

The book cover features a woman in a black leotard and shorts, seen from behind, holding a handgun. She is standing in a room with a window that shows a classical building. In the background, there are dark silhouettes of people. The title 'Send 'em Packing' is written in a large, stylized font, with 'Send 'em' in white and 'Packing' in yellow with a red outline. The author's name 'Hannah Beckham' is at the top in a white, distressed font. The publisher's name 'Changeling Press' is at the bottom in a stylized font.

Hannah
Beckham

Send
'em

Packing

Changeling Press

Send 'em Packing (Collection)
by Hannah Beckham

Changeling Press LLC

www.changelingpress.com

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Send 'em Packing

Hannah Beckham

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Send 'em Packing

Hannah Beckham

Maya Eddings is six feet tall, a black belt in tae kwon do, proficient with handguns, and an empath who runs her own private security firm in Kansas City. Her life couldn't be better, with the exception of two men who each want her to be exclusively theirs.

Matt Brewer, legal investigator and werewolf, wants Maya to be his life mate, but while she likes a little tail, actually growing one isn't all that appealing to her. Stephen Daniels, architect and part incubus demon, wants Maya too—body and soul. But he's willing to settle on her body—for now.

With two hunkalicious men fighting for her attention, mysteries to solve, bad guys to shoot, and a secret past that will rock her world, Maya's beginning to feel she's bitten off more than she can shoot.

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Packing Heat

Hannah Beckham

Maya Eddings never leaves home without her best accessory, a 9mm handgun. Maya's life couldn't be better, with the exception of two men who want her to be exclusively theirs.

Matt Brewer is an investigator for a law firm, and a werewolf. He wants Maya to be his life mate, but while she likes a little tail, actually growing one isn't all that appealing to her. Besides, his mother hates her.

Stephen Daniels, architect, and part incubus demon, thinks Maya can be the cure to his incessant one-night stands. He wants her—body and soul. Okay, really he just wants her body. But Stephen's her best friend's younger brother and that could get sticky.

With a mystery to solve and two hunkalicious men fighting for her attention, Maya's beginning to wonder if she's bitten off more than she can shoot.

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Chapter 1

Maya Eddings patted her 9mm pistol while she stood outside the elevator doors, waiting for what seemed like minutes, but actually only seconds had passed. Nervous habit, really. It helped her to concentrate on the job. Her client, Milo Bach, a minor rock star with a major ego, fidgeted with a hand-held video game, making grunting noises every time he pushed a button.

Glancing in his direction, she rolled her eyes. He wore too long jeans and a seventies' style, wide collared silk shirt. He was good-looking enough—if you liked the David Cassidy meets Twisted Sister type. Milo had come to Kansas City to play Kemper Arena and it was Maya's job to make sure he survived his press conference and autograph session.

His manager, Kit Stan, had hired Maya to get him safely from his room on the seventh floor of the Adam's Mark hotel to the lower lobby. Apparently he'd been getting death threats from a rabid fan, and it wasn't hard to see why. A little less than thirty minutes with the rock star, and Maya was ready to kill him.

She waited as the elevator door opened then peeked around the corners. *No passengers. Good.* Maya ushered Milo and his manager swiftly into the car and pushed the button for the first floor.

"Hold the elevator," a deep masculine voice yelled from the hallway.

Maya leaned her head out of the opening and wet her lips.
Mmm. Nice.

He was tall, at least 6'4", medium blond hair, and under the tight black pants and a cobalt Nehru jacket, she could see he had broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and long muscular legs. *Tempting, but uh-uh.* She was off men, even if they happened to be unbelievably beautiful.

He arrived at the doors, just as they were closing. His arm shot out in between them, making them bounce open. Maya stepped forward with cat-like quickness, placing her hand on the man's chest. Incredible heat poured down her arm, not burning hot, just strong sensual warmth. Her nipples went rigid under her black leather jumper.

Shit.

His mouth—upper lip slightly fuller than the lower—curved upward in a gorgeous smile. His remarkable bright green eyes were accented with gold rings around his pupils. Her breath caught in a short gasp and her tongue went tingly.

Even though his arms stayed at his sides, Maya felt hands brush against her breasts, caress her ass, rub down her mound to her wet folds. *It's all in your mind, Maya,* she told herself. *He's just standing there. Nothing else. Just standing there ...* Exuding some major mojo.

Heat and desire rolled off the stranger and she fought the impulse to close the distance between them and kiss his luscious mouth. Instead, Maya shook her head and nudged him back one step into the corridor. "Sorry, Stud, you'll have to take the next elevator."

He tilted his head to the side, raised an eyebrow, and backed away. "No problem, hot stuff."

Yikes! His smooth low voice sent goose bumps over her body. He winked as the doors closed between them. "Oh, jeez, I need to get laid," she mumbled, then turned her attention back to the client.

The rocker must have heard her, because he leaned against the elevator rail and whispered to her, "Hey, Maya, you gorgeous Amazon, what say we blow this joint and take a little me and you time?"

Usually she didn't mind the Amazon reference—being six feet tall, she was used to it—but the rock star was getting on her last nerve. Besides, his smarmy lust-filled emotions were dripping all over her. As a bodyguard, Maya's empathic abilities came in handy, but certain men *and women* could be overwhelming.

"You and me," she corrected and mentally added, *asshole*.

He snuggled his body in closer to hers. "Exactly. Me and you." His long hair brushed against Maya's shoulder. If he kept up the touching, he might not survive the trip to the lobby.

Rolling her eyes, she put out a hand to push him off. She patted the handgun in her hip holster. "No, the correct way to say that is 'you and me' and the answer is no." She wanted to add that big hair bands died in the 80's, but held her tongue. Besides, she hadn't been paid yet.

Milo put up his hands defensively. "Hey, baby, what's with the 'tude? Most chicks dig me. After all, I'm going to be a legend." He smiled—very self-assured.

Maya shook her head and held down the button on the two-way radio that clipped to her belt then spoke into the headset. "Jack, everything set?"

A voice came back over, "Yeah, boss, good to go."

"Tyler, you set?"

"Yeah, no problem," came a new voice.

The elevator slowed to a stop. "Have you ever heard of Michael Damian?" she asked Milo.

"Who?"

The doors opened to the lobby. "My point exactly. Rock on, dude. Your fans are waiting." Maya stepped out between him and a mob of screaming teenage girls chanting "Milo." She needed aspirin—and quickly.

* * * *

The press conference had gone on for thirty minutes, nearly twenty-nine too long. Maya was amazed at the long line of teenagers, boys and girls alike, along with some twenty-somethings who crowded into line to get Milo's autograph.

In the corner stood the tall man from the elevator. His startling green eyes met Maya's. Her clit throbbed at the heat in his eyes. Her ardor must have been written all over her face, because he smiled, slow and meaningful.

Involuntarily, she took a step toward him when a sudden wave of rage and anger directed at Milo washed over her. She went into full alert mode, tearing her gaze from the hotty with the body.

Scanning the crowd, she saw the channeler of those emotions weaving his way through the press of bodies—a stocky man with dark glasses and a long gray trench coat made his way closer to the client. Though Maya couldn't see his eyes, his emotions were easy to read, but it was a bit more difficult to decipher his intentions. She had a sinking feeling he wasn't a line-jumper there to get his CD signed.

Back to the job, she sighed, casting one last fleeting look at Mr. Sexy Tight Pants. "Tyler," she said into the headset, "glasses at two o'clock."

"See him," was his response.

"Jack?"

"Copy that, boss lady," he said.

Within a couple of seconds, Jack and Tyler closed in on the man's position.

Maya had problems trusting people, but Jack Simon was an exception. She'd worked security with Jack for several years. He liked her for who she was, not because he had aspirations for getting lucky with her. As a matter of fact, Jack wasn't even remotely attracted to her. He liked his women shorter and with more meat on their bones.

Bald, and only about five-foot-seven, he could take down someone twice his size in a second. He was in charge of securing the lobby, while she babysat the money. They'd recently hired Tyler Jackson, a former Marine, as back-up muscle. Tonight had been his first gig with them, and they were curious to see what kind of mettle he was made of—hopefully not at the client's expense.

"Take it slow, boys. This could be nothing."

They both nodded. Milo leaned close to Maya again. This time his hair grazed her face. "You look hot in black leather, baby." He patted her on the ass, and if he hadn't been paying her three hundred dollars an hour, she'd have broken his hand. *Jerk.*

"I am hot," she sneered. As a matter of fact, she was damned hot. Between the body heat from the crowd and the leather jumper she wore, Maya was sweating her ass off.

The man in the trench reached inside a pocket.

"Be alert, boys. He's digging." She really wanted to knock the guy on his backside, but no sense in getting arrested for assault because a suspicious-looking character was hunting for his pack of cigs.

Maya moved in front of Mr. Rock Star.

"Now that's what I call a view," he said. She pulled her 9mm and laid it against her thigh, easy for the rock star to see, hard for the crowd. "Just kidding." Milo took a step back. "No need for violence."

That made her smile. Up until five years ago, she'd been an English teacher at a local high school, and hardly viewed as dangerous. Maya had grown bored trying to explain the finer points of sentence structure and punctuation to hormonal adolescents who used colons as nipples for doodled breasts.

Besides, every emotion in the young pimply-faced cretins was punctuated and full blown, too much to handle for an adept sensitive—eight hours a day, five days a week. Ugh. Luckily, next to William Faulkner, karate became her passion.

That's how she met Jack and, eventually, became hired muscle. Most days she didn't regret a thing.

Jack moved in from the left and Tyler from the right. As trench coat pulled his hand from his pocket and showed the grip of a gun, Maya shoved Milo Bach down. "Go time, boys."

Jack and Tyler moved swiftly in unison toward the trench and Maya ran forward, trapping him in a triangle. "Gun! Everybody down!"

Of course everyone in the crowd panicked, nobody ducked down, and chaos ensued. *Fucking idiots!* People were running around messing with her view. Maya considered firing a warning shot, just to scare them, but then she knew she'd be down at police headquarters all night filling out paperwork.

What the hell, she thought, *I'm going to be down at the station all night anyways*. She held up her piece, ready to fire, when she caught sight of trench coat pulling his gun all the way out and waving the barrel. "Now, Jack, go!"

Jack tackled him from the right side as Tyler threw his body low to the man's left. Trench coat slammed to the floor, but somehow the bastard managed to keep a hold of his gun. He raised the barrel and aimed toward the ex-Marine.

"Tyler! Watch out!" Maya got to the man just as he squeezed off a round, nailing the blond bulldog in the shoulder. She kicked the assailant's hand and the gun went sailing. Following with a knee drop to the chest, Maya ended the fight by cold-cocking him with the butt of the 9mm. She rolled the guy over and put cuffs on him. As she scanned the room for wounded, green eyes from across the lobby met

hers in approval. The hotty tipped his head then walked out of the hotel.

Maya resisted the urge to go after him and went to check on her men. Jack knelt next to Tyler using cloth napkins to keep pressure on the wound. "He going to be okay?" she asked.

Jack smiled. "Yeah, went clean through."

Tyler grimaced. "It hurts like shit."

"Well, kid," she said, "welcome to private security." She patted him on the back. "Nice move out there, by the way. Too bad you had to go and get yourself shot."

In all the hoopla, Maya had almost forgotten about the client. She looked around for the rock star, but couldn't see him. "For Christ's sake!"

"Over there, under the table." Jack gestured with his thumb. "I think he's going to need a new set of britches."

Grinning, Maya shook her head. "They don't pay me enough for diaper changing."

They got paid well that night. The rock star's manager threw in an extra two grand for good measure. Tyler wasn't happy, but he would be after he recovered. It was good money for a couple hours of work.

* * * *

Stephen watched Maya talk with the police as they hauled away the perp. The raw grace of her power and smooth motion when she'd taken the man down nearly drove him crazy. For a moment, he'd almost jumped into the foray with

her, but she'd nicely managed to take care of herself. He knew she was an empath.

And he didn't need to be empathic to know what she was feeling when she'd touched his chest during the planned "chance" encounter at the elevator. His hand ghosted over the area above his heart where he could still feel the tingling of her hand. She wanted him and he meant to let her have what she wanted.

Seeing Maya, feeling her touch, had taken all his energy—the heat he'd felt within her, the rush of his blood pounding his arteries until he thought he would burst.

He hated the compulsion to have sex with anyone with a pulse, but such had been his life as a partial incubus, sex demon. Which meant no real super powers, except the ability to seduce just about anybody whether he wanted to or not. As a college student, he'd thought the whole thing was wicked-cool, getting laid on a nightly basis. But lately, all his demon had done was get him into more trouble than the sex was worth.

Unfortunately for Stephen, the incubus gene occurred every two generations in the males of his family. He'd been in the second generation since the last, and the only male. It was a dark family secret, to which only the men in his family were privy. There wasn't a cure, but finding one right lover might keep his demon part from seeking out many. At least it had worked for his grandfather.

Maya Eddings, he thought, could prove to be the answer, his redemption. His body burned at her touch, confirming what he already knew. She would be his salvation.

I will have you, Maya Eddings, he thought darkly.

* * * *

Maya spent most of the night downtown at the police station and the rest at the hospital with Tyler. The ex-Marine had done well for his first night. It took a bit of convincing on her part to make sure it wasn't his last. Finally, about four a.m., she'd arrived home and put on her Winnie-the-Pooh nightshirt. She loved the Pooh, his little butt poking out of Rabbit's home.

She rubbed his golden bottom plastered over her breasts. Her nipples tightened. *Who was that gorgeous man at the hotel?* He'd definitely made an impression.

Dead tired, she flopped on her bed. *Oh, my green-eyed mystery man, make my wet dreams come true.* She sighed wistfully then conked out.

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Chapter 2

The phone rang, rousing Maya from a hard sleep. She looked at the alarm clock. Jeezus, it was six in the morning. Fumbling for the receiver, she knocked it on the floor. "Damn it!" She felt around and located the phone. "Hello. You've woken Maya Eddings. Be afraid. Be very afraid."

"Maya?" the voice on the other end answered. "You sound gruff, babe. Rough night?"

"Hey, Paula." Maya relaxed. "You should know better than to call me before ten. I don't even get up to pee before ten o'clock." Paula Daniels had been her best friend since the sixth grade. They'd even gone to college together. She was one of the few people in Maya's life who didn't regularly piss her off.

"I know, I know," Paula said, "but I have a favor to ask, and I wanted to catch you before I headed to work."

Rubbing her sleep-worn eyes, Maya sat up on the edge of the bed. "Name it."

"Well, why don't you hear what it is before you make any promises..."

After Maya got off the phone, she found herself wide awake and with only two hours of sleep. She tried closing her eyes and making her mind blank, she tried reading, she tried some soft music, and nothing was working. No way in hell she was going to fall back to sleep.

Paula had asked Maya to escort her younger brother to a formal business party. Apparently his date had cancelled at

the last minute, and he needed someone on his arm to impress. Saying "no" to Paula wasn't an option. Maya owed her—big time. Her family life had been for shit and Paula had made her part of the family.

Paula's little brother had been fourteen the last time she'd seen him—gangly with a bad case of acne. Strange kid, really. That was ten years ago, in their senior year of college. Stephen had sniffed around Maya the entire time like a wayward puppy. Just great. She hoped he was over it.

Rolling over, Maya checked out the clock, again. Shit, it was only seven in the morning—her prime sleepy time. She brushed her teeth and checked out the tube. An old rerun of *LA Law* was playing. It made her think of Matt Brewer, the neighbor across the hall. He was an investigator for a law firm—mostly window peeping for divorce cases—and someone she'd slept with once or three times. Maybe more, but who was counting?

Mmm, Matt. One hot ticket, all beautiful body, curly black hair, and blue eyes. His father was Irish and his mother Greek. The lethal combination made him look like he belonged on Mount Olympus.

Maya really liked him, but he'd wanted something she wouldn't give him—a relationship—a life mate. Matt was a lycanthrope, a werewolf, born to it on his father's side, and once a lycan got it in his head to have a woman, he could be relentless. But Maya wasn't the settling down kind, nor did she have any plans of having puppies.

Besides, his family hated her. Specifically, his mother. Isadora Brewer, Izzy to her friends and practically anyone but

Maya—she'd insisted Maya call her Mrs. Brewer—was not a nice person. She wanted Matt to settle down with a nice were-chick, like she had room to talk! She'd started out human enough herself.

Just remembering the night Matt had arranged for Maya to "accidentally on purpose" meet his mom made her teeth hurt. The woman talked loudly, succinctly, and with lots of gesticulations. Talk about pissed. When Isadora found out Maya knew of Matt's lycan status, she flipped her wig. Seriously, she wore a wig. Okay, it was more like a hair piece, sort of looked like a squirrel's tail, but still...

It didn't really matter what his mother thought about her. Maya lived by the philosophy that friends were for fucking. Unfortunately, Matt hadn't seen it that way.

Lord, just thinking about him made her twitch and go wet. She turned off the TV. Dammit! Between Matt and Mr. Green Eyes, sleep looked less and less like an option. It had been three months since her last date. Which meant she hadn't been laid in nearly ninety days.

Damn Matt! And his moral conscience. The last part she thought with less anger and more regret.

She focused on the door, willing a knock she knew wouldn't come. She even considered doing a little knocking herself. No, she told herself, I will not go across the hall. Matt had made it perfectly clear that unless Maya wanted more than a bedmate, he was out. Besides, he had started to date some woman named Penny, Jenny, Wenny, oh, who the hell cared?

She sat quietly on the couch, clit aching for attention. "Fuck it," she mumbled. Matt didn't leave for work for another two hours, and who knew...

Maya didn't even bother to comb her mess of short black hair; instead she bee-lined across the hallway to Matt's apartment. Hesitating for just a moment, she knocked.

From inside she could hear, "Just a minute." Then a small crash. "Shit, Jesus, fucking plant." The door opened and Matt, wearing nothing but flannel pajama pants, his broad muscular chest staring her in the face, or rather her staring at the firm pecs, stood eye to eye with Maya while holding a sore big toe in hand. Not a great start.

He looked confused. "Maya? Is something wrong? It's seven o'clock in the morning. Something's gotta be wrong if you're ringing this early." He let go of his foot. "You look like hell."

"Stop talking." Maya stalked toward him. "Before I change my mind." She grabbed him into a kiss. His lips were unyielding at first, then they warmed to hers. His tongue slipped between her teeth. She put her hand on his cock, feeling it grow beneath the flannel.

"Wait, wait..." he said a little breathlessly. "I can't do this. I'm seeing someone."

Maya's grip tightened, not enough to hurt, but enough to get his attention. "See her, fuck me."

Heat touched Matt's hazel eyes as Maya pushed him back into the apartment, closing the door behind them. She wrapped her arms around him. He captured her lips in a

hungry kiss, darting his tongue between her teeth, exploring her mouth. His hands brushed down to caress her ass.

"Mmmm, nice ass. But you could have put on something sexy."

Maya blushed, remembering she was wearing "the Pooh." She stripped the nightshirt over her head, leaving only black silk panties against her pale skin. "How's this for something sexy?"

Matt smiled as he drank in her body, leanly muscled, and her bare 34 C's standing erect and ready for attention—not so erect that she could pass the pencil test, but still ... "It works."

She moved close for another kiss. "You're lucky I brushed my teeth." She lightly bit his lower lip.

Matt, the same height as Maya, growled, lifting her off the ground. He cradled her body. He kissed her neck and carried her to the kitchen counter. Sidling between her legs, he rubbed a hand between her breasts then down to her abdomen. "You've got a great body, Maya. I love the way it feels in my hands."

She put her tongue in his ear, then whispered, "Less talk. More action."

In response, he looped a finger around the wet silk of her panties and she moaned as he slid between the folds of her sex. "Damn, do you walk around in a constant state of horny? You're the only woman I know who's always ready."

"That a bad thing?" She squirmed with frustration, grinding against him as he withdrew his hand and placed it on her shoulder. *Crap!*

His face grew somber and serious. Never good news. "Yeah, Maya. Sometimes it is. I want more than sex from you and I'm not willing to settle for scraps anymore." He stepped away from the counter and scooped her nightshirt from the floor. "I think you should go home."

She hadn't expected that. She couldn't read Matt's emotions, not like she could most people. Apparently lycans were on a different frequency than regular humans, but he'd always been honest with her to the point that she didn't need to. Now was no exception. "Fine. I don't need you to get off anyways," she said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, I know." A glint of anger flashed in his brown eyes. "You are nothing if not self-sufficient. Now." He gestured to the door. "Goodbye."

A small scream of aggravation slipped from her lips. "You're such a ... such a ... woman!" She grabbed her clothes from his hands. The look he gave her made her nervous. Never smart challenging an alpha male, but he'd pissed her off.

Before she could get to the door, Matt was on her, shoving her against the wall. The nightshirt dropped to the floor, leaving his chest pressed against her bare flesh. He cupped her naked breast, molding the soft mound in his palm as his mouth went to her lips, her jaw, kissing with teeth grazing over her skin. "You're treading in dangerous waters, woman," he whispered in her ear.

She wanted to say something cute, funny, to lighten the mood, but "Danger is my middle name" seemed way too clichéd. Instead, she answered by sliding her hand into his

pants and felt the heat of his cock thrumming, while her fingers tangled in the curly hair surrounding it. Her other hand traveled to his head, holding his mouth firmly to her skin as his lips moved down her chest, his mouth capturing her nipple, sucking it in.

Matt grasped her leg, pulling her thigh up onto his hip. She moved her hand from his cock, allowing her pussy to grind against the rigid length. Frustration drove him; a barking grunt sounded through the quiet apartment as he lifted her off the ground again and carried Maya to his bedroom.

He threw her on the bed and she landed with a whoosh of breath leaving her body. He tugged the waist of his pajama bottoms down to his thighs, his feet doing the rest of the work as the flannels hit the floor. She drank in his body, fine black hair covering his broad chest with a pleasure trail leading to the rough curly hair framing his erect cock. "This is a mistake," were the words that came from his mouth, but his eyes told a different story. Matt wasn't going to stop himself this time and Maya rejoiced.

She slid to the edge of his bed, pulling his hips to her, and took the length of his cock into her mouth. Matt moaned, hips bucking forward in response. As her lips slid along the soft tender skin, her hand snaked into his nightstand and pulled out a condom.

He'd told her in the past that sex could transform a human to lycan, and even in her passion-drunk state, her pussy aching, wet, and ready, she remembered. Lycanthropes didn't get diseases or illnesses. Their genetic make-up made them nearly invulnerable. But even the promise of long life and

good health couldn't convince Maya that it was cool to grow a tail.

Slipping his cock from her lips, she sheathed the thick length of him. "Fuck me," she whispered, nearly begging. "I want you inside me."

Matt, standing at the edge of the bed, reached down and pulled her legs up, pushing her thighs back to position the bulbous head at her opening. "Damn, you're so fucking wet," he said, sliding the tip back and forth against her clit.

She squirmed, trying to force him inside. If he didn't hurry she would come before his shaft could fill her. "Stop teasing, and fuck me, Matt."

A ferocious grunt escaped his lips as she felt the apex of his cock enter her, followed by his entire length as he thrust his hips forward, nearly savage. Again he thrust, holding her thighs down, her knees to either side of her chest. The angle allowed his balls to slap against her ass with each forward advance.

Maya's fingers traced over her swollen nub, filled with blood, aching to be touched. She slid her hand until his cock slipped back and forth between her middle and ring fingers, feeling him as he moved in and out of her cunt. The tension in her body pulled like strings on a marionette, yanking and tugging, building with unadulterated pleasure as the ridge of his cock rubbed over the sensitive spot a mere inch or so inside her channel.

"Oh, God," she whispered, tears forming in her eyes as his fingers dug into the muscles of her thighs. Pleasure

overwhelmed her senses. "Matt," she breathed. "Matt, Matt, oh, shit, damn."

A jolt of ecstasy took her, filling Maya with the rapture that came with orgasm as her hips bucked against him. Her arms flew up and behind her head as she tried to grasp onto something, anything to keep her grounded. Maya moaned into a pillow that she'd managed to grab a hold of, her back shuddering as she came and came.

As the orgasm subsided, Matt's thrusts quickened, but remained steady, his hard cock working the sensitive spot in her pussy until she could feel the pressure of a new climax building, working its way through her once again. "Feels so good, so good..." Her words trailed off, then pinched back a scream as the next wave of pleasure hit, bowing her back.

Maya pushed her legs upward until her feet were by his head, taking the entire length of his shaft deep into her slick, swollen cunt. Her clit bounced against the mass of hair above his shaft as he gripped her thighs and pulled her fiercely toward him with every hard thrust of his hips. She looked into his deep blue eyes, slightly rimmed in gold now, intense, possessive as he drank in her sex-slackened face. With a snarl on his lips and his teeth clenched tight, he bucked forward. Maya came again as Matt pumped his orgasm into her, then held her tight as the last of his energy spent.

"That was fantastic," she said with a smile as he solemnly, and with regret she noticed, withdrew from her.

"What does it mean, Maya?" he asked.

"I don't know. It was fun, right?"

Disappointment covered him, she could tell by his body language, even if the look on his face had gone cold. Why couldn't he be satisfied? Maya sighed as Matt sat next to her on the bed. "I can't do this again. It hurts too much." Unshed tears rimmed his eyes. "Don't come over again. Please."

She wanted to hold him, to tell him it would be all right. Hurting him was the last thing in the world she wanted. But she couldn't give him what he needed, and it pissed her off that he wouldn't take what she could give. On that note, she picked up her clothes and left.

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Chapter 3

Maya chose vanilla. She always chose vanilla. It reminded men of chocolate chip cookies, a warm oven, and Mom. The scent took men back to wholesomeness and unconditional love, something they secretly craved, but never expected from someone who hadn't given birth to them.

She slipped on a tight black velvet number with spaghetti straps and a split up the side to accentuate her long legs. It was like a glorious path that led down to her new Prada three-inch strap sandals. Maya turned her ankle out to admire them. They'd cost a pretty big chunk of change. But when you're six feet tall, you have two choices, try to hide it or flaunt the hell out of it. Maya chose to flaunt.

At six-fifty-nine, Paula's little brother knocked at the door. At least he was prompt. When Maya opened the door to find Mr. Green Eyes wearing an impeccably tailored black three-piece tuxedo with a black silk tie, fitting his narrow waist and lusciously slim hips perfectly, she nearly fainted. "Uh, I think you have the wrong apartment."

He smiled, sultry and sexy, the sizzle in the air palpable. "Hello, Maya."

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! An orgy of emotions crashed against her. "Stephen?"

He looked around. "Were you expecting someone else?"

Oh, how his voice sent visions of sugar plums dancing through her head. "You've, uh, grown up some since the last time I saw you."

"Yep, grew a few inches and the acne cleared up nicely." A devilish grin crossed his face.

Other things had grown up nicely on him as well, the bulge in his pants for example—so much so that her eyes lingered for a moment longer than she'd intended.

"Maya," he said in a soft deep voice. "It's good to see you again." He leaned close and kissed her cheek. "Hmmm. You smell good."

The touch of his lips, innocent and simple, made her feel weak and, frankly, horny as hell. He was already a little too smooth and for another thing this was Paula's brother. *I will not molest Paula's brother in any way.* "Nice to see you, Stephen." And it was nice. Way too fucking nice!

Maya grabbed her Dolce and Gabbana handbag—small enough to be feminine, but large enough to carry lip gloss, a credit card, ID, some cash, and a gun. "Now, before we go, there are some ground rules that have to be established."

He nodded and even that looked sexy.

"Cut that shit out."

He smoothed his hair, his eyes going all bedroom GQ. "Cut what out?"

"Never mind. Okay. Pay attention," she told him, shaking her head to clear her hormone-addled thoughts. "Hand holding's fine, slow dancing is negotiable, but there will be absolutely no touching of any body parts covered by this dress." Of course, even the touching of uncovered body parts might not be a good idea.

"Absolutely," he agreed, but his light eyes sparkled with mischief.

So the black dress didn't cover much, her intent was still clear. She grabbed her wrap and linked arms with him. "This is a favor for your sister, buddy. Nothing else." Even if her body disagreed.

"Okay, Maya." He winked. "Got it."

She adjusted one of her three-inch strappies and they headed out. In the hallway, the door opened to 37B. Matt walked out. Great! It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't looked so damn good—tight black jeans, and a black T-shirt to match. She glanced at Stephen. What was it with men in black? Well, to be fair these two fellas would've looked good in burlap.

"Hello, Matthew." He hated to be called Matthew.

He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "Maya." He looked at Stephen then back to her. "You babysitting tonight?"

Maya's face went hot. Stephen grabbed her hand and kissed it gently, all the while watching Matt. One tiny little gesture that nearly sent her into a frenzy, wanting to strip off his clothes and knock boots right in the hallway—with both of them.

She forced herself to calm down and caressed Stephen's face. "Best gig I ever got." That slapped the smug right out of Matt. She waved at him as they walked away. "Ta-ta, Matthew."

His apartment door slammed shut by the time the elevator door opened. Maya and Stephen tumbled into the carriage laughing. "Thanks," she said to Stephen.

"Ex-boyfriend?"

"Ex-something," she murmured. He put his arm around her, and for a moment, she snuggled in—invisible hands snaking down her back, her buttocks, and thighs—but quickly came to her senses. "Hey, now. The rules still stand as prearranged."

Stephen smiled and went obediently to his corner of the elevator.

"And stop smiling!"

* * * *

The hotel ballroom was filled with the standard stuffed shirts and dressed up trophy wives. The way people treated Stephen made Maya feel like she was on the job. He was a regular minor celebrity. Apparently he was the youngest person to ever make junior partner at Dream Makers, Inc., a downtown architectural firm. The party was for him.

The place was decked out in a Greco-Roman theme. Large pillars lined the dance floor. The wait staff wore sandals, togas, and circular ivy headdresses. Maya hoped they'd skipped the purging basins. They were quickly ushered to the head table shortly after they arrived—cameras clicking left and right.

"I'd have worn my good dress if I'd have known I was going to be in the spotlight all evening," she said.

"You're gorgeous." He took her hand and kissed it again, sending melting twitters through her. Twenty flashes went off simultaneously.

Maya picked up an olive branch centerpiece—talk about overdoing it—then set it back down. "I'm used to guarding

the public spectacles, not being the spectacle. I don't think I like it very well."

"Sorry. I guess I should have warned you."

His expression told a different story. He seemed very pleased with himself, and he looked like everything was going as planned. And she wondered, what exactly was the plan?

A graying man in a well-tailored tux walked over to their table. A blonde woman in her forties, pretty in an Anjelica Huston way, with big breasts—probably fake—was draped on his arm.

Stephen stood and they shook hands. "Mr. Peterson."

"Call me John. After all, you're a partner now." The older man smiled. "No one deserves it more. The Harper account was a pure *coup d'état*." He laughed and Stephen looked quite pleased with himself.

"Thank you, Mister, eh, John."

Peterson gestured to the woman on his arm. "You remember my wife, Emma?"

"Of course," Stephen said. He kissed Emma's hand.

"Lovely to see you again, Mrs. Peterson."

She smiled. "I'm flattered you remembered me."

Her hand lingered in his just a little too long, which told Maya that the woman had a bit of a crush on young Stephen. That and the waves of lust blowing off her like dust in a windstorm.

Stephen broke contact first then looked down at Maya.

"This is Maya Eddings, my date."

Peterson took her hand and nodded his head. "A pleasure to meet you, my dear."

Mrs. Peterson leaned over and lightly kissed her cheek. "Nice to meet you, Maya." Her smile was tight and phony—like her tits—and just as strong as the lust had been toward Stephen, the jealousy she telegraphed toward Maya could knock out an elephant.

"Well, come along, Emma," Peterson said. "We've mandatory mingling to attend to." He looked at Stephen. "We'll talk later, my boy."

After the Petersons left, Maya and Stephen settled back down to the table. Maya clawed the air. "Meow."

"What?"

"She's a real feline."

"Who?" Stephen brushed a piece of lint from his sleeve. "Emma?"

"Oh, it's Emma now?"

Cocking his head to the side, he gazed at her. Those emerald eyes of his were startlingly clear and innocent—with just the hint of devil. Much to her dismay, Maya felt uncomfortably female. Stephen raised an eyebrow and asked charmingly, "Just what type of man do you think I am?"

Maya was just about to tell him *exactly* what type she thought he was, but they were interrupted. A middle-aged man, medium height, graying at the temples, and in a classic tux with bow tie, stood next to the table. He cleared his throat. "Daniels."

Stephen stood and took the man's hand in a firm shake. "Watkins."

"Congratulations on the promotion." The gentleman gave the appearance of control, but his real feelings washed over

her in angry waves. So far the night had proven a veritable cornucopia of intense emotions. In other words, an empath's nightmare.

Straightening the back of his jacket, Stephen sat down. "Thank you."

She expected a backlash of anger, irritation—something from Stephen toward the older man, but nothing. Right then Maya realized she couldn't read him. There was no strong *anything* from Stephen toward Watkins, and she cursed herself for being too blinded by her own hormones to notice. It was as if he could pick and choose what emotions Maya felt from him, because she definitely felt lust from him. More and more interesting.

Watkins glanced at Maya then back to Stephen. "Your date is lovely."

His date can hear you. Not that you're really paying attention, she thought.

"Yes, she is," Stephen agreed, never taking his eyes off Mr. Classic Tux.

Since it was apparent that she wasn't going to be introduced, she offered her hand. "Maya. Maya Eddings."

Watkins lightly took it. "Samuel Watkins." He leaned forward and kissed her knuckles. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms. Eddings." A pen fell out of his breast pocket and rolled onto the table. Stephen picked it up and gave it back to him.

Watkins smiled at Stephen, but it wasn't a happy smile by any means. If he could unleash the feelings behind those eyes, everyone in the room would have been dead. "Good

luck, Daniels," he said as a way of parting. Maya thought it was an odd thing to say.

"That man doesn't like you very much."

Stephen shrugged. "You're not wrong."

"Care to elaborate?"

"He's been working with the company for eleven years. I've been with them for one year. He's an associate. I'm a junior partner." He shrugged again. "No great mystery there."

She leaned back in her chair and took a sip of champagne.

"Why you?"

"Why me what?"

"Why make you a partner and not him?"

"Oh, that." He waved his hand as if shooing a fly. "I'm in demand. He isn't."

"He's not any good?"

"He's okay with basic mid-economy structures. But he has no vision for the high end market." He rubbed his face. "Look, I'm not interested in talking about Watkins."

"But..." Maya shook her head. "Never mind." Hey, if he didn't want to talk about it, who was she to push?

Stephen looked relieved. A soft slow waltz played in the ballroom. He stood up and offered his hand. "Care to dance?"

"Yeah, sure, why not?" Maya was annoyed that he wouldn't answer her questions.

Stephen danced like he'd been born to it—effortless, like gliding across ice. Maya concentrated on everyone else except Stephen to keep her knees from buckling as he held her in his arms.

Through the crowd, she noticed Watkins at the bar talking to a man in his mid-thirties with a white streak going along the right side of his dark brown hair. The man looked scruffy and out of place. Watkins' face turned red as the conversation grew heated. Maya didn't know why, but she was intrigued by the scene.

Both men seemed pissed. Watkins waved his hand in a dismissive gesture and started to walk away. The other man grabbed Watkins' arm. The look exchanged between the two men could only be described as less than friendly.

"Earth to Maya," she heard Stephen say.

"Yeah?"

"What's going on? You haven't heard a word I've said."

She pointed to the man at the bar. "Who's that?"

Stephen shrugged. "Dunno. He looks familiar, but not anyone I can place."

A man in a white tux, mid-fifties—handsome in that Sean Connery older but distinguished sort of way—went to the bar and began to talk to the other man. "Who's that with him now?"

"Him?" Stephen pointed to white-tux guy. "That's Carl Calbert. He's one of the senior partners at the firm."

Calbert leaned over and said something into the man's ear. The man nodded and left the area.

Stephen swung Maya around then dipped her as the waltz ended, one hand on her back, the other in her right palm, while an invisible hand trailed from the center of her chest to her stomach. It startled her enough that her feet slipped on

the floor, but he held strong and leaned close while she was still in a vulnerable slant. "I'm feeling neglected."

She grabbed his arms and pulled herself upright. "Poor baby." Maya started back to the table. Stephen followed. Six women made goo-goo eyes at him before they got back to their chairs. He made eye contact and smiled at every single one of them—*the bastard*.

Stephen gave her an odd look. "Something wrong?"

Maya rolled her eyes. "Why me?" It wasn't rhetorical.

"Why you what?"

"Your date cancelled?" Maya shook her head. "I don't think so."

He put his hand to his chest and did that little mock surprise thing Maya hated so much. "Are you accusing me of conspiracy?"

"Possibly."

"Would you believe that I've had a mad crush on you since puberty, so I took this opportunity to try and impress you?"

She turned her head until their mouths were mere centimeters apart. Maya was torn between wanting to thrash him or to kiss him. Okay, more than kissing, but she opted on neither, instead leaning back. "Maybe." She smiled. Stephen sighed. *Good*, she thought. *He's disappointed. Disappointment is good.*

He looked like he was about to say something when a waiter approached. "Are you Mr. Daniels?" the young man asked.

"Yes," Stephen said.

The guy handed him a folded note. "I have a message for you."

Stephen looked at it then scooted back in his chair. "If you'll excuse me for a moment." He stood up.

She grabbed his arm. "What's up?"

"I've been summoned by Peterson."

"You want I should go with?"

"No, it's in the ... executive boys' room ... If you get my drift."

"Ah, the toilet."

"Exactly."

She got up and started to follow him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm going with you."

He looked a little shocked, so she amended her statement. "I have to use the ladies' room. I'm sure it's near where you're going." He seemed hesitant, so she added, "Don't worry. I won't embarrass you around the other boys."

He smiled and put his arm out for her. "Thank you, Mother," he said.

"Huh." Frankly, she was insulted and planned to soundly kick his ass the next time he referred to her as mother.

* * * *

Stephen had gone into the men's room, while Maya pretended to go into the ladies'. After he disappeared inside, she went to stand next to the men's door. She was getting tired of all the passersby staring at her like she was a pervert—or worse, desperate. Looking at her watch, she

noted that it had been five minutes since Stephen had gone in. She hoped the meeting wouldn't last much longer.

The man from the bar brushed past her and entered the bathroom. Two seconds later he was backing out in a hurry. "He's killed him! Someone call the police," he shouted.

Maya pulled her gun from her purse and pushed her way in as the man took off in a sprint toward the hotel lobby, still yelling. A faint sour odor filled the room. Stephen was standing over Watkins and there was a small amount of blood on the floor next to his head.

Her mouth dropped in pure shock and she wasn't easily shocked. "Stephen..."

He looked up at Maya, his face a little green. "I ... I ... He's dead."

She moved closer, slowly, so she wouldn't scare him and so she could get a better view of Watkins. A pen was sticking out of the side of his neck.

She noticed Stephen's tie was loosened, his sleeves were drenched and his hair was wet around the edges. "Uh, Stephen," Maya said, trying to keep the tightness out of her voice. "What the hell have you been doing in here for the last five minutes?"

His face turned bright red. "Throwing up."

Well, that explained the smell. "What happened?"

"I don't know." He looked up at her, wide-eyed, like a deer caught in the headlights. "You have to believe me, Maya. He was like this when I came in."

She believed him. Problem was, she wasn't the one who needed to. The cops would be there soon, and he'd have a rough time convincing them he was innocent.

"Start from the beginning," Maya said. "Don't leave anything out."

Stephen's face tightened with stress. "I came in to meet with Peterson and I saw Watkins on the floor. I went to him, saw blood on the back of his head and the pen sticking out of his neck. I turned him over and checked for a pulse, but he was..."

"You flipped the body?"

"Yeah, I..."

"Oh, man. You never touch the body!" Maya might have been overreacting, but Stephen was already in deep *caca*, and moving the body wasn't going to help his case.

He slumped against the wall, looking tired and scared. Maya put her hand on his arm and she didn't feel fear, disgust, remorse, any of the expected emotions; again, she felt lust, savage and pure. When she let him go it faded.

"It'll be okay," she told him. Damn, she hated making promises she might not be able to keep.

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Chapter 4

The boys in blue had taken everyone's name who'd been at the party and let most of them go home. Most that is, except Maya, though they did kick her out of the bathroom. They'd taken Stephen downtown for questioning. Maya advised him to say nothing and call his lawyer. They'd taken her gun, even though she had the paperwork in her purse that said she was legal to carry concealed. She'd been a little hostile about that, but all in all, tried to be cooperative. A homicide detective Maya had encountered several times walked toward her looking none too friendly.

She put on her biggest, most charming smile. "Sandenski. How you doing? Long time no see." Maya didn't bother to shake his hand.

"Ms. Eddings," he said. "Why is it that someone is always getting shot or killed around you?"

"Now, now," she said. "Nobody got shot tonight. Which reminds me, can I get my gun back?"

Sandenski grimaced. Obviously, he didn't get her sense of humor. "I should have your private enforcement license pulled, Eddings."

"The worst you can do is get me suspended. But even that wouldn't stick for long."

He glared at Maya, and she decided not to press her luck. "I wasn't on the job tonight, Sandenski."

He crossed his arms and laughed one of those "you're-the-butt-of-a-good-joke" laughs—the kind that was more of a

snort than a real laugh. "You always bring a gun on your dates?"

Maya gave him her best professional smile—empty of meaning. "Yes." She wanted to say something witty and sarcastic, but looking at Sandenski, she figured, why bother?

His face sobered as if an invisible fist had punched off the noxious grin. "So, what happened here?"

"I already told your boys."

"I want to hear it from you."

They stared at each other for a long moment in a match of wills, waiting to see who'd crack first. But it'd been a long night and Maya was too tired to play games. She shrugged. "Stephen went to meet a guy named Peterson, one of the senior partners, in the bathroom. I waited out in the hall for him. A couple of minutes passed. A man went in then came out yelling. I went in. Watkins was on the ground dead."

"Anything else?"

"Like what?"

"Did you see anyone else go in or out of the bathroom?"

"Nope." But damn, she wished she had. "Can I get my gun back now?"

Maya called Paula and they met down at the station.

"Are they crazy?" Paula said. "Stephen wouldn't hurt anyone."

She put her arm around Paula's slim shoulders, pushing aside her long sandy-blond hair. "I'm trying to figure out if they're going to press charges or not. They haven't yet, so that's a good sign."

About that time, Stephen was paraded across the station lobby in handcuffs, escorted by two officers. Not good.

Paula saw him and panicked. "Stephen! Stephen!"

He turned and looked at her. His eyes were gaunt with dark circles shadowing under them. Paula tried to make a dash for him, but Maya grabbed her arms.

"Why is he handcuffed? Where are they taking him?" Paula cried.

Maya knew where they were taking him—in-processing. He'd be printed, photographed, and then put in a holding cell. She saw John Stokes, a detective and friend. "Stay here. I'm going to find out what's going on." She left Paula and walked over to John.

"Hey, Stokes," Maya said. "How's it going?"

John looked up and smiled. Even with slightly crooked teeth, yellowed from years of smoking, it was warm and infectious. "Maya-may-I. Second time this week at the station. This getting to be one of your regular haunts? Or you just looking for an excuse to see me?"

Maya smiled. A friendly face was a definite plus at this point. "Just looking for any excuse. You know me." She kissed his round cherub cheek. "I was hoping you could help me."

"What? No how's the wife? How's the kids? Just bing-bang-boom, can you help me?"

"Okay." She grinned at him. "How's Sharon? How's the kids? Now, can you help me?"

John smiled. "Sharon's doing great. We're working on number three, which you'd know if you ever bothered to

accept a dinner invite. The kids are ornery. And yeah, I'll try and help. Whatcha need?"

Sometimes, Maya really loved John. "Congrats on the new baby." She gave him a hug, then put on a serious face. "Stephen Daniels. They just took him down for processing. What's going on?"

The smile faded from John's face. "That's Sandenski's case, Maya. You'd better ask him."

"I don't think he's in the mood to answer any of my questions. Besides, I'm asking you."

"Well..." He hesitated. "I don't know about this, Maya. Sandenski outranks me. I could get in some deep shit for discussing this case with you."

"Come on, John. Who am I going to tell?"

John tapped his finger on the counter several times, looked around, and in a quiet voice, said, "Daniels consented to a fingernail scraping."

"What! Where was his lawyer?"

"Keep it down." John rubbed his fingers through his thinning hair. A look of guilt passed over his face. "He consented before his lawyer arrived. It tested positive for blood, Maya. Sandenski figures that's enough to hold him until forensics gets back with their report."

Paula was leaning against the wall, weeping into her hands. She was always stronger than Maya. Maya didn't have the guts to cry in public—not even when her father died. "Thanks, John." She hugged him again.

A loud voice drew her attention. It belonged to a three-piece blue suit that exuded max amounts of confidence. He

was talking to Sandenski. "My client is not going to stay here for one more minute. Do you hear me? Unless you plan to formally charge him, he's walking out with me."

"I can hold your client for seventy-two hours, Mr. Baler, without charging him," Sandenski told him.

The man, Baler, pulled out a flip cell phone from his pocket, dialed a number, said a few quiet words that Maya couldn't hear, then handed the phone to Sandenski.

"Hello." Whoever was on the other end caused Sandenski to blanch. "Yes, sir. I understand perfectly." Sandenski handed the phone back to Baler.

"You are not to talk to my client again unless I am present, Detective. Do I make myself clear?" Baler said.

Sandenski waved a uniform over. "Crystal," he told Baler. He gave the uniform instructions and the police officer headed toward the processing area. "I don't give a shit if your client is connected to the president of the goddamned United States. If he's guilty, I'm taking him down. Do I make myself clear?"

Baler nodded. Stephen was led into the lobby by the uniform and released to his lawyer.

* * * *

Baler had given Stephen last minute instructions, like keeping his mouth shut, then handed him over to Paula and Maya. It was nearly three-thirty when they got him back to his loft down on the Plaza. Maya had already figured out that their boy was rich and well-connected, but his loft, oh man, it was a work of art.

She whistled softly. "Wow," was all she could manage. The floor plan was open. In one corner, a king size bed sat upon a large platform surrounded with stainless steel uprights and large glass panels. A glass block wall was next to it, which Maya could only assume was the bathroom, since she could see into every other part of the loft. And with the exception of black suede furniture, everything else was steel and glass.

Stephen hugged his sister. "Paula, why don't you go on home?"

"I'm not leaving you."

"I'm fine."

Paula looked unconvinced.

Stephen put his hands on her shoulders. "Honest." He kissed her forehead.

She glanced at Maya, then nodded. "Okay."

"Good night, Sweet Sis." He kissed her cheek. "Try not to worry. I'm a big boy now."

Maya admired the brave front he was putting on for his sister. It made him seem even more grown up—mature. "I better get going too."

An unexpected look of determination came over Stephen's face as he walked to Maya and took her hand, again making her weak and nearly breathless. "Thanks for tonight."

He looked down and his bangs fell forward into his eyes. Maya resisted the temptation to reach out and brush them back. "They'll get this figured out." She forced a smile. "No worries." She gave Stephen's hand a final squeeze, fighting the impulse to shove him onto the floor and do naughty-

naughty things to his tall leanly muscled body, then went to Paula and put her arm around her. "You ready, babe?"

She nodded. "I'll call you tomorrow, Stephen."

When they exited the loft, Paula stopped. "What's up?" Maya asked.

"Maya, I know I've asked you for too much already, but could you help Stephen? Look into this ... situation ... and all."

"I'm not an investigator, Paula."

"You have a private investigator license."

"Yeah, but only so I can carry concealed. I guard bodies. That's what I do."

"Please," she said. "Could you just talk to him? Do a little digging? You know people and ... What if something happens to him?"

"What do you think might happen?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I just ... I couldn't handle it if anything else happened to him."

Maya nodded. "Of course."

"Thank you!" Paula hugged her hard.

"Don't get too excited. I can't make any promises."

Paula was smiling like she didn't believe her. "I have faith in you."

"Gee thanks." Maya wished she shared her best friend's confidence.

* * * *

After Paula left, Maya decided it was a bad idea to go back in the loft and talk to Stephen, but she turned around to the

door anyhow. She knocked and waited for a moment—no answer. She knocked louder. A moment later the door slid open. Stephen stood in the entry with his hair wet, body damp, and nearly naked with the exception of the black silk boxer briefs that clung to his firm thighs. Her mind screamed *run!*

Stephen looked surprised to see her. "Maya?"

"Uh ... yeah. Paula asked me to investigate the murder. She's worried about you."

He shrugged and walked back into the loft, leaving her in the open doorway. "I don't know what I can tell you."

"You never know," Maya said, sliding the door closed. "Humor me."

"Suit yourself." He grabbed a damp towel that was lying on the back of his couch and rubbed it vigorously over his mop of blond hair. "Want some coffee?" He shook his head, water shaking onto the floor. It reminded Maya of a really chic Calvin Klein ad, which made her want to run out and buy underwear and perfume.

"Sure," she told him, making her way to the kitchen area. "Why don't you get some clothes on and ... uh ... I'll get it ready for us." He was making her uncomfortable with his semi-nakedness.

Now, normally, she would have been fine in this kind of situation. Maya had no qualms about sex, but Paula was her best friend, her family, and the thoughts she was having for Paula's little brother felt almost like incest—almost.

He chuckled—kind of soft, and sexy, and low, and it made things tighten in her body. Her resolve to keep it strictly

professional deteriorated, and Maya refused to turn around and look at him. Instead, she made a beeline for the coffeemaker.

The kitchen was like something out of the future—stainless steel counters, polished white stone floor, and glass cabinet doors—even the refrigerator was see-through. It all seemed oddly sterile. It reminded Maya of one of those "Kitchen and Bath" magazine cover shots. Stephen had been a messy adolescent who lived on cereal and peanut butter sandwiches. She ran her fingers across the cabinets—they felt cold.

"You're getting fingerprints on the glass," Stephen said.

Startled, Maya turned around. She'd have thought he would have gotten dressed, but no—he was still in his boxers, no shirt. *Yippee skippy*. "Where do you hide your Cap'n Crunch?"

Stephen smiled, but it wasn't like earlier, when he'd been amused. Walking over to a long steel corner unit, he opened it up, and pulled out a box. "Regardless of what you may think," he said, "some things don't change." It was Cap'n Crunch's Crunchberries.

Maya barked a laugh. "You're blowing your new image. What would your fancy clients say?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Why do you think they're hidden?" He looked over at his empty coffeepot. "I thought you were fixing the java?"

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Chapter 5

They sat on the couch in the living room. Maya was thankful he'd had large chunky well insulated mugs. His hair was mostly dry now and hung haphazardly in his face. She asked the question she'd been curious about all evening. "Why didn't you come right out after you saw Watkins?"

"I've never seen a dead body." He shrugged. "They don't teach you how to react to that kind of situation in college."

"You were in there for several minutes..."

"I was a little freaked out, Maya." He rubbed his fingers through his hair. Irritation edged his voice as he added, "I don't know what you want me to say."

"It's just that..." She couldn't help but notice how sexy his hair looked, still damp and a little mussed. "I can't alibi you. I can't tell the police for sure that you didn't do it. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," he said then sipped his coffee. "I wouldn't ask you to lie for me. If that's what you think."

"That's not what..." Her cell phone rang. Maya walked over to her purse and retrieved it. The display read 5:00 a.m. "Hello?"

"Hey, Maya." It was John Stokes. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"Hi, John. Nah, I was up. What's going on?"

There was a pause. "They found Daniels' fingerprints on the pen that was sticking out of Watkins' neck," John said.

"They haven't issued a warrant yet, but it's just a matter of time."

"I understand, John. Thanks for the information."

"You might want to get a hold of him and tell him to call his lawyer. He's looking at some big time trouble."

"Thanks, John."

"One more thing," he added. "The pen didn't kill him. It was a blow to the back of the head."

"Any clue as to what he was hit with?" she asked.

"Nothing that could be found in the bathroom. Whatever it is, it has a strange criss-crossing pattern. Weird."

"Interesting."

"I thought you might think so. Talk to you later, babe."

"Bye." Maya hung up the phone and looked over at Stephen, who was sitting quietly on the couch with a curious expression on his face.

"What is it?" Stephen asked.

She told him what Stokes had relayed.

"Shit. I feel like I'm in the goddamn Twilight Zone."

Maya couldn't disagree—none of this felt real. He was being set up. At least she was ninety-nine percent sure. But by who and why? "Do you have any enemies? Anyone who'd want to see you out of the way?"

"Sure." He nodded. "But I don't..."

"Who?"

"Maya, I don't see how this is going to help?"

She stood up and started to pace. The Prada shoes were starting to kill her feet. She kicked them off. "Look. Someone is trying awfully damned hard to make you look guilty."

Stephen sighed and leaned back. "About two weeks ago, right after my junior partnership was announced, the FBI approached me. They said the firm was under investigation and wanted me to be their eyes and ears."

"What'd you tell them?"

"That I wouldn't do it."

"And?"

"They told me they'd make sure I went down when they got enough evidence to convict the partners."

"Yeah, okay, but I don't think the FBI would resort to murdering someone to get to you."

"You're right, of course." He swiped his hands through his hair, his green eyes impossibly bright. "Well, there's Carl."

"Carl? You mean Carl Calbert, the guy who was talking with the scruffy man at the bar tonight?"

"Yes, that Carl. I sort of ... umm ... slept with his wife."

"Sort of slept with his wife? How the fuck does someone *sort of* sleep with someone else?"

"I just meant it wasn't planned. It was only twice. The second time, he caught us."

"So, Calbert knew you had sex with his wife? A partner at the firm, and you still made junior partner."

"Apparently, he was outvoted at the meeting."

"Who else?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"I'm beginning to think you've burned a few more bridges than you're telling me."

Stephen shrugged. "There's Emma."

"Peterson's wife? Please don't tell me you banged her as well."

"No. But not because she didn't want to. She's been a little obsessed with me."

"What about Peterson? You think he could have picked up on any of that? Got jealous?"

Chuckling, Stephen leaned forward and shook his head. "Peterson's a nice man. Clueless, but nice. Emma's a pariah, but he thinks she's a goddess."

"Don't underestimate a man's ability to pick up on signals." Maya rubbed her eyebrows which had been ever tensing since the conversation began. Not only was Stephen a suspect in a murder investigation, he was a womanizer and working for a shady architect firm. "Anyone else?"

"Watkins."

"I think we can rule out the dead guy." Sunlight crept into the windows. Maya checked her watch—five-thirty, ugh. She walked over to the windows and realized her dress was starting to get damned uncomfortable. "Do you have some sweats or something I can change into? I can't think in this dress."

The side of his mouth turned up in a crooked smile. "Sure. I can't think while you're in that dress either."

"Don't get cute." *Too late.*

After Stephen brought her a black pair of jogging pants and an oversized top, she looked around the loft. There wasn't a single wall that couldn't be seen through. "I'm not changing in front of you."

He pointed over to the wall of frosted glass bricks near the bedroom area. "You can change in the bathroom if you like."

Scrutinizing the barely muted glass, she nodded. Not much privacy, but it would do.

She felt more than saw Stephen's gaze rake over her body before he asked, "Need company?"

Maya shivered and fought the whim to say, "Hell, yeah!" but instead she said, "I think I can handle it on my own. Thanks."

Stephen looked a bit confused. "Aren't you attracted to me?"

"I told you..."

"I know. Rules. But that's not what I'm asking. You don't feel ... compelled to have sex with me?"

It was an odd question and while she could definitely see his tall luscious self between her legs, the answer was ... "No." Yes.

Her answer seemed to relieve Stephen, which both surprised and annoyed Maya all at the same time.

Stephen shifted on the couch, silk boxers sliding up his thigh, revealing a strong curve of butt cheek. Her pussy thrummed as her lower gut clenched. *Holy shit.*

Maybe changing clothes wasn't the best idea. Getting naked anywhere near him was a bad idea. Her mouth went dry. "Uh, I should probably go home. We can talk tomorrow."

"You could do that." He leaned forward. "Or not."

This was too much. Matt the morning before, and now Stephen. It made her feel downright greedy. The fact she was even considering having sex with her best friend's brother

rattled her cage. "Feast or famine," she mumbled, taking an involuntary step toward him.

Stephen started to stand and Maya held up a hand. "Don't." Her breath caught at the look in his startling clear eyes. "Don't get up."

"Maya."

"Don't talk. Don't breathe. Don't move." Grabbing her coat and purse, Maya readied a hasty exit. "This is so not going to happen."

Stephen's focus stayed on her as she rushed to the door, slid it open, and stepped out into the hallway. Once the door was closed between them, Maya slumped against the wall. *Holy smack. Close call.* It took five steps to the elevator to realize she'd forgotten her shoes. "Fuck!"

"Looking for these?"

Maya pivoted on the ball of her foot. Stephen stood in the doorway, dangling her strappies. Like a carrot before a donkey. "Yeah, I'm an ass."

She closed the gap between them in a few short strides. Her mouth met his, pressing hard, lips, teeth, tongue feasting over each other and she breathed in the sweet scent of his freshly scrubbed body.

They fell into the loft. Stephen tugged her dress up as he pressed her body to the wall just inside. His hands moving down her thigh as his knee moved between her legs parting them. A finger looped the side of her stringed bikini panties and gave them a sharp tug, the strap breaking under the strain. She moaned her excitement.

His lips left her mouth, trailing kisses down her neck, breasts, abdomen, his hands pulling her dress up further around her waist. Firm hands grasped her buttocks as his mouth found her pussy, his tongue flickering against the clit, licking and sucking the swollen bud sweetly between his lips. Maya's legs buckled, but Stephen held her upright, a feat that impressed her and fueled her desire even more.

Tight tension coiled itself within her—the burning edges of an orgasm on the horizon. His tongue was doing incredible things, long, impossibly long it seemed, as it made its way into her pussy, sliding in and out, flicking to her clit then back in, fucking and sucking her while his teeth grazed her sensitive flesh. "Oh, fuck, I'm going to come."

He paused, one hand moving to her breast, pinching her taut nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "Come for me, Maya. I want to taste your desire explode in my mouth."

She nearly sang her compliance as his lips melded once more to her swollen pussy. Impossibly, she felt his hands everywhere, stroking her, caressing, as his tongue dove in and out and over, blood rushing away from her head to her cunt. She shuddered as a bell rang out in her mind, her sex contracting in spasms around his tongue. She flung her head back, it whacked against the wall, but even that minor pain didn't stop the rapture as he kept taking her, all of her, into him.

When the vibrations of the last of her orgasm subsided, Stephen withdrew his lips. Kneeling between her legs he eased her down onto his lap, his cock pressing hard against her soreness. "That was a delicious appetizer." He licked his

glistening lips, wet with her own lubricant. He breathed his desire across her neck. "Now for the main course."

He slid his cock from the side of his silk boxers. The end butted up against her pussy then slipped inside. It wasn't as thick as Matt's cock, but longer, much longer, and Maya groaned as he went deeper. "Oh, my," she whispered, throat hoarse from the orgasm.

Laying her on the floor, Stephen was slow, methodical, with deliberate strokes, those magical hands touching her everywhere. Pure sensation, she couldn't think, only feel. His cock seemed to vibrate inside of her, resonating throughout her system. A mass of pleasure and flesh, raw passion. "Faster," she panted. "Take me faster."

Needing him, wanting more, wanting all he had to give, she dug her fingernails into the firm muscles of his buttocks, urging him. But Stephen maintained the pace, slow even thrusts.

"I want this to be wonderful for you."

"It is," she nearly shouted, her body crying for him to take her hard and fast. "It is." She smacked his ass. "Now, faster."

His thrusts quickened, matching the rocking of her hips, grinding her clit against his groin, the coiling tightness building, and she wanted him to come, come with her.

"You're so hot, hot and tight. I can feel your pussy clenching my cock. It feels so good," he murmured. "So good."

"Yes. Yes." The rocking motion became more aggressive, his thrusting more insistent, his rigid cock bottoming out

inside her, painfully, pleurably. His mouth took her breast. He sucked hard, teeth grinding around the tight nipple.

"Ahhh!" she cried out as orgasm burst from her. She screamed as ripples of ecstasy crashed through her body, shaking her to the core. Stephen's moans of pleasure joined with hers as his hips bucked forward and held tight in place as he finished.

"I knew it would be that good." Stephen smiled, his green eyes translucent in the afterglow. Maya couldn't disagree. It had been fucking mind blowing.

"Get up." She patted him. "Stephen, get up." What had she done? Exactly what she'd told herself she wouldn't. *Shit, shit!* "I have to go."

"What's wrong?"

Damn, there was that look again. The same one Matt had given her. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I just have to go." She scrambled to her feet and tried to smooth her dress. It had a rip that went up to her waist. "Crap." Slithering out of the trashed gown, she grabbed his sweats, the ones he'd gotten for her earlier. "We need to talk."

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Chapter 6

Stephen dropped Maya off at her apartment building before going to see Baler. They arranged to meet for lunch later in the day at Manny's on Southwest Boulevard—but until then she was going to take a snooze. He'd reluctantly agreed they would keep their relationship friendly, if not professional—and that Paula would never find out. She didn't need the headache.

Barefoot and still wearing the sweats, Maya went into the elevator as Matt was getting off. *Bleeding hell!*

He held the elevator door open with one hand. Sniffing the air, he shifted closer. "Late night?" His face was blank, carefully guarded.

Argh! Why me? If only she could read him, feel something. She blinked, trying to concentrate. "No, early morning. Just got back from a run."

He looked down at her bare feet. "Without your shoes?"

She shrugged, too tired to come up with a really good lie.

"I can smell him on you, Maya," Matt growled, his words rough and dangerous. She couldn't think of anything to say—at least not anything plausible. Besides, when did she have to justify herself to him? He was the one who made it perfectly clear they were O-V-E-R over. Instead, she smiled. "Good to see you, Matthew, as usual." Giving him a little shove away from the elevator door, she gave him a finger wave. "Bye."

Matt frowned, eyebrows arching together in annoyance—much better than rip out your throat anger. And in a way, it

was kind of sweet. Even jealous he looked hot. Maya blew him a kiss as the elevator closed between them.

Before leaving the apartment for lunch, she called Jack Simon and told him what was going on. He agreed to get the lowdown on Dream Makers, Inc., for her. Jack had some pretty insidious contacts, so she didn't bother to ask him where he'd get the info from, but she knew he'd come through for her.

She showed up at Manny's Mexican Restaurant sporting her favorite pair of black low-rise jeans and a fitted dark green V-neck T-shirt. Not quite rested, but feeling much more alert, and a lot guiltier ... *Ugh, Paula's kid brother. How could I?* ... since she'd had a couple hours of sleep.

Stephen arrived before her. He wore a tailored charcoal gray suit, hugging his body in all the right places, making him even more drop-dead sexy—which answered her previous question about the "how." Three waitresses were fawning over him at the table. Even the older gal who worked as a host gave Stephen the hoochie-eye.

Looking around the room, Maya noticed that nearly all the women in the restaurant were gazing at him like they were diabetics and he was a chocolate bar. *Goddamn*, the boy was cute, but he didn't warrant this kind of attention, did he?

Joining him, Maya felt the animosity roll off the waitresses as two of them left and the remaining woman reluctantly took her order. She put up a block and the emotions subsided. After the waitress left, Maya turned to the mouth-watering young man. "What is up with you and women? I mean,

jeezus. It seems like every woman you meet really does want to have sex with you."

"Even you." The right side of his mouth turned up in a partial smile.

Everything about him made Maya's lower parts go tight and wet. She licked her lips. "Well..." She cleared her throat. "I've had a dry spell. This morning had less to do with you, and more to do with a needy libido." Not entirely true, considering she'd had sex with Matt the day before. Translation—a big fat lie. "It can't happen again."

"Okay," he said. But he smiled that infuriating smile.

"Cut that out," Maya chided as the food arrived. "What did your lawyer say this morning?"

"He keeps telling me not to worry, everything they have is circumstantial, but naturally, I'm worried," Stephen said while slicing his burrito. Maya took note that he hadn't taken one bite of food since the waiter had brought out the meals. He just played with it—cutting, moving, picking, piling. There was a small stack of diced onions and green peppers off to one side of his plate.

She had to ask. "Why don't you just ask them not to put onions and peppers on your food?"

He pushed another onion piece aside. "I had a friend in college who used to work as a cook. He said that whenever a customer would special order a dish or return food for adjustments it would piss him off so much that he would spit in the food. It's always haunted me." He finally took a small bite, chewed then swallowed. "So unless I'm in a five-star

restaurant, I just settle for whatever's on the menu and adjust the meal to suit me."

Her mouth dropped. "Manny's is a classy place! I can't even believe you would suggest something like that would happen here. And as for your friend ... let me just say, eww!" There! How was that for righteous indignation? The problem was, she'd ordered a tamale—hold the chili sauce—and now his story had her suspicious of her own food.

He took another bite of his burrito. "Mmm," he said. "This is pretty good."

One of the waitresses, a young chicky with pulled back brown hair, large breasts, little waist, sauntered over to the table. She'd undone the top two buttons on her blouse. Leaning toward Stephen, she asked, "Can I get you anything?"

Maya's emotional block held, but she didn't need it open to know what the waitress was feeling. "Why don't you just throw your panties at him, for Christ's sake? You could always drop a couple more buttons, but I didn't know double-Ds were on the menu."

The waitress snapped up straight and walked off in a huff.

"That was rude. Especially since you claim to have no designs on me."

Maya rolled her eyes and pushed her plate away. "So what exactly did the lawyer say?"

"I told you. He said not to worry." He scratched his chin. "Peterson says the note that came to our table wasn't from him. I think your theory about someone being out to get me might just be on spot."

The note! She suddenly felt like an idiot. Some investigator she was turning out to be. Slapping her forehead in frustration, she asked, "What did you do with the note?"

"I threw it away."

"Threw it away! How could you throw it away?"

"I threw it away before I went into the bathroom," he said, getting agitated. "I'm not a psychic. I didn't know that when I walked in there'd be a dead body. Jesus."

Maya took a deep breath. *Okay, calm down.* "It's fine," she said. "Are you going to be all right today?"

"Sure. You got plans?"

She did now. Maya envisioned an entire afternoon digging around in a Dumpster. It wasn't going to be pretty, but the note could be the key to finding out who framed Stephen. "Yeah. I need to take care of a few things."

They both stood up at the same time and grabbed the check. "I'll get it," she told him.

He shook his head. "No, my treat."

She could have argued—women's lib and all—but decided against it. "Thanks."

He winked then grinned. "Next time ... your treat?" he asked mischievously. It wasn't food on his mind.

"In your dreams," she said, brushing past him toward the exit.

"In yours," she heard him say. He wasn't wrong.

She went straight out of the restaurant without looking back—no sense in letting him know he might be right.

Maya managed to get a cab quickly, which is cause for celebration in Kansas City. She got out at the Hyatt. It didn't

seem nearly as glamorous as it had the night before. But nothing looks good in the brightness of pure daylight.

Skipping the front desk, Maya went straight to housekeeping. She told them that she'd accidentally thrown away an important phone number and they were happy to oblige. The good news—pick up wouldn't happen until Wednesday and it was only Sunday. The bad news—now she was committed to digging around in trash. Woo and freaking hoo.

The Dumpsters were around the back of the hotel. Maya had borrowed some latex gloves from the cleaning crew and dug around, tearing into multiple white trash bags. The stench was amazingly strong and rivaled boiled cabbage and beer farts. She took some Kleenex from her purse and stuffed two wads up her nostrils.

The first couple of bags were filled with paper towels, napkins, stale cigarette butts, ashes, business cards, half-eaten appetizers, and other items, but no note. She said a little prayer to find the note before having to go through the entire Dumpster.

When she ripped into the fifth bag and turned it out a long silvery cylinder nearly landed in her lap. Maya picked it up before she realized what it was—a stainless steel metal vibrator. "Eww!" she squeaked, dropping it back onto the pile.

Screw it. Time to go home, take a hot, hot bath and sterilize her skin, then come back later with a biohazard suit and a gas mask.

A homeless woman dressed in layers of shirts and two coats popped her head over the top of the Dumpster just as

she climbed out. "My territory, bitch," she said in a gravelly smoker's voice. Her dirty face pinched up. "Go find your own stash!"

Maya got out and brushed off her jeans. "Pardon me. Didn't realize you had prior claim."

The bag-lady picked up a sack, ripped into the side with her teeth, and pulled out trash a little at a time. "Yessiree, this is Bertha's treasure. Everyone knows that. Mine and no one else's."

Maya got the distinct impression Bertha wasn't talking to her anymore.

"Bottle," the bag-lady said, tossing an empty wine bottle into her shopping cart. She unfolded a piece of paper. She crumpled it up. "Trash." She threw it on the ground in front of the cart.

Maya scooped it up. A note! Some of the words were smudged with chocolate sauce—at least she hoped it was chocolate sauce. It said "Call me, Marcia" then listed a phone number. Damn, she couldn't get that lucky.

"Drop my treasure, thief!" Bertha screeched.

"You said it was trash."

"Treasure!" she insisted.

Maya shook her head and dropped the note. No sense in getting her all worked up.

"Skunk tried to steal my stuff. I run it off, but good." Bertha cackled through a toothless grin. "Now go on! Scat."

"Skunk?" She scanned the area.

"Skunk gone. Old Bertha gave it a good whack." The old bag lady held up her fist. "Gonna whack the tower too, if it don't get its skinny ass out of Bertha's territory."

The tower? It dawned on Maya the woman was talking about her. Then skunk ... She remembered the white streak in the guy at the bar's hair. Maybe ... "When did you see the skunk, Bertha?"

"How do you know my name? You've come to take me, haven't you?" She began to croon, then howl. "Take me away, take me away. I knew you was watching me. I knew it."

Maya reached out to the old woman and Bertha jumped and started swinging her fists. "Don't touch me! Don't disappear me. Why, why, why?" she cried.

The woman was obviously off her rocker. "When did you see the skunk?" She reached in her pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. "Tell me and you can have this. More treasure for Bertha."

She put her mittened palms over her ears and crouched low. "Don't say my name, not out loud. There's power in a name. There's power. The skunk. He had power. But I run him off. In the dead of the night, I run him off."

"Last night?"

"The lights were flashing, noise wailing." She made a siren sound. "Now get. Leave! Bertha has given her pound of flesh."

Dropping the twenty on the cart, Maya walked toward the gate of the tall privacy fence. No way she was walking back through the lobby after wading in filth. Bertha had seen the

Send 'em Packing (Collection)
by Hannah Beckham

man from the bar run out the back of the hotel when the police came. One more clue that didn't amount to much.

She looked back and saw the woman hold up the vibrator, twist the bottom, slap it against her palm, then toss it over the side into her shopping cart. Another "treasure." Eh, whatever got her through the day.

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Chapter 7

The cab driver made sour faces at her all the way back to her apartment. Maya tipped him well. He deserved it. It was the quickest ride she'd ever had from any taxi service. Granted, the smell of "eau de garbage" probably drove his foot down on the gas pedal, but he was tactful enough not to mention it. Again, he deserved the tip.

After showering, she put on her SpongeBob BrainyPants nightshirt and settled into the couch with a mug of herbal tea. She'd gone beyond tired after only a few hours of sleep in two nights.

At nine o'clock, Maya had begun to drift off to dreamland when someone knocked at the door. Her nerves completely shot, she jumped to her feet and grabbed for her 9mm.

The knock sounded again. "Maya," came a muffled voice through the door. She recognized the voice. Matt.

Just my luck. She opened the door. "What do you want?"

He was standing with his hands behind his back. "I just came to make a peace offering."

He brought his hands around to the front, holding a carry-out bag from The China Garden. Maya thought about slamming the door in his face, but her stomach growled in protest. "Well." She sighed. "Come on in." After all, a girl had to eat.

Matt looked her up and down. "You wear the sexiest clothes."

"Really?" He obviously lacked the sophistication to appreciate SpongeBob. "You can leave."

"Kidding."

"Fine. Sure." Maya flopped onto the couch. "Whatever, even."

Matt rummaged through her fridge and came out into the living room with a Diet Pepsi. "Help yourself," she mumbled loud enough for him to hear.

He shook his head. "Somebody's grouchy."

Thank you, Mr. Obvious. "What do you want, Matt?"

"Just to talk. I miss you."

"I doubt that. We see each other every day." She bit into a potstick dumpling. "How's Penny?"

Matt rolled his eyes. "Jenny." He shrugged. "But I call her sweetheart most of the time."

Inhaling when she should have exhaled, Maya lodged a piece of dumpling in her throat which of course started a horribly unflattering coughing fit.

"Are you choking, Maya?" Matt asked then started whacking her on the back. Like that helped.

She jumped up to get away from him. "Don't ... touch ... me," she managed to say between wheezing breaths. The phone rang. "Hell ... hello?" Her throat was still irritated.

"Hey, Maya." It was Steven. "You okay? You sound a little breathy."

She took a big drink of pop. Big mistake. It took her a few seconds to stifle a belch. "I'm fine. How are you doing?"

"Hanging in there. Did you find the note?"

"No. Sorry."

There was a pause on his end.

"You there?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess it was too much to hope for."

"Hang in there. I haven't given up. I'll try and track down the waiter tomorrow, maybe go talk to Calbert."

"Okay." Another pause. "Maya?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks again."

She nodded, mostly to herself. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Maya turned around after hanging up and Matt had made himself comfortable on her couch. She pushed his legs off the couch and sat down, burying her face in her hands. "I'm not cut out for this."

"Cut out for what?" Matt asked.

"Nothing."

Matt shrugged. "Who was that on the phone?"

"It was my friend Noneya." She leaned forward and sniffed the containers of Chinese on the coffee table. "Mmm ... Smells good."

"All right, smart ass." He handed her a pair of chopsticks. "Dig in." Matt smiled, his straight white teeth sparkling like a toothpaste ad.

She'd like to dig in, all right, right into some hot wolfy ass. "Quit grinning like that. You'll blind me."

"Can I help it if I have dazzling pearly whites?" He slipped his tongue over his teeth. "Besides, I thought you liked my mouth." He took a bite of Lo Mein and raised an eyebrow. "At least you never complained before."

Even with the noodle dangling from his lips, the man was gorgeous. And his mouth—oh, that mouth—well, it would get a five-star review from even the toughest critic. What the hell was he playing at? It wasn't like Matt to do games. Not his style. She took a bite of noodles and her mouth tingled a bit. "Don't flatter yourself, dog boy."

"Ouch." His face grew somber. "So, your new boyfriend's a murderer."

"Talk about ouch." Maya leaned forward. "I knew this wasn't just a drop by peace offering. How did you even hear about this?"

"Don't you read the paper? I do. It's all over the front page of the *Kansas City Star*."

The newspaper was rolled on the kitchen counter. Untouched. "But..." She walked over and picked up the *Star*. "Dream Makers, Inc., Golden Boy Chief Suspect in Hotel Slaying." Shaking her head, Maya sat down on a stool by the counter. "This is not good."

"I thought you knew."

"Oh, I knew he was a suspect, Matt. But Stephen didn't do it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I..." How could she be sure? Stephen was as much an enigma as Matt. She couldn't read either one of them. But in her bones, she knew he was innocent. *I wouldn't sleep with a killer. I couldn't.* Even as the words entered her mind, Maya's apartment began doing its own version of the twist. "Help."

* * * *

Matt paced the floor, debating the merits of calling 911. Maya's breathing was deep. He could hear her heart thumping strongly in her chest. He'd put her on the couch after she'd collapsed and propped her feet on some pillows. It had only been a few minutes, but if she didn't come around soon, he'd make the call.

"She has to be okay," Matt mumbled. He moved to the kitchen and found a clean dishrag. Wetting it with cold water, he went back to Maya's side, applying the cool compress to her forehead and neck. "Maya. Wake up. Wake up, now."

If anything were to happen to her, he'd lose it. He'd gone too far with the comment about Jenny, and even with the one about Maya's new thing being a murderer. And then the food ... "Maya. Please wake up, honey."

Her eyelids fluttered open. "Oh, dear Jesus," she whispered hoarsely. "My head's pounding. What happened?"

"You fainted."

Her violet eyes grew wide. "I don't faint. Did you call me honey? You know I hate shit like that."

Matt smiled as relief washed over him. She was going to be just fine. Impulsively, he kissed her. The warmth of her lips, holding firm at first, unyielding, then melting against his, fed his constant desire for her. He should stop. It was wrong to continue his pursuit of this woman who drove him completely crazy in more ways than one, but something about her wouldn't let him let go—possibly the tongue she slipped between his teeth.

He slid his hand along Maya's side, cupping the smooth curve of her breast, his thumb rubbing over an already hard

nipple. She moaned into his mouth, her back arching toward him.

Fuck! He'd promised himself he wouldn't fall back into her arms, not again, not without her complete commitment. He had Jenny now, more suitable to his family, to his life. She was lycan and understood the dedication that came with a true pairing.

But it was Maya, always Maya, who played in his mind, his heart. She called to the animal in him, and his wolf wanted her. And therein lay the danger. His animal threatened to shift every time he had sex with Maya, taking all of his strength and will to hold it back, to keep it from turning her into a were creature against her will.

She had no idea how hard it was for him to be with her and not really have her completely. Maya couldn't, wouldn't be that cruel. Yet, he'd never told her, because deep down, he didn't want her to stop showing up. No matter what he said to her.

Grabbing him by the shirt, Maya flipped Matt onto the couch and straddled his thighs.

"Feeling better?"

"You know it." She rolled her hips forward, rubbing her sodden panties over his fly. The warm wetness of her pussy soaked into his jeans—her fingers fumbling with the button on his pants, working the zipper, and releasing his cock against his abdomen. Long fingers grasped his length and he sagged under her touch. She was the strongest human female he'd ever met, part of the attraction, really. An alpha male needed a strong mate.

He flexed his fingers as she eased her moist heat over his cock, working as always to fight the change. His wolf wanted her badly and every time was a struggle. She was mounting him, which helped, but not much.

Rocking her hips back and forth, she said, "Shit you feel good. So thick inside me." Her eyes looked funny, completely glazed.

"Maya." He tried to stop her, but he wanted this, wanted her. The dose, it had been too much, maybe not enough and she was reacting to it. His jealousy had pushed him to this. Otherwise he never would have gone this far.

She hummed her delight, the muscles of her pussy gripping his length in her motion. His balls tightened against his body when she pulled up her knees, taking him deep and squeezing the loose skin of his sac between her buttocks. "Ohhh," he sighed. Fighting his orgasm. He couldn't. Couldn't come inside her. It wouldn't change her, but she didn't know that. She'd hate him after.

"Yes, yes," she murmured rocking faster, sliding up and down his shaft. He could smell she was close, the musk of her sex getting thicker, permeating his senses. "Matthew, Matthew," and while he didn't like being called by his given name, it sounded like heaven from her lips.

Unbidden, his hands went to her firm breasts, squeezing, pinching, teasing them with his fingers. Her grinding became more urgent, harder against him and he felt the blood rush to his cock, rock hard, ready to burst. Her humming grew louder and she pushed harder against him, thrusting her hips forward, hands reaching out to his chest. Her fingers tangled

in the hair and yanked as her orgasm spilled from her body, an earthquake of tremors and shudders.

"Fuck..." The word trailed off, as his balls jerked to his body and he couldn't hold back any longer. He pushed Maya back and pulled out, stroking his cock over her, masturbating as his climax hit, spilling himself over her stomach.

Her eyes cleared a bit to stare up at him, hazel, with just the hint of gray and brown. "What ... what just..." She scrambled back. "Oh, God. No condom. No condom."

And he knew what she feared. "It's okay. I didn't come in you."

"Fuck, fuck." She grabbed her shirt, wiping at the creamy substance on her abdomen.

And with that gesture, Matt knew. He had to end it. She would never accept being his mate. The idea disgusted her.

* * * *

Again, he'd made it clear they were through. Men! "Why did you even come over? You want me to let you go, but you can't seem to do the same. If you want out of my life, then get out of my fucking life!"

"It's not that easy."

"Well, it's not hard either." Maya threw up her hands in frustration. "Why do you have such a problem with just being my lover? I can't give you more than that right now. I don't know how. Besides, you don't see me whining because you have a girlfriend. Why can't you date her and just ... hang out with me every once in a while."

Matt grabbed her by the arms and held her to the wall. His eyes turned a funny amber color as his dark pupils undulated between large and really large. He sniffed along her neck and Maya held perfectly still. Scared to rouse his animal, scared that she'd have to fight her way out of the hold and one of them was going to get hurt. "I want all of you," he growled.

"Okay," she said calmly. "I get that." *Dear Lord, don't let him go wolfy now.* She'd only seen him change a little before, in the eyes, the hands, but never full-on lycan.

"I can smell your fear, Maya."

"That's bad, right?"

"It's good. Too good." His lips moved toward hers and she turned her head. "You push me too far, woman."

Shit! His nails had started to change, turning into claws. *No, no, no.* Her fear was amped up and she could swear the hair on his knuckles was growing longer. "Stop, Matt," she said quietly, firmly. His tongue licked at her jaw line. *I will not panic.* That affirmation was a bit late.

"Play with the wolf, and you're liable to get bit." He snapped his teeth in emphasis. The bones in his face crackled and snapped, reforming, elongating, becoming canine.

"Oh, hell no." Maya brought up a knee and nailed him in the groin. He doubled over with an "oof." She brought her instep down in one quick motion along his shin, landing hard on his foot. Surprised, Matt let go of her arms. Dropping to the floor, Maya rolled toward the coffee table, snatching her gun from it. She leveled the cold piece on him. Just in time, because he'd recovered quickly, and in the millisecond it took

for her to get the 9mm, he'd turned completely—covered in a thick black fur, twice as broad as his human self.

"Matt," she cautioned as he stalked toward her, stripping his torn tight clothing from his body, "I don't want to shoot you."

"Your bullets can't kill me."

He seemed pretty confident. "I may not kill you, but I'll hurt you. I don't want to hurt you. Do you get that?" She could read the headlines already. "Private Security Diva Maya Eddings Found Naked and Ripped to Shreds on Her Apartment Floor."

Werewolf Matt took a step closer. Maya aimed and squeezed, and with a loud bang, the bullet buried itself in the lycan's thigh. He howled. Honest to God howled. "Oh, dear Lord, I've just made him angrier." She looked at the large cock dangling, growing even larger, between his unnaturally animalistic legs. "Or hornier." Neither was a good option.

Maya scrambled backward until her shoulders met the wall, only ten bullets left now that she'd discharged the chamber round. Somehow, she didn't think it would be enough.

Dropping to all fours, Matt barreled forward in two giant lopes, while Maya emptied the rest of her rounds squarely into his chest, each one jerking him, but not stopping the momentum. She threw the gun, whacking him between the eyes, stalling him for a split second as she jumped to the left. His head put a hole in her wall. Matt went still, then collapsed, his face planted firmly in the drywall.

"Jeezus H. Christ." Maya rubbed her sore wrists. There were deep scratches she hadn't noticed during, but now, they hurt. Bad.

Matt's fur grew shorter, the bones shifting around, crunching, grinding, making her teeth hurt to hear and watch. She picked up the phone, then put it back down. Who could she call?

Soon, Matthew Brewer was human-looking again. His naked body slumped forward, knuckles dragging the ground, head still in the wall. "Oh, crap, I've killed him."

Carefully, slowly, she approached, gently touching his neck. A bounding pulse leapt against her fingertips. He moaned. "Matt?"

He still didn't move.

Maya pulled on his shoulders, dislodging his head as he flopped backward onto the carpeted floor. The rounds she'd put in his chest bled, the wounds weeping dark red blood. He coughed, blood spattering from his lips. "Oh, God. Matt. I'll call an ambulance. Hang in there."

He grabbed her forearm. "No," he wheezed. "I'll be fine."

"You're coughing blood. There's nothing *fine* about that."

"I think you punctured my lung."

"Even more reason to call an ambulance."

"Did you have to shoot me in the chest?" His voice was already getting clearer.

"You were trying to kill me."

He laughed, not an easy laugh, but one that was forced, causing another coughing fit. "I wasn't trying to kill you, Maya. I was trying to fuck you."

"Asshole."

"Sorry." He closed his eyes. Maya had never seen him look so vulnerable, wounded, and not just because of the bullet holes, which were healing and closing, two bullets already expelled from the skin and on the floor.

She brushed drywall dust from his cheeks. "I know how dangerous it is to be with you, Matt. But next time..." Leaning down, she kissed his forehead. "I will kill you."

Grunting, Matt rolled onto his side. "Let me just lay here for a minute. You can kill me later."

"I'm feeling totally freaked right now." Maya slid her back down the wall until her butt hit the ground. "You've never lost control before. I've never seen anything like it."

"I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"Uh, that's not what you were saying a couple of minutes ago." Maya shuddered, her eyes widening as three more bullets worked themselves out of his chest.

He flicked at one of the mangled pieces of lead that had caught right under his skin. "Yeah, well ... there is that."

His body might have been magically healing itself, but it was doing nothing for the dark stains on her carpet. "Would you look at this mess? You got blood all over the place."

"You shot me. Eleven times. There's bound to be blood."

"You attacked me." She punched his arm and he groaned. "What the hell got into you?"

"You got into me." He pointed to his temple. "Deep. In here. And I can't for the life of me get you out."

"We've known each other for a while now, Matt. Over two years, and you've never gone all furry on me before."

"You've never slept with another man since we've known each other."

"Oh, my God! It's a territorial thing. You've been sleeping with Jenny for the last three months, but I decide to get with someone else and you totally freak? It works both ways, buddy. You can't expect me to stay celibate while you're off gallivanting with the were-chick." She got up, went to the sink. "Besides, I've got much bigger problems than your ego. Like finding out whether Stephen is guilty of murder, or if he's being framed."

The skin on his chest had closed over the wounds and he pulled himself against the wall. "Can I help?"

"Oh, I think you've done quite enough. Don't you?" She wrung out a washcloth and threw the steaming towel at him. "You're paying for my carpet cleaner rental and you'll be working it, by the way."

"Just hire someone to clean the carpets."

"I can see explaining the crime scene scenario to them. Not!"

"Fine. I'll clean the rug."

"Damn right you will." She picked up a notepad and wrote down the names Emma Peterson, John Peterson, Carl Calbert, and Samuel Watkins. "If you're serious about helping me, I could use the lowdown on these people. Especially Calbert."

Calbert had been talking with the guy who found Stephen over Watkins in the hotel john, and he was angry at Stephen for sleeping with his wife. It was adding up to be an unlikely coincidence. "Also any known associates, especially a guy with a white streak on the right side of his head ... and

anything shady with the business." Couldn't forget the unlikely, but possible FBI connection. "Can you do that?"

Matt took the slip of paper and looked over the names. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Good." She gave him a hand up. "Now get dressed and get the hell out before I shoot you again."

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Chapter 8

The receptionist tap-tapped her way through the "William Tell Overture" while Maya waited on Carl Calbert in the lobby of Dream Makers, Inc. She thought it was a long shot that he would have murdered Samuel Watkins to get back at Stephen for the affair with his wife, but people had killed for less.

The hotel had given her a list of names for the waiters working that night and none of them had been the guy who'd brought the note to their table. So much for corroborating witnesses. Jack had called that morning and told her a contact in the IRS was suspicious of certain accounts handled by Calbert and Peterson, but they didn't have any proof. The numbers added up.

Even Matt and his connections were coming up short. She wasn't any closer to figuring out the mystery and the idea that Stephen might be guilty weighed heavy on her. After all, she hadn't actually seen the note and just had Stephen's word for what was on it.

But he'd been terrified. Even if she couldn't feel it from him, she saw it in the look in his eyes. He couldn't fake that, could he?

The door opened to Carl Calbert's office and, lo and behold, Emma Peterson and her perky breasts walked out. The blonde buxom woman's blue eyes were pinched in annoyance as she crossed the lobby without even a glance at Maya.

Bitch.

The receptionist stopped tapping and rolled her eyes. "Mr. Calbert will see you now." Annoyance seemed to be the general emotion for Dream Makers, Inc.

"Thanks," Maya said, then mentally added again, *Bitch*.

Carl Calbert, still looking very Sean Connery behind his large marble desk, barely acknowledged Maya's presence in the room.

"Mr. Calbert, I know you don't know me, but I'm Maya..."

A derisive grunt from deep in his chest cut Maya off. "I know who you are, Ms. Eddings. You are an only child, both parents deceased, you own a private security agency, and you're thirt—"

Maya cut Calbert off. "I get the picture. You know who I am." She met his deep brown eyes. "I have a few questions about the night of the party, if you don't mind."

His eyes crinkled. "Actually, Ms. Eddings, I mind very much. I have already given my statement to the police."

Maya had expected irritation, maybe even anger, but what she got from Carl Calbert was something totally unexpected. The man was amused. *Amused!*

"Maybe I'll have a question or two you haven't answered."

"What could you possibly ask, Ms. Eddings?"

"Do you believe Stephen killed Samuel Watkins?"

"Asked and answered."

This was getting her absolutely nowhere. She tried a different tactic. "How did it feel walking in on your wife making love to Stephen Daniels?"

Calbert's head snapped up sharply. "How dare you..."

Ha, ha! The amusement drained from him and was replaced with anger. "I dare. You better believe I dare, mister. So, we can talk about your wife, or we can talk about this case. Either way, I'm cool with it."

"I can have you thrown out of the building."

"Yes. Yes, you can. But then I'll go right down to the *Star* and have myself a nice little talk with a reporter about the affair. While it won't help Stephen's case, it will certainly be print worthy. Scandals always are."

"What do you want, Ms. Eddings?"

"I told you, just some answers."

The whole of his demeanor changed. There was still the undercurrent of anger, but outwardly, he became calm and relaxed. "I really have no idea what I can tell you, but ask your questions."

"Did you talk with Watkins the night of the murder?"

"No." His emotions didn't fluctuate. Maya was using them as a makeshift lie detector and the first response was *True*.

"Do you know why anyone would want to kill Watkins?"

"No." This time there was a ripple. *False*.

"Come on, Mr. Calbert. What are you not telling me?"

"Samuel wasn't the easiest man to get along with, but I don't know of anyone who would kill him. Other than Daniels." Partial truth.

"And why would Stephen want to kill him?"

"He's your boyfriend. Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"He's not my boy—never mind. Who was the man with the white streak in his hair you were talking with at the party?"

"I have no idea of whom you speak." Not only did his emotions jump, his entire body tensed.

Ding, ding, ding. Liar. "I saw him talking to Watkins and you that night, Mr. Calbert."

"I talked to many people that night. It was, after all, a party. I can't be expected to remember every person."

"Oh, he was quite distinguishable. Not only did he have a white streak down the right side of his head, he was the only guy there not dressed to the nines."

"Well, unfortunately, men don't notice such things, Ms. Eddings."

Liar again. Carl Calbert was a polished man, from his perfectly coiffed hair and beard, his thousand-dollar tailored suit, and his well-manicured, highly polished nails. He'd have noticed. "Forgive me if I don't buy it. Not at all. I don't think there's much you miss."

"You flatter me, Ms. Eddings. Is that all? I have a busy schedule today."

"One more thing. Why was Emma Peterson just here?"

"I don't see what that has to do with the case," he said, but his emotional meter was pinging off the radar. "Now, if you'll see yourself out."

For a moment, she said nothing, fixing her eyes on Calbert. "Got it." The man definitely had secrets, but until Maya's ability became reading minds, she wasn't going to find out this way. Maya stood, leaning forward, palms flat on Calbert's desk. She spoke calmly. "I'll find out what you know. Count on it, buddy."

Send 'em Packing (Collection)
by Hannah Beckham

The meeting had gone much as she'd expected, Calbert not telling her anything she didn't already know, but she was still pleased with herself, something she couldn't keep off her face as Calbert's brown eyes scrutinized her. One way or the other, she would find out what he knew, and the bug she'd placed under his phone was a good start.

Walking out of the building, she pulled out her cell phone and hit redial. "Jack, how's the reception?"

"Perfect, Maya," he said to her.

Excellent. Wireless magic. Gave a whole new meaning to "can you hear me now?"

"Great. Call me if you get anything interesting."

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Chapter 9

"Emma came to see me today," Stephen said as he walked past Maya into her apartment.

"Did she come?" It was petty, and a bit too close to jealousy to suit Maya.

His demeanor, normally fluid and relaxed, stiffened as his face went rigid and cold. "I guess you'd rather speculate than actually hear what happened."

Maya opened herself to him, to feel the anger behind his words, but there was nothing. She reached out, touching him with her fingertips. Desire poured over her like hot oil and what made it worse was his body language, tone. The look on his face said he was not feeling lustful in the least. "What are you?"

Stephen shook his head. "This was a bad idea." He turned to leave, but Maya kept her grip.

"You're not normal. I want to know why."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know I'm an empath, right?"

"Yes. I've known since I was twelve. Now, let me go."

Letting go was probably the smart thing to do, considering Maya wanted to ravage him, but she held on. "I feel one and one thing only from you, Stephen. That isn't natural."

He froze, then took a deep breath. "What do you feel, Maya?"

"Passion, lust, desire, yearning..."

"That's more than one thing."

"It's all the same and you know it. But I want to know why." She did let go then. "And I feel your hands, even when I know you aren't touching me, in intimate places, stroking, caressing ... What in the fuck are you?"

Eyebrows arched, he reached forward, close but not quite touching. "I can't. You wouldn't understand."

Holy cow! There was something. But why hadn't she picked it up before? In her heart of hearts, she knew Paula was completely human, so what could Stephen be that his sister wasn't? "Trust me, Stephen. I've seen a lot." Like a lycan shifting in her living room. "Matt's..."

"A werewolf. Yeah, I know."

"Oh, God, please don't tell me you're a shapeshifter as well."

"I'm not a lycanthrope. Though it might be easier if I were."

A vampire, maybe? No, they didn't exist. Did they? Besides, she'd seen him out in daylight and that counted, didn't it? "Talk to me."

"You'll hate me, Maya. I don't think I can stand that. Not now."

She nearly closed the gap between them when a growl came from the open door. "Stay the fuck away from him, Maya."

"Matt? Oh shit." Maya stepped around Stephen, using herself as a wedge between them. She wasn't sure what Stephen was, but doubted he had the strength to go one on one with the wolf, and she didn't want to have to shoot Matt again. "What are you doing here, Matt?"

"I could feel him, again, from my apartment."

Maya drew a frustrated breath and held it. She expelled it noisily. "Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Stephen answered from behind her. "My kind has a strange effect on lycanthropes. He's not just angry, Maya. Can't you see, he's turned on?"

Matt aggressively pushed forward, landing Maya squarely in Stephen's arms with all the whispers of silent promise playing across her skin. *So not good*. "Your ... kind?" she managed breathlessly. With Matt pressed in front of her, and Stephen behind, she couldn't think.

"He's incubus," Matt snarled. "I wasn't certain until I got closer to him. But I'm sure now."

As angry as he looked, Maya couldn't ignore the rock hard bulge behind the zipper of his jeans which now pressed against her thigh. "There's no such thing as a..."

"Demon," Stephen finished for her. "Not in the way Christian mythology explains it, Maya. But we are real. Pure flesh and blood."

"And hormones..." She felt faint again, but willed herself to stay upright. A shit storm was brewing and she was caught in the eye. Nervousness rose in Maya and she wished she could lie down and put her feet up. That's what people did when they were going into shock, right? Something about getting the feet higher than the heart.

Matt paused. "You're turning white."

Stephen leaned her back in his arms. "Her lips are going blue."

Mutual concern. Fantastic. At least her health had stopped the pissing match. "I need to lie down."

Matt grabbed her legs and they took her to the bedroom and put her on the bed. The dizziness started to go away. "What's wrong with me?"

Nodding, Matt got a cool cloth from the bathroom and put it over her forehead. "This happened last night." He was talking to Stephen, obviously. Talking was good, better than mauling. "I think I did it to her."

"What did you do?" Stephen asked.

"I put a little bit of aconite in her food last night."

"You put what in my what?" Maya's dizziness worsened.

"Wolfsbane," Stephen filled in. "It's a poison."

"Only in bigger doses." Matt had the nerve to look embarrassed.

Adrenaline rocketed through Maya and her head cleared completely and quickly. "You fucking poisoned me?"

Matt's pupils widened, shrinking the rim of blue that surrounded them. "I only wanted..."

"To manipulate her into being your mate." Stephen stroked the side of her face, soothing, calming, sending good ju-ju through her body. And Maya wanted it to stop.

She sat up, instantly regretting the action as the room began to spin again. Slinging her legs over the side of the bed, she put her head between her knees. "Like you aren't trying to manipulate me too."

Matt's cheek rubbed against her arm, almost submissive, and Maya imagined if he had a tail it'd be tucked between his legs. "I'm sorry, Maya. I thought..."

Maya didn't have the energy to shrug him off. "What does this stuff do exactly?"

"In humans, it slows the heartbeat and drops blood pressure. I didn't give you enough to last this long though. I don't understand."

"In lycans," Stephen added, "it acts as a love potion of sorts." His gaze shifted to Matt. "It's being around you that's making the effects last."

"You tried to give me a love potion?" she asked from between her knees, trying really hard not to hyperventilate. Matt's hands slid across her back and down the side of her breast. Her nipples went rigid against his touch. Stephen kept his distance, a few short inches, but thank God or Maya was going to have an orgasm. Not the best reaction at the moment. "Quit touching me."

"I can't help it." His remark was accusing, and Maya managed to turn her head sideways at Stephen, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"How come you know so much about lycans?" Probably not the obvious question, but his extensive knowledge made her curious.

"Let's just say I spent a really wild week in their company during spring break one year." He didn't even have the nerve to look sorry about it. "They have a strange reaction to my unique ... chemistry."

Matt's hand slid down her back, just under the waistband of her pants—his fingertips brushing her ass. Her eyes rolled back as she fought the impulse to help his hands along. "Oh, shit."

She turned to Matt, the fog in her brain clearing. His blue eyes had started to turn wolfish, gold rimming the edges of his irises. *Shit, shit, shit.* Her gun was in the living room in her purse and if he turned again she wouldn't be able to stop him. "You have to leave, Stephen. Put some distance between the two of you. Whatever you're doing to him, it has to stop."

"It's too late. My pheromones are airborne and they've saturated the room."

"Airborne, jeezus." How delightful. Not. Maya could feel the little vein in her forehead pop as her pulse quickened.

Stephen scooted in closer. "Being afraid just gets him more excited," he whispered as Matt licked her shoulder.

No shit, Sherlock. "I ... how can I keep him from changing?" she asked Stephen since Matt no longer seemed to care about conversation—his hands roaming her body, pushing at her shirt, his shirt already gone. *When the hell had that happened?*

"I can help, but you have to trust me."

"Trust you, my ass." If she could run, she would, but her legs were like solid planks nailed into place. "You're a demon."

"That doesn't mean evil, Maya. It's just another way of saying different. Like Matt's different. Like you're different."

"I'm not a demon or lycan."

"No, but not quite like other humans, are you?"

Tension pulled tight through Maya as Matt's mouth nipped along her arm and his hands fumbled with his pants. "Why aren't you stopping him?"

"I can't. Any act of aggression will force the change in him. And if that happens..."

"He'll kill us both?" she asked hopefully.

"He'll fuck us both. You'll be changed into a lycan, and when he changes back, he'll hate himself for doing it, and for *doing* me."

Okay, the fact that Matt would fuck them both was bad enough, but what the hell had Stephen said about changing her? "I would be made lycan?"

Maya tried to pull away from Matt and he responded with a snarl, his blue eyes nearly all yellow now and his fingernails elongating, thickening like claws. She eased back into his grasp and couldn't seem to get enough air.

"Didn't he tell you? There's two ways to become lycan. You can be born that way, or transformed through sex with a lycan in full-on were mode. It's a protein in the semen that does it."

Gulping in a breath, Maya muttered, "God damn, damn." That's why Matt had meant to have sex with her after he'd changed the night before. "What can you do to help?"

"I can make him come with me."

"And that's going to help how?" She couldn't believe what he was suggesting. Bad enough having two lovers, but two at the same time?

"I only mean, if we do this together, I can bring him to orgasm before he completely shifts."

"What about after? Won't he just want to go again?"

"The pheromones will be neutralized for the moment and his body will build a tolerance of sorts. If it all goes well, we might get out of this no worse for wear."

"Speak for yourself, buddy." The thought of being a man-sandwich both repulsed, and in a baser way, attracted her. *Fuck!* If it wasn't bad enough that she'd slept with both of them over the last two days, at the same time would literally push her into the red on the slut-o-meter.

Matt's pants were down around his knees now, and he was humping against her leg. "For Christ sake." Even worse—it felt good. "Fine! Whatever. Let's get on with this."

Stephen slowly, not making any sudden movements, positioned himself behind Maya, but not yet touching her. "If we do this right, it can be quick."

"Let's fucking make sure we do this right, then!" Matt's head moved between her legs and he bit down on the inside of Maya's thigh. "Yow..." she started to screech, but Stephen shushed her. "...za," she whispered.

"He's just holding you steady, letting you know he's there."

"Like I could miss that." At least the humping of her leg had stopped. "What do I do?"

"You've never had a threesome?" Stephen asked, amused.

"No. And I get the feeling you've done it way more times than I want to know about."

"Well, this isn't going to be your average threesome."

"No shit."

"For one," Stephen continued, "I'm going to try very hard not to touch Matt. While he'd be responsive, he wouldn't be happy when it was all over, and in this state, it would be too

much like rape. He wants you, even when he's not juiced up on pheromones, so you're the better option."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Do you care about Matt?"

It was hard to think with dog boy licking her inner thigh. "Uh ... yes. Yes." His tongue, slightly roughened, brushed over her panties. "Oh, yes."

"Then do exactly what I say if you don't want him to hate himself or you when this is over."

She needed Stephen closer, pressed against her. She needed his extra something to get through this. She cared about Matt, maybe even loved him, and wanted him most of the time. But the whole situation was freaking her out. "Touch me, Stephen."

"Not yet."

"Why the fuck not?" She squirmed backward and Matt grabbed her behind the knees and yanked her forward, his claws lightly scraping at her calves.

"Calm, Maya. Calm," Stephen soothed. "When I say not yet, it's because you need to hear me, really hear me."

"Okay." Her chest tightened. "I'm listening."

"Get his attention first."

Maya squirmed as Matt loosed a series of nips and licks, tugging her panties with his teeth. "I think I have his attention."

"Not what I had in mind." Stephen moved in closer, his shirt brushing against her back. "Take his face. Make him see you. Talk to him, gently."

Gently, gently. Right. She eased her hand to cup his cheek. "Matt. Matt, can you hear me?"

His growl, low and feral, vibrated against her skin.

"Is that a yes?" Shaking her head, she fought the panic. "Matt. Matt. Matthew." She tilted his face upward. For a moment, lucidity touched his eyes.

"Maya." He breathed her name like a sigh. And just as quick it was gone. Matt grabbed Maya by the hips and flipped her on the bed, her face landing between Stephen's legs.

"Oh, God, oh, God." Reacting, she grabbed Stephen's arm, *big mistake*. The connection sent a warm rush of hunger and desire through her. "Oh, God." The head of Matt's cock rested against her pussy, rubbing over her slick clit, and she ached to be filled. "Yes," she whispered hoarsely, her hand sliding over the thick bulge of Stephen's groin, as she pushed herself back onto Matt's cock.

Stephen's hand intercepted hers before she could undo his pants. "You don't have to. I can come by watching."

"I want to," she said, then moaned as Matt shifted his hips, sinking deeper and deeper into her.

"It's me. I'm sorry, Maya. I never meant..."

"No time for remorse." *Translation—shut up and get your pants off.* She wanted to feel the silky texture of Stephen's shaft against her tongue, taste him.

Before he could think to respond, Maya had his cock loose, taking the length into her mouth. He moaned. Matt grunted from behind her and she pressed back to slow him down.

"Don't," Stephen muttered. "Don't go slow. He has to come before he shifts and locks up inside you. If that happens you'll be unable to separate from him for up to an hour."

The idea of the thick cock imbedded, locked inside her should have frightened her. "That would be bad," Maya reminded herself as she licked and sucked the incubus' rigid length. Her hands cupped his balls, tugging, rolling them between her fingers.

Matt's body came over the top of her, his chest pressed against her back in a rush of hot skin and sex. The building thrusts coinciding with a chuffing noise, animalistic, from deep in his throat. His palms flattened on the comforter—his nails were thick and pointy, his fingers elongated, but not yet furred.

Instinct, instinct and the pleasure of his balls bumping against her clit, made her rock her pelvis backward then forward to meet his strokes as she swallowed hard over Stephen's cock, taking him into her mouth deep, deeper, into her throat. Her body had one purpose, one only, to pleasure and be pleased. Pure sensation, no thoughts, no plans, just action.

A low keening moan filled the room, and she realized she was making the sound, her throbbing clit aching, pulsing, as Matt's cock felt like it became enormous within her hot slick channel, sliding forward and back.

Stephen's hands grabbed her by the top of her head, not pushing, tugging, tight to the scalp, a hissing sound escaping between his teeth. Maya tilted her head, her brain sex-fogged as she watched his eyes widen, dilate. His pupils were red

with fire while he watched—watched her being fucked by another man. A flutter low in her stomach told her she would come soon.

She grabbed Matt's hands and yanked herself forward, forcing Stephen onto his back and Matt to follow. Letting go of Stephen's length, she stripped off her shirt and squeezed her breasts around his cock. "Holy fuck, you feel so good. You both feel so good."

Matt's arm looped her waist, lifting her ass up. His arm was hairy. *Dear Lord!* Hairier than normal. And unexpectedly, that turned her on even more. "Hurry, oh, sweet Jesus, hurry," she said to anyone listening.

"Get up on your hands, Maya." Stephen's voice was dark, heavy with night things, things that don't come out in the bright light of day. "I want to watch him fuck you."

"But..." Before she could get her question out, Stephen had forced her up on all fours, turned around and slithered beneath her. She could feel the heat of his breath against her stomach, his hands pulling her down, her throbbing nub connecting with his lips.

"Haaah..." Her breath fluttered out as he licked and sucked at the sensitive flesh while Matt continued his assault on her pussy. "Hoooh, too much. Fucking hell. So good. So good."

Burning heat sped rapidly through her body. Maya grasped Stephen's cock, stroking it as it grew more rigid and reddened with blood. Screaming, she spent her orgasm, bucking against both men, needing it to end, wanting it to last forever, the pleasure so intense as wave after wave of ecstasy rippled through her.

Stephen cried out against her cunt and she felt him come, the hot spray leaking down her hands. She stroked him faster, milking him, her pussy doing the same with Matt, until...

A moan, like a howl, but still human, drowned out the sound of Maya and Stephen. Matt used Maya's thighs like handles, pulling her tight against him as he came. The sound he made was triumphant, sad, and angry all at once. When he finished, he let her go and staggered back, withdrawing quickly, leaving Maya to mourn the loss of sensation.

Sighing heavily, she collapsed on top of Stephen, then rolled off to the side. "Wow."

Stephen leaned back against the headboard. "You can say that again."

"Wow." Maya began to laugh. She couldn't help it. The entire thing had been surreal, frightening and wonderful. "And just in case I didn't say it before. Wow."

Matt sat in the corner of the room, shadows covering his face. "I'm sorry."

"I don't know what to say to that." Reaching over, she flipped on the lamp near the bed. Matt had gone back to human mode, blue eyes, regular nails, no extra fur. Bonus. "I'm not going to lie and say I didn't enjoy it. I did."

A hand slipped across her shoulder. *Stephen*. She entwined her fingers with his. Something inside her had clicked. *I'm meant for both of these men, and maybe neither of them*. Something else clicked as well. "Oh, my God, oh, my God. You didn't wear a condom!"

Matt dipped his head farther. "No."

"Am I going to turn all wolfy? Please, please, someone tell me that his super-sperm didn't do some freaky mojo shit to me." Pulling away from Stephen, Maya jumped to her feet. "Somebody shoot me. Better yet, I should just fucking shoot the both of you!"

"I didn't turn. You're safe." There was a touch of indignation, if not a little disappointment in Matt's voice that pissed Maya off.

"It's true," Stephen added. "The change was stopped in time."

Throwing her hands up in exasperation, Maya paced the floor. "Well, I just feel all kinds of better."

Matt slid his back up the wall. "I guess being mated to me is a fate worse than death."

"What the fuuuck? Why can't I attract nice normal guys?" She clapped her hands once. "I got it! I'll take out one of those dating ads. Single white female seeks non-paranormal guy. Doesn't matter if you have a prehensile tail, webbed toes, or a third testicle, as long as you're totally human."

"A prehensile tail?" Stephen coughed, choking back a laugh.

Matt snorted. "Dude, I'm still trying to get past the third testicle."

Looks were exchanged between the two men, as if they suddenly remembered they were rivals not friends.

"I'm just saying," Maya continued, trying to lighten the darkening mood. "Something other than a fur-growing or sex-hormone-secreting supernatural guy might be a nice change of pace."

"But at least we're interesting." Stephen chuckled.

"Interesting I don't need. I'd be happy with stable. That seems to be lacking in this room." She grabbed clean panties and a bra from her underwear drawer. "Now, I'm going to go take a shower and you're both going to get the hell out of here before I decide to go bat-shit on your asses."

As she prepared her grand exit from the room, her cell phone rang. "For the love of Nellie. What now?" The display showed Jack's name. "Talk to me," she grouched into the receiver as she headed to the bathroom.

"You're in a bad mood," Jack answered.

"Yeah, I'm in a bad fucking mood, Oprah. Now, tell me what you got in as few words as possible."

"Meeting tonight. Calbert, Mrs. Peterson, and an unknown. Twelve sharp. Mayweather's Food and Drink. 958 Wyandotte." The phone went dead. He'd hung up!

"Rude. Just rude." Maya looked at the clock. Eight-thirty, plenty of time to clean up. Even though Jack had hung up on her, she knew he'd be there, backing her up all the way. It was a comforting reality.

"I'm going with you," Matt said, coming up the hallway behind her.

"Damn you and that super-sonic canine hearing."

Stephen stepped out of her bedroom behind Matt. "I'm going too."

"No. Calbert knows you."

"He knows you also," Stephen said around a sigh. "I'm coming, Maya. End of discussion. Someone is hell-bent on ruining my life and I'm going to find out who and why."

The testosterone in the air surrounding the two gorgeous, if a bit disheveled, men was palpable. Rolling her eyes, Maya gave up. "Fine, fine. But I'm not taking either of you anywhere looking like you just rolled out of bed. Go home." She made a shooing motion. "Get cleaned up and meet me back here around eleven. We'll head out together." A disturbing thought occurred to her. "We won't have a repeat of the earlier ... err ... incident, will we? You two being around each other and all. I am not having a three-way at a local bar and grill. I draw the line there."

Matt's brow rose in worry, but Stephen shook his head. "The reaction that lycans have with my hormones seems to only happen the first time they come in close contact to me." He shrugged. "That's not to say they don't enjoy my scent after, but it's not like putting a dog in a roomful of bitches in heat, it becomes more like..."

"Oysters for humans?" Maya filled in.

"Something like that."

Her shoulders eased, despite the tension, and she could see that Matt looked relieved as well. "Thank you, Jesus," she heard him whisper, and her heated thoughts of another trio-o-fun trip went out the window.

"Okay, great. All settled. Now get the hell out of my apartment."

Matt walked by brusquely, but Stephen paused next to her and dipped his head, his lips brushing against hers. An audible growl came from Matt, though he didn't turn back to look.

"Not nice," she scolded the lusciously tall, green-eyed man.

He smiled—simple, pleasant, beautiful. "I can live with that." Patting her ass as he headed out, Stephen added, "Catch you later, hot stuff."

"Not if I catch you first," she mumbled, clenching her clean undergarments as she headed to the shower, praying that she couldn't catch what either of them had.

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Chapter 10

Boot heels clacking and the soft pad of men's dress shoes were the only noises in the alley behind Mayweather's as Maya, Matt, and Stephen headed to the back door entrance. Maya opened her bomber jacket, pulled out her gun from the shoulder holster, checked the clip, replaced it, took the safety off then put it back in place.

She glanced at the guys and gave them a once-over. "I know I said this already, but you two clean up good."

Matt wore a deep blue button down shirt and black slacks while Stephen dressed in a silver Nehru jacket and black leather slacks. Both men knew exactly how to accentuate the positive. Not that she'd ever noticed any negatives in their looks.

"Thanks," Stephen answered. "You clean up real nice yourself, Ms. Eddings."

Maya beamed a radiant smile at the green-eyed incubus.

"Agreed," Matt grudgingly replied, not wanting to be shown up by his rival. "You smell nice as well." He snapped his teeth. "Good enough to eat."

Unsure whether to be fearful or flattered, Maya said, "It's vanilla."

"I know, but it's not the smell I'm referring to." This time Matt smiled, his white teeth shining in the moonlight sending naughty shivers down her spine.

"We'll pretend it's my shampoo and move on." She took a lock picking tool from her front pocket and put it to the

keyhole on the door, grasping the handle with her free hand. It turned. "Huh," she grunted. "Not locked."

Pulling the 9mm, Maya carefully opened the door and peeked in. A shadowed figure leaned against the wall. "It's about time you got here."

"Goddamn, Jack. You about got your ass shot off." She holstered the weapon.

"I can think of worse places to get shot." Jack's hand ghosted to his groin then he waved them in. "Come on. Mrs. Peterson and Calbert are in a corner booth away from the windows." His gaze traveled to Matt and Stephen. "What's with the entourage?"

"They can handle themselves." At least Matt could, and she prayed that Stephen had more skills than just mind-blowing sex.

They all shuffled past the "his and hers" johns in a tight line. The smell of beer and stale cigarette smoke filled the place. It was nearly midnight, and Maya motioned the boys to stay back while she positioned herself at the end of the bar. It was out of sight from Calbert's booth, but Maya could see him and Emma having an intense conversation through the mirror.

"If only I could read lips."

Jack came up behind her and placed an ear bud in her hand. "Don't have to. The table's miked."

Surprised, pleasantly, Maya placed it in her ear. Sure enough Emma's voice came across, a bit distant, and there was a little static, but clear enough Maya heard her say, "I don't like this, Carl. Not one bit."

Maya grinned at Jack. "How'd you know where they'd be seated?"

"Didn't. Just bugged all the tables and numbered the receivers."

Resisting the urge to pull the earpiece off and check the number, Maya settled in. Her sights were set once again on Emma and Calbert.

Emma leaned forward. "This is foolish, Carl. They can't prove anything. As far as anyone knows, Stephen killed Watkins."

Okay, tell me something I don't know.

Carl responded, "It's not just that Eddings woman. It's Toll. He's demanding a higher payment."

"Blackmail? You made me come to this godforsaken hole over blackmail? He can't prove anything, Carl. I swear to God, you're three points shy on the IQ chart of a moron."

Good one, Maya thought, storing it in her extensive database of putdowns.

Carl shifted uncomfortably. "He has the account books. The *real* account books."

"How in the world..."

"You hired him, Emma. He's a skin-walker. So how hard do you think it was for him to take my image and go right into my office unnoticed?"

What the fuck is a skin-walker?

"But how'd he get the combination to the safe?" Emma's tone was accusing and it wasn't hard to see who was in charge.

Carl managed to blush. "Well, I paid him from the cash stock ... and uh ... he might have seen me open it."

"You really are an idiot."

Carl's face blanched. "Crap. Here he comes."

Maya turned toward the door. *Yep, dark hair, average looking, white streak on the right side.* So that was a skin-walker. Looked pretty much like a man. Of course, so did Matt and Stephen.

The skunk, as Old Bertha so named him, scooted into the booth next to Calbert. He had a briefcase. Opening it, he pulled out a small handheld computer and slid it to Calbert. "I've asked you both to come, because I'm not stupid. I know your private bank account requires two passwords, and two signatures, and I want three million transferred to my account. Now. Or the documents will find themselves in the hands of the police. Along with an anonymous tip that you're both responsible for the death of Samuel Watkins, and why."

Emma cast him a seething glare. "I'm going to kill you."

Licking his dry lips, the skin-walker blanched and his skin rippled gray. "Don't mess with me, witch."

"I'm a sorceress, Toll. Don't forget it. And don't forget that I had Watkins killed for trying to blackmail me." She leaned forward, looking terribly and horrifyingly beautiful. Her blonde hair had taken on a shimmer, lights dancing under her skin.

Scanning the room, Maya opened herself to the emotions of the other customers, but while there was the standard grocery list available, no one seemed to notice or care that Emma was looking wickedly scary and supernatural. *What the fuck have I gotten myself into?* A werewolf, demon, skin-

walker, and now a sorceress? Maya wondered which fairytale creature was going to show up next.

An intense heat spread across Maya's back, and she turned. Matt stood behind her, nearly pressed against her, his earthy-masculine scent nearly overwhelming. "I thought I told you to hang back."

"Emma Peterson is not human?" His pupils undulated, making his eyes go black to blue to black.

"Yah think?"

"You can see her, see her true self?"

"Yes," she hissed, guessing what she was seeing was the real Mrs. Peterson, sorceress-extraordinaire. "I think we need more information before proceeding." The idea of confronting Emma and Toll, even in public, scared the shit out of Maya. She had no idea what either of them was capable of, but the fear that rolled off Calbert told her it would be bad. Really fucking bad.

"Good idea," Matt agreed.

Then things went from bad to worse. "Maya! Maya Eddings, as I live and rock!"

No, it wasn't the lion, the witch, or the wardrobe. *Fucking hell!* Milo Bach was yelling her name and heading straight for her with his posse in tow. The skin-walker and the wicked witch ... err ... sorceress looked up, eyes flashing to the mirror, and their angry gazes flickering to Maya. She heard the distinctly female voice through her headset. "Get her."

"Oh, shit." Her hand went to Matt. "Run. Run fast." Jumping off the barstool, she knocked Milo Bach over and back into his group. They stumbled back into each other,

sentient bowling pins trying not to fall over. It gave Maya the head start they would need.

Bolting to the hallway, she pushed Stephen, Matt, and Jack, shoving them toward the back, pulling her piece in the process. "Run, goddammit!" She didn't know what would happen if they were caught, whether they could stand against Emma Peterson or not, but she didn't want to find out.

Stephen's shoulder shoved against the back door as it flung open. All four of them tumbled into the alleyway. Maya couldn't stop herself from falling hard onto the pavement, the gun sliding a few feet from where she landed. Scrambling on all fours, she managed to pick it up. When she oriented on the exit to the street, Emma Peterson stood between them and freedom.

Maya looked around for another exit. Nothing. "Fuck me running."

"That might be doable." The voice came from behind her. Maya whipped her head to the back doorway. Toll stood a few feet from them holding a club-like object with a criss-crossing jagged end, the same pattern Stokes had described for the wound on Watkins' head.

"You have been a disappointment to me, Stephen." Emma's voice was curt, scolding. "I really thought you'd join us, but alas, I'm going to have to kill you."

And your little friends too. Maya took aim. "Back off, bitch."

"My dear, Ms. Eddings, bullets are so last season."

Before Maya could even think of squeezing off a shot, an invisible force threw her against the wall—holding, pressing,

squeezing the life from her. She wanted to worry about Stephen, about Matt, about Jack, but she couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Emma had been quick, quicker than Maya, and she was helpless. Forcing her head to the side, she saw the sorceress was glowing, bright orange hues, then a blur. Stephen? He'd rushed the woman, and when her attention focused on the incubus it left Maya.

With a surprising thud, Maya hit the pavement. Taking aim again as Emma used her power to throw Stephen off, Maya squeezed three rounds into the sorceress' chest. Blood poured from the wounds, as the blonde woman looked both astonished and pissed.

Maya smirked. "I'm bringing sexy back, bitch."

"You've ruined my dress, you little whore."

Okay, sooo not the response Maya expected. And the fact that Emma Peterson was still standing and her glow had turned from bright orange to fiery red did even less for her confidence. Jack was on the ground, unconscious. Matt and Toll were grappling in the corner. Stephen was pinned against the Dumpster, and the sorceress was reaching into her chest and digging out bullets as she stalked toward Maya. "We're so fucked."

"You have no idea," Emma seethed and swiped her hand through the air, drawing a quick but intricate symbol.

"Altescension."

The world went black.

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Chapter 11

"Ain't this a bitch," Maya mumbled, her head pounding with what she could only equate to the worst hangover of her life. She swallowed down the bile forcing its way up her throat. Everything was gray, from the walls, the metal beams in the ceilings, to the cold concrete floors. She'd been stripped down to her T-shirt and skivvies. "God, please don't tell me I'm dead, because I was really hoping dead would be more pleasant."

"We're not dead," Matt growled from behind her. "Though it's probably a better alternative."

"Jack ... Stephen?" Worry coursed through Maya as the chill of the room seeped into her bones.

"I'm here," Stephen said. "Jack ... he's still alive. But I don't know for how much longer."

She fought back the tears, struggling to maneuver so she could see them, but she was shackled to a column with handcuffs. "Can you move?" she asked either of them.

"No," came a simultaneous response. Then Matt added, "She's bound us magically."

"I'm in cuffs." But they were everyday cuffs, nothing magical about them. Probably Jack's. Apparently the *human* wasn't worth a magic spell. It pissed her off.

"Maya," a voice whispered in the shadows.

Her eyes widened. "Tyler?"

He silently made his way to her. "I followed you guys from the bar. That was some freaky shit. The blonde chick literally

floated you guys into the back of a van." He held out the cuff keys and started fiddling behind her.

A click-click and her wrists came free. "I hope you brought the fucking cavalry," she whispered harshly, crawling past Matt and Stephen to Jack. "Jack. Jack." She patted his chest, turning his head slightly to look at the blunt trauma. "This is not happening." The vicious wound to his head needed tending. Immediately.

"I didn't call the cops, Maya. I ... I..." Tyler stammered over his words.

"S'okay. Get Jack the fuck out of here while I figure out how to help Stephen and Matt."

With a curt nod of his head, the large ex-Marine lifted Jack with a grunt. "Back in a few, boss."

"No. Take Jack to the hospital." Tyler nodded again. As an afterthought, Maya added, "And call the fucking police, for heaven's sake."

Sending her thoughts out, probing the room, Maya felt no one else's presence besides theirs. *Why would they just leave us here?* When everything had gone black, she'd fully expected to wake up, or not wake up, in the ever after.

She scrambled to Matt and Stephen, the two men locked naked and back-to-back, knees bent close to their bodies. Trying to pry them apart, she stuck her fingers into the crease between them.

"I can break this bond if I can shift. Magic can't hold a lycan. It's why they fear us," Matt said.

"Who? Who's they?" A flash of being sandwiched between their hard luscious bodies popped into her head. She shook

the soo not helpful thought from her mind. "And why are you both naked?"

"The wizards," Matt answered. "And because they didn't want to take a chance that we'd have something on us that might alter the magic."

"I can't hear this, not now. I'll deal with it all later." All her paranormal nightmares were coming true. "Get to shifting."

"I can't. She's suppressed the instinct in me and I can't force it."

"Great. Just fantastic. Our only hope for breaking the magic that holds you is locked up inside and the wicked witch is bashing down our doors ready to take us and our little dog too."

"You can help him, Maya." Stephen's green eyes framed red pupils. He was definitely channeling his inner demon.

"You're a demon, Stephen. Can't you just ju-ju your way out of this? Surely demons are stronger than wizards?"

Stephen chuckled, but it wasn't pleasantly. The sound sent a ripple of desire and yearning through Maya, the lips of her sex swelling beneath its temptation. "So not the right time."

"It's all I can do. I told you before. I'm not a demon in the conventional mythological way you think of demons. I am sex. Pure and simple. It's what I do."

"That's helpful. Not." She had to think, get her head clear, but Stephen's pheromones were saturating the useful part of her brain. "How," she breathed heavily, drinking in his intoxication. "How can I help him shift?"

Matt's eyes were deep, dark in thought. He sniffed the air, and she knew he was pulling in her scent. "You smell good enough to eat."

Logic railed against emotion, but it was losing the battle quickly. "Sex. You think sex can tap into his ... animalness?"

"I think so."

While the idea brought about pleasant shivers through her stomach and lower regions, she couldn't help but worry. If Matt wolfed out, he'd break the magic that held them, but he might not stop there. "I'm scared."

"I won't hurt you, Maya," Matt said, his voice quiet with inner pain.

"There are more ways to hurt me than just physically." She closed her eyes, turning her head to avoid the wounded look on his face. "I don't want to be a lycanthrope. I don't..."

"I promise—"

"How can you? Really? In the last two days, you've tried to turn me into your permanent bedmate twice!"

Stephen added his two cents and a nickel. "Do we really have a choice here? Risk this or risk Emma filleting the flesh from our bones. While Matt and I might survive, you wouldn't."

His voice was gentling, sex on every syllable. He wanted her to try, his fear making the choice harder and harder for her to resist. Maya smacked Stephen's shoulder. "Stop. I can make the decision on my own without your mojo rising all over and through me." This close to both of them, the extra nudge wasn't needed. She felt the lust ease away slightly. "Thank you."

Unreal. Maya backed away, putting distance between her and the boys. She needed to think, formulate a plan. Leaving them both sounded good. After all, they did say they would probably survive and for sure she wouldn't. No, she couldn't leave them. Not like this.

Think, think. She didn't want to have sex in the cold, gray warehouse. Definitely not. Later, after the mess was over, it would all be negotiable. Then like a miracle, a plan came to her. She prayed it would work.

"I can understand why Matt can't get us out of here, but Stephen, certainly you could. You're much smarter, handsome, more clever." It sounded stupid, even as the words tumbled from her lips, but she kept it up, the look in Matt's eyes shifting from hurt to anger. "I choose you over Matt. You're the stronger of the two. And a woman needs a strong man."

Matt snarled, gnashing his teeth. Stephen's face turned ashen. "Maya, what are you doing?"

"You know it's true, my incubic love god." Okay, she'd gone a bit overboard, pushing her own gag buttons. A thousand warnings went through her, like how stupid she was, and how she might not be able to repair the damage she was doing to her relationship with Matt. But she pressed on.

"I could die a happy woman under your touch, my demon lover." She straddled Stephen's knees, dragging her fingers through his hair, touching Matt's head as well, purposefully.

"Shut up." Matt groaned, and her heart sunk at the pain and misery she was causing him.

"How cute. The submissive puppy wants me to shut my mouth. Tough. I only respond to real men. Not whipped dogs." Maya brushed her lips against Stephen's ear, blowing promise and seduction as her hair fell to Matt's shoulder.

"I am alpha."

She snorted. "Maybe to a ferret."

The heat poured from the lycan's skin. *Dear God, let it work. Don't let this be for naught.* Stephen's mouth connected to her collarbone, sliding teeth and tongue along the ridge and Maya moaned her pleasure. She pressed closer, bidding Stephen to take more, the plan shaping into something else altogether as her pussy went wet, aching, and a small sigh escaped.

"No!" Matt roared. Then again—this time the "no" turning to a howl that chilled and frightened Maya. She shrieked as the fully-furred lycan pounced, knocking her away from Stephen and onto the hard floor. There was a tussle of movement as they rolled along the floor ending with Maya helpless, pinned down by an angry man-wolf.

Not one of her brighter plans, she decided. Maya called out, "Matt. Matthew. You're free. You've done it."

"I'm going to show you who's a whipped dog, bitch."

Oh, shit, oh, hell. He meant it. "Stephen!" she screamed.

"Don't cry out for your boyfriend. His turn's coming. Cry for me. I want to hear you whimper."

Fucking hell. Appealing to his alpha side had worked, but the result was ending the same way sex would have. With sex.

"Scream," he said again.

Obliging, she cried out when he sunk his teeth into her shoulder. He came up, his muzzle burgundy with her blood, his yellow wolfish eyes taking her in. It wasn't sex, it was food. She was food. Worse and worse. She did the only thing she could do.

Stopped fighting.

She remembered a book she'd read about wolves, and mimicking submissive behavior. Drawing her arms in, Maya arched her back, bared her neck—like offering her throat to the big bad wolf wasn't the scariest fucking thing ever—tried to make herself as small as possible and whimpered. Honest to God whimpered. The wolf cocked his head, covered in confusion.

Confusion was good. She could live with confusion.

The penetrating stare from those golden eyes lessened. "You submit?" he snarled, gnashing his canine teeth.

"Completely."

Blue began to edge the gold, but he stayed in full-lycan form as he rolled to the left then up on his feet ... paws?
Thank you, Lord.

She glanced sideways and found Stephen pulling himself up, his perfect bow mouth bloodied and battered. "I'm sorry," she mouthed, but even as the words left her lips, the cuts healed over, quickly, leaving him unmarred.

Before she could even think about it, a shrill screech pierced the air. "Where the hell are they?" It was Emma Peterson.

Matt growled, stalking toward the voice.

"We need to get out of here," Maya said, but Matt ignored her direction.

Stephen had picked up a loose pipe from the floor. *Like that's going to help.* And Maya lamented the loss of her gun. Not that it would help either, but it would've made her feel better. A false sense of security was better than no sense of security.

Matt stepped out into the open. "I'm here, sorceress. Do your worst." He flexed his gnarled fingers and the hackles of his back stood on end, his tail straight out.

Emma Peterson looked surprised, and a flash of fear passed over her face. Even Toll looked nervous, though the big sword he now carried felt like an equalizer.

Feeling more confident, Maya stepped out into the open with Matt. *Stupid.* Emma's fear was replaced with seething hatred as she clenched her fist and let loose with a fireball. A goddamn honest to goodness for the love of Pete fireball!

With no time to duck the hurling ball of flames, Maya clenched her eyes and braced herself for the pain impact would bring. When nothing happened, she opened one eye, then the other. Matt had moved in front of her, taking the fury of the wizardess like she was throwing confetti. *Holy shit balls.*

To the left, Stephen was dealing with his own battle, going *mano y mano* with Toll the skin-walker. His pipe against the other man's sword. The edge of the blade swung down, hitting the pipe, nearly knocking it from Stephen's hands, but he managed to hang on, shoving the blunt end into Toll's stomach.

The sword came up in a high arc, then sliced neatly through Stephen's hand, the appendage hitting the ground, his fingers still wiggling. Maya felt sick. He was getting slaughtered.

She moved to help, only to stagger back as the tendons and bones sprouted from the amputation, blood vessels and flesh moving in next, re-growing his hand as he continued the fight. *Fuck meee.*

Calbert, who had been hiding in the shadows apparently, moved up behind Maya, and in the commotion, she hadn't noticed until he planted the barrel of a gun to her temple. "Tell them to stop, or I'll kill you."

His voice was shaky and she could feel the overriding fear and panic that coursed through him. In front of them, Matt tore into Emma's arm, shredding the flesh. A bloody piece of muscle flew over and hit Maya in the chest.

A warm wetness brushed against the back of her thigh and she realized—Calbert had pissed himself. In that moment, Maya knew the gun was nothing. Calbert was human and human she could deal with. Stomping on the arch of his foot, she followed with an elbow to his side, spinning as he doubled, then cranked his arm, the one holding the gun, behind his back. A shot rocketed off, echoing through the chamber.

Grabbing the gun with one hand, and his hair with the other, Maya rammed Calbert's head onto her up-swinging knee. He dropped to floor—out cold. "Mother fucker."

Matt was still tearing Emma to pieces, her body parts scattered and bloody, his fur mangled in blood and body

fluids. Eww. But Stephen was losing his battle, and while the whole hand re-growing thing made her think he'd be okay, helping him was her natural impulse.

She tried to get a bead on Toll, but Stephen kept moving in front of her. Maya fired a warning shot over their heads and the two men tumbled to the ground in a grappling match. When they rolled out of it, there were two Stephens.

They stood staring at her, both with that quiet ease. The Stephen on the left shouted, "Shoot him, Maya. In the head. He can't survive a head shot."

The Stephen on the right said, "I'm Stephen, shoot him. Shoot the skin-walker."

The snarling and growling ceased behind her as Matt's battle ended. He moved up behind her and she could smell the stench of death covering him. "Can you tell who's who?"

"No. They both smell the same."

"Well, I'm going to shoot one of them, dammit." In her head she eenie-meanned, but in the end, couldn't pull the trigger.

The Stephen on the left spoke up. "Shoot us both in the head."

Mouth dropping, Maya shook her head. She couldn't.

"You saw my hand. I'll survive the headshot. The skin-walker won't."

Maya swallowed hard as adrenaline surged through her. He made sense. She took aim, and when she did, the skin-walker shifted as he turned to run. Squeezing the trigger, Maya breathed out as the bullet jettisoned from the chamber and smashed into the back of his head.

Sirens wailed outside the building. "Oh, fuck." How in the hell was she going to explain the bloody massacre? "Get out, both of you. You can't be here," she told Matt and Stephen.

"What about you?" Matt asked, his body now human, naked, and covered in blood.

"I'll think of something. Just go."

They hustled out the back, both with parting glances to Maya. She could hear the screech of more cars pulling into the parking lot. She ran over to Calbert, smacking him in the face to rouse him. "Wake up, fuckwad."

Calbert's eyelids fluttered open. "What happened?"

She grabbed a handful of his hair and dragged him to his mauled girlfriend, what was left of her, anyway. "You see this," she hissed. "That man over there, the one with the bullet in the back of his head, is responsible. He had some kind of wild dog that tore her to shreds." She pointed at what used to be Emma Peterson. "You shot him using my gun as he ran to escape, his dog getting out before him."

"And why, why would I take the blame for this?"

"You want to bargain? Fine. You can either take your chances with the law, fess up to the murder of Watkins and Toll, or you can end up like your partners, dead and unrecognizable. You got it?"

Panic and fear rocketed through his system. "I ... I..."

"Can it, asswipe. My wolf..." she couldn't believe she called Matt hers, "...will eat your tiny little shriveled heart for breakfast. Got it?"

"Yes, yes."

Sandenski arrived in the building followed by a crew of blue as the agreement was made. "Drop the gun, Eddings," he ordered.

She backed away from Calbert and set the weapon on the ground. "It's about time you jokers arrived."

One of the cops took one look at the bloody scene and threw up. "What the fuck happened here?"

"They kidnapped me. Can you believe it?" Well, at least that part was true. "They knocked my ass out and when I woke up, this was the mess I showed up in. Calbert was standing a few feet away with my gun. He hasn't told me exactly what happened yet, but I'm sure you can manage."

Sandenski didn't look like he believed a word coming out of her mouth. But that was his tough luck. He had his killers and Stephen would go free. They would find gunpowder residue on Calbert's hand, lending to the credibility of Maya's story.

"What happened to your shoulder?"

"Same thing that got that poor bastard." She pointed to the scattered flesh that had been Emma Peterson. "Must have got me is all I can figure."

Raising an eyebrow, Sandenski looked at Calbert, who mutely nodded. *Smart boy.*

"Fine. Let's just say I buy it ... for now." He motioned to the paramedics. "You're going to the hospital and getting checked out. You can come down to the station tomorrow for an official statement."

A heavy sigh flowed from Maya. The hospital sounded good. A hot shower and a warm bed sounded even better, but

she didn't argue. She wanted to check on Jack, and find out exactly what Tyler had told the police so she could get her story straight for tomorrow. One of the paramedics put his jacket across her bare shoulders.

Sandenski put his hand out before she passed him. "Nice legs, by the way."

Maya smiled. Sandenski was a putz, a total asshole who lived to make her life miserable, but he was a good cop. And she could live with him admiring her legs.

The morning paper read "Dream Makers, Inc., Executive Arrested for Murder." Maya smiled as she folded the paper and placed it next to her coffee. She didn't need to read the article since she'd basically invented it. Three days had passed since "Bloody Tuesday," as she called it, happened. Thankfully, Jack was doing well. It had been touch and go for the first two days, but he'd opened his eyes the night before and spoke to her.

Stephen would be coming over soon. They had a date. A real one. He was taking her to dinner at the Crown Plaza, though he'd agreed to keep it to himself and not tell Paula. She wasn't ready to face her friend yet, but she didn't want to give up Stephen either.

Her relationship with Matt was tenuous at best, but he'd agreed to date her as well. Both men, sharing her equally, and it gave her hope for another trio-tryst, but she wasn't counting her chickens before they hatched. Of course, the lycan would continue to see Jenny. His family expected it, and as he put it, "If you can see someone else, then so can I." She sighed. Fair was fair. Luckily, Stephen was content to

have her and only her. The doorbell rang and a zing of excitement coursed through her body.

She ran to the door, then slowed her pace to open it. Bright green eyes stared at her with deep, dark thoughts. Naughty-juicy thoughts, and Maya decided, "Fuck it." Grabbing his head she yanked him down into a kiss, dragging Stephen into the apartment and slamming the door behind them. Dinner was way overrated.

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Packing for Three

Hannah Beckham

When Matt Brewer, Maya Eddings' werewolf lover, calls her from his hometown in the Ozarks, Maya is fit to be tied. He's in trouble. His were-chick girlfriend Jenny has disappeared, and the clan suspects foul play. And Jenny's den is blaming Matt.

Maya would love to tell Matt to kiss-off, but the stakes are too high. His life could be forfeit if the situation isn't resolved. So, she packs her bags and her 9mm for a road trip with her other lover, Stephen Daniels, riding shotgun. Probably not the best idea, since Stephen's incubic genes seem to have a really strange reaction to lycans.

Between Matt's family, Jenny's disappearance, and Stephen's unusual talent for inciting a sexual riot, Maya has gotten into more trouble than she can shoot her way out of.

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Chapter 1

"Jesus..." Maya Eddings' hands fumbled across the nightstand. The phone rang again as the bedside lamp hit the floor. "Christ!"

A warm brush of leg crossed her body, and she felt an arm loop over her chest. "Here." The warm timbre of Stephen Daniels' voice sent shivers through Maya's body as he handed her the phone.

"Who the hell calls this early?"

Stephen chuckled. "It's after ten a.m." To make his point he drew back the curtain, flooding the small bedroom with ungodly light.

As much as Stephen's body looked *freaking awesome* all kissed by the sun, Maya threw the blankets over her head and groused into the phone, "This better be good."

"I can hear him. I guess you're busy."

Even with the static, Maya knew it was Matt. Matthew Brewer, on again off again lover, full time lycanthrope, and general pain in the ass. "You know I keep vamp hours. The only busy I'm up to is sleeping."

A long pause followed and it pissed her off that she felt the need to explain herself, but she probably loved him. Even with his "pain in the ass" status. Peeking from the cover, she looked at Stephen, part incubus, full time lover, and generally one of the easiest guys she'd ever hooked up with. Scoping out his glorious ass resting perfectly on long well shaped legs, a v'd back leading to wide shoulders and the mop of dark-

blond hair on his head, she knew she probably loved him as well.

"I need your help," Matt finally said.

Rich. Great. He needed her help? She was nearly disinclined to respond, considering he'd taken off to his hometown of Camdenton with his were-chick girlfriend. "What could you possibly need my help with, Matthew?"

"Do you have to be so..."

"Bitchy? Yes. Yes, I do. You need help? Call Penny. Oh, wait. You don't need to call her. She's there with you if I recall."

"Jenny." His voice became gruff. "She's the reason I'm calling. She's missing."

"My Lord, you've got brass ones. Great big, gi-normous, gilded brass ones. Your *other* girlfriend disappears and you call me?" *Idiot*. Like Maya had any interest in tracking down her competition. Not.

"She's pregnant, Maya." He paused then added, "And they're blaming me. I'm going to be put before a lycan tribunal starting tomorrow."

Pregnant. Oh, my God. Jenny's pregnant. A sudden wave of nausea hit her, and Maya fought to keep from ralphing the chocolate pudding she'd eaten before going to bed. "That would be bad." She gulped in air.

"That's an understatement."

She remembered when he'd told her about his brother being whipped sixty-six times with a special rod that would leave scars on a lycan after judgment from a tribunal. The incident had happened three years ago, several months

before Maya had met Matt. After, his brother had been shunned from the clan. Matt wouldn't even say his brother's name out loud—they were that freaking serious. Matt didn't say what his brother had done to warrant a tribunal, but she had the feeling it had been for a lot less than suspected foul play in the disappearance of a clan member.

"When's the tribunal thingy?"

"It starts tomorrow. If Jenny doesn't show up, her family will ask for my death. I wouldn't take her as a life mate, and I made my intention clear yesterday to her family. She went missing three days ago. They think I killed her."

"Why won't you take her as a mate?"

Stunned silence ensued.

"Matt? Are you there? I can hear you breathing, goddammit."

"You wind me so tight sometimes. I just can't believe the crap that comes out of your mouth." He huffed his breath.

"Why didn't I take her as a mate? You. Fuck, Maya. You."

Well, wasn't that ... special. "Give me directions."

Stephen turned sideways, the morning sun casting a burnt orange over his pale, beautiful skin. He noticed Maya staring and wiggled his eyebrows. A sexy little grin graced his lips as he dragged a hand down his stomach to palm his thick cock.

Maya swallowed, hard. She finished jotting the directions down, trying unsuccessfully to ignore the growing warmth between her legs. "Got it. I'll be down this afternoon." She gasped as Stephen knelt beside the bed, his lips grazing the inside arch of her foot. "*Late* afternoon."

Matt groused something unintelligible into the phone as Maya dropped the receiver into its cradle.

"So..." Stephen's gorgeous green eyes peeked over her toes. "Road trip?"

Maya jerked her foot away. "No. No. No effing way I'm taking you with me."

Stephen crawled up between her legs, kissing his way to the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. "Pretty please."

"You actually expect me to take you down into the middle of a lycan clan?" She'd seen the way Stephen's incubic pheromones reacted with werewolves. Hell, she'd even enjoyed the scary, but oh-so-erotic fruit of the interaction. Scary because Matthew had nearly shape-shifted during the encounter trying to change Maya into the terminally furred.

The threesome had definitely made an impact on her though, and Maya had fantasized multiple times about it happening again, but ... "Uh-uh. I'm not fighting my way out of an orgy of horny wolves because you can't keep your ju-ju juice to yourself." Teeth grazed her clit and she moaned. "No fair."

His tongue swiped between the folds of her wet, swollen pussy as he glanced up at her through a thick fringe of dark eyelashes that framed his gorgeous green eyes. Pupils dilating, he murmured softly against her skin, "But I thought you liked my ju-ju."

"Oh. Yeah." Maya squirmed under the exquisite pressure of Stephen's tongue. "Ju-ju good. Ju-ju real good."

A wave of lust rolled over Maya and she bucked her hips forward. Her empathic abilities worked with every emotion in

humans, nearly none in lycans, and apparently, only one with incubus demons. Desire. At first it had troubled her that Stephen was a sex demon, but over the last couple of months she'd come to ... "Ahh..." Her thoughts were interrupted as his tongue slid into her pussy, unbelievably thick and long. "Fuck, you're fantastic." And a fantastic fuck.

Was it the fact he was an incubus that drew her to him? Having Stephen around kept her in a constant state of arousal. No, it wasn't that, at least not just that. He was uncomplicated. Maya liked uncomplicated. Needed it. Like now. The feel of his large, strong hands smoothing down her chest, caressing her breasts, kept the bad away. By bad, she meant Matt's news that Jenny was pregnant.

"I want you, Stephen. You. I want you inside me." Desperation tugged at Maya. She wanted to not think about Matt. "Stephen, Stephen," she whispered as she arched to meet his smooth glide up her body. She loved his height. Maya was six feet tall, and it was rare to find a man who could match her length in bed. Stephen was nearly six inches taller, and as he inched his thick cock deep inside her, his head bowed down to gaze at her with unblinking eyes.

He thrust his hips forward, hard, burying his cock deep within her. "Oh," she groaned. "Yes."

Withdrawing slowly, he thrust forward again, slow then hard was how he worked her body. His thumb reached down to massage her aching clit. She arched to meet his hand. His skin smelled sweet of honey and vanilla. He'd been using her body wash again and the scent heightened her awareness of his every touch, every caress.

"God, you feel so good. Your pussy is massaging my cock. I'm lost in you, Maya. Lost." He quickened his thrusts. Moving his hips back and forth, the head of his cock rubbing the sensitive area just inside her canal.

"I need you, Stephen. Make me come."

His mouth met hers, wet, warm, his tongue sliding past her teeth in a tangled fury. He rolled them until he was on his back with Maya straddling him. She rocked back and forth over his cock, squeezing her thighs against his sides as one hand tweaked her nipples while the other thumbed her clit. He knew exactly what she wanted and how she wanted it. Another reason to adore him.

The pressure mounted from within her and she glided down his cock, taking him as deeply as she wanted. "Come for me, Maya. I want to feel you come."

The words put her over the edge as the orgasm spread through her. She arched and cried out as her body stuttered forward. Stephen's hips jerked once, then twice, then again. She fell forward onto his chest. "You're really something," she told him.

"Ditto, babe." He grinned.

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Chapter 2

Maya turned to Stephen. "This is such a bad idea. I can't believe you talked me into letting you come along." When her eyes went back to the road an armadillo had suddenly appeared and she swerved, her right front wheel hitting the drifts along the side of Highway 65. "Where the hell did that thing come from?" She took a deep breath after getting the car and her pounding heart under control. "It just came out of nowhere."

"Armadillos don't just come out of nowhere, babe. They aren't the fastest animals on the block."

"Smart ass." Shaking her head, she gripped the steering wheel tighter. "Like I said before, this is a bad idea." She turned back to him to gauge his reaction, since her empathic abilities worked very little on the incubus.

Apparently, he must have thought his coming along was a good idea, because he didn't answer her. He pointed forward without meeting her gaze. "Eyes on the road."

She focused back on the highway, not so much because Stephen told her to, more because she didn't want to end up in a ditch in the middle of the Ozarks. "You're going to get me killed. You know that. Right?"

"I'm going to make sure that you don't get killed." His voice had taken on an edge, not feral like Matt's (when he was angry or horny), but closer than she'd ever heard it. "You have no understanding of lycan politics, Maya. By Matt asking you for help, he's basically named you lamb to the wolves."

It was hard to keep the heat from her voice. Maya didn't even try. "Obviously, Matt thinks I can handle myself." Her knuckles were going white. "But you don't."

"I think Matt is desperate, and he thinks you're the only person he can trust. I don't *think* he's got your best interests in mind. Only his own."

"I'm tired of this fight already."

"Good. I don't want to fight anyways." His fingertips grazed her upper arm, trailing slowly to her elbow.

A shiver of warm pleasure caught her off guard, her right hand loosening on the wheel as her left hand dragged it down. The car swerved into the middle of the road. Maya reaffirmed her grip and brought the vehicle back into the lane. "Are you crazy? You could have killed us!"

"I made sure no one..." He chuckled, his low reverb stimulating her body to action. "...or *thing* was on the road first."

"Stop that." They were twenty miles south of Warsaw, Missouri, the distance Matt had given in his directions. She motioned to the paper on the dash. "What's that road I need to turn on again?"

"Pull off on any of these small roads and I'll show you a turn on."

Without even looking, she knew his eyebrows were wiggling. "Stop that."

"I'm just saying." He grabbed the paper. "It looks like UU, but it could be VV, or even W. Your writing is terrible. And you used to teach English?"

"Don't make me shoot you." She snatched the paper from his fingers. "It's UU." Maya huffed. "Idiot."

Teaching English to a bunch of teenagers had been Maya's first career out of college, but as an empath, the drama of the "it's all about me" generation had taken its toll on her. She'd gone home nightly with migraines and seriously drained by the roiling emotions of the acne crowd.

Meeting Jack Simon, her business partner and friend, had been her salvation. She'd only started taking karate classes to blow off steam, but her natural aptitude for the sport and her quick ascension to black belt drew the attention of the former Army sergeant. Jack had been a Ranger with black ops over in the Middle East, and after he'd gotten out, he'd taken up private security.

After he'd talked Maya into coming on a job with him, she'd become addicted to the adrenaline and the money. So much better than a teacher's salary. Also, after a few weeks of weapons training, she got to carry a gun. That had been four years ago. Since then, the 9mm had been her best accessory.

Clearing his throat, Stephen pointed to a small sign up the road. "There it is."

The small gravel road was about one hundred feet ahead on the left. Maya put on the blinker and rapidly decelerated to make the turn. Although the road seemed well-maintained, the white gravel threw dust everywhere behind them, making the highway disappear completely from the rearview mirror. A farm house loomed on the right then there was nothing for

about four miles except wooded land and hills. "Where is the damn turn?"

"We should be coming up on it anytime. It'll be another left." Stephen gripped her arm. "Like right there." He pointed out the driver side window.

Maya glanced over to see two worn tire track marks between a couple of large trees. She slammed on the brakes, sliding the car forward about three feet. Putting the car in reverse, she rolled back to where Stephen had indicated.

"You've got to be kidding me. That's not a road. It's a path." The trees were so thick that the road was darkened under the looming branches of oaks and maples, poison ivy encroaching on the edges, giving the sense of an old fifties horror film. "It's a goddamn spooky path in the middle of freaking nowhere."

Her hand drifted inside her jean jacket, lightly touching the butt of the 9mm poking from her hip. It made her feel better. Like a security blanket. A cold steel woobie that could fire eleven rounds within a matter of seconds to take down the boogie man quick and make him cry for his mamma.

"That's the twentieth time you've checked your gun, Maya. I don't think it's going to magically disappear."

A few months before Maya would not have believed anything could magically disappear, but after coming face to face with a real honest to goodness sorceress and finding out magic was real, well, anything was possible. If it hadn't been for Stephen, she'd be living in ignorant bliss of that little tidbit. Of course, he'd either be dead or in jail right now, so knowing was the better option. Right?

"Again, don't make me shoot you." Smacking Stephen in the arm for good measure, Maya backed up a bit more and turned down the scary-as-hell road. "This is a bad idea."

"I wish you'd quit saying that."

"This time it has nothing to do with you. Something doesn't feel right. Like we're walking into a trap."

"Alert is good, Maya. Especially when you're going into lycanthrope territory."

"Or when I'm going into lycanthrope territory with a guy who puts the nip in catnip."

"They're wolves."

"I know. Don't you think I know that? It's a metaphor."

"We should be okay. We're going straight to Matt's cabin. He's the only one there right now, and I'll keep my distance from the other clan members."

Staying at the cabin and away from the other lycans had been the promise Stephen made to her. If he hadn't, Maya wouldn't have let him come along. But she understood. He needed her. Stephen's incubus genes required him to have sex on a regular basis and as long as he was with Maya he could resist the impulse to fuck anything with two legs. He didn't want that, not anymore, and neither did Maya.

She'd never had any moral qualms about sex, and up until Stephen and Matt, she was totally cool with the occasional strange wang. If she looked deep inside, she'd have to admit that she hated that Matt still slept with his werebitch, but fair was fair. No looking deep, she scolded herself. She had no intention of giving up Stephen. Strangely, the sandy-haired, green-eyed part-incubus didn't seem to care that she slept

with both Matt and him, but she knew if Stephen started diddling everything that moved, she'd lose it. She was more possessive of him than Matt.

It could've been the fact that Stephen was content to have Maya any way she'd allow, no pressure, no talk of marriage, or permanency. Easy. He was so easy. In so many more ways than one.

The tree branches dragged over the hood of her car reminding her of Freddie Kruger cutting into the side of a metal wall with his bladed fingers. "God, will this road never end?"

"I think I see the light at the end of the tunnel."

And there it was, the sun, peeking through the trees, throwing its blessed light down on the road now opening into a pastoral setting. She'd expected a small rustic cabin, something out of Grizzly Adams, but instead it was more like Donald Trump's guest house. "Holy bejeezus. This place is freakin' huge."

"I'd say Matt's been holding out on you."

"Ya think?" The cabin, if you could call it that, was a two-story log house accented with cedar panels, and had to be at least 8,000 square feet. She pulled up into a paved circular drive in front. "Who would have thought something like this..." She gestured toward the house then jerked her thumb. "...would have been at the end of that," she finished, pointing at the path of darkness.

As they exited the car, the front door opened and two large hounds came barreling out in front of Matt. The bigger, a black and tan, ran right up to Stephen, with the blue-tick

right behind him, and proceeded to try and hump his legs. Stephen shook both dogs loose and let out a sharp bark of irritation, cowing both the dogs. "Fuck," he muttered in frustration when they came back again.

"Pete! Snoop! Down!" Matt snapped the command and both dogs came to heel next to him. He didn't even try to keep the grin off his face.

"Relatives of yours?" Stephen asked as they approached the front porch.

The grin quickly left Matt's face. "I could let them at you again."

Maya stepped between the two men, duffle bag in hand. "Cool it. Both of you." She sidled between Matt and the door, moving into the foyer. Yes, the place had a freaking foyer. "Where do I put my shit?"

"My room is at the end of the hall on the left." Matt gave a wide berth to Stephen. While the incubus hormones wouldn't turn him into a stark raving sex-starved werewolf again, Matt still felt intensely horny around the part demon, and the feeling made him uncomfortable to say the least. "Did you have to bring him with you?"

Maya glanced sideways at Matt, then to Stephen, then back to Matt. "Yes. Yes, I did." She rolled her eyes. "Did you have to get your werechick pregnant?"

"I ... uh..."

"That's what I thought," she snapped. "So shut the fuck up." Maya headed up the stairs.

"My room is down here," Matt said.

"I know. I'm sure I can find my own up here somewhere."

"Oh, ho, she told you," Stephen kidded, drawing a dark, stormy look from Matt before the blond started up the stairs after her.

Matt broke his rule about not touching the sex-driven demon and grabbed Stephen's arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I go where she goes."

"The fuck you do. Not in my house."

"Don't push me, dog boy." The air stilled as the space between them grew tense and quiet.

Maya leaned against the railing, fighting a heavy sigh. What was a girl to do with two really difficult to kill men? "Let him go, Matthew." The storm brewing behind her eyes matched that of the lycan's. "If you boys can't play nice, I'll lock you both in a room together and let you fight it out on your own."

Matt let go of Stephen's arm, a puzzled expression of lust and anger clouding his face. Stephen smiled, dazzling bright, shining between his sensuous bow lips. "I'm all about playing nice."

Growling, Matt gnashed his teeth.

"Don't start nothin', won't be nothin'," Maya snapped. "Besides, and need I remind you, your *pregnant* girlfriend is the reason you called me here. You're not allowed to be jealous." It wasn't fair to Matt, but she didn't give a fuck. She wasn't the queen of monogamy, but sharing her men didn't set well either. "Come along, Stephen."

Before Maya could get to the top of the stairs, Matt had jumped from the lower floor in what could only be described

as a singly fantastic bounding leap. He landed in front of her. Maya was ready to fight, but all the protest left her body as he embraced her in his arms, his lips finding their way to hers, feeding on her mouth like a dying man with his last meal. The heat of his kiss made her weak, fragile as she gave in, her tongue matching his in a fervent dance. Her body responded to his feral nature. It always did.

"Matthew," she breathed against him.

His eyes were startling blue, no yellow rings to indicate an emerging wolf on the horizon. Moisture rimmed the inner edges, and therein lay grief and loss, but was it for Maya? Or for Jenny? He buried his face against her neck, the heat from his breath blowing softly across her skin, and it didn't matter. Matt was hurting, and Maya hurt because of it. "I'm sorry, Maya. So sorry. I shouldn't have involved you in my ... mess. I just didn't know..."

"Who else to call," she supplied, stroking his thick dark hair. "It's okay, Matt. I'm glad you did."

Stephen placed his hand on the small of her back. She was sure he meant to be comforting, at least 90.1 percent sure. Comfort was not what she felt. The sensation of Stephen's palm on one side of her, while Matt was pressed against the front of her body, sent an erotic shiver through her, bearing straight down into her pussy.

Matt must have sensed her arousal, or he was having a moment himself, because his hard cock pressed through his jeans against her thigh. When the lycan's hand slid along the side of her breast, Stephen took his cue and pressed his body against her backside, his hand moving to her free breast,

cupping then squeezing her nipple between his forefinger and thumb. Her back arched of its own volition as a moan escaped her lips.

"Wait," she said breathlessly. "Just wait."

Blue eyes met hers—*still blue, still blue*—as both men froze in place, neither moving. Maya wondered for a split second if they were even daring to breathe.

She traced the curve of Matt's jaw. "Are you cool with this?"

Matt began to breathe again, but Stephen remained still, like even a breath would ruin the moment until the lycan pressed his lips against Maya's. "I feel lost." Desperation edged his words. "I'm lost without you." Not much of an answer, but she'd take it ... for now.

Both her men were lost. Either with or without her. What did that say about her state of sanity? Stephen stripped her down to panties while Matt handled the shirt, the holster, and the bra. A breeze rose up the stairway, making her acutely aware of her nakedness. She dropped to her knees in front of Matt and undid his jeans. She could hear Stephen undressing behind her.

She freed Matt's solid cock from his pants and slipped it between her lips. He needed this, she could tell, just a little submission, and Maya was willing. She sucked and stroked his cock with her mouth and hands. Fondling his testicles, she rolled one around her tongue then the other. From behind, Stephen pulled her panties down around her knees. He spread her thighs with his hands. She felt his tongue slide

against the lips of her pussy as she took Matt's cock back into her mouth with vigor.

She wanted Stephen inside her so badly while she fucked Matt's shaft with her mouth. To take both men at the same time into her. "Fuck me, Stephen. Matt."

Matt began to pump his hips forward, sliding his cock in and out of her mouth, while Stephen held her thighs with one hand to steady himself, then pushed his length into her wet pussy. There was something so titillating about two men at once and the sheer taboo of it excited and aroused Maya, more so than the first time, since Matt wasn't turning furry.

Both men grunted and moaned as they pushed and pulled on her, thrusting and withdrawing. Matt came first, the salt of his semen washing over her tongue as she drank him in, sucking his cock until it was soft inside her mouth, and his moans became a whimper. Stephen quickened his thrusts, his balls slapping against her clit until she could take no more and she cried out around Matt's tender flesh. Then Stephen came, grinding and pounding her flesh with his hips until the last of his orgasm was spent.

Maya fell to her side and put her back against the wall, laughing, feeling powerful and good. "So, does this mean we're all okay with this arrangement now?"

Stephen chuckled while Matt grimaced and buttoned his jeans. "I'll never be okay with sharing you, Maya. But for now, I'll take you the way you'll have me."

"Good enough." Although his shift in attitude baffled her. Why all of a sudden had Matt decided to be cool with a threesome? She'd worry about it later. For this second, they

were all getting along, two supes and a human. Even to Maya, it sounded like a bad sitcom. "So tell me."

"I don't even know where to begin."

"The beginning is usually good."

Stephen had enough sense to keep his mouth shut, but Maya could see the hint of a smile play on his lips.

Matt chose to ignore Stephen's amusement. "I haven't been completely honest with you about my relationship with Jenny. What I'm about to tell you has to stay just between us." He gave the incubus a meaningful glance.

Stephen did the whole pretend locking the mouth and throwing away the key. Matt rolled his eyes. "Remember when I told you about my brother?"

Maya nodded, pulling up her panties and grabbing her shirt from the floor.

"Well, what I didn't tell you was that Jenny was to be his mate."

"Holy fuck stick. You're dating your brother's girl?"

"It's not what you think..."

Maya cut him off and stood up. "That's crazy, Matt. Even for you. I know your brother doesn't *technically* exist in your world. But still ... he's your brother." She looked around. "Where are my fucking pants?"

Stephen pointed over the banister. They were lying on the first floor.

"Great, just fucking great."

"Are you going to let me tell this story or not?"

"Fine, fine. But I can't believe I drove all the way down here for this."

"Jesus, Maya. Are you going to let me talk or what? I feel like I'm already at the tribunal."

Stephen placed his hand on her shoulder, sending peaceful vibes. "Sorry. Go ahead."

"You sure?" Matt waited and when Maya didn't say any more, he continued. "Jenny would have chosen shunning over giving up Mi ... my brother. The last thing he said to me before I was forced to turn my back on him was that he wanted me to keep Jenny safe."

"So your bed is safe?"

Matt's blue eyes turned dark, reminding Maya of tinted glass. "I haven't had sex with Jenny."

Both Maya's and Stephen's heads snapped up.

"Surprise." Matt shrugged.

"So..."

"The baby isn't mine. Which is another reason I wouldn't commit as her mate."

"Did she expect you to?"

"I'm not sure what she expected. Her clan found out about it before I did, and when they put me on the spot, I respectfully declined." Rubbing his hands through his short, black hair, Matt sighed. "It caused quite a stir."

"I imagine so." The baby wasn't Matt's. He wasn't having sex with Jenny. Yippee skippy. Of course, that brought up more questions. "If you aren't the baby's daddy, who is?"

A heavy sigh whooshed from Matt. "It's Michael's."

"Michael?"

"My brother."

He'd said the name, holy shit. Matthew had always been so careful, respecting the clan's decision when they'd shunned his brother. Maya waited to see if they would be struck by lightning before asking, "So you've been in touch?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry for not telling you. It's shitty of me, but they take shunning seriously in lycanthrope communities. I couldn't risk anyone finding out."

"Who am I going to tell, really?" Maya suspected that the reason Matt hadn't told her was because he wanted her jealous over Jenny, but she didn't put voice to the thought. "Beside the point." She waved her hand in dismissal. "Go on with the story."

"I've been arranging for Michael and Jenny to be able to see each other in Kansas City without the clan's knowledge, but we've made a point of coming home as a couple to keep up the legitimacy of a relationship. I didn't have a clue she was pregnant, but her mother knew instantly. A woman thing apparently. She put us both on the spot in front of her den and demanded a binding ceremony."

"Jenny just stood there, speechless, leaving it to me. I couldn't do it. I couldn't commit to a binding and ... hell, Maya, the only thing I could think was that if I bound myself to Jenny, I'd never have you in my arms again." He shuddered.

Maya slipped her arms around his waist. The gesture brought a low rumble from Matthew's chest.

"When I told them I wouldn't take her as a mate and couldn't come up with a good reason why, Jenny's father challenged me. It was about that time that Jenny took

lycanthrope form and ran off into the woods. I went after her and when I caught up to her, she attacked me. I got her pinned down, both of us a little bloody. She calmed and said if I let her up she'd come back with me."

"Let me guess," Stephen interjected. "She didn't."

"Nope. She took off again." Matt cracked his knuckles.

"When I got back to her family, I tried to tell them she was okay, just needed some space, but they could smell her blood on me and all they could think was that I'd hurt her in some way ... or killed her. Even worse. I thought she'd come back that evening, and when she didn't the accusations started flying."

"You think she went to Michael?"

"I wish. I've been in contact with my brother. Jenny hasn't even called him. It's been almost four days now. That's the deadline they gave me, by the way. If she didn't show, they would assume the worst and a tribunal would be called."

"That's not good."

"Understatement."

"I'm the queen of them."

That brought a smile to Matt. "I'm really worried, Maya. This is not going to go well for me. If Jenny does show up they're going to find out about Michael, and we'll both be shunned for being in contact with my brother. If she doesn't show up they're going to think I killed her, and I'll be put to death."

Oh, God, he'd said it. The D-word. "What do you want me to do? I'll do it."

Matt squeezed her hand. "I know you can't read lycan emotions, but you were able to read my mother's since she began as a human. Jenny's clan has a lot of *debanases*, lycans who started as humans. Someone knows something. The tribunal will last three days. We only have that long to find out who and why."

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Chapter 3

They'd left Stephen at the cabin the next morning and headed out in Matt's truck. Maya wasn't certain what to wear to a tribunal, so she went with country chic—low-rise jeans, T-shirt, black bomber jacket, and a black pair of Doc Martens. She must have changed T-shirts four times before settling on the dark green V-neck. It looked good against her pale skin, and the whole outfit made her look tough, yet still feminine. Considering she was six feet tall and had short brown hair, looking feminine could be a challenge at times.

The small trail leading from the cabin didn't look any better exiting than it had entering. "You need some serious pruning through here," she said, involuntarily ducking as a branch swiped the windshield.

"Nah," Matt answered. "It keeps out the riff-raff and gawkers."

"It didn't keep me out."

Maya was rewarded with a smile. "This isn't going to be like your day job. I know you can take care of yourself, but bullets aren't going to stop a mob of lycanthropes from tearing your throat out if things get out of hand."

"I can take care of myself."

"Just try not to be ... impolitic."

"Is that your nice way of telling me not to be a smart ass?"

"Yes."

She tried to think of a witty comeback, but unfortunately, nothing came to mind. "Fair enough."

"Wow, not even an argument. Amazing."

"Look. I'm not stupid. I shot you eleven times a couple of months ago. I know that your kind is stronger, faster, and much more resilient than I am."

"Just call me Steve Austin."

Speaking of the Million Dollar Man ... "What's up with the cabin? You live in a dinky apartment across from me in the city, yet you live like royalty down in the Ozarks. I know your job doesn't pay near that well."

Matt blushed. "Oh, that."

"Yeah, that."

"Well, my father is chief of the ruling clan down here."

"Oh. My. God. You're royalty. A friggin' prince."

"I'll inherit his position when he dies, yes."

"I feel like I should prostrate myself at your feet."

Grinning, Matt glanced over at her. "Only if you feel you must."

She slugged him in the arm. "Not unless it's to bite your toes off."

"Don't worry. I won't make you call me sir or master or anything like that."

Maya ignored the comment. "So, being a chief pays well, eh?"

"Kind of." Matt shook his head. "My father is the baddest of the bad asses. He fought challenge after challenge to make our den the strongest. It's a lot of work, but in the end, the lesser dens pay an homage of sorts. Ten percent of the yearly clan income goes to the ruling den. That's my father's. When

he dies and I become chief, new challenges will be issued, and I'll either be in charge, or be paying my own taxes."

"So, no fights to the death then?"

"Used to be, but the policy changed years ago. Now it's a fight to submission. Death is sometimes the result if the opposing challenger refuses to submit, but rarely."

"Well, your father has to be a bad ass to put up with your mom. So, it doesn't surprise me."

"Uh..." Matt winced as he pulled out onto UU. "I forgot to tell you that my mother's going to be there."

"It keeps getting better and better." Matt's mother, Isadora Brewer, was not the president of Maya's fan club. She wasn't even an honorary member. "Nails on a blackboard," she mumbled.

"Huh?"

"I was just thinking about how pleasant it'll be to see your mother again."

"It'll be fine." The twitch in his eyelid told a different story.

The first time she'd met Izzy, as the woman liked to be called by everyone but Maya (she preferred Maya to call her Mrs. Brewer) was the first time Matt and Maya had broken up. Matt had sprung the surprise meeting on both women. Neither had been too appreciative or too happy about the whole thing. Izzy thought Maya unworthy of her baby boy, and Maya thought Izzy a raving bitch in heels.

"That's like saying an F-5 tornado is blowing through town but the trailer court will be fine."

"Just don't shoot her."

Maya choked back a laugh. "She'd survive."

Now smiling, Matt eased back in the seat. "Yeah, but I'd never hear the end of it."

It was the most relaxed Maya had seen him since she arrived and she knew it wouldn't last. He'd shaved that morning, but he already had a five o'clock shadow on his strong angular jaw. His short curly black hair and dark eyebrows framed his clear blue eyes, perfectly melding his Irish and Greek lineage into a gorgeous package begging to be unwrapped over and over again.

"If you don't quit looking at me, I'm going to pull over."

Maya's eyes widened innocently. "Looking at you like what?"

"You know, like I'm a push-up pop that you can't wait to suck on."

"Ohh, I haven't had an orange Creamsicle in years. That sounds really good." She licked her lips.

Matt growled low, sexy. The sound made her lower parts go tight and wet. The lycan inhaled deeply through his nose. "I can smell your arousal, Maya." His tone had dropped two octaves lower than normal.

"Is the big bad wolf going to eat me?" She knew she was playing with fire, but just knowing that he hadn't been having sex with Jenny made her want him that much more.

"Only if you ask nicely." He flashed his teeth then yanked the steering wheel left, sending them speeding onto a turn off into the woods.

Maya hung onto the dash and braced herself as the truck lurched to a stop about twenty feet off the main road. "Uh, do

we have time..." Before she could finish the question, Matt had unbuckled himself and was working on Maya's seatbelt.

He scooted to the middle and pulled her across his lap. His arms wrapped around her tightly as he kissed her hard on the lips. "You're so goddamn beautiful. Beautiful," he whispered.

"Ditto," she answered back. Lame. Yes. But it was all she could manage as her body reacted to his every touch.

He'd popped the top button on her jeans, his hand slipping between the rough fabric and her skin, under her panties to her drenched, swollen pussy. "Always. I want to feel you, smell you, taste you..." Pulling his hand from her pants, he brought his glistening fingers wet with her fluids to his mouth and sucked them, his eyes never leaving hers.

Maya drew a staggering breath at the sight as she watched him. His eyes nearly rolled into the back of his head as he fed himself from her.

"God, you taste so fucking good." He dipped his hand once again, fingers playing along her sex, dipping the tip of his middle finger into her channel as she moved against the pressure, hips moving forward. Then again, he pulled his hand out to taste. She was surprised when he placed one finger to her lips and slipped it into her mouth. Sucking at his finger, Maya watched his eyes glitter with hunger and savage lust. Raw and unfettered.

With another growl, he pushed her back until her head was against the passenger window, pulling her jeans down her hips until they rested at her ankles. His head dipped between her legs. "Ah!" she cried out as his uber-heated tongue slid between the folds of her pussy, curling and flicking her clit.

His hand molded to her breast as he came up and pressed his lips to hers, his tongue fighting for occupation in her mouth, then back down between her legs to lick and suck the tender flesh. He hooked his other hand under her thigh, lifting her leg for a better angle to delve his tongue deeply into the heat of her pulsing channel.

She grasped his hair, squeezing her hands against the coolness of the soft curls while his face worked gloriously between her legs, then she pulled him up for another kiss, licking her own juices from his shiny wet lips. His eyes had been closed, and when he opened them, a yellow ring rimmed his black pupils. Fear shot through her like a large caliber round.

Matt snarled as he took two fingers and plunged them into her pussy, his teeth nipping her lower lip. "Fuck, oh fuck," she moaned into his mouth.

Her pelvis thrust against his hand as he thrust his fingers in and out. His free hand moved to his own jeans, freeing his large, solid cock. He rubbed the head against her clit, making her squirm beneath him, pleasure enhanced by building panic. The blue in his eyes had nearly disappeared in place of the wolfish amber-gold.

Maya forced herself to stop moving against him. She'd only found out a couple of months back that sex with a shifted lycanthrope could turn her into one of them, something about their sperm having some kind of special protein or some shit like that when they were turned. But as she had told Matt in the past, a tail didn't go with anything in her wardrobe. She had no intention of joining the ranks of the fully furred.

"Trust me." It was hard to know what to say, considering his voice had taken on the low, rumbling timbre of his wolf, and when she didn't respond, Matt's eyes narrowed. Well, that and the fact that he'd tried to turn her twice against her will. He reached around her side and came up with her 9mm in his hand. "If I shift you can shoot me."

She took the gun and dropped it in the floorboard. A small concession that she trusted him, but still close enough to grab if she needed it. "Fuck me." *Said the fly to the spider.*

That seemed to be the only encouragement he needed as he thrust her legs up, her Doc Martens pushing against his shoulders as his thick cock slid into the waiting grip of her pussy. Her head bounced against the window as he thrust his hips forward, burying himself deep within her.

Growling, Matt slipped out of her and turned Maya onto her knees as he straddled her calves. He yanked her jacket off, then slid the T-shirt over her head. The snap on her black lace bra came next, freeing her breasts. His hand slipped around, cupping the soft mound of flesh, pinching the nipple between his fingertips as he simultaneously bit down gently on her shoulder and pushed his thick cock into her pussy once again.

Pleasure soared through her body as she rocked backwards to meet the onslaught of thrusts, their moans meeting in chorus. His teeth bore down into her flesh, not enough to break the skin, but enough to hurt. The pain heightened the sensations as blood was pulled to her lower regions, making her feel impossibly swollen around his rock-hard shaft. He was dominating her, and she didn't care.

His teeth released the skin on her shoulder as a sound, much like a howl only lower, pushed through his mouth. One hand gripped the back of her neck, while the other splayed against her buttocks. "So good watching my cock slide in and out of your pussy. Feels so good." He lightly slapped her ass, then dug his fingers into the giving flesh. "Mine."

He surged forward again, another light slap. "Mine," he growled this time. "Say it."

"Oh, God..." Her words bit off at the end of a groan of ecstasy as his thumb slid over the circular opening of her ass, the pressure building inside her like a dam trying to hold back the ocean.

"Mine!" he grunted louder as he pumped his cock into her.

"Yours!" she screamed as the floodgates opened, her body bucking and shaking through the orgasm as ripple after ripple of ecstasy surged through her. Matt's pace quickened, his body rigidly moving against her, his grip tightening on the back of her neck and ass until ... "Ahh!" he cried out with one final thrust, holding himself tight against her until the last of his seed pumped into her.

He pulled out slowly as Maya collapsed down, her forehead lying on the passenger door armrest. "Holy shit stick. Fu-uck me."

Matt flopped back into the driver's seat, not bothering to pull his pants up. "I think I just did." He reached over and popped the glove compartment and handed her some napkins.

Maya started laughing. "Yes. Yes, you did. And quite well, if I might add." She grabbed the napkins and raised an

eyebrow. "You always keep things like that in your glove box?"

Matt smirked. "I'm always prepared, darlin'."

"A regular freaking boy scout." After cleaning up, Maya stuffed the napkins into a plastic bag behind the seat. She pulled up her jeans and sat back. Flipping the visor, she smoothed her hair down in the mirror and wiped at the smeared mascara under her eyes. "I'm a mess."

"You are stunning." He smiled. "And you are mine."

Maya had said it in the heat of sex, but she didn't mean it in the way she thought he thought she meant it. "About that..."

He put a finger to his lips. "Don't talk. You'll spoil the moment. For now, for this day, I need you to be mine. Okay?"

There were a million things going through her mind, like the fact that she was no one's possession, but instead of arguing, she nodded. "Okay."

They'd been on the road for about fifteen minutes when Matt turned the truck down a private-property-trespassers-will-be-shot road which led to a large houseboat on the lake. Dozens of men and women milled around by the dock in sectioned groups.

Maya inclined her head as they stopped. "Your people."

"Some of them."

"I just meant the terminally furred."

"We're lycanthropes, Maya. Not some creature glamorized by Hollywood. I don't mind your jibes so much, but many of my people will not take kindly to it."

"Got it." She raised an eyebrow. "So, anything special I should do when I greet them? Scratch behind the ear, sniff a butt or two?"

"Not funny." Matt opened the door and came around to Maya's side.

"I thought it was."

All eyes turned at once on them. Didn't none of them look like happy eyes. Matt must have felt the tension in Maya's body. He leaned to her ear and said, "Relax."

"Easy for you to say."

"Not really."

His hand slipped into hers, and the gesture brought her some comfort. A man approached them. He looked early thirties, solidly built, a few inches shorter than Maya, his brown hair blowing forward over his eyes. "Hey, Matthew."

"Dom." Matt's face was like stone, his voice tense. "You sitting on the council?"

"Sorry, bro. Trandill asked. I couldn't very well say no to him." His gaze shifted to Maya and she could see the color clearly now, a dark, dark brown nearly black. It was hard to tell where the pupils ended and the irises began. He walked around her sniffing the air between them. His lips formed a small "O." "You think this is a good plan? Bringing your bitch out here to flaunt in front of the Trandills."

Without thinking, Maya went for her gun, but Matt put his hand on her arm and stilled her. He bared his teeth to the shorter man. "Call her a bitch again and I'll put my fist down your throat and pull out that tiny heart of yours."

Dom's eyes narrowed like he wanted to take the challenge, but instead he threw up his hands. "No harm, bro."

"I don't have a brother anymore if you recall, Dom."

The brown-haired lycan shrugged and walked away. Maya saw a hint of a smile cross his lips as he headed down the hill to the others. "What an asswipe."

"Good description." Matt hadn't taken his eyes off Dom since he'd walked away.

"Who is he, anyway?"

"Dominic Goth. He *was* my brother's best friend."

"Ah." As if that explained anything. "What was all that sniffing he was doing around me?"

Matt managed to flinch and blush at the same time. "He could smell my scent on your body."

"Oh, no, you did not!" Turning on her heel, Maya headed back to the truck. Matt ran to catch up with her.

"Maya, please don't make a scene. I need you to be united with me here."

"You marked me." She forced herself to keep her voice quiet. "You fucking marked me like I was territory. A fucking dog peeing on his favorite tree."

"I won't lie to you, Maya. I'm glad you wear my scent. I'm not going to apologize for loving you." He stepped closer. "But I didn't start out this morning with the intention of broadcasting my sex life to the lycan community. I mean, first of all it's just plain stupid, considering why I'm here. Secondly..."

Maya didn't let him finish. She sealed his mouth with her own in a kiss that started tender, but ended with her feeling weak in the knees. "Secondly, I need to get over myself."

The crowd had gone quiet, and Maya knew without looking that they were all staring at her and Matt. She could feel anger and indignation from several of the lycans, the *debanases*, as Matt had called them. And it seemed that one of them was projecting a very strong sense of hatred in their direction. The emotion was choking. As she scanned the crowd, she found exactly where it was coming from, Isadora Brewer. *Oh, dear Lord, shoot me now.*

Next to Izzy was a tall man, taller than Matt and broader by several inches. His hair was shoulder length and black against his pale skin, salt and pepper beard, with the same startling blue eyes as Matt. Maya could only assume it was Matt's father, Duncan Brewer. With him being of Irish descent, she'd always imagined him a redhead with freckles and that Matt had gotten his good looks from his mother. But seeing Duncan for the first time, Maya could almost understand why Isadora had chosen to become his mate. He was fabulously masculine and gorgeous. Much like his son.

Matt released Maya. "That was probably not the smartest move."

"Count it among the many not-so-smart moves we've made today. But it did help to determine one thing. I can definitely read the emotions from the half-wolfies."

Matt beamed a smile at her. "You're brilliant. Have I told you that lately?"

She took his hand, ready to face the tribunal. "Not nearly enough."

He kissed her knuckles. "Remember, you're only here to observe. They're not going to like that I brought you, and things could get really ugly if you interfere."

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Chapter 4

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, and Maya sizzled under the piercing stares of the lycanthropes. Five men (including Dom) sat up on a small staging area inside the houseboat. Matt sat in a chair facing them. His mother and father sat in chairs next to him, while Maya and all the other witnesses had been relocated to the back of the room. The body heat from that many lycans in one small room was stifling. She wished Stephen were there, next to her, lending his comforting vibes. Of course, that comfort would only last as long as it took for the werewolves to start ripping their clothes off and trying to fuck everything in sight, including herself and Stephen.

Much better that he was back at the cabin was her next thought. She handled the glaring accusations they were making with their eyes, but she couldn't get past the sniffing. She wanted to smack them all on the noses and yell, "Bad dogs!" Instead she composed herself, shoulders and back straight as she dreamed about a hot shower and vanilla soap.

The council leaned and whispered to each other, then the large guy sitting in the middle stood. "This tribunal is now called to order." He motioned to Matt and Maya's heart skipped a beat. "Will the accused please stand."

Matt rose from his chair without hesitation.

"Matthew Donovan Brewer. You have been brought before the council on suspicion of misconduct in the disappearance of Jennifer ReAnne Trandill. What say you?"

Matt's words were clear, confident, succinct. "I make my declaration of innocence."

A stir and buzz went through the crowd. Isadora gave them all a scathing look. Maya could feel how much she loved and believed in her son, and in his innocence. And for one brief moment, she got on the Izzy bandwagon. Which lasted until Isadora Brewer turned the scathing look on her.

"Bite me," Maya mouthed.

Isadora narrowed her eyes and snapped her teeth. Maya flinched. Maybe pissing off the mommy wolf ranked up there with the not-so-good moves. While they were both on Matt's side of this argument, Izzy and Maya were definitely not on the same team.

"Who stands with the accused in this manner?" the large lycan in the middle asked, his voice booming loudly.

Isadora leaned forward as if to stand, but Duncan's tight grip on her arm held her in her seat. Murmuring ensued but not one member of the tribunal court stood. Izzy spoke.

"Many of you know my son, yet none will stand. You have hunted with him. He is not a murderer and you know it." Venom dripped from her words. "If no one will stand with him..."

"Don't, Mom. We talked about this. You agreed..." Matt said.

Izzy threw up her hand. "You are my son," she said fiercely and full of pride. "I will not lose another child to the whims of the clans."

"Isadora," Maya heard Duncan's soft southern voice say. "Would you leave me nothing?"

"I believe my son guiltless of this accusation. I believe he is true. If you are blinded to his innocence you are not the man I thought you were."

Anger crossed Duncan's face, Matt looked at his mother helplessly, and Maya couldn't stand the pain and frustration rolling off Isadora, banging in her skull like a hammer. On impulse, she stood. "I do."

Every head swung to look at Maya. Surprise, chagrin, and the feeling that she'd just stepped into sheer lunacy swept over her. "I will. I mean ... I'll stand with Matt." She raised her head, sticking out her chin in sheer defiance, and Matt looked ... stricken. *Crap, what did I just do?*

At the head of the room, Dom leaned forward, eager. "I accept Ms. Eddings' stand." The other members, less eager, concurred. The older man who had started the proceedings quieted the room. "Are you sure you are prepared to stand with Matt, young lady?"

"Uh ... yes?" She'd already said she would, too late to back out now. Right?

"No!" Matt roared.

"Sit down, Brewer. The council has spoken," Dom said.

Maya looked at Isadora who sat dumbstruck and silent. Which only seemed to confirm that Maya had done something really, really stupid.

The guy in the middle, whom Maya now assumed was in charge, looked at her sympathetically. "We'll proceed now."

Oh, shit.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me!" Maya slammed the truck door and stalked toward Matt's cabin.

"I told you not to get involved. How much clearer can I get?" Matt slammed his door as well. "I shouldn't have even called you."

"No. You shouldn't have." She threw up her arms. "So, what now? At best, I'll be beaten with a really big stick and shunned from your clan. At worst ... I don't even want to think about the worst."

"You'll be put to death. Right alongside of me," Matt said, his voice sullen. "Unless ... You should go home, Maya. I'll tell them you withdraw your stand."

Tempting. "No." She couldn't believe how incredibly stupid she was being by not running away.

Shattering glass startled them both from the argument. They looked up to the second-story bathroom window. Stephen waved his arms at them. "Get back in the truck! Lock the door! Maya, run!" he shouted.

Maya took a step toward the house, her 9mm already in her hand. A chilling howl froze her in place. "What the..."

"The truck, get back to the truck!" Stephen yelled. Maya noticed his shirt was ripped and he had blood streaming from his chest.

Running toward the front door, Maya heard a rumbling growl from the left. She glanced over at the seven-foot black-furred werewolf wearing the torn remnants of Matt's clothing. A blur of dark brown shag burst from the front door, rushing toward Maya. Before she could pull the trigger, the massive werewolf was on her, tackling her to the ground. She screamed as her head slammed against the hard ground.

"Maya!" Matthew roared.

Lightheaded and heart pounding, she felt more than saw Matthew jump on the back of her assailant. The brown wolf clawed at her clothing, her jeans ripped to shreds, his teeth grazing her cheek.

Oh, dear God, he meant to fuck her! What was the deal with horny fucking werewolves! The fog in her brain lifted as she struggled to free herself from his grasp. The lycan's knee dug into her thigh. Maya screamed as he forced her legs apart. It was a girly thing to do, but at the moment, girly was all she had.

"Michael! Stop!" It was Matt's voice, fear and panic edged around the feral rasping.

"Here! Here!" Stephen shouted.

The lycan's head snapped up, his yellow eyes alert as he sniffed the air. Suddenly, the werewolf rolled onto his back, his long, hard cock pressed against her bloody thighs. And he threw Maya off of him, elbowed Matt in the jaw and started toward Stephen. She'd never been so glad to be second choice.

As the incubus began to run, a whole new panic started. Bruised, bleeding, and battered, Maya rolled to her stomach and placed a well-aimed bullet into the brown wolf's back. He jerked, stumbled forward, but kept after the incubus.

Maya shot again, the bullet hitting his shoulder, as Matt jumped at him from the side and dragged him down. The black lycan pounded Michael's head until he stopped struggling and lost consciousness.

Stephen ran to Maya and helped her up. "You okay, babe?"

"Yes, yes," she replied shakily.

Matt had already shifted back to human, and the brown lycan was nearly there as well. Lying on the ground, unconscious, he almost looked sweet. Like a sleeping child. Almost. Maya kicked him hard in the head.

"Hey," Matt complained. "He's already out."

Maya sniffed. "Just want to make sure he stays out."

They dragged Michael into the house and tied him to a metal chair in the living room.

"Are you sure that's going to hold him?" Maya watched the eyelids flutter on Matthew's brother. "I mean, really? Super-strong wolf-man and all."

"He should be fine." Stephen moved behind Maya and stroked her arms. "The pheromones should have worn off by now, and he'll not have the same reaction again. And while he can shift and break free from the ropes, at least it gives us a head start."

"Fantastic." Maya shook her head and leaned back against Stephen. Her legs burned where Michael had clawed them. "What the hell happened?"

"Well, I had just gotten out of the shower, dressed, went down the stairs and there he was." Stephen shrugged. "He took one whiff of me, and the rest, as they say, is history."

"I can't believe he came here." Matt's distress shook Maya. "He shouldn't have come. If the clan finds out, they'll kill him."

"I saw the look on your mother's face today, Matt. I don't think she'd allowed that to happen."

"You don't understand." He slammed his fist against the wooden coffee table, shattering it into pieces. "Anyone who

tries to stand in the way of clan law will be put to death along with Michael. This includes my mother. Duncan will have no choice. If he doesn't allow them both to die, he'll be seen as weak. It could potentially destroy our den."

"Okay, so they take shit seriously around here." She gestured to Michael. "So, what do we do about him?"

"We have to get him out of here, and his scent. If the clan smells him anywhere, a hunt will be called."

Michael's head lolled sideways. "I'm not leaving..."

Matt tilted his brother's head back. "Mike? You okay?"

"Fine ... fine ... Back hurts. Head hurts." His eyes opened completely and he stared at Maya and Stephen. Horror filled his face. "Sorry." He coughed. "I attacked you. I'm not sure why, but..."

"It's not your fault," Maya said, but she didn't even sound convincing to herself. She pointed behind her to Stephen.

"Incubus. Good ju-ju. Makes the furry go horny-nuts."

Stephen grimaced. "You should be okay now."

"Yes," Michael replied. "The pull is still there, but it's ... manageable."

Matt grunted. "I think it's safe to untie him."

Maya put up her hands. "Uhm, I think I'm going to go clean up. My legs are killing me." She lightly rubbed over her tattered jeans. "Am I gonna need a rabies shot?"

Matt frowned, but Michael chuckled. "I've had my vaccine."

Maya smiled. "Decent."

"I really am truly sorry. I've injured you, and you have every right to expect recompense." Michael's blue eyes were filled with sadness and grief.

"Recompense?" Maya tried for light. "What are you, a lawyer?"

"Yes, actually."

"That figures. I'll bill you." She tried for a cool exit, but her legs felt wobbly. Stephen held her up.

"I'll help you."

"I'm not a baby." Her knees buckled.

"Shut up and let me help you."

"Bossy, bossy. You're starting to act like him." She pointed to Matt.

"No, I'm starting to act like you," Stephen said.

"Disturbing, really."

Maya nodded, all the fight leaving her. "Fine. Help me. Whatever."

The incubus scooped her six-foot frame into his arms. "You two talk," he said to the lycans. "Figure out what you need to do."

"Thank you." Matt put his hand on Michael's shoulder.

"Take care of her."

"I will."

Maya glared at both men. "I'm in the fucking room, you know?"

"Wow, he's really stocked for battle here." The medicine cabinet in the small guest bath was stocked with gauze, peroxide, Mercurchrome, antibiotic ointment, adhesive bandages, alcohol—not the drinking kind, though Maya could've used a drink—scissors, and tape.

"Weird, considering their voodoo-like healing powers."
Maya stripped to her underwear and sat on the edge of the bathtub, thighs turned out while Stephen prepared gauze.

He knelt between Maya's legs. "Yeah, it's a little weird. Everything looks newly purchased as well."

"Ouch. That hurts," she complained as Stephen dabbed at the scratches.

"You are a baby." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"You're worried?" She caressed his face. "Why? I've had worse injuries."

"I'm not worried about these." He gestured to the shallow wounds. "I'm worried that you're in way over your head here."

She couldn't argue. "Me too."

His bright green eyes met hers. "Then let's go. Let's get the hell out of the deep woods and back to the city."

"I can't." Maya leaned forward and kissed Stephen's cheek. "I already agreed to stand for him."

Stephen didn't get angry like Maya thought he would; instead, he smoothed her hair, leaned his head against hers and whispered, "Idiot."

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Chapter 5

Four-hundred-dollar suede boots squishing in the soft grass after a torrential downpour did not make Maya one bit happy. "Jeezus, Matt. Haven't you people heard of concrete sidewalks?"

"Us people?" The black-haired lycan smirked. "You should shop at Wal-Mart. You'd care less about your shoes."

Maya grabbed Matt's arm to steady herself as she shook a clump of mud from her heel. "I'll keep that in mind."

The tribunal had gone pretty much as it had the first day. Four hours of accusations, denials, and waiting. "This is such bullshit." Maya swatted at a horsefly that had been buzzing her since she'd walked out of the boathouse. "I hate nature." Although, she had to admit the scenery was beautiful, the pale orange reflection of the setting sun on the water, the tree leaves just starting to turn with vibrant fall colors. Even so. She sneezed. "Again, I hate nature."

"I have to tell you, having ol' Stev-o back at the cabin is making me nervous as hell. What if someone else shows up there?"

The same thoughts had been running through Maya's head. Stephen was her rock, but if more lycans showed up, she'd have more than a hard space to contend with. Maya leaned in close, not wanting any big ears to hear their conversation. "We can't have a repeat of yesterday. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't knocked your brother's ass out. You animals are pretty damned persistent

when you get a whiff of the..." She finger quoted the next word. "...incubus."

"Yeah, not good."

"So, where'd he-who-shall-not-be-named go?"

Matt rolled his eyes. "He's not the dark lord, Maya."

"Just trying to be discreet is all."

"He got a motel room in town. He's not going to leave without Jenny."

"If she's still alive."

"There is that. I can't think about her being anything but well. I just wish I knew what the hell happened. Someone or something is preventing her from getting in touch with Michael. She loves him. Ardently. She might disappear from her family, but not him."

"I'm sorry." Maya stroked Matt's cheek.

"For what?"

For all the times she'd referred to Jenny as a werebitch, for all the times she'd wished Jenny would drop off the face of the earth, for the fact that Matt had sacrificed so much to be with Maya at the expense of his clan, for ... "Everything."

"Well, well. Like brother like brother." A woman, dressed in a tight red skirt and a white blouse, walked toward them. An older woman with dark brown hair, cool gray eyes—a cold beauty. "Don't think you'll be getting away with any of this, Matthew. I'll see justice is done."

Dom strode up behind her. "Mother. Have you met Matt's current bitch, Maya Eddings?"

"Don't be a pomp, Dominic. It's unbecoming," his mother scolded him.

Maya stepped forward and extended her hand. "You must be Mrs. Goth."

A rush of hate, possessiveness, and pride washed over Maya. Emotions so strong from the female lycan that they nearly floored her. The woman glanced at Maya's now shaking hand and sniffed. "Clever girl. Parents must have been rocket scientists."

Maya's jaw went slack and she felt the red creep up her neck into her face as she stared at the she-wolf. "Well, your parents must have been..." Her mind blanked. Goth was a woman who thought she was better than everyone.

"I don't think it, dear. I know it." Mrs. Goth sniffed again. "As I thought. Come along, Dominic."

Amused and smug, so fucking smug. Dom's mother had somehow read Maya's thoughts, but how? Or was she just that good at anticipating reactions to her brand of vile? After the mother and son reached their SUV, Maya yelled, "Yeah, well, your parents must have been..."

Matt shook his head and patted her shoulder. "Let it go, Maya."

"Rude. Just rude."

"Yes, Laurenia Goth is that." He put his arm around her, the natural heat of his body taking the edge off as he helped Maya into the truck.

After they'd cleared the dock road, she asked, "What is their deal? Why the animosity?"

"Dom and I had a falling out after my brother's tribunal. Dom had been my brother's best friend, but he turned his back on Michael during the whole thing."

"I have to ask. What did Michael do that was so bad he was beaten and shunned?"

Matt winced. "He was twenty-one, just out of college with his undergrad when it happened. He was home for the summer and a couple days before the Fourth of July the Dunhills' barn caught fire after it was hit by a Roman candle. Their son Donald had been trapped inside. They caught Michael pulling Don out of the blazing building. He'd saved him, but several head of cattle died in their stalls. And Don was covered in third- and fourth-degree burns. He almost didn't make it. Even for a lycan that's a lot to heal."

"Did Michael do it? Did he start the fire?"

Matt shook his head. "I don't know. He's never defended himself in the matter."

"Well, I don't know your brother that well, but I can't believe he'd have been out shooting fireworks in the middle of the night all by his lonesome."

"Yeah. I know. But he wouldn't say any different. I always suspected Dom was involved, but I can't prove it. Not that it matters now." Matt turned on the main road. "Michael's fate is sealed. I have to worry about my ass now."

"And Jenny's."

"What do you mean?"

"If you're right, that she just wouldn't disappear, then someone has her. If she's not already dead."

The look on Matt's face told her he'd had the same thoughts. "I searched her trail. It ended less than a quarter of a mile from where we'd fought. Cold, nothing."

"Do you think someone could have organized her disappearance as a way to get to you? Your family?" She rubbed his shoulder. "From what you've told me, your dad's a big deal around here. Maybe someone is trying to take him down a notch."

Matt's blue eyes lit on her. "God, I'm stupid! No." He dismissed the idea. "It can't be that. Jenny's family called the tribunal. They have no quarrel with my den."

"Yeah, but wouldn't whoever's behind this know what would happen if Jenny came up missing? It still makes sense. Otherwise, why Jenny?" Maya couldn't see anything special in the woman. At least not the one time she met her. Sure the lycan was pretty, petite, had flawless skin, a full head of long red hair, big boobs ... *If you like that type.*

"The other den leaders like my father. He hasn't had a challenge in ten years. He's fair. It hasn't always been that way with the clan. But since my father took over, there hasn't been any major turmoil."

"There's going to be jealousy, Matt. You'd have to be living in a bubble to think otherwise. Even if it's not out in the open, it's there. Bubbling, bubbling."

"Like a witches' brew?"

"Speaking of witches. What the hell was up with that Laurenia Goth woman? She's vile."

"What'd you pick up from her?"

"Triumph, hate, and a deep-seated sense of self-worth. In other words, the bitch thinks a lot of herself." Maya snapped her fingers. "Oh! And I found it difficult to concentrate when she was there."

"This is because you couldn't think of a comeback to her jibe about your intelligence, isn't it?"

"As if. You know under normal circumstances I'd have torn her a new ass." She looked out the window. "Man, it's getting dark. You think it's going to rain?" Headlights appeared in the side-view mirror. Normally not a cause for alarm, but they were getting closer, quickly. "Uh, Matt."

"I see them." He punched the gas. The vehicle behind them matched speed, still gaining on them.

"What are they doing?" A jolt, then the truck lurched forward as the dark SUV smashed into the bumper. "Holy fuck! They're trying to kill us."

Matt swerved into the oncoming lane as the vehicle hit them again. "Good guess," he shouted.

"Go faster!"

"I've got my foot to the goddamn floor, Maya. This is as fast as she goes."

"Fucking hell!" She unstrapped her seatbelt just as the truck hit them again and she flew forward, face smashing against the windshield. "That's going to leave a mark." She pulled the 9mm. "Motherfuckers." Leaning out the side window, Maya shot at the pursuing truck. Even over the roar of the engines, she heard shouting and commotion from the other vehicle as they dropped back twenty feet.

"Aim for the tires!" Matt said.

"You try aiming for the fucking tires on a moving SUV going eighty miles an hour down a dark road in the black of night." She squeezed off two more rounds, taking a headlight out with one of them. "Shit! It's not that friggin' easy."

"They do it in the movies all the time."

"Well, if only I was John Friggin' Rambo." *Idiot*, she added as a mental afterthought. She squeezed off a couple more rounds as the pursuers got brave and came up close on them again. There was a flash, and a shotgun blast sounded. Maya felt multiple stings on her left arm and the side of her face. Anger and adrenaline danced through her body. She emptied the clip into the truck and it swerved off the road into the ditch.

"Shit, shit." She pulled herself back through the window and slumped in the seat.

"You got them, Rambo. We should go back and find out who was trying to knock us off the road."

Now that the adrenaline had passed, Maya felt lightheaded. "Uh-hum."

"Oh, crap. You're bleeding. Maya. Fuck." He punched the gas. "Hang on, honey. I'm taking you to the hospital."

The pellets in her skin burned, but she could see the flaw in his plan. "Too many questions. They'll want to know who shot at me and why."

"We don't know who or why, so it doesn't matter." Matt's face tensed with panic.

"Then when the cops start poking around, what's your clan going to say then? You're in enough trouble, Matt." The pain was bad, getting worse as the shock wore off. But Maya had been shot before, and it didn't feel like she was dying. "Just take me back to the cabin."

"No. We'll go to my parents' house."

"Oh, great. Izzy can sneer me into good health."

"My mother was an ER nurse before she married my dad. She can help. So ... shut the fuck up. If we're not going to the hospital, we're going there."

Maya pressed her hand to her face and came away with blood. "Fine. Torture by Izzy it is."

Less than ten minutes later they were pulling into a long drive.

"Why do you not want my son for a mate?"

Having a conversation with Isadora Brewer, in a bathroom no less, was nearly as painful as the antiseptic the woman was daubing on Maya's wounds. "Ya know, if this week goes badly, it's kind of a moot question, Mrs. Brewer."

"You may call me Izzy."

Oh goody.

"It will not go badly." She pulled out a pair of tweezers that had been soaking in rubbing alcohol. "This will hurt."

"No shit."

"I don't like you, Maya. But for some reason..." She dug into one of the pellet wounds on Maya's face and pulled out the first bit of shot. "...my son, he loves you."

Maya winced and gritted her teeth. "Why do you even care? You hate me."

"I don't hate you. I don't like you, but I don't hate you." Izzy was telling the truth. For once, Maya didn't feel a jolt of animosity, which she normally felt around the mommy she-wolf. It wasn't all warm and fuzzy, but it was tolerant.

"Well. Wonderful. One less person hating me—I can live with that. Ow." Another pellet hit the sink.

"You're going to need stitches."

"Ducky." Maya looked at her face in the mirror. Only three shots had hit the left side of her face, two in the cheek, one above the eye. Her shoulder had taken the brunt of the flying shot, but even so, only about seven pellets had penetrated the skin.

"Why were you all being shot at?"

"That's the question of the day, or night, or whatever."

"I fear for my son. Duncan has already sent some of our den to investigate where Matt said the other truck went off the road."

"Unless you're dead on lucky, I can almost bet the truck will be gone, along with its passengers."

"We have ways of finding what we want to find." She tapped her nose.

"Well, your sniffers sure haven't helped in finding Jenny." Maya held up a hand. "I'd lay odds the same people responsible for Jenny's disappearance are the same ones who tried to run us off the road. Worst of all, they're smart and they're covering their trail really well."

"You really think the two incidents are connected."

"I'd bet my right titty on it."

Izzy rolled her eyes.

"I'm just saying, I don't believe in coincidences."

"You may be smarter than you look."

"Uh, gee, duh. Thanks. What is it with you lycan women and your jibes about my intelligence? I'm getting pretty damn sick of it."

"Maybe if you didn't cuss every other word." Izzy shrugged. "Some lidocaine would be handy about now, but

I'm afraid I'll have to suture you without it." She pulled a little package out, broke it open and took out a hooked needle with a see-through thread attached. "Can't be helped."

"Goddamn, at least offer me a bullet to bite down on and a swig of whiskey."

Izzy raised an eyebrow. "You think it would help?"

"Ah. Skip the bullet biting and let's go straight for the whiskey."

Izzy left the bathroom, her hairpiece bouncing with every step. She returned moments later with a bottle of blended whiskey. "Here."

Maya took the cap off and took a long pull. The amber liquid burned her throat and the warmth of the alcohol spread into her belly. "Do I really need stitches?"

"One each, maybe two for the one on your forehead, or you can live with the scars. Another option, you can mate with my son, become one of us and heal yourself."

"You're really pushing it."

"A mother only really wants for her children to be happy. You'll understand when you have children."

"Are you kidding? I can't even keep goldfish alive. Why are you pushing the relationship all of a sudden?"

"You are a smart girl. I can see why my Matthew is intrigued by you."

"You think Jenny's dead. You think she's dead and you think Matt's going to be dead by the end of the week."

"Yes. If you accepted my son as a mate, I think he could be convinced to run away. I would never see him again, but at least I'd know he was alive."

Maya could feel the love that Izzy felt for Matt, and the desperate fear of a mother for her son. "I ... I don't..." Luckily she didn't have to finish the sentence because Matt and Duncan walked in.

"They found shattered glass at the scene but nothing else. The trail went cold," Duncan informed them.

Maya fought to keep the "I told you so" look off her face as she and Izzy exchanged looks. "No big surprise there." She sucked in a breath, squeezing her eyes shut as Izzy put in the next stitch.

A hand touched her back, and Maya knew it was Matt. He massaged his hands down and up and she tensed. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah." What she really wanted to say was, "Don't rub on me in front of your mommy. Go get Stephen," but she knew it would hurt Matt's feelings. Stephen would know exactly the right thing to say, to do, to make Maya feel better.

"The wounds are superficial, my son." Izzy linked her arm through Matt's and escorted him to the bathroom door. "You needn't worry. Let me finish here and you can take her home."

Maya stared at Izzy after Matt and Duncan were out of earshot. "Are you being nice to me because I stood for Matt at the tribunal?"

"Yes." She didn't elaborate.

"You know I had no idea what it meant when I did it."

"Yes, I know. But you came back today after you found out. You didn't run away, Maya. That says a lot about you."

Yeah, that she had cotton instead of brains between her ears. Well, she and Izzy would never be best friends, but it seemed in this, they were at least allies.

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Chapter 6

Stephen came out of the kitchen wearing boxer shorts and an apron, holding a wooden ladle. "What the hell took you guys so long? Dinner is ruined." His next reaction ... he dropped the ladle. "Oh, my God, Maya! What happened?" The question was more of an accusation and it was aimed at Matt.

"She got caught by a shotgun blast. She's okay," Matt explained.

"*She* can talk for herself," Maya added. "I'm fine, really. Some asshole tried to run us off the road on the way home."

Stephen was already next to her, examining the stitches under the little bandages on her face. "Did you go to the hospital?"

"No, Matt's mom did it."

"I don't like this, Maya. Not one bit. We've been here two days, and you've been injured twice already. First getting mauled by a lycan, now shot. What's on the schedule for tomorrow, an amputation?"

Matt dropped his keys on the foyer table. "I really hate to agree with demon boy on this, Maya, but maybe you should think about going back to Kansas City."

"Sounds like a good plan to me." Stephen nodded.

Both her men surrounded her with worry, their fears tugging at her, and Maya flushed. How could two men love her the way they did? "The only plan I have is ... going to bed." She took off her jacket and put it on the stair banister. Next, her shirt was off and over her head. Matt and Stephen

stared at her, dumbstruck. "Well, come on, guys. In the immortal words of Marvin Gaye, I want sexual healing. Se-sexual," she sang as she kicked off her shoes and shimmied from her jeans.

Stephen was the first to react, scooping her up and carrying her to the large guest bedroom. Matt hesitated, briefly, but followed. Stephen laid her gently on the bed, careful of her wounds. The guys stood on either side of the bed and stared at her. Complete polar opposites—Matt, dark haired, blue eyes, stocky, but ripped with muscle—Stephen, light haired, green eyes, lean and long, tightly muscled like a swimmer—both gorgeous.

Even with the injuries she couldn't help but think she was the luckiest girl in the world. "This is not a one-woman show. Off with the clothes," she ordered them. Surprisingly, Matt was the first one to strip. He slid in next to her on the right, then Stephen, torturously slow, took off his apron and his boxers and slid in on the left.

"My, my," she said to both of them as her hands caressed their already hard cocks. "What big dicks you have."

Matt chuckled. "Are we really going to do the X-rated version of Little Red Riding Hood?"

"I'm just telling it like I see it." She smiled. Her lips met Matt's in a gentle kiss as she turned toward him. Stephen pressed his body against her back, his cock nudging her buttocks.

Matt's blue eyes brimmed with wolfish amber. "Your blood smells good." He closed his eyes, afraid to look at her. "Does that freak you out?"

"Only if you plan to eat me."

He opened his eyes. "Oh, I plan to eat you."

Stephen undid her bra then slipped his hand under her wounded arm and slid around her front to cup her breast. "Me too." He pulled Maya on top of him, as Matt kissed his way down her belly, his fingers toying with the hair of her mound before he tugged her panties down and his tongue slipped between the wet folds of her pussy.

"Oh, shit." Stephen's cock pressed against the crack of her ass while he rolled her nipples with his fingertips and sucked the flesh on the back of her neck. Matt slipped a finger into her as his lips, tongue, and teeth worked her clit. Her whole body ached with arousal and desire. "Feels so good," she whispered, snuggling her body back into Stephen's while pushing her pelvis to meet Matt's mouth.

Reaching down, she grabbed a handful of thick black hair, pulling Matt's face tighter to her pussy, his mouth sucking her clit like she'd sucked his cock so many times. Stroking her sex with his mouth until she cried out. "Oh fuck, I'm going to come."

"Come for us, Maya," Stephen whispered in her ear.

"Not yet," she panted. "Not yet. I want you in me."

Matt looked up at her, his mouth glistening with her slick juice. She lifted her buttocks. "Put his cock in me, Matthew. Please, put his cock in me."

She felt Matt's hand under her ass, tugging Stephen's cock free and placing the head of it in her pussy. Matt's thick fingers guided the long shaft into her, inch by hard inch. "Oh,

fuck, yeah." She arched her back to take as much of the cock in her as she could manage.

Stephen moaned as he thrust his hips forward. Matt lapped his tongue around her clit once again then started his climb up her long body. "What ... what are you doing?"

"Do you want us both? Both of us in you?" His words buzzed in her head. Alien, foreign.

Stephen thrust forward again. "Yes, both of us."

A tingling sensation ran through her body, like shock, only it felt much, much better. "Yes."

Matt smiled, his eyes more amber now, but still human. His fingers stretched and rimmed her pussy as Stephen pulled out slightly to allow room for Matt. The large head of his cock pushed through and she cried out again. "Do you want me to stop?" Matt asked.

It hurt to be stretched so tight, but the pain added to the pleasure. "No, fuck no," she managed, her throat hoarse with panting.

Stephen grabbed the nearest pillows and propped them up at an angle. His hand went to her thighs, pulling her legs back. "Maya, Maya, love you."

Her body relaxed at his words and Matt slid the rest of his cock into her. She should have felt like she was being ripped apart. Instead, she felt completely turned on. Her head rolled to one side, her neck being nibbled and kissed by Stephen, Matt stretching and tugging her nipple with his teeth, while both men, slowly, and as one, stroked their rock hard cocks in her.

"Oh. Oh. Ah!" A tingling rush pulled against her stomach and down into her pussy, her clit vibrating against the hair of Matt's groin as her first orgasm took life. Her body shook against theirs as she brought her legs up, looping her heels around Matt's thighs. Tears were in her eyes, a physical response as ecstasy played over and through her. When it subsided, she collapsed back onto Stephen. "Nothing should feel that fucking good."

"Fucking should," Matt said.

Maya couldn't believe she'd just let two men fuck her at the same time. She'd been with both of them at the same time, but not like this. It was strangely more intimate, especially since they were both still in her. Also, she realized, her wounds no longer hurt or stung, not her thigh, not her arm, not her face.

Stephen moved first, his arms wrapping both Maya and Matt as he rolled them over so that Matt was on the bottom, Maya was straddling the lycan, and Stephen had her mounted from behind. She rocked over Matt's cock as Stephen began to thrust with earnest, both men grunting, moaning their pleasure of her shared pussy. "Oh, God, yes." They were not in unison, one cock moving slowly, the other quicker, and it felt even better than before.

Stephen's arm wrapped her waist and Matt's hands cupped her breasts. Maya slipped her hand down to her pussy, her fingers sliding to feel the two cocks as they moved inside her. Stephen bucked forward, nearly mashing her down. Maya cried out again as a surprise orgasm ripped through her. She arched against Stephen, grinding her hips down and out. Matt

roared as a shuddering climax took hold of him. Stephen followed, pumping himself into her until they all collapsed into a ball on the bed.

No one spoke for several seconds, until Maya caught the faint odor of something ... smoke. She leaned her head sideways and saw the glow of flame under the door. "The house," she rasped, patting Stephen's shoulder. "The house is on fire."

Stephen smiled lazily while Matt joined him in a chorus of ... "We don't need no water, let the mother-fu..."

She smacked him hard then kicked away from both men. "No, you idiots. The house is on fire." She pointed at the door.

"Oh, fuck!" Matt shouted. He and Stephen were up and throwing their clothes on. Maya's were on the staircase, along with her gun.

"Shit!" She ran to the door.

"What are you doing?" Stephen tried to pull her back, but too late, she'd already flung the door open.

Flames licked the stairwell, but the fire hadn't made it completely to the second floor. Maya yanked her arm from Stephen. "My gun!"

Matt pushed them both back and ran past. He was back in a few seconds with her charred holster and 9mm. His hands were covered in red, blistering burns. "Here." He shoved the weapon at her. She took it.

Stephen wrapped the blanket around Maya's naked body while Matt opened the bedroom window. He jumped the two

stories to the ground as Maya and Stephen watched him land with the grace of a cat. "Jump, Maya. I'll catch you."

It was a long fucking way down, and Maya was seriously considering braving the fire. She turned to the door. Heat poured into the room.

"No time to argue," Stephen said as he picked her up and tossed her from the window.

She screamed as she plummeted to the ground and stopped when she landed with an *ummpfh* in Matt's arms. Stephen jumped next with Maya's overnight bag in his hand. His landing wasn't so graceful as he rolled onto the ground, his head taking a terrible twist.

"Oh, God. Stephen!" Maya ripped herself from Matt's arms and ran to her incubus lover. His head was at an impossible angle, along with his leg which had turned back behind his body, the bone pushing through his bloody jeans. "His neck. Matt. Oh, God. His neck is broken."

Stephen's eyelids fluttered open. He reached for his head and twisted it back, then pulled his leg around and set it straight. Closing his eyes again, he breathed deeply as his body healed before Maya's eyes. "I'm okay, Maya."

"I'll never get used to that." She shuddered.

"Whoever started the fire, they didn't come by vehicle. I think I can track them." Matt sniffed at the air.

"Why wasn't your super-sniffer working when they were in the house starting the damn fire?" Maya asked, pulling clothes from her bag.

"To be frank, the only thing I could smell was you and how turned on you were."

"Oh," she said, slightly embarrassed as she tugged on a pair of jeans, slipped on some tennis shoes, and pulled a shirt over her head. "Well, that s'plains that." Her holster was blackened, but no worse for wear. She strapped it on, checked her 9mm. She'd put in a full clip before they'd left Matt's parents' house. She dug inside the bag Stephen had grabbed and took out two more fully loaded magazines.

"Okay. I'm ready."

Stephen put his hand on her shoulder. "I think you should stay here."

"Agreed." Matt nodded.

"Kiss my ass, both of you." Since when did they start agreeing on everything? "I'm going."

Matt glared at her. "Fine. I'll take the lead." His body jerked as his eyes went bright yellow. Maya watched as he changed first into the familiar werewolf form she'd seen several times now, then became smaller, more compact as muscle and bone stretched, bunched, and popped. When he was finished, the form he'd taken was a large black wolf. Only the eyes told her that Matt was in the animal somewhere. He sniffed at the air, howled, then turned and loped into the woods.

Maya's face went slack. Stephen nudged her. "I think that's the only invitation we're getting."

She nodded and they both took off running after Matt. The wolf moved quickly in a zig-zagging pattern, stopping every so often to paw at the ground or sniff a tree. He hiked his leg and pissed on several of them, shocking Maya even more.

"Do we really have time for potty breaks?"

"I think it's a territorial thing, babe," Stephen said as they ran. "He smells other males in his woods. It's natural to piss on their scent to reclaim his area."

Maya made a face. "If you say so."

Out of seemingly nowhere, a brown wolf went running full speed toward the black, then stopped in a sudden halt and yipped. The black wolf turned and continued the trail, the brown wolf at his side.

"Michael," Maya assumed, since they weren't getting into a big dog fight. "Where'd he come from?"

"I don't think he's been far since he got here."

After nearly three miles of running, the two wolves stopped and started whining, pacing between a couple of trees. Maya and Stephen came up behind them. They both seemed reluctant to move any further. "What is it, boy?" Maya knelt next to the black wolf. "Is farmer Johnson trapped under his tractor in the barn? Is Kitty down the well?"

The wolf put his ears back and growled.

Maya smiled. "Sorry, had a Lassie flashback."

Matt shifted back to human form. "You're not funny."

Michael followed suit. "I think she is." He chuckled.

Stephen muttered a curse and they all turned to look at him. "Black fucking magic." His fingers traced a pentagram carved in the tree. "It's an alarm system. Whoever put this here knows we're coming."

"I felt it when I crossed the tree line," Matt confirmed.

Maya shivered. "I'm really getting sick of all the 'Sorcerer and the Stone' bullshit. One maniacal magic user a year is my limit."

"You should go back," Matt was quick to add.

She glared at Stephen, daring him to agree. "You're not getting rid of me that easy." Maya chambered a round in the 9mm and took the safety off. "I'm in it to win it."

Michael whistled, soft and low. "Wow, she really likes that gun of hers."

"Yep," Matt and Stephen said in unison. Which was really starting to creep Maya out.

"We can do one of two things here, boys. We can continue on or I can shoot you all for being a bunch of smart asses."

Matt and Michael changed forms again and were back on the trail.

"Good answer," Maya mumbled.

The farther they got the worse Maya felt. Her legs were leaden and it felt like rain clouds were gathering in her head. "Do you feel it?"

"Yes," Stephen answered. "I'm finding it harder to go on. Every step is a chore."

"Exactly." Even the wolves were slowing down. "Didn't Matt say that in wolf form, sorcery couldn't stop him?"

"Yes, normally, yes. But this feels different than any magic I've seen. Not as blatant, but more potent."

"Great, that makes me feel better. Not." Fear coursed through her body with every heavy step. Suddenly, they were in a circular clearing in the woods. Every tree was marked with a pentagram. "Oh, this is so not good."

She crawled to the center where the wolves had lain down. They were starting to shift again, slowly, but already in lycan form. "Matt, what's going on?"

His voice came in a rumbling growl. "The magic is strong. Can't fight it."

"Mother was right. You are all dumb as a box of rocks." Dominic stepped from the woods.

"I should have known," Maya groaned. Her arms and legs refused to react.

"Dom..." Michael rasped. "Why?"

"How?" Matt added.

"Why? How? You Brewer boys were always such simpletons. I never understood what Jenny saw in you. Either of you." He easily paced around them. "Did you know my mother was a sorceress? Of course, probably not. Not many know, with the exception of your father and the council. When she chose to mate with my father, she gave up her powers with the transformation. The lycans thought they'd be safe after that." He laughed. "It was unprecedented, a sorcerer sleeping with the enemy. But no one could have predicted the end result. A lycan child with the ability of sorcery."

"You were my friend," Michael said. "We were friends."

Dom spat. "We were never friends. Your family is weak, and even still, my father refused to challenge. You were given everything. On top of that, Jenny wanted you as well. I couldn't stand seeing you together, touching each other. It made me sick." He stomped Michael's elongated jaw onto the ground.

"I just sat back smiling, laughing at your jokes, pretending until ... Remember the fire."

Michael's eyes widened.

"Yeah, that's right. It was my doing. I knew your do-gooder attitude would get the best of you. There we were, you, me, and Jenny, shooting off fireworks. It was easy. I just hastened the spark to a blaze. And all you could think about was Jenny." Dom clapped his hands. "It was perfect. We heard Donald scream from the barn. *Dom, get her out of here,*" he mocked. *"I'll handle this.* As always. The hero."

Maya found it difficult to move even the smallest bit, but she worked to slide her gun up on her thigh. Dom meant to kill them all, she could feel it, but even so, he planned to torture Matt and Michael first. She closed her eyes, focusing all of her energy onto her hand, her fingers. *Work, goddammit, work,* she bid them.

"After your shunning, I figured it would be the end. Jenny would come to me without you around. But no, instead, she went to Matt." Dom kicked Matt in the stomach. "But he never appreciated her!"

Michael struggled for his words. "What have you done with Jenny?"

"Do you think I could ever hurt her? The way you hurt her. The way you both hurt her. If you had really loved her, Mike, really, the way I do, you would have fought for her, taken her into exile with you. But you took your punishment and slunk off with your tail between your legs like a whipped dog."

"Fuck you," Michael managed.

"Interesting, but no." He smashed his fist into Michael's face, then turned on Matt. "Then you! You get her pregnant and won't even do the right thing. I couldn't believe my luck when Jenny showed up on my doorstep, bloody and crying."

"You better not have hurt her," Matt growled. "I'll kill you."
Dom laughed again. "You're in no position to be making threats."

The sorcerer-lycan continued his circling of the four of them. Maya had finally managed to get the gun on her thigh, but if he didn't stop right in front of her, it wouldn't matter. "Hey, dog-butt," she taunted. "If you were half the man Matt is..."

Dom leaned down in front of her. "I certainly wouldn't be sharing my bitch with a fucking demon. Yes, I know all about the incubus. I smelled him on you the first time we met. Tasty, yes, but I'm immune to their charms."

"Come closer," Maya whispered.

Dom leaned in. "Yes."

"Are you immune to this?" She'd angled the gun toward him and pulled the trigger. The bullet ripped through his right knee, knocking him to the ground with a howl of pain.

"Fucking bitch!"

The pain interfered with his hold on the spell and Maya could move her arm more easily. She turned sideways and unloaded the entire clip into the lycan. Before she could get reloaded, Dom pounced on her, already shifting, his wolf form brown, much like Michael's.

"Fucking bitch," he shouted again. "I'll kill you." He placed his hand on her chest. It turned cherry red with heat as it burned into her skin.

She screamed. Two blurs of fur knocked him off Maya at once. Three lycans grappled in a death match. Maya clutched

at her chest. The pain made it hard to breathe. Stephen was at her side, holding her, whispering gently to her.

The black-furred lycan, Matthew, yelped as a fireball nailed him in the side. Michael lunged for Dom's throat as Matt tore into Dom's leg. The sorcerer-lycan howled with frustration and pain, unable to hold the two of them off at once. His howls turned to gurgles as blood gushed from his neck wound. Matt and Michael didn't stop there.

Maya turned her face into Stephen's shoulder as the two brothers tore Dom to shreds. Dom stopped moving, his form shifting again to human. Michael plunged his hand into the lycan's chest and pulled out his heart. "Heal that, motherfucker," he growled.

Michael and Matt shifted. Stephen helped Maya to her feet. "She's badly burned. I don't know how deep it goes, but I have a feeling he managed to singe part of her lungs."

Michael looked at his brother. "Go, take Maya and get her help. I think I know where Dom took Jenny. I can find her on my own. Just go."

The two brothers clasped hands. Michael shifted to full wolf form then took off into the woods. Matt lifted Maya off her feet. "Maya, thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

She nodded, still clutching her chest. "It's getting harder to breathe," she wheezed. "Matthew, Stephen..." She vomited from the pain, then lost consciousness.

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Chapter 7

"Are you sure the burn was deep?" Maya heard Isadora Brewer say. "She's healing remarkably fast for a human. Even the wounds on her face and arms have all but disappeared."

"Stephen ... Matthew..." Maya mumbled.

"I'm here," Matt answered. "We thought it better if Stephen didn't come in. He's waiting in the truck."

Maya nodded. Probably smart. "I feel better. I can breathe much better now and the pain is nearly gone." The only thing left of the searing burning was a dull ache.

"Remarkable," Izzy said. "I think I may have underestimated your woman."

"I am not his woman."

"Yep," Matt chuckled. "She's feeling better."

Maya sat up from the strange bed. "Is it over? Now that we know the truth?"

"It's far from over, darlin'," Duncan Brewer said from the side of the bed. Maya hadn't even noticed he was in the room. "If what my son says is true, he may be out of the pickle for Jenny's disappearance. But Laurenia and Jonathan Goth are going to rain a massive amount of shit down on our heads."

"But Dom was fucking crazy. He kidnapped Jenny and tried to kill us with his hoodoo. Doesn't that count for something?" Maya couldn't understand the problem.

"If we can't find Jenny, it's all for naught. It'll be Matt's word, which isn't counting for much these days with the clan."

And you, little girl. While you're a feisty pistol, the clan will not believe you any more than Matthew. One, you're an outsider, two, they'll think you'll say anything to save your lover."

"But Mi—" Matt grabbed her arm and squeezed. Apparently, he'd left out the part about Michael being there. "But my word is good."

"We know that, dear," Izzy said, a look of warning in her eyes as well. "But the clan and the council won't see it that way."

A knock sounded on the bedroom door. Duncan went to answer. Maya could hear gruff whispers of hushed conversation. He closed the door. "Dom's body has been disposed of properly. There's nothing left to say what happened to him. And that's the way it's going to be. Do you both understand?"

"Where will we go tonight? Now that the cabin's a big ole cinder." They couldn't leave Stephen to sleep in the truck all night. It wouldn't be right.

"We have several homes in the area. You all can go to one of those. They aren't as big as the cabin, but they'll do."

Maya looked down at her bloody clothes. "I'm a mess. What am I going to do for clothes?"

"There's a twenty-four-hour super center in town," Izzy suggested.

"Fine, Wal-Mart it is." Desperate times called for desperate measures.

Actually, the trip to Wal-Mart had been less painful than anticipated. First of all, the clothes were much more stylish

than she remembered from college, and secondly, no one gave her disheveled appearance a second glance. Weird, but nice.

She and Matt had also picked up some groceries, shampoo, deodorant, and a few other necessities. It really was a one-stop shopping experience. Maya sat out on the back deck of the Brewers' home away from home. The tremendous view of the lake made Maya rethink her hatred of all things outdoorsy. She sipped on a bottle of beer (one of the other necessities they'd gotten from the store), and let the whippoorwill calls lull her into a deep meditative state.

The sliding glass door opened and Stephen joined her. "You really had me scared, you know."

"I know."

"And being stuck in the truck, not knowing whether you were going to make it or not drove me crazy with worry."

She caressed his face. "I know. I'm sorry. Really though, it was better than having an orgy fest with Duncan and Isadora Brewer. I think that really would've killed me."

"I'm really proud of you, Maya."

She smiled then frowned. "Proud about what?"

"The way you're handling your new ability to heal yourself. It hasn't even fazed you."

"My new ability to..." She gasped. "Oh. My. God! I can, can't I? Is that weird? That's weird right?"

"Well, I'm not surprised. I've always suspected you were more than what you seemed to be." He shrugged and took a draw from her beer. "Did you feel some kind of change in you when we were in the woods? Maybe something Dom did?"

Maya shook her head and grabbed her beer back with a "mine" look. "I don't think it's that. I think it happened when we all ... well ... you know."

"Oh, ho." He grinned. "During the two is better than one fest."

She smacked him. "Shut up. But, yeah, during that. I sort of felt tingly—"

"Me too."

She smacked him again. "Shut up." Gulping half the beer, she set the bottle down away from Stephen. "Anyways, tingling, then all my aches and pain went away. I just felt better."

"Hmm." He brushed his blond hair from his eyes.

"Interesting. We might have to experiment further."

"You think so?" *God, I hope so.*

Matt joined them with three beers in hand. He handed one each to Maya and Stephen.

"I could so get used to this," Maya said to neither in particular.

"Which part?" Matt asked.

"Don't you start with me as well."

"Maya and her harem of men." Stephen laughed.

"Whatever." She waved them off, but the possibilities wouldn't leave her alone. Her pussy tightened at the thought of both her lovers, in her at the same time. *Bad, Maya. Very, very bad.*

Matt crouched behind her and kissed her neck. Stephen dropped down in front of her, his hands moving up her thighs. "Good things happen to bad people," she murmured. For

three months she'd been fantasizing about having both men in bed, and now it was going to happen again, for the third time in three days. She nuzzled her head against Matt's chest. "Greedy."

"For you? Always." Matt's low voice sent flutters through her stomach.

"I was talking about myself." She leaned back and gazed into his light blue eyes. "I don't want to ruin the moment here."

His brows narrowed. "Then don't."

She was going to risk it. "Why are you suddenly okay with sharing me?"

"I'm not suddenly anything." He leaned down and tugged her earlobe with his teeth. "I've been a fool. Stubborn and foolish where you're concerned. For months now, Stephen has been with you almost every night."

"Every night," Stephen corrected as his fingers worked the button and zipper on her jeans.

Maya flicked his forehead. "You're not helping."

The incubus didn't look ashamed as he smiled all innocent like.

Matt continued. "I could die in the next few days, Maya, at the hands of my own kind." Before she could protest, he put a finger to her lips then kissed them. "I could die. I thought I would have all the time in the world with you when you finally came to your senses. I was fooling myself with the dream of a house in the suburbs and a white picket fence. So, I came to realize that if I wanted to have you, as much as you're willing to give, then Stephen is part of that bargain."

"We've talked," Stephen said, eyes peeking up from between her thighs.

"Oh goody, so you all kissed and made nice." Even though the comment was benign, the idea of the two of them kissing made her nipples hard and her pussy slick.

"God, Maya. I can smell the flood of lust pouring from your skin." Matt rubbed his nose against her skin. "We may both fuck you, but we're not doing each other, so get that notion out of your head."

Stephen's hand dipped under her panties. "I don't want to fuck you, either, wolf-man. If that's what you're thinking."

"Calm down. I'm quite content with both of you, only *doing* me. It's just..." God, even to herself she sounded like she was in junior high, getting ready to play truth or dare. "I was thinking about how hot it would be seeing the two of you kiss is all. That's a pretty far cry from fucking."

"I'm not kissing him," Matt grumbled.

She reached into her open jeans until her hand arrived at the folds of her swollen sex. She slid her middle finger along her slicked clit then put it to her mouth. Both men reacted visibly. "Just one little kiss."

Matt moved to her side and licked her juice from her lips. "You're playing with fire, Maya."

"Afraid you might like it too much?" Damn, it was becoming a game of truth or dare. She reached down again, then back to her mouth. Stephen reached up and caught her hand before it made it to her lips. He sucked her finger between his teeth, curling his lips around so that when he

pulled it out of his mouth it made a popping noise. She shivered with excitement.

This time she put one hand then the other down her pants. Both middle fingers shiny with her juices, she gave one to each of her lovers. They both licked the juices clean then looked at each other. Stephen spoke first. "I'm secure enough in my manhood."

"What manhood?" Matt rebutted.

"Bawk, bawk," Stephen countered.

Matt's face flushed with anger and heat.

Maya tensed. They weren't going to kiss—they were going to fight. Oh, shit. "Boys..."

"You think I'm scared to kiss a man? You're nuts. I'm totally alpha." Matt growled to emphasize his alphaness.

"Fine. If you say so, butch."

They were actually puffing their chests out at each other. "Now, guys..."

Matt lunged forward, his lips locking onto Stephen's and not just in a little peck, but a proper kiss, tongues and all, until Maya thought she'd have an orgasm right then and there on the lawn chair. "Holy fuck nuts." It was everything she'd fantasized and more.

When the kiss ended, Matt pushed back from Stephen. "Fuck you. Who's the goddamn chicken now?"

Maya shimmied down between them, tearing her clothes off on the way down. "You guys are the best!"

"That's what I'm talking about." Stephen wiggled his eyebrows as he shed his own clothes, Matt close behind.

Crawling over Stephen, she took his cock in her mouth while baring her ass to Matthew. He accepted the invitation, his tongue curling around her clit then moving up into her pussy, then to the skin between her pussy and her ass, then back inside her. She squirmed against him, pulse and body racing with need and desire. Then he did something he'd never done, he slid his tongue into her ass. Her eyes widened, her body jerked, and she nearly choked on Stephen's cock.

It felt good, better than good. She dropped the shaft from her mouth. "Jeezus." She stayed up on all fours, barely, as Matt's tongue rimmed her in the place that she usually proclaimed untouchable. Stephen turned and crawled beneath her. Up on his elbows, he went to work on her clit, sucking and licking, both of them working on her in unison.

Maya collapsed down on Stephen's abdomen, unable to hold herself up any longer as pleasure took over her senses. Matt's fingers plunged into her pussy, while his tongue continued its assault on her ass, thrusting in and out. Stephen continued his relentless sucking, nibbling, his finger joining Matt's inside her, both of them fucking her with mouths and hands.

A massive wave of pure ecstasy rolled through her as her hips bucked against them. They held her in place, unrelenting, making her take every ounce of the orgasm until her skin was on fire with raw nerve endings. She gasped, moaned, and sang her orgasm. They finished, lapping every bit of cream from her, not asking for more, not needing more.

Her satisfaction in that moment was their only desire. And she was satisfied.

When Maya regained control of her voice, she said, "So, big day tomorrow."

Matt licked his lips, then wiped them. "Yep, big day."

Stephen did the same, then nodded his agreement. "Yep. Do you feel better now?"

"It'll do, boys. It'll do." She grinned.

"Fuck that," Matt said. He picked Maya up from the ground, sat in the chair and impaled her on his cock all in one swift motion.

Stephen moved up behind her, rubbing pre-come against her anus.

Maya gasped. "Uh, I don't think..."

"Better not to, darlin'." Matt pulled her into a kiss, his tongue tangling with hers as Stephen slicked her with some sort of cool substance.

"It's just lubricant, Maya. Relax."

Relax? Relax! They were talking about going into virgin territory and they wanted her to relax.

Matt pushed his hips forward, his hands crushing her breasts as he took another kiss.

Stephen entered her from behind, slowly, just the tip of his cock pushing past the first ring of muscle. "Tell me to stop."

"Don't..." Maya whispered, ashamed at how good it felt having Matt inside her pussy, and Stephen pushing his cock in her ass at the same time. "...stop."

"So wet, so hot," Matt growled.

"So tight," Stephen said, sliding forward, inching his way inside. "Love you, Maya. So much."

"Love you, love you," Matt murmured against her lips.

Stephen said it often while they were making love, Matt occasionally, but in this moment she knew they both meant it. They loved her and were loving her with every bit of themselves, willing to share just to have her, willing to do and be everything she needed them to be. She rode them both, and allowed herself to be ridden by them as the wake of pleasure broke once more and she could feel herself spasm around them, drinking their cocks into her body, taking them as the orgasm took her.

Matthew howled beneath her as Stephen shuddered against her back. All spent, all satisfied. She waited until they could move, separately, both men's cocks going soft inside her, withdrawing slowly, reluctantly. She slid off Matt's lap into Stephen's arms. Then held out a hand for the lycan to join them on the ground. Unshed tears glistened in her eyes as she looked at both men in wonder. "I love you both, so much. So much. How did I live before you?"

Matt and Stephen surrounded her with their arms, holding her tight, like they were both afraid to let go. But she wanted to tell them it would be okay. They would be together forever. They were family now. She felt that more than she'd felt anything, ever.

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Chapter 8

It was Saturday, so the tribunal convened early in the morning, rather than the evening. It was the last day to prove Matt was innocent, and it wasn't looking good. Stares of disapproval and unabashed hatred focused on Maya, just like the prior two days. She faced them without fear. Whatever happened, she would not let them go down without a fight. Clan honor be damned. They couldn't tell anyone about Dom, because that would open a whole 'nother kettle of worms, and they couldn't call Michael as a witness, because that would just make things worse.

If only Michael had contacted them the night before, but Matt hadn't heard from his brother yet, and Maya feared the worst. Dom really had killed Jenny. "What are we going to do?"

Matt shrugged.

"That's not much of a plan." The dark-haired lycan had already put the kibosh on her plan to set Stephen loose on the clan and in the midst of the doggy-style orgy make their escape. Okay, so it hadn't been the best plan, but at least it was a plan! Waiting four hours for a sentence of death that she knew would come was not her idea of a good time.

"If it's any consolation, I think they'll settle for shunning you," Matt said, trying to be helpful.

"I'm not leaving this place without you, fur-brain. So, no, not much of a consolation prize."

The gathering crowd was getting anxious, as it was the last day. One of the Trandills called for justice, then the whole boathouse became a madhouse of shouts and calls for Matt's head.

"These guys really are a pack of carnivores."

"Not helping," Matt muttered.

The head guy stood up, the seat next to him, where Dom had sat, suspiciously empty. "I see no point in prolonging the morning."

Duncan Brewer jumped up. "I protest early judgment. Only four sit on the council of five. Where is Dominic Goth? You cannot continue without a fifth."

Maya's eyes widened in surprise. So, big daddy wolf had a plan. The man knew damn well Dom wasn't going to show up. He had *cojones*, she'd give him that.

The head guy looked at Laurenia and Jonathan Goth, who both looked confused about their son's whereabouts. "He'll be here," Laurenia said. Still as smug as ever. If she only knew.

Laurenia nudged her husband. He rolled his eyes, but stood. "I'll stand on the council in my son's stead if the Trandills approve." Jenny's parents nodded their approval.

"So be it," the head council guy said as Jonathan Goth made his way to the platform. "The council will take a break to discuss the matter of Matthew Brewer."

"Tell them the truth, Matt. When they get back, tell them the truth. You got nothing to lose at this point." It was time. Jenny wasn't coming back and they were about to pronounce sentence on Matt. What could it hurt to tell them about

Michael and Jenny? It certainly gave Matt less motive to have killed her.

"It won't make a difference and it will only serve as another black mark on my family."

"It's better than death!"

"They might think my parents knew. If that were to happen, they would tear our den to pieces. I have aunts, uncles, cousins, there are more lives at stake than my own."

"What about my life? I need you, Matt."

"You'll have Stephen. You'll go on."

Now he was just pissing her off. "What I said last night. I meant it. You are part of me, family. I love you, Matthew Donovan Brewer, and I don't want to *go on*!" In the midst of her anger, Maya hadn't noticed that the boathouse had gone silent. She looked around daring even one of them to say something. "And I don't care who knows it either." She stuck out her tongue at all of them. Childish, yes, but it felt really good.

All the lycans looked stunned, except for Isadora, who Maya feared might start a "slow-clap." Instead, Matt's mother merely dabbed at her eyes with a tissue and nodded.

Laurenia spoke up. "Touching, dear. But it's not going to win your lover's freedom. Or yours for that matter."

Maya was ready to come unglued on her psycho-son-making ass, but the honor was taken from her as Isadora Brewer jumped from her chair, shifted into a large black werewolf and pounced on the smug, smug woman. "Shut up, Laurenia," she growled. "You, stupid, stupid bitch."

No one interfered and they all seemed more than a little nervous, which gave Maya a whole new respect for Izzy. Within seconds, she was back in her chair, smoothing her blond hair, which Maya had always suspected was dyed, and her clothes like nothing had happened. Laurenia Goth didn't fare as well. She scrambled from the floor and fled the boathouse.

Izzy looked up at Maya. "I still don't like you."

"I know." Maya sighed. "But you don't hate me either. I can live with that." She leaned into Matt. "Your mother is one scary woman."

"Tell me about it."

The council came back within a few minutes. "Wow, that was quick."

"Not hard to come to a decision when your mind is already made up." Matt shook his head.

The head guy stood up again. "Do you have anything to say before sentence is passed?"

"No," Matt said.

"Then it is the judgment of the council of five that Matthew Donovan Brewer has been found—"

"Wait!" Maya jumped to her feet. "You can't do this. Matt is innocent. You all know him. Do you really think he's capable of killing someone?" Okay, stupid question. She'd already seen him kill a couple of people. "I mean, someone he cares about?" Still not making anything better.

Matt tried to tug her back down in the chair, but Maya shook free. "I know he didn't kill Jenny. I know it, and I'll prove it."

The councilman raised his eyebrow. "And where is your proof?"

Matt's eyes were pleading as he shook his head, silently begging Maya to keep her mouth shut.

"I ... well ... I ... just know he didn't." Fuck!

The head council guy rolled his eyes. Honest to God rolled them. Prick. "I'm afraid your say so is not enough, young lady. Sit down." His voice boomed through the boathouse.

"Is my say so enough?" a female voice said from the front door. It was Jenny. Her arm was in a sling and she had abrasions on her face and legs. A murmur of shock and surprise rippled through the attending clan members. "Sorry I'm late, but I was a bit tied up." She gestured to the rope burns on her free wrist.

The Trandills rushed to her and Matt sighed his relief. Maya hugged him, hard. "Yes!"

The council dude knocked his gavel on the table bringing everyone to order. "Jennifer Trandill. Approach the council."

She made her way to the front of the room. "Yes, Uncle."

"Where have you been?"

"I've been held hostage for the last six days by Dominic Goth while he tried to convince me to take him as a mate. You have been unfair to Matt. He is innocent in this whole business. I escaped only this morning and went directly to the hospital to make certain my unborn child is well. He is. I say 'my' unborn child because Matthew is not the father. There is no reason to hold him accountable to me."

A scandalized gasp rocketed through the crowd.

"The father is not of this clan and I am leaving to join him today. You will not see me again after. I just wanted to clear Matthew's name, and thank him for being such a good friend to me these past few years." She inclined her head to Matt. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he mouthed to her. Jenny turned and left the building. No one tried to stop her, not even her parents. Her decision had been made. Maya was beginning to think she'd underestimated all the women in Matt's life.

The gavel hit the table again. "Matthew Donovan Brewer is cleared from judgment. Tribunal adjourned."

"That it?" Maya asked. "We're free to go?"

Matt picked her up in a bear hug and swung her around. "Oh, yeah, baby. Free at last, thank God Almighty, free at last."

"Put me down." She laughed, then slapped his shoulder. "Idiot."

"Oh, you say the sweetest things." He grinned.

"Can we go home now, like, home home? Kansas City home? I've had about all I can take of the fresh country air."

"Yes, we can go home. Home home, even."

Before they left, Izzy took Maya aside. Her face was red and puffy, she'd obviously been crying. "When you see Michael, tell him I love him. And kiss my grandbaby when it's born for me."

Maya hid her surprise. "I will."

"Oh, one more thing, dear." Izzy smoothed her hairpiece. "Take care of my son, or I'll take care of you." Her eyes flitted amber and she snapped her teeth.

As Maya walked out of the boathouse and back to the truck, she shuddered. "Your mother is a very scary woman."

Word from the Ozarks was that Dominic Goth still hadn't shown up. Of course, Maya knew he wouldn't. The rest of the clan assumed that after Jenny escaped Dom went on the run. In actuality, Dom had held her captive in a small abandoned shack in the deep backwoods of his family's property. He and Michael had used it as a playhouse when they were younger, then later they'd branded it their private sanctuary. When Dom had revealed he'd been behind Jenny's disappearance, Michael figured out where she was being held.

After he'd rescued her, his first concern had been her safety and the safety of the baby. He'd wanted to go to the tribunal with Jenny, but they both knew that it wouldn't go well for Matthew if they did. Even with Dom's admission that he started the fire that caused Michael to be shunned from the clan, Michael and Matt would never be able to tell the clan without revealing they'd killed Goth. Then it would only be their word.

The chances that they'd be believed by the other dens in the clan would be slim and none. Several of the other den leaders would have looked at the situation as an opportunity to take Duncan down without a challenge. No one in the community had any idea how truly dangerous the lycan had been. A werewolf with the powers of a sorcerer—that could have been really, really bad. No doubt, Dom had had plans to take over leadership of the clan.

Personally, Maya was just thrilled to be home safely with Matt and Stephen. Michael and Jenny had stopped in once,

just to let Matt know they were all right. Maya gave Michael his mother's message. And now that Jenny was no longer a rival, Maya didn't dislike her near as much.

Matt, Stephen and Maya had been bed-hopping for several weeks, taking turns at each other's apartments. It seemed to be working. Their hours weren't always the same, so everyone got their alone time when they needed it, but they were still cohesive. So no one was more surprised than Maya, well, maybe Matt, when Stephen announced at dinner one night that he was giving up his gi-normous loft to move in with Maya.

Matt scooted from the table. "Over my dead body, demon boy."

"It's none of your business, dog breath."

Maya put her hands over her ears. "Guys! Can we just settle for a minute?"

"Look," Stephen said. "I'm rarely home and it makes no sense to pay several grand in rent a month on a loft that I'm not living in."

"You're not moving in with Maya, and that's that," Matt argued.

"Hey! I'm in the room." She drew a circle with her finger. "In the room. Here. I can speak for myself and make up my own goddamn mind, thank you very much."

"Well, what do you think?" Stephen asked.

"Well, boys..." She grabbed them both by the arm and escorted them to the door. "...I think..." She opened the door and pushed them out into the hallway. "...that I have a one-bedroom apartment. Matt has a two-bedroom apartment. You

should both live over there. Oh, don't worry. I'll let you come by and visit. But not until you stop arguing." She slammed the door shut in both their shocked faces.

Dusting her hands off, she sat back down to the table to enjoy her plate of spaghetti and meatballs Matt had so lovingly prepared. She could hear them arguing as she happily ate the garlic bread and salad that Stephen had made. It went down yummy as well. She figured she'd give them ten minutes from the time the yelling stopped and let them back in. Until then, she was going to enjoy her meal and her life.

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Packing Up

Hannah Beckham

Maya Eddings is being stalked. Which, normally, wouldn't be a problem. She's six feet tall, a black belt in tae kwon do, proficient with handguns, and has two uniquely paranormal boyfriends. Unfortunately, her stalker is of the hard-to-kill variety. It moves like a ghost, can possess the people she loves, and bullets whiz right through it.

Now, her incubic lover, Stephen Daniels, won't let her out of his sight, not even to pee, while her Lycan lover, Matt Brewer, has a simpler, albeit less appealing solution—he wants to change Maya into a werewolf, giving her a fighting chance against this new foe in her life, and tying Maya to Matt until death do they part. The upside, as long as Matt and Stephen are fighting with Maya, and for her, they're not fighting each other.

To uncover the truth about the dark entity after her, Maya discovers an even darker truth about herself. And while she would rather shoot herself than lose her independence or turn wolfy, as the stalker closes in, she may be out of options.

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Chapter 1

The tension in the grocery store oozed like a palpable fog. Maya Eddings' empathic abilities were amped and ramped. Problem was, it seemed like half the crowd wanted to hurt her client. Which made it really difficult to hone in on immediate threats.

"Attention shoppers, don't miss Conrad Gentry at the front of the store. He'll be signing bats all afternoon. All money goes to the MDA," came an older woman's voice over the intercom. "And we have a blue light special on hamburger in the meat department. Thank you."

The "all afternoon" comment reminded Maya she was up way earlier than she liked. She spoke into her headset. "Eyes open, boys." Jack Simon, her partner, answered affirmative. Neely Davidson, their newest employee and an ex-Kansas City police officer, grunted. He was their third employee since Tyler Jackson had quit after they'd come up against a sorceress.

Some people didn't deal well with supernatural happenings. If Maya had to guesstimate, she'd say that was about ninety-five percent of society. Neely seemed competent enough, if not a bit anti-social. Maya hoped he worked out.

Conrad Gentry, a major league pitcher and her client, stood behind a table signing baseball bats for fans, adults and children. The man was tall, taller than Maya, something she could appreciate since she stood six feet barefoot. He'd

insisted Maya not use a gun because of the kids. Noble, but stupid.

She itched her thigh where the 9mm usually rested. Even with a black belt in tae kwon do, she felt naked and vulnerable without her piece. Hell, she didn't even like to go to the bathroom without it.

"Price check on double maxi thin pads at checkout nine," another voice over the intercom resounded. There were a few sniggering laughs from children and a couple of men. The women around the signing area were appalled. How embarrassing.

Gentry ignored the chatter altogether. He'd been the baseball wonder of Kansas City for the past three years. Leading the league in hits, and had a better than normal pitching average, but he'd tanked in his last game. Rumors abounded he'd thrown the game as a gambling debt payoff. He'd been getting a series of death threats ever since. That was why he'd hired Maya and Jack to watch his back during his promotional appearance.

The baseball player tapped her hand. Maya turned to him.

"It's going okay, don't you think?" His eyes were a beautiful, deep blue. He blinked, and she could feel how much he wanted to be reassured. And Maya also sensed his serious crush on her.

Cute, but no. Before she could open her mouth, Jack shouted, "Maya, look out!"

A large man with a really bad mullet (was there any other kind?) had grabbed a bat from the table. Her hand went for her gun, which, unfortunately, she didn't have.

"Jeezus!" Too late to stop the downward swing of the Louisville Slugger, Maya threw herself over Conrad Gentry as his assailant brought the bat down onto her back.

"Asshole!" the thug yelled. "I lost my life savings because of you!"

Maya managed to turn around just as he swung the bat back down toward her. She threw her arm up and felt the bone in her forearm crack when the hard wood impacted.

"That does it." She kicked out with her spiked boot, nailing the culprit in the shin. He dropped to his knees and she kicked again, this time hitting his groin with the mother of all nut busters. He doubled over, hands holding his package, before his eyes rolled back and he passed out.

Rolling off Gentry, Maya cradled her arm. "Stupid son of a bitch."

Jack ran up to her and helped her from the floor. "You okay?"

Neely rolled the unconscious perpetrator onto his stomach and put him in cuffs.

"No." She winced, feeling the bone creak. The arm looked deformed, already starting to swell. "Where the hell were you?" The pain became increasingly intense as the adrenaline waned.

"I'm sorry. The guy came out of nowhere. Besides, you're the one who usually knows when something bad is about to go down, even when no one else is clued in."

Jack was referring to Maya's empathic ability to read emotions. For some reason, her mind hadn't focused in on the guy with the bat. The guy who definitely looked a whole lot

less threatening in a heap on the floor. "It doesn't matter. You call the cops?"

"I'm sure someone did." Jack helped Conrad from the floor.

Not that it had any bearing on her taking the job, but Conrad was innocent. The rumors were just that—rumors. When he'd first come to her about the job, she'd read it in his emotions. No guilt, no remorse, he was just anxious. And stressed.

The tall, muscularly built pitcher dusted his clothes, staring in awe at Maya. "You saved my life, Ms. Eddings."

"That's my job. Though, if you want my services again, I wear a gun." She tried to laugh, but a sharp pain on her right side stopped her. "Damn, I think he cracked some ribs."

Gentry reached out to steady Maya, but she moved away from him.

He smoothed back his slick, short-cropped brown hair. "You need to go to the hospital and get checked out."

"Yeah, Maya. I'll take you," Jack said as cops and paramedics filed into the grocery store.

Maya nodded to them. "I'll catch a ride with the medics. You and Neely stay, finish up the signing, then get Gentry home. He's had a rough afternoon."

The baseball player smiled. "You're one tough chick. I'll give you that. I'll write Jack the check for your services. You just take care of yourself. Thanks again."

"It's what I do." As the paramedics put her on the gurney, she gave one last directive to Jack. "Call Stephen, will you? He worries."

"Should I call Matt too?"

"Yeah, might as well."

When they rolled her out, Maya heard Conrad Gentry ask Jack, "Who are Stephen and Matt?"

"Her boyfriends," Jack answered.

"Whew, man." Conrad whistled. "What a woman." Strangely enough, she not only felt his wonderment, she could have sworn she heard his voice in her head saying, "No wonder she's not interested in me."

You've no idea, my friend, Maya thought as they pushed her out the sliding front door and into the ambulance.

Good drugs. They'd given her some really good drugs on the way to the hospital. She felt like she was floating, lighter than air. The paramedics, two husky men, were in the back of the ambulance with her. Monitoring her vitals, checking her oxygen saturation, and thinking what nice boobs she had. Maya giggled. Definitely good drugs.

Lately, she'd been picking up random thoughts, along with emotions. It disturbed her to some extent. She wasn't sure how she liked being able to read minds. It didn't happen often, but when it did, it seemed attached to feelings of lust. The new ability could have had something to do with Stephen Daniels, her part-incubus lover. Or maybe a combination of Stephen and Matt Brewer, her lycanthrope lover.

Since the three of them began sleeping together on a regular basis, Maya felt changed. Different. Faster, stronger, able to heal more quickly—not the bionic woman, but there were definite perks outside of having two gorgeous men wanting her undivided attention.

A warm sensation crept through her body. Stephen and Matt, Matt and Stephen. Good drugs. Everything felt dreamlike. *Maya*. Her name. Sexy, sensuous, dark. *Maya Eddings*, the voice in her head spoke again.

"Yes," she whispered, the word coming out in a sigh.

"Did she say something?" one of the paramedics asked.

"It sounded like it," the other one added. "She's really out of it, so no telling."

Invisible hands slid over her flesh, starting at her ankles, slipping up her shins, calves, lingering for a moment over her hips as she raised them to meet the touch.

"That's nice," she mumbled. The hands were heated, hot tub temperature, as they continued up her abdomen, her breasts ... "So nice."

"Hey, Sal. Is she..." She could hear alarm in the first medic's voice.

Sal chuckled. "She's not feeling any pain, that's for sure."

No pain. No pain.

"Her heart rate is increasing, along with her blood pressure." That was Sal.

The invisible hands caressed her shoulders, massaging the tiny aches gently.

"Yes," she murmured again. She should have been alarmed. It would have been smart to be alarmed, but between the pain medicine and the warm hands, she just felt really, really relaxed ... and horny.

"Her respirations are dropping. Oh, man, I think she's crashing."

She didn't know who was crashing, and frankly, she didn't care. She just wished they'd be quiet and let her enjoy—

"Ms. Eddings? Can you hear me?" Someone rubbed their knuckles hard over the middle of her chest. "Blood pressure fifty over thirty. We're losing her."

Join me. She couldn't respond verbally any more, but inside she was nodding in agreement. She felt really good, peaceful, and warm.

"Her pulse is thready. She's stopped breathing."

Poor woman, whoever she was.

Join me, Maya. The voice soothed her. *Forever.*

Hard plastic formed around her nose and mouth. She barely felt the whoosh of air being pumped into her lungs as a hungry mouth took hers in a kiss. She wished the extra hands pushing on her chest would just stop, and *WHAM*, electricity zinged into her body. *No*, the voice said. *We must join.*

WHAM, again. The pulse, much more powerful than the last, made it really hard to concentrate. Bursts of light and color enveloped her as she floated upward toward a dark shadow waiting, its arms held out.

Come to me.

Maya turned back once. A woman lay on a gurney, a mask and bag over her mouth, her shirt torn open with leads trailing to a machine. The two paramedics frantically worked on her. The scene was wrong. Really wrong.

Why won't you join? the voice asked.

Looking back to the dark shadow, she wanted to listen to him, to comply. But the figure on the gurney drew her back. There was just something so familiar. The right arm of the

woman rested in a splint. The medics were shouting, but Maya couldn't hear them any more.

WHAM.

She tried to cry out, to make the jolting shocks stop, but she couldn't make a sound. Stephen and Matt, Matt and Stephen. She wanted them, needed them. Nothing made sense. She needed them to help her make sense.

You need me.

I need them. I need to go back. Maya turned from the shadow, swimming through the mist, floating above the body.

No! the voice cried out.

Confusion surrounded her. The shadow reached for her, but Maya escaped its grasp.

WHAM. Pain exploded through her.

"I've got a pulse!" Sal said excitedly.

Air poured into Maya's lungs and she sat up, coughing, sputtering, rubbing her sore chest. "Fuck, Christ. Fuck." With her right hand, she grabbed the nearest paramedic and yanked him down to her face. "What did you give me?"

"I ... I'm not sure what you mean?"

"Pain medicine." Her throat felt raw and dry.

"You want more pain medicine?"

"No, idiot. I want to know what the fuck you gave me."

"Just Percocet." He tried to pull away, but she kept her grip tight.

"Never again. Here me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She patted his face, the five o'clock shadow brushing against her palm. "Good boy."

Send 'em Packing (Collection)
by Hannah Beckham

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Chapter 2

"I swear to God, if you try to come anywhere near me with that shot, I'm going to shove it up your ass."

The nurse looked appropriately frightened as she backed out of the curtain surrounding Maya's bed. She'd already told the doctor she wasn't about to take any more pain medicine. She'd cope. He'd insisted she take the shot so he could set her arm. She'd insisted he'd have trouble seeing patients with a broken jaw. Still, the doctor had made a last-ditch attempt with Nurse Good-n-Ready. "Asshole."

"Maya?" The curtain rolled back and Stephen appeared. "Oh, God, Maya." Relief flooded his face. "You scared the shit out of me."

Maya felt the blood rush from her and she did something very rare for her. She started to cry. Once the tears started, it became near impossible to stop. Stephen quickly wrapped his arms around her and held her close to his chest.

"I'm not crying."

"I know."

"I hate crying."

"I know." He kissed Maya's forehead, worry furrowing his brow. "I don't know what I would've done..."

"I'm fine." She could tell he wasn't convinced. "Honestly. If the damn doctor would just get in here to do his job."

"The doc said he wouldn't set your arm without some kind of local."

"The doc can kiss my lily white ass."

"It is."

"It's what?"

"Lily white." He helped Maya get back on the hospital bed. "Now, be a good girl. Get the local, and your arm set, so we can get the hell out of here."

"Matt wouldn't make me do it." She was pouting. No doubt about it, but she didn't care.

"Yeah, he'd probably just call Isy. She'd love to torture you." He blinked, slowly, his thick lashes closing over his gorgeous green eyes.

"So not funny." Isy, also known as Isadora Brewer, also known as Matt's mother, had been an emergency room nurse before she married Matt's father and became a lycanthrope. She didn't like Maya, but the two had finally come to an understanding. Don't hurt Matt and they would get along fine.

"Besides, if you let the doctor take care of you, I know of a 9mm handgun just dying to be in your hands."

She brightened. "You brought it."

"Out in the car." He must've seen the severe disappointment on her face, because he added, "I couldn't exactly have brought it into the hospital, babe. They have metal detectors and all."

"I get it." Even with the pain still throbbing in her right arm, she inadvertently tried to move it to where her gun normally rested. The pain intensified. "Shit."

"I don't give a flying fuck if you only allow one visitor at a time! I'm going in to see her!" a voice roared out in the lobby.

Matt. Maya's heart jumped a beat. She pulled at Stephen's sleeve. "Tell them to let him in."

The curtain parted and a nurse came in. "There's a guy out here—"

"Let him in, for Christ's sake."

"I'm afraid it's against hospital policy to have two visitors in the emergency area. It's the rules."

"Rules schmools." Maya felt desperate. "Let him come in."

"It's okay." Stephen squeezed her shoulder. "I'll go."

"No!" She grabbed his hand with her left. "Please," she said to the nurse. "Let them both stay with me. I'll even ... I'll even let the doctor give me whatever he wants. Please."

The nurse cocked her eyebrow. Thinking. Maya could feel the internal struggle inside the blonde bimchette. On one hand, she could make Maya's life harder by not allowing both men to come in. Jealous bitch. Or she could make her own life easier by letting the guys in and getting Maya out of the hospital more quickly. Decisions. Decisions.

"Well?"

Rolling her eyes, the nurse put her fist on her hip. "I'll have to clear it with the doctor. But ... I think it'll be fine."

A flood of relief swept through Maya. She couldn't count how many times her life had been in danger, how many times she'd brushed against death, but this had been the first time death brushed back. It scared her. So instead of being snotty, she merely lowered her gaze. "Thank you."

"Uh-hum." Nurse Good-n-Ready shook her head and left the area.

Maya didn't give the woman another thought. "I need you both."

"I know." He stroked his fingers across her jaw line.

She shivered. "I'm in pain and all I can think about is tearing your clothes off."

"Is that a bad thing?"

Shrugging, Maya eased down off the bed. As tall as she was, she still had to tiptoe to kiss Stephen. His tongue slipped past her lips, running along her teeth. She opened for him, devouring his mouth with her own. The pain in her ribs and arm lulled to a dull ache under the heaviness of his lust.

Matt pulled back the curtain. "Are you all right?"

Dropping back down on her heels, Maya broke from the kiss and turned to her lycan lover. She smiled, holding out her left hand to him. "I am now."

Without hesitation, he took it. "I'm sorry it took so long to get here. I had my cell phone off. I was taking pictures of a cheating husband for one of the firm's clients. I didn't get the message until I got back to the truck." He propped his head against her shoulder. "They tell me you stopped breathing..." His voice choked up.

Maya caressed his face. "I'm fine now, honest. Just a broken arm and cracked ribs. I'm going to be okay."

Stephen and Matt both had an arm around her, tense with the need to touch her. Matt's body felt so warm against her, his full lips red and flushed. She ached to kiss him. Dipping her head, she brushed her mouth against his. He responded with hunger and need. Leaning over, Stephen kissed her neck. Soft kisses, meant to be reassuring, but her body reacted with more than comfort.

Moving in closer to Stephen, she ignored her slinged arm, and pressed her lower body against his. His cock pushed

against her hip, thick and hard with desire. Slick heat swelled her pussy until she didn't care where she was anymore.

Matt moved behind her, still kissing her as his hand slid up her side to her breast. She moaned into his mouth. Stephen's fingers dipped down under her hospital gown, slipping along the band of her panties.

"Oh, I like the gown. Easy access." The tip of Stephen's forefinger grazed against her clit.

"Oh, shit," she groaned. Closing her eyes, Maya leaned her head back against Matt. He moved away from her mouth, lifting her off the floor. The lycan laid her across the hospital bed. He was careful, so careful. She looked up at his face. His eyes had already shifted to amber. The strain showed. He was fighting his wolf, working at being gentle, so scared to do her more harm.

Stephen leaned between her legs, his teeth tugging at her sodden panties. His green eyes were hungry with lust, but also ... worry. She'd been scared, but in that moment, she realized they were afraid as well. They needed to touch her, to make certain she was real and whole. Lifting her legs, the incubus took her panties off. He placed one leg over his shoulder. The glide of his tongue along the slick, swollen fold of her pussy rushed instant warmth to her lower stomach.

Matt nibbled her ear, working his way to her neck. His hands massaged her breasts, kneading their way down her abdomen. She lifted her hips to meet his fingers as they slid over her clit.

Stephen's tongue delved into her channel while Matt manipulated her inflamed button. The lycan kissed down her

chest, sliding the gown up so he could get to her nipples. He laved the sensitive tips, his teeth scraping the tightly drawn nubs. Maya moaned. She felt alive. Alive and on fire. "You feel so good. You both feel so fucking good."

Stephen inserted his finger into her pussy, then another. His mouth covered Matt's finger, his tongue snaking around to her clitoris as both men worked together to bring her pleasure. Matt took his hand away and rubbed her slick juices across her nipples, as Stephen sucked her into his mouth, milking her until she cried out for more.

Matt's hand joined the incubus', his fingers sliding into her channel, both of them finger fucking her as her hips rose and fell with their thrusts. Her pussy clenched, and the pressure inside bubbled. "I'm going to come," she panted. Their thrusting, licking, sucking, nibbling. It all became more insistent. Urgent.

"Oh, God. God. Ahh!" Her whole body bucked forward, but the men, her men, were relentless. She cried out again. "Fuck!" Her thighs squeezed involuntarily, trapping Stephen's face between her legs. She grabbed Matt's head, holding it tight against her breast as he bit, gently but firm.

Their fingers continued working in and out of her, rubbing against the bundle of skin just inside her canal. They brought her to climax once more, and she jerked against the spasms, moaning through the rapture.

Matt and Stephen gently kissed her sensitive areas when a loud clang sounded. Maya scrambled up on the bed, while Matt and Stephen jerked upright in response. The blonde nurse stood in front of the curtain. Dumbfounded.

Maya pulled the hospital gown down with her good arm, covering herself as best she could. Stephen's face glistened, wet with her juices, and he grinned at the nurse, unashamed.

The crash had been the casting kit she'd dropped on the floor upon entering. "Wow, I think you just broke about a dozen hospital regulations." The nurse's nipples stood erect, pushing through her peach scrub top. "I'm definitely jealous." She shook her head. "The doctor will be here shortly. I'll just go get a new kit."

Maya, Matt, and Stephen stared numbly at the closed curtain for a moment. "That was embarrassing," Maya finally said, more than a little mortified.

"Ya think?" Matt grinned. "At least I'm not a junior partner in a big fancy architect firm. Something like a three-way in the emergency room could really make for bad publicity."

"They don't care what kind of deviant I am, as long as I keep cranking out the designs, wolf breath."

Maya groaned. "I can't take you guys anywhere."

Ignoring Maya completely, Matt directed his comment to Stephen. "True. I guess they don't care who you're screwing as long as your clients are good and screwed as well, demon boy."

Maya frowned at her men. "Hey. I better be the only one getting screwed around here." That didn't come out right.

Stephen and Matt were still laughing when the fidgety-fudgety old doctor got there. "Well, Ms. Eddings. I hear you're ready to be reasonable."

"If you call being blackmailed into taking a shot against my will reasonable, then yeah, I'm all about the reasonable."

Maya sighed, wishing she had her gun. Then she'd show the doctor reasonable. Okay, she probably wouldn't shoot him, but giving him a barrel enema seemed like a good plan.

He looked on the floor in front of the hospital bed. A strange expression came over his face. "Why are there underwear on the floor, Nurse Jenkins?" the doctor asked as he readied the syringe.

The nurse blushed, and Maya thought she'd drop the equipment again. She cleared her throat and glared at Maya. "I have no idea, Doctor."

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Chapter 3

There hadn't been much they could do about her ribs, and the truth was, they didn't really hurt. Not like they should've. Even the bruising on her back had all but disappeared. The cast on her right forearm, however, bugged the shit out of Maya. Which was why she sat on the sofa in her apartment with a chopstick, trying to scratch the impossible itch about four inches down under the plaster and gauze.

Stephen took her chopstick away. "Stop that." Matt had gone back to work, but Stephen took the day off to baby sit.

Maya glared at him, then down at her pork lo mein. "How am I supposed to eat now?"

"If you can't keep shit out of your cast, you're going to be eating with your fingers."

"How'd you like me to break your fingers? Then we'll see how well you eat with them."

"All I need is my mouth, babe." He wiggled his eyebrows.

"I've got your babe..." Although she said it halfheartedly. Because, really, he could do some fantastic eating with his mouth. "You know, it's a good thing you're cute."

"Yep." He stripped off his shirt, throwing it in the laundry basket near the hallway.

"You want to wash my clothes?"

"I could." He disappeared for a moment in the bathroom. Maya heard the water turn on. When Stephen reappeared, he said, "But I'd rather wash you."

"I can wash myself."

"Nonsense. The doctor said you had to keep your cast dry. It'll be easier if you let me help." He dragged a hand down his firm, hard, deliciously sculpted chest until it rested on his abdomen.

Maya's body reacted instantly. "Somehow, I don't think anything would stay dry around you."

"Here's the plan." Stephen picked her up from the couch.

"My legs aren't broken, you know."

"Shush. I'll give you a nice hot bath, and then we'll take care of whatever stays wet afterward."

Now how could a girl argue with that kind of logic? The warm water enveloped her skin, easing aches and pains she didn't even realize she had. Maya hung her right forearm over the edge, keeping the plaster dry like a good little patient. Stephen soaped up her puffball shower watchamacallit with vanilla body wash. Maya's favorite. "Lean forward."

He worked the soft scrubber in circles over her neck, shoulders, and down her back. After, he scooped water with his left hand, rinsing the creamy suds from her skin. "Wow, you do that great."

"I'm a man of many talents." He lifted her chin until she looked into his eyes. "Lean back, now."

Smoothing the puffball across her chest, under her arms, he leaned in and kissed her. "You had me very worried."

"I'm fine. Really." She wished she could take his sadness. "I know how to take care of myself."

"Do you?" A hint of anger tinged his words. "I wish you had a different job."

"Like a school teacher?" She shook her head, then relaxed back into the tub as he washed down her stomach. Maya had been a high school English teacher in her not so distant past. She'd hated almost every minute of the job. "I've gone that route before. Besides, I really like my work. It's exciting."

"There are other ways, much more pleasurable ways of getting excited." His voice grew heavy, and Maya recognized the lust. His pheromones were always present, but he could secrete more whenever he wanted, and at the moment, he wanted.

"Fuckin' A." Her skin buzzed with desire. "The flesh is weak."

Stephen grinned. "Thank God. Huh?" His hand went between her legs, the slight roughness of the shower aid brushing against her pussy.

"You're preaching to the choir, babe." Maya grabbed the back of his head with her left hand, pulling Stephen into a kiss. He tugged his jeans off, and it didn't take long for the rest of him to join her in the tub.

Water sloshed onto the floor as he worked his knees between her legs. Not much room for two, so Stephen pulled her up onto his thighs. She straddled his rigid cock, sinking down on top of him. "You're so hard and ready. Feels so good inside me, so good."

She braced her casted arm against the back wall of the tub, as she held his face to her chest with her left hand. She rocked forward, her knees pressing hard onto the porcelain floor of the bath. Stephen's rhythm joined her own. He had a way of making her feel every glorious inch of him, and

making her come. God, how he could make her come. Over and over.

He placed his hands on her buttocks, lifting her as he slid slowly in and out of her pussy. The head of his cock brushed all the right places. She raised her breast to his mouth. He took her taut nipple between his lips, sucking hard. Hard enough to hurt. Just the way she liked it. "Yes."

She ground her clit against his pelvis, relinquishing all control. Her pants and moans echoed off the bathroom walls.

"I want to come," Stephen said through gritted teeth. "I want to come in you so bad."

His passion triggered her orgasm. "Oh, God, yes. Yes!" Maya threw her head back as she rocked her hips forward, waves of pleasure riding her entire system.

She stared at Stephen, his face determined as he quickened his thrusts, until ... "Ahh!" His eyes squeezed shut as he trembled and shook.

He eased Maya down into the water, still between her legs. She gazed at his face, studying every splendid feature. "You're wonderful," she whispered.

"Thank you." He grinned, kissing her cheek.

Around them, the room began to darken. At first, Maya thought it was the afterglow of a really great orgasm causing her vision to dim. But the darkness began to swirl, like one of those sci-fi black hole thingies she'd seen on The Learning Channel. "Stephen?"

The darkness sunk into his back, her incubus lover absorbing the entity like a sponge. His eyes filled with liquid

black, the expression on his face softening. "It's time," he said, his voice vacant of its usual charm.

Almost afraid to ask, she did anyway. "Time for what?"

"To join." Stephen's arms slipped under Maya's legs and he lifted, causing the upper part of her body, including her head, to drop under the water level.

Water poured into her mouth, burning her throat when she tried to scream. She kicked her legs, but he was too strong. Frantically, she reached out to the edges of the tub, but the angle he had put her in made it impossible to get her head up. She stopped struggling and opened her eyes. Through the water she could see Stephen, his eyes still black as shiny tar. A perfect calm came over Maya as she pulled her arms into the water.

Are you ready? the voice asked.

It was the same voice she'd heard when she'd flat lined in the ambulance. *No*, she answered. Her lungs burned, and ached. What little breath she managed to hold, she knew wouldn't last much longer. Digging her elbows down, she pushed until her nose crested the surface.

Whatever held possession of Stephen cocked its head sideways, looking confused. It leaned forward. In that moment, Maya lashed out with her casted arm, smashing Stephen across the bridge of his nose. His head snapped back for a moment, blood gushing from the force of the blow. He loosened his grip on her thighs, and gasping for breath, she scrambled up, pulling herself onto the ledge of the tub.

He grabbed Maya, trying to pull her back. "Stop. Stephen." She knew it wasn't him anymore, but she hoped somewhere

inside, her lover was there, fighting as hard as she was. She hit the linoleum floor on her left shoulder, kicking at any part of his body she could hit. "Oh, fuck!" Where was her gun when she needed it? In the living room, of course.

She managed to free her ankle from his grasp, *thank God for soapy hands*, and she crawled like her life depended on it, which it did, out of the bathroom. She stood when she hit the carpet in the hallway, running naked to her coffee table to reach her weapon. Turning, she took the safety off and chambered a round. Waiting. Watching. Nothing.

Cautiously, she stalked down the hall. "Stephen?" Again, nothing.

Peeking around the open door, she expected a full on surprise attack, but still, nothing happened. She peered toward the tub. Stephen's lanky legs perched at angles from the surface of the water, and as she stepped inside the door, gun carefully aimed and fully loaded, Maya saw him, slumped down, his head under the water, his body unmoving. "Oh, no. No."

She slid across the floor, dropped to her knees and pulled him out. He wasn't breathing. "Stephen? Stephen!" Her alarm echoed against the walls.

"Breathe, goddammit!" She yanked him out onto the floor, turning him on his stomach and pushing hard against his back. Water slushed from his mouth, and when it stopped coming, she turned him over and performed CPR. Tears streaked her face as she worked for twenty minutes, worn out, unable to get his heart started. "Stephen?" she whispered his name. Anguish, grief, disbelief—they

overwhelmed her senses as she collapsed into a fetal position next to her dead lover, who turned out not to be so impossible to kill.

"Maya," Stephen said hoarsely. She turned her head and watched in sheer amazement as his chest rose and fell with breath. He blinked, his eyes green again like emerald jewels.

Reaching out, she ran her thumb against his lower lip, then slapped him hard across the face.

"Ow!" he snapped sharply. "What the hell?"

"That's for scaring the shit out of me!" She grabbed his face and kissed him fiercely. "And that's for being alive." All in all, it'd been one tough fucking day.

"Do you know your door's unlocked?" A woman's voice sounded in the hallway. Paula, Stephen's sister and Maya's best friend. "Is anyone home? I just stopped in to check on you..." She appeared in the doorway of the bathroom and her mouth dropped open. "Holy crap!" She ran up the hallway with a loud "Ewww!"

Maya and Stephen looked at each other and shook their heads. "We'll be out in a minute," Maya called.

"Take your time," Paula answered back. "It'll take me a moment to mentally scrub your naked bodies from my eyes."

Stephen rolled his eyes. "We better get dressed."

"We need to talk about what just happened."

"I agree, but with Paula here, it'll have to wait."

He was right; with Paula there, they couldn't discuss the new whacked out shit in her life. Their life, since it affected Stephen as well. Paula didn't know that Stephen was part incubus.

Paula Daniels lived in the world of humans that believed paranormals were just fun fiction. Stephen's family worked very hard to keep the dirty little family secret that in every other generation a lusty pheromone-secreting demon would be born. Only the men were privy, while the women were kept blissfully unaware. Maya had almost told her once, but Paula's fragility about normal everyday life kept her from revealing the truth.

Really, how could she tell someone who had to be put on suicide watch over a hangnail that her brother was an incubus, and werewolves and other weird creatures truly existed? Maya didn't want the responsibility. She loved Paula. They'd been best friends since junior high, but there were some things friendship would only carry so far.

After dressing, Stephen followed Maya from the bedroom, buttoning his shirt while she towel dried her hair. Maya threw the towel on the couch beside Paula, working really hard at avoiding eye contact. "You recover yet?"

"Look, I know you two are dating. But it doesn't mean I enjoy seeing you naked and wallowing on a wet bathroom floor."

"Uh, my apartment. Hello?" Maya flopped down next to her and patted Paula's leg. "Besides, we weren't *wallowing*. We were just..."

The sandy blonde woman threw her hands up over her ears. "I can't hear you, la, la, la."

"Baby."

"Slut."

"Takes one to know one."

"Well." Paula grinned. "True."

Stephen threw his hands up over his ears. "I can't hear you, la, la, la."

Paula picked up the towel and threw it at him. "Shut up! Like you have any room to talk, Mr. Revolving Door." Her eyes widened. She turned sharply to Maya. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean ... I mean, his door hasn't ... Oh, man, I'm a jerk."

Maya laughed. "It's okay. Really. Your brother's a slut, also. It runs in the family, apparently."

Giving Maya a stern look, Stephen said, "My door hasn't revolved in a while. So both of you can just shut up."

For a moment, they were all quiet. Maya picked at her wet crumbling cast during the awkward silence.

Stephen grimaced. "We were supposed to keep that dry."

"Shit happens." Maya went into the kitchen and pulled a pair of boning shears from her knife drawer and began cutting the cast off.

"What are you doing?" Stephen joined her, watching with fascination. "We're going to have to get you a new one, you know."

"That's why I stopped by!" Paula exclaimed. "I ran into, uh, Jack down at the No Place and he told me you'd gotten hurt on the job today. Are you all right?"

No Place was one of the local bars in Kansas City. Before Maya started dating two men, she used to frequent it regularly with Jack. The beer was cheap and the music kickin', but it was a dive. Not Paula's usual hangout.

"I'm fine. Actually." And she realized the pain in her forearm had pretty much disappeared, along with her rib and back pain. *Just weird.* "Better than fine." The cast lay split open on the counter. Maya wiggled her fingers and twisted and flexed her wrist and forearm. It seemed during the whole black cloud of death incident, she'd miraculously healed. *Double weird.*

Stephen put his arm around Paula's shoulder. "I think Maya needs some rest, sis. Maybe you could come back tomorrow?"

Paula looked decidedly disappointed, but Maya didn't know for sure because she'd thrown up her empathic blocks the moment she felt the strong disgust rolling off her best friend after the whole naked in the bathroom incident. Paula felt strongly—about a lot of things.

Ducking under her brother's arm, Paula walked around the counter and hugged Maya. "Okay, I can take a hint. I'll see you tomorrow? I'll even bring coffee and donuts?"

Maya smiled and squeezed her friend back. "How can I resist an offer like that?"

"It's settled then. Tomorrow."

"Not too early."

Paula snorted. "Who you talking to? I know better than to show up before noon."

"You really do know me."

The blonde beamed. Trouble was, her friend really didn't know her. Not anymore. Not since Maya started keeping secrets from her. A fact that ate away at Maya, inside and out.

Send 'em Packing (Collection)
by Hannah Beckham

"Love you, brother," Paula said to Stephen.

"Love you more." He leaned over and kissed his sister's cheek then walked her to the door.

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Chapter 4

"Do you know what's going on? Do you remember any of what happened?" Maya paced back and forth, wearing a line in the plush carpet of the bedroom.

"I remember it all too well. It was bad, really bad. I was completely aware of everything, but I didn't have any control. It was like being a puppet with a brain."

"Did you get any sense of whatever it was that took you over?"

"Nothing, unfortunately. One minute I was inside you feeling nothing but exquisite bliss, then the next minute my body is trying to kill you." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I have to tell you. I'm freaking out."

"Tell me about it." She sat down next to him on the bed. "Uhm, there's something else."

"Yeah?"

"It's not the first time I've ... uh ... encountered this thing, or whatever it is. When I was in the ambulance, it came to me when I died."

Stephen reacted with alarm. "Before or after."

"I ... I'm not sure. I'd just put it off to an out of body, don't go into the light sort of thing, but now..."

"Something's trying to kill you, Maya."

So much for stating the obvious. "Ya think?"

"Don't be a wise ass. I'm not in any mood."

"You're in a mood all right." She scratched her arm. "Do you think it's got something to do with a sorcerer?" Maya

hated even saying it. Damn magic users were becoming the bane of her existence.

Stephen shook his head. "I don't think so. Magic feels different to me. It's like ants crawling lightly all over my skin when someone's using. With this, I felt nothing. Literally nothing."

"Why now? What the hell did I do to piss whatever this thing is off? This thing, this creature, it's tried to take me out now, twice in one day. That's pretty friggin' persistent."

"What's tried to take you out twice in one day?" Matt stepped into the room, his brow narrowed with anger.

As with Paula, Maya hadn't heard anyone come into the apartment. "I have really got to get a jingle bell or something for the front door." Maya didn't want to tell Matt about the entity. He could overreact at times, and she was too tired and too weary to deal with the drama.

Stephen leaned forward. "Some sort of shadow creature tried to kill Maya today. Twice apparently."

Thank you, Mr. Tattletale. "Yeah, that about sums it up." She glared at Stephen. He glared back. She fought the impulse to stick out her tongue.

Matt roared. "What the fuck! How come I'm just hearing about this now? You should have called me."

"And you'd have done what exactly? Gone all fur ball and chewed the dark cloud of doom to death?"

The skin on Matt's body rippled where he wasn't covered in clothing. His eyes went from bright blue to amber. He snarled. "I swear, Maya. Sometimes..."

"What? You want to kill me yourself?"

"Sometimes I regret loving you. You're a dangerous woman."

Now she was pissed. "You can get the hell out of my life anytime you want, Matthew Brewer. I think I've told you that on more than one occasion. I. Don't. Need. You." But she did. She regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth.

"Fine!" he shouted.

Maya stood up and got in his face. "Fine!"

"Okay then."

"Okay."

"I'm going!"

"Get out!"

The next few moments were filled with moans and groans as their lips met in a frantic kiss, hands traveling over each other's bodies. Maya pulled Matt's black T-shirt off, wanting and needing to touch his skin, to be pressed against the heat of his beast. His tongue danced against hers, his teeth grazing her lips. Under her fingers, she felt his muscles shifting, changing—hair growing rapidly, spreading across his flesh. She opened her eyes.

Matt had turned, shifted. But instead of looking like he normally did when he turned full-on furry, his face remained almost human. Almost. He pushed her back onto the bed. She grabbed Stephen's arm, who up until this point had done nothing. And his next action was completely unexpected. He kissed her, then pulled her to him so that he was behind her. He wrapped his hands around her front, effectively locking her arms down tight.

"No, no, no." This was not happening.

Matt undid his jeans, kicking them off onto the floor. He stalked toward the bed, erect and covered in black fur. "This is the only way I know how to protect you," he growled.

"Not like this." She tried to pull away from Stephen, to get off the bed, but he held her firm. "Stephen, help me."

"I am helping." He sounded as determined as Matt. "You're human, Maya. At least if you were lycan, you'd have a fighting chance at survival. I've never seen anything like this creature, but I do know stopping it from killing you is going to be next to impossible."

"I don't want to be a werewolf, goddammit. If you force me, I'll hate you both. I swear to God, I'll hate you."

Stopping at the edge of the bed, Matt roared his frustration again. "I can't lose you!"

Kicking out with her legs, she threw her head back, smashing Stephen in the face. It had to hurt, but he kept his grip. "You do this, you both lose."

So much physically stronger than she, Stephen held her tight. "At least you'll be alive."

"You don't know that. We don't even know what this thing is. It might be able to kill you both. Besides, I said *no*!" Maya crossed her legs. Her pants were still on and as long as she could keep it that way, she had hope.

Matt clenched his hands into fists. "Let her go."

Stephen closed his eyes. Reluctantly he released her. For the moment, it was over. "I want you both to leave." Her throat felt raw, tight. She wanted to cry, but not with them around. "Get out. Get the fuck out now!"

Stephen tried to reach out to Maya, but she jerked away. "Don't touch me. Don't you dare." She buried her face in the pillow until she heard the bedroom door close behind them.

* * * *

"It was a bad idea, Matt." Stephen scratched his head. Guilt, worry, anger and fear all pulsed through him at once. As a lust demon, they were strange emotions. He couldn't believe what he'd just done. Almost done.

"Don't blame this all on me. You went along with it, so you must've thought it was a good idea at the time."

When the darkness had swallowed him, taking over his body, he'd never felt so out of control. "Whatever this thing is that's trying to kill her, it's strong. Really powerful. I'm scared for her."

"You're scared for yourself, demon. Admit it, without Maya you're back to a string of one-night stands."

He focused his anger on Matt, leaping at him, tackling the lycan to the floor. "I was willing to let her become your mate. I love her."

Matt didn't fight him. "You think I don't? I've given up any hope of having a true bond to be with her."

"No, you haven't. You're just biding time, wishing against wish that she'll someday see the light and let you change her." The look on Matt's face when he said it showed the truth of Stephen's words. He rolled off of Matt. "She's not going to let us help her, not in the way you want. She's tough. Probably the toughest human I've ever met. She thinks she can handle anything that comes her way. And even though

she doesn't want our brand of help, somehow, we have to protect her."

"Agreed." Matt nodded, sitting up.

"This thing, it possessed me. Completely took over and tried to drown her. So, until we know what it is and how to stop it, we can't leave her alone, or be alone with her. Both of us need to be with her constantly, so that if one of us is taken over the other can step in."

"What if it can possess us both at the same time?"

It was a valid question, one to which Stephen had no answer. "Well, let's just hope it can't." Now, to convince Maya.

"I know someone who might have a clue about this, whatever it is." Matt pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

"Who are you calling?"

"My mom."

Just great. "I don't think..."

Matt held up a hand. "Hey, Mom? Yeah, it's me. I need to talk to the *shamus*. Can you arrange a meeting?"

"I'm going to go check on Maya. Hopefully, she's calmed down."

Matt followed him down the hall, finishing the conversation with the last person Maya would want involved. He clicked the phone shut as they approached the door. "Should we knock?" Matt whispered.

Stephen rapped lightly with his knuckles. Maya didn't answer. He knocked louder. "Screw it. If she shoots me, she shoots me." He opened the door, Matt right behind him. "Coward."

"You'll heal faster."

Maya was sprawled on the bed, her pillow covering her face.

"Maya." Stephen and Matt looked at each other. "She's not moving."

"Oh, God. No." Matt ran to the bed, throwing the pillow off her head. "Maya!"

Her eyes snapped open, her hand coming up, finger on the trigger of her 9mm. Alert, she aimed around the room.

"What? What?"

"You're okay." His voice choked.

"Cripes. Yeah, I'm okay. No thanks to you bozos. You woke me from a perfectly sound sleep. Thank you very much."

Matt buried his face against her shoulder, his fingers stroking through Maya's hair. She dropped her gun on the floor. "Might as well be a paperweight as much good as it's done me lately." Maya patted Matt's shoulder. "It's all right," she soothed. "I'm fine. Jeezus."

"We were wrong before and we're sorry," Stephen said.

"Damn right you are." She lay back, pulling Matt with her. "Two of the sorriest sons-of-bitches I've ever seen. I just don't understand why every time something goes to shit you want to force me to change."

"At least you're not screaming at us to get out again. Progress." Matt nuzzled against her chest.

Stephen rubbed his hands together. "We've made a decision. Until we can figure out what's going on, we're sticking with you. We're not going to let you be alone. So you sleep, we're there. You eat, we're there. You..."

"Take a dump?"

"We're there. Got it?" He crawled up next to Maya on the opposite side of Matt. "We may not be able to keep it from coming, but it's better than doing nothing."

A relieved sigh escaped her lips. "Good, because I don't think I can handle this alone."

Matt kissed her neck. "You won't have to."

"Great." She pressed her lips to Matt's forehead while smoothing Stephen's hair. "But, we're going to set down some ground rules. You are both physically stronger than I am, and I'm not going to go around worrying about fighting you while fighting this ghost."

"I say..." Stephen stretched, then slid his hands up her stomach. "It's time for makeup sex." He wiggled his eyebrows. "How about it?"

"Horn dog."

"He's the dog. I'm the demon."

"Not much of a demon," Matt grumbled. "Can't do much besides incite lust and heal."

"Don't forget he can grow parts back," Maya pointed out.

"I consider that part of the healing thing." Matt's hand traveled above Stephen's, cupping Maya's right breast.

"I don't think I agreed to anything here." Her insides were agreeable though, wholeheartedly. Even under the worst circumstances, she wanted them. Both of them, constantly and obsessively. Not that she'd admit it to either man. She moved her arms behind her head. Besides, she still felt a little angry and betrayed. "Stand up."

They looked at her, confused.

"I'm talking to the two of you. No arguments. Stand up."

Surprisingly, they obliged. Guilt at work there, no doubt. She wasn't above using it.

"Take off your clothes."

Stephen readily began stripping, while Matt looked slightly embarrassed.

"Come on, now. Strip for me." She half-grinned, biting her lower lip. "I've had a rotten day, and it'll make me feel better. You want to make me feel better, don't you?"

Matt rolled his eyes. "Evil." But he pulled his shirt up over his head and began to unbutton his jeans.

"Slowly," Maya said. "Move closer together so I can see you both properly."

Within moments, both men were down to their underwear, Matt in flannel boxers, Stephen in silk briefs. "Lovely."

Matt nervously ran his hand across his chest. "You're having a go at us, aren't you?"

Side by side, Stephen was several inches taller than Matt, but not nearly as broad. His build was that of a swimmer, long waist and legs, wide shoulders, sleek muscles leading in deep V cuts down under the fabric of his briefs, his skin smooth and flawless. Matt on the other hand, stood wide, like a barbarian, thickly corded muscles, not as defined, more rugged, stocky. His arms were nearly as thick as his thighs, coarse black hair covering his chest.

Maya sighed, taking them both in, beautiful, handsome. "Not yet, but I plan to," she eventually answered. "Now hush. No talking."

She wanted some control, because the whole day up until this point had been out of her hands. Getting up from the bed, she walked around them, admiring their bodies. She went to Matt first. He was the more insecure of the two, and Stephen would understand, whereas if she took the incubus first, Matt's feelings would be hurt. Besides, if she'd learned nothing, she knew that Stephen liked to watch.

She knelt before Matt, her face level with his groin. He moaned, his shorts tenting before she even touched him. She blew across the flannel and watched his cock jerk to the left under the soft breeze. Instead of taking down the boxers, she parted the fly, and grasped his cock in her right hand. The thick shaft pulsed against her palm.

Matt shifted, uncomfortable. She held him firm, her left hand sliding up Stephen's thigh to the large bulging shaft under his briefs. She caressed his balls while taking Matt's cock into her mouth. Sucking the lycan's cock was a pleasure, the feel of the silky skin slipping past her teeth, sliding over her tongue.

She peered up and to the left, satisfied with the look of hungry passion on Stephen's face as he watched her. Groping for the waistband of the silk briefs, she pulled Stephen's underwear to his thighs. His shaft, longer than Matt's but not as thick, felt warm in her hand. She rolled her thumb across the tip, smearing pre-come.

"Ahh," came his sigh.

Matt's hand worked through her hair, pulling, pushing as she licked and sucked him, swallowing hard on his cock. She pulled Stephen closer, until the head of his cock brushed

against her cheek. Slipping off Matt, she took Stephen into her mouth, giving him the same attention she'd given to the lycan.

She gazed up at Matt, his hand still fisting her hair. His eyes were closed, as if shutting away everything but Maya. She didn't want him to ignore Stephen, to pretend he wasn't there. She slipped the tip of his cock into her mouth, alongside the incubus'. Matt opened his eyes, heat pouring from his gaze.

Since returning from the Ozarks, the three of them hadn't slept together as a threesome often. The whole thing still made Matt uneasy. Maya slid both cocks between her lips, then licked each tip. She stood in front of both men and shed her clothing. She placed a hand on Stephen's cheek, then the other on Matt's.

Turning to Matt, she said, "I want you to eat my pussy, while..." She turned to Stephen. "...you fuck me." She'd never been so bold with her request, usually just happy to go along with whatever the men in her life wanted to do, but after the day she'd had, she decided life was too short not to ask for what she wanted.

Both men blinked. Stephen looked confounded. "But I..."

She put her finger to his lips. "I know you do. Which is why I want Matt to do it. He always gets to fuck, while you get to suck. It'll be a nice change of pace, don't you think? Besides, I'm not really feeling all that trusting right now."

Matt's face turned red. "I do have some control, you know."

"Yeah, that of a six-week-old puppy. Are we really going to fight? Or are you guys going to make me come?"

"Fine," Matt grumbled.

Maya turned with Matt, him facing her, her facing the bed. Stephen came up behind, his hands dragging along her hips, the sides of her thighs, then inside her thighs. He slid his finger into her pussy. "So hot and wet," he whispered against her neck.

Matt kissed down her chest, taking each of her nipples into his mouth, tugging with his teeth, tightening them before moving down to her abdomen. He pressed his tongue against the folds of her sex, then slipped it through, teasing her clit with his mouth. She moaned, leaning forward, spreading her legs for Stephen to take her from behind. With Matt licking her clit, flicking the tip of his tongue, if Stephen didn't hurry she'd come without him.

"Get in me. Now."

In one fluid motion, he impaled her, hard. Almost angrily. Fantastically. She cried out. Usually so gentle, Stephen thrust inside her, his hips undulating at a frantic pace. His fingers splayed across her ass, spreading her cheeks as his thumb played over her anus. She felt Matt's teeth graze her clit, then bite down. Not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough she'd be feeling it later.

She whimpered. Her skin danced with a million nerve endings firing all at once. "Is this how you want it, Maya?" Stephen's voice was thick, guttural.

"Yes," she told him. "Yes. Hard and quick. Alive."

He pumped his cock in and out, using her hips as handles, slamming her against him. She held Matt's face tight to her pussy, unwilling to let him slip off. Every part of her tightened, and when it released, the orgasm flooded her body as she shuddered forward. Even in the throes, Stephen was unrelenting, thrust after mighty thrust. She screamed when the second orgasm hit unexpectedly and she let Matt go.

Staring down into his face, she saw his eyes were reddened, teary—his expression ghosted and weary. But Stephen's constant stroke made it hard for her to concentrate. Matt pulled himself up onto the bed. He looked nearly shattered, and suddenly the need to comfort him took over. "Stephen," she panted. "Stop. Stop."

He stopped. He didn't pull out of her. But he stopped. She moved forward and off his cock, slumping to the floor in front of Matt.

Stephen spoke first. "Are you happy now? Do you feel better?"

"No." She buried her face in her hands. "Why are you so angry? I thought you wanted..."

"To be treated like a sex toy, no batteries required?"

"I didn't..."

"Didn't you? I'm a lust demon, Maya. I know what it's like to use and be used with no regard to feelings or emotions."

"There were feelings, emotions."

"Really? Look at Matt. Sometimes I think I care more about his feelings than you do."

Stephen's words cut through her. She'd been punishing them, both of them, with sex, of all things. "I'm sorry. You're

right." Maya crawled up onto the bed. "Matt." He moved up next to her and she cuddled in against his back.

Stephen sat on the edge of the bed, turned away from Maya. "I have to be more to you than just sex. I can't be with you thinking that's all there is between us."

"You know I love you. Both of you." Maya fought to hold back the tears threatening to spill.

"Do we?" Matt asked.

She kissed the back of his neck. "Yeah, you do. I'm just so angry about today. Every part of it. I took it out on you guys. That's what people do to the people they love, but I won't again. I promise." She rubbed her toes against Stephen's back. "Can we just lie here together? Sleep a little. I'm so tired."

Stephen nodded, then lay down behind her. Three naked bodies pressed together for comfort and reassurance.

"Do you guys still love me?" She nearly choked on the question.

"Yes," they said, almost in unison.

She sighed heavily as Matt's hand came back, resting over her hip, and Stephen wrapped his arm around her waist. It didn't take long for sleep to come.

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Chapter 5

Maya woke up alone in bed. Not alone in the room, however, because Stephen and Matt were both dressed—Matt sitting in the corner chair, and Stephen staring out the window. "Coffee," she muttered sleepily.

Stephen pulled the curtain open, flooding the room with daylight. "Not yet. We were waiting for you to wake up."

"Oh, that." Yep, she'd forgotten for a single moment that her life was in danger. A pair of jeans, clean underwear, and a shirt were laid out neatly at the foot of the bed. Stephen. He liked to do stuff like that for her. Seeing the clothes, neatly folded, made her feel a little better. Hopefully he'd forgiven her a little since the night before.

"Best hurry. Paula will be here soon."

Paula, dear Lord in Heaven. She'd forgotten about her coffee and donut date. "She doesn't know that I'm dating both of you."

Matt finally looked up at her. "Is that what we're all doing? Dating?"

Maya sighed and started dressing. "What would you call it?"

"Combat," Matt said.

"I never said you had to be a part of this. Part of my life."

Matt stood up and opened the bedroom door. "And that's what kills me." He gestured to the hallway. "After you."

Stephen put his arm around her as they walked into the living room. "Sometimes, babe, you need to learn how to keep your mouth shut."

"Whatever." Let Matt sulk. It's what he'd done best since they'd gotten together more than three years ago.

While the men busied themselves, making coffee, straightening the counters, and avoiding her, Maya flipped through the seventy channels of crap on her television. Three times. She turned off the TV. Nervously twirling her thumbs, she formulated discussion after discussion about how she would explain Matt's presence to Paula. Nothing sounded plausible.

Paula arrived shortly, bearing gifts—double espresso, mocha chai latte, and a box of raised, glazed, deliciously fattening donuts. Maya could feel disappointment from her friend almost immediately and she put her empathic blocks in place.

Paula frowned, her full lower lip jutting in a slight pout. "I thought it would just be the two of us. You know. A girl's afternoon."

"Well..." Maya took the espresso and stuffed a donut in her mouth, buying time to think.

Stephen to the rescue. "We're just helping out so Maya can get some rest."

"Hmm." Paula was unconvinced. "I can help her out. Why don't you guys take off? You both have jobs, right? Go to them."

"Maya's not the only bossy chick around here," Matt grouched.

Paula's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

Maya could feel the hackles rising. "Uhm, maybe you both should just find something to do, like maybe across the hall in Matt's apartment?" Inside she pleaded, begging them to relent this one time. They both stared at her like she was crazy. "Fine!"

She stuffed the rest of the donut in her mouth and grabbed Paula's hand.

"Where are we going?"

"To the bedroom," Maya said. She glared at Stephen and Matt. "Alone."

Slamming the door behind her, she sat down on the bed. Paula sat down next to her. "Tell me what's going on, hon."

"Nothing." Talk about reverting to five-year-old status.

"I've been seeing someone," Paula said.

Yay, a non-Maya's life is fucked up subject! "Really? Tell me about him."

"What makes you think it's a him?"

Maya turned sharply toward her friend. "No fucking way."

Paula laughed. "Made you look."

"Wench." She lightly punched Paula's arm. "That was just mean."

Paula raised an eyebrow. "But funny."

"Yeah, that too. So, seriously, you're seeing a guy?"

"For about three months now."

"I can't believe you haven't told me!"

"Really, when have I gotten to see you lately, Maya? You're a very busy woman. Hard to reach. Etcetera." She took Maya's hand. "I've wanted to tell you dozens of times."

"Well, tell me about him. What's his name? Is he cute? Good in bed? Give already."

"Jack."

"Jack who?"

"Jack Simon."

"My Jack?"

"I like to think of him as my Jack, but yeah, him."

Shocked. She felt genuinely shocked. "But you're not his type."

"Well, thanks a lot, Maya. Jeezus."

"I only meant..." Jack liked big women. Not tall, he wasn't tall himself, only 5'6", but he liked them pleasantly plump, and Paula was anything but. "God, I'm so happy for you!" She hugged Paula, quickly trying to undo the damage of her big mouth.

"Thank you." The woman beamed from ear to ear. And it dawned on Maya, this was the happiest she'd seen her friend in a long time.

"So, how's he in bed?"

"Maya!"

"What, I'm curious. I can't help it." She laughed.

"Like a hydraulic jackhammer. Powerful, strong, and can go all night long."

"Oh. My. God!"

They giggled like schoolgirls. It felt great talking about stuff not involving life or death. A really good distraction.

"I've been dying to tell you. I just wanted to wait until I was sure about Jack."

"So, you're sure, huh?"

"It's incredible, Maya. I can't even tell you how long it's been since I've been with a man who can't keep his hands off me. He's so nice, always wanting to do stuff for me." She sighed, sweetly, happily. That lasted a second before she turned serious. "I guess you would know what I'm talking about considering you have two guys at your beck and call."

Fan-fucking-tastic. She'd wanted to avoid this conversation. She batted her eyelashes innocently. "Why, Paula, whatever do you mean?"

"I know you're seeing both my brother and Matthew Brewer, even if they hadn't both been here when I showed up. I am dating Jack after all."

Mental note: Kill Jack. "I ... well, it's hard to explain. Besides, when did my love life become the hot topic of conversation?"

"Oh, about the time you started doing two guys at once." Paula threw up her hands. "Being honest here."

"Fine. I guess there's nothing to say then. You already know." Her voice sounded sullen, even to her own ears.

"You're not just using him, right? I don't think I could take that."

"No. I love him, Paula. Seriously, love him."

"If you're using the 'L' word, it has to be serious. But then, I don't understand why you're doing Matt."

"I'm not *doing* Matt." Exhaling noisily, she ran her fingers through her short brown hair. "I ... I love him too."

Paula snorted. "Greedy much?" She shook her head. "Can you really call what you're doing love? I don't want to lecture you..."

"Then don't."

"But."

"There's always a but." Maya rolled her eyes.

"Love requires sacrifice. It doesn't seem to me that you've sacrificed anything."

Only privacy and sanity. "And what big sacrifices have you made? Give me a break." The conversation was pissing her off. Maya understood Paula just wanted to look out for her little brother, but come on. "Stephen's a big boy. He can handle himself and his heart."

"You say you love him. Fine. I know I love him. He's my flesh and blood, Maya. I don't mind your sexual antics. I know you don't equate sex with emotion for the most part, but I see the way he looks at you. He's completely smitten."

"Smitten?" She nearly laughed.

Paula blushed. "Sorry, watched some old movies with Jack last night. You know what I mean, though. I've never seen him act like this with anyone. Ever."

"And Matt. My Lord, woman. The man looks miserable. Is it love to keep them both dangling, both of them knowing the other is having sex with you? I can't believe they can stand being in the same room with each other, let alone be okay about sharing you in bed."

Maya felt her gut clench and her emotional guard fell.

"Well..."

Paula's shock, disgust, horror, and fascination poured over Maya like hot oil. "Oh, no. You're literally having sex with both of them, aren't you? Like a total threesome thing? But I thought..."

"They don't have sex with each other, if that's what you're thinking." Try as she might, Maya couldn't get her mental shields back in place. The strong emotions were overwhelming, and she could hear the whispers of Paula's frantic thoughts bouncing in her brain. Maya grabbed her head. "Stop, please. Just stop."

"I haven't said anything."

The black cloud formed along the ceiling, again swirling into a vortex. "Paula, get out!" Maya pushed her friend off the bed, scrambling to the side where she'd dropped her pistol.

"What is it?" The black fog moved quickly, entering Paula, her green eyes turning liquid black.

Maya held her gun up. "Don't." She couldn't shoot. Not her best friend. Her human friend. Someone who wouldn't survive the damage. Panic gripped her tightly. Her hand shook, but she carefully kept her finger off the trigger.

Paula, or whatever possessed her, looked confused. "Why won't you join?"

At least it was talking, not trying to kill her. Yet. "I'm more a loner than a joiner. Sorry."

"You must join."

"If you're here for Jerry's Kids, I gave at the office."

Its eyes narrowed. "I don't understand."

"You and me both." The thing referred to itself as I. "What are you? Why are you trying to kill me?"

"You must join."

"You keep saying that, but *I* don't understand. Is this some sort of weird sci-fi, 'I am the borg, I must assimilate' sort of thing?"

"Assimilate. To absorb. To take in. Yes. You understand."

"No, I don't. I really friggin' don't." It took a step toward her, and Maya stepped back. "Stop. I don't want to hurt you." Amendment. She wanted to hurt it, just not Paula in the process.

"Your body must cease. You must assimilate."

"Stephen! Matt!" She needed the boys to come to her rescue, and now.

"They cannot hear you."

"What did you do to them?"

"Nothing. They await on the other side of the door."

Maya wondered the extent of the entity's power. "Did you do something to keep them from hearing what's going on in this room?"

"Yes." It stepped forward again. "You must join."

This had gone way beyond *Star Trek* weird and had stepped into the world of *Dr. Who*. Maybe it would be okay to give Paula a flesh wound. Something in the arm, or leg. She could survive that, right? But there was always a chance of hitting an artery, and Stephen would be pissed either way. Wait. The thing had said the guys were on the other side of the door. They couldn't hear, but they were there. Maya wondered if they could feel.

She moved her arm a bit to the left, aimed her 9mm and fired right through the door. Matt shouted, "Goddammit!" They burst through the door, splintering it down the middle. "What the fuck? You nearly took my nose off!"

Paula's back was to them, and Maya had resumed pointing her weapon at the woman. Stephen stepped forward. "Maya?"

"It's in Paula. Help me. I don't want to hurt her."

Matt wrapped his arms around Paula. The darkness moved from her body to his. He let her go, his blue eyes filled with inky blackness. The small blonde woman collapsed to the floor. Matt snarled, razor sharp claws held ready. Maya shot him in the shoulder. He leapt through the air at her before she could get off another round, but he was tackled mid-air by Stephen, as they rolled across the bed. When Stephen stood up, his eyes were black. He came around the bed at her.

Even stunned, Maya shot him four times. Eight rounds, only three left. "Shit!" Matt came roaring across the bed. Fully furred, he sunk his teeth into Stephen's shoulder. The blackness oozed backwards into the lycan and Stephen drooped in its mouth. Shooting wasn't going to help. Nothing would. They couldn't stop the creature. It would just keep going until Maya either killed everyone she loved, or let it kill her. So, she dropped the gun, closed her eyes, stilled her mind, and waited for death.

After a few moments of waiting, she opened her eyes. Matt, Stephen, and Paula lay in heaps on the floor, and the darkness had gone. Maya leaned against the wall and slid down until her knees touched her chest. She had resolved herself for death, and death went away. There was no comfort in the thought. It meant the entity was unpredictable, wanting to kill her one moment, then fleeing the next. Well, she wouldn't punch a gift horse in the mouth, but still.

The thing had body-hopped through the three most important people in her life as if it were a knife and they were

butter. But why hadn't it jumped into Maya? It seemed if it could possess and control a body, the easiest solution would be to jump into Maya and use the 9mm to blow her brains out. Suicide by proxy. No muss, no fuss. So much for Ockham's Razor.

She didn't feel like crying. Not this time. She did, however, feel like screaming. So, she screamed. And screamed. Then screamed again. It didn't make her feel better. "Shit."

She moved to Matt and Stephen, both of them healing already, breathing just fine. They looked sweet, like sleeping little boys. She checked Paula next. Same. Breathing, peaceful.

Because she didn't know what to do next, she called Jack.

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Chapter 6

Jack sat on the couch with Paula cradled in his arms. She hadn't woken yet, but she was talking in her sleep. A good sign, right? Matt and Stephen were cleaning up in the bathroom, because while they'd healed, dried blood could be a bitch to scrub off. Jack had brought Neely along, and the ex-cop was happily whistling as he shampooed the carpet in her bedroom with a steam cleaner.

"You're good at that."

He grunted. "I like housework."

That surprised her. Not so much that he liked housework, but more the fact that he'd admit it. "Thanks for coming."

"You are surrounded by freaky shit."

Strange response, but she took it. "Yep. That'd be me. I'm just going to go check on everyone."

Neely grunted again. A man of few words.

In the bathroom, Matt and Stephen stood shirtless, both with washcloths, wiping the blood from their chests. Matt didn't have any on his back, but Stephen had a large area on his shoulder where the bullet had exited and Matt had bitten him. "You guys okay?" She took the incubus' wet cloth and used it on his back.

"Yeah," Matt said. "You?"

They'd already gone through the formalities of asking earlier, but the constant reassurance was nice. They both touched her, stroking her shoulders, her arms, comforting. "I feel like the favorite pet."

Stephen smiled. "You are."

Maya snapped her fingers. "Now is not the time for pussy metaphors."

"Matthew?" a voice called from the front room. Woman. Prissy. Snooty. Isy.

"Dear God of all that is sweet and good, what the hell is your mother doing here?" Maya whispered harshly.

"Be out in a minute, Mom." He glared at Maya.

"I'm getting a cowbell for that door if it's the last thing I do." She was tired of people coming and going, well, mostly coming, without her being aware of it.

"Don't be ridiculous, dear." Isy poked her head into the bathroom. She saw the bloodstained washcloths. "Oh, my. What happened?" Then she caught a whiff of Stephen. "Oh, my."

Maya recognized the look. "Close the door. Matt. Close the door." Isy was getting a dose of Stephen's good ju-ju juice, aka sex pheromones, and lycan plus ju-ju made for some really bad mojo. Isy's eyes were already shifting as she licked her lips, body shaking with lust.

Matt tried to push her out, but Isy wasn't having it. She pushed back with the strength of a mamma bitch in heat. She reached out for Stephen, but Maya stepped between them. "I'm going to snap you like a rag doll if you don't get out of my way. I want him." Isy growled to make her point. She swatted at Maya, who ducked, and her hand came in contact with the incubus' chest.

Then things got crazy. "Stop her!" Maya yelled. Matt grabbed her around the waist as Isy wered out—fur, snout, teeth, and all.

Then it got even worse. "Isadora?" Duncan Brewer's voice came down the hall. When he saw Matt trying to tackle his wife out of the room, he decided to come on down and join the party.

Maya yanked Stephen to the floor while the lycan trio grappled in the doorway. "Crawl," she told him. Stephen nodded and they slipped past the distracted wolves. Jack and Neely came running to see the commotion. "On my say, I'll grab Matt, you guys shove them in." Them being Isy and Duncan.

She stood up, grabbed Matt's arm, and yelled, "Now!" Neely, Jack, and Stephen (even though it probably wasn't a great idea) shoved at the were-couple who went tumbling toward the tub. She slammed the door between them.

"Man the door," she ordered Matt. "You," she pointed at Stephen. "Go next door until they settle down."

"What do you want us to do, boss?" Neely already had his .38 pulled.

"If they get through the door, shoot them."

"You're not going to shoot my parents," Matt said while trying to keep the door from coming off the hinges.

Damn it, she'd already had one door ruined. "They'll survive."

"Not the point."

"Fine!" She turned to Neely and mouthed the words, "Shoot them."

He nodded his affirmative.

Soon, the two lycans quit beating at the door, and god-awful noises could be heard from within. A howl, a growl, a screeching moan. "What the hell is going on in there?"

Matt looked haunted. "You do not want to know."

Oh. Yuck. Sex! They were having sex in her bathroom. At least it'd be over soon, right? Wrong. Twenty minutes later, their songs of passion were driving a migraine into Maya's head. She left the hall and went into the living area. An old woman sat on the couch. Paula was in the chair across from her, staring numbly ahead, unaware of the commotion.

The old woman cackled. "Ah, lycanthropes. They are vigorous creatures are they not?"

"Yeah, they are. Who are you?"

Even her wrinkles looked surprised. "I'm the *shamus*."

"And that means?" Maya noticed that her left eye was milky in color, while the right was a dark brown. Her wrinkled skin was bronze, resembling cracked leather, and her hair, while tidy in a bun, was snow white.

A howl resounded through the apartment and neither the *shamus* nor Paula reacted, but it startled the bejeezus out of Maya. Staring at Paula, she worried. The blank stare, no reaction—what if the thing had scrambled her brain?

"Your friend is fine. She's simply catatonic for the moment related to post-traumatic stress."

"So you're a head shrink?"

"Of a type. I did actually study psychology in my youth. But women were allowed so little in ways of employment back

then. It was sheer folly on my part, but I don't regret the time I spent."

"Who are you again?"

"The *shamus*, my dear. Do pay attention."

Okay, it was like getting scolded by her third grade teacher. "Assuming I knew what a *shamus* was, why are you here?"

"Matthew Brewer. He asked his mother to arrange a meeting with me. I haven't been to the city in such a long time, I thought it would be a hoot."

Maya laughed. "A hoot, huh?" She heard crashes from the bathroom and grimaced. "I think my sink just hit the floor."

"Vigorous." The old woman fought to keep the smile off her face, but she couldn't keep it out of her voice.

"You're enjoying all this, aren't you?"

"Oh, why not." She clapped her arthritic hands together. "I'm old. And this is the most entertainment I've had in a while. Your incubus is quite good looking, by the way. Very handsome."

"How did you know?"

"I've got eyes, dear."

"I mean about him being an incubus. You're not lycan, or you'd have followed him to the apartment across the way."

"That. Well, as I've told you..."

"I know, you're the *shamus*." She was waiting for the *Twilight Zone* music to begin, and Rod Sterling to come out from behind the curtain.

Series of grunts and groans ensued. Maya tried to block them from her mind. Thinking of Isy having sex, ewww, her

ponytail hair extension thing-a-ma-jig bouncing up and down. Yikes.

The *shamus* leaned forward. "Why don't you tell me about this possessing ghost of yours while they're finishing? It may take your mind off the unpleasantness you feel about their impromptu coitus."

Who talked like that? "Is that why Matt wanted to see you? About the ... entity?"

"That's a start. Yes. That's why he wanted me to come. I'm an expert in the realms of paranormal. Better yet, instead of telling me, why don't you show me?" She held her hands out for Maya to take.

Reluctantly, Maya accepted. As soon as their palms connected, the entire series of events revolving around the darkness flashed through Maya's head like a slide show. It was uncomfortable, but not painful. And it was as if she were watching it as a bystander, not someone involved. Detached. It was what she imagined a Vulcan mind-meld might feel like. Live long and prosper, and all that good jazz.

When the old woman let her hands go, she breathed heavily and slumped back onto the couch. "Strange. Yes. Peculiar."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Not exactly. No. But it's familiar."

Isy, Duncan, and Matt chose that moment to come down the hallway. Neely and Jack followed them close behind. Neely still had his gun drawn. Matt narrowed his eyes at Maya. "Can you tell this guy *at ease*, already?"

"It's okay, Neely. Good man."

He grunted and turned back toward the bedroom. Maya could only assume he was going to finish the cleaning job.

Isy primped her hair, smoothing her squirrel's tail, aka the hairpiece, and clearing her throat uncomfortably. "That was ... unsettling."

Duncan, for the big, bad wolf that he was, looked wholly satisfied. *Eww!* again.

Maya rubbed her chin. "Would you like a smoke?"

"No, thank you. I don't indulge," Isy answered.

"Kidding."

"I don't do that either." She took Duncan's arm. "You all talk with the *shamus*. We're going to go sightseeing." She winked at Maya as she passed. "Tell Stephen it's safe to come back now." On her way out the door, Duncan in hand, Isy had an extra dip in her step. More boot knocking would ensue, of that Maya was certain. But at least, thank heavens, it wouldn't be in her apartment.

As the door closed behind them, Maya sighed. "What a disaster."

Matt became defensive. "You're a disaster."

She was too tired to fight. "Yep. That too. I can't believe your parents had sex in my apartment. And loudly, I might add."

"Tell me about it. There are some things a child should never know about his mother."

"Like the fact that she screams *fuck me harder* when she's getting ready to orgasm," Jack interjected.

Matt snarled. "Yeah, exactly like that. Thanks for the reminder."

Watching Jack, his arm around Paula, stroking her hair, she realized how very human he could be. "How come you didn't tell me you were dating her?"

"Because it's none of your business."

Wow. "Fair enough. I think you should take her back to your apartment. It's not safe around me."

Jack helped Paula to stand. Then he picked her up, cradling the blonde in his arms. "It never is."

So much for a warm fuzzy moment. Neely came out of the back winding the steam cleaner cord up around his arm as he pushed the machine. "Done." He gestured to Jack. "Ride?"

"Sure." Jack looked at Maya. "Don't die."

"Okay." She smiled, tight-lipped. Such touching concern, she didn't know what to do with herself. "Can you knock on the apartment across the way? Just to let Stephen know it's safe to come back."

He nodded, and the three of them left.

Matt took the old woman's hand. Kneeling, he kissed her gnarled knuckles. "Hello, *shamus*."

She nodded. "Matthew. Always such a good boy." Stephen walked in. She looked at him wistfully with her good eye. "Ah, the incubus returns. If I were eighty years younger, you'd be in trouble, young man."

Stephen grinned. "I bet I would."

Touching. Not. "Stephen, the *shamus*—*shamus*, Stephen."

"I know who she is, Maya. I'm not a complete dope."

No, apparently, Maya was the only dope around there.

"Well, excuse me. I was trying to be polite."

"It's all right, my dear. You're all on edge and sniping at each other won't help. Come sit, all of you."

Good little kids that they were, they did as she told them. Maya sat between Stephen and Matt on the couch, while the old woman perched in the chair opposite them.

"Where are your people from, girl?"

People? "My parents? They live about an hour east of Kansas City. Haven't talked to them since I was fifteen, but I've been told they still live there."

"You were adopted."

Maya knew she was adopted, but the old gal sounded like she knew it as fact also. "How do you..."

"I know things, Maya. If you can accept that, it'll make the whole process easier."

Matt and Stephen both took her hands. They sensed her vulnerability. To not be wanted by her biological parents, then again rejected by the parents who chose her, it's the sort of thing that does major damage to the psyche. "Why not? I can read emotions. Why can't you *know*? Makes perfect sense." But it didn't. Not really.

"You use your humor as a weapon. A defense mechanism. You believe that if you make yourself hard, inside and out, nothing and no one can hurt you."

Third rate pop psychology. "Try telling me something helpful."

Matt squeezed her hand in warning.

What? Was the old woman going to limp across the coffee table and gum her arm to death? Jeez. "Look, I've had a very bad two days. I apologize if I sound snippy, but something

has tried to kill me three times, and it's the way I feel.
Snippy."

"Twice."

"Huh?"

"It's only tried to actually kill you twice. The first time, you'd already died."

Maya coughed. "Semantics."

"Truth, my girl."

Maya coughed again. "Bullshit."

The old woman narrowed her brow, all humor gone from her face. Her milky eye began to swirl and sparkle. "I grow tired of your smart mouth. If you weren't such an interesting specimen, I'd leave you to your fate."

Interesting? A specimen? Something to pickle in a jar? Is that what the *shamus* thought she was? Maya didn't care how much her eye went all creepy and such, she wasn't going to let some old fart treat her like a science experiment. "I've had enough."

"Shut up, Maya. Enough already." Stephen's tone was bitter, angry. "For fuck sake. You may not give a shit about what's going on, but we do. Or have you forgotten that the thing has to come through us to get to you? Do you even care?"

Unexpected. "I..."

Matt's turn. "I'm sick of your crap. Goddamn. Anytime someone tries to help you, you chew their head off, or worse yet, shoot them. You want to chase us away? Is that the deal?"

Again, unexpected. And a little mean. "I have..."

"We do everything we can to be with you. To make you happy so you'll give just an ounce of your attention, but you can't even do this? Just sit and listen. God! And you call us idiots." Stephen.

"I'm out of here," Matt said, suddenly standing. "I can't do this anymore. You coming, Stephen?"

Stephen looked at Maya and shook his head. "Yeah, I'm coming."

The front door slammed behind them. Maya felt dumbstruck. Suddenly numb. "Happy now?"

The *shamus* wearily watched her. "Are you?"

"Do I look happy?"

"No, but isn't that what you wanted? To drive them away."

"I wanted to drive you away."

"Are you sure? I'm still here, while the men in your life have gone."

"Why is that?"

"Because I wanted to talk to you alone." She leaned forward in the chair, her widow's hump becoming more prominent. "I want you to listen."

Maya sighed, rubbing at the pain forming between her eyes. "So talk."

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Chapter 7

"You think it's a what?" Maya asked. The old gal had a serious Brothers Grimm complex. Gory fairy tales that didn't end well.

"They were called the Astrallu. It's where the name astral came when people talked of spirits. Ghosts. They were a people destined for great things, but they all but vanished over the last century."

Maya huffed. "The only thing I'm destined for is a purse sale at Macy's." Actually, shopping sounded really good at the moment.

"I'm not saying you are Astrallu. I'm not saying you aren't. I'm just saying, it's a good probability."

"So these people, these Astrallu, why are they targeting me?" The question of the week.

"I don't think anything is targeting you, as you say. I think you are Astrallu and the entity is your astral half."

"How is that even possible?"

"You're an empath, Maya. A lot of people would say that's impossible. The uncertainty lies in the timing. According to legend, Astrallu were joined at puberty. You are beyond that time in your life."

"Thanks for pointing out how old I am."

"Let me put it in terms you can understand. You attract supernatural and paranormal creatures like a bug light. No human can do that. You read human emotions, and lately you've been able to read thoughts. You heal with the rapidity

of something inhuman. And all this evidence doesn't make you wonder? Consider the possibilities, my dear."

"I'm human." Maya sniffed. She'd been human her whole life—she didn't want to be anything else.

"Partially. I agree. I think that's why your astral has developed so late in life."

"Again with my age?" She was a thirty-something now, and feeling every year of it.

"I think your near death experience is what manifested the astral in the first place. If you hadn't died for those few minutes, you might have lived out your life never knowing."

"So, the gist. Be killed. If I'm Astrallu, I evolve into some supernatural life form and live. If I'm not, well, 'sorry 'bout your bad luck, Maya. See you in the next life?' That's what you're telling me?" She wanted Stephen and Matt. She needed them to help her make sense of the situation. "What about becoming a lycan? Sorcerers can do it and change what they are. Can I?" She couldn't believe she was even considering the possibility.

"No. You are exceptional, Maya. I've only met one other of your kind. The Astrallu are all but extinct. If you are Astrallu, you can only be what you are. Your biology allows for nothing else."

"So, if you're right, this black cloud hanging over my head is my own making?"

"Yes. I think it occurs when you completely open your abilities to the world around you. When you're blocking your abilities, you block the astral."

Hope. "Great. All I have to do is keep my shields up all the time. Actually, this makes complete sense. The first time it happened, I was doped up, too loopy to guard. The second time was with Stephen, and since I can't read much from him anyhow, I never bother to block, and the third time, Paula caught me off my game."

"This is a lot to digest, my dear. And I'm tired. I'm old. And I need a nap."

"Take my bed," Maya offered. She wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon.

After getting the *shamus* settled into bed, Maya poured herself a cup of coffee and made a package of instant butter grits. Her comfort food. She could do this. If all she had to do was block her empathic abilities, then she'd learn to do it twenty-four/seven. It would keep her off the supernatural train, while keeping the people she loved safe.

Matt and Stephen. Stephen and Matt. With everything that had happened, she wondered if Paula wasn't right. Was she selfish? Not willing to sacrifice for love? She couldn't choose between them. Wouldn't. She'd rather be alone than have to pick one man over the other. It might not be fair, but that's how she felt.

Realistically though, could she live without her ability? It had been an inherent part of her being for most of her life. No. She could handle doing without—a far better choice than the alternative. She resisted the impulse to run out of the apartment and across the hall.

For like two whole seconds.

Within moments, she was knocking on Matt's door. It opened with the chain lock still attached. Matt stared at her. "It's gone. The thing's gone. We're safe." Not the most romantic opening line, and not entirely true. But she panicked.

"I can't talk to you right now, Maya. I'm glad you're safe. Really. But I need space." Matt fought the urge to take Maya in his arms and hold her. If she stood in front of him much longer, he wouldn't be able to stop himself. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"I miss you. I miss Stephen."

He missed her as well. Stephen was completely miserable. It had surprised the hell out of the lycan when Stephen agreed to leave with him. "We're not crutches, Maya."

If the truth be told, he liked Stephen. In a brotherly way, the way polygamists had sister-wives, the incubus had sort of become his brother-husband. Sharing in the responsibility and care that went into loving Maya Eddings. But she needed to learn they weren't the only ones responsible for making the relationship work.

That was the reason he'd opened the door. The incubus would crumble, hell, he was having difficulty not caving in. Maya's magnificence made him want to jump through hoops, roll over, and play dead. Anything to be with her, to touch her, to smell her skin. He closed his eyes and breathed in her scent. His cock stiffened and he closed the door between them.

He heard Maya slide down the door. She was crying. His heart wrenched in his chest. Stephen came up behind him.

"I want to let her in, Matt." The incubus sounded lost, as lost as Matt felt.

"Me too." He shook his head. "We can't. She doesn't see us as real. Can't you see?"

"I think she's been punished enough, don't you? Do you want to be just one more person in her life that's supposed to love her, but abandons her all the same? I can't. I can't do that. Not to Maya."

"Is this an unconditional love speech?"

"Nothing's unconditional, Matt. I don't want her to stop loving me, even if I'll always love her more. I can live with what she has to give. Can you?"

Loving her constantly and more than she could possibly love back—it was a tall order for any man. Let alone a lycanthrope. Matt slid the chain from the lock, opened the door, and both men helped Maya to her feet. "Come in," he said.

Maya wiped at her eyes. "Will you guys ever forgive me?" She felt desperate. She hated being so needy. It was such a girl move.

Stephen slipped behind her, his hands smoothing down her arms. "Can you just let us love you?"

She leaned into his shoulder. "Yes."

Matt slid his hand up her shirt. "I want you so bad it hurts."

They were in pain, both of them, so much in pain. And Maya could only blame herself. "I'm here." She kissed his mouth, sucking his lower lip as his hands worked her jeans.

Stephen reached around the front of her and tugged her shirt over her head and peeled off her jeans. He unsnapped the bra next. His fingers caressed her breasts, rolling her nipples, tugging. She moaned against Matt's mouth, then broke from the kiss. She turned in their arms, on tiptoe, naked, she pulled Stephen's face to hers, thrusting her tongue between his teeth. Matt's hands, Stephen's hands, wonderful, large hands rubbed over her body, massaging all her doubts and worries into oblivion.

Her pussy—wet, heated—pulsed under their touch. The warmth of their bodies made her sweat, their skin sliding with wicked friction against the moisture. Matt's fingers slipped between her thighs, Stephen's found her clit. They worked her, front and back.

"So hot," Stephen murmured.

"So wet," Matt added.

Stephen kissed his way down her neck, her breasts, her stomach, his tongue stopping to twirl and tease her belly button. He slipped the length between the folds of her pussy, flicking against her clit until she panted. Matt held her up under her arms, nearly lifting her from the floor. He was naked. She didn't know when that happened. His cock pressed against her ass, hard. Rock hard. So good.

She rocked back onto him, aching to be filled. Matt lifted her arm, his fingers trailing sensually down her side, while Stephen's teeth grazed against her swollen clit. "I need you to fuck me. Please fuck me."

Matt lifted her from the floor and turned her on his shoulder. She laughed with joy, grabbing Stephen's hand and

dragging him from the floor as her lycan carried her caveman style to the bedroom. He held her up until Stephen was naked and lying on the bed, his shaft solid and thick. Ready.

She crawled up the incubus' thighs, straddling his cock. She held the length and slid her pussy down over it. Biting her lower lip, she leaned forward, making room for Matt. Stephen slowly rocked his hips, stroking his cock inside her. Matt's fingers were lubed, not that she needed it, as they stroked the skin of her opening, stretching her wider, his fingers sliding against Stephen's cock, thrusting with her.

Stephen's thumbs played against her clit, drumming. "Oh, God!" she cried out. The orgasm hit without warning, her hips jerking forward, as pleasure took her.

When the spasms subsided, Matt pressed his cock against her. He growled, low and throaty as he pushed the tip past the opening, sliding his shaft in next to Stephen's. It felt so tight, the smallest amount of burning pain, as both men fucked her pussy. Matt's finger slipped into her ass as he thrust, carefully, keeping pace with Stephen.

"Yes," Maya panted. Having them both inside her made her feel complete. Whole. "Fuck me harder," she screamed as the pressure of another orgasm began to build. "Oh, God. Yes."

Matt howled as he pumped his hips against her ass. Stephen rocked his groin faster, grunting, groaning, sweat beading on his forehead. "Maya!" he cried out, his body shuddering beneath her. His climax triggered her own, and her body quaked under the ecstasy. Matt pumped hard four more times, then moaned loudly as he shook against her back, both of them coming hard inside her.

After a few moments of blissful silence, they all rolled to the left. And Maya began to sob. Love made you weak. Love could damage. That's what she'd been told in the past. But all she felt was joy, and that's why she cried. Both men wrapped their arms around her, holding her tightly. "Don't let me go. Never let me go." She meant it metaphorically, of course. Because eventually she'd have to get up to pee.

"We've got you," Matt said.

"We're not going anywhere." Stephen kissed her brow.

"I didn't realize. I ... I haven't been fair. To either of you. Is it wrong to love you both the way I do?"

"I used to think so." Matt stroked her hair. "But, now. Hell, Maya, I don't think one man could handle you all by himself." He grinned now.

Stephen laughed. "From your lips, brother." The incubus' mood turned mischievous. "I never realized how much you and Isy had in common."

Matt growled.

Maya turned in Stephen's arms. "You've got to be kidding, right?"

"Fuck me harder!" he mocked. Matt smacked him in the back of the head. "Ow."

"Mean." Maya grimaced. "Mean and hateful." But dear Lord, it was true!

Even Matt began to chuckle. "I'm going to have nightmares. I know it."

Maya smiled. "Okay, you all can let me up now."

Matt grasped her arm. "I thought you just said..."

"When a girl's got to pee, a girl has to pee."

He let her go and flopped back on the bed. She turned once before leaving the bedroom to admire both their gloriously naked bodies. In that second, she felt happiness. Sheer unadulterated happiness. Then the black cloud of death descended. Right into Matt.

The panic turned in Maya as she fought to throw up her blocks. She'd let them slip. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* Matt, all black tarry eyed, stood from the bed. Stephen grabbed him and the darkness shifted. Maya did the only thing she could. Run. She ran straight through the apartment, out into the hallway. If she could just get to her place before...

"Hey, boss." Neely strolled out of the elevator. He didn't even seem shocked that she was naked. As a matter of fact, he ignored it altogether. "I left my house key in your bedroom."

"Run," she yelled at him. She moved to her door. It was locked. She felt for her keys, but since they were in her jeans pocket, crumpled in a pile on Matt's floor ... she banged on the door.

Stephen stepped out into the hallway. His eyes inky black. "Join me."

Neely pulled his gun. "Should I shoot him?"

Matt came stumbling out next. He tried to drag Stephen back into the apartment, but the darkness shifted again. *Stop thinking. Stop feeling.* But she couldn't. She'd opened the floodgates and the water was coming, whether she liked it or not.

Matt turned to her, black fur glistening. "Join me."

"Do you want me to shoot him?" Neely, ever being helpful.

It wouldn't end. Never. "Shoot me," she ordered the ex-cop.

He raised an eyebrow.

"No!" Stephen yelled. He kicked out, knocking the lycan to the ground. Again, the astral jumped into the incubus.

Maya looked at both her men. "I love you." She turned to Neely, pounding her fist against her chest. "Now, shoot me, goddammit. That's an order."

"You're the boss." He aimed his .38 and the last thing that Maya felt was the explosion of pain in her brain as the bullet hit her square between the eyes.

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Chapter 8

The blinding pain left Maya almost instantly. A sense of perfect peace settled through her, although it really wasn't her anymore. Or was it? She floated above her body, the astral right above her. She wondered why she didn't feel the separation from her flesh. Kind of a letdown, really. Something like death should have more pow or kick to it. Instead, it was like ... moving on.

Join me, it called out.

It had left Stephen as soon as Neely shot her. She looked at the darkness. *I can't believe he shot me in the head.*

Lingering for a moment, she worried for her guys, who were wracked with grief as they held her lifeless body. She didn't really believe she'd make it back to them. Not now.

Join me.

Wow, you're impatient. Funny enough, she felt relaxed. No more anxiety over the future. No more angst about the past. *I'm ready.*

The astral floated down, melting into her spirit. Even though she didn't have a physical body, the blending tingled. It felt pleasant. Safe. Its color began to change, she changed. Her spirit had been white, and while white and black generally make gray, in Maya's case, her spirit turned bright pink. *Man, I hate pink.* The astral was silent. No longer separate from her.

She waited for whatever would come next. But nothing happened. She looked down again. Neely had pulled out his

cell phone. Either Jack, or 911. If Maya had to guess, she'd say he was calling Jack. Matt and Stephen looked miserable. She longed to comfort them.

Something finally began to happen. She was being sucked, like a vacuum. *Finally, I'm moving into the light!* But, there was no light. Only darkness. And the weightlessness went away. She felt heavy, solid, like being encased in stone. *Oh no, I'm going to hell, for fuck sake.*

"Maya." She heard her name being called. "Oh, God. Maya!"

Great, they knew her in hell by name.

"Can you hear me? Open your eyes, babe," another voice came.

Babe? Who in hell would call her babe?

She blinked. And there was light. Sitting up, she sucked in a deep breath, coughing and sputtering as her lungs grew used to taking air again. "Jeezus," she wheezed. Miracle of miracles, she'd somehow made it back into her body.

"Never mind," Neely said into the phone. He flipped it closed. "Like I said before. Freaky shit. Forget the keys, boss. I'll stay at a friend's house tonight."

It was the most she'd ever heard him say in one sitting. Then she remembered—he'd shot her between the eyes! Quickly, her fingers went to her forehead where she should have had a massive hole. Excellently enough, the skin felt smooth—not even tacky from blood. "Holy fuck, that hurt."

"Yeah, getting shot doesn't feel so hot, does it?" Matt grabbed her into a bear hug.

Stephen wiped the wetness from his cheeks. "Downright sucks."

"What happened? I mean, how did I come back?"

"You lit up like a pink neon sign, then bang, the bullet popped out, the hole closed in your forehead and your heart started beating," Stephen said. "Your eyes are still glowing sort of a hot pink."

"Crap, I hope that goes away," she complained. "I really do hate pink."

The neighbor lady from 34A popped her head out her door. She wore curlers and a plastic cap. She gasped when she saw the three of them in a naked heap in the hallway floor. "I'm calling the cops if you hooligans don't keep it down."

"Sorry, Ms. Ventri." Maya laughed.

The woman shook her head in disgust, and went back into her apartment. What Ms. Ventri didn't know was Maya had heard every lustful thought the woman had as she scoped out Matt's gorgeous naked body.

Maya pinched Matt's ass. "She is so crushing on you."

"How about we handle one crush at a time?" Stephen kissed her hard on the lips.

"Another Maya sandwich. I can deal with that." She heard their thoughts as well. All the questions, the worries, concerns. They were both content to wait until later to find out, needing to have her again, to prove she was real. She could live with that. As they helped her from the ground, she realized her ass felt warm and wet. "Crap."

Stephen and Matt stopped to look at her.

Send 'em Packing (Collection)
by Hannah Beckham

"Guess I don't have to pee anymore. We'd better hit the shower first, boys." She stared at the wet spot on the carpet. "I wonder if Neely would bring his steam cleaner back over."

"Come on," Stephen said. "Let's go inside." They put their arms around her and the three of them went back to Matt's apartment.

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Epilogue

Paula recovered from the catatonic state. Jack stayed mad at Maya for nearly a week. They'd been friends for a long time, but Paula being in danger almost changed all that. It made Maya feel good. It meant Jack loved Paula. Not bad.

Isy and Duncan stayed for a few days, and Maya took Duncan out to lunch one afternoon so Isy could go see Michael, Matt's exiled brother. His wife Jenny was finally showing now that she'd entered the second trimester of her pregnancy, and Maya had been only too happy to be a part of the reunion.

Matt, Maya, and Stephen agreed to get a house together. One big happy family. Maya's evolution had taken them all by storm, and while she wasn't sure what it meant, she felt grateful she wouldn't have to find out on her own. Matt and Stephen needed her. But she needed them in her life just as much, or more.

Three weeks after the "joining," as the *shamus* had called it, Maya felt as if she were finally getting some control back in her life. Like she ever had any. But at least she had gone back to work. Conrad Gentry hired Maya for another signing. Jack took the front of the bookstore. No Nonsense Neely, as she'd taken to calling him, walked the mid-section. He had stuck with the security agency, and Maya was grateful. The ex-cop was a mixture of antisocial with a hint of psychotic, but Maya could deal, considering nothing seemed to faze him.

Maya, as always, stayed close to the client. She brought the 9mm along. It was tucked safely in her shoulder holster under her leather jacket. Conrad had insisted it stay concealed. Didn't want to freak out the kiddies. In truth, Maya had developed a few more unique abilities since her *evolution* which made the gun almost unnecessary. She didn't care. The cold hard steel made her feel better. Like an adult binky.

The atmosphere was less hostile than the last time, but there were still a few stray idiots holding a grudge. And as a result of her newly developed senses, she could hear them, hear them all. Even better yet, she'd learned to filter their thoughts and emotions so she knew exactly who to watch.

So, this time, when an angry fan stepped up, prepared to do damage, Maya held out her hand. She could feel the warm tingling sensation flow through her arm. A thin thread of energy flowed from her fingertips, something only she could see. A hot pink invisible lasso—eat your heart out, Wonder Woman—which she wrapped around the man, watching as his body absorbed the thread.

The man's eyes turned bright bunny pink. She forced her will into the astral energy. He turned around and walked away. Just like she'd made him do. When he stepped out the door, she brought her hand back to her side and he stood outside in front of the store window looking dazed and confused.

"That's right, sucker," she muttered under her breath. "I'm Maya Eddings, and it'll be a sorry ass day if you run into me again. I'm tough. I'm the epitome of bitch in heels. And I am Astrallu." Whatever the hell that meant. And she did want to

know, but she'd figure it out as she went along. For now, she was kicking ass and taking names. It felt good. *Walking Tall* good. And if the bad guys didn't like it, they could pack their shit up and get the fuck out of her city.

"Did you say something?" Conrad asked.

I am woman. Hear me roar. She smiled at Gentry. "Nah, nothing. It's going good, eh? Lots of fans."

"Real good. Thanks again, Maya."

"That's my job."

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Hannah Beckham

Hannah Beckham is ready to be fitted for her own straightjacket and a magical stay in the rubber room. After a stint in the Army, Hannah found writing a great way to escape the insanity that is her life. She likes tough heroines with a sense of humor, and heroes who are hunkishly supernatural and a little damaged. She's always up for email. Readers can write her at hannah@hannahbeckham.com or visit her website at www.hannahbeckham.com.
