



PPB

*Treasured*



*Cari Z.*



## Pink Petal Books

Pink Petal Books, an imprint of Jupiter Gardens Press, publishes romance novels where the relationship is primary. It doesn't matter if you want to read super erotic or sweet inspirational books. Pink Petal Books believes that love is a beautiful thing, no matter what form it takes. For more information about Pink Petal Books visit <http://www.pinkpetalbooks.com/>.

**The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated. Permission is granted to make ONE backup copy for archival purposes.**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

TREASURED

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Copyright © CARI Z., 2010

ISBN# 978-0-9829099-4-2

Cover Art ® 2010 by Winterheart Design

Edited by Mary K. Wilson

Electronic Publication Date: August 2010

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Jupiter Gardens Press, Jupiter Gardens, LLC., PO Box 191, Grimes, IA 50111

For more information to learn to more about this, or any other author's work, please visit <http://www.pinkpetalbooks.com/>

# Treasured

Cari Z.



PPB

*Publisher's Note: This novella was written without chapter breaks. In order to keep true to the author's vision of this story, the publisher has chosen not to add any chapter breaks. Thank you for your understanding and enjoy reading.*

The first time I met Reese Daveth, he startled the ever living hell out of me.

My only excuse for not knowing he was a foot behind me and trying to get my attention was total, complete preoccupation with my work. That's good, right? That's admirable. Okay, so staring like a besotted lover at the collection of enchanted amulets on loan from a larger exhibit wasn't exactly my job, but it was related. In a way. Kind of.

I was a grad student at the University of Arcane Studies, getting my doctorate in the history of magic, and working in the university's small museum. I didn't have nearly the power required to adopt one of the more strenuous majors, like Magical Defense or Rites and Laws, but I had the bare minimum of talent required for admission. Those of us who couldn't make our abilities directly useful to society by being healers, telepaths or mages studied softer magical disciplines. History fit right in there. It hardly made my mother happy, and her reluctance to help out was what student loans were for.

I was in the process of attaching the nameplate for the exhibit to its enchanted glass case when I got distracted. The curator was supposed to identify exhibits, but she'd been working nonstop at the other museum since the artifacts had arrived. That left me to finish arranging things here, since I was the only other person keyed to the wards on the cases so I could touch them without setting off alarms. My hands were poised to attach the nameplate, but the compellingly bright blues and whites and golds beneath the glass had stopped me short.

I don't know how long I stood in a stupor in front of the case, but I definitely remember coming out my reverie. A sudden sharp tap on my shoulder followed by a loud, "*A-hem*," shocked my body back into motion. I proceeded to jerk away, the nameplate falling from my hands to the floor as I spun around with a shout.

"Steady there," a warm voice laughed. I stared at the cause of my distress, my breath catching in my throat. I'd just flipped out in front of a shifter. A hot, gorgeous, probably licensed to kill shifter of some sort, and that wasn't the kind of thing you wanted to do with a group that reacted poorly to jumpiness.

Shifting demanded such an incredibly high metabolism that it was impossible for them to be anything other than muscled and wiry, every edge sharply defined. Easy to identify. This guy had that kind of a build, long and lean like a runner, but he wore a very nice, tailored to fit suit, much nicer than he'd be wearing if he worked for the government. His hair was long too, free flowing like a black waterfall across his shoulders. His eyes were dark brown and his skin tan, his accent sounding British.

"Sorry," the man continued, sounding anything but sorry. "If I'd known I was going to frighten you like that I'd have been a bit more restrained."

"I wasn't frightened," I said automatically, resenting the fact that I'd actually been. Things very rarely took me by surprise, and when they did I tended to be a little over the top. I lowered my hands back down to my sides and tried to relax. "Can I help you?"

"Perhaps," he replied with a small smile. "But don't let me interrupt your work, mate. Got things to do here, I see."

"Right." I glanced around the floor until I saw the nameplate, a few feet away. I bent over to pick it up, trying not to move like I was nervous. When I stood back up again and saw the smirk on his face, I figured I'd failed miserably with that. "This will just take a second." I turned back to the display case and centered the plaque on the top front edge of the glass, then spoke the attaching charm. The small surge of power flowing through me left me feeling both energized and weak at the same time, like I wanted to bounce off the walls but couldn't because my legs would fall out from under me. Charms weren't my strong suit. I wavered.

“Easy, mate.” In an instant the man’s arm was around my waist, holding me firmly. He was taller than me by a few inches, but far wirier, and he didn’t seem even seem to register my weight as I sagged a little against him. Shifters tended to be stronger than they looked. “All right, then?”

“I’m fine,” I said, swallowing heavily before I moved away from him. Coming into close contact with a shifter wasn’t exactly relaxing, especially not one as good-looking as he was, but it did motivate me to stand on my own two feet. “Thanks. What can I help you with?”

“I was more curious than anything else,” the man replied easily. “I’m in town for the week, was looking for things to do, so I came by here.” He gestured towards the case. “I haven’t seen pieces like those since Istanbul.”

“They’re originally from Istanbul,” I replied, relaxing a little. Talking about work was something I could do much more comfortably than standing around fumbling with nameplates. “They came in with the Karun Collection.”

The man tilted his head slightly as he looked between me and the case. “I thought that was being held in the Museum of Art and Science.”

“It is. They loaned us some of the lesser pieces.”

“Smaller, maybe,” he said as he stepped closer to the case, eyeing the amulets speculatively. “But hardly lesser. A God’s eye is a powerful amulet of protection, and there are some very fine examples here. Some of them even have secondary enchantments on them, I see.”

“You can see that?”

The man grinned again. “Read it on the plaque.”

I felt myself blush. “Fast reader.”

“I’ve developed certain little skills,” he said modestly, but his eyes were sparkling. “Which is the one that opens the wearer to new influences?”

“The far right,” I said, turning back to the case to look at the treasures inside of it. “The gold and lapis lazuli.” It was an incredibly fine example, about the size of a silver dollar and beautifully restored by the museum staff in Istanbul.

“Lovely,” the shifter said as he stepped closer. A warning ripple flashed across the display, and he smiled and held up his hands. “I know better than to touch. Glass would let my hands through and then hold me if I tried it, right?”

“Right,” I said. The glass case was magically enhanced to withstand fracture, even from gunshots or molten-hot energy bolts. Anyone who touched the glass without being keyed to the glyph triggered an alarm, and anyone who tried to force the glass, even if you were keyed, would be held fast by it. It was a beautifully constructed spell, and a lot of museums were using it for security these days.

“It reminds me a bit of Shoshenq the Second’s Eye of Horus,” he mused. “Just needs carnelian and a bit of faience.” He shrugged then. “And it would have to be a bracelet, not an amulet, but the look’s right.”

That took me by surprise. “You’ve seen his funerary collection?”

“In Cairo, back in January,” he said. “That was right before the break-in, of course.”

“Wow.” A group of thieves had managed to break into one of the most heavily-guarded museums in the world and get out with millions of dollars worth of artifacts, almost all of it jewelry. “That was so sad. You’re lucky you got to see it.”

“Sad?” The shifter raised one slender, dark eyebrow. “Pathetic, maybe. It’s incredible that the museum wasn’t able to safeguard its own artifacts.”

“Not that aspect of it. It’s too bad the museum got robbed, but the sad thing is that the artifacts are lost to the public now. Thousands of people visit the Cairo Museum every year,

and they'll never be able to see the pieces that were stolen." I could see the bracelet in my mind's eye, the stylized Eye of Horus pieced out in gold and gems. "I've always wanted to visit Cairo. I bet the display was exquisite."

"It certainly was," he agreed, then held out his hand. "Rhys Daveth."

I took his hand automatically, wincing in anticipation of his squeeze, but it didn't come. "Reese?"

"Yes, mangle it as you Americans are wont to do, mate," he replied, but he smiled. "And you are?"

"Daniel Hart."

"You the curator here?"

"No," I said with a small laugh, "just a grad student. I work here part-time."

"What do you study?"

"The history of magic. Magical artifacts, actually."

"What about your ability?"

I shrugged. "Nothing fancy. Just enough to get through the doors." Having futuresight was nice, but it only really counted for something when it lasted longer than a second.

"Uh-huh." Reese looked at me speculatively for a long moment. "I'm new to this city. Never had much reason to spend time in the states before, and never this far south. Where's a decent restaurant?"

"Define decent."

"Five stars."

Well, that wasn't really a surprise, given the suit. "Um, you should try the Falcon. It's attached to the Marquis Hotel. It's supposed to be excellent."

"If it's as good as the company, I'm sure to enjoy it."

"Who are you meeting?"

"Just met him, mate." Reese clapped me on the shoulder. "When are you off?"

I glanced at my watch. "Another fifteen minutes. I'm closing things up now." My latent confusion caught up to the rest of me. "Why do you want to take me to dinner? We just met."

"Don't know anyone else in this bloody swamp of yours, mate, and at least you're pretty and can talk art. I'll wait out front." He smiled at me, turned and walked casually out of the hall, leaving me gaping. Gaping, flustered and incredibly turned on all in under five seconds. This guy was good. What a great impression I was making, too, very suave acting like a fucking virgin on a first date. I didn't have to question how he knew I was gay. Shifters had instincts that went way beyond normal.

Not that any amount of embarrassment would have made me change my mind about going out with him.

I didn't own a car. Most college students are public transport-type people, but I had the feeling that wasn't going to fly with my surprise date. Fortunately I didn't have to worry about it.

"Mind if we take mine?" he asked as I exited the museum. "Might as well get some use out of the bloody great thing while I'm here."

"Sure, where is it?"

"There." He pointed at a gigantic, ostentatious silver Hummer sitting in the parking lot. It was the most ridiculous car I had ever seen. I couldn't keep from laughing a little.

"I pegged you more as an Aston Martin type of guy."

"What, James Bond?" Reese grinned at me. "Danny, I wouldn't want to scare a beautiful bird like that by running her through these streets. Nah, I thought to myself, 'What's the

most American, least practical car I can get during my little sojourn to your fair city?' The answer was obvious." He pushed a button on a key fob and the car beeped open. "You drive."

"Drive that? I wouldn't even be able to park it."

"The hotel's bound to have valet, Danny," Reese said, walking towards his grotesque rental. I followed him over and climbed into the driver's seat. "Glad to have you here, mate. I can't wrap my head around your cracked way of driving. Not really my thing anyhow, more used to being driven."

"You have a chauffeur?" I asked, pulling the monster car onto the street. I'd never driven anything this big before. It made me nervous, which was good because my nervousness from the driving might help disguise my anxiety over being with Reese. I felt more than a little strange driving to the city's nicest restaurants in a Hummer with a gorgeous guy about whom I knew almost nothing. This wasn't the sort of thing I did. Ever. A fun night for me might involve going to a bar with some friends, but more often than not it meant staying in with a book. I hoped all he wanted to talk about was art, because there was nothing to learn about me that was remotely interesting.

"Cab or the tube, mate. New York's more my type of place. That or somewhere with a half-decent railway."

"Do you live in London?"

"Sometimes." Reese shrugged a little. "I travel a lot. You ever been there?"

"Once, when I was a kid."

"Lovely rotten old place, isn't it? Gets better every time they open a new pub."

"I wouldn't know," I said self-deprecatingly as I checked the street signs. We were close to the hotel. "I was a little young for pubs. All I really remember about London is the British Museum."

"Fantastic collections. Plenty of Turkish pieces there, if I remember right."

"Yeah, some of the Usak treasure was sent there after the fake was discovered in the late nineties," I said enthusiastically, pulling up in front of the Marquis. "The British Museum has some of the best security in the world. They need it. They have more magical artifacts there than any other place, too."

"The Louvre for the Mona, the Uffizi for the Italians, the Smithsonian to be overwhelmed...every great museum has something to offer." Reese opened his door and got out, gesturing for me to join him. I handed the keys over to a smiling young woman in a black valet uniform, feeling embarrassed at having to cop to having anything to do with the Hummer. God knows what she thought I was compensating for. Maybe having poor fashion sense.

"I'm not really dressed nice enough for this place," I said with a glance down at myself.

"You're with me, mate. I'm dressed nice enough for both of us." He smiled again at me as we walked into Falcon together. A hostess showed us to a table immediately, probably as charmed by Reese's looks and accent as I. We sat down, and I reached for the water. I needed something to combat the dryness in my mouth. What the hell? What was I doing in here? I glanced around the restaurant. I'd never been into the Falcon before, and now I knew why. I felt like I could barely afford to look at the silverware.

"Look a trifle edgy there, Danny."

I smiled despite myself. "A trifle? That's all? I'm hiding it better than I thought."

"Well yeah, I was being polite. Trust me. You can relax. Places like this accept a certain attitude. It's at least as important as the look or what you order. I could wear nothing but me smile and a linen napkin and still get a table with the right act."

"I bet you could." Picturing Reese in nothing but strategic napkins made me blush, and I looked away. I didn't focus on anything in particular, just stared blankly for a moment. My eyes suddenly itched, and I saw a pen fall onto the ground. I was bending over to pick it up before the waiter was within five feet, when he stumbled slightly and the pen slipped out of his apron pocket. I grabbed it and handed it back to him. "There you go."

"Thank you, sir." The waiter continued on his way, and I straightened to find Reese looking at me speculatively.

"How'd you manage that, Danny?"

"Manage what?"

"To get that pen. My reflexes aren't that fast, and I rely on them for a living, mate. The bloody thing wasn't on the ground before you were down there on retrieval."

"Oh. That's my talent." I hadn't even realized I was using it.

"Picking up pens?"

"You're a smart ass, aren't you Reese?"

"Only for people I care to make the effort with," he replied. "To everybody else I'm just a bastard." A waiter came over, and Reese ordered wine for both of us without bothering to glance at their list. It didn't seem to be a problem. "Everyone has that bottle, and if they don't they'll find it for us," he said reassuringly as he took in my expression. "Anyway, you were saying?"

"I've got futuresight." The flaring look of interest in his eyes was flattering, and I savored it for a moment before adding the caveat. "I'm only good for a second or two. Enough to grab pens before they hit the floor, but not much else."

"That sort of thing can be trained. Just a few short steps from futuresight to a full-out seer."

"My teachers never thought more training was necessary," I said with a shrug. "I never scored high enough on any of the tests to rate extra instruction."

Reese snorted softly. "Bloody fucking ridiculous. Futuresight's one of the rarest talents out there, even a second should rate extra instruction. How's your control?"

"Pretty good." Reese gave me a look. "Okay, it's really good. I can basically call it up on command, but it really doesn't get me much."

"I bet a second'll get you a lot of good things, mate." The wine came, and Reese picked his glass up with one hand, then leaned towards me, propped on his elbow. "Let's do some looking." He glanced out over the restaurant. "Couple over by the corner."

I followed his gaze, letting my eyes relax. "She's about to laugh." We could just hear the giggle from here.

"Anyone could have seen that coming."

"Doesn't mean I didn't use my talent to see it."

"How about that bloke over there?" He pointed towards an obese man with his back to us.

I waited, looking. After a few seconds I said, "Spitting out a bite." A moment later he was bent over his plate, making a surprised noise. "I don't think he's choking," I added. "It felt like he chipped a tooth on a peppercorn."

Reese raised an eyebrow. "You can feel them, too?"

"Not really. It's more of an impression than anything else."

"Very interesting." Reese looked around again. "Girl in the tacky gold dress."

"It's not that tacky," I objected.

"Danny, in a place like this, a girl wearing a dress that awkwardly revealing makes it tacky. Didn't even match it to her shoes, either."



"Now I know you're gay," I laughed.

"Bi, pet, bisexual. Come on, don't tease me. What's she about to do?"

I looked over at the young woman. She seemed to be enjoying herself, but he was right about the shoes. "Taking off the left shoe." There it went, a powder-pink stiletto now dangled from her big toe.

"Lovely," Reese applauded. "That's a pretty talent, Danny."

"I like it. It's come in handy a few times."

"I bet. Can you use it on me?"

"Why, what are you planning on doing?" I asked.

"If I told you, you'd not have to look." His smile was wolfish. "C'mon now, pet, give me a spin."

Oh God, there was no way that innuendo was unwitting. "Fine. Get going, hot shot. Do something impressive."

Reese picked up one of the small silver forks, balancing it on his index finger. I relaxed my eyes and looked at him, really *looked*. He flipped it around in the air, grabbed it by the tines and began to clink it rapid-fire between his wine glass, water glass and the other fifteen pieces of cutlery the restaurant seemed to think necessary. "Mission Impossible." I *heard* him change the tune just before his hands shifted. "White Christmas." He changed it again. "Um...God Save the Queen?" I pulled my hand back just before he tapped me with the end of the fork. "I thought you'd move faster than—"

Reese leaned across the table and kissed me. It was brief, but staggering. He leaned back and grinned at me in a satisfied way as I sat there, stupefied. "See that coming, pet?"

"Yes...but I didn't believe that you actually would."

"Visions ever lie to you like that?"

"No...but..."

"You look confused, Danny. Let me help you out with that." Reese took a sip of his wine. "I want to spend the evening with you, in a nice restaurant with decent wine and bloody marvelous A/C. Not too complicated, right? So no need to look shell-shocked every time I pay you a compliment."

"Kissing me is a compliment?"

"You think I go around kissing random people on the street, pet? Relax." He sat back in his chair, clearly practicing what he preached. "Let's talk some art. That'll cool you down."

We got through five courses in three hours, finishing with a caramel and currant bread pudding. My unease had vanished four courses earlier, and I laughed more in one evening with Reese than I had for the last month. I'd been a little at loose ends since the beginning of summer. No classes to teach, my thesis and research not taking up nearly enough of my time, and my few good friends travelling. Reese was more than enough to fill the vacancy that in my life, at least for the evening I would have him. I hoped I'd have him, at least. All signs seemed to point to "Yes" but I didn't want to make any assumptions.

"Why do you let me ramble on, pet?" Reese asked expansively, scraping the bottom of the pudding plate. He'd eaten easily twice what I had, which wasn't surprising, but I hadn't managed to figure out yet what type of shifter he was.

"I like listening to you talk," I replied. "You've been everywhere, it seems like."

"Jet setter, Danny, that's me."

"How does your work take you all over the world? What kind of business are you in?" I'd heard a lot about where he'd been and the fun things that had gone wrong, but very little about what he did, and almost nothing about who he was.

"It's dull stuff, for the most part. Lots of paperwork, lots of planning, meetings...like I said, dull. You're much more interesting."

"You're such a liar, Reese."

"You don't tend to rate yourself very high, do you mate?"

"I know myself. I'm an expert in magical artifacts and antiques, I work at a museum and my idea of a good time is researching and restoring." Damn, I really was boring.

"I like museums," Reese said, finishing his wine. "I like experts. Not enough people care enough about a subject to become an expert at it, pet. Terrible lack of expertise in this world, and not enough people know how to do research and...restoration." He looked at me speculatively. "I like you, Danny. I'd like to get to know you better."

"You've had all evening," I pointed out.

"Yeah well, I'd like all night, too." He grinned at me. "What do you say, pet?"

It wasn't even a question. "Where's your hotel?"

"Right here."

I blinked. "You're staying at the Marquis?"

"Makes it convenient, doesn't it Danny? No need to designate a driver, which is good because we've had two bottles of wine."

"I've only had a glass," I pointed out. "I thought I might be driving."

"And here I thought you were just playing hard to get."

"I'm not hard for you to get, Reese."

"Glad to hear it, Danny." He put his empty glass down and stood up, straightening his jacket before holding his hand out to me. "Shall we, then?"

He looked beautiful and confident, and I wanted to experience him. I wanted to become him for a while, I wanted to hold him close, and take a part of him for myself. I settled for taking his hand and letting him pull me to my feet. "Let's."

We went up to his room. The lobby and the halls might have been deserted for all the attention I paid to them. I had eyes for only one person. The elevator was mirrored, and his reflection was everywhere, surrounding me. I loved it. When the elevator door finally opened I didn't pay attention to the floor number or the room number; all I paid attention to was the feel of my hand in his and how warm his skin had become. As soon as his door shut, he turned into me, closing the distance between us in an instant. Reese was a few inches taller than me, leaner and longer, and his arms completely enfolded me. He kissed me again, and it was more than staggering this time, it was consuming. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back, leaning into him and pressing my entire body to his. He tasted like warm wine, so hot and passionate and all of it focused on me.

Eventually I fell back to breathe, just a hands-breadth away from him. Reese didn't stop touching me, rubbing the tip of his nose across my cheek before pressing small kisses to my jaw line. "How you feeling, pet?"

"I feel like I'm going to melt," I whispered.

"I'd rather make you explode, Danny-boy," he said before biting the edge of my ear. I gasped and grabbed the back of his head, keeping him close. He moved his lips to my neck and bit there as well before coming back to my mouth and devouring it. "I want you, pet." Reese's voice was low and intent, harsh with desire. Desire for me. If I hadn't already wanted him so badly, his voice would have been the ultimate aphrodisiac. "I want you in my mouth and all over my tongue, pet." His fingers were already unbuttoning my shirt, pushing it back from my chest. "I want you beneath me, and I want to be beneath you." His hands deftly undid my belt and the zipper of my slacks, one of those hot, long-fingered hands slipping inside to touch me. I moaned without meaning to; it was ripped from my throat. "I want to

taste you...I'm thinking now." He slipped down my body like a silk scarf, baring skin as he went, finally sinking to his knees and smoothly pulling down my briefs. "Lovely," he grinned, leaning forward and nuzzling his face against my erection. I looked down at him and groaned.

"Fuck."

"Eventually, pet," he said before taking me into his mouth.

I've had blowjobs before, not a ton of them, but I always enjoyed them. What's not to enjoy? I had never, ever had a blowjob like the one that Reese was giving me. He loved it. He seemed to enjoy it as much as I did, and I was liking it a whole hell of a lot. His tongue was everywhere; his lips gripped me tightly as they slid along the length of my cock. His fingers, those long, talented fingers, moved against my base and below, cupping and rolling my balls to press my perineum. It was so much sensation, so incredible, and the sight of him on his knees, all lean power and eager attention on me, sucking and humming low in his throat...there was no way I could last. No way at all. I ran my fingers into his long hair and pulled him forward, coming hard into his mouth. Reese swallowed my essence down, every drop, murmuring appreciatively. Eventually I had to pull him back, I was so sensitive. "Reese...oh God..."

"Mmm, Danny." He kissed the tip of my cock, and then stood, wrapping me up in his arms again. "You're delicious." He grinned, and looked me up and down. "And so, so pretty. Runner, pet?"

"Swimmer," I said breathlessly. I let him support my weight some as I recovered. He really was strong. "What kind of shifter are you?"

"Top secret, mate." He kissed me gently. "Maybe I'll tell you some time. Maybe you'll just have to find out on your own."

"A guessing game?" I asked playfully. "Twenty questions?"

"Maybe a scavenger hunt. I like to reel my prey in slow." He started walking me across the floor. "And right now I want to reel you into the bedroom."

"I don't think I'll fight too hard." I laughed suddenly. "I don't think I can fight at all right now. You've turned me into putty."

"Excellent. Flexible, malleable...I like that in a man." He laid me back on a gigantic bed. "I like hard women and pliant men. I want you, Danny."

"You can have me. I'm an easy lay after you softened me up with a fantastic dinner and a blowjob," I said, all smiles.

"Was thinking I'd go with more of a slow, torturous lay," Reese confessed. He reached down to unbutton his shirt, and I helped him, revealing his body inch by inch and loving every bit of the exposure.

"You're gorgeous."

"Thanks, pet. Blessed by God and country, you know." He pulled off his shirt, kicked out of his pants and then he was naked against me. It felt incredible. Every muscle stood out in stark relief, not an ounce of body fat remaining on him. I was in good shape from swimming, but it didn't exactly make me cut. Reese was like an anatomical drawing. He was beautiful, and he knew it, smirking down at me. His smug look faltered when I took him in my hand. "Danny..."

"Reese." I smirked at him now. "Are you going to keep posing, or are you going to fuck me with this?"

"Oh, you're going to get laid," he assured me. "Condoms and lube are in my bag, one sec." He pulled off of me, and got up, walking over to the bag lying on a dark leather chair. I couldn't take my attention from his opening the overnight bag. He removed several pieces of

dark clothing, surprisingly simple given the incredible suit he'd just stripped out of, and then pulled out a box of condoms along with a small bottle of lubricant. He looked over at me and arched an eyebrow. "Ready to be fucked, then?"

"Such romance," I laughed. "No wonder you're irresistible."

"Nah, it's not the romance, Danny," Reese said as he came back over to the bed. He fell onto me, pinning me down. "It's the handsome face, the fantastic body, the money and my devastating sense of humor. And the accent. You Americans can't get enough of that."

"That and your humble nature."

"Course, pet." Reese kissed me quiet and didn't stop. He slicked his fingers and reached down while I pulled my knees back. He stroked over my hole, swallowing every moan I made. He made some noise of his own as he eased one finger into me. "Lovely, pet, lovely. So perfect and tight." He gave me a finger for a while, then two, loosening and stretching. "You want me, Danny?"

"I want you so much," I murmured. "Please, Reese."

"Right." He removed his fingers and reached for a condom, placing it in my hands. "Lend a hand, pet." I slowly rolled the condom down over his long, smooth cock. I wanted him in me so bad I trembled, hard and ready to go just minutes after my last orgasm. He spread lube over the latex, and then slid into position. Reese didn't say anything now, not a word as he pressed his length slowly inside of me. He held my eyes intently, watching every expression as he buried himself in my body. I watched him until the feelings made me close my eyes, so full and so tight, pleasure and pain all at once. He felt amazing inside of me.

He started fucking me slow, just rocking a little at first, then eventually pulling further out and thrusting back in. It was still slow, and becoming as torturous as Reese had promised. He held me around the waist with one arm and cupped the back of my head with the other, holding me still to fuck me with a look of satisfaction. "You love it," he whispered.

"Reese...yes...don't stop."

"Not going to, pet." He went a little faster, thrust a little harder, and bit his lower lip for a moment. "Christ, Danny-boy...you're so fucking tight." He slanted his lips against mine. "Lovely little pet." He kissed me again, then freed his arm from my waist and reached between us, rubbing his palm across my cock before gripping it firmly. "Gonna come again, Danny?"

"I am if you keep touching me like that," I groaned. "Reese, fuck, go faster."

"Not yet." When he said that he meant it. He fucked me for what felt like forever, and eventually his hand on my cock became the only thing keeping me from coming, holding me in an iron grip while he drove me senseless. Pleading became begging became swearing, which eventually became nothing understandable at all. Reese finally sped up and pounded me, losing some of his incredible control as he neared the edge. Finally he let me go, and I came again, spurting my seed into Reese's hand and clenching my muscles around him. He let go then as well, thrusting deep and coming with a cry.

The aftershocks seemed to last forever. Even in his newly listless state Reese managed to keep from squashing me, resting his head against mine, but keeping his weight on his elbows. I kept my eyes closed, and eventually he kissed me there, against my eyelids, then my eyebrows. "Lovely, Danny-boy."

"Mmm."

"Tasty, too." I opened my eyes and saw him licking my seed off his fingers. He raised one eyebrow. "What?"

"You are too sexy to be real."

"Not quite, pet, but it's sweet of you to say." Reese pulled out and pulled away, just long enough to take care of the condom, and then lay down next to me again and snuggled up close. "You smell nice."

"What, like good food and great sex?"

"Like..." Reese considered it for a moment, then shrugged. "Something nice. Nice is indefinable, pet, doesn't have to smell like anything specific. Just nice."

"Well, nice is better than nothing."

"You're far from nothing, Danny."

Well that was good to hear. And now...now was it time to go? Probably it was time to go. I didn't really want to. I felt so relaxed and sleepy and safe next to Reese, but I probably should go anyway. "Reese...do you want me to—"

"Stay? Yes, pet." He kissed the side of my head. "Do stay. Need to work early?"

"Not until noon."

"Perfect." He kissed me again. "Sleep, pet. Sleep."

I slept.

~\* \* \*~

I was at work by noon the next day, after the nicest morning-after I'd ever experienced. We slept, and I dreamed very strange dreams of hallways I didn't recognize, lined with beautiful sarcophagi. Reese woke me up with another blowjob, then ordered in room service. I went down on him for dessert. I had to get home to clean up and get fresh clothes before work, so I left Reese drowsing on the bed at eleven-fifteen. We'd enjoyed a lazy morning, and then I'd left, no more plans made, nothing promised. It was all very casual and comfortable...and that was the only part of the morning after that left me unsatisfied. We hadn't made any plans. That had been it. The sum total of our interaction together brought to a sweet and sensible close, but I found myself more than a little depressed. I didn't push it, though. He had picked me out, picked me up, and shown me a very good time. He was a businessman, just visiting the city and living out of a hotel. He had other things to do. Possibly other people to do, but I didn't want to think about that either. I just wanted more.

I went to work like usual. The university was fairly abandoned during the summer, but the museum stayed open to the public. We had more than our fair share of people stopping in thanks to the collection of amulets and the press the other exhibit received. Professor Constance Glau, the curator of our museum, was helping out again at that exhibit today, getting it ready for its official grand opening, complete with gold embossed invitations and a black tie guest list. That left me to run our small show, which kept me fairly preoccupied. That's the only reason he was able to surprise me again.

One second I headed towards the back to grab some more flyers on the exhibit, the next a searching hand wrapped around my waist from behind. "Whoa!" I freaked out, and spun away from the touch, crashing back into the wall. Reese moved his sunglasses onto his forehead to stare at me incredulously. He was dressed a little more casually today, in a designer t-shirt and dark jeans appearing to be painted on. He still looked fucking fantastic.

"You'd think a night of shagging would have left you a little more relaxed, pet."

"Good God." I ran a hand through my hair and smiled awkwardly. "Sorry. I'm just not used to being surprised."

"People with futuresight usually aren't, pet. Any particular reason you never see me coming?"

"Probably because you sneak up on me from behind," I said wryly.

"Exaggeration, Danny. I creep in an adorable manner. I don't sneak."

"Got it. You're an adorable creep."

"Ta muchly, pet."

"So," I said after an awkward pause, "You just couldn't stay away from the exhibit?"

Reese smiled. "The exhibit is lovely as ever, Danny, but it's not the reason I stopped by today. I've got a party to go to tonight and I need a date."

"What kind of party?"

"The opening of the new exhibit at the Museum of Art and Science."

"Wow." I was impressed despite already knowing Reese was a pretty impressive guy. "Is this through your business? The opening is going to be really exclusive, even my boss could only get a ticket because she's working it."

"Yeah, business is brisk, pet. So, you in for the opening?"

"I'd love to go, but are you sure I'm the person you want along for this, Reese? I'm not exactly black tie material, and some of the people who are going to be there are kind of...conservative."

"Worried about my reputation or yours, Danny?"

"I don't have much of a reputation to ruin," I said simply. "I'm out, and anyway I'm still just a student."

"I'd like you to come with me, pet," Reese said. "It's not likely I'll jump your bones at the party, so we don't have to worry about labels, and besides, you can explain things to me. This kind of affair can be bloody boring if you don't bring your own entertainment."

I smiled. "Do I entertain you, Reese?"

"Too right, Danny." He stepped closer and brushed a hand across my shoulder, straightening my collar briefly. "You should say yes, pet, I've already got you a tux. I took your measure last night."

"You certainly did." What the hell. I did want to see him again; I'd been thinking about him all afternoon. "Okay."

"Excellent, arm candy scored. You're making this whole thing into much less of an ordeal, pet." He leaned in and kissed me briefly. "When are you done here?"

"Six."

"The party starts at eight so there's plenty of time for you to scrub up and get changed. Sound right?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Good." Reese moved back a step and crossed his arms, staring at me openly.

"What?" I looked myself over. Same as usual, really. Slacks, a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, inexpensive dress shoes. I looked back up at Reese. "What?"

"You're really incredibly cute, you know? With your scruffy blond hair and your pretty face."

"I'm not cute or pretty," I objected.

"Sorry to be the one to tell you this, but you're both, pet. Not devilishly handsome like myself, but cute and pretty. You've got the face of an honest man, and that's a valuable commodity."

"You say the strangest things, Reese."

"I know." He smiled at me. "See you at six, Danny." Then he walked out. It took me almost a minute to remember what I had been doing before he'd interrupted me. Reese tended to take up space, physical and mental. If I wasn't careful he'd end up taking up quite a lot of emotional space as well. I shook my head and walked into the store room.

Reese took me back to his hotel right after six, graciously letting me drive his beast of a rental again. As soon as we were in his room, and the door was shut he pounced on me. Literally pounced, driving me back into the bedroom and onto the bed in a matter of seconds.

I laughed against his mouth as we kissed. "You must be some sort of cat," I said as we got rid of our clothes.

"Cats aren't the only things that like to play with their food," he replied before forcing my pants down my hips. His kisses were hungry, voracious as he moved down my neck and chest. By the time he got to my stomach he was biting me, nipping at my pale skin until it flushed red before moving on to the next spot. It felt like I was under attack, and there was nothing I could do to stop it because I loved it so much. No lover had ever touched me like this, like there were interesting parts of my body other than the obvious. Reese sucked at the point of my hip until the skin glowed, raising a hickey before I could protest. Not that I would.

When he finally took me into his mouth I was so hard, so ready to be touched that the first stroke of his tongue wrenched a cry from me. Reese chuckled and continued to drive me insane, not relenting enough for me to catch my breath or control my rogue vocal cords. I came for him in under a minute. He drank me down, then slid up and held me as I shivered in his embrace.

"Holy...shit."

"Good times, pet." He grinned down at me and kissed the tip of my nose. "Shower now, yeah?"

"You want me to move?" I asked dreamily.

"Honestly I'd rather keep you on this bed and fuck you 'til you pass out, Danny, but we do have places to go and people to see. So come on now, up you get." He helped me sit, and then led me into the bathroom, a cavernous affair all done in marble and brass. It gleamed. I didn't like the decorations very much, but it did have a huge shower. Reese got in and started the water; I joined him once the water was warm.

We washed each other, but Reese didn't let me go any further than teasing. "Seriously, pet, we don't want to be late for the bash."

"It wouldn't take that long to fuck me," I argued as I soaped up his cock, running slick hands up and down it rhythmically. Reese shook his head, but I could see the heat in his eyes. I got out first and dried off while he rinsed. The towels were long and fluffy, but mine was pretty wet by the time I was done with it. On a sudden whim, I took both ends in hand and spun the cloth until it was wound tight. As soon as Reese got out of the shower and presented his ass as a target, I snapped him.

It was beautiful, executed at the ideal speed and producing a fantastic *crack*. I hit him right in the middle of one perfect cheek, and it flared red. Reese yelped and spun around to face me incredulously. "What the fuck, Danny?" He sounded pissed, but I knew better. I *looked* at him, like stepping into his body a second in the future, and I felt the surge of arousal washing through him, muscles bunching in preparation to—

I bolted out of the bathroom a moment before he lunged at me. My head start gave me enough time to at least turn towards him before he tackled me onto the bed, which rocked and bounced beneath our combined weights. "Bloody dangerous, pet," Reese hissed in my ear before he grabbed the bottle of lube from beneath his pillow. He poured some onto his hand, and then jammed two fingers into my body, not elegantly but with precision. It wasn't comfortable, not at first; I didn't care. I loved the fact that I'd made him lose some of his control, control that was so much better than my own. "Dangerous to mess with a shifter. More dangerous to run. Could snap you, pet, break you in two." His fingers found my prostate and pressed. I moaned helplessly. "I'll break you, Danny." His hand vanished, and he quickly put on a condom, and then he thrust into me fast and my conscious mind fled from the passion and the sharp, stinging pleasure I felt.

There was no slow build-up, nothing gentle or tender this time. Reese fucked me like an animal from the start, slamming into me so hard the bed thumped against the wall. I was saying something, or maybe just screaming, I wasn't sure, and Reese was biting and kissing and licking my skin, everywhere he could reach, and fucking and fucking and fucking me...I came so hard I saw stars, and my ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton. He came a moment later, roaring, flooding me and marking me with his teeth as he did. He kept his arms around me, but very gradually the embrace loosened enough that I could move. Not that I wanted to.

"Danny?" Reese asked after a moment. "Danny-boy?" He brushed his fingertips gently across my cheeks, and I felt the wetness they encountered. It wasn't from the shower. "You all right, pet? Did I hurt you?"

"I'm fine," I said hoarsely. And I was, physically. Otherwise I wasn't so sure, but I didn't think Reese cared about otherwise. "Fine. Thanks."

"Thanks for what, pet?"

I was spared having to answer by the sudden ringing of the hotel phone. Reese pulled out of me and rolled over to answer it. I listened with half an ear, mostly trying to get myself back under control. "Yeah? Ah, right. Right...sure. Yeah, I'll work on that." He hung up the phone and grinned at me. "Neighbors are complaining, pet. You're quite the screamer. Manager wants me to please break you in quietly next time."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Good. Now let's get up and dressed, pet. We've got less than an hour to get there."

It was enough time, barely. I hadn't worn a tuxedo before, but Reese had guessed my size almost exactly. The material was soft, black and shining; the shoes even fit. I felt self-conscious in it though, and even more self-conscious when I realized Reese wasn't going to be wearing one. "What the hell?" I asked, watching him put on a pure white, close-fitting Armani suit. "Why don't you have to wear a tux?"

"Pet, this suit cost ten times what that tux did. No one looking at me will kick me out for not dressing nicely enough, trust me." He brushed back his long dark hair, leaving it loose and shining. "Let's head out, then."

The Museum of Art and Science was beautifully lit, spotlights drawing attention to the long banners announcing the opening of the Karun Collection to the public. I had seen some of these bigger openings from afar lots of times and had worked several, but this was the first time I'd ever been a guest at one. It was quite a show. All the high-level city bureaucrats were there, from the mayor to the DA, and of course the wealthiest donors had showed as well. I was surrounded by "the beautiful people", as my mother called them. I felt like a fish in a fucking barrel.

We handed the Hummer off to another valet and started down an actual red carpet, which I was sure matched my face. Reese didn't touch me, but he did lean close as we walked inside and whispered, "Attitude, pet. Get it in gear, and they won't touch you."

"What attitude?" I muttered desperately.

"The kind that starts with a capital 'A', Danny."

I had no idea what kind of attitude came in capitals, but I didn't have it. I was a bad actor, a horrible liar, and I hadn't been raised with money so I didn't have habit to fall back on. All I had was Reese. Thinking that helped some, actually. I was here with Reese Daveth, dodgy businessman, but gorgeous date, and he had asked me to be with him tonight. Not any of these other people. Me. I stood a little straighter and exhaled slowly. Reese gave me a smile. "Good, pet. Let's get something to drink."



There was no bar. There wasn't any need. Drinks seemed to appear out of thin air, carried by polite and impersonal wait staff. Reese passed me a champagne and clinked our glasses together. "Here's to you, Danny. A pretty face, a brilliant mind, and a fabulous bloody shag."

"I hope my epitaph is half that complimentary," I laughed and sipped the champagne. It was wonderful, but not nearly as nice as the company. "Thanks for bringing me."

"Bit over the nerves then?"

"A bit."

"More alcohol will help," Reese assured me. "Come on, let's go look at some of the pieces. This collection is pretty special, isn't it?"

"It's one of the largest magical artifact collections in existence," I said as we walked into the main gallery. There were fewer people in here, most of them more interested in seeing and being seen than in actually looking at the artifacts. "All of the pieces were commissioned by Croesus in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, or at least that's the legend. Karun is actually the Turkish translation of his name. Croesus was as paranoid as he was rich, and he protected his more mundane treasures by interspersing magical ones in the hoard. They acted as everything from simple alarms to wards to booby traps. The only way to safely enter his treasure house was to wear a specially-enchanted God's eye talisman."

"All of which went to your museum instead of this one."

"Yes, thanks to Professor Hauer." I looked around for the slight German man. "He worked in the Pergamonmuseum in Berlin before coming here, and they hosted this exhibit there as well. Apparently he has a soft spot for desperate universities."

"I know Professor Hauer," Reese said absently as he gazed at a statue of a golden hippocampus that was enchanted to swim. "Good man, very helpful."

"What has he helped you with?" I asked, but Reese didn't have a chance to answer. The man himself had found us and was coming over, smiling.

"Mr. Daveth, always pleasing to see you. And you too, Mr. Hart! I was unaware that you had purchased a ticket." His voice had the barest hint of a German accent, and he looked surprisingly comfortable in his tuxedo. I had only ever seen him in tweed.

"He's here with me," Reese said smoothly as he shook Professor Hauer's hand.

"Really?" The slender man's blond brows pulled together behind his glasses. "I was under the impression that you would be bringing Miss Wilson with you this evening. I had expected her to be here."

"Jen's been to plenty of these things, Professor, whereas Danny's still new to the cutthroat world of upper-class posturing. I thought he'd be more fun."

"It's nice to see you, sir," I said as Professor Hauer reached out to shake my hand. "How's your son?"

The professor's cheerful expression faltered a little. "He's better these past few days, thank you, Mr. Hart." I knew through the grapevine that his son had a genetic disease that had prompted their move to the states, where they could get the treatment he needed. "I'm surprised you remember that, I believe I've only ever mentioned Karl in passing to you."

"The last time was two weeks ago. You were late to a meeting, and you mentioned you'd taken him to a doctor's appointment."

"Ah. Right. Good memory, um, Daniel, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ah. Well, very good. I hope you two enjoy the evening."

"We're sure to," Reese said, and then Professor Hauer moved off to greet some other guests. Reese looked at me. "Very good memory, Danny."

"He's the reason our museum got the God's eye collection," I replied as we moved to the next case. "It's not hard to remember things about people you admire."

"And you admire the good professor."

"Well, yes. This exhibit is huge news. It'll do wonders for the museum, for all the close local businesses, and for the people who come see it. I mean, think about it." I felt myself getting excited, and tried to tone it back, not wanting to come off like a little kid, but I couldn't help myself. "This sort of exhibit is history, archeology and anthropology at its best. It's beautiful, it's captivating, and it teaches about a rich and vibrant culture all at the same time. This is the sort of thing that gets people interested in learning. It's going to rival the T-Rex skeleton at the Natural History Museum for coolness while it's here. I mean, this is basically buried treasure!" Reese was shaking his head slightly. "What?"

"You're the fucking treasure, mate." He chuckled quietly. "You're a bit hard to believe, Danny. Have you always been this way? I'm surprised your parents let you out of the bloody house."

"What way?"

Reese opened his mouth to answer, but then his cell phone went off. Interruptions had really been playing into his favor tonight. "Gotta take this, pet, half a mo." He brought it up to his ear and answered curtly, "What?" Apparently the response took quite a while to get through, and Reese was rolling his eyes by the end of it. "I'm getting it done." Another pause. "No, you gave me a deadline. You didn't specify how I had to go about it, and I wouldn't work with you if you had. It's getting done. Yes, tonight. Yeah." He hung up abruptly and scowled at his phone. "Bloody bird."

"Your boss?" I guessed.

"For the moment, pet, just for the moment. I'm an independent contractor, and she's a micromanaging bitch. Therein we butt heads." He still appeared pissed off.

"Let's keep going," I suggested. "I can bore you with some more history."

Reese's scowl became a smirk. "Nothing you do bores me, Danny. How're you feeling, by the way?"

"Well fucked. Thanks for your concern." I steered my date towards another case, this one containing beautifully-preserved gold decadrachms. We managed to wander without interruption for another half an hour before his phone went off again.

"Bloody fucking hell," he muttered as he pulled it out. "*What, Zahra?*" He turned suddenly towards the front doors. "Oh, you cunt."

A statuesque redhead in a long emerald evening gown waved with her free hand. The other one held a cell phone. She smiled, perfect cupid lips curving into a bright and humorless bow. The wave turned into a "Get your ass over here" gesture, and Reese snarled as he hung up his phone.

"Fucking bitch. I won't be long, Danny." He headed across the crowded floor towards her without another word. I almost expected them to get into a fist fight when he arrived, but she said something that reigned in the worst of his anger pretty fast.

I decided I didn't want to watch him talk to a beautiful woman and turned back to the display. As it happened, though, beautiful women were everywhere. My boss came up from behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. Fortunately I didn't react to her the same way I had with Reese. I'd had more practice in feeling her coming. "Daniel!"

"Professor Glau, good evening."

"For heaven's sake, we're off the clock now Daniel, call me Constance." She smiled up at me. I'm not a tall man, but Professor Glau made me feel like a big guy. She was a hair under five feet tall, tiny and dark haired. "Well? What do you think of the exhibit?"

"The layout is perfect," I assured her. "I think the traffic will flow very nicely, and of course the artifacts are superb."

"I know," she sighed contentedly. "Who did you come with tonight, Daniel?"

"How do you know I didn't buy a ticket?"

"Daniel," Constance said, "I know how much we pay you. I know how much we pay me, and I don't make enough to buy a ticket to this party. There's no need to be shy. I'm glad you were able to come! Now who's your date?"

"He's over there." I pointed towards Reese and the redhead. "The good-looking one."

"He is rather pretty, isn't he?" she concurred, pushing her spectacles down her nose. Constance was very far-sighted. "Who's the lady?"

"A business associate of his."

"Really." Constance squinted for a moment. "She looks rather familiar. I wonder if I know her. Do you have her name?"

"Zahra. I don't know her last name."

"Zahra. Hmm, not ringing any bells. Perhaps from Serbia. I'm sure it will come to me in time." She pushed up her glasses suddenly. "Looks like your date's been liberated. I'll get out of your hair." With a last, polite smile she moved off into the crowd, and I waited for Reese to get back. He wasn't in a better mood than the one he'd left with once he got to me.

"Let's go."

"Right now?"

"Am I not enunciating, Danny? Yeah, now." He turned and headed towards the exits. I had to jog the first few steps to catch up to him, and I decided against saying anything once I did. We walked out into the humid evening air towards the valet, who immediately brought the car up, and Reese took the driver's seat this time. He peeled out of the lot and onto the road before I had my seat belt fastened.

He drove too fast. We weren't even headed back towards the hotel. He was just driving, weaving in and out of slower cars, and looking incredibly pissed off while doing it. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, wondering if I should say something. Fate and Reese's awful driving took that out of my hands.

"It's red, it's red, Reese, red, *brake!*" He didn't brake. He drove right through the light and into the oncoming traffic. It was a miracle that no one hit us, but a symphony of horns sounded in our wake. "Reese, *stop* the car." He did.

We were both shaking, him more than me. I guess he had more tension built up inside, but that had been close. "I think you should let me drive," I said as gently as I could manage around my adrenaline and anger at his behavior.

"Good thought, Danny." We switched places.

"I'll take you back to the hotel."

"No."

Well, that was abrupt. "Why not?"

"Because I don't bloody feel like it!"

I closed my eyes and sighed. My lover had turned into a two-year-old. "Where do you want to go, then?"

"Anywhere else. Just not there. How about your place?"

"My place?" I couldn't stop the incredulous rise in my voice. "My entire apartment could fit in the bathroom of your suite, Reese. I don't think you'll like it there."

"I will," he assured me. "You'll be there, so I'm bound to like it. Please, pet." He smiled crookedly. "I know I'm a bastard, and I don't deserve the break, but I'd appreciate your humoring me."

I couldn't say no to him. "Okay. My place." I restarted the car, and we drove in silence to my apartment. I lived on the top floor in a five story apartment complex by the river, and during the summer, when the heat was incredible and the air stuck to you like a foul and cloying perfume, it wasn't the nicest place to be. I hoped to God no one broke into the Hummer while we were inside. That wouldn't help matters any.

Neither of us said anything while we took the elevator upstairs. I was determined not to apologize again for taking him someplace he said he wanted to go, and Reese seemed to be in his own head space. We got to my floor, walked down to my place, and I let us in. He went in first and stopped a little ways in past the door, just looking around.

"Oh." Yeah, it was a little messy. I had books, references and photocopies lying on every flat surface, and more tacked to walls and stuck on the fridge with magnets. I was almost to the end of my thesis and, not being naturally organized, I'd decided the best way to keep track of things was to arrange them so that I could see everything I needed. "Sorry about the mess." Damn it, there I went apologizing.

"Not a problem, pet," he said after a moment, shrugging out of his incredibly expensive jacket and tossing it over the back of a chair. That reminded me of my own tux, which was way too hot for an apartment without air conditioning. I took off the jacket and vest, hanging them next to the door, then started on the tie.

"Let me." Reese's fingers closed over mine for a moment, then slipped beneath them and went after my tie. He moved slowly, strangely focused on a task I was sure he could have finished in two seconds. He looked at my tie, and I looked at him. Once he had it undone and lying across my shoulders I asked, "Are you okay?"

He considered it for a moment. "Not sure, pet. I'll figure it out soon enough."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

That brought his smile back. "I'm sure you can, Danny, if you've got a bed hidden somewhere in this charming little walk-up."

"It's not a walk-up," I reminded him as I went over to the couch and started clearing papers off it. I took the cushions off, then pulled out the fold-away bed. I had just done my bi-weekly sheet change, so at least I had that going for me. Otherwise it was...well, what it was. "It's not exactly the Marquis," I said quietly.

"S'got you, Danny." Reese's long arms slid around my waist, and his lips nuzzled into the back of my head. "Better than any other bloody thing lately, including that sodding hotel." He kissed my neck, and I closed my eyes with a shiver. "You've the patience of a saint, pet. You know that?"

"Yes."

"The modesty of one, too."

"I'm taking a page from your book, Reese."

"Mmm...are you on the page where I strip you down and have my way with you, Danny?" he purred in my ear.

"I could be on that page," I admitted, leaning back into him. "With a little encouragement."

"Well, I'm an encouraging bloke." He slid the dangling tie off my shoulders and dropped it on the floor, then began slowly unbuttoning my shirt as he kissed me again. And again, and again. He shifted their placement, but he never stopped kissing me. My thoughts went from acutely aware of my surroundings to a slow building desire that blotted out every trace of self-consciousness. Eventually I was completely undressed, and at Reese's mercy, but he was still almost fully clothed. This seemed wrong to me, and I told him so.

"You can't fuck me through those pants."

"Not planning on fucking you, pet," he replied as he gently turned me and pushed me down onto my back. "Too rough a word for what I've got in mind."

"What, then?" I gasped before he took me into his mouth. He didn't reply, just focused on my cock, stroking it firmly but slowly, so slowly, sliding over me and hitting every sensitive spot with the tip of his tongue and the pads of his fingers, driving me completely insane. "Oh, god...more, harder, please..."

"Not now," Reese murmured as he pulled back. He ghosted his fingers over my entrance. "Sore, pet?"

"A little," I admitted.

"Thought so. Where's your gear?"

"Nightstand." He opened the drawer and grabbed my condoms and lube. "You should check the expiration dates, though."

Reese mercifully didn't say anything about that, just checked before nodding. "Fine, Danny. Roll over onto your side."

"Aren't you going to..." I gestured at him weakly.

"Undress? Nah. Can't stay long, Danny, my bloody boss has plans for me."

"At ten at night?"

"Business never sleeps, pet. Besides, I want to go to her all mussed and smelling like you, so the bitch knows exactly what she's interrupting. Make her so fucking pissed." He set a hand on my shoulder and gently guided me onto my side, and then a moment later his hand was between my legs, slick and soft. "You're all lovely and relaxed, pet."

"You fucked the tension right out of me earlier."

"Happy to hear it." A few seconds later he was entering me, still slow and gentle, the first time he had really been gentle with me. He kissed my bare shoulder and hugged me close, rubbing his thumb lightly over my nipples again and again. I arched back against him, closing my eyes and sighing. He withdrew and pressed back in, out and back in, his angle just enough to brush my prostate and start a smoldering ache deep inside of me. He didn't touch my cock, just my chest and stomach, barely-there caresses.

"Reese..."

"Let it build on its own, pet," he whispered. "It'll be worth it."

It built, minute after minute, the desire and the urge, and that tightening sensation of expectation. I was panting, moaning with each exhale as Reese made love to me. He was right; this wasn't fucking. This was too soft, too loving for that. I forced my mind away from those thoughts with an effort, focusing back on the moment. I was going to come, soon, and it was going to be incredible. "Reese..."

"I know, Danny." He sped up the barest hint, just enough to provide a little more sensation, and it was enough. My orgasm spooled out from my center, inflaming my muscles and nerves and burning me with the ecstasy of it. I had never had an orgasm so drawn out, so leisurely, as if my body had all the time in the world to experience something so overwhelming. Reese pressed his cock as deep as it would go and came inside me with a low moan, crushing me back against him for a second before relaxing again. "Dan..." He slumped over me, nuzzling into the crook of my neck like an enthusiastic puppy. "Danny."

We lay there for a few long minutes. I counted every breath against my back, savoring the feel of his silk-covered skin, damp and clinging to mine. When I felt the rumble of his voice start again, I closed my eyes. "I have to go, Danny."

"I know."

"Want to do breakfast?"

I laughed. "Yeah." Another thought occurred to me. "My key card. For the museum. I left it in your hotel room."

"When do you need it back?"

"I don't work until Monday. Professor Glau's taking tomorrow's shift. She has a few things left to do with the exhibit."

"No problem, pet. I should be able to swing by the hotel and grab it before breakfast."

"Where would you like to eat?"

Reese shrugged. "Pick a spot, pet, wherever you like. I'll find it."

"Penny's Diner. It's on Cable Street, just a few blocks from here."

"Sounds good." He pulled away, and I let him. It wasn't that hard, now that I knew I'd see him again soon. "Around eight, pet?"

"Sure." I rolled onto my back and watched him adjust his pants, then put his jacket back on. "Drive safely."

"Thanks for the reminder, Danny." He walked out the door, shutting it softly behind him. I smiled to myself and set my alarm for seven. I didn't want to be late.

I had strange dreams again. It wasn't the first time I had dreamt of work, but it was the first time I was taking things out of exhibits and putting them in my pockets. The details were perfect. I felt the cool slide of the enchanted glass against my hands and wrists as I reached into the case containing the God's eyes. I was keyed to the wards so the alarm didn't go off, and the nifty bit of magic I had coated my hands with just before entering the building kept the glass from holding me as I pulled the amulets out. I had no idea why I was doing it, though. And I only took five of them, while the display contained over twenty. Then I was gone, back out in front of the building, watching the sky turn rose-gold with the rising sun. I sighed heavily, headed off down the street to my Hummer—

I woke up. My head ached and the space behind my eyes tingled. That had not been a restful dream. I briefly considered hitting the snooze button, but I really didn't want to keep Reese waiting, so I got up, cleaned up and headed out the front door a little before eight. It was a five minute walk to Penny's, and I was still early. I ordered a coffee, looked over the menu for a second and kept an eye out for Reese.

I could wait with the best of them, but after an hour I had to face facts. Reese wasn't going to show up. I had even dialed the hotel, but his phone just rang and rang. I didn't have his personal number so I couldn't call it, and I'd never made sure that he had mine so he could call me. I tried not to let it bother me. Apparently his boss was something of a nightmare; she'd probably kept him longer than he expected. At nine I walked back to my apartment, a little dejected but no worse for wear.

Then I got arrested.

It happened really fast. I walked into my apartment building, barely even noticing the police car parked outside. I mean, it's not like I'd ever had any reason to notice the police. My apartment wasn't in the best neighborhood, but it wasn't awful. There hadn't been any burglaries or other crime sprees that I knew of, so I just ignored the black and white car and walked inside. I rode the elevator up to my floor, and when I got out I saw cops by my front door. "Oh no. What happened, did someone break in? Is my stuff still there?" Oh God, were all my documents still there? I tried to push past the first officer, but an arm across my chest stopped me.

"Mr. Hart?"

"Yes?"

The officers exchanged glances. The one with the long reach spoke again. "My name is Officer Greaves, sir, and this is Officer Jameson. We need to ask you some questions."

"Ooo-kay." I waited.

"Downtown, sir."

That floored me. "Why?"

"I'd rather not get into it here, sir, but you need to come with us." He produced his handcuffs and I jumped.

"Hey, no! You don't need to cuff me, good lord! What happened? I'll come with you, fine, but I have no idea what this is about."

"The handcuffs are procedure, sir," Officer Greaves said apologetically.

"Does this mean I'm under arrest?"

"Technically, sir, you're only wanted for questioning."

"In connection with what?" I asked. He raised the handcuffs again. "Look, please don't put those on me," I begged. I didn't want anyone to see me looking like a criminal. "I'll come with you guys, no problem. Just don't handcuff me."

Officer Greaves gave me a long look, then put the cuffs away. "Fine. Let's get going." I let him lead me back to the elevator in a daze. Down we rode, stopping once on the third floor for Mrs. Polanski. When she saw me, at first she smiled—I pet-sit her cats when she goes to visit her daughter. Usually we were friendly. When she saw I was accompanied by the police, her smile vanished. "Ah, um...I'll get the next one," she said weakly.

"Hell," I muttered.

"Look on the bright side," Officer Jameson said cheekily, "At least she didn't see you in cuffs."

"Mark," his partner chided him as we hit the ground floor. Thankfully there was no one else around to witness my walk of shame out to the car. Officer Greaves opened the back door and I slid in gingerly. "You okay?"

"Just no lights or sirens, please," I requested. I would die of shame otherwise.

"None," he promised, and shut the door behind me.

I sat in silence on the ride to the station. Picked up for questioning. I had been fucking picked up for questioning by the fucking police. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. The closest I'd ever come to getting busted by the cops was a friend's kegger in college, and I had booked it out of there like every other guy not too wasted to run. I'd never ridden in a cop car. I tended to respect authority. My current situation was so incredibly mortifying I knew I had to be bright red, but I couldn't help it.

I was escorted into the station in a blank fog. Somehow I got seated behind a table in a stark white room. Somehow a glass of water found its way into my hands. Then the nice cop was gone and a detective was sitting across from me, and he looked pissed.

He made pissed look good. He wasn't relentlessly gorgeous like Reese was, but he was definitely handsome. The fact that he looked about my age made sitting across from him a little less nerve-wracking, even though he looked annoyed. I had a feeling he wasn't really annoyed at me.

"Mr. Hart?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Detective O'Connell. Did either of the officers who brought you here explain the reason we want to question you?"

"No, sir. I mean, Detective. Um." This wasn't going smoothly. "I have no idea why I'm here," I finally said, slumping in the chair a little.

"Can you account for your whereabouts between five and six am this morning, Mr. Hart?" His tone was even, but there was a little frown line between his eyebrows.

Oh. Shit. "I was at home, sleeping."

"Can anyone confirm this, Mr. Hart?"

Oh, *fuck*. "No. I was alone. What's happened?"

Detective O'Connell sighed. "At five fifteen this morning, the University of Arcane Studies' museum was robbed. The thief used an employee key card to get inside, walked through the wards like they weren't even there and managed to reach directly into the case to steal several small, very valuable magical artifacts. The theft was discovered this morning by the curator, Professor Glau, who turned the surveillance footage over to the police."

I felt my breathing shallow out, felt my fingers begin to tremble. Holy shit. I saw the detective sigh and square his shoulders a second before he actually did, and then he said, "The camera footage shows you, Mr. Hart, entering the museum and stealing the artifacts."

"No," I whispered. "It can't. I didn't."

"The wards didn't go off, Mr. Hart. They're keyed to two people, and one of them is you. The camera shows you. It was your key card that was used to enter the building, and there's no one to vouch for your whereabouts during the hour the theft took place. That's pretty damning evidence."

"I *didn't*," I said a little more strongly. The thought of it actually made me shudder. Steal from my own museum, my own exhibit? "I didn't do it. Oh God, what did Constance say?"

"Professor Glau was understandably upset."

"I have to talk with her." The thought of her thinking that I was behind the theft made me absolutely ill. I leaned shakily across the table. "Please, I have to talk to her—" My elbow hit my plastic cup of water and sent it spilling across the table. "Fuck. Sorry." I leaned back again, pulling my hands into my lap. "I'm sorry." The water dripped slowly off the not-quite-level table onto the linoleum floor by my foot, making a sad little puddle.

"It's okay. I'll get you another." Detective O'Connell got up and walked out the door. He didn't close it, though, and I was close enough to hear the first part of his conversation with a man I didn't recognize. "He's got no clue."

"He could be lying."

"Then he deserves an Oscar, because I can smell the fear rolling off of him. He genuinely has no clue what happened this morning."

"He could have been 'thrall'd."

"If Daniel Hart did it, he was definitely 'thrall'd, but I'm not convinced."

"Darren, all the evidence points at this kid. We have to follow the leads."

"I know, but..." His voice drifted out of my hearing range. I covered my face with my hands and groaned. I was fucked. I was so fucked.

I didn't think I had been enthralled into breaking into my own museum, but there was no other way I could account for the wards not going off. Even then, the enchanted glass should have held the thief; I was only keyed to keep the alarms from reacting. My key card had been used to get in, but I hadn't even had my key card this morning—

Reese had my key card. Or at least it was in his room. I knew I should tell Detective O'Connell. This was the moment to come clean with anything I could think of that would support my innocence, but I didn't want to. I didn't know that Reese had anything to do with this, and I didn't want to set the cops on him just for having the bad judgment to associate with me. Someone must have copied it. And my face. And my fucking DNA. That was the thing about getting through the wards: it wasn't enough to look like me, any old glamour could manage that. The person who'd stolen the amulets had somehow managed to *be* me, down to the molecular level.

Fuck.



The rest of the questioning was pretty tame. The detective asked me about my evening, and about Reese. Constance had mentioned him to them, but since I'd never told her his name they didn't have much to go on. I answered the questions as simply as I could, giving them his name and where he was staying but nothing else. Hell, there wasn't much more I could say. I didn't know his ability, didn't know the details of his work, didn't know anything about his associate other than the fact that they argued...all of the things I didn't know were bothering me more and more, but now wasn't the time to analyze that.

I sipped a little water without spilling it all over myself, Detective O'Connell took it pretty easy on me, but in the end it came down to: you're all we've got. And even I had to admit that the evidence was pretty conclusive.

"We're going to keep investigating," the detective said tiredly by the end. "At the very least, we need to question Mr. Daveth. We can't let you go, though. Not yet."

"Oh my God. I'm really being arrested?"

"If it turns out to be nothing, you won't have a record. There won't be any damage done."

"The damage has been done." It had, too. My boss thought I was a thief. My reputation, what little I had, was going to be ruined. I was going to jail. My lover was looking more and more shady. The silver lining was eluding me.

"You were fingerprinted as part of the child safety program, right?"

"Yeah." My mom had had me printed when I was in elementary school, just in case I was ever snatched off the streets. She worried a lot about random violence.

"Then there are just a few more things to take care of. You'll go to a holding cell for now. No other people and you won't have to change, but I will need to hold onto your personal effects. Do you have a lawyer?"

"No."

"We'll make sure you have one when you need one. Is there anyone else you want to call?"

I wanted to call Constance, but I didn't know what to say to her. "Don't believe your eyes. I'm not the thief"? I'd have liked to talk to Reese, for purely selfish reasons, but at this point I was afraid that nothing he could say or do would be comforting. The only other person I considered, for the barest second, was my mother, but that...no. Just no. "No."

"Okay, then. Let me take you for processing."

I proceeded to get processed, which mostly consisted of signing a few things and getting my mugshot taken. I handed over my wallet and keys, then Detective O'Connell escorted me to a small barred room not far from where I'd been interrogated. "Want something else to drink?" he asked as I sat down on the bed.

"No. Thanks."

"I'll be back in a few hours, unless I get some more information sooner."

"Okay."

Detective O'Connell sighed and locked the door behind him, then walked off down the hall. I stared out through the bars for a while, feeling kind of numb and liking it that way. Numb beat panicking hands down and I could feel the panic pricking around the edges of my mind. That was all I needed now, to have a complete breakdown in a jail cell after being accused of robbing my own museum. That would be the cherry on top of this shit sundae. I snorted, breaking my own reverie with the weirdness of that image. It would be okay.

It would be okay because I didn't do it! I knew that much. I didn't know who did, but it wasn't me. Enthralling someone was a lot harder than most people thought, and I had an edge when it came to avoiding that because of my futuresight. You had to hold and maintain eye contact to get a thrall to take, and I could feel the wrongness of something like that. One

of my lousier boyfriends had tried it once, the fucker. It was the only time since middle school that I'd punched someone. I still remember the feel of his head snapping back beneath my fist, the shock on his face, and my erupting, consuming anger. I hadn't let go like that in a long time. I was close now, though. Panic might lose out to rage, which would be even worse.

I closed my eyes and breathed in through my nose, out through my mouth as slowly and deeply as I could. I needed to stay calm. This would be worked out. It would. The police wouldn't hold me for long. The detective didn't think I'd done it, and I knew I hadn't. The truth would come out. I just had to wait for it to happen.

Detective O'Connell brought me a sandwich and some more water after a few hours. He didn't say anything else, but I could tell by his harried look that nothing new had broken, which meant they hadn't found Reese yet. I was still their best lead for the robbery, which would make me the world's dumbest criminal. I'd walked right up to the cops at my front door, for fuck's sake. Shouldn't I be running? Where had I stashed the God's eyes? No one asked me because no one thought I had actually committed the crime. I held onto that, held it and tried not to think about anything else as the hours crept by. Everything was fine. It was going to be fine.

Then my mother called.

I stared blankly at the officer when he told me who was on the phone. How had she even figured out what was going on? Then it hit me. Mrs. Polanski must have called her. She knew my emergency contact information and seeing me get arrested, well, that must have qualified to her as an emergency. I wanted to appreciate her thoughtfulness, but I couldn't. Damn, I really needed to change my emergency contact information.

"Sir? Do you want to take the call?" He held out the phone to me. "I have to stay in the room while you do, but you can take it in here."

If I didn't talk to her, she'd just freak out and drive down here. That would be...excruciating. "Sure," I muttered, and held out my hand for the phone. "Hey Mom."

"Daniel! Oh my God, Daniel, what's going on? Are you all right? Have you been hurt? Have you been beaten? Have you been raped?"

"Jesus, Mom! Calm down, I'm fine. I'm just sitting by myself right now." The cop gave me a sympathetic glance. "Everything is okay."

"Daniel Charles Hart, don't you sit there in *prison* and lie to your mother that everything is okay! What have you done? Why are you in jail?"

"They think I stole some artifacts from the museum, Mom." I held the phone a little away from my ear as she shrieked. "I didn't, of course. They'll find out who did it soon enough and then I'll be released."

"You don't know that, Daniel," she sniffed. I mentally groaned, and ran my free hand over my face as I heard her waterworks get going. "You're far too trusting. People take advantage of that. They always have, and if the police decide you have to go down for this crime, they'll pin it on you. There are a lot of dirty cops out there, Daniel. They can twist the evidence however they want."

"Have you been watching crime dramas again, Mom? Every officer I've met here has been very nice."

"I don't watch those shows anymore, they gave me nightmares." She sighed heavily. "Do you need me to come and post bail, Daniel?"

"Bail hasn't even been set yet, Mom. If I need help, I'll call you again, okay?"

"You call me the minute something changes, you hear me? I don't care if it's two in the morning. I don't care if you catch me while I'm in the shower or on the toilet, you *call*—"

"Christ! Mom, okay! I get it, I'll call you. Please stop describing things."

"Don't be such a priss, Daniel."

"Mom, I have to go." I looked desperately at the officer, and he nodded. "My time is up, I have to free up the phone. I'll call you, I promise."

"You'd better. I love you, honey. Even if you really stole those things and go to jail forever and break my heart, I'll still love you. You know that, right?"

"I didn't steal anything, Mom. Love you too. Bye." I handed the phone back to the officer, and he got up and walked it back over to the small table down the hall he'd brought it from. "Good fucking lord." I closed my eyes tiredly. My mother was exhausting to handle when I wasn't under arrest. Right now...well, nothing about that call had been comforting.

"You okay?"

"Hmm?" I lifted my head and focused on the officer in the doorway. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Good. I'll be right down the hall, kid. Try to get some rest. You look beat."

"Okay. Thanks." He left, and I lay back on the small, hard bed. I was run down, from the arrest, and the phone call and the energetic night before. My mind was too tired to process anything anymore, and I fell gratefully into a deep sleep.

The dream came on slowly. I was sitting in the back of a van filled with computer equipment, next to two other people. The closest one, the one tapping on the computer keys, was a woman, short, slightly plump and very cute in a teddy bear print t-shirt, with dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and eyes reflecting the glow of the computer screen. "I've hijacked the mundane alarm system. Cameras and motion detectors are mine. And may I say, Reese, it would have been a lot easier for me to get my gear in place if you'd taken me with you last night instead of showing off for your new boy toy. I had to battle the crowds today to get the stuff set up. A five year old almost puked on me. It was G-R-O-S-S."

"Today was the better play, Jen," I said as I ran my hand through my hair again. My shaggy blond hair. I couldn't stop touching it. Not nearly as good as touching him, but it was still nice. Fuck all, the urge to go stroke myself off was almost overpowering. I did have a thing for his cock, and right now it was mine in the most intimate sense of the word. I felt myself getting hard and forced my hand away. Now wasn't the time to think about Danny. "Last night the guards were on high alert, first time people were looking at the exhibit and all that. Today was much better. Screaming kids, crowds on top of crowds...made it easy, yeah?"

"Not too terrible," she admitted. "Okay, you guys are good to go whenever. Everyone has a com, right? Just speak, and I'll hear, and vice-versa."

"Yes, Jenny," the young man next to her sighed. He had the same dark coloring and short stature, but was skinny to the point of being scrawny. "I swear, you're worse than Zahra sometimes, always checking, checking, checking."

"I want to make sure this job doesn't blow up in our faces, Jeremy," Jenny said stiffly. "Like the one you tried to do by yourself in Vancouver."

"You blew me off for that job. It isn't my fault it went south," her brother protested.

"I blew you off because it was a last-minute hack job that I didn't want any part of! I did break you out of jail after, remember?"

"Kids, kids," I interrupted. "Much as the sibling rivalry entertains, try to focus. The God's eyes are definitely gonna work, yeah?"

"Absolutely," Jeremy confirmed. "The enchantments on them are incredibly strong, especially considering all the time since they were cast. They'll protect us from the artifacts' magical effects. You've coated your hands, right?"

"Yeah. Stuff works with the glass, Jer, but does it have to stink so sodding bad?"

"The ingredients are non-negotiable!" Jeremy insisted. "Excuse me for not taking the time to make my incredible fix for getting through enchanted, thief-catching glass not smell as pretty as you'd like."

My response was forestalled by the opening of the back doors. Zahra had a hand on her hip, and I could hear the tap-tap of her foot without needing to see it. "All ready?" she asked, her Eastern European accent sharper than usual. It was finally dark out. The museum had closed three hours ago.

"Yeah luv, sure thing." I slid out of the van and stood next to her. Jeremy followed, leaving Jenny alone in the back.

"Keep us up to date," Zahra told Jenny before she shut the door. "Jeremy, you've got the combination to the wards?"

"Hauer got them to me a few hours ago. They're programmed into the wand," he said. "What, Chris not coming?"

"No. The fewer people you have to push through those wards the better. She's the driver for this job."

"Waste of her talents, luv."

Zahra turned her irritated glare on me. "You'd rather I bring her inside and have her take out the four security guards? It's unnecessary. We can avoid them, and Christine's been a little erratic lately. I don't need her taking things too far. She stays here unless things go sideways." Zahra pulled the black ski mask over her head, adjusted it and added, "And that face looks ridiculous on you, by the way. I don't know why you're keeping it on."

"I like it."

"You're infatuated," she accused me as we set off across the grass towards the museum's back door.

"Who wouldn't be? Look at 'im. He's hot."

"He is kind of hot," Jenny agreed over the com.

"He's a puppy, and you don't have time for a pet." Zahra pulled out her lock picks and set to work on the small service door. "Alarm is taken care of, right, Jenny?"

"Right, Zahra. You know, I have done this before."

"Experience is no proof against failure." The door clicked open, and we quietly entered the building.

"You should never give motivational speeches, Zahra, you'd suck at it. On second thought, I'd like to see you suck at something, so go for it. Okay, the cameras show two guards in the station by the front door, and two walking the upper wing. You're clear to the main hall." Jenny giggled suddenly. "And to the main haul. Oh my God, that's cute. Isn't that cute? I love that!"

"I am not related to you," Jeremy muttered, keeping his dowsing wand extended in front of his body as we walked slowly along. The wards bent and twisted around us, sliding over us like water over stones. "Hauer's good for it so far. We might as well not be here as far as the magic is concerned."

"And them seeing us on film, Jenny?"

"I got the loop in place five minutes ago. They're not watching anything other than..." She paused for a moment, then said, "Water polo? I didn't even know that was a televised sport! Sooo lame."

We arrived at the exhibit hall. The guards were a hundred feet away from us facing the opposite direction. All we needed now was to be quiet and avoid catching their notice. If they turned around and saw us taking the artifacts, Chris would have to come and bust some heads. That was to be avoided if at all possible.

We each had a list of artifacts memorized. Small, portable things we could carry on our bodies instead of in sacks, things that would fetch beautiful prices on the black market. I headed towards the golden hippocampus that Danny had admired with me the night before. Reaching the case, I slowly pushed my hands into the glass. Jeremy's ointment really was lovely stuff. The God's eye around my neck flared hot for a moment as I touched the golden statue, then settled again. No extra alarms, and Professor Hauer's personal attention to the wards around the cases ensured that, for the next half an hour, anyone would be able to touch them without problem. It was a beautiful scam.

I lifted the statue out and placed it in a large pocket on my vest. Bye bye madding crowd, hello private collector. A small pang went through me as I thought of what Danny'd have to say about that. He was so earnest about these artifacts, so set on their being appreciated by the world. I could well guess what he'd have to say about tonight. I didn't want to think about how he'd reacted to being arrested for stealing from his own museum. Not well. Not well at all.

Fuck all, couldn't go there right now. Finish the job, then make it right. I moved on to the next case and its elaborately-jeweled necklace. Hello there, luv. Fancy a spin?

We were done in just under five minutes. "Wrap it up, guys," Jenny warned, "The guards upstairs have finished that round and as soon as they get back, the ones down here are going to make their way through the main exhibit hall."

"We're done here," Zahra murmured. "Let's go."

Jeremy led the way down the hall. The wards slithered and slid, a little rougher this time due to our rush. We had to be gone before we were in the roving guards' line of sight. I brought up the rear, ducking around a pillar by the back door just as the men came around the corner and headed for the station. Zahra and Jeremy already had the door open.

"Come on!" she mouthed emphatically.

"One sec," I whispered. "Jen, can you put me on camera for a few moments?"

"Uh...yeah."

"Rhys, no!" Zahra slashed her hand through the air, anger making her tense.

"Go on!" I shooed her away. "Get the van going, I'll be there in a minute."

"God damn it!" Zahra pushed Jeremy out behind her and stalked outside.

"Jen, give me a countdown," I said as I pulled off my black ski mask.

"Look around that pillar to the camera by the plinth. The one with the cherubs. The tasteless one. It's on in three...two...one...now."

I stepped around the corner, looked up at the camera and grinned. I tossed them a salute and a wink while I was at it; I didn't want them to bloody ignore me, after all. I heard a shout from the guards' station and considered my mission a success. There you go, Danny-boy. You're welcome. I ran out into the darkness towards the car and—

I woke up. And I realized that my dream wasn't a dream.

What. The. Hell.

I didn't know what to make of it. My talent didn't give me prophetic dreams, and my futuresight never extended past where I could see. At least, it never had before I met Reese. And this time I wasn't just dreaming his dreams, I had *been* Reese. I'd seen through his eyes, felt what he felt. And he...he had been me. For some reason, he had been me. Oh, shit. Of course he had been me.

Reese must be a doppelganger. There was no other explanation for it. I'd been wondering since we first met what kind of shifter he was, and now I knew. He took other people's forms. A genuine doppelganger, a natural humanoid shapeshifter, was incredibly rare. Hollywood loved using them, and history was rife with speculation about certain events

that seemed to have had to have been influenced by a secret double, battles won and royal treaties brokered while a perfect twin assumed the throne. Only a king could afford a true doppelganger, but very few specific instances of their use was ever proven. How could it be? They were chameleons. The only catch to their talent was that they had to consume some of whoever they wanted to be. Hair, nail clippings, flesh...or semen. Reese had been really fucking motivated to go down on me. Now I knew why.

I was nothing but a mark. He'd needed me to get into the university museum, and he needed the God's eyes to get into the exhibits at the Museum of Art and Science, because he was a thief. He was a fucking thief and a con artist, and he had played me like a violin.

My head was killing me. The pounding behind my eyes was the closest thing I'd felt to a migraine in years. My limbs were trembling, and my chest ached. I covered my eyes with the heels of my hands, pressing hard enough to see stars. Everything hurt, and I felt torn between wanting to kill Reese and wanting to break down. I worked on my breathing again, focusing hard, because neither of the other options would be good for me now. I could cry or hit things when I got home. Or both. I was pretty sure I'd be going home now.

Half an hour later, Detective O'Connell opened up the holding cell. Rather than take me back to the interrogation room, he sat down on the bunk next to me and held out my wallet and keys. "Here."

"Um...thanks." I put them slowly into my pocket. "Does this mean I can go?"

"A man matching your exact description was caught on camera robbing the Museum of Art and Science—" he briefly checked his watch, "thirty-eight minutes ago. The guards informed us and sent us the video to review. It's definitely you. Or rather, whoever masqueraded as you to get the things he needed for the job tonight. I'm assuming you aren't working with your double."

"No," I said tiredly.

"Do you have any idea who he might be, and how he was able to bypass security measures which should be completely secure?"

"I...I don't think so." The denial came out of my mouth before I had a chance to consider why I wasn't turning on Reese so hard I spun in place. "I...no. Sorry."

"Are you sure about that?" The question was surprisingly gentle. "We haven't been able to locate Mr. Daveth. He hasn't been back to the hotel since yesterday evening."

"I'm sure." At least I could be honest about that. "I don't really know Reese very well. I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"It's okay. You've had a rough day, Mr. Hart. I'm sure you want to get home."

"I really can go?" I was a little surprised they were letting me go so easily.

"Stay close in case we need to question you again, but...yes. You really can go. You were in our holding cell while the museum was being robbed, Mr. Hart. Unless you've got a teleporter up your sleeve or one hell of a talent for astral projection, I think it's clear you didn't have anything to do with either job. I'll call Professor Glau and let her know."

"Thanks." We both stood up. "I was brought here in a patrol car. It's too late for the bus, I think..."

"Officer Greaves is going to give you a ride home."

"Okay." We shook hands and then the detective pointed me in the direction of Officer Greaves and the exit. "Goodbye."

"Be safe, Mr. Hart."

Officer Greaves let me sit up front this time, and he mercifully didn't press me for any more information. I sat and floated randomly from thought to thought, just fine with letting the haze of this fucked up day shield me from my emotions. As he pulled up in front of my

apartment building, Officer Greaves handed me a card. "In case you think of something or need some help," he said simply.

"Thanks. You've been really nice, I appreciate it, Officer."

"You can call me Brian."

"Thanks, Brian." I opened the door and stepped out into the evening air. It was warm and fetid but I was out in it, and home, and that was all that mattered at the moment. I gave Brian a small wave and headed inside, moving mechanically into the elevator. I rode up to my floor, vaguely grateful that no one else decided to get on, and walked down to my apartment. I let myself in and shut the door behind me. I looked out over all my papers, my research, the work of years that had almost been thrown away today because of an asshole who thought he could use me and throw me away like a fucking tissue...the anger filled me completely but there was nothing I could do for it, nothing I could break, nothing to hit, no way to scream without attracting attention. I sank onto the floor with a frustrated hiss of breath, my hands clenching against the worn gray carpet.

*Breathe. Breathe.* Except I couldn't breathe, I couldn't even move, all I wanted was to lash out, and even that was denied to me now, there was nothing but the fire and the fury. Suddenly I saw him, I saw him step towards me from the side, saw him begin to bend over and I threw myself in that direction, leading with my fist. It connected solidly with his jaw just as he materialized out of nowhere. Reese fell back heavily, landing on the floor with a thump. I scrambled over his body and raised my other fist, ready to continue a beating he absolutely deserved, but then I realized he was out cold.

Well, shit.

The rage dissipated, leaving me exhausted and drained, but I had this idiot to take care of now. I touched his face, looking at the swelling along his jaw that was sure to become a lovely bruise soon. Ow. He'd deserved it, but ouch. That was going to hurt. I put a pillow under his head and dragged myself over to my freezer to find a pack of frozen peas. No peas, but frozen corn was close enough. I grabbed a mostly clean dish towel, wrapped the corn in it and sat back down next to him, laying the improvised ice pack against his jaw. He flinched, barely, and I was actually kind of relieved to see him waking up. "You asshole." That way I could curse him out more satisfactorily.

"D'ny?" Reese said blearily. His eyes fluttered open. He took in where he was and what was on his face. He looked accusingly at me. "You h't muh!"

"You came out of nowhere, and you robbed my museum, and you almost fucking wrecked me!" I yelled at him. I leaned away from him on my arms, forcing distance between us so I didn't hit him again. "You seduced me and fucked me and used me and probably enjoyed every fucking second of it, you bastard, so don't even try pulling off self-righteous with me right now. I should call the cops. I really should. I know how you did it, I know you're a fucking doppelganger, Reese." I paused for a second. "Is that even your name?"

"S one of them." He held up a hand to forestall my next furious outburst and moved his jaw experimentally. "Not broke, but that was a good shot, pet. I figured you'd guess my nature when the pieces came together. Why haven't you told the police what I can do, Danny?"

"I don't know," I said honestly, too pissed off to prevaricate. "I had plenty of opportunity to, sitting in the fucking police station all fucking day while they were looking for you."

"Shouldn't swear so much, pet, it's bad for your vocabulary."

"Fuck you!" I shouted. "What did you take?"

"Just a few lovely things," he replied. "And before you ask, I don't have them anymore. They're already on their way out of the country, so don't bother threatening me for them."

"I can't believe you did that!" I exclaimed. Now that I'd gotten started I couldn't seem to control my volume. "You stole something that people all over the world would love to see, Reese, something beautiful and precious. You stole an experience from them. You also used me to do it, and that—" The words stuck in my throat, and I couldn't force them out, so I went around them instead. "That made me spend the day in jail, and even there I wasn't safe from my mother. I had to explain to her why I was in prison. I'll have to explain this to my boss. What if I can't finish my doctorate because of this, you fucker?"

"What's stopping you? You've been proven innocent, pet. There's no reason for the university to stonewall you on your way to professorship and a nice, boring job teaching underclassmen who don't care as much as you do about ancient artifacts and managing museums."

"Don't you fucking judge my choices," I muttered at him. "You have no right to judge anything I do, you're a goddamn thief."

Reese shrugged. "Doing what I love, though."

"So am I, and it doesn't involve defrauding entire countries of their heritage."

"Sounds so sexy when you say it that way, pet." Reese smiled slightly, then suddenly got serious. "I didn't plan on using you, Danny. I was looking for another way to break in when I met you, and well, I wanted you. Fact that you worked in the museum was secondary to me wanting to fuck you into the mattress. You're smart and cute and lovely company, and I enjoyed every second of being with you, even when Zahra was pissing me around."

"Reese..." I sighed. "I really, really want to believe you." I really didn't want to be just a way in to him, but I had the sneaking suspicion no matter what he said that I was. I couldn't trust him. I just couldn't.

"You should," he said gently. "Help me sit up, Danny." I put one hand behind his shoulder and pulled him up, irrationally worried about how he was feeling. Fuck. Why did I care if he had an achy jaw and the beginnings of a headache? I'd felt like shit all day. He could feel like shit for a few hours for my sake.

"How did you break through the wards in the Museum of Art and Science?" I asked once I was sure he could sit up on his own. I didn't tell him about the dreams. I didn't want him knowing what I could do. Hell, I wasn't even sure myself yet what was going on.

"Professor Hauer was our inside man there, pet."

I was stunned. I'd heard it, but I hadn't really believed it. "Why would *he* do that? Of all people?"

"Cause his son is dying and the treatment that can save him is bloody expensive," Reese replied. "Too expensive for him to afford without a major windfall, which this is. Figure any residual blame'll get shifted to him, so you'll be totally in the clear soon enough, Danny."

"He's thrown his entire career away..."

"To save his son's life, pet. It's the honorable thing to do when you weigh it out like that. I want to give you something," Reese said, changing the subject abruptly. "Let me lay out why you should accept before you start protesting, okay? No hitting, no calling the cops, no kicking me out. Deal?"

"Ooo-kay."

Reese reached into his right pocket and pulled out a small, delicately-wrapped item. He passed it to me, and I was surprised by the weight of it. Small but heavy meant stone or metal, and he had stolen plenty of metal objects tonight. "Oh no."

"Open it," he said, staring at me intently. I had no choice but to obey. I opened the paper slowly, fearful of damaging whatever was under it. When I saw the gold and lapis lazuli staring at me from the palm of my hand, my breath caught. It should have been a moment of



repugnance, of disgust that he would even think of giving me such a thing, but instead all I felt for those first few seconds was wonder at the beauty that was in my hand and warmth that someone cared enough about me to think I was worthy of it.

"It's the one that opens you to new influences," Reese said softly, already seeing the recognition in my eyes. "I thought you could use it after the time you've had with me, pet. Bit of a reminder that it wasn't all bad, right? And don't sing me a song about how it belongs in a museum, and we're robbing kiddies of dreams, 'cause that's bollocks. There are plenty of dreams to go around, Danny. I just thought you could use a few more good ones. Wear it sometimes, pet, see what happens. You might like it." He placed his hands on the floor and levered himself to his feet. "I should be off, yeah?" He grinned down at me. "No need to get up, I know the way out. And keep the tux, pet. It looks good on you."

I reached out and caught his pant leg as he turned to go. "No, wait a sec...just..." I stared down at the amulet and then back up at him, dumbfounded. "You confuse the hell out of me, you know that?"

"That'd be me air of mystery, pet. 'S meant to be confusing."

"I should hate you. I should call the cops. I should have told them about you."

"Why didn't you, Danny?"

"Because...I don't know!" I exclaimed, letting him go and getting up myself, pacing over to my windows. I set the amulet down very gently, still cognizant enough to protect it before the trembling in my hands got worse. Part of me wanted Reese, the quintessential disruptive force, out of my life before he made things worse. I had no illusions that things could get a lot, lot worse. But I also wanted him to stay. I looked at him, and I couldn't imagine just letting him go, not when he was giving me a chance to keep him just a little bit longer. He was like one of the artifacts I treasured so much, exquisite and rare and beautiful. I wanted to look at him forever. I wanted to hold him like I had held that amulet, except I knew I didn't have the right. I didn't have a right to either one of them.

"Danny." Reese crossed the room and stood next to me, not touching but close enough that I could feel his heat. "You don't have to know. It's okay."

"It's not okay," I mumbled. "I have no idea what to do about you."

"Don't have to do anything, pet." His arms came up slowly, tentatively, and slid around my shoulders. He pulled me to him, and I let him, resting my head on his shoulder with a sigh. "Let me do for a while," he said gently against my hair. "You tired?"

"Yes."

"Let's lay down, then." He pulled me back towards the bed, settling both of us onto it. We lay back, and I snuggled into Reese's arms, burying my face against the crook of his neck. I was exhausted, drained in a way I had never felt before. It was comforting being with him, and I couldn't make deny myself him right now, not when he felt so good. He held me close, one hand working its way through my tangled hair, soothing and rhythmic. "Wish we'd had time for breakfast, pet."

"Me too." The fact that he'd been stealing from my museum at practically the same moment didn't make me want him any less, I found. "I waited an hour for you."

"Did you eat?"

"No. Just drank coffee and pretended to read the paper."

"Next time I'll make sure you get fed, Danny."

"Next time?" I murmured. I felt drowsy, almost ready to drift off.

"Yeah, pet. Figure I'll be back at some point if you're into it."

"You could stay now," I suggested.

“For a little while, pet.” He kissed my lips gently, his hand coming down out of my hair to cup my face. I breathed in his silent exhalation against my mouth, treasuring the tenderness of the moment and mourning when it was over. “For a little while,” he repeated. I fell asleep in Reese’s arms, lulled by the warmth of his body and the comfort of his nearness.

When I woke up the next morning, I was alone. The amulet I had set on the windowsill had been moved to my pillow, though. I ran my finger over it carefully, reverently. Open to new experiences. It looked like Reese Daveth had ensured that much before he left.

I could give it back. Give back the amulet, explain what I knew. Maybe I’d even give Detective O’Connell enough to find Reese and the others before they fenced all the artifacts. It was the right thing to do, the responsible thing. But I didn’t want the responsible thing right now. I wanted Reese. In his absence, I wanted whatever experiences he was willing to give me. I closed my hand over the amulet, pictured Reese, and hoped.

## Epilogue

I watched cars go by with my eyes closed. It was a way to keep preoccupied on the bus ride home and practice at the same time, a suggestion from my newest instructor at the university. I sat by the window, set my backpack between my feet and turned my music up to block out distracting noise, then closed my eyes and concentrated. The city busses were incredibly slow, and no one liked to get stuck behind them. Cars and trucks sped around us at every opportunity, and I focused on *seeing* them do it.

*Green four-door sedan.* A few seconds later I opened my eyes and watched as a shiny green hybrid zipped around us. I smiled to myself. A few seconds. I was up to *seconds*, plural. I touched my left hand to my chest, lightly fingering the zippered pocket inside my jacket. The amulet was there, resting close to my heart. I really shouldn’t have carried something so precious around with me where it might get damaged, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave it at home either. I compromised and placed it, carefully wrapped, into a secure pocket on the inside of my jacket. I could feel the weight of it without exposing it to the elements or prying eyes, and it was close enough to work its charm on me and remind me of Reese all at once. Not that I was in danger of forgetting him any time soon.

Three months had passed since the museum robbery. I’d been cleared of all charges. Professor Hauer had vanished, and the police were no closer to solving the crime now than they were when it was first committed, although Reese was still a decided person of interest. Constance apologized for doubting me, my job was secure, my thesis was on track, and I was enjoying the few classes I taught in addition to the ones I was taking. Things were fine. Things were rosy. Things were practically perfect, yet I was more unhappy now than I had been since my sophomore year of high school. I knew my inexplicable melancholy was annoying for my coworkers and friends, and after a few fruitless tries they’d stopped asking about it, which was fine with me. I couldn’t explain missing Reese to them anyway. As far as Constance was concerned, he was bad news, and I found it easier not to talk about him after her first few diatribes.

She was probably right about Reese, but that didn’t keep me from wanting to see him again. He’d said he’d come back, and I believed him. And he’d been in touch, kind of. Every couple of weeks I got a postcard in the mail. The first one was from New York, the next from Bangkok, then Osaka...they came from all over the world. They were unsigned, but there was

a short note with each of them. I liked the one from Togo the best. It had a picture of a huge concrete dove in the middle of a traffic circle, and on the back Reese had written *Why am I here? Fucked if I know, pet.* The cards had a space to themselves on the mess that was my coffee table, tucked between my reference books and my laptop. It had been a few weeks since my last one, and I was looking forward to checking the mail.

The bus stopped a few blocks away from my apartment building. I shouldered my backpack and got off, grateful for my jacket now that fall was well underway. It rarely got so cold it would snow here, but the rains were chilly enough to be uncomfortable. I hurried down the sidewalk to my place, entering the front door gratefully and combing my fingers through my damp hair before heading towards my mailbox. Electric bill, an ad for a housekeeping service, and—yes! Postcard! I grabbed it eagerly and scanned the picture, taking in the gondola and the elegant white bridge. It had to be Venice. I turned it over and frowned. There was nothing there. No message, no address, not even my name. How the hell had it gotten here? Maybe it wasn't from Reese after all, maybe...well. Weird. I clamped down on my sudden sharp feeling of disappointment and tucked the card in with the junk mail, then headed for the elevator.

My hall smelled really good. Someone had ordered out; no one here cooked that well. I inhaled and sighed, knowing a fabulous broth and noodle dinner awaited me, and opened my door.

The smell of eggs and bacon, waffles and syrup, bagels and cream cheese was overwhelming. I gaped at my kitchen countertop. It was covered with Styrofoam containers, half a dozen at least, and several paper cups that smelled like they contained coffee. "What..." I tore my eyes away from the food and glanced around my living room. It was empty. No one was there but the food was hot, someone had to have brought it.

"Evening, Danny."

"*Christ!*" I dropped the mail and whirled around, my heart pounding through my chest. Reese was there, standing with a cup in one hand and a paper in the other. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit that managed to look casual and extremely expensive at the same time, and one perfectly-sculpted eyebrow was raised in disbelief.

"Really, pet?" he asked incredulously. "Three months and that's the best you can do by way of a hello? Bloody pathetic. Tell you what, I'll go back to the stairwell, and we'll try it aga—" I dropped my backpack to the ground and flung my arms around Reese, staggering him and provoking a, "Scalding tea, Danny, watch it!" before he found his equilibrium and hugged me back. Somehow he walked us inside, got the door shut and set his tea down, and then his fingers were carding through my damp hair as he pulled my face up for a kiss.

I felt my desperation drain away as the kiss lengthened, my mind easing as I realized he was actually here, cupping my face between his hands and touching me gently, but hungrily. He brushed my lips with his tongue and I opened my mouth for him, whimpering a little as he slipped inside of me. He tasted like heat and bergamot and Reese, a taste I had been desperate for without really knowing why until I tasted it again.

A long minute passed before we pulled slightly apart, me panting and Reese smirking. "Missed me, then," he said smugly.

I smacked him on the shoulder with my hand. "You asshole. Stop sneaking up on me, you're going to give me a fucking heart attack."

"Thought you might see it coming this time," he said, shrugging minutely. "Been getting better with the futuresight, haven't you, pet?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "How do you know that?"

“Good connections, Danny.” The smugness drained out of his expression and for a moment, all I could see was softness and desire. Then he leaned in, kissed me again lightly, and let me go. “Breakfast for dinner, pet. Told you I’d feed you the next time I came around, yeah?” He gestured towards the counter. “I didn’t know what you liked so I got some of everything.”

“That’s way too much food for two people.”

“Shifter here, Danny. Trust me, none of it will go to waste. Have to reheat some of it, though, you’re late.” He picked his cup up and sipped at it. “Had to get a refill for my Earl Grey. Eat up, pet, I want you to have plenty of energy for the main event. I can’t stay long.”

Ah. Of course. “How long can you stay?” I asked, my frantic joy at seeing him again cooling down as I realized he’d be leaving again soon.

“Just the night.”

Well, fuck. “Oh.”

Reese stared at me for a moment, then snorted. “No ‘oh’ in that tone of voice, Danny, like I’ve just kicked your bloody puppy. I didn’t come to this eternally-moist city just for a booty call. I’m here to make sure you’re coming with.”

“Coming where?”

“To Venice. Didn’t you check your mail, pet?”

Now it was my turn to raise an eyebrow. Both, actually, I couldn’t do just one no matter how hard I tried. “How am I supposed to know to interpret a random blank postcard as an invitation to take a trip to Italy?”

“Well, the picture was of Venice, so that would be the destination, naturally. And it’s blank because you haven’t filled it in yet. I thought we’d go over your winter holiday, and you can send the card to your mum.”

I must have looked like I didn’t really follow him, which was entirely accurate. Reese set his tea back down and folded me into a loose embrace, with enough space between us that he could easily look at me. “I’ve missed you, Danny. I want to do something fun, someplace you’ve never been before. My treat. There’ll be a lovely exposition of Impressionist paintings at the Palazzo Grassi, the usual assortment of Renaissance art...”

“Is this for a job?” I asked suspiciously. “Because I won’t help you with a job.”

Reese frowned, then sighed. “S’pose I deserved that. No, Danny, this is for us. Just us.”

Well, that was different. “Oh!”

He grinned at me. “There’s the ‘oh’ I was looking for, pet. Nicely incredulous with a hint of excitement. Ready to try something new, then?”

I grinned at him, feeling the weight of the amulet pressing against me. No way was I ever taking this off now. “With you? Absolutely.”

## About the Author

Cari Z is a Colorado girl who loves snow and sunshine. She works, travels, writes and speaks poor French, but at least the French is improving. Slowly.



PPB

Pink Petal Books, an imprint of Jupiter Gardens Press, would like to invite you to explore the entire Jupiter Gardens, LLC family.

Don't forget to sign up for our reader's loop where we have monthly giveaways, chats, and more! Information can be found on the Pink Petal Books' website.

Jupiter Gardens, LLC – <http://www.jupitergardens.com/>

Pink Petal Books – <http://www.pinkpetalbooks.com/>

Jupiter Gardens Press – <http://www.jupitergardenspress.com/>

Thank you for buying and reading our books! Our authors appreciate your patronage.

**If you liked TREASURED, you might also enjoy SPIRTED by the author...**

A single pink orchid sat on my desk when I returned to the station. Just the one flower, elegant and exotic, curving slightly towards my chair with its sweet-smelling blossom perfuming the room. And it was growing out of my coffee cup.

“Damn it!” I swore. I threw the paper sack that held my lunch onto my desk. No way. No way in hell. I stormed out of my cubicle and down the hall to where my supervisor, Jack Myers, spoke on the phone in his own, much larger, office. He held a hand up to forestall any speaking on my part while he continued nodding into the phone. I waited with ill grace until he hung up a few minutes later, and then I exploded.

“I’m not doing it!”

“Andrea.” He tried to placate me. “It wasn’t my idea, but the commissioner insisted on it. Try to be reasonable.”

“Reasonable?” I exclaimed. “How can I be reasonable, when you’re handing my case over to that arrogant, selfish, ass-kissing little—”

“Andrea, you’re keeping the case. O’Connell will just be assisting in the fieldwork. It’s safer for you to have backup anyway. Someone inside the clubs, not just sitting in a squad car a block away.”

It was reasonable, but I didn’t want to listen. “He can’t tear himself away from a mirror long enough to be helpful. Jack, I’ve been working on this case for three months and I deserve to be the one to see it through. Just because the police commissioner thinks Darren O’Connell is the greatest thing since the inception of forensic thaumaturgy doesn’t make him a good man in the field. He’s a lab rat disguised as a caped crusader. He doesn’t follow orders. He—”

“Steals glory?” Jack interrupted softly. His voice was kind but his expression was firm. “I know how you feel about O’Connell. I know you two have a history together. But you said it yourself, Andrea. You’ve been working the case for three months. You still haven’t managed to get your hands on a sample of the drug. We need to know what we’re dealing with in order to hunt down the people who are manufacturing and distributing it, and this stuff has the fastest half-life of any magical narcotic we’ve ever encountered. We can’t hold the people who sell it because as soon as they turn out their pockets, the stuff disappears.” He sighed heavily, the lines in his face deepening.

“Meanwhile we’ve got everyone from runaway kids to the wife of a state senator getting sick on the stuff. O’Connell’s skills fit this case. The police commissioner thinks we need him to close it, and I’m tending to agree with him.” Jack heaved himself up from behind his desk and walked around to me, then took one of my hands in both of his.

It wasn’t strictly professional, but I didn’t care. Jack and I went way back. He was one of the only people in the world I could truly call a friend, him and his wife Moira. The only other person in this part of the country I’d known as long as them was Darren, and our relationship hadn’t turned out so well.

“He’ll be back pretty soon. He had some sort of official luncheon to get to and couldn’t wait for you. When he comes back, let him read the case file, okay? Try to be polite. You’re both adults. Both professionals. Both cops. You can do this.”

It was all true, and yet I felt like a whiny teenager. Something about Darren pushed my angst button. Maybe it was his showmanship, maybe it was that his career had gone so much further than mine, maybe it was just that I still woke up with tears on my face after I dreamed

about him. But Jack was right. I needed to focus on solving the case. People's lives depended on it.

"Yeah," I said, my voice almost steady. "Yeah, of course, I can. Sorry about the tantrum, Jack."

"If you never threw them, I'd suspect a doppelganger had taken your place."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded with a smile.

"Mean? What? Did I say something?" Jack grinned and headed back around to his chair. "Old age is messing with my short term memory. Or at least that's what I tell my wife whenever I can't find the remote to change the channel from football to interior decorating."

"You're a bad man." I shook my head. "Very bad. I hope Mo gives you hell."

"She does, and I prefer to think of it as adding a little spice to our relationship," he replied smugly. "Now get out of here. Go take a walk or meditate or whatever you have to do to be ready to deal with him when he gets back."

"Will do." I turned around and left his office, moving a lot more slowly than I had when I'd entered it. Inside though, my heart raced. Meditate? I'd need my punching bag to calm down now. I sat down hard in my chair, rocking it back onto two wheels, and stared resentfully at the orchid. My lunch sat uneaten on the desk, and my appetite had fled with my composure. Darren O'Connell. Shit. Well, the least I could do was be ready.

I started organizing the files on my desk, pulling together everything I had on the drug case. The files practically were my desk these days; this case had consumed my world. A brand new drug called fairy dust, manufactured by magic and controlled the same way, it seemed. I had been trying to get a bead on the dealers for weeks and weeks; that was usually the easiest place to start. It was no good, though. The drug dissolved into thin air as soon as we touched one of them. Apparently intent played into its very existence, and if we weren't buying then we weren't getting anything, not even a speck. Buying it didn't work either, not in the long term. If you didn't take it in under a minute, it vanished again. There was something new every day, but this stuff was so new it was on a level all its own.

I was so busy getting things together that I didn't notice his arrival. The scent from the flower suddenly grew stronger, and I looked up just in time to see him run one of his long, slender fingers down one of the velvety petals.

"I designed this orchid just for you, Andi."

I didn't raise my gaze beyond his hand. I didn't want to see the slow curve of that smile spreading across his face, his too-handsome face. I didn't want to look at him at all. After a brief pause, I kept pulling my paperwork together. "Pink isn't my color."

"Well, originally it was going to be a lighter shade, but there was a little coffee left in your mug when I willed it to grow." He sounded amused.

"Light pink is still pink, Detective O'Connell. It's a pale, washed-out figment of its better self, but it's still pink."

"Do I detect some rancor, Detective Haney?"

I lost my cool and glared up at him. It hurt to see him for a moment, standing so close after years apart, but I let my anger override the piece of me that still felt an anxious sense of

desire and longing in his presence. He was smiling, the bastard. His hair was a rich auburn, longer than regulation but of course he got away with that. He was part of a family that got away with a lot of things thanks to their warm, endearing perfection. Their particular gift leant itself to beauty and health. Whereas mine...

*It isn't a competition*, I reminded myself sharply. I made myself smile at him. "Rancor? Not at all, Detective O'Connell. Here." I thrust a three-hundred page file into his arms. "Some reading material to start you off. Feel free to pull up a footstool."

"I'm fine here, thanks," he replied, settling his weight on the edge of my desk. "And I think you can probably fill me in faster than reading this file could."

Damn, he was right. I fought to keep my professional face. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you have any ideas about the chemical makeup of the drug?"

"All we know is that it's a powerful hallucinogen," I replied. "It induces euphoria in small doses. Larger doses lead to manic fits, hysteria and seizures. A large enough dose can cause death, and it isn't a pretty way to go." My eyes glazed over for a moment as I remembered the girl from last weekend. Cute young thing, probably expecting ecstasy and instead she screamed herself to death. When I came out of my brief stupor, I noticed Darren looking concernedly at me. Concern looked good on his face, but I knew better than to trust him.

"Despite that, the demand for the stuff is higher than ever. Fairy dust has a magical component to it that connects it to the will of the dealer. If they want it gone, it's gone. It has to be used fast and that's probably one reason for the overdoses. People get anxious and they take too much."

"The maker is a sorcerer, then."

I nodded. "And the dealers all have to have some ability, in order to make the connection to the drugs. There aren't that many people with ability in this part of the world, even with the minor amounts needed for this job. There are several guys that I've been covering, but they move around a lot, and the sorcerer has a spell that changes their appearances."

"Aha." Darren smiled knowingly. "That's the real reason you're on this case."

My particular talent did assist me with identifying people, but the way he said it rankled. "I'm on this case because I broke this case wide open, Detective O'Connell. I work vice, or didn't you remember that? Oh wait, that's right!" I plastered a falsely bright smile on my face. "You don't get into the trenches anymore. You're too busy kissing ass on Capitol Hill and making love to politicians. Do Italian boots taste better when you lick them, Dare?"

I tried to make him mad. I hated his presumption, his casual ease, his designer clothing and his heartthrob smile. I wanted to break his composure. Angry, guilty, whatever—as long as it wiped away his cool. Instead, he threw his head back and laughed. "Oh my god, no one has called me Dare for years! Andi, you do care."

"No, I don't."

"If you say so." He glanced down at the file. "So you need me to stabilize the drugs?"

"So they tell me. We need to find out what's in them, get a handle on where the sorcerer is getting his raw materials."

"Why not just tail the dealers?"



"It's not that easy," I said defensively. "Their appearance changes, Detective. It changes every five freaking minutes. This is a high-level spell, and I'm under orders not to break cover. I'm a spotter, nothing more." That rankled, too. "But by the time I get a description off to the uniforms and they move to arrest, the face has changed. The one time we did get a collar, the drugs had evaporated. This is a sharp organization. These guys are really good."

"Is your cover solid?"

God, I wanted to smack him so hard I knocked his fine-looking ass off my desk. "Yes," I said slowly and calmly. "My cover is solid. My cover is great. My cover is not the issue here, so drop it."

"It's a security question, Andi, nothing personal."

*Everything is personal with you!* Damn, I was losing it. I needed space, fast. "If you have everything you need to make a start, I'd appreciate it if you'd go, Detective O'Connell. I have a lot of work to do."

"I'm sure you do," he replied. "Are you running an operation tonight? Should I be getting ready?"

There was no way I was ready to run an operation with him. "Not tonight. I've got other plans. Tomorrow."

"Friday it is." He got up off my desk, taking the file with him. "I think I'll go see Jack again before I leave. It's been a long time. Call me when you're ready to go out."

"Yeah."

He paused, then crouched down next to my desk, balancing lightly on the balls of his feet. His eyes forced mine to meet them. "It's good to see you again, Andi. Really."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't since my throat seemed to be swollen shut. Forcing it open now would cause a dam to break inside of me, and I couldn't live with myself if I made a pathetic scene in front of Darren. He looked at me searchingly for a moment, then got up and walked away. I exhaled explosively as soon as he turned into Jack's office, and felt the prick of treacherous tears threatening my eyes. I had to get out of there.

I grabbed my jacket off the back of my chair, pulled my bag off the floor and tossed my unappetizing lunch into the trash can. After a moment's pause, I took the stupid orchid with me as well. I went out the back door, not wanting to go by Jack's office with Darren in it. My little clunker was waiting for me in the lot. Parked right next to it was a monstrous SUV, silver hued with custom hubs. Darren's car. The irony of his parking placement didn't escape me. If I didn't love my Beetle so much, I would have bashed his door with mine. I kept my composure and pulled out of the lot. I kept it on the drive home. I kept it until I was through the front door of my apartment, my things were on the counter and my shoes were off. Then I started crying.

It didn't make any sense. I was over Dare, I really was. I hadn't had any interaction with him for five years, not since we were both rookies working our first cases together. We had met in training, and as the only two trainees with extra abilities, we were put together a lot by the instructors. It was impossible not to be attracted to him at first sight. Beautiful and talented and smart...back then he had been kind, too. He was the first person in his family to break with the healing tradition to go into law enforcement, and he felt isolated because of it.

I was thousands of miles away from my family, and even lonelier. We became friends, partners and eventually lovers.

The partnership only lasted a year. We were assigned to find an escaped convict hiding in a Louisiana swamp. He was half troll, and talented enough with nature magic to hide himself well. Dare could track him through the muck. He'd always been good with finding things in the wild. We'd followed him into a deep section of mangroves before realizing that it was a trap. Hip deep in swamp water, the liquid became thick sludge, holding us fast. The half-breed could do more with his magic than just evade us, it turned out. The mud sank beneath our feet, burying us further and further in the glutinous water.

Except it didn't affect Dare like it did me. He didn't realize before that day exactly how much power he had. He broke free of the spell, propelled himself straight out of the water and willed the mangroves themselves to hold the convict in place. It was an astonishing display of nature magic, and the convict was as surprised as Dare. Once the troll was secure, Darren remembered me. Only by that point, I had drowned.

He saved me, obviously. Pulled me out of the water and revived me with his skill. He wasn't as good with people as the rest of his family was but he had more than enough power to restart my heart. So I went to the hospital, the convict went back to jail, and Dare sailed into the limelight. He got a lot of attention for the case and soaked it up like a cat in a sunbeam, delighting in being recognized as more than just an appendage of his famous family.

Oh, he remembered me eventually. He came to the hospital, brought me heaps of flowers and apologized for waiting to save me. He knew he'd be able to bring me back, he'd told me. It was a simple enough trick. He would never have let me die; he'd always be there to save me.

Except he had let me die.