

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



ENFORCER
Seduced URBAN
SEDUCTIONS
ELIZABETH LAPTHORNE

Enforcer Seduced

Elizabeth Lapthorne

Book three in the Urban Seductions series.

Sage Barrington is an Enforcer with the magical ability to blend into any situation. When she's chosen for a new, elite crew made up of Enforcers and human police to go undercover in search of a drug ring responsible for numerous deaths, she knows this mission could be the most important of her career. So she isn't prepared to have her heart stolen on the job. The searing passion she discovers with human Chase Whieldon burns to her soul.

Chase can't believe the slender witch will carry her weight in their crew. Sexy and alluring, she heats his blood and fires his imagination. Antagonism quickly morphs into sizzling chemistry. Scorching the sheets shatters their preconceived notions.

As the stakes rise and the danger intensifies, Chase and Sage must trust each other implicitly. On the front line, facing a growing evil, the only way to keep each other safe is to see this mission through to its explosive end.

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Enforcer Seduced

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Boy Scouts: Boy Scouts Of America Corporation

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Chapter One

Night had fallen over the city of Chicago, and the playground appeared spooky in the inky darkness. Swings and slides stood silent, waiting for the sun to rise and rambunctious children to be let free once again. Two streetlamps stood on either side of the path that bisected the park. Outside the small, twin circles of light, the shadows were enhanced, rather than illuminated.

Instead of children playing, a half dozen adults congregated on the edge of the grassy land. Each appeared to have military or other professional training. Their stances showed a fluid grace and they were strategically positioned to defend themselves. Each scanned the area in what might appear to an outsider as a casual manner, but to a similarly trained person showed heightened awareness of their surroundings and constant vigilance.

A mixture of witches, wizards and humans, the motley group had been hand-picked for the upcoming mission. Sage Barrington felt privileged to be a member of their team of seven. They were the first ever joint unit of magical Enforcers and human Police.

"You'd think those bureaucratic asshats could get themselves into gear and join the party instead of slowing us down with their endless red tape, wouldn't you?" Angelina Harling muttered darkly to their group.

At the witch's words, Sage turned toward a tall, solidly muscled blond man who stood on the footpath growling into his cell phone. His agitated pacing was crisp and precise—the motion of a man trained in drill practice. His hair was cut military short and his anger at the unfortunate person on the other end of the line was palpable.

"Come on, Ange." Sage laughed. "What would we possibly do with a bunch of fat, lazy managerial jerks? You'd set them all on fire within ten minutes. Assuming we could keep Blade from stabbing them, that is."

Tall, willowy and with a wealth of dark brown hair, Angelina—more commonly known as Flame—had worked a handful of cases with Sage and her partner Blade over the years.

Even in the darkness of night, Ange wore her reflective sunglasses. Her eyes were extremely sensitive to swift changes from light to dark or vice versa. Without the glasses, she could be crippled at a crucial moment from the pain such radiance shifts could cause.

Sage's magic came in the form of being able to blend in to any crowd, manipulating her essence to mimic those around her like a chameleon. When it came to undercover work, she was a pro.

If she pushed her magic too hard and fast, it frequently resulted in migraines or she'd pass out. The more power witches or wizards used, the greater the toll on their bodies. Most Mages were trained in their youth to manage the side effects from using their powers—but extreme power came at a high cost. While Ange had yet to meet the explosive or security device she couldn't handle, her power came at the cost of extremely sensitive eyes.

"Of course, I was forgetting our dear Bradley's twitchy temper." Ange smirked. The smug look she cast Blade didn't go unnoticed by Sage.

"Bradley?" Julian Sherwyn echoed. Tall, lanky with close-cropped blond hair and soft gray eyes, Julian so far had been the quiet one of the group. Even though their team had been assembled only a few short hours ago, Sage had pulled some strings and obtained a brief dossier on each of the members she didn't know personally.

Julian was human but an exceptional cop. Usually the backup man and well known for his bravery and fierce loyalty, he had earned numerous commendations. Each of the reports she had scanned had commented how Julian never gave in, didn't know the meaning of giving up and flat-out refused to leave a man behind or undefended.

Next to Sage, Blade's body vibrated after Ange's teasing and Julian's innocuous query. Her partner of many years shared a strange form of understanding with Ange.

"My name," Blade said, drawing himself up to his full six feet and five inches, "is Bradley McKinnon Worthington the Fourth. My colleagues and *friends* call me Blade. If you really want to, you can call me Bradley, Julian."

Blade was dressed completely in black. With skin the rich color of the finest coffee beans, black eyes and closely trimmed hair, her partner might melt into the inky midnight stillness were it not for his pearly white teeth.

A master of any steel as well as most forms of fighting, Blade was a true warrior. Even though Blade held himself proud, Sage could hear the derision in her partner's tone as he stated his full legal name.

Sage and Blade had shared an entire bottle of tequila after one of their first missions and she had asked how he had become so proficient with his blades. Blade had described how when he mastered his first weapon, the steel in his hands had literally sung to him. It became an addiction he could not deny, something so integral to him he could not imagine life without his training.

Julian didn't back down at Blade's words, though he did nod his understanding curtly.

"Well, at least I can see why you've been paired off with the cheerleader here."

Sage blinked and turned to face the darkly handsome man she had been attempting to ignore all evening. He was just on six feet tall, with shaggy dark brown hair and two or three days' worth of stubble on his jaw. Her first impression had been Chase was a snitch, down on his luck.

Bristling indignantly at being written off so easily, Sage took a deep breath to rein in her temper. It had been years since any of her coworkers had called her

professionalism into question. She had a well-deserved reputation for infiltrating previously untouchable groups as well as a high level of success in her missions. Deciding to teach Chase not to judge a book by its cover, Sage linked her hands behind her back, tilted her head so her long blonde hair fell over one eye and smiled shyly.

By manipulating her essence, tapping into her magic, she made herself appear softer, less like the fighter she was and more like an innocent. With her senses magically heightened, the area around her appeared crisper. Blade, to the normal eye, didn't move, but Sage could see the tiny ripple of muscle as he thought about responding to Chase's pointed comment.

Laying a hand on her partner's arm, Sage coyly ducked her head.

"That's okay, Blade," she said, her voice soft and meek. Sage felt Blade relax as he realized she was playing with Chase. "Maybe Chase has a point. I am so very small and delicate. I need a big strong man like you to keep me safe."

Were it not for her heightened awareness, she'd probably have missed Ange's hastily swallowed snort of laughter. In past missions she and Ange had been the last witches standing. Hurt and bloodied but always victorious—their enemies dead or captured as buildings burned down around them. Ange's nickname wasn't Flame purely because she was hot.

Sage stole a glance at Chase to find him studying her. Before she could close the distance between them and show him exactly how well she was able to take care of herself, the sound of Captain Will Allcott swearing clearly rang out across the park.

Back at the precinct where they had originally gathered, the combined magical essences of Sage, Blade, Ange and the Tracker of their team—Matthias Kestell—had fried Will's cell phone. Magical energy did not mix particularly well with new forms of technology.

Before leaving police headquarters, a lieutenant's phone had been commandeered from his desk. Lesson learned, the captain stood halfway across the park from them so his "new" phone wouldn't die in the same manner as its predecessor. Edgy as she and her fellow Enforcers were, Sage wasn't sure this cell would last long either. Reports of a new, exceedingly potent drug had been trickling in to the Enforcers for a number of months now. Highly addictive, especially to humans, the drug showed a wide variety of symptoms from person to person.

Some humans got high while others fell into a depression or ended up committing suicide. Raw power had sent a small group of humans absolutely crazy, jabbering and unable to process having their minds opened so vividly to the world around them.

Hallucinations, paranoia, feelings of omnipotence—the list seemed to be endless. Despite the best minds going over the reports and trying to find correlations, at this point the type and severity of response appeared random. Nobody could predict anything when it came to this.

The Magical Tribunal had been deeply embarrassed after discovering a group of wizards using the human world as cover for their illegal drug trade a number of

months ago. Many on the council felt the segregation between the magical and human worlds had gone on long enough. While an equal number of Tribunal members felt this separation was still necessary, a compromise had been reached after this serious breach had been unearthed.

It had been decided that neither the Enforcers nor the police alone could get a handle on the growing drug trade. A temporary joint task force had been convened, the first of its kind. Their new team had been placed under the command of Will Allcott.

Captain Allcott, from what little Sage had seen of the blond man, appeared to be a dedicated policeman, straight as an arrow and blunt as a sledgehammer. Crisp and certain of himself, with years of obvious experience and training, Will struck Sage when they first met as a leader in every respect.

Physically the man had kept trim and fit, unlike the stereotypical paper-pushing captain. Any thought of Will as being less than totally in charge a hundred percent of the time withered and died the moment he opened his mouth. The man's every word had the utter ring of command.

"I don't care that your Scouters can't get a handle on the number of people in that club, I am not sending my team in blind. Do you get that? Now get me a good estimate or I'll bust your lazy ass down to street cleaning."

"Someone's unhappy," Matthias mumbled as a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. He, like Julian, was quieter than the rest of the group. An excellent Tracker, he frequently kept to himself, rather than working in partnerships or crews like most other Enforcers.

Trackers could become bombarded with information if their control and focus were not good. Unless one got a handle on how to filter unnecessary information early on, they could burn out fast. Matthias had lasted the distance and still managed to retain his sense of humor. Sage liked working with him immensely.

Will closed his phone and stalked back to their group, pausing a few feet away as it rang again. Checking it, he swore and turned the phone off before returning it to his pocket. Switching on his beeper to filter calls, he shook his head.

"You guys bust my beeper and I'll skin the lot of you," he growled in frustration. "I can't get the full pay allowance for a team of professionals out of the department even when the orders are from on high for us to do this mission. No way will they replace my cell phone because magical energy fritzed it. Hell, that's assuming they believe what I write on the requisition form. And I don't want to think about what Ellerson is going to say when he realizes I've stolen his cell."

"Come on, Captain." Chase grinned. "Just say the word. I'll lift one from some bimbo in the club. Julian here is decent with the tech stuff, he can tweak it so she'll never know and you'll be set for the next day or so."

Will snorted and shook his head. Sage had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She hadn't realized Chase would be coming inside the club. She'd thought it

would be herself and Blade, as usual. She was the point person, Blade her backup and partner. Always. What possible extra help could Chase give?

"Don't you dare, you bastard," Will replied easily. "The last thing I need is the commissioner on my case about some well-connected idiot's teenage daughter wailing about how an undercover agent seduced her, made her spread her legs and hand over her phone."

"She won't be complaining, Captain," Chase replied with a smirk.

Will chortled and drew his hand across the air to end the conversation. "Okay, listen up, people." The command in his voice gained their full attention. "This is how it is. I've been put in charge of this team, however temporary or not it turns out to be. Are we clear?"

Will paused and held the glance of each of them in turn. Chase and Julian nodded immediately. Matt paused for a split second before tilting his head in assent. His face was impassive as usual. Ange had started to nod, her thoughts inscrutable behind her shades. After a moment she concurred more firmly and Sage joined in with a few sharp nods. Last, with narrowed eyes, Blade looked Will up and down. After a very brief pause, Blade also nodded.

"You're the leader," he affirmed, his deep voice rumbling in the darkness of the night.

Will nodded once curtly and then continued.

"Right. Here's where we're at—as you know we're fairly certain the new drug is being pushed around here. Recent reports indicate that it's sprung up at this club, The Abyss. It's full of under twenty-fives with a hefty portion of the Goth and the wannabe crowds. If the scouting team can pull their finger out we might get numbers of what we're facing inside. From that I can structure better contingency plans. Extractions, keeping innocents safe. Any worst-case scenarios. Despite my giving the other team more than three hours' warning to get themselves in gear, we have no idea whether there's even one pusher inside or as many as a dozen."

"Do you want me to go ahead?" Matthias spoke up. "If we've got so much as a hint it's a magic user who's the pusher I can try to identify them, glean some extra information and report back."

"Good idea, but we have no clue who the pushers might be, let alone whether or not they are magical or human," Will replied. "Scouters think most of the people inside are kids," he continued. "The basic problem is we don't have any information. That's what this mission is all about. We know—kind of—what happens *after* these kids get high and crash. I hope you've all read the dossier and are up to date with that side of the mission."

Will paused and each member of the team calmly met his gaze, confident and prepared. Sage had been intrigued even though very little knowledge had been collated. "The hospitals and private clinics have had numerous cases of surges of paranoia, screaming fits, all kinds of uncontrollable behavior. What we don't know is

who's supplying it, who's selling it, what it's called or what it looks like. We don't know what the damn drug *is*. Whatever it's made of metabolizes as fast as the high and crash. Bloodwork from dozens of cases has shown nothing."

Frustration flashed in Will's pale blue eyes. He scratched at his stubble-covered cheek angrily but held his rage under control. Running a hand over his blond hair had the short strands springing immediately back up, but he apparently didn't know or care. Taking a deep breath, he outlined the plan.

"So, Blade, Ange and Julian, you three are going to watch our asses. I'd prefer it if Blade and Ange, you stayed up ahead and kept a handle on what happens. Monitor any communication that passes on the comms—assuming they work—and also collect anything that might be useful that you come across. You'll need to do the regular sweeps too. Ideally you'll leave Julian to guard the rear. That's what he's best at. Having said that, you're all professionals and this isn't kindergarten, I'm not going to hold your hands. You need to talk about it between yourselves and sort it out, pronto."

Will paused to catch his breath, giving the three of them a split second to raise any concerns before he continued.

"Ange, I know you like to burn your bridges as you leave, and I also know you're generally the team assassin when the situation calls for it. I'm going out on a limb here and I'm not ordering you to keep that attitude of yours in check. You're a big girl. But I agreed to have you on my team because I feel someone like you is an asset—and not just for your lethal skills—and it's always good to have a Plan C. You're it. Don't fuck with me though. You're our last resort. If all hell breaks loose and we're about to be annihilated, do whatever it is you do. Otherwise, keep your hands clean. You read me?"

Sage turned to Ange and could swear if her eyes had been visible there'd have been a twinkle of laughter in them. The edge of her full lips had tilted into the faintest of smiles. "Got it, Captain," she agreed huskily. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Will nodded. "Matt, you'll be up high. We've got an office around the back that overlooks the club. Use the street lights only, we don't want some nosy kid on the street to catch sight. If necessary, you can lean out onto the window ledge and be only a matter of feet from the club. You're the Tracker, I want you to home in and relay to the team where you sense magic and anything else you can give us. Effectively you're the eye in the sky. I also hear you can forewarn sometimes of an impending attack?"

Matthias nodded, his electric blue eyes sparkling.

"It's been known to happen," he agreed with macho pride. It was the cheeky dimple in his cheek that gave him away. Matt ran a hand through his thick brown hair and cocked his head to the side impishly.

Will smirked and shook his head. "Wonderful. Give us whatever you can as soon as possible. You get even a whiff this might be an ambush, magical or otherwise, you notify us all immediately. That leaves today's lucky winners, the point guys," Will finished as he turned to look at Sage and Chase.

Sage swallowed hard, debating whether she should request Chase cover their asses with Ange and Julian so Blade could be her partner. Chase and she had barely exchanged more than two dozen words, but there had been an attraction between them, an instant connection she had firmly pushed aside.

Worse than having to ignore the chemistry flaring between them, they had been mildly antagonistic to each other. Sage wasn't certain she could work with someone who had no faith in her or her abilities, who thought her nothing more than a pretty ornament meant to distract the enemy.

Upon occasion, she did use her youthful looks and body to distract others—any woman with sense and the ability would in those situations. But it was not her only trick and certainly not her default answer to any problem. Sage did not have the patience to convince Chase of that, nor did she have the desire to show off and prove herself. Time and experience would do it all for her.

Despite her misgivings, Sage decided not to object and cause friction. She only hoped it would not be a choice she regretted later. Will appeared to read her mind. After a long look at her he frowned.

"Chase is the best damn undercover agent I've ever worked with," Will stated confidently. "Sage, I've heard nothing but good things about your magical ability to mimic and blend in undercover. I need you to stick close, watch each other's backs, but most importantly of all, mingle and gather every tiny little piece of information possible. The dossiers you read on the drug had barely a half dozen sheets of paper inside. By tomorrow morning I want that file thick. I want names, addresses, eyewitness accounts. After tonight you should be able to give me detailed accounts on everything about this drug. I also want your opinions on why people are buying it and how it's being marketed to the kids.

"You know we can't do blood tests on those addicted, it metabolizes too fast. If you can find out why the stuff breaks down so quickly, add that in too. You're doing the main groundwork for what *everyone* will be following and studying from here on in.

"And just in case that's not enough, we would love to get details on what the pushers look like. Is it just a few select people handing this out or are they flooding the market? What—" The mechanical beeping of Will's pager cut off his next comment and he looked down at the device. With a muttered curse he mumbled "damn Scouters" and stalked away from the group and back to the footpath as he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket again.

Chapter Two

Silence reigned as they all looked among themselves. Sage wondered who would break it, not overly surprised when it was Chase who spoke first.

“At least you didn’t bring a handbag,” he teased, “I’d hate to have to hold it for you while you paused to apply your lipstick or something.”

Her patience at an end, Sage turned to face Chase. He had almost six inches on her and he probably weighed twice as much as she did—all of it muscle. Still, she had learned to fight with Blade, who towered over Chase. And Blade was built more solidly than the human, so Sage figured she could probably take him.

“Fuck you, Chase,” she replied calmly. “I’m not some breakable doll and I’ll prove it to you anytime, anywhere.”

Matthias and Julian jeered quietly, looking back and forth from her to Chase. Chase cocked an eyebrow and appeared intrigued, though whether it was the potential for a fight or something else she didn’t know. Sage realized her words could hold an intimate double meaning and she swallowed down embarrassment but kept her face calm and serious.

“You think you can take me?” Chase asked, his tone light and amused. His eyes were unreadable in the darkness. Sage couldn’t get a handle on the electricity that grew between them.

Then, in a flash of insight, she realized Chase simply was the sort of man who needed to experience things himself. He wasn’t the sort to learn from being told, he needed to be *shown*. Sage had detested the constant need to prove herself to the wizards around her during her first few years on the Enforcers. She loathed showing off. With her deceptive, innocent blonde looks, however, it had been necessary until her reputation and skills proved themselves. Word of mouth about her talents had finally negated the need to prove herself to every new team she encountered.

But she understood how working with the humans—who had no idea about her or her talents—would sooner or later necessitate her once again showing her capabilities. She would not let her pride hold her back from doing whatever was necessary for their team to be successful. If that included “proving” herself to Chase, then so be it.

Sage tilted her head to each side, working out any kinks in her neck. Simultaneously she bounced on the balls of her heeled boots as she tried to shake a bit of energy and warmth into her muscles. If this was how Chase wanted to initiate her, she could handle it.

Despite their physical differences, Sage had confidence she could wipe the floor with Chase.

"I know I can take you," she replied with perfect confidence. Julian and Matt had their heads together and Sage thought she heard them exchanging bets but she kept her focus on Chase.

"No magic or weird stuff. Just hand-to-hand?" he asked suspiciously. Sage smiled angelically and nodded. Chase shrugged out of his leather jacket, unholstered his gun and handed both items to Julian without taking his gaze off her.

"You're on, sweetheart."

Sage widened her stance to center her balance. Ideally she'd not be doing this in a cold park in the middle of the night. Visibility was poor, but more importantly she was dressed for clubbing in a tiny black leather mini, knee-high laced leather boots and a gold sequined halter-necked top.

She'd fought in worse conditions and been successful. Sage focused her attention on the man before her and calmed her mind so she wouldn't be caught by surprise.

Keeping her gaze trained on Chase, she mirrored his actions as he slowly circled her. The other four had stepped back a few paces each, creating a small, tight ring around them.

They continued to circle each other. Sage figured Chase would lose patience in a second—usually men started out using their brute strength, arrogantly assuming they could overpower her in one quick swoop.

Watching his body carefully, she tried not to admire the way his chest filled out his dark button-down shirt, or the way his hips gave way to long, leanly muscled legs. As those legs jerked minutely, the muscles bunching, she realized he was about to rush her.

Stepping back as he sprang forward, Sage let her mind go blank and her training and instincts take over. In one graceful, fluid motion she had practiced a million times, she turned, changed Chase's center of gravity and tipped him over onto the ground.

Retaining her footing, even if she did wobble on her high heels, Sage quickly pinned Chase with her small body. They struggled silently, their breaths coming faster. With their faces only a few inches apart, Sage easily read the furious look Chase threw over his shoulder.

Sage knew Chase would make his next effort a lot more difficult for her. Still, she was quietly confident she could match him step for step.

Unwilling to relinquish her advantage, Sage strained to keep him pinned. Straddling Chase's waist, she discovered with a breathless little laugh she actually was enjoying herself. Sage had never been one to back down from a challenge, but as she had quite a reputation for excellence amongst the Enforcers, she hadn't needed to prove herself since her days as a fresh-faced trainee.

This was rather fun.

Her focus must have dipped because Chase, with the innate sense only a real fighter has, noticed and capitalized on it. In a swift, strong movement he almost succeeded in flipping himself—and her with him—over.

Instead, he managed to push her off him enough to turn himself onto his back. With a grunt and flexing of her thigh muscles, Sage continued to pin him after nearly losing her balance, but only barely. Now they were lying face-to-face on the grass, and Sage was startled to feel her pussy heat as she pressed herself into Chase's thick erection.

Flush against each other, Sage straddling Chase's hips, it was impossible for either of them to miss the way his hard cock was jutting against her inner thigh.

Sage's eyes widened as heat seeped into her skin. Chase bucked and the intimate gesture mimicked the way he would thrust his cock deeply into her pussy. Sage couldn't help but let her mind fly to a far more intimate embrace they could be sharing in this situation.

Their gazes met and locked. Sage lost her breath as she fell into bottomless pools of dark chocolate. Chase shifted, aligning them better and, had they been naked, he would have slipped directly inside her, wet as she had become.

Chase lifted his hips and Sage struggled against him, pinning him down. Locks of her long blonde hair fell over her face and brushed his jaw and neck. His eyes widened with surprise, heat flaring within them. Sage's breath came faster and her heart beat furiously.

The scent of grass mingled in the air with the faint scent of his cologne. Sage felt her desire growing as they bucked with intense intimacy against each other. What had started as a struggle to prove her skills had quickly turned into a far more sensual tug-of-war. Annoyance had morphed to passion. The spark ignited between them, its intensity almost took Sage's breath away.

She wanted him to rip her tiny thong off so she could undo his pants, take him in her hand and press his thick length deeply inside her pussy. Wet and clenching as she was, it would be a simple matter to lift herself, spread her legs just a few inches wider and—

"You owe me twenty bucks," Matthias' smugly pleased tone snapped her attention back to exactly where she lay. Sage looked up at her teammate and for the first time all evening was glad they were in the shadows. A blush crept over her pale skin, heating her cheeks.

Chase cleared his throat softly and her gaze snapped back down to meet his. A sly grin twitched at the corner of his mouth. The man was not only cocky, but cheeky too.

"I wasn't expecting it either," he said, keeping his tone low.

Yet again this human had surprised Sage. He had purposely kept his comment between them. She had thought he would lord their mutual reactions over her.

Flustered and turned-on, Sage wasn't exactly sure what to say. She hadn't been in a situation like this before. Separating work and pleasure had always been easy, instinctive. All sorts of barriers were being crossed tonight and Sage wasn't sure she wanted some of them to be breached. Not here and certainly not by this strangely quixotic man.

"I— Well, I—" Sage couldn't finish the sentence.

Chase once again jerked his hips up, pressing his hard cock into her softness. Despite the raunchy motion, a soft twinkle appeared in his eyes. It was as if they shared a secret knowledge between themselves. Their joint arousal grew but the rest of their crew remained clueless. The fact of their intimacy flourished between them, unfurling like the most delicate of buds in the gentle sunshine.

As Chase's eyes dilated with pleasure, it became difficult for her to tell where his black pupil ended and the brown of his iris began. Their breaths came harder and it took considerable effort for Sage not to pant her need or grind her hips and open pussy over Chase's thick cock.

"I know," he soothed her in a soft undertone. "At least this will make the rest of the evening a hell of a lot more interesting. I'm sorry if I pricked your ego earlier. But you really are such a tiny thing it's hard to believe you can pack such a punch. If I hadn't experienced it for myself I'd never have guessed just to look at you."

Sage's face softened as she listened to Chase admit his earlier misconception. She had to quash the desire to stroke his cheek. Instead, she smirked and punched him lightly in the shoulder as she pressed her weight back onto her heels and prepared to stand. Wet and skimpily covered, she didn't want to flash the rest of their team, nor give Chase an eyeful. A girl had to keep *some* secrets.

"Apology accepted, even if you shouldn't have been such a chauvinist to begin with," she chided lightly as she got to her feet. "For future reference, I didn't use magic on you. Be grateful. I can pack a far stronger punch if I've a mind to."

"I believe you," he nodded, wincing only slightly as she stood and the heat from their closeness evaporated. Sage missed the comfort of him beneath her, but pushed the errant thought away.

"Shit, Chase," Will grouched as he returned to the group. "Quit playing with your cock, will you? And get your head into the game."

For a moment Sage stared, thinking Will had noticed her and Chase's aroused state. However, Chase merely cleared his throat and shot a quick comeback. She released a breath as she came to stand next to Blade.

"Good show," he commended her. "Nice to see you might get some action for a change."

Sage shot her partner a quelling glance, but he simply smiled at her, his teeth blinding in the darkness of his face. Letting the comment go, Sage's lips twitched as they turned their attention back to Will.

"Okay, people, that was the Scouts and we're out of time. We're still going in blind. Sage, Chase, it's up to the two of you to do what you do best. Blend in, carefully ask around and get everything you can. A sample and maybe some names would be ideal but in a pinch anything will do. Information is key here."

Will paused as he drew out a cigar, the end already clipped and partially chewed. Popping it into his mouth and biting down around it in what Sage suspected was a pre-

mission ritual, Will gnawed before speaking clearly around the cylindrical length, obviously from long practice.

"Each and every one of you has a chance to potentially add to that file. I don't care if it's instinct, magic or if the Lord Almighty hands you a message about this shit. This drug is bad and we need to fight it. You know where we stand. Let's do our duty and come back safely."

Will nodded his dismissal and stepped back. Sage turned to Blade and they bumped fists.

"Be safe, Sage," Blade intoned. "Ange, Matt, Julian and I will have your ass, but make sure you keep an eye out while you do your thing."

"I will, and you be safe too. No unnecessary risks, you hear?" she replied.

Ange grinned, lifted her glasses for a split second so they could lock gazes before she lowered her shades again. Sage thought it a pity the deep, dark violet blue of Ange's eyes couldn't be seen more easily, but she shook the thought away as quickly as it appeared.

"We've got you," Ange said.

Chase came and stood beside Sage, and Ange nodded to him.

"You watch each other. No bullshit in there like out here, or I'll be pissed," the dark-haired woman said firmly.

Sage smirked and looked at Chase. "We don't want Ange pissed. It never ends well," she cautioned as she tried to not laugh.

"Definitely not," he agreed solemnly. "I don't need the stress of an arson investigation if she burns the place down around us."

Ange and Sage laughed and a warmth crept into Sage's chest. An hour earlier she wouldn't have believed Chase could laugh and talk shit with them, or not in a lighthearted manner like right now.

Scruffy as he appeared, she'd have thought he could only do the macho male thing, stroke his own ego and attempt to pat her on the ass. There was a depth here to the man she hadn't expected. Just as she had evidently surprised him with her fighting prowess, so too did he now impress her.

Despite her personal rules against mingling work and play, she found Chase...intriguing. Intoxicating. She could fall under his masculine spell with only the slightest of pushes. It zinged her with energy even as it thrilled her with wary concern.

Chase touched her elbow softly, as if she were delicate, and indicated they should head out of the park. A part of her wanted to snap at him, but his small smile and straight face showed he hadn't meant to treat her as though she would break, but simply acted from courtesy. Irritation melted and Sage knew she would have to trust Chase completely.

Her attraction to the man was more than she really ought to feel for a comrade. But allowing him to lead her, Sage followed and tried to clear her head.

As they walked together down the block, Blade, Julian and Ange melted away into the background. Sage doubted they'd lay eyes on each other until the mission ended and they debriefed.

Unless, of course, it all went to hell. Not wanting to dwell on what Ange's spur-of-the-moment Plan C might entail, Sage forced the thought far, far out of her mind. Positive thinking did wonders. If she thought long enough on negative outcomes they only became that much more likely.

The streets grew more crowded as they neared the club around the corner from the park. Sage eyed the women they walked past. From years of practice, she noted their postures, the way they tilted their heads as they laughed and flirted. A wealth of information could be gathered in mere seconds as they walked down the street. Sage mimicked different characteristics when she saw common threads.

She also took note of the loudness of their voices, slang they used and all manner of other minutia people took for granted in their social companions. While not conscious of these things, when a person *lacked* them and did not conform, it became obvious they were an outsider immediately. Sage could blend in here with her physical mannerisms as well as giving a more subtle *push* by manipulating her essence.

Placing a hand on Chase's arm, she urged him to slow his brisk walk as they came within sight of the club.

Sage focused her attention inside herself and seemed to become younger as she altered her essence in small bursts. Manipulating her magic and basic signature, Sage found her step lightened. She could feel the changes within her, subtle as they were.

Sage knew she would appear more carefree, like a girl out for a night on the town after a few drinks instead of a trained soldier, sharp and deadly. Her smile lightened and her shoulders relaxed, she tossed her hair around her face and sent Chase a smoldering glance from beneath half-lowered eyelids.

"Think you can keep up with me tonight, stud?" she taunted him, enjoying the feel of magical power running through her body as her senses really jacked up. Sage didn't unleash her full power; she wanted to snap and sizzle, not blind the partiers in the club.

"Absolutely," he agreed, his grin toothy and eager. He reached up to his ear and the hidden comm lodged in it, switching the unit off with a flick of his finger. Sage had switched hers off the moment it had been placed on her, not wanting it to fry when she used her magic.

Sashaying closer to Chase, she wrapped an arm around his waist and leaned into his embrace. She let his arm rest over her shoulders and didn't murmur as his hand toyed possessively with a long lock of her hair. They waited in the queue to enter The Abyss. Music spilled from the open doors and filled the streets. A vast array of people waited to gain entry, a few being turned away by the bouncer on the front door.

The bouncer, well over six feet tall and solidly built, took one appreciative look at Sage, a quicker glance at Chase and held out his hand.

"Entry'll be ten bucks, twelve if you need a stamp to pass out again," he grunted. Chase dug the money out of his pocket with one hand and they held out their wrists to be stamped.

"Let's get this party started," she laughed huskily as they held hands loosely and entered the dimly illuminated club.

Chapter Three

Lights flashed in time to the heavy beat of the music, the pounding of the bass vibrating right through Sage's body. Although she'd erected basic protection before entering, the beat nevertheless rocked through her hard enough she knew after a few hours a migraine would begin.

Swallowing hard, Sage tried to relax. She willed the tension not to take hold of her muscles, instead absorbing everything. Years of experience had taught her she needed her instincts revving so she could be guided by her innate talent.

A slow look around the large club led her to believe the majority of people idling in small groups on the edges of the dance floor and along the walls were regulars. People mingled around the bar while waiting, ordering and drinking their beverage of choice. The dance floor was packed with a mixture of wide-eyed newbies and regulars.

Having allowed her instincts time to soak in the atmosphere, Sage let her eyes focus properly. With her magic active, she could pinpoint smaller details often missed.

Many of the people her instincts had labeled as the regulars were dressed in Goth wear—lots of leather, wrist cuffs and tight leashes around mostly the girls' necks. Dyed black hair, pale makeup with thick, dark lining around the eyes was the main theme for both the men and women.

Most others were dressed in normal club wear—tight skirts, slinky dresses and bold colors.

Sage stood on tiptoes to speak in Chase's ear.

"I think the dance floor is our best bet," she said. "Not only will we blend better, but we'll have a good view of the entire club. You up for some dancing?"

Chase narrowed his eyes. Sage followed his gaze as he watched the people writhe on the large center floor area as if he were debating something. Finally he looked back to her with a wry grin. "My prom lessons didn't include dances like this," he laughed, "but I'm willing to give it a go."

As Chase took her hand and led her to the dance floor, Sage allowed her body to relax. With each step she subtly flexed her muscles and mimicked the posture of young girls around them. Sage allowed her magic to lead her actions so she would appear young and sensual as she danced.

Most couples were all but fucking, indulging in very public displays of eroticism. Sage prepared to simulate that alluring aura, gyrating her body in time to the deep beat of music pulsing around them. The temptation to feel Chase's hard cock in her hand, his skin warm on hers, held Sage in thrall and her mouth watered with desire.

Although her hips moved with fluid grace, her eyes scanned the crowd with the laser-like clarity of a seasoned professional.

When Chase ran his fingers across her bare neck and down her exposed back, Sage turned into his chest.

"We might have our work cut out for us to fit in here. Have you seen...?"

He chuckled and continued to move sinuously, resting his other hand on her hip and turning her so their groins were aligned.

"I certainly have. Are you saying, Ms. Barrington, that you might be in over your head?" Small puffs of his breath caressed her ear.

Sage snorted and shook her head once decisively. "Not at all." To emphasize her words, she cupped his ass. Rocking herself against him, she rubbed her damp pussy against his growing thickness without missing a beat to the music.

They ground intimately against each other. Her heart was racing, pumping furiously in her chest as the simmering attraction that had been growing between them exploded into an undeniable lust. Sage felt the weight of eyes upon her. Carefully she glanced around, only to notice two couples nearby watching herself and Chase hungrily.

One of the spiky-haired boys made a universal hand motion for them to continue, his gaze devouring them both. A quick glance around the crowded dance floor and Sage realized they'd unknowingly put themselves "on show". It would look very strange if they didn't continue.

"Chase," she whispered. Their eyes met and he nodded infinitesimally, lowering his mouth to the shell of her ear.

"Are you all right with this?" he asked, the words barely audible over the music.

"We need to convince them we've done this before," she replied, worried about failing their mission before they'd even begun.

"I do so love a challenge," he muttered huskily.

Sage lifted one hand to brush through the surprisingly soft locks of brown hair that fell over his forehead.

Chase lowered his head until their lips were barely an inch apart. She could smell his muskiness along with the smoke and alcohol of the club around them. She clenched her hands in his soft, enticing hair.

When she closed the distance between them, they both moaned. His lips were soft, far more pliable than anyone's she had ever tasted before. At first the kiss was tender, gentle—as if they were testing one another again.

They broke apart suddenly. Tenderness flamed into something more intoxicating. Fire exploded between them as their mutual attraction soared. They panted quickly and stared into each other's eyes. Deep in the dark brown depths of Chase's gaze, Sage recognized an insatiable attraction nearly identical to what was beginning to overwhelm her. All thoughts of their voyeurs had melted from her consciousness.

She could only assume Chase saw her own desire in her gaze. When they resumed kissing, it was not some polite testing of the waters. This kiss was ravaging—holding a hunger and fierce passion they had not dared to show one another a mere moment ago.

Sage opened her lips, her tongue seeking the heat of his mouth. Instead, she found his tongue searching similar ground. She sucked him deeply into herself, her tongue rasping along his, battling for supremacy.

They were grinding together in time to the deep, sensual bass of the music, swaying in an intimate embrace.

They pulled apart, gasping.

“Circe,” Sage swore softly, her eyes glazed and her senses reeling with the overload of erotic information. “You’re damn addictive, Whieldon.”

He smirked in male satisfaction.

“I’m glad I can multitask.”

Sage frowned then gasped as she felt one thick finger stroke her through the damp lace of her tiny thong. Her body quivered as she hovered on the brink of ecstasy. She had never craved a man this strongly.

She knew they were on mission. Right now, Sage didn’t care that they were supposed to be maintaining cover so they could search for the drug. All she knew was that she desperately wanted to feel Chase inside her. She wanted to share her every intimate secret with him and experience the most intoxicating pleasure with him.

“What do you—?” Her words died, strangled in her throat. Chase pushed aside the thin scrap of lace and plunged a finger deeply inside her wet, hot pussy, delving between her flushed lips. Sage’s eyes widened.

Chase crooked his finger to stroke over her G-spot and Sage’s head fell back as she released a low groan. Chase’s skill was intoxicating. Her body shuddered against the onslaught as she struggled not to lose control of herself.

She wanted to fall to her knees, unbutton his pants and suck his cock deeply down her throat in retaliation. She shuddered in Chase’s arms as he stroked her deeply and intimately.

Never had she been more grateful for technology not being compatible with magical essence. Had they been on comms, the entire team would be in little doubt what Chase and she were up to right now.

“Chase,” she moaned, as her inner thighs quivered. “Circe, you’re going to kill me.”

“Not yet,” he promised huskily, adding a second finger into her wet cunt. “Not yet. But soon, sweetheart. Very soon. Fuck, you look edible like this. Your skin is flushed, your mouth is open as you struggle to breathe. The sight of you aroused like this would drive any red-blooded man to insanity.”

Sage tugged his mouth down and sank her teeth into the tender flesh of his full bottom lip. His stubble scratched over her supersensitive skin and she enjoyed the naughty thrill the rough stimulation sent through her.

They kissed long and slow, each a drug to the other. Sage could admit it would not take much to become addicted to Chase and his intimate charms. From the way he ate at her mouth it seemed he too, felt more than just a passing fancy.

Taking their time, they tasted each other's mouths as Chase finger-fucked her there in the middle of the dance floor.

Sage had never acted so wickedly in public, nor had she ever *played* while on the job. The entire situation sent thrills of fear and ecstasy through her body, which shivered from the naughty sensation of Chase's touch.

His finger once again rasped over her G-spot and she cried out. Sage could *feel* her body blossom and open further for him. Chase added a third finger inside her cunt and started fucking her in earnest. He dipped his head to seal her mouth with his, swallowing Sage's cries.

Her body wept juices over his palm and the scent of her own arousal nearly drove her mad. Chase tilted his head once her cries ceased, kissing the pulse point at the base of her throat. His teeth nipped the tender skin then he laved his tongue over her.

Sage's hips rocked upward with a mind of their own, desperately seeking release. Her heart pounded madly in her chest and her lungs bellowed as she attempted to moan and draw in breath. Her back arched, riding Chase's thickly muscled thigh and rubbing along the long, wide hardness of his shaft.

Throwing all care to the wind, not minding one whit if every single member of the Enforcers waltzed through the door right now to watch the show, Sage ground against Chase. His free hand cupped the back of her thighs, urging her closer. His fingers were wicked inside her body as he thrust her closer to the pinnacle of her pleasure.

Sage squeezed her inner muscles, sucking hard on his fingers. Chase made a low, groaning sound, his eyes dark and hot. Her nipples peaked against the thin material of her top. The gentle scrape of silk against her sensitive flesh heightened her pleasure and her back arched, stars bursting across her vision. Each of Sage's senses became blind from the overwhelming heat as she orgasmed, the potent bliss of release indescribable with her senses magically heightened.

Unable to help herself, Sage screamed in the din of the club, the music thankfully drowning out her cries as her back and neck bowed in the unmistakable fever of climax.

Despite the fact her eyes were closed, she knew Chase watched her reach her satisfaction. Her skin prickled with magical awareness as she could *feel* the weight and heat of his stare roam over her body. She rode his fingers hard through the fluttering contractions of her peak.

Sage's muscles tingled with the force of her pleasure.

When Sage's eyes fluttered open she flushed deeply and quickly looked to where the two couples had been watching her. They both were wrapped up in each other, more interested in their own pleasures now than watching others.

Sage sighed in relief. Chase's hand upon her thigh felt warm, dependable and she let her gaze roam the club once again. A short, slender girl caught her attention.

Adrenaline, desire and need crashed through her body. All Sage wanted to do was drag Chase out of the club to somewhere more private where they could rip each other's clothes off and fuck each other until the world imploded in a fiery ball of heat.

Sage watched the waif curiously. Cropped brown hair had been raggedly cut, as if she had taken the scissors to it herself in the dim light. Her eyes were large and dark and almost too big for her pale, hollowed-out face. She looked unwell. Outwardly, the woman didn't appear any different from numerous other Goth girls gathered in clusters around the walls of the club. Black lace gloves and a white ruffled shirt coupled with a black vest weren't uncommon in this setting. Her brain finally kicked into gear and Sage realized what had caught her attention—the girl's movements were twitchy, jerky—that of a junkie. Her eyes were not just dark but almost black, the pupils dilated to a startling proportion. Small twitches, unnoticeable to the human eye, tugged muscles at the corner of her eyes and too-pale lips. It took a minute for Sage to catalogue all these small nuances as her body came back under control. She rested a hand on Chase's shoulder and gently tapped a finger to get his attention, then nodded to the girl.

"You must be better than I believed," Chase said hotly in her ear, "what's so different about her?"

"I'm *way* better than you believe," Sage responded but her attention remained on the slender girl. "As for what's different about her, she sets off my inner radar. My instincts are screaming something at me about this girl."

Chase rocked them back and forth in time to the beat of the music. Sage assumed this was so they wouldn't draw undue attention to themselves. His body, the scent of his cologne, the sensuality in his light touch all vied to distract her.

"Had I not caught sight of her," Sage heard herself speak before the words could be censored by her brain, "we'd be moving against the wall so I could return the favor. I have a mind to finally discover what you taste like. I was just thinking how much I'd prefer to drag you out of here, somewhere private, strip you naked and fuck you blind and follow it up by fisting you hard again only to suck you dry. Then we could learn how loudly we can make each other scream."

Heat suffused Sage's cheeks as she described the craving lodged in her brain even as she struggled to keep her focus on the junkie girl that had captured the interest of her instincts. Chase panted and Sage withdrew her gaze from the waif-like girl before her continual staring brought them the wrong attention.

Chase watched her with a hungry intensity that nearly burned holes into her. They held each other in thrall for a moment longer before Sage grinned and turned them around on the dance floor so she could continue to watch the girl.

"You love this, don't you?" Chase commented, amused. He dragged their bodies flush together, wrapped a steel-strong arm around her and moved once more to the

beat of the music as they alternated surveying the room and keeping an eagle eye on the addict.

"It makes you hot," he continued darkly, whispering her deepest secrets into her ear like sinful temptation. "To be standing here with me, knowing all hell might break loose at any moment. To know others are around you, fucking like mad, and yet you can remain hidden among them. Being lost in the crowd. You love that. That naughty, secret knowledge that no one else but *me* knows what we're doing, what *I* am doing to you and your body."

Sage's heart pounded against her chest so loudly she wouldn't have been surprised if those around them could hear it. Her mouth was dry and she swallowed. Her body clenched wantonly and she could not deny the truth in his words or the ferocity of her reaction to him.

"And you love knowing you can do this to me," she countered. She flipped her long blonde hair and studied their quarry, but her mind was on Chase. "You're getting off on the thrill of the chase. Your heart is pounding in your chest and your prick is so hard you think the slightest touch would have you exploding in your pants. You can imagine my tongue on your hot skin, the way my eyes would darken as I opened my mouth and swallowed you whole. You're wondering what noises I'd make as you fuck my mouth just like I'm wondering how deeply I could swallow you down and if I could make you scream."

They weren't so much dancing now as fucking through their clothes. Sage wondered if they'd be able to finish the job without stripping each other there and just having at it.

She'd never failed at a task set to her, never wavered for a moment in the past. Yet this man, this *human* male, pushed each and every one of her buttons in a way no one else had come close to.

She *wanted* to lose her control around him, she ached to perform every wicked, nasty deed she possibly could with him. She hungered for the moment when she would feel him naked and hot, thrusting completely inside her.

Chase cupped her ass, tilting her into him so he would be deeply penetrating her were it not for their clothing.

"The moment we're out of here, I'm going to—"

"Fuck," she cut him off. Across the club, the twitchy brunette had moved into the shadows near the bathrooms. Two guys in leather pants and leather vests over naked chests were huddled around her, money in their hands.

"Shit," Chase swore and swung Sage around so her back pressed against his chest. She shimmied her ass against him and lifted her hands above her head, dancing around him as if he were a pole and she a stripper.

Now they could safely watch the exchange between the two men and the skinny brunette pusher. Sage let her hand fall to twist a lock of her hair around her ear, masking the fact that she had just switched her comm on.

"Guys, I think we've found a pusher," she said, hoping to Circe they could hear her clearly. "Back of the club, shadows near the bathroom. Five-five, maybe five-six. Age is twenty to twenty-four, hard to judge from this distance. Emaciated, a junkie look, twitchy around the eyes and mouth. She's deathly pale, got ragged cropped hair all over the place. Black or dark-brown eyes."

Chase had switched on his own comm and picked up where she stopped.

"Item is in small plastic baggy, looks to be a pill form, four to six in a bag is my guess."

"Pale purple," Sage added as they slowly made their way through the crowd. Chase leaned over her smaller frame, dancing and leading her from behind as they moved to the beat of the music to keep their covers intact.

"Got that," Will commented through their earpieces. "Proceed with caution. We have no idea if she has backup or what the situation is out there. Neither of you are any use to us dead or captured."

"Aww, Captain, I didn't know you cared," Chase drawled, smiling sarcastically and blowing Sage a kiss.

They paused on the edge of the dance floor, a dozen yards from the small girl and as close as they dared to be just now. Sage narrowed her eyes, focused all her senses on the small pills as the exchange was made.

Pushing her magical powers as high as she dared within the noisy, overcrowded club and not be bombarded with information, Sage tried to capture all the information she could. Immediately she felt a slight drain, the burning of her magic beginning to catch up with her, but ignored the faint weariness. She could recuperate later.

"I feel a draw of power to the pills. Something I haven't experienced before. Chase, do you feel it?" she asked, wishing Blade had come with them. Sometimes he caught things she couldn't put into words.

"It's got a pull, like it draws me to it, tempts me," Chase responded.

Sage felt her mind click at the description.

"It might have magic embedded in it. Circe protect us, they might be infusing the drugs with essence, or using magic to manufacture the pills. No wonder it breaks down so fast and has such a widely varying response in humans."

"Sage, you need to explain better, or point us in a clearer direction," Will rapped out over their comm, frustration evident in his tone.

"I'll do one better. Chase and I will try to get you a sample," Sage replied confidently.

Turning into Chase's embrace, Sage felt her magic take over her body, her magic altered her in subtle ways to conform to the persona she wished for—tremors vibrated through her and her eyes took on the twitchy, roving look of a junkie coming down from her high.

Many subtle mannerisms could be faked, but they would rarely hold up under careful scrutiny. Sage's magic allowed her to mimic the real thing without having to take the drug, to *become* that which she needed to simulate. In the space of a minute she altered from herself and into someone on the verge of a user crash, looking for a fresh fix.

"Damn, but you're good," he said softly. Then he caught the pusher's eye. Looking from Sage to her, he nodded and tilted his head, silently asking if she had stuff to sell.

"Wait for it," he murmured. Sage waited a few heartbeats, then slowly turned to face the girl and let her eyes widen hungrily as she caught sight of the tip of a small baggy.

The brunette nodded with a jerk. Together, Sage and Chase started toward the woman. The essence of the drugs grew stronger, but then Sage realized the girl had a strange type of magical signature she'd never encountered before.

Doubt crept into Sage's mind. The girl radiated magical essence, but it felt...displaced. As if it overlaid something darker and more twisted and not resonating from her core like every other magical user Sage had experienced.

When Sage and Chase were only a dozen paces away, the girl lifted her hand to her throat, her eyes widening at something Sage couldn't see. Instantly on edge, Sage turned, expecting to see some threat behind her. Nothing but the dancing, writhing crowd pulsed on the floor behind her, however.

"Something isn't right," Sage murmured to Chase, the fact they were on comms forgotten for the moment.

"If you feel a genuine threat, Sage, pull the plug. There are hundreds of people in there and —"

"No," Sage cut the captain off. "It's not that drastic, just something we've missed. I can't tell just yet, it's a gut instinct."

"She's bolting," Chase snapped out and Sage whirled around to catch sight of the skinny woman ducking down the corridor.

"Dammit," she cursed and rushed forward. The two men in leather who had bought the baggies melted out of the shadows. One of them restrained her, the other blocked Chase.

"Free jolt for you!" The man laughed as he held Sage in place.

"Jolt?" Sage asked, distracted for a moment.

"Purple jolt," the man clarified, "the best damn —"

An explosion erupted inside the club. Smoke filled the room, billowing across the dance floor and clouding everyone's vision. The whole world seemed to move and Sage fell to the floor on top of the leather-clad man who'd struck his head on the hard parquet.

"Report! Sage! Chase! Dammit, someone over there tell me what the fuck just happened. Julian, what the hell?"

Will's sharp voice ring in her ear. She could practically see him in her mind's eye, rubbing his jaw, chewing on his cigar. His clear blue gaze would be piercing as he rapped out commands and demanded through the sheer force of his will for someone to snap to attention and report.

Her head ached, her ears rang and for the life of her she could not find moisture in her mouth or make her voice work. The ringing in her ears turned to screams, and Sage jerked her head, forcing it upright. Smoke wafted everywhere, burning Sage's nose and throat. Aside from shadowy forms running helter skelter everywhere, she couldn't see a damn thing.

Coughing the smoke from her lungs, Sage got to her hands and knees and crawled over to where Chase lay facedown on the hard floor.

"Chase?" she shouted above the din as the other clubgoers stampeded toward the exits. "Chase!"

"Sage? Chase?! Dammit, one of you fucking tell us what's going on in there!" Will's voice echoed in Sage's head as she tried to clear it.

Emergency exits on one of the far walls had opened. The sound of hundreds of feet storming toward the doors caused her head to ache even more unbearably.

The pusher, she knew without a doubt, was long gone.

"Chase!" she shouted, shaking his shoulder and feeling for a pulse.

"Angelina, Blade, Julian, move the fuck in. I want to know what's happening and the teams to extract, now!"

Breath returned to Sage the second she felt the strong, steady pulse beating in Chase's neck. Wobbling, she pushed herself into a standing position and took stock of their situation. The club had nearly emptied and the pounding in her head started to ease.

"She's gone, Captain," Sage spoke wearily, hoping Will could hear her over the comm. Before Will could respond, Chase groaned and Sage knelt back down to assist her partner. Together they managed to get upright and head toward the doors just as Blade and Ange came in and caught sight of them.

Sage could see Julian a few paces behind Blade and Ange, his clear gray eyes alert and roving. Not for a moment did he pause, watching their backs even though Sage felt confident the party had ended with the abrupt smoke bomb.

"You taking lessons from Flame, Sage?" Blade grinned as he checked her up and down for injuries. Chase was standing unassisted, but it was a near thing. To Sage, he looked as if he might fall down if a strong wind picked up.

"Go shove it, Blade," Sage returned with a shaky grin. "No one does a party quite like me. Besides, you'll note there might be smoke, but not a lick of fire here. So don't you go wagging a dark finger at me."

Ange and Blade snorted, amused. Chase gave a weak grin, his hand pressed against his forehead as if to hold his skull together. He was bumped and bruised. Sage looked over the man to ascertain whether he was bleeding anywhere.

Satisfied, Sage took a deep breath, holding it in her lungs for a moment before releasing it. Julian continued to survey the scene around them, not uttering a word as he guarded them.

Sage caught Chase's gaze and jerked her head to indicate they should leave. He nodded his assent.

As they exited the club, the smoke began to dissipate. Clumps of people stood around, many taking pictures with cell phones and – Sage would bet – uploading them to social networking sites.

Annoyed at the cavalier way the kids seemed more interested in the smoke and possible fire, instead of the danger behind the evacuation and real threat to lives, Sage struggled not to snarl at the groups filling the street. The five of them passed through the crowd of youths, making their way toward the park.

Ange and Blade also appeared ticked off. As if with one mind, the five of them wandered a winding course around the huddled throngs of people. Their combined anger crackled in the air around them. Sage couldn't help but smirk as people shook their phones, turning them off and then on again and cursing as the devices stopped working.

It might have been petty of her, but it felt good.

Chapter Four

Sage looked around the dark park, smiling. With a sense of déjà vu, she and her comrades stood in an identical circle to the one they had congregated in just a short time ago. They faced one another as Captain Will—once again—spoke with agitation into his cell phone underneath the dim light of the streetlamps.

Instead of tension and nerves, however, this time there was camaraderie. Adrenaline from the bomb blast surged through Sage's blood. She had little doubt from the quick gestures and animated speech of her teammates they were all riding high from the action. Sage did not believe in coincidences out in the field. That bomb had not been random.

The war wasn't close to over. But they had survived their first battle as a group against those responsible for putting the drug out on the street. Sage had been watching the junkie girl closely. Had the brunette actually set the bomb, Sage would have seen. The scenario showed a level of planning and forethought the girl did not appear capable of. Someone else must have set the explosive and kept it in reserve as a diversionary tactic or escape plan. So the junkie had an accomplice who had somehow—possibly remotely—set off the charge.

The temporary setback their team had experienced could have left Sage with the feeling of having come out second in this meeting. That was not the case, nor was it the atmosphere within their crew.

They had put their enemy off balance, placed new pressure on the drug pushers, shown them that the authorities were on to them and determined to stop it. That, coupled with identifying one of the pushers, made the night a success.

"The captain will get some techs researching the name purple jolt," Chase spoke. "By dawn, everything related to the name will be downloaded for us to go over."

Sage couldn't keep her eyes from Chase. Even though he had no magical essence, he nearly *glowed*, riding the high of their night. His grin was enormous and she would have to be blind not to notice how his eyes sparkled.

As the rest of the team bantered with one another, Sage thought about the intensity of her reaction to Chase. Frankly it was not something she had expected. None of her previous partners stirred her as deeply as Chase had in a few short hours.

Knowing how murky mingling pleasure with work could become within the Enforcers, she had decided not to go down that path. Within any crew, trust was integral not only to the team's success but also the safety of each member. Bickering could ruin the simplest of missions. Throw in anger, resentment and petty revenge and the resulting mess was guaranteed.

Even knowing all this, Sage couldn't help herself. Chase attracted her on so many levels. He had a magnetism about him, especially pumped-up as he was now. An energy lived inside him that drew her in, snared her up and attracted her potently. And power clung to Chase. Not magical power, but a seductive air of command she had found in very few people.

The strength she could feel in him, the potency of his soul's essence, drew her like candy to a sugar junkie. Chase appeared to be the whole package for Sage. From his sexy good looks to the power of his spirit, coupled with his sense of humor and his understanding of the risks and pitfalls of their profession, Sage couldn't believe how well matched they could be.

Better still, she had responded fiercely to his touch back in the club. He had appeared eager for her, their kisses heated, his touch hungry. Sexual chemistry exploded between them, and Sage worried she might lose her heart to the man.

"There's no chance that incendiary came into the club while we witnessed it," Matt insisted. Sage's attention snapped back to their conversation. She took a deep breath and forced her mind back to the job and away from the desire Chase brought out in her. She could ponder that later. Right now she needed to get her head back into the game.

"I was just thinking they planted it earlier," she agreed. "It would indicate they planned to use that club regularly, or that they've been pushing there for longer than we believed."

"I'm still curious what tipped them off. Sage had the act down perfectly. That girl was convinced she'd be making another sale until something made her rabbit," Chase said with a shake of his head.

"It doesn't matter what made them run," Ange insisted. "The club is—or was—a known selling point for them. To date it's our only solid lead."

"They can set up shop anywhere," Chase insisted, clearly not afraid of Ange. "This operation is slick and subtle. We need to investigate, yes, but move on and find them again."

Sage watched as Ange frowned and placed her hands on her slim hips. Sage could feel a passionate debate boiling up among them. Before it could begin, however, Will returned.

"That wasn't a complete bust," Will started. "Beily is contacting the drug task forces as we speak and going to collate everything he can wring out of them about jolt or purple pills. We should have something by dawn. I'm putting a team on surveillance of The Abyss, a couple inside and rotating teams outside. I think it's a long shot we'll get another bite at the apple here, but we would be fools not to at least cover a known front for this drug."

Sage nodded with the others. It didn't take magical ability to see Will was pissed. Sparks practically radiated from the tips of his blond hair, and his eyes snapped with the electricity of his frustration.

Their captain drew in a deep breath and released it in a long huff. His body relaxed on the exhale.

"Okay," he continued, sounding resigned. "So much for Plan A. One day I swear I will lead a mission where Plan A works and we all get to go home early to our beds for a good night's rest. So on to Plan B. The buddy system. We have a lot of ground to cover and each night this drug stays out there, a greater number of kids will end up getting their lives ruined. Julian, Matthias, you boys are together. Blade, Angelina, you two are pairing up. Chase, Sage, you're stuck with each other."

The team looked among themselves but no one raised any complaints and Will moved on quickly.

"Standard protocol is that when we buddy up we also compartmentalize to minimize leaks. So before we break up, does anyone have any further leads, information or gut instincts the team should know about? This is your chance, people. Impress me. Show me where your heads are at. The comms were recorded, SOP, but did anyone see something or note anything that should be added to the group before we split?"

Silence reigned among them.

Sage had to look into the darkness of the park to still the embarrassed laugh that threatened to escape. Here was Will, offering them the chance impress him, and nothing but silence filled the early morning air.

"Well that's impressive," Will finished wryly. "Okay, people, if that's all then we can split up now and I'll assign everyone their current tasks. Sage, Chase, stay here, I'll start with you two. The rest of you can fan out and wait."

Sage caught Blade's eye. They grinned at each other, shrugged and knocked their fists together.

"Be safe," they said to each other. Ange and Blade moved to one side of the park, Julian and Matthias paced on the other side under a lamppost while Chase and Sage glanced silently at each other before returning their attention to Will.

"Okay," he said, "I think you've opened up a solid lead of inquiry. I think we can run further with this."

Will frowned, his brow furrowed, and they waited patiently as he appeared to gather his thoughts.

"First thing I want to organize tomorrow morning is for you to get together with a sketch artist. Even if she's gone under, this girl who is pushing the drugs is a lead. A solid one. I'm assuming you both got a good look at her?"

Sage and Chase nodded affirmation.

"Excellent. I want you at the precinct with the best artist we have. I want details. You're trained observers and good with people, you need to agree and get the sketch as close as possible. I want something we can use and pin her down with. Doesn't matter if she goes under and hides out, a good enough sketch will net her for us."

"Holt is the best sketch artist to my knowledge, Captain," Chase replied. "I can text him tonight, leave a message with him."

"Perfect. Set it up for as early as you can all make it." Will nodded. "Now the other thing I want you to do is continue with this line of inquiry. You've set yourself up as people looking for this jolt drug. Work with that. If this has been the main selling post of the drug, then chances are the addicts aren't that far away. I wanted to brief you two first because what with all the excitement happening up the street, it's a fairly safe bet that many of those kids haven't had time to go far. Get in with them. Follow them home, even. Find out where they all flop together and get high. I want you to do what you're best at—integrate yourselves."

"You want us to crash their drug flophouse?" Sage repeated as she tried to wrap her head around the order.

"Yes," Will insisted. "This stuff is more addictive and more intense than any other drug on the market. People usually congregate together when they want to get high. Flophouses are all over the city and now we have a starting point to find one where jolt is the drug of choice. You have an opportunity here. Use it. Even if it's not a drug house, these junkies all have to live somewhere. Chances are there's an apartment building in staggering distance where they can run back, hide, and fly high safely. That's what you need and where you will find the next link in this chain."

"Infiltrate the clique of drug users." Sage nodded. "I doubt people were paying particular attention, but we *were* making our way toward the woman moments before the explosion. It's a logical step that since we were deterred in getting our hits we'd be asking around, looking to reconnect with the source. It's solid."

"We'll need to get moving," Chase added. "Response units will try to clear the area as soon as they can. Enough prodding and the junkies will scatter to the winds. It will be a lot more difficult if we have to search them out ourselves."

"Keep your cell off unless you want it fried," Will suggested. "Hand over the comms and any gear you won't be needing for the rest of the night. Don't forget to set up the appointment with Holt and you can check in with me then."

They returned their earpieces to Will before leaving the park and returning to the club. The crowd had thinned noticeably since they had vacated the area, but a small cluster of people still crowded in groups behind the barricades, watching the police and fire departments do their jobs. Chase wrapped his arm around Sage's shoulder and she tensed up. Her mind had been on the job and even this casual touch reignited the electric attraction that burned under the surface between them.

When she realized Chase was getting into character, Sage let her body relax and tried not to recall too vividly their antics together inside the club. Instead she focused on manipulating her magical essence. Sage wanted to keep her junkie persona visible. She wanted everyone to find exactly what she wanted them to see.

Sage wrapped her arm around Chase's waist, cinching them together. They stood like this on the outskirts of the crowd, studying people, trying to work out who watched from curiosity and who from concern.

"I like the two girls over there," Sage said softly. She nodded toward a pale-skinned, ratty-haired blonde woman who stood off to one side. The blonde held hands with a caramel-skinned woman.

Chase nodded and bent to press a kiss to her temple and whisper back. "They look pretty shaken up to me. Should we follow them discreetly and question them when we know where they're heading? That way if we scare them or ask the wrong question we will know where to find them again. It also might lead us to more people to talk to."

"Definitely," she agreed. Sage had thought about making a similar suggestion herself.

"Heads up," she warned Chase.

A uniformed police officer came to the barriers and started moving everyone along. The blonde and her friend appeared to be holding each other upright as they half staggered, half walked down the street.

Chase and Sage followed at a distance, letting up to half the block stretch between them—but always keeping their quarry in sight. Neither woman turned to watch them or acted as though they were aware of anything about their surroundings except for each other.

As Will had hypothesized, less than ten minutes and three blocks later, the women came to a stop and sat on the stoop of a rundown apartment building. The blonde pulled out a cigarette, lit it and dragged deeply on the stick as if it were the elixir of life. Her companion tugged on her long, black curls and braided the tresses back. Listless, she seemed to lose interest before she could finish the task.

Sage looked up to Chase, her eyebrow cocked.

"Think this is it?" she asked. She had a strong feeling in her gut this was where the club regulars stayed, but she didn't want to try to take over her temporary partnership with Chase. She wanted them to value each other's opinions.

Instead of replying, Chase pressed a soft kiss to her lips. Sage's heart hammered in her chest, taken aback as her entire focus had been on their mission. When his tongue flicked out to tease and taste her, Sage found her attention homing in on this electric man.

She licked her lips, tasted him on her and smiled. Sucking in a deep breath, she tried to calm the pounding in her chest. Her gaze locked with Chase's and they shared a silent, intimate moment. Sage wondered if he had done this so they would have just a tiny nugget of them to hold on to before they entered a potentially dangerous situation.

"I think this is just what we were looking for," Chase said. "Let's go chat with the ladies."

Sage touched Chase's arm to pause him while she focused on manipulating her essence to change her demeanor. Taking on the intricate mannerisms of a junkie, she didn't merely mimic the twitchy, high-strung people she had seen around the club, she completely became one of them.

When she was comfortable she had a proper balance between her magic and her mind being in charge of her body, she glanced at Chase and nodded.

They walked down the street, heading directly toward the two women on the stoop.

"Let's walk past and then I'll pretend to notice them," Sage said softly to her partner. Only a tiny tilt of Chase's head acknowledged he'd heard her. Focused on the road before them, Sage and Chase walked a pace or two past the women before Sage came to a sharp halt.

She stared at the women, squinting as tremors shook her body. Chase watched Sage for a moment and then turned his attention to the two women sitting together on the front stoop. Sage jerked her head around to stare hard first at the blonde and then the dark-haired woman. Nodding as if to confirm something within herself, Sage tugged urgently on Chase's black shirt and tilted her head in the direction of the women.

"They were there!" she stage whispered. "By the bar. I'm sure of it."

"If you're sure then you should ask them, darling," Chase replied as his gaze roved over the women and then returned to Sage's.

Sage turned and retraced her steps until she stood eye to eye with the blonde. Chase kept pace with her as their arms were still linked. The four of them stared at one another silently and then Sage nodded again. Her cheeks and hands trembled, twitches shaking her body infrequently as her mind seemed to wander from the withdrawal of the drug.

"You were there, weren't you? I saw you," Sage said, her speech fragmented. The blonde stared at her before shifting closer to her friend, who wrapped a protective arm around her. The support of her companion seemed to give the blonde the confidence to nod.

"Saw you too," she mumbled. "With him."

A nod in the general direction of Chase followed this brief response, though the blonde didn't look at Chase nor acknowledge his existence further. Upon receiving the subtle hint, Chase leaned back. Without actually moving away, he withdrew so Sage became more prominent and in control of the situation.

Despite Chase's original arrogance back in the park, he clearly understood when to be brazen and when to step back. Sage tightened her fingers around Chase's arm to convey her thanks. His action not only showed trust in her to work these women, but also proved his professionalism.

"I'm Sage," she introduced herself. "We were going to see the girl. Dark hair, brown eyes. We didn't get to see her. The place got all smoky and loud. I *need* to see her."

Sage heard the whine in her tone and hoped she wasn't overdoing it. She waited patiently while the blonde paused to suck deeply from the cigarette. She held the smoke in her lungs before finally releasing it with evident reluctance. She seemed to ponder Sage's words until finally she scratched her cheek and lifted her gaze. Watery blue eyes met Sage's.

"You follow the jolt?" she asked softly, her eyes glazing as if in arousal. A longing that sounded nearly like love had entered her tone. "You haven't lived until you've tried the jolt."

Sage's magical instinct led her, the talent for fitting in guiding her. She opened herself to it and heard herself whimper.

"Got the jolt from a friend, four days ago," Sage mumbled, sniffed and then the muscles around her mouth twitched as if in hunger. Two fingers reached up to scratch at her lips before she added, "Need to ride it again though. Dark lady disappeared before I could score from her."

Sage stopped. She didn't want to lead the two women too quickly. If they could make their own assumptions they would give her unconscious hints. Allowing them to lead the conversation as much as possible also would keep Sage from appearing too eager to get the names and links they needed.

A minute passed before the blonde once again nodded her understanding. She didn't seem aware of the passage of time between their brief spurts of conversation, as if time had no meaning to her. The dark-haired woman divided her time between staring out into nothingness and watching her companion.

"I'm Jaime, this is Dee. You need Alice," the blonde finally said. Sage worked her mouth as if she were chewing something, thinking hard.

"Alice?" Sage repeated. She hoped Jaime would follow up with more information, but Dee finally shook herself out of her apparent trance and tightened her protective hold around Jaime's shoulders. Eyeing Sage suspiciously, Dee took the cigarette from Jaime's hand and took a long drag from it before stubbing it out on the concrete step.

"Four days?" Dee repeated, as if Sage had only just spoken the words. "Nobody lasts four days. You can't *live* without the purple jolt."

Sage recognized an antagonistic set to Dee's body, the disbelief clear in her tone. Again her magical talent tingled inside and she felt her body shake. Fatigue crept into her limbs as she spent more energy. She opened herself more fully to her talent and let it take over her body. To her magically enhanced gaze, Chase's stance was protective and aware.

She found herself trusting him implicitly to protect her. Letting go of the last remnants of her conscious mind and losing herself within the character of a junkie would leave her open to any ambush that might occur. Sage took a quick breath and, putting her faith in Chase, embraced her talent and let herself be submerged as a junkie.

As if a switch had been thrown, Sage's mind opened into the persona and her magically enhanced senses blew wide. Subtleties that she had not recognized earlier

became clear as she assessed the situation before her. The evident intimidation resonating from Dee was the primary threat she needed to overcome. Sage stood up straighter, jutted her chin out stubbornly and confronted Dee.

Before she could think about the words, they fell from her mouth, her magic in clear control of her body.

"I can too!" she declared. "I can do anything. I'm *magical*!"

Chase stiffened beside her. Sage felt a moment's fear as she heard her own words. It took a second for her mind to catch up with what her talent had discovered.

Sage and Chase had experienced the pull the pills exerted back in The Abyss. Sage realized her magic had extrapolated from what they had witnessed that the high gave some of the junkies a feeling of invincibility.

Jaime's pupils dilated and her breath came faster. Dee's antagonism melted away as her eyes resumed their faraway glaze. The strength of their reaction was unsettling.

"Alice sells us the purple," Dee confirmed after a moment. "C'mon, Jaime. Need some now."

Sage watched as Dee half lifted, half carried Jaime up a few of the steps. Deciding to go for broke since the women appeared less suspicious, less antagonistic now, Sage interjected before they could open the door.

"He'll buy a hit off you," she whined, her eyes opened wide in a beseeching plea. "I can't wait to find Alice. I need to fly again."

Dee scowled at her.

"No. It's *our* jolt. Not yours. You can't have it."

Sage thought about pressing the matter, but her instincts warned her it would be a mistake. Once again Dee had become antagonistic. Obviously jolt was fiercely protected. The unusually aggressive reaction it brought out in people astonished Sage. While she had come across drug users a few times in her career and understood the hold addictions could have, jolt was something more. Sage tucked the knowledge her talent conveyed to her along with all the other tidbits they'd discovered in this conversation away for future reference.

She was pleased they had found an apartment building with at least one addicted couple residing within. With luck there would be at least a few others who could assist them. It was an excellent starting place to try to glean further information about the drug and this pusher – Alice.

With only a few hours remaining until dawn, it wasn't a bad evening's work.

Waiting silently until Dee and Jaime entered the building, Sage watched as the flimsy wooden door slammed closed and rattled in its frame. She turned to Chase with a small smile.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I sincerely hope we won't catch fleas if we end up staying in this joint," Chase replied.

Sage paused, caught between laughter and the urge to scold him. Laughter won.

"Don't tell me *this* is the worst place you've had to stay a night or three?" she teased. The building looked run-down and as if it could do with a very thorough clean. Regardless of this, the brick foundations were solid and it had been built for a middle-class setting. No one could call it a quality establishment, but it wasn't yet suitable only for bulldozing.

"Am I dealing with a little princess?" she continued when Chase pressed his lips together rather than answer her. "A pretty, pampered little princess used to room service, heated pillows and mommy there to kiss her good night?"

Her tone was light and teasing. Sage had stayed in far worse places than this, sleeping on the ground or on the streets when a case called for it. She couldn't believe Chase wasn't just yanking her chain to gauge her reaction.

He wrapped his arms around her, lifted her from the ground and kissed her cheeks.

"Damn lucky I can't just bend you over my knee right now and spank you, miss," he murmured huskily in her ear. "Of course I'm not some princess. Doesn't mean I'm itching to get fleas or sleep with one eye open so we're not surprised by some hyped-up junkie crashing through our door to steal a stash of drugs we don't own."

Sage sobered at that. She hadn't thought far enough ahead to devise plans for their security, or consider that, as supposed junkies, others would think they had drugs or cash in their possession. She shook her head and closed down the last vestige of her power so she could once again focus fully on their mission.

"I should have got my head back on track sooner," she apologized. "You're right. While I think it important we stay here, we will need to take extra security precautions."

Sage would have continued, but Chase pressed a finger to her lips, his dark eyes alight with mischief and laughter. Realizing she'd been had, that he had been teasing her just as she prodded him, Sage barked out a small laugh before hastily swallowing it down.

Chase wrapped his arms around her and Sage leaned eagerly into his embrace. They stayed locked together for an all too brief moment. Sage pulled back to meet Chase's gaze, amused as she rocked her hips up enticingly into his crotch.

"I—" her words were cut off as once again he pressed his finger to her lips. She held his gaze as she tried to convey her growing arousal and hunger for him with her gaze. She hoped he understood without the words and she rocked her body closer to his, pressing them intimately together.

Finally, Sage opened her lips and swallowed Chase's finger. Wickedly, she licked her tongue around the digit and then sucked it as if it were his cock.

His eyes darkened, the hot, chocolate color turning black as his pupils dilated and his breath came harder. Bobbing her head, she looked directly in his eyes and watched him watch her.

Sucking him hard, she slowly drew her head away until with a soft *pop* she released the digit from its hot bondage.

"We need a room," she murmured to him. "One that isn't on the ground floor so rabid addicts can't jump through our window early in the morning looking for a fix."

Chase cleared his throat twice trying to speak before he finally just nodded to her as he swallowed hard.

"Assuming I don't just explode," Chase said huskily, "or press your teasing little ass into a wall and fuck you blind, we also need to reconnoiter the building. I want to see if we can get lucky and find ourselves another addict to talk to. The reactions to jolt are so varied we might manage to find someone more willing to talk and less close-minded, possessive and antagonistic."

"Agreed." Sage nodded. She tried to ignore the hot thrill that had seared through her body at his mention of fucking her hard against the wall. The mental picture alone had her pussy growing damp. Her heart beat faster, but Sage managed to push that delicious fantasy down so they could finish what they needed to before they could be alone together in one of the apartment units.

"You'd better call Will." Her voice sounding thick to her ears as lust rode her hard. "Get him to set us up with a room while we scout around. The man is so determined we complete this mission with all haste I'm sure after we've finished a quick search of the building he'll have managed to arrange something for us. And *then* we will see if you can manage to catch my teasing ass and fuck it against a wall or any other surface you like."

Chase's grin could not be contained. He dug into his pocket, turned on his cell phone and punched in a number without looking at the keypad. Will's number obviously had been memorized long ago.

"Promises, promises, sweetheart. You're a walking wet dream. You realize that, don't you?"

Sage snickered and opened her mouth to respond, but Chase's attention had gone to his cell.

"Captain? Chase. Yeah, we found your flophouse and need you to organize a room for us. There's a sign out front indicating vacancies and the real estate agency handling it. I think a pre-dawn wake-up call will sound better coming from you than us. You ready for the number and address?"

Sage rested her head on Chase's chest, enjoying the heat from his body as they stood huddled together by the side of the road. Chase read the number to Will and gave him the address. She pieced together from Chase's brief responses that Will would get right on it and call them back with a room number within the hour.

"How's everyone else doing?" Chase asked and Sage squeezed him gently in gratitude for his thoughtfulness. Eager to hear about the rest of their team—amazed it had been such a short time since they had broken up—Sage stood on her toes to listen

in. Chase obligingly tilted the cell away from his ear so they could both hear Will's response.

"Nothing much to report yet," Will answered. A small scratch of static messed up his next words, followed by, "after dawn when places open hopefully the information will start coming in thick and fast."

Chase thanked the captain and then hung up.

"Into the fray, partner?" she teased as she released Chase and turned to face the apartment complex.

"And right out the other end, sweetheart," he countered. "Let's get moving. I'd like that room and bed before the sun cracks over the horizon."

Sage smirked at him. They knew neither of them would be getting sleep. If they were lucky, the bed would be somewhere comfortable for them to finally explore each other's bodies more fully. Sleep wouldn't come for a good long while, until after they were both sated.

Side by side, they walked up to the flimsy wooden door. Sage tried the doorknob, but it had been locked behind Jaime and Dee. Sighing, she stepped back and Chase pulled out a slender tool from his inner jacket pocket. With a professional air, he inserted it into the lock.

"You're just full of surprises," Sage laughed.

Chase shrugged. "One decent kick would break this door into splinters, but I figure if we're going to be staying here, discretion might be the better option."

Not thirty seconds later, the door popped open. Chase stood and grinned at her. Sage winked at him, impressed. Together they entered the building.

Chapter Five

Deep silence hung in the air. None of the usual sounds of a large apartment complex could be heard. No music. No shouting. Not even the sound of a TV through the paper-thin walls.

"I can't believe how quiet it is. You don't really think it's too late in the evening to catch anyone around, do you?" Sage asked as they walked up and down the ground floor corridors.

"Maybe it's too early?" Chase suggested. "Perhaps the junkies moved on to another club to get their fixes since The Abyss and Alice disappeared on them."

Undaunted, they walked up the stairs to the second floor and repeated the procedure of scouting every corridor. After ten minutes of careful searching, nothing at all had been discovered.

Sage frowned. She had expected if nothing else at least to hear some signs of life from Dee and Jaime, yet the place was still as a graveyard.

"Maybe Dee and Jaime went straight out the back door as soon as they were out of our sight?" she hypothesized. "It has to be that or everyone else is either dead asleep or already passed out cold behind closed doors."

The third floor held the last of the small apartments. With patience they continued to search, but found no signs of life. There remained only the roof. Sage felt dejected as they propped open the access door.

"Cheer up, sunshine," Chase consoled her, "this might not be the end to the day we'd hoped for, but tomorrow we're bound to have more luck."

Sage threw him a grateful look and smiled as they went out into the predawn darkness. She took a deep breath of the crisp air, tempted to ask her partner if they could stay out here and watch the sun rise before returning to their room. Dawn couldn't be much more than a half hour away, the sky had already lightened from an inky midnight blue to a paler shade, promising a clear, stunning sunrise.

"Might as well be thorough," Chase commented and Sage nodded her agreement. They split up, each taking one side of the rooftop. Sage had all but given up hope of finding anyone and was merely going through the motions when she spotted a mop of brown hair propped against a corner of brickwork.

Surprised, she froze, expecting the man to be aware of her as she was of him. The head did not turn nor acknowledge her. For a moment she wondered if the man were alive.

Sage paced closer at an angle so she could see his profile before entering his direct line of sight. The man stared out into the early morning sky, seemingly at nothing at all.

It wasn't until Sage saw the slight rise and fall of his chest beneath a worn t-shirt that she breathed easily. The young man hummed tunelessly to himself, lost in his own thoughts.

As Sage came closer, she could see his eyes were a warm brown. When she was a half dozen paces away, he seemed to catch sight of her from the corner of his eye. He blinked and a pale, shaky hand brushed the brown fringe out of his eyes.

A tattered green t-shirt had been coupled with a pair of grimy pale blue jeans and a battered black leather jacket. The slender man pushed himself fully upright and beamed at Sage. His eyes were glazed, his pupils dilated. She could only hope he was somewhat lucid.

"Hey, Angel!" he greeted her happily. Sage blinked, shocked at the familiar greeting. Unsure whether he might become aggressive like Dee had been, she didn't want to contradict him. She didn't have the chance to respond, however, as he continued talking.

"They told me I'd see you one day and sooner rather than later if I didn't fix up my mess and toe the line," he continued with near boundless enthusiasm. "Damn, I really should have listened, eh? But honestly, once you start to walk down a chosen path you just destroy yourself trying to bend and please everyone. I had to keep going, didn't I? Oh no. You're a good angel, right? Not a cranky one?"

Sage smiled softly, not sure where to begin with that semi-coherent opening. She finally settled upon, "I'm not cranky. I promise."

The man barely looked twenty years old, but he had to be that and more—his eyes showed such age and painful wisdom.

Chase came up beside her. With a quick look from her to the man seated on the concrete rooftop, her partner remained silent but slowly wrapped an arm around her.

The junkie shouted with laughter. As he chuckled, the youth scratched at his arms. Numerous pinpricks showed needle marks at varying stages of healing. Some of the wounds were so old they had scarred over, none looked fresher than a week or two.

"Now I get it," he finally managed to speak as his laughter subsided. "You've hooked up with a demon. No wonder you've been dumped with this duty and ended up here with me. I finally get my helper angel and she's about to Fall. Isn't that just typical?"

"But that's okay," he insisted, hardly pausing for breath. He struggled to stand but his legs wobbled and wouldn't hold him. Sighing, the young man shrugged.

"You'll need to come down here," he patted the concrete beside him. "I'm not crashed enough to stand up just yet. Say, you *are* looking for me, right? This isn't some pit stop because you're lost and looking for directions? 'Cos I gotta tell you, I don't know much of anything right now. I'll need a good couple of hours more to get straight before I can be of help to either of you."

Sage struggled to follow the disjointed thoughts. She wished she wore anything other than her leather miniskirt, but lowered herself to the ground while retaining a

semblance of modesty. She bent her legs to the side and perched on the surprisingly cold concrete. Chase sat cross-legged next to her.

"We're looking for you," he agreed, "but not to take you away. We're here to talk with you."

The brunet looked back and forth between them and snickered.

"I'm Gabriel," he said to Chase, "my friends call me Gabe. I'd hope your partner knows who I am, but I guess I haven't really been on the angelic list for a good few years. But what do you want to talk about? I can talk. I like to talk. That's why I come up here. When I get high I also like to dance. I'll dance nonstop to anything. My neighbors don't like that."

Sage swallowed hard to try to suppress laughter. He obviously hadn't crashed from whatever high he had been on, but she had a feeling it wouldn't be too far away from the slow drooping of his eyes.

"We want to talk to you about the jolt, Gabe." She tried to keep her voice as light and musical as she could. Gabe nodded solemnly, as if he had been expecting her question.

"I thought it might be that. I'm glad an angel is asking me about it, not the others. They just whined and bitched at me. I'd even started going straight, but that just made it worse 'cos they wanted me to be a different person. And how can I be different?"

Gabe barely seemed to need to breathe between his sentences. He spoke quickly and smoothly as if she and Chase understood every word.

"It was at the dance club a pal offered me a free hit," Gabe said. "Everyone was already so mad at me I figured 'why not', you know? And man, I just *flew* away from it all. The whole world and everything within it felt so good. Sounds were better, colors brighter. I danced for a whole day straight and didn't feel it at all. Everything was just *right* for the first time in years and years. And losing that..." Gabe's voice hitched and he looked up to Sage and Chase, his eyes big and a little sad.

"Losing it just sucked, know what I mean? To have everything so perfect and right and then not...it was worse than anything. Stuff you didn't notice before seemed harder, colder, the edges sharper. It's like being inside a warm place and then being shoved out and told you have to stay cold all the time. And so you try it again. And again."

Sage felt her heart touched by the slender man. She watched as he raked a hand through his messy hair. His scars—internal and external—were heart wrenching. Gabe couldn't be very old and yet it sounded as if his life had been such a series of ups and downs she could feel nothing but sympathy for him. She laid her hand on his knee to soothe him.

"We can help you," she offered. "Find somewhere you'd like to stay, maybe get you cleaned up."

Even with his jutting cheekbones, his long, too-slender neck and unhealthy pallor, when Gabe smiled, Sage could see the optimism that infused this vivid man. A cheeky,

devil-may-care grin lit up his face and she almost forgot his earlier distress and the physical damage he had caused himself with the drugs.

"You really are an angel," he replied with a touch of wonder. "But I've already lost two families. I'm ready to move on. I thought I could manage to clean up when...well, I'm satisfied with where I am and I've made the best peace I can with my life choices. No one forced anything on me and I think maybe I've just had my run."

Chase took Sage's hand and she caught her partner's eye. They knew—had learned long ago—you just couldn't save everyone, sometimes not even the ones you desperately wanted to. But she simply couldn't live with herself if she didn't at least try. Gabe was the epitome of those she needed to do her best for.

A dimple dipped in Chase's cheek as he gave a quick nod and his dark brown eyes flashed humorously. Sage took this as proof of his willingness to stand alongside her. Gratitude filled her. Gabe's vitality had touched something inside her and Sage could only hope Chase had been similarly affected.

"Are you sure?" Chase pressed Gabe. "We could help make you comfortable, that's what angels and demons do, remember. She's trying to save me and I'm trying to help her live a little. You're a good man, Gabe. We could assist you."

Gabe laughed—a carefree sound that echoed around them all in the still, pre-dawn air. Such a deep laugh from such a slender chest.

"I can't imagine what either of you could possibly do for me, or why you'd bother," Gabe replied. "But sure, if I have you both now to watch out for me that's a whole lot more than I thought I'd ever get. Maybe I did something right before all this."

"Come on." Sage squeezed Chase's hand and got to her feet. Chase lifted a finger and indicated his cell—which had previously been switched to silent. Sage nodded as she held a hand out to Gabe.

"Let's get you inside," Sage said. "What kind of angel would I be if I left you here, cold and all alone on the roof?"

Chase spoke quietly into his cell as Sage helped Gabe up, laughing and bantering with him. Five minutes in his company and Sage could tell Gabe would always be the life of any gathering. His spirit touched everyone around him, bringing warmth and a quick laugh.

How he could possibly have "lost two families" she just didn't understand. But then she had lost her parents in her mid-teens. A series of foster homes and youth centers had seen her through until she had been old enough to sign up for Enforcer training. Family to her was Blade and to a lesser extent other colleagues she trusted. Family was not necessarily blood or duty, but like-minded people who understood and accepted her without question or doubt.

The thought that Gabe had opened himself and given loyalty to people who had cast him aside made Sage mad. Family should accept you unconditionally. They were the people who were patient with you, loved you no matter what idiocy you

performed. Also, family was a lifelong commitment—to Sage’s mind there wasn’t an “out” clause. Family stuck.

But she took great care to keep her rage hidden. She didn’t want to upset Gabe.

Chase caught up with them as they started down the stairs. He joined in with their ribald conversation and ended up laughing more than Sage and Gabe.

“Two twenty-one,” Gabe sang, a shiver racking his skeletal body. Chase walked a pace ahead of them. He’d already palmed his lock pick. Sage grinned. *What kind of angel and demon duo would need a lock pick to enter an apartment?* she wondered idly.

Gabe seemed too happy and out of it to notice, let alone care about such mundane things like keys, locks or how an angel and demon would assist him into his apartment.

Chase reached Gabe’s door and Sage slowed their pace. When Gabe leaned against his doorframe, Chase jiggled the doorknob and opened the door for him. As the brunet entered his room, he grinned at Chase.

“Definitely a demon,” he chortled, seeming pleased by this apparent confirmation. “You take care of your angel. They have a tendency to slip away if you’re not looking.”

Despite his carefree attitude, something about Gabe’s words struck Sage as coming from deep within his heart. Although half of what the man said didn’t make the least bit of sense, he nevertheless seemed wise beyond his years. Or what aspects of his conversation she understood did.

“I’ll take care of her,” Chase replied. “We’ll take care of you too, Gabe.”

The largest grin yet spread over Gabe’s face, his eyes lit up and his face glowed with happiness. He vigorously waved farewell as if he were sailing away for uncharted territory.

A bit of Gabe’s happiness drained away as he seemed to realize Sage and Chase now would be going. Sadness dimmed his eyes, though the grin remained and Sage had a feeling Gabe didn’t know they could see the worry clearly on his face.

She took his hand and squeezed it.

“You’ll see us again,” she promised. “We take care of our own.”

Gabe nodded, though Sage wasn’t certain he believed her. She couldn’t believe Chase would have said they’d watch out for him and not mean it, and she’d do what she could for the young man. She hoped after some time had passed Gabe would come to see for himself they were serious.

The struggle showed clearly in his eyes. Gabe wanted to believe, to embrace the help they offered but he was reluctant. Sage wondered just how many times he had been burned by such promises in the past. After a moment’s silence, his smile became charming once again.

“My friend gets his jolt from Alice,” he said suddenly. “She supplies everyone. Alice is the only contact I’ve heard about in the entire city. Now the club is closed there might be a bit of a panic, especially among those who don’t have something else to fall back on. Not like me. I used a lot of other drugs before I found jolt. I’ll miss it, but I’ve

got plenty of other stuff stashed. I'm always scared of running dry. You might find Alice starts coming around here to keep people hooked. There's quite a few users scattered about on this block who need it."

"Gabe, thank you for your help," Sage replied gratefully. The man scratched his jaw, his neck and then his arm again.

Without another word, he ruffled his already mussed hair and grinned impishly. "If I don't see you again, I really enjoyed meeting you, Angel, Demon," Gabe said with a smaller smile.

"We'll be back before you know it," Sage reassured the slender man. Gabe nodded, but Sage couldn't tell whether she had managed to convince him she spoke the truth or not.

Gabe closed the door and without needing to say anything Sage and Chase waited as they listened to the lock click. Gabe's footsteps retreated. Chase wrapped his arm around Sage's shoulders and tenderly kissed her temple as they turned together to walk down the corridor of the apartment building.

"We'll keep an eye on him and make sure he stays safe," he said. Sage felt love infuse her chest.

"I don't even know where to start," she sighed. "Something about Gabe just reached out to me. And even though he's clearly flying high, he still managed to give us important leads."

"Do you really think Alice is the only pusher?" Chase asked, his forehead creased with a thoughtful frown. "The drug has spread like wildfire. The junkies are desperate for more. Why on earth would the manufacturers limit themselves to only one pusher? It doesn't make sense."

Sage shrugged. "It wouldn't make sense if Alice was literally the only pusher in the city, but maybe she's just the only one we currently know about and the only one Gabe knew about. Gabe didn't have to help us at all. Clearly he wanted to give us what information he could. I think we should follow up on Alice as far as we can but keep our ears open for word of any other pushers that might be around."

Chase nodded and stopped at the end of the corridor. Sage cast him a hot look and kissed him. Heat ignited between them as flames of lust licked along her body. She pressed him into the wall, eating hungrily at his mouth. Passion burned deep inside her chest and chased away the faint melancholy of Gabe's situation.

With obvious reluctance, Chase pulled away, lifting his head, his breath coming fast.

"The captain found us a room on the first floor, room 109," he panted. Sage felt her body tighten in need and expectation. *A room, thank Circe!*

"Sounds good," she managed as Chase took her hand and led her down the corridor.

They descended the stairs and found their apartment. Chase leaned over the doorknob and picked the simple lock—easier than someone having to bring them a key on such short notice, especially in the middle of the night. Less than twenty seconds later, Chase opened the door with a smirk, waving his arm to indicate she should enter the apartment first.

Sage stepped into the room and eyed it critically. It was spartan but clean. She wanted to make a teasing remark to Chase about the lack of fleas. But before she could, he surprised her by leaning back against the door to close it and grabbing her around her waist, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around in a tight circle, then pulling her flush against his highly aroused body.

Chase bent his head and kissed her with a fierce passion that shot heat straight through her. Her breasts became sensitive, pleasure tingling across her skin and running thickly through her blood.

The searing desire caused her nipples to peak painfully against the smooth material of her halter top. The need arched a connection from the tips of her breasts down into the depths of her belly. An instant later, the wonderful sensation pooled hotly in her pussy. Her lower lips became slick, her entire body prickling with heat as she became unbearably oversensitive.

Lightheaded from the lack of oxygen, Sage pressed herself hard against her partner and returned his kiss ferociously. All her pent-up tension from the extreme evening overflowed her system and she was surprised that electric energy didn't shoot out from her extremities.

All her lust for Chase exploded from within her. Every ounce of her potent sexual attraction to him poured from her lips and into the frantic kiss they shared.

Chase's legs fell apart and Sage moved closer to him, loathe to have an inch of space separating their bodies. Wrapped up in his ardent embrace, she felt fulfilled and cherished unlike anywhere else.

Magical energy hummed along her skin, sending electric pulses of power sparking through her system. Sage had enjoyed her fair share of lovers in the past, but the times where her magic had been so thoroughly aroused were very few. Certainly her skin had never before itched with the full potency of her power when responding to a *human* man. It excited and scared her just a little. The strength of her response to Chase was nearly overwhelming in its intensity.

"I want to be inside you," he muttered against her lips. His hands fumbled at her shoulders, pressing her soft skin as he caressed her. He didn't appear conscious of it, but his palms picked up the prickling magical energy along her skin. Sage didn't know how Chase managed it, but it almost felt as if he absorbed her magical energy and then returned it back to her with a hot, masculine energy all his own.

Throughout this exchange she continued to kiss him deeply, their tongues tangling with a staggering intensity as they tasted each other intimately. Nimble fingers worked

at Chase's waist. Finally she managed to undo his slacks and push the material away from his hips to pool at his feet.

Chase toed off his shoes and stepped out of his slacks as Sage hooked her fingers inside the soft cotton of his boxer briefs and peeled them down his thighs. Just as eager as she, Chase lifted the thin, slinky material of her halter top up and over her head, baring her from the waist up.

"Your breasts are amazing," he muttered huskily, large hands cupping her. The soft pads of his thumbs flicked lightly over each of her nipples and teased them to pointed arousal. The spark of her desire hummed louder, filling her ears. Sage wondered at the strength of the sensual arousal this man created in her.

She hastily unbuttoned Chase's shirt, licking her tongue over smooth expanses of skin as it became revealed to her. The softness of his flesh surprised her. His chest felt strong under her curious tongue and the salty taste of his sweat intrigued her. The subtle, spicy scent of pure him enveloped her, heightened Sage's senses and teased her unbearably. She could just imagine his scent around her, over her, under her, inside her and she wanted to wallow in it, roll around until she could smell nothing but Chase Whieldon encompassing her everywhere.

Sage worked her way down his body until finally her lips pressed over the slickly coated head of his erect shaft. Eagerly she flicked her tongue out to wrap around his cock, the salty pre-come teasing her with his most intimate flavor.

Chase moaned and tilted his hips toward her, his cock pressing into Sage's lips as they teased each other. Chase thrust into her mouth with a steady rhythm, one hand reaching low to knead her breast and tweak her erect nipple to push her arousal higher as he fucked her mouth.

His motions became jerkier as their breaths came faster and they lost control over themselves. Their passion climbed higher and the world around Sage grew fuzzy around the edges. Her full attention was on this gorgeous man before her. Heat seeped into her skin, her face flushing as her arousal grew. Small sparks snapped along her fingers as her magic built inside her. She had never lost control of her magic during sex before. Yet this time she had not climaxed and her body seemed as if it were about to do just that. It was unusual to say the least.

"Fuck me," she panted as she lifted her head up away from his hard, thrusting shaft. Urgency made her tone thick as she stood and pressed her body along the length of her partner. "Please, Chase. I'm so close and I need to feel you moving deeply inside me."

Chase groaned harshly, groped beneath her skirt and then tugged on her thong. Cool air surrounded her overheated pussy as the lace came completely free before Chase's fingers covered her cunt.

Thick, long fingers stroked her lips, gathered her moisture and finally penetrated her. Sage arched her back, pressed herself closer to Chase and moaned at being filled by

him again. Her fingers clenched at his shoulders, wanting more than just his thick digits to touch her this time, to bring her satisfaction.

Tugging at his shoulders, Sage turned them so that she pressed her back into the flimsy wood of their apartment door. Chase stood between her splayed legs then sank down to reach into the pocket of his fallen clothes and pulled out a foil-wrapped condom. Standing, he nudged one of his thickly muscled thighs between her legs, urging her to spread herself even wider for his access as he quickly sheathed his thick, heavily aroused cock.

Sage's legs shook, her balance was precarious. She would not remain upright should she move her legs any farther apart. She wanted Chase deeply inside her pussy. She freely gave him everything he could possibly want, laying herself bare before him.

"Circe, Chase. Now. Please," she begged him unashamedly.

With a low moan, Chase lodged his thick head at her entrance and pressed inside her body. Sage shouted out in pleasure, her body thoroughly pierced. She shuddered with the intimacy of the moment. Chase penetrated her fully, the joining of their bodies intense. His ragged pants filled the air between them, his hands on her skin hot as he stroked her flesh.

Possessed deeply, Sage lifted her body up for a moment of relief and then pressed back down harder, pushing Chase farther inside the clenching walls of her pussy. Chase bent his head, claiming her lips as his hands settled on her waist to tilt her farther onto him. This new angle allowed him to pull out a tiny amount and thrust more completely inside her cunt. When the tip of his cock knocked against her cervix they cried out. Sage was flooded with the pleasure of being overwhelmed with him.

"Sage," he panted, his eyes so dark they appeared completely black, "oh Sage, you're perfect."

Sage gasped, clenching his shoulders to hold herself upright. Her thighs shook and her body convulsed right on the knife edge of pleasure. Never had she experienced sex so intensely. Nor had she felt so completely overwhelmed by her partner. This fell so far outside of her usual intimacies she almost felt as if she had fallen through a rabbit hole and into another world altogether.

"Chase, I..." her words trailed off. "Circe, I..." she tried again, but could not form a coherent thought, filled, possessed and branded as she was.

Lowering his head, Chase took away any need for her to say more as he kissed her soundly. Their lips, teeth and tongue fought for dominance as he withdrew and pressed back inside her, taking her higher than she had ever known was possible.

The door rattled on its hinges as he fucked himself into her, his cock possessing her with a depth she could barely believe. In and out, over and over he penetrated her body, both of them soaring higher.

Canting her hips up, meeting him thrust for thrust, Sage tightened her inner muscles to milk him. An explosion rocked through her, starting at her lower stomach

and rolling over her body, causing her to convulse as magical energy escaped when she climaxed.

Chase moaned, caught up in his own orgasm, and thrust into her harder, his cock exploding and hot seed shooting from him. Even though she could feel the warmth of his tip through the condom, she wished she could experience Chase filling her with his essence. The thought left her head as soon as it arrived, the blinding eroticism of her climax short-circuiting her brain.

They screamed.

Chase continued to piston inside her pussy after she came down from her high. Sage lifted a hand to her hotly flushed face, damp tendrils of her hair everywhere. Flicking the pale blonde tresses away, she smiled with satisfaction at Chase as his hot, dark gaze locked on her as though he was searching her for something.

"Hi there," she said huskily, her voice croaking.

Chase grinned arrogantly. "Hi yourself," he replied. "You do realize how magnificent it is to see you appear like such a debauched, thoroughly fucked woman, don't you?"

"Chase, you sound so very smug. After sharing explosive sex with you, how else would I look?" Sage chuckled.

He then leaned down to kiss her with slow, indulgent passion, taking his own sweet time to explore her mouth again, and Sage thoroughly enjoyed relearning every inch of him. Their tongues tangled together, teasing each other sensually.

They pulled back, breathing deeply and flushed once again.

"You felt wonderful," Sage said softly.

Chase pressed another kiss to her temple before replying. "I'm damn glad I'm such a Boy Scout," he replied. "Being prepared is second nature."

"I'm clean," Sage replied cautiously. "And I've had my suppression shots. There's no possibility of my getting pregnant accidentally, or any kind of health concerns."

"I'm clean too, sweetheart," he reassured her. "All police officers have regular health checks, so I know I'm no risk to you. I'm happy to keep using protection if you need, though that will require a pit stop before we indulge in an encore."

Sage bent her head and captured her partner's lips, tasting him. She loved the soft feel of his lips beneath her own, the way their tongues twisted together as she caught and sucked his tongue to tease and tempt him further.

When he pulled his head back they were panting and his eyes were darker, his pupils dilated. It took a moment for them to catch their breaths and be able to speak.

"I don't think extra protection is necessary," Sage panted.

They shared another heated kiss before Chase removed his cock from her body. Tenderly he helped steady Sage on her still wobbling legs before he took her hand, laced their fingers together and led her farther inside the small apartment.

"We should call Will with Alice's name," Chase said reluctantly. "And maybe get some rest before I thoroughly molest you all over again."

Sage tilted her head, blue eyes twinkling wickedly.

"I rather liked the experience of being ravished by you," she said. "I won't complain if a repeat performance occurs, with or without sleep."

Chase laughed and slapped her lightly on her leather miniskirt-clad ass.

"Wench. You are an amazing temptation. You'll be lucky if I don't bend you over right now and fuck you until you can't walk at all. But I really do think we should call Will."

Sage laughed and wriggled her ass provocatively as she headed toward the small bathroom to wash herself.

"You never know," she taunted him. "I might enjoy being bent over and taken hard. I might enjoy it so much I beg you oh so prettily for more."

Grinning to herself as she saw his cock twitch in response to her words, Sage sashayed to the bathroom so Chase could make his call.

The bathroom consisted of a cracked sink, a stained shower, a toilet and a large mirror. Two thin but fresh-smelling towels were under the basin and Sage debated having a shower now versus having a shower in a few hours before they'd need to make their next move.

Deciding upon a quick hand wash for now, Sage unlaced her boots as Chase updated Will on what they had discovered. Listening to Chase's end of the conversation, Sage used his recap to help refresh her own thoughts of the mission so far.

As she thought, Sage she stripped out of what remained of her outfit. Naked in the chilly room, she grabbed the washcloth, rinsed it with cold water and used it to freshen herself up.

Chase's take on the events was insightful. Succinctly he summarized everything to Will with only infrequent pauses as their captain presumably asked for small clarifications. Sage was pleased that Chase's impressions coincided with most of hers.

When Chase came to their finding of Gabe, he described the young man and repeated the information about Alice being supposedly the only known pusher in Chicago. From what Sage could gather from Chase's side of the conversation, Will also didn't think this was likely, but it was the only confirmed lead—from Dee and Gabe—they had to work on for now.

Although Chase's tone was caring and protective as he discussed Gabe, Sage was glad Chase didn't speak about their promise to watch over Gabe and help him. That felt private to her, not something to be placed in an official report.

After Chase and Will had gone over the possible connections between Alice and Gabe, Chase fell silent. The quiet stretched out and Sage presumed Will spoke at length with Chase interjecting the occasional brief "yes" or "no". Weariness overcame her as

the lateness of the hour caught up to her. She finished rinsing her body, wrung out the washcloth and dried herself. Finger-combing the knots out of her hair, she loosely plaited the length down her back and then washed her face.

Chase spoke. "No, I definitely think we need to all get together as a team, that's a good idea. But do you really think it wise for Sage and me to leave the building? Alice could turn up at any time. This is one of the best leads we have and I think it would be wise to have someone from the team remain here. Sage and I can do background checks remotely easy enough. All we'd need is for you to organize someone in soft clothes to drop off a digital camera, laptop and router. Sage and I can discreetly take pictures of everyone here, upload them and we'd be set."

Sage shivered in the cool air and idly wished for her terrycloth robe. Pushing the thought out of her mind, she collected her clothes and boots and returned to the main room of the apartment.

Placing her clothes in a neat pile on the bureau, she bent to pull back the bedspread and blankets to check the cleanliness of the sheets. A small tingle at the base of her spine warned her she was being watched. She threw a quick look over her shoulder, then grinned at Chase. The hot look in his eyes clearly showed his appreciation of her nakedness.

"Yeah, I think we could risk a conference call," he said a little huskily. "We'll be fine as long as my cell phone doesn't die. Maybe have your delivery guy bring me a spare cell just to be safe. If the brass really wants to be briefed face-to-face we can do it over the web. Just remember neither Sage nor I are prepared for a long stay here. We'll need supplies, but that can all wait until later in the morning. For all we know, Alice will be doing an early morning visit and we'll be able to hand over surveillance of this place before noon."

Finding the sheets threadbare but clean, Sage decided she felt tired enough to risk sleeping in them. Sitting on the edge of the mattress, she let her body relax for the first time all evening.

Chase wrapped up the conversation with Will, promising they'd be awake and coherent in a few hours for a conference call. He closed his phone and padded naked to join her on the bed.

They sat on the twin mattress companionably. Sage shifted on the bed so she could lean against Chase's shoulder. As he shifted his weight, she focused on his lean, muscled body and once again thought of just how handsome this man was.

She had no regrets at the intimacy they had shared. While neither of them had raised the issue of "what now?", Chase's ease in her presence didn't give her the impression he was beating himself up for mixing his private life with his career.

He wrapped an arm around her and squeezed her in a half hug. When he released her, she lay down on the mattress and he followed with a smothered yawn. Lying on his side facing her, his thick, long cock firm but not fully erect, he watched her with a

satisfied gleam in his gaze. Chase reminded Sage of a large, dark motorcycle with its engine left idling. With a few revs he could be a wild, thrilling ride once again.

Even though Sage knew she needed the sleep, she found it very difficult to quiet her mind with this sexy man next to her. She took a deep breath and tried to relax and get some rest.

Chapter Six

"Alice is our link in the chain," Sage started, unable to stop her brain from calculating how to continue their mission.

Unsure whether Chase would want to discuss work with her after a day that had already lasted almost twenty-four hours, she left it at that. He picked up the thread immediately.

"Absolutely," he said. "It's whoever is supplying the drug to Alice we're looking for. Though I'm definitely curious who she is and how she got involved. Her background might give us more leads to work. If we find who her contact is and how they are linked it could lead us further up the chain."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," she agreed. "Alice might be our starting point, but she should connect to someone who connects to someone else. Gabe said the drug is hard to come by. It seems as if those involved are trying to keep control of every step."

They grew silent. Sage spoke again, more hesitantly this time.

"I've started wondering if magic is even more involved here than we thought previously," she started. When Chase waited for her to continue, she gained strength from his silent support. "The pull that drug gives off. The influence and addictiveness it exerts on the human youths. The wide range of symptoms that are manifested between individuals."

Sage grew more enthusiastic as she continued to explain. She'd never had a sexual partner with whom she could brainstorm her missions. It felt different and exciting. Most importantly it felt *right*.

Being an Enforcer, protecting people and working in this manner held a large importance in her life. The love for her career was deeply embedded within her heart.

Most men couldn't wrap their heads around her enjoying something so dangerous and at times upsetting. The majority of her partners had needed to be kept outside the loop of her work. It invariably caused tension in her relationships, which quickly rang the death knell for them.

Sharing this side of herself with Chase added a dimension to the relationship growing between them. Chase grinned, seeming struck by her happiness. His happiness was contagious.

"You're glowing," he teased her and Sage blushed.

"I don't know about you," she said, "but it's a novel experience for me to be able to do this with my lover. Discuss work, have him support and understand this part of me. No one else has managed to fuck me blind against the apartment door and then sit in

bed with me and try to figure out who the bad guy is and how we can catch him and lock him away. It's...it's a bit of a turn-on."

Chase reached out a hand and stroked his fingers over her leg. He slowly worked his way up her thigh until he traced her outer labia. Sage let her legs fall open and Chase leaned up onto his elbows and tugged her until her legs were spread wide and she lay back on the mattress, supported on her elbows.

Sage watched Chase stroke her, his fingers collecting her cream. As he rubbed his thumb over her clit, she became more aroused. Her breaths came faster as he leaned forward and his tongue darted out to taste her. A slow lick along her opening had her moaning with wanton approval.

Chase ate at her, his tongue darting inside her cunt and tracing the edges of her walls, fucking her with long, slow thrusts. His actions had her panting and a sexual flush crept down from her neck to stain across her breasts. Sage cupped herself, pinched her nipples with just the right amount of pressure. Her peaks were sensitive and the extra stimulation increased her arousal.

Warm, large hands tilted her hips farther up and Sage fell back onto the bed. Chase knelt between her legs, lifted her high so he could bury his face between her thighs.

"Chase," she pleaded, her eyes fluttering shut as her pleasure grew. She never wanted this to end. She wanted to draw out every nuance, every drop of pleasure she possibly could.

Chase hummed against her sensitive skin and then lightly slapped her ass cheek. Sage jolted, a squeak of surprise escaping. As soon as he had delivered the slap, his warm fingers caressed her skin, massaged the tiny sting away. Sage felt herself grow wetter.

"Mmmmm," Chase murmured as he pulled back to lick and lave at her clit. "You like that, don't you, sweetheart?"

Sage groaned incoherently, her hips arching up higher to press her clit into his wickedly talented tongue. Teasing her now, Chase dodged her efforts for the extra stimulation. Lifting her head, Sage opened her eyes to look at him as she answered his hot comment.

"Yes, I like it," she admitted. "I've never enjoyed pain, but that sting and the pleasure that comes from it makes me hot. It's arousing. I want you, want more. Please."

Chase slapped her ass again. The sound of his hand on her flesh filled the air for a second. Sage felt a forceful sting. A moment's pain was quickly laved away with his hot tongue and massaging fingers.

Sage felt herself flowing copiously. Her body's sensual response to Chase's ministrations was impossible to hide as her arousal grew. Considering the intensity of her orgasm not so long ago, her rapidly growing arousal came as a surprise.

Two fingers entered her clenching cunt. Sage moaned at the intimate possession. Desperately seeking more stimulation, she lifted herself into the pressing digits as her

warm flesh swallowed him down. His tongue continued to entice her, stroking her flesh and pushing her arousal to even higher levels.

Sage could feel nothing but Chase, his touch and his scent around her as she lay back on the bed and he ate at her and fucked her with his fingers.

He slapped her ass a few more times, the heat in her cheeks morphing into an exciting tingling. Electric pulses zinged from her clit to her nipples. A faint sheen of sweat prickled over her skin and her breaths came in hard pants as she struggled to get enough oxygen into her lungs.

When he lowered her ass to the thin sheets, her skin felt so sensitive, the small pricks of tenderness heightened her pleasure. Chase lapped at her juices, swallowing her down as if she were a potent elixir he craved.

All too soon she felt her body contract, her breath seize and her orgasm wash over her—toes flexed, pussy clenching Chase's fingers, her head thrown back as she screamed her peak. Chase continued to lap at her, flicking his tongue over her clit as she rode through her climax.

Panting, Sage's eyes half opened and she realized she had stopped massaging her nipples. Usually the sensitive buds were as important to stimulate as her clit for her to come so hard, especially twice in such a short period of time. Replete, she grinned at Chase.

Her partner rolled back to his side, his smile filled with a hint of well-deserved arrogance. His gaze rested on her breasts hungrily. Sage's gaze lowered to his heavily aroused cock. His shaft was thick and hard, the head a deep purple-red color and slick with pre-come.

Wickedly, she grinned at him and lifted herself to her hands and knees. Crawling over him, she pressed her lips against his. They kissed, a sweet gesture that soon became hungry as Chase's arousal beat at her. His hands reached up to cup her breasts and knead them delicately. As his fingers brushed over her peaked nipples she moaned.

Her small sound of pleasure seemed to spur him on. He fondled her breasts more urgently, appearing to seek his own relief.

"You're a breast man, aren't you?" she purred huskily, arousal still thick in her tone. Chase agreed hoarsely, the sound not so much a word as an utterance. Sage pressed her breast harder into his hand. He tweaked her nipple and she moaned, her eyelids fluttered but remained open so she could watch him and read his reaction to her words.

"Do you want to fuck my breasts?" she asked. "Do you want to press your cock up through them and fuck me until your come splashes over me?"

"Damn right I do," he moaned as he sat up. Chase collected the pillows behind his back and propped himself up with them as Sage lowered herself between his legs. Pressing her breasts together tightly, she bent until she felt the slick tip of Chase's cock try to seek entrance.

His hands fisted gently in her hair as his hips pistoned upward. Making the passage as tight as she could, Sage felt Chase's thick cock finally penetrate between her breasts.

After a moment they found a rhythm he liked and Chase jerked his hips up and fucked her breasts wantonly. Sage lowered her mouth and as his cock head came through the top she laved at him with her tongue. A strangled sound emanated from Chase as his pleasure skyrocketed. He jerked himself up again, his cock peeking out through the top of her breasts. Sage ran her tongue over him, a long lick caressing his sensitive tip.

Chase panted hard and groaned. Sweat coated his brow as he ground his teeth. Sage started sucking his head as his shaft continued to slide between her breasts, pre-come leaking copiously from his slit. She licked him in wet, smooth strokes.

"Yes, oh yes," he moaned. Sage felt a thrill pass through her at his evident pleasure. He roared and fisted his hand in her hair tightly, pulling her down on him until his cock filled her mouth and he started fucking her throat and her breasts simultaneously.

A few strokes later and he erupted, jets of thick, hot come filling her mouth. Sage swallowed him down, enjoying the salty taste of his essence. Spent, Chase collapsed back on the pillows, his chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath.

Sated and happier than she could ever recall being, Sage crawled up the bed to lie next to him. He wrapped his arms around her, held her close in his tight embrace. Chase smiled sleepily at her as she hugged him tightly in response.

Slowly he lowered his lips to hers and they tasted each other. Sage shared Chase's taste with him. He eagerly licked along her tongue and sucked it lightly into his mouth.

"We really need to sleep," he murmured. Sage agreed but didn't move. Without releasing her, Chase leaned over to where he had placed his cell phone on the carpet beside the bed. With one hand he turned the phone back on and set the alarm before placing it back on the floor. With a final kiss, Sage turned so Chase could spoon her. They snuggled together under the blankets.

"We'll grab a few hours rest and then shower before the cell conference," he decided. Since that was what Sage had been thinking she didn't argue but instead wriggled so the length of her back ran down his chest, sharing the warmth of their skin.

When Chase dropped a kiss onto her shoulder, Sage wanted to tell him she loved him. Her mind rebelled, insisting it was too soon for such words, especially when she wasn't sure how he felt. She worried a declaration of love after only one day would scare him off.

Even though Sage knew how she felt, for the first time she could recall she shied away from decisive action. Chase wrapped his arm loosely around her waist. Sage could feel the warmth of sleep overtake her.

Just moments before she passed out, however, she thought she heard him whisper "I love you, Sage". As sleep claimed her, she decided it was just her imagination, the words too soft to have been spoken at all.

* * * * *

A mechanical beeping sound penetrated Sage's consciousness. She felt as though it was only minutes since she had sunk into a deep, dreamless sleep. *Beep...beep...beep...* The fourth "beep" sounded distinctly unhealthy. A few seconds after that, a clunky warble was emitted into the apartment.

Next to her, Chase swore vehemently and turned in the bed. Sage cracked an eye open and lifted her head high enough to look around. She watched him reach to the floor and fiddle with his cell. Before he could finish a despairing screech sounded.

Sage lowered her head back down and snickered into her pillow.

"I wouldn't laugh if I were you," Chase mumbled as he turned back over and burrowed into the covers. "My cell dies and we're in trouble. At least until I can steal another one. I don't like our chances of that here, considering the sorts of tenants we're likely to find."

Sage could have easily snuggled under the covers and allowed herself to fall back into a blissful rest. Knowing Chase's cell would ring all too soon for their conference call and that she would need to at least sound fresh and up to speed forced Sage's hand. Lifting herself up onto her elbows, she kissed Chase, enjoying his instant, if sleepy, response.

"Shower?" she murmured. He mumbled incoherently and buried his face back into the covers. Snorting her amusement, Sage kissed the barely visible forehead through shaggy dark brown hair and reluctantly climbed from the warmth of the bed.

The bathroom tiles were cool and Sage wasted no time in pulling the clean towels from under the sink. Switching on the shower as far as it would go without the handle coming off, she waited a moment before a strong spray of water came from the showerhead.

With no blow-dryer and such a thin towel, Sage didn't trust being able to get her long hair dry and manageable after a good soaking. She tied it around itself into a firm knot. She hoped it would remain in a tight bunch and not unravel halfway through her shower.

Sage adjusted the water until it felt hot enough and gingerly climbed into the stall. Six or eight hours more sleep would be perfect, but a long, hot soak in the shower would at least have her feeling refreshed and ready to face the day with some composure.

Breathing in the steam that filled the small room, Sage let the heat of the spray needling her flesh relax her body and massage the kinks out of her muscles. Squeezing out a dime-sized drop of shower gel, Sage cleaned away the previous long day's worth of grime. The scent of smoke from the club had largely dissipated, but the steam and scented gel helped wash away what remained.

It could only have been five minutes later when she heard the soft pad of Chase's naked feet slap on the bathroom tiles. She grinned as he opened the door to the shower

stall and with a quick, hard kiss and a slight scraping of stubble from his chin, nudged her aside to share the hot water.

"Damn Will and his stupid calls," Chase mumbled tiredly as he ducked his head beneath the spray and scrubbed his hands over his face. "He'll expect me to be bright and chirpy without coffee. A shower is probably the smartest idea to make me human again."

Sage laughed and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

"I might be able to help with that," she murmured huskily, amused when a wet hand cupped her waist and drew her up close to his body.

"Mmmm," Chase agreed with growing arousal and interest, "you might be very helpful indeed, Sage."

"How could I possibly assist in waking you up?" she mused and tried hard to keep the laughter from bubbling out. Chase's thick shaft pressed hotly into her thigh, but she pretended it wasn't there.

She traced her hands down his slick, muscled chest and arms. Her touch on him was light, meaning to arouse him slowly. The warm water sluiced over them, the steam creating the impression they were safely cocooned in their own little world.

Sage had every intention of milking what little time and privacy they had together.

With a sexy growl, Chase pressed her wet body back into the cool tile walls and kissed her ravenously. Despite their multiple joinings mere hours ago and the many intimacies they had shared the past evening, Chase plundered her mouth as if this were their first time together and he simply had to taste her.

Hunger burned within her chest. Sage gave back as good as she got. Urgently they pressed their bodies together, exploring one another and discovering every secret erogenous place.

A heated thrill of desire shot through Sage's body. Her nipples beaded and her pussy once again become slickly hot with the gush of her lust. She craved this man, even after knowing him for less than a day. His fingers traced over her skin, shooting sparks of electric arousal through her as her body reacted with intoxicating speed.

Chase muttered incoherently against her lips as he pressed nipping kisses down her jaw and along her neck. Sage shivered deliciously. The sensual scrape of his teeth against her skin had every logical thought flying out of her head as she reacted purely physically.

Sage moaned, rocking her hips up to press the smoothly shaved mound of her pussy onto Chase's thick cock. They ground together, taunting each other, drawing out the moment where they knew he would penetrate her fully and stretch her decadently.

Chase's warm hand moved under one of her slender thighs, lifting her so she opened to him. She wrapped her thigh around his waist, pressing herself back into the wall. Covering her with his own much larger frame, Chase lifted her other leg and wrapped it around his waist.

Strong hands cupped her ass and held her in place. Chase ran the tip of his cock head up and down her labia.

"Do it," she moaned, "oh Circe, Chase, I need to feel you inside me right now. Please, please."

"Patience, my love," Chase teased her as he let his head press barely an inch inside her warmth only to pull back out again. Sage groaned and tried to shift her hips, unable to force him more deeply inside her. While he pinned her to the wall, he held her weight securely in place.

Sage wrapped her arms around Chase's neck and stroked her fingers through his thick, shaggy hair. Kissing his roughly stubbled cheeks, then his nose and finally his lips, she bit down gently on his soft lower lip. He growled. His hips thrust forward, the entire plum head of his cock lodging inside her.

"Naughty wench," he scolded her without any anger. "You know just which buttons to press, don't you?"

Sage merely continued to suck on his bottom lip, wriggling her hips from side to side as if to coax him deeper inside her. His eyes looked like twin pools of melted chocolate, dark and shining with a deep emotion she couldn't put a label on.

Her heart rapped a steady staccato against her chest and Sage felt love for this man rise. Despite the brief period they had known each other, their circumstances had been intense.

New as it was, her love for him was strong, true and undeniable.

Recalling the words she thought he might have said the night earlier, Sage let herself hope that perhaps the intensity of his emotions might lead eventually to love for her. They worked well together as a team, and both felt passionately about righting the wrongs of criminals and protecting the innocent.

Silently, Sage tried to communicate her love—or at least the depth of her feelings—to her partner. She couldn't tell if Chase understood her, but he pressed hot and hard inside her, penetrating her with a slowness that was a form of decadent torture. Her body opened to him as he entered her inch by inch.

Sage's nails dug into the warm skin of Chase's shoulders as her back arched. With small, whimpering sounds she urged him deeper. They were panting as steam billowed around them. Finally he lodged fully inside her, as deep as he could penetrate.

"You're so tight," he whispered, "so firm and wet and slick. I can't believe we fit together, you clamp down so tightly on me."

Sage grinned and clenched her inner muscles, squeezing down harder around him. Chase groaned appreciatively and kissed her hard. He withdrew just a scant few inches and then pressed back inside her again.

Magic pulsed within her as he seemed to rub along every inner nerve of her pussy. Incoherent with the waves of pleasure rolling through her body, Sage merely cried out, a guttural, insensate sound more animalistic than human.

She slid her hands over Chase's shoulders and reached up to cup his jaw. Drawing him to her, she kissed him passionately. The waves of her love and magic rolled out from her and filled the world around them.

"I love you," she whispered against his lips, her voice so low she couldn't be positive he would hear. Sage hadn't meant to let the words escape but they were out before she could stop them. She lowered her eyes, worried she had jumped the gun.

Wet fingers touched the base of her chin, lifting her face until she looked directly at Chase. He grinned at her, his face lit with joy. A small roar of pleasure escaped his lips as he fiercely pounded inside her. Over and over he thrust inside her, filling her pussy perfectly.

Knowing she would have bruises on her thighs and lower ass where his hands clenched, holding her in place, Sage relaxed and embraced everything Chase could give her. Pleasure rode her and her heart hammered hard as her body tingled.

"Say it again," Chase insisted. Sage peppered small, hungry kisses all over his face and neck.

"I love you," she repeated obediently. "I love you so much I fear I might shatter from the intensity of it."

"I love you so much too," he replied. His voice sounded raw from the strength of his emotions. "I especially love the ferocious side you hide beneath your pretty blonde looks and those sweet blue eyes," Chase added, as if he could sense her need for him to declare himself. "You're everything I could possibly dream of in a woman. You've seduced me with your magic, your compassion and your fierce strength."

"Oh Goddess," Sage moaned. Chase's words as much as his sensual rhythm pushed her so quickly up to her climax it felt as if her magic shattered around her. Her climax felt as if it burst her into tiny pieces.

"Chase!" she screamed. He stood in front of her, his cock piercing her body. With a deep shout that must surely have woken their neighbors, he came with her, shuddering as he filled her with his seed.

Sage's nails dug into Chase's shoulders, the hard muscles beneath her soft hands flexing as he pounded her into the wall. Hot water poured over them as they shook with release. Sage watched Chase's eyes, stroked his slick skin and enjoyed the perfect moment.

Finally, however, reality intruded.

"You don't think it's too soon?" Sage asked. She was loath to ruin the special moment between them, but she needed to know that Chase's declaration wasn't the sex speaking. Her partner grinned sexily at her and then tapped a finger to the tip of her nose.

"We make snap decisions on a daily basis," he reminded her, clearly amused. "We regularly face life-and-death situations. I've witnessed the lowest points a person can fathom and then hours later experienced soaring highs. Do you really think I'd need a few weeks of courtship, maybe a month or two of dinner-and-a-movie-style dates to

become comfortable with the fact I've found a magical witch who can rock my world? I'm not afraid of love and what that entails. I meant every word I said, Sage."

Sage laughed, delighted. She bent her head to lick along the small, crescent-shaped wounds on his shoulders that her nails had left behind. Lifting her head, she laved her tongue along his full lower lip. They kissed passionately, her heart unfurling as love vibrated between them.

Chase helped her regain her feet, her legs a little wobbly on the slick floor. They rinsed each other off with warm hands and more water, laughing playfully. With a squeal as Chase's finger lingered a little too long around her puckered asshole, Sage sluiced the water from her body, leapt from the shower and then reached for her towel.

"If we start something like that we're going to miss Will's call. And I don't even want to imagine you explaining you were reaming my ass in the shower, and are sorry we missed his conference."

Sage dried her body. She struggled to ignore Chase's heated gaze as it raked over her, watching her every move. His eyes burned into her like a brand, making her skin prickle. She wanted nothing more than to run off to some sandy, deserted island with Chase in tow. She wanted to have the freedom to take their time and really explore one another. She longed for the leisure to speak of anything and everything that crossed their minds.

Instead, they were holed up in a building full of junkies, chasing down a drug pusher and hoping to discover who she answered to so they could break a ring of magical drug manufacturers. Suddenly she wished the entire situation to hell. She wanted to be selfish, not to care about the drug or the wizards behind it. But despite the temptation to ignore everything, Sage couldn't forget the damage the drug unleashed upon both their worlds.

An Enforcer's life was not always sunshine and roses.

"Next time," she promised Chase. Her words were full of intensity, the weight of her promise vibrant in the air between them. Next time, when they were at her place—or his—she'd let him do anything he wished. While they would always be "on call", it would be easier for them to explore each other when they weren't waiting on a conference call or rushing to raid a club.

Sage wasn't worried. There was plenty of time—they had forever.

She finished drying herself and pointed to Chase's towel.

"I'm getting dressed," she said, "before those eyes of yours tempt me into doing something crazy like riding you until we really do miss Will's call."

Chase held out a hand, his eyebrow cocked in challenge. Discretion being the better part of valor, Sage hung up her towel and escaped into the bedroom to survey what remained of her crumpled clothes from the evening before.

Her slinky halter-necked top lay in a puddle on the floor by the door. With her thong torn into pieces and having been braless the evening before, that meant she would be underwear-less until she could get a change of clothes. Her leather miniskirt

ensured she would be decently covered—Sage just hoped she wouldn't need to do much fighting before she could get someone to drop off some jeans for her.

She shimmied into her skirt, pulled the halter top over her chest and tugged her hair out of its bun. Even though no one on the other end of the line would be able to see her, she felt more in control knowing she was decently dressed. Her boots could wait for later. They were sexy as hell and kicked ass, but she didn't relish getting blisters from over-wearing them.

Chase left the bathroom as she ran her hands down her short skirt. She only hoped she could manage to get through what remained of the day without flashing anyone. He leered at her and she laughed as she flipped him off.

"First stop we can make I'm buying new clothes," she insisted.

"I think you look hot. I like the thoroughly ravished look on you," he bantered, a wicked smile on his face. Before Sage could retort, his cell rang. As if a weight of professionalism had settled over each of their shoulders, they instantly sobered up.

Eagerness, the thrill of the hunt welled in Sage's stomach. With their new knowledge of Alice, she could just tell they were getting closer. She hoped the rest of their team had been busy through the early hours of the morning.

Sage could taste the case ratcheting up a notch as Chase answered his cell and put the captain on the speaker.

Chapter Seven

"Okay, we all here?" Will's voice filled the room as if the man himself stood by the window and paced up and down the side of the apartment. Sage felt amused at the vivid mental image created by the captain's tone alone.

"I'm here," she spoke up, pleased to hear Blade's voice state his presence followed quickly by Ange.

"Julian here and Matt's trying to work out how to text the photo we've found," Julian added.

"That makes six of us, Will," Chase drawled. "All your little chickens home to roost. What do you have for us?"

"Funny," Will snorted, "you're a comedian, Chase. Now hold your tongue and listen up. While you got your beauty rest the rest of the team worked their asses off and completed some research. Matthias is sending through a picture of the girl we believe to be this pusher. You've all been updated and should know that Chase and Sage keep on hearing Alice's name mentioned when they ask around about the source of the pills. Julian?"

Sage sat on the edge of the bed. It felt unusual to be standing at attention as if she were being briefed in person when it was just herself and Chase. Chase followed her and laid the cell phone between them. There was a pause and a muffled bit of talk between Julian and Matt before Julian spoke more clearly into the phone.

"Okay, Matt's just sent the image out. It should arrive in a few seconds. The captain told us to look for this Alice girl. We started with birth and death records, but you don't even want to know how many women under the age of thirty are called Alice. We took a few risks and culled the number by half by tightening the parameters of age and location. After that, we still had way more names than we could look into quickly."

"So I got to thinking," Matthias continued when Julian paused. "Instead of searching databases and whittling down a mammoth list of records, it might be quicker to do a newspaper article search using key words. We knew it was a long shot, but we could play with different searches in a very short period of time. Had it not panned out, we wouldn't be too much worse off than we already were. I looked up varying combinations of the words Alice, magic, youth. I scanned the results looking particularly at photos for a brunette, Caucasian girl."

Sage's eyebrows rose in surprise, though she kept silent. Usually Matthias followed one train of thought and didn't jump around needlessly in his approach to problems. Certainly open to change and the fluidity of any given situation, Matthias still generally took the tortoise approach to these matters. When Matthias paused dramatically, no one else jumped in so she decided to take the honors.

"And did it help?" she asked. "It sounds as if you had some success."

Chase's phone vibrated as the message came through. He pressed a couple of buttons and a grainy photo filled the screen. Obviously copied from a newspaper article, the grinning face of a pale-skinned, dark-haired girl beamed out at them. Shining, bright brown eyes grabbed Sage's attention as she took in the healthy glow of the girl. Dark curls framed her face, spilling over her shoulders.

Sage stared hard at the woman, taking in her navy-blue button-down shirt and the energy that hummed around her. With difficulty, she recognized Alice as the twitchy junkie from The Abyss.

"Wow," she commented. "How old is that picture? I couldn't swear to it being her, she's changed an awful lot. I have to admit though, it certainly looks like the girl I saw selling at the club."

"Believe it or not," Matt answered, "that photo is less than six months old. Meet Alice Greenly, folks. Twenty-two years old. Human and the youngest of three girls. Alice was born and raised here in Chicago and appears on paper as an utterly normal girl in every respect until four or five months ago."

"Alice had been accepted into the Chicago College medical course," Julian picked up as Matthias tapered off. "The picture you're looking at was taken for the small local newspaper and had everything but a heavenly choir singing the girl's praises. She'd been doing temp work as an intern in one of the local clinics and also volunteering at women and children's shelters. The article was one of those fuzzy feel-good style of newspaper articles to remind everyone that the whole world isn't going to hell in a handbasket.

"The ink of the paper run had barely dried before her parents reported her missing," Julian continued. "The girl seemed to just fall off the face of the earth. She went to a party with a bunch of girlfriends from her school, celebrating their acceptances into courses they wanted. Apparently it was quite the girls' night out."

"Alice got home safely," Julian added. "Her father waited up to make sure everything had gone smoothly—but the next morning it was as if she had disappeared. There was no apparent break-in. Nothing had been stolen and the mother didn't discover anything more than possibly an outfit or two missing from the girl's wardrobe. The police didn't list it as a kidnapping and put it as a possible runaway scenario."

Sage frowned. From what the guys said there didn't seem to be a logical explanation behind Alice's actions. Here was a happy, healthy girl on the cusp of the fruition of her life dreams. She had a loving family, siblings and friends and had just been accepted into university with no reason to up and disappear.

She was about to ask, but Blade beat her to the punch. "What about the boyfriend?" he asked.

"Things had petered out and died a fairly natural death with her boyfriend," Matthias answered. "They'd been steady for about six months but he'd been accepted to a course he really wanted to do in a different state. They'd discussed the long-distance

thing, held it together through the last of the school term and had parted agreeably when school broke up. It's a lead, but my gut says it's not the right one."

"To continue," Julian interjected, "Alice did resurface two months later. Understandably, things were rocky, to put it lightly, with her parents. They had questions and Alice stonewalled them. The parents pushed her. Not surprisingly, Alice had a serious falling-out with her sisters and parents and left again. From what we can gather in the few short hours we've been researching, she still hasn't managed to patch up any of those relationships. She's been estranged from her whole family and they have no clue where she is or what she's really doing. It appears her life has pretty much spiraled out of control."

"There have been a few public phone booth calls to her parents' number, generally once every couple or three weeks. They last under a minute each time. I'd guess they're just a 'Hi I'm alive gotta go' style message," Julian continued. "There's nothing on either of her sisters' phone records that suggests she patched up the relationships with either of them, nor does it follow they're in one another's confidence."

"And then there's the new social circle she's keeping with," Will added. "Matthias ran her through your wizard's databases and while none of us seem to have put two and two together, this slip of a thing, this *human* girl seems to have somehow gained sketchy magical essence and powers."

Sage felt her eyebrows rise in surprise.

"What?" she responded, Ange and Blade echoing similar shock.

"Are you positive, Captain?" Ange recovered from a stunned silence first. "You don't just get magical power. It's innate—you're born with it or you don't have it at all."

Sage chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip as she mentally reviewed everything she'd seen and experienced in the last twenty-four hours. She had felt the tug of something. She had assumed it was the drugs. Could it have been Alice herself?

Her exposure to it had been for less than a couple of seconds, there and gone before she could truly get a hold on it. Add in the distance and crowded press of the club and it had been nothing more than a fleeting impression.

"Are we certain she was human to begin with?" Sage asked as she searched for possible explanations. "Could she have been adopted or—"

"Not a chance," Julian insisted. "We've seen family photos. The resemblance between the sisters and the parents is too close to be anything other than genetics. She's human. Or she was human."

"Are we certain she showed signs of magic?" Chase asked. "Couldn't she just have been a sensitive? Or perhaps someone with a really keen intuition? What do we have on that?"

"I woke up one of her old school friends," Matthias answered, "called her cell and massaged the truth. I asked her about Alice when she returned. The friend—Kiri—described her as 'spooky'. Kiri thought Alice was obviously high on something and that it had somehow given Alice the ability to read her thoughts. Kiri described how Alice

would recite things back to her verbatim that she had been thinking and just giggle and say what a pity it was she hadn't found the drugs before their exams and final year. The only other helpful tidbit Kiri could give us was how Alice said she was in the process of 'helping to create medical history'."

"I don't suppose we got lucky enough to find anyone who discovered where she went in that missing time or who she hooked up with? Obviously someone is using her and that's the person we need to find," Blade interjected.

"Course we aren't that lucky," Julian snorted, "but we're a damn sight further along than we were this time yesterday morning. We know she met someone around the end of her final year who is integral to jolt. It isn't a leap to assume Alice is still in contact with this person and presumably pushing the pills for them."

"Whoever this wizard or witch is that she did fall in with, they have power. Truckloads of it," Matthias added. "I've spent most of the last few hours trying to Track Alice and she's heavily concealed. No way if she did somehow manage to infuse herself with essence and power she could do this alone."

"Her signature should be fairly distinctive—" Sage started as she struggled to express the faint sense of wrongness she had picked up on in the club. Matt interrupted her before she could find the right words.

"Oh I know. It's...wrong. Twisted, but not in an evil sense, just not natural. It's difficult to express.

"Once I started to seriously home in on Alice," Matthias continued, "it became obvious to me that she is someone who has magic who should not. What actually has me concerned, though, isn't that she somehow has become infused with essence not her own. That could explain her sudden new magical powers. What does worry me is that whoever is protecting her is so powerful. If they can cloak her so steadily for hour upon hour it gives me a bad feeling in my gut."

"Should we tap into one of the other divisions?" Blade asked. "See if there are any new concealment castings making the rounds? We all sometimes get so caught up in our own areas we lose touch with how fast everything moves."

"This isn't a charm or talisman," Matt disagreed. "A charm would leak, if it was only the essence of the caster. A good enough Tracker can detect when a talisman is being used to overlay a person's essence. No. The only indication I've been receiving from this woman is the very small flares when she and whoever she is with both lose control of themselves. We're talking flares of her power for the split second her buddy also loses control and drops his rigid control. Were her signature not so distinctive and had I not been one hundred percent focused on searching her out, I probably would have missed the few instances entirely."

"They're not leaving the area, are they?" Ange queried. "If they pack up shop and move right now we'd really be dropped in it."

"I can't swear to it, but I don't think so," Matthias replied. "The indication I have been getting is that they're nearby. The few flares haven't felt far enough away to be outside the city limits. Neither do they have the erratic feel of panicked flight."

"The problem seems to be," Will broke in, "that this Alice could be a walking time bomb. Even ignoring the fact it's she who is actively pushing the drugs amongst the humans in the clubs, she also is an unknown quantity. We have more questions here than answers, people. How is it she's gone from Little Miss Perfect about to be a doctor, to a strung-out, emaciated junkie who's pushing the latest craze in drugs? Who is protecting her? And most importantly of all, who is supplying and manufacturing the drugs?"

"If we could narrow down who we think might be involved or casting the protection," Matthias added, "then I could Track them, see if their signatures linked up with that protecting Alice."

"Should we keep on looking into how these drugs work?" Blade inquired. "I still think the multi-pronged approach we have been taking is our best bet for working this through fast."

Ange, Chase and Sage all simultaneously added their agreement to this.

"Sage, can you go over those moments you saw Alice again, please?" Julian asked. "Especially with everything we've discovered, running over it one more time might help jog something free."

As thoroughly as she could, Sage described again the brief moment she had seen Alice. Her emaciated body, her unhealthy pallor, the ragged cut of her hair—as if she had taken scissors to it herself in the bathroom mirror. Like Matt, she struggled over the description of the draw the magical essence had on her.

"I still couldn't say whether the strange pull was her or the drugs, or possibly the both of them. The more I think about it the more muddled my thoughts become. One minute I think it was the drugs being infused by magic, the next I think it was Alice, then it could just have been the ambience of The Abyss itself. We're talking a second, a brief instinct that snapped my attention," Sage apologized.

"The drugs could be infused with magic, and that is somehow absorbed with the drug itself into the human system," Chase suggested. A silence fell over them.

"Holy fuck," someone muttered.

"It would explain a lot," Sage said. "Why the reactions and symptoms vary so wildly. Magic isn't like a substance that breaks down into consistent packets. Magic is inherent to us Mages. It's something unique like a fingerprint. If humans are somehow being infused with essence, then it would react in wildly different manners from person to person."

"I can't imagine anyone from the magical world stupid enough to think this was a smart idea," Ange replied dryly. "And trust me, guys, that is really saying something. We have some utter nutcases that totally outclass your fruitcakes."

"You should have seen this one guy I tracked—" Julian snorted, but Will cut him off before they could digress into one-upmanship.

"Have any of you ever heard of this shit before?" Will steered the conversation back on track. "Is it possible for humans to be infused with magical essence? Sage and Matt have described Alice's signature as appearing twisted and wrong. Could this be because she's currently a walking oxymoron? A human who has magic inside her. Is there any precedent for this?"

Into the ensuing silence, Sage spoke up.

"It makes a certain twisted kind of sense, but whether it's actually possible in practice is something I've never heard any discussion on. Magic isn't just being able to do castings and learning how to harness your power, it's integral to who and what you are. Think of it like a piece of your soul. This energy inside you is such an intimate aspect of yourself, it's not as though you can just give it away or transfer it like a coupon."

Sage paused for a moment to try to imagine what separating pieces of her magic from her soul would be like and shuddered.

"I can't believe someone would willingly give up parts of their essence to do this," she finished with a shiver. "Will, I know you guys might find it hard to understand what it would be like, but there is no way I'd think someone could live without their magic. It would be like giving pieces of your memories to someone else. I don't understand how anyone could willingly do that, or what it would be like on the receiving end."

"It would be overwhelming," Ange spoke huskily. "Magical essence isn't like a piece of clothing you put on and take off, it's something deeply embedded inside your soul. We can only hypothesize, but I would think that for someone not used to having magic within them it would be overpowering. Coping with something so alien, especially for a human with no training or guidance, you would think their mind would break down, unable to assimilate the bombardment of new data."

"Which is sounding exactly like what we're facing," Will finished grimly. "These kids who have taken the drug might start off all right, but in a fairly short time they're losing the plot. They can't cope with what their senses keep telling them or their brains are overloading and they seem to end up paranoid, hallucinating and just gouging their eyes out."

"Maybe the police and the Enforcers should network with Social Services. If the human and magical world join forces they could limit some of the fallout from jolt," Chase suggested. "Human counselors could explain our side of the addicts' traits and wizards could explain what effect the magic is creating. Surely with both sides working together we could set up some sort of clinic to give proper help to these addicts?"

Sage shot him a glance, wondering if perhaps Gabe was on his mind. His idea had a lot of merit and she felt proud of him for coming up with it. For too long the magical

world had held itself completely apart from the human world, the two almost never interacting.

In recent years there had been small areas of crossover. Ritual New Agers, curious humans with minor levels of natural talent. More and more it looked as if the way of the future was some level of integration between the two. These things took time though, and Sage knew magical bureaucracy worked even more slowly than human.

"If we catch these kids quick enough we might be able to get them training," Chase said. "If nothing else, humans can potentially be shown how to cope with these temporary powers. If they understand what is happening to them it should keep them more mentally stable, it will allow them a feeling of control."

Sage thought of Gabe and how he might find what he searched for if he had the right support and knowledge offered to him. "I agree," she added, "and it's something the powers that be should start looking into sooner rather than later. The longer these kids are addicted, the more essence they will imbibe. I would think the more out of control they'll get and the quicker they'll fall apart."

"Even assuming these kids are strong enough to withstand the cravings, if they spend too long on the essence and get used to life with it then when they dry out chances are they will feel shattered," Matthias added in his quiet tone. "Retaining magic might not be natural for a human, but it's worse than a regular drug."

"Everything will feel harder, colder," Chase added. Sage was struck by him saying exactly what Gabe had told them. "It will be like their life has dulled and become more painful in every way."

"Sounds as if it's already too late for some of them, like Alice," Blade commented. "If it's twisting her up inside, changing her in ways we can't understand, she's worse than just a regular pusher. She's an unknown. We could profile her for eternity – if she's changing in ways we can't predict then we need to find her, stop her and only then look into getting help for her."

"It might be worth trying to get her into the open. We could set a trap," Ange suggested.

"The girl dropped her family and friends like hot potatoes," Will grunted. "I'm not sure who we could use to try to bait a trap. Now maybe if we discover whoever it is she's hooked up with, that might work as bait. Having said that, if we find out who her source is, I'd rather we went after them. If we cut off her supply she will come out of the woodwork by herself. No matter how desperate she gets, Alice can't push what she doesn't have. Hell, if we can manage to shut down the supply of drugs everyone will be forced to dry out. I still say the higher up the chain we can get the better."

"We're assuming here that she hasn't already fallen off the deep end," Julian added with a sarcastic drawl. "From the sounds of it she's already a few bricks shy of a load. And if she's willing to set off explosions in the middle of a packed club then she obviously is past caring about innocent collateral damage."

"Okay," Will interjected firmly, "we're getting off topic again. This is how it will be. Chase, Sage, you stay in the apartment complex. We have multiple sources stating that Alice is likely to return there to try to push the drugs. This is particularly true now the club is temporarily closed down for repairs. You'll report in to me every other hour without fail even if you've nothing but boredom to complain about.

"Julian and Matt, you will be staying at HQ researching. Matt, I want you cross-checking our references on Alice. In particular I want you to isolate those whom she came into contact with in the six months before she left home. Julian, you managed to sweet-talk Kiri, use that charm on Alice's sisters and her closest friends.

"Blade, Ange, I want in the Enforcers' database. You need to look at who this magical connection of Alice's could be," Will continued. Sage could hear the others making low assenting noises. "We have more data now, hopefully it will help against the landslide of information you've been struggling through. Look for lots of raw power and charisma. Focus on the men but don't exclude any of the females who really strike your fancy as fitting into this. We're still looking for a small group of powerful people. I think there should only be a couple of them, four at most. Any more than that and internal politics would have likely torn them apart by now.

"Okay, you all have your assignments. I want everyone checking in regularly. My gut says this thing could blow up in our faces soon, so I want people to keep me in the loop. Any questions?"

Silence echoed around and someone—Will, Sage suspected—grunted. "Great. Let's move, people."

The group said their goodbyes and phones disconnected. Chase picked up his cell and closed it with a small *snap*.

"Looks as though we're stuck here for another day," he said with a small smile tugging the edges of his mouth.

Sage stretched out lazily onto her side on the soft mattress. A sensual smile played along her lips and she watched as Chase placed his cell once again on the floor near the bed. One eyebrow cocked upward, she ran the tips of her fingers slowly along her collarbone, down the round curve of one breast, finally tracing along the outside edge of her halter top.

"Hmmm," she agreed, "a whole day, stuck inside with only each other for company. Whatever will we do with ourselves?"

Chase cleared his throat and crawled closer to her. His hands settled comfortably on her hips as if they had lived there for years. Tugging her gently, he pulled their bodies flush with each other.

"Hmmm." He dipped his head to trace his tongue along the edge of her shoulder. He continued his way over her skin to the very sensitive crevice of her throat. Nerves along the small hollow woke up and started dancing at his touch. She shivered in excitement.

A grunt of approval puffed out of Chase's lips and he continued to lap at the sensitive area, his teeth scraping over her skin. The rasp sent jolts of pleasure through her body. Her nipples beaded in excitement as her back arched. The bowing of her body pressed her farther into his warm embrace.

"Circe," she panted. Her hands cupped his jaw and ran lightly over the prickly stubble there. "You drive me wild, Chase. How the hell am I supposed to concentrate on work or danger when all I can think about is piercing myself on your cock? All I want is to ride you hard, thrusting your prick deeply into me as we fuck ourselves insensate."

"I'm all up for us fucking each other anywhere, any time," Chase agreed huskily. "I certainly can't seem to get enough of you. I'd happily have you pounce on me day and night, sweetheart."

Sage laughed, rolled Chase over onto his back and straddled his hips.

"I think this time I'll be in charge," she mused. As if they had all the time in the world, Sage trailed her fingers down Chase's impressive chest. She let her fingers linger, stroking his warm skin. She loved how responsive he was. Goose bumps popped up as he reacted to her touch. He shivered visibly and Sage felt the warm rush of sexual power roll over her.

"Then, if you're a very good boy, after I've had my way with you, I'll let you fuck me however you like, and we'll be even," she murmured hotly.

Chase laughed and Sage lowered her head to string kisses down the center of his chest. She enjoyed her explorations. Her tongue laved one nipple as her fingers delicately tweaked the other into a hard nub. After a moment she swapped sides so that she could repeat herself the other way.

Her fingers traced intricate patterns over Chase's skin. Her tongue eagerly followed and after a few minutes she worked her way lower, teasing as she grated her teeth around the tiny hairs surrounding his bellybutton.

Tauntingly slow, she was starting to undo the first button of Chase's waistband when an enormous *crash* sounded against the door. Sage turned her head, surprised something had knocked so solidly against their door and not come through the flimsy wood. A second *bang* shook the walls of their apartment and the thin, pliable door splintered. Most of the door came off its hinges, chunks still screwed into the frame but the rest littering the floor in a mess of broken wood pieces.

"Holy shit!" Sage cried out, shock racing through her body. Alice stormed into the room, her petite frame crackling with powerful, angry magical energy. Sage leapt from the bed, landing nimbly on her feet. Years of training had her reacting before coherent thought could kick in. She crouched low, her balance centered in a fighting stance.

Regardless of how Alice had entered this world—human, Mage or something else—right now she clearly had magical energy roaring through her body. Faint silvery blue sparks of energy sizzled from her fingers, her hair spiked around her face from the

static as she stormed inside. Sage could see Alice's control over herself had completely gone—if she ever had ever mastered any.

"Must protect my purple," Sage thought she heard the emaciated young woman mutter. Sage had no time to question Alice. The tiny woman came toward her like a tornado.

Alice seemed caught up in the moment, anger clearly blinding her actions. The intensity of the fight weighed heavily in the air between them. Sage was in no doubt of the seriousness of the situation. While she didn't fear for her safety—she knew she could protect herself—it was never wise to engage in combat with a junkie.

"Alice, wait—" Sage tried to placate the girl. She didn't get another word out before Alice's pure black eyes fell upon her. Without pausing, Alice pulled out a wicked-looking dagger. The blade alone was at least ten inches long, the handle thick and ornate. Light reflected from the shiny steel, which came to a scarily sharp point. Even though Alice clearly had no training in the art of fighting with a dagger, Sage didn't need to be told a novice could cut a person dead with an instrument like that just as easily as a professional.

Having been a partner to Blade for years, Sage knew her knives and swords well. Nevertheless, her stomach rolled uneasily at the ferociousness of that blade.

Sage wanted Alice alive at the end of this struggle, if possible. The girl had a wealth of knowledge that could have this mission wrapping up in prompt time. Dead, Alice was no use at all to them except as a silent link in a large chain.

Sage had a sinking feeling Alice wanted her nothing but dead and buried. This would not be an easy fight, regardless of Sage's vast experience and talents. Sage stood her ground.

"Taken away my jolt. You've ruined everything..." Alice continued to mutter, more to herself than Sage or Chase. Sage struggled to catch the incoherent ramblings but it grew difficult as Alice appeared to stop and start randomly, uttering just a few words aloud and the rest presumably in her head, unable to differentiate between the privacy of her thoughts and reality.

"Alice, we can help you." Sage tried to reach the woman with calm talk. She stretched out her hand, hoping the gesture would soothe the woman and reach her mind.

Alice merely slashed out with the dagger in a loose, clumsy movement.

"Got to kill you... He says you'll destroy us," Alice mumbled, as if psyching herself up for the fight. Sage tried to keep track of what the woman said so they could review it and question her later, while also keeping her attention focused on the dagger.

When Alice made her next jerky lunge, Sage moved lightning quick. A swift dodge and she grabbed the knife from Alice's hand. Screaming in rage, Alice rushed her. Sage let her and then carried the young woman's momentum further, twisting them to the floor.

Sage turned the dagger in her hand so the blade pointed away from them just in case Alice got a lucky hit in. Her balance precarious, Alice lunged again at Sage. They rolled together as Sage lost her balance and Alice tried again to overpower her, using her nails as claws, her teeth and feet to lash out at Sage. Clearly Alice wanted to damage her any way possible.

They struggled together, two women each desperately trying to gain the upper hand. Sage had her training and superior strength behind her, and in her heart she knew she would come out victorious in this fight.

Regardless, she was trying hard not to harm Alice more than necessary and the young woman held no such qualms. Not only did Alice not seem worried by how much damage she inflicted on Sage, she didn't seem concerned about her own personal safety either.

Sage dropped the large dagger to the floor. Alice fought valiantly with the strength of a crazy person. Sage needed both hands to restrain Alice. She shifted her center of balance and nearly managed to pin the girl. Alice appeared to realize she was losing the battle and shrieked like a creature possessed.

"No, no, no, no, no!" she screamed, clawing at Sage and ripping at her hair. "He said you'd destroy us. Said he didn't need me anymore. You've ruined *everything*!"

"Alice, Alice, we can get it back for you," Sage tried desperately to connect with the smaller woman. Finally managing to grab a firm grip around bone-thin wrists, Sage pinned the girl down and straddled her. They were panting from the exertion but finally Alice stilled and Sage heaved a sigh of relief.

Recalling Chase, Sage kept her weight forward, her grip on Alice firm, but threw him a sarcastic look. A cutting remark sat on the tip of her tongue, but when she caught sight of him she swallowed it down.

Far from lazing back and scratching his ass, he hovered barely a couple of feet away, crouched forward, ready to spring to her help should she need it. The stance he held was unmistakable.

Her heart filled with love as the full weight of the situation dawned on her. Chase hadn't just blithely turned his head and let her do all the work. No. He had trusted her strength, training and her competency to do her job and do it well without his interference.

Instead of wanting to keep her on a shelf chained in the kitchen somewhere to breed and cook for him, Chase accepted her fully and loved every aspect of her. Not just the pretty shell she lived in or the sizzling intensity of their passionate sex. He also had proven he loved the crime-fighter, the savvy martial arts student who wielded a mean blade and took no shit from her opposition.

Chase embraced all of her and *trusted* her to be able to handle herself and the situations she got into. No other sexual partner had been able to deal with that in the past, all of them wanting her more feminine side and unable to handle the fact she might possibly be better in a fight than they were.

Sage knew Chase could have handled the situation just as well as she did, but he didn't need to prove it to her. By stepping back, he had shown his faith in her. Instead of throwing a withering comment at Chase, Sage lightened her tone to tease him, her love for him shining in her eyes.

"Thanks for your help," she laughed. "Can you get me something to restrain her with, please?"

Chase nodded and turned away. As Sage returned her attention to the skeletal young girl beneath her, she could hear Chase ripping a cord from the single lamp out of the wall.

Astonishingly, much of the glaze had left Alice's eyes as Sage looked at her. She blinked up uncertainly at Sage. While her pupils still appeared huge, some of the warm brown of her irises showed, just as they had in the earlier photos Julian and Matthias had shared.

"Alice?" Sage inquired gently. "Honey, are you all right? Do you remember what's been happening?"

Instantly tears filled the young woman's eyes and she pressed her lips together as they trembled. She nodded shakily. Sage took a gamble that gentle prodding now wouldn't upset her unduly, but would hopefully get them some much needed information and answers while the girl remained lucid.

"Honey, we need you to tell us who gives you the jolt. You know, the drug? Where is it being made? We're the police, sweetie, and we need you to help us. Please tell us everything you can."

Alice's lips trembled and tears leaked from her eyes. She twisted one bony wrist and reluctantly Sage released her hold. Alice pressed her hand to her eyes, mopping the dampness and rubbing her nose as she sniffled.

"I've hurt my parents," she sobbed. "They're so worried about me. So angry and upset. Can you tell them I love them? That I'm sorry?"

Sage kept an eagle eye on the girl's hands, worried she might attack again, but kept her voice as comforting as she could manage given that she straddled her, pinning her to the ground.

"Of course, honey," she soothed. "They know you love them, that it's just the drugs doing bad things to you. I'm sure they love you very much and are just worried, not angry. You can call them as soon as you talk to us. Lots of other people are in a similar situation and we need to get the drug off the streets. It's not fit for people to digest. You know that. Please help us."

"He said I could help him, that we could bridge the gap between the magical world and the human world. He told me that by making us more like them we could show it wouldn't be a bad thing to unite the worlds. I thought it made sense, and it all started so well..." Alice's words trailed off as she turned her head to look out the window.

Sage tensed, unsure what the girl looked at. She had absolute faith in Chase watching her back, certain he would see any danger that might attack them so she kept

her sight firmly set on Alice. The young woman tensed, her back arching and Sage leaned forward so she wouldn't be thrown from her.

Snarling, Alice turned her head back, her eyes pure black once again.

"Bitch!" Alice spat and once again struggled against Sage. "David is my *soul mate*. Do you really think a few kind words from you will make me turn against him? Betray him and what we have managed to accomplish? Our love is eternal and nothing will break us apart."

Wildly Alice fought against her and Sage struggled to keep her pinned. The girl lunged to one side. Sage saw out of the side of her eye as Chase threw a piece of electrical cord at her. She grabbed it and tried to use it to restrain Alice, who was fighting like a wild creature. The two women writhed together fiercely.

"Sage!" Chase shouted as he leapt forward.

Sage saw too late Alice had grabbed the dagger.

Everything happened in a split second. Alice lifted the dagger. Chase dived forward, his hands closing around Sage's shoulder.

Desperate to protect her partner, not wanting him to insert his body in front of hers to shield her, Sage shifted her weight to the side, which carried their momentum and twisted them off at an angle away from Alice.

Instead of burying the dagger into Sage or Chase, Alice shocked Sage as she plunged it hilt-deep inside her own neck. Alice severed her jugular in a smooth motion that betrayed no hesitation. As the dagger ripped through her skin, she emitted a piercing, shrill scream that Sage knew would stay with her for life.

Blood gushed, spraying thick and viscous from the mortal wound Alice had inflicted upon herself.

Sage jerked as she felt a tingle on her cheek and down the side of her neck. She had turned her head instinctively as Alice's wound had sprayed blood everywhere. Where the droplets had fallen on her naked skin, magic hummed from the enhanced fluid.

As her mind tried to work out how Alice's blood could sing with such power, Sage's hands pressed around the dagger embedded in the young girl's neck. She knew it was hopeless, but Sage tried valiantly to stem the flow of her blood.

Alice's eyes had reverted to their warm brown shade. As she watched though, the light of any awareness left as blood seeped from the gaping wound. Alice's tortured soul left her body as she bled out and died.

Sage felt her heart sink in despair, sadness filling her for this lost little girl.

Chapter Eight

Sage and Chase stared down at Alice's dead body. Sage looked up to her partner, fear rushing through her now the surge of adrenaline had passed.

"I thought you were going to push yourself into her way," she said shakily. "You terrified me."

"I thought the same thing," he answered gently, wrapping one warm hand around her shoulder and helping her to her feet and off Alice's body. "It's why I went for her. I couldn't bear it if something happened to you. If she'd managed to stab you with that damn dagger..."

Sage nodded, understanding exactly the mixture of fear and dread. They worked with danger every day. Sooner or later odds were someone would best them. Acceptance didn't stop her heart from clenching in fear. She wrapped her arms around Chase as she buried her head in his chest.

"Me too. I couldn't bear it."

They clung together until Sage could feel Alice's blood begin to dry on her clothes and body. The scent of it, bitter and copper, hung heavy in the air of the small apartment.

"Circe, this is awful. And I don't have anything to change into. We *have* to stop by my apartment soon so I can get into some fresh clothes."

Chase ran a hand down her hair, twining his fingers in the strands.

"Did you hear what she said? Near the end?"

Sage let the last of the adrenaline from the fight drain from her body. A deep breath helped clear her mind and get her brain working once again.

"David," Sage nodded. "She called her boyfriend David. It's not much, but at least we have his name."

Sage rested her head on Chase's shoulder. Her mind trailed back to Alice and those final moments.

"I want to make sure we report that Alice helped us in the end," she said. "Whoever announces her death to her parents needs to make sure they're informed she didn't die in vain."

"I'll make the calls," Chase offered. "A cleanup crew can be here shortly. You grab a shower and we can discuss what to do when you're done."

They leaned close, pressing their lips together in a silent affirmation of everything that had grown between them. The kiss lasted only a few seconds, but was still full of love and hungry desire.

Sage could feel their hearts joining as each moment and experience they shared tied them more tightly together. She loved this man with every fiber of her being. Better still, she knew he felt the same regarding her. Despite the melancholy circumstances, the bitter loss of a human life, her heart soared. Everything would turn out right. She believed it deep in her soul.

"I'll just be a few minutes, I need to wash this blood off and catch my breath. Don't let the guys in just yet, I want to be dressed for that and I won't take long."

Sage waited for Chase to promise and then collected her boots and walked back to the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Her bare feet cold against the tiles, Sage dumped her ruined outfit onto the floor—a few more creases would make no difference—and turned on the hot faucet for the second time this morning. As she tied her hair back up into a knot, she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

It wasn't as bad as she had assumed. Blood splattered over her chest, neck and some of her face, but plenty of pale skin showed through. She had felt drenched, the tingling sensation had long since dissipated but the revulsion she felt remained.

Cringing, Sage ran the faucet in the sink and hastily scrubbed at her face and neck, eager to get the blood from her skin. The water was uncomfortably cold, but Sage didn't care. When her vigorous scrubbing had cleaned her, Sage turned the faucet back off.

Steam had filled the small room by now and Sage tested the temperature of the shower water, finding it not as hot as she usually liked it. Beyond caring, she entered the stall and let the water seep into her tired body and stiff muscles. She tilted her face up into the spray and let it do its work.

When the water had taken a turn toward lukewarm, Sage scrubbed her body from head to toe, determined to get every last vestige of Alice's blood off her.

Sage was not a queasy person. She did not shrink from blood or the nastier side of her job. She had never thrown up at a scene, nor hesitated before performing her duty. Sage knew her strength was an integral part of her makeup, one sad death would not shake her courage.

The image of Alice a few months ago rose before Sage's eyes. The girl had looked innocent, naïve. It was highly likely she had either ignored the warning signs or perhaps not even known enough to recognize the trouble she courted.

No one deserved to lose their sanity to a drug and end up killing themselves. Alice had seemed to be sacrificing herself for this David person, understanding Sage and Chase were determined to get as much information out of her as possible. Sage hated the waste of life, especially since she held little doubt this David didn't care for Alice—or not enough to warrant her giving her life for him—and had probably been using the girl as a means to an end.

She pitied Alice and hoped her soul had found peace. With a brief, silent prayer to Circe to watch and guide Alice's soul to its rest, Sage finished rubbing her body and turned off the faucet just as the warm water ran out.

Climbing from the shower stall, Sage gauged which of the two used towels were least wet and ran it briefly over her body. She eyed what remained of her outfit. Patting her skin dry, she hung up the towel again and pulled on the bloodstained skirt, halter and boots.

The material was ruined, but there wasn't much she could do about it now. With no other option, she dressed herself and looked forward to stopping by her apartment at the first opportunity. She desperately needed a fresh change of clothes.

Untying her hair from its knot, she got the tangles out of the long strands as best she could with her fingers. Dressed and as presentable as possible, Sage opened the bathroom door. She came out into the main room and looked sadly at Alice. With a deep breath she made her peace and turned to face Chase.

"Calls go okay?" she asked. Her partner watched her, his eyes dark and filled with a gentle understanding. Sage's lips hitched up in a small smile of thanks. She blew him a kiss.

"I'll be fine now," she reassured him. Chase nodded and looked out the window. Sage tilted her head and wondered what he looked at.

"Cleanup crew will be here in ten minutes," he said, answering her unasked question. Chase held out a hand and Sage crossed to him, took it and allowed herself to be drawn into a fierce hug. She squeezed Chase back tightly and they stood there in silence, taking comfort and giving it in return.

Sage tilted her head and let one hand snake up Chase's back to cup his neck, threading her fingers through thick, soft, brown shaggy hair. She tugged the strands gently until he lowered his lips to meet hers.

Slowly they tasted one another, the kiss subtle but with a growing hunger. Their tongues tangled, parrying and thrusting. Leisurely fucking each other with their mouths, Sage enjoyed the pace they set. Neither were in a rush, she knew they had their whole lives spread out before them. She had no doubt they would spend every moment possible together, both on the job and intimately in their private lives.

Chase thrust his hips forward, his half-hard cock pressing into the worn leather of her skirt. Sage moaned—a hungry sound that echoed around the room. Her body reacted instantly to Chase's touch, heat seeping through her muscles and peaking her nipples with arousal.

"Ten minutes?" she repeated. "I'm not certain that's enough time to do justice to what I have in mind for you."

"By now they're probably closer to five minutes away," Chase replied mournfully. "The choice is yours, sweetheart. If you're up for it, I could never say no to you."

Outside their window a car door slammed. A dinged-up sedan had pulled up out front.

"That's them," Chase again answered her unasked question. "I don't know the other two, but that redhead is Maurice. He really needs to shave that ugly goatee. The

guys back at the station have a pool running on how long his missus will let him keep it."

Sage checked the room to make sure they hadn't left anything behind and then jerked her head toward the door.

"Should we meet them downstairs? Did you explain the situation to them, or did you contact Will and tell him to update them?"

"Will was in a meeting with the brass." Chase shrugged into his leather jacket and they headed for the door. "I'll try him again from your place. My cell is starting to die. Static on the line was horrendous while you were in the shower. Let's go. Maurice is good people, he'll treat this with respect."

Sage and Chase headed down the stairs at a fast pace so they wouldn't miss the three men before they came too far into the building. In the entrance foyer they all met up, Maurice greeting Chase with a strong handshake. Everyone exchanged introductions, the two other police officers absorbing the brief explanation of Sage being a fellow officer and Alice's death.

Maurice and Chase smoothed the way when the standard questions were raised. Chase recited the number for Will's direct extension and urged them to call him for verification of their identity and the case they currently worked on.

"The main area of the scene hasn't been touched at all," Chase concluded. "Sage cleaned up afterward in the bathroom. Once you see the blood splatter you'll understand why it was necessary. We're in the middle of something big but you have my cell number. Captain Allcott is leading our team and can contact us at any point if you need further reports from either of us. Is there anything else you need?"

Maurice scratched his goatee thoughtfully as he shook his head. "It sounds fairly straightforward. Internal Affairs is going to want to stick their nose in as well, so be prepared for that." Sage and Chase nodded as Maurice continued, turning to Sage, "You were straddling her?" She nodded.

"I had her pinned, she's fairly fragile as you'll see. To hold her wrists I had to drop the dagger to one side. She had a few moments of lucidity before she went crazy again. I'd been about to restrain her, Chase had just thrown me an electrical cord you'll see we left on the floor. Before I could tie her safely, she lunged, grabbed for the dagger and killed herself. The angles of penetration and the spray pattern should verify that. As Chase explained, she might have given us a critical clue and I'm not keen for her to be splashed over the papers as a young junkie pusher, particularly not when it will devastate her family even more."

Maurice nodded and gestured for the two other men to start up the stairs.

"We'll handle it," he assured her. "Don't worry. I'll call when we've finished with the forensics and had the splatter confirmed. You'll be needed for official statements and interviews later, but we'll clear it all with Captain Allcott first. It sounds like an open and shut case."

"Thanks, man," Chase said and the two clasped hands once again before Maurice headed up the stairs.

Sage and Chase exchanged looks and headed out of the building. Taking a deep breath of the fresh air, Sage stretched and then rubbed her arms to ward off the faint chill of the morning.

"There's no way I'm walking back to my apartment in these boots," she said with a small smile. "We should grab a taxi. It will only take ten minutes for me to change and you can call Will from my landline and update him on everything. We also need to tell Matthias and Julian they can stop searching for Alice."

"The captain warned us not to contact each other, to go through him unless all hell broke loose," Chase replied as they headed toward the main street. "I'd be more comfortable keeping with his plan and trying to contact him a few more times before we break protocol. Then Will can tell Matthias and Julian to move their research from Alice and on to looking for a connection between her and this David. If Will's meeting takes too long we can call Julian and update them ourselves later."

Sage nodded as Chase whistled shrilly at a passing cab. Brakes squealed as the car decelerated quickly. They jogged over and opened a door each. Chase pulled out a ten-dollar bill as Sage gave her address to the driver, who nodded without a word as he pulled away from the curb.

* * * * *

Chase wandered around Sage's living room, amused to find it very like he would have imagined. The walls were painted in cheerful, bright colors. The furnishings matched and were pretty and feminine without being overpoweringly so.

Mementos were discreetly tucked away in small nooks. A small pile of books and magazines was arranged neatly on the coffee table. The room spoke of the amazing woman he had come to know, trust and deeply love in the last day.

Enormous windows let the sunshine in to lighten the room further. The couch filled up almost an entire corner of the room, creating a cozy but semiprivate discussion area.

Sage had run upstairs, promising to change and return quickly. He could hear doors and drawers opening and closing. Comfortable in her private space, Chase took his time to take everything in, peering at a few of the photos and scanning the titles of the books gracing her shelves.

"Don't forget to call Will!" Sage shouted down to him. Chase grinned. He'd been so interested in her home it had slipped his mind.

Despite his first impression that Sage was some delicate, breakable little princess playing at being a magical police officer, he had become impressed with her strength and her capability as time had moved on. In the past twenty-four hours, he had found himself surprised by her many layers. She knew how to turn a situation to play to her strengths and work her magical talent to its best advantage in any scenario.

When Chase added in her inherent sexiness and the electric chemistry that boiled between them with a mere glance, he knew she was the perfect woman for him. Sage was everything he could desire in a life partner, all wrapped up into one petite, blonde, powerful package.

Deciding not to attempt to turn his cell on inside her home lest it finally die on him, Chase searched until he found an old-style dial handset phone on a small table in a corner near the couch. Turning the dial to ring Will's cell phone number, Chase waited for the line to connect. After a couple of tones, Will answered.

"Captain, this is Chase, we found Alice for you."

"Excellent!" Will boomed. "Do you need a car to bring her in?"

"Uh, there's a slight problem with that. The woman was batshit crazy. She attacked Sage with a ten-inch dagger." Chase paused as silence hung heavily on Will's end. Deciding to deal with it like a punch in the face, he continued quickly, "Sage subdued Alice and we spoke to her for a little. Alice seemed to almost have a split personality. Anyway, the girl made a rush for the dagger and killed herself. Maurice and two of the forensics guys are at the apartment gathering the evidence and doing what they can."

"What?" Will shouted.

"This isn't a dead end. Alice mentioned that 'David' was her soul mate and she wouldn't betray him. According to her, David said we were going to ruin his plans and he didn't need her any longer. He cut off her supply," Chase continued calmly. "I have a feeling he wound her up, maybe even purposely pushed her buttons. But she definitely referred to him once as David, so it's something to move on."

"Like there's only a handful of Davids running around this city," Will snorted. "Where are you if forensics are pulling apart the apartment?"

"We're at Sage's, she needs a change of clothes. Her outfit from last night is ruined. Alice severed her jugular and Sage was on top of her, pinning her. She caught a lot of the resultant mess. We were planning on coming into the station next to try to help Julian and Matt research."

"Well, Matt will be pleased he can stop beating his head against that brick wall," Will agreed. "I'll cancel your meeting with Holt too. No sense in you getting together with a sketch artist when the suspect is headed for the morgue. I'll also need to send one of the uniforms out to the parents."

"Make sure they stress Alice wanted to apologize to them and helped give us information in the end," Chase added. "She had just a moment of lucidity in there, said she was sorry for hurting her parents. From what she said, she seemed to want to help bridge the human and magical worlds by helping the humans get magic. Don't forget she did give us this name, even if she didn't mean to."

Will grunted but didn't say anything. Chase could almost hear him chewing on the end of his cigar while he thought. Chase held his tongue, waiting to let Will think things through.

"I'll make sure the officers mention it, but I don't like your chances of her reputation remaining pure if the press gets wind of this story. Still, if she did appear contrite in the end it's something that might make things easier for the family," he conceded. "Okay, get your asses in here as soon as Sage is fixed up. We could use the help. Julian and Matt have been tied up these last few hours, but they might have found some links on the financial end of things."

"Sounds excellent," Chase replied as Sage came down the stairs. "Okay, she's ready. We should be there soon."

"See you," Will said and hung up. Chase replaced the receiver in its cradle and turned to survey Sage. Dark blue jeans hugged her ass and showed off her slim legs. A t-shirt that looked well-worn had been coupled with a jacket and ankle-high boots. She'd tied her hair back into a ponytail that spilled halfway down her back and swung jauntily as she came toward him.

"The miniskirt and boots held a certain appeal," he teased her, "but you look much more like an ass-kicking Enforcer in this."

"Will's been updated?"

Chase nodded.

"Did you tell him how you just stood back and watched me wrestle and finally pin Alice?" Sage asked with a cheeky grin. Chase felt a smile spread across his face as he recalled the equal parts fascination and fear that had held him steady watching Sage fight the thin girl.

"You were my hero," he panted breathily with a hand held to his chest. "Oh I felt all a-flutter just watching you. A big strong hero, fighting my battles and there to rescue me."

Sage snorted. He grinned.

"Seriously, sweetheart, I dare you to find a man who doesn't want to sit back and watch two women fight each other—especially when one of those women is the love of his life and semi-naked. Every man loves to watch a girl fight in the ardent hope clothes will be torn, bodies will be bared and someone will throw Jell-O shots over them to make their skin glisten in the light."

Chase still mocked the very real fear he'd had for Sage, but he knew he'd made the right choice in trusting her to be able to protect herself. Had things gone wrong, he would have stepped in, but he was pleased to have shown such faith in her abilities, and so was she.

"So it had nothing to do with you trusting me?" she pressed.

Chase hid behind teasing and laughter. "Trust?" he parroted. "Sweetheart, I'm shocked. I just wanted to see you work and admire your skill—not to mention your round little ass peeking out the bottom of that tiny skirt that you were pretending to wear."

Sage shook her head and chuckled.

Chase reverted back to their earlier conversation. "Julian and Matt have found something helpful about the financing of the drug, so we're free and clear to head into the station and research David to our heart's content."

Not for the first time, Chase marveled at how comfortable they were together, how well they worked as a team and how seamless the transition between them had been. He could easily see himself partnering with her on more missions, working together well into the future.

But there was more to them than just their working relationship. He knew without a doubt he wanted this woman in his life always, not just as a partner and colleague, but as a friend, lover and helpmate as well.

Sage came to him and Chase wrapped an arm around her, kissing her as if they had been together for years. They indulged in a moment of tasting one another before Sage pulled away with a tender smile.

"So we're heading to your office?" she prompted. Chase nodded and Sage took his hand and led him to the kitchen. "There's parking there, right?"

Chase had a moment's confusion until Sage pulled a set of keys from a hook on the wall. He grinned.

"I have a spot there, sure, what do you have?" he asked, curious what kind of car she drove.

"It's a few years old," she admitted with a twinkle, "but it's a sporty little number with eight cylinders and more horsepower than is sensible."

Chase pressed an enthusiastic kiss to her lips.

"Now I know I'm in love," he teased her as he tried to snatch the keys from her hand. He didn't really care who drove, but his ego insisted he try to get behind the wheel.

Laughing, they wrestled as she locked the house behind them and led him to where her car was parked. Giving up with only a minimal amount of grumbling, Chase lowered himself into the low-slung seat and buckled himself in. Sage revved the engine and wind whipped through his hair as they peeled away from the corner.

* * * * *

Sage found herself walking slowly through the office, wanting to take in everything she could about Chase's work environment. She couldn't help her smile. The open cubicles, the ringing of phones, rustling of papers and general din of people talking to one another reminded her strongly of communal areas in the Enforcers' headquarters.

Their carpet had been worn equally thin by millions of shoes walking over the years, their walls were just as bland—and poorly painted—and their view of the city definitely was similarly restricted from the grime-riddled windows.

Chase called out a few greetings, waved or nodded to a couple of other people, but they walked steadily through the packed area and down a corridor to where closet-

sized offices branched off in every direction. Halfway down the second or third mazelike corridor he paused outside a door that looked identical to every other. He cast her a sheepish grin.

"I'm not the neatest person," he warned her. "So I need your word you'll ignore the mess that has probably multiplied over the last few days I've been away."

Sage snorted. "What on earth gave you the impression I'm a neat freak?" she laughed. "Seriously, I know how reports and memos breed while you have your back turned. I don't dare go on vacation because I know I won't be able to open my door when I return. And that's assuming Blade hasn't shoveled everything from his to my side of the office while I'm away in the hopes I'll forget and file all his junk as well."

Chase leaned toward her and Sage tilted her head up, grinning impishly at him. The clean scent of soap struck her senses and she liked the simplicity of such a smell on him. One thickly muscled arm wrapped around her waist and she felt herself drawn up as he pulled their bodies flush together.

Lifting herself more, Sage fisted her hands in the linen of Chase's shirt and enjoyed the warmth of his chest seeping into the fabric. Their lips touched gently, but Sage could feel the heat and power of her magic rush between them as if they had been plugged into a socket.

His taste had become familiar to her now, yet still felt shiny and new to Sage. Her tongue flicked out, tasted his, then traced his lips teasingly as he tried to capture her tongue with his own. They flirted for a moment, each trying to gain the upper hand, and Sage felt her pussy grow damp at the sensual promise his hands made as they traced patterns on her back.

Pressed together, she could feel him begin to harden. An instant later he captured her tongue and sucked hard, eliciting a moan from deep in her chest. Chase pulled away, looking satisfied by her ardent reaction.

Lifting a hand to her flushed skin, Sage drew in a deep, steadying breath. It took her a moment to remember where she stood and what they had meant to do.

Clearing her throat, she grinned at her partner, winking cheekily at him.

"I promise I won't poke you for the mess," she said, "but unless you want a coworker to get an eyeful, maybe we'd better go in? I can feel the clock ticking on us."

Chase kissed her one last time before pushing open the door to his office. He groaned deeply and Sage could already feel the laughter bubbling up in her chest. His large body filled the doorway so she couldn't see much, but the situation had an edge of humor to it she couldn't ignore.

She ducked around him and entered his office. His walls were the same bland, oatmeal color that graced the rest of the department. A small gray filing cabinet, a simple wooden desk and two uncomfortable-looking chairs were the only items of furniture present.

A veritable mountain of papers sat in a collection of different in-trays, with most of the surface of the desk also covered in sticky notes, memos, printouts, maps and other

assorted paraphernalia. A slim, black laptop lay half buried. Chase cleared a small area of the desk with little fanfare. He simply gathered handfuls of the papers strewn everywhere and dumped them in the least crammed tray on the corner of his desk.

Pointing to one of the chairs, he sat on the other one as he powered up the laptop. He barely looked at the keys as he logged in to the network, clearly having done it so many times in the past the gesture was practically automatic now.

Sage half dragged, half wheeled her chair over next to his and sat down to watch over his shoulder as he opened tabs, checked the most urgent of his emails and then handed the laptop over to her.

Opening a new browser, she logged in remotely to the Enforcer network. Working a handful of windows simultaneously, Sage searched outstanding warrants, persons of interest and other databases. She was looking for a link between the name David and anything related to new or exotic drugs.

Time passed as Chase added his thoughts to the parameters of her searches. He watched her work and Sage didn't find herself annoyed with that prickly awareness of being monitored. A few promising leads all dead-ended. The Davids she discovered were either incarcerated, awaiting execution, or not in the country.

Rubbing at a crick in her neck, Sage sat back with a frustrated huff.

"Nothing," she grumped. "Alice was pretty damn out of it there toward the end, maybe David is his surname? Or middle name? Or hell, maybe David was her beloved first pet dog and she was off in la-la land. I don't know."

Chase laid a warm hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. As his fingers kneaded her with surprisingly tender caresses she felt her tension melt away. Her frustration still bubbled under the surface, but his mini-massage helped more than he could possibly have known. Sage blew out another pent-up breath.

"It's a good lead, a solid one," he said. "Let's try it a bit longer before we start questioning ourselves and what she said. Alice was on her way to college, right? Medicine. Maybe she met David there? That was the last thing she appeared to be doing before her life spiraled out of control."

Sage frowned. She rolled the idea around in her head and it settled nicely. Logically she knew she couldn't let a bit of frustration set her back. Chase was right. His idea was an angle she hadn't thought of. She sat up straight again, her hands paused above the keyboard as she collected her thoughts.

"Just the college?" she spoke her thoughts aloud so Chase could follow along. Shaking her head, she corrected herself. "No. Medicine, drugs, pharmaceuticals?"

"Maybe even biochem," he added helpfully. "Biochemistry would also help him in the manufacture of drugs. Any of those fields really – they're all connected."

Sage nodded, her mind working eagerly. Opening new tabs in the browser, she used her Enforcers password to log into a back doorway in the Chicago College records. While that loaded she opened another tab and logged into the magical Academy records and started searching there.

Enforcers had back doors into all sorts of areas, though magical companies and records were by far easier to access. Databases regarding their own kind had long been sorted out and registered for their needs. A dedicated section of Enforcers now worked primarily on gaining access to human databases for research and inquiries like this, but there were bugs and gaps in their access.

Not surprisingly, the Academy database loaded first and Sage started her search. A few flagged names popped immediately and once again she and Chase leaned close to investigate them more closely. After another hour of careful work cross-checking the names pulled with the Enforcer database as well as past students enrolled in the Chicago College, they had a good candidate for further investigation.

David Sarke.

A basic background check showed he had been raised in both the magical and human worlds, his mother being a witch and his father an engineer. Originally he had been enrolled in the Academy, but he'd left just steps ahead of being booted out. Details were sketchy, but the brief report Sage could dredge up listed a vague "improper use of university equipment" as the reason he was disciplined.

"Covers a lot of ground, doesn't it?" Sage remarked dryly.

Chase snorted. "Sure does. He could have been using large flasks to distill his own beer for keg parties, or he could have been secreted away, stealing glassware and using it to start up a drug lab. Practically anything fits into that brief description."

Sage nodded and switched tabs. The college search had finished and sure enough David Sarke's attendance records had popped up.

"He learned his lesson," Sage murmured as she quickly read.

"Definitely more circumspect," Chase agreed as he, too, scanned the details. "Mediocre grades, but he still dots all his i's. Kept his nose clean and any actions he took were under the radar this time. But look at these extra-credit courses in biochemistry and practical classes. He might have learned subtlety, obviously he's not been caught being naughty again. Right now he's the only one who fits our criteria. All the others are missing something."

Sage nodded and with Chase guiding her they opened up what other linked files they could gain access to and started making notes. Chase picked up the phone, knocking another pile of papers unceremoniously to the floor, and tried the local number in David's file.

"Disconnected," he said as he hung up. The address was a post office box and while Sage jotted it down, neither of them moved on it just now. They wanted a physical address, if possible. Somewhere they could go and try to find Sarke.

Talking quietly between themselves as they opened more tabs, they worked together to track down every piece of information about David Sarke they could.

"Bingo," Chase crowed, tapping a finger to the screen as an address showed up. "I know that area. It's full of warehouses and factories. A concrete business park."

"Annex 3," Sage muttered as she jotted down the address and the name of the database that had given them the information.

Closing down her browsers, Sage grinned as their cross-checks came back positive in other searches.

"Look at this—utilities in the name of David Sarke for the Annex. I have a good feeling about this." Her excitement grew as she could feel them closing in on their quarry.

"It's got that vibe," Chase agreed. They exchanged a glance, both of them understanding the indefinable feel of tugging on the right thread and just knowing they were on the right track. Sage had no doubts this would pay off, she'd experienced this sensation with Blade too many times in the past not to know what it felt like when a case came together perfectly.

"Shall we move?" Chase asked as he powered down his laptop.

Sage stood and nibbled on her lip as she thought. "I really do have a good feeling about this," she hedged.

Chase caught her eye and nodded as he waited for her to finish her thought. "Well," she continued, "if this is the right place, and it's an annex of a warehouse or factory, what if it's where he's manufacturing the drugs? Running in blind—just the two of us—that doesn't feel right. We're a team now. I'd hate to get there and be in over our heads, or chewed out for not letting the others know."

Chase paused then nodded his agreement. "I see what you mean. Speed is important, but this lead could go either way. We'll look foolish if it's a dead end, but I'd rather that than tip off Sarke or his workers. I'll call Will, and you can call Blade?"

Sage stood on tiptoes and pressed a soft, chaste kiss to Chase's lips. "I love the way you think."

He snorted and grabbed her ass, holding her body flush against his. "You love me just for my brain? Not my devastating good looks?"

Sage threw her head back and laughed. Chase threaded one of his hands through her hair and settled at the base of her neck. Finally she wriggled her ass, ground against him and then pulled away. "I do love your devastating good looks, not to mention your delicious cock. But I also love your brain."

"I guess I can't argue with any of that," Chase teased as he gave her a sexy wink.

Sage waited silently while Chase called Will and briefly updated him on what they had discovered. On the speakerphone she could hear Will call out to Julian to run a complete search on David Sarke.

"We will need to sew this up tightly, but Julian and Matt can get someone else on that while we move," Will said.

Julian called out to the captain, his words unintelligible over the phone line. Will grunted.

"Julian says this Sarke appears to fit with what they've collected. Good work, guys," Will's voice boomed as he shouted back to Julian. "Get Hossey and Rivenhall to finish the searches. Tell Matt and be ready to move out in ten minutes."

There was a brief silence from Will before he continued, "We'll bring in a ground team as well," Will barked out as the noise level around him grew. "I want a dozen men ready and geared up in less than five. Move it, ladies! Chase, we'll keep you and Sage on point and have your backup outside," Will said, his voice clearer now as he had apparently turned back to speak into the phone. "We'll meet a block south from the Annex in fifteen minutes. Okay?"

Chase and Sage agreed and Will hung up. Quickly, Sage called Blade.

"We've got a lead, are you mobile?" she said without greeting, knowing Blade would recognize her voice immediately.

"Yeah, we're in Ange's car. Where are you and where are we going?"

"We're at police headquarters," Sage said as Chase collected the gear they'd need and added extra ammunition into the pockets of his jacket. "We'll be waiting outside in a couple of minutes. Can you pick us up, please? We'll fill you in on the way."

With a quick glance at her notebook she read out the address for the Annex and they hung up. This time when they walked past the cubicles there was the familiar feel of the hunt gearing up into unstoppable action. People spoke more briefly and sharply to one another, more of an edge rested in the air as people prepared themselves.

Checks and double-checks occurred, gear was tested, ribald comments followed by edgy laughter filled the air as Chase and Sage wove through the throngs of men and women. More than a few nods and friendly shoulder slaps followed them as they left the room and headed downstairs to wait outside for Blade and Ange.

Sage waited on the corner, looking up and down the road so she wouldn't miss her partner and Ange. It wasn't until Chase touched her shoulder she realized her booted foot had been tapping impatiently on the sidewalk.

"I get like that too," he admitted. "Edgy and impatient. Your adrenaline has started to kick in, I assume?"

"Yeah," she agreed.

Turning to look up at Chase, she let her gaze roam over his face. For perhaps the hundredth time she lingered on the strong, hard planes, the scratchy stubble from the growth he hadn't shaved earlier in the morning, the long, straight nose that defined his face and made him seem like some ancient Roman soldier.

Finally she let her gaze meet his warm brown eyes, understanding and an answering edgy heat swallowing her whole.

"A part of me always wants to dive right in once I've worked it out," she explained. She knew he understood, but speaking of it aloud was something she hadn't been able to share with her sexual partners in the past.

"I just want to leap to it, throw a punch or wrestle the bad guy to the ground," Sage continued. "I want to get it over and done with, finished so I can move on to the next task. The other half of me craves the hunt and fight. It's weird, I love the thrill of putting the pieces together and hunting the bad guy. Nothing else comes close to how you work the puzzle and then act on your knowledge. It's a rush, a high unlike anything else."

"And then you want it over with so you can start it all again, but you also are so very tempted to relish every second and draw it out as long as you can handle it," he nodded. Sage felt her breath catch and warmth fill her heart. Chase wasn't just saying random words, or extrapolating from her own thoughts, he totally understood what she meant and how she felt.

If she hadn't already known how deeply she loved this man, she would have figured it out right here and now.

"It's the same for you," she said. Her words were more a comment than question. Their hands met, each of them reaching for the other. As their fingers linked and they squeezed gently, the sound of brakes squealing and burning rubber filled the chilly city air.

As one they turned, each moving instinctively into a defensive stance to face the incoming driver. They only relaxed when the enormous, dark figure of Blade came into view behind the wheel. Ange sat beside him, her dark hair barely mussed and her reflective sunglasses perched on her nose, her mouth stretched into a huge grin.

Sage snorted, and exchanged no further words with Chase as they climbed into the back seat of the sporty jeep.

"Let's rock," Blade said, his deep voice rumbling in his chest. With another squealing of tires burning the asphalt and a lunge of power as the jeep responded to his pressing the accelerator, they all but jumped away from the curve and hurled back into the traffic.

Chapter Nine

"I've got a good feeling about this," Blade said. Sage had filled them all in on what had happened since they last spoke. Ange nodded and turned her head to speak to Sage.

"Probably not a trap," she commented as her fingers stroked over the leather sheath of her dagger. "And it doesn't feel like a dead end. Who else is on board?"

"Everyone," Chase replied.

"Matt and Julian," Sage added. "Who I presume will be watching for a trap and guarding our backs. Will and a team of his guys should meet us there too. The extra crew will be backup if we get in over our heads."

"We never get in over our heads," Ange murmured with a small smile. Blade chuckled and joined the conversation without removing his eyes from the road.

"If this place really is a drug plant you can't burn it down, Flame," he insisted, part laughing, part chiding. "Solvents, chemicals, glassware—none of these things are conducive to your favorite pastime, sugar."

"We'll see," Ange replied casually, not at all daunted by Blade's logic.

"It could all be a dead end," Sage interjected. "It took a fair bit of digging to get to it, and we've no proof David Sarke is involved, let alone our guy, or that this is the place. For all we know he's just some penny ante pusher with a thing for making his own drugs."

The jeep lurched as Blade parked with another squeal of the tires. They all climbed out of the car and looked around. Sage scouted the area as a number of cars and armored vehicles parked and people congregated. She caught sight of Matt and Julian climbing out of Will's car and the two groups joined together.

"Initial reports are there are three people inside the Annex," Will stated as he chewed the end of his cigar. Scratching his jaw and rolling the cigar around, he removed it and stuck it reluctantly in the top pocket of his shirt.

"Matt, Julian, I want both of you up on that roof as discreetly and promptly as possible. Matt, we need to know this isn't an ambush. Julian, you're the second set of eyes again, keep our asses safe."

"I live to keep ass safe," Julian chortled as he high-fived Chase before following Matt up the street toward the Annex.

"Smartass," Will muttered, but a smile twitched the corner of his mouth. "Blade, Ange, you're the immediate backup. I want Chase and Sage to be on point and go in first, but I want the two of you to be within shouting distance since we can't use the comms. My ground team has already complained all the latent magic and adrenaline in

the air has fried their units. Whatever is going on in there, they're throwing around a lot of magic doing it. Okay?"

Sage nodded along with the others. Chase checked his holster and tossed his jacket into the backseat of Will's car, freeing up his ability to draw. The usual tension crept into Sage's shoulders and the base of her neck as she stretched, preparing herself for battle.

Wishing them good luck, Will stalked over to the group of a half dozen men in black gear checking and snapping on body armor, loading rifles and preparing themselves.

"Listen up, ladies!" Will shouted to get their attention and then barked out their individual orders, explaining what would occur and how they were to react.

"I don't know how that man can still have his voice," Chase said with a shake of his head, his gaze not wandering from the magazine clip he checked.

"At least he understands the concept of giving a girl space to do her work right," Ange murmured as she flexed her fingers and did a few warm-up stretches. A muttered incantation and a small spark of fire zinged from her fingertip and scorched the ground.

"You'll watch your ass?" Blade insisted, his voice deep and protective as he glanced at Sage.

Winking at him, she grinned cockily. "Of course. I always watch my ass," she teased him.

Blade snorted. "Bullshit, *I* usually watch your ass."

"I'll watch her ass," Chase interjected humorously, his dark brown eyes meeting Blade's deep black ones. For a moment the two men simply stared at each other. Sage could swear they were communicating something without words, but she wasn't sure she wanted to know what.

"Is he always like this?" Ange asked, amused, her eyebrow arched.

Sage snorted and nodded. "Sadly, yes. You get used to it after a while. To be fair though, Blade's really good for intimidation tactics or in a barroom brawl."

Blade shot a glancing blow to her shoulder and she snickered. They were badgering each other, talking big to help ease the tension of the imminent fight.

Sage stood tall and closed her eyes, breathing in and out deeply to settle her mind. She needed to focus so she could get into the mindset for the fight. None of them bothered with anything more than a vest for body armor. If David was inside, chances were good he would use magic, not guns.

Distractions sapped Sage's power. She had learned early on in her training how to quickly enter a light meditative trance. It was invaluable in confrontations.

Just potent magic or rock-hard strength wasn't enough in a magical fight. The winner was usually whoever had the strongest will. As most Enforcers were unwaveringly stubborn—which was perfect in a fight—it also made for many character

clashes. Problems within the teams weren't uncommon. Once a good fit between partners occurred though, they often worked together for years.

A light touch to her lower back had her smiling but her eyes remained closed. She could smell Chase's clean scent and knew it was him.

"I need to focus," she said softly. "My mind shapes my power. I have to direct it carefully. If I don't keep a clear mind and stay on task I'm useless in there."

"I can't imagine you useless," Chase replied and Sage could hear the smile in his voice. She cleared her mind, brought her power into a laser-sharp point and felt the answering tingle in her fingertips.

Her eyes fluttered and then she opened them. The whole world appeared clearer, as if someone had sharpened the sight on a camera lens. Shadows of the buildings were not as deep and windows far away appeared closer. Sight, smell, sound, touch and taste all had been enhanced as her power in its true measure had been activated and brought to the fore.

Blade also had that different, warrior, battle-ready look to him. Whereas normally he looked like a predator, right now Sage wouldn't be surprised if hardened criminals crossed the street before passing him.

Flame, in contrast, had become more relaxed. Her motions were so fluid she appeared like a graceful dancer. She shook her fringe forward, the long, dark brown bangs shading her face. Sage watched as Flame turned away from the bright afternoon sunlight even though she wore her shades.

"Be safe," Sage said to her friends, the words not just a tradition but also an order from one comrade to another. Blade and Flame nodded and repeated the words back to her.

Stepping up next to Chase, she tilted her head in the direction of the Annex.

"Let's go see how good our instincts are." She smiled sharply. Despite her earlier pessimism in the car, not wanting to get everyone's hopes up only to crash later, Sage had a feeling deep in her gut that their information was correct.

Her magical instincts hummed, gave her absolute confidence they were about to hit the jackpot and would find—and shut down—the drug lab within the next few minutes.

They walked side by side down the street, Sage still on the knife edge of alertness. Chase seemed to delve into his own head, readying himself.

Jacked up as she was, Sage could see the slight twitching of his trigger finger. He looked as if he itched to be put into motion, was barely holding himself in check until the action began.

As if they were sharing a mind, Chase and Sage paused as they turned a corner and the Annex came into view. Sage looked to the sky, squinted a bit and barely made out the outlined shadow of where Matt—or perhaps Julian—lay on the rooftop covering the entrance.

"Let's circle around once, decide where and how to enter and then jump right in," she said decisively. Chase nodded his approval of the plan and they did a short, quick circuit of the building.

Large windows with blinds drawn over them gave nothing away. A set of double doors were at the front with two single doors around the back. Sage drank everything in and felt her magic humming inside her. Her magical affinity for Strategy was mild. Sage knew of other Enforcers—Strategist talents—who could wash the floor with her. But out of Blade, Matthias, herself and Flame, her talent for Strategy was the best.

"I think running this as straight and narrow as possible is the easiest solution," Sage commented after some thought. "We crash the front, Blade and Flame cover the back, Julian and Matt are on top to make sure we aren't ambushed. That's my take, what's yours?"

"If we went in the back we'd have to separate," Chase said. "One agent needs to go through each of the two doors. With both of us coming in the front first we can hopefully overpower them upon entry to have minimal fuss. I like our chances your way better."

Sage nodded and made hand motions to Blade and Flame indicating their plan of action. They signaled they understood and moved around back.

"Remember, there's three of them at least," Sage cautioned Chase as he cocked his gun and braced himself. She closed her eyes and drew in a slow, deep breath as she centered herself and gave Flame and Blade time to get into place.

She could feel Chase beside her, itching to get inside. Training held him silent as they waited. To anyone else, her partner would appear still, but she could see better than that.

"When we are about six paces away from the door, Chase, you might want to close your eyes and cover your ears," she warned him. He nodded his understanding. Ready, Sage kissed her partner for good luck.

"Ready."

"On the count of three then," he said huskily, the pad of his thumb lingering on her soft lower lip. "One, two..."

Together, on "three", they made a quick dash toward the double doors at the entrance of the Annex. A half dozen paces in, as promised, Sage took a deep breath, held her hands out before her, and with a quick, guttural incantation shot her balled-up power out from her hands.

With an ear-splitting *bang*, the door disintegrated into dust. The noise from her energy being released and the heavy wood being pulverized into tiny particles was immense. Glass shattered, dust flew everywhere blindingly and cries filled the air as Chase and Sage ran inside.

Even though Sage knew Chase had been expecting something of the sort, his eyes were wide and showing their whites as he blinked in shock. Swearing vehemently

under his breath, Chase mumbled something about “never fighting with her again” as he cocked his gun and looked around the laboratory.

Sage scanned the inside area, her brain divided as she assimilated everything in a few seconds. Three of the windows neighboring what used to be the front doors had been blown out by the force of her magic. Two men in their early twenties stood with their mouths open, lab coats stained with solvent and dust, the beakers around them smashed and their goggles slipping from their faces.

One of the men was the source of the screams, the other shouting to be calm and shut up. Her instincts humming, Sage decided instantly these men were scientific assistants, neither of them striking her as likely to be David.

She continued to scan the area while Chase shouted at them to stay where they were and put their hands in the air. The men finally noticed them and promptly changed the tenor of their yelling as they backed away from the wooden bench. Sage tuned out their babbling, a mixture of pleas and explanations.

Chase shouted louder, firm and angry. In a commanding tone, he repeated his order, but Sage only listened with half an ear.

Simultaneously Blade and Flame kicked in their respective doors. The faintest of flickers caught the edge of Sage’s jacked-up senses and she felt more than saw movement to the far right.

Chase shouted loudly and shot his gun as one of the young men tried to zap him. A scorching trail of burning energy left a scar on the table where he had ducked out of the way. For a split second her attention divided dangerously. Half her mind knew the obfuscated trail she had picked up would have to be David, but the other part of her mind wanted to stand back-to-back with Chase and defend him, fight alongside him.

Firmly, Sage reminded herself Chase was a big boy with a big gun—he could take care of himself.

“Blade, cover Chase. Flame, your nine o’clock, follow me!” she shouted at the top of her voice, allowing herself only a half second to glance meaningfully at Chase before turning and running in the direction she had indicated.

Flame came up beside her, fluid, graceful and deadly.

“Chase and Blade can take care of the jackasses. I didn’t see the target, what’s out here?”

“He can obfuscate himself,” Sage absently replied, her mind fully focused on discovering any segment of a trail she could. “Had I not been looking so carefully I’d have missed him. He’s very talented.”

“Not talented enough,” Flame snorted. “If you can See him, or catch a glimpse while jacked up then he’s not unbeatable. Should I grab Matt?”

“No,” Sage replied as she sniffed the air. Something wasn’t right, and not just the manner in which Sarke had seemingly melted into nothingness and disappeared.

"Oh fuck." Sage blinked and froze in place. Automatically Flame copied her. Sage continued to sniff the air. "Ange, it's a trap. He came over here to set off a bomb. Maybe he *is* talented enough to not be seen. He must have purposely let me catch a glimpse of him. Look."

Sage indicated a small glass container casually propped up against the wall. It was concealed by the large benches, glassware and sacks of chemicals stacked everywhere. Flame glanced hard at it, her eyes inscrutable behind her shades. Slowly, she pulled her sunglasses off her face, folded and tucked them into an open pocket of her shirt.

"Shit," Flame commented and threw a glance over her shoulder. Sage also looked behind them at the now smoldering wreckage that had been the laboratory. The general din had died down, the struggle between the four men appearing to have been vicious but over quickly.

Blade had contained the two young men and wasn't even breathing hard. Chase finished reloading his weapon as Sage watched him, sweating a little.

"Better get them out of here and round up the troops," Flame snapped out. Sage didn't mind the change in command. When it came to explosives, no one she knew was better than her friend.

"There's a—" Flame began, but the deafening sound of half the roof exploding drowned out whatever else she tried to convey. A huge ball of fire *whooshed* upward as concrete, tiles and other building materials rained down on them all. Sage stayed crouched on the floor, her eyes squeezed tightly shut and her hands pressed hard against her ears to protect herself. With her senses so jacked up, the noise was painful.

Coughing and brushing debris and who knew what else from her hair. Sage looked around to find Blade and Chase crouching near them. Their mouths were moving though Sage couldn't hear a word they said. The men stood and came closer, but that didn't help their voices penetrate the deafness in her ears.

Turning to Flame, Sage saw that she'd hidden her eyes behind her glasses again and was groping for the nearest bench to reorient herself. Hearing came back slowly, along with her brain busily spinning. Finally, after what felt like forever, sense returned.

"Blade, the roof exploded. We've found a bomb down here. It might be on a remote. Make sure Will and his men don't come in here," she said fiercely. Blade held her gaze for a moment, weighing his own thoughts, then with a quick, fierce kiss to Flame he nodded and turned to stalk back across the room.

Lifting each bound man by the back of his collar, Blade half dragged, half propelled them out the hollow that was all that was left of the front doors. Once outside he shouted out orders and commands to Captain Allcott and his men. Her mind finally caught back up to speed. Sage stared up and out into the gathering twilight sky as it darkened into a navy blue.

The sun would soon set and despite their best efforts, every one of her senses said David Sarke was now long gone.

Matthias and Julian, however, had not made any contact. Little remained of the roof after the explosion. Fearing the worst, she looked to Chase with a quiver in her lower lip.

"Can you check on the boys?" she asked, shocked to discover her voice wobbly. "They're supposed to be up there, but if they were...and they haven't... Can you check on them, please? And get them to safety?"

Silently Chase kissed her lips and squeezed her shoulder. Sage winced and he rubbed it, apologizing with his eyes. Feeling battered and bruised, she tracked Chase with her eyes as he climbed up the stairs, dodging bricks, crumbling parts of the wall and other hazards as he lightly escaped to the roof of the Annex.

"Sage," Flame said tersely. Sage followed her friend's gaze and saw the digital display on the explosive behind the glass case. It read 05:00. "It's the same make and style of the remains of the explosive at the club."

Before she could think to reply, Captain Allcott stuck his head in the door.

"Everyone good here? My boys are ready to clean the place out. We want everything bagged and tagged here. It's damn difficult working without comms but considering how you gals blew everything to shit I'm rather glad—"

"Captain," Sage cut him off. Jerking her head, she indicated the bomb, but she figured he couldn't see from where he stood. "We still have a live one here. It's armed, but that doesn't mean—"

"Sage!" Flame shouted as she moved closer. Instantly Sage's attention returned to the device as the 05:00 moved to 04:59 and began to count down.

"Fuck," she swore angrily. "Captain, we have less than five minutes. Move your guys out and warn the others."

"We can empty this place in under five," Will insisted and turned to shout before she could start to argue. "Alpha team, move in now! We have an explosive in T-minus four minutes and I don't want to see so much as a paper clip go up with the Annex. Now!"

Sage shook her head and cursed, but recognized a brick wall when she faced one. Resigned, she knelt down beside Flame as her friend removed the glass casing. In the background she could hear the heavy thump of a half dozen armed men clomp into the lab, spread out like a net and start packing everything not nailed down.

Despite the astonishing speed they worked with, nothing broke as they emptied the laboratory. Sage figured the threat of an imminent explosion would act as a stronger incentive than Will's yelling for the men not to linger. But she was wrong. Two teams of six men paired up rotated in a tag team formation. The instant one buddy left the other would enter with a fresh box and resume where their partner left off.

"Okay, so what can we do to buy these guys more time and not have the lot of us blow up?" Sage asked Flame with only a hint amusement in her tone.

"There's not much we can do," Flame returned, "unless you want to try to freeze the timer?"

Sage pondered the decision for all of three seconds according to the clock. It might buy them a bit of extra time. As soon as they froze the device, the ambient temperature would thaw it. Regardless, it might gain them an extra second or two for each second they lost.

Doubling their chances.

She liked those odds.

Sage ignored the heated prickle of wary glances she could feel on the back of her neck with her senses so heightened. Closing her eyes and breathing deeply, she tried to do in a few seconds what often took minutes.

She blocked out all thoughts, calmed her breath, stilled her mind and entered a light but powerful meditative trance to heighten her flagging magical energy.

The slightest movement from Flame snapped her back into reality. They were out of time. Sage breathed in slowly, then opened her eyes and let cool energy trickle from her fingers. She slowly released a tiny droplet of freezing cold essence.

It paused at 02:32 for one heartbeat, and then another. The timer then ticked back down to 02:31, 02:30 and Sage repeated the trickle of energy. Focusing intently on her magic and the large red LED numbers, Sage let Flame watch their backs and the men doing their work.

As the timer crept toward one minute Sage had found her rhythm and managed to relax into a steady pace. Feeling rather as if she were trying to release the ocean into a jar one drop at a time, she discovered she missed the banter Blade and she usually indulged in during moments like these. Her anxious energy needed a release. Flame being the nearest person possible received the brunt of it.

"So how are you treating my partner?" Sage asked a little more tartly than she had intended. Feeling Flame's eyes on her, Sage elaborated. "I've worked with our dear Bradley the Fourth for over three years now. Call me protective."

"Well, I'm assuming the Fourth has to be better than the third. Upgrades usually are," Flame replied with good humor.

"You two seem to be getting rather close," Sage probed carefully. She didn't want to pry, but it was the next thing that entered her head.

"Oh I don't know," Flame returned. "I don't think we're as close as you and Chase appear to be. Should I be picking out my favorite pair of shoes and ordering my hair done for the ceremony?"

Sage laughed. This style of banter was exactly what she needed to keep her mind off a million other things. The thought of herself in a wedding dress though, some big, white, frothy concoction of a nightmare, made her want to run away.

"You're not doing my partner?" Sage asked again.

"Damn straight I'm doing him," Flame replied smugly. "And we're managing together really well too. I don't need to ask about you and Chase though. Anyone with eyes in their head can see you two are all over each other whenever you get a chance."

Sage glanced up at Flame and grinned. "Oh that was low. You'll be in trouble if I ask you and Blade to stand up with me. Neither of you would look good in a hoop skirt and taffeta."

Flame looked as if she might pass out from shock, though she quickly recovered.

"If you wanted to die, or perhaps have your house burn down, sure, sugar, you could try asking. Though I bet our Bradley might look intriguing in a Bo Peep outfit. You could have a costumed affair."

Unable to suppress the snicker of laughter, Sage missed a second and blinked as she realized they were quickly running out of time, even slowing it down like they were. While her attention reverted back to the timer, Flame scanned the area as the last man packed a few more tubes and nodded to her.

"Time to run," she said. Sage shook her head.

"You head for the door, I'll follow," she insisted. Flame sighed and grabbed her arm and started to haul them away. Sage let one last trickle leave her fingertips, returned her friend's hard grasp and together they sprinted for the cavernous hole in the wall.

Mentally she counted down the last few seconds, Flame also counting softly under her breath as they ran. Just as they reached outside they shouted simultaneously in warning to all around them, "Four, three, two—!"

A deafening roar of explosion sounded out. Parts of the Annex building shot up and then out in every conceivable direction. Sage had started to damp down her magic so this time it wouldn't be as devastating as the previous explosion. But this bomb was far more powerful.

A wall of heat picked Sage and Flame up and threw them bodily across the concrete. Sage cried out as the hard ground scraped many exposed areas around her body. Debris rained down, pelting everyone in the vicinity. Sage slowly pushed herself up on her arms, glad she had worn long sleeves and dark blue jeans. Painful though the grazing was, the ringing in her ears was more annoying.

Turning to Flame, she tilted her head silently, asking if she was all right. Flame showed her palms and pushed her shades farther up her nose. As Sage's hearing returned, Chase knelt beside her, his hands gentle as he helped her sit up. His warm palms ran over her body as he checked her for injuries.

Not a wince or twitch escaped his notice, but he breathed a sigh of relief when he realized no serious damage had befallen her. Astonishingly, Blade knelt on Flame's other side, a small crease of concern between his dark eyes. Sage never would have thought to pair the two, but they appeared to be making something of it.

Sage's hearing returned slowly, the first thing she recognized being the sound of Will's boots on the concrete as he came forward. What crumbled remains of the Annex still stood burned fiercely.

"We got everything, thanks to you two," he said warmly, offering a hand to help them to their feet. "Julian and Matthias are fine. Bradley thinks Sarke zapped them on his way out so he could make his escape. In all the confusion of that roof explosion, Matt had been blinded for a moment. It was all Sarke needed.

"Anyway," Will continued, "we have everything and will get it to the labs right away. Even without Sarke we can at least start working out what this shit is and how we can stem the tide. So thank you."

"Those drugs are infused with magical essence," Sage warned as she leaned into Chase, her right ankle twinging unhappily. Chase helped steady her weight with a warm arm around her waist. Sage felt a thrill at how easily they came together, as if they were two pieces of a whole.

"Not only are they more potent and more addictive than any drug your team will have come across, but it's highly dangerous for humans to consume potent essence like that. I think your lab staff will have a number of answers on their hands very soon for the strange and wildly varying reactions you've been hearing about from purple jolt."

Will nodded. "Thanks, Sage. I'll make sure everyone knows. Do you think you could pass along a request for maybe an Enforcer or two to help smooth things along until we have a handle on it?"

Sage looked to Ange and Blade, who nodded.

"We'll pass along the request with the strongest recommendation possible," Sage agreed. "A joint front on this is the only way we'll get any answers. For now, though, only put your strongest-willed people onto it. We don't know all the effects and temptations that might be present and we don't want to learn the hard way anymore."

"Absolutely," Will agreed. "We'll see you all tomorrow afternoon at cop central for the debrief and a preliminary report on our findings."

With a snappy salute, Will turned around and finished organizing the pack-up of the boxes of evidence. Soon the trucks were pulling away. Ange, Blade, Chase and Sage moved farther away from the building as fire crews belatedly arrived to deal with the mess.

"I'm going to take Sage back to my place and patch her up," Chase said. "She can email in her report later tonight after we all get some rest."

"I think I've done about as much damage here as I'll manage," Ange agreed with a small smirk at the still-burning building.

"I'll catch you tomorrow in the office?" Sage checked with Blade, weariness overwhelming her suddenly. Blade looked at Chase for a moment, but nodded.

"Like the babe said, not much more we can do here," he agreed. "I'll catch up with you tomorrow. Management can wait for our reports until later. Don't sweat it."

Sage couldn't imagine a few hours would make that much difference to their superiors. A long soak in Chase's bath, with Chase over or under her, sounded like exactly the sort of medicine she needed right now.

Ange and Blade headed for the jeep and Sage gingerly walked on her sore ankle. Chase held her hand, their fingers twining together as they ambled toward another car.

"Managed to steal Holt's keys," Chase explained. "Julian and Matthias have been taken by Will to medical to get checked out and likely will be stuck there overnight. Saves Blade and Ange the hassle of dropping us off at my place."

Sage could only feel grateful as her aches and pains began to make themselves known.

"I think tomorrow we need to—"

"Take a break and maybe run off to Hawaii?" Chase interjected. Lifting her hand to his mouth, he kissed her knuckles, nipping them and then licking them soothingly.

"Sage, love, it's over for now," Chase chided her gently. "The manufacturing of the drugs has literally blown up into a zillion pieces. Sarke is on the run and the whole thing has fallen around his ears in a mess. Let it go, at least for a while. Captain Allcott and the team will deal with it for now."

Sage grinned as they reached the car. When he moved to open her door for her, she pulled him close and wrapped her legs around his waist, lifting herself so her warm, moist center rubbed enticingly against his crotch. His hands cupped her ass, cradling her cheeks as he lifted her closer and ground his semi-hard cock against her warmth.

Kissing him fiercely, Sage ate at his mouth, threading her hands through his soft hair and letting her fingers glide through the strands. Chase pressed her into the chilly metal of his car and lifted her higher. She tightened her legs around him, squeezing him as moisture pooled in her panties.

"We're going to get arrested," Chase panted as he pulled back, one hand eagerly lifting her shirt up and swearing as he came into contact with her armored vest.

Sage threw her head back and laughed. "I was going to say, before you so rudely interrupted," she chided gently, "that tomorrow I think we need to spend the morning in bed thoroughly exploring every inch of each other's bodies to check for bruises and scrapes. I might have all kinds of damage to add new and more interesting scars to my collection."

Chase's hot gaze burned into her face, dark, deep and fathomless. A wicked-looking grin crossed his face as he lowered her to her feet. In a show of gallantry, Chase opened the door for her. She climbed into the passenger side.

"I think, Ms. Barrington, that is the best damn idea I've heard in a very long time."

Sensual intent glinted in his eyes as he slammed the door and hurried around to the other side. Shutting his own door, he started the car with a roar and burned rubber as he turned them toward his home.

"Indeed, I think we ought to start assessing the damage the moment we get inside. Just to be safe," he insisted.

Sage laughed, delighted at the proposition and eager to begin. "Absolutely. Just to be safe," she agreed with mock solemnity.

Unable to restrain her joy, Sage grinned at Chase. He beamed back at her, barely dividing his attention between the crowded streets and her roaming fingers. Sage did her best to distract him without getting them killed.

Her fingers stroked up Chase's thigh, the smooth material warm from his body heat. His shaft grew erect as she caressed him, eager to feel his thickness under her palm. She pressed a kiss to the edge of Chase's jaw, his skin soft and tempting. After a few very interesting minutes where her flirty touches threatened to distract Chase from driving, they ended up compromising. Holding hands, fingers threading intimately together, Chase drove with one hand while Sage restrained herself from further explorations.

Sage knew they would have more than enough opportunities in the future to indulge. They were fierce warriors in their own right but a sensual partnership had grown between them, a meeting of equals. Her heart filled with love for this dark-haired human man who could bring out such joy in her with just a glance or tilt of a smile on his lips.

Sage pressed another hungry, nipping kiss to his jaw.

"I love you," she told him softly. The first of countless times she planned for their future.

About the Author

Elizabeth Lapthorne has been writing professionally since 2002. She has been astonished by the success of her Rutledge Werewolf series, and finds immense pleasure in hearing from her fans. To date she has more than ten books out, a few of those even in paperback.

Elizabeth regularly goes to the gym to chew over her ideas; many a book has begun or been worked through while cycling on the bikes. She also loves to read, eat chocolate and talk for hours with her friends. Elizabeth would love to hear from her fans, and checks her email religiously.

Liz welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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