



*Sweet  
as Sin*

INEZ KELLEY



Sweet As Sin  
By Inez Kelley

John Murphy is tormented by nightmares. A bestselling young-adult author, he writes the ultimate fantasy: stories where good always triumphs. He knows better. His past has shown him the worst in people—and in himself. When he moves next door to the sexy, vibrant Livvy—a woman completely unlike his usual one-night stands—he's driven to explore every curve of her delicious body.

Pastry chef Livvy knows that giving in to the temptation that is John Murphy won't lead to anything permanent, but she deserves a passionate summer fling. John discovers she's as sweet as the confections she bakes while Livvy slowly unravels his secrets. But what will happen when she uncovers them all?

Dear Reader,

A new year always brings with it a sense of expectation and promise (and maybe a vague sense of guilt). Expectation because we don't know what the year will bring exactly, but promise because we always hope it will be good things. The guilt is due to all of the New Year's resolutions we make with such good intentions.

This year, Carina Press is making a New Year's resolution we know we won't have any reason to feel guilty about: we're going to bring our readers a year of fantastic editorial and diverse genre content. So far, our plans for 2011 include staff and author appearances at reader-focused conferences such as the RT Booklovers Convention in April, where we'll be offering up goodies, appearing on panels, giving workshops and hosting a few fun activities for readers. We're also cooking up several genre-specific release weeks, during which we'll highlight individual genres. So far we have plans for steampunk week and unusual fantasy week. Readers will have access to free reads, discounts, contests and more as part of our week-long promotions!

But even when we're not doing special promotions, we're still offering something special to our readers in the form of the stories authors are

delivering to Carina Press that we're passing on to you. From sweet romance to sexy, and military science fiction to fairy-tale fantasy, from mysteries to romantic suspense, we're proud to be offering a wide variety of genres and tales of escapism to our customers in this new year. Every week is a new adventure, and we want to bring our readers along on the journey. Be daring, be brave and try something new with Carina Press in 2011!

We love to hear from readers, and you can email us your thoughts, comments and questions to [generalinquiries@carinapress.com](mailto:generalinquiries@carinapress.com). You can also interact with Carina Press staff and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!  
~Angela James

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# **Dedication**

For Lee: thanks for holding my hair  
For the women of Twinshock: D.I.T.A.

“He who fights with monsters might take care lest  
he thereby become a monster.”

—Nietzsche

# Chapter One

A splash of bloody red in the blue sky fluttered like a shapeless bird before landing on his forearm. John plunked the box down and picked up the silky red bra.

It wasn't an industrial, serviceable model. This was one of those make-your-mouth-water pieces that would barely cover hard nipples while pushing things into a better vantage point. It was the type of bra a woman wore when she wanted a man to take it off of her. He could almost see the tiny front clasp nestled between two round swells begging to be unleashed. He'd popped a few of those clasps with his teeth before, and the urge hit again.

He glanced over the hedge. A clothesline held a rainbow of bras, panties, camisoles and other feminine intimate wear. The bra in his hand matched a tiny scrap of a thong pinned between a bit of peach lace and a black bra with see-through cups. Oh yeah, he had to meet his neighbor. A smile twitched his mouth. No time like the present. He tucked the bra in the back pocket of his jeans and rounded the hedge, crossing the small patch of grass to a tiny front porch. A wicker wreath

hung dead center on the banana peel-colored wood. He rapped several times with a firm knuckle.

“I got it!”

His best smile in place, he waited for the woman who owned such a decadent scrap of clothing to answer. The door swung open and his smile faltered. Although very pretty in a Barbie college-girl way, the strawberry blonde who answered wasn’t his type. She looked too young and innocent for him. His excitement faded to grim acceptance. He should’ve known better than to trust hope. Hope was like a scratch-off lottery ticket—a buck better left in your wallet.

“Yes?” Curiosity shone in her pale blue eyes and he looked for an escape.

“Yeah, hi. I’m John Murphy. I’m moving in next door and the wind picked up a bit—”

“Andrea, who is it?”

A sultry, whiskey-edged voice pulled his eyes behind the girl. As she turned around, the door slid open farther and the woman named Andrea motioned for him to step inside. He had to force his feet to move. His ribs tightened painfully around his lungs.

Here was his vision. Loose curls the color of cinnamon framed her heart-shaped face as she stared at him with violet eyes. No earthly woman had eyes the shade of lilacs. This mirage had to be



a product of the sun and heat. His gaze drifted from her face downward and a different kind of heat boiled in his gut.

A purple tee shirt stretched a faded Disney character across her ample chest, and he wondered what color lace lurked under Tinker Bell. Long smooth legs poured from beneath her cut-off shorts. Splotches of plum on her toes hinted at her secret womanly side and made him smile. She wore no makeup but had an internal glow. This was a lady made for sin.

Sin was something he knew intimately.

He offered his hand, and the strength in her grip surprised him. Her soft grasp spoke of competence and confidence. Short unadorned nails highlighted the fact she wore no rings. The sweet scent of cake frosting filled his nose and he inhaled hungrily. His brain slammed into sexual overload as he flashed on licking sugar from her skin. His zipper was suddenly too snug.

Betty Crocker had never been so arousing.

Livvy narrowed her eyes. His gaze scored over her body, leaving a trail of burning desire in its wake. She cast her own assessment from his work boots to the faded jeans that hugged his thick thighs. A damp V of perspiration molded his plain white shirt to his chest. The short sleeves had slid up, pushed back by sculpted muscles.

A knot of longing formed in her throat, but she pushed it down and locked her gaze with his. Deep blue, almost navy, his eyes could have been too pretty for his rugged face except they were hard and unflinching. Tiny lines creased the corners but beneath the desire lurked something dark, something shadowed, something dangerous. This wasn't a man for frivolity. He was made for hard work, hard play and heartache.

Prickles of unease joined with needles of lust and skated up her spine, a sudden throb of awareness aching between her legs. This guy shouldn't have even pinged her radar. No man seared a woman with that intense a sexual evaluation if he wanted commitment. His perusal was more one-night-stand than church-aisles-and-roses.

Her treacherous body responded to his scrutiny with a whorish force. Pure animalistic lust flared, and she fought the primal urge to preen for him. *Arrogant sexy bastard.*

His hand still held hers and she yanked it away. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name. I'm Livvy Andrews."

"John, John Murphy."

"Olivia and John!" Andrea laughed. "It's like *The Waltons*. No, *Grease*! That's perfect."

"Uh, no. It's not." Livvy shot her sister a "cease and desist" look that was pointedly ignored.

John came to her rescue. “Like I was saying, the wind’s picked up a good bit and I found something in my yard I’m sure belongs to one of you, since it certainly isn’t mine.”

From his back pocket, he pulled a scarlet demi-bra. Seeing it in John’s large hands did wicked things to her stomach. Wicked, delicious, stirring things. Embarrassment flooded her cheeks. Livvy snagged it and thrust it behind her back. Satisfaction gleamed from his face. Somehow she’d stepped into a web she hadn’t known he’d spun. The bit of satin was warm from his body. Her breasts tingled and her nipples tightened and his gaze dropped to them, his grin widening.

“Sorry. I meant to get the laundry down earlier,” Andrea said when Livvy stayed silent.

His shoulders shrugged but his eyes never left Livvy’s chest. “No problem.”

“Well, welcome to the neighborhood.” Andrea bounced a look between them, a curious expression raising her eyebrows. “Hey, John, it’s our turn to host the Annual Elmcrest Fourth of July Picnic tomorrow night if you want to join us. Nothing fancy, just burgers, beer, chips—standard cookout stuff. Don’t worry about bringing anything, but come meet everyone. We have a great view of the fireworks, but I guess you do too.”

Livvy clamped her teeth down. *I'm going to smother her with a pillow in her sleep like I should've done when she was four.*

The low rumble of a car engine pulling into the drive snapped Andrea's gaze over her shoulder.

"Tow's here!" She darted outside, leaving them alone.

A bolt of anxiety shot through Livvy. John Murphy was too damn sexy for his own good. He wasn't doing *her* good any favors either. Desire tinged with danger upped his devil-may-care appeal. This was one bud she had to nip now.

She plastered a completely fake smile on her face. "Yeah, it's a neighborhood tradition. Come over. Bring your wife and kids."

A twitch danced along his upper lip before he grinned. "Can't. Don't have either."

Livvy lowered her brows. A shiver slid along her skin and she fought the shake. He was far too cocky to encourage. "Then bring your girlfriend."

"No girlfriend to bring."

"Bring your boyfriend then."

A bark of a laugh rumbled out. "Sorry, honey, you're stuck with just me."

"I don't want you," she snapped.

John leaned close. The scent of sunshine, man and power wrapped around her. "Maybe I want you."

Livvy stepped away and opened the door. She arched a brow, a silent invitation for him to leave. “Yeah, well, you know the old saying about people in hell and ice water?”

“You offering me a drink?”

“Not unless you go to hell.”

John’s eyes narrowed and his chin lifted the barest tick. He stepped through the door but dipped his head until his breath washed over her cheek. “I probably will but not today. See ya tomorrow, Livvy.”

“Come on, not today.” Livvy turned the key harder, praying the chugging, grinding noise would roll over into a smooth purr.

It didn’t happen. The next try earned only silence. She laid her head on the steering wheel.

“You need a jump?”

The gruff question snapped her head up. John stood shirtless, his dark hair sleep-tossed, bare feet buried in her yard. He had zero excess flab anywhere. A sprinkling of ebony hair on his chest narrowed to a downward point and her eyes automatically followed it. The top button on his jeans was unsnapped, as if he’d just pulled them on after rolling out of bed.

*Oh, no, all I need is to let the stud-muffin play knight in battery-charged armor.* Livvy opened her mouth to lie and say she’d already called for

help, then realized how late she was. It was him or wait for a rescue that could take up to an hour. Even more than the lost time, she really couldn't afford the mechanic charges. Like a huge bite of day-old bread, the acceptance stuck in her throat.

"Yeah, thanks."

"No problem. Just let me grab my keys."

Livvy caught herself staring and yanked her gaze away. Man-candy, he was just man-candy. Nothing she could sink her teeth into.

Well, she could. But it would all be empty calories. Calories she didn't need. Not to mention cavities.

She called the bakery. By the time she clicked the phone closed, John's truck was growling to life. He pulled nose to nose with her little Subaru and hopped out, leaving the driver's door open. Livvy popped her hood and climbed from her seat, the morning heat sticking her shirt to her back. He'd snapped his jeans and put on a shirt with a brewery logo so faded she couldn't read it. His feet were still bare and, for some reason, that made her smile.

He stopped at the edge of his bumper, yellow jumper cables in hand. "Damn, Livvy, you keep smiling at me like that and I'm going to get the wrong idea."

*And this is why I should never have allowed my AAA to expire despite the cost.* "The only wrong

idea you could get is that I like you. Now please, do the jumpy-thing here so I can get to work.”

John seemed unmoved by her declaration. “On the Fourth of July? What do you do?”

“I’m a pastry chef. I own the Sugar Shack down on Lexington so yes, I work on holidays, some anyway.”

“Cake frosting.” His murmur sounded like a sinful caress.

She made sure ice coated her voice. “Yeah, sugar and spice and everything nice, that’s me.”

Something wicked brewed in his gaze, something tinged with a playfulness that enticed her. She waited for his flirtatious comeback. Instead, he shook his head with a slight chuckle. “No comment.” He raised the truck hood and crooked his finger. “You can’t reach from over there, come here.”

“Can’t you just do it? I don’t know how.”

“I could but I’m not going to.” His gaze raked from her toes to her hairline. “Somehow, Livvy, you don’t strike me as the damsel-in-distress type. So come over here and let me teach you so you can save your own ass next time.”

Firming her jaw, she crossed to him and had to stand on her toes to peer into the belly of his half-ton beast. Exhaust-scented heat blasted her face. A frown pulled at her mouth. It was so gross in there.

“First things first.” John’s voice rumbled with a hidden tease. “Please tell me you know what the battery is.” Livvy gritted her teeth in annoyance but pointed at the square top. He nodded. “Good girl, half the battle’s already won. Take the connectors. Red is positive, black is negative, okay? Now, find the negative terminal.”

Livvy stared. Terminal? Well, the things in her hand looked like alligator clamps so they had to grab onto something. The two sticking-up things looked like likely candidates. They even had a plus and minus sign on them. She pointed to the minus sign.

“Right. Now, hook it up, black to negative.” She tucked her lip between her teeth and did it. “Now, red to positive.” The second clamp followed.

“Is that right?”

“Yep. It’s not rocket science. If you can bake a cake, you can charge a battery. Let’s move to step two.” He handed her the ends of the cables. “Don’t let those ends touch now. They’re live. And don’t touch any metal on the car.”

Her gaze followed the long yellow cord back to his truck. The thing was so big it looked like it could eat her little Subaru in one chomping bite. A niggle of fear formed in her stomach. “Uh, Murphy, couldn’t this be dangerous?”



John grinned. "Sure. Couldn't making cookies be dangerous if you didn't know how to operate an oven?"

"I guess so."

"Livvy, I'm not going to let you get shocked, I promise." One hand pressed along the small of her back, propelling her closer to her car. The feel of his palm struck her like a slap. Curving along the dip of her spine, his touch was innocent and friendly, not the least bit sexual, but still tingles darted into her bloodstream. Her lips pursed with a silent exhale and she looked up.

His brows were drawn, frowning at her engine. "Hold up. How old is this battery?"

"I don't know. It came with the car so I guess, four or five years maybe?"

His hand left her back and he moved to the side of his truck. Her shoulders slumped at the loss. The silver toolbox lid clanged shut and John reappeared with a stained red rag and a small piece of wrinkled sandpaper.

"Your terminals are corroded."

Livvy bent over the engine with him, leaning on the warm frame but holding the connectors away from any metal. Her eyes searched his face for any ulterior motives but there was nothing there but concentration. In fact, other than that first comment, he hadn't flirted once.

"Why are you helping me?"

“Isn’t that what neighbors do?” He sanded the terminals, fine rusty flakes falling in a shower, then straightened and wiped his hands on the rag. She stood and their eyes met. Neither moved. John’s voice dropped to an intimate caress. “Okay, do your thing. Black then red.”

It was important for her to do this right while he watched but she didn’t examine why too closely. She clamped the proper connectors onto the right poles and jumped back, looking for his approval. He nodded. “Now, fire her up, see if she catches.”

Livvy sent a short prayer before turning the key. When the engine roared to life, she felt like squealing. She bounded out of the vehicle, grinning. “I did it!”

“You sure did.” John leaned on his bumper, crossed his ankles and tossed her the red rag. “Let her run a minute before unhooking them.”

“Thanks, Murphy.” She scrubbed at a smudge of black along her finger. “Sorry my sputtering car woke you.”

“Nah, I had just gone to bed. I tried to get some work done last night.”

“Work? What do you do?”

At first she thought he wasn’t going to answer. He stared straight into the car engine, not moving. His Adam’s apple bobbed and he licked his lips slowly. “I worked in construction, but now I write

full time. At least I do when the damn story talks to me. That isn't happening right now."

"Write? What do you write?"

He shrugged and his nose twitched. *He's embarrassed.* Searching her mind, she couldn't recall seeing titles with his name. Perhaps he wasn't a very successful writer.

"Dark urban fantasy. You know, demons, werewolves, stuff like that." He drew a breath, fingertips tucked into his front pockets. "I write under the name J. B. Flannigan."

"Oh my God! You write Jondi?" Dumbfounded, Livvy stared at him. Jondi and his monster friends were heralded as America's answer to Harry Potter. The Young Adult fantasy series had swept the nation like a firestorm and become a literary sensation. She'd stood in line with Andrea last winter to buy the third book in the series the day it came out.

Jondi, a shaggy blue monster with bright green sneakers and ball cap, captured the spirit of innocence. His best friend was Thorn, a six-foot bat with red eyes and wicked fangs. In Book One, Thorn had frightened and terrorized the New Woods of Gillimat until Jondi befriended him. Now the two were inseparable, one gentle and kind, the other menacing and frightening but loyal to the death. Embraced by schoolchildren and parents alike, some claimed the content too dark,

too frightening, but good always triumphed and the morals somehow got through. The darkness hid a tale of hope. Livvy wondered if the same was true for the author.

A hint of bitterness crept into his tone. "Supposedly anyway. I have a bit of writer's block."

Somehow, the admission was for so much more. The look that had crossed his face had been two-fold—misery and terror. A surge of unexpected protectiveness swept through her and she desperately wanted his flippant arrogance back, anything to erase his troubles.

She hummed with a teasing smile. "The Master of Monsters here on Elmcrest Drive. Well, well, I'm in the company of greatness."

His eyes shot to hers, pain almost hidden, and he winked. "The Master bit was my publisher's work, not mine, but if you want greatness, we'll talk later."

The flirtation was so blatant it was intoxicating, and it had been so long since she'd had a drink. Thirstily, she drank in the sight of him. His nearly blue-black hair gleamed in the morning sunshine, and a slight widow's peak accentuated his greedy eyes. Deep marks framed his mouth, laugh lines she might have called them on anyone else, but not his. No, on this man they were more like scars, imprints from gritting his teeth and staring down

an enemy. Her tongue ached to flick out and glide along each groove.

She made the mistake of looking into his eyes. A spark ignited that had nothing to do with the jumper cables. John pushed off the bumper and stepped into her space. Warmth from his chest beckoned and her nipples puckered, straining to get closer. A rich masculine scent wafted from his skin. She sucked in a breath, drawing him deeper inside.

*I really have to stop lusting after the neighbor I don't like.*

“Are your eyes real?”

She angled her head up as if her senses weren't thrumming like a guitar string. Bravado came out bitchy. “No, I got them out of a Cracker Jack box. Of course, they're real.”

“I meant are you wearing colored contacts? I've never met anyone with violet eyes before.”

“My eyes are grayish blue. They just pick up whatever color I'm wearing. I like purple.” It was hard to be snotty when the reason for her damp panties stood before her, but she tried. His gaze caressed her, leaving her buzzing with awareness.

“They're beautiful.”

“Thank you. Are we done here then?”

“Maybe I'm just starting.”

Soft as dandelion fluff, his claim barely reached her ears. She chose to pretend it hadn't. "Can I unhook now?"

"Sure." She turned and reached for one connector when his hand grasped hers. Awareness ignited through her as he leaned over her, his body touching hers in intimate places. Hot breath brushed her cheek. "Red first. I wouldn't want you to get a shock or anything."

A volcano erupted, scorching want searing her skin and choking her breath. Chocolate lava cake was one of her weaknesses and this temptation had all the same ingredients—sinful extravagance, decadent flavors and wicked enjoyment. Every time she indulged, she spent the night with an upset stomach. Lesson learned.

She unhooked the clamps and tossed them at him. "You unhook your own truck. I have to get to work."

"Get a battery," he called, lowering the Subaru hood as she climbed behind the wheel. "Unless you want me to jump you again."

His suggestive tone firmed her jaw. She leaned out her window and shook her head. "You know, Murphy, I like you better when you aren't flirting."

"So you admit you do like me." His smile dimmed the sun.

She gave an unladylike snort. "No comment."

As she pulled away, she could have sworn he was whistling the theme song from *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* and her grin erupted.

The silly, happy mood stayed with her all day. It bolstered her through arguing with supply companies and juggling payments. She even smiled through sending overdue payment reminders. Just after lunchtime, one of her employees entered the kitchen with a small folded paper. "Some guy just dropped this off for you."

Livvy pulled her hands from the bread dough bin and wiped them on a damp cloth before reaching for the note. Brisk, bold ink strokes brought a heat to her face that rivaled the ovens behind her.

*New battery installed but I'm flexible. Call me if you ever want jumped.—J. M.*

"You catch my backyard on fire and I'll kick your butt all the way back to your apartment." Livvy laughed as Tow leaped back from the spitting flames. His short blond hair sparkled nearly white in the setting sun, almost as bright as his dazzling smile.

"Oops. Too much lighter fluid."

Tow added more burgers and she sighed. Jealousy was something bitter in her mouth, a foreign taste. Her sister was a very lucky woman. She'd found a great guy. George Prescott,

nicknamed Tow for his ultra-pale towhead, was long and lean. An avid runner, he'd literally bumped into Andrea one morning and the rest was history. Of course, they were nauseatingly perfect together, like Barbie and Ken on crack. Livvy loved to tease them that their children would have pink hair. There was only so much perfection a woman could stomach.

"What are you smiling at?" Tow strolled over.

Seated at the round wooden picnic table, Livvy sliced and diced ripe cantaloupe into a large bowl, discarding the rind into a plastic bag. "How much you look like a high-priced boy-toy."

He chuckled at her familiar jibe. "Well, I *can* be bought. You didn't happen to bring home any of your chocolate-raspberry torte, did you?"

"Nope. Andy said you were on a pre-wedding diet." She dumped a container of blueberries into the bowl. "I'm making fruit salad instead."

"Your sister is punishing me because she gained two pounds. She's the one on a wedding diet. Makes no sense to me. I like her ass as it is."

Livvy gripped the paring knife and started coring strawberries. "White is not a forgiving color. She just wants to be beautiful for you."

"Too late," Tow breathed as Andrea walked into the yard. His face lit up. Livvy almost sighed until she realized he was ogling the tray Andrea carried. Two dozen huge strawberries dipped in



dark chocolate captured his attention. "Oh God, those look good."

Andrea tore her eyes from the dessert and glared at him. "No way. If I can't have any, neither can you."

"Andy, I love you but you are not keeping me from chocolate." Tow snagged the largest berry and shoved it in his mouth. "Go eat a sugar-free Popsicle."

"You are so not sleeping over tonight." Andrea smacked the tray on the table and turned with a huff.

Tow grinned, lowering to the seat across from Livvy. "So I hear your new neighbor's joining us tonight."

Livvy stayed silent and concentrated on ripping the tiny green heads off berries.

The smile vanished. "I take it that's a sore subject. Don't you like him?"

"She likes him too much." Andrea giggled, coming back out of the house with a red Popsicle. "He makes her engine purr."

The knife hit the table with a sharp crack. "Stop that!" She winced at her juvenile protests.

Andrea ticked off items on her fingers. "He had your bra in his pants, jumped you this morning and bought you a battery. You at least owe him a blow job."

“Andy.” The word ground from Livvy’s throat like cut glass. Tow swallowed his snicker.

“Livvy, I’m not blind, you know.” Andrea smiled like a fish-fed cat. “The air sizzles between you two. You just better keep hold of that knife so you can cut through the sexual tension when John gets here.”

“Maybe I should just wait until you go to sleep and cut that ponytail of yours off.”

Andrea grabbed the long strands protectively. “You leave my hair alone. You even said he was sweet this morning. Admit it, Liv, you like him.”

“I don’t know him enough to like him,” Livvy spat. “A person can be sexy as hell and still be a complete ass. Maybe he won’t even show up tonight.”

“He will,” came a deep baritone from behind her.

Livvy bit her tongue and her eyes closed in mortification. “Murphy, how long have you been standing behind me?”

“Long enough to know you think I’m sexy as hell.”

She stood on unsteady legs to grab the bags of Granny Smith and Red Delicious apples. “You must have missed the complete ass part.”

A lust-drunk gaze slid down her body and came to rest on her hips. “Trust me, I noticed the ass.”

Livvy ignored him and sat, blowing away a slow breath. Tow went to flip the burgers and Andrea supervised, mainly protecting his butt with her hands in case some stray spark defied physics. John folded into the seat across from Livvy.

He cocked his head, never dropping his gaze from her face. "Looks good enough to eat."

She arched her brow. "Okay, where's the nice guy from this morning? This creepy flirting thing you have going again? Not working. Give it a rest."

John leaned his arms on the table. "Say yes first."

"Yes to what?"

"Going out with me."

"That would be a 'hell no' not a yes." Livvy snorted and cut into a bright green apple.

"Why not? You don't have a boyfriend or he'd have been the one you called to jump you."

"I didn't call *you*, either." Livvy dropped the last green-skinned apple chunks in the bowl and discarded the core before picking up a red one. A sharp crack sounded when her blade sank into the crisp fruit. "And I'll pay you back whatever you spent on the battery but I am not dating you."

"What are you afraid of, Livvy?"

The knife stilled deep in the apple-meat. "Not you, if that's what you're implying."

“Of course not.” John smirked. “I’m harmless.”

“I’m not.” The apple split cleanly down the center.

A simmer ignited in his eyes, a blue-hot flame that shouldn’t have warmed her but did. His low whisper turned the heat up. “I believe you. Makes the temptation even greater.”

She handed him an apple. “Satisfy that temptation elsewhere.”

John took the apple and chuckled. “‘And so Eve gave to Adam and he did eat, and their eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked.’ An apple started it all, you know—man’s downslide into the tempting sins of the flesh.” He kept his eyes locked with hers and bit down. The crunch vibrated through Livvy with an electric current. It sizzled as his tongue slicked out to catch a stray drop of juice. “Sweet...as sin.”

“About done with the salad?” Andrea jerked Livvy from the sensual haze by plopping a casserole dish onto the table. Behind her, the first of the neighbors trickled into the yard.

Livvy hopped off the bench and thrust the paring knife at her sister, refusing to look at John. “You finish the apples. I want to talk to Helen.”

She rushed toward the Sorensons, taking time to play ultra-Martha-Stewart-hostess. She directed potato salad and side dishes to the table and beer and sodas toward the coolers. Everyone

commented on the Cosgroves' house finally getting bought and wondered about their new neighbor.

The smile on Livvy's lips quivered. She dared look back at the table. John laughed and talked with neighbors as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Then he raised his chin and caught her stare. Desire hissed. It coiled through her like a snake up a tree, mesmerizing and tempting. No serpent had ever been as alluring.

She jerked away and greeted more people. She focused on everyone's comfort, making sure there were plenty of cold drinks and enough plastic forks. She refused to look in John's direction. Refused to look at the firm, calloused hands that could tantalize her skin. Refused to look at the strength that rippled the muscles in his arms when the men moved the heavy table farther under the shade tree. Refused to look at the odd silver strand tucked in his ebony hair that begged to be fingered. Nope, she refused to look.

But she saw. It made her damp and soft and hot in all the wrong places.

All evening she'd been trying to ignore him but she failed in spectacular fashion. She wouldn't meet his eyes, but watched every move he made. She didn't speak directly to him but licked her lips as he turned away. Every time he looked at her,

her face snapped away and a slight blush pinkened her cheeks. If she ignored him any more, they'd be lovers by daybreak.

John sucked in a deep lungful of relaxation. Evening started to fall. The first stars peeked through the deepening blue sky and the wind carried the hushed sound of leisure. Only a few remained in the backyard, couples mostly, who hadn't hurried off with young children to the downtown carnival. They sat on blankets or in lawn chairs, waiting for the promised fireworks display. He listened with half an ear as Bill Truman bragged about his hybrid roses and Ethel Lowenstein complained about the Sorensons' poodle. Both elderly, they welcomed him with old-fashioned grace but sniped at each other like rivals.

So far, everyone seemed open and friendly. The day's humidity bled away and left a pleasantly cool evening. Time slowed to a peaceful crawl and, for once, the peace didn't smother him. John's chest warmed. Did contentment smell like burgers and breezes? He'd never known it so he wasn't sure.

Through the kitchen window, a blur of auburn hair captured his gaze. She'd barely sat all evening, working nonstop to make sure everyone had a nice outing. Her friends lounged in well-fed comfort and she was inside, still working. He

sipped his beer and eyed the last remaining dessert before pushing away from the table. The time for playful ignoring was over.

The sliding door whispered in its track and he stepped into the darkened room. Livvy stood at the sink running water over the utensils. She hadn't turned on the lights and the rapidly fading sun left the room in shadows. Her spine stiffened when he stepped close, his chest barely touching her back.

"Need any help?"

"No, thanks, I'm almost done."

He set the tray aside and leaned his hands on either side of her body, bringing his mouth to her ear. She froze with her wrists buried in the water. Ginger curls brushed his lips. "Did you even slow down long enough to eat tonight?"

"I ate some, here and there."

"Hmm." His low hum sped her breathing. He plucked the last strawberry from the tray. "You fed everyone else, now let me feed you."

He gripped the green leaves and held it inches from her mouth. "Last one, all for you."

"Murphy, I don—"

"It's a strawberry, Livvy, that's all."

Slowly, she rose up on her toes. Her rounded ass skimmed his groin. He deliberately held the dessert a fraction too high for comfort, forcing her to tilt her head back to take a bite. The long line of

her neck shone like cream. The soft tug of her teeth on the fruit and the slight smack of her lips on the chocolate tightened his stomach. The oversized berry was too much for one bite and the light pink nestled in the dark coating thrust his thoughts to other paler, softer flesh he had yet to discover but desperately wanted to taste.

“Mmm.”

Her purring pleasure stroked a growing need inside him. “Can I have a bite?”

“Oh...yes.” Her quavering voice was low, expectant.

“You take another first.” This time, he brought the berry to her mouth, brushing his thumb along her lip as it closed around the chocolate. “Again.”

“But there won’t be any le—”

“Again, Livvy.”

She nibbled the last of the dessert from his fingers. John tossed the leafed cap to the counter and cupped her throat, feeling her swallow, feeling the silky brush of her hair against his cheek. He let his hand trail down her neck. With one slow finger, he touched the strap of her tank and slid it down her shoulder. A thin black strap of a bra followed. The memory of the see-through number he’d seen hanging on the line rushed desire through him.

He bent and held his lips just above the curve of her neck. “This is what I want to taste.”



She swallowed hard but didn't move. His lips barely landed on her skin. She still smelled of frosting, and his tongue flicked out to taste her. *Sugar. Sugar and salt.*

Fast and loud, her breath echoed in the room. She tilted her head a fraction, and it was enough encouragement for him. He smiled against her neck. The fight was over. He'd won and his reward would be sugar-sweet. A sense of victory swelled through him.

John bit her. Her sharp gasp pierced his gut and hardened his cock. Wrapping one arm around her waist, he cupped her throat and sucked before nipping her again. Livvy's body curved into his, hips thrusting back into his growing erection. She fit perfectly against him and a primordial satisfaction claimed him. She would be a fantastically responsive lover. His tongue traced the bite mark before traveling up her jaw. Triumph sang in his gut as her eyes closed in surrender.

A submissive whimper passed her lips. She turned, twined her arms around his neck and kissed him. Her mouth was warm and pliant under his. He delved deeper than he intended, pulling her closer, starving for more. *God, she's sweet...* She tasted like forbidden things. Things he yearned for and rarely received. Like chocolate birthday cake and strawberry ice cream. He

preferred spicy to syrupy delights. But she was that, too. Red Hots, the candies that burned your mouth but tasted so good you couldn't stop eating them. Livvy was red hot.

John took her mouth until they were both breathless. He grew dizzy on a sugar high. He slipped a hand under her shirt hem. Heated skin met his palm. *Hot, sweet sugar. Red Hots.* She arched her back, planting her breasts firmly into his chest. Her painful tug on his hair jacked his hunger higher.

Light flooded the room, shining harshly into his closed eyes, and he forced his mouth from hers. Livvy buried her face in his shoulder.

Andrea grimaced and embarrassment colored her cheeks. The light snapped off. "Sorry. Just wanted to pee before the fireworks start. Don't let me interrupt."

She darted through the kitchen and Livvy pulled her hands from his neck. The spell had been broken. John tightened his hold but she pushed lightly at his chest.

"Stop. This is a mistake." The raw desire in her voice belied her words and he feathered her brow with soft kisses. Rather than step away, she leaned closer to his mouth. "Murphy, stop. We can't do this. We're neighbors, this isn't smart."

"Geography shouldn't stop this, Livvy. It feels too good." He let his mouth play down her cheek.

On his biceps, her hands tightened. She raised her head. Those vivid eyes captured his, and his throat clenched.

“And what happens if it falls apart? Then we have to see each other every day. It’s too risky, Murphy.”

He moved away. Just one step but enough to make his skin yearn for the touch of her body. He couldn’t force his arms totally away from her sides. He burned for her, but she had a right to know this wasn’t going to be some grand love affair. She had to know it. There could be no other way.

“Liv, I’m not looking for forever. I’m not interested in long term or marriage or anything like that. Just you and me, spending time together, having fun, and maybe getting naked. No promises and no heartaches. We could be good together. And when it’s done, it’s done, no harm no foul.”

“So this is what, build up for one hell of a one night stand?”

He wanted to say yes but a gnawing appetite told him one night wouldn’t be enough. She was too mouthwatering to be ravished. He wanted to savor her spice until it burned him, let her sweetness flood his bitter soul until his teeth ached with it. No, one night was nowhere near enough time.

He couldn't resist one last taste from her lips before whispering against her cheek. "A night, a week, a month, who knows? It's for as long as we're both enjoying ourselves. And you *will* enjoy it, Livvy."

She shivered and his stomach tightened against the urge to take her mouth again. The soft pink tongue he'd just tasted skimmed her upper lip and her gaze dropped to his chest. Out of the corner of his vision, he saw her hand shake as it floated toward him. It landed with a butterfly touch above his heart.

"I need to think about this."

"You know where I live...and what I want."

John walked into the backyard and she deflated with a loud sigh. There was no denying they'd been kissing. Her wet handprints marked him as if she'd staked a claim. Damn, the man lit her burners like no one ever had. Her fingers trailed over a swollen mouth that could still taste him. Greedily, she wanted more.

"I'm sorry." Andrea peeked around the corner of the dark room before sliding in. She opened the freezer and bright yellow light framed her embarrassment. "I didn't mean to walk in on anything."

"It's okay." Husky with unfulfilled passion, Livvy's voice cracked.

“So? Tell me.” Andrea bumped the door closed with her hip, a paper-wrapped Popsicle in her hand. The darkness surrounded Livvy like a blanket, isolating her from the outside. She wanted to grab it and hold it close. John tempted her like Godiva chocolates, sparking an appetite in her that shocked her. She hadn’t known how hungry she was.

“He isn’t looking for permanence.”

“Are you?” Andrea asked.

Livvy closed her eyes. She’d been hitting the snooze button on her biological clock for a while. She wanted the white wedding, the picket fence, the baby bottles. But those things were out of her reach right now. Many times she’d been told that one day she’d make some lucky man a very good wife. Vain or not, she believed that. So far, someday and some man hadn’t arrived together. Perhaps her standards were a bit high, but she had no intention of lowering them. She’d had relationships and affairs, some serious, some fun, some nothing more than avoiding empty nights.

Nothing inflamed her like one caress of those navy eyes.

Her face swung to Andrea and she saw not her baby sister but a mature woman about to be married, a wife long before her older sister. “Someday, sure, but John Murphy isn’t the type you bring home to Mama, you know? He’s the

guy you sneak out to meet after your nice date drops you off. The kind you give your virginity to under the bleachers. He scares me.”

Andrea stiffened and went into a mother-lion protective stance. “Scares you? How?”

“Haven’t you looked into his eyes, Andy? There’s no laughter there. None. It’s very dark and secretive and...dangerous. Not in a beat-you-behind-closed-doors way but in an I-have-baggage-like-Samsonite kind of way. Intense. That’s the word. He’s intense...and it’s not that I’m frightened *of him* so much as what he makes me feel is scary, kind of out of control and reckless.”

Livvy ran her hands over her face and stopped cold. Her hands smelled like John—rich, earthy, sexual. A coil of need wrapped tighter around her chest and she tried to dispel it by blowing through her mouth.

“I don’t need this right now.” Livvy tried to shove the longing away but it hummed through her blood with a tempting growl. “I’ve got enough on my plate dealing with the Shack’s financial troubles. I do not need a man distracting me.”

“Maybe that’s exactly what you do need,” Andrea offered. “The past couple months have been a real bitch for you. It’ll do you good to think about something other than cash flow.”

"I'm fine. The Shack is fine." Livvy plastered a deliberately calm expression on her face. She'd eat glass before she let Andrea know how tight things really were. She wouldn't let anything destroy her sister's joy. "Don't worry about me. I want you to have a wonderful wedding."

Andrea stared for a long breath then an impish grin appeared. "It looked hot. You were definitely wanting something else a few minutes ago."

"Oh, I want him." Livvy smirked. "Maybe I just need some hard, hot monkey sex. It's been a while."

Andrea tore the paper from her icepop and headed for the glass doors. "Listen, Liv, if you want it, go for it. Have a summer fling and enjoy. It'd take your mind off money. If it leads to more, great, if not, what's the big deal?"

"The big deal is he lives next door. What if things end badly? Then what?"

"Then you put up a privacy fence and we egg his house. Just because you're in the market for a minivan doesn't mean you can't test drive a hotrod." Andrea stopped with her hand on the door handle. "And if the engine purrs the right way, take several trips around the block."

Night fell and couples paired off to blankets and chairs, snuggling and waiting for the show. A few single friends congregated around the picnic table. John folded into a chair beside Tow and

Andrea, never turning his head toward the kitchen. One of Andrea's nursing buddies strolled over to him, her flirting evident even from a distance. Livvy bristled. She waited. John said something that made the woman laugh but he made no move to open the small circle to her and she wandered away. He didn't watch her leave.

The cool grass licked at her ankles as Livvy walked to the Adirondack chairs, skirting one couple's blanket and outstretched legs. On top of the closed cooler, citronella candles illuminated the night and beat back mosquitoes. The pale yellow flickering highlighted one side of John but the other side lapsed in the night.

"Fireworks are scheduled to start anytime," Andrea offered. Livvy pulled a folding lawn chair beside the candle glow.

In the distance, the sounds of children screeching and muffled bangs from purchased fireworks drowned out the crickets. Livvy shifted in her seat. Her skin prickled and she knew John was watching her, but she refused to look in his direction. The chair's woven nylon bit into her thighs and she kicked off her sandals, bracing her toes on the cooler to prevent having waffle-ass when she stood up.

Andrea tossed her pager onto the cooler with a dull clatter. "I'm on call."



“As what?” John’s deep voice stroked the night as he had her skin.

“I’m an RN down at St. Bartholomew’s ER. If I can make it to midnight without getting called in, then I’m off for three glorious days.” She jabbed the air with her fist, making everyone smile. She wiggled her eyebrows and blew a kiss to Tow. “And you don’t have court for two days so prepare to be completely molested.”

“Can’t molest the willing.” Tow chuckled and settled Andrea’s feet on his thigh, stroking her ankle absently. The move was intimate, instinctual, personal. Livvy’s heart leaped and she dared a glance at John. He hurriedly drew his attention away from the tender act. Some things, some actions, although not sexual, were private.

The sky exploded with a dazzling bloom of pink and a deafening crackle. Everyone’s concentration shot up toward the flashing fireworks when Livvy made her subtle move. She propped her feet on the side edge of John’s chair, beside his leg. He glanced down at her painted toes then looked at her questioningly. Her lips tilted upward and she lowered her lashes shyly then raised them and caught his gaze. Slowly, she slid her feet onto his thigh.

Understanding shone on his face and the corner of his mouth lifted in acceptance. Deliberately, he covered her instep with a firm hand.

## Chapter Two

*The green-eyed monster and his master can bite my ass.*

Livvy glared through her window at the beautiful dark-haired woman on John's deck. Her hair reflected the afternoon sun as she laughed, her face turned up to him. He smiled, tweaked her nose and leaned in to kiss her cheek. The closeness was evident.

Fingers white-knuckled on the counter, Livvy ground her teeth. No promises and no heartache, he'd said. He'd made no mention of other women, but then she'd never asked. *Fool! This is what you get when you let your hormones do the thinking for you.*

Livvy whirled around and marched into the living room. She'd spent most of the night kissing him. Still, they'd managed to talk for hours, seated on the wooden picnic table, sharing words and light caresses. She wasn't sure which she'd enjoyed more. When the first brush of dew made her shiver, John had kissed her goodnight, a scorching kiss that left her breathless and eager for more. She'd had multiple erotic dreams about

him all night. Well, he could just stay there, in dreamland, far away from the reality of her bed.

The pages of the pastry magazine blurred under the haze of her anger. She'd learned to swallow many things in life but that was just one thing she couldn't stomach. She'd shared her toys, her clothes and her house but there was no way in hell she could ever share a man. Not even a man she wanted for only a few nights.

Her father's first girlfriend, or at least the first one she'd known about, had also had black hair. It had stood out against the white of his car and the blue of the sky that frosty November morning. Her mother, lips thinned into a tight line, had snapped "Get in the car" and jerked the seatbelt tighter across her little sister's lap.

Andy whimpered, the boys fought for the window seat, and Livvy stood frozen. "Mom, who is th—?"

"I said get in the car!"

Livvy couldn't tear her gaze away from the motel parking lot across the street from the grocery store. They were laughing, kissing, and looked so happy. She had never seen her parents act that way. Her father never turned his head, never looked across the street to see his wife blocking the car window from her younger children. But Livvy saw it all, and a childish

innocence died with a shutting of a motel room door.

Nothing was said on the way home. Her mother grabbed the grocery bags and Livvy herded her brothers and sister inside the quiet house. She stripped off their coats, found cartoons on the television and promised to bring them some cookies if they behaved.

She tiptoed into the kitchen. Her mother stood staring out the window, ignoring the paper sacks of defrosting frozen dinners and marked-down meats. Livvy put the groceries away, filled the cookie jar and took a handful into the living room. Her mother hadn't moved when she returned.

"Mom?"

"He's a good man...most times. He stood by me when I got pregnant with you, and he loves you all. It's been hard but he'd eat dirt before you kids went without."

Just to fill space, to have something to do with her shaking hands, Livvy dumped potatoes in the sink and scrubbed the skins clean. She started dicing them into a pot until she couldn't see for the tears blurring her eyes.

"Are you...are you getting a divorce?"

Her mother sucked back a sob. "And do what? Live on welfare? Get a job waiting tables? Giving half my paycheck to some daycare to raise you

kids? No. Never you mind what you saw. It doesn't mean anything. Never does."

But it had meant something that time. That time, when her parents' loud voices filled the hall after bedtime, she knew why they argued. Pulling the blankets higher on her brothers and looking into their round faces, she made a promise to herself. She would never stand in a kitchen and stare out a window while her man was with someone else. She would never be so dependent on someone else that she turned her head when he came home smelling of perfume. No child of hers would ever lie in bed and listen to her mother's crying.

John could go fuck himself and that little bitch on his deck but he'd never fuck her.

When the phone rang, she snagged it and barked out a greeting.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Hey, Leo, no, I was just watching TV." Livvy used the lie to cover her shaking voice.

"Well, change the channel if it ticks you off that much." His chuckle made her smile. "Look, I know it's short notice but I scored two tickets to the Sunday Smooth Jazz show tonight. Since you're the only other person I know who likes it, want to tag along? We could grab some dinner and make a night of it. Kelsey has to work and, well, she listens to that country crap anyway."

Livvy flashed on John's arm around the pretty brunette and tapered her eyes.

*No harm, no foul.*

"Leo, I'd love to go."

Reflected in the glass, his stony face mocked him like a ghost unable to move on.

"What're you doing, Johnny?"

With one hand, he drummed a steady rhythm on the sketchpad on his knee. He twirled a pencil in the other hand. "Nothing."

Gina peered out the window and then smiled. "Looks to me like you're spying on the neighbors."

"Maybe."

"Which one's your neighbor, the man or the woman?"

"The woman."

"Ah, I see." The smug-attorney tone in her voice irritated him and he shot her a stern look. Gina ignored him and sat on the arm of his easy chair. He shifted to the side so she wouldn't fall off and resumed his surveillance of Livvy and her date.

*Date.* The word sent a tangy jolt of infuriation through him. How could she kiss him breathless and then go out with another man? A fierce sense of possession swelled in him and he fought it like a rabid dog. He had no claim over her, wanted no

claim, but couldn't stomach the thought of her with anyone else. He wasn't the jealous type. His confusion pissed him off.

*God, she looks good.* The pale green dress molded to curves he'd held last night and swished along legs he wanted wrapped around him, legs he'd dreamed of just hours ago. He'd awoken near evening, eager to seek her out. He saw her laugh up into the face of another man through the window and cold shot through him.

He should have pushed for more last night but doubted it would have gotten him anything but a raging hard-on and a cold shower. He knew Livvy's type well. She dreamed of white weddings and baby blankets. Those women, if tempted just enough, loved the forbidden nature of sex without strings. The kind he specialized in. It took more work than a bar pickup, but the pursuit was almost as much fun as the capture.

Livvy, with her sugary skin and her shuddering fight against her own longings, tempted him. Even better, she had a mind that entranced him. Some women were lookers, others were stimulating. Livvy was both—a decadent offering. John never passed up an opportunity for a little indulgence.

John had tried to convince himself they were just friends. Livvy couldn't be going out with someone else after responding to him the way she had last night. She wasn't the cock-teasing kind to

string two men along at once. John never had and never would be on any woman's leash.

But the hours had ticked by and he found himself perched by the window, watching for the strange blue truck. Finally it pulled in front of her house and he nearly sighed with relief until the bastard touched her. It wasn't the passionate clutches John had shared with her, but the man with a crewcut had put his hands intimately on her waist.

Fury laced John's bones as he sat transfixed, watching them like a cranky old man. A quick peek at the clock showed they'd been talking on the front porch for nearly twenty minutes now. Twenty minutes while his gut had spewed bitter anger into his throat.

"So what's her name?"

Gina's question was too light to not be prying. "Olivia and back off, Gina."

She giggled. "Hmm, methinks my brother has a girlfriend."

"No. If she were mine, do you think I'd be letting *that* happen?" He jabbed a finger at the window. Gina peered out just as Crewcut pressed a soft kiss to Livvy's mouth. A guttural growl formed in John's throat and he caught it before it burst from his lips. His eyes saw her with Crewcut and his mind screamed *mine*.



Gina laughed. “Johnny, if she isn’t yours, then why’d the pencil in your hand just snap like a twig?”

At two minutes until eight the next morning, Livvy flipped the deadbolt and turned the laminated sign from CLOSED to OPEN. The door flew out of her hand, the bells banging with a musical clank. John glared at her, his lips white around the edges.

“We have to talk.”

There were four seconds of *Oh my God, he’s yummy* before irritation sprang like a jack-in-the-box. He couldn’t be gorgeous when she was pissy, it wasn’t allowed. She whirled on her heel and walked away. “I’m a little busy right now. We’re just opening and I have clients coming in to discuss a bat mitzvah cake.”

Anger turned his eyes almost cobalt and, despite her agitation, she found them hypnotic. “Livvy, I really think you’d prefer I say what I have to say in private.”

“Fine.” She stomped to the kitchen’s swinging door. “Pam, can you watch the front for a while? I have something to take care of in my office.”

Her office was small and cramped, the desk shoved against one wall while the remaining ones held metal shelves of supplies and specialty molds. She flipped on the light and motioned him in with

a steady hand. He stalked past her, turned and waited for her to close the door.

The instant the latch caught, he roared. "Explain to me what you were doing last night."

She glared at him. "Last night? Let's see, I was eating scampi, listening to jazz and having a grand time."

He growled and stepped into her personal space, towering over her like a drill sergeant. The urge to lean up and kiss him was almost too great to ignore. Nose inches from hers, brows nearly touching, his breath tickled her face. Livid vibrations poured from his body and bounced against hers. His irritation slid off her like water off a slanted roof. She felt no trepidation. An anger that had close roots to desire heated her blood. How dare he judge her actions when he was guilty of the same crime?

"Did he touch you?"

The question was torn from his throat. It excited her on a primal level. A primitive ache formed low in her belly and she tossed her curls and challenged, "What if he did? You don't have a claim, remember?"

His eyes darkened and a shiver licked up her spine. "The hell I don't. I was with you first."

"Piss-poor claim, Murphy. I'm not the last cookie in the jar."

He grabbed the collar of her blouse, wrenched the material to the side and his gaze landed on the bite mark he'd branded her with. Rather than scare her, the move energized her. He was jealous. A zest of hunger flavored her mouth. Fierce need dampened her panties.

"You went to another man with my mark still on you. Why?"

The single word enraged her, inflamed her even as the closeness of his body called to her. "Why not? Like you said, no promises, no heartache. So I went out last night, big deal. And your mark? What am I, cattle? Back it up, cowboy. I'm sure you weren't hurting for company. Not with that little chippy I saw on your deck yesterday. Remember her? The one who was all smiles and laughs? The one you kept pulling closer and hugging? What happened, Murphy, didn't she put out enough?"

"Chippy? What are you talking about? Do you mean my sister?"

"Your sister?" Funny how one word could totally destroy a good mad. Livvy blanched. "You didn't tell me you had a sister."

"You never asked." Rocking back on his heels, John stared at her. "Do you mean you went out with that jackass because you thought...?" He let the sentence hang as she bit her lip in shame. Face tight, his voice rumbled, low and controlled.

“Gina is my sister. She came down to help me get settled in as a surprise. You can meet her in a few minutes. She went to the store and is supposed to pick me up here.”

Livvy sidled around him to her desk and leaned on the edge, one arm across her waist, one hand pressed to her mouth. Guilt swelled inside her. She’d made a mistake and judged him too quickly. Her eyes flew to his. “I’m so sorry. I jumped to conclusions.”

“Yeah, you did, and straight into another man’s arms.”

“It wasn’t like that.” Her protest was cut short as he stepped in front of her and caught her mouth. Brutally, he took from her until she was gasping. Her body burned beneath his touch. She buried her fingers in his hair and pulled him closer. John needed no coaxing. He pushed her back to lie flat on her desk, his hard body covering hers. Papers skidded to the floor and pens dropped like rain. She didn’t care. She just wanted more of him.

His lips caressed hers, his whisper hoarse, rough and tattered. “I want to kiss the taste of him right out of your mouth. Make you forget about him. Did he kiss you like this?”

She nipped his chin and lied. “Yes.”

Warmed with a growl, his kiss burned her lips. She angled her neck, giving him access to her throat. His tongue was hot and slick and he grazed

her with sharp teeth. Gulping air, she twisted beneath him, desperate to feel more of his mouth, more of his fire, more of him. Fire skated along her flesh. His calloused hands cupped her swelling breasts.

“Did he touch you here?”

“Yes,” she lied in an agonized breath that turned to a cry of pleasure when he pinched her aching nipple. How large and hot his palms were. Her back bowed and thrust her breasts into his hands. His tongue trailed down to her breastbone. The V of her blouse stopped his path for only one second before his mouth closed on the throbbing peak. The sensation of his sucking through her clothes ratcheted up the desire to a burning level and she moaned his name.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and arched into him. His groan reverberated in the room and he rose to feast on her lips. He shoved her skirt to her waist, cupping her ass. Raspy words slithered across her skin.

“Here? Did he touch you here?”

“Yes,” she lied again, anything to make him stop the ache he had created inside her. Harshly, he palmed her ass, rocking her against him. The whimper that escaped her was swallowed before it began as his lips caressed her jaw. Firmly, she ground herself into his zipper and he pushed between her legs.

Thoughts fled and only feeling registered. He was as hard as she was wet. Livvy raked her fingers down his spine, gripped his hips and tried to bring him closer. She needed his touch, the feel of him against her. When his hand left her ass, a cry of loss racked through her until his fingers grazed her wet core through her panties.

Snapping her eyes open wide, she locked on to his lusty gaze. She tasted his desire as strongly as her own. It had a unique flavor, like caramel just before it scorched. He swallowed once, his breath ragged.

“Here, Livvy, did he touch you here?”

She let her lip curl into a feral smile. “Yes.”

There was no gentleness as he pushed aside the fabric and plunged inside her. She cried out, not in pain, but in satisfaction. Her clit throbbed and ached as his strong fingers sluiced over it. A fizz of want knotted in her belly and she tensed against him. Frantically she pressed into his hand and clawed at his back. Too fast, too powerful, her senses reeled but he showed no mercy. Her body was his to command.

A split second before she exploded, he seized her mouth and drank in her warbled moan. Release pounded through her body like an electric shock and she gripped his shoulders. He held her trembling thighs while she crested and during her gradual descent.

The knock at the door stilled them both. Livvy's heart pounded so fiercely she had to strain to hear Pam. "Livvy, the Bernsteins are here."

She fisted her hand in his hair, searching for strength to speak. His kiss slid to her jaw and she clung to him. Forcing a swallow down her parched throat, she modulated her voice. "I'll be there in a minute."

John buried his head in the crook of her neck. He caught her hand as she reached below his waist.

"But you didn't—"

"It's okay, Livvy. I didn't plan on this happening. I don't have anything with me and you need to go."

"I feel selfish." She stroked his hair.

"You feel incredible," he murmured, kissing her palm.

Livvy's bones quaked as he helped her to stand and she shimmied her skirt back over her hips. John touched her cheek with a gentle finger and motioned over his shoulder with his head. "You go ahead. I need to stay in here and cool down a bit."

"Murphy."

He walked away and stood with his back to her. Hands thrust into his pockets, facing a candy temperature chart, he blew out several deep, noisy breaths.

“Murphy, about Leo—”

“Livvy, I meant what I said. I’m not looking for forever...but I didn’t like his hands on you.” He turned and the fierce possessiveness on his face riveted her. Those harsh lines around his mouth stood out, daring her to defy him. “I can’t explain it and I don’t know why, but I can’t handle that. I need there to be no promises, no heartache and no other men.”

“No other women either, okay?”

John paused, then dipped his head with a snort. “Sure, why the hell not? You and me, Liv, until whatever the hell this is burns out.”

Livvy grabbed her white chef’s coat off the chair and held it to her heaving chest, knees trembling. Licking her lips, she whisked away the last bit of his taste.

“Leo never touched me. I lied.”

He winked at her. “I know.”

Ben and Ruth Bernstein looked tired and drawn, both with deep shadows under their eyes. At a café table in the corner of the display room, Livvy put a heavy album of cake-design pictures in front of them before taking a chair for herself. She explained her pricing and categories while they watched their daughter with protective eyes.

In one of the stiff-backed waiting chairs, Ashley sat quietly, swinging one leg in boredom.



She only had one leg to swing. The other ended just above the knee and bore the bright scars of recent amputation.

“Ashley, don’t you want to come look at some of the designs?”

Livvy’s heart ached for the woman trying to draw her daughter into the discussion.

“I don’t care. Whatever you want. Like always.” The depression in the young girl’s tone was palpable.

John came through the back and sank into one of the waiting chairs beside her. Ashley didn’t look in his direction but tucked her backpack and forearm crutches closer to her seat.

“Ashley, come look at this Barbie Princess cake. And here’s a really cute soccer one.”

The girl’s face hardened. “I haven’t played with Barbies in years, Mom, and I don’t play soccer anymore either.”

Ruth Bernstein’s eyes filled with tears. Livvy laid her hand on the sad woman’s arm and squeezed. She didn’t know the story but the pain was obvious. Sniffling, Ruth hurried into the powder room while Ben slumped with a dejected air. Livvy’s eyes sought John’s and saw him staring at Ashley speculatively. He pulled her backpack out from beside the chair. His second book, *The Mystical Orb*, was poking out of the front pocket.

Propping her chin on her hand, Livvy watched while he drew the girl into conversation. “Do you like Jondi?”

The girl’s dull brown ponytails swished as she shrugged. “I like Thorn better.”

“Me too. What’s your favorite scene?” John quietly slipped the thick book from the pouch, holding it against his leg.

Ashley stared at him for a long minute before twisting her mouth in contemplation. “When Thorn and Andros are making the fire power potion and it explodes.”

John nodded. Idly, he pulled a pen from the backpack pocket and flipped the book open. The pen began skating along the inside front cover. Ashley watched his hands, her eyes growing wider.

“That was a cool scene.” John’s words provided a backdrop as the pen flew on the page. “The explosion rocked the entire base of Windago Mountain. I liked when Jondi and Thorn finally faced the Serpent King. They could’ve died if they hadn’t trusted each other.”

Ashley shook her head vehemently. “No, Thorn would never let anything happen to Jondi. Remember when he flew through the ice storm with a broken wing? Thorn would die before he let Jondi get hurt. When they drank from the Brotherhood Well, their souls got all mashed

together. They're better than best friends, better than brothers even. Thorn will always protect Jondi, no matter what."

John's hands moved like a bird, quick, darting, graceful. He rarely looked at the page. Instead, he looked at the girl, whose face now shone with interest. Ben stared in wonder.

"Like you said, they're part of each other. When one hurts, so does the other, but Thorn *did* hurt Jondi. He had to pull the poisoned fang out before Jondi died. He hurt him so he could heal."

Ashley scratched her chin and thought. "Yeah, I guess he did."

John smiled and turned the book for her to see. "Thorn's a protector, a guardian to those he loves. When he watches out for you, nothing bad can happen anymore."

Ashley's eyes grew damp and her lip quivered. She looked up at him, hero worship in her eyes. John had worked a bit of magic with that pen, some charm that touched the sad little girl.

"You're him." The girl's soft voice filled with awe. "You're J. B. Flannigan. Mom said you lived around here but I didn't believe her."

"Well, I do. You should always believe your mom. She's part of you, too. She'd never let anything bad happen to you if she could prevent it."

Ashley touched the drawing with timid fingers. "You drew Thorn with his missing ear. No one remembers that."

"It makes things harder for him since he uses his ears like eyes. It takes more work, but he does it. He won't let himself fail. It makes him grumpy, though, when he can't do something. That makes him work harder. And makes him grumpier."

John tugged her ponytail, earning her smile. He handed her back her book and she cradled it open, staring down at the picture. Without looking, she reached for her crutches and slipped the bands over her arms. The rubber tips banged on the floor with a hollow thump as she walked the few paces to her father and showed him the sketch.

Livvy spied Ruth Bernstein over the girl's head. The tired mother had streams of tears on her cheeks as she stared at her daughter, who grinned brightly at her father. Hands steepled to her mouth, Ruth turned to John and mouthed "Thank you." He nodded back.

Dashing tears from her own eyes, Livvy smiled brightly at the girl, who presented her with the book. "Can you do this? I want this on my cake."

In broad bold lines, a huge bat glared. His massive wings were wrapped around a smiling pony-tailed girl with nine freckles. Behind him, a gloomy forest screamed terror but the determination on the bat's face projected security

in his embrace. His ferocious eyes dared anyone to harm his charge. Rather than fear, the image sang with comfort and safety.

Livvy nodded. "Yes, I can do this. It'll be the best bat mitzvah cake I've ever done."

Ashley picked out flavors and colors. She was talking excitedly to her mother about guest lists and decorations when the bells over the door tinkled and a thin dark-haired woman entered. With a smile, she crossed to John and took the seat just vacated by Ashley. The same slant to their eyes and ebony sheen to their hair screamed the familial bond, and Livvy internally winced. Her lust had blinded her to such commonalities.

Livvy wrapped up the Bernsteins' details and Ben walked over to John. The two men exchanged low words and ended their conversation with a handshake. He tried to lead his family out of the store but Ashley turned, hobbled back to John and thrust the book at him.

"Will you sign it?"

With an embarrassed smile, John nodded and scratched the pen against the paper again. The family left and John stood, a dark flush on his cheeks. "Autographs, that's something I can't get used to."

Livvy didn't care who was in the room or who saw. She rounded the counter and reached for him.

Planting a soft sweet kiss on his lips, she blinked against tears she'd been holding at bay.

"You're a remarkable man, John Murphy."

Gina thrust her hand at Livvy and introduced herself. Livvy responded politely but she couldn't take her eyes off John. He had dimensions she'd never imagined. He'd just given a cheerless little girl the tools to pull herself out of a depression and blushed when asked to accept praise. The same hand which had brought her to a shattering climax had empowered a fragile child. What other mysteries was this man hiding?

Gina Salvatori stirred the marinara sauce before adding the chopped basil. Her brother stood beside her mangling an onion. She took the knife from him and shooed him away. He didn't fool her. He hadn't wanted to help with dinner so he made himself a nuisance until she took over.

"I've missed you. That book tour was too damn long. I'm glad I could get away and come help."

"What? We've talked every week."

"Email is not the same. And I'm talking about family time, not you sending me stupid jokes. I miss goofing off with you, and the boys need to spend some time with their only uncle."

"Don't nag. I'll visit at least once a month, promise." John sent her a charming smile, one she

knew to immediately be wary of. "I'll bring them noisy, annoying battery-powered toys so every time you hear them, you'll think of me."

She pointed the sauce-covered spoon at him. "Don't you dare."

He chuckled and, sitting at the bar, grabbed a notepad and drew shapes.

"So anything new and exciting happening in Monsterville?"

His deep sigh made her brows furrow. His jaw worked back and forth before he raised his eyes to hers. "There is absolutely nothing happening in Monsterville. Not a damn thing."

"Oh God, since when?" Her heart lurched. John always had stories to tell. Always her protector, her babysitter and her surrogate father, he'd made her childhood magical and safe. With their upbringing, it was a huge accomplishment. John without words was terrifying.

"A month or so." His voice was low and tinged with ache.

"You're going through a lot of changes. Give it time. It'll come. Don't force it." She squeezed his arm in support. He snorted and his doodles evolved to a bubbling cauldron of bones and onions. "So, tell me about Livvy."

The pencil stopped. "Nothing to tell. You met her."

“She didn’t even know I was in there. She only had eyes for you.”

Her gaze narrowed as he shifted on the bar stool and flipped the paper over to draw more. Shoulders hunched over the paper as if shielding it, he radiated tension. Concentration beyond the simple scribbles lined his face.

Gina cocked her head and stared at him. “Johnny, what color are Livvy’s eyes?”

Softness eased the lines around his mouth and a gentle smile lifted his lip. Delight infused her. “Depends on what she’s wearing. One minute they’re like summer lilacs, the next they’re like storm clouds.”

Gina let him draw in silence for a few minutes while she added the garlic and oregano to the sauce. At times, for her, John had reached mythical status. He was her strong, capable older brother who faced any challenge with fierce determination. He might come out bloody but he’d come out standing. It wasn’t until she was an adult that she realized he came out standing alone. Always.

“Johnny, how many women have you loved?”

His head shot up. “Gina, keep your nose out of my sex life.”

“Not sex, you idiot. You could’ve screwed the entire Miss America lineup and I wouldn’t care.



I'm talking about love. How many women have you loved?"

"You lawyers ask too many questions." He grimaced and turned his attention back to his paper. He focused all his energy on the notebook, the pencil scratching louder, faster. Her question obviously made him uncomfortable but Gina was no longer just his kid sister. She was a grown woman, a wife and mother, and she didn't need a protector anymore. Her life was content and she wanted his to be the same.

"Johnny, you're thirty-eight years old. Don't you think maybe it's time to start looking at settling down?"

"I bought a house, didn't I?"

She smacked the counter with the dishcloth and glared. "Yeah, and your sister came to help you settle in. Do you not see anything wrong with that picture, brother-mine?"

"So leave. I didn't ask you to come down. I could've managed just fine alone. I always do, always will."

He wouldn't raise his head to look at her. Cold dread poured over her. "Oh my God, you believed him."

The pencil stopped but he didn't look up. "I don't know what you're babbling about."

"Yes, you do!" Shock made her skin cool as she looked at him with pity. Maybe her childhood

hero hadn't escaped as unscathed as she thought. "Just because our father was a—"

"He was *not* my father. He was yours, not mine." The quiet words were colored with fury and she swallowed the rest of her protest. His image shimmered behind the tears filling her eyes—tears for John, the man, and tears for Johnny, the little boy.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, turning back to the sauce. Tense silence breathed in the room, a monster from the past. It raged as the bloody red liquid bubbled and brewed. The slam of his deck door made her jump.

The loose deck step provided just the outlet he needed. Screws would be stronger but they didn't have the same therapeutic strength so he slammed nail after nail into the wood. Around the thirteenth nail, he paused and wiped the sweat from his upper lip. *Damn Gina to hell and back.*

He didn't mean that. Hanging his head, he thrust the hammer back into his toolbox and climbed the repaired stairs. Throwing his body into a deck chair, he brooded. Old fears threatened to resurface and he pushed them back with a muttered oath. Some monsters were better left in the closet.

The soft creak of the door let him know his sister approached and he stubbornly turned his

head away. A glass of iced tea appeared and he closed his eyes. She was always trying to take care of him. He took it in one hand and grabbed her wrist with the other. Sliding his hand down to her cool palm, he squeezed. She squeezed back. Just like that, they were all right again and she left him to his thoughts.

He could never stay angry with her. It was for her that Jondi and Thorn and all the rest had been born. Lying in the dark, she would tremble and shake as they listened for the footsteps on the stairs. To distract her, he told long winding stories of magic and triumph until she fell asleep, still holding his hand. Long after she stopped believing in monsters and magic, the tales lived on.

The iced tea was cold in a throat made sore with swallowed memory and he drank deeply to wash the ache away. He set the glass beside the discarded tablet he'd carried outside. He had them all over the house, bought them in bulk. It was a small pleasure to have them handy when the urge hit. He no longer had to hide his work, fear who might take it, twist it to see what they wanted.

A passing cloud shadowed the book as he flipped it open and thumbed to a blank page. He wasn't the type to draw kittens and rainbows. His style was more...sinister. Long ago he'd figured out his brain held far too many dark, disturbing images that required purging, if not through words

then through simple sketches. He'd tossed a few into the envelope when he signed with his agent just to show her what he envisioned with the first book. The next thing he knew, he was illustrating his own stories.

He liked it that way. Not every child lived a saccharine-coated life and identified with all those happy, bright pictures in other tales. Others just liked the impudent twist he placed on everything. John snorted. He was nothing if not irreverent.

The idle scribble took form and he gave a wide berth to his muse. In a few minutes, something stirred in his soul. Broader now, his strokes curved and squiggled on the paper with increasing speed.

Words leaped in his mind like popcorn in a kettle. The ice rattled in the glass as he bumped the table in his haste to get to his computer.

## Chapter Three

Livvy trekked up her driveway, longing for a hot shower and a cool drink. Before she reached her door, her name rang out. She waved to Gina leaning over John's deck railing. The brunette motioned her over and Livvy stifled a groan. She didn't want to make nice with John's sister. She wanted to wilt and wash off six layers of puff pastry but the thrill of seeing John stirred her blood. She hooked a sharp turn and crossed the backyard.

"Hey." Gina smiled. "You look beat."

"I am beat. If I never see another piping bag, I'll be happy. I had a sale going and don't think I sat down once since noon. Good for business, bad for my feet."

"Iced tea?"

Livvy's mouth watered at the thought and she nodded, then followed the woman inside. John's house was larger and more open-layout than hers, with one great room holding dining, kitchen and living space. The furniture was new but comfortable looking and there were no signs of moving boxes anywhere.

“Wow, you must have worked your butt off in here. When I moved in, I lived out of cardboard for weeks.”

Gina laughed and poured two tall glasses of iced tea, moving a sketchpad aside. “Nah, Johnny doesn’t really have much. Bachelor life, you know? He ended up buying a bunch of stuff yesterday and I just told him where to put it.”

“So where is he?”

Gina cocked her head and looked at her for a long beat. Uncomfortable being a bug under a microscope, Livvy took several swallows of the sweet tea.

“Did Johnny tell you he’s had writer’s block lately?”

“Yeah, he said something about that.” Livvy toyed with a droplet of condensation slipping down her glass, tracing wet lines on the counter. Gina seemed very mother-hen-ish as she crooked her finger and led her down a short hall. Gingerly, she opened a door and Livvy peeked in.

John sat at a huge desk, fingers flying over a keyboard. He didn’t look away from the monitor nor did he acknowledge their intrusion. Stony concentration deepened the lines around his mouth and between his brows. The glow from the computer screen reflected off thick gold-rimmed glasses.

"I didn't know he wore glasses," Livvy murmured. Somehow, the eyewear made him seem more approachable, less intense and ultra sexy. She watched for several minutes while he typed at breakneck speed. Those fingers were spinning out magic. She could have watched all night if Gina hadn't closed the door in her face.

"Johnny's blind as a bat without his contacts but staring at the computer dries them out. I always know he's in for a marathon typing session when he puts his glasses on."

*Blind as a bat.* The phrase hung in Livvy's ears and the image of Thorn leaped to her mind. The puzzle that was John Murphy had more pieces than she thought. Luckily, she loved puzzles. But she couldn't figure out why Gina felt it necessary to bring her into this.

"So he's writing again. That's good, right?"

They returned to the kitchen. She angled onto her barstool and picked up her glass.

Gina leaned against the counter. "It's great. It's just, well, it's like he's on an alcoholic bender. He calls it his word rush. I've seen him like this for days. He'll write until he can't see straight, crash for a few hours and then start up again. Forget little things like eating, showering or changing clothes. Only the story matters. He can churn out a hundred pages during these things."

“No offense, but what does this have to do with me?”

“I have to leave in the morning. If I know my brother, he’ll write most of the night before falling into bed sometime tomorrow, unless he just falls asleep at his desk again. Then he’ll start right back at it when his eyes fly open. I’d like you to keep an eye on him. Make sure he eats and maybe washes behind his ears once in a while. At least until he gets out of this word-rush thing.”

The younger woman crossed the room and stared directly into her eyes. Livvy got the sense she was trying to extract a promise and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

She hedged. “Murphy’s a grown man, Gina.”

“The question is, is he your man?”

The bold, direct query sucked the air from Livvy’s lungs. Was John hers? No, he wasn’t. They had something between them, something more than sex. She didn’t know exactly how much more it was. They hadn’t gotten that far yet, but oh, how she wanted to. She wanted it enough to nod. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

The relief on his sister’s face was plain. “Thank you. I know it’s silly. Johnny’s too old for a babysitter but it’d just make me feel better knowing someone who cared was around.”

“No problem.” Livvy shrugged to hide her discomfort and sought to change the subject. She



hiked her thumb back toward the hall. “It’s a little crowded in there. His desk is so huge, I’d feel closed in jammed in that corner. Why’d he put all his weight equipment in the study and not the basement?”

It seemed like an innocent question. There should have been no reason for Gina’s face to freeze into a blank expression but it did. The brunette licked her lips and found the new placemat edge extremely interesting. “Uh, he wants to redo the basement into a larger office later on and add a weight room but for now, Johnny uses it to brainstorm or when he needs to exorcise some demons.”

“Demons? You mean monsters?”

“Those, too.” A wrinkle appeared between her black brows. “Look, I know he’s not an easy man on anything but the eyes, but he’s worth it. You mean something to him and I don’t even think he knows it yet. Just remember that when he gets...” Gina wobbled her head, searching for the right word, “...difficult.”

“Eat.” Livvy smacked the plate on the desk. John’s fingers danced over the keyboard. She’d cut short her workday to rush home to check on him as she promised and found him exactly as she’d seen him last night—same position, same clothes, same frenzied typing.

“Murphy, take a break and eat. Isn’t your ass tired from sitting?”

“Hmm?” he muttered but didn’t slow his pace.

She tried harder. “Murphy, come on. A five-minute break. It’ll do you good, restore the circulation to your legs.”

“Mmm-hmm.” He never took his eyes from the rapidly appearing letters that scrolled across the white screen. Tempted to go find a breaker and flip it, she resisted because if he hadn’t saved recently, he’d be furious at losing the work.

*Well, if I can’t tempt him with food, I’ll try sex. No man ignores a half-naked woman.*

“Murphy,” she singsonged, walking in front of his desk, unbuttoning her blouse. The air conditioning puckered her nipples as she slid the shirt from her arms and draped it over his shoulder. He shrugged it off like a fly, barely missing a stroke.

He hadn’t even looked up. She snatched her shirt from his feet and stormed out the door. The clickety-click of the keyboard followed her out. The sound taunted her all the way to the kitchen where she slapped together a sandwich for herself.

She’d never been outright rejected in an attempt at seduction, no matter how half-assed, and it stung that he preferred hairy monsters and bats over a willing woman. Willing was the key word. The sandwich stuck in her throat and

scratched with her swallow. She was horny. That incredible-but-too-fast orgasm in her office had skyrocketed her hunger and no ham on rye could ease the appetite.

His phone rang. There was no echo from deep in the house so apparently this was the only wired extension. He'd never hear it down the hall, as wrapped up in his writing as he was, so Livvy lifted the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Oh. I was looking for John. Are you...his wife?"

Livvy narrowed her eyes at the cautious feminine voice. "No, may I ask who's calling?"

"This is Karen Edwards. Is John there?"

*Karen who?* "He's busy at the minute. Can I take a message?"

"That's okay, just have him call my cell when he's free."

"Sure, just let me grab a pen to wr—"

The light laughter chilled down Livvy's spine. "Oh, he has the number. Just tell him I owe him a big, fat kiss and to call me."

Livvy stared at the receiver as she hung up. His sister was Gina. He'd said his agent was named Christina. Who the hell was Karen and why did she owe him a kiss? The urge to stomp into his office and ask ripped through her but she fought it. She'd only known him a few days. He had a life

prior to finding her bra, knocking on her door and kissing her senseless in her office.

Jealousy was stupid right now. She'd jumped that gun already. Memories welled of strange women calling, asking for her father, and their occasional astonishment that, yes, Bryan Andrews did in fact have a wife and children. She scrubbed a hand across her eyes. She had to trust John. The phone call didn't mean squat. Karen could be anybody. Livvy had guy friends. Maybe John had a woman friend. As in a nonsexual, not-sneaking-behind-her-back friend.

But then that friend would know he wasn't married, wouldn't she?

Frustration fueled her through the quick dinner cleanup. The constant rhythm of the keyboard grated her stretched nerves. Using too much force to wipe the barely smudged countertop, she knocked a sketchpad to the floor. It landed belly up and the penciled drawing displayed made her stop.

It was her. Well, sort of her. It was her face in caricature, in a fanciful half Dr. Seuss, half Tim Burton style that brought a stunned grin to her face. John had made her a pixie, with tattered wings and a so-what smirk. The pixie's dress was vaguely similar to her tank and cut-offs, had she thrown them through a wood chipper. He drew her in a fresh, sexy-yet-innocent anime way.

Flipping the page, she found hundreds of other drawings—some cute, some macabre, others too strange to figure out.

John's art had a dark take on life yet each doodle hinted at a lighthearted undercurrent. Like the skull with the bleeding, bloodshot eyes holding a daisy between its exposed teeth. Apparently John had been unimpressed by his Chinese meal one night because his Peking duck ended up being a king peeing on an irate feathered bird.

Page after page held glimpses into his mind. Every single piece of paper was utilized. She thumbed through each one, wondering what he was thinking at the minute he'd drawn them. Some he'd scratched out, as if they were unworthy to grace the paper. A few astounded her.

In such simple short strokes, he captured the soul of whatever he sketched. A car looked like it could fly off the page, leaving skid marks. A vine seemed to writhe like a serpent and the geometric design was nearly 3-D. Turning the sketchbook upside down, she tried to figure out what one drawing was. Her lips pursed as she recognized the folds between a woman's thighs. John was not only a wonderful artist, he was all male.

A male who'd just turned down one very real-life horny female.

She slapped the pad on the counter, grabbed her overnight bag, marched into the den and announced her intention of taking a bath...naked...in the master bathroom...alone. Damn him, he never even looked up. She left both his bedroom and bath doors open. John never darkened either one.

The pulsating jets of the Jacuzzi soon lulled her into a calmer state. Frothy liquid rolled over her skin, leaching tensions and annoyances away. She soaked until her fingers and toes wrinkled and her butt got sore from sitting. A vague, low cramp twinged deep in her hips and she groaned, popping out of the tub.

Well, she now had a better explanation of her pissy attitude than just horniness. Cursing fate, she dug in her travel bag for a tampon. Maybe it was a good thing John was so wrapped up with his monsters. It left her alone to battle Kotex.

John's new couch cradled her far too well and she nodded off twice watching reruns. She flicked off the TV and locked the back door. It was near midnight and her eyes drooped. A floppy nightshirt skimmed her thighs and her bare feet made no sound against the carpet. Fighting a yawn, she peeked into the depths of monster central. His typing was slower now. At some point, he'd eaten half the ham sandwich. The stale bread

of the other half slid as she picked up the plate and set a glass of orange juice in its place.

*He looks tired.* His raven hair stood scattered about his head as if he'd run his hands through it several times. The dark shadow of a beard tinged his jawline, made even darker by the shine of his glasses in the computer glow. Livvy's heart softened and she reached to stroke his shoulder.

With a soft cry, his arms flew over his ducked head and his back hunched away from her. The stance twisted her gut. Rather than jump as if startled or even lash out as if scared, John cowered like a kicked dog. Icy pricks of dread burst into her bloodstream.

His breath whooshed out and he whipped around to face her. Fear seeped from his eyes, shame entering before being replaced by a hard, cold spark. The brazen smile was meant to charm but seemed forced and stiff.

"Damn, Liv, you scared the shit out of me. I didn't know you were here." His look bounced from her toes to her face. "Why are you here? In your pajamas?"

"Gina asked me to keep an eye on you, make sure you didn't grow roots in here. I figured it was easier to do if I was just down the hall. Besides, it's Andrea and Tow's anniversary and I wanted to give them some privacy. I didn't think you'd mind."

“Of course I don’t mind but Gina shouldn’t have asked. I’m not a little kid.”

“Karen Edwards called.” She watched for the freezing of muscle, the shift of guilty eyes, the bracing for a fight.

John just yawned. “Oh yeah? What’d she say?”

He stood and stretched powerful arms above his head, bones cracking like dry wood. His arms lowered and circled her waist, pulling her hard to him. Her hands flew to his shoulders. She’d known him only days and already her body responded to his, comfortable in his power.

“She said to call her and she owed you a kiss, a big fat kiss actually.”

A wide smile spread across his face. “Really?”

“Yeah. Who’s Karen?”

“My editor. A big fat kiss means she likes the last rewrites. If she hated them, she’d say she owed me a swift kick in the ass.” He glanced at the timestamp on the computer. “Damn, too late to call her back tonight.”

“It is late. I was just heading to bed.”

“Since you’re ready for bed—” his head dipped to nuzzle her ear, “—think I could interest you in my bed rather than the guest room?”

“Uh, I tried that. You didn’t even look up when I got naked.” The look of confusion on his face prompted a giggle and she brought one hand up to stroke his bristly cheek. “But it’s not going to



happen tonight for three reasons. One, I'm exhausted. Two, you need a shower and three, it's not the right time." His brows shot up quizzically and she rolled her eyes slightly. "Of the month, Murphy. Wrong time."

Understanding dawned and he nodded before bending to take her mouth in his. Light and tender, his kiss fit her mood. His body molded into hers, hard where she was soft, firm where she was yielding. The rightness surprised her. Even his height seemed to fit perfectly with hers, his chin at easy rest on her crown.

He drained the orange juice, then pulled her out of the den and down the hall. The kitchen light shone harshly and he squinted while opening the refrigerator door. His rumbling stomach brought a wry smile to her lips. "If you shower, I'll fix you something to eat."

"You don't have to cook for me, Liv. Despite what my sister thinks, I can take care of myself." He upended the carton of orange juice and drank directly from it. Livvy opened her mouth to protest, then remembered this was his house. He could do as he pleased. His throat moved as he swallowed, and she fought the urge to kiss his Adam's apple. Would the stubble feel like sandpaper under her lips? The imagined coarse sensation spiraled lusty thoughts into erotic visions and she shook her head to clear her mind.

“Did you sleep at all?”

John tossed the carton into the trash and turned to the cabinet. “I conked out for a few hours in the chair yesterday then went to bed this morning for a while.” He dug peanut butter out of the jar with a tablespoon and ate it.

Livvy cringed, took the jar from him and recapped it. He was such a bachelor. “Let me feed you real food.” John leaned on the bar while she scavenged in the refrigerator. “I’m glad you’re over your writer’s block.”

“Yeah, first time that’s happened. I’m not ashamed to say it scared the shit out of me. I don’t like being without my monsters.”

“You talk like they’re real.”

“They are, to me anyway.”

“Hungry enough for pasta?”

“Anything that’s easy, I’m not picky.” He shrugged and flipped through the full sketchpad. He frowned at something then tossed it in the trashcan. He scratched his jaw furiously. “Do you care if I go shower now? I need to shave. My chin is itching like crazy.”

“Go clean up.” She smiled. “Food in five minutes.”

Livvy set leftover marinara sauce to heat and dumped dried bowtie pasta in a pot of water. The sketchpad in the trashcan caught her eyes and she lifted it out. How could he just throw something

full of such creativity away? She opened the book, searching for one picture.

A pixified Livvy stared out at her and she grinned. Did he really think her breasts were that big? And could he possibly draw her eyes any wider? Snorting in soft humor, Livvy tucked the notepad in her oversized purse. His trash was her secret treasure.

After retrieving some sausage from the refrigerator, she sautéed it with onions and peppers. The lateness of the hour dawned on her. This might be too spicy a meal. One flick switched the burner off and she went to ask about his stomach's tolerance.

She peeked around the half-open bedroom door, listening for the shower. Silence met her and she frowned. The bathroom door stood ajar and she didn't want to barge in. He'd probably left it open out of habit, not spiteful invitation as she had.

"Murphy?"

"Yeah?"

"You decent?"

"Depends on who you ask. Door's open though." Livvy crossed the bedroom and stuck her head inside. John stood at his bathroom vanity with a deep green towel wrapped around his hips and his eyes closed, a bottle of contact solution in his hand.

Sexual awareness slammed into her like a bulldozer. Construction work had done wonders for his body. A thin white line above the towel edge suggested he spent long hours outdoors shirtless. The dark hair on his chest was neither too thick nor too thin. It was just enough to make her follow the narrowing arrow down to where it disappeared beneath the terrycloth low on his hips. It would be so easy to begin at his neck and travel that path downward with her fingers or her mouth.

*Follow the yellow brick road...*

She yanked her gaze back to his face and forced the pictures from her mind. Blinking several times, he set the bottle aside and reached for a can of shaving cream. As a small child, Livvy had loved watching her father shave. It seemed like a magic trick when his smooth cheeks would appear.

“Can I watch?”

John raised his eyebrows. “I guess. Nothing exciting, though. Just me, a razor and two days’ worth of stubble. I always get shaving cream on my glasses so I had to pop my contacts in first. Besides, showering blind sucks. Thank God for extended-wear lenses.”

“I like your glasses.”

“Contacts are safer, can’t get knocked off your face.”

Livvy shrugged. She supposed working in construction had made that a concern. The white foam hissed into his palm. He lathered his face as she watched in fascination. The razor slid down, stroke by stroke, removing the whiskers and revealing smooth wet skin. His head rose to skim the blade down his neck and her tongue flicked out as if to taste the slick flesh. The sandpaper had been transformed to what, silk? Velvet? Supple suede?

*This is ridiculous.* Shaking her head, she remembered why she came back here. “Are sausage, peppers and onions too spicy for you this late?”

He shook his head while dragging a hand towel across his now smooth face. He caught her eyes in the mirror. His mouth split into a wolfish grin. “I like spicy.”

It should be illegal to be so damn sexy on so little sleep. Her feet itched to walk to him, to loosen his knotted towel and steam up the bathroom without water. But she couldn’t so she backed out of the room. His chuckle followed her.

By the time he rejoined her in the kitchen, she had his meal ready and her hormones under control. One was an easier task than the other. Thankfully, he was dressed in a pair of gray sweats and a black tee shirt. He looked at the food on the dining table and shook his head.

“Damn, Livvy. I’d have been fine with a bowl of cereal. Thank you. You didn’t have to do all this.” He smiled before sitting down.

Pure satisfaction filled her and she brought the parmesan cheese to the table. Pulling one leg under her chin, she sat across from him and sipped a mug of green tea. “It wasn’t any trouble. Gina made the sauce. I just boiled and sautéed some stuff and boom, dinner. Easy.”

Freshly scrubbed and fed, he didn’t seem very menacing. He simply reeked of sex appeal. His eyes caught her gaze and he held a fork up, offering her a bite with raised brows. The invitation was for more than food. He flirted even without words. But his words entranced her when spoken in a rich butterscotch voice.

“This is good. So are you a *chef* chef or is pastry chef a whole different animal?”

“I took the core courses but specialized in pastry early on.” She wrinkled her nose at him over her cup. “I like the sweet stuff.”

“And I like the spicy,” he teased, spearing a bright red pepper.

“Remind me and I’ll bring you a Chocolate Orgasm.”

His fork halted in front of his mouth. “Chocolate orgasm? They come in flavors now? Damn, I didn’t think it had been that long since I got laid.”

Livvy laughed. "It's a brownie, dummy. Dark Belgian chocolate, chili pepper, and...well, it's a spicy sweet. I think you'll like it."

"Liv, I'll like any flavor orgasm you give me."

She shook her head, hiding her smile. "Eat your pasta."

"You're bossy." He chuckled.

Her brow arched. "I'm the boss. That's what I do. I boss and bake."

"Always?"

"Pretty much. You could say I grew into it. Mom and Daddy...they didn't have the best marriage. And my mother was not the world's greatest cook. More than once we had Cheerios for dinner. I hung out in the kitchen to stay out of their way. After a while, I started reading cookbooks. Cooking kept me busy, kept me from feeling too much. I just kept doing it until I was doing it all the time, every meal."

"Sucks having to be a grownup when you're still a kid, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does." They shared an understanding smile. "You too?"

He nodded. "Worked under the table from the time I was thirteen. Started with picking fruit crops, moved to stocking grocery stores, then... Yeah, it sucked. But money was tight so every bit helped."

"Same here, especially after my father died."

“Sorry. When was that?”

“I was fourteen. Mom just...she’d never worked outside the house and suddenly, there she was with four kids and a mortgage. She panicked for a while but finally calmed down and decided we were going to shoestring it out on Daddy’s life insurance while she went to school. She became a CPA and I played stand-in Mommy until I was old enough to get a part-time job at a bakery. I found out I loved it and was good at it. So I went into a mountain of student-loan debt and the Culinary Institute. And here I am. Boring, huh?”

“Nothing about you bores me, Livvy. You use the kitchen like I do my stories, a place to escape, be your own lord and master.”

John had framed her feelings so perfectly, she smiled. “Yeah, I do. The kitchen has always been my safe place, where I find my grounding when life gets messy.” Her smile slid off her face. “I just hate when the messy seeps into the business.”

“Problems?”

One shoulder shrugged to hide her discomfort. He made it feel so right to just pour out her troubles to him, she hadn’t censored her mouth. “Just the economy and business is a little slow right now. I mean, the Shack is doing okay. I’ve got regular restaurant clients who are the backbone. I just wish the sidelines were doing better. I guess those lean years at home hit too



close. I like a blacker bottom line than I have right now.”

John angled his head, looking under the table. “Your bottom line looks fine to me.”

She scowled and he laughed. She rose for more tea, her hand automatically stroking his shoulder. The memory of his cringe stilled her walk.

“Murphy, when I touched you in your st—”

John held his hand out. It sank slowly to the table. Eyes transfixed on his now empty plate, he spoke to the marinara smear, not to her.

“You have to understand, Livvy. I write some dark stuff, a magical world that only exists between my ears until I pull it out. To do that, sometimes I get pretty deep inside my monsters’ heads. Listening to them isn’t enough. I have to feel what they feel, see what they see. Sometimes, I have to *become* the monster. You just walked in on a tense moment, that’s all.”

He was lying. The certainty fell on Livvy like a rock. But the lie was so convincing she wanted to believe it. Stepping behind him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged. He stroked her forearm with one hand. His damp hair tickled her cheek and her eyes squeezed shut. If he needed to lie, then the lie she would allow.

For now.

The mood changed like the flip of a switch. He pulled her around to sit on his lap. The burn of

peppers burst into her mouth as his tongue stroked hers. She lost track of time or perhaps it stood still. All that existed was John's mouth on hers, their tongues married in an erotic foreplay dance, and the increasing staccato of her heart.

Strong hands slid down her arms to cradle her braless breast and pull her snugly to him. The scent of minty shaving cream lingered on his jawline as she nibbled to his ear. Her path was cut short when he rolled and pinched her aching tip. She hissed in pleasure. She felt him thicken under her thighs. She was too weak for this temptation.

"You feel so good, Livvy. And you always taste like sugar. So sweet."

She stilled the fingers at her breast. "Murphy, stop. We can't."

"We could," he tempted, nuzzling her cheek.

"We're not." Rather than pull away, she circled his shoulders with her arms and buried her face in his neck. John wrapped his arms tighter and held her. She swallowed her own desperate appetite. As he relaxed under her, she melted into his frame. She laid her head on his shoulder and breathed in the soft fragrance of soap and spice. One finger ran up and down her arm, the slow trek seeming to hypnotize him.

"I'm tired."

“I bet. Why don’t you go on to bed? I’ll clean this up then I’m headed there myself. Morning comes too early.”

His eyes lifted and locked with hers. The embrace shifted from easing lust to comfort to something deeper, something fragile and sacred. She pulled back and searched his face for a change, an explanation of the magic he’d spun from air. All she saw was the blue of his eyes as they worshipped her with a reverence she had yet to earn.

Something lurked in his exhausted gaze, a need, a question she couldn’t fathom. Livvy got the strongest sense he was afraid and clinging to her like a child’s security blanket. She quirked one brow, inviting his words. He dipped his head until he could press his cheek to her shoulder.

“Will you sleep with me, Livvy? Just sleep? I promise I’ll behave.”

His words turned her stomach to warm pudding. He craved her touch, not her flesh. She wasn’t lusted for, just cherished and needed. Her throat choked with a tenderness no words would form. She walked shaky fingers through his hair and down his cheek before she nodded.

Shutters dropped over his eyes but not before Livvy glimpsed the unspoken gratitude. He’d thought she might refuse him. Somehow, his plea

now meant more, as if she'd honored him with her presence. He humbled her.

She held him close a long minute before they rose and went to bed, the dishes still on the table. She slipped into his bathroom, reemerging to find him straightening the rumpled blankets. The alarm clock on the left told her John's preferred side of the bed and she went to the right. She crawled in and rolled to face the wall as he took his turn in the bathroom. He didn't speak when he returned, flipped off the lamp and slid beside her. His arm curled around her hip. Within minutes of crawling beneath the sheets, his breathing leveled into a deep rhythm but he never released her.

The tiny hairs on his arm tickled her fingertips in the dark. It had been so long since she'd slept beside a man, she marveled her nerves weren't twanging. But John kept his promise and hadn't pushed once they lay down. This simply felt right, being here in his arms while the hushed night surrounded them.

Sleep came slowly. Just as the softened edges touched her, John jerked. A stuttered catch to his breathing opened her eyes and Livvy looked over her shoulder. A deep line sliced into his brow as his eyelids pinched tight, his lips moving in muttered syllables.

"Murphy?" She rolled to face him. The garbled whisper was beyond her comprehension but the

emotion came through clearly. John's nightmare reduced his voice to a frightened child. His knees drew up between them, and his shoulders hunched, rounding his back. The position chilled her.

"Shh, it's okay. It's just a dream." Shushing him with gentle words, her hand landed on his cheek. He shied away from her touch, curling tighter into himself. He trembled, fine shivers that racked his entire body.

"Hurts," he mumbled.

"What hurts, Murphy?"

"Stop, please."

"It's okay." Tears sprang to her eyes and she blinked the burn away. The broken noises sounding from his chest stabbed into hers with a physical ache. Leaning over his knees, she rubbed her nose along his. "Nothing can hurt you now. I'm here, Murphy. You're safe with me."

He nuzzled her nose then pulled her close. Even asleep he had strength, and the crushing hug forced the air from her lungs. She didn't care and clung back, holding him as tight as she could. He didn't let go even as he slid deeper into sleep.

It took far longer for Livvy's heart to slow and her muscles to relax. Whatever demons lurked in his past still had a firm grip on his memories, and Livvy squeezed harder, wishing she could take the hurt away. She eased the sheet up, tucking it under her chin, covering him with her body and

the blankets. The last conscious thought in her mind was that they were wrapped in Thorn's wings and nothing could harm them as long as they never let go.

The thick mist lay like cotton over the forest floor and made his fur soggy. Jondi shivered. Something skittered under a rock in front of him and he jumped. He was good and lost, all right. Nothing around him seemed familiar. The trees moaned with an eerie wail and the wind cackled in his ears. Head ducked against the gust, one hand clamped on his ball cap, he wished Thorn were near. He wished anyone was near. It was cold and frightening here. He wanted to go home.

His stomach ached and his head hurt. He was starting to feel like he'd never see home or his friends again. The journey back from Poddlemat had never taken him this way before. Unsure exactly how he'd become lost, he didn't know which way to turn. He'd been walking for so long, he no longer knew how far he was from Windago Mountain. He didn't know how long ago he left the main path or how he'd gotten so deep into the Hidden Dell. The tall spindlewood trees with the high canopies of leaves blocked every marker he could think

to search for—the mountain peaks, the Mother Star, even the Great Blue Moon was hidden by leaves.

Blackbirds shot through the treetops as a high-pitched keen rang out. The sound sent shivers of snow through his belly and he ran. The laces of his sneakers dragged in the mud and slapped his ankles as he tore through the thick underbrush. Knapsack thudding on his back, he ran and ran. He thought he was running from the awful sound, but with the trees wailing and the echoing wind, instead he ran straight toward it. In fact, he nearly tripped over it. He skidded to a stop just before he crashed into it.

Not it.

Her.

Sniffling and shaking, a pretty girl monster was curled into a ball on the forest floor. Tears of pure glitter streaked from her wide violet eyes as she looked at him. Fur the color of pale pink tulips was peppered with mud and sticks while leaves clung to her long purple ponytails.

“Please don’t hurt me.”

Her whimper made Jondi’s chest ache. No one had ever been afraid of him before. He tried to stick out a hand, to show her he

didn't mean her harm, but she cowered against a log. Long wet lashes fluttered as she squeezed her eyes shut tight. Tiny tears fell anyway, darkening the fur of her cheeks.

Searching for a way to reassure the frightened little monster, he scuffed his sneakers in the loose dirt of the Dell floor. Dozens of tiny glossy stones in a dove gray caught his attention and he idly scooped them up. Smooth and cool, they warmed between his fingers.

"Are you lost?" Jondi shoved the rocks in his knapsack and sat on the log beside her. Each ponytail bounced wildly as she nodded. "Me too. Are you scared?"

The lavender hair bobbed.

"Yeah, me too. Maybe we can work together and find a way out of here. My name's Jondi."

Pale purple eyes as wide as Higonda Gap stared up at him. "My name is Vory."

John rubbed the cramp in his hand and reread the first chapter, smiling in satisfaction. The first draft was pouring out like no other book had. Vory had leaped to his mind like a flaming cannonball. He couldn't type fast enough for her. Jondi was instantly smitten with the little girl monster but



Thorn was not impressed. Thorn was downright mean to her.

This was proving to be an interesting development. John liked to set the stage, throw his monsters in as much trouble as he could, and watch them work their way out of it. This time was no different.

Except Thorn kept stepping out of character. He'd found the two lost monsters and, in the process, gotten lost as well, his radar completely useless in the mystical Dell—a fact he never failed to throw in Vory's face with a biting sarcasm. Only once did Jondi point out that Thorn had gotten lost looking for him and Vory had nothing to do with it. The big bat had snapped his dark violet wings and zipped straight up into the air, leaving a confused blue monster staring after him.

Writing by the seat of his pants could be a harrying trip, but John loved the surprise he felt as his characters found their own paths. Often they veered to the left but so far, they'd always had a reason. Sometimes they just waited until the last few chapters to let him know what that reason was. So Thorn's behavior, while strange, wasn't too unsettling to him. They always figured it out.

The original sketch of Vory lay beside the computer and he picked it up with a frown. She reminded him of someone. Vory had been born of

the healing after his spat with Gina. Once he'd added color, she oozed with life. Clad in a pale pink skirt, she flirted with him from the page, looking up bashfully from beneath long curled lashes. No other character, except Thorn and Jondi, was as real to him. Vory could walk into his study now and crawl on his lap and it wouldn't surprise him at all.

Monsters were more real to him than most people anyway.

A quick glance at the clock showed he had about fifteen minutes until Livvy called. He pulled out the colored pencils, intent on starting an illustration for chapter four. The next time he looked, he had twelve minutes left. He leaned back with a frustrated grunt and tossed the pencil against the desk. Damn, Livvy had wormed her way into his daily routine and he actually liked it.

This story was doing something to him. It dredged up old feelings, old memories he'd thought were buried too deep to crawl out. The nightmares had come back, but apparently he hadn't talked in his sleep this time. Livvy never mentioned a word, rushing out to work the next morning with a sweet kiss.

Letting her go had been difficult, though. She stirred an emotion in him no one ever had...security. It hadn't faded. She called him twice a day on breaks, by request, and would

bring home something sweet for dessert. They'd make dinner in his kitchen, talking late into the evening before ending up making out on the couch like horny kids. She left him hard and wanting, hinting at more to come.

With any other woman, he'd have walked by now. John did not play hard-to-get sex games. But with Livvy he was reluctant to push. Before, pursuit was fun, short and sweet. Flag 'em, tag 'em and bag 'em, his construction buddies had teased him. He targeted only a certain type of woman and always let them know the score. Livvy threw that game plan out the window, and he had no idea why he not only allowed it but was relishing it.

Hell, they'd slept together and he'd brought her to an orgasm but they hadn't yet had sex. How twisted was that? John stared at the phone, thumbing his lip as he wondered at his own patience. With a sardonic snort, he realized he was as lost as Jondi.

The ringing phone jolted his pulse to a jump. If he was lost, he'd rather be lost with Livvy than alone. The hand poised above the phone shook with his realization. A swift breath halted the tremor. He refused to examine something that went against everything he knew about himself, hitting the talk button instead.

Her soothing alto caressed his inner monsters,  
making them purr like kittens.

## Chapter Four

Rough gravel stones weighted the wedding plans spread out across the picnic table. Andrea compared guest lists and seating charts while Livvy sketched out sample wedding cakes. She held one up for her sister to see, and Andrea took a bite of her ruby-red Popsicle then wrinkled her nose.

“Too flowery. I want sleeker, more upscale.”

Livvy tore the page with a loud rip and crumpled the design into a ball. She might not have John’s level of raw talent but she could draw cake designs with the best. This was her wedding gift to Andrea and Tow, saving them the expense of a professional cake. She also stopped charging Andrea rent after Tow proposed, covering all her living expenses so her sister could funnel all her cash into her wedding. Would it kill Andy to be a little grateful? Livvy tossed the drawing to join the dozen other crumpled balls on the table. *Spoiled little Bridezilla much?*

The incessant banging on the roof drew her attention. She craned her head up and shaded her eyes with her hand. “How bad is it?”

John's dark head appeared in the horizon. The low-slung tool belt drew her gaze to the tight muscles of his stomach, bare in the late afternoon sunshine, and her tongue flicked out. *God, I want to eat him up.*

"Not too bad, actually. Just a couple shingles and the flashing needs replaced. An hour or two, max, but it needs done soon or you're going to end up with a leaking roof."

His work boots stomped down the ladder, the metal shimmying and shaking. Her stomach did the same, thanks to that fine ass moving beneath his jeans. He grabbed his discarded shirt and wiped the sweat from his face. Livvy caught Andrea's laughing eyes and theatrically fanned herself. The younger woman giggled as John approached.

"What's so funny?"

Livvy bit her lip as Andrea boldly lied to his face. "Oh, just seating charts and stuff."

Shrugging, he turned to Livvy. "If you want to go now before they close, we can get the shingles and I can finish up tomorrow. They're calling for rain in the next few days."

"Sure. Let's go."

"Let me run home and grab a clean shirt. Back in a minute."

Both women watched him walk away. Andrea whistled. “God, Liv, he’s like a brownie—hot, sinful and full of dark chewy chunks.”

“Now you know why I can’t wait to get home from work. I’m a major chocoholic.”

Andrea fixed her with an intense stare before cocking her eyebrow. Two careful bites of frozen ice got chewed. “So is it good?”

A blush warmed her cheeks that rivaled the afternoon sun. She sipped her iced coffee to help hide the burn. “I don’t know yet. Aunt Flow came for a visit and I haven’t told him she left.”

Her sister shook her head in sympathy. “You mean you haven’t gotten any? That sucks.”

“Yeah, well, good things come yaddah yaddah yaddah. I’m prolonging the main event, enjoying the trip so to speak.”

“I thought this was a pure sex thing between you two, a booty-call deal. What’s going on?”

Livvy toyed with her mug. The ice cubes were disintegrating, sliding into the creamy liquid surrounding them, slowly and ever so subtly changing the consistency of the drink. “I don’t know exactly. It started that way. But things have sort of...changed.”

“Like how?”

Livvy propped her chin on her hand and looked over at John’s deck, watching, longing, hoping.

“It’s kind of complicated to explain. He’s got all these layers, you know? We talk. I bet I’ve burned more cell minutes this week than I have all summer just talking to him while I’m at work. He’s funny, once you cut through the bad-boy image, although his wit is sarcastic. And he’s a softhearted person, but he’d be pissed if I said that out loud. Watching him laugh is like, well, it’s amazing. You can tell he doesn’t laugh much but when he does, it changes his whole face.”

“Oh my God, you’re falling for him.” Andrea, red dripping down her hand, gaped at her as if she’d grown three heads.

Livvy wished she could deny it. Falling for John wasn’t smart; it held risks she was unfamiliar with. He made her pulse race and her stomach lighten with just a look, a touch. A smarter move would be to walk away, find someone less intense, less provoking.

Instead, a fierce strength swelled in her chest and she fixed her sister with a steady stare. “Maybe I am. It’s so early, who knows. I just know that whatever’s happening feels good and I’m not stopping it.”

Livvy heard John’s door close, bid a hasty goodbye to her sister and dashed inside to grab her shoes and wallet. She met him at the border of their properties. Just watching him descend the



stairs had made her appetite flutter. “We’re taking your truck?”

He nodded and in minutes backed out of the driveway. Livvy sneered at his radio station and flipped it. He flipped it back with a grin. They repeated the jostle five times until his hand on her knee stilled the battle. His smile made her lungs freeze despite the heat index.

“My truck, my music.”

“Redneck.”

“Proud of it.”

At the home improvement store, she laced her fingers in his and he squeezed her hand. Contentment kicked through her system like caffeine. Who knew shingle shopping could be the best date she had ever had?

The smell hit him like a front-end loader, English Leather and peppermint. A chill formed in his gut and spread out like a cancer, consuming him. John drew a shaky hand down his clammy face and looked around for the monster that couldn’t be there. Across the checkout register, one aisle over, a man with a cane paid for petunias. The elderly man smiled wide, showing yellowed and missing teeth. Against his chill, a raging fire erupted in John’s belly as nausea blanketed him. He had to get out of there. Now.

"I'll wait at the truck." He ignored Livvy's confused frown and barreled through the automatic doors. Dry heat smacked him in the face and he gulped burning lungfuls of air sprinting to the Ford. His heart pummeled his chest wall harder than a jackhammer. He bent at the waist, hands on knees, to inhale and exhale slowly.

Gradually his heart rate slowed, his breathing moderated and he climbed into the driver's seat. Logically, he knew what happened. Scent was the single most powerful trigger for memories, he'd read. The demonstration of that trigger just took him by surprise. He hadn't smelled that combination in twenty years.

"Hey, what happened in there?" Livvy's voice jerked his head to the open passenger window. The wind tossed her hair, and her eyes filled with concern.

"Just the heat." The lie came easily. "Hop on in while I load up, okay? And fingers off the radio or you walk home. This truck is a no-pop zone."

*It worked.* She smiled and opened her door as he climbed out. He scooped the heavy pack off the wheeled trolley. The shingles hit the truck bed with a hard thump. It was a sound he was intimately familiar with.

Livvy worried her lip and studied John. *What happened?* The earlier trip had been full of teasing and affection. Now tension and dark foreboding seethed in the truck cab. His jaw worked side to side and she could hear his teeth grinding. Every muscle in his body was tight, prepared for battle. He never took his eyes off the road, brows pulled hard to the center.

She tried to draw him from his mood by flipping the radio channel. He didn't respond. She turned the music back with a sigh and looked out the window. The scenery zipped by at an amazing clip. Snapping her eyes back to him, she noticed the speedometer. Seventy.

"Murphy, slow down. There are always cops through here."

His expression never changed but his foot fell on the accelerator. The massive engine purred like a satisfied cat and leaped. Eighty.

"Murphy! Come on, stop it."

Lip curled, he pushed even more and the vehicle soared past a line of cars. Eighty-five and climbing.

"I mean it. Slow down."

Cold fury radiated from his fierce eyes and he glared at the road as if it were the enemy. Along his neck, below his ear, a dark vein stood out as he gritted his teeth and punched the motor. Flashing lights whirled in the rearview mirror

with a siren's quick, loud *chirrrrrrrrrp* and his eyes snapped up. "Shit!"

"What the hell did you expect?" she screeched.

The truck slowed and pulled to the side of the road. The familiar silver-and-black Crown Victoria coasted to a halt behind them. Livvy stared in the rearview mirror as a certain North Carolina State Trooper approached the truck.

*Oh, this could be bad. Really, really bad.*

John rested his wrists on the top of the steering wheel and closed his eyes. The tightly controlled blankness on his face couldn't hide the blazing anger singing from his body. Livvy wished she were anywhere but here at this minute. She turned to face her window when the trooper stepped to the driver's side.

"Sir, your license and registration, please." She felt John shift and heard the visor in front of her flap down but she didn't turn around. "Sir, do you realize you were going ninety-one... Livvy?"

Livvy pasted on a bright wide smile and turned around. "Hey, Leo."

On the steering wheel John's knuckles went white but he showed no other reaction. So far he hadn't uttered a sound, and Livvy doubted any could escape the rigid cords of his throat. The confusion on Leo's face slid to trained speculation. He shifted a look from her to John and back.

“Everything all right?” His voice was neutral but she caught the look of concern in his eyes.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” Her voice cracked, too high and too fast, and deliberately took a quick breath. “Murphy’s working on my roof for me. We had to get some shingles before Lowe’s closed. Hey, you have to stop by the Shack tomorrow. I’m making chocolate-chip baklava, your favorite.”

*I’m rambling. I’m rambling, Murphy’s got a bug up his ass and Leo’s worried. One is pissed and the other has a gun. Happy happy joy joy.*

Leo’s gaze narrowed, judging her words, then moved to study John. John stared directly ahead, his fists squeezing the steering wheel. Leo held John’s license up, his eyes bouncing silently between the card and the man for a long minute before he lowered the plastic. Once more his gaze settled on Livvy. He gave her a small smile.

“I’ll be sure to swing by and get a piece. I do love your baklava.”

Holding the registration and license out in two fingers, he offered them back to John. Just as John moved to take them, Leo flipped them back toward his palm. Livvy groaned mentally. *Not now, Leo. Please, none of this macho bullshit.*

“Y’all have a good day. And slow down.”

John took his papers and nodded tightly. Leo touched his campaign hat brim and nodded back

before looking at Livvy. The look he sent her was pure warning. "I'll call you, Liv."

John put the truck in gear and pulled back into traffic at a legal speed. The tic that appeared in his jaw enthralled her. He stayed silent for several tense minutes.

"I'd have paid the damn ticket, Livvy. You didn't have to flirt my way out of it." His voice was gravel and bit the air with friction.

She swung her head and glared. "I wasn't flirting, and if you'd slowed down when I asked, you wouldn't have gotten stopped."

"What? And missed meeting the famous Leo? Hell, no, wouldn't have missed that experience for the world. Think he'll call you tonight? Or will he wait until tomorrow? He want more than chocolate chips with his baklava?"

The sarcasm was too much. Whatever strain had filled the cab had seeped into her skin and she lashed out. "All right, you know what? You're a dick. He's a friend, that's all. Grow up, Murphy."

"Right, a friend," he sneered. "I saw you kiss him."

"So what do you want, a cookie?" Livvy shoved her hair off her forehead. "It was a peck between friends, that's it. I've done a hell of a lot more with you, although at this minute, you couldn't pay me to kiss you."

John shot onto a side street. He slammed the truck into park, released his seatbelt and whirled in one motion. His kiss stole the gasp from her throat. The center console bit into her hip as his tongue slid between her lips. She tried to hold on to her anger, but it proved too difficult.

“Murphy—”

“I’m sorry, Livvy. I just...got jealous and I’m being a bastard.” With her forehead against his, she felt him force the stiffness from his body. The hand from her nape sank into her hair and he squeezed his eyes tight. “Forgive me?”

Livvy pulled back and shook her head. “You confuse the hell out of me, Murphy. You’re so easy to get pissed at and yet so easy to forgive. By now, you have to know I don’t want any other man. This isn’t about Leo. What happened back there? What made you so upset?”

“Let it go, Liv, okay? I’m sorry.” The smile he sent was dazzling, brilliant and as fake as a three-dollar bill.

The message rang loud and clear. *Back off.*

The shingles package bit into his shoulder as John hefted it up and slammed the tailgate shut. A lightweight flashing was coiled in a cardboard box and Livvy carried it easily across the lawn. Angry voices halted them both.

“How come you get a five-thousand-dollar dress and I have to eat chicken? Get a cheaper gown and a better menu.”

Tugging on John's arm, Livvy pulled him toward the house. He dropped the shingles as softly as possible and followed her into the kitchen.

“Barbie and Ken fight much?” He motioned out the window to the backyard-turned-battleground. Ever since Livvy had confided her secret comparison to him, he couldn't stop mentally seeing the two wearing bathing suits and standing in little cardboard boxes.

“Not usually, but Andy's being a bit of a control freak with the wedding. Want some lemonade?”

He accepted just to have something to do with his hands. His skin crawled with the intensity of his earlier anger. He'd been looking forward to maybe swinging the hammer before the last of the daylight faded. Giving the arguing couple space seemed a smarter move but his mind shifted from anger to sex with lightning speed. The surplus adrenaline coursed through his veins like a drug, heightening his awareness.

Livvy flitted around the kitchen, chattering, but he couldn't focus on her words. Her ass was a different story. The firm rounds of her butt pressed against her capris as she bent to pull



something out of the cabinet. On any given day, if he were asked his favorite part of a woman's body, he'd give a different answer. Legs, breasts, ass, he liked it all. But with Livvy there was something sensual about her, something just a tick over beautiful that made him instantly hard. He wanted her like mad. Just the memory of the soft sounds she made when she came on his fingers made his cock jump.

He ripped his eyes from her body and concentrated on her face before he had a visible erection. No sense browsing when the merchandise wasn't available yet. Her full lips moved as she spoke but he wasn't listening. He imagined them sliding along his skin. Something she said must have been funny because she laughed, tossing her head back and exposing her throat. A knot grew in his gut at the expanse of creamy skin. He wanted to bury his head there, lap the sugar from her body until she begged for more.

*This is not working. I need to burn off some energy fast.* John pressed the icy glass to his forehead and tried to think about gas prices, changing the oil in his truck or how much his ticket would have been. Nothing would erase the erotic image of Livvy naked, those violet eyes pleading for him to take her. That image morphed into angry brown eyes, spitting fire.

Everything got too loud. The refrigerator hummed like a bee. The swoop-click of the second hand on the clock grated and he swallowed. His pulse rate jumped, booming in his ears like a kettledrum. Sweat popped along his upper lip. His gaze flicked to the doorway. Three steps and he could be out of the kitchen. Another forty-four steps to his deck staircase. Less than a minute and he could be in his house, safe and in control. His feet twitched to move.

The patio door shot open and John bolted straight, his grip nearly shattering the glass in his hand. Without thought, he put his body between Livvy and the door.

“Divorce attorneys should never get married anyway so maybe there won’t be a wedding. How’s that for a compromise?” Tow threw over his shoulder. He left the patio door open and stalked down the hall. Eyes wide, Livvy hurried into the back yard.

John crossed to the counter and peeked out the curtained window. Andrea was crying, her head bent into her arms. Livvy rubbed her shoulders as her mouth worked soundlessly. *Yeah, two emotional women, time to bail.*

Tow stormed up the hall carrying a gym bag overflowing with clothes. The deep flush on his face was almost comedic but there was nothing funny about the wrath in his eyes. He jammed the

bag onto the counter. “Want to go grab a couple beers?”

Alcohol sounded fucking perfect right now. “Yeah. Let me tell Li—”

“Don’t do it, man. Escape the noose while you can. Before you know it, you’ll have to ask permission to take a leak and she’ll have your balls in her purse, too. Screw it, let’s just go.”

“It’s after 2 a.m., Liv. He’s been gone for hours. He won’t answer his phone. He’s left me, I know it.”

Livvy rubbed her eyes. Her baby sister was a melodramatic mess. When they found Tow’s overnight bag, Livvy had taken it as a good sign. Andrea had nearly collapsed with her wailing. She had barely stopped all night and Livvy had a raging headache because of it. The living room was dark except for the muted TV, and the flickering light aggravated her throbbing temples.

Curled on the chair by the window, Andrea watched the empty street. She cradled her cell phone in the hope Tow would call. She’d already irritated her coworkers by calling the hospital three times to check the patient list for his name. He wasn’t in jail. He wasn’t in the morgue.

“Was I being that bad about the wedding?” Andrea looked at her with swollen red eyes.

Livvy longed to lie to her but knew it wouldn't be doing her any favors. "You are a bit of a Bridezilla, Andy. Just stop trying to make everything so perfect. You're marrying the man you love. That's what's important."

"Not if he's left me. I chased him off. And he took your boyfriend with him."

Livvy opened her mouth to deny that John was her boyfriend but stopped. What was he to her? He wasn't her lover. He wasn't her boyfriend. He wasn't a boy at all. What was their relationship? Other than neighbor, she couldn't answer completely. But she'd never had Mr. Truman's hands in her panties nor kissed Ethel Lowenstein with blazing passion, and they'd been her neighbors for years.

She'd been disappointed when she realized John had left without saying anything. Disappointed and a little hurt. He couldn't have stuck his head out the door and told her he was leaving? Livvy assumed he was with Tow only because the two had disappeared at the same time. But where could they have disappeared to?

Where did most men go when they had a fight with their girlfriends? Was Tow drowning his sorrows in some woman's cleavage right now? What about John?

Livvy shook her head. No, he'd given her no reason to be suspicious and she wouldn't doubt

him again. But Andrea's panic was starting to rub off.

Andrea sprang from her chair and whipped the curtain back. A silent police cruiser pulled to a stop in front of the house. Andrea darted out the front door before Leo could climb from the car and walk to the passenger side. Livvy watched from the porch, hands clamped over her mouth.

Leo held his palm up to stop Andrea from grabbing the back door handle.

"He's too drunk to drive. I'm getting off shift so I just brought him home." He looked at Andrea sadly before raising his eyes to Livvy. "I brought them both."

When he opened the door, Tow literally fell out of the cruiser. He scrambled awkwardly before rising. Andrea tried to help, which made things worse. Finally on two feet, he stood wavering and Livvy saw his face. Bright and smiling drunkenly, he had the beginnings of a black eye and an obviously bloodied nose.

"Andy, I got in a bar fight! How cool is that?"

Andrea burst into tears and threw herself at him. He fell back into the cruiser door but wrapped his arms around her. Leo stared at Livvy rather than at the couple beside him. Andrea led Tow through the yard and Livvy's eyes locked on the darkened interior of the car.

*Where is he?*

The night turned suddenly cool and she blamed her trembling on the weather. A slight wind molded her long nightshirt to her body. She crossed her arms, her thumbnail between her teeth to hide her quivering lips.

“What happened?” she asked Leo.

“I got called in to help with a fight down at the Brewster. Look, Liv, it wasn’t that bad and I didn’t want to screw Tow over. I’m not charging them with anything but they’re both way too drunk to be driving. Make sure Andrea gets Tow’s car in the morning, all right?”

Livvy pushed the windblown hair out of her eyes. There was something he wasn’t saying. Something that filled his gaze with apprehension. Something that made her mouth dry and her eyes wet.

John pulled himself out with much more drunken grace than Tow had. In fact, at first glance, he didn’t look drunk at all until she looked in his eyes. Tow drunk was boisterous and happy. John was dark and moody with a razor’s-edge glint in his eyes hinting at danger. He stepped away from the open door and leaned on the rear panel, fingertips tucked in his front pockets. He avoided her eyes.

Livvy stared at him, her breath coming fast and hard. She didn’t know this man. The John Murphy she knew created wonderful magical monsters that

fought for good and justice. The man she knew kissed her tenderly and stroked her with gentle hands. She didn't know this drunken stranger with the swollen jaw, bleeding lip and bloody knuckles peeking from his pockets.

The slam of the car door pulled her from her inspection. She inhaled and exhaled before turning her face back to Leo. His gray uniform shirt glowed silver in the faint moonlight and she fastened her eyes on his nametag. He stood, hands on his radio and ASP baton, waiting for her to look up. The concern in his eyes nearly allowed her tears to fall when she did raise her face.

"Thanks. I owe you."

"You don't owe me anything, Liv." He opened his mouth but then clamped it shut and scowled at John. He took her arm and motioned his head for her to walk with him to the front of the cruiser. She turned but only made it two steps before becoming the filling in a chest sandwich.

"Get your hands off her!"

John lunged at Leo, Leo stood firm and Livvy was caught in the middle. John's forward motion sent her sprawling into the trooper. She was trapped between both strong male bodies, and everything slowed. She saw John draw back his fist and Leo snap his telescopic steel baton open into a fighting position. Leo's free arm went around her shoulders from the front, John's

around her waist from the back. The wind rushed past her ear as she fell into Leo's badge. It bit into her cheek with a cold sharp prick. Under his shirt, his vest was rigid against her face.

"No!" Her scream paralyzed each man. She shoved them apart. She stood between them, arms outstretched like a blockade, and prayed they wouldn't clash again. When neither made a move, she slowly lowered her arms.

Leo took a step closer to John. "Are you asking to go to jail, asshole?"

"Leo, shut up. And put that thing away!" She pointed to Leo's steel ASP before turning on John. His narrowed gaze locked on the officer and an angry tic formed under his eye. Livvy had a brief flash of him getting arrested if he so much as blinked in Leo's direction and panicked. They had to be kept apart. She shoved his chest not once, not twice but three times until he took faltering steps into the grass.

"You! Go sit down. I mean it, go!" Pointing to her porch, she turned to retrace her steps. Rather than see, she felt John start to take a step toward them. She whirled back and pushed him to the stairs. "Sit. Do not move, do you hear me? Stay put."

"Livvy, your face. You're hurt." He went to cup her cheek and she slapped his hand away.



“You should have thought about that before acting like a raging bull. Now don’t move.” She stalked back to Leo with her hands in her hair. Leo glared at John as she approached then turned a softer gaze to her.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded and wiped her hands down her face. The scrape stung in the night air. Leo went to touch her cheek but she stopped him with shaking fingers. “I’m fine, really.”

Leo tightened his jaw. His voice was soft and commanding. “Liv, how well do you know him?”

“He’s my neighbor.”

He looked at her with skeptical eyes.

She shuffled her feet. “We’ve been seeing each other for a little while.”

Leo locked his eyes on John behind her and whispered, “I ran him through the system. He has a record, Livvy.”

Shock smacked into her chest and she closed her eyes. The night took on a surreal quality. *This isn’t happening. This is all a strange dream, a nightmare.* “What kind of record?”

She didn’t recognize the calm tone coming from her mouth. How could her voice sound so normal when her brain was scattering like dust?

“I don’t know. It’s a juvenile record and sealed, but...” Leo looked directly into her face, steeling her for his words. “I tried to pull some strings off

the books. Normally it works. Not this time. I've never seen that happen, Liv, except in violent crimes."

If Livvy thought she was shocked before, that sentence floored her. Unable to breathe, she wrapped her arms around her waist. *What's happening here? How did this go from exciting and thrilling to bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do?*

She wasn't aware she was crying until a cold tear splashed on her cheek. Leo gripped her arm and she looked up at him. His frown was full of tender apprehension.

"Be careful, Liv."

## Chapter Five

John sat on the stone step, his face throbbing, his head spinning and his chest heavy. *I'm too old for this shit.* Alcohol buzzed through his veins but it didn't blind him to what was happening. The secret he'd thought long buried reached up and bit him in the ass.

Humiliation more than booze kept his head bent low. The landscaping rocks around Livvy's small porch were polished gravel, variations of white, cream and gray with a few odd bits of color tossed in. They held his attention while he avoided seeing Livvy, seeing Livvy with the trooper, seeing Livvy learn about his shame. One dark blood-colored stone caught his eye and he picked it up, rubbing it between numb fingers.

He didn't look up until the cruiser pulled away. He came face to face with Livvy's crotch. The nightshirt read Kiss Me, I'm Irish and even if she was, he doubted he could follow that direction without getting slapped.

Inch by inch, he forced his gaze up. Those wide eyes bore into his and his heart screamed. Vory stared back at him. *Dear God, she's my Vory.*

“Murphy—”

“Are you afraid of me?”

She wiped her runny nose, looking over his head. “I don’t know.”

Pain stabbed him in the belly and he swallowed whatever pride he had left. He tucked the rock in his pocket and stood. He looked down into her face, with her pool-like eyes and grazed cheek—the face he’d given a different name—and something inside him cracked.

“Goodbye, Livvy.”

He did his damndest to walk straight. She called out his name once but he didn’t slow. His seldom-used front door was locked and he didn’t have the key, a thought that struck him as ironically hysterical. The grass crunched under his heavy boots as he rounded the house. Deeper darkness lurked between their homes and his inebriated creative spirit also found that funny. But the shock of seeing the real-life Vory staring at him had stolen the sarcastic laughter.

The steel toe of his boot caught on the stair tread and he fell with a curse. Swallowing something that tasted like tears, he finished the climb and went into his empty house. The ache inside needed to be filled. He just wasn’t sure how. He’d never known how.

John was standing in the blackness when she slipped through the door. He watched her find her way in the dark. In the filtered moonglow, her skin was almost luminescent, like an angel's, an angel he had no right to touch, to tarnish.

"What are you doing here?"

She focused on his general location and stepped toward him. It was eighty degrees outside but she'd put on pants. Dark sweat pants, maybe black, covered her long legs, and tiny little shoes hid her toes. *How did I never notice how small her feet are?*

"I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine, Liv. I'm drunk and I'm fine. Go home."

Her eyes must have adjusted to the dark because she stared at the bottle in his hand. "You're still drinking?"

"Yep." Deliberately, he put the bottle to his mouth and swallowed a long pull.

"Aren't you drunk enough?"

"Not by half." *I still feel. It hurts. Go away. Stay.*

A timid pink tongue licked her lips and his longed to follow it. "I need to know something. Were there...other women at the bar?"

"It's a public bar, Liv, of course there were women there."

Her eyes squeezed closed and his chest panged. It made him angry. He was many things but he wasn't a cheater. Although how would she know that? How did he? He'd never cheated because he'd never allowed anyone to get close enough for him to cheat on them. No one until Livvy. She deserved better than him.

"You need to go, Liv. I don't know how to be with someone like you, someone good. You just need to walk away now."

"Why? Did you do something to make me walk away?"

"Something? Or someone? That's what you're worried about, right? That I picked up some easy ass and am hiding it from you? Here's a tip, honey. I'd just tell you if I'd fucked someone tonight. I listened to a pissed-off drunk lawyer whine about his girlfriend and watched a ballgame with the sound off. Exciting shit in my life, huh?"

She raked her hand through her hair. "What was the fight about?"

"I dunno. It started in the back and spread out. One minute I was watching TV, the next I was knocking teeth." *And enjoying the hell out of it.* The burst of adrenaline soothed him more than the liquor.

"And getting brought home in a police car, can't forget that little adventure."

John sneered and brought the bottle back to his mouth. "Gimme fifteen more minutes and I can forget everything about tonight."

"I'm not that lucky."

"Want a drink?" He extended the bottle with a sarcastic snort.

"I don't drink. And you need to stop drinking."

Moonlight caught her pale face, turning her scrape to purple, and his lungs stuck in his ribs. "You need to put some ice on your cheek."

"I'm fine. You're the one who was in a fight. Your lip's stopped bleeding though."

"Lucky me. Go home."

Sugar and spice scent slammed into him as she stepped closer. Not even another swallow of bourbon could mask it. He jerked his eyes from her face before he did something stupid, like kiss her.

"I'm not leaving, Murphy. Talk to me."

Irritation surged through him and he pushed off the counter. This was his house, damn it, his castle. He made the rules, not her. She needed to leave while he had enough common sense to push her away. Pain charged him with a battery cable jolt.

"Talk to you? No talking, Livvy. I don't owe you a damn thing. You're not my mother or my lover, and you sure as hell will never be my wife, so just back off." He let the venom pour out but

she didn't shy away. Damn her, she never even flinched.

The steel claw of her eyes looked deep and grabbed his soul. "You asked me if I was afraid of you. The answer is no, I'm not. I never have been. Irritated, annoyed and incredibly turned on, yes, but not afraid. You can get mad and yell and scream all you want but I'm not leaving."

A million thoughts rushed through his head—physically pick her up and put her outside, pick her up and take her to bed, wrap his arms around her and take her here on the kitchen floor. He might not frighten her, but she scared the shit out of him with what she made him feel.

If anger wouldn't make her leave him, maybe crudeness would.

"If you're staying, you're staying naked, in my bed, under me. You choose."

She smiled. "Does this bad-boy persona really work for you? Seriously? You think by talking a tough game I'm going to run way? No deal. Not leaving."

"I'm tired of hearing the word no."

"I'm tired of saying it." A sad little sigh bowed her head. "I wanted to go to bed with you tonight."

"Then do it." John pulled her close. "Let's go to bed."

"Not now."



“What’s wrong, Liv? Afraid I can’t get it up?” He tugged her hand to his crotch, to the thick bulge that was hardening. “Trust me, that’s not an issue.”

“No, but the fact that you’re drunk is.”

John snorted and let go of her. He gulped another swallow. “I screw everything up.”

She took the bottle from his hand and poured it down the sink before wrapping her arms around his waist. “Get over yourself, Murphy. Nothing is that big and bad. It’s not like you killed anybody or anything.”

“Wanna bet?”

John’s words punched into Livvy’s chest. He twisted out of her embrace and slumped against the counter. The sharp scent of bourbon filled the room, flavoring the air with a sting. Shadows caressed him with a lover’s touch as he bowed his head. His chest heaved but his voice was soft.

“There, you know. I killed a man. Now go home, Liv.”

Her feet cemented to the floor. Of all the danger she’d sensed in him, she’d never considered that. Her stomach clenched and a squeak died in her suddenly dry throat. John had killed a man? Murder? Her gaze landed on the rock-hard bulges of his arms. Even at rest, they hinted at bone-crushing strength. His hands were

rough, large and marked from years of hard labor. The already-bruising knuckles proved he could and would strike out when provoked. The steel in his eyes hid some deeply rooted anger that could slice out without warning. His body had been honed to a weapon. She had no doubt John could kill easily if he wanted.

He was drunk. He'd charged at Leo, not caring or respecting his badge or his gun. Even now, hostility and fury twanged around him. And she stood beside him in the dark, alone and in her pajamas. In one viper-fast strike, he could lash out and snap her neck before she could muster a scream. Fear should have been racing through her veins like poison...but it wasn't.

The knowledge didn't mesh with what she knew, what she felt deep inside when she looked into his eyes. There had to be something, some part of him she didn't know but could sense on an instinctual level. There had to be. He'd been so gentle with Ashley, using smiles and magic to draw her out of her pain. He'd been angry in her office, hurt and vibrating with jealousy. But he'd kissed her, touching her with determined but sensual hands that gave only pleasure, not pain. Under all that power, muscle and hate, there was something else. Something that soothed her instinctual fear. She couldn't name it but it was as

potent as his liquor. She felt its lullaby in her marrow and let it guide her.

“No.” Falling from her lips before she could catch it, the denial gave her roots. She pulled her shoulders back and moved closer. “I’m not leaving. Tell me what happened. Leo said it was a juvenile thing.”

“Didn’t feel that way.” His sigh was softer than a whisper. “It was a long time ago and none of your business.”

Livvy kissed him. The bitter taste of alcohol flooded her mouth and she coaxed his tongue to dance with hers. The freshly broken skin grazed her mouth and she licked over the small wound. He gasped. She had to work at it a bit before his mouth relaxed to hers and his arm slid around her waist. He deepened the kiss with a low sound of defeat.

When he’d walked away from her, her heart had dropped. His “Goodbye, Livvy” meant goodbye, not see you later. Watching his back, she realized she couldn’t let him go. He didn’t frighten her. His leaving had.

Shock had clouded her mind and chilled her skin. No man who could fight monsters in his past yet reach out to a child could be bad. She couldn’t accept that. Lacing her fingers in his hair, she pulled her lips from his. His eyes stayed closed as she stroked his bruised jaw.

“Whatever happened, I’m here and this, whatever *this* is between us, makes it my business.”

“I’d never hurt you, Livvy. Believe that. Never. Don’t be afraid of me, please.”

“I’m not. I trust you. Now trust me.”

Laying her head on his chest, she willed him to feel her acceptance. She just held him, waiting, not pushing but letting her openness seep into his body. When she thought he would deny her, his breath tickled her hair.

“I don’t know who my father is. Until I was seven, it was just my mother and me. Then she married Alan Warner, the Reverend Alan Warner, a mean, twisted son of a bitch. Then Gina was born and... My mom died but made me promise to take care of the baby. Alan...”

He tried to pull away, but Livvy hugged him tighter, squeezing her faith into him. “Alan what, Murphy? What did Alan do?”

“He beat the shit out of me daily until I was almost sixteen, among other things.”

Tears dripped down Livvy’s cheeks. She’d known. Somewhere inside, she’d known. There was no other explanation.

“He never touched Gina. That made it okay. As long as she was safe, I could handle anything he wanted to dish out.”

When he hadn't spoken for a long time, Livvy raised her head. John stared deep into nothing. Something tremored in his body and he tightened his hold on her waist. Ache filled her and she clutched his arms. "What happened?"

He shook his head and blew out an oath. "That's enough, Livvy. Let it go."

"I can't. I hurt for you."

"Don't." The word sounded like a bark. The strength in his grip when he tried to push her away stunned her but she didn't let go. For one brief second, he looked in her eyes, then shifted away. "You don't understand. I—it's ugly, Liv."

"Whatever it was, you survived it."

"Did I?" John closed his eyes and pulled her close.

Cradled against his chest, she realized he was ashamed. He couldn't look at her and speak. He could only give his words to the darkness. Bringing her mouth to his throat, she kissed him. Her lips felt his words.

"He hit her. I'd never struck back at the bastard until that night but he hurt Gina, his own child. And then he..." His breath shuttered out in a haze of alcohol and pain before he crushed her to him. Through hard muscles, she felt his bones quiver. Livvy clung to him, a lifeline for his storm. He wasn't ready to let her in all the way, but she would take the crumbs. "Let's just leave it at that,

okay? I ended up bloody and he ended up dead. Manslaughter, special circumstances, kept in juvie court. Case closed. End of story.”

It wasn’t the end at all. There was so much more pain under the surface but he’d given all he could. It was a step, just a tiny one, but the hardest, she hoped. And he’d taken it with her.

Livvy pulled her wet face from his neck. Touching his cheek, she shook her head.

“No. Not the end of the story, just the end of that bitter, terrible chapter. You’ve rewritten the rest of your life. Words are your magic, Murphy. Magic always wins over monsters.”

“You’re sick.”

Jondi stared at his best friend in concern. Thorn’s wings drooped, his eyes were rheumy and he couldn’t stop coughing. The bat leaned against a gnarled oak and hacked, the thin skin of his wings trembling with the force.

“It’s just the Dell. I’ll be fine once we get to Andros. Come on, let’s go.” He pushed off the tree and trudged to the worn walkway.

Windago Mountain stood visible in the distance, its gleaming white castle atop the crags and jutting stone. Jondi hurried after his friend, his heart filled with worry.

Thorn's fever was getting worse. Like stone grating stone, his breathing rasped out and he could no longer fly. He would lose consciousness, falling from the sky like a fluttering black cloud. Luckily, both times he'd fallen, he'd hit tree branches and not the hard ground.

"He's getting worse." Vory's musical whisper reached his ears and he turned with a sad smile. Thorn lashed out at Vory every chance he got, his sickness making him grumpy and irritable far beyond normal. So far, she just treated Thorn like a bothersome bug, laughing at him and swatting him away. But it troubled Jondi. He hated the venom in Thorn's voice.

Offering his hand, he pulled her up a steep incline before hurrying after the black bat.

"Slow down!" Jondi called as Thorn stormed through the underbrush. Stickerbush twigs and tangleweed vines grabbed at his feet, making him and Vory fall behind. Thorn halted, looked over his shoulder and sucked air between his fangs. The sound was as eerie as the Dell itself.

"I'm going home. If you want to follow, hurry up, but leave her here. She has no

business in Windago. You should've left her in the Dell like I told you!"

"You stupid bat, you're going to make yourself worse bellowing like that. Quit pushing so hard. We can be there in a few days. The castle top is visible just over those mountains," Vory argued as she and Jondi came within feet of the massive figure.

Suddenly Thorn swooped to the pink monster, his wings spread wide and his sharp teeth glimmering in the sunlight. "Don't tell me what to do, girlie. If you're following, then follow, but shut up while you do it. I don't like you, I don't want you here and, as far as I care, you can—"

"Thorn!" Jondi stepped between his friends, shielding Vory. "Stop it."

The bat whipped his head around and took off at a clip. The wind used his wings as a sail, propelling his feet faster along the forest trail.

"Why does he hate me?" Vory cried, the quiver in her voice breaking Jondi's heart. He didn't know. Somehow the not knowing was as scary as the Dell.

And then Vory coughed.

They finally went on a real date. Crammed in after the bakery closed, before she had to go back and



make more sugar-magic, John took Livvy to dinner. Looking decidedly enticing in a crisp white dress shirt and dark pants, he enthralled her with stories he'd yet to put to paper. The swelling was gone from his face and the small graze was barely noticeable. His split lip gave him a rough-and-tumble pout that made her heart quiver.

He stuck with water, avoiding any alcohol, and she smiled. Low music, soft lights and a delectable menu lulled her senses into a dreamlike state. Just the way he held his fork seemed incredibly sexy to her. She leaned her head in her hand and let his tale enchant her. Seductively dark, his gaze wrapped around her, blanketing her in silence until the restaurant faded away. In the entire world, there was just the two of them.

"How can you do that? Just...create something out of nothing?"

"It's a gift." He grinned. "Or a curse. I can't stop the ideas most times. It's like living with a movie in my head I can't turn off."

"Well, if any of those creative flashes happen to involve flour and sugar, throw them my way."

A frown wrinkled his brow. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing." She sighed. "I've just been wracking my brain, trying to come up with a new product line, a hook, something to give business a little boost."

“Can’t help you there, honey. Business shit makes my head hurt.”

“How *is* your headache?”

John grimaced. “Don’t talk too loud, okay? I forgot Wild Turkey is a mean bird. She likes to make me think I can handle her until she whoops my ass the next day.”

Locked on her face, his smoldering gaze sent crackles along her skin.

Heat bloomed and she took a hurried sip of water, in danger of spontaneously combusting at any minute. “Is that why you started writing then? I mean the monster stuff, not the drinking.”

“I started writing to get them out of my head, yeah, but more just poured back in.” Pushing his plate away, he propped both elbows on the table and leaned in. She mimicked his stance until their faces were only inches apart. Bright white teeth flashed against the darkness of his split lip. “After Gina moved out, I suddenly had too much time on my hands. Idle hands are the devil’s playground, you know, so I decided to write down all the stories I told her over the years. It just kept growing and before I knew it, I had a manuscript...and it sat in a drawer for six months.”

“And what, New York invaded your bedroom and read it under the bed?”

He shrugged with a sheepish grin. “No. I busted my ankle at work and ended up on my ass for eight weeks. A friend read it and asked me what I was going to do with it. I didn’t have an answer. All that night I thought about it and decided, what the hell, the worst thing that could happen is it would give some agent a good laugh at the idiot redneck. But the joke was on me and I got an offer before my ankle healed.”

“Male friend or female friend?”

“He married my sister.” He winked at her.

Livvy sipped her water. “You said Gina moved out? When did she live with you?”

Defense flashed in his eyes. On the heels of the defense was something flickering, something fearful. Without thought, she reached for his hand and found it fisted on the table. She covered it with hers and waited.

“After I got out...I petitioned for custody of Gina. She belonged with me, not strangers. It took a while but it was finally granted. The court system was always hovering nearby, waiting for me to screw up. I wasn’t about to let that happen. I always heard the monsters but I was too busy keeping a roof over her head, making sure she had what she needed, to do much storytelling. I did some but it was more of a hobby. When she got married, I was lost. I just started pouring out words then.”

Livvy rubbed his fist until it relaxed. Slowly, he turned his palm to cup hers and focused his eyes on her water glass.

“Liv, last night... You’re the only person I’ve ever told any of that. It’s not something I’m proud of, by any means.”

“I know.”

Her breathy whisper made the candle flutter and his eyes leaped to the flame before settling on her face. The tense lines around his mouth softened. “But you didn’t damn me. Thank you.”

“Thank you for telling me, for trusting me.”

His lips grazing her knuckles sent spirals of want licking up her bones. She doubted even the most rigid morality code would protest a kiss on the hand but his kisses, the way his tongue followed his lips with tiny little licks, the way his mouth never really left her skin, was one of the most erotic things she had ever felt. She swallowed in sudden hunger that had nothing to do with food.

She slipped her fingers from his and sent him a wistful smile. “I have to get back to work.”

“I wish someone else could do that damn cake,” he muttered. “At least let me keep you company while you do the Betty Crocker thing. You shouldn’t be alone there after dark anyway.”

A softness rose in her chest. “You’re sweet, Murphy.”

"I'm many things but sweet isn't one of them." He leaned back, studying her with speculative eyes. "You've never called me John. Why?"

She tilted her head and laughed. "Don't you remember Andrea's linking our names? The *Grease* thing? I decided in that instance I wasn't going to play into that game. Now I can't help it, I think of you as Murphy. Does it bother you?"

"No, it's fine. Do you want to know what I thought of the minute I saw you?" The devilish note in his voice tickled up her spine and she shivered. She knew exactly what he had thought or at least had a good idea. She wanted to hear him say it. She needed to hear him say it.

"Tell me."

"I thought you were made for pure sin."

"Sin, huh? That sounds...tempting."

His look scorched her with a pure sexual heat. The unbridled longing on his face warmed her blood and she slid her foot out of her shoe and found his leg. Her toes creeping under his pant leg elicited a deep noisy breath.

"Livvy, be careful. I'm not drunk tonight and I'm tired of cold showers."

"Me, too."

## Chapter Six

“I love Pam,” Livvy whispered into the oversized walk-in cooler.

“What?”

“She did the fondant and all the scroll work. All I have left is the detailing.” She whirled and smiled. “I can’t afford to hire another pastry chef. Pam doesn’t have any formal training but she’s a baker’s dream. She has quirky talents, like she can smooth fondant like a pro but simple roses are beyond her. She refuses to do them. Forget dragées—she calls them Satan’s balls—and Cornelli Lace makes her scream. But she can do a Lambeth design better than I can.”

John quirked an eyebrow. “I see your mouth moving and know you’re talking, but I have no clue what language you’re speaking.”

“Sugar talk.” She laughed.

John helped her move the small but heavy tiered cake to a stainless worktable. The normally bustling space was quiet, and their voices echoed in the cool room. Forgoing her standard work coat or even an apron, Livvy grabbed the clipboard with the cake details off the pegboard and started

gathering materials. With proficient movements, she was soon cranking out roses.

After every few petals, she glanced at John. This store was her baby and she was proud of it. She wanted him to be impressed. Satisfaction filled her as he glanced around at the pristine work area with its dual stainless tables running the length of the room. Long hard years of work had earned her the right to straighten her spine in ownership.

She'd found the means to make sure she never fell into the trap her mother had, looking the other way as her husband took lover after lover. The early lesson had hit home for Livvy. *Never be so weak that you swallow betrayal as your lot in life.*

No one could describe Livvy as weak.

She frowned at the rose forming in her hand. Now if she could only get a little stronger. The April balloon payment on her business mortgage had wiped out most of her savings but that was what she'd been saving for. She made it, in full and on time. But making the new higher post-balloon monthly mortgage payments was straining her thin budget. She needed a money booster now that could produce a steady flow.

"Why Sugar Shack?" John ripped her from her less-than-sweet thoughts. "I'd think you'd be the more upscale type name."

Livvy smiled. "This place used to be a candy store, but it'd been closed a while when I bought it. I was cutting corners every place I could, trying to save money. I had my brothers, my cousins and friends all pitching in to help clean and paint and whatever. Anyway, several nights my brothers were supposed to be working here late but nothing ever got done. So, I stopped by unannounced, flipped on the florescent lights and found both of them buck naked in different alcoves with their prospective girlfriends."

"Ouch." John winced. "Talk about mood killer."

Livvy snorted. "Even though I put a stop to that, they started calling this place the Sugar Shack and the name just stuck."

"I like it, though. It's kind of sexy and playful."

"If you want sexy and playful..." Livvy let the flirty statement hang until John arched a questioning brow. "Go read the top rack of the display case out in the main storefront. The entire top tier is from the Adult Cravings line."

"Adult cravings," John repeated, crossing his arms. Carnal lust deepened his eyes to night-sea blue. "What kind of cravings do you have, Liv?"

"Do you mean me or the store?"

The air crackled with innuendo. "Either."



“Well, I told you about the Chocolate Orgasms. We also make Buttercrotch Crunch, Lemon Lick-her bars, Pink Layer Soufflés, Double Chocolate-Chip Studmuffins, Cinnamon Red Hot Lovers, Peanut Butter Nookies, Sugared Sixty-Nines, and my favorite, Triple Cheesecake Climax.”

“Triple climax, huh? Now there’s an interesting personal challenge.” A wealth of flirtation hid behind his smile. One petal drooped.

“You’re distracting me, Murphy.”

“Sorry.” His tone implied he wasn’t at all.

“The sooner I finish this, the sooner we can leave.”

“And do what?” he challenged.

Livvy took her time and completed the bloom before looking at him. “That depends on what I’m craving tonight.”

He drew a deep breath, lust flaring like a match before he walked away. “Work faster, Liv.”

John strolled, hands in his pockets, staring at the strange oversized machines that created delicate pastries. The large ovens were taller than he was and placed at the far end of the room, away from the decorating area. The opposite wall was the back entry to the display shelves which dominated the store front. He shivered when he opened the refrigerated side door, the cold pooling around him in a pale swirl.

“Help yourself to anything you want,” Livvy called, not moving her eyes from the flower nail in her hand.

Hopping onto the table opposite her, John tasted the Belgian chocolate. The decadent sound from his lips sent shivers through her thighs.

“Damn, Liv, was this from the top rack? It’s like sex on a fork.”

*“That’s a Chocolate Orgasm.”*

John devoured the brownie, licking the plastic fork clean. “I’m hooked. It’s like chocolate crack. You must be Jenny Craig’s nightmare.”

She burst out laughing and he joined her. The sound created a tender quiver in her heart. The grooves around his lips proved how little he truly laughed in life. Hope bloomed as she realized with her his laughter came easily.

Livvy set the last of thirty-four roses to dry on a parchment-lined former and looked up. John was scribbling on the back of a pricing sheet. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing, doodling.” He smirked and held up his drawing of a lopsided cake with a clock springing gears and coils into the air. “This is what killing time in a bakery makes me think of.”

Laying the flower nail aside, she crossed to him and took the paper. “Murphy, this is amazing.”

“Nah, it’s just me goofing off.”

She stepped away to prevent him taking the paper back.

“Come on, I was fooling around. Throw it away.”

“No. Can I have this? I mean, I think I can make and sell this cake. It would be a great idea for like a fortieth birthday ‘Beat the Clock’ type thing.”

“Sure, whatever. It’s just scrap work. I usually just pitch stuff like that away.”

Livvy thumbtacked the drawing onto the corkboard and went back to the worktable. With the roses drying, she started covering the cake with Swiss dots. The work went quickly. Just as she finished the dotting, she found him staring at the splat board beside the deep utility sink.

“Ugly, isn’t it?” She quickly removed the bag tip.

“It looks like a paint ball wall.”

“That’s where we test the air brush, mix colors and clean out the nozzles.”

He tilted his head, took a step back and snorted. “It’s a dragon.”

Frowning, she circled the long metal table and stared at the multicolored wood board with him. “You sure you have your contacts in? I don’t see a dragon.”

“It’s there,” he promised, “just waiting to come out.” With a mischievous grin, he grabbed a black

marker off the assignment board and uncapped it. In minutes, he had drawn looping curves around swirls of color.

Livvy stood mesmerized as a dragon came to life on her splat board. High red and yellow arcs of spray became wide-spread wings. The concentrated blue closest to the sink was a head with broad nostrils shooting flames of orange and red. Its wide-bowled belly held a rainbow of scales. Purple and black overshots became a flanged tail. The feet and sharp toes ended below the color line and Livvy knew exactly where she'd spray the next pigment burst.

"Okay, how did you see that? I stare at that thing every day and never saw anything in there before. Now it seems obvious."

He replaced the marker on the white board and turned with a shrug. "I don't know. It was just there. Things talk to me, show themselves. I guess because I listen. My imagination's one thing no one could ever take from me." He pulled back, retreated inside himself. "So are you finished?"

Livvy rolled her shoulders to ease a knot of exhaustion and nodded. John moved the now-completed cake back into the cooler while she filled the deep stainless sink. It only took them about half an hour to put the kitchen back in order for her Sunday crew. She flipped off her work lights with a loud sharp click, plunging the once-

bright room into shadows. Streaming from the display case, the only illumination was tinged faintly blue.

John's arms came around her body and he nuzzled her neck. In the cool room, his body was warm, firm and enveloping. The pose was so reminiscent of their first kiss, her breath caught and her pulse flew into overdrive. "Are you going to bite me again?"

"Maybe."

"Why don't you grab some beignets out of the case for our breakfast in the morning?"

"Our? Are you staying with me tonight then?"

Pregnant with meaning, the question hung for a split second before she smiled. She laid her head back on his shoulder. "Yes, I am."

John didn't answer, simply released her and hurried to the back hatch of the case. He oozed lusty impatience—absolute sinful, mouthwatering impatience. He was a man on a mission and she was that mission.

Confidence made her chin rise. He wanted her. Maybe as badly as she wanted him. But he was going to wreck the display case with his single-minded quest. She walked behind him and nudged him aside, ducking under his raised arm. "Here, let me find them. You're going to mess up the trays."

"What's this?"

Lust slammed into her at the small plastic box in his hands. “Uh, that’s a Two For Play Kit. You must have gotten it from the top rack.”

“Two for play?” One brow arched as he stared at the seemingly innocent mini cupcakes.

An idea sparked. It was so out of character for her, totally irresponsible and spur of the minute, that at first she rejected it. But it clung to her imagination like chocolate ganache—rich, decadent and tempting.

Livvy closed the door behind her. She took the thin clear case from his hands.

“It’s a twist on *foreplay*. Here, let me show you.”

With a flick of her thumb, she popped the plastic top and the thick scent of buttercream wafted upward. His nostrils flared but his eyes never left her face. “Smells sweet.”

“It is. It’s Italian buttercream frosting, so it stays very...smooth and soft. The sugar is heated so it’s like silk on your tongue as it melts.”

John barely glanced at the pastry. “Buttercream. Silk that melts on your tongue. I like the sound of that.”

“You’ll like the taste, too. The heating means it’s very sturdy but it tastes very delicate.”

He lifted his hand and drew his knuckles down the curve of her cheek. Her breath caught.

“Sounds... sinful.”

Livvy inched closer and tilted her head. “Want a bite?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Devil’s Food or French Vanilla?” The words meant nothing. She was offering him so much more.

“Devil’s Food, of course.” He accepted her offer with a whisper.

His pupils dilated and his tongue skated across his lip. The cake was heaped with a frothy swirl of frosting in snowy white. Slowly, she licked half the frosting off the mini. She held it in her mouth and stepped to him. The sugary cream slipped from her tongue to his.

Drenched in sweetness, his mouth caressed hers. Long after the frosting had melted away, she pulled back and brought the cupcake to her lips. John’s breath deepened as she held half the mini dessert in her mouth. Gripping his neck, she yanked his lips back to hers. A wolfish grin appeared just before he took the dark cake and her kiss in one greedy motion. The shared bite melted with their heat and dissolved with their hunger.

A stray trace of chocolate speckled his lip and Livvy brushed her finger against it. He captured her fingertip, drawing it inside his mouth for a wet caress. A throb began between her legs.

“Your turn.”

John plucked the remaining mini from the box. He licked half the dark fudge frosting away, curled his arm around her waist and drew her mouth to his. The rich chocolate coated her tongue, flavoring the moan that sprang from her chest. Whatever calories were in the frosting were burned away by his kiss. His sharp teeth pierced the pale cake before the other half touched her lips. A sudden burst of spongy vanilla filled her mouth, mingling with creamy fudge and sizzling John Murphy.

“Two For Play, I like it.” His sugary breath warmed her cheek.

“We’re not done yet.”

She lifted the carton. In a third compartment, generous ruffles of chocolate and vanilla circled each other in an erotic blend. His gaze followed as she dipped one finger in the frosting and brought it to her tongue.

“Can I tempt you into a taste of sin, Murphy?”

Her long lick garnered his loud swallow. *Oh yeah, he’s hungry and I’m the only item on his menu.*

The low white noise of sleeping machinery mimicked the hiss singing through her veins. John flung the box on the table behind him and grabbed her, planting her ass on the table. The tall work surface positioned her precisely against his zipper. She drove her tongue into his mouth. The sweet



taste of sugar and cake heightened her intense craving for him, and she hooked her legs around his hips, her arms clinging to his shoulders. The faint sound of her shoes hitting the tiled floor rang like a gong through her body, vibrating every nerve in anticipation.

“I’ve been dreaming of you covered in frosting forever.”

The cool metal table warmed rapidly to her steadily rising body temperature as his blind fingers found the covered buttons of her blouse. Hot calloused hands cradled her breasts, his thumbs tracing over the tightened tips. She arched in total abandon. He made her feel wicked and reckless and she loved it.

“Livvy, this is where you stop me because if I get on this table I’m not stopping.”

She leaned back on her elbows with a wicked grin. Who wanted him to stop? From the reclined pose, she crooked her finger, inviting him to join her. He kicked off his loafers and hoisted his body up to cover her, claiming her mouth in a hard, hot kiss. The feeling was deliciously like the first make-out session in high school—forbidden, illicit and thrilling.

His tongue traced lazy circles, skimming down the lace edge of the bra. Her nipples begged for his mouth but he trailed his kisses back up her jaw to her lips. Protest surged through her. This was

her seduction. Why was John controlling the action?

Her fingers trembled, working the flat buttons of his shirt free. The fabric peeled open, baring him to her touch. *Present time for Livvy*. She skimmed her hands up his stomach and the muscles tightened under her caress. A feather-light kiss brushed above his navel made him quiver and she purred with power. The linen blouse slid from her body like melted ice cream, slithering silently to the floor. Finally, flesh met flesh.

John splayed one large hand just below her collarbone and masterfully laid her back to the table before stroking his palm down over her bra to her stomach. The move was rough, possessive and raw. He claimed her body with one broad-fingered swath.

“Damn, I love this bra.”

The same bra he’d returned to her the day they met released to his fingers, and the wispy cups fell away. From beside his knee, he brought up the tossed container of frosting. A wicked slant carved into his brow and he dipped one finger into the swirled mix. “Now, where should I taste Livvy first?”

His now-white finger trailed down her neck. With long slow moves, his tongue lapped at the

frosting. A groan rippled the air. She thought it came from her mouth, but she wasn't sure.

He dotted her collarbone, her breastbone and the curve of each breast. Never before had any man lavished so much attention on her skin. There was no rush, no trying to get to the next level. Just John, the frosting and her flesh. One sugary dollop landed on her tight peak and his mouth followed. His tongue teased her pebbled nipple until the ache below began to throb. His name ripping from her throat was a plea.

The sugar was long gone but he continued to suck and nip her breasts until her hips rocked to his. She loved the feel of his body atop hers, firm and heavy, an exquisite friction of the lusty variety. Nestled deep inside moistened folds, her clit ached in delicious torture, but John wouldn't be hurried. He simply began the entire journey all over again. At some point, her bones dissolved and she was reduced to a mass of quivering need.

Whimpers poured from her and she sank her fingers into his hair as he painted her navel with frosting and then lapped it away. Slowly, slowly, so damn slowly it drove her crazy, he tasted and nipped each inch of her stomach from ribcage to skirt band. She was ready to scream in frustration when he took her mouth, his tongue delving to share the sugar. The thick sweetness intoxicated her.

Something snapped inside Livvy. She wanted more. Now. She grabbed at his belt. "My turn."

His soft chuckle halted her fumbling and he held out the empty carton. "No more frosting."

She snatched the box and threw it to the floor. His zipper slid down, her efforts aided by the hard bulge straining at it. "This is a bakery. Pick a sugar, I have it."

John leaned close, kissing the soft vulnerable place below her ear. "You, I want your sugar, Livvy, melting on my tongue."

Erotic, naughty and exactly the right ones to say, his words painted a picture that plunged her body into shivers of anticipation. Somehow he'd taken her seduction and twisted it around until she was the one being seduced. She no longer cared. Frantic fingers pulled at his shirt flaps, ripping the warm cotton down his arms. He tossed the clothing away.

It hit something with a small metallic rattle and he froze. He pulled a wide caddy closer and plucked a container out with a triumphant grin. His delight was obvious. John wanted to play.

"That's not sugar," Livvy warned. "It's Lusterdust, an ultra-fine sparkling powder. No taste."

Her words were met with his lips and he lowered her once more to her back. John peeled the plastic top from the short tin and drew his

fingers over the baby-powder-fine crystals. The awe on his face quickly turned to marked determination.

He poured a small pile on her stomach before setting the can aside. He widened his concentric circles until her entire stomach was powdered. The silky dust spread beneath his hands like fabric as he massaged upward, coating her with a pearlescent glow. He smoothed the crystals from her stomach to her breasts, her shoulders to her throat.

Livvy felt beautiful just watching him stare at her body. His fingers shook as he lingered a trail down her nose, across her brow, and on her cheeks. Veneration eased every line from his face.

He breathed a sigh. "Livvy, you *are* an angel. You're really glowing."

The sheen on her breasts sparkled like fairy dust in the pale light. Normally applied to pastry with a soft brush, his hands had worked the dust into her skin, illuminating it with cold fire. The wonder on his face shifted to want. John growled and pressed his mouth to her glistening stomach, his tongue blazing a path from her tummy to her breasts.

Playtime was over. John was hungry.

Like butter in a hot skillet, his lips sizzled across her skin. The side button of her skirt popped and a firm hand jerked the short zipper

down. John gripped the skirt band and yanked both it and her panties off in one swoop. He tossed her clothing to the side and she froze, naked before him.

Shallow breaths stuck in her throat as he devoured her with a carnal look. He was a hunter and she was prey. Never before had any quarry anticipated capture so much.

Livvy wanted him to look, needed him to be as hungry as she was. In a long slow stretch, she reached high above her head, rounding her breasts to their fullest. He wrapped his fingers lightly around her throat then skimmed his hand down her body. He curved to the sides, caressing each breast before palming her stomach and lower. Hot as a kiln fire, the move burned her, branded her, seared into her soul that she belonged to him. There was no hesitation, no timidity in his claim. She was his and she knew it. She reveled in it.

One firm hand gripped her left ankle and lifted it up near his biceps, opening her body to him. His eyes locked on her melting center. A primal cry brewed in her gut as he threaded his caress through the small thatch of damp cinnamon hair before smoothing down into heated honey.

Livvy bit her lip to hush her begging. The higher he built her fire, the stronger it burned. The stronger it burned, the more she craved it. The more she craved him and his total possession, the

more Livvy wanted to close her eyes and surrender to the release he offered. But she didn't want to stop looking at him.

Bathed in frosty light, dark hair blending into shadows, eyes swirling with lascivious intent, John enthralled her with sinful temptation. No wonder poets spoke of the devil's beauty leading women into sin. Just the sight of him above her, bare-chested, pants open, coaxing her toward climax, made her tongue so thick with lust she could hardly breathe.

Livvy grasped the reins of her fragile control with a shaky hold. She needed to let go, to shatter into a thousand pieces, but the feel of his hands was too sweet to abandon. She wanted more. She wanted him. His lips split into a shameless tilt as he raised her ankle to his mouth.

With one hard kiss below her anklebone, he placed her foot on his shoulder. Controlled focus darkened his face and he lowered his body in slow degrees, allowing her leg to slide along his shoulder until her knee rested there. His mouth was inches from her when he looked up and flashed an animalistic grin. Teeth like fangs, the expression was untamed and raw. She tensed as he moved lower, closer, predatory. The wild look in his face threatened to consume her. Swallowing the plea in her mouth, she became his meal.

The first touch made her moan. She pressed her ass against the warm metal as his tongue stroked her. He teased her without mercy and she quivered with each lick. Her clit swelled under his circling tongue. John thrust his hands under her with a low growl, cupping her ass, bringing her more fully to his mouth. Her unsteady fingers shot out to grip the rounded table edge.

Deep in her belly, need swirled like the frothy frosting. It coated every nerve ending with a sweet twang that resonated at a fevered pitch. Her foot curled against his back as her body tensed. Just as her tight muscles began to scream in protest, he raked her clit with his teeth.

Livvy exploded. Her shuddered cry echoed in the cavernous room. It flowed through her body like a tidal wave of gourmet flavors. His mouth took her fast and hard until she felt each nip, lick and suck deep in her belly, drawing out her climax until there was nothing left but shivers of afterglow.

As the last tremor stilled, John forged a line of kisses up her abdomen, across her ribcage, in the valley of her breasts, up to her jaw. The savagery in how he took her mouth—without grace or gentleness—screamed his raging appetite. A void whimpered low in her body, an emptiness needing to be filled. Her trembling arms wound around his



shoulders and pulled him closer, hands gripping at his slick back.

Need surpassed all civility. Livvy whispered into his mouth, “Now, Murphy, now.”

His humming growl tingled their still-joined lips as he reached for his wallet. She found the pulse under his jaw and traced it. His body went motionless, rigid. Even his breathing stopped. Pulling her mouth from his skin, she looked at his face.

He stared at the open wallet in his hand beside her head. Denial blanked his features before they went stony.

“Goddamn it!”

John rolled away from her so abruptly, the air was sucked from her lungs. He jumped to stand beside the table and threw his wallet against the wall with a loud, frustrated howl. “Fucking moron!”

“What? What’s wrong?” Livvy sat, alarmed, hands covering her breasts.

He slumped against the table edge, gulping air. “I don’t have a condom.”

He was cursed. It was as simple as that. He’d never get to make love to Livvy. Both hands fisted in his hair, John struggled to regain some semblance of control. The heavy taste of sugar mixed with her skin coated his tongue and he

shook with need. The temptation to sink inside her was too close, too enticing. Thirty seconds from scoring a goal and he discovered he didn't bring any equipment.

*Fucking moron.* Fantasies were not supposed to end with blue balls.

He'd meant to put a condom in his wallet. He distinctly remembered thinking about it. Now he was paying for it. He wanted her like he'd never wanted anyone before. The sound she'd made as she climaxed under his tongue was the most erotic sound he'd ever heard. It resounded through his body like a bass drum, thrusting his need to a primal level. That sound alone had nearly brought him to the end. Thank God she hadn't uttered his name in those shuddering gasps or he'd have blasted off before she even touched him.

It might not have been his best or longest performance, but he'd come within an inch of taking her, driving into her and finally possessing her. Sucking in air, he heard Livvy shift behind him on the table. He closed his eyes and focused on wintry pictures of frosty barren landscapes, icebergs sinking the Titanic, glacial sheets sliding onto frozen lakes, anything frigid and reducing.

Livvy's hand caressing his laboring chest snapped his eyes open. Her hair cascaded onto his shirt, which she'd left unbuttoned but pulled across her shoulders. She circled his neck with her

arms. Just the weight of her leaning into him, pressing into his erection, hurt and he tightened his muscles. *Cursed. Definitely cursed.*

“Livvy—” He tried to say more but her kiss quieted him.

“You know, Murphy, for a creative man, you have no imagination.”

Her lips followed her hands, from his neck to his solar plexus to his stomach. A mixed tonic of shock and want swept through him as she sank lower. Cool air hit him one second before her warm hand circled his shaft. His slithered hiss didn’t stop her hands from cupping him, stroking over his hard length and easing his boxers down. His mind slammed to a halt, and he lost the ability to form complete words. When her tongue flicked out and caressed his tip, the ability flooded back.

“Livvy.”

“Shh.”

John tensed from her too-light touch. This was foreplay, he needed completion. Now. This second. His body no longer ached, it screamed in sexual torment. Every cell cried out for it and yet she teased him with slowness. Her lips traced over him, barely touching him. Fingers wrapped around his cock, Livvy smiled up at him. That smile, wide and alluring, froze his heartbeat. Then she took him inside that smile.

He wanted to beg her to finish him quickly. Her persecution was far too sweet. Too gentle and too teasing and damned near too perfect to stand. Each brush of her tongue sent charges of fire up his spine, making his teeth clench. One slim hand stroked upward as her lips slid down.

Livvy seemed hell-bent on drawing out his delicious suffering until he begged for mercy. John gripped his unbound belt with a crushing strength. He was caught, held on the peak, and she would not let him fall. The curse he uttered was twofold. One, for the pure sensation of her scorchingly sweet mouth on him, the second as he realized she meant to slowly torture him.

*What a wonderful way to die.*

Resigned to her power, he allowed the intensely erotic rhythm to enthrall him. Each long glide of her mouth brought him closer, tightened his muscles and intensified his need. For one brief second, she released him, shook her hair away from her eyes and caught his gaze. The seductive command on her face stunned him.

In the thin blue light, the dust shimmered on her incandescent skin. Her cheeks and nose sparkled, her eyes shimmered with fire, and her lips were lush with color. His white shirt around her shoulders mimicked angel wings folded at rest. A strange awareness seeped into his chest and, for

just a split second, he could have sworn she offered him salvation through sexual healing.

Eyes locked with his, she lowered her lips once more to his tip. Her lids fell and she took him deeper than before. John moaned as she sank to the base of his shaft before rising to sink again. And again. And again. He wanted to grab her head and drive into her mouth, to rush over that edge, make her ease his torment.

*No, not to Livvy, not like she's some barroom tramp.*

He wrapped the loose leather around his fist. The buckle of his belt bit into the other palm, the pain keeping him centered. Livvy destroyed that center with an easy grace. She moved one slender hand to his, unbound his fingers and brought them to the crown of her head. Her thumbs traced the ridge of his hip before she pulled at him, forcing him deeper, urging him to move. Such a minor gesture, it screamed of her trust.

Her trust was his undoing. Control obliterated, lust took over. A cry tore from his throat and he thrust into her tempting mouth. It was hot and rough and he held nothing back. Livvy never shied away.

John did not fall from the peak she'd held him on. He plummeted. Every muscle in his body quivered and red stars exploded behind his pinched eyelids. He thought he said her name. It

was the only thing his mind was capable of processing. Rapid, furious, blistering waves shot through him until his knees shook with expended exhaustion.

Unable to support himself, John propped his lower back against the table. His knees locked to prevent crashing to the floor. Sanity slowly returned and his vision cleared. Livvy filled his sight. Livvy, his angel. Her arms circled his neck and he forced his trembling arms around her waist. Laying her head on his shoulder, she leaned into him while his breathing slowed. The tranquility of the room cocooned them. Her finger carved her name above his heart in gentle swoops. Her touch was too pure to absorb. He buried his face in her hair and cradled her tight. What had she done to him?

Her laugh rang out and she reached down. John let his hand trail down her back and glide over her bare ass. His shirt gapped, exposing the creamy swells of her breasts. Just-sated desire flourished in his sluggish veins. The night was not over yet.

The empty plastic cupcake carton in her hands, Livvy stood with a mischievous expression. "Two For Play. Regular price five ninety-nine plus tax, demonstration not included."

His chuckle joined her laugh and she leaned her face to his. He expected a kiss. Instead, she rubbed his nose with hers, a totally playful,

childlike move that stunned him with its  
simplicity. It warmed his heart.  
And chilled his blood.

## Chapter Seven

The taste of impending rain fell on John's lips and he inhaled the dampness. Outside the Sugar Shack's back entrance, he leaned on the painted block wall and breathed deep. The lingering bakery smells of yeast and pastry were comforting and heightened by the weather. In the distance thunder rumbled softly, and the breeze carried the faintest whisper of electricity.

"Storm's brewing fast," he murmured.

Livvy stepped out the door, keys in hand. Her eyes shot to the darkened sky, devoid of starlight, and she sighed. "Please tell me you finished fixing my roof today despite the hangover. I really don't want to get home and find Lake Livvy's Living Room."

The exhaustion in her voice furrowed his brows. She'd gotten very little sleep last night because of his drunken escapade. Smudged shadows under her eyes changed them to the shade of pansies. Suddenly he wanted to get her into bed but not for sex. He took her hand.

"I promised, didn't I? Your roof's fine. Come on, I'll drive home. We'll get your car tomorrow."



The drive from the Shack to Elmcrest Drive took thirty-five minutes. John was sure Livvy slept for thirty-three of those. Head resting on her arm pressed to the window, she dropped off as soon as the giant motor began its rhythm. Her hair swayed with the motion of the truck, catching the passing light of cars and streetlamps. Awake, she was a vivacious bundle of barely contained energy. In sleep, Livvy took his breath away. He almost hated pulling into the driveway so he circled the block three times.

The motor died and she blinked awake. "Sorry."

His mouth opened but nothing came out. A wave of something crashed on him. Something he grudgingly recognized as protectiveness. He wanted to scoop her up, tuck her into bed and sit for hours doing nothing but staring at her slumbering face. Swallowing emotions too raw to examine, he exited the truck and met her on her side as she stepped down. Her house stood dark, no cars around and silent. He led her around his yard and up the stairs.

The inside light flared harshly to life as the first fat drops of rain fell. He pushed Livvy toward the hall, telling her to shower and crawl into bed. The soft kiss she brushed across his mouth lingered long after he heard the water. Hands braced on the bar, he fought the churning in his gut. Something

was different. Livvy was different. He was different with her.

The rain hit the roof with a steady *patpatpat* that addled his senses. The room seemed too closed in despite the openness of the floor plan. He couldn't breathe. Whipping around, he stomped back outside.

Water drops pelted him, plastering his shirt to his skin within seconds. The air had the electric sizzle of impending lightning and the scent of tilled earth. John let the wind and rain sluice over his face, whisk his hair from his brow and drip down his neck. Cool and cleansing, it did little to ease his racing heart.

Livvy did something to him, something that tempted him, not only with sex but with hope. Longtime experience had taught him *hope* was a dangerous thing, a cruel and vicious demon that would much rather kick him in the balls than lift him up. It did just enough good that he forgot the pain of the kick for a while then laughed like a crack addict when he most needed a smile. He was starting to need Livvy.

Sardonic emptiness clutched at his gut. He was not what Livvy needed. She deserved someone better, less tainted. The one thing John knew was his own bleak soul. He'd long ago accepted his path, even had fun with the journey. There wasn't a commandment he hadn't broken, many more

than once, and a few daily. He had no reservation about lying when the need suited him. Selfish and self-absorbed, he didn't give a shit what anyone thought. He'd give his life for Gina, had taken a life for her, but even she had grown up, moved on, made her own family. His destiny was predetermined. He'd always thought he could handle it.

An angel with deep copper hair tempted him to believe he could have more. He'd told her one dark secret and she'd kissed him. Instead of fear, she showed him tenderness. The trust and grace she offered humbled him. Like water to a thirsting man, she created a longing deep inside him, a longing he'd never known. John wanted to belong to one person and one person alone. He wanted it with a voracious need that threatened to consume him. But what price would Livvy pay if he offered his blackened soul?

By the time the rain increased to a deluge, he had no answers. John drew a deep breath and wandered down the hall, soaked to the skin. Livvy had confiscated one of his tee shirts and was curled on her side of his bed, sound asleep.

Her side. His bed, her side. The fact the phrase jumped so easily to his mind jacked his emotions up even higher and he swallowed a dry knot, the only thing that wasn't dripping wet puddles. Damp dark red tendrils streamed onto the pillow,

and his fingers itched to bury themselves in them. On her cheek, now clear of any makeup, a dime-sized bruise drew his gaze. Crewcut's badge might have made the bruise but it was his fault. He'd marked her again, this time not so pleasantly.

He stalked into the bathroom and snapped the water on as hot as he could stand it. The room filled with steam as he peeled wet clothing from his body. His skin was sticky with the traces of frosting and lovemaking, tiny glitter crystals shining in his chest hair. He almost hated to wash the physical memory away.

The water pounded his tense neck and he braced his hands on the tiled wall. He'd blown it tonight. A stupid mistake cost him the longed-for chance to finally sink into her soft body. But he couldn't muster regret. She'd given him not only his fantasy but something he hadn't known he'd wanted—her faith. It touched him on a level he'd thought long denied him.

With a towel around his hips, he treaded softly into the bedroom. Livvy hadn't moved. He considered pulling on boxers or sweats but it seemed ridiculous now. Naked, he slid beneath the sheet. Livvy sighed and rolled into him. Propped on one arm, he stared down into her face and searched for what made her different.

He'd had innumerable beautiful women in his life. He'd long ago stopped counting. Livvy

wasn't the prettiest or the bustiest or the most alluring. What made her so different? Why did she tempt him to dream?

The question bounced in his head and he wrapped his arm around her waist. She shifted, snuggled back and murmured a sleepy sound. His body froze. Livvy wasn't wearing panties. His cock pressed against her firm bare ass and his libido sat up, looking around. John buried his head in her hair. It was going to be a long night.

"You'll like Windago. It's always spring there," Jondi said.

Thorn sucked his teeth in annoyance, bringing another bout of coughing that peppered the night.

Vory fed a small bit of kindling to the fire and curled her arms around her knees. "I can't wait. It sounds so peaceful there."

Irritation exploded as Thorn shot straight up into the tree without warning. He hung high above their heads, wings wrapped tight to his body.

Vory watched him and shook her head. "He really doesn't like me."

"He's just not feeling himself. You'll see, he'll come around." Jondi said the words more to convince himself than Vory but she smiled anyway. The fire danced in the small

breeze and he settled to rest beside her, tennis shoes stretched out wide. The only sound was the snap of the flames and Thorn sucking his teeth high in the air, so when she spoke, it startled him.

“Thank you for helping me. You could have left me alone like Thorn wanted, but you didn’t. Standing up to your best friend isn’t easy, I suppose. I’ve never had anyone do that for me.”

“Thorn’s wrong. He’ll see that. I wanted to help you. There is something about you that makes me feel good, like we were meant to be friends. I couldn’t leave you behind, no matter what. Besides, you’re coughing too. I want to help take care of you. Andros will know what to do.”

Rosy lips tilted with her shy smile. His eyes trained on her mouth, Jondi didn’t see her hand move. But he felt it touch his and he swallowed. She had a magic in her, a magic that called to him. Just like with Thorn, he knew his destiny involved Vory. He just didn’t know how.

Even as she started to cough, Jondi turned his palm so it cradled Vory’s. He held it while her cough grew.

Thunder woke Livvy from lush, erotic dreams. Arms shaking in a wide stretch, she turned to the right side of the bed but John was gone. The raging storm colored the morning in gloomy drear but her mood was sunny. Brushing her hand over the dip in his pillow, a soft wonder filled her chest. Magic born of more than lust had fizzed between them last night. Her heart tripled in speed and she sighed. Did she dare give her feelings a name?

She relaxed into the pillows and caressed her memories. A warm heaviness grew between her thighs and she groaned. She was turning into some sort of lust-starved nymphomaniac or something. She shoved back the comforter and made a quick trip to the bathroom. Her reflection earned a grimace. A curly-haired woman should never ever go to bed with wet hair unless she enjoyed waking up resembling some strange tropical fish. She worked her fingers through the flattened tangles before washing her face.

Folded atop the vanity was her now freshly washed clothing but most of it was a dry-clean-only mess. The skirt was a loss, the blouse a joke of wrinkled linen, and she had no desire to put the bra back on. Instead, she opted for the now-clean panties and a pair of John's boxers used as shorts. Not fashion-model perfect, but her ass wasn't hanging out. Good enough for her.

The fast *tappitytap* of the keyboard led her to the study door. Seated in his usual spot, glasses hiding his eyes, John didn't acknowledge her presence. For one long minute, she watched him. How could this man, this teller of children's tales, make her feel so wantonly adult?

Her feet made no sound as she turned away but his voice halted her.

"Hey, you're awake." He looked up and smiled.

Her heart leaped two feet out of her chest. "Have you been up long?"

"I don't know, a couple hours, I guess. Wanted to get some ideas down."

Silence descended and brought its brother Awkward along. *Not quite lovers, and yet not quite not. Now there's a tongue twister for you.* She stared at him, shifting from one foot to the other, fanny chilling in the air. He stared at her, fingers skimming repetitively over the enter key. How do you handle the morning after the night before that didn't quite happen?

The chair rolled back from the desk and in a few steps he stood in front of her. One large warm hand slid around her neck, sending goose bumps along her skin.

"Cold? I'll turn the air down." His hands stroked her cool arms with a tender friction. "I just started coffee, so maybe that will warm you up some. Come on."



She followed him to the kitchen where the rich scent of French Roast hung heavy. Through two cups, a scramble of eggs and the pop of the toaster, John teased her about wearing his underwear but it didn't stop his eyes from landing on her exposed thighs when he thought she didn't see. They shed the awkwardness of things not completed and found their normal bantering rhythm. Although he said he had to work, Livvy chose to stay, camped out in his office and read, needing to be close to him.

Quiet comfort surrounded her for hours as she relaxed with him. Snuggled under a fleece blanket in the ragged armchair wedged beside his weight bench, she watched John type while alternately rereading his copy of *Book One: The Crystal Tear*. Outside, the storm swirled, pelting the windows with gusts of sheeting rain. Inside, Livvy luxuriated in time spent just watching, just drinking in, just being with him.

She wasn't quite sure exactly when it had happened, but she'd fallen teacups over keister in love with John Murphy.

He'd put his contacts in while she'd made coffee and now sat frowning at the monitor. Livvy wondered if he knew exactly how much of himself and his life he'd written in those pages. Thorn, with his sarcastic wit and dark, menacing looks, Jondi, with his gentle heart and unwavering

belief in good, both were sides of this man she loved. The constant theme between the two was loyalty. They could never be parted because, in real life, they were the same man.

The character of Andros intrigued her. The big soft-spoken magician with flowing white fur and quiet assurance of the path best chosen sounded almost motherly, although John had written the role as a male. Was it memories of his mother or a maturity of life that gave tone to the wise old monster? Was it the voice of the author trying to lead the monsters to the story's end? Chin buried in her arms, arms on her covered knees, she studied John as his eyes flicked over the typeface.

The villain, the evil Nordrake, she assumed was cast in the mold of Alan Warner. Nordrake spit venom from a forked tongue when he spoke, his angry red face scratched raw in places by an itch he would never fully resolve. His usurping of the throne decades ago should have made him content, cured his quest for power. Instead, he lusted for blood, the end of the Royal Latona line. He hungered for Jondi's death. Remembering some of the vile curses Nordrake spoke, Livvy shivered. No child should ever hear such hatred spill from the mouth of a parent, not even a substitute parent.

“Damn it!” His mutter jerked her out of her thoughts. John flipped the monitor off with a sharp jab and thrust himself back in the chair.

“Problems?”

He glanced over at her and shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m just not sure where they’re going with this. Being that I write the damn thing, you’d think they would let me know what they’re doing.”

The blanket hit the ground soundlessly as Livvy rose and walked to his chair. “Let me see.” She reached down and flicked the monitor back on.

He flipped it back off quickly with a firm chuckle. “Oh, no. No one reads anything until it’s ready for submission. This is all just bones anyway, no real flesh until I get it lined out.”

Livvy arched her brow, leaned over and tried to turn the screen on again. He caught her hand and pulled her to his lap. His rough jeans highlighted her bare legs, making her aware of just how little she wore.

“I said no, Livvy. It’s not ready for anyone but me.”

“One page.” She held up one finger. “Come on, Murphy. I won’t tell anyone. Let me take a peek.”

His gaze lost its shine, as if he was looking inside for a long time before he glanced at her. That lopsided grin she loved peeked out. “I can’t

believe I'm doing this. I don't share my monsters, Livvy. Not at this point, anyway, but...one page, all right?"

He leaned forward to turn on the monitor and her heart softened. He was trusting her more than he had anyone before. The screen popped to life and she scoured the typeface.

The cough left her gasping, her vivid lilac eyes streaming sparkling tears. Weak and shaky, she lay back against the cool ground, struggling to breathe. "Jondi, maybe Thorn's right. Maybe you should just go home. I'm getting sicker every minute and you... Maybe you should just leave me here."

"No." The command in his voice surprised Jondi but it felt right. He didn't fight it, embracing the determination that swept through him. "Can't you feel it, Vory? You, me, Thorn, we're all tied together."

"I feel it," she whispered.

Jondi thought she fell asleep. The only sound was her ragged breath, the night insects clamoring in the dark, and the wind's brush against Thorn's wings. The pale purple of her ponytails fanned around her head and he touched one. It was soft, silky, like the underside of a flower petal. It

tickled, sliding through the fur on his hand, and he smiled.

Her murmur barely broke the night. "One day, you'll be sorry you met me, Jondi. I feel that, too."

He felt it too but didn't know what it meant. He rolled onto his side and watched her dream. Sleep would not come to him.

"Vory?"

He sighed before clicking the monitor off. "New character. She's... Jondi has a crush."

"You sound like this is all really happening, Murphy, instead of something you think up." Livvy relaxed back against his chest and he tightened the arm around her.

"They're my words but it's their story. They belong to me. Or maybe I belong to them, I don't know. Each one has a little piece of me in them somewhere."

Livvy turned her attention to the objects scattered on his desk. She reached out to touch a crystal ball. Baseball-sized, the black glass had a fiery plume of orange blown into the center. Tiny air bubbles trapped inside gave the impression of movement.

"Is this Jondi's Orb? From the second book?"

John smiled and picked up the small object. He placed it in her hand casually. "Well, it was the

inspiration for it, anyway. It's just a paperweight but it spoke and I listened. I have something for each segment of the story."

"Show me." *Share with me, let me in.* Her breathless whisper drew his gaze to her face. Something tender darted across his eyes. His hand fell and opened a deep drawer to his right. She leaned over and stared inside. Nothing of any value, the entire collection might have cost ten dollars, but the immense wealth of creativity they inspired made them precious. He pulled each one out.

"The Crystal Tear actually came from an old civil war homestead I worked on. My crew was demoing the ballroom area and this just caught my eye. Despite everything falling down around it, this piece of cut glass from an old waxy chandelier stayed beautiful. So I pocketed it and kept on ripping out floorboards. I didn't know why at the time but it had a story for me."

He laid the prismsed glass aside and took the paperweight from her hands. "Gina gave me this for my birthday. I used to keep a fan blowing in the kitchen where I wrote in our first apartment. It would ruffle whatever papers I had scattered around. She liked the colors, simple as that. She was maybe fourteen, I guess. But she bought it with babysitting money that she'd earned."

The glassy orb joined the tear before he brought out a small bucket. It was cheaply made, but he held it as if it were made of gold. Deeper, with a touch of anger, his voice conflicted the gentleness of his hands.

*“Book Three: The Brotherhood Well.* The first job I had as a teenager was picking apples. It’s damn hard work but the apples are so tart your lips tingle with the bite. I got paid for the strength in my back and it got me out of Alan’s house, so to me it was like paradise. The gift shop sold these buckets with apple bread in them. I ate one every day and dreamed of never going home.”

The mention of Alan made her heart stutter and she took the bucket from John, holding it to her breast as she longed to hold the child he had been. The wooden pail seemed to hold all his adolescent longings, longings that had never come to be.

He reached deep into the drawer and pulled out a punched-tin oak leaf, handing it to her. The pointed, jagged leaf in a deep burnished copper weighed next to nothing yet was rigid and sharp. Although primitive, it still had an elegance.

*“Book Four: The Enchanted Oak,* comes out this December.” The names of his books were never released before they hit the shelf but he shared it with her with a wink. “A reader sent it to me, believe it or not. Christopher, he was eleven. He just wanted to thank me for the first book and

give me something he'd made by himself. He said he wanted to be an artist, a metal sculptor, and Jondi made him feel like he could succeed one day." John paused and shook his head. "He called me his hero. It was my first real fan letter."

She sat on his lap, staring at his treasures and realized how much he'd shared with her. Inch by inch, his tough shell was cracking and letting her in. Emotion welled in her eyes and she turned from him to hide their dampness. The monitor stood black and silent on the desk and she tapped her finger against it.

"So, what about this one? Does it have an inspirational object? A title?"

His chest expanded with a slow inhale. The shutters slammed closed in his eyes and her heart sank. "Kind of. It's still forming."

He pushed at her back slightly, telling her to move. When she got too close, he pushed her away. *Two steps forward, one step back.* Just when she thought she'd made progress with him, he shut her out. But new love gave her determination and she dug her heels in.

*Not this time, mister.*

"Come on, break time. Your monsters aren't talking and I need more food." She pulled him out of his chair and down the hall. Livvy hopped up on the bar, swinging her legs like a teenager. She didn't miss the way his eyes flew to her bare



thighs. Was he thinking of having them wrapped around his hips? Was he remembering kissing them last night? Whatever thought went through his mind, it made him draw a deep breath and turn to the cabinet. A wickedness took hold of her and she plotted how to get him naked.

The phone shrilled beside her and Livvy jumped. John crossed to answer, leaning over her body. The fact his hand skimmed her thigh and then stayed there as he picked up the receiver thrilled her. Livvy reached up to kiss his neck but her name drew her attention.

"I have no idea. Here, ask her yourself." Handing her the phone, John turned away abruptly, his mood surly. Livvy frowned at the change before cradling the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Livvy! Talk to my thick-headed brother, will you? I need him to come to the company picnic Sunday after next. Seriously, Liv, I *need* him to be there. And you too, of course."

Livvy listened with half an ear as Gina spoke about the picnic. Most of her attention was on John as he made sandwiches. He held up the mayonnaise and mustard, looking at her with a cocked eyebrow. Livvy pointed to the mustard.

"Uh, I don't know, Gina. If he doesn't want to come, I don't know that I can change his mind."

John soundlessly clapped his hands. Using her toe, she nudged him in a silent tease.

"I can't take no for an answer. Tell him Preacher will be there," Gina bribed with a whine. Livvy relayed the information to John who shrugged but never looked up.

Livvy brought the phone back to her ear. "Sorry, Gina, I think he's digging his heels in here."

His sister snorted. "All right, fine, time for the big guns then. Tell him if he doesn't show up, I'm giving Emily his new phone number. And I'll tell her Johnny has been asking about her."

Jealousy reared, but Livvy bit her tongue and gave John the message.

His head snapped up and he yanked the phone away from her. "Don't you dare give that bitch this number, do you understand me?" He listened with narrowed eyes.

Gina's voice was a garbled stream from the receiver, so Livvy climbed off the counter. *Who is Emily?* Her mind spinning, she finished their sandwiches and cut them in two.

"Fine, Gina, whatever. We'll be there. But don't pull this shit again." John hung up with too much force but didn't turn to face her.

Livvy bit into half her sandwich. Four bites later, he turned around.

“What company?” Her innocent question brought his grin.

“Salvatori Construction. Gina married my old boss’s son, Pete. They own it now.”

Livvy nibbled her sandwich. “You do realize you didn’t ask me about going, right?”

His raised brows told her hadn’t thought of asking. He’d automatically linked them and it made her smile, all gooey and warm inside, like a half-baked cookie. He was thinking of them as a couple.

“You’re right, I didn’t. Sorry, I just assumed.”

She picked up the plate holding his sandwich and held it out in front of him. “So who’s Emily?”

“Liv, don’t, okay?” The lines around his mouth tightened. John set the plate aside and reached for her. Rough through her thin shirt, his hands settled at her waist. “I never claimed to be a monk. Far from it, but the only woman in my life now is you.”

Damn, now why did he have to go and get all sweet when she was trying to dig up old-girlfriend dirt? Livvy looped her arms around his neck and leaned into his embrace. A soft feeling warmed her chest. She rubbed her nose to his before sliding her mouth to his kiss. He coaxed her tongue to dance in long, lazy strokes. His hands smoothed up then down, tracing the line of her

back. Her appetite surged, the sandwich long forgotten.

The cadence of the falling rain echoed and thunder rolled in the distance, warning of another squall fast approaching. Livvy's bones tremored as a sexual storm brewed in the kitchen. Electricity buzzed that had nothing to do with the weather but emanated from the steadily increasing heat of body friction, of lips on lips, tongue on tongue, cotton to cotton. An ache formed deep inside her—a wet warmth that pulsed and intensified.

He released her mouth to glide his lips along her cheek. "I'm hungry, Livvy, but not for lunch."

Need engulfed her, erasing everything from consciousness except the feel of him. The rough pads of his hands sent crackles of lust along her skin. He dipped his fingers beneath the back of her panties, cupping her ass. She angled her head and moved her hair aside for his kisses raining down on her like the storm. Ebony hair bunched in her grip as she tried frantically to get nearer, desperate for a taste, for a flavor to fill the hunger he'd created. The muscles of his back tightened as her tongue found and skimmed his jaw.

"I'm having one of those adult cravings myself," she whispered.

"Then I should, ah, feed that craving."

John palmed the side of one swelling breast, thumb skimming her taut peak. A whimper formed but was lost to her fast-sucking breath as his fingers swept under her ass, feathering over the moisture that gathered between her legs. One fingertip delved between her folds, thrusting along the wet slit.

“Let me satisfy that craving, Livvy. I want to tempt you, with nibbles and licks, kisses and tastes, touches and strokes, teases and thrusts.”

Livvy gasped as he punctuated each phrase with a stinging nip to her throat. A master of words, he painted a too erotic picture in her mind and he swallowed her moaning sigh. His kiss scorched her. For one long hot minute he did nothing but dive repetitively into her mouth. She mimicked his every move and sank her teeth into his lower lip when he started to pull away.

John bent, cradled her in his arms and walked down the hall. Something went soft in Livvy’s belly. Although a cliché, being carried to bed by the man she loved touched some secret place in her heart. In one move, John made her feel cherished, desired and so very feminine. He released her legs but their connection wasn’t lost. He cupped her face and dotted kisses along her cheeks. The wind howled, the rain poured and the thunder rumbled but Livvy only heard the beat of John’s heart mirroring her own.

For all the intimacy they'd shared, this moment washed over her with sudden nerves. She stood at the pinnacle of a mountain. There was no turning back if she jumped. Making love with him sealed her future. No other man had ever created not only the desire but the rush of sweeping emotion that simmered in her veins. For her, this wasn't just love, it was fairytale magic, forever and happily ever after. A risky move since no promises had been spoken. But her heart leaped blindly, and she was freefalling straight into his arms. The rush was breathtaking.

On the roof, the downpour beat hard, thousands of tiny feet in a running march. The rhythm echoed her pulse. Their clothing melted away until they stood naked, skin to skin with nothing but time between them.

"How hungry are you, Livvy?" His voice was pure temptation hidden in a brazen chuckle.

"Very...hungry."

The bed lay exactly as she'd left it, mussed and wrinkled, blankets shoved to the bottom. She drew him near with a gentle tug. The lightning flashed and captured him in strobed light. Livvy's heart thudded beneath her ribs.

John was all the seven deadly sins personified. *Lust* blazed most forcefully, carving his features with demonic beauty. *Pride* bowed his mouth as he watched her tongue skate across her bottom lip.

Only *gluttony* could describe the hunger in the gaze raking over her body. *Sloth* slowed his movements, tormenting her with his absolute control, but *wrath* battled in his expression, urging him to possess her. Rapturous *greed* heated his skin and he took her mouth in primitive passion. His tongue darted into her mouth and *envy* coveted her very breath.

John turned her around, his lips falling to her shoulder, his hands sliding up to cup her breasts. His rigid shaft nestled in the cleft of her ass and she arched back, pressing tighter. She melted as his mouth traced along her neck. He pushed her belly flat onto the pale sheets, covering her body with his. Hot and thick against her thigh, his cock teased her. Her folds swelled, slick with beckoning entreaty. Soon. So very soon.

The line of her spine became a trail and he traversed each inch slowly. His tongue slithered over the curve of her behind. His teeth dashed the soft flesh with a stinging bite. Livvy quivered as his fingers grazed her hidden dampness. She thrust her hips up, pushing her ass closer. John parted her slick skin and stroked her clit in fast, light strokes.

His broad tongue glided up the back of her thigh. Thunder boomed, shaking the earth with a vicious power, and she jumped beneath his mouth. Those enthralling fingers left her.

“How hungry are you, Livvy?”

“Starving.”

Tantalizingly slow, he kissed along the dip of her spine. Last night was an appetizer, a sampling. She craved more and would have it, have him. She rolled beneath him. His shoulder caught her first kiss. Lips and tongues met before dipping to taste skin of different textures. John lowered his mouth to her collarbone, her stomach, her breasts. He licked her painfully tight nipples, and her thighs opened to his hand.

Against her breast, his soft whisper tickled. “Nibbles and licks, kisses and tastes.”

His mouth skimmed along her stomach. “Touches and strokes.”

His tongue licked at her throbbing clit. “Teases and thrusts.”

With the devil’s own patience, he mouthed her until oblivion was within her grasp. Her hips arched and she called his name in a broken murmur. Each maddening touch drew tighter and tighter in her belly. Livvy reached for him, to pull him closer, deeper, to ease the desperate yearning.

He drew back with a carnal grin. “How hungry are you now, Livvy?”

“Famished.”

Her throaty answer drew his mouth to hers. Heady with blind passion, Livvy rolled her tongue across his. Feminine power surged through her.



He was firm and heavy. Needing the touch of him, longing to hear her name from his mouth, she curled her fingers around his shaft. His growl enthralled her. He was as hungry for her as she was for him.

Loving the feel of him, so thick and solid, her fingers glided over his length until he began to rock to her motion. John licked her mouth and reached above her head. A slide of wood, a quick sound of wrapper tearing and a split second gone from her skin, then he covered her, spreading her thighs with his. His ragged breath mingled with hers.

Light nips at her lips plagued her with temptation. She twisted, obsessed with the need to take him, be possessed by him. Her legs locked around his hips, her nails raked at his arms and back, but John held himself a fraction too distant.

“What are you craving, Livvy?”

Every pore shrieked with wantonness, and her brain no longer functioned. Her single word was a plea. “You.”

Then he was there. Lusciously unhurried, he filled her with a delicious stretch. A hiss blended with a sob of satisfaction. John’s low groan captivated and empowered her.

“Liv...oh God...so sweet.” Tight cords in his neck stood thick as he gritted his teeth in the slow effort and she basked in the knowledge that he

wasn't as in control as he wanted her to believe. His entry lasted forever and her eyes flew open, unfocused, until he was deep inside her. A hard squeeze pulled a gasp from him. Feminine pride rushed her and she tightened and released around him.

"Fuck!" His control snapped. He pushed up, lifting his chest from her, and thrust. He rocked into her and she bowed to him. He nudged her clit with each movement, from leisurely to passionate to frenzied, each stroke propelling her higher, closer.

Livvy bucked, clutching at his hips, driving herself nearer to him. John moved, rolling beneath her and thrusting up. His gaze fixed on where they joined.

"God, Liv, yes. Do it, honey, take me with you."

Her nails gouged into his chest as she balanced. Livvy ground down, squeezing and stroking the thick length inside her. His fingers dug into her hips and an unruly cry pealed from his throat. Livvy sucked in a scream, clenching and exploding. His body shook and her name echoed in the storm's howl. For one instant, he ceased to be, she stopped existing. It was only them, as one, together.

## Chapter Eight

“You’re beautiful, Andrea, truly beautiful.” Livvy blinked several times to clear the shimmer from her eyes. Andrea stared at Livvy through the octagonal mirror, tears sparkling in her own eyes. The waterfall of shining satin and beading created the picture-perfect princess-bride look Andrea had been striving for.

“Do you think Tow will like it?”

“Andy, you’re beautiful, he loves you and it’s on sale. He’ll love it.”

While Andrea made a deposit and scheduled a fitting, Livvy browsed through racks of white. Her hand fell on a sample veil with delicate scalloped edging. The pearl-encrusted combs sparkled with quiet elegance and she couldn’t resist slipping them into her hair. The blusher veil was not really her style but since it was attached, she smoothed it over her face. A bride stared back at her from the mirror. A surging in her chest made her breath catch. Like a child playing dress-up, the image captivated her.

“What are you doing?” Andrea’s voice made her jump and she ripped the headpiece off with a guilty laugh and burning face.

“Just playing, I guess.” Her shaky fingers shoved the length of lace into the bag and Livvy refused to face her sister. It wasn’t until they had exited the ultra-posh salon and were walking to her car that she dared a peek.

Andrea stared at her, a stubborn thrust to her jaw. “Livvy, what’s going on with you and John?”

*Now there’s the million-dollar question.* A deep sigh was hidden by the click of the automatic door locks opening. Livvy started the car and snapped the air conditioning to high before replying. “We’re taking things slow, I guess.”

“Slow? *Slow?* If you’re not at the Shack, you’re with him. You haven’t slept in your own bed since God was a child. That is not slow, Livvy.”

The snottiness in Andrea’s tone irritated her. How could she explain to her sister something she didn’t understand herself? “I’ve been an adult for a long time now. If I want to sleep with someone, I will. You’re the one who told me to go for it. Test drive the hotrod, you said.”

“Test drive, Livvy. Test drive. You’re looking to lease the sucker. You can’t be a soccer mom in a hotrod. Screw the car analogies. John’s not the marrying kind. He’s the love-’em-and-leave-’em type, a sexy bad boy. Even you said he wasn’t the type you take home to Mama, and now you’re playing with wedding veils.”

The knot that jammed Livvy's throat choked her until she forced it down with a hard gulp. "Things are changing, Andrea. He's different."

"Bullshit. He's getting a piece of ass and you're giving him your heart."

Livvy fixed her sister with the same look she used when Andrea would sneak cookies from the jar as a child. Every instinct in her body snarled in protective fury. "What's with you? I thought you liked Murphy. Is this about him and Tow getting drunk? I seem to remember both of them in the back of Leo's cruiser, not just Murphy."

"I do like him. It's just..." One hand rubbed her eyes. "Look, I never thought you two would get really involved. Not emotionally. I thought all you wanted was sex. I just don't want to see you hurt, okay?"

"I'm not going to get hurt. And I love him." Chin raised, Livvy glared at her baby sister.

Andrea sighed. "Have you told him that yet?"

"No, not yet." Softer than she meant, her words sounded timid.

"And of course he hasn't said anything." Andrea's tone was just shy of acidic and Livvy drew a calming breath.

"Some things but not what you mean."

"Tell him, Livvy." The challenge was clear. "If you're so sure, tell him. But I bet anything that once you say it, he tucks tail and runs."

Livvy thrust the car into drive. “You’re wrong about him, Andy.”

“One of us is—and I really do hope it’s me.”

The numbers never changed. Livvy rubbed her eyes and racked her brain. The Sugar Shack operated in the black but that red line was too close for comfort. The first few years, capital had been better. She’d made double loan payments and bought a house. Then the economy tanked and things got leaner. The Shack was still profitable but not as much as Livvy wanted.

That balloon payment had been expected and planned for so, although it hurt, it wasn’t out of the blue. But no one had told her the entire country would be tightening their belts just when her mortgage increased. Her restaurant contracts were her bread. Walk-ins, party orders and the adult line of delicacies were her butter. They were all proven money-makers. She got bookings for several bachelorette parties and sorority bashes nearly every weekend. Still, they weren’t enough.

When Tow proposed, Andrea had been so excited and that joy had spread. Livvy’d had no reservations about letting her stop paying rent to save for the wedding of her dreams. She’d always mother-henned Andrea, more so now that their real mother had passed. But losing that extra income had come at a very bad time. One

professional-grade baker's oven gave up the ghost, the bank payment came due and her health insurance took a hike all the same week.

She'd tightened her belt so hard, the buckle whimpered. It helped but not enough. Her eyes focused on the computer screen. Bright green and mocking, the cursor blinked at her meager resource balance. It didn't magically double. The projected outcome was dipping dangerously close to that thin line between being in the black and in the red. She needed another epiphany.

A headache bloomed and she reached for the Tylenol and John's sketchpad. Somehow, his rendition of her just made her feel better. She carried the pad with her to the front to relieve Justine for her break. Each flip of the page brought a wider smile to her face. Damn, John had talent for finding the brightness buried in all those dark images. She could use a little of that optimism now.

The bells of the front door banged on the glass. She pasted a welcoming smile on her face. "Hi, may I help you?"

A middle-aged woman with too-bright lipstick barreled to the counter. Behind her, a bored teenager in emo dress heaved a burdened sigh. Livvy moved a crystal bowl of peppermints seconds before the woman's huge Coach purse smacked down.

"I'm Marnie Florici and this is my daughter, Meagan. I saw a drawing that author did that you're putting on my niece's cake. Ashley Bernstein? Meagan has a sweet sixteen party coming up Saturday and, well, as you can see, she is not the pink roses type. I thought maybe you could do something."

Livvy's jaw popped open. Saturday was impossible. Not only was she booked solid for the next three weeks, her secondary chef was still on vacation. It would all fall to her.

"I don't want a freakin' party." Meagan's black lips barely moved but the disdain smacked the air.

Marnie whipped around and spat through clenched teeth. "Your cheating-ass father is paying for it and you're having a party that'll make his wallet weep."

A snort fanned long spiked bangs out from Meagan's hidden eyes and she crossed her arms. "Real adult, Mom."

"Hey, I'm not the one boning my receptionist."

Marnie kept talking. Slowly, the size and importance of this event sank into Livvy's brain. This was Marnie Florici, grande dame of three counties. Her family owned the biggest bank, three grocery stores and a slew of minor businesses. This was primo walking advertisement all wrapped up in one middle-aged acidic package desperately in need of a root touch-up. If Livvy



wowed them with this cake, word would spread and give her business a jumpstart.

“Too bad there are only male characters in those books.” Marnie raked her gaze over her not-quite-a-princess daughter. “I could see you as a little monster.”

Meagan brazenly raised her middle finger. “I liked the bat.”

“There is a female monster but not until the next book.” Livvy could have snatched the words out of the air the second they left her mouth. *Damn.* She fumbled, hoping to cover her blunder. “I’m sure we can find something you like, Meagan.” Livvy motioned to the design books. “Why don’t we start looking through that album and you can tell me what you like, okay?”

“She likes boys, skipping school and pissing me off.”

Meagan grinned, a twisted lift to her black-painted mouth. “I’m good at all three, too.”

Livvy let them argue and moved the sketchpad down the counter to make room for a few other design books. Meagan flipped through one book while her mother listed all the traits she inherited from her good-for-nothing father.

“Damn, Mom, this is all froufrou shit. Let’s just go.”

Livvy cringed. Emo, punk and Goth were not her forte. She doubted she could really even

discern the difference—all she knew was they all had a lot of black. But she needed this order. She racked her brain, desperate for an answer.

“Find a design.” Marnie was a woman with a vendetta. “There has to be something in there you can stomach.”

“Bitch.” A huff of pure teenage exasperation burst out. The plastic liners snapped with each page she thumbed and her sneer grew. Shoving one book aside, Meagan glanced at John’s sketchpad and flipped it open. Her hand stopped. “What’s this?”

Livvy floundered. “Uh...it’s just some drawings a friend did. It’s not...” Trailing off, Livvy watched in wonder. An animated electricity enlivened Meagan’s frame. She stood straighter, a dimple appeared with her smile and the pages turned slowly.

Inspiration struck.

All that useless, creative filler suddenly exploded into ideas for a younger, more modern, more pop-cultured line. Excitement sped Livvy’s heart rate. She could do this. It was just classic pastry application with a funky twist. It was all in the design. Designs she had right before her eyes, saved from an undiscovered grave. John’s garbage could be her financial salvation.

Livvy grabbed on with both hands and took a leap.

“It’s...our newest upcoming line. In fact, it’s so new, these are the originals, so I don’t have any color copies or pictures at the moment. You could be the first client, have something no one else has ever had.”

“What line?” Marnie asked, peering over her daughter’s shoulder.

“Well,” Livvy scrambled, her brain churning. She looked at Meagan’s black lips. Her Adult Cravings line just got a brand-new, slightly sinister-looking baby sister. “Dark Cravings.”

“Did that writer who did Ashley’s drawing do these, too?”

“Yes.”

Livvy caught Marnie’s eyes and the older woman cocked her head. She glanced down at the drawing of Livvy with wings. A knowing sneer twisted her lips. “So that’s how it is.”

Livvy refused to bite that fishing line and focused her attention on Meagan. A wink of light reflected off her nose ring. She studied each drawing, a snort sounding occasionally as she looked through the pages. She shoved the long bangs away from her black-rimmed eyes. “Oh, cool! I like this. Mom, look.”

Livvy glanced at the upside-down image. It was one of the few drawn in ink. An elongated casket with a sunroof, a set of organ pipes spitting flames and motorcycle wheels screamed defiance.

Winged bats flew overhead while the coffin-driver laughed his skeletal head off, flipping the bony bird to the world. The license plate read BYT ME.

“If that’s what you want, I don’t care. Maybe it’ll remind your father he’s supposed to cover your car insurance, too.” Marnie snickered, brandishing her scorned-woman attitude like a sword. Livvy refrained from commenting that it was her daughter who would feel the cut.

“Why don’t we personalize it a bit?” Livvy smiled.

Meagan tapped her black-painted nails and nodded. Underneath the hair dye, the piercings and the eyeliner was a child caught between a bitter mother and a cheating father.

Livvy’s heart cringed. How well she knew that position. “Just let me run into the back and copy this. I’ll be right back.”

Livvy set them up with complimentary cupcakes and darted into her office. Her hands shook with excitement dialing John’s house. Through three rings, she tapped her foot. She hung up when voicemail clicked on and dialed his cell. Nothing. *Damn*. He’d said he was going to mow the lawn this afternoon. Just her luck to get an epiphany when he was playing Grass Master.

Opportunity was knocking at her door and she was damn well going to open it. John couldn’t mind. He’d drawn the picture for Ashley and

hadn't minded when she turned it into a cake design. He'd given her permission to use the clock cake as she saw fit, said he was going to throw it away. He *had* thrown this sketchpad away. She'd just go ahead this once and then talk to him about it.

One photocopy later, she and Meagan hunched over the page, adding short spiked hair and a bust line and turning the motorcycle wheels into bicycle tires. In the interest of pastry application, the bats were lost but Livvy suggested a bat-shaped bustier rather than the ragged tux John had drawn. Marnie rattled off guest lists and menus, all the while badmouthing her ex-husband. Livvy made notes, jotted down suggestions and sent sympathetic glances to Meagan.

Livvy tallied up the estimated price, educated-guessing at the time and effort, tacked on a percentage for a rush-job and named a painfully high price. Marnie smirked and made the cake larger.

*John Murphy, I love you. The Sugar Shack's Dark Cravings are up and running, hopefully straight to the bank.*

She broke the speed limit racing toward Elmcrest but home wasn't her destination. Her feet pounded on the deck steps and she thrust the door wide with a cheek-splitting grin on her face.

“Murphy?”

“In here.” A voice called from the living room. He pulled himself from his reclined position on the couch with a naughty grin. “You’re early. Come here.”

The pulsing music that was so not his taste flowing from the TV drew her eye. Scantly clad models pranced down a catwalk, hips swiveling to show off the latest in lingerie. She rolled her eyes. Like real women wore six-inch heels while parading around in their underwear. How any woman could walk around in those bits of interconnected thread and expose what they were born with amazed her. It also apparently enthralled John as his eyes slid back to one blonde model strutting around in a pink thong and little else.

“You are such a man,” she grouched, grabbing the remote.

“Hey, I was watching that.”

“*Was* being the correct word. You don’t need them. You have me.” She clicked the TV off, tossed the remote away, and twirled onto John’s lap.

His hands went immediately to her hips. “You weren’t here and I was thinking about you. There was this one black number that had a chain going up her...” A devilish glint appeared as he cupped her ass. “How do you feel about leather, Liv?”

“I think it would chafe places that you wouldn’t want chafed.” Grass clippings clung to his shirt and she brushed them away. “You smell like a golf course. Go change. I’m taking you out to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“You. Remember that clock cake you drew? I think it started then, really. I was looking through one of your sketchpads—quit playing with my ears and listen—”

John hummed, dragging his tongue down her neck to the place behind her ear that sent shivers up her spine.

“There are things in there that can really translate to baking—Murphy, I’m trying to tell you—God, do that again.”

“This?” A shudder worked her shoulders. “Or this?”

“Oh, that.” Her eyes closed and her mind scattered. It took effort to angle away from his mouth. “Anyway, it sparked something inside my head. Something that said ‘dark’ and ‘current’ and ‘very profitable.’ I came up with an idea for a new line. It’s younger and fresher and, God, Murphy, it’s going to be like a shot of adrenaline to the Shack. I named it Dark Cravings and I have you to thank for it.”

A slow grin crept out and he pulled her tighter to him, situated her thighs around his hips. "That's great."

"This is going to be huge, Murphy, I can feel it."

His hand delved under her skirt. "I can feel it, too."

She poked him in the ribs. "Stop. Go change. Where do you want to go for dinner?"

"Honestly?"

"Anywhere you want. You pick. This is on me."

"Let's order Chinese and stay in."

Livvy deflated. "You are such a hermit."

"No, I'm horny." His chuckle danced along her skin.

She rolled her eyes. "That's what you get for watching underwear models."

John rocked into her. The growing ridge in his shorts pressed against her in delicious temptation. "No, that's what I get when I think about you wearing that underwear...and me taking it off you."

"Murphy, I want to go out."

"Liv," John sighed exasperatedly. "I don't want to go anywhere tonight. If it's my choice then I want spicy Hunan chicken, hot and sour soup, and you naked."



She leaned forward and licked along his jaw. “Come on, champagne, a nice steak, something along those lines?”

John pushed her back. A wicked glimmer lit in his eyes as he opened the buttons on her shirt. “I don’t like champagne and I can grill my own damn steak. There are a hundred ways you can thank me and I never have to leave this spot.”

“Spoilsport. You’re killing a really good excitement high here.”

“If you want excitement...” John pulled the tails of her blouse loose from her skirt and slid his hands up her stomach.

“I also want to talk to you, butter you up, ask for a favor.”

“Butter sounds interesting. Slippery though.” Along her thighs, his fingers teased slow lines that left goose bumps in their wake. “And I am all ears for any *favor* you want.”

She shook her head. John had a one-track mind right now. A track that was making her wet and needy. “Murphy, I need your help. This is important to me. Have you heard a word I’ve said?”

He nibbled a tingling path down her neck. “Mm-hmm, got it. Clock cake, Shack, new line, Dark Craving. I’m having a dark craving myself right now.” His tongue dove into her mouth, tempting hers to come and play.

Her fingers sank into his hair. “The new line i—” A gasp ripped from her throat as he rolled her tight nipple between his fingertips. “I’d like to use y—” He licked a line down her neck, sucking and nipping until her breath came in harsh pants. “About the sketchpa—” His tongue traced over the upper curve of her breast. “I want to base the—”

“Liv, stop talking.”

“Wait, I need to know if you’re okay with me doing this.”

“Honey, you can do whatever you want if let me do what I want.” He tugged the blouse from her arms and nipped along her shoulder. “And I want to do some things right now.”

“Murphy, you have no idea how much this means to me. It’s going to be fabulous.”

“It always is fabulous, Liv.” Reaching around her back, he popped the hook on her bra. “I love your underwear, know that? It’s like a Victoria’s Secret catalog come to life.”

Cupping her palms over her breasts, she held her bra in place. “If you like it that much, I have another amazing idea.”

“I’m listening.” He nibbled at her thumb. “Move your hands.”

“No. Sit back and leave my boobs alone a minute. How would you like your own private lingerie showing as a thank you?” Grinding her

hips against his erection, she tongued his lips. “I have a few things you might be interested in. Stockings and garters, thongs, demi-bras and boy shorts. Red, black, white, a few pastels and—” she dragged her lips along his neck, “—one hot purple number I know you’ll love. It’s a split-crotch thing that I haven’t been brave enough to wear yet. Sound spicy enough for you?”

Every muscle in John’s body drew taut. “You have those here?”

“No, at home. But I’d have time to go grab an overnight goodie-bag while you call the order in. I’ve also got a pair of black stiletto heels that I can barely walk in.”

He pushed her off his lap. “Go Liv, now.”

He was dialing the phone before she got to the door.

“Don’t forget the egg rolls!”

Each hand-drawn sketch was photocopied, the smaller scribbles getting separated onto their own sheet inside a plastic liner. The liners filled a thick black album, each one with a barcode and a design name. She mimicked Meagan’s lips and the album now sported a black lipstick kiss above the funky font title. Using specially bought artist pencils, Livvy colored the copied pictures. The simple act of coloring felt childlike but she poured

adult concentration into making them perfect, blending shades and shadows.

They were rough drawings never meant for more than occupying John's idle hands, so she tweaked most of them, polished and refined a few lines, completed a few half-drawn ones. She hunched over John's dining room table and transformed his trash into her promise. He wrote in the study, yelling teases down the hall, calling her a workaholic. It wasn't that she was a workaholic. It was that she had the same fizzy feeling she had before the Shack opened.

That same fizz in her gut bubbled when she proudly tacked photos of Meagan's completed casketmobile cake on the exhibit board and privately framed herself in original impish form in her office. Pamphlets were printed, prices set and dark-colored fondant reordered. She paid Justine's teenaged grandson a small fortune to update her website and add a Dark Cravings page. He had a slew of ideas and rapidly outlined his suggestions. Livvy took them and placed three ads online.

Then she crossed her fingers and waited.

Meagan Florici's not-so-sweet sixteenth party was on Saturday evening with over two hundred guests, mostly friends from her posh private school. Sunday, the Shack received over a hundred unique hits to the website. The server crashed twice but came back up within minutes.

Monday she got walk-ins asking to see the Dark Cravings book. One college girl ordered the reshaped clock cake for a steampunk sorority welcome-back-to-school party.

Wednesday, a twelve-year-old boy fell in love with the blue-and-black striped dog that walked on three legs and a pooper-scooper. His doting parents hadn't blinked at the specialty price or the chocolate dog turds on the cake top.

Thursday, she retooled one design to create a wedding cake in black fondant. The bride's tears left inky eyeliner tracks down her ultra-white cheeks. By Friday, Livvy had orders scheduled through October.

Dark Cravings was an official success.

"Murphy, how many people are going to be here? I don't think I brought enough cookies."

Gina's house was a sprawling two-story Colonial with acres of grass stretching in either direction. Livvy stared in appreciation as John drove around the back. Already several dozen people were milling around, and a huge grill stood ready beside a humongous smoker. Picnic tables were scattered across the lawn and a DJ was setting up his equipment under a striped tent. A portion of a back field had been roped off for parking and John backed next to a huge lazy pine.

“Maybe a hundred, give or take. It’s a big deal every year.” His distracted voice brought her eyes back to him. Back and forth, his jaw worked and he stared out the windshield. She rubbed her palm across the hard muscles of his arm.

“You okay?”

He nodded and climbed from the truck before she could ask anything more. He already had the tailgate down and was pulling out the oversized blue cooler with the Sugar Shack’s logo when she stepped close. One hand rested on the cooler top and she took the opportunity to slip her arms around his waist on that side. In the past few weeks, they’d grown so close she could feel the unease inside him like a fresh burn.

“Talk to me, Murphy.”

He reached for a stray curl that had fallen from her hairclip and twined it around his finger. The blush of new romance was a heady cocktail and both seemed intent on guzzling every drop. Livvy watched as each tiny sliver fell from the steely wall surrounding his innermost self. With every piece, he gave more of himself to her and she eagerly gathered each bit. His touch, his taste, the smell of his skin was embedded in her heart, a heart that ached for him and his discomfort.

“I don’t belong here anymore. I quit over a year ago.”

“But you worked with these people for over a dozen years, they’re friends. You said a couple of you emailed and called—”

“It’s just different now. I’m not one of the crew anymore. Things have changed. Look, Liv, they know I quit to write, I never hid that. But they don’t know I write under Flannigan and I’d rather keep it that way.”

“Why?”

Broad shoulders rose in a slight shrug while his eyes soared to the tree line. “J. B. Flannigan writes monster stories for kids. John Murphy writes tough-guy, kick-ass heroes with a heavy erotic twist. Which do you think a bunch of construction workers would prefer? I mean, if someone asked me to my face, no, I wouldn’t deny it, but I’d rather not draw too much attention to it. People change when they find out.”

Livvy scrutinized him, the slight breeze lifting the front locks of his ebony hair. He preferred dark to white meat, loathed golf and had a stubborn streak three miles wide. His favorite movie was *Schindler’s List*, he was ticklish in only one place and had a fondness for motor-head repair shows. All these things she’d discovered since becoming his lover. Yet there were still so many puzzle pieces of him she hadn’t figured out.

Jondi and John were one and the same but he protectively shielded the monster and their tie

from most people. John's picture had never even appeared on the books' dust jackets, only a photo of his pencil-gripped fingers sketching the creature.

Her sigh brought his gaze back to her face. "You've had more success as Flannigan but if you don't want me to mention it, okay. Your secret's safe with me."

A shadow crossed his face. The hand from her hair traced a line down her cheek before resting on her lips. She kissed his fingertips and he smiled. A sense of having passed some weird test filled her. She had to force her lungs to breathe as he pulled the cooler from the truck and headed to the house.

Inside, chaos reigned. Children darted in and out the wide-open patio doors while harried mothers chased after them. John called to his sister from the patio and held up the cooler. At her quizzical look, Livvy slipped into the muggy kitchen. The scent of Old Bay and butter assaulted her and she dodged two toddlers dripping with watermelon juice. "I wasn't sure what to bring. It's just some cookies and stuff from the Shack. Where do you want them?"

Gina smiled, her face glowing with the sheen of steam from the boiling kettles. "There's a table set up over next to the grills for desserts. You didn't have to do that, Livvy, but thanks. Would



you mind grabbing a basket here? The shrimp are getting ahead of me.”

John disappeared with the cooler and Livvy scooped pound after pound of small shrimp from a kettle, dumping each basket into an ice bath. When the crustaceans were under control, Gina paused and blew a stray hair away.

“Thanks for getting him here. I worried when he moved that he’d end up a recluse. Johnny doesn’t exactly search out friends, you know. He’s content with his creations and take-out pizza.”

“I didn’t get him here. You and your threats did.”

“Hey, whatever works.” Gina laughed as John and a tall man with bright emerald eyes came through the door. The man dropped a kiss on Gina’s cheek before stealing a chilled shrimp. Quick introductions flew and Pete Salvatori disappeared with a tray of basting spices. Gina thrust potato salad makings at Livvy.

Mixing the goopy blend, Livvy bit her lip to hide a smile. John’s sister treated her like family. Guests you catered to, family you dictated to and bossed around. Right now, John was on the wrong end of that dictatorship.

“I just don’t understand, that’s all.” Gina pointed her knife in John’s direction and scowled.

“A police cruiser, Johnny? What in the hell were you thinking?”

John rubbed his eyes. “I was thinking at least this time I wasn’t in handcuffs. Enough with the cross-examination, Gina.”

Livvy grimaced at the anger as he strode out the door and across the lawn, stiff-backed and swaggering. Irritation emanated from his body. Another element of being treated like family was not hiding your arguments. She’d forgotten that part.

“He told you.” Awe in her voice, Gina gaped at her, her brows rounded in surprise.

Livvy concentrated on mixing the salad but nodded. John’s sister just stared. Silence stretched while the shrimp pot continued to boil, the sound of rapid bubbling filling the space. After a small swallow that felt almost like a betrayal of his confidence, Livvy sighed. “Yes, he told me about Alan.”

Gina rubbed her neck. “Wow. Johnny doesn’t even talk to me about it anymore. You must mean a hell of a lot more to him than I thought.” She turned a soft smile on Livvy. “I’m glad.”

Conversation became impossible as more women came into the kitchen bearing casseroles, baskets and boxes. Gina directed everything to its proper place and Livvy was sent to a wide table on the patio where several women sat sorting

small toys into sand buckets. Gina tossed out to no one in particular that she was John's girlfriend, and the circle opened immediately. Such simple words, but they made Livvy's heart buoyant as she tucked yo-yos and squirt guns into plastic buckets.

Livvy glanced around at the now-bustling yard for a familiar flash of dark hair. At the far end of the grass under a small oak tree, beside a tapped keg, John stood with several other men in a circle.

"Never fails," Gina piped up when she noticed the direction of Livvy's gaze. "You get a bunch of men together, they all revert to puberty, and their IQ drops twenty points."

"That's why they all end up with stupid nicknames." One woman snorted. "You try being married to a man everyone calls Skunk and see how you like it."

A young woman sighed. "Still, look at them. If testosterone could patch the ozone layer, that group over there would fix the problem in an hour." Livvy had to agree. The group was nothing more than a feast of masculine eye candy with every flavor represented.

A very pregnant woman pulled herself out of her chair and moaned. "Yeah, well if they start whipping out rulers to see who's got a bigger package, I want pictures. It's been so long since Cas touched me, I forget what it looks like."

“Looks like he already touched you enough,” Skunk’s wife quipped and the feminine group erupted in laughter.

Like most company picnics she’d attended, the crowd was evenly divided into groups. The married folks with small children commandeered the center and watched brightly scrubbed preschoolers ruin their clothes while sharing stories of bottles and kindergarten teachers. Beneath the oak, single men, or those with no children, told stories that would most likely burn a blush onto a woman’s cheeks while their counterparts stood around the dessert table and told tales of their own that were just as catty. On picnic benches and various lawn chairs, the older crowd relived different days. Behind the scenes, the small group of women who kept things rolling moved with quiet efficiency. Only mealtime would bring everyone together.

Pete sent a loud blast from an air horn and the crowd moved en masse closer to the food tables and grills. Livvy’s back molded against John’s chest, his dark shirt absorbing the heat of their bodies and the day. The clip from her hair released in his hand, spilling her hair around her face. John tucked the clip in his pocket with a small grin before running his fingers through the loose curls. He brushed the hair to one side and nibbled her neck while everyone else bowed their

head for a prayer. A zing of sexual energy made her thighs tremble and her eyes refused to focus.

Somehow she ended up with an overflowing plate at a wooden table beside him. Children ran by, squirting water pistols and streaming bubbles while the DJ blasted an eclectic mix of music. Tablemates laughed and teased and Livvy had no trouble relaxing. The end of the long meal silently signaled people to drift to their separate groups, but Livvy hated to part from him. Straddling the bench, John held her with him until everyone else had cleared away. They stole a private moment in the throng of picnickers, the instant connection sparking with a single sly look.

Just before his mouth landed on hers, Gina called to Livvy, asking her to help clean up. Livvy smiled at him in mournful resignation. His hand clung to hers as she went to step away.

“Let ’er go, Shakespeare, and come get a beer,” a deep voice called.

Livvy turned with a grin. “Shakespeare?”

John stood, popped a quick kiss on her mouth and chuckled. ““What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.””

Livvy leaned in and rubbed her sunburned nose against his. “You’re no rose, Murphy, just a silver-tongued devil.”

His eyes darkened in the bright sun and he pulled her close. The spicy scent of his skin wrapped around her as his lips traced her ear lobe. "If we ever get a minute alone, I want to show you what a silver tongue I have."

"Shakespeare, come on." The voice laughed. "Or do you need an audience, you pervert?"

John sighed and dropped his head back before calling over his shoulder. "Shut up, Beaver. I'm working here."

Livvy shoved him away with a giggle. The sway of her hips as she crossed the lawn did erotic things to his imagination. He couldn't get enough of her. Shaking his head to clear the sexual cobwebs, he joined the small group of men under the shade tree.

A brawny black man chuckled heartily as he filled red plastic cups from the tap, passing them behind him like a well-oiled machine. The beer assembly line rarely changed, from the keg to Smoke, to Utah and down the line. The familiar scene eased John back into the fold.

"One question." Foxy grinned, his dark blond hair flying in the wind. "She a real redhead?"

John took a long sip of the cool brew handed to him. Not bothering to hide his grin, he nodded.

"I love redheads." Casanova sighed.

John smacked him in the back of the head and fixed him with a stern look. "Want your fingers broken? Don't touch. Aren't you married now?"

"Married, yes. Dead below the waist, no."

"But still stupid," John shot back.

"Oooh, Shakespeare's jealous, boys. There's a first. Better watch it, Cas, he'll nail your boot to the ground next." Smoke laughed around the ever-present cigarette.

Smoke made a good foreman for just that reason—he knew when to back off, when to divert attention and when to knock heads. That he was a stone-solid mountain helped immensely. At six-one, John came even with the bald man's thickly corded neck.

John shot him a grin. "I never meant to shoot the nail gun at your foot. I aimed for your balls and slipped."

Jibes and jokes, tall tales of women and adventures were passed around like a *Playboy* in a locker room. Occasionally one of the women drifted over to flirt, ask a question or generally remind them they were being watched, but mostly the banter was crude and all male. John searched for a glimpse of Livvy through the open patio door, smiling when she came into view. His gaze landed on another woman headed toward the oak.

"Who the hell brought Emily?"

Every set of male eyes flew to the approaching brunette. Of the group, few hadn't known her and even if they hadn't, her reputation preceded her like a parade.

"Stoner's shackled up with her now," Casanova whispered just as she joined the outskirts of the group. She headed directly to John.

"You're stuck in her craw, Shakespeare," Foxy said. "You didn't scratch her itch long enough."

Curves that most country roads would envy reminded John of her appeal but he had no interest in heading down that path. Long dark hair bounced with each step. The knotted halter-top bared her lean stomach and drew attention to her breasts. She was beautiful, John acknowledged, but her beauty was superficial. He had a sudden thirst for Livvy's kisses.

"Hey, Shakespeare."

Her voice had made more than one man pant, but John looked through her, sipped his beer and nodded. "Em. Where's Stoner?"

"Where is Stoner usually? Out behind the cars, I guess. Where've *you* been? You just dropped off the face of the earth. I've missed you."

"Been around. Moved on. Nothing important to hold me here."

A dimple appeared as the subtle dig landed. "You didn't stick around long enough to get a good taste."



Before he could blink, she planted her painted mouth on his. John jerked backward, his spine hitting the scratchy bark of the shade tree. He wiped his hand across his mouth.

“Don’t do that, Em. I’ve been there, done you. Not interested in a repeat.”

A gleam lit her eyes and she boldly slid her hand over his zipper. “I do love a challenge.”

“You got trouble,” Beaver hissed. John’s eyes flew over Emily’s head. Livvy was headed straight for him with jealous fire on her face. His gut sank.

Emily looked over her shoulder. A feline grin bowed her lips and she turned back to him with a soft laugh. “She’s too sweet for you, Shakespeare. You could eat her in one bite and still be hungry. I know you like them spicy, just like me.”

Her fingers moved higher, walking up his chest. It took everything he had not to rip her hand from his shirt but he was honestly afraid he would crush her wrist if he touched her right now.

“Lady, if you want to keep those tiger claws, you’ll get them off my man right now.”

Emily licked her lips, turned and pressed closer to his chest. “Go away, sugar.”

“Hands off, bitch.”

The brunette spun away from him on her heel. “Who are you calling a bitch?”

"I only see one dog in heat here." Livvy narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. "From what I hear, you've had every Salvatori man sniffing after your skirts, and most of them find a well-chewed doggie biscuit. But you're barking up the wrong tree this time, Fifi. He's in my doghouse now, so paws off."

Utah snickered but no other sound broke the air. John stood with his jaw hanging open. When had his sugary lover turned into a spitting alley cat?

Emily's ruby claws circled around his neck like a leather collar, trying to mark him as hers. "I don't see him fighting me off."

Livvy glared at him. Possession swelled and for the first time in his life, he didn't choke on it. He was Livvy's and only Livvy's.

He calmly reached around and eased Emily's hands from his skin. "Not interested, Em. Not now and not anytime in the future. This mutt's been housebroken."

Fury flashed on her face and she shoved away from him, digging her nails into his stomach. Livvy wiggled her fingers, a sarcastic sparkle in her eyes. "Bu-bye, Bow-wow."

Laughter burst out in the group but dimmed in his ears as Livvy walked to him. Her chin notched higher and her steps grew bolder than he'd ever seen. A scant hair's breadth from him, Livvy shook her head with an unreadable expression on

her face. "Can't leave you alone for a second, can I?"

"I didn't start that."

The men milled around him but he knew they had keen ears and were hanging on to every word. He didn't care. All he cared about was Livvy. She'd doubted him before. Did she doubt him still? John had always gotten his share of female attention, even been the center of a few catfights. Before, it had stroked his masculine ego. But now fear brewed and he wondered if she trusted him. He'd never wanted a woman's trust but he needed Livvy's. He'd think about why later.

Her hand shot to his face and he braced for a slap that never came. Instead, she whisked her thumb across his bottom lip. She arched one eyebrow in challenge.

"Whore-red is not your color."

Her slow smile eased the tight muscles in his gut. *Damn, she knew what was happening the whole time and played me like a roulette wheel. She trusts me.* Such a strong sense of wonder took hold that his hands trembled. "Quite the wildcat, aren't you, Liv?"

Livvy cocked her head and tossed his flirt back to him. "Meow."

Desire leaped, pouncing with a speed and strength that threatened to bring him to his knees. He'd known she was beautiful but now she

radiated a glow that captivated him. The fading sunlight kissed her hair, bathing her face in gold. Just one look and he was harder than an oak board, something Emily couldn't manage with a touch.

"Gina asked me to tell you guys that Preacher's up on the patio," Livvy said, pushing a stray curl behind her ear. "He's using a cane now and can't walk down this way. She wants you to break up the Boys' Club and go on up."

No one moved. John sucked in a slow breath before agreeing. "We'll be up in a bit."

Livvy leaned in and brushed a fast kiss across his mouth. Her sharp teeth snagged his lower lip before turning to walk away. He playfully swatted her retreating behind. She froze and glanced over her shoulder. "Did you just spank my ass?"

There was no way he could have missed the twinkle of humor in her eyes. Not bothering to mask his chuckle, he leaned back against the tree. "Yep."

She batted her eyelashes. "I liked it."

Every single man turned to watch her walk back across the lawn. Utah groaned in delight and sang *bowchickawowow*, making the others laugh. John gloated. She might be getting ogled by a dozen horny men but she was going home with him.

*Mine.*

Standing with his tongue practically hanging out, Foxy croaked. “Damn, Shakespeare, where’d you find her? Under a honey tree?”

Fierce masculine pride made John’s chest swell. “Sugar tree, Foxy, pure sugar.”

Preacher held court on the patio like the King of Siam. The deterioration of his body shocked John and made him feel certain that more than time was eating away at his former mentor. The once robust man was frail, his coffee skin grayed and loose on his bones. But the rich resonant sound of his voice was not hampered by the slight slur. If anything, it took on more of a gospel tone, soothing and gripping at the same time. His mind was keen as ever, sharp as a rip saw.

Twirling a straw between her fingers, Livvy laughed and teased as if she’d belonged in the crowd for years. Smoke—relegated to the far edge of the patio near a sand-filled coffee can full of cigarette butts—sang out a few words of censorship whenever the guys got too coarse. Mixed company manners were alive and well at Salvatori Construction. But the gentle reprimands were taken in stride. From the house, the sounds of muted feminine laughter could be heard. A few stray children chased fireflies in the growing dusk. A sense of contentment hung in the air.

Livvy gathered a handful of paper cups and napkins, stepping over his outstretched knees. She bent close and brushed a soft kiss across his forehead, then headed into the kitchen. She took his breath with her.

“Shakespeare.” Casanova, reclining in a chaise lounge, his very pregnant wife between his legs, motioned to the kitchen with his chin and nodded. “She’s all right.” Highest praise from the biggest male slut—now repentant—John had ever known. He nodded back, oddly touched.

Preacher began another story. He only made it halfway through when Gina came out and rested her hands on her husband’s shoulders. “All right gentlemen, time to get to work, break down the tables and clear out.”

Pete chuckled. “My name’s on the paychecks but you know who the real boss is, guys.”

A chorus of complaints sounded but within minutes, John was alone with Preacher. A huge bowl of peanuts sat in the center of the wrought iron table and he snagged a handful, popping one at a time into his mouth.

“So how’ve you been, Preach?”

“Fair to middling, son. Getting old ain’t what it’s cracked up to be. I hear you’re doing good.”

The nuts cracking in his jaw, he nodded. “Yeah, it was time for a change of scenery.”

“Read your books.”

Caught by surprise, John jerked his eyes to the wise old man. Deep brown, undimmed by sickness or age, the stare reverberated through him. Suddenly, he felt like that nineteen-year-old kid asking for a job. "Which ones?"

"All of them. Both Murphy and Flannigan."

John's stomach dropped. Preacher's opinion was rarely given without request and he was surprised how much he wanted to hear it. Popping three more peanuts into his mouth, he gazed at the crew tearing benches down, careful to avoid looking at his former foreman. "So what'd you think?"

"You want pretty or the truth?"

John took his time before answering. "Never knew you to spoon-feed shit, Preach. Give it to me straight."

A crack of old bones and a phlegmy cough delayed the response, making John reach for more peanuts. He needed something to bite down on. Nerves stretched as he went through the entire handful and yet Preacher didn't speak. Not even waiting for his first major reviews had made him this antsy.

"I think you got a world of pissed in you, son."

John snorted. "And this surprises you?"

"Sure it does. Thought you be long outgrown that nonsense. But that's not all I thought. You

also got a world of hope in you, too. And that's your problem."

"Preacher, what in the hell are you talking about?"

The black man shook his head and sighed. "You ain't got the brains God gave a goose, do you, son? No man can live in two different worlds, least not in real life. And that's where you are, straddling a fence with one ball on each side. You need to pick one and be done with it. Or maybe you done picked already and just don't know it."

Hard iron bit into his back and John shifted. How could a man he hadn't seen in over a year sum up his life in a few sentences? The writer in him was jealous, the man was wary. Preacher hit too close to home. The familiar weaponry of attack and insult thrust forward. "And maybe you took too much medication and are seeing shit that isn't there."

Preacher leaned back and grinned, ivory teeth shining in the torchlight. "Nope, got a little box with the days of the week on it. I'm good. You're the one needs to get his head examined. Or your ass kicked. Or maybe just go on in the kitchen back there and get you some fulltime lovin' from that gal of yours."

"I'm getting plenty of loving, thank you very much."



The sharp jab of Preacher's cane made him swear and grab his leg. Frowning over his pointed finger, the old man cemented him with a fierce scowl. "Don't you be sassing me. I don't care what you do between the sheets. You think I ain't watched you today? That gal's worming her way into your blood. You can't pick a side, you're gonna screw up and lose her 'cause you're too damn dumb or hurt her 'cause you're too damn bullheaded."

"I may be many things, Preach, but I'm not dumb. Things with Livvy are fine how they are. I don't need to change anything."

"For now, maybe. But you think she's going stick around when you don't come up to snuff? That gal ain't some piece of spread-all-over white trash like that Emily. She'll be looking for more than a romp in the hay before too long. You ready to put your name behind hers? If not, cut her loose now 'cause it ain't going do either one of you no good."

A monster roared in the deep recesses of his mind even as his heart leaped forward. Everything Preacher said was true but John couldn't accept it. He didn't want to think about tomorrow or next week or next year. He wanted to think no further than tonight and Livvy's arms. Right now, she was his. It had to be enough. He didn't dare dream of more.

“I can’t love her, Preacher.”

The old man laughed and slapped his knee. “Son, you best close the barn door ’cause that horse done run for the hills.”

A ton of gravel slid into his gut and he heard the certainty in the idiom, read it in Preacher’s coffee eyes. He let Preacher’s observations take root. His jaw locked tight and he felt his molar crack but ignored the pain. Pain was nothing compared to the deluge of fear that spilled into his blood.

John glared at a man he deeply respected, one of the few people he wanted to respect him. Preacher had kept his secrets, reported to his probation officer for over a decade, stood up for John when he petitioned for custody of Gina. He’d also kicked John’s ass when he’d screwed up. If he could imagine having a father, it would be the man beside him.

He hated that Preacher gave voice to the words his soul couldn’t speak. Both hands skimmed through his hair before he crossed his arms in frustration.

“You see too much, old man. I wish I could be the man she needs, but I can’t. No matter how bad I want to.”

A rough cough rattled for a long while as John stewed, tonguing his now-aching tooth. All the while, the aging Freud stared into the deepening

twilight. “Wanting ain’t that far from getting. Just takes hard work and you ain’t never shied from that.”

John fought the wave of guilt that surged from his stomach. Hard work he could muster, miracles he couldn’t. He’d caused enough hurt in his life. Adding Livvy’s name to that list was a cross he just couldn’t bear.

The frail man grabbed his shirt collar with a surprising strength and pulled him closer. Firm kindness shone in his chocolate eyes and John swallowed. “You need to shuck off your daddy’s ghost before you can expect a miracle, son.”

Like battery acid, the wisdom ate at him with a searing sting. John pulled away, air whistling through clenched teeth. “You don’t pull any punches, do you?”

“I done threw my last punch years ago. Truth serves me just fine now. Time you faced up to a couple things. You need to shit or get off the pot.”

## Chapter Nine

The foreman bid him goodnight with a wave before hobbling to the house, his cane making no sound on the stone floor. John watched until he was swallowed by the kitchen light then looked out at the night. Down in the yard, only a few men were left, tearing down the last of the tented pavilions and moving tables. Too many thoughts flowed through his head and John couldn't stay still. He walked the perimeter of the huge patio, dousing torches and gathering paper cups but never thought about his actions. He was too busy trying to figure out where to get a miracle.

“Hey.”

Livvy's voice stretched to him like a lighthouse beacon. Extinguishing the last torch, he dusted his hands on his jeans and watched her come to him in the dark. Preacher's laugh rang in his ears. He mentally tried the phrases he'd been shying from.

*I love Livvy. I'm in love with Livvy.*

Through the sunscreen and Old Bay, the scent of buttercream teased him as she circled his shoulders. He stared into twilight eyes. His mouth went dry. Emotion rushed like a dam breaking and his knees weakened.

*I love her. Oh my God, I love her.*

He reached for her without thinking, pulled her to him and then up until her feet left the ground. Against his ear, her laugh chimed like music and he squeezed his eyes shut. *I love her and she's mine. Right now, if time would just stop, everything would be fine.*

"Your sister sent me for you."

Unable to move, he just held her tighter and shook his head. "She can wait."

John could have held her all night like this but she pulled back and looked into his face. Throat burning with unspoken words, he gritted his teeth and pain shot down his jaw. Her eyes widened in concern. He blamed the peanuts rather than his own emotions.

"We need to head home," he said, fingering her hair. She nodded and tried to tug him toward the kitchen but he wasn't ready to be in the light yet. "Be there in a minute."

Livvy stepped back into the illumination of the door and John drew an unsteady breath.

*What am I doing?*

Walking deeper into the shadows off the patio, his eyes trained on the starry sky. He scanned the dark heavens and took a timid step over the fence Preacher had spoken of, doing something he had not done willingly in nearly three decades.

He prayed.

“I don’t even know if You’re real, if You exist.”

The wind stung his face and scratched his eyes but he refused to bow his head. His subdued, reverent tone was met with a sudden violent wind gust that snapped a smoldering torch back to life. It flared with a loud whoosh beside him and the hair stood on the back of his neck. If that was an answer, it was a good one because his heart tried to climb out of his chest through his throat. He dared to hope.

“I’ve never asked You for a damn thing but I’m asking now. Let me keep this.”

The torch flickered out with a cough. Sounding a bitter snort, John wondered if that was his answer. He should have guessed it might be. When had God ever heard him?

“Everyone’s gone.” Pete leaned his shoulder on the dining room doorframe and watched his wife. John straddled a kitchen chair, his arms on the framed back. Gina was scrubbing the daylights out of the pristine stovetop. The dishtowel in her hand slowed as Livvy sensed a sudden tension in the air.

Pete reached over and took the sponge from his wife’s fingers, laying it to the side, eyes locked on her face. She braced her hands on the cooktop and nodded even though he hadn’t spoken.

"I'm going to give the boys a bath." Pete's soft parting words earned a second nod before Gina resumed her scrubbing.

"Johnny, I need you to take the boys for a few days."

"Sure," he replied. "Once Tyler gets a little older—"

"No, Johnny." Slamming her hand down on the stove, she pinched her eyes tight. "Now. Tonight. I need you to take them and keep them for a little while."

John's spine straightened at her tone. "What's going on, Gina?"

Gina spun around and tossed the sponge into the sink. It hit with a soapy splash as she locked her gaze on her brother. "I have to be at the hospital at six in the morning."

John's eyes widened and his lips flattened. The muscles bunched in his arms. "Why?"

His sister swallowed and reached for the dishtowel, averting her eyes. Her voice was low and wet. "I have a lump."

Like a razor against a leather strop, John's harsh intake of air scored the air. Livvy's eyes moistened as fear darted across his face and his chest began to rise and fall.

"You're too young." Almost angry, his voice startled her.

Gina laughed humorlessly. "I'm older than Mom was. And because of how she died, my oncologist—"

"Oncologist?" Blood drained from his face.

Livvy reached out, circling his shoulders. Under her hands, he trembled violently.

Gina's face softened and she tried to smile at him but it quivered. "Just a precaution because Mom died so young. They're being very aggressive. I'll have the lump removed in the morning and then, well, depending on the test results, Pete and I have some talking to do."

John shoved forward, shrugging Livvy's hands off. She sank onto a chair beside him, watching his fists clench over and over. Her heart shed a hundred tears. She loved him. His pain was now hers.

"I want to be there."

"Johnny, no." Gina ran her hands through her hair and Livvy wondered if she'd learned the move from her brother. "Look, my boobs are none of your business, okay? But there are only two people in the entire world I'd trust with my life, you and Pete. I need Pete with me. I need you to take my babies."

Her voice cracked and she whirled to face the sink. Eyes closed, John bowed his head for a brief second and drew a long silent breath. Fierce determination etched into every line of his face



when he raised his head. Around his lips, the grooves stood out like slash marks.

“Whatever you need, for as long as you need it.”

A promise, the deep baritone was solid and unwavering. Livvy reached for him and he allowed it, curling his fingers around hers. If she had to describe him at that minute, she would pick the word resolute. Nothing and no one would stand between John and his pledge. If she hadn’t known before, this one moment proved how deeply and fiercely he could love.

Gina closed her eyes. “I wish I could remember even one thing about her. I don’t even know what she looked like, Johnny. I’ve never seen a picture or anything. You at least have memories.”

“Alan burned all her pictures after she died.” John released Livvy’s hand and rubbed both palms on his jeans before rising. Although heavy, his boots made little sound as he walked hesitantly to Gina. He leaned his hips on the counter and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. Livvy pressed her hands to her mouth and watched him take out a small crinkled picture. He held it in front of his sister’s averted face. “It’s not the best but it’s the only one I have. I took it out of a frame Alan missed and cut it down.”

Gina cradled the small photo. She touched one finger to the front as tears trickled down her

cheeks. "You've had this all the time? Why didn't you show me before?"

John dropped his eyes to his feet. "I don't know. It was mine, you know? The only part of her I could keep."

Gina rubbed his arm briefly but her eyes couldn't stay off the photo. "Is this me?"

"Yeah. I think it might have been Easter. Maybe Mother's Day, I don't remember."

"Look how young you were." Gina smiled and sniffed, her fingers tracing the paper.

"Goofy kid," John teased, finally looking at his sister. The haunted pain shadowing his eyes broke Livvy's heart.

Gina stared at the picture. "She's beautiful."

"You look like her."

John's voice cracked and Gina dove into his arms. She cried for only a minute, but clung to him for much longer, gripping his shirt sleeve. Words too low to hear poured from him but his tone was reassuring and gentle. The sound of his comfort mingled with Gina's sniffles. Pete walked in and surveyed the scene with a resigned look. Over Gina's head, the two men locked eyes and something passed between them. John nodded once and Pete echoed the move before touching Gina's back.

"Boys are watching TV."

Gina pulled from her brother and turned to Pete, showing him the small picture. He caressed her cheek.

John held up his hand when Gina tried to hand the picture back. "Keep it."

"No, it's yours, Johnny. You've kept it for this long, it should stay with you. Make me a copy for my birthday or something." Wiping her cheeks, Gina pressed the picture into his hand. "I need to go gather the boys' things."

Pete followed her out as John studied the floor. He jumped when Livvy touched his arm but he gave her a soft smile. Cupping her nape, he sighed. "This day needs to end."

"Can I see?" she asked.

He handed her the picture with a small shrug. Faded and creased on all corners, the cut was crooked. A stunning dark-haired woman held a small infant, both in pastel dresses. John, glasses canted, slouched beneath his mother's arm. Each of them was smiling.

"She was beautiful. What was her name?" Livvy murmured, handing it back.

"Elaina." John shoved it in his wallet and took her in his arms. His heart pounded loud and steady against her ear. She simply squeezed him until he moved her away and walked out the back door without a word.

Thorn collapsed outside Windago's walls. Frantic and terrified, Jondi followed Andros, who carried the bat inside, the lifeless wings trailing like a child's blanket. The wizard barely spared him a glance as he mixed and ground the medicine. Although he hadn't spoken to her, when Vory coughed and then sneezed, Andros whirled around, his black eyes searching her face. Despite his questions, she had no answers. She had gotten sick before she met Jondi, but it got worse the farther out of the Dell they walked.

One heaping spoon of herbs in a teacup was shoved at Vory while Andros poured more into Thorn's fanged mouth. Jondi watched in growing fear as Andros muttered in confusion. This was not a sickness from nature. This was Nordrake's hate. Away from the rotting dampness of the Hidden Dell, the scent of evil clung to both his friends. Nordrake's reach was long and possibly deadly. All the faith in his small body prayed Andros could cure them.

But the night only got longer and his friends sicker.

In a John Deere-themed bedroom, Livvy found Gina shoving clothes into a duffel bag that was

already overflowing. "A sweater, Gina? It was nearly a hundred degrees today."

Gina looked at the clothing bag and sighed. "What am I doing?" She sat on the twin bed and buried her hands in her face. Livvy moved the duffel bag and sat beside her, running her hand up the woman's back.

"You're on autopilot. It's okay. We can sort through this in just a minute." The brunette nodded and covered her face with her hands. "You'll be okay. No matter what happens, you'll be okay."

Gina raised her head and looked around her son's room, an ache plainly written on every curve of her face. "I can't leave them. I have to be here to see them grow up."

"You will be. Stop thinking the worst." Livvy continued rubbing her shoulder until Gina once more was back in control. She popped off the bed like an oven timer and dumped the bag on the bed. Together they sorted and folded the assortment of clothes.

"Livvy, what's your earliest memory? How old were you?"

The question stumped Livvy for a minute and she rested a small pair of Scooby Doo underwear in her lap while she thought back.

"Just before my brothers were born. I remember sitting with Mom and coloring for

hours, eating ice cream sandwiches for lunch and hoping the twins would never be born so I wouldn't have to share her." Sheepishly, she grinned at the staring woman. "Sounds a little selfish now but that's what I remember, wanting to be the only one."

"It sounds beautiful," Gina whispered and closed her eyes. "I was about four, I think. I remember Johnny kneeling on that damn broomstick, sweat streaming down his face, hands stretched out and shaking like a leaf while my father screamed to an empty church. It must have been a Saturday, when he would practice his sermons. My ears hurt even though I tried to cover them with my hands. Your memory is nicer."

Four tee shirts and a few pairs of socks later, Livvy had gathered enough courage to ask. "Gina, what broomstick?"

Stunned eyes flew to hers and Gina sat back on her heels. "You said he told you."

Livvy focused on lining up seams and pockets. "He told me Alan beat him...and a little about the night he died."

Gina dropped the jeans on the floor and ran her hands through her hair before staring at her. Livvy got the sense she was looking through her, not at her, to a time long past. "He didn't tell you anything. Damn it, Johnny."

Fingers laced around the back of her neck, Gina closed her eyes and drew a noisy inhale. When those eyes snapped open, they held the same resolute haunted look John had had in the kitchen fifteen minutes earlier. The similarity was frightening.

“Livvy, are you in love with Johnny? I mean for-keeps type of love? Through thick and thin and all that?”

“Completely.”

“How tough are you?”

Livvy steeled her jaw. “Tough enough to handle anything except losing him.”

Gina thought a minute then nodded. “I’ll be right back.”

Livvy finished folding the small pile of clothes. The odds and ends that weren’t packed got smoothed and stacked on the dresser in front of a big green tractor toy. Not sure what else she could do, Livvy sat and waited. What did Gina mean John hadn’t told her anything? The thought of there being more to his past filled her with a cold heavy dread. But a powerful urge to get answers grew like a tidal wave. Lifting her chin, Livvy realized nothing she could learn would make her love him less. But she might, just might, be able to understand some of his mood swings. If John wouldn’t or couldn’t tell her, maybe his sister would.

Gina slipped into the room with an old cloth clutch bag. She closed the door like a thief, making sure it made no sound, before crossing to the bed. She unzipped the duffel and then opened the clutch. Inside, a faded army-green folder nearly two inches thick was stuffed full of papers and envelopes. Gina fixed her with a hard stare.

“God, I hope I’m doing the right thing.” She pulled her shoulders back with a visible strength. “I don’t know how Pete got it, but this is Johnny’s defense file. He should’ve walked free. He would have if the judge hadn’t had a burr up his ass. All I know is Pete spent a lot of money under too many tables to get this. I’m sure it wasn’t ethical and it certainly wasn’t legal, but he got it, for me. There were some answers I needed that Johnny...just wouldn’t give up. I got more than I asked for, more than I really wanted to know. But I got answers. Maybe you will too and can help him...if I’m not here.”

The bag disappeared under layers of shorts and jeans. “Don’t let Johnny see this, Livvy. And whatever you do, don’t tell him I gave it to you.”

“I won’t.” Stunned and immensely curious, Livvy took the duffel bag in trembling fingers. Gina blew out a harsh breath. Her mouth opened at the same minute the bedroom door did.

Pete looked in with raised eyebrows. “Booster seats are in the truck and John’s ready to go.”



“We’re coming.” Gina smiled at him. When his steps sounded on the stairs, she turned and gripped Livvy’s hand. “Listen to me. Love him hard. And when he pushes you away—and he will—love him harder. When he gets mean, love him even more. Stick like glue, Livvy. Despite anything you read, he’s a good man. You’re the only woman I’ve ever seen make him happy. I’m counting on that to mean something.”

“I love him. I’m not going to let him go. He’s why you became an attorney, isn’t he?”

Gina blinked away a crystal glaze. “Read it, Livvy. Then you’ll know why... Every child deserves a protector. Johnny never had one except the ones he made up in his head, and they don’t help much in a court of law.”

He had to leave her with a smile. Gina kissed and hugged her children for a third time and John knew he had to see her smile before he drove away. Pete scooped three-year-old Tyler up in his arms, tossed him in the air and carried him to the truck behind Livvy. Five-year-old PJ talked a blue streak as she swung their clasped hands back and forth. On the high concrete porch, Gina watched with shiny but firm eyes as they got into his truck.

“They’ll be fine.”

His words drew her gaze down to him on the lawn and she nodded with conviction. “I know. I

don't have to worry about them. They're with my big brother."

John bowed his head before she totally unmanned him. "Yeah, he eats nails for breakfast with a Drano chaser."

She leaned on the railing. "Better than that nasty sugared crap he used to eat."

"Hey, I like that sugared crap."

Like he was one of her sons, she leaned down and ruffled his hair.

"Call me." He caught her hand and squeezed.

She squeezed back. "I'll have Pete call. Try not to let PJ drive you nuts."

"He can't be any worse than his mother was."

Her laugh thrilled him. "Boy, are you in for a surprise."

His tongue rolling around inside his cheek, a million words flew to his mind—how she meant everything to him, how glad he was that he hadn't been alone growing up because of her, how she better not leave him now, how sorry he was that he couldn't protect her this time.

What he said was short. "Be good, sister-mine."

She knew it without words. Her eyes misted and she nodded. His focus swung back to the truck and he watched Pete check the booster seat straps around Tyler. He shook his head with an ironic snort. "Car seats. Gina, there are car seats in

my truck. You know you're the only one in the world I'd do this for, right?"

His sister studied him for a long minute before turning her eyes to the truck. Livvy waved goodbye through the opened window. "Really, brother-mine? The only one? You sure about that?"

John furrowed his brow. "You stop matchmaking."

She mimicked his frown. "You stay out of police cars."

He'd meant to make her smile. She returned the gift.

Dressed in only a low-slung pair of shorts, John sat on the deck railing, staring into space. In his stolen tee shirt and her pajama bottoms covered in rubber ducks, Livvy left the heavy door open a crack, in case the boys woke up, and padded on bare feet over to him.

"Out like a light, both of them."

He nodded but didn't speak.

"Murphy, you're drugged, half asleep and sitting fifteen feet in the air. Get off there."

"Nah, it's only like twelve feet."

"I don't care, you're scaring me. Come on." She stroked his back and he spun his legs around to step back onto the deck.

Sleepy-eyed, he looked at her and grinned. "Your nose is pink."

"Curse of the redhead—easy to burn." At the mention of her hair, his hand sank into it and rubbed it between his fingers. "You look really tired."

He pulled her to a chaise lounge. Stretching out, he held his arms open and she snuggled down beside him. His eyes closed, one hand resting on her hip. The languid way he moved made her brows tighten. "How many of those leftover painkillers did you take?"

"Mmm, three."

"Murphy! The bottle said one to two as needed."

"I needed three. My tooth hurts."

On one elbow, she looked down into his relaxed face. "If you fall asleep out here, I'm not waking you up. I'll leave you out here as mosquito food and have the whole bed to myself."

He laughed. "My hide's too tough and you usually steal the blankets anyway."

Lapsing into silence, Livvy played with the front of his damp hair. The file Gina had given her, now tucked inside her oversized workbag, had tempted her while John was in the shower. But she'd resisted the urge. Answers could wait until the daylight. Tonight, she was more worried about John than Johnny.

“Gina’s scared,” she whispered.

“I know.” A frown marred his tranquil face.

“She asked me a weird question tonight. She wanted to know what my earliest memory was.”

John shifted, rolling away from her as much as the lounge would allow. “She’s afraid the boys will end up like her, without a memory of their mom.”

Somewhere deep in the darkness, a cat meowed loudly, a faint radio played and a few cars buzzed down the street, but Livvy didn’t speak. She fingered his hair, gathering courage. He’d given her the perfect opening.

“So what was it, Liv? Your memory?”

“Oh, about my mom before Mitch and Greg were born. Eating ice cream. She told me hers, too.”

Like a window sash, his lids flew open but he didn’t turn to her. “What was hers?”

“In a church with her father preaching.” Livvy coated it, a spoonful of sugar for the medicine she feared might come.

John’s eyes closed and his lips thinned into an ironic twist. “He did enough of that, she should remember it.”

“So what’s your earliest memory, Murphy?”

Surprisingly, he didn’t tense or shy away. He smiled into the night, an easy genuine smile of pleasure.

“I think I was four or so. I’d had a nightmare or something. Anyway, I woke up and was afraid there was a monster in my closet. I mean terrified, shaking in my Spider-Man pajamas, you know? I couldn’t call out to anyone so I got mad and decided that no monster was going to make me scared in my own room. I got out of bed, threw open the closet door and demanded the monster play Matchbox cars with me.” Livvy laughed with him and threaded her fingers through his. “That was when I met Andros. He was the first.”

“Wow. Nice memory.” Livvy sighed, glad he had some. In the distance, the radio snapped off but the cat continued to meow. Wind sang through the leaves, creating a soothing natural lullaby. As hushed as the night, her question was soft. “Why couldn’t you call out if you were scared? Where was your mom?”

He held his breath for a split second. “Damn, Livvy. You’re too easy to talk to and you hear too much.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I don’t know.” John sat, pulling his knees up and crossing his arms on them. Livvy scooted behind him. Her hand ran along his spine as he squinted up into the stars. “My mother worked nights. She was only sixteen when I was born. I never met anyone in her family or heard her talk about them, and she couldn’t afford a sitter, so she

left me alone. She'd tuck me into bed, kiss me goodnight and leave. When I woke up in the morning, she was there."

"She left you alone at four?"

"Before that. She didn't have a choice, Livvy. My mother was a hooker."

Silenced by shock, Livvy couldn't think of anything to say. John hung his head. "Gina doesn't know. I never saw a reason to tell her. She's got this picture in her mind of what Mom was like. I didn't want to destroy it." Her cheek pressed to his shoulder blade, Livvy wrapped her arms around his waist. His skin was warm and smooth. It vibrated against her ear. "I figure that's where I got my first name. She didn't know which one knocked her up, but John covered them all."

"Don't."

He shook his head. "It's okay. If it bothered me, it stopped a long time ago. I don't remember ever being mad at her or ashamed or anything like that. I just knew that she made me peanut butter and jelly pancakes for breakfast and I'd play in the bedroom while she slept for a few hours. It was just me and her until bedtime. It wasn't a bad life." John snorted with disgust. "Then she met Alan. He *saved* her from a life of sin."

When he said no more, Livvy leaned up and propped her chin on his shoulder. "It has been a really, really long day. Are you about ready to go

to bed? I have a feeling two little boys are going to be up bright and early in the morning.”

“Livvy, why are you here?”

She went motionless. “Because I want to be.”  
*Because I love you but am too afraid to tell you yet.*

John turned to face her, the space much too small. She ended up reclined, with him leaning over her. His eyes searched her face. “Why, Livvy? Why do you want to be here?”

Unconsciously, her fingers went to his temple, to smooth the soft hairs along his hairline. Sparse silver strands caught the moon glow, shimmering like ice. She wondered if he’d get those distinguished gray winglike markings as he aged. The thought was deeply intriguing and she longed to be there to watch the transformation. Her other hand went to his shoulder, the skin warm despite the night air. Her fingers seemed ultra pale next to his swarthy tone.

“Are you throwing me out, Murphy?”

“No.”

That was it. One word and no more. But it was the right one. She leaned up to kiss him and he met her halfway. The kiss lasted for several minutes without increasing. It was not the kiss of lust-starved lovers but a kiss that spoke of there being a tomorrow.



John broke away and propped his head in his hand. "You make me talk about things I never talk about."

"I don't make you. I just listen."

"You're right. But now it's my turn to listen. Tell me a secret about you, Liv. A secret nobody knows."

"I don't have any secrets." *Except I'm head over heels in love with my neighbor.*

"Everybody has a secret."

"Not me." *I have a file from your sister that has every bit of your pain in it. I'm going to read it and try to find a way to help you to love me, to love yourself.*

"Not a single one?"

He seemed so disappointed she almost made one up. But then a blush stole to her cheeks as she realized she did have one secret if she was brave enough to share it. Even as she thought it, she realized she could never be as brave as he had in sharing bits of his story.

He singsonged above her. "I see a secret. Come on, tell me."

"It's embarrassing." She looked over his head.

Rich and seductive, his voice coaxed her. "It's easier in the dark. Close your eyes. I'll close mine. And whisper it in my ear."

His tone stroked her like a caress, gave her strength. She nodded and closed her eyes. The

brush of his hair on her cheek as he bent to her nearly silenced her, but she'd gone too far to back down. Her lips touched his ear and she whispered as softly as she possibly could.

He gasped and then laughed. "The night we met? Twice?"

"Yes." Her whisper barely broke the night but his stunned exhale rang loud.

"I'm flattered. So how am I as a fantasy lover?"

She buried her face in his neck.

He nuzzled her hair and whispered down to her. "Livvy, that's the most erotic thing I've ever heard. Next time, I want to watch."

Hot blood soared to her face. "No. I couldn't—relax if you were watching."

"Damn, Livvy. I think you just gave me a new fantasy."

## Chapter Ten

Deep in sleep, Livvy's dreams turned erotic. Invisible hands stroked her, teased her, kindled a fire low in her belly. She heard her name drifting on a breeze. Liquid heat poured over her and she sighed. Slowly she rose from the depths of slumber and found her dream was a reality. John coaxed her awake, her body already lush from his caress. Her first conscious breath was taken by his kiss. She let her head roll back as he nipped her neck.

A sharp thought made her grip his shoulder. "I left the door open in case the boys—"

"I shut it. We'll be quiet." His voice was the barest whisper.

Each gentle stroke reminded her of that dreamland breeze. He slid the shirt over her head and took her mouth, drawing out each bit of softness. Every move he made was hushed and deliberate, leisurely and patient.

She knew he'd taken out his contacts and pulled away from his kiss, her nose touching his. "Can you see me?"

He nodded. He stroked her cheek, trailing his finger along her pink nose and down her chin.

This was different than anything that had been between them before. Nothing triggered the thought, just a sure sense of change in the room, like an impression in time. Bewildered, she fingered his lip before it fell to her breast.

“Murphy?”

“Shh. I want to love you, Livvy. Let me love you, please.” Just below a whisper, mouth skimming hers, her name and that coveted word in the same sentence brought tears to her throat.

*So close.*

“Since our first time, have I ever denied you?”

His frown deepened. Ears couldn’t hear what his lips formed but the heart could. “Never.”

“I never will.” Her promise closed his eyes and he brought his kiss to her neck.

He loved her perfectly, each caress beyond gentle, beyond sweet. Secret places she’d never known about were discovered and worshipped. From the top of her feet, the inside of her elbow, the point of her shoulder blade, he did exactly as he promised. He loved her until her body ached.

She had no idea how long he touched her. It seemed to stretch for hours and she never wanted it to end. Tears of emotional and physical overload streamed from her eyes and he kissed them away, the saltiness on his lips the sweetest taste she’d known. The sky lightened, pink tingeing the room. She shattered in his arms and

he drank in her unspoken sobs. Against her throat, her name was a muted cry. He clung to her as if his very life depended on it.

He left her for a brief second. There was a soft creak when John cracked open the bedroom door. Then he returned to her arms, breath fanning her bangs. Sadness and confusion lined his face and tore at her.

“I wish I knew what was going on in that head of yours.”

He just laid his cheek on her shoulder. His hair feathered through her fingers and she kissed his crown. His muscles relaxed as sleep took hold. A bird began to sing good morning. Pink turned to pale gold and the bird gathered friends who joined the twittering song.

“Murphy?” His name hung on her quivering lips but he didn’t stir. She murmured his name once more but still, he slept. Emboldened by his silence, Livvy cradled him and opened her heart in a whisper. “I have another secret. I want to hold you like this forever. I love you.”

She never knew his eyes cracked open.

Moans and shrieks threatened to split the castle walls as a painful fever ravaged Thorn’s thin body. Andros worked tirelessly, searching books and scrolls, grinding and mixing, hoping one more thing would work.

Vory lay on a small cot in the workshop, shivering and trembling, hearing Thorn and awaiting the same fate. A knot in Jondi's chest smothered his heartbeat.

"Here." Gently, he held a cup of water to her mouth. She sipped less than he wanted but it seemed all the effort she could muster.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

Trepidation gripped him and he knelt beside her. "Don't be. Andros will find the answer. Nordrake won't win. I won't let him. You're both going to be fine, I promise."

Wide violet eyes twinkled at him, the flush of fever brewing behind them. "I trust you. Somehow, I knew I was supposed to go into the Dell that day, even though it scared me. I knew I'd find something there, something special. And I found you."

Vory slipped into a cough-ridden sleep while Jondi sat beside her. Thorn's screams tore at his soul and he ached with misery. Andros had to save them. He couldn't lose either one of them.

"Can we go to McDonald's? Can we see a fire truck? Why do dogs bark? Do fish have ears? Tyler snores. Daddy let me ride in the forklift.

Mommy said he was an idiot. Daddy told me not to tell her but Mommy says I should."

"PJ." John closed his eyes. "Do you ever shut up?"

"No. Mommy says I'm at a curious stage."

John cleaned his contacts and shook his head. Wearing just his boxers, he stood at the bathroom sink, a miniature inquisitor in dinosaur pajamas sitting on the closed toilet beside him.

"What're you doing? What are those? Do they hurt?"

"They're contacts lenses. They help me see and no, they don't hurt. Why don't you go eat breakfast? Livvy said she would make you waffles."

The child shook his head and bounced on the throne. "I like it in here. Do you like waffles? I like Mommy's waffles. Daddy makes ones out of the freezer but they're okay. Why do you have hair on your chest?"

"Because that's what happens when boys grow up."

"My daddy has more than you."

"Your daddy is Italian. If I give you a dollar will you go watch TV?"

"Tyler is watching *Sesame Street*. I don't want to. It's for babies."

Resigned, John lathered his face and tried to tune the noise out. Compared to this, his sister had

been easy. All you had to do with Gina was give her a book and she wouldn't speak for hours. PJ prattled on, his mouth moving a mile a minute. The last questions yanked John's attention.

"Is Livvy my aunt Livvy? Are you and Livvy married?"

The razor stopped. "No, PJ, we're not married."

"Then how come you have the same bed?"

The blade nearly slit his throat as he whipped his head to stare at the Junior Morality Policeman. Gina definitely had her hands full with this one. Feigning casualness, John rinsed the razor. "Well, you and Tyler were in my guest bed and there was nowhere else for Livvy to sleep. And my bed is big enough for two grownups."

"You need to buy her a nightgown. She sleeps naked."

Brain screeching to a halt, John blinked. He remembered Livvy crawling into bed wearing his tee shirt. She went to sleep wearing it. She didn't take it off until... The door had been half open when he awoke rather than the inch wide gap he'd left it at. A burning grin crossed his cheeks and John squatted down in front of the nosy child. "PJ, did you get out of bed last night?"

"I had to pee and couldn't find the bathroom."

Head hanging to hide his smile, John chuckled. "Know where it is now?" The boy nodded and



John ruffled his hair. "Good, and don't tell Livvy you saw her naked. Girls get upset about stuff like that."

"Okay." The machine-gun speech fired up as he followed his uncle into the bedroom. John made a note to lock the door that night. Maybe he could pick up one of those baby monitor things. Anything to put a bit of privacy between the boys and his bedroom.

"Murphy! Christina's on the phone."

John pulled the polo over his head and strode down the hall in his boxers. PJ trailed him like a shadow but deserted when Livvy slid a stack of waffles on the table. She handed John the phone and pulled butter and syrup from the fridge.

"Hey, Christina."

"Morning. How's your mood, John?"

His chin lifted and his muscles stiffened. "I have a feeling it's going to get worse. What's up?"

Livvy paused and looked at him over the refrigerator door. "What's wrong?" she mouthed and he shook his head.

"My daughter's a fan, you know that. She loves all the books you sign for her, loves showing off to her friends. She went internet searching and turned up something. Windago Haven," Christina said. "Heard of it?"

“Yeah, it’s a message board or some shit. Readers started it up a couple months ago. I checked it out a few times. It looked harmless enough. Why?”

“They have a new fanfic forum. As of last night, there are forty-eight stories about Jondi and Thorn you didn’t write, everything from more jewel quests to a frankly disgusting sexual escapade between Thorn and Andros.”

“Fuck!” John ground out. PJ’s eyes went wide and John muttered the word again in his head. He scowled while pointing at the little boy. “Do *not* repeat that, PJ!”

“Who?” Christine asked.

“I’m babysitting my nephews.”

Livvy sent him a puzzled look but never paused while cutting up Tyler’s waffles.

John pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can you email me the details, links and stuff? I want that shit taken down.”

“Hitting Send now.”

“Thanks, Christina, I appreciate it. Tell Becky I’ll send her an iTunes card as a thank you, too.”

Christina laughed. “You do that and she’ll be trolling the web for fanfic instead of doing her homework. Good luck, John.”

“I don’t need luck. I’ve got a killer attorney.” John stabbed the disconnect button and hit speed dial four.

“Something wrong?” Livvy whispered.

“Yeah.” John lowered his voice so the kids wouldn’t hear. “A bunch of little dickheads are making up their own stories using my monsters and putting them on the internet. Not happening. There’s a copyright in the books for a goddamned reason. Those are my monsters. I write what they do, no one else.”

The receptionist put him straight through to Gina’s law partner, Carla Lenowski, a piranha in contractual law. After accepting her good wishes for Gina, he outlined what happened and she promised to get to work on it right away. Livvy stroked his lower back and he leaned into her touch. It was just one small example of why he loved her. She understood him.

“Shut ’em down, Carla. I don’t care what it takes. Nobody uses my monsters but me. No one.”

Sure that his jaw was swollen three inches out from his face, John checked the rearview mirror. It didn’t look any different, but the numbing in full swing made his tongue feel thick. Livvy had pulled a rabbit out of her hat to get him into her dentist on such short notice, so he shouldn’t complain, but damn. What wasn’t numb felt like it had been brushed with barbed wire. Add that to the dentist’s lecture on grinding his teeth, and his mood was far from pleasant.

His key turned the ignition and his pocket rang out. Pete's displayed number made his heart thud.

"What's up, Pete? How is she?"

The shuddering breath on the other end of the line chilled his bones. Pete "Chief" Salvatori was one of the steadiest men he knew. He could handle any piece of big equipment ever invented as easily as pushing a baby carriage and never wake the baby. Pete had asked him for permission to take Gina out before approaching her. John was glad when Gina fell in love with the big Italian. He treated her like a queen, openly said she was his life, doted on her and his children. To hear him fighting tears filled John with icy terror.

"Pete?"

"She's asleep. The surgery's over." Taking long breaks between sentences, he was obviously struggling to speak. "The—lump was deeper than they thought. They had to take more—tissue. We won't know for a while, maybe a couple weeks."

"But she's okay now?"

"She had a reaction to the anesthesia. John, she quit breathing twice. So she's in ICU for the night so they can observe her, make sure everything's okay."

John dropped his head back on the seat and gritted his numb jaw. Blood filled his mouth as he bit his cheek without knowing. "But she *did* wake up? She's going to be all right?"

“Yeah. But she’s hurting. They upped her meds some, but are trying to balance...” Pete sniffed. “I can’t lose her, John. I can’t.”

“That makes two of us, man.” Pinching the bridge of his nose, John echoed Pete in taking several calming breaths.

“I’ll call you later, when she’s more awake. How are the kids?”

“Fine. Livvy took a day off to help out. Don’t worry about them, you just take care of Gina.”

The cell snapped closed with a loud pop and John sat, blood chugging in his veins like molasses. Two days ago, life was fine and now everything was skittering toward hell in a handbasket and he was being swept helplessly along with it. Two days ago, Gina was healthy, Livvy and he were living some pretend fantasy, and he could keep his monsters under control. Now, Gina might have breast cancer, Livvy was begging to be loved and his monsters were in someone else’s hands. What the hell was he supposed to do?

He never wanted to love Livvy. From the start, he’d told her he didn’t want forever. Trouble was, now he did and it sucked because he couldn’t have it. He couldn’t do that to her, not to his angel. Damn, it hurt though. He smacked his head back against the seat. *Damned if I do and damned if I don’t.*

A familiar monster growled in his mind and recognizable demons hissed in his ear, but from somewhere in his gut rose a gospel voice uttering simple words filled with quiet power.

*Expect a miracle. Pick a side and be done with it.*

Calm swept through him. He knew what he had to do. One hand ran through his hair and John deliberately took deep breaths, giving himself time to change his mind. He never did anything half-assed. If he was picking sides, he was going all the way. He didn't change his mind. Nodding with conviction, he thrust the truck into drive.

*I'd like to peel the hide right off his delectable ass.*

"Livvy, where's Uncle John? He's been gone a jillion hours! He promised to bring back ice cream."

*He promised a lot of things.*

"Maybe we'll make cookies later. I'll even let you cream the butter if you're good. Now go back and watch TV while I finish the dishes."

*Avoid and distract.*

PJ grumped back into the living room and Livvy squeezed the sponge in a death grip. How easily those old habits crept back in. How many times had her mother decided on impromptu trips to the park to avoid the twins asking when Daddy

was coming home? Something under her ribs ached with a hollow thump.

*I'm staring out a kitchen window, with kids under my feet, and wondering where in the hell my man is. I've lived this. I will not live this again.*

Livvy rinsed the sink and gritted her teeth. John hadn't asked her to do any laundry or straighten up but they needed to be done. It had felt good at first, all homey and sweet, until the clock started to mock her. She was here, cleaning and cooking, taking care of his nephews and he was...where?

He worked from home, damn it. Her dentist was near retirement age and closed at noon Mondays. She'd caved at one and called John's cell but it went straight to voicemail. He hadn't returned her texts either. Pete said he'd talked to him earlier but there was no answer now. John loved Gina too much to ignore a call today of all days. Resentful thoughts darted through her mind. Unless he was too busy to answer the phone. Livvy worked all day. He was free to do whatever with whomever and she'd never know if he...

In a burst of vehemence, she snapped the dishtowel off the rack and dried her hands. She was not her mother and there was no way in hell she could stomach this. At least she could walk away and not starve. She was better than her mother, better prepared, better informed. She

didn't need John Murphy to take care of her. She could take care of herself just fine.

Yesterday, seeing that slut all over John had sent hot streaks of jealousy through her but she'd never, not for one minute, considered that he'd responded to the skank. His mouth had been too tight and his eyes too pinched. Even if she hadn't read his body language, she'd come to trust him. But where was he now?

PJ pulled back the curtain, his little lip tucked under his crooked teeth, watching the driveway. Her brothers used to do the same thing. Once or twice they'd worried that their father had been in an accident but her mother had assured them he was fine. He always was. He'd come home freshly showered and happy. Until one day, he didn't and had never come home again.

"PJ, don't sit in the window, okay? Why don't you go outside and play?"

"Uncle John said we could play kickball when he came back."

Her father had always come home in a good mood. He'd spend the rest of the night roughhousing with the boys, reading to or playing tea party with Andrea, helping Livvy with her math homework. Those years had been full of confusion for her. She'd wanted to hate him, to be angry that he put her mother through so much, but she loved her daddy and he loved her. She'd had



trouble reconciling that her father had a lover on the side. Did John?

How could a woman love a man who cheated? How could a woman stop loving a man who cheated?

“Come on, PJ. Let’s do some of your homework so you don’t get behind, okay?”

“I don’t want to. I want Uncle John to come home.”

John’s truck pulled in the drive and Livvy blew out a calming breath. Tyler jumped from the floor and ran to the window, cheering that he’d arrived. Livvy wasn’t so thrilled.

She faced the window as the deck door creaked and the boys went running as if it were the second coming of Christ. She heard them pepper him with questions, heard his laughing reply and her temperature rose. PJ proudly carted two half-gallon containers of ice cream past her and shoved them into the freezer. So John had remembered the ice cream but couldn’t be bothered to call? Nice.

She held her irritation until he crossed to the bar. His smile jacked her anger even higher.

“Hey,” he said.

Suddenly, it was too much. She needed to leave. Her bare feet slapped the floor stalking by him. She grabbed her oversized bag and jammed her feet into her shoes.

“Supper’s in the oven. Your laundry’s caught up, the bedding’s changed and your agent called. Pete wants you to call him back, too. Don’t forget Tyler’s allergy medicine at eight and they need a bath yet. I’m going home.”

The slam of the door gave her a small zing of satisfaction but it snapped open before she reached the top step.

“Livvy! What’s wrong?”

Like one too many blocks in a tower, her control toppled and she whirled on him, unleashing the emotional hurricane that had brewed all day.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong is you left here at nine this morning and it’s after six. Where the hell have you been?” *Please don’t say you just had things to do. Please tell me the truck broke down, that you got stuck in the mother of all traffic jams, that aliens descended and kidnapped you, anything but—*

“I had some stuff to do.”

Livvy closed her eyes. “You couldn’t call? Or at least answer your phone? Even for Gina and Pete?”

John scowled and yanked the cell from his pocket. Resignation hardened the lines around his mouth. “Damn, I forgot to charge it last night and...I never thought about calling, Liv. I’m sorry.

I just figured the kids would be okay with you. Is Gina all right?"

"They moved her to a regular room. But those kids in there don't know me from Eve. I met them yesterday, Murphy, yesterday. Your sister asked *you* to take care of them, not me. I took a day off to help you, not do it for you. The dentist was important. I understand that. But it's half an hour each way. You could have walked there and back twice since you left." She poked his chest. "You used me and I don't appreciate it."

He thrust his hands deep in his khaki pockets and rolled his tongue around inside his cheek. His eyes shot to the decking floor before rising to hers. "Okay, where the hell is this coming from? I should've called, I get that, but you are way too pissed off for just that. What's wrong?"

"You figure it out." She turned once more for the stairs and made it down two before his voice stopped her.

"I can't figure out shit unless you talk to me."

Hurricanes are hard to stop and she was no exception. She stomped back and fixed him with a glower. "Why bother? You couldn't give me the consideration of a two-minute phone call. I watched my mother sit by the phone, waiting for my father to call, wondering where he was, night after night. He never called. When he'd finally

come home he'd blow her off, say he just had things to take care of. Sound familiar?"

John had the decency to look guilty. "Oh shit."

"Yeah, oh shit. He screwed anything in skirts while my mother waited for a phone call and a lie."

"You think I was out screwing someone?"

"I don't know where you were, Murphy. That's the point."

John shook his head. "No, the point is you decided I'm guilty because your father was a dick."

"Takes one to recognize one, I guess."

A flush of anger darkened his cheeks. John balled his fists. "Okay, we need to back up here before one of us says something really out of line. I was not... Christ, Liv, I thought you trusted me. You did yesterday. What happened?"

"You didn't call. This is where I'm selfish. I don't share well. If you want to be with me, then you treat me with enough respect to call me and tell me the truth. That's the only thing I'll ever ask of you. That you don't make me wonder where you are and who you're screwing."

"Uncle John, are you and Livvy fighting?"

PJ's timid voice called from the threshold and she averted her face. The boys didn't need to see her tears or hear her anger. It wasn't their fault their uncle was an ass.

“Yes, PJ, we are. You go back inside and keep an eye on Tyler for a minute. I’ll be right in.” His calm baritone soothed her as he meant it to soothe the child, and she had to steel herself from softening. She didn’t face him until the latch clicked.

He avoided her eyes. “I swear I wasn’t with anyone else, Livvy. I just had some things I needed to take care of, stuff that...only came up because of everything that’s happening with Gina. I should have called. I’m sorry.”

“That makes two of us.” Unable to stay any longer, she darted for the stairs. This time she made it down five.

“I heard what you said last night. Your other secret? I heard it, Liv.”

Shock and dread tilted her world to the left and her vision spun wildly. *He heard?* She gripped the railing and her eyes squeezed shut. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I was. You woke me when you said my name.”

She blinked to clear her eyes then reclinbed the steps. She folded both arms to hide her shaky hands and focused her attention on his chin. “If you were awake, why didn’t you say anything?”

His jaw shifted as he gritted his teeth. The tightening of his lips brought passionate memories

to the front of her mind and she pushed them down. "I was just stunned, I guess."

"You had to have known, Murphy, had some idea." Braver now, she raised her eyes to his.

He shook his head. "I knew I...meant something to you but I didn't know that. Did you mean it, Livvy? Was it just the moment or is that how you feel?"

Andrea's taunts slammed into her. Could she stand here and admit she was in love with him and him not tuck tail and run? Is this where he started pulling back because she did the unthinkable and fell for his moody ass? He'd told her he didn't want forever but she'd thought maybe... Was she willing to risk it? John was giving her an out, a chance to lie, blame it on the sex.

Livvy didn't want a lie. She lifted her chin. "I meant it. I love you."

He smiled, the edges of his lips tilting just slightly. "I like hearing that."

Silence, only silence, passed between them. Part of her heart wept as she realized he wasn't running but he wasn't going to repeat those words to her either. Her head shook, denying her disappointment. She spun around and headed for the stairs.

"What does this mean, Livvy? You love me but you're leaving me? Is this over now? Is this how it ends?"

He couldn't have hurt her more if he'd literally stabbed her in the back. Livvy stopped her descent. *Was this over?* No, her love wasn't over. She just needed to be loved in return. She wanted him to love her with the intensity she loved him. Sucking back a sob, she held it until her lungs burned like acid, digging for the courage to answer him.

Had every look, every kiss, every tender moment they'd shared been a lie or wasn't he feeling the same? No one was that good of a liar, were they? She'd thought, hoped, he was falling in love with her too.

He'd nicely volleyed the ball into her court, making her the villain. If this—them—they were over, it wasn't her choice. It was up to him.

An ex-high-school-volleyball captain, she turned back to him and served. "This is an argument, Murphy. What you do with it is your choice. You know how I feel and where I live."

She managed not to run and not to break down...until she was inside.

John watched the sun glint off Livvy's hair as she walked across the grass. Her proud stance belying the pain in her eyes, she slipped from his sight and his chest lurched. An exhale of frustration burst from him and he threw his body into a deck chair. His full pocket bit into his thigh and he eased the

small blue box out. He worked his jaw back and forth until he had the courage to open it.

The stones sparkled, sending rainbows of light across his hand. It had taken hours to find what he wanted. He'd ended up driving over a hundred miles just to find a better selection and lucked out finding a jeweler who had exactly the right stones. He'd just had to wait for the stones to be set. Although never imagining he'd ever need one, once his mind had been made up, he knew exactly which ring he wanted Livvy to have.

Nearly three carats in total, he'd winced at the price but knew she was worth twice that. Livvy was beyond special, she was his angel. He'd chosen a side and hit the ground running. This was what he wanted. He wanted Livvy. Forever.

Monsters, demons, whatever, he'd battle them all just to see her face every morning until he was too old to remember his own name. But he'd screwed up. She'd run from him crying and he had no clue what to do to get her back. How could a man who juggled dozens of imaginary monsters not get a handle on one human female?

The lid snapped shut sharply and he dropped his head back. "Shit."

"You said another bad word."

He fixed his nephew with a sarcastic look. "Yes, PJ, I said another bad word."

"That's okay. Mommy says that one."



"I probably taught it to her."

PJ leaned on his knee and looked up at him. "Why was Livvy mad? Was I bad today? I didn't mean to spill the orange juice and I only hit Tyler once, maybe twice, I don't remember."

"No, I'm sure you weren't bad. But don't hit your brother. Hitting hurts. I hurt Livvy's feelings, that's why she's mad."

"Are you going to say you're sorry?"

"I did. She's still mad. She's mad at her father and using me as target practice." John rose with a grunt and shoved the box back in his pocket. "Where's Ty?"

"In the living room. Livvy said we could make cookies tonight. She said I could mash the butter. Is she coming back?"

The house seemed hollow. John closed the door and listened for what was different. There was more noise than usual. The TV blared some squeaky-voiced song and Tyler stood in front of it shaking his rear end in a strange dance. PJ rambled on, pausing only for breath. The air conditioner hummed and, from the back, the rumble of the clothes dryer droned.

It hit him like a sucker punch. Livvy was gone. His house had no heartbeat.

Even when she was at work, her presence lingered. Now it was as if she'd taken her spirit with her, with no plans to return. Cold that had

little to do with the blowing air seeped into his muscles. John leaned back on the door, mind spinning. A headache began to throb behind his eyes.

“Livvy made chicken. We saved you some.”

Kicking off the door, he palmed the top of the little boy’s hair. “I’m not hungry, PJ.”

“Livvy wasn’t hungry either. But it was good chicken. Can I have ice cream now? I ate all my dinner.”

John scooped ice cream into bowls and wished PJ would shut up. If he said Livvy’s name one more time, John was going to go crazy. Tyler came running and John put him on the barstool in front of a cereal bowl full of Neapolitan. Both PJ and Tyler’s eyes bulged at the adult-sized serving. John ate from the carton, not tasting a bite. Ice cream didn’t satisfy. He wanted buttercream.

“PJ, when your Mommy and Daddy argue, what does your daddy do?” He’d sunk to a new low. He’d asked for relationship advice...from a five-year-old.

Pink and brown cream coating his lips, the little boy screwed up his eyebrows in thought. “Mommy cries and yells, Daddy says bad words and goes outside.”

“Okay, did that,” John said with a wry grin. “What about after? How do they stop fighting?”

Vanilla and strawberry slid down PJ's chin. "Daddy says he's sorry, Mommy calls him an idiot and then he kisses her. Her face goes all goofy, like this." Half rolling his eyes, he looked like he was having some type of seizure, which made John smile.

"Yeah, but what about when your Mommy is wrong and your daddy is right?"

PJ shrugged. "Daddy says he's sorry anyway. Daddy says it takes a big man to crawl. But I've never seen him do that. And even Tyler doesn't crawl anymore, but he did for a long time...and he wore a diaper."

"Nuh-uh, I'm a big boy!"

The two argued while John shoved the ice cream carton back in the freezer, spoon and all.

"All right, enough. Eat your ice cream. And then we're going to go see Livvy. I need to learn how to crawl."

For fifteen minutes, Livvy hoped John would follow her. As half an hour slid by, she knew he wouldn't. She sank onto the couch and clutched a small throw pillow to her stomach, swallowing her tears. *Love sucks.*

Andrea stumbled up the hall, rubbing sleep from her face. Seeing Livvy on the couch, she stopped. "Hey, you're home. There's a change."

When Livvy didn't speak, Andrea grew solemn. "What happened?"

"We had a fight." Her voice was husky, tattered.

Andrea swooped her long hair over her shoulder and sat beside her. "Bad?"

Livvy shrugged, unable to explain how something so small had exploded so nastily. "He was gone all day and didn't call. I...I freaked out on him a little bit, accused him of being with someone else."

"Oh, Liv." Andrea rubbed her knee. "Not all men cheat, you know."

"I know. But...yeah, I wish that was all I said to him." At Andrea's inquisitive look, Livvy raised her eyebrows. "I told him I love him. You were right."

"Oh, Livvy, I'm sorry. I didn't want to be." Tears filled Andrea's eyes then and she wrapped her arms around her older sister. Livvy let loose her control and wept. Andrea pulled back with a grin. "Want to egg his house? We could slit his tires. I know, let's get a dog and let it shit in his yard."

A small knock at the front door drew her head up and Andrea looked at her warily. Hope rushed at her like a tornado—violent, fierce and terrifying. Andrea strode to the door as Livvy held her breath.

"Is it Murphy?" she whispered.

Andrea shook her head. "Not unless he shrank. But it is for you."

PJ, with chocolate stains on his red tee shirt, stood smiling like a cat. In his sticky hand, he clutched a large bunch of Mr. Truman's prize roses. The distinctive pale cream color was unmistakable. Livvy assumed they had been snipped without permission.

"PJ, what are you doing here? Where's your uncle?"

The little boy motioned over his shoulder. Behind the shrubbery, Livvy spied one bent khaki-covered knee, a squirming Tyler perched on top. She smiled through wet eyes.

"Uncle John said I was supposed to tell you something."

Squatting, Livvy brought herself to his level. "What did Uncle John want you to say?"

"Um, first he's sorry. Then he's an idiot and then, um, oh yeah, he wants you to come back. You promised we could make cookies, Livvy. Can we make them tonight? And these are for you, but they stink."

He thrust the four soft-stemmed roses at her. She took the flowers and tweaked his nose. "Thank you, PJ. Tell your uncle I said...tell him I said thank you."

"Kay."

His tennis shoes smacked the steps as he thundered toward the bush. Livvy closed the door and Andrea mouthed "That was so cute." Livvy nodded just as a tiny knock sounded. Livvy blew out a stuttering breath before she opened the door.

"Tyler! Hey, sweetie."

Livvy stroked the preschooler's cheek as he grinned at her, tiny white teeth shining. One finger popped in his mouth and he held out a single cream rose. "Fower, Wibby. Unca John gived it to me."

"Is that for me?" He nodded and she held out her hand. "Can I have it?" Shaking his head, he clutched the rose tighter. From the corner of her eye, she saw a dark head bow and swore she heard him sigh.

"Okay, sweetie, you go back to Uncle John now." She watched as Tyler climbed down her steps, still carrying his flower, before shutting the door.

Andrea grinned. "That was the sweetest thing I've ever seen."

Once more a small knock sounded near her hips. Livvy opened the door, eyes searching low. She saw Tyler and PJ and their uncle's pockets. Swallowing her stomach, she slowly raised her face to his. The hard lines around his mouth stood out like incisions, yet his eyes were soft, filled with regret and determination.

“That was sneaky, Murphy. Sending little boys to do a man’s job.”

“When the stakes are this high, I’ll use what I have to.” Tongue flicking out to wet his upper lip, he closed his eyes for a brief second. Tyler turned to run and John’s hand clamped down on the child’s head. PJ picked his nose. “I’m sorry, Liv. I screwed up.”

Tyler wiggled from under his hand and darted toward the road. John lunged off the porch with a curse, caught him by the back straps of his overalls and picked him up like a lunch pail. The child dangled from his hand as he turned back to her.

“Active little boogers, aren’t they?”

At that moment, her sister earned a halo by opening the door and asking who wanted Popsicles. Both children stormed by Livvy. John didn’t blink and never took his eyes from her face. He stepped to the porch edge and she met him there, her head only inches above his.

“I’m not your dad. You can’t blame me for shit he did.”

“You’re right. You didn’t deserve that. I just got wrapped up in old memories and... I’m sorry.”

His hand crept along her hip. Livvy blinked against a blur of tears. That simple touch

grounded her and she wanted to jump into his arms.

“Old memories are a bitch, aren’t they? My word may not mean much right now, but I swear I wasn’t with another woman. You either believe me or you don’t. I don’t know how to make that happen.”

“I believe you.” Livvy nibbled her lip and forced herself to look straight at him. “What’s going on with us, Murphy? This is more than a summer fling.”

“I don’t know. Just, when you walked away...” John’s eyes shifted to the side before bringing his face back to hers. His voice dropped. “I’ve never done this, Liv. I’ve had one-night-stands, and affairs, and friends with benefits, but not this. Not what we have, whatever this is. I don’t know what I’m doing. But I’m trying.”

Livvy fingered the rose petals to keep from reaching out and smoothing his hair back. “It scares me how much I...need you.”

“I know all about fear.” His voice was a low whisper. “I’m afraid I’m going to wake up and find out all this is just a dream. That I’m back in that hell I thought I’d crawled out of. That you...that you’re a dream.”

“Murphy, no. I’m real. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”



“Make you a deal. You don’t leave me and I promise I’ll never be like your father.”

She let the roses trail down his nose. “Deal.”

He leaped on the porch and wrapped his arms around her waist. His kiss was hard, too much emotion for one move, but she loved it. She loved him. “If I have to call you every ten minutes when I’m out of your sight, I will.”

“Once will be fine. And I’ll be waiting when you get back.” Something he said stuck in her mind and she backed away just enough to see his face. “You’ve never had a fight with a girlfriend?”

A dimple appeared with the grin he sent her. “Technically, this is my first. I’m a fight virgin. Be gentle with me.”

She laughed. His hands sank into her hair and cradled her head. The man who wanted no promises bored one into her eyes. “Before, if women started arguing, I bailed. It wasn’t worth it. They weren’t worth it. I’m not bailing on you.”

He loved her. She knew as surely as she knew how to make royal icing. He just couldn’t say it. Suddenly, his whispers while making love last night took on new meaning and her toes curled.

She buried her face in his shoulder and held him tight. John squeezed, too much pressure to be comfortable, but she didn’t care if she ever drew another breath. She had him. The homegrown roses wafted their thick scent over her as her

heartbeat slowed to normal and she dried her eyes. Livvy raised her head from his shoulder. The front of his hair fell over his eyes and she pushed it back playfully. "You need a haircut."

"I need you."

"You've got me, Murphy."

One hand dipped into his pocket, his balled fist making it bulge. The other hand cupped her jaw, thumb tracing the apple of her cheek. "Livvy, what you said on the deck...no woman has ever said that to me." His voice rasped, gravelly and rough. "Tell me again."

"No."

The single word made his hand fall and brows draw together. "You didn't mean it?"

"I meant it, Murphy. I feel it with each beat of my heart. I want you to feel it in my every breath. But I need to hear it, too. So if and when you can say it back, then I'll repeat it."

He looked above her head. He pulled his hand from his pocket and nodded. "Fair enough."

## Chapter Eleven

After taking a day off, Livvy was running behind schedule but she dove into her work, delegated a bit and simplified the week's new selections. By one-thirty, she poured a cup of coffee and locked herself in her office. Her chair squeaked and her pounding heart jumped. The file Gina had given her lay on her desk, the embodiment of evil. Like a guilty would-be thief, she considered walking away, leaving the tale untold until, someday, maybe, John would tell her himself. He was doing that, tiny tidbit by tiny tidbit.

She'd been able to wait yesterday. The kids had demanded every second of her attention and she hadn't wanted to risk being discovered so she'd left it tucked in her bag. After John and the boys had shown up on her porch, the day had gotten sweeter, her heart more settled and her mind more at ease. John loved her even if he couldn't say it yet. He was worth the wait, she'd decided. He'd tell her in his own way, his own time.

Until late in the night, that decision changed.

Far after midnight, her arms wrapped around his waist, breasts pressed to his back, John's

trembling had awakened her. Sound asleep and sweating like a field hand, his breath rasped in shallow pants and his head shook back and forth. She tried to soothe him, stroking his back, but he bucked from her, bolting upright, a look of pure fear on his face.

He ignored her calling, thrust off the blankets and disappeared into the bathroom for a long time. She stayed in bed, the cold spot that had been his haunting her. He hadn't come back to bed. Rather, he went wordlessly to the study where the muted clang of the weight bench rang for hours. He'd shut her out.

For a long ten minutes, she stared at the faded green folder, wondering if she really wanted to discover his secrets this way. It felt like cheating. But temptation dangled like a carrot before a rabbit. She reached instead for the phone, the short ring in her ear like the starting buzzer for a prize fight.

"Hello?"

"Miss me?" She forced cheer into her voice.

The low answering chuckle warmed her belly. "Of course. What are you doing?"

She shifted an accounts receivable folder over the green one. "Oh, just looking at billing stuff. I thought I'd call and see how you were feeling."

"Me? I'm fine."

“You didn’t get much sleep last night.” Through the phone, she heard Tyler cry and PJ swear he didn’t do it, but she didn’t hear John. The silence hung and she let it.

Finally, he spoke. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

*Shut out again.* She pulled the green folder loose and thumbed its thick edge. “Murphy, I may end up working late, maybe very late. There’re some things I need to handle here.”

“You do what you have to, Liv. You know the door’s open, don’t you?”

“It could be an ungodly hour. I could just go home—”

“Liv, come here.”

His butter-rich tone bathed her soul. *God, I love him. I have to do this.* “Okay, I’ll be there as soon as I can. Don’t wait up.”

“I’ll be awake.”

Gulping her goodbye, she fumbled replacing the receiver. She pulled the file forward and flipped it open. The very first page made her sob.

The color photo of barely sixteen-year-old John had a hospital curtain in the background. The sickly green fabric highlighted his face. A full two-thirds was mottled and bruised. Both eyes were swollen tight and a row of black stitches crossed his brow. The next several pages held similar photos, of his battered back and chest, his blistered arm and a close-up of his stitched wrist.

He had not been beaten. He had been mangled.  
Before she'd read a word, Livvy wept.

Quickly discovering that writing and children did not mix, John improvised. He dug out his hated laptop and the garden hose and parked himself in a deck chair. Tyler and PJ ran through the sprinkler in the back yard and he cursed the smaller keys.

His monsters were not behaving. Nothing he wrote worked unless he let them speak for themselves. A groan leaked out as he deleted a full thirty-seven pages of text. John turned the story over to them and served purely as medium. Before his mind's eye, they came alive.

“Thorn's dying.”

Jondi heard Andros but it seemed as though his voice came from far, far away. The hills and mountains of Gillimat rose in deep purple arches against the evening sky, pushing back the blanket of day for just a while longer. Night was rising, shifting the sky from pink to violet, and Jondi watched in silence.

“I know,” he whispered, tears dripping down his throat. “So is Vory.”

“Yes.” White fur trailing like a veil, Andros sat hunched at his workbench,

bowls and beakers all around. Exhaustion laced his voice. "I'm sorry, Jondi. I have tried everything I know. Nordrake's magic is too strong. Whatever spell he's cast, I can't break it."

"You have to!" Anger rushed through him with a burning fire. He whirled around and screamed. "Don't let them die. You're the most powerful wizard in the world. You can save them, I know it."

Andros shook his head slowly, sadly. "White magic, Jondi. I only know white magic. The dark spell is too strong. Everything I've tried has failed. I have failed."

Jondi could not accept those words. Pain and fear made him angrier and he banged his fists on the scarred table.

"Don't give up. You always tell me don't give up. There has to be something, somewhere that can save them. And why didn't I get sick? I was in the Dell longer than Thorn. Why is he dying? Nordrake hates me, he doesn't know Vory, why her? Why?"

"I don't know why you didn't get sick, Jondi. There's no reason to this spell, none. It makes no sense. I just don't know." Andros went to bury his head in his wide

arms when he stopped, stared at the candle flame and gasped.

“What?” Hope touched Jondi like a fairy wing, lightly, teasingly.

“It makes no sense. No rhyme nor reason. But perhaps, if you don’t try and solve the riddle, the answer will come. Rather than cure the body, maybe you should cure the spirit. And then maybe, the body will follow.”

Jondi frowned as the wizard jumped up and began gathering powders and herbs, bowls and pestles. Andros muttered to himself, snapping his fingers when a new thought appeared. Jondi understood none of it. He just knew that time was running out and Andros was trying for a miracle.

Ground houndspaw, the tears of a mermaid, and three sprigs of mint were tossed in a

A *kerthunk* and PJ’s scream yanked John from his words and he pitched the laptop aside, jumping to the deck railing. Tyler lay flat on his stomach at the base of the wooden stairs, blood pooling around his head on the small concrete slab. Panic reached down his throat and ripped his heart from his chest with clawlike fingers.

“Tyler!”



The child didn't respond. The only sound was his own erratic heartbeat and PJ shrilling like a fire siren. John's mind went blank. His bare feet barely touched the stairs as he flew down them, leaping the last several. Water from the slippery grass seeped into his knees when he slammed to the ground.

Cool and slick, Tyler's skin seemed too baby soft to be real as John rolled him over. Tyler was now howling and his cherub-cheeked face was streaked with red. More crimson gushed from his crown. John did the only thing he knew to do. He scooped and ran.

A soft knock on the door snapped Livvy's head up and she quickly closed the file. Pulling several invoices on top of it, she wiped her eyes before unlocking the door. David, her secondary pastry chef, peeked in with a frown.

"You okay? You've been in here for a couple hours. That's not like you."

"Yeah, just catching up on some paperwork."

The older man nodded, running his hands over his ample belly. "Okay. I'm going to start that weird steampunk baby-shower cake. I just finished the bread orders, too. But the bloody ladyfingers gross me out, so Justine's doing them. Since you added this Dark Cravings stuff, business has picked up a lot, hasn't it?"

“Yeah, it has. Seems there was a whole niche that no one else had covered—the not-so-sweet who still like sugar and have parents who like to show off.” Livvy threaded a hand through her hair and sighed. “One good thing about Marnie Florici, she has a mouth as big as her bank balance. I’ve got the next month jammed full.”

“I saw that.” David grinned at her. “If this keeps up, I’m asking for a raise.”

“If this keeps up, you can have one.”

He threw back his graying head and laughed. “Okay, I’m going back in to wrestle with ravens and compasses.”

Livvy closed the door behind him and whispered, “You do that. I’m dealing with monsters and demons myself.”

Coffee long gone cold slipped across her lips as she lowered back to her chair and resumed reading. Alan Warner, the small-town reverend, had beat more than Bibles. After his wife died, he turned his grief on her son. Convinced he was the Devil’s spawn, the bastard child born of an unsaved whore, Alan had set out to cleanse John’s black soul.

Stunned any human being could inflict such hatred on a child, Livvy fingered her quivering lip. An empty ache formed, longing to cradle the long-grown little boy in her arms. Her eyes fell on the word *whore* and she sniffled. John was wrong.

Gina knew all about her mother's previous occupation.

A child who heard monsters speak was ripe fodder for the zealous crackpot, and Alan leaped on the notion that John was at times possessed by demons. He'd tried to take John's monsters from him. Defiantly, John told his tales in the dark to a sibling who was made to watch his every punishment. Livvy smiled as she recognized that defiance even today. How strong he was, even as a kid. He'd not only survived hell, he'd emerged with a tale to tell.

But poor Gina. Her foster parents reported she wet the bed for a year after her father's death, each night screaming for her brother. Dozens of letters printed with juvenile scrawl were addressed to John at the Hollybrook Correctional Facility for Youthful Offenders. Livvy laid them aside with a sad smile. She sent a soft prayer of thanks that neither suffered alone.

Like any other thirty-eight-year-old man, John had scars. Nothing huge or telling, but small marks on his skin that could have come from sports injuries or accidents. One particular scar, a thin line on his wrist she'd asked about, he'd explained away as a sheet-metal incident. He'd lied. The mark wasn't an accidental injury; it was a badge of courage. It came from the locked back door window John had shattered to reach his sister

before her father burned her hands with scalding water.

The night Alan died.

The night John stopped the abuse.

The written accounts from teenaged John, seven-year-old Gina and various churchgoers read like a list of inquisition tortures. The broomstick Gina had mentioned was a favorite punishment and weapon. John had to kneel on the broomstick, hands outstretched, and pray aloud for deliverance, reciting scriptures until he could no longer speak. According to Gina, it happened weekly.

Livvy's gaze landed on the wheeled bucket and mop. She jumped from her desk, laid the handle flat to the ground and knelt on the wood. She just wanted to taste what his childhood had been like. Sweat beaded on her forehead almost immediately and she grimaced, shifting her weight back to her heels. It did little to erase the pain and she nearly cried out in less than a minute. Standing, her legs quivered. How had he endured that? She couldn't understand how John had any use of his knees left.

The throb persisted as she sat and picked up yet another page. The broomstick would fall until Alan was satisfied John's penitence was sincere or until John could no longer remain upright. In five years, he'd had six broken ribs which required treatment. Her tears dotted the paper, marring the ugly words. Doctors, based on X-ray findings,

suspected that more broken bones had healed on their own. Among other things, they found evidence of an unreported skull fracture long since healed.

Disgust threatened to force the coffee from her stomach. Alan had been reported no less than five times to Child Protective Services, the majority of the claims reported by medical personnel. Each time he was cleared, mainly based on his name and occupation. Livvy prayed that CPS had tightened their investigations in the past twenty years and that no other child fell so far between the cracks.

Tears fell in an unending stream as she uncovered more and more horror, each account seeming the worst she could imagine. Reports and statements from teachers, neighbors and the congregation filled the file, each knowing a small bit, none confessing to knowing all. Perhaps none did. But most knew more than they ever reported until it was too late.

Every single page had been gathered, trying to prove that John felt he had no choice in taking Alan's life. In John's mind, there was no alternative. The system failed him. The church failed him. He couldn't trust them to save Gina. He just did it himself as he had all along.

Numerous psychologists' reports spoke of John's protectiveness. One went so far as to say it

was unhealthy and self-destructive because John chose to not only take his punishment in silence, but also the punishment of his sister. Alan told John he must take the position of Christ, suffering for others to redeem his tainted soul. By all accounts, John never balked. For over five years, he kept Gina safe from Alan by taking twice the abuse.

Until one evening he'd been gone and Alan had tripped over Gina's shoes. He'd turned on her, bloodying her lip and reaching for the steaming tea kettle. But John came home and stopped him. That was his crime. Rather than turn away and go for help he never felt existed, he entered the house and took matters into his own hands. Hands that were bloodied stopped the pain and yet were found guilty.

John had taken care of his sister, just like he'd promised his mother.

"Are you sure I shouldn't take him to the hospital?"

"John, chill. You're more freaked out than Tyler is."

Andrea closed the first-aid kit and repositioned the bag of frozen corn on Tyler's head. Seated on the counter, wrapped in a flowered towel, the preschooler watched Andrea's every move with bright shining eyes. She smiled with a wink at him.

Tyler grinned and blinked both eyes. *Now here is a future heartbreaker.*

During the first tense minutes PJ had been easy enough to distract with little helpful tasks. He'd fetched the washcloth and towels as if bearing the secrets to world peace, taking great pride in being useful. John did nothing but pace and shake, watching his bleeding nephew with anxious eyes.

"He's okay. Head wounds bleed a lot. It doesn't even need stitches. His pupils are reactive, his pulse rate and breathing are normal, and you said he didn't get knocked out." John shook his head but didn't stop his feet. "Just don't wash his hair until the scab is solid, a day or two. Do you have any liquid ibuprofen? And Neosporin?"

He paused and both hands raked through his hair. "Gina sent a bag of stuff. There's probably some in there."

The pacing resumed and Andrea took a harder look at him. Sometimes it wasn't the patient who needed the most attention. Fright had left him shaking like a dog and his breathing was accelerated. John wouldn't be the first caregiver to collapse on her but he was too big for her to handle alone. "John, sit down. Now."

Whether it was her authoritative tone or that he was on automatic she couldn't tell, but he took a seat beside PJ at the table. His tee shirt looked like he'd been in a battle, the blood smears resembling

a macabre Rorschach test amidst drying damp patches. A streak of blood had dried to the color of sun-baked brick along his jawline. His knees were wet from the sprinkler and he left footprints wherever he stepped.

When he'd rushed in carrying the crying child, she'd flown into nurse mode and snatched Tyler from his arms. She'd assumed the accident was much worse until she assessed things. There had been a lot of blood. But Tyler was wet, his hair dripping pink, making it seem like much more than it really had been.

Removing the corn bag and swinging the little boy onto her hip, she crossed to the table and dropped him gently in John's lap. She picked up one thick wrist and began timing his pulse. John tried to pull away but she tightened her hold.

"What are you doing?"

"Shh." Eyes locked on the ticking clock, Andrea counted. "Your pulse rate is a little high."

"You think? He scared the shit out of me."

"You said a bad word again," PJ piped in, the hastily retrieved towel drooping around his slender shoulders. "You said a whole lot of bad words on the steps. Even the really, really bad ones."

Andrea smiled as John's lips went tight.

"I know, PJ. I'm allowed."

"When can I say them?"



She had to fight a laugh as John bit back another bad word. “When you have hair on your chest.”

Deciding he was in no danger of passing out from anything other than nephew fatigue, Andrea stopped her silent monitoring. “Give Tyler some Motrin, dab on some more Neosporin, and try to keep him quiet. Watch to make sure he doesn’t start slurring words or walking off balance, those types of things. Really, I think he just got a bad booboo.”

John nodded and stood, hitching Tyler onto his hip. “Thanks, Andy.”

“Oh, one more thing.” She dug in the freezer and produced two Popsicles. “A liberal application of flavored frozen sugar water. Cures most any ailment.”

PJ snagged the purple one so she handed Tyler the orange. The trio headed for the door, John’s large hand guiding a wet PJ not to touch anything.

“Playing daddy isn’t easy, is it?” She laughed.

John stopped cold. Her smile froze on her face. Without turning, he shook his head. “I’m not a daddy, Andy, and never will be. I’m an uncle. That’s enough for me.”

One hand holding the kitchen curtain back, she watched them walk across the lawn with a frown. How could Livvy end up a soccer mom if the man in her life wasn’t going to play ball?

Livvy climbed the wooden stairs, pulling her hair off the back of her neck. She needed a shower in the worst way. John's file had left a film more disgusting than sugar and flour ever had.

"Hey."

Livvy screeched. Too many monsters lingered in her mind for such a fright. John chuckled in the moonless dark.

"Damn it, Murphy, you nearly gave me a heart attack. What are you doing out here?"

"Soaking in the silence. I think PJ used up both of my eardrums tonight."

Dropping her bag, Livvy kicked off her shoes and strolled to sit beside his bare knees on the chaise lounge. "He sure can talk, can't he? You didn't have to wait up."

But that he had meant the world to her. She studied his shadowy outline. The images invoked by what she'd read were too vivid in her mind to see him clearly and not cry.

"It's not that late, the boys have only been down about an hour."

"How's Tyler?"

He snorted. "The little brat's fine. He ran around all evening like a mini tornado."

His smooth tone flowed like a soothing salve for her aching heart. The lounge shifted as he moved, his hand reaching for her cheek. The

coolness of his fingers and the scent of beer reached her seconds before his mouth.

Livvy had never cared for alcohol, sticking with fruity mixed drinks when she did indulge. But served on his lips, the flavor held more appeal. The taste was potently sexual and she savored the brew.

Abruptly, he broke away. "Liv, have you been crying?"

Guilt spun until she was dizzy with a thousand feelings. Her eyes closed to hold yet another rush of tears at bay.

"What's wrong, honey?"

The casual endearment was nearly her undoing. A few tears dampened her lashes before she forced them back. On her lips, the lie was heavy. "It's just been a long day. I'm tired...and a little hormonal, I guess."

The firm hand at her cheek slid down to her neck and massaged with gentle fingers. Fingers she now knew had been broken. A calloused palm that long ago had wept with second-degree burns cupped her shoulder.

"Come on. Let's get you to bed, then."

His hand found hers before pulling her to a stand. His knees cracked and her heart cried out. The beer bottle flew from his hand as she rushed into him, wrapping her arms around his neck with

a sob. He caught her before she toppled them both over.

“Livvy, what’s wrong?”

“Just hold me.” Her whisper stuttered. “And just let me hold you.”

He did. He held her until her tears faded and the stars appeared. His comfort became her foundation until her trembling stopped. Even now, his strength amazed her and she clung tighter. John didn’t let go until she stepped back and smiled.

An hour later, dry-eyed and calmer, Livvy wrapped the cord of her hairdryer into a tight coil and flipped off the bathroom light. John laid his book aside and pulled her side of the blankets back.

“Better now?”

The sheet whispered as she slid beside him with a nod. A stab of guilt poked her but she allowed him to blame her hormones for her behavior. She leaned over him and shrugged. “Sorry. Woman’s prerogative to get all emotional over the way the wind blows.”

“You need to slow down a bit. You’re working too hard.”

Stony muscles in his chest flexed under her palm as he crossed his arms behind his head. She knew now why he honed his body when tormented. Strength had saved him, delivered him

from evil, as it were. It had empowered him and given him the means to provide. It had kept him alive.

He watched her fingers trace his sternum. "What?"

"Nothing," she murmured. "I just like the feel of you under my hands."

A slow grin of interest carved his lips. "Now there is a provocative statement."

She kissed the corner of his mouth. "You're incorrigible."

He laughed at her. "But I'm damn good, too."

"And not the least bit modest." The laughter lifted her spirits. She poked his ribs and tormented his one ticklish spot above his left hip. With feigned indignation, he shoved her touch away before grabbing her hands, rolling her beneath him and halting their play. His jaw softened as he stared down at her.

One large hand buried under the pillow behind her head. Their lips descended and rose, meeting in the space between. His mouth teased hers until she parted her lips. Tongue stroking tongue, she ran her hands down the smooth line of his shoulder.

John broke away from her kiss, diving back twice before retreating completely. Emotion darted through his eyes. Against her breast, his heart rhythm sped up. "Liv, I—"

Tyler's crying pierced the night, loud through the new baby monitor. John's lids slammed shut and his hot sigh warmed her cheek. Muscles she hadn't realized he'd tensed sagged under her hand.

With a quick kiss on his frowning mouth, she rose from the bed. "I'll go, you've dealt with them all day."

John collapsed face down into her pillow. He'd come so close. Rolling to his side, he pulled the blue box from under her pillow and stared at it. *Strike two.* He shoved it in the nightstand drawer and waited for Livvy to return. Maybe the opportunity would present itself again.

Tyler's cries lasted for a while but soon faded to muffled hiccups. Livvy's lullaby floated across the hall and echoed with static from the baby monitor. From classic nursery songs she drifted into the slow melodies of the fifties and sixties, bringing a smile to his face. Only Livvy would make "Yakety Yak" sound sleepy. When she crossed into "Chantilly Lace," he pushed back the blankets and went searching.

Silhouetted in the nightlight, Livvy rocked on her feet. She crooned softly into Tyler's hair and dropped a kiss or three along his forehead. John stopped and stared. She was beautiful. He basked in the sight of her for two full songs before she

noticed him. Her eyes went round before crinkling in amusement. "I never claimed to be a singer."

Chin nudging toward her arms, he matched her low volume. "Is he okay?"

She nodded, never stopping her sway or her kisses. "I think he just misses his mommy. But he's getting heavy and my arms are about to fall off. Can you take him and put him down?"

John pushed off the frame and reached for Tyler. Livvy went to put the little boy in his arms and it happened. His arms cradled under hers, hers cradled the child, and their eyes met and froze. Magic sizzled. Her pupils widened. Something ancient zapped between them, latched onto his soul and yanked it toward hers.

Powerful. Basic. Man. Woman. Child. Family.

Their lips met in a whisper kiss. *Now*, his brain screamed. But his throat clogged and nothing could pass, even air. Livvy broke the spell with a tiny step back, her eyes locked on his face. Her breasts rose and fell with unspoken emotion before she hurried from the room. John let the moment fade in slow degrees.

Tyler snored softly as John crossed to the bed. PJ's head was buried under a pillow, his arm dangling off the mattress, stuffed duck on the floor. The scent of baby soap mingled with slumber and John's smile grew. He lowered the little boy to the sheet.

A flashback slammed into him with the force of a swinging broomstick.



## Chapter Twelve

“Mommy! Mommmmmeeeeeee!” John couldn’t get the straps unfastened quick enough. Tyler’s feet flew as soon as John pulled him from the truck. By the time John joined them on the high porch, PJ had worked up to a verbal fever pitch and was near hyperventilation. Pete ruffled his hair and answered half a million questions while Gina smothered a giggling Tyler with kisses.

John saw her searching the child’s head and grimaced. “Sorry, Gina. I got wrapped up in Monsterville and wasn’t watching.”

The wide smile she sent him did nothing to ease his guilt. “Don’t worry about it. He’s fine. These two could get hurt right under your nose.”

Tyler tried to climb on her lap and Pete sprang from his chair. “Hey, easy with Mommy, Bucko.”

“Pete.”

John recognized the warning in Gina’s voice. Pete ignored it, sending her a warning look of his own and moving the little boy to her side. “Ty, Mommy has an ouchie. No climbing, okay? And no picking him up, Gina. I mean it.”

“Pete! Oh, you need to go back to work and get out of my hair.” Aggravation laced Gina’s face

and she stood, gripping her son's hand. "Come on, guys. Mommy has a surprise in the kitchen."

The trio scrambled in the front door as Pete sighed and settled back into his chair. Hiding a grin, John took Gina's seat.

"Your sister is the stubbornest mule I ever met," Pete growled.

John chuckled. "You married her."

"Yeah, well, you raised her, so this is your fault."

"Gina raised herself, I just put food on the table." John leaned back and studied his brother-in-law. Lines of worry and fatigue crossed his broad face and his eyes were shadowed. Concern made John's voice lower than normal. "How is she, Pete? Really?"

"She's sore." The reply was quiet. "But her spirits are up. It's like now that they got it out, she can handle whatever happens. Says she lived through...you know, growing up like you guys did...and then having two kids while going to law school, so she can handle anything now."

"She can." John nodded as Pete stared out at the lawn.

Nothing was said for a long time until Pete drew a deep breath. "She wants another baby."

Those words brought a knot to John's chest. He focused on a fat bumblebee lazily drifting from pink flower to pink flower in the hanging

baskets until he could find his voice. "Is that smart?"

Pete snorted. "I don't know. I mean, we're just at the talking stage until we know...something, but how can I tell her no? I'd give her the world in a box if I could, but I can't keep her safe from her own body. How can I steal the one thing giving her hope now?"

Since he had no answer, John stayed quiet. He kept his eyes on the bumblebee. His sister had chosen a good man. Stepping aside as Gina's protector had been hard for him, but knowing Pete loved her made it manageable. Knowing she loved Pete made it easier. It was a step he'd never regretted.

Pete jerked back to the present with a sniff. "So how're things with Livvy?"

"Good." Whether it was Pete's sentimentality or his own growing awareness, John stunned himself by softly admitting, "I bought a ring."

Pete's head whipped around but John refused to move his gaze from the buzzing insect. There was no explanation for his heart to pound but he concentrated on it, feeling the deep thud against his ribs, taking pleasure in the knowledge that Livvy made it happen.

Pete whistled. "How the mighty have fallen."

John shook his head with a grin. The old reputation seemed so foreign to him now. The

man who was always on the lookout for the next piece of ass seemed almost a stranger. Livvy had become so ingrained in his soul he couldn't imagine how he'd lived without her.

"Chasing pussy gets old, Pete. Besides, she says she loves me."

"Which is nice but do you love her?"

John leaned forward and watched the bee bounce on the porch ceiling a few times. The thudding of his heart tripled. He couldn't say it to Livvy, how could he admit it to Pete? But who better would understand than a man desperately in love with his wife? He turned and looked Pete directly in his face.

"Yeah, I do." Blowing out a shaky breath, John tried to joke. "But don't tell Gina. She's like a dog with a bone."

A slight smile quirked Pete's lip. "So did you ask her yet?"

"No. I came close a few times."

The bumblebee buzzed behind him, headed toward the road. John turned to watch his winding path swerving in the breeze. So much energy expended to get from point A to point B when a straight line seemed easier. But then, John mused, the straight path always did seem kind of boring.

"Don't wait, John." Pete's shaky voice was strained. He fingered his wedding band, spinning it around his finger. "Don't wait."

Tyler barely made it through lunch. His head started to droop at the table, threatening to smack into his plate. When Gina moved to pick him up, Pete sent her a scolding look and scooped the child up. "Sit. I'll put him down. Come on, PJ, you too. Time for nap."

"Aw, I'm too big for a nap. Ms. Jenkins doesn't make me sleep at school if I don't want to. And Uncle John didn't make me. Naps are for babies. I don't want to."

His father arched one brow in John's direction but directed his words to his son. "No nap, no TV. Your choice."

PJ slid out of his chair and started to follow his father out of the room but detoured to John. "Can I come stay with you again? Livvy said I could see her baker shop and we didn't go. She said I could have a cupcake. And maybe Tyler won't get all bloody next time."

Gina hid a smile behind her coffee cup as John fixed him with a fierce scowl. "Now why would I want you to come back if you're going to be squealing and telling your daddy I didn't make you take a nap?"

PJ jumped up and down, pleading, "Please, I didn't mean to. I didn't tell him about the bad words or seeing Livvy naked or all the ice cream. Can I please come stay?"

A swift heat flooded John's face and Gina dropped her jaw. As fast as he could, John agreed the boys could come back and sent PJ up the stairs.

"I can't wait to hear this explanation, brother-mine." She propped her elbows on the table and waited.

John sent her an embarrassed grin. "He's exaggerating. So I let him eat ice cream and skip naps for a few days, it's not the end of the world. And he told me about a couple words you let slip often enough that I don't feel guilty. Besides, I've heard Pete when he gets mad. It wasn't like he'd never heard them before."

"Hmm, and about seeing Livvy na—"

"He got up in the middle of the night to take a leak. It was an accident."

Gina's lips went tight.

He leaned back in the chair and pointedly looked at her. "What?"

Her shoulders shrugged and a flash of pain shot across her face at the move but the eyes she settled on him were stern. "You had your girlfriend sleep over while my boys were with you? Can you not keep your pants zipped for a few days? What were you thinking?"

"Gina, if you don't want the boys staying with me, that's fine. But my life with Livvy is not up for discussion. She's there and she's going to be there for a long time, so deal with it."

Her coffee cup lowered with a slow steady hand. "A long time, huh? Care to elaborate on that?"

John snorted. "Nice try. I'm not falling for that. When I'm ready to talk, you'll know. Until then, back off. Let's just say that you aren't the only one thinking of adding a member to the family, okay?"

The radio blared some honkytonk twang and Livvy studied the legs sticking out from underneath the truck. High on ramps, the hood open, the overgrown Tonka toy seemed to be devouring John. Lord only knew what he was doing.

Gravel crunched under her feet as she squatted down and peered under the machine. "What are you doing? This thing's too new to be broken already."

"Hey, you're home early." She had to lean back as he wiggled from beneath with a red oil-stained rag in hand. "I thought I'd have time to change the oil before you got here."

She met his brief kiss with a shake of her head. "Why don't you just take it to a garage like a normal person?"

He raised one brow before lying back and disappearing once more. "I'll do it myself so I know it's done right."

“Doesn’t the gravel hurt your back?”

A laugh rang from under the motor. “Nah. Hey, I need to go up to New York next week for a couple days. Want to come?”

“New York City? Why?” Livvy hated not being able to see him so she knelt low, rocks biting into her knees, fanny in the air, and peered under the truck. John had a strange wide-mouthed pliers-type thingy around some other thingy and was trying to twist it. The harsh way he screwed up his face and the clench of muscles in his arm told her it was not easy. And just in case she had any doubt, he started cursing it.

He raised his head slightly to see her and smiled. “I have a sit-down scheduled with my agent. There’s a CG movie company showing interest in *The Crystal Tear*.”

“Murphy, that’s great!”

“Maybe,” he grunted, applying more force to the hanging thingy. “We’ll see. I’m not sold on the idea, no matter how much they’re paying.”

“Why not? I think it’s wonderful. We need to celebrate.”

“Nothing to celebrate yet. I’m not sure I want it to happen. That’s why Christina asked me to come up and discuss things. She thinks it’s great, too, but I don’t know.”

“Why?” Livvy wrinkled her nose in confusion. How could he not be thrilled someone wanted to



turn his monsters into a movie? To her it seemed the pinnacle of success.

He pulled the pliers thingy back to his chest with a deep sigh. "Because Liv, *I* draw Jondi. I'm the author *and* illustrator. I'm not sure I want someone else giving them life, you know?"

"But you gave them life, put them in print. How is that different?"

"Because I control who sees what, what goes to print. My words, my drawings, they're all mine. Alan tried to take..." Squinting his eyes shut, his voice dropped to a gruffer, deeper octave. "Even...even when I was in... After he died, if I wrote something or drew something, it got taken and examined and... No, Liv, I don't want *anyone* touching my work."

Livvy grimaced at his tone then softened at the implication. She wasn't just anyone. That he'd given her the trashed drawings to use showed how much she meant to him. But she'd never even think about touching his monsters and frankly pitied whoever did. Facing the Master of Monsters when he was pissed would make anyone wet their pants.

"Why bother going to New York then?"

John fit the pliers back on the hanging thing. "I promised Christina I'd be a good little client. Think you can go?"

"I wish I could. I haven't been there in years. But I have three Adult Cravings baskets and two cakes from our new Dark Cravings line scheduled on top of everything else. I'm getting orders from three counties and I had to stop taking orders for Halloween. It's a critical time at the Shack, new product, trying to make it work. Even with David full-time, we're swamped. I have Pam and Justine slated to pull a double shift on Friday."

"You need to hire more people, another pastry chef or something."

Livvy huffed. "Trust me, I would love to but I just can't right now. I hope maybe soon. I hit a vein that was untapped and I plan to suck it dry like a starving vampire."

A low snigger seeped from under the truck. "Bloodthirsty little thing, aren't you?"

"Hey, my shop means as much to me as your monsters do to you. I can't let anyone take it from me. This could be the wave of income I need right now."

"Are things that tight? I mean, if you need a loan—"

"Do *not* finish that sentence." The bite in her words left teeth marks in the air and determination tightened her lips. "The Shack is fine. I don't need help."

Wisely, John kept his mouth shut. Livvy thrust the white chef coat under her legs as a cushion

from the scrape of rock. How was his back not screaming? She wondered if the thickened skin from the beatings had anything to do with it.

A grunt and a string of curse words flowed from beneath the truck.

“You need your mouth washed out with soap, know that?”

A rough chuckle sounded from the belly of the Ford beast. “So PJ kept reminding me.”

“How’s Gina?”

Another grumble, a lower curse and a loud exhale spewed out. “All right. Sore. Waiting to find anything out.”

Just as she bent to peer under the carriage, his grunt gave way with a clank and a spit word of pain. Livvy scrambled back as his body shuffled out from under the truck. He sat up with a growl and reached for the red cloth. Blood welled from his knuckles.

“Don’t do that, that thing is filthy!” She cupped her hand over the slight wound, applying some pressure before holding her coat to his fist.

“You’re going to ruin that.” He grinned but allowed her to fuss. “It’s not that bad. The manufacturer put the damn filter on too tight and I busted my knuckles. Stings for a bit, but it’s nothing.”

“Oh, hush up and let me fret, all right? That’s what a woman does when someone she loves gets hurt.”

Once the words left her mouth, she snapped her lips closed. But it was too late. He’d heard them in daylight and she couldn’t really be sorry. She dared a glance up.

He smiled, light dancing in his eyes. Black oil tipped his fingers so he stroked her cheek with the back of his left hand. “I like hearing that again.”

Her stomach quivered until it fluttered like laundry in a breeze. A long curl waved in front of her nose and she brushed it away before dropping a light kiss on his hand. The smile slid from his lips. He crawled back under the truck.

“Go wash up. I got oil on your cheek.”

Livvy shook her head in confusion at his abrupt dismissal. *What the hell was that about?* Once in the bathroom, she stared at her reflected face. A small streak of oil and blood lined her cheekbone, probably from her own hand. An inkling of understanding dawned on her.

Andrea had told her how John reacted to Tyler’s accident. Now he’d shoved her away. Soap foamed on the washcloth as she scrubbed at her cheek. The oil on her skin wasn’t the problem. It had been the blood that scared him.

Revulsion coated his tongue with thick cottony bile. Beneath the motor, John inhaled several exhaust-flavored breaths, trying to slow his racing heart.

Firmly he fixed his eyes on the underside of the motor. It looked like a massive pit of twisted dusty black snakes, writhing into a heaving mass around blocks and chunks. Serpents began hissing in his ear. His fisted hands smacked the gravel. *No!*

*Slow. Control. Breathe. Relax.*

It made perfect sense in a twisted way. Logically, John knew he was under some stress, knew he had chosen to make some huge changes in his life. All were triggers for flashbacks, nightmares and irrational fears, even if he hadn't had them in years. It was his mind's way of processing old issues and accepting new ones. They were healthy.

"Healing brain purges" was what the state shrink had called them. John preferred "mental-baggage vomit." But knowing it and dealing with it had always been two different matters. The suddenness always shocked him. There was never a warning when a flash would strike, just the overall niggling in the back of his mind that monsters lay in wait before the starburst popped behind his eyelids.

At his lowest point, the flashbacks had lasted for hours and then could come back to back. The

reality that he and Gina were safe was too hard to grasp, and his brain had revolted. John thought he'd lost his mind, or even worse, that his mind had split in two. He'd retreated so often to the safe place in his subconscious, the high mountains of Windago and the comfort of Andros's arms and Thorn's wings, he was afraid one day he'd never want to leave.

Last night he'd looked down at his nephew's sleeping face and had seen it once again covered in blood. The split-second vision opened the doorway for a million swirling images to crash down, eating at his gut like vultures in a Greek myth. Phantom pain had ricocheted through his body, stomach tightening in fear and skin burning with blows that had stopped years before. Warbled hymns sounded in his ears, drowned out by screamed sermons and shouted curses. It nearly brought him to his knees before he snatched control away from the demons. It had still taken two hours under the weights, with four frantic breaks to double-check the door locks, before he could breathe normally.

He'd crawled into bed beside Livvy and the last wisps of terror had finally faded. Just the smell of her skin soothed him. She was what he needed. Still, the nightmares came.

But awake, he'd learned to have power over the memories, to focus and redirect the energy. He

had healed in more than body. For a moment, he considered finding a doctor. Medication had helped slow his mind before, allowing him to work through things. He'd hated it and the side effects and couldn't wait to be rid of the damn things. So he'd weaned himself off it and dealt with it by sheer willpower. Just like he would do now.

Normally, the sight of blood didn't bother him. He'd certainly seen enough of it through the years, most of it his own. But Tyler was so small, so dependent on his uncle to keep him safe that every ounce of logic and information had evaporated. He'd taken one look and went blank. The only thought in his head had been he'd failed. Failed Gina, failed Tyler, failed to protect them.

And Livvy, his angel, her face marred by the thin swath of red, had jabbed his gut with exaggerated fear. His blood should not—could not—ever stain her. Would he fail her, too? For the first time since making his choice, he questioned his path. Could he really do this? He needed Livvy. But could he be what Livvy needed him to be? He wanted to. He'd never wanted anything more.

One terrifying phrase leaped to his mind. *The road to hell is paved with good intentions.*

After carrying every single pillow in the house she could find to his bed, Livvy stood outside the bathroom door and bit her lip. Seducing John should be easy. He had the libido of an eighteen-year-old. If she blinked the right way, he'd take her. But she wanted to take him, make him lose control, love him until he ached. She wanted this to work even more than her dreams for her business. John was her future.

She gripped the doorknob and slipped inside the room. Billows of steam rolled upward and dripped down the mirror. Behind the frosted glass, John kept showering. Livvy eased the rear shower door open and stepped in.

John held his head under the stinging spray with his back to her. Water sluiced down his body, over tight muscles that made her tongue stray to the corner of her mouth. The second arc of water jutted over her head. One hand reached out to him through the shower spray before drawing back. He didn't know she was here. Touching him might not be the best way to announce it.

She cleared her throat. "I believe somebody needed their mouth washed out with soap."

Droplets from his hair pelted her as he spun around. A wide shameless grin shone as he slicked wet hair away from his face. Livvy stepped into the second spray, tilting her head back to let the water flow through her curls and



down her arched back. She stretched like a sun-warmed cat. Thin streams of water coursed over her body, dripping off already tightened nipples.

John liked watching and Livvy was counting on that. One thing about taking an erotic shower with a man was there was zero chance for him to hide his interest. His eyebrow wasn't the only thing rising. He moved until he nearly touched her, his voice dropping low in a tease.

"I thought you took a shower before dinner."

She crossed her arms under her breasts, her hands not quite covering the tips. The motion rounded them fuller and his nostrils flared with his inhale. She loved that he loved her breasts. He made her feel seductive and feminine with just his eyes. She loved that he was a noisy lover, as if the basic instinctual urges were barely contained. He made her feel alluring and sensual. She loved that he always held back until she'd reached pleasure before taking his own. He made her feel cherished and treasured. She loved him. He made her feel loved.

A bold step brought her to him, nipples skimming his chest as she reached around his arm. Water dripped from his chin, landing on her shoulder.

"I think I missed a few places. Wash my back for me, Murphy?"

Pulling her wet hair to one side, she handed him the gel bottle and turned, watching him over her shoulder. His lips landed on her neck. The scratch of whiskers electrified her. Warm liquid soap drizzled across her back, contrasting against his rough hands. Wet fire danced across her skin.

Long, slow strokes spread the glaze down her spine, along her ribcage and across her hips. Frothy bubbles slid along her back and his fingers followed, cupping her ass before tracing a path down the cleft. A quick inhale expanded her lungs and his arm circled her waist, bringing her back to him.

His teeth nipped her ear. “Don’t move. You wouldn’t want me to miss washing anywhere, would you?”

Livvy pressed her behind against him, cradling his rigid cock in the valley of her ass. The soap gave her motions a silken glide and he groaned against her skin. He massaged her breasts and her peaked nipples were rolled until they throbbed, pinched until they stung, stroked until her spine melted. He let one hand slip down her tummy, fingers combing through the damp triangle.

“Definitely don’t want to miss this part.”

John knew her body well, knew where she was most sensitive, what brought the most pleasure. Several lighter-than-air flickers over her clit had her panting. Sizzling sparks ignited in deep hidden

places and she began to ache. It was too much, too soon. She wanted him hungry—no, *starving*—for her.

Livvy shoved away from him and spun. There was no mercy in her kiss, just pure lust. The harder she took his mouth, the harder he grew. She swallowed his moan before it touched the humid air. Slick wet muscles pressed tight to her as hot water flowed over their bodies. One large hand fisted in her hair and he pulled her head back, exposing her throat to his kiss. She growled her pleasure.

She reached over his shoulder to the shower gel. “My turn.”

The cap popped under her thumb and she squeezed soap over one tight deltoid. She smoothed the pearly liquid across his arm and chest while his teeth captured her earlobe.

Lust made her bold and she followed his lead, diving her fingers into the back of his hair. A quick yank pulled his head back until she could lick up his neck.

“I said ‘my turn.’ Turn around, Murphy, so I can wash your back.”

He devoured her with his eyes, but he obeyed. Palms pressed on the tile, he looked over his shoulder, daring, urging her to touch him. She scored from his nape to his ass with her nails, leaving thin red lines in their trail. Shiny gel

dripped slowly along his shoulder as her wrist turned and traced a path back up. Like budding wings, his shoulder blades shuddered at her touch. She slicked the foam down every inch, around heaving ribs, into the dip of his spine, along the crest of his hips.

*He likes this, the aggression, the animalistic power.*

Drunk with that power, she ran her foot along the inside of his calf, down to his ankle, kicking it to widen his stance. His back stiffened until her fingers skimmed downward. She stroked over the curve of his ass to the backs of his legs. Along the insides of his corded thighs, his muscles twitched. Her tongue dipped along his spine. She cupped his ass then followed the soap's glide along his cleft.

His snarl echoed and he whipped around, grabbing for her. No kiss they'd shared had ever been deeper. Tiny bubbles spread down his body, coating hers where they met. He palmed her ass, hauling her tighter to him. Water streamed along her back, whisking away the froth, intensifying the graze of his hands. Livvy purred at his thick length pressed against her tummy.

Her hands dove between their bodies. She caressed the wide head before coiling her fingers around his shaft. His sudden intake of breath sang in her ear. She deliberately touched slower and lighter than she knew he liked. Rumbles deep in

his chest voiced his impatience. He thrust into her palm, wanting more. She shoved and he took a step back.

Broad-tongued, she skimmed up his jaw, the rasp of whiskers heightening her thirst and then dropped low, licking down his collarbone. Her teeth found a small flat nipple and bit. A shocked sound left his lips seconds before they sought and captured hers.

The tang of desire burst in her mouth as his tongue hunted hers. Not ready to relinquish power, Livvy thrust off his hands. She circled down his hip, across his cock and gripped his balls. His head snapped back in pleasure. Water drenched his hair and her name ripped from his lips. She tightened her hold, squeezing and stroking with both hands.

She miscalculated. His excitement was higher than she imagined. John took control. Smooth tile met her back as his body slammed into hers and held her flush to the wall. He framed her face in impatient hands, bruising her mouth with his. His fingers buried in her long wet curls and he tightened his grip, pulling until her head was angled back.

“You like that.” Rasping in raw hunger, he dared her to challenge him.

She couldn’t. She did like it, the almost force, being controlled by him in small gestures,

knowing she had driven him to this point. Her slight nod was met by a firm drive of his hips into hers. A shiver of need shot down her spine.

John took her mouth, nibbling her lips, her chin, her throat until she cried his name, wanting, needing more. His stubbled jaw scoured her skin. One leg shot between hers. John jerked her knee over his, opening her to his touch. Her hips bucked at the first stroke but he held her firm, fingers knotted in her hair, mouth at her throat. He glided over folds slick with feminine heat then drove deep, sinking into her. Her clit ached in glorious anguish against his hand. Wet curls brushed his palm and his touch sank deeper.

A violent tornado twisted in her muscles. She arched to him, tiles biting into her shoulders, her leg twining around his. A throbbing shifted to a tense tingle inside her.

“Let go, honey. Let it happen.”

She climaxed at his command. Her body convulsed in utter abandonment, cries of pleasure rebounding off wet walls. Her useless legs could not support her trembling and she clung to his shoulders.

John held her as her hazy eyes slowly refocused. Her first sight was of John smirking in triumph. *Now the fun begins.* Livvy filled her lungs with damp wet air scented with soap and sex. She laid her palms flat on his chest, pushed

him back and closed the distance in less than half a heartbeat.

“You’re entirely too cocky.”

“Partially right,” he laughed.

Water sluiced over her shoulders, splashing her skin, spraying him with fine droplets. Her hand skimmed down his body and Livvy whispered, “Forgive me.”

She reached behind her. In one motion, she popped the door latch, snapped the hot water off and bolted from the shower. Icy cold needles peppered her leg and the flow hit John straight in the groin.

John’s pained cry blasted the room. Her lips twisted in a sympathetic grimace when she heard him smack the faucet. Snagging a thick towel from the sink ledge, Livvy darted out of the bathroom. The shower door slammed open and he screamed her name, not in pleasure. She wrapped the towel around her dripping hair.

“What the hell was that?” He jerked a towel around his hips and stalked to her. “Christ, Livvy, that wasn’t fucking funny!”

Water dripped steadily from his hair, cascading down his neck and shoulders, dripping across a chest that heaved with frustration. She leaped to him, pressing her mouth to his. His lips were cold, the chill making them firm. Or maybe it was his anger.

"I'm sorry. I never expected things to get so...hot in there. I just wanted to tease you. But you touched me and..." She shrugged at him.

His jaw clenched tight. "Next time, say 'John, stop.' Do *not* do that again. I'm serious, Liv, it hurt."

Livvy rubbed his cold nose with hers. "I'm sorry. I promise I did have a reason."

"What possible reason could you have for trying to freeze my balls off?"

"So I could heat them up, of course." She took his hand and pulled him farther into the darkened bedroom.

"I'd rather you just left them warm to begin with."

A chair from his dining table sat at the base of his bed. Livvy felt his questioning eyes fall on her and averted her face. She'd never get through this if she looked in his face. She guided him to the caneback chair.

"Livvy, wha—?"

"Shh. Just sit."

He settled in the chair, brows drawn quizzically. A hot burn told her she was blushing but it didn't keep her from leaning into him. Her breasts swayed, the water on her skin cooling in the air conditioning, as she pulled the towel from her hair. She dropped the wet terrycloth at his feet



and took his hands, wrapping them around the chair arms.

“Livvy?”

“Promise me.” The catch in her voice made her close her eyes and when they opened, they connected with his.

“Promise what?”

“Promise me you won’t move. And you won’t talk.” She brought her lips to his ear. “And you won’t join in.”

His hand shot out to grasp her arm. “Won’t join what, Liv?”

She peeled his fingers from her skin and put them back on the chair arm. “I’m going to give you your fantasy.”

## Chapter Thirteen

John had to forcibly snap his mandible back in place. *Give me my fantasy?* Lust pounced like a starving panther as she crawled on his bed into a mound of pillows. They surrounded her shoulders and back, angling her body into a semi-reclined position directly in front of him. From above the swell of her breasts to the roots of her hair, a fiery blush stained her skin red.

A small smile softened his mouth. That she would try to do this for him was intensely erotic and incredibly sweet. John leaned on the chair arm, loose fist to his chin. Her eyes closed and her hands trembled. She'd given him more than one fantasy but he doubted she would be able to deliver this one. Livvy was too nervous. No, Livvy was too mortified. Her movements were hesitant and self-conscious. Sharing something so intimate and private went against her nature but that she tried meant everything to him. No woman had ever cared so much about pleasing him.

Then something changed. The stiffness went out of her limbs, the lines of her face eased and Livvy stopped trying to please him. She began pleasing herself. And John went hard.

That hair—that glorious ginger hair that teased and tempted him, begged him to run his fingers through it—fanned out on several pillows. Water had deepened the color until it nearly matched the small V above her thighs. He clutched the chair arms, his hands itching to grasp those wet locks.

A harsh swallow forced the ball of desire down past his galloping heart. He imagined her closed eyes were viewing some private film reel, living some secret fantasy of which he'd never know. She'd told him she'd thought of him the night they met. Was she thinking of him now? The thought of her imagining anyone else knotted his brows in jealousy. Livvy was his, damn it!

Her rounded nails scored down her breasts, and his mouth watered. Nipples the color of roses stood to her fingers' touch, pebbled beneath an invisible lover's mouth. He could feel them next to his tongue, knew the texture as they tightened. Around the bottom swell of her left breast—a breast that fit so firmly into his hand—she stroked, slowly, gently, before circling to do the same above. Her second hand repeated her motions on the other breast.

Her breath quickened, her pink tongue darting out to her full bottom lip. He echoed the move. Water dripped down his neck and back, chilled trickles highlighting the increased heat of his skin. The towel around his hips was damp and cool. It

should have been enough to stifle the growing pulse in his cock but it had little effect. The brush of the terrycloth was nearly painful. Had Livvy not shocked him with the freezing water, he'd have come already. Even now, his erection was full force, achy and heavy. Slouching, he spread his knees slightly, balls tightening in want.

One slow hand skimmed down her stomach before it dipped between her legs. John froze. She parted her thighs a fraction, not nearly a large enough fraction, Livvy teased the flesh around her sex. He mentally begged her to let her legs fall open a bit more.

This was not porn, not a staged, filmed, and artificial act. This was Livvy, a real live woman, his woman, in private, pleasing herself. If she were acting for him, surely she would want to move her leg and let him glimpse the full show. But he was just a voyeur into her actions, her intimate, personal actions. How humbling and exciting at the same moment.

A flush turned her skin to peach and the flavor flooded his mind. He craved peaches, the juicy flesh that filled his mouth with sugar. He wanted the peach of Livvy's skin beneath his tongue. She whimpered. The sound was an erotic shot straight to his groin. He jerked the towel aside and gripped his aching shaft. He pumped his fist, tasting her in memory.

The hand at her breast toyed with a stiffened nipple, pinching harder than John would have imagined but found fascinating. She continued to stroke just the outermost edge of cinnamon. Slow pulls along his shaft mimicked her touch. She lifted her chin as if in a kiss. Lush lips whispered something too low for him to hear and his heart pounded. Was she thinking of him? Dear God, he hoped so but would he ever know? Did he even want to know if it wasn't him?

Her tongue skated across her lips and her legs shifted. His stomach muscles clenched as the glossy folds peeked from behind her fingers. His hold tightened, gripping his cock more firmly, wishing it were her soft walls around him. One, then two, of her fingers slipped between slick layers and he had to bite his lips to contain his moan. Did she know how beautiful this was? Her breath shuddered as she found the hidden pearl he wanted.

God, he loved the sounds she made. Low and throaty, they hypnotized him with her mating call. He forced his hand away from his cock. He didn't want to come yet. He wanted to be with her when that happened. His hands shot to the towel and grasped the edge in a white-knuckled crush.

The booming of his heart rang in his ears as she moved those teasing fingers up and down, back and forth. He knew how hot her flesh would

be and his knuckles cracked with his fisted restraint. Short rough pants filled the air but he wasn't sure which of them they belonged to.

Finally, her knees fell open and her feet climbed higher on the sheet until she was spread before him. A tic formed over his brow and sweat beaded on his lip. He wanted her to hurry. He wanted her to slow. He wanted her. Pink and glistening, her flesh beckoned to him, openly tempted him.

With two lazy fingers, Livvy circled the bud he knew would be firm and tight. His tongue mimicked her move. Slicking the nub between those fingers, she moaned and his cock jumped. John clenched his teeth. She'd begged him to stay seated, stay silent and not join her. Keeping that promise was torture. Muscles stiffened over every inch of his body as he struggled not to give in to his need to possess her, to love her like no imaginary lover could.

One finger touched her clit, tapped it with a butterfly-light rhythm. His brow rose and he added the new trick to his memory of her. When her hips started rocking to her touch, a soft growl eked out before he could catch it. Faster now, her fingers slid over her wetness and he clamped his fists on the chair arms. She was driving him mad.

John had no idea how many orgasms he'd given Livvy. He'd felt them, tasted them, smelled

them, heard them. He'd never seen them, not from this viewpoint. The sight inflamed him like a gasoline-soaked cloth. Mouth open in silent scream, her lips exposed her sharp teeth. Her neck and back bowed. Her hips pressed into the mattress. Her heels bit into the sheet. Her toes curled. Her knees shook.

John's breath came in gasps as her fingers sank inside the tight passage he craved. The peak of her climax thrust her hips up toward her moving hand and the other fisted the sheet. That sound, that delicious, erotic sound of her orgasm, cried out. Hidden in its depth was a single word.

His name.

Like a too-taut rope touched by a razor blade, his body shivered with fractured control and a mindless growl.

John buried himself inside her before the last quiver faded.

Unexpected and hard, his penetration jolted her, thrilled her. Livvy clung to him as he plunged inside, rocking over her engorged nub. Lust tinged his kisses with a savory bite. Rough hands forced hers above her head and his hips crashed into hers. Primal instinct made her rise to meet his every thrust. Each powerful drive sent shockwaves of burning need through her.

This was her fantasy—John, hungry, self-restraint long gone, loving her with each punishing stroke. They pawed each other, scraped teeth on skin, growled and snarled, each wanting more. The violent raging appetite consumed them.

Livvy planted her heels and arched, needing him to fill the ache inside. John reared back, slammed his forearms under her legs and brought her splayed knees up, curving her hips into his deepest thrusts. Her screaming gasp was echoed by his grunted pleasure. Every stroke was fierce and not totally without pain but if he dared stop, she would go mad.

Far in the recesses of her body, an ancient drumbeat grew. It gripped her with an unruly power. Her body tightened around him and his spine jerked, his furious rhythm faltering. He buried himself deeper than ever inside her. Head thrown back, teeth clenched, he let loose a wordless cry. Wet heat filled her and a climax ripped from her soul with a ferocious quake. The primitive control exploded like a powder keg. She didn't have the breath to spare to cry out, to scream in abandon, to even whimper in delight. All she could do was soar.

Livvy had no idea how long they hung in the glow of descent. All she knew or cared about as she drifted back was she was in John's embrace.



He let her quivering legs fall and stroked her hair. When her eyes fluttered open, he filled her gaze.

“Uh, wow.”

“Yeah, wow... Livvy, you...oh God, what you did...if you knew... You amazed me, Livvy. That was...you were incredible.”

She knew why he'd looked so smug in the shower. Making someone lose control so completely made you feel invincible. But she would feel invincible later. Exhaustion had seeped into every quivering muscle and Livvy could barely find the strength to answer his gentle kiss with a tease. “Oh, you liked that, did you?”

“I loved it... I love you, Livvy.”

She frowned at him. “What?”

He brushed a soft kiss across her mouth. “I said I love you, Livvy.”

She pulled her mouth from his, staring to make sure she'd heard what she thought he'd said.

John fingered a long damp curl before looking at her. And then he smiled. “I do. I love you.”

Tears formed before she willed them away. A sob blended with a laugh and she kissed him. She lost count of how many times she said it as she kissed him, but each time he repeated it, imprinting it on her heart.

*Do it now.* John knew it was the right time. Livvy's body cradled his, her lips danced along

his mouth and he hated to move away. But this moment was worth it. One last kiss and he started to pull from her embrace. She whimpered and he froze. The trembling of his thighs reminded him of how hard he'd taken her and panic gripped him.

"Liv, oh God, did I hurt you?"

Her head was shaking before he finished. "No. Never. You loved me. Extremely well."

John pressed one more kiss to her lips before easing from her body. He lunged across the bed. The nightstand drawer handle slipped from his fingers on the first grab. He reached wider, outlining the words in his head. His fingers fell on the box...the condom box.

The box he hadn't touched before sinking inside Livvy.

Anything he'd planned to say got erased by a serpent's hiss and replaced with one chanted curse.

*Oh shit.*

Livvy waited for John to return, as he always did. He didn't move. Stretched out on his stomach, propped on one arm, he was barely breathing.

"Murphy?"

The long line of his back twitched when her hand landed on his side. Her nails had left their mark, dozens of short red lines stood out. God, she loved the feel of him. Her fingers slid down

over his ass and he pulled himself away, swinging his feet off the bed. “Liv...”

Something ominous in his voice rippled her calm. Deep in her belly, a scared tremor grew and she reached for the sheet. Whatever was wrong, she did not want to discuss it naked. She didn’t want to discuss anything, period. She wanted him to crawl back in her arms and cling tight to the moment.

Elbows on his thighs, forehead in his hands, he drew a huge noisy breath. “I didn’t use anything. I got so... Damn, Livvy, you made me crazy. I never even thought about a condom.”

She sighed. She’d thought something terrible had happened. In the grand scheme of life, this was a blip. They messed up. Not smart but not horrific either. Rolling to her side, she reached out to him and he didn’t shy away. “It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not.” He turned and crawled under the sheet with her. He folded one arm under his head and reached for her hand. It might not have been the traditional position of lovers after making love, but Livvy cherished these moments. In the sleepy afterglow, they would talk face to face, about private things, tender things.

The lines deepened around his mouth as his jaw shuffled. She laid her hand against his beard shadow. Tension vibrated through his body like a tuning fork struck against stone.

“Talk. What’s going through your head?”

He removed her hand from his cheek but held it. “You’re not using any birth control, are you?”

“No. I’m allergic to most of the pills. You said you’d tak—”

“I screwed up.” Anger clipped his words and Livvy drew her hand away. He let her and would not meet her eyes. Her unease strengthened.

*This is really freaking him out.* Rolling to her back, she stared up at the ceiling. *Why does it feel like things are slipping through my fingers?* His hand slid across her stomach and she pushed the doubts away. He’d just told her he loved her. Things would be fine.

“Livvy, tell me this is a safe time.” From her stomach, his hand moved lower, below her belly button, above her pubic bone. And there it stopped. His meaning was obvious. “Livvy?”

Eyes closed, she swallowed. “Do you want me to lie to you, Murphy? I think so, but I don’t know for sure. I’ve never been exactly regular. It could be fine or it could not be.”

Blowing out a harsh exhale, he rolled to his back and covered his eyes with one arm. She laid her head on his chest. His arm circled around her but something was missing. It wasn’t the normal warmth she’d come to know, and beneath her cheek his heart raced. An ache formed in her chest.

Cautiously, Livvy traced a circle through the thinning line of dark hair on his stomach. “Look, everything is probably fine. Stop worrying. We can—”

“Can you take that Plan B stuff?” His gruff interruption halted her finger. *He is so not handling this well.*

“I’m allergic, Murphy. No, I can’t.”

“So we just wait and pray?”

The incredulous volume in his tone shot steel into her spine. This wasn’t her fault. He wasn’t some horny teenager facing telling his parents he’d knocked up the prom queen. They were mature adults who had not two minutes ago professed their love. His attitude hurt her, made her feel tainted rather than loved.

“I can’t change the laws of human biology for you. What’s done is done.” Pulling the sheet tighter to her breasts, she rolled to her side, away from him. He didn’t move.

For long moments, Livvy listened to him breathe. The creak of the mattress let her know he was moving but she didn’t know she’d been holding her breath until his arm crept around her waist. Like spoons in a cutlery drawer, his body molded into hers. His mouth pressed to her damp hair in a gentle kiss. Her back relaxed into him.

“I don’t want kids, Livvy...ever.”

When dreams shatter, they make a sound. Livvy's sounded like a deep baritone whisper. From the time she was a little girl playing house, her vision of the future included a mommy, a daddy and babies. Andrea teased her about wanting to be a soccer mom but it was the truth. Hearing that the man she loved wanted no part of that scenario stung like a whip.

John was so good with his nephews. How could he not want children of his own? The room shrank four sizes and the bed grew three times smaller. She felt closed in, confined, trapped in his embrace. John must have felt her stiffen because his hand moved from her waist to rub her arm.

Lying naked in his bed, legs shaky, pressed tight to him, she felt alone. No, she felt abandoned. A hole formed in her stomach, sucking every emotion into a hard pit. The pit grew heavier until it was a physical pain. It was almost a relief when he turned away from her.

"I'm going to go write a while."

Her eyes pinched closed. She couldn't watch him walk away. There was the swish of cotton as he pulled on shorts and the flick of the lamp before the light died. Livvy's heart beat it by one minute.

He'd made her cry.

Back against the hallway wall, John sat in the shadows. Darkness surrounded him inside and out. His hands fisted on his bent knees as he listened to Livvy weep. Fear slithered through his veins. Somewhere in the night, hope laughed its maniacal head off. A chorus of monsters joined in until he was nearly deaf to anything but the hiss of evil laughter and heartbroken tears.

He'd dared to dream. And made her cry.

An ache twisted in his chest, stuttering his breath. What was he thinking, buying a ring? Livvy could never be his, not that way. Somewhere along the line, he'd gotten lost and forgotten who she was, what she was. She was a good girl. First came love, then came marriage, then came Livvy with a baby carriage.

The first, he acknowledged bitterly, he managed without much effort. How could he not love her? The second, being legally bound to Livvy, would have been no hardship. He'd made that mental leap already. Having her for every day of every year for the rest of his life would have made him the happiest man alive. But never could he handle the last.

*Children. A child with an angel.*

*A child to inherit a curse.*

The idea of children had skimmed his mind but he'd shoved it away. Kids weren't required just because you got married. He didn't want them and

Livvy'd never talked about a baby. Didn't women in love talk about wanting kids if they planned to have them one day? Gina had talked nonstop about babies from the minute she and Pete got serious. Livvy'd never said a word but her silence, her stiffness in his arms, told him a different story. Terror clogged his throat.

Livvy wanted a baby.

He couldn't risk that.

Sweat dripped into his eyes and he didn't bother to wipe it away. Flashes of his mom in her last days ripped through him with a screaming pain. He'd killed her just by being born. Giving Livvy his baby could be her death sentence. His body shook so hard his teeth chattered. *God, please, no. Not my angel. Please let her be okay.*

And what if he turned out like Alan, became the fucking monster that he hated? Fear gnawed a hole into his belly. When a younger PJ had spilled milk on his laptop and fried it halfway through the second book, he'd yelled at PJ, made him cry. He'd left the house shaking with suppressed emotion.

What could he do to his own kid if he lost it and... It could only take one hit and... *Oh God...* Having any child look at him with terror in their eyes would destroy him. That would never happen, he wouldn't let it.



Years ago, he'd considered taking surgical steps to prevent ever becoming a father. But the idea of someone coming near his crotch with a scalpel had scared him to death. Now he wished he had. Just the whisper-thin chance Livvy was already carrying his baby made him break out in a sweat. Nausea surged from his stomach. He couldn't handle this.

Not since he was a stupid kid had he had sex without latex, not once. Before his arrest, it had been inexperience and immaturity that made his safety hit or miss. During lockup, he was too busy keeping his ass to the wall during shower time to worry about women. But he knew better once he was released. Until tonight. With Livvy.

She had been so beautiful, felt so perfect that even now, smelling her scent on his skin, his body craved hers. They fit so flawlessly together, all wet warmth and pulsing exhilaration. The closest thing to heaven he would ever know was making love to Livvy with nothing between them but skin. But heaven came with a price. The most intense sexual experience of his life just cost him too high a penalty. Her.

He'd finally told her he loved her. He regretted those words more as each second ticked by. It was just another regret to add to the pile he had concerning Livvy. Why hadn't he walked away before her heart got involved? When she

whispered her second secret in the dark, he should have bolted like a scalded dog. But he hadn't and now it was too late.

He had to escape. Quietly as he could, he slinked back in his room and got dressed. The keys rattled as he lifted them from the dresser and he froze, watching the bed. Livvy didn't stir. Still on her side, the moonlight barely brushed her face. But the dim light illuminated the tracks left by her tears. Tears he had caused because he couldn't be what she needed.

Weak and hating himself for it, he bent down and brushed his lips across her cheek, tasting salt mixed with sugar. The flavor lingered as his truck sped into the night.

## Chapter Fourteen

The beeping alarm yanked Livvy from her restless sleep. She rolled to John's side and smacked the clock until it shut up. She was scowling before she even opened her eyes. He hadn't come to bed again last night. No click-clack of computer keys greeted her and the house was oddly hushed.

Livvy tugged a tee shirt over her head and tiptoed to the study. John was not asleep at his desk. He wasn't sprawled on the couch. There was no note saying he'd run out for coffee. His driveway was empty. Livvy stood staring at that empty patch of gravel and fought a shiver.

Her mind raced with worry as she darted across the lawn and into the back of her house. Andrea sat on the couch eating frozen pizza, her scrub top wrinkled and her eyes heavy.

"Morning," she called without turning her face from the TV.

"Hey." Livvy poured herself a cup of coffee. "Are you eating pizza for breakfast? What happened to your diet?"

"This is my dinner and screw it, I'm starving. I might even have another slice."

"What time did you get home?"

“About three. I had to work a split shift. We’re short-handed since Katie’s on vacation.”

“Did you notice if Murphy’s truck was in the drive when you came in?”

“Mmm, not that I recall but I didn’t look. Why?”

“Just wondered. He was gone when I woke up.”

“Meh.” Andrea yawned and stretched. “He probably had cabin fever. I swear he leaves his house less often than many shut-ins do. I’d go nuts if I couldn’t get out every day.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m going to hit the shower.”

Under a scalding spray, Livvy picked and prodded at every place John had mentioned going since he moved in. There weren’t that many places he might go. A sudden thought slowed the washcloth’s trek up her arm. Could Gina have taken a turn for the worse? She could completely see John darting out the door in that case. Leaving a note would be the last thing on his mind. She hadn’t heard the phone ring but with only the single extension in the kitchen, she might have slept through it.

She rinsed the shampoo from her hair and discounted that thought. No, John would have woken her up if something that traumatic had occurred. She was back to square one. As immature as it sounded, it fit. John had bolted

because he was afraid. It didn't take a mind reader to understand last night's mistake had changed things. She'd expected a tense conversation or four, a walking-on-eggshell wait until nature took its course. She'd never expected him to bail.

She called his cell before she got dressed. Straight to voicemail. Feeling like a love-struck teenager, Livvy called information and was informed there was no public listing for anyone named Salvatori except for a Salvatori Construction. She was connected in less than a minute. A nasally female put her through.

"Hi, Pete? It's Livvy Andrews. Sorry, I didn't know your home number."

"Livvy? Hi. Is everything all right?"

The guarded tone made her eyes close. "That's what I was wondering. Uh, Murphy isn't with Gina by any chance, is he?"

"No, she's playing Homeroom Mom today at kindergarten. Livvy, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just..." She swallowed. "I can't find Murphy."

"Did something happen? Did you guys have a fight?"

"Not really." This was stupid. She never should have called. "I'm sure it's nothing and he'll turn up soon. Sorry to bother you at work."

"It's okay. Look, I don't want to get into the middle of anything but..." A low sound made her

think he sat down heavily, as if his load was suddenly too heavy to carry any more. "No one knows more than me. Loving those two isn't always easy, all right? Sometimes, it's hard as hell. They're both stubborn and strong and...hurt, down where you can't see it. But I promise they're both worth it. If you ever need an ear or a shoulder to cry on, anything, you can call me any time."

"Thanks, Pete." Livvy hurried off the phone. She gulped another cup of coffee and drove to the Shack. Her gaze darted down every side street, over every parking lot, looking for the oversized red truck. Nothing.

Why was John so scared? No, neither one of them was ready to be parents but his reaction was extreme. What was going through his head? Something was missing, something she didn't understand, something that no army-green folder could explain. Part of her wanted to call Pete back and pour out the whole story, to beg him for insights. But she could never do that to John. He kept his secrets too closely guarded. Pete probably knew more but that knowledge was private, personal and not for sharing.

Lipstick she had carefully applied a half hour ago was chewed off before she pulled into the Sugar Shack's lot. She sat outside the building and stared at the white painted cinderblock.

Outlined for the day were three baked-goods trays for the local college alumni meeting, a fiftieth anniversary cake and twelve dozen pumpernickel rolls for a nearby restaurant. She also had to start the cakes for Friday's pickups and deliveries. Added to the normal bakery needs, it was a full schedule.

Her mind should be full of all those details that brought in income. The only thought she could muster was how much she loved him and how desperately she needed to hear his voice.

"Where are you, Murphy?"

The coffee in his cardboard cup had long ago cooled and was now bitter but he sipped it anyway. Why he'd driven half the night to come back to this place he didn't know. When he pulled in the lot before daybreak, a stray dog had run off but there were no other signs of life.

He must have dozed. One minute, the church stood like a black shadow, the next, it was bathed in soft morning light. Now an orange cat lay on the steps, lazily cleaning its face. He pulled his eyes from the cat to the building behind it.

It didn't look like much. Just a small brick church with a gravel parking lot, clapboard parsonage situated behind it. Parked at the far edge of the lot, John could tell the house had been recently repainted a blistering white. It shone like

alabaster in the early morning sun, making him squint.

The flowerbeds had been taken out and replaced with river rock and birdbaths. Shutters that had once been green now sported a deep red sheen. Without looking, he knew the back porch would have been repaired. The third step had always sagged and, of course, the door window had been busted out. He'd done that his last night here.

Morning dew was sucked into the growing heat and John stared. He stared so hard the voice at the window made him jump.

"Good morning."

Her gray hair wrapped in a messy bun atop her head, the plump woman screamed *grandmother*. Her silver glasses hung on a chain around her neck and John was quite sure her teeth could have done the same. "I've been watching you out here a few hours now. At first, I thought you were waiting for someone, but I guess not. Would you like to come in?"

His tired eyes shot back to the quiet building. He had not set foot inside a church since his arrest. Gina and Pete had had an outdoor wedding so he'd been spared the trip then, and he'd not bothered to attend his nephews' baptisms. John and churches did not mix well. Did he want to go inside this particular church now?



“Yeah.” He yanked the keys from the ignition and followed the woman to the wide double white doors. He didn’t get far inside. Just within the foyer, before the actual sanctuary, his feet locked on the floor.

The carpet was new. Yards of camel stretched where once dull red had lain. Gleaming with polish, the pews looked the same, as did the altar. Not even the high windows in frosted colored glass had changed. But he noticed these things almost subconsciously. His eyes were trained on the third row back from the pulpit, center aisle, on the floor. His spot.

“Are you looking for a new church to attend?”

The woman’s voice buzzed like a fly, hovering just above his thoughts and his reply was terse. “No.”

“All right. I’m Emily Standish, the pastor here. What’s your name?”

“John.”

“Hello, John.”

He could feel her eyes boring into him and knew he probably looked like trouble. He hadn’t shaved since yesterday, and sweat rolled down his back despite the stale but cool air in the room. Every muscle in his body was shrieking with tension and he tried to move his gaze from that invisible spot. The whistle of swinging wood

came from the past. Demons screamed his unworthiness in a never-ceasing voice.

*"Louder, John."* Whack!

*"And I will not have mercy upon her children; for they be the children of whoredoms."*

*"I said louder. Hands out!"* Whack!

*"For their mother has played the harlot: she that conceived them has done shamefully—"*  
Whack!

The slight touch on his arm made him flinch and his face snapped to the older woman. She radiated concern but at this minute he didn't care. She didn't withdraw her hand. Instead, she cupped his elbow and tried to lead him inside.

"Would you like to sit? Maybe I can help."

Ashamed to admit he wasn't sure how much longer his weak legs could hold him, he allowed her to lead him to the very last pew. His knees would not bend and his eyes would not leave that damn empty spot.

Before he knew it, he was standing directly over it. Body trembling, he raised his face to the pulpit, half expecting to see his demon standing there. It stood silent and empty but words rang in his ears.

"Cursed be the day on which I was born. The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, 'A child is born to you, a son,'"

making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb for ever great. Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?”

He wasn't aware he'd spoken aloud until the last word fell from his lips.

“Jeremiah twenty, verses fourteen through eighteen, I believe.” The pastor's soothing voice pulled him from the memory.

“John, age eleven through sixteen.”

Silence, not wholly uncomfortable, seeped into the room and he stared unseeingly at the empty church. It didn't seem as dark a place as he remembered it being. The walls were the muted eggshell they had always been, and the piano still sat on the left side of the choir loft. Red hymnals and Bibles dotted each pew, and tall candles graced each side of the altar. It was quiet. Maybe peaceful to some, never to him. But no demons screamed here anymore. They had long since left this place and moved to his head.

“You're Pastor Warner's son.”

The soft statement spiked his anger. “No. He married my mother but I was never his son.”

"I remember reading the newspaper accounts. Why are you here, John? What are you looking for?"

He had no answer. What was he looking for? What had brought him back to this place after all these years? More confused than before, he turned and faced her. There was no condemnation in her eyes, no fear. She patted the pew seat and he joined her without thought.

Pastor Standish angled her portly frame and leaned back, fiddling with her glasses. "Are you looking for forgiveness?"

John snorted. "Pastor, if you think I'm here because I'm sorry the son of a bitch died, you're wrong. At the time, it was me or him and I'm too selfish not to have picked me."

"But you came *here* for a reason. Any church would have done if you were simply looking for absolution. Tell me how I can help you."

He focused on the crucifix on the far wall. "I don't know. I hardly remember driving here."

"What were you thinking before you got in your truck?"

Hands steepled to his lips, John leaned his elbows on his knees and tried to find the words. Giving voice to his greatest fears was never easy, and he found his tongue oddly tied by her question even though his mind was racing.

*I was thinking that I made an angel cry out of my own pathetic fear. That I need someone to tell me I'm wrong, that my soul isn't as damned as Alan said. That even if it is, it won't tarnish Livvy just because I love her. Tell me I picked the right side of the fence. Tell me he was wrong and I'm not a danger to anyone who loves me. Tell me I won't become a monster to my own child.*

Pastor Standish waited but no words came. Her hand fell on his shoulder and he couldn't harness the strength to shrug it off. He didn't know why he couldn't force his tongue to move. Maybe the secret was buried too deep to be exhumed, maybe he was too ashamed to admit he even contemplated believing Alan, or maybe he just didn't want to hear the answers for fear they would confirm the worst.

Too much had crashed down on him in too short a time, and his mind struggled to adapt. Added to the normal stresses of an advancing career, buying a house and moving, he'd met an angel, then fallen in love with an intensity that defied description. Before, whenever anyone got close, he'd never had to think about pushing them away, he just did it. It was second nature. But one glimpse into Livvy's eyes and he was powerless.

Powerless. That was the word he was looking for. He was powerless in his life for the first time since becoming an adult. Once control slipped, it

gathered speed and raced from him like a quarter horse. The harder he tried to grasp onto the reins, the farther away it got until once more he felt like that crying child kneeling on a broomstick, waiting for the pain to hit.

Powerless. He couldn't prevent what was happening to Gina and her fear ate at him. He'd promised to take care of her. Even with Pete in her life, he'd always bear that responsibility. She'd entrusted him with her son and he let Tyler get hurt. His storybook monsters were floundering on some unknown path and someone else wanted to bring his tales to life.

And Livvy. His eyes closed in pain. Livvy was the best and worst thing that had ever happened to him. A man could be content with bread alone if he'd never tasted anything else. But one taste of sugar and John knew he'd never know such sweetness again.

What was she doing now? She was probably at work. He squeezed his eyes tighter. He knew her. She'd be worrying about him, wondering why he'd left without a word. She'd already called his cell but he hadn't answered. Even now, he was hurting her.

There was no doubt in his heart Livvy loved him. And that was what would ultimately hurt her, *how* he would hurt her. As he'd known all along, he could not be what she deserved. That he'd

prolonged the heartache for a taste of heaven was his shame. God forbid there might even be another soul involved now.

He gazed at the painted crucifix. "Take the pain of others to redeem your soul" had been pounded into his head and body with every hurt. He'd given that notion up years ago. There was no redemption for him. But he could protect Livvy. It meant inflicting some heartache. For each lash that fell on her, he knew he'd feel it ten times harder.

"I have to go." His abrupt jump to his feet startled the minister and she hurried to follow him to the door.

"John, wait."

Only manners stopped his feet. Pulling a red ink pen from her blouse pocket, Pastor Standish scribbled on a small square of blank paper from a table holding programs and pamphlets. She handed it to him with a tight squeeze to his fingers.

"I don't know what you're looking for but I want to help if I can. If you ever want to talk, call me. My door is always open to you, anytime."

Tight-lipped, John nodded, shoved the paper in his pocket and walked away.

He needed the practice.

*Answer, damn it.* Livvy snapped the cell closed and frowned. *Where are you, Murphy? What's going on in your head?*

Dialing the house phone once more and hearing his voice mail, she growled. She'd left a message on each line and texted him twice. He either hadn't checked or had no intention of calling her back. The pit in her stomach yawned louder.

She sank into her desk chair and winced. Last night had left her tender but she cherished each ache. Boundaries had been crossed that had nothing to do with their bodies. John had told her he loved her. Now he was going to bolt.

Even if Gina hadn't warned her, she knew John. He'd even told her when things got rough in other relationships, he bailed. Well, she wasn't about to let him bail on her. She wasn't willing to walk away because he was afraid, and she couldn't let him walk away. His strength amazed her but he had yet to see how strong she could be.

Love meant standing by someone when they feared or hurt. He could yell, bang around, say cruel things if he wanted. It didn't matter. She was sticking to him like white on rice. John was just going to have to get used to the idea. She was standing by his side whether he liked it or not.

"It's ready."



Andros held up the small glass flute. The sparkling amber liquid inside made Jondi's heart pound in anticipation. It pounded so loudly he missed the sadness in the wizard's voice.

"Let's give it to them, then. How long will it take to work? Will they be better by sunrise?"

"Jondi." Andros laid his huge hand on his shoulder and squeezed. Tears filled huge black eyes. "There wasn't enough."

"Enough what?"

"The houndspaw. It only blooms one day a year. Last spring, I picked all I could find. It wasn't enough for two doses."

Jondi stared in terrorized understanding but his head shook fiercely. "No, you said this was the last chance to save them."

"It is." Andros stepped to the window and filled his lungs with the fading afternoon wind. "It's the last chance for one of them. You have to choose, Jondi. Who gets the potion?"

"But I can't pick one. If only one of them gets the medicine then the other—"

"—will die, yes, I know." Low and soft, Andros's voice held firm awesome power. "You have to pick which one lives and which one dies, Jondi. Bound by white

magic, I cannot knowingly choose death for a living creature. But I can honor your choice. You must decide. Who gets the medicine?"

"I can't pick one. Thorn is part of my soul and Vory—Andros, Vory has my heart. How can I choose? Can't you give each half the dose and keep searching for—?"

"No, Jondi. It's not strong enough to divide. Not against Nordrake's evil. Painful as the choice is, if you don't make it, they both will die."

Shaking with fear and pain, Jondi dropped to his knees by the roaring fire. How could he pick? Thorn lived in his every heartbeat, they were closer than any two creatures ever were before. Finding Vory had been like discovering a hidden treasure, priceless and life-changing. But could he watch them both die if he did nothing?

Shadows fell and the fire dimmed. Battling within himself, he stared at the glow until there was nothing left but embers smoldering on the hearth. Andros never moved, staring out the window, awaiting the word.

It came in a hushed wounded whisper, torn from the depths of pain never before felt by a living being.

“Thorn.” A sob caught and Jondi swallowed it with a gulp. “Thorn lives. Vory dies.”

John’s finger hovered over the save option before yanking away. Sparkling on a bed of cream velvet, the engagement ring he’d bought Livvy demanded attention. It sat beside the keyboard, tempting him away from the bitter prose. Like Jondi, he was battling the choice. His cell vibrated with a loud buzz. He ignored it. He had no words for Livvy yet.

He wasn’t stupid. Nor was he blind. He knew exactly what his written words symbolized, what his monsters had been trying to tell him. An angel and a demon soul don’t mix. He didn’t like to hear it but that didn’t make it any less true.

Eyes blurred with his decision, he clicked save forcefully and snapped the jewelry box closed. The clack was his prison door slamming shut. The blue box dropped into his right-hand drawer and he bowed his head over shaking fists.

“I’m sorry, Liv. I picked the wrong side.” A quiet whisper, no one heard his words but a small blue monster who wept inside him.

The absolute silence in the house carried a sense of foreboding and Livvy fought off an internal chill as she stepped inside. John's truck sat outside but she didn't hear him. In fact, he was so still, she almost walked by him. Seated on the couch, elbows on his knees, he didn't speak or turn as she moved closer. The ottoman sat just before him and she lowered herself to the cushioned seat, searching his face.

He looked like hell. His clean jaw and damp hair from a recent shower did nothing to hide his exhaustion. Red rimmed his eyes, making the blue almost eerily clear and the black lashes stark and harsh. Haunted shadows vied with pale cheeks, and the grooves around his eyes screamed of no sleep. Even leaning forward, his back was so stiff he looked starched, and his fisted knuckles went from white to red as he clenched and unclenched them.

"We need to talk." Calm and clear, her voice surprised her. But then she'd been preparing for this battle all day and had scripted several scenarios in her head. John nodded but never raised his eyes to hers.

"Yeah, I guess we do." His words husked like sandpaper on a rough board. His indrawn breath made his shirt rise but he didn't speak.

She chose her words with great care. "I know you're scared. And I understa—"

“This isn’t working anymore, Liv.” He cut into her words with knife-like precision.

“What’s not working, Murphy?”

“This. Us. Last night just brought home some major differences between us. And I think it’d be best if we just walked away now.”

Livvy smiled sadly. She’d predicted his words almost to the letter but they made her heart stutter. She tried to take his hand but he pulled away from her. “There are some issues, I agree. But we can work through those.”

His shaking head halted her. “No, we can’t. I don’t want to. We agreed this would last as long as we were both enjoying it, and I’m not anymore. It’s over.”

Even though she’d expected something similar, his words hurt. But she was ready to defend what her heart knew to be true. Gina’s words rang in her ears. *Love him hard, love him harder, stick like glue.* John was about to see how hard she could love him and how sticky she could be. He was worth it.

*John Murphy, meet your match.*

“You enjoyed it enough last night.”

His eyes shot to hers. The coldness there shocked her but looking deeper, she could see his pain. It gave her strength. Pain meant he cared.

“Yeah, I didn’t hear many complaints from you, either. But it doesn’t matter. It’s just not working out. Let it go.”

Cocking one eyebrow, she fixed him with what she hoped was her haughtiest look. “You know, I hate when you say ‘Let it go.’ That means ‘Back off Livvy, I’m slinking into asshole mode and don’t want to talk about it.’”

She knew her tone would infuriate him, push him to the limit, like poking a wounded bear. She wanted that. Once he got rid of all the warring emotions, then he could think clearly.

John leaned back and fixed her with an angry stare. “Good, you get the idea then. Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Liv.”

“Oh no, you don’t get off easy. I’m not walking away from you, and you’re not walking from me either. Not like this. Not after what you said to me. I love you. You told me you loved me. And I knew before you ever said it. Don’t try backpedaling now.”

Cruelty glinted in his eyes and he gritted his teeth. A strange satisfied feeling filled her stomach. Gina knew him well. So did she. She could handle this. This was one fight he would not win. And together they would celebrate victory.

“Don’t read too much into it. I hate to bust your bubble but you aren’t the first woman I’ve told that to just to get in their pants.”

“Hate to bust your bubble, Murphy, but you were already in my pants when you said it. And I don’t believe you for a minute. Nice try though. A for effort. Now, want to talk about the real reason you’re trying to dump me?”

Bolting to his feet, he stalked past her. “Pick an excuse, whichever you want as long as you’re dumped. Just make sure you shut the door when you get out.”

He disappeared down the hall and Livvy cupped her neck in both hands. Letting him cool down was pointless, he’d already spent nearly a full day running scared. She slapped her hands on her knees and followed him. Loving John Murphy was easy except when it was hard to love John Murphy. But either way, she did.

Throwing clothes in a travel bag, he barely looked at her when she walked into his bedroom. She watched him move with catlike controlled grace, all sleek lines and menacing power. He made her blood sing.

“Running away from home?”

“I told you I had to go to New York.”

“I thought that was next week.”

“I moved the meeting up. I leave in the morning.”

She leaned on the wall beside his dresser. He couldn’t stay still, his body trembling with too many emotions, and it heartened her. “Pack away,

run all you want, Murphy. I'll be here when you get back, loving you, waiting to talk."

A pair of jeans smacked the bag with a loud *thwap*. "You're going to be a real bitch about this, aren't you?"

"If that's what it takes. I love you. Angry, grumpy, laughing or sad, I love you completely. I'm not willing to let you break us up because you're afraid of what might be."

"What 'might be' is your problem, not mine. Get out, Liv."

Livvy smiled though her heart cringed. "That's at least one lie, one cruel remark and a handful of dismissals. And yet, I'm still here. Let me know when you're finished your tantrum so we can really talk."

That pushed his buttons. He slammed a drawer shut beside her hip, anger pouring off him in waves. White lines formed around his mouth and his dark brows sliced into his face. Part of her heart ached with his misery. The other half urged her to stay strong.

He turned his back to her, his voice calm and stony. "Livvy, please leave. I don't want you here. I don't want you, period, all right? If you want me to be cruel, I can, but I'd really rather not. I thought things would be different, but they aren't and now I just want out."



He was so busy shoving her away he was ignoring the issues. He continued to pack odds and ends and she racked her brain, trying to find the key to unlock his mind to make him talk to her. It always came back to one place. Resolution fell on her like a fog, heavy and pressing but unable to be ignored.

“What did he say to you, Murphy?”

“Who?”

“Alan.”

His shoulders snapped back as if she’d struck him, and he whipped his head to her.

“What did he say that makes you push people away?”

If it were possible for frost to travel in a look, his eyes managed the feat. Her stomach quivered with his chilled rage but she refused to look away. The key worked even if the lock was rusty.

“Not a damn thing,” John spat. “This is just me, wanting to get away from you. Stop trying to make this something it isn’t. He has nothing to do with this.”

Livvy nearly cringed. She might have missed the trembling of his hands before he tucked them into his pockets had she closed her eyes. She’d not only touched a nerve, she’d twanged it like a banjo. “He has everything to do with *this*. *This* happens to be very important to me. *You’re*

important to me. He messed with your head and it's affecting our relationship."

"Are you deaf? We have no relationship! It's over!" His lips peeled back over his teeth and his snarl was hurled with pure exasperation.

She flashed on when they met and the danger she'd sensed in him. A bitter ache rose from her stomach. Her lover stared at her like an enemy. She'd be lying if she didn't admit her knees shook in fear. But her love was stronger than her fright. "And again, I'm still here. I'm not leaving you, Murphy. Not based on some twisted message your stepfather brainwashed you with."

He yanked the zipper on his travel bag. "You don't know a damn thing about it, so just shut up."

Swallowing a lump the size of his fist, Livvy shook her head. He left her no choice. "Seven broken fingers, left arm broken twice, an unreported skull fracture, severely bruised kidney and spleen from a mysteriously never reported car accident—"

He whirled to her with a mixture of horror, fear and contempt etched on his face. "Stop it."

But she couldn't. "—at least six broken ribs, two treated second-degree burns, hairline fracture of the left orbital socket, dislocated patella, bruised collar bo—"

"Shut up!" His enraged whisper hissed like a cornered snake and he charged toward her.

“—a total of one hundred and fifty-four stitches, too many bruises to count, minor cuts and abrasio—”

“Shut up, you bitch!”

His palms smacked the wall on either side of her head with a thunderclap. She jumped, eyes crashing shut. Drywall vibrated behind her from the force of his hands. Violence radiated off his frame, and the sides of her throat collapsed, sticking together, preventing her lungs from working.

*Trapped!*

With massive arms on either side of her head and his broad chest in front of her face, the simple fact that he had killed before flashed in sudden vivid color. For the first time, she was afraid of John.

His stuttered breath scorched her cheek. Barely contained fury wracked his body and his mouth descended to her ear. His menacing voice petrified her.

“You missed a ruptured ear drum, a dislocated jaw, a broken nose and welts the size of garden hoses. Where the fuck did you find all that out?”

John was a big man, hard-muscled and furious. Neatly pinned to the wall without touching him, her body tensed for flight out of instinct, her hands sliding along the wall behind her. But he

wouldn't hurt her. Livvy knew this deep in her bones. If he'd wanted to, he already would have.

She raised her chin. The inhale she drew dried her mouth and she forced her limbs to slow their shaking. "Does it matter? I know and that's enough. And I know some of the things he said to you, some of the terrible, evil things you had to listen to growing up. But what was it that scared you so badly? Why do you push people away? Why won't you let yourself be loved?"

His bowed head nearly brushed her cheek. With a heaving shudder, his fury abated to distress. His muscles relaxed although he didn't move away. Tentatively, she pulled her hand from the wall and touched his cheek. His eyes were closed, jaw locked tight, but he didn't jerk away. Livvy grew brave. She turned her head to him. The crackle in her words was a plea.

"Please, Murphy, tell me what he said that haunts you."

In slow, jerky increments, his hands slid down the walls and cupped her shoulders. They circled her neck. He stroked his thumbs along her throat, up and down, never moving his head from her ear. His whisper was nearly too soft to hear. "Do you know about that night?"

*That night.* As if there was only one night ever in history. "I know you had no choice. I know that

you spent two days in the hospital afterward. I know bits and pieces.”

Along her windpipe, into the hollow above her collarbone, up to her jaw, his thumbs caressed her like a rhythmic massage.

“He locked me out. Curfew was nine and I was late. Five fucking minutes late or it wouldn’t have happened. I’d have been there to protect her. Instead, I had to smash the door in.

“I came in and Gina ran. That’s all I cared about, that she was safe. He threw the tea kettle. I jerked my arm up to guard my face and that’s when he hit. The broomstick was never far out of reach but this time I wasn’t backing down. If he went for her once, he’d do it again. I had to stop him.”

The muscles of his biceps were solid under her fingers. Her quaking fingers traced over his shoulders to the nape of his neck, soothing as much as he would allow. She pressed her cheek to his. He didn’t move away, and her first full tear fell.

*Let the hurt go. Let me share your pain. Let me share your healing. Let me love you.*

“I don’t remember when I lost my glasses. I just knew that I couldn’t see. But I didn’t care. No way were we both walking out of that room. Then the broomstick broke. My back was finally stronger than the wood. He had to face me without

stepping out of reach. I got him down and wrapped my hands around his throat. The son of a bitch laughed at me. My blood was dripping on his face and he *laughed*. Do you know what he said?"

"Tell me."

So close that her lips felt his swallow, she begged for his secret. John pulled his head to the right, just enough to graze his nose against hers. Their eyes closed and they breathed as one, exchanging tear-salted air. His lips almost touched hers. His whisper caressed her in place of flesh.

"He said he saw a demon in my soul. I'd heard it for years but at that minute, I believed it. Because I felt it—the rage, the anger, the hate. Then he smiled and dared me to condemn myself to hell. Do you know what I did, Livvy? Do you know what I did to curse my eternal soul?"

She shook her head. He gave her one feather-soft kiss, then he opened his eyes. The air pinched from her lungs.

John tightened his grip around her neck. His thumbs pressed to her windpipe and his lips curled back in a feral sneer. Fear exploded like a cannon. Livvy's hands flew to his forearms, nails scratching, as her eyes widened in fear.

He hissed into her face. "I snapped his fucking neck!"

His last word echoed as air rushed into her lungs. His now-gentle hands around her throat were trembling as fiercely as she was, and he waited for her condemnation.

Livvy couldn't deny she was frightened of John, more afraid than she had ever been. Tears streaked her cheeks and dripped onto his hands. The urge to run coursed through her veins. She locked her shaking knees to halt the automatic flight response.

She couldn't find any evil in his eyes. All she saw was hurt and sorrow, tinged with love. The burn in her throat came from her tears, not his thumbs. He'd barely pressed, just enough to scare her, a few seconds at most. There had been more pain in his lovemaking.

He wanted her to be afraid enough to run from him.

On a stroke of blind faith, she raised her chin and smiled at him, teeth chattering behind quivering lips. "Good."

Shock sent him backward, his fingers falling from her neck, brow wrinkled in confusion. Clarity surrounded her. If John had wanted to hurt her, he would have. But he hadn't. He'd meant to scare her. He'd succeeded, but not enough to make her join the ranks of those who had shied from him. *Love doesn't shy away from fear. It erases it.*

“You did what you had to do. He’d hurt you enough, too much for mercy.”

“I don’t want your fucking pity.”

She pushed off the wall, walking close enough to feel the heat of his body. John shoved his shaky hands in his pockets.

“Pity? Is that what you think I feel? This is not pity. This is love.” Livvy’s eyes closed for a half second, her fingers running through her hair. “You’re too smart to believe his lies. Curses only work if you let them. Don’t give him that power. I won’t. I’m fighting for us, for you and me. I’m not leaving you, so get used to it. If you’re going to hell, I’ll be right behind you.”

His eyes widened before narrowing. The front lock of his hair fell over his forehead like a canopy shading a sheen of sweat. It shimmered with his emotional shivering and she longed to push it back, have him smile that lopsided grin at her.

Instead, his mouth went thin and tight. “You never asked me where I went last night, Liv.”

The abrupt change of topic jolted her and her mind scrambled for a second. “No, I assumed you just went for a drive to think.”

“Don’t assume.”

Forcing words around the rock in her throat took effort. “Where’d you go last night, Murphy?”



Just when she thought he wouldn't answer, he inhaled sharply and blew out a slow breath. His trembling ceased. "I went to Emily."

He slapped her with his words. Each syllable stung and she gaped at him. Denial raced forward, ripped the breath from her chest and darted out her mouth. "You're lying."

His eyes locked with hers and he shook his head. Truth rang in his simple motion. Deep under her ribcage, a cry formed but couldn't escape. Her arms clamped across the ache in her belly. His image swam as her eyes spilled hot teardrops. "Why?"

John pulled a hand from his pocket. A crumpled white square was caught in two fingers and he held it to her. Like the serpent of Eden, she was afraid to touch it yet was mesmerized by it, drawn to it. She barely felt the thin paper through her numb fingers but the elegant red script sent a sharp fang bite of venom to her blood.

*Emily Standish—call me anytime* with a phone number beneath.

"Her door is always open to me." His voice and his face were stone hard.

Livvy struggled to breathe. She'd rather his hands were still squeezing her neck than the clench she felt around her heart. He loved her. He couldn't have cheated. He'd promised. She trusted

him. There had to be some misunderstanding. "Did you sleep with her, Murphy?"

A gulp worked his throat. If it was possible, sadness tinged his face before cruelty lifted his lip in a smirk. "There wasn't much sleep involved."

"You bastard!" A crack split the air and her hand throbbed before she realized what she'd done. Brilliant red, her handprint marred his cheek.

His frosted gaze raked over her. "Get out."

A sob burst from her chest. He'd done it. He found the one way to shake her love for him, her faith in what they could have. Pain, fear, anger and nearly anything else she could have handled. But never that. He knew it and used it to hurt her. Shared secrets were twisted into a heartless weapon. He'd cheapened every second she'd trusted him.

Her feet touched the hallway and his voice barely reached her ears. "Liv."

Frantic to escape, to curl into a ball of pain and gut-wrenching sorrow, she stopped. She waited with closed eyes, physically incapable of facing him.

"If you are pregnant..." The break was so long, she put her hand on the doorframe for support and turned to him. His back was ramrod straight as if he were waiting for a whip to crack. Then his shoulders slumped and his eyes closed. "...get rid of it."

“Go to hell.”

“Count on it.”

The sound of glass shattering from inside rippled across the lawn as her feet skimmed the grass. Livvy heard nothing except her heart screaming.

## Chapter Fifteen

She flew from John's house like the rabid hounds of hell were nipping at her heels. She wept bitter tears that did nothing to ease her. Her pain simply sank, taking root deep in her belly until she felt pregnant with the Rock of Gibraltar.

A quick call to Pam, a small lie about stomach cramps, and she spent the day alternating between sleep and sorrow. By the time Sunday rolled around, acceptance and resolve replaced the tears and she refocused her hurt-fueled energy. She cleaned her house from top to bottom, sending Andrea to Tow's miniscule apartment to avoid her pity. In between spit curses at John—and herself for believing him—she polished and scrubbed until her hands were red. Her tears only flowed on the inside.

Monday found her at work long before sunrise and her employees wondered aloud if she were taking speed. Her only outward sign of anger happened when her eyes fell on the multicolored dragon on the splat board. Pam had just stocked the display rack with a half dozen Two For Play kits. Livvy pulled the tray out, dumped the entire lot in the garbage and slammed her office door.

An hour later, she was filling crème puffs with rum-laden peach marmalade.

Only late at night did she allow her pillow to soak in the heartbreak of shattered dreams. A quick Google search and she had Gina's address. The army-green folder full of hurt and secrets got sent back with no word or note of explanation. If she could rid herself of the misery as easily, with packaging tape and confirmed delivery, she would.

When hurt threatened to eat her alive, Livvy buried herself in darkness. She scoured the web for artwork that could translate into sugared creations, visited artists' sites and held strange emailed correspondence with people called Cryptonight, Chi-dread and Hexter. The Dark Cravings album grew to double the size but her gaze fell most often to a tattered-winged pixie framed over her desk.

John's house stood quiet late into the following week. How could she hate him and love him in the same heartbeat? But she did. Memories hit at the oddest times—Tow's beer bottle sent her mind to the taste of John's kiss on the deck. David brushing Luster Dust onto pastry made her lips quiver. Andrea scrambling eggs flashed her to another day, another place, another hand. Her eyes strayed far too often to the sleeping house across the shrubbery.

*It may be time to think about that privacy fence.* Unfortunately, Lowe's didn't sell a patch kit for the heart.

Pregnant.

The test lay silently on the bathroom sink ledge, its bright pink plus sign shining like a spotlight. Livvy's fingers shook as she picked up the long white plastic stick.

"Well? What does it say?" Behind her on the closed toilet lid, Andrea bit her lip. Livvy handed her the test and sat on the tub edge. Her sister glanced at it and her mouth dropped open. "Oh my God, Tow's going to kill me."

Livvy laughed. The laughter felt good. It had been too long since her throat felt the bubbled sound. "Tow's not going to kill you. He loves you. He's in the living room going nuts as we speak."

"But I'm on the pill! I can't be pregnant."

"Andrea, you're working twelve-hour rotating shifts. You never know what day it is. Lord, you set the garbage out two days early last week and the Sorensons' dogs dragged it all over the neighborhood. You can't tell me you didn't miss one tiny little pill."

"Okay, I missed a couple. But Livvy, I can't have a baby. I cannot be... Oh God, six months pregnant on my wedding day! I can't!" Andrea

stared at the test as if sheer will could erase the mark. "What am I going to do?"

Livvy stroked her messy strawberry-blond hair. "First, blow your nose. Then go out there and talk to Tow. You two need to decide what you want."

Andrea sniffled, grabbed a length of toilet paper and blew loudly. She looked at the test and wiped her eyes. "Livvy, I'm having a baby."

Livvy nodded and hugged her sister, shoving the tiny pang of envy aside.

Confusion fluttered on Andrea's face. "Liv, why did you have a pregnancy test in the medicine cabinet?"

She let a sardonic tone seep out. "Why do you think? Ironically, I never had to use the test. I got my visitor two days after...after Murphy went to New York."

"Did you tell him?"

"Why bother? He doesn't care."

Andrea squeezed Livvy's hand. "You know he's back, right? His truck was in the drive last night when I got home."

"I know. I saw it."

The empty box mocked her from the sink ledge and she tossed it in the trash. Jealousy rubbed the fragile scab on her pain and she wanted Andrea to leave her alone. She craved the distance from her sister's joy as much as she craved the embraced wings of an angry bat.

“Tow’s going to wear a hole in the carpet. Go put the poor man out of his misery.”

Andrea slipped out of the bathroom and Livvy yanked her clothes off. She snapped the shower to high but still overheard the happy masculine shout. The water spray hid her envious tears.

Four days. He’d been home for four days and managed not to see her. But she’d left the house each morning no later than 6:12 a.m. The earliest she’d come home was 7:41 p.m. He’d listened for her car.

*Livvy.*

In four days, he’d written exactly eight words. His monsters were silent, the story stalled.

*Livvy.*

Gina hung up on him twice when he’d called to see if she knew any results. The only thing she would say before slamming the phone down was he was an idiot.

*Livvy.*

Tow spotted him coming in the house and nodded, which earned a smack on the arm from Andrea.

*Livvy.*

Her incoming number on his cell display tightened his chest. It was fine, his heart no longer beat anyway. He flipped the phone in the last millisecond before voice mail kicked in.



“Hello?”

Silence. Eyes closed, he thought he'd missed the call and nearly snapped the phone shut. Then he heard her. Hesitant, tense, filled with a pained tone he'd put there by cruelty, the sweet sound caressed his ear.

“Hey. The last thing on earth I wanted to do was call you but...I'm desperate and need a favor. I wouldn't ask at all but time's running out.”

*A favor? A baby? Please no.*

“What do you need?”

“The Bernstein cake? The one you drew for Ashley? She wants Thorn freestanding, not painted flat. David and I have worked all day and we can't get Thorn right. Our best effort looks like Yoda with wings. Would you...would you be willing to try? The cake has to be delivered tomorrow. I can arrange it so you'd work with David. She's just a child, Murphy. Can we be adult enough to do this for her?”

He'd go to the moon for her. Timbuktu, the Antarctic, wherever. He'd do anything, give anything, to erase the hurt he'd put in her eyes. His truck, his house, his left nut, his life, if only she would laugh the way she had with him. He'd deliberately destroyed his right to ever hear that sound.

“Please, Murphy.”

“Tomorrow? It’d have to be early, Liv. I’ve never worked in 3-D...or sugar either, but, yeah, I’ll try. For Ashley.”

“Okay. We open at eight.”

She hung up. No goodbye. No tears. No small talk. Business over. Click.

John closed the phone and stared at the monitor. Andros whispered in his ear.

Thorn went insane. Screeching, throwing himself against the stone walls, he tore at his flesh with razored fangs. Andros wrapped him in a protection spell, the magic folding like a baby blanket, to hold the violence at bay. The terrorized bat sat rocking in the corner, the only movement possible. Glazed, unfocused and empty, his red eyes recognized no one. Not even Jondi.

Vory moaned and screamed, her cough wracking her frail body with brutal shivers. Despite the heaped blankets, she shook with cold as painful fever ravaged her. Over and over, her cry of agony echoed to the castle parapets and tormented Jondi.

His hands clamped over tiny hidden ears, Jondi squeezed his eyes, trying to block out the sound and sight. Something had gone terribly, terribly wrong. Andros had given Thorn the potion and the bat jerked like

lightning had struck his bony frame. The sound that careened out of his foaming mouth shattered beakers and bowls. The wizard had jumped so fast to avoid the snap of fangs, he'd seemed like a white blurry cloud.

"Impossible," he muttered, pouring over the thick tomes in his laboratory. "It should not be. The potion was correct. This should not be happening."

"Make it stop," Jondi whimpered.

Andros rose from his seat to pat his shoulder, to offer some comfort. A high-pitched scream of excruciating misery blasted the walls before fading to a barking cough.

Frantic with despair, Jondi clutched the wizard, begging for aid. "Why won't she die? You said death was near but she's still screaming. She's in so much pain. Please, help her die."

"I can't, Jondi. You know that. Vory lives still because she is strong, so very strong in spirit. Death will come. But not until her spirit caves and accepts the end."

"It's my fault." Jondi sniffed. "I'm sorry I ever met her. If she'd never met me, then she'd wouldn't be hurting, be dying now. It's all my fault, Andros."

At that moment, Thorn grunted, shifting his bound body to bang his head against the white stone. Blood splattered before Jondi could race to him, wrapping thick blankets around the misshapen ear and its pointy counterpart. The deep red liquid soaked the fabric, and still Thorn banged. Jondi cradled the large wrapped head, feeling the repetitive bash into his chest, a heartbeat on the outside of his small furry body.

As tears dripped from his blue fur onto fevered black skin, Thorn clutched him in a terrifying lucid minute. “Let me die. Please, just let me die.”

“Never!” Jondi vowed, horror cracking his voice.

Thorn’s red eyes went wide, circles of blazing evil. “I smell it. Feel it. Like ants on my wings, biting, eating, fire with no burn. Blood all over, on the floor, the stone—get it out, out, out, out...”

His maniacal chant dissolved into grunts once more, and the bat began thrusting his battered head toward the stone floor. Jondi bundled his blood-brother tighter and rocked him before turning frantic eyes to Andros.

“And this? How is this curing his spirit? He’s crazy! This isn’t Thorn. What went wrong, Andros?”

“Nordrake.” One word filled with bitter contempt and fiery scorn. “Whatever his spell, its evil persists, twisting and distorting anything good or wholesome.” Andros’s oversized rocker creaked with his weight as he slumped dejected into the cushioned seat. “He’s won, Jondi. Nordrake’s hate is too powerful. He’s won.”

“With a baby coming, Tow and Andrea need the house. Since they aren’t having a huge wedding now, they had enough for the down payment, and everything is signed, sealed and official. And I just need to get away from there, you know?”

Leo leaned on the counter as Livvy wrapped up his chocolate-chip muffins. She tossed in an extra one with a wink at him.

“It’s not right. And I don’t like you moving to Tow’s apartment. It’s a rattrap, Liv. I wouldn’t let my sister live there.”

“You don’t have a sister, but thanks. It’s fine for now. I’ll find something better later, once summer is over and I get some space from...things. I’ll figure something out.”

“You love him.”

A sad smile leaked out and she nodded. Now why couldn't she fall for someone like Leo? Her mother had loved him. He was such a good, decent man, any mother would. Any smart woman would. But they'd learned a long time ago they were better friends than anything else. Besides, Livvy'd still be longing to hang out under the bleachers with a dark-haired bad boy.

"I can't believe he was jealous of me." Leo laughed. "I wish I'd known that when I stopped him. It would've made things a lot more fun. I was worried about you that day."

Livvy sighed. "Apparently Murphy saw me kiss you goodbye the night of the jazz show and it just kind of mushroomed."

"Liv, I've kissed you a million times. It's like kissing my nonexistent sister." His brow cocked and he leaned farther across the counter. "Although you were my first hickey."

"Leo, we were fourteen. And that doesn't count—you wanted to make Missy Anderson jealous and paid me three dollars for that hickey."

"I should've written him that ticket." He grinned. "I will. Every chance I get, I'm nailing him. And I'm going to make him do a field sobriety test just for shits and giggles. You can safely bet that by the end of the month, that asshole will be cursing the day he hurt my best girl."

“Leo, behave. Leave him alone.” Livvy didn’t want Leo to risk getting in trouble but he was cocky enough to try to get away with it. “And what’s this ‘best girl’ stuff? I thought you and Kelsey were getting pretty involved.”

Above his uniform collar, the flush seemed bright across his cheeks. “We’ll see. She has lousy taste in music. But I might bring her with me Saturday if she’s not working.”

“Great. I can tell her all your bad habits, like the mold experiment you used to keep in your refrigerator.”

“It’s still there, so she knows.” He straightened and his gaze cemented out the store window. “You sure you’re ready for this?”

Livvy froze. John had the driver’s door opened and was stepping out. Bright morning sunshine deepened his hair to a nearly blue-black raven’s wing. He’d finally gotten it trimmed. The front no longer threatened to slip over his forehead. She almost missed that endearing lock of hair.

“I swear I can hear your heartbeat from here. Want me to stick around?”

Quickly shaking her head, she tried to breathe. Air stuck in her lungs with a sharp jab. He wore a crisp black suit and tie. The jacket made his shoulders a mile wide and she couldn’t swallow.

“Hey, Liv, know what makes a good cop?”

Leo had circled the counter and now stood directly beside her. With effort, she pulled her eyes from the window. "I don't know. A big gun?"

"No. The ability to immediately assess a complicated situation and make a snap decision about what move will rectify the problem." Devilment sparkled in his eyes a split second before he grabbed her. "You owe me three bucks."

"Leo, don—"

His mouth descended on hers the instant the bells jangled over the shop door.

Leo told the truth in that they had shared many kisses over the years, all platonic. This one was not. It was firm and intimate and completely surprised her. Shock was all that kept her from pushing him away at first. When she shoved at his chest, he was already pulling away. His raised eyebrows mocked her. He snagged his pastry bag off the counter and tossed a jolly "Bye, Livvy" in her direction.

John's eyes were averted too far above the trooper's head not to have seen what occurred. Jealous fury shimmered around him. Arms crossed, jaw clenched so hard she could see the muscles working from across the room, he stood halfway in front of the glass door. Leo approached, full official attitude in place.



Leo was maybe half an inch taller but John was broader through the chest and shoulders. Like two snarling dogs, they glared, neither moving an inch.

"Step aside," Leo spat.

"I did," John growled.

"Your loss."

"My choice."

The coded macho bravado soured Livvy's stomach. She was not a piece of meat to be fought over by one dog who didn't want her and another who was playacting. Her voice was soft but firm in the tense room. "Leo."

It brought a halt to the testosterone standoff. John moved four inches sideways and Leo four the other way. He did not take his eyes from John's face as he called over his shoulder, "See you Saturday, Liv."

"Bye."

The bells clanged behind him. John shook his head. "I really don't like him."

"Yeah, well, you're not his favorite person either." Suddenly tired, Livvy just wanted the day to be over even if it was only eight-thirty in the morning. "Forget about it, Murphy. Leo was just trying to bait you."

"I'm not biting."

Stung, and ashamed she was after everything he'd said, she closed her eyes to hide a wince. "I never thought you would."

John might not have been biting but he did nibble. "So what's on Saturday? You have a date with Barney Fife?"

His eyes drew color from his suit jacket, turning to ink. His few gray hairs stood out, crystal on ebony. She looked him square in the face. He'd find out sooner or later, it might as well be from her. She tried to make her words light and casual.

"Strangely, although I live in redneck central, I only know two people who own pickup trucks. Leo is helping me move Saturday. I sold my house."

If she had kneed his crotch, John's face could not have looked any more stunned. "What? When?"

"I signed the papers yesterday."

His shoulders sagged with a harsh exhale. "You didn't have to do that, Livvy."

"Yes, I did." The whisper that fell lay between them like a vast river.

"Do you need more help?"

His offer sliced with razor precision and she bristled. Pain made her resistant to much of his sarcasm but she could not handle his sweetness without tears. She'd shed enough of those in private, she would not cry in front of him.

"Not from you."

His nostrils flared. *That stung, didn't it?*

“Can we just do this? I have to get on the road.”

“Of course.” She invited him around the counter to the swinging door with a tilt of her head. He followed, his feline fluidity washing over her.

She motioned to his jacket. “This is nice. I’ve never seen you dressed like this.”

“I’m going to a funeral.” Her hand stilled on the brass door panel. “Preacher died. He had another stroke.”

The gasp flew before she could catch it. His friend had seemed frail but it still must have come as a shock. Her fingers fell to his arm and he didn’t shrug away. “I’m sorry, Murphy.”

He nodded before looking into her eyes. A quiver began low inside her. One step would bring her to his arms. Her feet itched to move. Only the remembered flash of frosted blue gave her the strength to pull her hand away and push the door open.

“David.” The portly chef appeared at her side. “This is John Murphy. He’s Thorn’s creator. Show him your magic and let him work his, will you?”

The gray-haired man nodded. “Sure thing, just let me pull the cake and we’ll get started.”

As David ducked into the walk-in cooler, Livvy motioned toward the hand sink along the

wall. "I'll put your jacket in my office so it doesn't get sugar on it. Roll your sleeves above your elbows and wash for a solid two minutes. Don't touch anything not at your workstation and listen to what David tells you. You'll do fine."

He not only removed and handed her his suit jacket, he pulled the burgundy-striped tie from his neck and draped it across her arm. They were warm from his body and she fought not to hug the material close like a teenager with a crush. The top button of his shirt popped open with a quick twist of his fingers before he reached for his cuffs. Rolling the stark white sleeves, his face filled with longing. His gaze shifted from the splat board dragon to the far table where Justine was rolling layer after layer of dough through a pasta machine.

The clear memory slammed into Livvy in vivid color. Heat flooded her face and thighs in the same instant. The gulp that moved his Adam's apple showed he remembered, too.

David slid the cake board in front of him. "I sculpted the head out of rice cereal but... you might want to start from scratch 'cause it's kind of ugly."

Livvy lifted her chin and tossed a half-apron toward John. "When you're done, I'll be in my office. Have fun, gentlemen."

Steps measured, slow and calm, she walked to her office. She hung his jacket on a coat hook and

sank into her desk chair before burying her face in her hands. So close she could see each individual black eyelash, and yet she couldn't touch him. She fought to hold her tears at bay. One fought back and rolled down her cheek. It held so much pain.

"I knew it." A snarky voice raised her head. Standing in the doorway, Pam's plump figure swathed in a white apron reminded her of a WWII-era German nursemaid. "Figured something was bothering you but this proves it. Tall, dark and good-for-nothing flopped, huh? Well, don't you fret, babygirl. There ain't a man alive worth a woman's tears."

Livvy grunted. "And how many times have you been married?"

"Four. And working on number five. But that doesn't mean men aren't scum. Just means I like scum from time to time." Pam smiled, changing her face from sturdy to pleasant. "Livvy, go home. Me and David can handle things for a few days. Go home, cry it out, pack your house up and move on. Forget about whatshisname back there and concentrate on you. The thing about a broken heart is you only wish you could die for a while. It fades."

"Work keeps me sane right now."

"But you're driving us crazy," Pam muttered, waddling back toward the kitchens.

Livvy ran a shaky hand down her face. She'd live. No one ever really died of a broken heart.

She dove into arranging orders and schedules to cover her absence. Pam's grandson jumped at the money she offered for a one-day painting job. In less than an hour, everything was neatly laid out. Her shop would run smoothly, orders would get filled, and the dragon on the splat board would be painted over, erasing all traces of magic. When she returned, she'd have a new address, a new outlook and a new white wall to start over with.

The frame above her desk mocked her. Smooth glass slid under her fingers as Livvy traced her pixie-self's jaw. The arrogant lift on that lip and the defiant fire in those larger-than-life eyes seemed too unbowed, too unbruised, too unsullied to be her anymore. That drawing embodied passionate innocence. Her face reflected in the glass, a portrait of what that cartoon image should never become.

This she would keep, the only bit of him she would allow herself. This sketch would not end up on display but buried in the bottom drawer of her desk, under invoice copies, old employee files and a fine layer of stark denial. Maybe in a few years it wouldn't hurt so much to see it, to remember that, for a while anyway, John had loved her.

She slipped the thin paper out of the frame back and into a protective sleeve. A design name

leaped to her mind and she titled it quickly. *Bittersweet*.

The sound of heavy footsteps warned her John approached. He was drying his hands on a stained white towel and she tried not to remember them caressing her.

“All finished?” The paper trembled in her hands so she laid the drawing aside and laced her fingers together in her lap.

He nodded and smiled a genuine smile that kicked her stomach somewhere between her teeth and her tonsils. “Yeah. David was great. It was pretty cool, Liv. That gum paste stuff is like Play-Doh, kind of fun. And I’ve never seen Thorn like that, free standing, almost alive. I may have to re-evaluate my opinion on the animation offer. Seeing my characters like that...it was magic. I really like his wings, that shiny stuff. What is it?”

“Pulled sugar.”

“It’s what I see in my head, what I can’t make happen in two dimensions. No one ever...” A softness swept into the room, a reminder of how linked, how connected they’d become, of how far apart they now were. His voice dipped, richer than warm caramel. “Thanks for letting me help.”

This was the John she missed. The man who’d torn her heart to pieces was nowhere in sight.

“Thank you for helping. I’m sure Ashley will be thrilled.”

The desk drawer pulled out with a slight whoosh. She stood, handing him a white envelope. He took it with a curious slant to his brow. "What's this?"

"The Shack's standard fee for local artists. I didn't want you to think I was taking advantage of...anything."

He crumpled the envelope in a ball and tossed it on her desk along with the damp towel. "I didn't do it for pay. I did it for a little girl who has enough pain to deal with."

Damn, this John really needed to leave before she forgot he broke her heart. She retrieved his jacket and tie. "Then I'll just repeat, thank you."

Focused on unrolling his sleeves, he ground his teeth so loudly she heard the scrape. Nothing was spoken until he fumbled with the cuff on his right wrist. Her fingers slid the button through the slot for him. Her feet had closed the distance between them without her realizing it.

"Thanks." The gentle word fanned her hair and she raised her eyes to his. He stared down at her face. Love shone so brightly, it blinded her. God, she missed him.

Possessed by some crazed goddess of reverse seduction, Livvy tucked the tie under his collar, smoothing her hand along his shoulders and down his buttoned front. Touching him was automatic, soothing and so very familiar. Metallic salt filled



her mouth and she pushed back sadness. The cuff she'd fastened moved farther up, until one long section of hair wrapped around his fingers. His other hand moved to her hip. With his lids lowered, he brought his mouth to hers.

"Don't."

Both hands fell away as he stepped back. "Sorry, habit."

Handing him his jacket, she fled to her desk. Shoulders she knew the taste of shrugged into the coat and she searched for something, anything, to fill the yawning silence.

"How's Gina? Did she get her test results?"

He snorted and brought his chin up to button his shirt. "I don't know. She's not talking to me. I'm going to corner Pete today." Tie tails in each hand, he stopped and looked at her. "Have you talked to her?"

"Me? No."

"I just wondered." The silk strip whizzed as he knotted it and slid it upward.

Her leg started jerking and she grew desperate for him to leave. A step behind the chair hid her shivering.

He made no move to go away. Instead, his hands sank deep in his pockets, jacket flaps tucked behind thick wrists. "What about you? Any test results I should know about?"

It took a minute for her to understand his question. The tremor rose from her leg to her stomach. The effort to keep her voice level was enormous. "You're off the hook, Murphy. I'm not pregnant."

He exhaled so loudly she knew he'd been holding his breath. The sound raked her with a hundred needles, each tiny prick scoring a bloodless line. Silver crested her vision and she knew tears would follow. She needed him to leave.

She gave him a shove. "Give Gina my love. And the boys, too."

He stared, emotion raging on his face. She knew he loved her. Knew he'd purposely thrown away what they could have had. Thrown it away in the one manner that would hurt her the most. It was a cruelty she'd never thought him capable of. She'd been wrong.

"Goodbye, Murphy." Those two words rang with finality.

His brows twitched and his eyes closed. "Goodbye, Liv."

He turned sharply and the edge of his coat skimmed the loose papers on her desk. A few fell, fluttering across his pathway, and he knelt to gather them. His hand stopped inches from one paper then he reached out and brought the plastic-

covered sketch up. A myriad of expressions darted across his eyes. His chest rose and fell rapidly.

“What the hell...? Where’d you get this?”

“I...” She darted her eyes to the album then back. “You threw them away.”

“Them?” His mouth gaped then snapped shut. He thrust to his feet, looked down at the black book and sneered. “This is what you’ve been working on? The Dark Cravings shit you were always talking about?”

The transparent sheath wrinkled in his grip as he flipped the album open. The first page held a copy of Thorn embracing a freckle-faced child. A prepared sheet already waited for the photo, the blurb typed below describing each detail. He turned the page and gritted his jaw. The casketmobile, his original, sat opposite Meagan’s modified one. Pure venom hissed along her spine from the heat of his glare. He searched page after page, snapping them with increasing strength.

“You fucking bitch.”

Livvy recoiled. “Excuse me?”

“I said, ‘You. Fucking. Bitch.’” Two bright slashes of red along his cheeks held the only color on his face, the rest was blanched and sallow. Beneath his jaw, that dark angry vein throbbed. He slammed the book shut and held the now-bent-in-half pixie to her face. “I knew the Shack was struggling and you’d do whatever you needed to

make it succeed but I didn't think you'd stoop to stealing."

"What? You told me I could use them. I flat out asked you, remember? I tried to thank you and we ended up in bed."

"I said you could have the shit I drew in the bakery, nothing else!"

"Oh, no. I *asked* you about the sketchpad. You said I could use whatever I wanted."

His eyes shifted to the side as if searching his memory but his head shook. "No, I didn't know you meant more than what I gave you. These pieces weren't for sale. You took them."

She propped her hand on her hip. "From the trashcan."

How petty was he going to get? He treated these things like orange rinds and coffee grounds and now, now he wanted to make it sound like she stole the Crown Jewels? *Oh let's see, I ripped her heart out and force-fed it to her but she took my garbage so we're even.*

In his white-knuckled fist, the sheeting wrinkled. "It doesn't matter where you got them. You had no right."

"Let's not talk about right and wrong, okay? You do not want to go there with me."

With a grunt, he ripped the pixie drawing in two and flung it to the ground. A small cry eked out and her hands stretched. *No, not that one.* That

was hers, was her, by his hand. Hadn't he taken enough from her? A fresh burn seared along her heart as those halves fluttered to her feet. What meant so much to her meant nothing to him. The truth stung like a scorpion.

She bent and cradled one smudged piece. The label *Bittersweet*, the top of her wings, her hair, and one eye were all that remained.

"All of it, Livvy. Every fucking pencil line that belongs to me, I want removed from that book now."

Her head jerked up and the unshed tears vanished from her eyes. A harsh breath dried her mouth and pasted her lips to her teeth. She was so damned tired of being torn apart by him, literally now as well as emotionally.

"No." She stood with a defiant stare. "I've worked my ass off the past few weeks. I started with worthless crap you threw away, that you *said* I could have, and created a new outlet, a new line that's skyrocketing right now."

His brows slanted so harshly they nearly touched. "I don't give a shit if it's been bronzed and nominated for sainthood. I didn't give you shit. They belong to me."

"No, Murphy, they *did* belong to you. Then you threw them away, said I could use them, and then they became *mine*." Livvy stalked to the opposite end of her office, needing the space. Her

bones shook and her vision pinpointed. A throbbing headache bloomed and she rubbed her neck.

“Not you, Liv. Not you, too.” A subtle tremor in his voice she’d never heard whipped her around. She never expected what she saw on his face.

Something glowed in his eyes, something she’d never seen and never wanted to see. Betrayal wasn’t pain, it wasn’t grief and it wasn’t anger. It was all of those things and more, things that had no name but were dark, twisted and ugly, burned with shame into the most hidden parts of your being. Only someone you’d given your heart to could deliver the most screaming pain.

He’d done that to her.

And she had done it to him.

John didn’t share his work with anyone. Alan had used it to fuel his hate. The state had used it to examine and diagnose him. Livvy had used it for money. She had used his work, those bits of his soul, without regard to how it would impact him. No one else read his work but he’d let her. No one else saw his rough sketches, but he’d shown her. No one else had held his heart. But he’d given it to her. And she’d broken it just as he had hers.

The realization sucked the strength from her bones. She reached for him. John stepped back. He blinked the glow away. The betrayal shifted to rage.

He picked up the thick album, stared at the shiny black lips and snorted. “Intellectual property infringement is illegal, Liv, and more than that, it pisses me off.”

The book hit the desk with a thud that echoed deep in her body.

A swallow shifted the knot of his tie and an eerie calm washed over him. His eyes went blank. A feral curve scored those marks around his mouth deeper and sent shivers slithering down her spine.

“I don’t take this shit lying down any more. I fight back. And I fight to win.” His hand was steady as he brushed an invisible speck of dust from the framed business license hanging on the wall. “An eye for an eye, Liv. You take my work, I take yours. You’ll hear from my attorneys.”

He walked away as if he hadn’t just stomped on her stomach. Livvy sank into her chair. Her hand quaked reaching for the phone. When the soothing voice answered, she had to force her tongue to move.

“Tow, I think...I need a lawyer.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Arnold “Preacher” Johnson’s funeral rivaled that of any local celebrity, attendance overflowing to the greeting room of the small funeral home. With Pete in the lead, Smoke in the rear, wet-eyed men laid their mentor to rest. John couldn’t help but feel he’d let the old man down as he dropped a handful of dry dirt on the closed casket. He chalked it up to another failure.

Gina sat close to Preacher’s daughter Myra, her hands always full of tissues. Since the boys were nowhere in sight, John assumed they were with a sitter but when he’d asked, Gina had turned away from him with a huff. For once in his life, Pete kept a secret and told John he was on his own. He was too tall to sleep on the couch so John would have to wait Gina’s anger out. John fumed. This was the longest she’d ever been mad at him and he didn’t like it one damn bit.

Myra’s house was beyond full and the yard teemed with people. Something about death made people bring out casseroles and pies, so food was as plentiful as the tears. John escaped with the Boys’ Club outside. The subdued group shuffled in unfamiliar dress clothing, unknotting ties and



shedding jackets. The fact that Utah wore steel toes with his suit amused John. Stories of Preacher were the main focal point.

Foxy threw the first emotional punch to his gut. "Where's Livvy, Shakespeare?"

He shifted on his feet and dodged the blow. "At work." *I made her cry again.*

During memories of company picnics, Utah jabbed. "So did Livvy ride your ass about Emily?"

"Never came up." *I just used that name to destroy her.*

Less than five minutes later, Smoke—with his big meaty fists and sweat-dotted bare head—threw the knockout strike. "Never thought I'd see the day you got tamed. So when you getting hitched, Shakespeare?"

The group laughed but his silence spoke volumes and soon everyone looked at him with solemn faces.

*I almost did. I would have. I couldn't risk it.*

His tongue too thick, he shrugged and shook his head. "Never."

"Sorry, man, she was a real sweet lady." Beaver's soft reply stung. The bearded man had no idea how sweet. John's throat clogged with ache. *Buttercream.*

With the hot breeze against his back, John rolled his tight shoulders. Blood itched through his skin and the pain hissed with each breath. He

reached over and pulled a cigarette out of Smoke's shirt pocket, lit it and inhaled. He needed something moving in his chest since his heart was dead. Smoke handed him the near-empty pack, small lighter tucked in the cellophane. John nodded and walked away without a word.

Cigarette pinched tight between his lips, he dug the brown bottle from his pocket and twisted the lid. He swallowed the pill dry, grimacing as it scratched his throat. He'd taken one this morning after leaving the Sugar Shack. It was a little soon for another, but hell, this day sucked ass.

He'd lied to Livvy about moving up the meeting with his agent. He'd just had to get away. What he intended to be a cool-down-and-regroup week had turned into a mental-demon-infested trip down memory lane. The cycle of flashbacks had trapped him in that ritzy hotel room for two days. It took waking up curled into a ball in the closet before he'd finally caved and called the first doctor he could find listed in the phone book who could work him in.

The psychiatrist had listened, prodded a little, double-checked the faxed medical records. John flat-out refused an in-patient evaluation so Dr. Stolberg insisted he start therapy, preferably weekly. John agreed and allowed him to set it up closer to home. After giving him a stern lecture, the doctor finally prescribed the drugs. One kind

for the flashbacks, one for mood swings and anxiety.

Anxiety? Fuck that, this was outright hell on earth. As much as John hated to admit it, the meds helped. At least they helped with the shit in his head. There was no little white pill for heartache.

Gina found him sitting on his tailgate, tie pulled loose, jacket long gone, sleeves rolled. "You stopped smoking years ago."

"Are you talking to me now or just lecturing?"

"Both, I guess." The wind blew a long strand of hair loose from her clip, and it fluttered wildly before settling across her cheek. Her eyes fell on him like Judgment Day, hard and unflinching.

He took another drag. "Gina, I'm in no mood for a lecture so skip it. How are you?"

She parked her fanny on the tailgate, using her arms to pull herself up beside him. Her print skirt whipped in the breeze and she tucked it under her knees. "How are you?"

"Fine. You didn't answer me."

"I know. I want to talk about you first, you and Livvy."

The glowing butt hit the ground and John popped off the tailgate. Road dirt and hot ash ground under his slick sole. "Nothing to talk about. There is no me and Livvy."

"I got that. What I want to know is why?"

“When’s the last time I asked you about things in your marriage? I don’t. Return the favor.” Irritation pushed the words out too harshly, snapping the air with pointed teeth.

He’d forgotten how easily Gina snapped back.

“Tell you what, brother-mine. When you have a marriage to discuss, then I’ll return the favor. Right now what you have is a pissy attitude and smoker’s breath. What happened?”

Bright sunlight made him squint at her. How could she do that? Jump down his throat and, in the same instant, smile at him? Livvy did that, he realized hollowly. Maybe it was a female thing, a gene men just didn’t inherit. Whatever it was, it irritated him more.

“She stole from me.”

Her jaw dropped. “What? Like money?”

“Artwork, cast-off stuff,” he muttered.

“I thought you shredded everything.”

“From my study, yes, but not sketchpads. Hell, I don’t even think... They’re all over the house. When they’re full, I throw them out in whatever can is closest.”

“Okay, as an artist, that’s just stupid, but whatever. Tell me what happened.” Her demeanor shifted from sisterly to lawyerly as he explained. At one point, she raised her hand and stopped him. “Wait, where? What trash can? Inside your house or at the curb? And when did she take them?”

"I don't know. I found out this morning." John shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"The where, definitely. The when, it might." Gina worried her lip. Face turned to the breeze, she hunched her shoulders and sighed. "But it's the why that bugs me. I can't see her... Johnny, do you think she meant to hurt you, that she did it out of spite or revenge or—"

"No." The denial leaped to his mouth. Now that the shock had faded, the long drive had given him time to think, and the medicine clarified the reality. Livvy could never be that cruel, that deliberate. That was his claim to fame, not hers. "I gave her one. Two actually. She just... She talked about it all the damn time. I just never made the connection."

If push came to shove, he'd be hard pressed to pick out every drawing that was his. Scribbles were scribbles. The larger ones, the pictures he'd spent more time on, sure, those he remembered. But the smaller stuff? Christ, he'd drawn thousands of pieces of mindless crap, never giving it a second thought. And she'd said she'd asked about using them. He barely remembered that, hadn't understood what she'd been talking about. He'd been too interested in getting her naked to pay attention to her words.

It wasn't *what* she took or *when* she'd taken it but that she had taken it *at all* that hurt him.

Falling in love had made him blinder than the optometrist's charts would ever show, and the slice of betrayal thumped worse than any broomstick.

Nicotine-flavored guilt filled his mouth with a sudden choking bitterness and he spat into the bushes. It didn't help. What Livvy had done was wrong, but it wasn't intentional. Livvy hadn't set out to hurt him. Two wrongs might not make a right but they sure as hell left double the mark with twice the pain.

"She came right out and said 'John, I'm using your art in my business' and you ignored her?"

"Murphy. She calls me Murphy. And no, she never said that. At least, not in those words. But she didn't hide it, either. Hell, she worked on those damn cake designs every night at my table while I wrote. She thought I'd agreed to it but I... I didn't. So she didn't think she was doing anything wrong. It was garbage."

"Livvy is not stupid, Johnny."

"No. But...I was pissed as hell this morning. Now I just... Have you ever taken money out of Pete's wallet without him knowing?"

Gina blinked. "We're married. Joint property and bank accounts, all that good stuff. Sure, I've grabbed cash from his wallet if I needed it. He's grabbed my credit card when we're in a hurry or something. That's how couples work."

“She grabbed tee shirts out of my drawer every night and I didn’t give her permission each time. That would be stupid. They were there if she needed them.”

“Tee shirts don’t make her a profit. She’s making money off your ideas and you’re getting nothing for it. Is she accrediting them, using your pen name, the Jondi connection?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“What do you want me to do, Johnny? I’m still on medical leave, but I can have Carla file an injunc—”

“No, let it go. I owe her.”

It wasn’t about money, had never been about money. Hell, he’d offered her a loan and she’d refused. It was about using the sharpest blade in your arsenal to chop the one you loved the most into tiny shreds. He’d done it to her. Deliberately. Then he’d turned around, lashed out and hit her where she was most vulnerable—her safe place, her business. Somewhere in the world, there was a meaner, more self-loathing motherfucker, but right now, John felt sure he held that prize.

“Let it go? You owe her?” Gina narrowed her eyes. “Okay, enough bullshit. That’s guilt talking. What’d you do?”

He pulled then lit another cigarette, hand cupped around the lighter. The trembling of his fingers did nothing for his mood. His sister wasn’t

helping much either and his anger rushed back. Holding the smoke in his mouth, he sucked air through his teeth, feeling the burn flow through him. His body had been too long without nicotine and it rushed to his head with a dizzying force. He didn't want to deal with this, with Gina's nosiness.

In a flash, he realized he didn't have to. He grabbed his jacket from beside her and headed for the driver's side. "None of your fucking business. I'm going home. Off the truck bed."

"Coward."

The word stopped him like a brake pedal and his head whipped around. Her thinned brows were slammed together and her lips pressed into a tight line. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth. "What did you call me?"

"Didn't catch it? Let me say it louder then. You, John Flannigan Murphy, are a mean, self-absorbed coward running from a dead man." The fast slam of his door made her jump but she didn't look at him. She just shook her head. "I love you, Johnny, but you're letting Daddy win. He's got you whipped from the grave."

He snorted. "Whatever, Gina. You want to peck at me? Give it your best shot, but make it good because you're really pissing me off."

"What hurt the worst?" Dark hair slid over her back as she turned her face to his. He expected anger, but what he saw was pain, etched bone-



deep. “What did he do that hurt you the worst? The burns? The broomstick? If I had to guess, I’d pick your jaw. That scared me to death. I thought he’d killed you.”

His muscles quivered around bones that locked tight. What had hurt worst? He couldn’t even begin to speculate. Grinding the half-smoked butt to the ground, he gripped the truck side and stayed silent. They didn’t talk about this anymore. It had been years since they had. He’d made sure she’d had thousands of insurance dollars’ worth of therapy growing up so it wouldn’t haunt her. Why now did she look horrified?

“Do you know what he did that hurt me the most?”

The soft question jerked his head up. Alan had only laid hands on her once that he knew. Had he hurt her before that? Fear tightened an already paralyzed chest. “What did he do to you?”

“He made me watch.” Silver drops lingered on her lashes, pooling until they slipped over her cheeks. “He would wake me up and drag me to the kitchen to make me watch while you got punished because I’d spilled milk six hours earlier. He made me watch and listen while he force-fed hate to the only person who loved me, the only person I loved. You took the beating but I got the guilt. I still have it.”

Anger fled and he stepped to her, reaching for her hand. Her nails bit into his skin and she sobbed. "Do you know how hard it is to watch someone you love hurt and know you caused the pain? To see the tears and know you put them there? Hear cries that will ring in your ears forever, all because you loved? You took all the hurt for me, because you love me. And he knew it. That was my punishment. My love brought you pain."

John tried to draw breath but his lungs were stuck to his ribs. Did he know that pain? Yes, he knew. He'd shattered Livvy's trust, broken her heart, killed her love. He knew the agonizing bitterness all too well. He'd just never known Gina suffered from it. He'd thought he had protected her.

The ache from his childhood suddenly seemed less and more at the same time. Less because she'd suffered with him. He hadn't really been alone. And more, for the same reasons. His body, her spirit, both bore the echoed ghosts of abuse. But they had each other, had always had each other.

"Gina, don't do this. You're what kept me alive. I love you, sister-mine. You never did anything wrong. Alan's dead. Don't let him hurt you anymore."

Her face lifted with a shaky smile. "Practice what you preach, brother-mine. Stop listening to him. Your blood is no more tainted than mine is. Stop giving him power over you. Stop pushing people away. Stop protecting yourself from people who want to love you the way I do."

Questions he'd prayed for answers to in the old church flooded back to him in his sister's voice. His lower lip shivered. Flattening it to his teeth, he focused on the truck roof. John knew what she said was true. He knew it in his head. But in his heart, his soul, it was hard to believe. It had been pounded there by hate and wood for far too long. Demons were hard to kill.

"I know all that."

"Then why did you push Livvy away?"

John scoffed. "You're a 'gator, Gina. Once you get your teeth in something, you never let go, do you? You just wrestle it around until it gives up and dies."

"I learned from the best."

One last squeeze and he dropped her hand. He watched her feet swing above the asphalt. "I hurt her."

"So go after her. Make it right."

He pulled the last cigarette from the crumpled pack. Lighting it filled a second, allowing him to gather his thoughts. "Some hurts are too deep. I wanted her to leave and she wouldn't. Nothing I

said could make her leave me, so I...I got mean, meaner than I ever have before. It worked.”

He could have sworn guilt flashed in her gaze. It was probably just the sun because once she wiped her wet eyes, the look she fixed him with was fierce. “What did you do?”

Smoke choked around stuck words and he blew out a slow stream. Guilt lowered his lids. “What’s the worst thing a man can do to the woman he loves?”

“I know you didn’t hit her. Please tell me you didn’t cheat on her.” He locked his gaze on hers and brought the cigarette to his lips. Gina gaped. “Johnny, how could you?”

“I didn’t. But I let her think I did.”

“What? Why?”

“It doesn’t matter.” One hand raking through his hair, he snorted a self-deprecating laugh. “I lied, she believed me. I’m a very good liar.”

“You’re an excellent liar, Johnny. That’s why you’re a good storyteller. But why?”

Before he could take another drag, Gina hopped off the tailgate and yanked the cigarette from his mouth. She pitched it into the road. Her stern jaw rang opposite her loving eyes. But some things, personal things, he could never share with his sister.

“Liv sold her house to get away from me, Gina. It’s over.”

She deflated in front of him. Sorrow turned her voice soft. "I'm so sorry."

"Me, too. Now will you tell me what the doctor said?"

Her eyes fell on his loosened tie and he tensed for a blow. His stomach quivered and his head spun. Fear was more powerful than nicotine.

"I won't gross you out—and trust me, I could, but I won't. I'll never nurse another baby from that side but...I don't have breast cancer."

John reached for her. He didn't mind the single tear that finally leaked into her hair. All that mattered was, once more, his baby sister was safe.

Tow rubbed his forehead. "Tell me again, where was the trash can?"

"In the kitchen." Livvy paced like a yo-yo in front of his desk, arms clamped around her stomach.

"And he clearly threw it away? It didn't get knocked into th—"

"He picked it up, looked through it, then threw it away."

"And you took it because...?"

"Because I was a love-struck fool with no brains?" She didn't smile and neither did he. A breath puffed her cheeks and she ran her hands through her hair. "He drew me. I—I felt pretty. If

he didn't want it, I did. I never meant to... God, I am such an idiot."

"You never got any permission or agreement in writing from him?"

"No. It was all verbal."

"You had confirmed permission for how many?"

"Two. I thought... I asked if I could use the others but..." Livvy scrubbed at her eyes. "I thought he agreed. He didn't understand what I was asking."

"So how many of his drawings did you end up using?"

"Fifty-six. But I didn't use them exactly as they were. I had to change some things. What about those people who go around digging in dumpsters for old lamps and stuff and make sculptures out of them?"

"Outside trashcans are fair game usually, but this was *in* his house, so that won't wash. You took fifty-four drawings without clear permission, altered them, and made a profit."

"I am so screwed."

Tow cocked his head and toyed with his pen. "Probably, but it's so far out of my field it might as well be written in Vulcan. The smartest move right now is to do what John said. Take all his stuff out of the line until I can get you set up with somebody who handles this stuff."

"I did before I came here." Livvy sank into the chair in front of his desk and buried her face in her hands. "I can't afford a big lawsuit. Could I really lose the Shack over this?"

Silence echoed. He didn't have an answer, but she looked at him, begging for a reprieve. He wanted to lie but owed her the truth. "I don't know, Liv, but you might want to prepare for that. It depends on how much John wants to pursue this."

"He's pissed and loaded for bear. I repeat—I am so screwed."

A tug of war growled in his gut. On one hand, he couldn't believe Livvy was so naïve or so stupid that she hadn't realized what she was doing. On the other hand, John deserved to roast in hell for hurting her. If he had a third hand, he'd add to the battle in his belly and say that Andrea would expect him to have some magic legal Band-Aid for this mess. The last bit is what made him reach for the Roloids.

"Karma is a real bitch." Livvy hopped up to stare out his small window. She should have a lovely, inspiring view directly into Judge Wendell's bathroom. He really hoped the judge had closed his blinds this time. "What was supposed to be a summer fling, a purely sexual, no-strings affair turned out to be the biggest mistake of my entire life."

His head came up, the search for a lime-flavored antacid forgotten. *Now there's a revealing statement.* Tow mulled a sudden suspicion around, poked it and decided to go with his spasming gut's intuition. "Getting involved with John was the biggest mistake?"

Afternoon sun slanted through the glass turning her hair to fire-red, all the more vivid next to her colorless skin. She leaned her forehead on the window sash.

"No. My biggest mistake was doing to Murphy what everyone else in his life did. I abused his trust. He guards his monsters like most people guard their children and now I know why. They can't hurt him."

Her words stirred newly-emerging parental feelings and Tow frowned. Already the tiny bean inside Andrea meant more to him than he could ever have fathomed. He'd do anything to protect it, keep it safe from harm. Yet every day he watched parents use their kids as little more than an emotional bullet. People who'd promised to love, honor and cherish thought nothing of obliterating their partner a few years later over who got Aunt Mildred's blender. It became a game of stick-it-to-them instead of stick-with-them.

Her wet, caustic snort pulled Tow from his thoughts.



“I took the rest of the day off with the intention of trying to move forward, to get my life back on track. Now I’m barreling toward complete ruin and all I want to do is get drunk and forget.”

In nearly five years, Tow had known Livvy to have exactly two drinks. A diabolical plan sprouted in his head and he had to stop his hand from checking his brow for horns. Instead, he grabbed his jacket and stood. “Actually, that sounds like a plan.”

Livvy shook her head. “Yeah, like you’re really going to risk pissing Andy the Pregnant Pressure-Cooker off right now by showing up drunk again.”

“Who says I’m drinking?” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and walked her toward the door. “This is your pity-party, Liv. I’ll play designated driver. First stop, liquor store. Second stop, grocery store. I better grab some more Popsicles. Damn, I wish they sold boxes of just the cherry.”

Andrea climbed from her car smelling of vomit and disinfectant. Fighting the wave of nausea, she noted John’s truck in his driveway and flipped it off. She wanted a cherry Popsicle, a bath and a foot rub. She opened the front door and all three of those things fled her mind.

The living and dining rooms were filled with cardboard boxes but not a single one was full. Incongruous assortments poked out of each box. Why would Livvy pack clothes in the same box as pots and pans? Was that the toilet plunger sticking out of a box of books? She wandered to the kitchen, her face twisted in confusion. At the table, Tow smiled until her gaze fell on the opened alcohol bottles. He shook his head.

“Don’t look at me. I’m not drinking anything stronger than orange juice. Livvy, on the other hand, is trashed.” He tugged her closer, lifted her scrub top and kissed her flat tummy. “Hey, Butterbean, Daddy missed you.”

Andrea snapped her shirt down. “Butterbean is making me want to throw up and Livvy doesn’t drink.”

“Livvy drinks like a fish when she can’t taste the alcohol.” Tow laughed. “Today has been...let’s just say I ended up playing bartender to keep her off the streets. Here she comes.”

Tow wasn’t kidding. Livvy was drunker than the proverbial skunk. And she was pissed. Her copper hair was pulled up in a messy topknot. She was braless and wore her oldest cutoff shorts. Her eyes were unfocused and glassy. She tossed a handful of toiletries into a box holding a food processor and several CDs. Pointing her finger at

Tow, she seemed to be picking up a conversation midway through.

“Do you know how many health codes that violated? They could shut me down for tricks like that. And those damn tables are hard on your ass. What in the hell was I thinking?”

“I understand,” Tow replied vaguely. Livvy whirled around and marched back down the hall. Once she was out of sight, Tow smiled and shook his head.

“Why aren’t you stopping her?” Andrea screeched.

“I’m letting her vent...and learning way too much about her sex life. She’s been like this for an hour, Andy. It shouldn’t be long until she passes out. Here she comes again.”

Livvy carried a stack of sheets and a set of hot rollers Andrea thought died two years ago. Both got dropped in a box full of photo albums. “Okay, so yeah, he’s right and I’m wrong and life sucks a huge one but I didn’t mean to hurt him. He knew what the hell he was doing when he dropped his pants for that slut.”

“I see your point,” Tow said. Livvy disappeared into the hall.

Andrea pounced. “What in hell is she drinking?”

He pointed to the five opened bottles. “Well, she started with that chocolate and schnapps

geriatric stuff but it was taking too long. So I mixed a little of this, a little of that, about a dozen shots' worth, with two cherry Popsicles. I thought one glass would be enough to knock her out but she slurped the entire pitcher."

She glared at him and the grin slid off his face. "I got the idea from John the night we went drinking. He called it a Leftover Hangover. I didn't tell Livvy that name. She wanted to feel good. I told her it was called a Happy Snapper."

Livvy reappeared with a comforter the size of Guam. She stuffed it on top of the food processor and turned to them. A wide smile broke over her face.

"Aaaaandy!" Andrea was enveloped by widespread arms that swayed her back and forth. "My baby sister is having a baby."

"Uh, Liv, why don't you sit down a while?"

"No. I have to be ready for Leo. Did you know he kissed me today, with tongue, and Murphy didn't bite, but then he almost kissed me, too? Then he ripped up a pixie and now he's going to sue me."

Her brain hurt trying to decipher that statement and Livvy wavered down the hall once more. "You wasted my cherry Popsicles so my sister could get drunk?"

"I bought a new box, honey," Tow placated her. He pulled a king-size Kit Kat from a plastic bag. "And chocolate."

She ripped the candy bar from his hand. By the time Livvy reappeared, Andrea had devoured the candy and washed the blender pitcher. Throwing a bunch of mismatched shoes in an empty box, Livvy cocked her hip.

"And another thing. Where in the hell does he get off calling me a fucking bitch? I didn't go looking for Fifi. If I had half a backbone, I'd go tell him where he can shove that damned one-eared bat and his sketchbook."

"Go for it, Liv. Give him hell," Tow encouraged. Andrea's mouth dropped open and he clamped his hand over it.

"I should. Screw it, I will. He can't run away from home all the time."

Andrea pulled Tow's hand away as Livvy shoved her feet into clogs and darted out the sliding glass door.

"Tow! Stop her."

"No, let her go. She needs to get John out of her system. If it takes giving him a piece of her drunk, befuddled mind, let her do it. She won't hold anything back and it'll be good for her."

She huffed, "Her mind is not the piece I'm worried about her giving him."

Tow chuckled, recapping the vodka bottle. "Yeah, well, that might not be such a bad idea either." She glowered and he pulled her close. "Andrea, I'm a divorce attorney. The one thing I know is heartbreak and what it can do to a person. Livvy's not living, she's existing. And it hurts. Trust me, she needs this."

She sighed. She'd been the one to encourage Livvy to sleep with John. It was supposed to be a summer booty call. She never meant to lead her to heartache. "I just hope you're right. With her luck, John will take one look at her and run, leaving her passed out on his floor."

"No chance." He leaned in and pecked her mouth. A strange set of keys appeared out of his pocket. "John dropped his truck keys in the driveway this evening. I saw them when we pulled in. That saved me from letting the air out of all his tires. He's not going anywhere tonight. He's stuck with a full-frontal, pissed-off Livvy attack."

"I don't get it. Why is that a good thing?"

Tow smiled the shark-like smile he used in court and she fought a sudden shudder.

"Because sometimes love is a bitch. Because I'm betting he loves her as much as she loves him. And because I'm a very good divorce attorney. I know exactly how to make a man's life a living hell."

Infomercial...cartoons...CNN...teenager  
headache music...*Seinfeld*...Home Shopping  
Network...*Gospel Hour*...Infomercial...politics  
...Weather Channel...ballgame...black-and-white  
movie...

John flipped through the channels, barely registering the flickering images. Stretched on the couch, the glow from the screen illuminated off his glasses. Today had drained everything out of him, leaving nothing but an empty shell. Like his house. He just wanted some noise, some parody of life. The remote stopped on *I Love Lucy* and his stomach jumped. It was too close to “I Love Livvy” so he punched the button a few more time until the TV paused on the History Channel. *Whatever, that works.*

He dropped the remote to the floor and picked up Livvy’s hair clip. He’d discovered it in the console of his truck while looking for his missing keys. He fastened and unfastened it, letting the rhythmic click drone in his mind. Stolen images washed over him and he bathed in each one while Hitler’s army marched on Poland in the background.

Livvy meowing at him, mischief sparkling in her heather eyes.

Livvy singing softly into Tyler’s hair, swaying in the nightlight’s glow.

Livvy trailing roses down his nose, eyes full of love and tears.

Livvy barreling across his deck with a murderous look stamped on her face.

It took a split second for reality to sink in. The door crashed open and Livvy blazed into the room like a wildfire touched to a dry kindling pile. Jackknifing upright, John barely had time for his bare feet to touch the carpeting.

“Liv, wha—” Her thighs straddled his like a wrestler. Her hands reached for his face and anger rolled off her flushed skin. He got a brief glimpse of enraged pain before his vision went blurry. “Damn it, Liv, give those back. I can’t see!” He reached blindly then heard a muted clank and wondered where she’d tossed his glasses.

“Good. You can’t run away. Just shut up and listen.” The order was heavily laced with fruity alcohol. The uncharacteristic fact stunned him.

“Livvy, you’re drunk.”

“Damn right I am.”

Cherry heat flooded his mouth as she kissed him. A kaleidoscope of thoughts burst into his brain in the same instant. This wasn’t right. She didn’t belong to him any longer, she never really had. He shouldn’t kiss her back. She felt too good to stop. He opened his lips and tasted one last breath of heaven. One kiss, or a series of hundreds



of small ones, would be enough to last him a lifetime without her.

Firm bare legs pressed along his, gripping him with a remembered awareness that sent blood rushing to his groin. How hot she was at the junction of her thighs. Gripping her hips, he pulled her closer.

*Livvy.*

Her back was a long smooth line from hip to neck, and his hands traced every inch. She wrenched her mouth from his with a stuttered breath. "You hurt me."

Like an ice-cold blade, her words stabbed with no mercy. This close, he could still see her eyes, the iridescent sheen twisting the knife deeper. Alcohol had stripped away her barriers and she seethed at him. He relaxed, prepared to be her target, to accept whatever shot she wanted to fire at him.

The Kool-Aid red of her lips quivered. "I hurt you, too. But I didn't mean to. I'd never do that on purpose. But you did. How could you? How could anyone be that deliberately cruel? Why, Murphy?"

"Li—"

"No. No talking. You listen." She leaned back and he lost her into the fuzzy smudges.

He squinted, trying to bring her face back into focus. Angry tears hit his face as she shook his shoulders.

“Why? I loved you. You promised. I could’ve handled almost anything else, but you cheated. And with Fifi! I let you watch me *play with myself*, damn it! What kind of man are you? Were you two laughing at me? Was she good, Murphy? Was it better than we were together? Because I didn’t think anything could be better than that night. Were you thinking about her then?”

Her questions tore into him, each word bleeding anguish. “No! Liv, ple—”

“Shut up! Do you know how much you scared me? Could you feel my fear? Did you even care? I had never been afraid of you until that minute. You terrified me.”

Shame collapsed his lids and filled his mouth with acid. The writer learned how powerful words could be as they sliced with fresh ache. He deserved her contempt but the intensity burned like hellfire. Hurt like he’d never known surged through him.

“You’re mean and cruel and I wish I’d never met you, never loved you. You took something special and threw it away. Like that damn sketchpad. You just pitched it, pitched us, like we were nothing. We were something to me. You tore my heart out then dropped me as if I didn’t matter

and never had. I didn't mean anything more to you than those drawings did."

Her words sank deep, tearing into him. He never knew he could ache so much without a touch. He didn't know if he could survive this beating. His angel carried a sword that cut with more concentrated force than any broomstick.

Beneath his hands, her hips shifted and he opened his eyes to find her suddenly in focus. Her eyes began to droop with alcoholic stupor. She buried her head against his neck.

"I didn't think there was a piece of my heart left for you to break until today. You want the drawings back? You can have them. Take them all. Take me to court, take the Shack, take whatever. You can't do anything worse to me. I don't have anything else for you to take. I gave you everything I was."

Livvy snuggled closer, her words slurring and dropping lower. John let his hand skim up her back, cradling her to his chest. He laid his cheek on her hair. Every nerve cried out from her verbal assault but holding her once more was too sweet. He couldn't let go.

"You stupid asshole. You're in my blood, Murphy, in my soul. How do I live without you now? You tell me. You're the one with all the answers."

The last syllable died away on a faint exhale. Resistance seeped from each muscle until she lay, a deadweight against him. He couldn't move for one long minute. What had she said?

"Livvy, what did you say?" He pulled her away from his chest, straining to see her. "Livvy, wake up, say that again."

She simply sighed and rolled into his shoulder. Cotton absorbed her tears. It nearly muffled her words completely. "I hate you."

His vision blurred from wetness as well as genetics, John took the jab straight to his heart. Butchers gut a carcass with less damage than those terms. Three tiny words, eight letters in total, cut into his chest, grabbed his heart and yanked it out. The gaping wound screamed as she slept.

He stood and carried her to bed. He didn't need his eyes for this trip. Memory guided his feet. He lowered her to her side of the bed, the side he'd not been able to make himself roll to since she'd left it. He pulled the twisted elastic from her hair, smoothing the curls along the pillow. Selfishly, he let his hand linger before moving to her shorts. The button popped and he tugged the faded denim down her long legs, tossing them aside. Just as he had Tyler and PJ, he tucked her in, kissed her forehead and left her to sleep.

John went searching for his glasses but it was impossible. He had no idea which direction Livvy

had tossed them. He crossed in front of the couch, tripped over her shoes and stepped on her barrette. He bit back a curse but the pinch gave him something to focus on other than her words.

Silently slipping back into his room, he closed the bathroom door before turning on the light. The contacts stung his eyes and he let the moisture gather there, washing the sting away. They weren't real tears even if his nose burned and his throat tightened. He refused to look in the mirror before he left the room.

His glasses were under the bar. Livvy had pitched them farther than he thought. He laid them on the counter and picked up the phone. Andrea answered on the second ring. Without identification or greeting, he simply told her to call Pam and tell her Livvy was sick and wouldn't be in to work in the morning.

"She's already off for a few days. Where is she? I want to talk to her." Andrea's voice was cold.

"She passed out. I put her to bed. She'll be fine until morning."

"Leave her alone, John. You've done enough dama—"

He hung up with a gentle click. Damage, yes, he'd done enough damage already. He'd turned love into hate in one fell swoop. He never did anything half-assed.

## Chapter Seventeen

Twenty minutes later, he heard her. The bathroom light sliced across the empty bed in a harsh triangle. On her knees, Livvy retched violently, her back arching with the force. One slim hand held her hair, the other gripped her heaving stomach. John waited in the open door. She retched for so long, he began to worry.

“Livvy, how much did you drink?”

“Go away.”

He waited through another round of vomiting. “How much, Liv?”

“I don’t know. Some peppermint schnapps and chocolate syrup. Then Tow made some Happy Snappers.”

“What the hell’s a Happy Snapper?”

“I don’t know. You told him about it.”

She heaved again, less forcefully. John couldn’t remember telling Tow about any drink recipe except the Leftover Hangovers, and if the bastard had made those for a novice drinker, then John was going to kill him. “Liv, did it have Popsicles in it?”

“Two cherry.” She vomited the words.

Tow was a dead man. Peppermint Patties followed by a slapped-together instant drunk was too much for a beginner's stomach. Livvy was lucky she didn't have alcohol poisoning. "How many did you drink?"

"One. Pitcher." Sliding to her butt on the floor, hair in front of her face, she reached up and flushed the toilet. John caught her before she crashed to the tile. He pulled her to a half-stand and realized she hadn't quite made it to the toilet in time. She couldn't sleep like this. She also couldn't stand by herself.

"Liv, come on, wake up. We need to get in the shower."

She pushed out at him, panic widening her eyes. "No shower. No, Murphy, not with you."

"Okay, okay, shh."

He waited until she clung to him then lifted her butt onto the vanity. He filled the basin with warm soapy water, one arm around her waist so she could lean against his shoulder. If he couldn't hold her forever, he could at least care for her when she needed it.

The washcloth helped revitalize her as he wiped her pale face. She pushed her hair out of her closed eyes, her hand grabbing for his arm when she fell back.

He tried not to frighten her with his words. "Liv, I'm going to take your shirt off, okay? Just hold onto my arm."

He pulled the stained shirt over her head, tossed it in the shower then squeezed water out of the cloth. One-handed, he cleaned her chest, working down to the top edge of her panties. Green polka-dotted cotton. A smile threatened his mouth as he remembered a bright purple pair that hadn't lasted ten minutes. He forced the memory away and dunked the cloth again.

Livvy didn't fight him. He wondered if she was awake when her hand caressed his cheek. "I'm sorry I hit you."

The whispered apology halted his movements but he couldn't bring his face to hers. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. How could I do that to you, knowing what you lived through? I'm so sorry."

Mute with emotion, he nodded and rinsed the cloth. Livvy's slap had been minor and yet she was the only person who had ever apologized. The move screamed with meaning. Re-warming the cloth, he murmured, "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Her nod was almost invisible. The tear that fell was not. He bent low, cupping her heel. Red streaks dotted her left calf and he drew the washcloth down her leg. Her fingers stroked his hair. "I wanted your baby."



He hadn't thought it was possible for his chest to get any tighter. Why did fear have to taste so sour? His eyelids squeezed firm and his voice was broken. "Don't, Livvy."

She swayed but tried to use her hands for balance. When he rose, her eyes found his. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too." The words scored his raw throat.

Cherry lips tilted along one side and she broke the connection with a slow shuttering of her lids. John pulled in a deep breath and drained the basin. Livvy shivered. He snagged a towel and smoothed it along her damp skin. When her hands crossed her breasts, hiding them from him, his throat got tighter.

She was too unsteady to leave so he pulled his tee shirt over his head, tugging it over hers. The color made him smile softly. Livvy never wore red, claiming it clashed with her hair. Tonight she had no choice and didn't seem to notice. He thought the color made her hair seem brighter, bolder, closer to the hue of her mouth. It was adorable.

"I need to brush my teeth." The sentence sounded like one long word as she started slipping back into sleep. Although she struggled, he knew it was a battle she would lose very soon. Her toothbrush still stood beside his in the glass cup

and he held her while she leaned over the sink, spitting foam. When he pressed two white tablets in her hand, she protested.

“Liv, trust me. Take them.” She fought the water too but he got her to drink half a cup. It was the best he could do. Almost asleep, she rocked on the vanity. Smoothing her bangs away from her face made her open her eyes halfway and tilt her cheek into his palm. His knees threatened to buckle.

He helped her off the vanity and steadied her at his side until she was ready to walk. She licked her lips and nodded. Four steps had their feet on carpeting and she shrank back, pulling from him.

“No, I can’t, Murphy. Not your bed, please.” Her words squeezed his gut in an iron vise. His bed had once brought her pleasure.

“It’s the closest to the bathroom. I’m not sleeping there. You’re okay.”

Coaxed back to calm, she let him lead her to the empty bed. She snuggled into her pillow with a sigh. In the bathroom’s glow, her lashes cast tiny shadows on her cheeks and he stroked his thumb across one. The lashes parted and she caught him with a sad drowsy gaze. John squatted beside her and caressed her hair.

She’d leave him in the morning, probably hungover and feeling worse, and he’d never get this close to her again. He wanted her to stay

awake forever, just like this, letting him drown in her eyes. But too much alcohol flowed through her system and her eyes fluttered closed, shutting him out. He pulled his hand from her hair and grazed her mouth with a soft kiss.

“Love you,” came her sleepy sigh.

John rocked back on his heels. Did she love him or hate him? Probably both, he realized. He quietly grabbed another shirt before turning off the bathroom light and leaving Livvy to sleep. In the hall, he paused. He was always leaving Livvy. She hadn’t left him until he pushed her away.

The remote had gotten kicked halfway under the couch and he fished it out, one click halting Germany’s rise to power. Plunged into dark slumber, the house breathed. John stopped and listened. The house felt different. Livvy had come home for the last time.

Leather creaked as he sat, his head laid back into the cushion. Hell could not get any more torturous than hearing Livvy pour out her pain. Pain he’d caused her when all he wanted was to protect her.

Bright starbursts of colored light popped behind his eyelids and he tensed. *Oh God, not now. I can’t handle any more.* The shrink had warned him it would take a while for the medication to build up in his system, to prevent all but the most powerful flashbacks. His hands

gripped the couch cushion and he tried to focus on breathing. It didn't work. He didn't have the strength to fight this one off, and his spine rattled.

Flashes and snippets rushed his mind. He clamped his hands on his skull, a futile attempt to halt the memories. He rolled off the couch, curled into a ball. Carpeting burned his knees and scratched against his forehead. The ghostly whistle of swinging wood stung his skin. His ears filled with distorted voices as the images claimed him.

*Alan, red-faced and sweating... Louder, John... violet eyes wide in terror... If you're going to hell, I'll be right behind you... The broomstick lying on a flat red floor... Buttercream... Tea kettle whistling... Homestyle wisdom in gospel tones... Cursed be the day on which I was born... Livvy, head back and laughing in the sunshine... Gina crouched in the pew, hands clamped over her ears... Vory screaming... Livvy's legs around his hips as she rocked beneath him... A bumblebee bouncing on a white ceiling... Do it! From hell you came, to hell you'll return... Blood streaking Tyler's cheeks... Whispered secrets in pale morning light... A torch springing to life against a black sky... Coward... Chantilly Lace and a pretty face ... I'm not leaving you, Murphy... Wet copper hair spread on white pillows... Plum toenails against his leg as fireworks shimmered*

*overhead... Livvy kneeling before him, angel's wings at rest... Trembling cherry lips... You're in my blood, Murphy, in my soul.*

The aftermath was always hushed. Silence pressed like a too-heavy wool blanket. He had no idea how long this attack had lasted. Now sighted eyes searched the dark, focusing on shadows. John gathered his scattered thoughts but it was a slow process.

Reality came back in snatches. It was night. He was alive and unhurt. He was on the floor. He was under his dining room table. Livvy was in his bed. She was going to leave him when she woke up. She loved him. He loved her. They'd hurt each other. Andros whispered, offering peace.

His heartbeat slowed to normal. Gulping air, John drew unsteady hands down his damp face. Muscles wasted with tension quivered. His knees cracked when he rolled to his feet. Sweat dripped down his forehead and he let the wizard's voice lure him to the study. The silent monitor taunted him. A dry mouth worked to swallow. Blue then white appeared as he clicked files.

Seconds ticked by as the program loaded and John opened the bottom drawer. He pulled out a small stone, stolen from Livvy's landscaping. It gleamed in the lamplight with the glossy color of dried blood. He searched the stone as if it were an oracle of legends and he heard its story.

He began to type.

Despair hung like fog in the now silent room. Both Thorn and Vory were exhausted, slipping deep into a troubled sleep. Jondi had no more tears left, his soul empty and numb to anything other than the swish of Andros's fur as the wizard paced. Huge white feet kicked his knapsack, the opened flap spilling odds and ends over the polished stone floor. Andros heaved a great sigh and bent to pick up the scattered mess.

His massive hand cradled the tiny gray pebbles, black eyes wide with wonder. "Jondi, where did you get these?"

He shrugged, his voice dull and flat. "They're just rocks. I found them in the Dell. I thought they were pretty. I don't know why I picked them up."

"They're blood stones, Jondi, ancient magic. I haven't seen any since I was your size."

Jondi glanced at the large monster. "You can have them."

The wizard's voice trembled in horrified understanding and he closed his colossal hand over the delicate rocks. "Could even he be that evil?"

The wild movements of Andros's eyes, his hurried breathing and the shake of his fur penetrated Jondi's pained stupor. "What?"

Andros didn't speak, just grabbed a small sharp knife and rushed to Thorn's side. The speed of his removing Thorn's bandage frightened Jondi. When he hurried to Vory's side and pulled the blade, Jondi jumped in fear. Andros lifted one small hand and cut into Vory's flesh, the thin line bleeding bright red drops onto the stained bandage.

"What are you doing to her?"

"Come, give me your hand." Jondi hesitated and Andros roared, "Now! Come here."

A brief sting crossed his fur as the blade sliced a short line. Blood welled until Andros pressed the cloth to the wound, soaking the bright ooze. Jondi watched in confused fascination. Andros pounded one small stone into powder, his pestle and mortar grating with a fractured crunch. The blood-soaked cloth spread out on the table held the stain of three friends, three souls linked forever by fate.

"What are you doing?"

"Praying that I'm right and it's not too late."

Smaller than sand grains, the pulverized blood stone fell from Andros's fingers and sprinkled over the fabric. It touched the wide stain from Thorn's head and began to smoke. A thin line of smoke wafted from Vory's blood a second later. But it lay flat and damp on Jondi's before sucking the wet mess up, the powder turning deep red.

Andros drew a deep breath. Using his fingers, he scooped up the wet red mix and dropped bits onto the smoldering patches. Smoke poofed, then the tiny sodden grains sucked the smoke back, turning black.

"What happened?"

"The spell that made no sense. It's your blood, Jondi. Nordrake cursed the Dell. Any warm-blooded creature inside it will get sick and die from his curse...except for royal blood. It's perfect hate. He couldn't kill you outright so he set out to torment you, steal from you what was most precious, your friends."

Hope blinked and Jondi held his breath. "So, can these rocks...can we save them?"

Andros sadly shook his head. "If you were bigger, maybe. But the tainted blood needs to be filtered through the stone and through clean royal blood. You can't survive that."



“I don’t care.” Filled with the strength of every prince before him, Jondi stood firm. “I can’t live without them, Andros. If it takes every drop of blood I have, do it. Nordrake might get my death but he’ll never get my soul as long as they live. Do it.”

“I can’t knowingly take a life even to save another. I—”

“I said do it! I can’t let them die. If you won’t do it, then teach me how!”

Measuring the conviction in his eyes, Andros nodded. “All right, Jondi. I’ll teach you. And then I’ll bury you.”

She’d died and no one had told her. It was the only possible explanation for the throb in her skull. But if she were dead, then she wouldn’t be feeling anything, right? Livvy rolled across the pillow, the simple motion making her hurt more. Bits of memories flooded back. Tow had made her some deliciously cool sweet drink and then everything got fuzzy.

The light stabbed her and she realized she was in John’s bed. *Wait, how did that happen?* A fleeting image of sitting on John’s lap, kissing, and his hands floating across her bare breasts shimmered through the haziness and she groaned. Had she done something really stupid?

Her hands held her head so it wouldn't fall off her neck and she pulled herself from the bed, stumbling to the bathroom. The red tee shirt caught her eyes in the vanity mirror and she slumped. There was no way she'd have pulled this color from the drawer, not even when drunk. She smelled like John, the masculine scent wrapping around her with a twisted comfort. Something had definitely happened.

The cabinet latch echoed, gunshot-loud, and she winced before looking for the Tylenol. She got sidetracked at the two brown prescription bottles on the middle shelf. Livvy blinked and picked up the closest bottle. *Benzodiazepine. Dr. Bernard Stolberg. Manhattan.* The date was last week and the bottle was mostly full. The second prescription had the same doctor's name but listed the drug as Seroquel.

Livvy shoved the bottles back on the shelf and grabbed two painkillers. She greedily gulped two glasses of tap water. Her stomach quivered as the fluid hit. She'd been sick. She knew that. She remembered thinking her stomach was going to explode.

*Wonderful, his last memory of me will be me puking my guts up.*

She splashed handful after handful of cold water on her face, trying to clear the cotton from her mind. Vaguely she recalled yelling at John,

crying, and something about a shower. Trying to focus hurt, so she stopped. What she needed to focus on was getting out of here before John found her awake. There was no way she could face him like this.

She came face to face with him the minute she opened the bathroom door, nearly colliding into him. His hands shot out to steady her as she fell backward. She shrugged his hands off, angled around him and went in search of her shorts.

“Head hurt?” His voice pumped up the throb and she grimaced.

“Yeah.” Her throat was raw, making her voice husky. She coughed and shards of pain stabbed into her brain. Her shorts lay in a ball beside the nightstand. The thought of bending over to grab them nauseated her, so she wasn’t sure she could actually manage the act. Instead, she sat slowly on the bed, careful not to bounce, and pulled the shirt hem as far down her thighs as possible.

Embarrassment heated her face but she had to know. “Did we...?”

“No.” His small smile was gentle and he shook his head. “You just slept. Alone.”

He didn’t look as if he’d slept at all. His hair was messed and tumbled, and the grooves at his mouth and eyes were deeper than normal. Shadows grew under his eyes and tension knotted his shoulders.

“I need to go home.”

“Stay. You’re hungover and hurting. Home will be there in a few hours. Just rest.”

The idea appealed so much she nearly caved on the spot but being here, in his bed, with him in the room hurt too badly. It reminded her of what she’d lost. Pain gave her power and she leaped from the mattress.

And hit the floor. Carpet burned her knees as her head spun.

Okay, so maybe a little more rest before she left was required, just enough to make the room stop circling. John lifted her to the bed, laying her back and pulling the sheet over her hips. She let the blackness engulf her.

When Livvy opened her eyes the next time, pain didn’t explode, it merely thudded. The walls didn’t spin. They only rippled for a second. She just might survive, but only if she got away from John—she didn’t have the resolve to argue with him any longer. She pulled herself out of bed and padded to the bathroom.

John was waiting when she came out. He’d changed into jeans and a bright sky-blue shirt that lightened his eyes but did nothing for the lines of fatigue around his mouth. Steam wafted from the daisy motif mug in his hand, the mug she preferred her coffee in while at his house. He’d

remembered. Livvy fought the wave of tenderness, forcing it away as he taught her, with cruelty.

“Hemlock? No thanks, you drink it.”

He held the mug out to her. “It’s green tea and chamomile. Gina left it here. I think it tastes like shit but it’s supposed to help an upset stomach.”

Livvy didn’t have an upset stomach until he’d said it. Then her insides lurched. *When did he start being able to control my bodily functions?* Grudgingly she accepted the cup, careful not to touch his hands.

“Thanks. I’ll get out of your hair in a minute.”

She blew on the liquid and let the fragrant steam wake her senses. Easing back to the bed, she pulled the blanket over her bare legs, a move she saw he noticed. His gaze jerked from her legs to the wall behind her. Dead air hung for a minute. Livvy couldn’t think of a single thing to say to break the mood that wouldn’t bring fresh tears until she looked over his shoulder at the long cherry dresser. The mirror frame hung empty.

“What happened to the mirror?”

John gritted his jaw before replying. “I punched it out after you left...that night. I didn’t like the man I saw there.”

Livvy recalled the sound of shattering glass and nodded. What more could she really say? A few harsh comments threatened but they weren’t

worth the oxygen. They had hurt each other enough. It was time to let go. It was time to heal.

“Liv, now I need a favor.” Gravel rough, his voice was hesitant. “Will you read something for me?”

“What?”

“Book five. Just the skeleton, really. It’ll be three times the size when I’m finished but... It’s important.” His eyes on the wall behind her, he missed the frown she felt pulling at her lips.

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll steal it?”

He shoved one hand into his pocket. “I trust you.”

“Murphy, I have a headache big enough to stop a freight train and am looking at two of you right now. I really don’t want t—”

“If you love me, Livvy, read my manuscript.”

A heart can only break so many times before it goes cold. Narrowing her eyes, she glared at him. “Low blow, Murphy. That’s blackmail.”

“When the stakes are this high, I’ll use what I have to.” At those words, words he’d used before to soften her anger, his eyes finally dropped to hers. “Please, Livvy.”

Why couldn’t she deny him? Why did he still have the power to turn her insides to jelly? “Fine.”

He picked up his laptop from the dresser and handed it to her. A flash drive stuck out from the

side. "It's the only file on there so you can't miss it."

"I got it." She flipped the screen up and punched the power button. "Go away. I can't read with you hovering."

He turned to leave the room but stopped on the threshold. "I'll tell you straight out, it's raw. But the story's real. To me, it's very real."

At her small nod, he disappeared from sight. Livvy sagged back into the pillows. What the hell was she doing? He'd lied to her. He'd broken her heart. He was going to take her bakery. The computer finished the power-up cycle, and his web browser automatically opened. Her heart started pounding in echo to her head. She had the entire internet at her fingertips.

Without thinking about it too hard, she jumped out of bed and wobbled into the bathroom. She brought both prescription bottles back and carefully typed in the drug names. Anti-depressants. She scowled at the screen. Okay, so maybe John was depressed. She hadn't exactly been spouting sunshine lately either. But something about the armchair diagnosis seemed off.

Nibbling her lip, she searched for Dr. Bernard Stolberg. Her stomach flopped. He was a psychiatrist specializing in the treatment of military personnel returning from combat. John

wasn't a soldier, but he had been in combat all his life.

The good doctor's website was very helpful, the welcome page giving his positive spin on the treatment and therapies for... Livvy's chest tightened and she hit the back button three times, fighting nausea that had nothing to do with her hangover. The medications in her hand were commonly prescribed to treat different aspects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Livvy ran a palm over her face. It made sense. He'd lived through hell. No man could do that and not carry scars. She scanned WebMD and mentally ticked off symptom after symptom. Did John have flashbacks? She knew about the nightmares, the headaches, the mood swings, the aggression. Even the self-destructive behaviors like drinking, speeding and fighting played a role. His anti-social tendencies melded right into the mix.

The list was endless, covering everything from sexual dysfunction—which he'd never suffered from with her—to problems sleeping—which he had with regularity. Her heart clenched at the suicide statistics shown. No, John would never... He was a survivor, period. She clung to that thought.

One symptom stuttered her breath. Hypervigilance was an exaggerated intensity of



fears and emotions, and was often accompanied by increased anxiety and exhaustion.

Wasn't that John to a T? Looking back, she could see the signs. Where any other man would have been upset or worried over a lapse in birth control, John shot into orbit. That forgotten condom had triggered something that rocked him to his core. Livvy couldn't figure out how it related to Alan but she didn't have to. John had obviously made the connection and it had thrown him into emotional overload.

Words swam on the screen and she wiped her eyes before closing the browser. But now he was getting some help. That was good. If she couldn't be the one to take care of him, at least he was taking care of himself. No one else ever had.

Her gaze dropped to the flash drive. She clicked the icon and waited while the file loaded. Something in this story was important to him, important that he relay to her. What could he want her to see? She knew he wrote magic. She'd seen him pull a smile from a sad little girl with only a few strokes of imagination. Was there enough magic in this story to make a miracle and heal two broken hearts? Somehow, that seemed too tall an order for even the great J. B. Flannigan, Master of Monsters.

John responded to sixty-five questions from a fan-based website and no sound from the bedroom. He'd updated his professional blog with the upcoming release information and silence from the bedroom. He cleaned out his overflowing inbox and heard nothing from the bedroom. He'd called Christina and told her to accept the animation offer if she felt it was right. That call left his ear ringing from her excited laugh but he heard zilch from the bedroom. Antsy and tense, he sat, fingers drumming on his thigh, staring at the window. Somehow, he slipped into a doze, the long sleepless night catching up with him.

A door creaked and he shot upright in the chair. Livvy, now wearing her cutoffs under the red tee shirt, hair pulled into a messy ponytail, bolted past the study.

"I'm just getting some toast."

*Translation: I'm not finished reading and don't want to talk to you.*

A few minutes later, she walked by the open door, paper towel holding two slices of toast. She stopped but her head didn't turn toward him. "I need the power cord, the battery's dying."

John dug the cord out of his desk drawer and handed it to her. He couldn't help but notice she made sure their fingers didn't touch. She took a step away then stopped. "Is Vory...am I Vory?"

"Yes."

The confirmation made her head shake. “Even as a pink monster, you hurt me. You really don’t do anything half-assed, do you?”

And then she was gone, the jab stinging like a bee.

Andros did more than teach Jondi. He ground the blood stones, carried Vory from her bed, placed her next to Thorn and wrote the spell on thick vellum for Jondi to read. Then he stood back and watched, eyes wet.

Eyes dry, Jondi laid his hand on the bat’s folded wing, silently saying goodbye to the strongest part of himself. His friend, his protector, his brother of choice, Thorn deserved to live to fight another day. He would never have wanted to end up like this, mindless, pure rage, bent on self-destruction. Jondi’s last gift to him would be peace.

Under that same hand, Vory shivered, her fur petal-soft and hot. Shiny violet eyes opened, capturing his gaze for a long, quiet minute. She smiled and fell back to sleep. Whispering goodbye, Jondi stroked her long lavender hair. She deserved happiness. His last gift to her was comfort.

“I’m ready.” Calm and determined, he stepped away from his friends.

Andros tried one last time. "It will hurt. You're the last of your line and this will mean your death. I won't be able to bring you back."

"I said I'm ready. I want to do this. I can't live knowing I could have saved them and didn't. This way, they live and remember me." A knot formed in his throat and he swallowed, but it stayed there as he looked at Andros. "Thank you for teaching me, for caring for me."

Black eyes shining, the wizard nodded. Jondi turned to the table with a deep breath. The long silver knife stood ready, awaiting his hand. One last time, he turned to Andros and smiled. "Take care of them."

Jondi stepped between his friends, kneeling at their heads as they lay on the stone floor. His hand didn't even shake as he sliced long lines across one arm of each. Blood spewed from both but they never flinched. Jondi jammed the knife into a block of wood he'd laid there for just this purpose. Quickly, he ran both of his palms down the blade, scoring the blue until it parted in a searing double sea of red.

The powdered magic rock stung like fire as he dipped his hands in the bowl but he didn't scream. Instead, his voice was clear,

loud and resolute as he repeated the written spell.

“Soul from my blood. Blood from my soul.

Taint removed, now made whole.

Evil washed by pure white light.

Bind we three, by magick’s might.

Me to her and me to him,

Flow freely blood, yet my life dim.”

His bloody palms clamped across the two pouring wounds in a thunderclap, and enchantment erupted. Windago Mountain groaned under the force and the howling wind burst through the shutters. Vory screamed. Thorn bucked. Jondi gritted his jaw and held tight.

Jondi watched in frozen horror as Thorn cast off the protective spell in a massive outpouring of violence. Razor fangs hissed and spit before he tore into the flesh of his free arm. Once the red spray arced into the air, the bat lunged for Vory. Jondi couldn’t move, bound by coursing magic. He couldn’t even scream as Thorn’s bloody fangs opened wide and bit.

## Chapter Eighteen

Livvy raced down the hall and slid into the room with her chest heaving.

“You cannot kill Jondi!”

John looked at her with hollow eyes. He couldn’t do this. Not only would his readers revolt, he *was* Jondi. He was Thorn, too, and maybe Andros but Jondi—sweet, lovable Jondi—embodied triumph over adversity. Livvy stared at him. An imaginary monster giving his life so his friends could live seemed so valiant and noble, but why? What was John trying to tell her? Maybe she was too hungover to grasp the concept, to read between the lines, but it felt like something was missing.

Did Thorn kill Vory? Was that his way of punishing her in what he called Monsterville? What did Thorn’s insanity mean? How could the series continue if Jondi were dead? Did Nordrake really win? John had to be setting up some magical save, an enchanted switch of some kind. When he didn’t say anything, her heart fluttered to a stony stop.

He meant the gentle monster to die. Wasn’t that some sort of literary suicide?

“I don’t understand you. How can you kill off part of who you are?”

The chair creaked as he stood. He avoided her eyes and sat on the edge of his desk. “I haven’t written the last chapters yet. Tell me, what did you see in the story?”

Livvy rubbed her temples. “I don’t know what you’re looking for, Murphy. I could see you wrote me as Vory. Jondi and Thorn are obviously parts of you. So I guess one part of you loved me, the other part... I don’t know. I got the whole Thorn-hating-Vory thing. Thanks, by the way. Nice move having him rip into me at the pivotal moment. I hope he gets pink-monster indigestion.”

John shook his head. “Liv, Thorn doesn’t hate Vory.”

“Could have fooled me. But then, you’ve done that before, haven’t you?”

John cringed then looked at her. “I’m tired of us hurting each other, Liv. I love you.”

His words stomped on the pieces of her broken heart. “If that’s how you love, I think I’ll just pass. Look, I read your story. Thank you for taking care of me last night but now I’m going home. I’ve got two days to finish packing.”

She made it to the end of the hallway before his voice reached her. “You promised you wouldn’t leave me.”

Her feet adhered to the floor, she felt him walk up behind her. When his hand brushed the loose hair off her shoulder, staying too long in the scattered tendrils that had escaped her elastic, she shuddered.

“Yes, I did. And you swore you wouldn’t be like my father. I guess we both lied. Sue me. Oh wait, you are.”

“No, Liv.” He turned her to face him. She couldn’t raise her eyes, instead focusing on the three flat buttons at his collar. “Did you mean to steal from me?”

She shoved his hand off her shoulder. “Of course not! I just...I didn’t think. They were trash scribbles, not your monsters. You said I could... I would have never touched... I should have known better. I know...knew how much...”

Despite the tightness of her throat, Livvy straightened her spine. Just deserts were never pleasant.

“I’m sorry, Murphy. I misunderstood. I pulled your work out of the line. I’ll tally the income based on any of them and make sure you’re reimbursed every penny plus a percentage of the total line. If that’s not enough, then you do what you have to. I’ll figure something out. You’re not the only survivor in the world.”

Why couldn’t she move? Her feet refused to listen to her brain and walk away. He stood so



close she could see the weave of his shirt, the threads in the buttonholes, the shadow of his hand as it rose once more to her hair. Why couldn't she leave him?

"Keep them. The sketches are yours, use them however you want."

"No. I...I really need to cut all ties. I'll make sure you get them back. I will say thanks again, though. It was your drawings that sparked the original idea of a Dark Cravings line. I just didn't think... Using the drawings without confirmed permission was wrong. I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

His thumb skimmed her cheek and she held her breath, bracing for his anger.

"I don't care about some stupid sketchpad. I care about us."

"*Us* is over, Murphy. You made sure of that."

"I didn't sleep with Emily, Liv. I wanted to push you away and you wouldn't leave me. And bastard that I am, I knew that would do it, would hurt you enough to make you run away. So I lied."

Numbness circled and her brain skipped. "I don't believe you."

That damn piece of folded white paper floated in front of her eyes and she averted her face. How was it possible to hate a scrap of stationary so much?

“Call. I can’t ask you to trust me but just call the number.”

Her anger surged. “I don’t want to talk to your bitch.”

He said nothing, just held the paper out. Muscles jumped along his jawline. Whether it was hope or fury that made her fingers snatch the paper she didn’t know, but she did, and then stalked to his bar. Her hands shook so badly it took two tries to dial the number. Through three long rings, Livvy silently cursed.

A voicemail clicked in. She listened to the entire message, staring at John. He’d crossed to the couch and sat waiting, fingers steepled. She lowered the receiver and walked to him, sinking onto the ottoman.

“A church? Emily is a minister? I don’t understand.”

John raised his eyes and the regret there shocked her. “I panicked, Liv. I flat-out panicked and ran. I ended up at Alan’s old church, looking for...something, answers maybe, I don’t know. Emily Standish is the pastor there now. She’s the Emily I saw, not... Liv, I didn’t cheat on you. I haven’t even thought about another woman, not for one second. But I knew what your father did. So I lied, knowing even as I said it that it was a hurt you didn’t deserve. I’m sorry.”

The ache in her chest eased, leaving only a hollow void. She believed him. But there were so many obstacles in her path she wasn't sure which way to turn. So much bitterness existed between them. Yet when he slowly reached for her hand, she didn't pull away.

"Why a church, Murphy? Why that church? What were you looking for?"

His breath warmed the skin of her thumb as his fingers stroked her hand. Low and deep, like a storm's warning rumble, the grief in his tone belied the bright sunshine streaming through the window.

"In the story, Nordrake's Blood Curse? I lived that. For years, he crammed it in my head that I was stained, my soul was tainted, my blood the curse of demons. I know it isn't real. God knows I spent three years listening to state-appointed psychiatrists tell me it wasn't true." John leaned back against the leather, his chest rising and falling too quickly.

Livvy didn't think, she just moved beside him, curling one knee under her, holding tight to his hand.

"It's like the year you learn that Santa Claus isn't real. You know it. It makes sense. But somewhere inside you, you still have that little bit of hope left that maybe, just maybe, he *is* real. Only for me, it wasn't hope that got buried, it was

fear. When you're a preacher's kid, or stepkid, you hear about hell a lot. It was as real to me as McDonald's, Liv. More real than Santa ever was."

Tears slowly dribbled off her lashes. He was telling her his story. Not the one in an army-green file, not the snatches and bits from a sibling, but his story, his fears, his pain. The shell he'd let crack before was wide open now and he was welcoming her inside.

"He said my mother wouldn't have died if I hadn't been born. Breast cancer was her punishment for my life. But I could save Gina from being stained for sharing my blood by taking her punishments. And I did. I didn't just think I was protecting her back, I thought I was protecting her soul. Every hit, every bruise was excruciating but I was thankful for each one because it meant Gina wasn't damned like I was."

He leaned forward and covered his eyes with unsteady hands. She stroked his shoulder. His back trembled under her palm.

"I was a kid. I believed him. I know it's stupid. I know there is no such thing as Santa Claus or curses. But when Gina told me about...her surgery, everything came back so hard. I felt like it was my fault. I started...I started wondering if maybe he was right."

"Murphy, no."

He staring into nothingness. “I know better in my head, but that little fear inside just kept growing. I tried ignoring it, shoving it away. I didn’t want to believe it. I wanted to believe I wasn’t damned. And I wanted you. That’s when I realized how much I love you. I’ve never loved anyone so much. It scared me.”

She reached for him and he sat back. She laid her head on his shoulder, with his cheek pressed into her hair. “Everything snowballed. I got so...Ty got hurt. My story was going nowhere. I started losing it. And then...when I forgot the condom, it exploded. I couldn’t handle it. Even the remote thought of you... Liv, I’ve never considered being a father, okay? It’s just something I wasn’t willing to risk. If there was the smallest chance he was right...if my Mom died because she had me, then what would my baby do to you? I couldn’t risk it.”

Livvy let her silent tears dampen his shirt. Like Jondi giving his life for his friends, he was willing to give everything to keep her safe. As twisted and mixed-up as his thinking was, supercharged through the horror of PTSD, John had protected her out of love.

John in profile exemplified emotional purgatory. His face, tilted upward by slight degrees, seemed to beg for mercy. With his eyes closed, he’d given his fears to the sunlight, but

sheltered them in blindness. He'd given them to her.

She kissed him. He kissed her back once, twice, three times before pulling her close.

"I'm sorry, Livvy. I'm so sorry. I hurt you so much. I can't even say I didn't mean to. I did. I tried to push you away and you wouldn't leave. All you kept saying was you loved me and would never leave me. God, Liv, you threatened to follow me to hell, exactly what I wanted to save you from. I just wanted you to go before something happened."

Smoothing his cheek, she felt the twitch beneath his skin. "Nothing is going to happen. Even if it does, it's not your fault. Despite your overblown ego, Murphy, you can't control fate."

His scoff was sardonic. She offered a timid smile. His eyes dropped from her face to her neck. The hand from her cheek slid down, caressing her throat. His thumb traced her windpipe. Disgrace furrowed his brows.

"I *made* you afraid of me. I wouldn't have really hurt you, Liv. My mind was all screwed up. I swear to God, I just wanted to scare you into leaving me. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too, Murphy. I wanted to be the one person who never hurt you and look what I did."

She pulled his fingers from her neck only to find his lips there, kissing each inch as he

murmured apologies. His hair trickled through her fingers like silk. Dipping her chin, she caught his mouth. A second chance at love tasted like sugar and salt.

“You saved me, Livvy. Keep the damn sketches, whatever, I don’t care just...don’t leave me. I need you.”

“I’m here.”

The elastic holding her ponytail pulled hard as he burrowed his fingers into her hair but she didn’t care. “I promise I’ll never—actually I can’t do that so let me try this. I promise I’ll try, okay? I went to a doctor...a psychiatrist. I got some medication and... There’s no hiding I’ve got some problems, Liv. I know that. But I’ve got an appointment next week in Charlotte with someone...a therapist. I want to be better for you. I never want you to look at me in fear again.”

“I’m glad you’re getting some help, Murphy. Not for me, but for you. You deserve to be happy.”

“You make me happy.” John eased her hands from his head, cradled them in his palms and brought his gaze to hers. Leather creaked as he slid off the couch, kneeling before her. “Last night you said you hated me. And then told me you loved me. Can you forget the hate, Liv? Can you forgive me? Can you love me again?”

The taste of her tears grew and she stroked his jaw. She didn't have to love him again. She'd never stopped. Pain so fierce only came with love as strong. Livvy leaned in and stroked her nose against his. "Forgotten, forgiven and loved."

A lopsided smile broke out. He brought her mouth back to his for a hard, short kiss before rubbing his nose to hers. "My mom did this. She'd tuck me in bed, kiss me goodnight and then rub noses with me. She said they were angel kisses and were made of pure love. The first time you did that, it shocked me. You gave me something I never thought I'd ever have, angel love."

"Sounds like your mom was a sweet lady." Livvy leaned over, rubbed her nose with his deliberately and then dropped a kiss on the very tip. "And I love her son with all my heart."

"I love you."

His mouth took hers with an intensity that sucked the breath from her body. Livvy clung to him, afraid she would blink and this would disappear. His tongue dove deeper into her mouth, his fingers biting into her sides. No, this was real. John was real. Somehow, he'd worked his magic and all she knew was love.

Suddenly, John moved back and brought her hands to his mouth. He kissed her knuckles then jumped to his feet. "Stay right there. I have something for you."



Livvy laughed. “Are you going to make me read again?”

An excited grin appeared with his nod. He ducked down the hall and she called out, “Is this what loving a writer is like? Am I going to end up needing reading glasses from eyestrain?”

His quiet laugh warmed her, sending bubbles through her veins. The sound of the keyboard made her frown. “What are you doing back there?”

“Give me one minute, okay? Don’t move.” She heard his printer wheeze.

Livvy ran her hands down her face and collapsed back into the cushion. Her stomach gurgled and her knees shook. The urge to scream, laugh and dance in one fast movement zinged through her body. She contented herself with running her feet in place on the carpet.

His footsteps drew her cheek-splitting smile. He’d never looked better to her. Although shadows smudged his eyes, his face radiated the same excitement she felt in her heart. The deep lines around his mouth shifted to laughing creases and he went back to his knees in front of her.

A folded single sheet of paper was held stiffly in his hand and he bit his lower lip. He handed her the page without a word. The paper rattled as she unfolded it.

Dead center, Courier font, the words stopped her pulse.

*Livvy and Vory,  
You are our Angel, our heartbeat,  
our soul.  
We cannot live without you.  
We love you.  
Marry us?  
John, Jondi and Thorn*

Stars flashed in her vision and her throat slammed shut. Every muscle froze solid. She lowered the page and a gasp jerked air into her lungs. On a bed of milk-colored velvet, surrounded by blue, the box John held sparkled with magic.

*Is this really happening? Maybe I'm still drunk and this is a vivid hallucination.* But in no hallucination would her bare thighs stick to the couch. This was real.

"I bought this the day I went to the dentist. I had to wait while the stones were set. That's why I was gone so long. I almost asked you half a dozen times. But I couldn't get the words out." A sound escaped her lips and he smiled, letting a palm glide along her thigh. "Don't cry, Liv. It's better like this. No more secrets between us."

She traced the three stones as he held the box. Unusual but beautiful, the ring glittered in the bright sunshine.

John shrugged one shoulder. "It's weird, I know. The first stone's a sapphire for Jondi, the gentle part of my heart, the part that will love you forever. The other side is an onyx. The jeweler thought I was crazy, but Thorn's as much a part of who I am as Jondi. He's the one who will fight to the death to make you happy."

"And the diamond in the center?" Livvy's voice came out with a wet squeak. "For Andros? Because Vory would be pink."

John shook his head. "For you. The purest part of my soul. My angel."

"It's beautiful." She stared at the ring, her timid fingers touching the cool stones, the smooth velvet. His written proposal wrinkled. Her staggered breath was the only sound.

"Livvy." His voice drew her gaze. A grin angled one corner of his mouth. "I haven't heard a *yes* yet."

She didn't answer and the small smile disappeared from his lips. She stayed silent. His mouth flattened and he eased his hand from her leg. "Does that mean no?"

Her dry tongue darted out against her quivering lip. Regret darkened his eyes and he dropped his head. His shaky hand snapped the box shut. When

his jaw clenched and he looked away, she grabbed for his free hand. "Murphy, I—"

"Why, Liv?"

She heard the sting in his tone, like sandpaper on steel. He tossed the blue box on the couch haphazardly. She waited until he brought his eyes back to hers. "It's just...I need to...you... Children. You said you didn't ever want them."

"And you do." At her nod, he drew a breath then blew it out slowly. "The idea scares the hell out of me, Liv, straight-out piss-my-pants fear. I don't think I could... What happens if I... What if I hurt them?"

Livvy shook her head. "No, Murphy, you wouldn't. You know the pain too well. You've never hurt your nephews. Even though you were messed up, you didn't hurt me. You'd never hurt a child."

"I'm scared, Liv." John pinched his eyes shut and swallowed. The tension never left his shoulders but determination pulled them back. "Okay, if you want them, I'll deal with it."

Livvy dropped her head to her hands. "I don't want you to deal with it. I want you to want it, too."

They sat in silence for a long tense minute. Finally, Livvy lifted her head and fixed an unflinching gaze on him. "Murphy, what if I tell

you I lied and could walk across the lawn and bring back a positive pregnancy test?"

Blood drained from his face. His brows rounded and his mouth dropped. "You told me you weren't."

"I know what I said." She refused to blink, keeping her eyes locked on him.

"A baby?" John slumped. His chest began to heave. He whispered, "You're pregnant?"

Livvy stared. Shock began to fade and his brows furrowed. His lips thinned and his eyes flicked from side to side, jaw grinding. She watched the stiffening of his spine, the tightening of his forearms, the clench of his fists. He rocked to his feet with a single thrust and glared at her with furious eyes.

"You knew? You knew you were pregnant and you got so damn drunk you couldn't stand up? Christ, Liv, what in the hell were you thinking? You can't undo shit like that. Fucking hell, I was worried you had alcohol poisoning." His hands shot through his hair and he spun away.

John stomped two paces then whipped around. The determined slant to his jaw and slashed lines of his brow screamed anger. "And I'm definitely kicking Tow's ass now, dumb son of a bitch. Damn it, you knew? Schnapps and snappers? Jesus, Liv, what the fuck were you thinking?"

Livvy leaped from the sofa with a laugh. John caught her, elbows gripped in hard hands, and yanked her back before she could wrap her arms around his neck. The intensity on his face made her smile wider.

“It’s not fucking funny, Livvy. Do you have any idea how dangerous what you did is?”

“I’m not pregnant.”

He frowned in confusion. His hands dropped away and he took a step back. “But you just sai—”

“I said ‘what if.’ I am not pregnant. Andrea is. That’s why I sold my house to her and Tow. They need it. For their baby.”

“Andrea?” He rubbed his temples. “Then why did you—”

“Don’t you see? When you really thought I was, you didn’t get scared or panic or anything like that. Your first instinct was to keep your baby safe. You got protective, Murphy.”

Shock blanked his features. His tight brows relaxed and his shoulders softened in slow degrees. A twitch danced along his mouth. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

This time, when her arms slid around his neck, he didn’t hold her away. She whispered against his ear. “Sometimes an idea is a lot more frightening than the reality. One day, I want to tell you those words and mean them. Now you won’t be so afraid to hear them.”

His grin widened and he wrapped his arms around her waist, drawing her up until her feet left the floor. "That was dirty."

"Hey, when the stakes are this high, I'll use what I have to."

His words thrown back at him brought a chuckle. "Hey, Liv, want to know something? When you said you weren't pregnant just now, do you know what I felt? Disappointment. How's that for a shocker?"

The surprise in his voice thrilled her. His mouth claimed hers and her heart sang. This is where she wanted to be forever, in John's arms, loved and protected. Not even Thorn's wings could wrap her in such happiness.

"Ask me again, Murphy."

John put her feet back on the ground and buried his hands in her hair. "Will you marry me, Livvy?"

"Yes."

She rubbed her nose against his, giving him angel love. John answered, giving her his version, monster love.

# Epilogue

## *~Book Five: The Blood Curse~*

She stood at the top of the knoll, her back to him, her back to everything but the wide open valley below. Sucking wind through his fangs, Thorn shrugged his sore wings and watched. She didn't move, even though she knew he was behind her. Now, she would always know. Just as he would always know where she was. Air currents kissed her fur, rippling the pink fluff as her ponytails danced. Breath whistled as he blew out. He swallowed across his swollen tongue and walked to her.

Her singing voice bounced in the wind before reaching him. "I wondered if you would come. You've been watching me for an hour, trying to gather your courage."

She irritated him. She always would, with that sharp tongue and sassy wit. He hoped he would be irritated for a long, long time. It was what Jondi wanted. "You have a mouth on you, girlie."

"Says the bat with three-inch fangs." Her sarcasm couldn't hide the tears she wiped away. "Is it over? Is he buried?"



“Andros sent me to get you. Look, I didn’t want you here, that’s no secret. Me and him, we were like an echo. You couldn’t have just one of us. But when he found you...you smelled funny, like danger but sweeter. Now I know it was the Blood Curse. I wanted to scare you off, make you leave, keep him safe. I wanted him to pick me over you. But he didn’t and I got scared. I’d yell and he’d step between us...and I’d hate you more.”

The harsh sound of his sucking air filled a minute of silence. Even now, she stood in front of him, arms defiantly crossed, treating him like a buzzing insect. Thorn raised his arm, the fresh knife slice barely scabbed over and tender.

“I still don’t like you much. But he chose us both so we’re bound, forever.” Grabbing her wrist, he yanked it up. Her knife wound was as raw as his, the bright scab shining wetly in the sun. The pale pink fur glowed lighter against the backdrop of his deep indigo wingskin. He squeezed her arm. She flinched but didn’t care. He wanted her to remember this minute for the rest of her life.

“He gave us his blood, every last drop of it. Now he lives in you as well as me. We live in each other. We’re family, girlie. A mismatched, mixed-up, mingled-blood family.”

Vory tried to turn from him but he wouldn't let her, his grip tightening on her arm. The glare she settled on him was icy, lilac frost.

"Let go, Thorn. If you were scared, it was your own fault. I never tried to separate you two. He never wanted to choose between us. He wanted, he needed, us both. But he's gone and I don't want to be around you anymore."

"Get used to me, girlie, because I'm here to stay by your side forever. He made sure of that. I'll die for you if I have to, but I don't have to like you to do it."

He sucked his fangs in irritation and she jerked her arm out of his grip. Summer lightning flashed in her violet eyes and she smacked his wing. Fresh tears made her words liquid, anger made them boil.

"Stop doing that! It sounds like you have gnats in your teeth, you stupid bat. I know what he did, what he gave us. I felt his blood go into my veins. I felt his life start to fade. I saw Andros carry him away. But what did you do? Why did you bite me like that?" Thrusting up her other arm, she shoved the puncture wound he'd left in his pointed face. "What were you doing when he gave us his life, O Mighty Protector?"

Nonexistent brow cocked, he sneered at her. "You're not too bright, are you, girlie? I made a

circle—him to me, me to you, you to him. I was trying to save all our lives.”

Heartbreak scratched into her face and glitter tears fell like rain. “Well, guess what? You failed!”

Taking one step back, Thorn glared at her. Sobs shook her shoulders and those wide eyes pinned him with pain. His patience snapped. Wings spread at full stretch, red flashing in his vision, he leaned in until his nose touched hers. He made sure his voice hissed and she cringed in fear.

“I never fail.”

He winked at her. Shock painted her face and he dropped his left wing. She looked over his shoulder and sobbed. Waving from the courtyard, Jondi beckoned them back to the castle grounds. Vory stared in disbelief and then brought her slack face back to his.

“But how—?”

“A circle doesn’t end. We saved him like he saved us. We all belong to each other now. He can’t live without us, and me and you need him. We need each other, too. What do you think, girlie? Think you can stomach being blood-related to a cranky old bat?”

Outshining the sun, Vory tossed her head back and laughed. She threw her arms around him, her joy sending bluebirds fluttering from the trees. He

bristled and pulled away, a patch of heat dotting each cheek.

“Wanna fly with me, girlie? Let’s go home.”

## About the Author

Inez Kelley read her first romances in elementary school, under the bedcovers by flashlight when she was supposed to be sleeping. They spawned dreams that never ceased. She wrote her first tale at age eleven and hasn't stopped since, writing romantic comedy, fantasy and anything else that tickles her fancy. Her backlist includes the laugh-out-loud comedy *Jinxed*, the acclaimed fantasy *Myla by Moonlight* and the sequel, *Salome at Sunrise*, and books two and three of the erotic Dirty Laundry series, *Talk Dirty to Me* and *Coming Clean*.

She took her creative advertising honors degree and did every job under the sun, including theater makeup artist and 911 dispatcher before quitting to write. A transplant to the Midwest from the mountains of Appalachia, she loves baking, reading and anything that helps her avoid housework.



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