sighed. "Come to bed with me, Pandora. I'm not sure if either of us are up to anything athletic, but I know I won't get a wink of sleep unless you're there beside me." He switched out the lights as he pulled her toward the stairs. "Besides, I might have nightmares."

She laughed. "More likely me when it comes to nightmares." It was a casual comment, but Pandora had a sneaking feeling that she wouldn't have too many nightmares if Cheney's arms were around her, or his warm body comforting her as it spooned against her spine.

In no time at all they were naked and snuggled beneath the covers. In the darkness and comfortable silence, Pandora spoke.

"I nearly lost myself, Cheney."

He was quiet for a moment, stroking his fingertips over her arm where it lay across his chest. "You scared me. Not just growing into that massive tree, but I could feel your—joy. Your pleasure in it. I was so afraid you wouldn't come back to me."

"It was hard. An experience like that...well, it defies description. Maybe it was because I'd held it all back for so long. Ignored it, suppressed it, whatever you want to call it. I'd turned my back on half of myself. If you hadn't called me when you did, well who knows what might have happened. But I do know one thing." She tapped his chest. "You helped me take the first steps toward understanding what I am, Cheney. If not for that, for you, I might not have been able to let go and become the one thing that saved us."

"We're both going to have to work on that." Cheney's voice was sober and thoughtful. "I've done the same thing, Pandora. I haven't turned away from my gift, but I rarely use it in a way that could give me the kind of joy I felt from you."

"I guess it's all about coming to terms with who we are. Accepting it. Using our abilities to improve our lives, rather than sticking them in a box in the back of our closets."

"Think we can do that?" He rested his cheek against her head.

"I think—I think that *together* we can do anything." She smiled contentedly.

"I think you're right." He moved down a little, his arms sliding over her skin in a gentle sensuous caress. "Counselor?"

"Hmm?"

"I'd like to make a motion." His hands wandered to deliciously sensitive places.

She moaned with delight. "Motion granted."

### **Epilogue**

The moon shyly peeked from behind its veil of clouds, illuminating a small figure who mounted the steps at the rear of an unobtrusive building in Chinatown. It patted the head of one of the two small Foo dog statues bracketing the entrance.

"Hey, Wilfred. Did I miss anything?"

The stone eyes lit up with a cheerful green glow as a hand rested, palm down, between the ears.

"Good to know. Keep up the good work." Karl passed through the door, which had opened in response to his palm identification system. No need to jangle keys and wake anyone. He liked his privacy and wasn't shy about using technology to serve his own needs as much as anyone else's.

Making his way to the lab, his mind dwelt on the questions of the hour. How that monster had created a chimera that had survived for longer than five minutes. Then there was the question of how it had been controlled—how a mind-link could be established with a thing like that.

Karl was no Svengali. He asked for and received volunteers willing to spend an hour or so being poked and prodded or filling out surveys. Some were even hooked up to various calibration devices.

But no one was ever hurt, Karl paid them by the hour, and the results were always kept confidential.

It wasn't so much the genetic component that fascinated him. Genetics seemed little more than elaborate mechanics and he had no desire to crossbreed a vampire with a unicorn or do anything else uselessly outrageous.

But the idea of telepathy, true telepathy between AGs? Well, now *that* was fascinating. Tracing the source of the ability, identifying which AG mutation possessed it, and figuring out how to make use out of it—all these things were of interest to Karl.

He was turning concepts over in his mind as he walked to some of his equipment and took a quick look at the data they were generating. Nothing there really surprised him. The numbers simply confirmed that Victoria Larson was part human female and part ghoul. Physically. There was a third source of DNA in what was left of its brain that shared enough genetic markers to be positively identified as blood kin—probably her grandfather.

Of course there were irregularities, but these would be followed up on by his equipment, not Karl himself. Once again he blessed his great-grandparents for amassing a fortune and his grandparents for enlarging it.

And once again he permitted himself a moment of self-disgust. For it was unknown to everyone except Karl that in his family tree was one relative who had worked for Prendergast Industries. A great-uncle who had seen the writing on the wall and managed to get out before the shit hit the proverbial fan. None of which was terrible.

But it was what he'd done afterward that made Karl sick. This man had sold some of the Prendergast experimental techniques for a considerably huge sum of money. Then vanished off the face of the earth without revealing the name of the buyer.

At the back of Karl's mind was always the possibility that when *irregularities* occurred, like the basilisk killer and the ghoul-chimera, one of *his* relatives was to blame. That such an event signaled the use of that stolen Prendergast information. And that perhaps this would be his chance to trace the source and uncover the name of the buyer, which would lead him to whoever might be using it today.

He sighed. Didn't look like it was going to happen this time around. But there was always tomorrow.

He glanced at the clock. He was restless, hungry, ready for company. And the night was young.

There was a neat apartment at the rear of the lab and as Karl reached his bedroom, he heaved a sigh and slipped from his small clothes. It wasn't bad being a little person. Women were fascinated and men amused, but not threatened. All of which worked well for Karl in his professional life.

His personal life? Well that was something else. Like him, it was very private.

Nude, he stood before his mirror and closed his eyes, relieved that he could at last let go of this current body and shift back to his original shape.

The warmth of the change flooded his veins and he grunted as muscles stretched, connective tissue relinked with itself and bones strengthened.

Mere moments passed before he opened his eyes—and looked at himself.

"Better." He grinned.

The tall handsome man in the mirror grinned back. There was much to be said in favor of shape shifting. The biggest advantage? None of the women he slept with would ever find him the next day—unless he wanted them to.

Slipping into his jeans and black shirt, Karl left the trappings of science behind him and headed cheerfully out for his favorite club, secure in the knowledge that even his oldest friend Lian wouldn't know him if she met him now.

His little alter ego was partly a joke Karl played on the world, partly a psychological experiment and partly a desire to keep his real identity close to his vest. He could get laid and produce elegant scientific data without any overlap between the two. It was just about perfect.

With a whistle on his lips and a carefree attitude, Karl strolled in to the Den of Iniquity, fielding greetings from friends, warm smiles from more than a few women and heading for the bar.

The music was good, the micro-brewed house beer excellent and for the moment all the baddies Karl knew had been vanquished. Couldn't ask for more than that.

Fate, always on the alert for thoughts of that nature, snickered.

Karl didn't know that, of course. He merely sat comfortably on his barstool as a stranger walked through the door...

#### About the Author

Sometimes dreams do come true. Wynne Hayworth's dream has always been to write good books that people will enjoy. Stories that make them smile, even if there's blood spatter tossed into a few of 'em. Humor is, to Wynne, a vital part of life. Without a laugh or two now and again, things can get horribly depressing, thus there's always going to be a strong dash of fun in everything Wynne writes. That's her promise to herself—and her readers.

To learn more about Wynne, please visit <a href="www.wynnehayworth.com">www.wynnehayworth.com</a>. She loves to hear from readers and you can drop her a note at <a href="wynne@wynnehayworth.com">wynne@wynnehayworth.com</a>.

## Look for these titles by Wynne Hayworth

Now Available:

Afterglow

Demons are Forever

#### Demons are Forever

#### © 2009 Wynne Hayworth

Afterglow. Our world is changed. Mutated. Now home to humans who possess DNA belonging to creatures once thought to be only the stuff of legends. So what if the neighbor howls at the moon every month? No big deal as long as he mows his lawn.

A savage killer munching on helpless victims, however, is a big deal to Detective Buck Shand.

Buck is thinking less legend and more nightmare as he surveys the most recent in a series of brutal slayings. It's beyond even his special talents, and he's going to need help with this one. It arrives in the shapely form of Dr. Lian Herrick, a woman with her own form of Afterglow mutation—a demon that will shake Buck's everyday world to its foundations and turn his brain inside out.

Will their combined skills be enough to track and stop a savage killer? Possibly. If they can keep their minds on business and their hands off each other long enough to lure a beast who feeds on sex—then kills for pleasure.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for* Demons are Forever:

He was gentle, warm, touching her mouth at first then licking at the seam and urging her lips apart. His tongue slipped inside as she welcomed his intrusion, sucking on it, teasing it with her own then sliding past it to learn his contours, the hardness of his teeth, the softness of the skin around them.

Warmth blossomed between them, the warmth of lovers sated and the promise of passion to follow. Buck held her face cupped in one hand, not doing anything more than kissing her.

She lost herself in that moment, overwhelmed by the tenderness, the delightful knowledge that this might well be the first real kiss she'd ever experienced. The dark confines of the truck disappeared, leaving only Buck and his mouth. Her body still thrummed with the remembered pleasure of an orgasm that had shaken her world. But her mind and her heart relished the simple joy of a man's mouth on hers, a man's hand cradling her cheek and a man's warmth enveloping her.

Finally they parted on a sigh.

"Mmm. Nice." He whispered the words as he stroked her cheek then let her go. "I can't let this stop here, Lian. I won't."

She gazed at him. "I don't want it to either. But it's complicated, Buck."

"I know." He seemed to pull himself together, shaking off the sensual tenderness and becoming once again the cop on the case. "First things first." Reaching for the keys, he withdrew them from the ignition and nodded at her door. "If you're ready, let's go inside and deal with the case. For now we work. Later, we..." His lips turned up wickedly at the corners. "Later, we'll play with that demon of yours."

Unused to such blunt honesty, Lian could only follow his orders. "Okay."

They walked quietly across the empty garage to the elevators. She couldn't think of anything to say that hadn't already been said and sensed Buck's thoughts turning back to the murders. She simply took comfort from his presence at her side.

It wasn't until they reached the squad room and found the captain frowning over the latest crime scene photos that he finally spoke.

"Cap, Herrick here thinks she may have picked up on something."

"What?" The captain's head snapped up.

Lian lifted her chin. "We both sensed much the same sort of thing that Detective Shand felt at the earlier scene. The lust, the hunger to feed, the overwhelming sexual urges."

"So?"

She didn't mistake the captain's curtness for anything other than what it was, a man desperate to do his job and stop such senseless butchery. "I have some limited cognitive abilities of my own. What I felt was a creature driven by lust. The killing? That may not have come from him."

The captain frowned and motioned to chairs. "Sit. Explain."

Lian wearily took a seat and ran a hand through her hair. "I'm not sure how to describe it. You've seen the photos. It was bad, as bad as it gets, I reckon."

Buck nodded. "I've never seen worse, Cap."

"You don't have to tell me. In all my years, I've never seen worse either. Go on."

She marshaled her thoughts. Neither man would appreciate a lengthy exposition. "It's my opinion that this creature, whatever he—it—is, wants the sex. The urge to kill is coming from elsewhere, a direction to its mind, perhaps. An exploitation of its instincts. I don't know. There's a conflict I sensed, a confusion when the killing begins. Almost as if it's being told what to do from that point on."

The captain frowned. "How the hell is that possible?"

Buck shrugged. "Who knows? At this point, after seeing that slaughter, I'm ready to believe anything. To take a stab at any crazy notion if it gets us close to stopping these killings."

"So we've got a creature that seems invisible and leaves no DNA or forensic evidence after having savage sex and then ripping girls to pieces. And now you're telling me that the sex is one thing and the killing's another?"

"Yes." Lian stared at him. "As insane as it sounds, yes. I think this *whatever it is* is being controlled. Being *forced* to kill. The sexual urge is incredibly strong, and there's violence mixed in to it, no question. But I doubt it would go as far as it has without a nudge from something or someone else."

"Jesus H." The captain stared at the photos again. "How the hell do we deal with this?"

Buck leaned forward. "We can't do any more than we're doing right now. We have to follow our procedures. The techs are still working this scene—perhaps they'll find something, some minute particle

that'll put us ahead of where we are right now. Fisher's talking to people. If anyone can get info out of the Bogs crew, he can. Maybe a girl saw something she didn't think mattered. Sooner or later, Cap, this thing's gonna make a mistake. When it does, we'll be there."

Something dead this way comes...

# That Voodoo You Do © 2010 Jodi Redford

That Old Black Magic, Book 1

For ten long years Griffin Trudeau has managed to keep his paws off Jemma Finnegan, best friend and leading star of his kinkiest fantasies. As her appointed cat familiar, indulging those fantasies with the delectable witch is strictly forbidden. But when Jemma shows up at his door with seduction in mind, control goes right out the window.

Too late he realizes making love to Jemma is the trigger that launches a zombie apocalypse.

Jemma's been dealt a double whammy: she's just discovered she's a witch. And Griff has been hiding whiskers and a tail. Oh, and if her life wasn't crazy enough, a dead voodoo queen needs her blood to raise a legion of zombies.

There's one plan that might work to increase Jemma's powers so she can put an end to the looming holocaust. A sexy threesome with Griff and Logan Scott, a werewolf familiar with a history of rubbing Griff's fur the wrong way. A cat and a wolf playing nice, much less sharing? It'll take a miracle.

Warning: A witch, tiger and wolf doing naughty things. A dead voodoo queen doing evil things. And zombies doing zombie things. Get your shovels ready.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for* That Voodoo You Do:

"So what's going on in there?"

Logan propped his elbow against the frame, giving her a close-up view of his barbed-wire tat. Now that she thought about it, the symbolism seemed appropriate. Tangling with the lusty werewolf was bound to leave a few scratches. "Just Clarissa taking care of some coven business. Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head over, darlin'."

She narrowed her eyes. "That managed to be both evasive and sexist."

"Damn, and here I wasn't even tryin'." He chuckled. Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, she reached around him for the doorknob. He scooted sideways, forcing her hand to smack into his abdomen instead. His bare, firm-as-marble abdomen. Her fingertips brushed the warm hollow of skin resting just above the low rise of his button fly. Sucking in a sharp breath, she yanked her arm away and shuffled back several steps.

Logan's irises shimmered with amusement and heat. "Don't stop now. Things were just getting interesting."

"I, uh, just have to go and...um...yeah." She spun and stumbled in the direction of the kitchen before she did something really stupid, like follow the silky trail of hair disappearing beneath the waistband of Logan's jeans. With her tongue. That thought sent her tripping through the entry of the kitchen. She jerked to a halt when she spotted Griff in front of the stove, stirring the contents of a large stockpot. He was notably shirtless too, which put the mouthwatering expanse of his back on dazzling display. She stared at the muscles shifting beneath all that golden, velvety skin, her suspicions bubbling. It was too damn weird and convenient that both Logan and Griff were standing around half naked all of a sudden. Unless some devious shirt monster was making its rounds in the neighborhood, there was definitely something afoot.

And where was everyone else, anyway? She craned her neck, scoping the dining alcove for signs of Ms. Peach or Gloria.

"Hey, baby. You're just in time for a taste test."

She whipped her head around at Griff's zippy tone. Now she *knew* something was up. Griff didn't do chipper, particularly not thirty minutes after snarling at her like a pissed-off Tony the Tiger. "What the hell is going on?"

Griff tried for a guileless look. Oh yeah, he didn't do innocent well either. "I'm getting lunch ready." "Without your shirt on?"

"It's hot in here."

Well...that was certainly true. Even without Griff's muscle-icious torso making her girl parts all warm and tingly, there was no denying the temperature in the kitchen hovered between muggy and melt-your-panties-off miserable.

Griff dug a spoon out of the drawer and ladled some of the sauce he'd been stirring. "Tell me if this needs anything."

Her intuition warning her to be on the lookout for any sneakiness, she hesitantly crossed to the industrial-sized, stainless-steel stove. She tried to wrestle the spoon from Griff, but he insisted on feeding her the concoction himself. Almost from the instant the tapestry of flavors met her tongue, a seductive ripple of heat unfurled inside her, tightening her nipples beneath the sundress's snug, smocked bodice. Griff's thumb traced the outline of her lower lip. Holding her gaze, he lifted his finger and slowly licked it clean. If the humidity didn't melt the crotch of her panties, Griff demonstrating his perfect oral skills sure as hell would.

"What do you think? A pinch more salt and pepper?"

She stared into Griff's dark-as-sin pupils. Clearly he was waiting for her to answer, but damn if she could concentrate on anything beyond the flush of arousal making her dizzy with hunger. Only it wasn't food she was lusting for at the moment. Knees wobbling, she clutched the counter. "W—what's in that sauce?"

"Butter, egg, milk. The usual Béchamel ingredients."

Sure, and a liberal dash of horny goat weed and Viagra thrown in for good measure. She had no idea why Griff was trying to get her juiced up for sex. He knew damn well that all he had to do was breathe and

she'd gladly tackle him to the floor and ride him until they were both properly yippee-ki-yayed out. Which left only one possibility.

He was about to spring some hellaciously scary sexual request on her. If a midget and a monkey strolled in right now, she was so out of th—

"Looks like the party is revving into high gear." Logan ambled into the kitchen, his expression wicked and wolfish.

Her focus shifted between the two gorgeous specimens of male flesh on decadent display, and the puzzle pieces began locking together. *Oh, sweet Jesus*. Her heart frantically tap dancing, she snatched the embroidered dishtowel resting on the counter and blotted her perspiring forehead. Either the heat and the sauce were getting to her, or Griff and Logan. More than likely, all four.

She shot Griff an accusing glare. "Now I get it. You think the three of us having sex will fix everything, and I won't have to worry about Nettie luring me to the dark side. Did it even occur to you to give *me* a say in this decision?"

Griff thunked the spoon on the stovetop before giving her his full attention. "Christ, do you honestly think you wouldn't get a say? Damn it, you know I'd never force you into doing anything you don't want."

She plunked one hand on her hip and waved the other hand at the stockpot. "But you weren't averse to a little cheating, courtesy of your pasta à la sex sauce."

"I just wanted you to feel more comfortable. Relaxed."

"Turned on," she added, arching a brow.

A guilty flush spread from Griff's jaw to his cheeks. Chuffing a laugh, Logan joined them at the stove. "Catman had good intentions, sugar. The potion in the sauce is designed to loosen inhibitions and supersensitize erogenous zones you didn't even know you had." He flicked a glance in Griff's direction. "Maybe you better give her a demonstration."

She snorted. "Trust me, he already did."

Logan's mouth curled in wicked devilment. "You only got a small taste of the potion's capabilities. To truly appreciate its gift to the fullest, you need to ingest it in a more...intimate manner." Before she knew what he was up to, Logan unlaced the ties securing the sundress to her shoulders and pushed the bodice down, exposing her breasts. Gasping, she shot him a startled look. He awarded her a crooked smile. "Don't worry, you're gonna enjoy this."

Something warm and sticky stroked her nipples. She jumped at the unexpected sensation, her gaze shooting to Griff's sauce-coated fingers as they painted her areolas with the creamy substance. He lowered his head and followed the path of his fingers with his tongue, sparking a new conflagration of fire inside her. She shivered and Griff peered up at her, his eyes blazing. Curving an arm around her waist, he stood and claimed her mouth in a hot, devouring kiss. He tasted of Béchamel and exotic spice. Of magic and sex.

She wrapped her fingers in his hair, tugging him closer, ravenous for more. Their tongues rasped in a mating dance and she wiggled against him, her nipples aching for the sumptuous devotion of Griff's mouth.

Logan's knuckles skated the length of her spine. "Noticing the effects yet?" She mewled a response and he chuckled. "Excellent." He worked the dress over her hips and the garment floated to her feet. His feather-light touch skimmed above the elastic of her bikini, teasing the dimples near her tailbone. She arched against Logan's hand, her knees turning to jelly when he palmed her ass and gave it a good squeeze. He snuggled close behind her, so close she easily detected the hard ridge of his erection suggestively rubbing into her. "I've got something for ya, darlin'."

Oh yeah. No mistaking that.

Griff's mouth trailed to the crook of her neck, and something soft and silky caressed her cheek. She reached for the fabric, but Logan swept it behind her head.

"Not yet. First I want something in return."

She licked her lips, a hot liquid rush of excitement pulsing low in her belly. "What?"

"A taste." Logan's teeth scraped her earlobe, making her breath stutter. He moved lower and tongued the pulse point beneath her ear. "Same as you gave Catman."

A whimper escaped her and Logan tilted her head, his fingers tunneling in her hair as his lips glided along hers. Sucking her tongue into his mouth, he gave her a sneak peek at the devastation he could wreak on her body. If she let him. The question was, would she?

There's more than one way to outsmart a fox...

# Foxy Lady © 2010 Marie Harte

#### A Cougar Falls Story

Trust Julia Easton to screw up Sheriff Ty Roderick's March Madness plans. The pixie-faced vixen might be the picture of feminine perfection, but she tests his innate sense of order to its limits. Weeks ago, he let his conscience turn down a proposition his body still burns to accept—then she vanished. Now he's in the middle of Nowhere, Washington, racing to rescue her from danger.

There's risk in leaving Cougar Falls, but it's the only way Julia can hope to save her sister from making the same mistake she almost made with Ty. Settling down and having kits is one thing, but it can't be done with a human, especially one from a hunting family. Unfortunately, her sister isn't budging, and the fiancé's brother won't take Julia's no for an answer, either.

When Ty comes riding to their rescue, Julia plans to use him and lose him. No way is she throwing herself at that alpha jerk's feet in gratitude. Then Ty gives her the answer her heart still longs for: he wants to spend the rest of his life making things right. Now if only she can find the courage to say yes.

Warning: Beware a foxy sheriff, a backwoods bad guy, a cunning vixen, sexy escapades in and out of the bedroom, and the return of stubborn male shifters who think they know everything.

#### *Enjoy the following excerpt for* Foxy Lady:

Ty didn't know whether to spank Julia or kiss her senseless. Just seeing her again aroused him in a way he was hard-pressed to explain. Her scent, the feel of her smooth skin under his hands, her soft kiss, all of it made him want to throw her down on the nearest bed and fuck her until he couldn't move. He wanted to tie her to him and make her admit she couldn't stop thinking about him. Because he sure as hell couldn't stop thinking about her.

Hearing that Neanderthal claim Julia had nearly ended Ned's life. It had taken a lot of discipline to remain still. Ty didn't like that loss of control. As town sheriff, he came into contact with conflict on a daily basis. He had a reputation as calm and collected. So why did Julia Easton tie him in knots?

At least the woman looked nervous. As she should.

"Well? I'm waiting," he said in a quiet voice, pleased when Julia and Gabby jumped.

The three sisters were exceptionally popular in the clan. Meghan was the youngest, and at the age where she needed to explore. No one had balked when she'd left town for college on the outside. Still, this Jason business would need some explaining.

Everyone liked Gabby, the most outgoing and genial of the three. She had a tawny complexion that suited her dark red hair, and a curvy frame where Meghan and Julia were leaner.

Slender, sexy and beautiful, Julia made him ache. She made him want to beg. He huffed. A Roderick didn't beg. Hell, at home he rejected sexual offers from women left and right. But Julia had never asked a thing from him, not until the sly vixen had propositioned him, drunk as a skunk. Now how the hell could he say yes to that and not have her hate him in the morning?

Meghan was the first to answer him. "Ty, uh, I'm, well..."

"Get on with it, Meghan." She really was cute. A younger version of Julia.

"The brat thinks she's in love," Julia said, her words laced with disgust. Her gaze met his before it skittered back to her sister.

"I am in love," Meghan retorted. "Just because you're turning into the neighborhood cat lady is no reason to be jealous I've found someone special."

Ty coughed to smother a laugh. "Cat lady?"

"You know, the old lady with no life who lives with like thirty cats for company."

"We like cats," Gabby defended, shooting Meghan a look that surprised Ty. She seemed genuinely annoyed.

Meghan flushed. "I'm just saying Julia blames me for having a sex life."

"I so did not need to hear that," Ty muttered.

Julia's eyes sparkled and her scent grew richer. When angry, the little spitfire turned him hard in a heartbeat. He casually crossed the room to stand behind an oversized chair to hide his erection. Talk about embarrassing, not to mention irritating. The vixen made him crazy like no one could.

"Okay, you want to talk about your sex life? Fine," Julia sneered. "Are you using birth control? Does Jason know what can happen when you go into heat? Is he prepared to help rear your litter?"

Fascinated, Ty watched the family interplay. He'd never seen Julia so impassioned. Normally she did her job with calm precision and couldn't be described as anything other than cool. But with Meghan, she acted like a virtual firecracker. A sultry redhead with a temper to boot. God, he wanted her.

Meghan stared from Julia to Ty and back again, her cheeks scarlet. "I am not going to talk about this in front of Ty."

Thank God.

She continued. "I'm going to call Jason to come get me." Tears filled her eyes. "He's the only one who understands me. The only one who *cares*." She sobbed and fled the room.

Everyone stared at the slammed door in silence.

After a moment, he asked, "You sure she didn't major in drama?"

Julia's lips curved.

Gabby choked on a laugh. "I'll go talk to her. You deal with him," she said to Julia, a knowing look in her eyes that made Julia blush. Gabby joined Meghan in the bedroom, leaving Julia and Ty alone together.

"Now it's just you and me, honey. Where should we start?"

Julia gnawed on her lower lip, and he wanted to kiss the sting away. She turned her direct amber-eyed gaze on him. "Why are you here?"

"You're welcome for saving you, by the way. Or would you rather I stepped aside so you and Ned can head down the aisle?" he asked dryly.

"Please. I can handle Ned."

"Oh?"

"Granted, he's an ass. But I know how to handle the type." The look she gave him heated his blood to boiling.

"I raced nearly two hundred miles on no sleep and shitty gas station food. I left the raptors in a frenzy, ready to rip out Sarah Duncan's feathers one by one. The cats are at the throats of the gray wolves again, the bears are losing their minds, and half our clan is in favor of instituting a new mating policy, whereby the silver foxes will soon have arranged marriages. I left all that behind to save you from Hunters."

"Hunters?" Julia blinked in confusion. "Rip out Sarah's feathers? Is she okay?"

He spoke through gritted teeth. "The Whitefeathers and Gerald have it all under control. Sarah's the one who told me you were having trouble with Hunters."

"What do the Whitefeathers have to do with this?"

"Julia, focus, would you? Why would Sarah think you were dealing with Hunters?" The thought of Julia being hunted down and killed had nearly stopped his heart before he'd managed to bear down and concentrate on finding her.

"Hunters? Where would she get that idea?" Her expression cleared. "Oh. Right. The last time we spoke I mentioned Jason's family's disgusting hobby of mounting dead things in their homes. She might have gotten the wrong impression."

"I'm not sure she did. Ned Williams seems pretty threatening." *And he likes you way too much for my liking*.

"He is, but he's nothing I can't handle." Now she sounded like the competent legal assistant he knew her to be. Sexy, unruffled, self-contained. "I'm sorry if you rushed out here on our behalf, but we're fine."

"Oh, right. I can see that. Some asshole just shot all of our tires. Your sister is involved with an outsider the clan knows nothing about, and you're getting married to Ned No-Neck Williams."

Julia pinched the bridge of her nose. "I didn't say we weren't having some problems, but it's a family matter. Not your concern, Ty."

He liked her saying his name. He'd like it a whole lot better if she'd cry it out as her body clenched around his in orgasm. "Oh, but it is my concern. Meghan's in some serious trouble. And it doesn't seem like she's going to drop this Jason anytime soon."

"I know." Julia sighed. "But we'll handle it."

"Yes, we will." Ty made a sudden decision. Maybe he could fix a few issues at once. He had no transportation at the moment. Considering the "long line of Williamses" in Nowhere, he'd venture a guess he'd have a hard time finding spare tires for his truck in town.

Time to match wits with a sexy, conniving adversary. Satisfaction flooded him at the thought of tangling with Julia again. He really had missed her.

"What does 'we will' mean?" Suspicion made her voice husky.

"It means I'm here to fix a few things. But first things first." He took a step closer, pleased when she licked her lips, nervous.

He answered how he should have the first time she'd asked, four weeks ago. "Yes, Julia. Yes, I'll take you home and make love to you until neither of us can walk."

He kissed her before she could close her pretty mouth.

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